

overwhelms the listener, who assumes that the speaker really must know what he is talking about. Quite often, of course, he does, as in the examples below. The roots of this technique might conceivably lie in the folk practice of riddling and similar kinds of wordplay. It may also be related to the kind of witty gesture involved in nicknaming. It is definitely related to the kind of product brand-name story that Roger Abrahams records in *Deep Down in the Jungle*, and which still flourishes in the Black Community.

Cavalier took a ride across the desert on a Camel, just 'cause he was in love with somebody called Fatima. Philip was blasting off to Morris. Now Raleigh decided since he had made a Lucky Strike he was going down to Chesterfield's. He had a whole pocket full of Old Gold. And so, last but not least, he decided to go on a Holiday.

[Kid, #100, p. 244.]

In this poem by Reginald Butler the continuity of technique is evident.

You go round the mulberry bush and I'll go round  
the CEDAR

You pull up your petticoat and I'll pull out my  
PETER MURFEE

Had a dog, Lorenjo was his name  
Loan him to a lady friend to keep her company.  
Around the house Lorenjo ran; he stumbled  
on a ROCK.

His head went up the lady's dress; he tried to smell her—  
Get away, you dirty dog. You make my nature RISE  
There ain't but one man in this town that can  
lay between my—

Thank you mam for a glass of beer, pity if you SUCK  
same, for a man

who get a wife and don't take time out to roll and  
tumble

on a thimble leaning on a ROCK—

The smallest woman in this town got the biggest  
COCKtail

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gingerale leaning on a STICK

The smallest man in this town got the biggest

DICK Tracy Count Basie

Ted Joans elaborates this technique in two interesting compositions—"Jazz Must Be a Woman" (p. 221) and "The Nice Colored Man" (p. 223). The first is somewhat mechanical because of the alphabetical arrangement of the names, but one soon discounts this and in fact considers it as a structural device that displays the poet's intimate knowledge of his subject. Although it is rather inert on the page, the poem as a spoken composition could be very effective, deriving its force from the fundamental assumption that these names are known, or should be known, because they identify the musicians as creative shapers of reality.

"The Nice Colored Man" is much more effective because the poet succeeds in suggesting the rhythmic variety of the spoken voice on the page. In addition, the witty variations that he plays on the word "nigger" are completely unpredictable, yet, like good jazz, perfectly logical once they are articulated.

b. *Jazzy rhythmic effects.* To an extent "The Nice Colored Man" also illustrates this practice, but certainly there are others. The poem must be read in its entirety for both devices. Even so, as in so much of the Black poetic tradition, many of these effects are lost on the printed page; thus the ear is still the best judge. With that realization, some poets at Broadside Press have begun to record their work, both on tape and record. Especially interesting to the listener is the fact that some of the rhythmic patterns of contemporary Black poetry go back to folk and street sources and are commonly known in the Black Community. Some of these occur in children's games and in the folk rhymes that were recorded by Talley in his *Negro Folk Rhymes*. Others are traceable to the rhythms of the dozens, and even to popular quasi-folk songs like the "Dirty Dozens" and to urban narratives and toasts like "Shine" and "The Signifying Monkey."

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Compare these lines from LeRoi Jones's "T. T. Jackson Sings" with the traditional dozens lines which are printed just below them.

I fucked your mother  
On top of a house  
When I got through  
She thought she was  
Mickey Mouse

\* \* \* \*

I fucked your mother from house to house  
Out came a baby named Minnie Mouse.

[Recorded by R. Abrahams, "Playing the Dozens,"  
*American Folk Music Occasional*, No. 1, p. 79.]

In Mari Evans' poem "Vive Noir!" the rhythms reflect the hipness of the folk tradition as it becomes urbanized.

I'm tired  
of hand me downs  
shut me ups  
pin me ins  
keep me outs  
messing me over have  
just had it  
baby  
from  
you . . .

Etheridge Knight's "Dark Prophecy" (p. 330) is more than a paraphrase of the traditional "Shine and the Titanic." It is to that piece what the blues poems of Hughes and Brown are to blues songs. The essence is retained while the form is altered to make the meaning less dependent upon a musical accompaniment, or upon the spoken voice.

Yeah, I sing of Shine  
and how the millionaire banker stood on the deck  
and pulled from his pocket a million dollar check  
saying Shine Shine save poor me  
and I'll give you all the money a black boy needs—

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Two further examples in this anthology are Carolyn Rodgers' brilliant "The Last M. F." (p. 346) and Ladele X's "O-o-oo-ld Miss Liza" (p. 356), which the reader may examine for himself.

It should also be pointed out that these rhymes are deeply rooted in Black speech and Black oratory as well as in certain kinds of Black song. When we return to prose, to Ellison's *Invisible Man*, we find a demonstration of these jazzy rhythms in a popular Black narrative style. In the following passage the speaker describes the exploits of Ras the Exhorter in a battle with the mounted police during a Harlem riot.

Before the cops knowed what hit 'em Ras is right  
in the middle of 'em and one cop grabbed for that  
spear, and ole Ras swung 'round and bust him across  
the head and the cop goes down and his hoss rears up,  
and ole Ras rears his and tries to spear him another  
cop, and the other hosses is plunging around and ole  
Ras tries to spear him still another cop, only he's  
too close and the hoss is pooting and snorting and  
pissing and shitting, and they swings around and the  
cop is swinging his pistol and every time he swings  
old Ras throws up his shield with one arm and chops  
at him with the spear with the other, and man, you  
could hear that gun striking that ole shield like  
somebody dropping tire irons out of a twelve-story  
window.

[Signet ed., pp. 487, 488.]

c. *Virtuoso free-rhyming*. This occurs both in speech and in poetry, and seems to be related to the impulse to lard speech and conversation with proverbs and aphoristic sayings, both sacred and secular, but there is a pronounced emphasis upon wordplay either as an indication of hipness or seemingly an end in itself. There may be present also certain residual linguistic habits that might have been carried over from the tonal elements of African languages. These verbal habits are found in both the older and the younger members of the community. For example, a Black

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man in his fifties recently said the following in an interview which I conducted on the meaning of "Soul":

I don't want nothin' old but some gold;  
I don't want nothin' black but a Cadillac!

A few years ago it was commonplace for a preacher to announce the following sermon text:

I can't eat a bite, I can't sleep at night,  
'Cause the woman I love don't treat me right.

