# BRAWLEY BENJAMIN GRIFFITH

## THE NEGRO IN LITERATURE AND ART IN THE UNITED STATES

**Benjamin Brawley**

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*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24169588*
*The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States:*
*ISBN http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/35063*

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# The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States

## PREFACE

The present volume undertakes to treat somewhat more thoroughly than has ever before been attempted the achievement of the Negro in the United States along literary and artistic lines, judging this by absolute rather than by partial or limited standards. The work is the result of studies in which I first became interested nearly ten years ago. In 1910 a booklet, "The Negro in Literature and Art," appeared in Atlanta, privately printed. The little work contained only sixty pages. The reception accorded it, however, was even more cordial than I had hoped it might be, and the limited edition was soon exhausted. Its substance, in condensed form, was used in 1913 as the last chapter of "A Short History of the American Negro," brought out by the Macmillan Co. In the mean time, however, new books and magazine articles were constantly appearing, and my own judgment on more than one point had changed; so that the time has seemed ripe for a more intensive review of the whole field. To teachers who may be using the history as a text I hardly need

to say that I should be pleased to have the present work supersede anything said in the last chapter of that volume.

The first chapter, and those on Mr. Braithwaite and Mrs. Fuller, originally appeared in the *Southern Workman*. That on the Stage was a contribution to the *Springfield Republican*; and the supplementary chapter is from the *Dial*. All are here reprinted with the kind consent of the owners of those periodicals. Much of the quoted matter is covered by copyright. Thanks are especially due to Mr. Braithwaite and Mr. J. W. Johnson for permission to use some of their poems, and to Dodd, Mead & Co., the publishers of the works of Dunbar. The bibliography is quite new. It is hoped that it may prove of service.

*Benjamin Brawley.*

North Cambridge, August, 1917.

# I
# THE NEGRO GENIUS

IN his lecture on "The Poetic Principle," in leading down to his definition of poetry, Edgar Allan Poe has called attention to the three faculties, intellect, feeling, and will, and shown that poetry, that the whole realm of aesthetics in fact, is concerned primarily and solely with the second of these. *Does it satisfy a sense of beauty?* This is his sole test of a poem or of any work of art, the aim being neither to appeal to the intellect by satisfying the reason or inculcating truth, nor to appeal to the will by satisfying the moral sense or inculcating duty.

The standard has often been criticised as narrow; yet it embodies a large and fundamental element of truth. If in connection with it we study the Negro we shall find that two things are observable. One is that any distinction so far won by a member of the race in America has been almost always in some one of the arts; and the other is that any influence so far exerted by the Negro on American civilization has been primarily in the field of aesthetics. To prove the point we may refer to a long line of beautiful singers, to the fervid oratory of Douglass, to the sensuous poetry of Dunbar, to the picturesque style of DuBois, to the mysticism of the paintings of Tanner, and to the elemental sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller. Even Booker Washington,

most practical of Americans, proves the point, the distinguishing qualities of his speeches being anecdote and brilliant concrete illustration.

Everyone must have observed a striking characteristic of the homes of Negroes of the peasant class in the South. The instinct for beauty insists upon an outlet, and if one can find no better picture he will paste a circus poster or a flaring advertisement on the walls. Very few homes have not at least a geranium on the windowsill or a rosebush in the garden. If also we look at the matter conversely we shall find that those things which are most picturesque make to the Negro the readiest appeal. Red is his favorite color simply because it is the most pronounced of all colors. Goethe's "Faust" can hardly be said to be a play primarily designed for the galleries. One never sees it fail, however, that in any Southern city this play will fill the gallery with the so-called lower class of Negro people, who would never think of going to another play of its class, but different; and the applause never leaves one in doubt as to the reasons for Goethe's popularity. It is the suggestiveness of the love scenes, the red costume of Mephistopheles, the electrical effects, and the rain of fire that give the thrill desired – all pure melodrama of course. "Faust" is a good show as well as a good play.

In some of our communities Negroes are frequently known to "get happy" in church. Now a sermon on the rule of faith or the plan of salvation is never known to awaken such ecstasy. This rather accompanies a vivid portrayal of the beauties of heaven,

with the walls of jasper, the angels with palms in their hands, and (*summum bonum!*) the feast of milk and honey. And just here is the dilemma so often faced by the occupants of pulpits in Negro churches. Do the people want scholarly training? Very often the cultured preacher will be inclined to answer in the negative. Do they want rant and shouting? Such a standard fails at once to satisfy the ever-increasing intelligence of the audience itself. The trouble is that the educated minister too often leaves out of account the basic psychology of his audience. That preacher who will ultimately be the most successful with a Negro congregation will be the one who to scholarship and culture can best join brilliant imagination and fervid rhetorical expression. When all of these qualities are brought together in their finest proportion the effect is irresistible.

Gathering up the threads of our discussion so far, we find that there is constant striving on the part of the Negro for beautiful or striking effect, that those things which are most picturesque make the readiest appeal to his nature, and that in the sphere of religion he receives with most appreciation those discourses which are most imaginative in quality. In short, so far as the last point is concerned, it is not too much to assert that the Negro is thrilled not so much by the moral as by the artistic and pictorial elements in religion.

