

IRWIN RUSSELL

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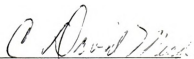
Irwin Russell

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Donald Kenneth Hanzek

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ABSTRACT

IRWIN RUSSELL

By

Donald K. Hanzek

My major purpose is two-fold: to propose a new reading of Irwin Russell's works based on the premise that he was essentially a satirist; and to suggest that Russell, rather than being a "faithful and sympathetic" delineator of the Southern Negro, actually contributed to the conventional stereotypes. In support of my theses I have relied heavily on manuscripts, letters, and papers in the Maurice Garland Fulton Collection in Special Collections at the University of Arizona. Principal among these is a series of over three-score letters written to a correspondent in Indiana during his most productive years.

As evidence I have attempted to place Russell in proper historical perspective. Reconstruction-era Southern whites were aware of Northern apathy and antipathy toward the Negro; consequently, they created stereotypes calculated to exploit these emotions. As Russell was in the mainstream of this movement, it follows that he, too, was hardly concerned with the accurate portrayal of the freedman. Therefore Russell depicted the Negro not as he was, but as the South preferred to see him.

I also suggest that Russell was a satirist of no mean ability and that his natural inclination was toward insight into the foibles of mankind. Consequently, I adopted the following course:

1. I have examined his letters and noted his marked preference for, and knowledge of, the old satirists.



2. I have defined satire by assimilating the commonly held tenets of noted critics in this genre.
3. I have exemplified each satirical device with an excerpt from his letters to illustrate his competence and to suggest this as his customary mode of thought.
4. I have applied these critical dicta to his non-Negro dialect works to further demonstrate the pervasiveness of the satirical element.
5. I then applied the same criteria to his Negro dialect poems.

This evidence indicates that Russell was a satirist who employed his talent to further the stereotyped "comic Negro."

This stereotype and two others--the carefree, irresponsible, naturally inferior Negro, contented with his role, and interested in neither freedom nor equality; and the "faithful" retainer, loyal to "Massa" even after Emancipation--were then uncovered as appearing in the works of selected twentieth century writers. Consequently the enduring quality of these stereotypes may be perceived.

The inescapable conclusion is that Russell was a satirist; that he used his satire to ridicule the Negro; and that he created stereotypes which influenced the Northern mind for at least half of a century. I do not, then, dispute either Russell's influence or position in American letters; indeed, I contend that as an artist, he has been slighted. But I cannot agree that Irwin Russell was the "faithful" delineator of the American Negro in the South.



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INTRODUCTION

I have deviated from the customary reading of Irwin Russell's works as accurately depicting the Southern Negro during Reconstruction. I have instead adhered to W. E. B. Dubois' dictum and examined them "as though Negroes were ordinary human beings." Consequently, I have suggested a new reading based on the premise that he was a gifted satirist and that, rather than being the "faithful" delineator of the Negro, he contributed to stereotypes which prevailed well into the twentieth century.

In advancing this interpretation, I have relied extensively on previously inaccessible material in the Maurice Garland Fulton Collection in Special Collections at the University of Arizona Library. Among the most important papers are Professor Fulton's typescript copies of letters written by Russell to a lady in Indiana (For the provenance of these letters, see Appendix A). This correspondence, evolving from an advertisement which Russell had placed in the Cincinnati Enquirer, consists of sixty-three letters and one post-card and encompasses more than three years, from August 25, 1875, to December 22, 1878.

The letters range over a broad spectrum of topics, including religion, politics, philosophy, current events, local affairs, literature, and the Negro problem. They are especially valuable as Russell had evidently fallen into the habit of confiding in his unseen correspondent, for many of the letters are extremely personal. Moreover, on several occasions Russell explicitly confessed this tendency. In a letter



dated March 23, 1878, Russell wrote: "I tell you a great many things that I never think of mentioning to others, . . . I have got to regarding you as my one friend." Later (July 27, 1878), he declared: "I know that I have no friend to whom I talk as I write to you. And I never did have." Finally (October 28, 1878), he confided: "Now, I do not ever talk to people as I write to you. . . . I have insensibly fallen into a way of making my letters to you expressions of my feelings and thoughts, just as they come."

From these excerpts it seems reasonable to infer that the letters reflect his real thoughts on a variety of subjects; consequently, they are invaluable to a study of Russell.



Chapter I

Irwin Russell: Southerner

My! how my fame rings out in every zone--
A thousand critics shouting--"He's unknown."
Ambrose Bierce

I

Irwin Russell, a Mississippi poet during the Reconstruction, is a relatively unknown figure in the North. In the South, however, he has been singularly honored. The State of Mississippi distinguished him by having his the first marble bust of a literary figure to be placed in the Mississippi Hall of Fame. Moreover, the State accentuated the tribute by the official proclamation of an "Irwin Russell Week." And his native townsmen further commemorated the poet by dedicating two memorials in his honor: a building and a bridge.¹

But Russell's literary stature does not rely upon such obtrusive, material memorials as these. He has secured a position in literary history both as an artist of some talent and as an important influence on more widely known Southern writers. For it was Russell who first exploited and then popularized a subject and genre which later served as a nearly inexhaustible fount for Southern writers: the Southern Negro dialect poem. In these he also exerted an influence on the Northern mind, imposing impressions of Negro character that would persist well into the twentieth century and serve the South as well in its struggle to retain white supremacy.

¹ Maggie Williams Musgrove, "Proclamation Concerning Irwin Russell Memorial," Port Gibson Reveille, LIII (October 31, 1929), 1.



If, as Paul H. Buck posits, all Southern literature after the Civil War "contained a persuasive dogma of defense" and either explicitly or implicitly attempted to enlist the readers' sympathies for the lost cause of the confederacy,² then Russell's role as precursor in the school depicting the Southern Negro acquires added stature. For his facile pen painted many of the stereotyped Negro character traits which were later to recur in films as well as literature. The three most important stereotypes are: the happy-go-lucky, carefree, irresponsible Negro contented with his lot and secure in the care and affection of the Southern whites; the faithful retainer, a myth dear to Southern hearts; and, more importantly, in a sense previously overlooked by his critics, satiric caricatures of ignorant, amoral, absurd beings whom no reasonable white Northerner could possibly consider the equal--intellectually, politically, or socially--of any Caucasian.

I have referred to Russell as the premier exponent of the Southern Negro dialect poen; and, for many years, critics attributed this distinction to the young Mississippian. In 1889 C. Alphonso Smith noted that Russell's "priority in the fictional use of Negro dialect has been frequently emphasized."³ In 1906 Carl Holliday praised Russell's use of dialect as a "bold innovation" which "taught Southern writers that their 'acres of diamonds' were at home."⁴

² The Road to Reunion: 1865-1900 (Boston, 1947), p. 209.

³ "The Historical Element in Recent Southern Literature," Publication of Mississippi Historical Society, 11 (1899), 9.

⁴ A History of Southern Literature (New York, 1906), p. 368.



Alfred Allen Kern in 1916 flatly stated "he put the Southern negro into Southern literature" and emphasized that it was "Russell's distinction to have discovered both a new literary form--the negro dialect poen--and also a new literary field--the negro--that has since become the most widely cultivated of all the fields in Southern literature."⁵ As recently as 1933, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in a feature article displayed in bold type the sub-title: "Irwin Russell Was the First American to Use the Negro Dialect in Literary Form."⁶ And the December 1939 volume of the Southern Literary Messenger contained a lengthy article by G. William Nott entitled "Irwin Russell, First Dialect Author." Even in 1968 the editors of a Southern anthology recognized Russell as "the first to realize the literary pssibilities of the Negro in southern Mississippi."⁷ Clearly then Russell has long enjoyed the reputation of pre-eminence in the use of Southern Negro dialect in literature.

Despite these accolades, Russell was not the first to utilize the Negro dialect poen as a mode of literary expression. Sidney Lanier had already published poems in Negro dialect in Scribner's Monthly Magazine, Russell's favorite outlet, nearly a year prior to the appearance of Russell's first effort in January of 1876. And even Lanier had a predecessor. Thomas Dunn English had published dialect poems in the "Bric-a-brac" section of Scribner's in 1871. Therefore

⁵ "Biographical Notes on Irwin Russell," Texas Review, II (1916), 140.

⁶ The St. Louis Post-Dispatch (January 1, 1933), 7.

⁷ The Literature of the South, ed. Thomas D. Young et al. (Chicago, 1968), p. 434

any adherence to Russell's chronological priority in the field obviously becomes untenable. Nevertheless, it was Russell's poetry that occupied a prominent position in Scribner's during the latter half of the decade. The list of Russell's contributions to this magazine--not by any means his sole source for publication--is impressive. Beginning with "Uncle Cap Interviewed" in January, 1876, Russell published twenty-eight individual works in the Scribner's Monthly Magazine in a period spanning less than five years. Every volume in the collection edition of the magazine from Volume XI to Volume XX includes at least one piece by Russell. Some contain several. Volume XVIII (May - October 1879), for instance, carries nine contributions by Russell. Although not the first to use the Southern Negro dialect, Russell was assuredly effective as indicated by his continued popularity with the Scribner's editors. Perhaps the best indication of Russell's enduring reputation in the field lies in each critic's acknowledgement of Russell's status before nominating a new poet as the innovator of Negro dialect in literature.⁸

Russell's enduring reputation undoubtedly rests to a great extent on the lavish praise bestowed on him by Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page. Rarely does any critic omit Harris' eulogy which prefaced the 1888 collection of Russell's poems. The importance of this introduction can be readily discerned in its retention by a later editor, Maurice Garland Fulton, in his 1917 edition, Christmas Night in the Quarters. In this oft-quoted tribute, Harris distinguished Russell as "among the first--if not the very first--of Southern writers to appreciate the literary possibilities of the Negro

⁸ See, for example, Buck, The Road to Reunion, p. 201.



character." This is high praise indeed from the creator of Uncle Remus .

Page added even more luster to Russell's reputation. He dedicated his and Armistead Gordon's volume Befo'de War: Echoes in Negro Dialect to Irwin Russell "who awoke the first echo." And in "The One Mourner," one of Page's Negro spokesmen laments the death of "Marse Irwin" who:

. . .couldn't a' talked so nachal
'Bout niggers in sorrow and joy,
Widdouten he had a black mammy
To sing to him 'long ez a boy.

In addition, Page directly acknowledged his indebtedness to Russell. Maurice Fulton quotes Page: "Personally I owe much to him. It was the light of his genius shining through his dialect poems,--then and still first,--that led my feet in the direction I have tried to follow."⁹ As the volume by Page and Gordon appeared in the same year, 1888, as that of the first collection of Russell's poems, one may of course, suspect some sentimental exaggeration in such an effusive acknowledgement. However, many similarities between the two Southerners do exist. The broad correspondence in the use of dialect, the emphasis on the Negro, and the monologue for character revelation are obvious. Volume XIII (November 1876 - April 1877) of Scribner's Monthly, for instance, carries a short poem by Page, "Uncle Gabe's White Folks," which bears a remarkable resemblance to one by Russell in Volume XI (November 1875 - April 1876) of the same magazine.

⁹ Maurice Garland Fulton, ed. "Irwin Russell," Christmas Night in the Quarters and Other Poems by Irwin Russell (New York, 1917), p. xiv. Hereafter cited as Christmas Night in the Quarters.



Technically, both are dramatic monologues with nearly identical openings: an aged faithful retainer's commonplace observations on his personal well-being. Thematically, both ring a nostalgic note for the "ole days," although the sentiment is much more pervasive in Page than Russell. Finally, both poems emphasize the Negro's religious bent. The poems, of course, also contain numerous dissimilarities which reflect the individual temperaments of the authors. Russell's characteristically whimsical tone permeates his poem while Page's customarily sentimental view shades his.

Thus have two of the South's premier writers of Negro dialect literature attributed precedence and personal indebtedness to Irwin Russell. Russell's importance can also be inferred from his perennial inclusion in various Southern literature anthologies. Even on a popular level Russell remains attractive to the Southern mind. For in 1954 Dietz Press of Richmond, Virginia, advertised a monograph, Christmas Night in the Quarters, the "great Southern classic," as the ideal Christmas gift. Perhaps Professor Kern, in an unpublished article, best assessed Russell's stature: "a knowledge of the importance of Irwin Russell in the development of Southern literature is as necessary to him who would thoroughly understand that literature as is a knowledge of Anglo-Saxon to him who would thoroughly understand English grammar."¹⁰

One should not infer from the above that the Negro did not appear in Southern literature prior to 1870. However, his appearance had

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Maurice Garland Fulton Collection in the University of Arizona Library (Tucson), Box 8, Folder 4. Hereafter cited as the Fulton Collection. No part of this collection may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the University of Arizona.

been limited and always in a minor role. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug" provides an appropriate example, for Russell admired Poe "as our greatest writer, beyond doubt."¹¹ In this tale Jupiter, the manumitted servant of Legrand, serves principally as a form of comic relief, and in essence, exemplifies Forster's definition of a "flat" character. Although he has also a dramatic and a technical function--character revelation and the performance of menial tasks, he is summarily dismissed from the last pages which include the denouement.

Even in his minor role, Jupiter reveals the persistence of the Negro stereotype in the Southern mind. For he exhibits many of the same characteristics later displayed by Russell's Negroes. He is superstitious--afraid of the "berry hebby bug" which might cause the limb to break, although the wood is sound enough to bear "de weight of one nigger." He is ignorant--his inability to distinguish left from right results in added suspense and labor; indeed, the last major reference to Jupiter remarks his ignorance. He is utterly devoted to "Massa Will" and "could be induced, neither by threats nor by violence to leave Legrand. Even his speech bears many similarities to Russell's use of dialect. Jupiter's speeches are replete with double negatives, mispronunciations, lack of agreement, apharaersis, faulty use of case, especially with personal pronouns, and malapropisms. That Russell had read Poe's tale can be readily proven. In a letter to his cousin,

¹¹ "Letters to a Lady in Indiana," Part II of the unpublished Mississippi Sketches and Letters, ed. Maurice G. Fulton in the Fulton Collection, Box 7, Folder 2, Letter No. 27. Further references to this correspondence are from the same source and will be parenthetically cited by letter number only.

Clara Russell, he berated Poe's old pirate for being "rather silly, to use a cipher that was so simple and so easily read."¹²

Obviously then Southern literature before 1870 did include Negroes, but, as with Poe, usually in a minor capacity.¹³ Therefore William Malone Baskervill's judgment remains essentially correct: "in the racy, humorous writings of Longstreet, Thompson, Meek, and others . . . the negro is conspicuous for his absence."¹⁴

As documented above, Russell's reputation of primacy and influence owes a great deal to the words of Harris and Page. These two Southerners have also been responsible for the major trend in critical interpretation of the young poet's works. Nearly all of his critics have followed their lead in adjudging him a faithful and sympathetic delineator of the Negro. Baskervill quoted both Harris and Page at length.¹⁵ Fulton retained Harris' preface and further reiterated Harris' judgment in his own introduction to Christmas Night in the Quarters, stressing Russell's "faithful and sincere delineation of Negro character."¹⁶ W. L. Weber remarked Russell's "true picture of Negro life" and also cited Harris and Page.¹⁷ A. Smith echoed

¹² Fulton Collection, Box 8, Folder 1.

¹³ For a brief survey, see Sterling Brown, The Negro in American Fiction and Negro Poetry and Drama (New York, 1969), pp. 5-15.

¹⁴ Southern Writers: Biographical and Critical Studies (Nashville, 1902), I, 3.

¹⁵ Baskervill, p. 18.

¹⁶ Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. xiv.

¹⁷ "Irwin Russell: First Fruits of the Southern Romantic Movement," Publications of Mississippi Historical Society, II (1889), 20.



Harris while emphasizing Russell's historical role in perpetuating "the peculiar life of a people" in a Southern literature which was "to become a true reproduction of Southern conditions."¹⁸ James Wilson Webb, in an unpublished thesis, stressed Russell's "unusually realistic and detailed" portrayal of Negro character.¹⁹ And even more recently, Mrs. L. D. S. Harrell noted that Russell was "peculiarly fitted to present the Mississippi Negro of the 1870's with fidelity and sympathy."²⁰ Neither these critics, nor any others, have ever deviated from this consistent interpretation of Russell's works as nearly photographic representations of the Reconstruction Negro. Perhaps the redundancy of this scholarship can be best perceived in two major reviews of Russell's collected works. Reviewers separated by a thirty-years' time interval both began their articles in precisely the same manner, quoting J. C. Harris: "I do not know where could be found to-day a happier or more perfect representation of Negro Character."²¹

II

Despite the almost universal acceptance of Harris' judgment, self-admittedly "the opinion of an uncritical mind,"²² I believe the

¹⁸ Smith, Publ. Miss. Hist. Soc., 11, 9.

¹⁹ "New Biographical Material, Criticism, and Uncollected Writings of Irwin Russell" (University of North Carolina, 1940, p. 71.

²⁰ "A Bibliography of Irwin Russell with a Biographical Sketch," Journal of Mississippi History, VIII (1946), 3.

²¹ "Reviews: Irwin Russell's Poems," The Critic, X (October 27, 1880), 200; and

"Review," The Sewanee Review Quarterly, xxvi (1918), 124.

²² Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. x.



critics have erred. I submit the following as the bases for my contention: first, nearly all of the Russell critics present a limited perspective, essentially a Southern point of view. Northern critics usually mention Russell only briefly, if at all. Van Wyck Brooks serves as representative example. He accedes that Russell demonstrated the value of the Negro as literary material but limits his critical opinion to commenting that Russell was "rather overpraised."²³ Significantly, Brooks does not characterize Russell's Negro portraits as either accurate or sympathetic. Second, while they almost unanimously place Russell in the forefront of Southern literature, "a true reproduction of Southern conditions," they fail to consider the necessary corollary to this assessment: Russell was also in the mainstream of Southern thought. Certainly Southern thought in the 1870's exhibited a far greater interest in keeping the Negro "in his place" than it did in his sympathetic portrayal. Few Southern writers deviated from this current of Southern thought. One who did, George Washington Cable, found it expedient to remove from Louisiana to Massachusetts.²⁴ Third, Russell was a satirist. Northrop Frye has remarked: "The use an age makes of satire depends on its own problems."²⁵ As the South's major problem was the Negro question, it seems logical to assume that Russell would devote his talent to the issue.

²³ The Times of Melville and Whitman (New York, 1947), p. 363.

²⁴ Rayford W. Logan, The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901 (New York, 1954), p. 163.

²⁵ "The Nature of Satire," Satire: Theory and Practice, eds. Charles A. Allen and George D. Stephens (Belmont, California, 1962), p. 29.



The Southern genesis of Russell criticism requires little verification. Joel Chandler Harris of Georgia and Virginia's Thomas Nelson Page have attained notable positions among the highest rank of Southern writers. Maurice Garland Fulton has an impressive Southern heritage: his father, Robert B. Fulton, served as Chancellor of the University of Mississippi, and his maternal grandfather, Landon C. Garland, was the first to hold the identical position at Vanderbilt University. C. Alphonso Smith, born in North Carolina, was for many years the Edgar Allan Poe Professor of English at the University of Virginia; and William Lander Weber, also born in North Carolina, the Bishop George F. Pierce Professor of English at Emory College and later president of Centenary College of Louisiana. Many of the contributors to Russell scholarship are of local origin. Mrs. L.D.S. Harrell, a research assistant at the Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi, is a former resident of Russell's birthplace, Port Gibson. James W. Webb taught in Port Gibson. And Mrs. Maggie Musgrove, a prolific writer about Russell's life, also resided in Port Gibson.

Russell, despite his important contribution to literature, remains a local figure. Therefore, one could expect the criticism of his works to be parochial in nature. And, as noted above, it is. Unfortunately this Southern bias does not argue well for an objective evaluation of his poetry.

I must also note that the characteristic tone of Russell criticism became established in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. This period's significance lies in the mass of anti-Negro literature, which, perhaps, reached the epitome in Thomas Dixon's The Leopard's



spots (1903). The vehemence of the anti-Negro sentiment during the period caused C. Vann Woodward to characterize--or stigmatize--the era as the crest of racism.²⁶ Within a year of Dixon's novel Baskervill inc l u d e d Russell in his volume on Southern writers. James Webb has not e d the importance of this article, calling it "probably the best crit i c a l study made of the poet."²⁷ A. C. Smith's historically or i e n t e d commentary was published in 1899, and his judgment remained bas i c a l l y unchanged in a later contribution to the Cambridge History of American Literature. Kern wrote articles in 1907, 1916, and 1917, a l l retaining essentially the same thesis. And W. Lander Weber's essay pl a c i n g Russell in the forefront of the Southern romantic movement a p p e a r e d in 1899.

I do not suggest that these men were racists, although Harris had w r i t t e n some "venomous" racist material in the Atlanta C o n s t i t u t i o n.²⁸ One critic, Theodore L. Gross, has also suggested that "an implicit rac i s t note" exists in all of Page's writings.²⁹ I do contend, however, t h a t their cultural heritage precluded an objective analysis of R u s s e l l's work.

While the critics have placed Russell in the vanguard of a l i t e r a t u r e which accurately depicted the South, they have failed to r e m a r k that he was also in the mainstream of Southern thought. And in

²⁶ C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, 2nd ed. (New York, 1966), p. 74.

²⁷ Webb, unpubl. thesis (University of North Carolina, 1940), p. 190.

²⁸ Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, p. 94.

²⁹ "The Negro in the Literature of the Reconstruction," Images of the Negro in American Literature, eds. Seymour L. Gross and John E. Hardy (Chicago, 1966), p. 71.

the early 1870's, the South, as a whole, rarely evinced any preoccupation for the "sincere and faithful" delineation of the Freedman.

Rather, as Claude G. Bowers has noted, it wanted primarily a restoration of normal conditions."³⁰ For this the following were patently necessary: the overthrow of the Reconstruction government; the removal of the Federal occupation troops who helped maintain the government in office; and, above all else, the right to determine on a local basis the role of the Negro in the new South. On this last point the South remained adamant: there would be no social equality for the Negro.

The South's justification--or lack of it--for abhorring and undermining the Reconstruction government remains outside the purview of this study. However, a brief consideration of the more recent scholarship on the period may prove enlightening as it reveals the persistence of commonly held attitudes in the Southern mind. Southern critics and historians half a century after Russell's death displayed the same bias and complaints of their predecessors: the Republican administration was corrupt, the Negro legislators were ignorant, and the entire regime verged on the farcical.

An extremely influential Southern historian, Claude G. Bowers, provides an outstanding example. Bowers' Southern bias was so pronounced that W. E. B. Dubois assailed his The Tragic Era as "a classic example of historical propaganda."³¹ In this particular

³⁰ The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln (Cambridge, Mass., 1929), p. 55.

³¹ Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880 (New York, 1935), p. 721.



volume Bowers mocked the ignorance of black delegates to various state constitutional conventions, ridiculed a South Carolina Negro legislator for his "many-syllabled words, ludicrously misplaced," emphasized the overt cupidity of Negro legislators, cited a description of the Louisiana Senate as a "monkey-house" where "coal-blacks speak incoherently," and specifically scored Governor Alcorn's Mississippi legislature on its number of illiterate ex-slaves.³² Yet Vernon L. Wharton, another Southerner, has defended the record of this very legislature as a vindication of the South's classic claim for slavery as an educational institution. Moreover, Wharton has acknowledged the intelligence and competence of the Negro delegates to the Mississippi Constitutional Convention.³³ As one can readily discern from the above commentary, however, even the objective Wharton could not refrain from attempting at least a partial defense of the South's peculiar institution. Nevertheless, Wharton's overall assessment generally concurs with that of Edward King's made on a Southern tour in 1874. King, speaking of Negroes in the Mississippi Legislature, noted that "none of those immediately attached to the government at Jackson are incapable," although he did concede the Legislature "Now and then" contained ignorant Negroes.³⁴

³² Bowers, The Tragic Era, pp. 216-217, 354-356, 364.

³³ The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890 (New York, 1965), pp. 275, 146-156.

³⁴ "Radical Mississippi," Reconstruction in the South, 1865-1877: First Hand Accounts of the American Southland After the Civil War by Northerners and Southerners, ed. Harvey Wish (New York, 1965), p. 184.



One should not interpret the above as implying that no ignorant or corrupt Negro politicians held office during Reconstruction. Such a conclusion would be patently absurd--probably about politicians in any legislature at any time. Obviously Negro politicians of questionable character and competence did exist; however, the emphasis on their ignorance and venality presents a badly distorted picture and detracts from the achievements of intelligent and dedicated Negroes of unquestioned integrity.

Nor should one conclude that all such biased accounts emanated from the South. Northern apologists for the Reconstruction governments have revealed the same propensity for perversion on the obverse side of the political coin. Briefly, as one could anticipate, they minimize the corruption and ignorance of the various state legislatures and emphasize the positive achievements, such as expanded suffrage and free public education.³⁵ Essentially, however, the major impetus in interpretation of Reconstruction has come from predominantly Southern-oriented writers. Until recently Dubois' rather caustic observation held a great deal of truth: "the South is determined to rewrite the history of slavery and the North is not interested in history but in wealth."³⁶

One may readily perceive from the brief discussion above that the term "mainstream of Southern thought" is not a mere cliché. Twentieth century Southern thought bears a markedly noticeable resemblance to that of the 1870's. Years after Redemption Southerners were still

³⁵ Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the Making of America (New York, 1964), p. 136.

³⁶ Black Reconstruction, p. 723.



berating the Reconstruction governments. A propos to this, C. Vann Woodward has remarked that "thirty years or more since the reign of the Carpetbagger . . . the legend of Reconstruction was revived, refurbished, and relived by the propagandists. . . . Symbols and paraphernalia of the Redemption drama were patched up and donned by twentieth-century wearers."³⁷ The durability of attitudes encompassed in this phrase is indeed remarkable.