This, of course, was a ploy to get people interested; what they were treated to was the idea of depending on God, not on human beings, for solace. Let us recall too that this kind of rhyming is found in the speeches of Malcolm X and in those of Martin Luther King, Jr., as in the "I Have a Dream" speech with its dryly comical "every hill and mole hill" reference. In this collection, interesting examples from the street tradition can be seen in Rap Brown's poem, in lines like the following:

They call me Rap the dicker the ass kicker  
The cherry picker and city slicker the titty licker . . .

d. *Hyperbolic imagery.* The breathless virtuoso quality of free-rhyming comes from the utilization of single rhyme sound, the object being to get in as many rhymes as one can. Oratorically, this is balanced by a passage in which there is no rhyme at all, and the wit and the energy expend themselves in a series of hyperbolic wisecracks, rooted in the tradition of masculine boasting.

These wisecracks also illustrate *hyperbolic imagery* as the passage is balanced with material, like that below (also Rap's poem), with resonances in the folk tradition. Note, however, that the last two lines present a kind of hyperbolic coolness—supercoolness.

I'm the man who walked the water and tied the  
whale's tail in a knot  
Taught the little fishes how to swim

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Crossed the burning sands and shook the devil's hand  
Rode round the world on the back of a snail  
carrying a sack saying AIR MAIL.

Some idea of Rap's relationship to the folk tradition may be seen in the resemblance between the passage just quoted and the following secular rhyme quoted by Sterling Brown in *Negro Poetry and Drama*, p. 21:

I seen Solomon and Moses  
Playing ring around the roses . . .  
I seen King Pharaoh's daughter  
Seeking Moses in de water . . .  
Seen Ole Jonah swallowin' de whale  
And I pulled de lion's tail;  
I've sailed all over Canaan on a log.

Hyperbolic imagery, in short, is common in Black speech and often reveals striking poetic talent. In the account of Ras the Destroyer's battle with the Harlem police, Ellison's genius illuminates this cultural feature. Ras, for example, is described thus:

And man that crazy sonofabitch up there on that  
hoss looking like death eating a sandwich . . .

We recall that some of the most imaginative images of this type are found in the sermons, both folk and learned. See the *Book of Negro Folklore*, pp. 232-42, for folk examples. Listen to contemporary urban preaching for others. Rev. C. L. Franklin of Detroit, famous in his own right and the father of the gifted Aretha Franklin, continues a sophisticated version of the folk sermon in imagery like this:

I want God's Word to be shaped like a vessel,  
And I want my soul to step on board.

e. *Metaphysical imagery.* When hyperbolic imagery merges into the kind of figure in which precise intellectual statement is coupled with witty far-reaching comparison in a unified and passionate image, it is called metaphysical imagery

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after the practice of Samuel Johnson. This kind of imagery abounds in the work of English religious poets of the first half of the seventeenth century and in poetry from the Eliot school. It appears also in Black poetry, sermon, and song. A good example is this passage from Big Bill Broonzy's "Hollerin' the Blues" (p. 110):

You'll never get to do me like you did my buddy Shine  
You'll never get to do me like you did my buddy Shine—  
You worked him so hard on the levee—  
Till he went stone blind.  
I can hear my hamstrings a-poppin', and my collar cryin'  
I can hear my hamstrings a-poppin', and my collar cryin'.

The last two lines are anatomically precise, though hyperbolic, and the pun on "cryin'" (the slipstream from his running and the emotion that he feels) picks up the effort which goes into his frenzied attempt to escape his buddy's fate. And we hear the steady stream of wind and tears punctuated by the rhythm of his Achilles tendon as it "pops" like a whip as he runs. Frankly, the image is worthy of John Donne, one of the master poets of the English Metaphysical School.

f. *Understatement.* A supreme example would be these tragic blues lines:

I'm gonna lay my head on some lonesome railroad line;  
I'm gonna wait on No. Nine, just to pacify my mind.

g. *Compressed and cryptic imagery.* This can be seen by the arcane references to what I have called "mascon" imagery as well as lines like Ted Hunt's poem in this volume and Muddy Waters' "Just to Be with You" (Chess 1620, LP 1501). For comparison here is the street cleaner's rap to Ellison's hero.

All it takes to get along in this here man's town  
is a little shit, grit and mother-wit. And man,  
I was bawn with all three. In fact, I'maseventh-

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sonofaseventhsonbawnwithacauleverbotheyesandraised-  
onblackcatboneshighjohntheconquerorandgreasygreens—  
[*Invisible Man*, Signet ed., p. 155.]

h. *Worrying the line.* This is the folk expression for the device of altering the pitch of a note in a given passage or for other kinds of ornamentation often associated with melismatic singing in the Black tradition. A verbal parallel exists in which a word or phrase is broken up to allow for affective or didactic comment. Here is an example from Rich Amer-son's "Black Woman":

Say, I feel superstitious, Mamma  
'Bout my hoggin' bread, Lord help my hungry time,  
I feel superstitious, Baby, 'bout my hoggin' bread!  
Ah-hmmm, Baby, I feel superstitious,  
I say 'stitious, Black Woman!  
Ah-hmmm, ah you hear me cryin'  
About I done got hungry, oh Lordy!  
Oh, Mamma, I feel superstitious  
About my hog Lord God it's my bread.

Aside from elegance of gesture, there is the opposite aspect of the tradition—frankness, bluntness of language, obscenity—a kind of verbalized social dissonance. Despite the fact that the poets, like the blues singers and the dozens players, use it with great virtuosity and even (in the case of Carolyn Rodgers) a certain charm, it remains perhaps the least understood aspect of the tradition. In the classroom, ironically, it causes a great deal of confusion because instructors are unaware of, underestimate, or refuse to acknowledge the "Soul-Field," the complex galaxy of personal, social, institutional, historical, religious, and mythical meanings that affect everything we say or do as Black people sharing a common heritage. The same students who read and understand Don Lee's "The Wall," for example, are tongue-tied in the classroom because they have to pretend that they do not know the meaning of that powerful Oedipal word in the last line, and

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our own special employment of it. But the word is important to an understanding of the Black Experience within the context of the poem. It is charged with more experiential energy than perhaps any other, with the possible exception of the word "nigger."

This blunt style is certainly familiar to the general reader by now. However, it still has not been appreciated as *literature*, at least as a valid aspect of *Black* literature. Too, it is difficult to isolate specific structural aspects of this style since it may in fact employ the forms of the elegant style with the difference lying chiefly in the usage of obscenity. Here, however, one has to be honest. The use of obscenity is frequently brilliant, at times inspired, whether it occurs in literature or in real life. However, convention forbids us to treat it seriously until the inventor has either achieved "universal fame" (in which case no one challenges his prerogative to dirty words) or has been dead for two hundred years (in which case he is unable to defend himself either way *anyway*). Notwithstanding there are certain "ground rules," as it were, by which one can judge the skill or the art employed in the rough style. For example, one can devastate an opponent by sheer dint of dirty detail. On the crudest, least imaginative level the dozens can degenerate to that. Unfortunately some contemporary Black poetry suffers from the same defect, prompting warnings by craftsmen like Stanley Crouch and Larry Neal. A more skillful use of the style would lie in concluding an "elegant" passage (satirical or otherwise) with a rush of prurient detail as in Rap's poem, for instance.