But there is something deeper than the sensuousness of beauty that makes for the possibilities of the Negro in the realm of the arts, and that is the soul of the race. The wail of the old

melodies and the plaintive quality that is ever present in the Negro voice are but the reflection of a background of tragedy. No race can rise to the greatest heights of art until it has yearned and suffered. The Russians are a case in point. Such has been their background in oppression and striving that their literature and art are to-day marked by an unmistakable note of power. The same future beckons to the American Negro. There is something very elemental about the heart of the race, something that finds its origin in the African forest, in the sighing of the night-wind, and in the falling of the stars. There is something grim and stern about it all, too, something that speaks of the lash, of the child torn from its mother's bosom, of the dead body riddled with bullets and swinging all night from a limb by the roadside.

So far we have elaborated a theory. Let us not be misunderstood. We do not mean to say that the Negro can not rise to great distinction in any sphere other than the arts. He has already made a noteworthy beginning in pure scholarship and invention; especially have some of the younger men done brilliant work in science. We do mean to say, however, that every race has its peculiar genius, and that, so far as we can at present judge, the Negro, with all his manual labor, is destined to reach his greatest heights in the field of the artistic. But the impulse needs to be watched. Romanticism very soon becomes unhealthy. The Negro has great gifts of voice and ear and soul; but so far much of his talent has not soared above the stage of vaudeville. This is due most largely of course to economic instability. It is the call of

patriotism, however, that America should realize that the Negro has peculiar gifts which need all possible cultivation and which will some day add to the glory of the country. Already his music is recognized as the most distinctive that the United States has yet produced. The possibilities of the race in literature and oratory, in sculpture and painting, are illimitable.

Along some such lines as those just indicated it will be the aim of the following pages to study the achievement of the Negro in the United States of America. First we shall consider in order five representative writers who have been most constantly guided by standards of literary excellence. We shall then pass on to others whose literary work has been noteworthy, and to those who have risen above the crowd in oratory, painting, sculpture, or music. We shall constantly have to remember that those here remarked are only a few of the many who have longed and striven for artistic excellence. Some have pressed on to the goal of their ambition; but no one can give the number of those who, under hard conditions, have yearned and died in silence.

# II
# PHILLIS WHEATLEY

ON one of the slave ships that came to the harbor of Boston in the year 1761 was a little Negro girl of very delicate figure. The vessel on which she arrived came from Senegal. With her dirty face and unkempt hair she must indeed have been a pitiable object in the eyes of would-be purchasers. The hardships of the voyage, however, had given an unusual brightness to the eye of the child, and at least one woman had discernment enough to appreciate her real worth. Mrs. Susannah Wheatley, wife of John Wheatley, a tailor, desired to possess a girl whom she might train to be a special servant for her declining years, as the slaves already in her home were advanced in age and growing feeble. Attracted by the gentle demeanor of the child in question, she bought her, took her home, and gave her the name of Phillis. When the young slave became known to the world it was customary for her to use also the name of the family to which she belonged. She always spelled her Christian name P-h-i-l-l-i-s.

Phillis Wheatley was born very probably in 1753. The poem on Whitefield published in 1770 said on the title-page that she was seventeen years old. When she came to Boston she was shedding her front teeth. Her memory of her childhood in Africa was always vague. She knew only that her mother *poured out*

*water before the rising sun*. This was probably a rite of heathen worship.

Mrs. Wheatley was a woman of unusual refinement. Her home was well known to the people of fashion and culture in Boston, and King Street in which she lived was then as noted for its residences as it is now, under the name of State Street, famous for its commercial and banking houses. When Phillis entered the Wheatley home the family consisted of four persons, Mr. and Mrs. Wheatley, their son Nathaniel, and their daughter Mary. Nathaniel and Mary were twins, born May 4, 1743. Mrs. Wheatley was also the mother of three other children, Sarah, John, and Susannah; but all of these died in early youth. Mary Wheatley, accordingly, was the only daughter of the family that Phillis knew to any extent, and she was eighteen years old when her mother brought the child to the house, that is, just a little more than ten years older than Phillis.

In her new home the girl showed signs of remarkable talent. Her childish desire for expression found an outlet in the figures which she drew with charcoal or chalk on the walls of the house. Mrs. Wheatley and her daughter became so interested in the ease with which she assimilated knowledge that they began to teach her. Within sixteen months from the time of her arrival in Boston Phillis was able to read fluently the most difficult parts of the Bible. From the first her mistress strove to cultivate in every possible way her naturally pious disposition, and diligently gave her instruction in the Scriptures and in morals. In course of time,

thanks especially to the teaching of Mary Wheatley, the learning of the young student came to consist of a little astronomy, some ancient and modern geography, a little ancient history, a fair knowledge of the Bible, and a thoroughly appreciative acquaintance with the most important Latin classics, especially the works of Virgil and Ovid. She was proud of the fact that Terence was at least of African birth. She became proficient in grammar, developing a conception of style from practice rather than from theory. Pope's translation of Homer was her favorite English classic. If in the light of twentieth century opportunity and methods these attainments seem in no wise remarkable, one must remember the disadvantages under which not only Phillis Wheatley, but all the women of her time, labored; and recall that in any case her attainments would have marked her as one of the most highly educated young women in Boston.

While Phillis was trying to make the most of her time with her studies, she was also seeking to develop herself in other ways. She had not been studying long before she began to feel that she too would like to make verses. Alexander Pope was still an important force in English literature, and the young student became his ready pupil. She was about fourteen years old when she seriously began to cultivate her poetic talent; and one of the very earliest, and from every standpoint one of the most interesting of her efforts is the pathetic little juvenile poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America:"

'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God – that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye —
"Their colour is a diabolic dye."
Remember, Christians, Negroes black as Cain
May be refined, and join th' angelic train.