Irwin Russell's position lies precisely within this current of Southern attitudes. He vehemently detested the Reconstruction government of Mississippi. His correspondence abounds with satirical commentary on Republicanism. As this topic will be developed in some detail in a subsequent chapter, a few examples should suffice here. In one letter (Letter No. 6) he mildly enjoined his correspondent to come South as a missionary for "We need missionaries, but have enough carpet-baggers to supply foreign markets. We are shipping numbers." In another (Letter No. 23) he stipulated an American's first duty as the necessity of being a good Democrat, and emphatically asserted "If these conditions (being a good Democrat) were fully met, I would cheerfully vote for the devil, if he should 'run' in opposition to the infamous Republican party." In a third letter (Letter No. 26) he voiced a violent antipathy toward Reconstruction government which probably reflects the contemporary view extremely well. This succinct, bitter impression of the era by a Southerner who lived in it warrants quotation of some length. Russell stated emphatically:

³⁷ The Strange Career of Jim Crow, pp. 85-86.



For years, we have borne a worse slavery than was felt by the negroes. We have been plundered, insulted, abused, and tyrannized over by ignorant savages, and the vilest of the white race, who led them; we have had to undergo wrongs that were never before inflicted upon humanity; we have lived in subjection to the most degraded set of scoundrels on earth, with no security to life or property, and no redress for the injuries that were daily put upon us; and have all the while been slandered and misrepresented foully by such cowardly villains as Morton. . . . The North has had no sympathy nor humanity, and has shown none. . . . We have re-established honor in our government, and it shall stay at all hazards.

The references to ignorance, incompetence, and corruption unmistakably place Russell in the popular current of Southern thought. It would seem only logical to assume a Southern bias in his poetry also.

Another source of antagonism during Reconstruction lay in the presence of Federal troops as occupation forces. One could scarcely expect the impoverished South, shattered and disillusioned by the loss of a war fought principally on its own soil, to welcome the victorious Federal troops. And certainly the large numbers of black soldiers among these troops would only make the occupation even more unpalatable. The intensity of this understandable antipathy has been well-documented. James W. Garner, a Southerner praised by Dubois as impartial and objective,³⁸ especially singled out the Southern animosity toward the Negro soldiers.³⁹ J. G. Randall quoted an excerpt from Walter F. Fleming's Documentary History of Reconstruction which stated the presence of Federal soldiers was "a constant source of irritation to the people."⁴⁰ Again Bowers reveals the intensity and durability of

³⁸ Black Reconstruction, p. 720.

³⁹ Reconstruction in Mississippi (New York, 1901), p. 105.

⁴⁰ The Civil War and Reconstruction (Boston, 1937), p. 684.

Reconstruction's emotional impact on the South. He has provided the most scathing condemnation of the occupation forces. Bowers believed the Federal government had driven the South to "the verge of a new rebellion by stationing negro troops in the midst of their homes" and attributed the action to "stupendous ignorance, or brutal malignity." He continued by scoring the insolence and brutality of "thousands of blacks with muskets and shining bayonets swaggering in jeering fashion before their former masters and mistresses." White officers in command of these troops did not escape Bowers' scorn, for he vilified them as "degraded" and as having encouraged the outrageous conduct of their troops.⁴¹ The South hardly presents a convivial view of occupation even after the lapse of several decades.

Certainly the South would probably be unique in history if it had welcomed an occupying army from an essentially hostile power. Russell's reflection of the popular Southern attitude may be readily anticipated: he objected vehemently to the presence of Federal troops in the South. His letters contain several comments which clearly delineate this antipathy. In one (Letter No. 15) he recorded with rather sardonic satisfaction: "Through a merciful dispensation of providence, one of our Yankee soldiers shot another, night before last, while drunk." In another (Letter No. 23) he attributed Custer's massacre to a scarcity of fighting men created by the stationing of "thousands of U.S. soldiers . . . in the South, to intimidate the honest people and preserve the fraudulent Radical ascendance, which troops ought to be on the frontier." And in a letter dated July 28, 1876, (Letter No. 24) he stated bluntly: "We don't like them [U.S. soldiers] - for the reason

⁴¹ The Tragic Era, pp. 52-61.



that the military has been the exponent of the hostile, ungenerous power that has treated us shamefully since the war."

Russell, however, did not single out the Federal troops as Negroes. Nor did he vituperate the white officers. In one instance (Letter No. 28), he actually extolled the local garrison commander's reaction to a complaint registered by W. D. Sprott, a prominent Mississippi Republican. According to Russell, Sprott had objected that Federal troops were fraternizing with local Democrats to the exclusion of Negro society. Upon hearing of this complaint, the local commander, Captain DeCourcy, sent Sprott "flying out of his office, cursed him loudly, and told him he wasn't done with him yet." One would expect Southern glee at such an event. Nevertheless, the preponderance of evidence places Russell's attitude well within the mainstream of Southern thought that objected to the occupation. After consideration of recurrence, length, and emphasis in Russell's letters, one must undeniably conclude that Russell abhorred the presence of Federal troops.

Russell also stood firmly with the majority of Southern whites on the most crucial issue of Reconstruction: the Negro problem. The South remained unshakeable in its conviction of the Negro's innate inferiority and the absolute necessity of white supremacy. The much-belabored concept scarcely requires documentation. John Hope Franklin cited Dr. C. S. Cartwright, a physician at the University of Louisiana, as "only one of a number of physicians who set themselves up as authorities on the ethnological inferiority of the Negro." According to Franklin, Dr. Cartwright believed "the capacities of the Negro adult for learning were equal to those of a white infant; and the



Negro could properly perform certain physiological functions only when under the control of white men."⁴² Cartwright's view, cited above, was published shortly before the Civil War in defense of slavery. Southern belief of Negro inferiority did not die with military defeat, however. Nearly four decades after the war, Professor Paul B. Barringer of the University of Virginia stated: "The Negro race is essentially a race of peasant farmers and laborers. . . . As a source of cheap labor for a warm climate he is beyond competition; everywhere else he is a foreordained failure, and as he knows this he despises his own color."⁴³ One can readily perceive in this speech echoes of the old ante-bellum feudal society. Perhaps the classic exposition of the Southern white's attitude was made by John Sharp Williams. On December 20, 1898, Williams stated: "You could ship-wreck 10,000 illiterate white Americans on a desert island, and in three weeks they would have a fairly good government, conceived and administered upon fairly democratic lines. You could ship-wreck 10,000 negroes, every one of whom was a graduate of Harvard University, and in less than three years, they would have retrograded governmentally; half of the men would have been killed, and the other half would have two wives apiece."⁴⁴ Quite clearly the concept of Negro inferiority has been dominant in the South for decades.

Convinced of the Negro's inherently lesser capabilities, the South remained adamant in asserting its sole right to determine his destiny.

⁴² "The Militant South," American Negro Slavery: A Modern Reader, eds. Allen Weinstein and Frank Otto Gatell (New York, 1968), p. 166.

⁴³ Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, p. 95.

⁴⁴ Logan, The Negro in American Life and Thought, p. 90.



Forced by military defeat to abolish slavery, the Southerners, nevertheless, insisted that they alone, without Northern interference, would determine the respective roles of the ex-slaves and their former masters. Both Woodward and Buck, among others, were struck by the defiant obstinacy. Woodward noted this insistence by referring to "South's demand that the whole problem be left to the disposition of the dominant white people."⁴⁵ And Buck stressed the tenacity of those who "had fought stolidly and unyieldingly for control over a problem they insisted was domestic in nature"; who "continued to resist with compromise any suggestion of outside pressure."⁴⁶

One could easily infer the South's solution to the problem: the Negro would be relegated to a subordinate status comparable in all name to his former slavery. The actions taken by post-war legislatures clearly signalled the wave of the future as state after state passed infamous "black code" laws. Both Wharton and Dubois have characterized these codes as, in effect, simple re-enactments of the old slave codes.⁴⁷ Even a summary of these codes remains beyond the scope of this paper; however, their general spirit may be perceived in the ultimate section of Mississippi's code. Herein the legislature simply applied to all "freedmen, free negroes and mulattoes" the old penal and criminal laws applicable to "crimes and misdemeanors committed by slaves, negroes or mulattoes." The intent is obvious.

⁴⁵ Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, p. 6.

⁴⁶ The Road to Reunion (Boston, 1947), p. 283.

⁴⁷ Wharton, The Negro in Mississippi, p. 89; and Dubois, Black Reconstruction, p. 177.

These codes, of course, did not receive unanimous acclaim in the South. Wharton has suggested that "Altogether, the conclusion may be drawn that the Black Code was not approved by the best thought of the state."⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the codes were enacted by several states and remained in force until repealed by later Republican-Negro administrations. From this one may surmise that they undoubtedly reflected the popular opinion of the mass of Southern whites who are too frequently discounted by historians of the era who concentrate on the Bourbons and the blacks.

III

The South justified its solution on the bases of the Negro's innate inferiority and its firm conviction that it best understood the Negro. Rare was the Southerner who did not conceive of himself as being intimately acquainted with the Negro's character. This notion rings like a refrain in the works of Southerners--old and new. The legislators who formulated the Black Code of Mississippi justified the same on the grounds of its enactment by men who understood the Negro."⁴⁹ Tom Watson, the erstwhile Populist leader, extolled the virtues of Negro "Mammies" and claimed an understanding of the Negro.⁵⁰ Wharton expressed his regret that forceful emancipation took from the Negro's side "the very men who could best have guided his steps in the new

⁴⁸ The Negro in Mississippi, p. 90.

⁴⁹ Wharton, The Negro in Mississippi, p. 86.

⁵⁰ C. Vann Woodward, "Tom Watson and the Negro in Agrarian Politics," The Negro in the South Since 1865: Selected Essays in American Negro History, ed. Charles E. Wynes (University, Alabama, 1965), p. 60.



paths."⁵¹ Bowers echoed this sentiment: "Left to themselves, the Negroes would have turned for leadership to the native whites, who understood them best."⁵²

Whether or not the Southerners really did understand the Negro is still a matter of controversy. W. E. B. Dubois, a Negro, conceded that they did.⁵³ Sterling A. Brown, another Negro, disagreed.⁵⁴ Certainly, enough paradoxes to confuse multitudes existed in the Southern view: The Negro was a happy-go-lucky, carefree, irresponsible soul;⁵⁵ yet the South, before, during, and after the Civil War, lived in an essentially unfounded, mortal fear of insurrections.⁵⁶ The Negro demonstrated a marked proclivity for prevarication and larceny;⁵⁷ yet the South delighted in narratives of the great trusts faithfully kept by the Negro.⁵⁸ One must conclude that Southern assertions of best knowing the Negro should be accepted with some reservations.

⁵¹ The Negro in Mississippi, p. 22.

⁵² The Tragic Era, p. 198.

⁵³ Black Reconstruction, p. 275.

⁵⁴ "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," Journal of Negro Education, II (January, 1933), 203.

⁵⁵ Francis Pendleton Gaines, The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and the Accuracy of a Tradition (Gloucester, Mass., 1962), pp. 198-202.

⁵⁶ For the South's violent reaction to even rumors of insurrection, see Franklin, "The Militant South," American Negro Slavery, eds. Weinstein and Gatell (New York, 1968), p. 163.

⁵⁷ Gaines, p. 17.

⁵⁸ Bell Irwin Wiley, Southern Negroes, 1861-1865 (New Haven, 1938), pp. 68-69.

Russell compounds the problem. Critics have long justified their appraisal of Russell as a "faithful delineator" of the Negro at least partially on the basis of a letter cited by C. C. Marble in The Cr (Oct. 27, 1888). Therein Russell laid claim to the Southerner's intimate knowledge of the Negro and added, moreover, "I have lived long enough away from them to appreciate their peculiarities." Undeniably Russell had more than a passing acquaintance with the Negro. James Webb recorded as one criticism by Russell's contemporaries his tendency to spend "too much time with the Negroes."⁵⁹ Even Sterling A. Brown has acknowledged Russell's acquaintance with "Negro folk-life." One could justifiably assume, however, that many of those who held the paradoxical views noted above had also spent some time with the Negro and were equally well-versed in Negro folk-life.

Apparently Russell himself had his moments of uncertainty. In a letter dated August 4, 1877 (Letter No. 41), he revealed those misgivings by qualifying his assertion of knowledge. He noted: "I find it impossible to define my colored friend, although I have studied him very carefully, and I think I understand him." And in a subsequent letter (Letter No. 43) he freely admitted, a propos to his proposed book on the Negroes, "Such a book as is wanted on the dark question is far beyond me. I would not attempt it." Despite these reservations Russell generally echoed the prevailing cry that the South knew the Negro best.

⁵⁹ Webb, unpubl. thesis (Univ. of N. Carolina, 1940), p. v.

⁶⁰ Brown, Journ. of Negro Educ., 11, 184.

A corollary to the above concept rests in the claim advanced by white Southerners that they constituted the Negroes' best friends. And here again one finds Russell adhering to the Southern line. Perhaps one can best perceive this attitude in Russell's detailed account of a visit by the U. S. corvette Plymouth to Grand Gulf. While white Southerners were treated as guests by the officers and crew, Negroes were not permitted aboard. Russell viewed the proceedings with great glee. His joy permeates the passage which warrants extended quotation. Not only is it replete with the clichés of Southern tradition--the Negro's ignorance, his maltreatment by the "Yankees," and his deep seated affection for the white Southerners, but the narration also reveals Russell's characteristically humorous perspective.

Russell recorded:

But the great fun was the discomfiture of our colored friend. Our C.F.--about a thousand of him--went to see the ship. He dressed up in his burying clothes, and went on the cars, and on horse-back, and per 'Walker's line'. But when he got there, they wouldn't let him go aboard. Now, the curiosity of our colored friend being stirred up mightily; and he being finally persuaded that the U.S. Government belongs to him and is "run" in his sole interest (as indeed it has been in this part of the world, since the war); his rage was infinite. He exclaimed: 'Ef Mahs' Grant wuz Pres'dent, we could go on dat boat. Wha' sort Pres'dent is dis yur Hazen Wheelah? Ketch me votin' for him agian.'" Our barber, Bob Boatsman, who is nearly white, a very respectable man, and a good Democrat, got aboard--being taken for a white man by the officer of the boat who got a terrible blowing-up from the first liuetenant for having made such a mistake. Our people all like Bob, and were glad to see him there. But the other darkeys got furious. 'Who is dat nigger?' said they, 'He any better'n any oder nigger?' Just then, along came and landed the "Robert E. Lee"--the finest steamboat ever built--and the negroes went aboard of her and admired without molestation. Then their remarks ran in this wise: "Our own white folks, dey doesn't treat us mean, des 'kase we's niggers. Heah's de Lee--heap bigger an' finer 'n dat ol'boat out dar-- b'longs to Suvvon white folks; an' Cap'n Campbell, he's



a Suvvon gemmen; an' we is 'lowed to go on de Lee-an' de ossifers tells us 'howdy' an' treats us like rale gemmen alluz does. But dem po' white trash Yankees, dey ain't nuffin no-how, an' ain't got no mo use for a nigger 'cep' to make money off him'. The little affair has excited great wrath among the entire colored population of the county. Talk to one of them about it, and he says: 'Yes, sah, dem Yankees done us mean. Our white folks wuz willin) for us to go on de boat wid 'em--dey knowed we'd behave proper an' 'spectful. I tell you, sah, I's been a fool long enough. You all what is ben raised up wid us is our bes' frien's, ef we'll let you be; an' I's gwine to stick up to you, an' vote wid you, arter dis. You heered me.'" (Letter No. 36)

The import of the passage is plain; the Southern whites were the Negroes' only hope and even the ignorant Negroes were becoming cognizant of the fact.

The major obstacle in linking Russell with the prevailing Southern thought on the remaining point, Negro inferiority, lies in an oft-cited passage from C. C. Marble's Critic article (November 3, 1888). Marble stated:

On another occasion, when asked whether there was real poetry in the Negro character, he expressed himself thus liberally: 'Without communication or social intercourse with intelligent and cultivated people his thought has been necessarily original, and that has been done more to prove the approximate truth of the now common saying, Vox populi, vox Die, than anything in the history of the white man . . . he has manifested a foresight and wisdom in practical matters worthy of the higher races. . . . I am a Democrat, was a rebel, but I have long felt that the Negro, even in his submission and servitude, was conscious of his higher nature and must one day assert it. . . . The Negro race, too, in spite of oppression, has retained qualities found in few others under like circumstances. Gratitude it has always been distinguished for; hospitality and helpfulness are its natural creed; brutality, considering the prodigious depts of its degradation, is unusual. It does not lack courage, industry, self-denial, or virtue. . . . Surely the Anglo-Saxon, deprived of the ordinary helps and stimulants of civilization, would have degenerated into beasts of the field. . . . He treasures his traditions, he is enthusiastic, patient, long-suffering, religious, reverent."



On the surface the passage practically constitutes a panegyric on the Negro. Actually, a closer study reveals the passage is not as laudatory as seems first apparent. For the entire selection rests on the underlying assumption of Negro inferiority. The highest praise extended remains but a comparison of the Negro's capability in 'practical matters worthy of the higher races' [my italics]. This qualification detracts from the various other laurels bestowed on the Negro; for while he has exceptional qualities, those qualities are on an inferior scale.

Another problem with the passage lies in the evaluation of its accuracy. Did Russell include these sentences in a letter, or did Marble merely record the remembered portions of an oral conversation? Marble failed to make this distinction. Obviously, if part of a written document by Russell, one could hardly question its validity. On the other hand, oral remarks recorded at some unspecified later time are notoriously subject to distortion, either purposely or inadvertently. And the slim evidence available points to the selection as an oral conversation. Of the six quoted passages attributed to Russell in Marble's articles, four are unmistakably marked as excerpts from letters. But the remaining two, including the above selection, bear no such distinction. Actually the context implies the opposite. These two passages are cast as responses to direct questions. They are prefaced by "he said" and "he expressed," not by "he writes" or "in a letter" as was characteristic of the other excerpts. One passage also bears the qualifying "in substance," indicating a digest of divergent thoughts into a single impression. One wonders at this

point whether Marble possessed the talent, diligence, and retentive powers of a Boswell. As is, only a tentative acceptance of the passage as expressing Russell's thought seems the wisest course.

Fortunately, however, the Fulton Collection contains evidence of a less nebulous nature. Nowhere in the sixty-three letters to a lady in Indiana did Russell accord the Negro equal status with the white. And very rarely did he praise them. But the letters abound in denigrating comments. Rather than the "courage, industry, self-denial, or virtue" of Marble's isolated comment, one finds instead: "As a race, the negroes have every vice and not a single virtue. I have lived among them all my life, and ought to know them; and I do not believe there is a negro in existence that is not capable of any crime" (Letter No. 4); and, "Negroes, as I remarked to you once before, seem to entirely lack the moral principle, and are easily persuaded to crime. . . . But the negro, if left to himself, seldom attempts such crimes as murder; for the simple lack of courage." (Letter No. 29) So much for courage, virtue, and the absence of major vice.

Russell also mocked the Negro's supposed penchant for appropriating other's goods by commenting that a recent law would be "rough on our po' darkey hog-thief," and admonishing his correspondent, who was contemplating a Southern visit, to "See that your trunks have a negro-proof lock" (Letter No. 38). In another letter (Letter No. 24) Russell again derided the Negro's lack of courage in a comic account of the Southern white's deception of the Freedman. Negroes were allegedly frightened into enlisting with the Democrats by being told Republicans were forming "colored regiments to be sent against the Indians." A



catalogue of his remarks encompasses a wide range of Negro frailties: "You need not desire any closer contact with them [the Negroes] --with them, the enchantment bears direct ratio to the distance" (Letter No. 5); "Ten white men can rout a hundred negroes at any time" (Letter No. 14); "I always had a great contempt for Desdemona--probably because she married a darkey" (Letter No. 19); "Negro hewers of wood and drawers of water" (Letter No. 38); "A sober one, and one that does not steal more than twice the amount of her wages, is a rare avis" (Letter No. 53); and "their morals are not improved by 'gettin' 'ligion' --on the contrary, the loudest mourners are the most supreme scoundrels" (Letter No. 56). The catalogue could be continued nearly indefinitely. Without a doubt the sheer weight of this evidence places Russell in the mainstream of Southern thought. Russell himself has concisely stated what is perhaps his most characteristic attitude: "It is a difficulty for me to determine whether the negro is created to work for the white man or to amuse him. Practically, his destiny is to do both" (Letter No. 41).

IV

I have attempted thus far to demonstrate the stultified state of Russell scholarship, his significance in American letters, and his essential alignment with the then prevailing Southern thought. The last becomes increasingly important, for several scholars have acknowledged the defensive stance of the post-war Southern literary movement. Southern writers, aware of the unfavorable picture of Southern life created by abolitionist literature, epitomized by Uncle Tom's Cabin, reacted vigorously to the criticism of Southern



institutions and traditions. W. J. Cash wrote "that the decisive factor for the almost sudden appearance of this literature was social--that the outburst proceeded fundamentally from, and represented basically the patriotic response of the men of talent to, the absorbing need of the South to defend itself, to shore up its pride at home, and to justify itself in the eyes of the world."⁶¹ Paul H. Buck declared flatly, "Its aim was to convert the Northern disbeliever."⁶² Both F. P. Gaines and R. H. Logan corroborated this contention.⁶³ Theodore Gross contended: "Southern writers of Reconstruction did not create a literature of artistic merit--they produced propaganda."⁶⁴ And the dominant figures in Russell scholarship, Baskervill and Smith, have also marked this trend. Baskervill asserted, "Consciously or unconsciously, they one and all . . . adopted a method diametrically opposed to that of the author of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'. "⁶⁵ Smith stated unequivocally that "the true answer to Uncle Tom's Cabin and the most adequate one that could be given is to be found in the historical note that characterized the work of Irwin Russell and those who have succeeded him."⁶⁶

⁶¹ The Mind of the South (New York, 1941), p. 142.

⁶² The Road to Reunion (Boston, 1947), p. 219.

⁶³ Gaines, The Southern Plantation, p. 78; and Logan, The Negro in American Life and Thought, p. 251.

⁶⁴ "The Negro in the Literature of the Reconstruction," Images of the Negro in American Literature, eds. Gross and Hardy (Chicago, 1966), p. 71.

⁶⁵ Southern Writers (Nashville, 1902), I, 4.

⁶⁶ Publ. Miss. Hist. Soc., II, 8.



In the light of the above, I propose a critique of Russell from a modern perspective which acknowledges the Negro as a human being rather than as a formula. Contrary to the popular conception of Russell as a "sincere and faithful delineator" of the Southern Negro, I suggest rather that Russell portrayed the Negro not as he was but as the South preferred to see him. In so doing Russell contributed to the stereotyped image of the Negro as a naturally inferior being, contented with his subservient role in society, and interested in neither social equality nor freedom. Nearly indistinguishable from this stereotype is Russell's depiction of the faithful retainer's regard for his former master. While not an overt element in Russell's poetry, this sentiment permeates one of his unpublished short stories indicating that he was not unaffected by this dearly loved trend in Southern thought. Moreover, I suggest that Russell was essentially a satirist and that he utilized his satiric ability to help create still another stereotype: the comic Negro.



Chapter II
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I have often thought that there has rarely passed
a Life of which a judicious and faithful Narrative
would not be useful.

Dr. Samuel Johnson

Nikolai Gogol's biographer, writing of Gogol's childhood, believed
"that the only thing that kept Gogol from being the butt of his class
was his devastating sarcasm; the boy's vicious tongue protected him
from being ridiculed."¹ Irwin Russell, writing of his own childhood,
asserted: "When I was assaulted I fought as hard and as long as I
could; but I was weak and 'delicate,' and easily beaten; therefore I
had to look for new means of defense and revenge. I resorted to bitter
words--and became an adept in their use. I heaped contempt and
ridicule on my enemies, conquered blows with sarcasm and directly
mortifying language--until finally there was not one who dare to
annoy me, for fear of my notorious tongue" (Letter No. 65). Gogol was
a nineteenth century satirist; Russell was also.

Although all satirists can hardly be encompassed by any single
formula, many have exhibited similar character traits, including a
youthful propensity for satire.² Russell shared with Gogol an early
awareness of satire's destructive quality. Obviously, all evidence of
this sort remains inconclusive. All satirists do not possess the same
characteristics; nor do all people possessing traits customarily

¹ Leonard Feinberg, The Satirist: His Temperament, Motivation,
and Influence (New York, 1965), p. 56.

² Feinberg, p. 81.



attributed to satirical writers necessarily become satirists. Nevertheless, since Russell displayed numerous personal qualities shared by many recognized satirists, it seems reasonable to consider him as a satirist also. These similarities, Russell's parochial reputation, and a present paralysis of scholarship on his life suggest the necessity of a brief biographical sketch.

Unfortunately, students of Russell's works have been continually hampered by a lack of accurate biographical data. For Russell's acquaintances have exhibited a peculiar reluctance to divulge information.³ As a result scholars have been forced to utilize material which is essentially unreliable. Compounding this difficulty, critics have often employed accounts of various incidents as though authentic with little or no supporting evidence. Moreover they have demonstrated a frustrating faculty for quoting without documentation. Russell scholarship is replete with "it is said" and "tradition holds," with the author rarely noting the precise source. Finally, all Reconstruction issues of the local newspaper, the Port Gibson Reveille, have been mislaid in the Claibourne County Courthouse for nearly three decades; nor has the Reveille, still being published weekly, retained any copies from this era. One must regret that earlier scholars with access to these editions failed to search them thoroughly.

But there is at least some degree of consistency in the various accounts of his life's more prosaic details. All biographers concur on June 3, 1853, and Port Gibson, Mississippi, as the date and place

³ See for example, A. A. Kern, "Biographical Notes on Irwin Russell," Texas Review, 11 (1916), 141.



of his birth. The Russell family subsequently removed to St. Louis, Missouri. According to most of Russell's biographers, this move was effected in 1853. However, C. C. Marble, Russell's cousin, and Mary Elizabeth Russell, his sister, have both indicated 1855 as the correct year. As this issue does not impinge on Russell's character, the latter date, as recorded by relatives, seems most probable.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Dr. Russell, Irwin's father, returned with his family to Port Gibson. But the family did not remain in Port Gibson throughout the hostilities. While the comprehensive dates are uncertain, the Russells had evidently joined other refugees in Georgia. Russell's letters give ample testimony of the journey. In a letter dated July 18, 1876 (Letter No. 24), he painted a highly descriptive word-picture of the caravan enroute to Georgia through the Mississippi wilderness. In another letter (Letter No. 41), he gave a jocular account of a social call on "one, Florence Pugh, spinster, who was a playmate of mine for a month or so in 1863, and boarded at the same house that was honored with my presence--in the city of Atlanta and commonwealth of Georgia." The duration of the sojourn in Georgia remains unknown.