Perhaps the hallmark of successful use is wit, which listeners and readers instantly recognize and respond to in a manner similar to their response to metaphysical imagery, but in addition to the pleasure of intellectual surprise there is the added dimension of defying social taboo. Frankly, at times one arrives at a kind of rock-bottom truth which is memorably expressed. Compare, for example, the following

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passages, one from English literature, the other from the Black street tradition:

(a) A rag, a bone, a hank of hair . . .

(b) Pussy ain' nothin' but meat on the bone . . .

Here the words "meat on the bone," with echoes perhaps of biblical imagery distilled in the folk mind, challenge literary prejudice with their essential rightness.

In this anthology, several of the poems embody the blunt style. For example, Imamu Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) "Pretty-ditty" (p. 211) hinges on the last line and especially on the hyperbolic but subtle in-group meanings of "motherfucker." Although Don Lee's "The Wall" (p. 334) hinges on the same word, also in a hyperbolic sense, the meaning suggests appreciative awe and scales off into personally and communally recognized meanings which are more felt than named, in other words, into a condition of *saturation*.

Close to the directness of street talk are poems like Ahmed Alhamisi's "The Black Narrator" and Ebon's "Presidential Press Parley" (p. 351); and in Carolyn Rodgers' "The Last M. F." (p. 346), the rough tradition is gradually and delightfully subsumed in the intellectually elegant.

Finally, it is perhaps in the appropriation of the dozens techniques that contemporary Black poetry has been most effective in the use of the rough aspect of the tradition. For example, one could profitably study Imamu Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) "Word from the Right Wing." It is especially significant since it involves the political element with the dozens on the one hand, and it illustrates the dozens as a political weapon on the other. Baraka, of course, was not alone in this, for while he was employing this much imitated device in poetry, Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, who were engaged in direct political action, employed the dozens as a mode of attack, and of entertainment, which their opponents, accustomed to the golden sonorities of the sermon, were unable to deal with. The technique was too flexible for the establishment, too allusive, too cryptic, too dangerous.

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This brings us to a curious and very important aspect of Black speech in this country. Certain words and constructions seem to carry an inordinate charge of emotional and psychological weight, so that whenever they are used they set all kinds of bells ringing, all kinds of synapses snapping, on all kinds of levels. I am not speaking merely of words like "nigger" and "the big M. F.," as Ron Welburn calls it, since they are rather obvious. I am not speaking of "code words." Nor am I speaking merely of what literary critics mean by the word "resonance." I am speaking rather of words which are innocent enough—words like "rock," "roll," "jelly," "bubber," "jook," and the like, which have levels of meaning that seem to go back to our earliest grappling with the English language in a strange and hostile land. These words, of course, are used in complex associations, and thus form meaningful wholes in ways which defy understanding by outsiders. I call such words "mascon" words, borrowing from (of all places!) the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. NASA invented the acronym to mean a "massive concentration" of matter below the lunar surface after it was observed that the gravitational pull on a satellite was stronger in some places than in others. I use it to mean a *massive concentration of Black experiential energy* which powerfully affects the meaning of Black speech, Black song, and Black poetry—if one, indeed, has to make such distinctions.

Let us take the word "roll," for example. Here are some instances of its use: "Rock and Roll," "Rollin' with My Baby," "I'm Rollin' Through an Unfriendly World," "Let the Good Times Roll," "He was sure rollin' today," "Roll 'em, Pete," "If you can roll your jelly like you roll your dough . . .," "Let the church roll on," and so on. The meanings connote work, struggle, sexual congress, dancing, having a good time, and shooting dice. They cut across areas of experience usually thought of as separate, but they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the meanings overlap and wash into each other on some undifferentiated level of common

experience. The poetic potential of all this should be obvious, so I shall not belabor the point.

However, here is a more complex example. Take the line from the hymn "Hold to His hand, God's unchanging hand." Compare it with the blues line, "If you don't want me, baby, give me your right hand." Compare Faye Adams' song from the fifties, "Shake a Hand, Shake a Hand." White critics of Black folk song call these expressions clichés. I *know* that they are mistaken. What has happened is that the experiential energy of the expression is lost to the outsider, so consequently all that he can sense is the "outside," the morphology of the term, and any criticism is, as a result, merely superficial or distorted. Black people have used these expressions over and over because they are deeply rooted in an apparently inexhaustible reality, in this case, a highly compressed secular/sacred experience. I think that I need only mention "the right hand of fellowship" and the crossed hands of the Civil Rights Movement, both dating back to the earliest days of our life in this country, and I suspect even to Africa itself.

The same kind of mascon term occurs in music. Although I am neither musician nor musicologist, I can cite, in addition to my own observations, the following statements from trained musical observers, which are all the more important because these observers are "outsiders," i.e., non-Blacks. The first is from Martin Williams' article in *Down Beat* (January 21, 1971, p. 12), in which he discusses the recurrence of certain blues and boogie-woogie figures in the history of jazz. With regard to one figure he acknowledges:

But my brief account of the recorded history of the phrase probably doesn't scratch the surface of its use as a basis for written themes, nor its use as an interpolation, in hundreds of variants and permutations, by soloists as they improvise.

It is one of those phrases that just seem to have been indigenous parts of Afro-American musical lore from the beginning, as it were, and whose meaning for each successive generation of players has been tenacious.



With empathic insight, Charles Keil points out the Black oratorical technique of repetition, which characterizes both the preacher and the blues singer, in this case, Martin Luther King and B. B. King. The repetition is not tiring because it deals with mascon structures. He is speaking here of the "I Have a Dream" speech:

This relentless repetition of phrases, the listing of American landmarks and the long enumeration of Negro goals, gradually moved the audience to an emotional peak, a fitting climax to a stirring demonstration. Employing a standard twelve-bar blues form, repeated over and over again in song after song, turning out well-known phrases in every chorus yet always introducing novel combinations and subtle new twists in each performance—in short, using the same patterns—B. B. King rarely fails to give his listeners much the same kind of emotional life.

[*Urban Blues*, pp. 96-7.]