Meanwhile, the life of Phillis was altogether different from that of the other slaves of the household. No hard labor was required of her, though she did the lighter work, such as dusting a room or polishing a table. Gradually she came to be regarded as a daughter and companion rather than as a slave. As she wrote poetry, more and more she proved to have a talent for writing occasional verse. Whenever any unusual event, such as a death, occurred in any family of the circle of Mrs. Wheatley's acquaintance, she would write lines on the same. She thus came to be regarded as "a kind of poet-laureate in the domestic circles of Boston." She was frequently invited to the homes of people to whom Mrs. Wheatley had introduced her, and was regarded with peculiar interest and esteem, on account both of her singular position and her lovable nature. In her own room at home Phillis was specially permitted to have heat and a light, because her constitution was delicate, and in order that she might write down her thoughts as they came to her, rather than trust them to her fickle memory.

Such for some years was the course of the life of Phillis Wheatley. The year 1770 saw the earliest publication of one of her poems. On the first printed page of this edition one might read the following announcement: "A Poem, By Phillis, a Negro Girl, in Boston, On the Death of the Reverend George Whitefield." In the middle of the page is a quaint representation of the dead man in his coffin, on the top of which one might with difficulty decipher, "G. W. Ob. 30 Sept. 1770, Aet. 56." The poem is addressed to the Countess of Huntingdon, whom Whitefield had served as chaplain, and to the orphan children of Georgia whom he had befriended. It takes up in the original less than four pages of large print. It was revised for the 1773 edition of the poems.

In 1771 the first real sorrow of Phillis Wheatley came to her. On January 31st Mary Wheatley left the old home to become the wife of Rev. John Lathrop, pastor of the Second Church in Boston. This year is important for another event. On August 18th "Phillis, the servant of Mr. Wheatley," became a communicant of the Old South Meeting House in Boston. We are informed that "her membership in Old South was an exception to the rule that slaves were not baptized into the church." At that time the church was without a regular minister, though it had lately received the excellent teaching of the Rev. Dr. Joseph Sewell.

This was a troublous time in the history of Boston. Already the storm of the Revolution was gathering. The period was one of vexation on the part of the slaves and their masters as well as

on that of the colonies and England. The argument on the side of the slaves was that, as the colonies were still English territory, they were technically free, Lord Mansfield having handed down the decision in 1772 that as soon as a slave touched the soil of England he became free. Certainly Phillis must have been a girl of unusual tact to be able under such conditions to hold so securely the esteem and affection of her many friends.

About this time, as we learn from her correspondence, her health began to fail. Almost all of her letters that are preserved were written to Obour Tanner, a friend living in Newport, R. I. Just when the two young women became acquainted is not known. Obour Tanner survived until the fourth decade of the next century. It was to her, then, still a young woman, that on July 19, 1772, Phillis wrote from Boston as follows:

> My Dear Friend, – I received your kind epistle a few days ago; much disappointed to hear that you had not received my answer to your first letter. I have been in a very poor state of health all the past winter and spring, and now reside in the country for the benefit of its more wholesome air. I came to town this morning to spend the Sabbath with my master and mistress. Let me be interested in your prayers that God will bless to me the means used for my recovery, if agreeable to his holy will.

By the spring of 1773 the condition of the health of Phillis was such as to give her friends much concern. The family physician advised that she try the air of the sea. As Nathaniel Wheatley

was just then going to England, it was decided that she should accompany him. The two sailed in May. The poem, "A Farewell to America," is dated May 7, 1773. It was addressed to "S. W.," that is, Mrs. Wheatley. Before she left America, Phillis was formally manumitted.

The poem on Whitefield served well as an introduction to the Countess of Huntingdon. Through the influence of this noblewoman Phillis met other ladies, and for the summer the child of the wilderness was the pet of the society people of England. Now it was that a peculiar gift of Phillis Wheatley shone to advantage. To the recommendations of a strange history, ability to write verses, and the influence of kind friends, she added the accomplishment of brilliant conversation. Presents were showered upon her. One that has been preserved is a copy of the magnificent 1770 Glasgow folio edition of "Paradise Lost," given to her by Brook Watson, Lord Mayor of London. This book is now in the library of Harvard University. At the top of one of the first pages, in the handwriting of Phillis Wheatley, are these words: "Mr. Brook Watson to Phillis Wheatley, London, July, 1773." At the bottom of the same page, in the handwriting of another, are these words: "This book was given by Brook Watson formerly Lord Mayor of London to Phillis Wheatley & after her death was sold in payment of her husband's debts. It is now presented to the Library of Harvard University at Cambridge, by Dudley L. Pickman of Salem. March, 1824."

Phillis had not arrived in England at the most fashionable

season, however. The ladies of the circle of the Countess of Huntingdon desired that she remain long enough to be presented at the court of George III. An accident – the illness of Mrs. Wheatley – prevented the introduction. This lady longed for the presence of her old companion, and Phillis could not be persuaded to delay her return. Before she went back to Boston, however, arrangements were made for the publication of her volume, "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral," of which more must be said. While the book does not of course contain the later scattered poems, it is the only collection ever brought together by Phillis Wheatley, and the book by which she is known.