In the early part of 1867, Dr. Russell once more made his way to St. Louis, establishing his residence at 927 Olive Street. Irwin, listed as a day scholar in the commercial course, attended what is now St. Louis University, graduating in 1869. While he has mocked his own lack of studiousness (Letter No. 14), page thirty-four of the St. Louis University Catalogue of Students for 1868-1869 carries the name of Irwin Russell as a senior student who had excelled in the semi-annual examinations. The university alumni record also bears a hand-written

entry attesting that Irwin was converted to Roman Catholicism in March 1869.

Following Irwin's graduation, the Russells retraced their steps south to Port Gibson. The events of the next few years become distorted through the lack of positive information. Russell was admitted to the Mississippi Bar at the age of nineteen, and also served an unspecified time in the law office of Judge L. N. Baldwin. But a dominant characteristic of this period in Russell's life seems to be a penchant for roving. Discounting various anecdotes of his waywardness which are not susceptible to proof, one still finds at least two major pilgrimages: a stay in New Orleans and a trip to Texas.

Evidence of his New Orleans stay permeates his letters. One letter to his cousin, Clara Russell, contains a vivid account of the French Market.⁴ The description reveals Russell at his best and rivals Addison's portrait of the Royal Exchange (The Spectator, No. 69) in capturing the very atmosphere of the setting. As New Orleans lies only two hundred miles from Port Gibson, one could reasonably object that Russell may have seen the market on a short-lived visit. However, his other correspondence indicates a longer stay. Regarding his research for an ultimately unpublished article, Russell wrote: "I am now getting up an article embodying some observations made among the sailors--at a great sailor-boarding-house in New Orleans. Jack is a queer fellow, and his life ashore is peculiar and amusing. I had the curiosity thoroughly to familiarize myself with it--devoting several weeks to the

⁴ Fulton Collection, Box 8, Folder 1.

purpose" (Letter No. 34). One may conclude Russell's sojourn in New Orleans was an extended one.

Evidently, he also made an excursion to Texas. While the accounts of this trip are many and diverse, the best estimate suggests 1872 as the correct date of the journey. Austin Wharton, who some biographers mistakenly contend accompanied Russell, confirmed the above date.⁵ Russell also provided personal affirmation: in his correspondence he evaluated the stage coaches plying between Waco and Belton as "miserable" (Letter No. 37).

Russell did not confine his passion for travel to actualities. He liberally interpolated visions of prospective voyages in his correspondence, even to working out the financial requirements for an extended world cruise clearly far beyond his means (Letter No. 42). When his correspondent wrote of her plans to attend the Centennial in Philadelphia, Russell, his pride obviously stung, retorted that he was planning a voyage to France for the Paris Exposition (Letter No. 25). He later elaborately constructed a route to Persia for his correspondent (Letter No. 66). All of these travels, real or simply the products of wishful thinking, suggest his restless nature.

Russell's other activities during this period remain a matter of some speculation. Many of his biographers have delighted in placing him at the center of the little town's social life. G. William Nott even crowned him Port Gibson's "play-boy."⁶ This portrayal of Russell as the town's social lion apparently received its major impetus from Russell's involvement with the local amateur theatrical group, the

⁵ Fulton Collection, Box 4, Folder 1.

⁶ "Irwin Russell, First Dialect Author," Southern Literary Messenger, 1 (December, 1939), 811.

purpose" (Letter No. 34). One may conclude Russell's sojourn in New Orleans was an extended one.

Evidently, he also made an excursion to Texas. While the accounts of this trip are many and diverse, the best estimate suggests 1872 as the correct date of the journey. Austin Wharton, who some biographers mistakenly contend accompanied Russell, confirmed the above date.⁵ Russell also provided personal affirmation: in his correspondence he evaluated the stage coaches plying between Waco and Belton as "miserable" (Letter No. 37).

Russell did not confine his passion for travel to actualities. He liberally interpolated visions of prospective voyages in his correspondence, even to working out the financial requirements for an extended world cruise clearly far beyond his means (Letter No. 42). When his correspondent wrote of her plans to attend the Centennial in Philadelphia, Russell, his pride obviously stung, retorted that he was planning a voyage to France for the Paris Exposition (Letter No. 25). He later elaborately constructed a route to Persia for his correspondent (Letter No. 66). All of these travels, real or simply the products of wishful thinking, suggest his restless nature.

Russell's other activities during this period remain a matter of some speculation. Many of his biographers have delighted in placing him at the center of the little town's social life. G. William Nott even crowned him Port Gibson's "play-boy."⁶ This portrayal of Russell as the town's social lion apparently received its major impetus from Russell's involvement with the local amateur theatrical group, the

⁵ Fulton Collection, Box 4, Folder 1.

⁶ "Irwin Russell, First Dialect Author," Southern Literary Messenger, 1 (December, 1939), 811.



Port Gibson Thespian Society. Russell has admitted to taking an active role in the group and even acknowledged himself as its founder (Letter No. 50). Mrs. Maggie W. Musgrove verified this contention.⁷

Despite this certain involvement, however, Russell's letters disclose a sardonic view of social life in Port Gibson. He frequently interspersed commentary denoting a disenchantment with local social amenities. In a letter dated August 4, 1877 (Letter No. 41), he explicitly voiced his antipathy: "I have lost all liking for the forms and observations of what is known as 'Society'; including parties, evening calls, et id genus omne." In another missive (Letter No. 43) he emphasized the public's surprise at his attending a party and, possibly facetiously, added: "Having there entered upon a wild career of dissipation, I determined to astonish the natives by going it as strong as possible; and, accordingly, last Sunday night, I went to church!" He has clearly implied that his fellow townsmen were more accustomed to his absence than his presence at social functions. In a later letter (Letter No. 64), he emphasized his aloofness. He bitterly declared his hopes that his "d--d ten thousand friends" would not discover he cared for anything. Apparently he had cultivated an air of disinterested isolation.

It is difficult to determine the cause for this seeming estrangement. His restless soul may well have rebelled at being confined within such narrow boundaries. Or perhaps the restrictive nature of a small town's society served as an abrasive to sharpen his ready wit, resulting in his becoming unpopular.

⁷
LIII "Russell Playwrite [Sic] As Well as Poet," Port Gibson Reveille, (May 2, 1929), 4.



Surely his satiric, incisive wit must have bred some antagonisms in such a restricted theatre. In his visit to Miss Pugh noted above, for instance, Russell apparently enjoyed himself immensely at the expense of some other young men-about-town. He deliberately violated Southern protocol which required him to leave upon the arrival of another gentleman caller. His failure to do so caused extreme anguish and discomfiture to not one, but two late arrivals.

Conduct of this sort, coupled with satiric retorts, could quickly render anyone unpopular. And there is evidence that Russell did not hesitate to use his caustic tongue. Even clerics suffered its sting. A letter dated November 11, 1878 (Letter No. 65), aptly illustrates his devastating, satiric wit:

How would you like to have your steed compared to Rosinante, when you were riding a really good horse, in good form, with new saddle and bridle--and that remark made by a stupid snob with whom you had but the barest "speaking acquaintance"? That happened to me the other day, in the presence of a crowd who were waiting before the post-office for a mail to be distributed--the Rev. Mr. Mounger (M.E.) loquitur. In return, I desired him to mount, that we might have a complete representation of Don Quixote and his horse, and further observed that, if there was no Sancho Panza at hand, we might nevertheless find an ass without going far to look.

This is deadly irony. If Robert C. Elliot surmised correctly that satire costs friends,⁸ one should not be greatly surprised at Russell's eventual estrangement in the community.

Russell also found other outlets for his energies. His biographers have already noted his interest in typography, a trade which he apparently plied on occasion. This skill evidently led to a brief

⁸ The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art (Princeton, 1960), p. 143.

engagement with the newly created Port Gibson Reveille as a type-setter and reporter (Letter No. 10). His service in this capacity was short-lived; in less than a month he had severed connection with the paper because of a difficulty with the editor (Letter No. 11). Apparently, however, journalism did attract the prospective poet. He once alluded to a stint as a reporter for the New Orleans Times (Letter No. 65), and, subsequent to the Reveille venture, attempted another excursion into journalism. In a letter dated October 6, 1877 (Letter No. 46), he enscribed an account of a new undertaking. He and Ben Chisholm, the local telegrapher, were initiating a publication utilizing a "new process of printing, copying, etc., by the aid of electricity." He later devoted a lengthy passage to describing mechanical difficulties encountered prior to publication. That the Port Gibson Electric-Record ever appeared in print seems doubtful. At any rate none of Russell's biographers has ever remarked its existence.

While the Fulton Collection does contain evidence of Russell's association with a newspaper, which one, when, and for how long remain unanswered questions. The evidence consists of two fragments in Russell's hand.⁹ One is a poem lamenting a publication delay caused by an inopportune and insensitive visitor. In addition to implying an association with a newspaper, the poem demonstrates Russell's propensity for satire. For the poem, a parody of Poe's "The Raven," embodies an art form acknowledged as a satirical technique.¹⁰ The other scrap contains Russell's promise to "I am 'bout promiscus'" at any exposed

⁹ Fulton Collection, Box 8, Folder 1.

¹⁰ Ronald Paulson, The Fictions of Satire (Baltimore, 1967), p. 95.

heads in the best journalistic tradition. Surely most satirists would heartily endorse this sentiment.

The Spring of 1877 was marked by Russell's resumption of legal studies. In a letter dated April 2, 1877 (Letter No. 35), Russell announced he was reviewing his law books as he had been invited to rejoin his former preceptor, Judge Baldwin, in the fall. He also rather unabashedly affirmed his extraordinary competence in conveyancing, a skill frequently noted by his biographers.¹¹ From this date his correspondence carries numerous references revealing his renewed absorption with legal work. One letter (Letter No. 38) conveyed a detailed description of the projected new chambers he was to share with Judge Baldwin. The same letter contained a lengthy catalogue of the legal volumes to be mastered in Mississippi law; the catalogue clearly demonstrated intimate knowledge of the profession.

Precisely when Russell actually resumed practice is unknown. A letter dated October 26, 1877 (Letter No. 46), intimates he had been practicing for some time prior to that date. In this letter he excused his tardy response because of the press of legal affairs. Although the young attorney may have been busy, he apparently did not derive much financial benefit from the practice. For in this same letter the irrepressible Mississippian mocked his own poverty: "Look at me--I am not made proud and haughty by the possession of my present cash capital of one dollar and sixty cents. I remember that I was once a poor man, and reflect upon the possibilities of my being poor again. Hence my urbanity."

¹¹ See, for example, C. C. Marble, "Irwin Russell," The Critic, X (October 27, 1888), 199.



The poet's unluccrative legal career was disrupted by the yellow fever epidemic of 1878. Russell's unselfish actions during the crisis have been justly extolled by his biographers. Unfortunately some have been rather extravagant. John S. Kendall, for instance, illustrating the folklore trend in Russell biographies, wrote: "One of the traditions of the town is that he used to take his banjo to the homes of the dying, and to its accompaniment sing the hymns which comforted the patients in the last hours.¹² The account is touching, but probably apocryphal. Nowhere in his correspondence did Russell even hint at such an event, and his letters to the Indiana correspondent during the fever outbreak are replete with extensive descriptions of various incidents in which Russell played a role. It seems hardly likely that he would omit any allusion to this conduct. I should also note in passing that Russell has specifically denied possessing the rare musical talent with which his biographers are inclined to endow him.¹³

While some of the anecdotes concerning Russell's activities during the epidemic are doubtlessly either exaggerated or apocryphal, the evidence suggests that he did perform worthwhile service. He had contracted the disease as an infant; he was, therefore, immune. This immunity undoubtedly placed a heavy burden on him, for there were few able-bodied men who had not deserted the town for the safety of the country. Russell, describing the exodus, wrote:

¹² "Irwin Russell in New Orleans," Louisiana Historical Quarterly, XIV (July, 1931), 327.

¹³ See, for example, A. A. Kern, "Irwin Russell," Library of Southern Literature (Atlanta, 1907), X, 4604.



You should have been here to see the yellow fever panic when it first set in! . . . people began to tumble out of town in every sort of vehicle, by every road. Every conveyance was instantaneously engaged and put to use, and some people had to wait forty-eight hours before they could get anything with more wheels than a barrow. I took my brother and sisters to Mr. Bridger's plantation, seven miles from town, and there they may remain until the first frost. The scene in town reminded one of the accounts of plague-stricken cities, at the time when the dreadful truth is first told among the people. Women and children cried and wrung their hands, and some men who are brave enough about other things grew white as chalk with horror. (Letter No. 60).

His correspondence in general contains such a mass of specific material relating his cares and actions that no reasonable person can abstain from praising his conduct. The relevant passages are far too numerous and extensive for citation here. One must read the last few letters in their entirety to derive a proper conception of Russell's role. Briefly, his contribution to the town was three-fold: he helped organize the local Howard Association; he nursed the afflicted; and he buried the dead. I should add that he also served as an unofficial statistician, compiling the list of the dead.¹⁴

After the epidemic subsided, Russell removed to New York. Even prior to the outbreak of the fever, he had announced his intention of seeking a position with a New York daily journal (Letter No. 51). This resolve undoubtedly received additional impetus from the sight of the desolate little town still reeling from the after-effects of the fever. However, he did remark the possibility of temporary employment as a type-setter on the Reveille, should that paper resume publication (Letter No. 62). Evidently this hope did not materialize, for his last

¹⁴ A. A. Kern, "Biographical Notes on Irwin Russell," Texas Review, 11 (1916), 146.



letters focus primarily on the necessity and mechanics of his departure. The final letter in his correspondence with the lady in Indiana reveals his intent to quit Port Gibson shortly after Christmas. Whether or not he adhered to this date is unknown.

Some of Russell's biographers have written erroneous versions of his emigration from the South. Kendall, apparently following Baskervill's lead,¹⁵ recorded that Russell left Port Gibson subsequent to the death of his father; Kendall also set early December as the time of Russell's arrival in New York.¹⁶ Both assertions are incorrect. The Claibourne County Chancery Court Proceedings for 1879 reveals that Dr. Russell died May 21, 1879, nearly five months after Russell's scheduled departure. The last letter to his Indiana correspondent is dated December 22, 1878, and bears the heading of Port Gibson. The evidence seems conclusive that the move occurred in late December and was motivated by financial concerns rather than his father's death.

Russell's sojourn in New York was brief, lasting some six months. Little is known of his activities there. In The Critic, November 3, 1888, C. C. Marble, his cousin, gave the following account: "He loitered at old bookstalls and snatched many a delight from the exposed tomes. . . . Especially was everything old sought after by him: old prints of which he was extremely fond; black-letter volumes, for he was a connoisseur in printing, recognizing at a glance the various types used in bookmaking; old volumes of dramatic works, with which his small

¹⁵ William Malone Baskervill, "Irwin Russell," Southern Writers (Nashville, 1902), I, 33.

¹⁶ Kendall, Louisiana Hist. Qtr., XIV, 328.



library abounded." Beyond this sketchy description, Russell's pastimes remain mysteries.

Marble has also preserved the best physical description of Russell. In The Critic (November 3, 1888), he painted the following portrait:

His hair and complexion were light, and the beard he at one time assiduously cultivated, consisted of two or three somewhat scattered tufts. His carriage was erect, with a slight stoop of the shoulders and inclination of gazing afar off, his long arms dangling by his side.

Russell's correspondence adds somewhat to the image of a tall, stooped, rather frail young man. In a letter dated November 23, 1875 (Letter No. 5), he gave his height as "five feet eleven, ordinarily; and six feet with a glass of beer down." In a later letter (Letter No. 52), he reported recovering from a bout with illness during which he had suffered substantial loss in weight. He weighed "140 pounds on the same scales that marked my weight at 121 pounds only a very short time ago!" Spectacles, which gave him "a sort of a literary Bosting-look, you know" (Letter No. 8), and false teeth, which made him "again a picturesque object" (Letter No. 36) complete the picture.

II

In mid-August of 1879 Russell arrived in New Orleans aboard the steamer Knickerbocker. He died in this city on December 23, 1879.

Accounts of his activities in the interval between his arrival and untimely death are ambiguous. Various biographers have provided several different narratives of his activities during this period. They range from "Literary hack-work"¹⁷ through "a semi-official

¹⁷ A. A. Kern, "Irwin Russell, " Library of Southern Literature (Atlanta, 1907), X, 4603.

capacity" with the New Orleans Times-Picayune¹⁸ to "an editorial position on the Times."¹⁹ The only certainty is that he did contribute to the Times-Picayune. For Kendall has gleaned from the Times' files several poems by Russell not available in the collected works.

The variant readings in the above paragraph illustrate a major problem in Russell scholarship: his drifting into the realm of folklore. Even this brief sketch, abetted by the previously inaccessible letters, suffers from a lack of specific material. Despite this lack--or possibly because of it--critics have focused primarily on the young poet's life rather than his work. The result has been much the same stagnation and redundancy that characterized Russell criticism. Critics have persisted in recounting identical incidents with monotonous regularity. Often it seems as if only the authors' names have been changed. Moreover, the accounts frequently differ in details resulting in the subsequent emergence of Russell as something of a folklore figure. The Dr. Mary Walker hoax illustrates this tendency. Many writers have included versions of this youthful escapade which differ somewhat in details. And, according to one of the principals involved, all are mainly in error.

Briefly, Dr. Mary Walker, a prominent figure in the women's suffrage movement, was deceived into visiting Port Gibson by a letter purporting to be from local supporters. Allegedly, Russell had composed

¹⁸ Laura D. S. Harrell, "A Bibliography of Irwin Russell with a Biographical Sketch," Journal of Mississippi History, VIII (1946), 5.

¹⁹ C. C. Marble, "Irwin Russell," The Critic, X (November 3, 1888), 214.



the missive. Here narratives diverge. Russell, employed as a railroad clerk taking tickets on the train, recognized Dr. Walker;²⁰ Russell "greeted" her at the station;²¹ or Russell and "a companion in guilt received her at the train and accompanied her to the designated place."²² W. H. Marquess, Russell's co-conspirator, in a letter to Fulton, recalled that Russell was "acting as clerk to the agent," substituting for an ill friend "when suddenly who would appear in Port Gibson but Dr. Walker, stepping off the train at the station in sight of Irwin."²³ If one accepts the word of a participant, one must conclude that the above accounts contain some mistakes. Marquess also gave another version of the hoax's outcome. Kern,²⁴ Kendall,²⁵ and Webb²⁶ declared the lady exacted damages. In the above letter Marquess acknowledged that Dr. Walker "threatened suit against our parents, but got legal advice that it would be useless." He then added: "She left in high dudgeon--the town laughing at us but mostly at her." The incident undoubtedly occurred; however, the particular details must be regarded with some skepticism.

In addition to reflecting the folklore trend, the episode reveals

20 James W. Webb, "New Biographical Material, Criticism, and Uncollected Writings of Irwin Russell," unpubl. thesis (University of North Carolina, 1940), p. 8.

21 Kern, Texas Review, 11, 143.

22 Kendall, p. 325.

23 Fulton Collection, Box 3, Folder 3.

24 Kern, Texas Review, 11, 144.

25 Kendall, p. 325.

26 Webb, p. 9.

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two of Russell's characteristics: a penchant for practical jokes and an implied social conservatism. The former also suggests his satirical inclination. Although some scholars argue that satire does not embrace practical jokes, Gilbert Highet disagrees and contends the hoax is "parody in action."²⁷ Whether strictly satire or not, the hoax would seem to indicate a predisposition in that direction on the part of the perpetrator.

The Walker incident was not, of course, an isolated instance of Russell's propensity for practical joking. A single example could hardly be considered definite evidence of a predisposition for satire. But the anecdote is not unique; Russell initiated many other practical jokes. Mr. Webb has related how the young poet once lay down for a nap in a coffin after having imbibed generously of an alcoholic beverage.²⁸ The Negro who discovered him suffered a considerable shock. Russell himself wrote with obvious relish of another incident which proved temporarily shocking to his fellow townsmen. Russell had accompanied a male companion who was of a rather slight stature to a masquerade skating party. The companion, Nick McDougal, wore women's clothing and make-up. Russell has best described the effect:

There were a number of ladies present who were masked though not in fancy dress, and everybody thought Nick was one. He acted the part to perfection--sniffed his bouquet--dropped his handkerchief for me to pick up and all that. "Who is she?" "Who can it be?" "Oh! I know, --it's so-and so"--such were the whispers on every side. We skated off

²⁷ Leonard Feinberg, An Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa, 1967), p. 212.

²⁸ Webb, p. 11.

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in style. After a while Nick threw his arms around my neck and I mine around his waist, as we skated along--to the intense horror of the real ladies. "Who is that creature?" was the universal cry. (Letter No. 33)

In another letter (Letter No. 25) he gave explicit directions on the proper manner of bedeviling guards at the Centennial held in Philadelphia. The evidence seems to indicate the inclination towards practical jokes as an integral part of his character.

On the second point, social conservatism, Russell allied himself with a satirical tradition. Robert C. Elliott has noted:

The satirist claims, with much justification, to be a true conservative. Usually . . . he operates within the established framework of society, accepting its norms, appealing to reason . . . as the standard against which to judge the folly he sees. He is the preserver of tradition, the true tradition from which there has been grievous falling away.²⁹

One "falling away" castigated by Russell was the women's suffrage movement. He regarded this movement as a perversion of womanhood, forcing upon a woman "duties which she is unable properly to perform," and "'rights' which she cannot naturally exercise" (Letter No. 19). Dr. Mary Walker with her masculine attire surely symbolized the perversion to Russell. The point of the letter, which succeeded beyond his hopes, was just as surely to demonstrate feminine gullibility, to emphasize the absurdity of the movement.

It is difficult to determine how these social attitudes were affected by his rather serious physical disabilities, if at all. Such matters are speculative at best; and, as Alvin B. Kernan suggests, very possibly misleading.³⁰ Nevertheless, Russell did suffer from numerous

²⁹ Robert C. Elliott, The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art (Princeton, 1960), p. 273

³⁰ Kernan, The Plot of Satire (New Haven, 1965), p. 4.

ailments: a bout with yellow fever, the loss of sight in his right eye, frequent attacks of neuralgia, and probably alcoholism.

Some discrepancies exist relative to these liabilities. However, the letters in the Fulton Collection help resolve some of the ambiguities. The majority of Russell's critics have correctly asserted that yellow fever struck Russell when he was but three months old in 1853. Kendall, the exception, maintained Russell was three years of age when stricken.³¹ He has obviously interpolated "years" for "months"; he was, at any rate, incorrect. Russell, in a letter dated July 31, 1878, stated: "I had yellow fever here in 1853" (Letter No. 59). How detrimentally this ultimately affected his health must remain speculative. But nearly all of his biographers have noted his frailty, as did Russell himself in the passage cited above.

Writers once more diverge rather widely on the matter of Russell's restricted vision. C. C. Marble in the October 27, 1888, edition of The Critic attributed Russell's loss of an eye to "the point of a fork," giving no specific date for the incident. Baskervill misquoted Marble and asserted Russell was two years of age when he incurred the injury. Baskervill also attributed the loss to the point of a penknife.³² Kendall echoed Baskervill on the offending instrument but insisted Russell was five at the time.³³ A. A. Kern simply noted Russell's poor eyesight which required him to wear glasses from childhood. He also

³¹ Kendall, p. 324.

³² Baskervill, Southern Writers, I, 11.

³³ Kendall, p. 324.

declared Russell suffered from the "constant shrinking on one pupil."³⁴ According to Russell he sustained the loss of vision in one eye while visiting Philadelphia in 1855 (Letter No. 24).