The net effect of this, Keil correctly concludes, equals "soul."

However, most outsiders are neither so sensitive nor so knowledgeable as Keil, and the viewpoint which he describes below not only represents that of the contemporary American public, but of an earlier one as well, including professional music commentators.

To the uninitiated—and a surprising number of music critics are included in this category—Jimmy Smith's funky runs, Coltrane's sheets of sound, or B. B. King's clichés seem monotonous, tiresome, or just plain boring; but to the people who have been exposed to the music for the longest time and who have listened to it with care and attention, these artists never lose their freshness and vitality.

[*Urban Blues*, p. 97.]

#### *Black Music as Poetic Reference*

Now let us formally, though briefly, consider this second referent—music—in further detail. Aside from mascon structures, there are other important ways in which music, Black

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music, lies at the basis of much of Black poetry, either consciously or covertly. I have been able to distinguish at least ten types of usage, but I am certain that there are others. I shall list them first, then attempt to illustrate them.

1. The casual, generalized reference
2. The careful allusion to song titles
3. The quotations from a song
4. The adaptation of song forms
5. The use of tonal memory as poetic structure
6. The use of precise musical notation in the text
7. The use of an assumed emotional response incorporated into the poem: the "subjective correlative"
8. The musician as subject/poem/history/myth
9. The use of language from the jazz life
10. The poem as "score" or "chart"

In No. 1, *the casual, generalized reference*, there are mere suggestions of Black song types. Here are some examples. In Jean Toomer's "Song of the Son" (p. 118):

. . . one seed becomes  
An everlasting song, a singing tree,  
Caroling softly souls of slavery,  
What they were, and what they are to me,  
Caroling softly souls of slavery.

Compare Sterling Brown's "Slim Greer" (p. 136), where the whites left Slim alone in the parlor:

An' he started a-tinklin'  
Some mo'nful blues,  
An' a-pattin' the time  
With No. Fourteen shoes.

And see Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" (p. 176):

. . . We  
Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

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Finally, note the range of the reference in Margaret Walker's "For My People" (p. 163):

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues and jubilees . . .

In No. 2, there is a *careful allusion to song titles*, as in James Weldon Johnson's "O Black and Unknown Bards." The entire poem must be read in order to appreciate the effect.

A more subtle use is found in Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" (p. 169), where the poet names and describes the songs coming out of the "vendors," i.e., the jukeboxes: "The Lonesome Blues," the "Long-Lost Blues," and "I Want A Big Fat Mama." For a reader familiar with these songs, the titles evoke a more particularized response, and the effect thus borders on the "subjective correlative" alluded to in type seven. In brief, then, these categories are suggestive and not ironclad and mutually exclusive. In fact, if one knew the various blues songs whose lyrics anticipate "Big Fat Mama," another dimension would obviously be added to his understanding of the scene. Actually, Miss Brooks sums up the meaning in these powerful lines from the poem:

The pasts of his ancestors lean against him.  
Crowd him.  
Fog out his identity.

Note also how she assumes knowledge of the popular Black songs, but in order to create the proper contrast, she delineates the essential quality of the European composers whom she mentions. Saint-Saëns' name is beautiful enough in itself to evoke his "Meditation" from *Thaïs*, but she goes on to suggest the "piquant elusive Grieg," Tchaikovsky's "wayward eloquence" and "the shapely tender drift of Brahms."

In her "I Love Those Little Booths at Benvenuti's" (p. 174), she uses the technique in a flatter, less evocative but still

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precise manner as she indicates the music which the Bronzeville people play: "They All Say I'm the Biggest Fool," "Voo Me on the Vot Nay," and "New Lester Leaps In."

In "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" (p. 238), Michael Harper not only uses the title of the composition as an epigraph, but quotes from the companion poem that Coltrane wrote for the album, building upon the phrase "a love supreme" in a manner suggesting a musician improvising on a motif. It is highly effective. Compare Kgositsile's "Origins" (p. 308) with the line concluding "what is this thing called/Love," where the reference is probably to a specific version of that song, perhaps Charlie Parker's. This usage extends even to conversation or, perhaps, arose *from* conversation as, for example, in James Baldwin's reference to Lorraine Hansberry as "Sweet Lorraine," which immediately resolves into a specific version of the song in the incomparably sweet voice of Nat King Cole. These, of course, are not random, "free" associations, but connections which naturally emerge from the "Soul-Field" of the Black Experience.

Both Don L. Lee and Nikki Giovanni, two of the most popular poets of the sixties, make considerable use of this device. See, for example, the references in "Don't Cry, Scream" (p. 336) to "Ascension" and "My Favorite Things" of Coltrane, as well as James Brown's "Cold Sweat." In Nikki Giovanni's "Reflections on April 4, 1968" (p. 279) the concluding line is adapted from the title of the Thomas A. Dorsey hymn "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." The poet makes this "Precious Lord—Take Our Hands—Lead/Us On." Shortly before his assassination, Dr. King had requested the director of the Operation Breadbasket Band to play this song for him. It is important to note that the composer of the song was once a famous blues singer and pianist who accompanied Ma Rainey, under the name of Georgia Tom. The story of his conversion is legendary. Hundreds of Black sacred and secular songs employ this image. It is so powerful that it must be considered a *mascon*.

Also worth careful attention is Giovanni's "Revolutionary

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Music" (p. 280) with its brilliant use of title and quotation from popular Black songs, ending with Sam Cooke's poignantly prophetic "A Change Is Gonna Come," which anchors not only the reality of the Civil Rights Movement but his own untimely death.

Quotations from a song are incorporated into the poem in the third device. For examples, see again J. W. Johnson's "O Black and Unknown Bards" and the poems of Nikki Giovanni mentioned above. Observe, too, that the weaving of song titles and/or quotations from a song into the texture of a poem has a parallel in the use of titles and quotations from literary works, as in Sarah Webster Fabio's "montage" on the death of Langston Hughes, entitled "A Mover," *Negro Digest*, September, 1967, p. 42. Obviously, non-Black writers use similar references, especially literary ones. The important thing here is that the references are chiefly to Black music.

Adaptations of song forms, the fourth device, include blues, ballads, hymns, children's songs, work songs, spirituals, and popular songs. These are fairly numerous and easily recognizable for the most part, especially the ballad, the hymn, and the blues. The first two have numerous parallels in other literary traditions. But the blues as a literary form was developed and refined by Langston Hughes and later by Sterling Brown, although Hughes clearly overstated his case for the fixity of the blues form in his preface to *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. Notwithstanding, in the poetry of both men it is important to see how they expand and amplify the form without losing its distinctive blues flavor. Poems like Hughes's "The Weary Blues" and "Montage of a Dream Deferred" and Brown's "Memphis Blues" suggest something of their range, even in their respective first volumes of poetry. Their work merits close study for the subtle use which they make of this form. Since all folk blues do not have the "classic" twelve-bar, three-line form, as examples by "Son" House and Charlie

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Patton and others clearly show, the poets' blues extensions therefore are not only logical but historically accurate.