The visit to England marked the highest point in the career of the young author. Her piety and faith were now to be put to their severest test, and her noble bearing under hardship and disaster must forever speak to her credit. In much of the sorrow that came to her she was not alone, for the period of the Revolution was one of general distress.

Phillis remained in England barely four months. In October she was back in Boston. That she was little improved may be seen from the letter to Obour Tanner, bearing date the 30th of this month:

> I hear of your welfare with pleasure; but this acquaints you that I am at present indisposed by a cold, and since my arrival have been visited by the asthma.

A postscript to this letter reads:

The young man by whom this is handed to you seems to be a very clever man, knows you very well, and is very complaisant and agreeable.

The "young man" was John Peters, afterwards to be her husband.

A great sorrow came to Phillis in the death on March 3, 1774, of her best friend, Mrs. Wheatley, then in her sixty-fifth year. How she felt about this event is best set forth in her own words in a letter addressed to Obour Tanner at Newport under date March 21, 1774:

Dear Obour, – I received your obliging letter enclosed in your Reverend Pastor's and handed me by his son. I have lately met with a great trial in the death of my mistress; let us imagine the loss of a parent, sister or brother, the tenderness of all were united in her. I was a poor little outcast and a stranger when she took me in; not only into her house, but I presently became a sharer in her most tender affections. I was treated by her more like her child than her servant; no opportunity was left unimproved of giving me the best of advice; but in terms how tender! how engaging! This I hope ever to keep in remembrance. Her exemplary life was a greater monitor than all her precepts and instructions; thus we may observe of how much greater force example is than instruction. To alleviate our sorrows we had the satisfaction to see her depart in inexpressible raptures, earnest longings, and impatient thirstings for the *upper* courts of the Lord. Do, my dear friend, remember me and this family in your

closet, that this afflicting dispensation may be sanctified to us. I am very sorry to hear that you are indisposed, but hope this will find you in better health. I have been unwell the greater part of the winter, but am much better as the spring approaches. Pray excuse my not writing you so long before, for I have been so busy lately that I could not find leisure. I shall send the 5 books you wrote for, the first convenient opportunity; if you want more they shall be ready for you. I am very affectionately your friend,

*Phillis Wheatley.*

After the death of Mrs. Wheatley Phillis seems not to have lived regularly at the old home; at least one of her letters written in 1775 was sent from Providence. For Mr. Wheatley the house must have been a sad one; his daughter was married and living in her own home, his son was living abroad, and his wife was dead. It was in this darkening period of her life, however, that a very pleasant experience came to Phillis Wheatley. This was her reception at the hands of George Washington. In 1775, while the siege of Boston was in progress, she wrote a letter to the distinguished soldier, enclosing a complimentary poem. Washington later replied as follows:

*Cambridge, Feb. 2, 1776.*

Miss Phillis, – Your favor of the 26th of October did not reach my hand till the middle of December. Time enough, you say, to have given an answer ere this. Granted. But a variety of important occurrences continually interposing

to distract the mind and to withdraw the attention, I hope, will apologize for the delay and plead my excuse for the seeming, but not real neglect. I thank you most sincerely for your polite notice of me, in the elegant lines you enclosed, and however undeserving I may be of such encomium and panegyric, the style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your poetical talents, in honor of which, and as a tribute justly due to you, I would have published the poem, had I not been apprehensive that while I only meant to give the world this new instance of your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of vanity. This and nothing else determined me not to give it place in the public prints. If you should ever come to Cambridge or near headquarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the muses, and to whom Nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations.

*I am, with great respect,*
*Your obedient humble servant,*
*George Washington.*

Not long afterwards Phillis accepted the invitation of the General and was received in Cambridge with marked courtesy by Washington and his officers.

The Wheatley home was finally broken up by the death of Mr. John Wheatley, March 12, 1778, at the age of seventy-two. After this event Phillis lived for a short time with a friend of Mrs. Wheatley, and then took an apartment and lived by herself. By April she had yielded to the blandishments of John Peters sufficiently to be persuaded to become his wife. This man is variously reported to have been a baker, a barber, a

grocer, a doctor, and a lawyer. With all of these professions and occupations, however, he seems not to have possessed the ability to make a living. He wore a wig, sported a cane, and generally felt himself superior to labor. Bereft of old friends as she was, however, sick and lonely, it is not surprising that when love and care seemed thus to present themselves the heart of the woman yielded. It was not long before she realized that she was married to a ne'er-do-well at a time when even an industrious man found it hard to make a living. The course of the Revolutionary War made it more and more difficult for people to secure the bare necessaries of life, and the horrors of Valley Forge were but an aggravation of the general distress. The year was further made memorable by the death of Mary Wheatley, Mrs. Lathrop, on the 24th of September.

When Boston fell into the hands of the British, the inhabitants fled in all directions. Mrs. Peters accompanied her husband to Wilmington, Mass., where she suffered much from poverty. After the evacuation of Boston by the British troops, she returned thither. A niece of Mrs. Wheatley, whose son had been slain in battle, received her under her own roof. This woman was a widow, was not wealthy, and kept a little school in order to support herself. Mrs. Peters and the two children whose mother she had become remained with her for six weeks. Then Peters came for his wife, having provided an apartment for her. Just before her departure for Wilmington, Mrs. Peters entrusted her papers to a daughter of the lady who received her on her return

from that place. After her death these were demanded by Peters as the property of his wife. They were of course promptly given to him. Some years afterwards he returned to the South, and nothing is known of what became of the manuscripts.