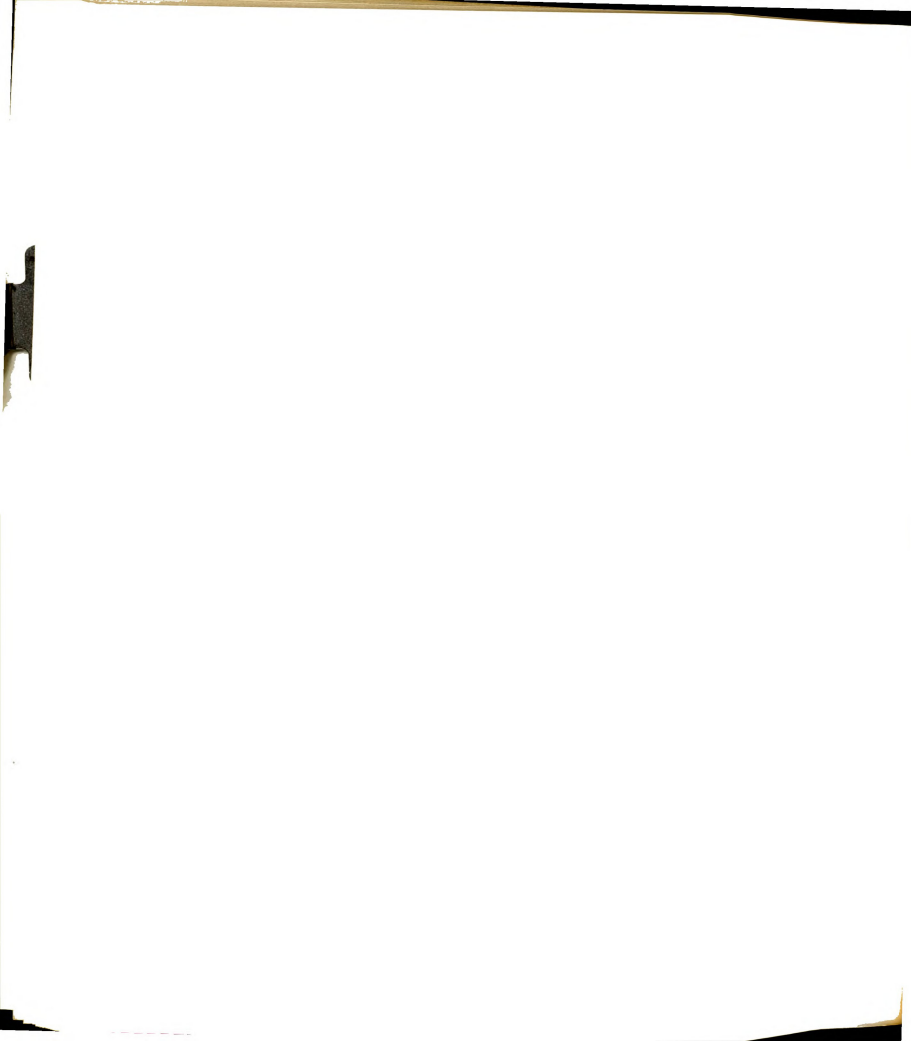
A third physical ailment, neuralgia, has received little attention from his biographers. Nevertheless, Russell's correspondence bears ample evidence of his suffering from this affliction. In a letter dated February 11, 1877 (Letter No. 32), for instance, he commiserated with his correspondent who was evidently also beset with neuralgia. Russell even sent her his father's favorite prescription for the ailment and commented at length on the dosage necessary to relive his own pains. As was typical of Russell, he frequently spiced these complaints of ill-health with humorous overtones. For him, suffering held its benefit: as his father was a physician, neither prescription nor medicine cost him any money (Letter No. 19).

Alcoholism probably aggravated these physical disabilities. The statement must necessarily be qualified as his biographers have been reluctant to treat with this facet of his character. They have, instead, tended toward euphemism and apology. J. S. Kendall, for instance, preferred to call it a "special weakness" rather than a vice.³⁵ C. C. Marble did not mention the fault. Baskervill merely alluded to others' attempting to shield Russell from his "own weakness."³⁶ Fulton, surely not unreasonably, used a charitable view of the failing. His effusive and passionate plea represents the general tone adopted by Russell's

³⁴ Texas Review, 11, 142.

³⁵ Kendall, p. 325.

³⁶ Baskervill, p. 34.



biographers. The appeal took the form of a quotation from Carlyle regarding Burns: "Granted, the ship comes into harbor with shrouds and tackle damaged; the pilot is blameworthy; he has not been all-wise and all-powerful; but to know how blameworthy, tell us first whether his voyage has been round the Globe, or only to Ransgate and the Isle of Dogs."³⁷ While sufficiently sentimental, the passage sheds little light on the extent of Russell's drinking.

Actually, none of the biographical sketches of Russell contain definitive proof on this point. They even frequently differ on when Russell acquired the habit. The attributions range from early childhood³⁸ to the last year of the poet's abbreviated life.³⁹ Moreover, Kern, in another article, added to the confusion. Kern acknowledged the possibility of error by noting that some of Russell's friends contended he had never drunk to excess.⁴⁰

Russell's letters possess an many ambiguities. In a letter dated June 3, 1876 (Letter No. 20), he flatly declared: "Drinking liquor makes me absolutely insane--(and I therefore never touch it)." But a later letter (Letter No. 37) contains a humorous anecdote on his drinking. Russell related that the only means of survival on a difficult stage-coach trip were his three companions: "The first of these was my bottle

³⁷ Maurice Garland Fulton, ed. "Irwin Russell," Christmas Night in the Quarters and Other Poems by Irwin Russell (New York, 1917), p. xxv.

³⁸ Kern, Lib. of Southern Lit., X, 4602.

³⁹ G. William Nott, "Irwin Russell, First Dialect Writer," Southern Literary Messenger, I (December, 1939), 813.

⁴⁰ Texas Review, II, 143.

of whiskey. The second was a portly, side-whiskered Englishman. The third was the Englishman's bottle of whiskey." However, Russell concluded his account with an avowal of his abstinence from liquor for some eighteen months. At this point one could infer that drinking had been a problem for Russell but was no longer. Unfortunately, later correspondence contains several allusions to moments of depression resulting from some personal problem. On April 14, 1878 (Letter No. 52), he wrote on the necessity of his conquering the difficulty, implying through analogy that his problem was personal, self-imposed, and deep-seated. A reasonable supposition would be that the problem was an alcoholic one.

The Fulton Collection helps, at least partially, to resolve the problem. Russell's sister acknowledged his drinking but asserted he did so excessively on only two occasions.⁴¹ The collection also includes a letter from a man who knew Russell in 1879. This acquaintance, later an assistant editor for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, presented what is probably the most objective account. He contended that in 1879 Russell was "completely under the influence of liquor."⁴² Therefore, on the available evidence, one may reasonably assume liquor held some attraction for Russell, especially in his last year. However, the precise extent of the attraction remains questionable.

This attraction acts indirectly as a link between Russell and other satirists. The failing, of itself, is unimportant. I concur with Fulton's desire for a charitable view of the perfectly human fault.

⁴¹ Fulton Collection, Box 4, Folder 1.

⁴² Fulton Collection, Box 3, Folder 3.

Nevertheless, Russell's drinking acquires significance in relation to his previously noted moods of depression. Several scholars have remarked that satirists, in general, are not happy men. Feinberg stressed the trait, asserting: "The satirist usually is a melancholy individual."⁴³ Gilbert Highet corroborates this declaration, noting: "Satirists are not happy, noble, well-balanced men."⁴⁴ If Russell's drinking did contribute to his depression--as seems evident, it can hardly be ignored.

The extent of Russell's alcoholic problem is not the only clouded issue. A major problem arises from the numerous anecdotes about the poet which are nearly impossible to validate. Of these one must be considered here as it further illustrates the folklore trend in Russell scholarship. The matter concerns Russell's involvement with two young ladies of Port Gibson: Sallie Massey and Dora Donald. Of the two Miss Donald seems to be the more recent candidate for the lead role in Russell's romantic life. Characteristically, her debut was marked by the time-honored folklore formula, "Local tradition has. . . ."

A. A. Kern, apparently founding his thesis on material acquired from Mrs. Musgrove,⁴⁵ elaborated on a passage in Marble's Critic (November 3, 1888) essay. Marble, summarizing the effects of the 1878 yellow fever epidemic on Russell, had written, "he had lost many dear friends, including the one on whom his affections were fixed and his happiness depended." Kern continued: "Local tradition has added

⁴³ The Satirist, p. 135.

⁴⁴ Juvenal The Satirists: A Study (New York, 1961), p. 143.

⁴⁵ Fulton Collection, Box 4, Folder 1.

somewhat to Mr. Marble's statement in regard to Russell's sweetheart. According to this source of information, his sweetheart was a Miss Dora Donald.⁴⁶ Miss Donald, dormant to now, suddenly becomes ubiquitous in sketches of the poet's life. In 1929 Mrs. Musgrove contributed a physical description of the young lady.⁴⁷ In 1931, Kendall acknowledged her primacy in Russell's life.⁴⁸ In 1939, Nott extolled her as "the great love that every man meets but once."⁴⁹ In 1940, Webb concurred.⁵⁰

The catalogue is impressive. However, I suggest the following points in opposition to this contention:

1. The context of Kern's commentary clearly implies that Dora Donald was the fever victim alluded to in Marble's article; yet it was Sallie Massey and not Dora Donald who died during the epidemic (Letter No. 66).
2. Nott, for one, has declared the relationship with Miss Donald transpired after Russell's return to legal practice in the fall of 1877. This time falls within the period covered by Russell's letters to his Indiana correspondent; yet nowhere did he mention the name of Dora Donald.
3. Miss Alice Keifer, an acquaintance whom Russell mentioned

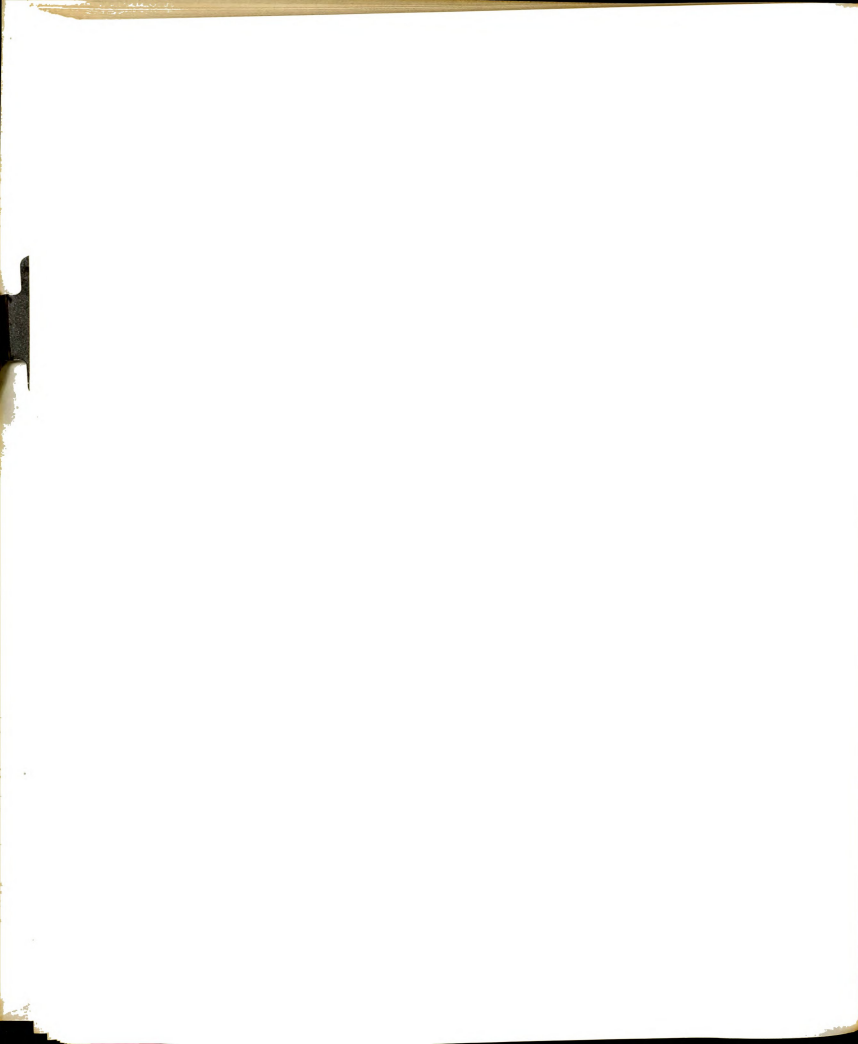
⁴⁶ A. A. Kern, "Biographical Notes on Irwin Russell," Texas Review, 11 (1916), 148.

⁴⁷ Maggie Williams Musgrove, "The Girls in the Life of Irwin Russell," Port Gibson Reville, LIII (May 23, 1929), 5.

⁴⁸ Kendall, p. 336.

⁴⁹ Nott, p. 912.

⁵⁰ Webb, p. 22.



frequently in his letters, denied any knowledge of Miss Donald's existence.⁵¹

4. Mary E. Russell, the poet's sister, also denied any knowledge of Miss Donald.⁵²

The evidence confuting Miss Donald's role would appear to be equally as formidable as that affirming it. The significance of the affair, however, lies not in Miss Donald, per se. It is, rather, her appearance in an ambiguous context nearly four decades after the poet's death that is important. For the seeming willingness to accept her presence uncritically creates the confused and distorted picture of a folklore figure, not a practicing poet of the last century.

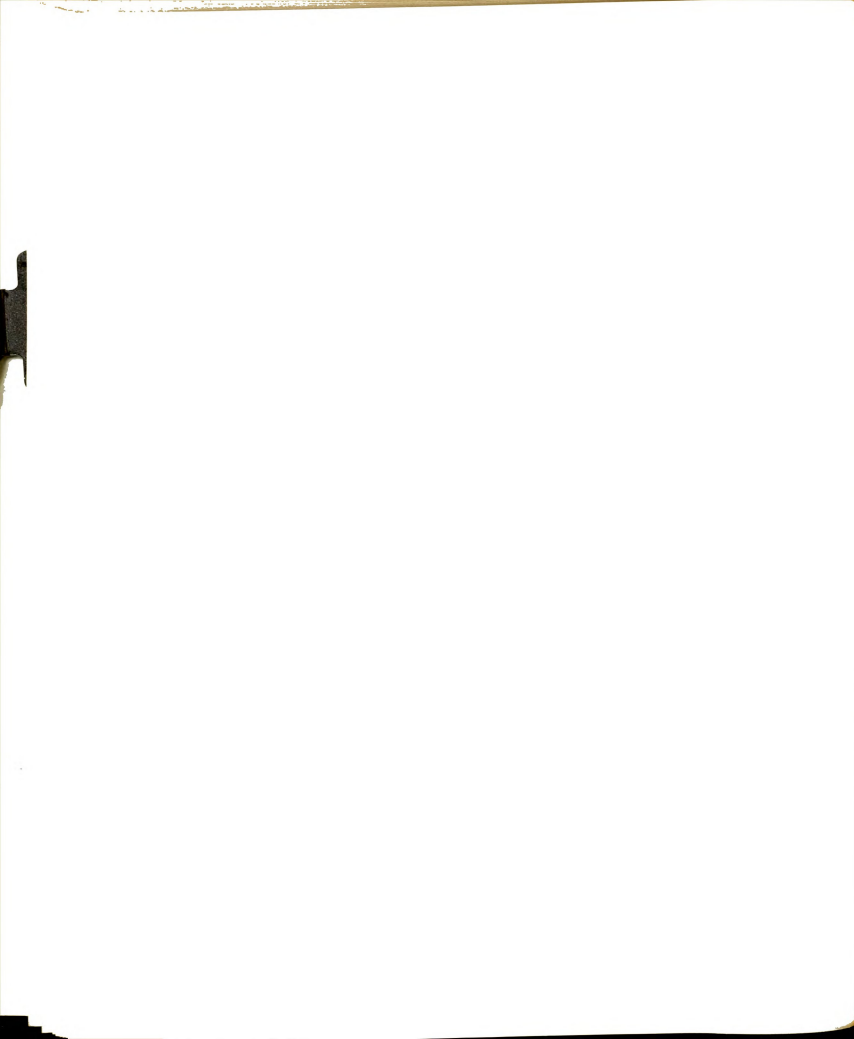
III

The tenuous quality of the various narratives concerning Russell's mundane behavior casts a shadow of uncertainty over all aspects of the poet's life. His correspondence in the Fulton Collection does, of course, yield some insights previously denied critics. However, even in these letters, Russell displayed a marked inconsistency in religious and philosophical discourse; only on political issues did he steadfastly maintain a well-defined position.

One should not be surprised at Russell's inconsistency. He lived in a difficult time. In addition, his brief life hardly afforded him the opportunity to conceive a fully developed consistent philosophy. His

⁵¹ Fulton Collection, Box 4, Folder 1.

⁵² Fulton Collection, Box 4, Folder 1.



predisposition for satire may also have contributed to this inconsistency.⁵³ Considering these factors--an almost complete reversal of black-white roles, economic destitution, a brief life span, and an inherent satirical skepticism--one could logically anticipate some contradictions.

Russell's religious posture aptly exemplifies these contradictions. The young poet, who, like Lewis Carroll, had a passionate love for the logic of pure mathematics, found orthodox Christianity's reliance on faith abhorrent. Nevertheless, faced with the absence of scientific data proving God's existence, he resorted to what he derided in Christianity: an absolute dependence on faith. His correspondence reflects the mental and emotional anguish this religious nature imposed on one unable to accept orthodoxy.

In these letters, despite an early avowal to avoid any religious controversy, Russell devoted considerable space to this topic. Few of the letters are devoid of religious references of some sort; in many, the subject dominates the missive. His religious utterances range throughout a broad spectrum marked at each extreme by the flippant and the fervent, respectively. Appropriately, the arrangement is nearly chronological: the light touch in the early letters and the more serious tone in the later period.

The second letter of the series in the Fulton Collection typifies Russell's more casual allusions to religion; however, at the same time it also implies what is essentially Russell's deepest feeling on the subject. Russell remarked: "In the regard to theology, I'll only say, in

⁵³ Leonard Feinberg, The Satirist: His Temperament, Motivation, and Influence (New York, 1965), pp. 144-168.

the language of my favorite Sterne, 'I do not see which way the honor of Providence is concerned in repaying us exactly in our own coin'--You may infer that my belief is one of great 'latitude'--and longitude, too, if you will." The quibble with longitude contributes to the slighting dismissal of religion; nevertheless, embodied within the quotation from Sterne lies the nucleus of Russell's real religious stance: belief in an omnipotent, essentially unknowable deity completely unaffected by the actions of insignificant beings here on earth. In the third letter Russell continued to slight religious speculation. His ironic commentary reveals his basic contempt of orthodoxy. Russell wrote: 'I am glad you agree to let theology 'slide.' I generally do. As Carlyle remarks, 'It is written, "When the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch"'': wherefore, in such circumstances, may it not sometimes be safer, if both leader and led simply-- sit still?!"

This sardonic view of religious authority appears frequently in the correspondence. A brief catalogue will suffice to illustrate this cynicism. In the seventh letter he mocked the 'pious Tartuffes and Pecksniffs' who disrupted the quiet with their "senseless bell-tolling." Significantly Russell added: "Church bells are a nuisance. God don't need any advertisement." Clearly even here religious belief does exist; Russell simply dislikes the trappings of traditional Christianity. In the nineteenth letter he displayed an attitude and satiric touch reminiscent of Mark Twain. Russell admitted the propriety of Dante's inscription at the entrance of Hell and then added: "I should think that the simple word 'Lethe' would best suit the lintel of Heaven." In letter number twenty-nine, he summarily discounted Biblical authority: "I know nothing about whether it [suicide] is forbidden by the Bible or not--that

would signify nothing in my estimation." Letter number forty-one contains a long disquisition which perhaps best intimates his distaste for Christian shibboleths. After exonerating the Devil for his role in men's affairs, Russell proceeded to represent God as a Devil. The rhetorical irony of his conclusion bears the unmistakable mark of a satirist. Russell summarized: "How we moderns improve on ancient things. Our Shamanism has two devils, instead of the one that contented the poor heathen of old Persia. One pronounces 'judgments,' and the other executes them. 'Do my dirty work and be d--d to you,' says Ormuzd to Ahriman. This is a very irreverent thing--not for me to talk about but for people to believe in."

The import of the above catalogue, which by no means exhausts his ridicule of Christian dogma, clearly shows Russell's estrangement from traditional religious practice. This does not mean Russell was irreligious; indeed, as noted, many of his comments imply an inherent religious attitude. Russell simply disained orthodoxy, not religion. That Russell did possess a deeply devout nature may be as readily perceived from the later letters. Despite his desire for a divine institution based on "a pure intellectual philosophy--reverence without superstition, reason instead of 'faith,'" (Letter No. 19) Russell ultimately acceded to the necessity of faith. Perhaps, as it is Russell's creed, he should be left to express it himself. Russell did so, eloquently, in the following:

One poor lady (really a lady) came crying to me, telling me how she had made a coffin and buried her little daughter in the garden, and asking me to go and see if I could not put the grave in better order than she could do. Of course, I did. And, to comfort the poor lady, I knelt by the grave and prayed aloud! Imagine me praying there--me, who do not believe in prayer. I do believe--I know that there must exist a Supreme Being, who is infinitely wise and good.

But I cannot think that the supplications of us insignificant creatures may influence the action of the Almighty.

.....

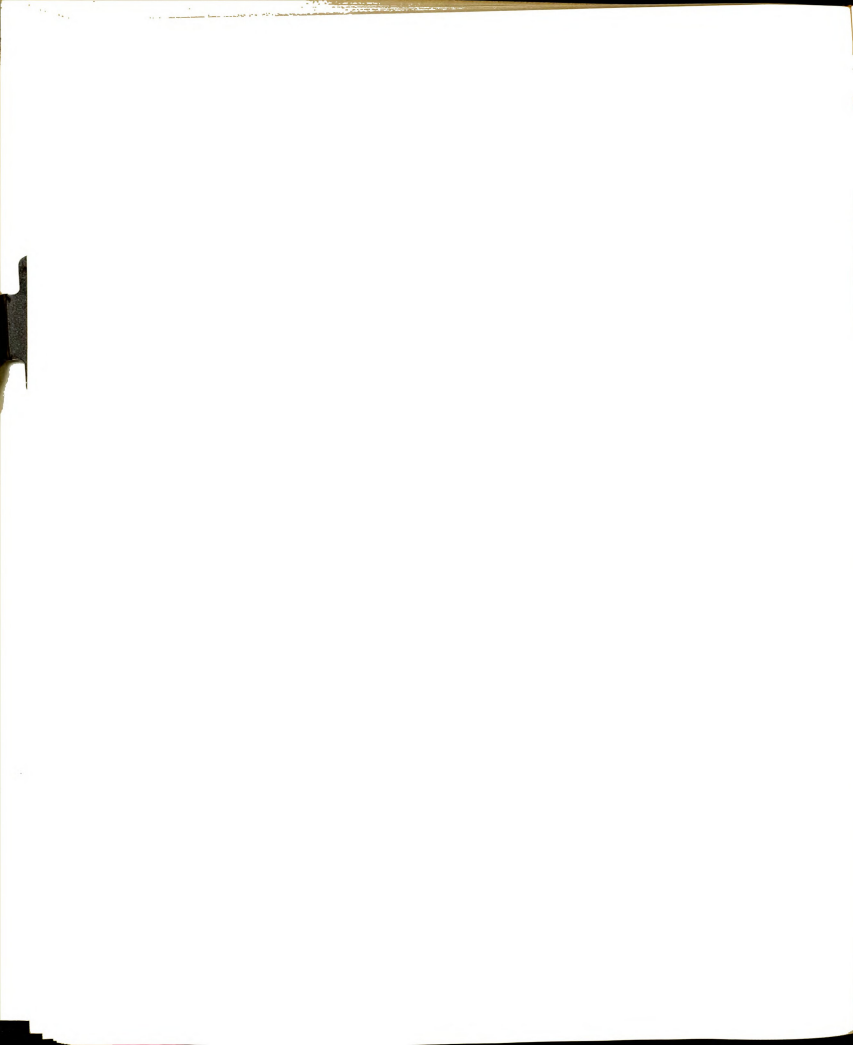
I have given many, many hours to the earnest study of religion, trying only to find the truth; but I find nothing on which to rest the belief that I am most anxious to have established. Nothing shows me that I ought to pray--that I have a right to pray. I do not look lightly upon these matters. I reverence our creator as profoundly as you do and I would not willingly offend him. But I cannot take the word of man for a revelation of God, without evidence or even probability to support it--I cannot see how false logic and petty sophism prove alleged facts in religion, when they would be inadequate in the less important common affairs of the world. Show me the truth--let me see that it is truth--and no man will receive it more gladly than I will. (Letter No. 62)

Russell's is the anguish of one who cannot accept a religion based on faith; yet, finds that he must accept the existence of God on no other grounds.

I have emphasized the religious side of Russell's character as it has received only slight attention from other biographers. Kern had destroyed a rhetorical opponent's charge of skepticism by asserting flatly that "the author of 'An Exchange,' 'The Cemetery,' and 'Going' needs no defense on the score of skepticism."⁵⁴ Webb echoed Kern.⁵⁵ I take issue with neither. Our difference is a semantic one. In the commonly accepted definition of skepticism as a disbelief in Christian orthodoxy, Russell was indisputably a skeptic. However, Kern and Webb, interpreting the term more loosely, may justly have based their refutations on Russell's clear acknowledgment of God's existence.

⁵⁴ Texas Review, 11, 144.

⁵⁵ James W. Webb, unpubl. thesis (University of North Carolina, 1940), p. 18.

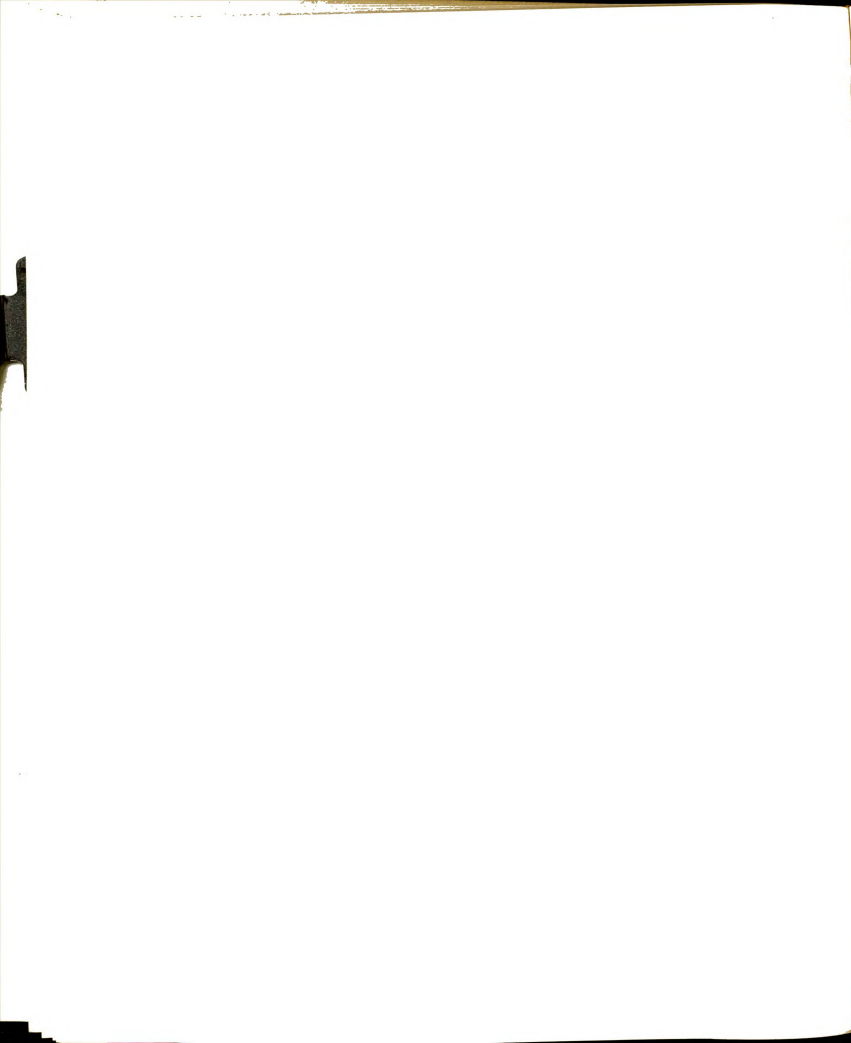


Russell's inconsistency also permeates his personal ideology. He was an idealist who frequently professed a faith in the continuing progress of civilization. Yet, despite this avowed idealism, Russell frequently voiced a bitter disenchantment with the contemporary state of affairs. And his reading tastes reflected both a marked preference for the older authors and disdain for his contemporaries.