In addition, note how Brown combines the blues form and feeling with the ballad and, in effect, "invents" the blues-ballad which, as a literary phenomenon, is as distinctive as Wordsworth's "lyrical ballad." \* Moreover, Brown and others like Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Robert Hayden, and Dudley Randall have also mastered the traditional literary ballad in the Anglo-American tradition, even to the Pre-Raphaelite echoic refrain of Dante Rossetti and William Morris.

Another example of blues in this volume is A. B. Spellman's "the joel blues" (p. 263). The reader should also examine the many fine examples in *Poetry for My People* by the late Henry Dumas, edited by Hale Chatfield and Eugene Redmond (Southern Illinois University Press, 1970). Other poets who have built upon this form include Robert Hayden, Owen Dodson, and the West Indian Edward Brathwaite.

An example of the work song can be found in Sterling Brown's poem "Southern Road." By contrast, there is Langston Hughes's delightful "Children's Rhymes." The reader who might question the sophistication of the rhymes should be reminded of the poet's habit of writing down snatches of songs, conversation, and the like from real life. He might, in addition, listen to Harold Courlander's recording of children's rhymes on the Folkways album *Negro Folk Music of Alabama*. Black city and country folks alike may remember their own local variations of these songs.

For religious songs it is difficult to approach the original grandeur of the spirituals, so wisely, I feel, the poets usually allude to them. In this volume Robert Hayden's "Runagate Runagate" (p. 157) is a prime example.

Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into  
darkness

\* See "Memphis Blues" in Brown's *Southern Road*, and, in this volume, "Ma Rainey."

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and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror  
 and the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing  
 and the night cold and the night long and the river  
 to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning  
 beckoning  
 and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that  
 somewhere  
 morning and keep on going and never turn back and  
 keep on going

In this first stanza there are allusions to the songs: "One More River to Cross," "In That Great Getting Up Morning," "Keep on a Inching Like a Po Inch Worm."

However, the traditional English hymn has influenced poets like George Moses Horton. Horton and other early formal poets in whom this kind of influence is documented can be studied in William Robinson's excellent anthology, *Early Black Poets*, and Benjamin Brawley's *Early Negro American Writers*. Still it is somewhat surprising that the whole body of gospel song which influenced Black and white music so deeply in recent years has been virtually ignored by contemporary poets, with the outstanding exceptions of Henry Dumas and Nikki Giovanni, the latter having recorded some of her work with The New York Community Gospel Choir. Perhaps the general lack of interest by the poets stems from the comparative blandness of imagery in the gospels when compared to the spirituals and the blues. Nevertheless, the soul singers like James Brown and Aretha Franklin draw heavily upon both the imagery and the singing and instrumental styles of this tradition. It remains to be seen, then, whether the growing importance of the soul singer as cultural hero will affect the course of the poetry. Perhaps we will have to look to the dramatic and semi-dramatic creations of performing groups like The Last Poets, The Blue Guerilla, and The National Black Theater. Perhaps we will have to build on the roots of Langston Hughes again, after all.

Device No. 5 is the practice, with considerable variety, of forcing the reader to incorporate into the structure of the

poem his memory of a specific song or passage of a song, or even of a specific delivery technique. Without this specific memory the poem cannot properly be realized. Some outstanding examples may be found in Don Lee's "Don't Cry, Scream" (p. 336), with its stylized allusion to the Coltrane sound; Nikki Giovanni's poem referring to Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" (p. 280); and Sarah Fabio's poem on Duke Ellington (p. 243). There are, of course, early examples in Sterling Brown's "Ma Rainey" and "When the Saints Go Ma'chin' In."

Further examples of this practice can also be seen in Percy Johnston's "Number Five Cooper Square" (p. 191), with the lines:

I remember Clifford tossing  
 Bubbles, Scit! Whoom!, from an  
 Ante-bellum moon. Scit! And  
 Killer Joe's golden chain, Scit!  
 While Ornette gives a lecture on  
 A Sanskrit theme with Bachian  
 Footnotes, scit. . . .

LeRoy Stone's "Flamenco Sketches" (p. 194) is an example of the kind of precision which is possible with this technique. Here the poem seeks to realize the musical experience. But even in its precision it does not lapse into the purely technical detail for its own sake. Note the "whisper/ intoned in fifths/ slivered through Davis durations," or the last section, "Comment/ on a cloud of Oriental ninths/ comment!"

In Lance Jeffers' "How High the Moon" (p. 200) the precise descriptions of musical structure gradually give way to the realization of the social context. Even here, however, the sense of musical style is still present in the lines:

. . . the beat of the street talk flares strong,  
 the scornful laughter and the gestures cut the air.

Parentheses suggest that this is a distillate of the poet/ listener's mind. It is not mere free-association, however, for "the beat of the street talk" takes up the question of "speech-



inflected jazz" alluded to earlier. There is a good deal of documentation, especially of the be-bop period, of musicians actually making their horns "talk" either to one another or to the audience. All that was said was not flattery either! The topic needs researching. Observe, for example, the blues singers like Furry Lewis and Mississippi John Hurt telling the audience, "I'm gonna let this guitar talk to you." Compare Rev. Gary Davis, the blind preacher guitarist, who even in his religious songs stops and asks "Miss Gibson" to sing a little while. And the most popular recent example of this is B. B. King and *his* Gibson guitar "Lucille."

So, in fact, the poets are translating what the instruments say, but in order to understand them fully, one must know the original text, as it were. See A. B. Spellman's poem on Coltrane (p. 261), where he says, "Trane's horn had words in it."