The conduct of her husband estranged Mrs. Peters from her old acquaintances, and her pride kept her from informing them of her distress. After the war, however, one of Mrs. Wheatley's relatives hunted her out and found that her two children were dead, and that a third that had been born was sick. This seems to have been in the winter of 1783-84. Nathaniel Wheatley, who had been living in London, died in the summer of 1783. In 1784 John Peters suffered imprisonment in jail. After his liberation he worked as a journeyman baker, later attempted to practice law, and finally pretended to be a physician. His wife, meanwhile, earned her board by drudgery in a cheap lodging-house on the west side of the town. Her disease made rapid progress, and she died December 5, 1784. Her last baby died and was buried with her. No one of her old acquaintances seems to have known of her death. On the Thursday after this event, however, the following notice appeared in the *Independent Chronicle*:

> Last Lord's Day, died Mrs. Phillis Peters (formerly Phillis Wheatley), aged thirty-one, known to the world by her celebrated miscellaneous poems. Her funeral is to be this afternoon, at four o'clock, from the house lately improved by Mr. Todd, nearly opposite Dr. Bulfinch's at West Boston, where her friends and acquaintances are

desired to attend.

The house referred to was situated on or near the present site of the Revere House in Bowdoin Square. The exact site of the grave of Phillis Wheatley is not known.

At the time when she was most talked about, Phillis Wheatley was regarded as a prodigy, appearing as she did at a time when the achievement of the Negro in literature and art was still negligible. Her vogue, however, was more than temporary, and the 1793, 1802, and 1816 editions of her poems found ready sale. In the early years of the last century her verses were frequently to be found in school readers. From the first, however, there were those who discounted her poetry. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, said that it was beneath the dignity of criticism. If after 1816 interest in her work declined, it was greatly revived at the time of the anti-slavery agitation, when anything indicating unusual capacity on the part of the Negro was received with eagerness. When Margaretta Matilda Odell of Jamaica Plain, a descendant of the Wheatley family, republished the poems with a memoir in 1834, there was such a demand for the book that two more editions were called for within the next three years. For a variety of reasons, especially an increasing race-consciousness on the part of the Negro, interest in her work has greatly increased within the last decade, and as copies of early editions had within recent years become so rare as to be practically inaccessible, the reprint in 1909 of the volume of 1773 by the A. M. E. Book Concern in Philadelphia was especially welcome.

Only two poems written by Phillis Wheatley after her marriage are in existence. These are "Liberty and Peace," and "An Elegy Sacred to the Memory of Dr. Samuel Cooper." Both were published in 1784. Of "Poems on Various Subjects," the following advertisement appeared in the *Boston Gazette* for January 24, 1774:

**This Day Published**

**Adorn'd with an Elegant Engraving of the Author,**

**(Price 3s. 4d. L. M. Bound,)**

**POEMS**

**on various subjects, – Religious and Moral,**

**By Phillis Wheatley, a Negro Girl**

**Sold by Mess's Cox & Berry,**

**at their Store, in King-Street, Boston**

of these, however, must be excluded from the enumeration, as it is simply "A Rebus by I. B.," which serves as the occasion of Phillis Wheatley's poem, the answer to it. Fourteen of the poems are elegiac, and at least six others are occasional. Two are paraphrases from the Bible. We are thus left with sixteen poems to represent the best that Phillis Wheatley had produced by the time she was twenty years old. One of the longest of these is "Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo, from Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book VI, and from a View of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson." This poem contains two interesting examples of personification (neither of which seems to be drawn from Ovid), "fate portentous whistling in the air," and "the feather'd vengeance quiv'ring in his hands," though the point might easily be made that these are little more than a part of the pseudo-classic tradition. The poem, "To S. M., a Young African Painter, on seeing his works," was addressed to Scipio Moorhead, a young man who exhibited some talent for drawing and who was a servant of the Rev. John Moorhead of Boston. From the poem we should infer that one of his subjects was the story of Damon and Pythias. Of prime importance are the two or three poems of autobiographical interest. We have already remarked "On Being Brought from Africa to America." In the lines addressed to William, Earl of Dartmouth, the young woman spoke again from her personal experience. Important also in this connection is the poem "On Virtue," with its plea:

Attend me, Virtue, thro' my youthful years!
O leave me not to the false joys of time!
But guide my steps to endless life and bliss.

One would suppose that Phillis Wheatley would make of "An Hymn to Humanity" a fairly strong piece of work. It is typical of the restraint under which she labored that this is one of the most conventional things in the volume. All critics agree, however, that the strongest lines in the book are those entitled "On Imagination." This effort is more sustained than the others, and it is the leading poem that Edmund Clarence Stedman chose to represent Phillis Wheatley in his "Library of American Literature." The following lines are representative of its quality:

Imagination! Who can sing thy force?
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
Soaring through air to find the bright abode,
Th' empyreal palace of the thundering God,
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
And leave the rolling universe behind:
From star to star the mental optics rove,
Measure the skies, and range the realms above;
There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
Or with new worlds amaze th' unbounded soul.

Hardly beyond this is "Liberty and Peace," the best example of the later verse. The poem is too long for inclusion here, but may be found in Duyckinck's "Cyclopedia of American Literature,"

and Heartman and Schomburg's collected edition of the Poems and Letters.