Russell's idealism manifested itself overtly in his assertions of civilization's progress. In letter number ten, he exclaimed: "I think the world improves: that the talk of these degenerate days is perfect nonsense. . . . I tell you the world progresses." In a later letter (Letter No. 18), he remarked that the ancients "vegetated--as we do, in comparison with those who shall follow us." Perhaps the most relevant and unrealistic declaration was his belief that "an honorable and liberal man has a better chance of becoming wealthy than either a swindler or a miser" (Letter No. 52). The remark intimates a striking unawareness of the way of the world. It does lend some credence, however, to L. J. Potts' conjecture that all great satirists are "baffled idealists."⁵⁶

But Russell himself frequently displayed views contradictory to this idealism. Consider his bitter commentary on the Compromise of 1876: "Our Republic is extinct--fraud is superior to justice--all law is abrogated--the rights of American citizens are denied--ballots are only waste paper--and we are to have a sham government, to which no man owes respect, support, or allegiance. It is time to dance the Carmagnole!" (Letter No. 33). The bleak account hardly bodes well for the progress of civilization. Other attacks on the contemporary scene proliferate in

⁵⁶ Comedy (New York, 1966), p. 154.



his letters but are far too lengthy for inclusion here. Certainly one may infer that even in Russell's view it was not a society conducive to furthering "honorable and liberal" men.

Additionally, Russell possessed a predilection for old authors. He often stressed this passion for his literary predecessors, especially those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (See, for example, Letter No. 40). Corollary to this was his contempt for the modern poets. In letter number twenty-seven, he denigrated his contemporaries. He castigated them for their lack of originality and noted that when original, they were usually "ridiculous." Russell concluded: "But whether this new school poetry has merit or not, it seems to me to be very bad taste for its authors to attempt to force it upon the public, and, because the public refuses to admire it, to rush into print (as some of them have done) with sneering condemnation of the stupidity of popular opinion, which refuses to be guided by them, and refuses to recognize the concealed beauties of their 'poetry.'" Relating this to Russell's own contention that a literature reflects the social values of its age (Letter No. 10), one could hardly conclude that society had progressed.

Russell's political stance presents no such inconsistency. As I have implied in the previous chapter, his political philosophy can be summed in one word: Southerner. The extensive political discourse in his correspondence focuses almost entirely on Southern problems. He vociferously declared his displeasure at Northern policies; he deplored the biased view of the Northern press; and he practically disregarded international problems. To Russell, only the South mattered.

This attitude did not result from ignorance. Russell was intelligent. His capability of reading at age four and comprehension of Milton at six are favorite anecdotes of his biographers.⁵⁷ He continually strewed Latin tag phrases throughout his letters, indicating a familiarity with that language. His reading encompassed such disparate authors as Chaucer and Dr. Montgomery Bird. He was also well educated for his time. His studies at St. Louis University included modern and ancient history, geography, philosophy, language, and science.⁵⁸ He was conversant with the contemporary affairs of the nation. To deplore the Northern press obviously required some knowledge of it. And, in a letter dated April 24, 1877 (Letter No. 36), Russell commented on the time required to peruse the Chicago Tribune. Surely his provincial political leanings evolved from a limited interest rather than a limited intellect.

Russell's references to foreign affairs, usually in response to a query, are few and scattered. He customarily expressed himself tersely. His correspondent's projected visit to Persia elicited this warning: "Russia, Turkey, England, India, Afghanistan--all these are getting up a nice little mess, and Persia can't keep out of it" (Letter No. 66). In one letter he compared Poland with the South: "The fate of Poland was a blessed one compared to ours" (Letter No. 58). In another, he adopted a mock-heroic tone and haughtily averred: "Mississippi, so far, preserves an armed neutrality towards both Russia and Turkey"

⁵⁷ M. G. Fulton, ed. "Irwin Russell," Christmas Night in the Quarters and Other Poems by Irwin Russell (New York, 1917), p. xv.

⁵⁸ Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Saint Louis University, 1866-1867 (St. Louis, Missouri).



(Letter No. 36). Even in this facetious reply one can perceive Russell's parochial attitude.

Russell's political writing on local matters, unlike his disinterested commentary on international affairs, was voluminous. He frequently devoted several pages of a letter to an elucidation and defense of the Southern position. Generally he concentrated on Southern disturbances and corrupt electioneering practices, both attributed to Republican agitation. Nationally, the Hayes-Tilden Presidential race in 1876 evoked his most bitter commentary.

Russell's attribution of local election violence to Republican instigation is clearly evident in his correspondence. His political discussion on this topic is far too lengthy and profuse for inclusion here. Therefore, an extended account from a single letter may serve best. In a letter dated November 4, 1876 (Letter No. 28A), he addressed himself to rectifying "the recent dispatches in the Republican papers about the 'Port Gibson Riot'; in which Democrats are said to have broken up a Republican meeting, made an attack on the negroes, 'hunted' them like partridges, 'and killed and wounded a great number of inoffensive blacks.'" Russell alleged that a mass of armed Negroes, led by W. D. Sprott, were marching into town to hear a speech by Negro Congressman John D. Lynch. When confronted by the sheriff and congressman Lynch at the outskirts of Port Gibson, the Negroes dispersed. Later, a sheriff's posse was fired upon from ambush, resulting in one horse killed, one Negro wounded, and eight Negroes arrested. Russell described the scene in town: "Every white man in town got his arms and rendezvoused--(barbaric expression)--at the courthouse. The country negroes, who were in town in immense numbers, galloped up and down



--seemingly undecided what to do-- while black women stood on the sidewalks and called to them: 'Go get your guns! Go get your guns, and use them, too!' One Negro flourished a revolver, crying: 'D--n 'em, we've begun it now, and let's gib 'em h--!'--whereupon a white man held the muzzle of a gun to his head and made him hand over the pistol." Russell concluded: "It is the avowed policy of Southern Republicans, to provoke race conflicts by inciting the blacks to attack us, and so furnish grists of dead darkeys for the outrage mill." Russell's resentment of the Southern Republican-Negro coalition and the distorted reporting of the Northern press is strikingly evident.

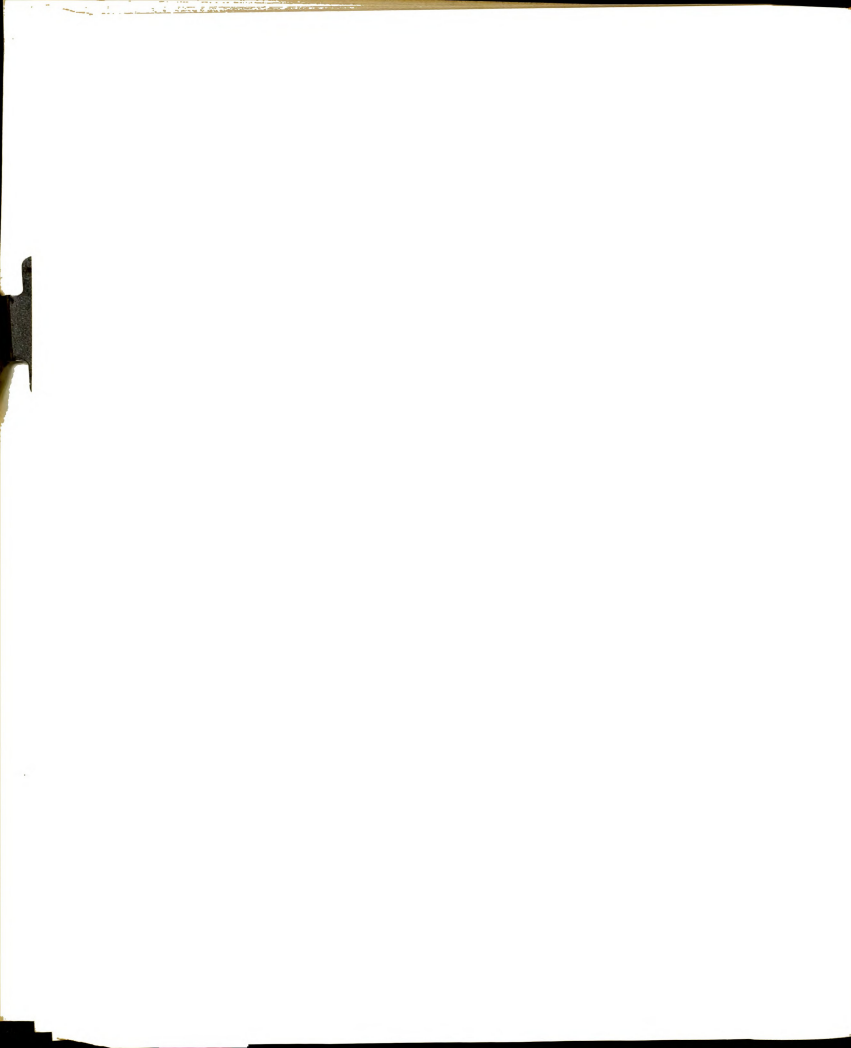
The Hayes-Tilden Presidential contest in 1876 perhaps best reveals the extent of Russell's pronounced Southern bias. Russell steadfastly maintained his belief in the ultimate election of Tilden. His letters are filled with statistics disclosing Tilden's majority. His vehemence on this matter may be ascertained from his dire prophecies of another war should the Presidential mantle fall on Hayes (Letter No. 31). Even after the Compromise of 1877 had been effected, Russell remained adamant. He maligned the "cowardly compromise" as "unnecessary, illegal, and cowardly" (Letter No. 32). His scornful opinion reflected the general trend of popular Southern thought,⁵⁹ emphasizing the narrowness of his political tenets. For the articles of the Compromise, an open secret, had much that was attractive to the South: Southerners in the Federal Cabinet, control of their own state government, and implied removal of federal troops from the South.⁶⁰ Despite this, Russell continued to be

⁵⁹ C. Vann Woodward, Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction (Boston, 1951), p. 189.

⁶⁰ Woodward, Reunion and Reaction, p. 208.

disenchanted. As late as August of 1878 (Letter No. 60) Russell scored the participants as "villains . . . traitors . . . curs." Here he scaled the heights of abuse: he expressed his preference for Grant over L. Q. C. Lamar and Benjamin Hill; for Grant, at least, was "not a sneak or a coward, if he is a thief."

Perhaps this strong Southern note is the most appropriate one on which to conclude this brief sketch of his life. For despite his lengthy sojourns in the North--nearly ten years of his fewer than twenty-seven--Russell was predominantly a Southerner. He was born in the South; he lived in the South during its most trying years of war and reconstruction; and, shortly before his death, he returned to the South after only a brief stay in New York. Russell had once facetiously written: "Live in such a place? Certainly. You know our anthem says 'We'll live and die in Dixie'" (Letter No. 32). He was an apt prophet. On December 23, 1879, Irwin Russell died in a boarding house at 73 North Franklin Street, New Orleans, Louisiana.



Chapter III

SATIRE

It is one of the maxims of civil law,
that definitions are hazardous.

Dr. Samuel Johnson

I

Satire is an ambiguous term. Scholars attempting to delineate its limits customarily resort to circumlocution. Nearly all of them, however, concur that the rhetorical devices utilized by the old, acknowledged satirists form an integral part of the definition. Russell evidently possessed an intimate knowledge of their writing, for he has liberally sprinkled allusions to these authors throughout his correspondence. The multiplicity of these references and Russell's profession of having studied technical aspects of literature (Letter No. 48) suggest his familiarity with satiric devices. I shall draw on Russell's correspondence to demonstrate this familiarity. For his use of rhetorical devices associated with satire was so pervasive in these letters as to suggest that this was his natural mode of thought, thereby also strengthening my contention that he was primarily a satirist. One should hardly wonder then that Russell, a student of literature, fond of old satirists, apt in the use of rhetorical devices, would write satirical poetry.

Russell's predilection for the satirists is apparent in the series of letters written to his Indiana correspondent. Allusions to satirists and their works dominate his literary discourse as these men are constantly singled out for praise. In Letter No. 5, for instance, Russell admired the satiric touch of Robert Burns. He wrote:

I consider one page of poor Robbie Burns ("poor" in a different way from Ralph Waldo) worth all that Tennyson and Longfellow ever wrote. Even if we leave the beauty of his poems out of the question, they are still superior--for they are so full of point. Where is the satire, ancient or modern, that can compare with "Holy Willie's Prayer"?

In the same letter he extolled Byron's satiric pieces, exclaiming, "as for Don Juan, I know it by heart!" Yet, in the following missive, he admitted "Byron is unsatisfactory. Some of his poems are entirely too indefinite." In Russell's critical judgment Byron's satire evidently excelled his romantic poems.

Russell's acquaintance with satirists was not a shallow one confined to only a few authors. A catalogue of those appearing in his letters would reveal the range encompassed by his reading. The roll displays both geographical and chronological variety. He cited both Juvenal's original Latin verse (Letter No. 10), and Dryden's translation of the "most ungallant fellow old Juvenal" (Letter No. 39). In Letter No. 4 he quoted Heinrich Heine, who, in the opinion of Matthew Hodgart, wrote the greatest German satire of the early nineteenth century.¹ France was also represented. Russell ironically referred to Moliere's Tartuffe as a "charming fellow" (Letter No. 26). Later he revealed mixed emotions in evaluating Rabelais. Of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Russell wrote: "Rabelais' work is at once the best and the worst book imaginable. Its wit and deep satire are unapproachable, but they are inextricable from those things which make the book unfit for any reader except a student" (Letter No. 43). The final qualification suggests Russell's critical interest in satire.

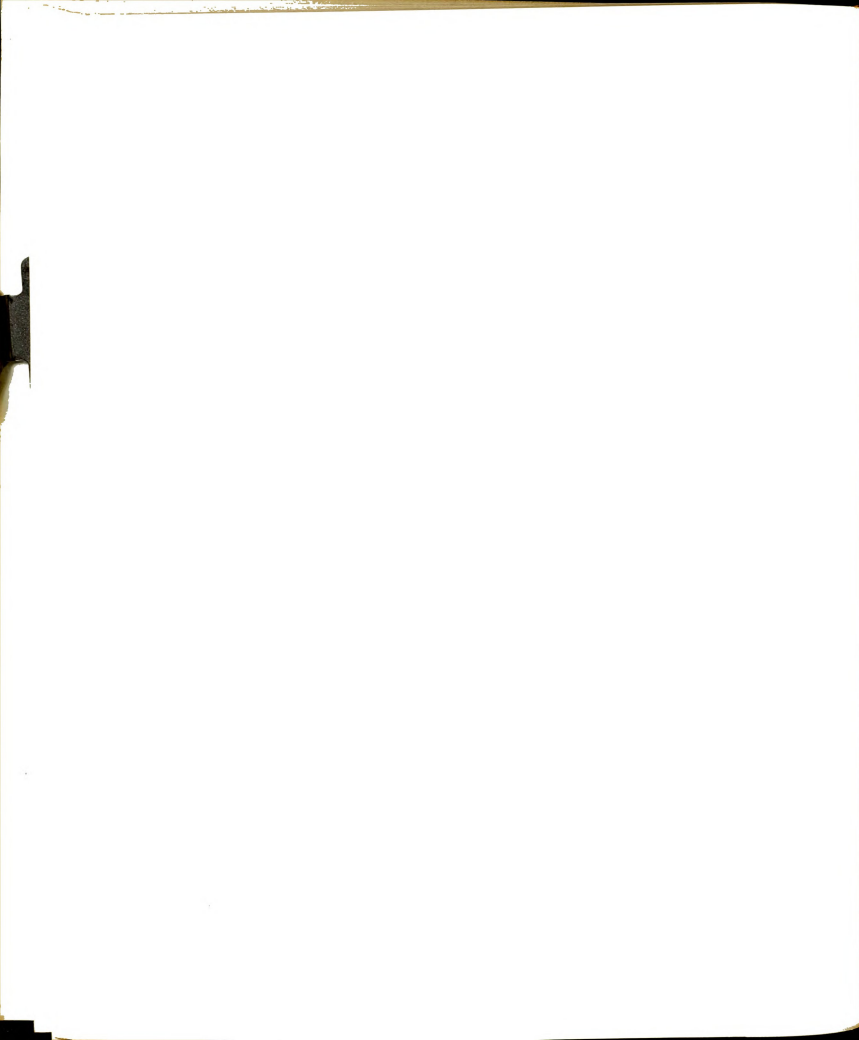
¹ Satire (New York, 1969), p. 76.



Concerning another French satirist, Voltaire, Russell evidently held no such reservation. In this same letter he disparaged Voltaire's use of "the most peurile sophisms to attack the sophistry of the Christians." Russell concluded: "Voltaire was a great man thrown away." Significantly, Russell scored Voltaire for his technical deficiency, not his target.

Russell exhibited depth as well as breadth in his reading of satire. He demonstrated this quality in his commentary on William Gifford's "The Baviad" and "The Maeviad." Russell revealed his critical acuity by recognizing the first as the "exact counterpart of Persius' first satire" (Letter No. 39). He then elaborated: "That and his 'Maeviad' are unsurpassed as powerful satires and are very instructive to the students of the history of literature." Russell's laudatory remarks about Gifford are particularly appropriate as Gifford shared some of Russell's characteristics: ill health, detestation for radicals, and antipathy for his contemporary writers.

Russell had read intensively and extensively in the field of satire. A partial catalogue of the satirists alluded to in his letters would include, in addition to those already named: Samuel Butler (1612-1680), Ben Jonson, John Cleveland, Thomas Heywood, Sterne, Fielding, Swift, Dryden, Twain, and Cervantes. And he apparently read critically. In the above commentary on Rabelais and Gifford he acknowledged himself more than a casual reader. Thus it seems natural that his carefully cultivated tastes would ultimately result in a command of satire's functions and rhetorical devices.



works because of their importance in all definitions of satire. The tenuous quality of the term may be readily ascertained by a brief examination of works about satire. Nearly every scholar admits the difficulty of precise definition. Robert C. Eliott called it "the problem which has plagued critics and historians of satire since Roman times."² L. J. Potts flatly stated that "satire is not a clearly defined species of literature."³ And Leonard Feinberg concluded: "Satire is such an amorphous genre that no two scholars define it in the same words."⁴

It would be difficult to give a precise definition of satire. But as David Worcester has remarked, "students must either make their own maps, or else 'With weary tread/Each wrapt in his own doom, they wander, wander.'"⁵ I shall, therefore, confine my definition to the description of the attitudes and rhetorical techniques on which there is at least a modicum of scholarly agreement. These basic criteria are as follows: one, an intent to ridicule; two, an inherent appeal to the audience's superiority; and three, the use of certain rhetorical devices common in the works of acknowledged satirists.

Modern critics tend to be rather sceptical of satire's effectiveness in provoking changes. Nevertheless, these critics usually confess that the satirist still exercises his talent for ridicule with the specific intention of affecting society.⁶ The satirist deliberately attempts to

² The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art (Princeton, 1960), p. 118.

³ Comedy (New York, 1966), p. 153.

⁴ Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa, 1967), p. 18.

⁵ The Art of Satire (New York, 1940), p. 8.

⁶ See, for example, Feinberg, Introduction to Satire, pp. 254-255.



diminish the object of his attack by exposing him to the audience's laughter. Some critics regard this sense of purpose as one of the fundamental tenets distinguishing satire from comedy. Meyer H. Abrams, for instance, defining satire in A Glossary of Literary Terms, asserted: "It differs from comedy in that comedy evokes laughter as an end in itself, while satire 'derides'; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt existing outside the work itself." David Worcester made the distinction even more concisely: "The laughter of comedy is relatively purposeless. The laughter of satire is directed toward a preconceived end."⁷ From the above, one may logically conclude that intent constitutes an integral part of satire.

The necessity of proving intent immediately poses a question. Was Russell consciously striving to implant the notion of Negro absurdity into the Northern mind? Any answer must necessarily be speculative. It would seem to rest on the answers to several other questions. Was the contemporary trend in Southern literature generally oriented to a defensive posture? Was Russell deeply enough absorbed with political affairs, especially in the role of the Negro, to emphasize Negro absurdity for political and social reasons? Was Russell aware of the potential power of the pen in swaying public opinion? Finally, has Russell written anything, exclusive of his poems, which would suggest an attempt to influence Northern judgment? All four questions take an affirmative answer.

The first two questions have already been answered in Chapters I and II respectively. The first point requires no more elaboration for

⁷ The Art of Satire, p. 38.



scholars agree that Southern Reconstruction literature was clearly marked by a propagandistic intent. The second point requires only limited expansion, as Russell's preoccupation with Southern politics was made clearly evident in Chapter II. However, his assessment of the Negro's political talent has not yet been clearly defined. That this judgment was hardly complimentary to the Negro may be easily inferred from such passages as the following: "We have been plundered, insulted, abused and tryannized over by ignorant savages" (Letter No. 26); and "their real absurdities cannot even be done justice to on paper" (Letter No. 30). In a letter dated June 10, 1877 (Letter No. 38), he was even more explicit in evaluating the Negro's governmental potentialities. Russell wrote:

I have seen important suits, which involved the nicest distinctions of law, left to the decision of a jury of twelve such ignorant darkeys, who had to get the baliff in charge of them to write down the verdict-- not one of them being able to read or write at all. And we have had sheriffs, justices of the peace, country treasurers, majors, members of the legislature, etc. etc. who could not write or read a word. And this was the rule, here; not the exception.

Clearly Russell held no romantic illusions about the Negro's political acumen. This distaste for Negroes in positions of power could easily have influenced his poetry. For the distorted, one-sided depiction of the Negro as a ludicrous being would help insure against a return of the above conditions. A North persuaded of such mental incompetence on the Negro's part would be much less likely to insist on the maintenance of Negro-Republican rule.

The affirmative answer to the third question must rest on inferential evidence. The well-read Russell, a graduate of a Jesuit institution wherein he studied rhetoric, would have some cognizance of language's persuasive properties. His resentment over Southern treatment at the

hands of Northern authors also indicates an awareness of rhetoric's practical application. Russell, for instance, was particularly incensed over the depiction of Southern Civil War prisons. He bitterly denounced Northern writers who had presented what was to him a distorted, biased account. In a letter dated February 26, 1877 (Letter No. 33), he voiced his anger:

Now, you cannot find a New Englander author that will speak of us fairly. They talk about the treatment of prisoners at Andersonville and Libby, where we gave them all the necessities that their own blockade allowed us to obtain, and the same rations that our men on duty were served with; yet they never mention the fact, which the U.S. government records publicly show, that the mortality among Confederate prisoners in Northern prisons was far greater than that of the prisoners confined at Andersonville or Libby or any or all of our prisons--and yet the North wasn't blockaded. . . .

The tone of the passage could hardly be justified if Russell were indifferent to the effects of rhetoric. If of little value in formulating public opinion, there would certainly be no point in scoring the Northern writers for their failure to present both sides of the issue. While he disliked the Northern narrative, the artist in Russell appreciated the efficacy of its delivery.

Russell's recognition of the effectiveness of this propaganda may also be perceived in the very first letter of the series. He apparently felt it necessary to immediately destroy what he assumed to be his correspondent's view of the Southerners. Significantly, he utilized a traditional satirical device--hyperbolic irony--to achieve his purpose. Russell wrote: "We never have the blues--all we 'White Leaguers,' whenever we feel badly, step out and kill a half a dozen Negroes; which never fails to restore tone to the system." The facetious exaggeration

would quickly dissipate any preconceived notion of Southern barbarity held by his correspondent. This evident need to reassure her, however, demonstrates Russell's awareness of the distorted Southern image which had been created by Northern authors. Russell's defensiveness was not without some justification. A recent historian, Paul Buck, has commented at length on this image. He remarked, for instance, the effect of J. F. Trowbridge's The South (1866) on the Northern public, noting as the books "central theme. . .that the South was barbarous. . . . The 'spirit of slavery' had debased the Southern mind."⁸ One must conclude that Russell did not necessarily joust with windmills: there was a point to his irony.

The above examples, of course, do not exhaust Russell's technical perceptions of the persuasive content in Northern writing. A specific denunciation of the biased Northern press was presented in some detail in Chapter II. And others are scattered throughout the letters. In Letter No. 31, for instance, Russell, speaking of Republican perfidies, averred: "but I am tired of setting them down for your perusal, although most of their number are not likely to be shown to you by the papers you read." In a later letter (Letter No. 34), he mocked a "most artistic 'outrage' story" in a Northern paper as "totally apocryphal."

One may reasonably assume from the foregoing that Russell was not ignorant of propaganda's effects. One may also reasonably assume of the truth would hardly hesitate to retaliate in kind.

Relative to the fourth question, evidence does exist of Russell's desire to influence Northern judgment. Many of his letters contain lengthy descriptions of local incidents wherein Russell attempted to

⁸ The Road to Reunion: 1865-1900 (Boston, 1947), p. 17.



justify Southern actions, rectify the Northern misapprehensions, and engage the sympathy of his correspondent for the South's predicament. These efforts are illustrated in his account of the Port Gibson riot previously presented in Chapter II. The correspondence also contains several other long narratives of a like nature. It would seem that the sheer bulk of the letters devoted to such description would constitute prima facie evidence of Russell's purpose.