In the examples cited above, tonal memory at times provided usually all of the subject matter of the poem, particularly in the examples of Johnston and Stone. In Don Lee's famous poem "Don't Cry, Scream," he draws upon the Coltrane "sound" in a highly effective manner, both in the written poem and in his performance of it. He begins with general descriptions of the music:

blowing  
a-melodics  
screeching,  
screaming,  
blasting—

It was "music that ached./ murdered our minds (we reborn)."  
And in the rebirth the poet celebrates the blackness that we were taught to despise. Then follows the stylized *visual* representation of the Coltrane sound. It is merely suggestive, but still precise in its own way. There are stage directions that become part of both written and spoken comment: "sing/ loud &/ high/ with/ feeling" and "sing/ loud &/ long/ with feeling"; then rooted in a sure knowledge of the

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instrumental style anchored in the vocal style of both sacred and secular music, the directions state: "sing loud/ & high with/ feeling/ letting/ your/ voice/ break." It is that precise technique of "letting/ your/ voice/ break" which is so *Black* and so right. In performance, the poet gives three different pitches to each verbal group of "we-eeeeeeee," "scream-eeee-eeeeee-ing." The effect is, literally, thrilling. Some academic critics call this poetry "unreadable." One has to smile at their arrogance. There is a story current in the Black Community about a white critic who, after listening to some records by Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders, said with great condescension, "It's interesting, but you can't dance to it," whereupon a young brother said with withering scorn, "You can't dance to it!" So we can say to those critics that maybe Don Lee is "unreadable" to you, but then so really is Martin Luther King, Jr., to say nothing of Malcolm X. In this poem, then, the stylized rendition of the Coltrane sound becomes the touchstone of the meaning. The sound, in effect, becomes the *persona*. The Trane sound is the sound of the real, of the natural, of the spiritual. But the separations are arbitrary and Western, for they are part of the same truth.

i can see my me, it was truth you gave,  
like a daily shit  
it had to come.

can you scream——brother? very  
can you scream——brother? soft

i hear you.  
i hear you.

and the Gods will too.

Almost a perfect parallel exists in Lee's use of the spoken Black voice in the poem "Move Un-Noticed to Be Noticed: A Nationhood Poem" (p. 340), where the Black exclamation of surprise, excitement, and astonishment is used to sum up the tremendous natural potential energy of the Black masses. Many writers have called attention to this "exotic" speech

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"My Favorite Things." This amounts, really, to another specific kind of musical referent that we can simply call *singing or humming a specific tune or melody*. Coupled with this, the poet comments on the melody in the traditional manner of the blues singer and the Baptist preacher, modifying this, however, into a coherent Liberation Rap. Although the form on the page is fairly fixed, even with stage directions for stomping the foot for rhythm, the poem is fluid, a kind of score that lends itself to a wide range of dramatic interpretations.

In the sixth kind of musical referent, *precise musical notation is incorporated into the text of the poem*, as in the manner of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Whistling Sam." The technique suggests a possible solution to some of the problems of contemporary Black poetry. In this connection, one should recall Dr. DuBois' use of musical quotations as epigraphs to the various chapters of *Souls of Black Folk*. It is reasonable to assume that the total meaning of the book cannot be approached without *hearing* these phrases as well as reading the poetic fragments which accompany them.

A variation on this usage can be seen in Langston Hughes's neglected poem "Ask Your Mama," where the poet uses as *leitmotif* the traditional "Hesitation Blues," the music of which is printed before the Contents of *Ask Your Mama* along with the "Shave and a Haircut" "figurine." In the text of the poem, the appearance of the music and its performance are specifically indicated by the poet. One could compare this practice with that of Don Lee and Sarah Fabio. This poem, in fact, is almost the kind of "score" that Larry Neal speaks of. It is certainly more than just a "libretto," or a "lyric." Hughes carries out the musical analogy by calling his glosses to the poem "Liner Notes." In fact, Hughes "performed" this poem with Randy Weston at The Market Place Gallery in Harlem.

In device number seven, the reader's *emotional response to a well-known song is incorporated into the poem* in a man-

ner resembling the use of a "rest" in music or an assumed "obbligato." And sometimes this is done by using a single word, as in Robert Terrell's "Asian Stew," with its play on the word "jelly."

Wit rice-n-mud-n-bamboo shoots  
Wit sizzled hairs-n-human eclairs  
Wit shrapnel-n-goodwill-n-jelly  
jelly jelly

[*The New Catalyst*, Morehouse College, 1969]

Since the reference is to a state of mind or feeling instead of to an object or structure, the technique could be called the use of the "subjective correlative," in contrast to the "objective correlative" of the New Criticism. The clearest examples in this collection are Carolyn Rodgers' "5 Winos" (p. 344), with the reference to "the most carefully/constructed a-melodic Coltrane psalm . . ." and, especially, "Me, In Kulu Se & Karma" (p. 345), where the basis for the ecstasy of the experience is the assumption that the reader has felt the same way about the music. I distinguish this from "tonal memory" because that category refers more specifically to the actual structure and performance of the music. There is, to be sure, some of that in "Me, In Kulu Se & Karma," but the emphasis is upon *the emotional reaction to the music*. The poet calls this a *bein* poem: "Every poet has written a *bein* poem. In fact, most poets start off writing them. Just writing about the way they be, they friends be, they lovers be, the world be. . . ." And she quotes from this poem. It is significant, I think, that the poet's sense of *bein* is clarified and heightened by the music. See her sensitive essay, "Black Poetry—Where It's At," *Negro Digest*, September, 1969.

*The musician himself functions as subject, poem, history, or myth* in the eighth device or category. Particular musicians may be so treated, as in Brown's "Ma Rainey" (p. 134), Don Graham's "Soul" (p. 322), or A. B. Spellman's "did john's music kill him?" (p. 261). There is also a more general treatment, as in Hughes's "Jazzonia" (p. 128). In addi-

tion, the music rather than the musician may be the actual subject of the poem. This is probably the largest category of musical referents in Black poetry. The range is wide, even in this anthology, and the reader should compare and study the poems mentioned above and also Ted Joans's virtuoso piece, "Jazz Must Be a Woman" (p. 221), Neal's "Don't Say Goodbye to the Pork-Pie Hat" (p. 290), Henderson's "Elvin Jones Gretsch Freak" (p. 264), Jeffers' "How High the Moon" (p. 200), De Legall's "Psalm for Sonny Rollins" (p. 202), and Graham's Poem for Eric Dolphy" (p. 321).