It is unfortunate that, imitating Pope, Phillis Wheatley more than once fell into his pitfalls. Her diction – "fleecy care," "vital breath," "feather'd race" – is distinctly pseudo-classic. The construction is not always clear; for instance, in the poem, "To Mæcenas," there are three distinct references to Virgil, when grammatically the poetess seems to be speaking of three different men. Then, of course, any young writer working under the influence of Pope and his school would feel a sense of repression. If Phillis Wheatley had come on the scene forty years later, when the romantic writers had given a new tone to English poetry, she would undoubtedly have been much greater. Even as it was, however, she made her mark, and her place in the history of American literature, though not a large one, is secure.

Hers was a great soul. Her ambition knew no bounds, her thirst for knowledge was insatiable, and she triumphed over the most adverse circumstances. A child of the wilderness and a slave, by her grace and culture she satisfied the conventionalities of Boston and of England. Her brilliant conversation was equaled only by her modest demeanor. Everything about her was refined. More and more as one studies her life he becomes aware of her sterling Christian character. In a dark day she caught a glimpse of the eternal light, and it was meet that the first Negro woman in American literature should be one of unerring piety and the highest of literary ideals.

# III
# PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

INCOMPARABLY the foremost exponent in verse of the life and character of the Negro people has been Paul Laurence Dunbar. This gifted young poet represented perfectly the lyric and romantic quality of the race, with its moodiness, its abandon, its love of song, and its pathetic irony, and his career has been the inspiration of thousands of the young men and women whose problems he had to face, and whose aspirations he did so much to realize.

Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, June 27, 1872. His parents were uneducated but earnest hard-working people, and throughout his life the love of the poet for his mother was ever a dominating factor. From very early years Dunbar made little attempts at rhyming; but what he afterwards called his first poetical achievement was his recitation of some original verses at a Sunday School Easter celebration when he was thirteen years old. He attended the Steele High School in Dayton, where he was the only Negro student in his class; and by reason of his modest and yet magnetic personality, he became very popular with his schoolmates. In his second year he became a member of the literary society of the school, afterwards became president of the same, as well as editor of *The High School Times*, a

monthly student publication, and on his completion of the course in 1891 he composed the song for his class. Somewhat irregularly for the next two or three years Dunbar continued his studies, but he never had the advantage of a regular college education. On leaving the high school, after vainly seeking for something better, he accepted a position as elevator boy, working for four dollars a week. In 1893, at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he was given a position by Frederick Douglass, who was in charge of the exhibit from Hayti. "Oak and Ivy" appeared in 1893, and "Majors and Minors" in 1895. These little books were privately printed; Dunbar had to assume full responsibility for selling them, and not unnaturally he had many bitter hours of discouragement. Asking people to buy his verses grated on his sensitive nature, and he once declared to a friend that he would never sell another book. Sometimes, however, he succeeded beyond his highest hopes, and gradually, with the assistance of friends, chief among whom was Dr. H. A. Tobey, of Toledo, the young poet came into notice as a reader of his verses. William Dean Howells wrote a full-page review of his poems in the issue of *Harper's Weekly* that contained an account of William McKinley's first nomination for the presidency. Dunbar was now fairly launched upon his larger fame, and "Lyrics of Lowly Life," published by Dodd, Mead & Co. in 1896, introduced him to the wider reading public. This book is deservedly the poet's best known. It contained the richest work of his youth and was really never surpassed. In 1897 Dunbar enhanced his reputation as

a reader of his own poems by a visit to England. About this time he was very busy, writing numerous poems and magazine articles, and meeting with a success that was so much greater than that of most of the poets of the day that it became a vogue. In October, 1897, through the influence of Robert G. Ingersoll, he secured employment as an assistant in the reading room of the Library of Congress, Washington; but he gave up this position after a year, for the confinement and his late work at night on his own account were making rapid inroads upon his health. On March 6, 1898, Dunbar was married to Alice Ruth Moore, of New Orleans, who also had become prominent as a writer. Early in 1899 he went South, visiting Tuskegee and other schools, and giving many readings. Later in the same year he went to Colorado in a vain search for health. Books were now appearing in rapid succession, short story collections and novels as well as poems. "The Uncalled," written in London, reflected the poet's thought of entering the ministry. It was followed by "The Love of Landry," a Colorado story; "The Fanatics," and "The Sport of the Gods." Collections of short stories were, "Folks from Dixie," "The Strength of Gideon," "In Old Plantation Days," and "The Heart of Happy Hollow." Volumes of verse were "Lyrics of the Hearthside," "Lyrics of Love and Laughter," "Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow," as well as several specially illustrated volumes. Dunbar bought a home in Dayton, where he lived with his mother. His last years were a record of sincere friendships and a losing fight against disease. He died February 9, 1906. He

was only thirty-three, but he "had existed millions of years."