But even more proof is available. On two occasions Russell specifically mentions sending Southern Democratic papers to his correspondent. In Letter No. 28 Russell added this postscript: "I send you quite a number of extracts from a Democratic paper. I hope they are not too many--and I ask it as an especial favor that you will read them." In a later letter (Letter No. 38) he acknowledged mailing copies of the Vicksburg Herald and the Port Gibson Reveille. While the contents of the papers are unknown, one may infer from the specific reference to "Democratic" that Russell was once more furthering the Southern cause. This inference acquires added authority in the light of another comment by Russell. In a letter dated December 3, 1876 (Letter No. 30), Russell vilified the Louisiana Returning Board for accepting the testimony of a Negress, Miss Eliza Pinkston. Russell ended by stating: "I would send you papers containing the phonographic report of the whole affair, were it not for the fact that the horrible details of the Negress's monstrous statement are too awful for you to read."

While the letters were, of course, directed to only one Northerner, the sentiments expressed are still indicative of Russell's general attitude. An attempt to influence one person suggests a desire to influence many: a wish he himself made explicitly. In Letter No. 29, he



declared: "And it is time that you should know, and that all Northern people should realize, that the thing called 'Republican Party' in the South is a thing that is so utterly vile, contemptible, and horribly loathsome, that no words are adequate to properly characterize it." The expansion from a single person to the entire North reveals Russell's deepfelt conviction on the issue. It also suggests that the author, given the means to reach the large Northern audience, may well have seized the opportunity.

III

The second major criterion also rests on substantial critical authority. Scholars generally agree on satire's inherent appeal to a sense of superiority in the audience. David Worcester, for one, noted: "The ironist appeals to an aristocracy of brains."⁹ And Leonard Feinberg, with his customary insight into human nature, accounted for satire's basic appeal by asserting: "Few people can pass an objective snobbery test."¹⁰

That the white Southerner was convinced of his superiority over the Negro hardly requires verification beyond that already presented in Chapter I. But it was the white Northerner at whom the satire was directed. What was his attitude? The evidence shows that he had always been in substantial agreement with his Southern counterpart. Nearly all historians remark that the white North, wherein Jim Crow originated, held tenaciously to the concept of white superiority. John Hope Franklin, for example, commented on the widely held view "among those who were opposed to slavery, that Negroes were inferior and deserved

⁹ The Art of Satire, p. 38.

¹⁰ Introduction to Satire, p. 26.



special, separate treatment."¹¹ Paul Buck verified this belief in a catalogue of the attitudes expressed by prominent Northerners.¹²

Incontestable confirmation is also available in the congressional records. Prominent Northern congressmen who led the campaigns for Negro rights specifically denied Negro equality. Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, for instance, asserted unequivocally: "So far as mental or physical equality is concerned, I believe the African race inferior to the white race," and "I do not believe in the equality of the African race with the white race, mentally or physically, and I do not think morally." Later Representative Albert S. White, representing the select committee on emancipation, reported: "It is useless, now, to enter upon any philosophical inquiry whether nature has or has not made the Negro inferior to the Caucasian. The belief is indelibly fixed upon the public mind that such inequality does exist." Even Lincoln had repeatedly voiced his acquiescence.¹³

Perhaps the most honest account of the Northern attitude is contained in an anecdote related by Senator James R. Doolittle of Wisconsin. Senator Doolittle told of the Vermont farmer who called on his congressman in 1843. The farmer expressed his desire that the congressman "take hold of this Negro business, and dispose of it in some way or other; have slavery abolished, and be done with it." The farmer, though shaken to

¹¹ "Jim Crow Goes to School," The Negro In the South Since 1865: Selected Essays in American Negro History, ed. Charles E. Wyles (University, Alabama, 1967), p. 136.

¹² The Road to Reunion, p. 296.

¹³ The Reconstruction Amendment Debates, publ. by the Virginia Commission on Constitutional Government (Richmond, 1967), pp. 27, 30, 242-243.

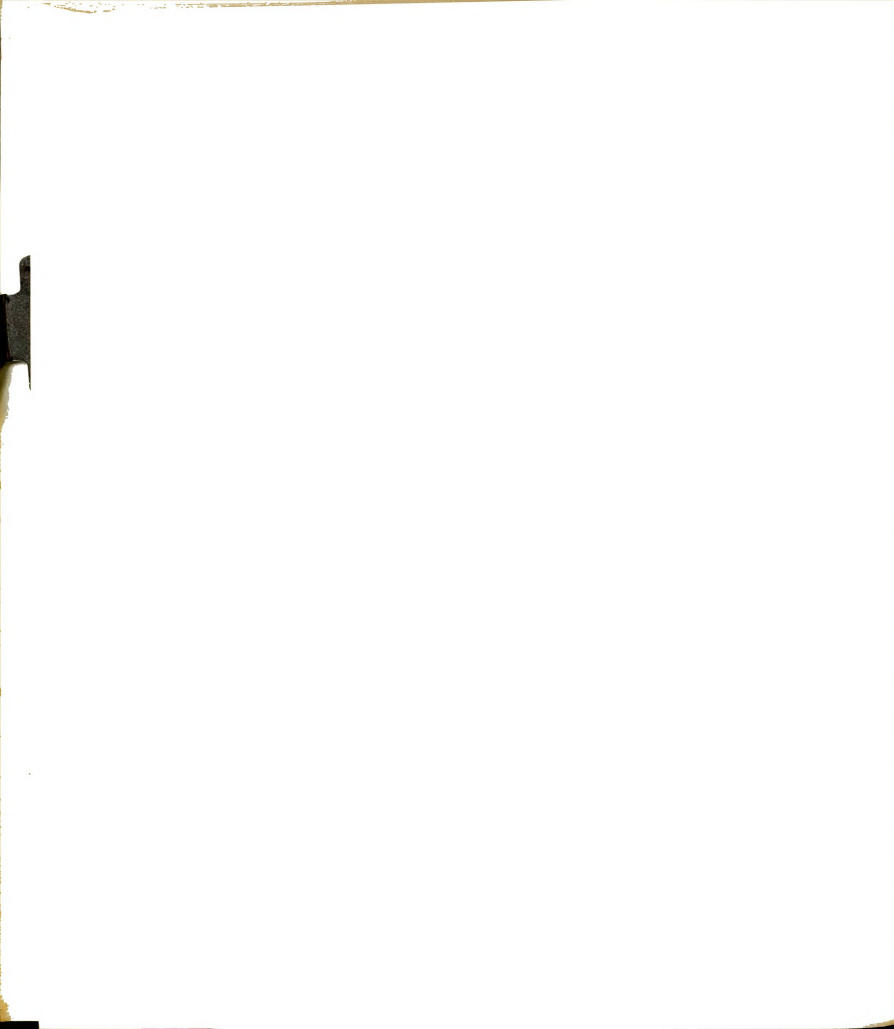


his thrifty Yankee core, even acceded to the possibility of increased taxation contingent upon such abolition. However, when the Congressman suggested that the freedmen might be distributed among Northern communities and that the quota for the farmer's village, Woodstock, would be five hundred Negroes, the farmer balked. The record reads:

"What!", said he, "five hundred Negroes in Woodstock! Judge, I called to pay my respects; I bid you good evening;" and he started for the door, and mounted his horse. As he was about to leave he turned around and said: "Judge, I guess you need not do anything more about the negro business on my account."

Russell's poems, then, almost surely reached a sympathetic audience which accepted its superiority over his subject as self-evident. His comic treatment of the Negro's ignorance, absurdity in affecting the airs of the whites, amorality, and ludicrous antics undoubtedly struck a responsive chord in his Northern audience, drawing them closer to the Southern whites. A propos to this unifying tendency, Hugh Dalziel Duncan has examined at some length the cohesive effect of laughter emanating from the ridicule of an outsider. As Duncan's conclusions are pertinent to my thesis I will quote rather extensively:

We see ridicule used as magic art in the treatment of groups struggling for status. Each newly arrived immigrant group in America became a butt of ridicule for older groups who had risen to power and who therefore were able to set standards of Americanization. The immigrant is always a challenge even a threat to established customs. He makes us realize that two (or more) evaluations of actions are possible. Laughter helps to resolve this. As we ridicule the newcomer, we overcome confusion through the euphoria arising within us as we laugh. Such ridicule is also used for control of minority groups. We ascribe ignoble and ludicrous characteristics to them, so that we can legitimize the "need" for control. In magic art we do not hate and then ridicule, we ridicule so that we can hate. [Italics are mine] If such laughter is



not checked by reason operating through imagination, as in great art, the butt of ridicule soon becomes the scapegoat, whom we torture and kill for our edification.¹⁴

The passage bears directly on the satirical content of Russell's poems. His "ludicrous characterization" of the freedman would surely appeal to the intellectual and moral superiority of his Northern white audience. It would also appear reasonable to assume that the resulting euphoria would contribute to a closing of ranks between Northern and Southern whites; for as Henri Bergson has stated: "Our laughter is always the laughter of a group."¹⁵ Although Duncan's reference is to magic art, there is an unquestioned relationship between this art and satire. Robert C. Elliott has examined this historical association at length in the first chapter of The Power of Satire (Princeton, 1960). And ridicule is also fundamental to satire. Gilbert Highet, for one, has emphasized its role, declaring "that ridicule is a powerful a weapon as invective, and that it is more properly the arm of satire."¹⁶ An application of these theses to the statistics dealing with the post-Reconstruction lynchings of Negroes suggests the Archilocus legend is not without its truth.

IV

Russell's use of rhetorical devices--the final criterion in this brief description of satire--indicates a nearly unconscious reliance on them. He constantly resorted to them in his correspondence. Indeed the profuseness of examples lends added credence to the basic conception of

¹⁴ Language and Literature in Society (Chicago, 1953), pp. 24-25

¹⁵ Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, trans. Clouesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York, 1914), p. 6.

¹⁶ Juvenal the Satirist (New York, 1961), p. 78.



Russell as a satirist. For he applied a satirical twist to a wide range of subjects, suggesting that the satirical mode was his customary one. The inclusion of these rhetorical devices in satire is quite valid. David Worcester, for instance, called them "all important." He then added: "What is more to the present point, the presence or absence of such devices determines what is satire and what is not."¹⁷

Archilocus, the first satirist of record, became a legendary figure through his invective.¹⁸ Russell did not utilize this technique in his poems but did in his letters. One such example, directed at Southern politicians, has already been noted at the conclusion of the preceding chapter. Russell's talent in this respect, however, can be best illustrated in his outburst against New England, the seat of abolitionism. In a letter dated May 22, 1876 (Letter No. 19), he vented his spleen:

These ideas of the "suffrage shriekers" come from that hot-bed of fanaticism and shimerical philosophy, New England, and are among the many outgrowths of that foul tree, Puritanism, which has overshadowed and blighted all our institutions. Such criminals, liars, and slanderers as that part of the country is populated by, brought about our dreadful civil war; and New England is a Nazareth out of which nothing good can come. The "Pilgrim fathers" were the most abominable set of contemptible scoundrels that ever lived, except that race of rascals, their descendents, who reside "down East." If any of them had lived eighteen centuries or so ago, Judas would never have got that money.

The venomous implication of the last sentence reveals Russell's capability in the field. The reduction of all New Englanders to a moral stature beneath that of Christianity's arch-traitor aptly *culminates* an attack on the self-righteous East.

¹⁷ The Art of Satire, pp. 14-15.

¹⁸ E. I. Elliott, The Power of Satire, p. 7.



Russell's antipathy for New England led him to more subtle thrusts. Abandoning the bludgeon of invective, he resorted to the rapier of irony: a favorite satirical weapon.¹⁹ In Letter No. 8, he acknowledged having relatives "down East": Ben Butler, the Union general and Northern politician, and Susan B. Anthony, the suffragist. Russell followed the admission with a Biblical quotation used only in a quasi-mocking manner: "O Lord, what have I done, that I should be so afflicted?"

On another occasion the irony directed at New England betrayed a more serious purpose. Taking umbrage from a Northern newspaper's allusion to the South as "half-civilized," Russell wrote:

How I wish I were a Bosting man! Why can't New England civilize us? I am truly grateful for what she has done already--sening her sons to kindly relieve us of our superflous property--why, now, can't she complete the good work and express Beecher and Parton down here to elevate our morality to the approved New England standard, and forward other missionaries to cultivate our tastes and intellects in parallel courses with the morality? (Letter No. 33)

Verbal irony in the classic sense permeates the passage as Russell ridicules New England with mock envy, sham praise and sarcasm.

In a later letter (Letter No. 40) Russell took obvious pleasure in loosing yet another barb at the East. He related the social shortcomings of a visitor from Connecticut, a "sweet youth." The Connecticut youth, despite inclement weather, apparently refused to hire a carriage to convey himself and a young lady to a party in the country. Ultimately the girl's father did. Russell concluded the veiled thrust at Yankee parsimony with superb Southern irony: "Really, I don't wonder that Downeasters think negroes are as good as they are!"

¹⁹ Worcester, p. 81.

Russell's irony was not restricted to a denigration of New England: he attacked indiscriminately. Given his political bent, one should not be surprised that much of the satire in his correspondence was devoted to politics: "The pre-eminent topic of satire."²⁰ In a letter dated July 13, 1877 (Letter No. 40), Russell resorted to tongue-in-cheek Socratic irony to emphasize the South's maltreatment by the Federal government. He acknowledged having read of a murder trial in Indiana and an "attempted mobbing of a man in Bloomington"; Russell then asked: "Do you have 'Ku Klux'? Was the affair political? Are troops to be sent to Indiana, and is it recommended to 'remand that state to a territorial condition'?" The irony in the rhetorical questions mocking the North's continual waving of the "bloody shirt" is obvious.

In another letter (Letter No. 34) Russell used irony of understatement to casually damn radical Republicanism. Russell wrote: "It is dull, here. Even the political killing and houseburning business has become inactive. Trade will probably look up, however, now that Sprott has returned from Washington. . . ." Sprott was the Republican state superintendent of education. This casting of murder and arson as simply part of a Republican's stock in trade is enhanced by the dry matter-of-fact tone. In the same letter Russell recounted another incident, possibly apocryphal, which illustrates his contempt for Republicanism. Russell related how a Mr. Kirkbride, a Mississippian rooming with Sprott in Washington, had stolen \$300.00 from Sprott. Russell described the apprehension of Kirkbride:

²⁰ Hodgart, Satire, p. 31.



Grand tableau! Great consternation in the highest official circles, at this lack of honor among thieves! But it was a touching incident--it was "Republicanism" brought home to "Republicans," and appreciated with double strength. Who can blame Kirkbride? Doubtless he aspired to some high office, and had been required to prove his qualifications for filling it.

Again the reader discovers mock sympathy culminating in sarcastic irony: here, to suggest the thieving propensities of Republicans. As I have noted, however, the incident may be apocryphal: Kirkbride was the man who married Sallie Massey.

Russell's ironic assaults on Republicanism are far too numerous for inclusion here. However, his preoccupation with the same may be ascertained by the unusual context in which they occur. The returning board, for instance, was a favorite target of Russell's, and he continually surprised his reader by sudden satiric aspersions on its integrity. In a letter dated February 11, 1877 (Letter No. 32), Russell casually interrupted his praise of St. Valentine with: "He might have successfully run for office against any other Saint in the calendar (unless his opponent had been provided with a returning board)." In a later letter (Letter No. 35), he facetiously concluded a review of his unsuccessful defenses against mosquitos by noting: "Perhaps our wooden-headed President (so-called) would respond to my earnest appeal, and send down a few virtuous republicans to count the mosquitos out. . . ."

While politics provided a favorite object for Russell's satire, his irony was hardly confined to the field. Often he lashed out at his contemporary poets, especially Tennyson. In Letter No. 10 Russell demolished Lord Alfred with the following ironic judgment: "Tennyson's 'Queen Mary' I think is about on a par with Josh Billings' Almanac in literary merit." The epigrammatic irony is suggestive of Ambrose



Bierce's book review: "The covers of this book are too far apart."²¹

Spiritualists also received similarly brief treatment from Russell. After a short discourse on Mesmerism, Russell added: "Balaam is said to have consulted a man in a 'trance with his eyes wide open'---and asses and spirits have continued to make communication ever since." (Letter No. 15)

Additionally Russell proved his familiarity with satirical devices by employing other ironic modes. In the first letter of the series he used innuendo to malign the veracity of newspaper reporters, writing: "I have become proficient in the art of lying, and have even been successful as a newspaper correspondent." Exaggeration is utilized to ridicule the Baptist's concept of total immersion. Russell related: "Two ladies joined the church and were baptized in the bayou. One of them being a very fat sinner, the boys (I observed) made marks with little sticks at the water's edge to see how much she would raise the creek" (Letter No. 45).

Occasionally the exaggeration resulted in caricature. In Letter No. 31, for example, Russell dispensed with all reservation in describing the local marshall and his deputy. Here is Russell's extravagant portrait:

He is no ordinary man. In the walk of pleasing fable, Munchausen lags far behind Jordan. . . . His speech is most extraordinary--no man ever talked like he does--for he is given over to the use of polysyllables of his own invention and construction, the meaning whereof no man may fathom; and he combines these with the longest words in Webster, selected entirely at random. Jordan is as great a terror to evil-doers as was Mr. Bumble the Beadle. His appearance is extremely warlike. He carries five revolvers, a shot-gun, a bowie-knife,

²¹ Feinberg, Introduction to Satire, p. 209.

and an immense hickory club, when on duty; and is, withal, attended by an enormous yellow dog of surpassing ugliness. His principal assistant is a gory monster named John Smith. John is even more martial in appearance than his chief.

Demonstrating still another affinity with satirists,²² Russell insisted on the veracity of his description.

The anticlimax, a device preferred by Juvenal,²³ is another which recurs throughout Russell's writings. In the second letter of the series he advised his correspondent to answer promptly "because the sword of Damocles may be said to be suspended over my head by a nine-inch hawser. . . ." Later in the same letter he commented on the possibility of a Negro attack requiring him to take arms. He immediately dispelled any fears aroused: "Should I fall--over a grapevine. . . ." In Letter No. 7, preparatory to unburdening himself about a broken engagement, he wrote: "List to the harrowing tale. 'If you have tears, prepare to shed them now'--if not, get an onion." The deliberate and abrupt descent from Shakespearean tragedy typifies Russell's use of the anti-climax, a device which is also a predominant feature in his satirical poems.

Russell also displayed an inordinate fondness for punning, another rhetorical device of satire.²⁴ This affection may be perceived in the title of his doggerel poem "A Pun Her Travels." Confirming this, one finds puns everywhere in his works. In Letter No. 25 he devoted several lines to the name George Major, using the expected "Minor" and "Ursa Major." In Letter No. 33, he played with "honorary" and "Ornery." In

²² Kernan, The Plot of Satire (New Haven, 1965), p. 5.

²³ Hight, Juvenal the Satirist, p. 176.

²⁴ Feinberg, Introduction to Satire, p. 80.

Letter No. 37, he enclosed a brief doggerel poem with a pun on "railing."

Russell wrote:

When old Father Adam for peace was inclined,
'tis said that Eve gave him a piece of her mind;
And further, that Adam, when Eve would commence,
Was fain to take himself over the fence:
Eve couldn't--mount it--and never, since then,
Have women got over the railing at men.

Additionally, disparaging symbols and comparisons formed an important segment of Russell's repertory. His Negroes are only infrequently separated from their possums, chickens, mules, or hogs. A new law is characterized as "rough on our po' darkey hog-thief" (Letter No. 38). A description of Christmas in the South includes a comment on how "stray pigs unaccountably disappear from their wonted 'wallers'" (Letter No. 31). Russell, of course, did not confine himself to the Negro. He derided a young evangelistic Baptist preacher by comparing him to a drummer "traveling about for the house of J. Baptist & Co." (Letter No. 45). His contemporary poets again fail to escape unscathed. After expressing his delight in finding an edition of the Della Cruscan poems "that Gifford so mercilessly annihilated in his 'Boviad'" Russell mockingly noted that "even Lanier's 'Cantata' or Whitman's 'Blades o' Grass' pall their ineffectual fires in comparison with them" (Letter No. 41).

Burlesque is another form of comparison important in satire.²⁵ And Russell frequently used it. In Letter No. 24, Russell began a parody of "the Centennial bosh": poems by Bayard Taylor and Sidney Lanier. In it he expressed his contempt for the Centennial, especially its commercialization. This attitude is readily discernible in the passages surrounding the brief comic effort. Russell introduced the

²⁵ Worcester, The Art of Satire, pp. 41-42.



parody with a parody, mimicking the style of a side-show barker. Following the poem, Russell adopted an exaggerated tone of mock contrition, employing rather heavy-handed irony. Russell wrote:

I began a grand epic on the subject. Its title was:
 "The Grand Centennial Model and Moral Exhibition of the
 Nineteenth Century. Walk up, gentlemen! The Wonders of
 Nature and the Triumphs of Art!--By the justly famous
 Irwin Russell, Esquire, which writ 'Nebuchadnezzar.'" I
 finished the opening four lines:

We read in each journal that's issued diurnal
 About the great fuss on the Fourth to be made,
 And posters and dogers [sic] invite the old codgers
 To come to the show with their passage prepaid.

Here I paused, and began to ask myself, "Is this
 justifiable? What have the American people done to you,
 that you should subject them to such torments?" I tore
 up the incomplete Epic; and, since then, I have been
 the prey of violent remorse for even the attempt to
 write Centennial poetry.

The incongruity fundamental in burlesque led Russell to some unusual
 uses of the device. In Letter No. 7, he attacked the current rage for
 black-face which resulted in even Shakespearean drama being performed
 by actors wearing burnt. The brief passage uses travesty not to satirize
 Shakespeare, but rather to ridicule the ludicrous portrayals. Russell
 reduced the matter to absurdity by writing:

I have likewise appeared as "Bolognicus" and the Ghost
 in the bloody tragedy of "Gimlet," and also as
 "Dicky Three Times." In the character of "O'thello,"
 I have sternly demanded: "Desdemony, whar am dat red
 dambanna handkerchief I gub you?"--and she answered,
 "My Lord it's in de wash!"

Russell further demonstrated his familiarity with the rhetorical
 adjuncts of burlesque. In Letter No. 35, for example, he employed the
 mock-epic style in the description of a young lady's visit. He even
 furnished the narrative with classical and archaic material. He then
 emphasized the ludicrous aspect of the mock-epic by a sudden



anti-climactic ending. Russell portrayed the incident as follows:

Through the silvery moonlight, along the leafy corridors,
where the tiny minstrels of the greenwood chanted their
evening hymns to Diana; came to me a damsel, with whom the
fire-flies waged war from envy for the lustre of her eyes,
and darted fiercely at her--yet paused, circled, and
slunk away, abashed by the gentle majesty of her
loveliness. Who passes along the road so late? Not
Compagnon de la Majolaine. No; it was Alice--and don't
you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt? I regret to say
that this Alice is another man's wife and that she is
not, in fact, handsome.

A final consideration rests with Russell's use of dialect.

Satirists have often employed eccentric speech in their efforts to
ridicule, and Russell, of course, adopted Southern Negro dialect as his
primary vehicle. Concerning this device, Leonard Feinberg has commented:
"The laughter at dialects varies with the social rating of the nationality
represented (A French accent is considered by American audiences charm-
ing, but Russian, Yiddish, and southern Negro are ludicrous)."²⁶
Inherent within dialect is the visible manifestation of divergence from
the social norm. As one critic has noted: "The ridiculing of an outsider
. . . is one of the most pervasive conventions of satire."²⁷ The
nonstandard dialect undoubtedly also catered to the audience's sense of
superiority.

Russell often used this dialect in his letters for purposes of
ridicule. The previously cited passage in Chapter II concerning the
visit of the naval gunboat provides one example. Another may be found
in Letter No. 38. Here, Russell found dialect necessary for a proper
description of a court room scene involving a Negro in legal difficulties

²⁶ Introduction to Satire, p. 216.

²⁷ Ronald Paulson, The Fictions of Satire (Baltimore, 1967), p. 23.



with his spouse. Russell recorded the freedman's speech: 'Women is de de'il--'specially nigger women. When we men ort to be working in de crap, de women has us follin' 'roun' dis Circus Coacht.'" In another letter (Letter No. 56), he again resorted to dialect to emphasize the antics of Negroes at a church service; Russell told of his cook who was so frightened by the "shouting and stamping and raving" that she left the church after the woman next to her had leaped on a bench "and dived head downwards onto the bench in front again, with her feet in the air--smashing the back of the bench all to 'smithereens.'" He then related his cook's reaction:

You got to hold 'em--ef somebody didn't hol' 'em dey'd t'ar yo' eyes out--dey'd kill demselves. Oh, yes, say, dey would, shy' 'nough! Dey does day-a-way 'cause dey's got Christ in 'em. Co'se dey has! When dey keeps on holl'in' Oh! sweet Christ! dey bound to has Christ in 'em! Dey wouldn't be holl'in' day-a-way widout dey got Jesus in day soul.

One suspects the dialect helped the audience regard the fervor and absence of logic as purely Negro traits.

One may logically infer from the preceeding evidence that Russell had a penchant for satire. All of the ingredients are present: intention, audience, and capability.

I should note, moreover, that this consideration of Russell as a satirist is not completely unique. Some of the previous Russell scholars have fleetingly noticed the quality. C. C. Marble, for instance, revealed the greatest insight as he wrote: "to him the exaggerations of the great satirist [Rebelais] were scarcely such, as he saw the deformities of modern society with a kindred eye, and applied the wit and sarcasm of the Seventeenth to the follies and wrongs of the



Nineteenth centuries."²⁸ But Marble failed to elaborate on this singular unsubstantiated generalization. Excepting references to the obviously satirical prose piece "The Hysteriad," other critics generally mention only his attraction to caricature²⁹ or paraphrase Marble.³⁰ Evidently their acceptance of Harris' critical judgment prevented their pursuing the concept any further. Nevertheless, even their brief notices support my major thesis: for, despite their general prejudgment, these critics still detected the spark of satire in Russell.