*Language from the jazz life or associated with it, commonly called "hip" speech, constitutes the ninth type of referent. This speech blends into so-called street talk, but one can find instances of precise and specific musical references, as in Larry Neal's "Don't Say Goodbye to the Pork-Pie Hat," or David Henderson's "Elvin Jones Gretsch Freak," or Percy Johnston's "Number Five Cooper Square." Sometimes the language may even be drawn from jazz criticism, as in Neal's use of the expression "rolling sheets of sound," which is a term often applied to the playing of Coltrane. In addition, there is the idiom of "bop" talking and "scat" singing, introduced into poetry, it seems, by Langston Hughes. This language from the jazz life, finally, is evident in many contemporary Black poems, though by no means in all. Nor, obviously, is it necessary to employ it in the writing of a Black poem. Notwithstanding, the world of jazz has had a tremendous impact upon the vocabulary of spoken English in this country, and it is thus quite easy to employ that language without being aware of its origin. Thus, in addition to the overworked words, "soul" and "funky," even relatively precise musical expressions like "going through rough changes," are part of the vocabulary of Blacks and the hip young whites who imitate them.*

In the tenth category, *the poem as "score" or "chart,"* we move to the most challenging aspect of Black poetic structure

—the question of limit, or performance, of the text, or better, to use Larry Neal's expression, "the destruction of the text." When I say "limit," I raise the question of the distinction between singing Black songs and reading Black poems. When I say "performance," I refer essentially to the same question. For my own part, the question is merely academic; the distinction between song and poem, never that precise in the oral tradition, is in the context of the New Black Poetry, and some of the old which builds upon the same sources and styles, not at all very useful. By "destruction of the text," Neal, if I understand him correctly, refers both to the relegation of the printed poem to the status of a "musical score," and to a lack of concern with "permanence" in the Western, Platonic sense of IDEAL FORM. A poem may thus differ from performance to performance just as jazz performances of "My Favorite Things" would. Moreover, it implies that there is a Black poetic mechanism, much like the musical ones, which can transform even a Shakespearean sonnet into a jazz poem, the basic conceptual model of contemporary Black poetry. The technique, the fundamental device, would be improvisation, lying as it does at the very heart of jazz music. To this one may add the possibility of the poet's working with a group of mascon images drawn from the Black experience, especially from the spirituals and the blues, upon which he would build his free but disciplined associations. The text in such a case would become a chart, not a score, bringing it even closer to the musical ideal. There are other possibilities, some of which the poets are already trying. If they are successful, the whole thrust of modern poetry could conceivably be changed. That, however, is not their concern, and consequently not mine.

This concludes our discussion, then, of the first two of three broad critical categories which I proposed near the beginning of this essay: Theme, Structure, and Saturation. There remains now the third, which while difficult to formulate, does provide I hope at least a theoretical concept with some validity and usefulness.



## SATURATION

By "saturation" in Black poetry, I mean several things, but chiefly (a) the communication of Blackness in a given situation, and (b) a sense of fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the Black Experience. I postulate this concept as a third category for describing and evaluating Black poetry. As in the other two, theme and structure, this category exists only in relationship to the entire work and is employed merely to deal with an aspect of the poetry that warrants discussion and appreciation. In other words, just as it is misleading to speak of theme to the exclusion of structure and vice versa, it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak honestly about saturation without considering these other two. In addition, one must not consider the poem in isolation but in relationship to the reader/audience, and the reader to the wider context of the phenomenon which we call, for the sake of convenience, the Black Experience.

We may first consider saturation as a *perception* by the reader that a given poem deals with the Black Experience even though there are no verbal or other clues to alert him. He simply *knows* that this is so. He may perceive this on varying levels, either sharply and precisely by gestalt, or obscurely upon reflection. Sometimes the awareness comes through as a kind of "tone," sometimes as "perspective," either that of the poet, or of the reader. Note these two examples from Mari Evans' collection, *I Am A Black Woman* (William Morrow & Co., 1970).

I am not  
lazy . . . just  
. . . battered

Also (from "Where Have You Gone," p. 35):

where have you gone  
with your confident

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walk your  
crooked smile the  
rent money  
in one pocket and  
my heart  
in another . . .

With Mari Evans the special despair that seeps through the jeweled diction, and sometimes the bitter wit itself, is somehow akin to the blues. In cases like these, the awareness is largely un verbalized and comes across as a "typical" situation, which we identify as true-to-life or part of the Black Experience. Perhaps there are minute linguistic or gestural clues, but these are highly ambiguous, as in the statement "I am not lazy." Anybody of any race could say that, of course, but what makes it special is the reaction to the implied historical stereotype of the lazy darky. Black people have a kind of hypersensitivity to those stereotypes even when their use is unintended or unperceived. Therefore, for one who is totally immersed, as it were, or saturated in the Black Experience the slightest formulation of the typical or true-to-life experience, whether positive or negative, is enough to bring on at least subliminal recognition.

Again, saturation may be viewed in terms of analogy, and one may use literature itself as a basis for comparison. There are, for example, passages in a poem that we may designate as very "English" or "American" without ever being able to explain ourselves more precisely than that. Or, even more basically, we may prefer an obviously flawed sonnet to one which is metrically perfect, and even consider it somehow to be a better poem or more poetic or meaningful. The same is true, more dramatically so, in more expansive forms like the epic or the novel, where some other consideration than mere structure causes us to prefer, for example, a Dreiser novel to one by Scott Fitzgerald, or Faulkner to Hemingway. The same kind of consideration enables Blacks to recognize *Native Son* as somehow truer to the Black Experience in America, somehow more typical than *Invisible Man*, even though,

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paradoxically, the latter deals with a wider range of that experience.

What we are talking about then is the *depth* and *quality* of experience which a given work may evoke. We are also speaking about saturation as a kind of *condition*. The kind of difference, for example, that exists between a Tin Pan Alley "blues" and a blues by Lightnin' Hopkins. Or if one protested because of the identifiable form of the blues, we could turn to the important phenomenon of Blacks taking over certain "white," i.e., general American cultural traits or features, and putting a decidedly Black stamp on them. One may think for example of Bessie Smith's rendition of a Tin Pan Alley song like "Muddy Water," which is much better by far than the song deserves. Was it pure commercial concern that motivated her? Didn't she understand the words? At any rate, anyone who has heard Mississippi bluesmen sing of catastrophic flooding in the Delta would perceive some commonality in the singing of Bessie Smith. More to the point is this: What is it, except some fundamental mechanism or set of values, that causes an Aretha Franklin to *select* for her special Black interpretation certain songs that were written and sometimes performed by whites. To speak of universal appeal, I think, is a cop-out, for the obvious rejoinder would be why is one particularly good song chosen and another rejected? Especially when the singer takes the trouble to give it a Black interpretation which is literally a reinvention. To speak purely in musical terms is, of course, a contradiction because of the virtual saturation of all Black music in the conditions which produced it. I would attribute the choice to an inner personal need or to cultural drive. Perhaps to a cultural imperative, to use Harold Cruse's phrase. At any rate, stylistic differences aside, the recognition on the part of the audience that the artist has made a selection based on a set of mutually shared experiences and/or values is another way of talking about saturation.