Unless his novels are considered as forming a distinct class, Dunbar's work falls naturally into three divisions: the poems in classic English, those in dialect, and the stories in prose. It was his work in the Negro dialect that was his distinct contribution to American literature. That this was not his desire may be seen from the eight lines entitled, "The Poet," in which he longed for success in the singing of his "deeper notes" and spoke of his dialect as "a jingle in a broken tongue." Any criticism of Dunbar's classic English verse will have to reckon with the following poems: "Ere Sleep Comes Down to Soothe the Weary Eyes," "The Poet and His Song," "Life," "Promise and Fulfillment," "Ships That Pass in the Night," and "October." In the pure flow of lyrical verse the poet rarely surpassed his early lines:[1]

> Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
> How questioneth the soul that other soul —
> The inner sense which neither cheats nor lies,
> But self exposes unto self, a scroll
> Full writ with all life's acts unwise or wise,
> In characters indelible and known;
> So, trembling with the shock of sad surprise,

[1] As stated in the Preface, we are under obligations to Dodd, Mead & Co. for permission to use the quotations from Dunbar. These are covered by copyright by this firm, as follows: "Ere Sleep Comes Down to Soothe the Weary Eyes," "The Poet and his Song," and "Life," 1896; "Lullaby," 1899; and "Compensation," 1905.

The soul doth view its awful self alone,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes.

"The Poet and his Song" is also distinguished for its simplicity and its lyric quality:

A song is but a little thing,
And yet what joy it is to sing!
In hours of toil it gives me zest,
And when at eve I long for rest;
When cows come home along the bars,
And in the fold I hear the bell,
As night, the Shepherd, herds his stars,
I sing my song, and all is well.

* * * * *

Sometimes the sun, unkindly hot,
My garden makes a desert spot;
Sometimes a blight upon the tree
Takes all the fruit away from me;
And then with throes of bitter pain
Rebellious passions rise and swell;
But life is more than fruit or grain,
And so I sing, and all is well.

The two stanzas entitled "Life" have probably been quoted more than any other lines written by the poet:

A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,
A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,
A pint of joy to a peck of trouble,
And never a laugh but the moans come double;
And that is life.

A crust and a corner that love makes precious,
With a smile to warm and the tears to refresh us;
And joy seems sweeter when cares come after,
And a moan is the finest of foils for laughter;
And that is life.

"Promise and Fulfillment" was especially admired by Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske, who frequently recited it with never-failing applause. Of the poet's own reading of "Ships that Pass in the Night" on one occasion, Brand Whitlock wrote: "That last evening he recited – oh! what a voice he had – his 'Ships that Pass in the Night.' I can hear him now and see the expression on his fine face as he said, 'Passing! Passing!' It was prophetic."

Other pieces, no more distinguished in poetic quality, are of special biographical interest. "Robert Gould Shaw" was the expression of pessimism as to the Negro's future in America. "To Louise" was addressed to the young daughter of Dr. Tobey, who, on one occasion, when the poet was greatly depressed, in

the simple way of a child cheered him by her gift of a rose. "The Monk's Walk" reflects the poet's thought of being a preacher. Finally, there is the swan song, "Compensation," contributed to *Lippincott's*, eight exquisite lines:

> Because I had loved so deeply,
> Because I had loved so long,
> God in his great compassion
> Gave me the gift of song.
>
> Because I have loved so vainly,
> And sung with such faltering breath,
> The Master in infinite mercy
> Offers the boon of Death.

The dialect poems suffer by quotation, being artistic primarily as wholes. Of these, by common consent, the masterpiece is, "When Malindy Sings," a poem inspired by the singing of the poet's mother. Other pieces in dialect that have proved unusually successful, especially as readings, are "The Rivals," "A Coquette Conquered," "The Ol' Tunes," "A Corn-Song," "When de Co'n Pone's Hot," "How Lucy Backslid," "The Party," "At Candle-Lightin' Time," "Angelina," "Whistling Sam," "Two Little Boots," and "The Old Front Gate." Almost all of these poems represent the true humorist's blending of humor and pathos, and all of them exemplify the delicate and sympathetic irony of which Dunbar was such a master. As representative

of the dialect verse at its best, attention might be called to a little poem that was included in the illustrated volume, "Candle-Lightin' Time," but that, strangely enough, was omitted from both of the larger editions of the poems, very probably because the title, "Lullaby," was used more than once by the poet:

Kiver up yo' haid, my little lady,
Hyeah de win' a-blowin' out o' do's,
Don' you kick, ner projick wid de comfo't,
Less'n fros'll bite yo' little toes.
Shut yo' eyes, an' snuggle up to mammy;
Gi' me bofe yo' han's, I hol' 'em tight;
Don' you be afeard, an' 'mence to trimble
Des ez soon ez I blows out de light.

Angels is a-mindin' you, my baby,
Keepin' off de Bad Man in de night.
Whut de use o' bein' skeered o' nuffin'?
You don' fink de da'kness gwine to bite?
Whut de crackin' soun' you hyeah erroun' you? —
Lawsy, chile, you tickles me to def! —
Dat's de man what brings de fros', a-paintin'
Picters on de winder wid his bref.

Mammy ain' afeard, you hyeah huh laughin'?
Go 'way, Mistah Fros', you can't come in;
Baby ain' erceivin' folks dis evenin',
Reckon dat you'll have to call ag'in.

Curl yo' little toes up so, my 'possum —
Umph, but you's a cunnin' one fu' true! —
Go to sleep, de angels is a-watchin',
An' yo' mammy's mindin' of you, too.