²⁸ "Irwin Russell," The Critic, X (October 27, 1888), 200.

²⁹ See, for example, A. A. Kern, "Irwin Russell," Library of Southern Literature (Atlanta, 1907), X, 4604.

³⁰ See, for example, William M. Baskervill, "Irwin Russell," Southern Writers (Nashville, 1902), I, 15.



Chapter IV

SATIRE: PROSE AND POETRY

Perhaps I may allow, the Dean
Had too much satire in his vein.
Jonathan Swift

In an unpublished short story, "Wanted, an Oracle," Russell espoused his belief in the efficacy of satire by writing: "What humbug can resist attack? Where are the romances of chivalry, since the chronicle of Cid Hamet Benengali? Where Della Crusca and Laura Matilda, after the Baviad and Moeviad?" The passage suggests Russell's faith in the persuasive powers of satire. Consequently, one should be more surprised if he had not written satire than if he had.

His fondness for this genre may be readily perceived even in his semi-scholarly writing. An examination of Russell's article on Cornelius Agrippa, a philosopher whom he was fond of quoting (See Letter No. 10), reveals this predisposition. Despite the academic tone of his discourse, Russell was unable to resist interpolating several ironic comments. On one occasion, after enumerating Agrippa's listing of geometric products-- "Magnaries, Machanopocotickes, Poliorceticckes," Russell suggested: "Between paragraphs, the reader can consult the dictionary or encyclopedia."¹

Later in the essay he resorted to irony of understatement to derogate an especially vague, circumlocutious definition by Agrippa. One may grasp the tenuous quality of the description from the following:

¹ James W. Webb, "New Biographical Material, Criticism, and Uncollected Writings of Irwin Russell," unpubl. thesis (University of North Carolina, 1940), p. 178.



I mean, that is to say, I have almost rashly uttered the name of the thing, whereby I should be a sacrilege and foresworn, yet I will speak with circumlocution, but somewhat more obscure. . . . It is a thing, which hath substance, and not overmuch fiery, nor altogether earthly, more simply watery, nor a most sharp nor most blunt quality, but indifferent, and light in touching, and after a sort tender, or at the least nor hard . . ." (p. 178).

Russell's observation could serve as a classic example of litotes: "The description is scarcely definite enough to enable us to find the philosopher's stone" (p. 182).

Significantly, even here, Russell managed to strike out at one of his favorite targets: modern writers. I should note here that, to Russell, the appellation "moderns" was loosely synonymous with all nineteenth century writers. In Letter No. 27 Russell had criticized them for printing condemnations of an unappreciative public. In this essay he utilized ironic understatement for the same purpose. After noting the title of Agrippa's 101st chapter, "A Digression in Prayse of the Asse," and remarking that Agrippa had concluded by saluting his readers as "O ye asses," Russell stated: "Perhaps some modern authors would like to follow his example in this respect" (p. 182).

Their obscurity and their contempt of audience which Russell believed prevalent in the works of his contemporaries provoked him to write his most blatantly satirical piece, "The Hysteriad."² This brief article, which appeared in Scribner's, was one of Russell's favorites. He once referred to it as "a work of genius" (Letter No. 46), indicating again his fondness for satire. And the selection was richly endowed with the ingredients of satire. The intent to ridicule was clearly

² Scribner's Monthly, XVI (May-October, 1878), 759.

presented in the opening lines; the attempt to enlist the reader in Russell's cause was overtly made; and the utilization of various satirical devices to ridicule the modern poets is patently evidenced.

As the work is rather inaccessible and requires examination in some detail, I shall include it here:

It is thought proper to premise: that a poem of the period, or periodical poem, is a thing that is altogether emotional, and is not intended to convey any idea in particular. This fact is well known to all who are familiar with the canons of our reconstructed Art of Song; but it seems not yet to be fully recognized (or, at least, sufficiently admired) by the uncanonical class of readers, who fail to see that High Art is identical with High Jinks, and have the bad taste to want but little ear below, etc., etc., etc.

Let us laugh, haw! haw! with the ass:¹

Let us weep², oh! oh! with the thistle--
Oh! oh! haw--wohaw--where goest thou, poet?

I go it

To the muses' singing-class,
To whistle, whistle, whistle.

Notes:--1. Herodotus has nowhere observed that this animal ever laughs, or that he has any jocund impulses whatever. Poetic license, however, is pleaded in this behalf. 2. There is indeed no special reason why we should weep; but the first and second lines have to be made anti--anti--antispasmodic. (Antispasmodic is good.)

N. B.--Objections to the brevity of this poem are not in order, although as to other points--for instance, its lack of adjectives and new compound words--a demurrer might be well taken. Short poems are now fashionable; and the petty formalities of rhyme and reason having been lately declared by authorities to be mere useless embroideries on the fustian of stylish verse, it is quite probable that the poetry of the future will be briefly expressed in gestures--like the philosophic discussion between Thaumast and Panurge. With these few remarks, etc.

Russell's title is appropriate. It embodies a satirical device--exaggeration, and it constitutes an implicit statement of intent.



Russell's purpose was to reduce to absurdity the emotionalism that he attributed to modern poets. His title, however, exceeds mere allusion to simple feeling: it denotes wild, uncontrollable fits of emotion, hardly the effect sought by his contemporaries. Moreover, even the title's suffix suggests Russell's satirical intention, as it had become practically a satirical commonplace. A reading public familiar with such works as Pope's Dunciad, Churchill's Rosciad, and Gifford's Moeviad and Baviad would immediately perceive Russell's goal. And it would have been the knowledgeable to whom Russell would appeal; for as Worcester has noted: "The ironist appeals to an aristocracy of brains."³

With the first lines Russell reinforced the suggestion implicit in the title. He deliberately exaggerated the moderns' stance by postulating that emotions and ideas were mutually exclusive, gravely asserting that a poem "is altogether emotional and is not intended to convey any ideas in particular." This distortion immediately placed the objects of his ridicule in an untenable position and further drew the reader to his own. While such tactics are hardly fair, one need not condemn Russell too harshly. As Leonard Feinberg has discovered, the satirist traditionally "stacks the cards in every way he can."⁴

In a reference particularly pertinent to the "The Hysteriad," Russell wrote: "I can understand Shakespeare, but I cannot understand Browning; and I am heretical enough to prefer common sense to transcendentalism" (Letter No. 27). Later in the same letter he quoted

³ The Art of Satire (New York, 1940), p. 77.

⁴ Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa, 1967), p. 90.



Thackeray in support of his position: "This may be poetry, but it is not sense." Unquestionably, Russell deplored what he considered obscurantism in modern poetry. This detestation, however, should not be surprising: a poet whose literary tastes favored the Augustan age probably would prefer "common sense."

Russell used another stratagem in the prefatory note to enlist the reader's allegiance. His ironic use of "canon" and "uncanonical" separated his reader from the poets under attack. For Russell, modern poets, who had dispensed with the normal accoutrements of poetry, actually had no "canon" or critical criteria; consequently, the discriminating reader, the "uncanonical," was really the true arbiter of taste. Russell thus appealed directly to his reader's sense of superiority, suggesting a reliance on the reader's standard of excellence and implying that the sensible reader, unlike the devotee of modern poetry, could surely distinguish between "High Art" and "High Jinks." Essentially, Russell called on the common sense judgment of a public noted for its traditional pragmatism. Such an appeal would hardly have failed on barren ground.

After establishing his purpose and assuring himself of a sympathetic reader, Russell continued his attack on nineteenth century poetry by employing a number of satirical devices. The entire article, for instance, revolves around the classical concept of reductio ad absurdum. Russell reduced emotionalism to a subhuman level: the raucous Bray of an ass and the ludicrous picture of a weeping thistle. He then pushed such regression of language to its logical extremity: expression through gestures. For poetry which lacked both sense and form could be as adequately presented without words.



At this ultimate point he resorted to the same device he had previously used: disparaging comparison. Earlier in the article he had equated "High Art" with "High Jinks," thus suggesting modern poets were simply perpetrating a farce on the public. Their supposedly complex or mystical poems contained no meaning; they were in the nature of practical jokes played on a deluded public. In concluding the article he intimated that the current trend for such nonsense would eventually lead to a complete dismissal of the written word. As the final touch of ridicule, he compared this future state with the ludicrous debate between Thaumast and Panurge in Book Second of Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel. The analogy was appropriate. Panurge, like the modern poets, conquered his opponent through sheer gall by letting Thaumast read significance into totally inane gestures, just as the moderns strived to deceive their audience.

But the heart of the article lies in the travesty of modern verse. The absurdity of the nonsensical verse and the foolish rhymes--e.g. "poet" and "go it"--mocked both classes of modern poets: those without "point, idea, or sense" and those "who still write verse, but twist that verse up into such queer forms that one is puzzled how to class it. . . ." (Letter No. 27). As the true subject of the poem, belles-lettres, hardly received dignified treatment the classification of this burlesque effort as travesty would appear reasonable. Moreover, the travesty is doubly appropriate: the degraded state of letters is represented through the slighting treatment.

It is difficult to determine if Russell was directing his ridicule at a specific author anywhere in the burlesque poem. But the first lines do suggest Coleridge. This inference seems reasonable on two



accounts. Coleridge had written a poem entitled "to a Young Ass" wherein he had saluted the ass: "I hail thee Brother" (l. 26) and expressed the desire to take it with him to "the dell/Of Peace and mild Equality to dwell" (ll. 27-28). Russell's linking of the "ass" and poet suggests the same equality, with a different connotation: to him, the equality would have stemmed from the ass's ability to write as well as Coleridge. Moreover, Russell in his correspondence (Letter No. 27) had cited Lord Byron to support his charge that most nineteenth century poetry lacked content and form. Russell quoted from Byron's satire on Wordsworth: "Who, both by precept and example, shows/That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose." These lines precede by less than twenty lines Byron's ridiculing of Coleridge as:

The bard who soars to elegise an ass
So well the subject suits his noble mind,
He brays the laureat of the long-ear'd kind.
(*"English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,"* ll. 262-264)

The paralleling theses and Russell's evident awareness of Byron's charge suggest Coleridge as a specific object of Russell's satire.

Russell went a step beyond Byron to the next level of absurdity: equating the poet with vegetable matter. He then strengthened the impression by a synthesis of the "haw" and "oh" into "wohaw"; at this stage, to Russell, there was apparently no distinction between poetry for man, beast or for vegetable: it was all equally nonsensical.

Additionally, his repetition of "oh" could hardly be accidental. This much abused interjection, which even now supposedly signals strong feeling, stressed his attack on emotionalism. In "The Hysteriad" it was ludicrous; to Russell, in modern poetry it was apparently the same. Russell may have used the exclamation specifically to mock Whitman,



whom he detested. For Whitman was fond of the interjection, using it, as one critic has noted, some thirty-five times in the 1860 version of "Out of the Cradly Endlessly Rocking."⁵ However, as the exclamation was scarcely peculiar to Whitman, it does seem more logical to presume Russell was simply gibing at the current emphasis on emotion.

The last lines of the brief burlesque poem are also suggestive. Not only do they add to the total diminishing effect by implying a reduction of poetry to sheer noise, they also strike a familiar and appropriate note. Desdemona, preparing for death, sang "Willow, willow, willow" (*Othello*, IV, iii, 41-44). The modern poet, abetting the death of poetry, goes to a "singing class" to "whistle, whistle, whistle." To Russell modern descendants of Shakespeare were merely "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (*Macbeth*, V, v, 17).

Russell next employed a technique made famous by Fielding in *The Tragedy of Tragedies* and Pope in *The Dunciad Variorum*: bogus scholarship. In these notes Russell mocked the absence of content which required artificial means to achieve significance. In keeping with his satirical intent, even the notes are absurd; but, being absurd, they served his purpose: no one can discover meaning where none exists. This absurdity is readily seen in the first note which has several parallels in Fielding's work. Fielding continually interpolated irrelevant allusions to the classical scholars; Russell did the same with Herodotus. Citing the Greek historian as an authority on an ass's hilarious propensities may not be the height of the ludicrous, but it surely approaches the summit.

⁵ Roger Asselineau, "Whitman's Style: From Mysticism to Art," in *Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 96.



The exaggerated "anti-anti-antispasmodic" also suggests the "annotations of H. Scriblerus Secundus." If "Antispasmodic is good," then the other must be three times better. At any rate, Fielding's fictitious annotator thought in an identical fashion. Relative to the line: "Oh! happy, happy, happy, happy Thumb!" Fielding's sham note reads: "Massinissa is one-fourth less happy than Tom Thumb: 'Oh! happy, happy, happy!'" (I, iii, n. 32).

The article also displays several examples of the satirist's favorite device: irony. When Russell wrote: "the uncanonical class of readers . . . have the bad taste to want but little ear below," he surely meant the opposite. The "uncanonical" reader had the good taste to recognize poor poetry. Russell engaged in the same verbal irony in the footnotes. One suspects that, in Russell's estimation, there were many reasons "why we should weep."

In the final note Russell used the pseudo-defense tactic of Swift to pile up the ironies. Both pretended to anticipate possible objections to their narratives in order to emphasize the actual theses. Swift had facetiously written: "I can think of no one objection that will possibly be raised against this proposal, unless it should be urged that the number of people will thereby be much lessened in the kingdom."⁶ Russell imitated this sham defense and apparent concession of a minor objection: "Objections to the brevity of this poem are not in order, although as to the other points--for instance, its lack of adjectives and new compound words--a demurrer might well be taken." The verbal

⁶ "A Modest Proposal," in Eighteenth Century Poetry & Prose, ed. Louis V. Bredvold et al., 2nd ed. (New York, 1939), p. 246.



irony is evident; he means precisely the opposite of what he said. For many nineteenth century poems were short and replete with adjectives and newly coined compound words.

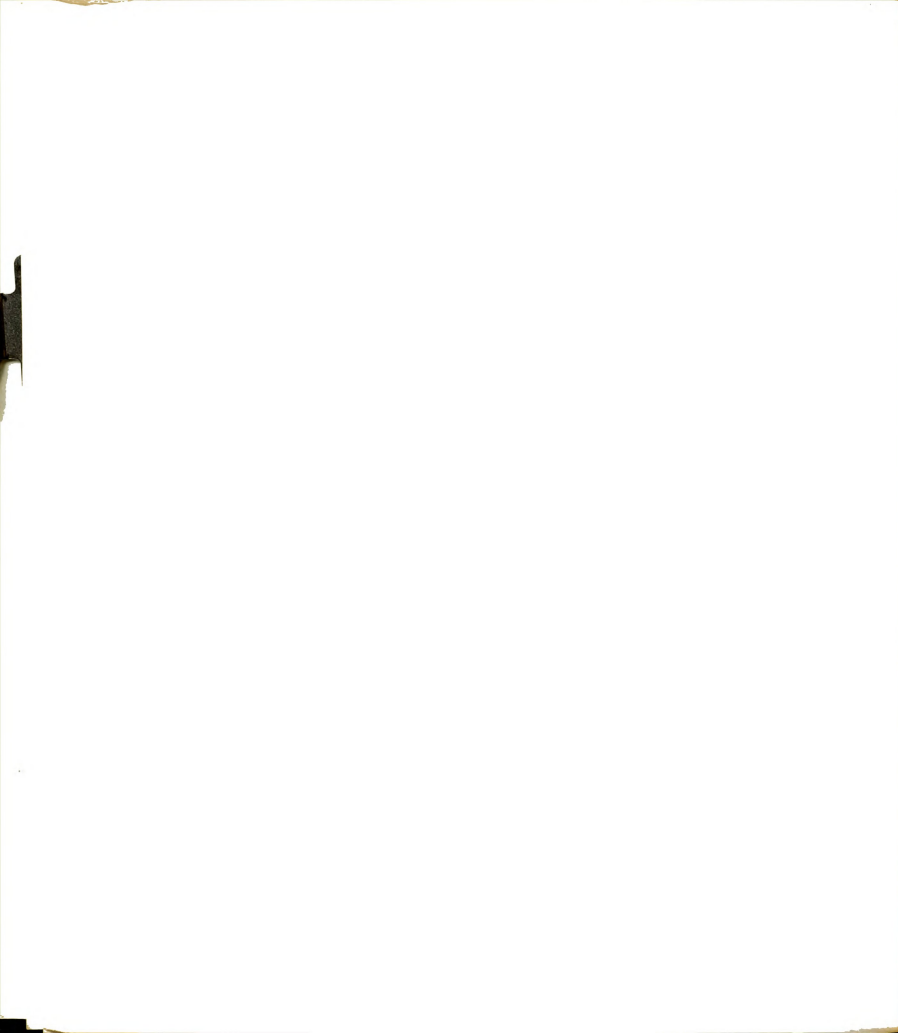
Again one suspects Russell was designating Whitman as the principal offender. Critics have noted that Whitman's later poems tended to brevity.⁷ Also Whitman continually coined compound words, for example, "weapon-word" ("To the Pending Year"), "battle-contest" (Old Age's Ship & Crafty Death's") and "war-strife" ("Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun"). Moreover, he displayed an excessive fondness for adjectives. His description of Lincoln as the "powerful western fallen star" ("When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom's") exemplifies this characteristic.

The selection of Whitman as the specific object of the satire is enhanced by Russell's sarcastic reference to "authorities" who had declared "rhyme and reason . . . to be mere useless embroideries on the fustian of stylish verse . . ." In a letter dated September 29, 1878 (Letter No. 27), Russell had written: "I saw, recently, a statement of Walt Whitman's to the effect that rhyme, and even measured lines, spoiled poetry, and should not be used." Russell's opinion of this may be inferred from his ironic commentary as he added: "To him, then, D'Israeli's 'Wondrous Tale of Alroy' would be a model poem."

Russell's prose satire other than "The Hysteriad" includes a short story entitled "The Fools of Killogue."⁸ In this tale Russell attacked another species of man which he detested equally as much as he did the nineteenth century poets: politicians. In addition to being a favorite

⁷ Asselineau, Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 101.

⁸ Scribner's Monthly, XVIII (May-October, 1879), 950.



object of satire,⁹ politicians were likely targets for Russell on other grounds. His contempt for politicians, especially those who had served on returning boards, has already been documented. His taste for poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, periods which practically specialized in political satire,¹⁰ also hinted at politics as an eventual target. Moreover, the irregularities in the election of 1876, following the scandals of the Grant administration, would enhance the possibility of finding a sympathetic audience for his ridicule. Therefore Russell again evidently had both the intention to ridicule and a receptive audience.

"The Fools of Killogue" is a monologue. The Irish narrator relates the story of the village of Killogue. Briefly, Killogue was an isolated village in Ireland. In order to prevent a visit by the Irish King Brian Rhua which would result in conscription to the Irish Parliament, highway taxes, and destruction of their finest meadow, the villagers diverted the King's progress with a wild tale that the entire town had been inundated. Later, when the King discovered the ruse, the townsmen pretended madness in an effort to ameliorate the King's vengeance, thus the title.

Russell's selection of narrator and setting contributes to the satiric effect. His Irish story-teller related a tale of his homeland in a brogue represented through eccentric spelling and syntax. As I have previously noted, dialect itself is a satiric device; consequently, Russell's use of it provides him the opportunity for dual-edged satire:

⁹ Matthew Hodgart, Satire (New York, 1969), p. 33.

¹⁰ Hodgart, p. 60.



he ridiculed both politicians and Irishmen.

Significantly, the Irish as an ethnic group occupied a social niche comparable to that of the Negroes. This similarity was emphasized by Leon Litwack in his North of Slavery. He attributed the antagonism between the Irish and the Negroes to their bitter competition for menial positions and noted that the Irish "channeled their frustration and anger into hatred of the Negro." Nevertheless, in the eyes of other Americans, the Irish were equated with the Negro. Litwack, quoting an English visitor, summarized the prevailing attitude: "To be called an 'Irishman' is almost as great an insult as to be stigmatized as a 'nigger feller,' and in a street row, both appellations are flung off among the combatants with great zest and vigor."¹¹ And a major American literary figure, Mark Twain, suggested this inferior status by the refrain "No Irish need apply" which recurs throughout "Buck Fanshawe's Funeral."

It seems hardly coincidental that Russell, a pioneer in using the Southern Negro dialect for humorous effect, also employed an Irish dialect. His use of the Negro dialect emphasized the Negro's estrangement from polite society: his use of the Irish dialect served the same purpose. In each instance this eccentric language usage accentuated the ethnic differences of these socially inferior groups. Therefore, considering Leonard Feinberg's conclusion "that laughter at dialects varies with the social setting of the nationality represented,"¹² it would appear reasonable to assume that Russell, in this tale, has exploited dialect for satiric purposes.

¹¹ North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860 (Chicago, 1961), p. 163.

¹² Introduction to Satire, p. 216.



Russell's narrator immediately revealed a predisposition for procrastination. Despite his objection that he must be "afther wathering them gladiolusthes," he quickly postponed such activity in favor of smoking and talking. And he as quickly stamped himself as possessing a tendency to exaggerate. In his story the King was "aylivin fate hoigh" and the "bit o'blackthorn he carri'd was two yaids long, and that heavy that only himsilf c'd lift it." Hyperbole is followed by ironic understatement. The Irishman noted the disadvantages of receiving a royal appointment to parliament. For the King passed laws while at "Mrs. Rafferty's shebeen-house" and the parliament was responsible for them. The narrator added that members of parliament were "li'ble to be hung whin annything wint wrong wid the counthry; and as there was no salaries ped, office-holding was not popilar."

Irony also lies in the reality underlying Russell's depiction of royal edicts emanating from a grog-shop. While the satire is not nearly as vicious as that of Jonathan Swift's, it does suggest his accounts of the ridiculous forces influencing the conduct of the world's affairs. With Swift's monarchs, erotic impulses determined the fate of the citizens;¹³ with Russell's King Rhua, Irish whisky did the same. For later in the tale, Russell subtly confirmed the suspicions incited by "shebeen-house." Apparently the mock flooding of the village was a particularly appropriate means of diverting King Rhua. Russell's storyteller ironically observed: "Brian Rhua, who hated wather worse nor anything, immediately turned off in another diriction and niver wint nare Killoogue at all." The King's fondness for the grog-shop, coupled

¹³ "A Digression on Madness," A Tale of a Tub, in Eighteenth Century Poetry & Prose, ed. Louis V. Bredvold et al., 2nd ed. (New York, 1939) p. 186.



with his aversion to water, hardly augers well for the propitious rule of the nation. One suspects Russell was also hinting at the same failings--addiction to whisky and aversion to water--among the Irish in the nineteenth century.

In concluding this tale, Russell resorted to anti-climax, a satiric device he especially favored. After hearing a long catalogue of mad antics by the men of Killoge--blowing their breath at the sun to cool the weather and learning to whistle "Garryowen" backwards--the King decided the people were truly mad; however, he insisted the village contribute its ten men to parliament anyhow. Russell's sardonic finish implies his view of current political qualifications. His narrator declared: "as this was the first toime that fools was iver thought illigible for office, yez may know it was moighty long ago, begorra!"

In another short story, "Wanted, an Oracle" (See Appendix B), Russell mocked affectation, "the only source of the true ridiculous." He attacked this vice as displayed by a village's self-appointed arbiter of taste, Colonel Carver, the "Chief Inspector of Moral Weights and Measures," and the townspeople who accepted the Colonel's critical dicta. Both the Colonel and his fellow townsmen were ignorant, but each affected understanding: one in issuing inane judgments and the other in pretending comprehension. For both the Colonel and his fellow citizens the affectation stemmed from hypocrisy, as neither possessed any learning. Consequently, Russell has concentrated on the more distasteful source of affectation, thus heightening the effect of his tale. For as Fielding had observed: "From the discovery of this affectation arises the Ridiculous--which always strikes the reader with surprise and pleasure; and that in a higher and stronger degree when the affectation

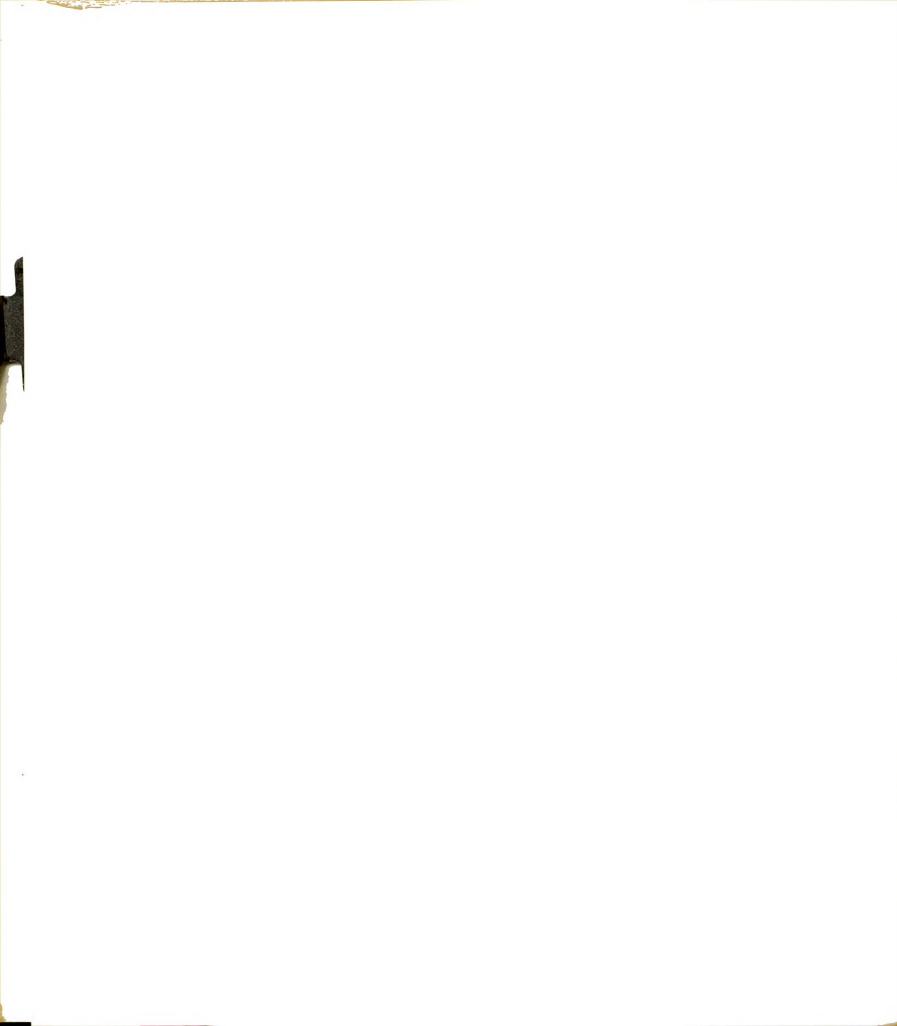


arises from hypocrisy, than when from vanity. . . ."¹⁴

While the reader may take pleasure in the revelation of affectation in this tale, there is little surprise. Russell overtly struck at his cultural pace setter with sarcasm, disparaging comparison, and even mild invective. The opening paragraph contains a sarcastic generalization about those who formulate public opinion; they do so through providence: "it being impossible to discover any other purpose for which they can be created or evolved." Russell placed the Colonel in this category and then elaborated on the innuendo of "evolved." The Colonel's critical vocabulary--"fiddle-faddle," "Fol-de-rol," and "Pht!"--is "gibberish that must have descended to us from the anthropoid ape." Later Russell strengthened this disparaging allusion to the Colonel's ancestry by referring to the Colonel's "apish vocabulary." Irony was also employed by Russell: although the Colonel never read anything, "his reputation as a literary critic was firmly established." Russell briefly summarized his conception of the Colonel: "It was thus forever; he knew nothing and criticized everything." The reader, therefore, is hardly surprised when the Colonel is exposed as a fraud. Colonel Carver, to use Russell's description of Emerson, another cultural leader, was without doubt "an ineffable ass" (Letter No. 47).