We may speak more directly of saturation with specific

relationship to both theme and structure. In such cases, where style and subject matter are obviously Black, one may feel, for example, that a word, a phrase, a rhythm, is so *right*, so *Black*, that its employment illuminates the entire composition. An example would be Gwendolyn Brooks's observation of the Bronzeville man with the belted coat, or Sterling Brown's "Sister Lou," where the poem ends with the felicitous words, "Take your time, honey, take your *bressed* time" (my italics).

It is, in fact, in character drawing where questions of saturation become especially dramatic. Here one may feel that a given *objectively* described character, or self-revealed character, may be *perfectly* Black, i.e., that any additional touch would result in caricature or other distortion. The character is thus felt to be saturated in the Black Experience, and the poem itself a saturated one. This perception comes as a kind of gestalt in which the whole is more than the sum of the parts, the character more than his actions, his speech, or his thoughts, although they are in this case identifiably Black. Such characters abound in the poetry of the period from the twenties through the fifties. They may be inventions based on real life observations or they may be historical or legendary figures. There are fine examples in this text by Brown and Hughes, by Dodson, Brooks, Hayden, and others. In brief, the Nat Turner of Robert Hayden (p. 154) and Margaret Walker (p. 166) are Black in ways that William Styron's Turner could not possibly be—or certainly is not. That is, I think, because the Black portrayal of Turner becomes almost a *mascon* image, as it were, a highly concentrated experienced reality that embodies somehow in a single man a major movement of the racial mind.

That, briefly, is what I mean by saturation as a descriptive category. How now does it function as a critical category, as a means of evaluation? In the first place, it lets us know that the recognition of Blackness in poetry is a value judgment which on certain levels and in certain instances, notably in matters of meaning that go beyond questions of structure and



theme, must rest upon one's immersion in the totality of the Black Experience. It means that the ultimate criteria for critical evaluation must be found in the sources of the creation, that is, in the Black Community itself.

In the second place, it lets us know that judgments regarding fidelity to the Black Experience are both objective and subjective, and that although a Joel Chandler Harris may record Black folk tales, the inner truth of those tales must be decided by the people who told them and who listened. Here, of course, we are not speaking merely of *realism* as a literary phenomenon. Notwithstanding, in the history of Black literature generally, and Black poetry specifically, let us remember the circumstances in which the realists worked, and let us remember what they accomplished. Let us, then, assume the same attitude in evaluating the realistic poetry of the sixties.

The concept of saturation as a critical category provides a clue to the philosophical meaning of phrases like "Black Is Beautiful," "Black People Are Poems," and so on. For Blacks the celebration of Blackness is an undertaking which makes value judgments, some of which certainly many American whites would reject. Nonetheless, if a Black celebratory poem is to be *understood* on the most elementary level it must be on these terms. There are none others that are valid.

## SUMMARY

I have suggested a critical framework which, hopefully, is flexible enough to facilitate discussion of the entire range of Black poetry produced in the United States, whether it is folk poetry, or escapist poetry, or Black revolutionary poetry. First, I have considered the two main aspects of that tradition, which can be called the "formal" and the "folk." However, I called attention to the usefulness of Richard Wright's corresponding terminology, which is "the Narcissistic level" and "The Forms of Things Unknown." Both of these levels existed simultaneously when the first extant Black poem was composed. Both levels have existed throughout the recorded history of Black literature in the United States, and both exist today.

It is fallacious to think of these two levels as discrete entities, although for the most part the influence has been from the folk to the formal during the periods of greatest power and originality. Notwithstanding, one must consider as well the influence of the formal upon various aspects of the folk source. This, of course, can be seen in the development of the spiritual and other song forms, in the influence of biblical imagery and thought on the sermons, and even the sermon itself as a Western form, albeit fundamentally transformed by African sensibility and the peculiar demands of Black society. These matters are much too involved for discussion here, but it is clear from numerous sources that these two sides of the tradition were, and still are, conscious on various levels of each other.

The relationship is perhaps too subtle to be called dialectic. At any rate, it implies that Black poetry has contour and movement and direction. These latter two qualities I have touched upon in the first of the three categories—theme—which I set up as a basis for describing and evaluating the poetry. The main movement has been in the direction of

Freedom, of Liberation, and has generally followed and illuminated the historical movement of the people, despite apparently contradictory minor patterns. As a critical category, theme is very useful and has been, in fact, the basis of much of the discussion of Black poetry which presently exists.

The next category—structure—has not been spelled out in great detail on its own terms, especially for that poetry which is most distinctly Black, although there have been notable efforts in folk poetry by Brown and others, and ground-breaking monographs on individual poets, such as James Emanuel's distinguished work on Langston Hughes and George Kent's incisive work on Gwendolyn Brooks. But the problem of relating the structure of a Phillis Wheatley couplet to a McKay sonnet to a Ted Joans rap has, to my knowledge, been eschewed. Wherein does the Blackness lie? I have suggested an answer, at least, a hypothesis—in the roots, in Black speech, and in the movement toward the forms of Black music. I have arrived independently at this position, but it is one which is shared by some of the poets themselves, several of whom have expressed it quite precisely on various occasions.

Finally, I have tried to postulate a concept that would be useful in talking about what Black people feel is their distinctiveness, without being presumptuous enough to attempt a description or definition of it. This quality or condition of Black awareness I call *saturation*. I intend it as a sign, like the mathematical symbol for infinity, or the term "Soul." It allows us to talk about the thing, even to some extent to use it, though we can't, thank God! ultimately abstract and analyze it: it must be experienced.

That really is the purpose of this essay—to send us back to the poems themselves and to the people who make them. This is the great challenge of our poets as they incessantly proclaim their miraculous discovery that Black people are poems. What this means for the teacher and the student and the critic is that, like the poets, they must not separate themselves or their work, whatever it is, from the concerns of the people. Nor must they assume that they know all there is to

be known about the people, including themselves. Nor all that there is in the Black Experience simply because they are Black. Nor that that knowledge is sufficient unto itself. For the knowledge of Blackness is the knowledge of pain and oppression as well as joy. It is a knowledge rooted in history and the real world, in all of its incompleteness and fragmentation. It is also a knowledge rooted in the spirit, which thus demands real action—social, political, and moral—in the real world, to make it fit for living, not exploitation. For non-Blacks the vision is a challenge to see the world through the eyes of others. It might even mean an enlargement of sensibility and a change of values. They must decide for themselves. But whatever they decide, Black people are moving toward the Forms of Things Unknown, which is to say, toward Liberation, which, however I have stammered in the telling, is what it is all about.

S.E.H.