The short stories of Dunbar would have been sufficient to make his reputation, even if he had not written his poems. One of the best technically is "Jimsella," from the "Folks from Dixie" volume. This story exhibits the pathos of the life of unskilled Negroes in the North, and the leading of a little child. In the sureness with which it moves to its conclusion it is a beautiful work of art. "A Family Feud" shows the influence of an old servant in a wealthy Kentucky family. In similar vein is "Aunt Tempe's Triumph." "The Walls of Jericho" is an exposure of the methods of a sensational preacher. Generally these stories attempt no keen satire, but only a faithful portrayal of conditions as they are, or, in most cases, as they were in ante-bellum days. Dunbar's novels are generally weaker than his short stories, though "The Sport of the Gods," because of its study of a definite phase of life, rises above the others. Nor are his occasional articles especially strong. He was eminently a lyric poet. By his graceful and beautiful verse it is that he has won a distinct place in the history of American literature.

By his genius Paul Laurence Dunbar attracted the attention of the great, the wise, and the good. His bookcase contained many autograph copies of the works of distinguished contemporaries. The similarity of his position in American literature to that of

Burns in English has frequently been pointed out. In our own time he most readily invites comparison with James Whitcomb Riley. The writings of both men are distinguished by infinite tenderness and pathos. But above all worldly fame, above even the expression of a struggling people's heart, was the poet's own striving for the unattainable. There was something heroic about him withal, something that links him with Keats, or, in this latter day, with Rupert Brooke and Alan Seeger. He yearned for love, and the world rushed on; then he smiled at death and was universally loved.

# IV
# CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT, the best known novelist and short story writer of the race, was born in Cleveland, Ohio, June 20, 1858. At the age of sixteen he began to teach in the public schools of North Carolina, from which state his parents had gone to Cleveland; and at the age of twenty-three he became principal of the State Normal School at Fayetteville. In 1883 he left the South, engaging for a short while in newspaper work in New York City, but going soon to Cleveland, where he worked as a stenographer. He was admitted to the bar in 1887.

While in North Carolina Mr. Chesnutt studied to good purpose the dialect, manners, and superstitions of the Negro people of the state. In 1887 he began in the *Atlantic Monthly* the series of stories which was afterwards brought together in the volume entitled, "The Conjure Woman." This book was published by the Houghton Mifflin Co., the firm which published also Mr. Chesnutt's other collection of stories and the first two of his three novels. "The Wife of his Youth, and Other Stories of the Color-Line" appeared in 1899. In the same year appeared a compact biography of Frederick Douglass, a contribution to the Beacon Biographies of Eminent Americans. Three novels have since appeared, as follows: "The House Behind

the Cedars" (1900); "The Marrow of Tradition" (1901); and "The Colonel's Dream" (1905).

Mr. Chesnutt's short stories are not all of the same degree of excellence, but the best ones show that he is fully master of the short story as a literary form. One of the best technically is "The Bouquet." This is a story of the devotion of a little Negro girl to her white teacher, and shows clearly how the force of Southern prejudice might forbid the expression of simple love not only in a representative home, but even when the object of the devotion is borne to the cemetery. "The Sheriff's Children" is a tragic tale of the relations of a white father with his illegitimate colored son. Most famous of all these stories, however, is "The Wife of his Youth," a simple work of art of great intensity. It is a tale of a very fair colored man who, just before the Civil War, by the aid of his Negro wife, makes his way from slavery in Missouri to freedom in a Northern city, Groveland [Cleveland?]. After the years have brought to him business success and culture, and he has become the acknowledged leader of his social circle and the prospective husband of a very attractive young widow, his wife suddenly appears on the scene. The story ends with Mr. Ryder's acknowledging before a company of guests the wife of his youth. Such stories as these, each setting forth a certain problem and working it out to its logical conclusion, reflect great credit upon the literary skill of the writer.

Of the novels, "The House Behind the Cedars" is commonly given first place. In the story of the heroine, Rena Walden, are

treated some of the most subtle and searching questions raised by the color-line. Rena is sought in love by three men, George Tryon, a white man, whose love fails when put to the test; Jeff Wain, a coarse and brutal mulatto, and Frank Fowler, a devoted young Negro, who makes every sacrifice demanded by love. The novel, especially in its last pages, moves with an intensity that is an unmistakable sign of power. It is Mr. Chesnutt's most sustained treatment of the subject for which he has become best known, that is, the delicate and tragic situation of those who live on the border-line of the races; and it is the best work of fiction yet written by a member of the race in America. In "The Marrow of Tradition" the main theme is the relations of two women, one white and one colored, whose father, the same white man, had in time been married to the mother of each. The novel touches upon almost every phase of the Negro Problem. It is a powerful plea, but perhaps too much a novel of purpose to satisfy the highest standards of art. The Wellington of the story is very evidently Wilmington, N. C., and the book was written immediately after the race troubles in that city in 1898. "The Colonel's Dream" is a sad story of the failure of high ideals. Colonel Henry French is a man who, born in the South, achieves success in New York and returns to his old home for a little vacation, only to find himself face to face with all the problems that one meets in a backward Southern town. "He dreamed of a regenerated South, filled with thriving industries, and thronged with a prosperous and happy people, where every man, having enough for his needs,

was willing that every other man should have the same; where law and order should prevail unquestioned, and where every man could enter, through the golden door of hope, the field of opportunity, where lay the prizes of life, which all might have an equal chance to win or lose." Becoming interested in the injustice visited upon the Negroes in the courts, and in the employment of white children in the cotton-mills, Colonel French encounters opposition to his benevolent plans, opposition which finally sends him back to New York defeated. Mr. Chesnutt writes in simple, clear English, and his methods might well be studied by younger writers who desire to treat, in the guise of fiction, the many searching questions that one meets to-day in the life of the South.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.