Even Russell's physical description of the Colonel partook of satire. The Colonel was cut on a militaristic pattern which ludicrously complemented his unearned rank, a point Russell reduced to absurdity: "Nobody knows how the Colonel got his title. Colonel he was when he came among us, and Colonel he remains. There was a strong universal feeling that he ought to be General; but nobody ventured to promote

¹⁴ "Author's Preface," Joseph Andrews and Shamela, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Boston, 1961), pp. 10, 11.

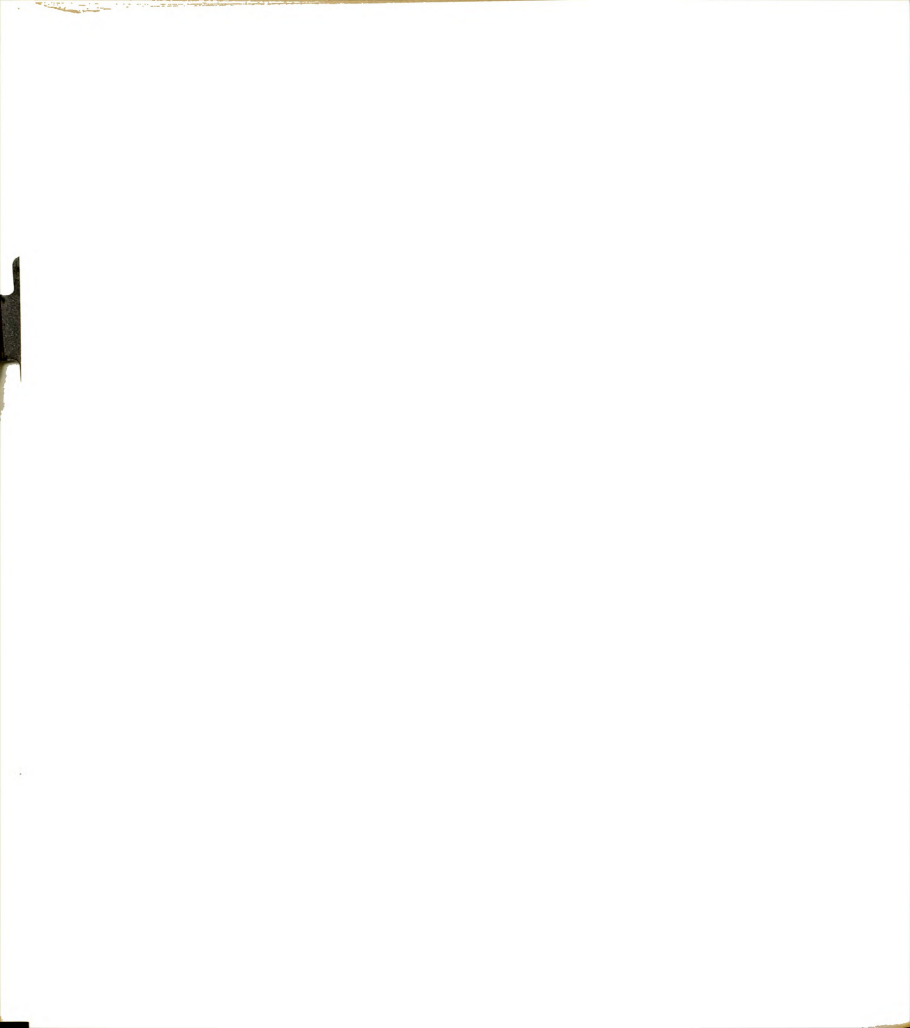


him." If Henri Bergson was correct in positing that "the attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine,"¹⁵ the angularly precise Colonel, "short, florid and polygonal," who even crossed the street "diagonally," is hilarious.

It is this inelasticity which results in the Colonel's ultimate humiliation at the hands of his antagonist, the Doctor. The rigid Colonel had become an automaton, accustomed to overawing the public with his oracular pronouncements; however, when called upon to explain them intelligibly, the machine simply broke down. The Colonel was unable to cope with the Doctor's facetious irony. For the Doctor, with his apparently innocuous questions, forced the Colonel to flee ignominiously. The Colonel's criticism, "namby-pamby stuff," was reduced to absurdity by the Doctor: "'Ah---namby-pamby--' observed the Doctor, in a thoughtful way,--'namby-pamby. I know 'Namby'---that is the name of the sheriff's officer in 'Pickwick.'" But "Pamby"--Colonel, what is the signification of "Pamby"?'"

Here again Russell has displayed his talent for irony. The Colonel, unable to explain his critical terminology, was forced to retreat. Ironically, however, the Colonel's words were susceptible to definition and had been formerly used as criticism. Russell undoubtedly knew that Ambrose Phillips, an eighteenth century English poet, had acquired the nickname "Namby-Pamby" for poems written in praise of childhood. As the Doctor had been commenting on a leaf from a boy's algebra book, the criticism was not without merit. Additionally, the Colonel had a

¹⁵ Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York, 1914), p. 29.



critical precedent; for William Gifford, whom Russell had praised in this tale, had used the same expression critically in "The Baviad" (l. 176). Consequently the Doctor's allusion to Dickens' Namby served as a smoke screen to confuse the Colonel. The Colonel's ignorance was emphasized: he was unaware that he had, in actuality, uttered a defensible thought. Russell's irony has, then, operated in the best satirical tradition as a "kind of intellectual tear-gas that breaks the nerves and paralyses the muscles of everyone in its vicinity. . . ."¹⁶

While his Doctor excoriated the Colonel, Russell, himself, displayed little sympathy in depicting the townspeople. On a smaller scale they too were charged with affecting non-existent knowledge and his attack on them was equally overt. In the second paragraph he employed ironic definition in sardonically commenting that "the required amount of Opinion, to meet the necessities of any community, is always in an inverse ratio to the community's size." Later he resorted to a fox hunt analogy to disparage the townsmen: a hunter pursuing a fox over rough country encounters the same difficulties as does the Doctor in pursuing an idea with his "stupid audience."

As the Doctor held forth in pursuit of his idea the townspeople revealed their kinship with the Colonel. Ironically, the Doctor's philosophic discourse was as incomprehensible to them as the Colonel's inane mouthings. Nevertheless, each point made by the Doctor was greeted by "Nods, sagacious grunts, and vigorous smoking." When the Doctor included an allusion to "Slawkenberginius's tale," the audience,

¹⁶ Northrup Frye, "The Nature of Satire," Satire: Theory and Practice, ed. Charles A. Allen and George D. Stephens (Belmont, California, 1962), p. 23.



"who had never before heard of Slawkenberginius, assumed a very dignified expression of countenance, and waved their pipes slowly in token of acquiescence." Significantly Russell added: "Satisfied, the learned lecture proceeded." From this point on the Doctor, patently aware of his audience's ignorance, engaged in the wildest of semantic absurdities. He injected utter inanity into what had previously been a relatively sane discourse. Even Coleridge would have experienced difficulty in extracting meaning from: "the rhymers, remorselessly leaving the further history of A in obscurity, makes an abrupt transition to that of B--who, we are informed, 'was a butcher.'" Perhaps this is Y the result of deep design." The Doctor's transition, after determining the dullness of his auditors, was nearly as abrupt.

The accuracy of the Doctor's judgment may be perceived in Mr. Dobson's version of the Colonel's defeat. Mr. Dobson related "that 'the Doc. kinder chewed the Colonel, while ago;' but proved totally incompetent to explain the manner of the mastication." The ironic understatement serves to equate the Colonel and his audience by their mutual incapability of explicating their oracular statements.

Russell concluded his tale with massive verbal irony. Registering mock indignation and dismay, he poured ridicule on all self-styled cultural leaders and on the ignorant and apathetic public who merited no better. Again emulating Swift, Russell vehemently defended the object of his satire. After briefly noting the conduct of the people without an oracle, Russell declared:

This state of things must not exist any longer. It is Anarchy. It is confusion. It is Chaos. If it is allowed to continue, what will become of those bulwarks of civilization, the venerable Frauds of Society? If people think for themselves, down will go all the idols,



presently, and all the worthy charlatans will be set to begging, or,--horrible thought!--to working. The thing is too monstrous. It must not be. We must have another Oracle, and that without delay.

Russell's final satiric touch took the form of an advertisement for an oracle. He evidently believed, along with the great satirist, the second Samuel Butler, that "The public buys its opinions as it buys its meat, or takes in its milk, on the principle that it is cheaper to do this than to keep a cow. So it is, but the milk is more likely to be watered."¹⁷

II

Russell's first poem, entitled "A Chinese Tale," appeared about 1869.¹⁸ Although Fulton dismissed the poem as "clever but Juvenile"¹⁹ and excluded it from his 1917 collection, the poem does have some importance. In it Russell displayed a budding talent for satire, lending credence to Northrup Frye's contention that "one must be born with the sardonic vision."²⁰ Moreover, his choice of subjects reflected an early facility in selecting subjects, for he ridiculed outsiders and women: both popular targets of satire. Ronald Paulson considered the ridiculing of an outsider "the most pervasive convention" of satire.²¹ And Matthew Hodgart relegated the woman as an object of satire to a

¹⁷ The Notebooks of Samuel Butler: Author of "Erewhon," ed. Henry Festing Jones (New York, 1917), p. 261.

¹⁸ Fulton Collection, Box 8, Folder 1.

¹⁹ Maurice Garland Fulton, ed. "Irwin Russell," Christmas Night in the Quarters and Other Poems by Irwin Russell (New York, 1917), xx.

²⁰ "The Nature of Satire," p. 17.

²¹ The Fictions of Satire (Baltimore, 1967), p. 23.

position second only to that of a politician.²²

In "A Chinese Tale" (See Appendix B) Russell wrote a ludicrous narrative on the origin of the Chinese custom of foot-binding, a custom which Rayford Logan has noted, "made easy the caricaturing of 'the Heathen Chinese.'"²³ Nor was the "heathen" concept ignored by Russell. In the poem, the Chinese Emperor Fab-u-lus, had awakened in the night and seen a figure clad in white. The frightened Fab-u-lus then went "to the shrine/Of Great Confucious divine" for guidance. Russell then reduced the foreign mode of worship, already ridiculed by his allusion to Confucious as a deity, to utter absurdity. The Emperor vowed:

. . . to burn a lock of hair
From off a sacred puppy's tail
If good Confucious would not fail
To keep the Ghost in purgatory,
(Or lower still), and furthermore, he
Vowed that he would sacrifice
Before the shrine, a pound of rice.

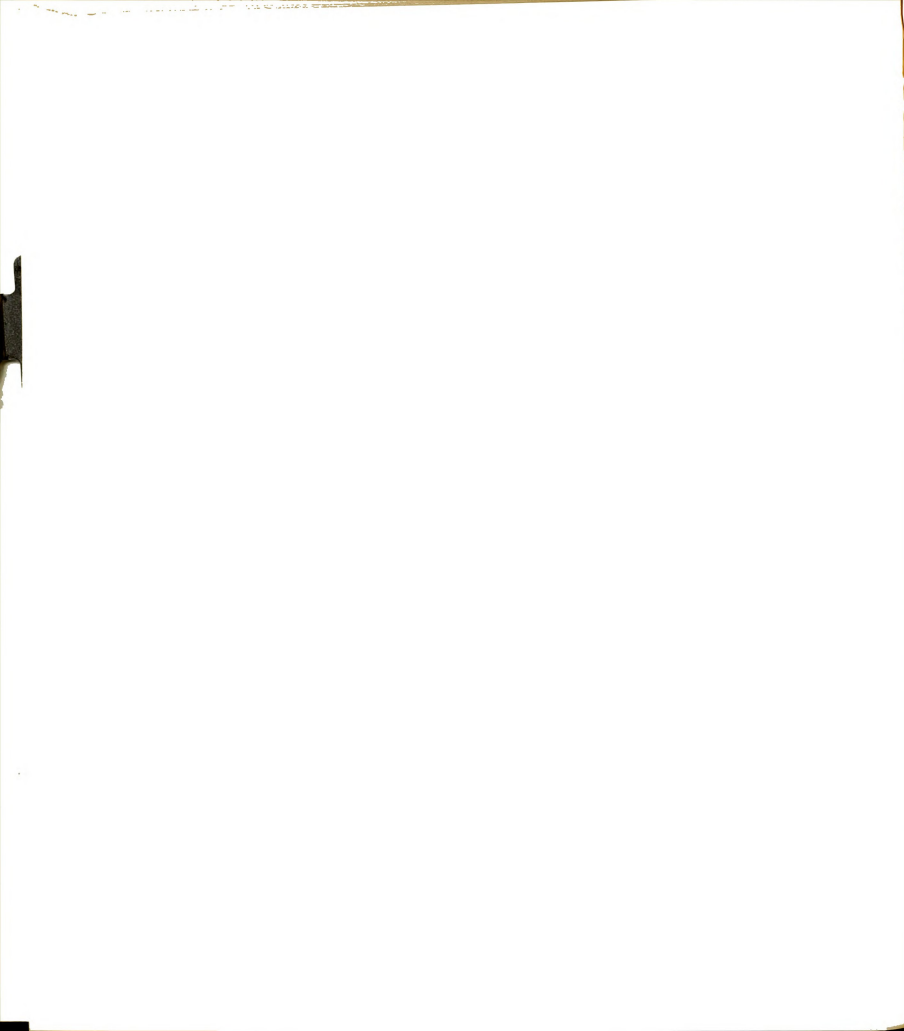
Russell's exaggerated distortion of the Chinese customs exphasized the Chinese estrangement from American society. For as Litwack has recorded, even the Negroes "appeared to share the white man's revulsion at the appearance of this alien population."²⁴

While far from being a polished effort the poem reveals Russell's predilection for satirical devices. Hyperbole is rampant. His poem will divulge why ladies' feet "are cramped so tight they do not grow/Longer than an inch or so." The Emperor, discovering that the ghost is the Empress sleep walking, blames her large feet and avers:

²² Satire (New York, 1969), p. 79.

²³ The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir 1877-1901 (New York, 1954), p. 160.

²⁴ North of Slavery (Chicago, 1961), p. 167.



"I'll shortem 'em off. They're eighteen inches long/I'll take off fifteen, and then she can't go wrong." The exaggeration is evident.

While he used hyperbole to ridicule Chinese customs, Russell employed irony to attack the women. For the Emperor "governed his subjects throughout his life/And, wonder of wonders! he governed his wife." The parallelism and the exclamation sufficiently suggest Russell's attitude towards the role of women. Even as a youth he tacitly concurred with Juvenal that wives dominated their husbands.²⁵

Essentially, however, in the poem Russell ridiculed women for their vanity. The Emperor's edict prohibiting women from having feet longer than the Empress's first created a furor; nevertheless, the women "finding that monarch proof against their passion/At last submitted, as it was the Fashion." Women, suggested Russell, will suffer any discomfort, even pain, simply to follow the established vogue.

Women again provided Russell's quarry in a short poem entitled "A Practical Young Woman."²⁶ In it Russell mocked romantic conventions and the grasping nature of women. Herein an unsuccessful suitor, lacking material wealth, resorted to verse as an alternative. The verse, a burlesque of the Elizabethan sonnets, in which the suitor "praised her hair and eyes/Her lips with honey laden" was sent to the young lady. Russell, however, deliberately shattered the romantic conventions with the ironic anti-climax in the last verse:

²⁵ Gilbert Highet, Juvenal the Satirist (New York, 1961) p. 101.

²⁶ Christmas Night in the Quarters and Other Poems, ed. Maurice Garland Fulton (New York, 1917), p. 105. Hereafter cited as Christmas Night in the Quarters.



She read it over, kept it clean,
 Put on her finest raiment
 And took it to a magazine
 And got ten dollars payment.

Russell used the same rhetorical device, anti-climax, to disparage the New England "suffrage shriekers" (Letter No. 19) in "The Opinions of Captain DeLacey, R. A.,"²⁷ written under the cognomen "Job Case." Through his spokesman, Russell made a mockery of "equal wights," ridiculing the concept by facetiously extending the idea to its extremity. The Captain recognized some merit in fraternity; but he qualified his judgment:

It would not mattaw much to me
 Were all men bwothaws. No. But mistaw,
 Think what a w'etched thing 'twould be
 If ev'wy woman were my sistaw!

Russell also utilized his talent in a more serious tone to denote human frailty. His "Nine Graves in Edinboro"²⁸ revolves on cosmic irony and provides a grim reminder to the reader that he, too, is mortal. In the poem Russell adds irony on irony. The poem depicts an old sexton going about his daily labor of digging graves. The old sexton "sang right lustily" as he dug the prescribed nine graves; and when the first body, "a fair young child" was buried, the sexton "leaned on his spade and smiled/And wondered, 'How many more to-day?'" By now the reader, alerted by the Gothic tone must surely become aware of the pervasive irony in the old man's smiling question. Russell, nevertheless, left nothing to chance; the next corpse is a woman whom the sexton had loved "in years gone by/But the years had gone. . . ." The italicized "had"

27 Scribner's Monthly, XVIII (May-October, 1879), 640.

28 Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. 125.

provides another hint of the poem's ultimate course. But Russell continued to heap on the ironies:

At six o' the clock his task was done
Eight graves were closed, and the ninth prepared
Made ready to welcome a man--what one
'Twas little the grim old sexton cared.

Russell's goal appears so obvious at this point that the next speech by the sexton, approaches dramatic irony. The sexton, nearing death, symbolically sat on the brink of the final grave to rest from his toil and said:

. . . "This last is the best
And deepest of all I have digged to-day.

Who will fill it, I wonder, and when?
It does not matter: who'er they be,
The best and the worst of the race of men
Are all alike when they come to me."

The reader, aware of "who will fill" the grave may easily perceive the irony. For when "they went to him with a man, next day," they found the sexton dead. The irony is complex. There is a macabre truth in the sexton's last words: to a live man, dead men are "all alike," to a dead man, all are the same.

Usually, however, Russell adopted a less serious tone, adhering to Cicero's admonition that "neither great vice. . . nor great misery, is a subject for ridicule and laughter."²⁹ His short poem, "The Irish Eclipse,"³⁰ serves as an example. Herein he again belittled the Irish by stressing such traits as gullibility and a penchant for exaggeration. In the poem, Professor MacShane "the foinest astronomer iver was sane," explained to his countrymen the cause of an eclipse that had endured

²⁹ On the Character of the Orator, in Theories of Comedy, ed. and trans., Paul Lauter (Garden City, New York, 1964), p. 24.

³⁰ Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. 102.

"for three days at wan toime!" The Professor's comical explanation must be a classic example of the satirist's rather unconventional use of logic.³¹ After castigating his countrymen as "most iligant gommacks," he accounts for the phenomena in the following manner:

"Ye're part of an impoire, yez mustn't forget,
Upon which the sun's niver able to set;
Thin why will it give yer impoire a surproise
If wanst, for a change, he refuses to roise?"

The same illogic prevailed in "The First Client,"³² a poem in which Russell mocked his own vocation: the law. While the legal profession has long been a prime target among satirists,³³ Russell struck at a particular aspect not usually attacked. He ridiculed the hypocrisy in the appointment of attorneys to defend the impoverished. Russell derided the practice specifically as it tended to provide employment for novice lawyers rather than a defense for the accused. Russell ironically noted that such practice was based on "much the same principle that obtains in every charity hospital, where a young medical student is often set to rectify a serious injury to an organ or a joint."

In the poem, the court-appointed lawyer, Mr. Smith, defended his first client with a "bust of eloquence." His speech had contained quotations from a disparate variety of authorities: "Shakespere, Blackstone, Chitty, Archbold, Joaquin Miller, Story, Kent, Tupper, Smedes, and Marshall and many other writers." This incongruous grouping of the literary and legal into a parody of the epic-catalogue emulated

³¹ See, for example, Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa, 1961), pp. 150-153.

³² Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. 114.

³³ Feinberg, Introduction to Satire, p. 38.



a favorite device of the nineteenth century satirists.³⁴ Russell then heaped exaggeration on incongruity to accentuate the over-zealous defense by Smith. Smith advanced hypothesis after hypothesis "And so on, with forty-six more hypotheses, upon none of which, Mr. Smith ably demonstrated, could Scroggs be derelict." Despite the hyperbolic rhetoric of the defense, Scroggs was sentenced "to a three-year term in the penitentiary, and a heavy fine, and the costs on top of that." Russell then pushed the travesty to utter absurdity through Scrogg's reaction: "And the prisoner in wild delight, got up and danced and sung;/And when they asked him the reason of the strange behavior, he said: 'It's because I got off so easy--for if there'd ha' been a few more of them darned hypotheses, I should certainly have been hung!'" The defendant's joy at being convicted--ostensibly the opposite result of that striven for--provides an ironic assessment of the dissimulation inherent in the practice: the court is able to appear compassionate while at the same time remunerating a bar member; only the client is the loser.

Russell maintained a similarly low regard for the results stemming from another ostensibly charitable practice: missionary work. Although he praised the missionaries for their "sincere philanthropy and self-sacrifice," he considered it "a pity to see so much goodness, talent and energy utterly thrown away" (Letter No. 52). This respect for the people, however, did not prevent him from writing a doggerel poem disparaging missionaries and their successes. Russell directed the poem "The Strange and Surprising Adventures of the Bold Young Missionary

³⁴ See, for example, Alexander Pope, "The Rape of the Lock," Eighteenth Century Poetry & Prose, ed. Louis V. Bredvold et al., 2nd ed. (New York, 1939), p. 356.



Girl" (Letter No. 64; See Appendix B)³⁵ to his correspondent who was evidently contemplating joining a mission in Persia.

The poem, with its contrived and often absurd rhymes, verges on Hudibrastic verse. Thematically, the poem also suggests the Hudibrastic: the relatively serious undertaking of a missionary is presented as a pathetic, rollicking farce comparable to the "Perils of Pauline." Moreover, the elevated spiritual objective is subordinated to the more mundane desire for self-aggrandizement. Russell facetiously emphasized this ironic aspersion on the missionary's motivation. His "Missionary Girl's" intent was:

"In anderuns I'll hob and nob
With wives of Khans, and eat Kabob,
And have galore diversion-
.....
"Some travelers that I recall
Have gathered fortune for me, then?"
Why not such luck for me, then?"

In Russell's version, his missionary could hardly be characterized as altruistic. Russell continued to stress the selfish motive; but, in so doing, he also managed to include a satiric thrust at the state of Christianity in the United States:

"My own dear Indianny ain't
The sort of place to pay a saint,
Dispensing gospel bounty;
(though native heathens here amount
to twenty more than man can count;
With more in Posey County)"

While Russell was undoubtedly being facetious in attacking the motivation of the missionaries, one detects a serious note in the ironic hyperbole of the last verse: there were large numbers of

³⁵ This poem also appears with variations in geographical allusions in Irwin Russell's "Fulton's Seamen," The New Orleans Times (August 24, 1879).



"native heathen" to be uplifted morally, if not spiritually. Russell's passion on the point may be perceived in the following excerpt from Letter No. 52:

. . . let us, instead of wasting precious time and substance and noble lives in the useless effort to extend the empire of a religious philosophy, go to work here at home, among the poor, the ignorant, the miserable and the criminal of our race and country; let us preach and practice morality, and let alone the impossible task of manufacturing "faith. . . ."

The rest of the poem is a farce of nondescript nature. Russell employed a conglomerate of rhetorical devices--quibbles, puns, anti-climax, ludicrous rhymes, even mock-epic style--to depict the extravagant adventures of the "missionary girl." His missionary, learning the oriental languages, impressed the Shah with her compositions:

For lo! his eyes fell on the page
And rapture took the place of rage
Said he: "Oh! gaze upon it,
This poem here, in Saadi's style!
Who wrote it? With a bashful smile,
The damsel said: "I done it."

The abrupt and ludicrous anti-climax shattering the mock-epic illusion is characteristic of the entire poem. Russell heightened the absurdity with more ironic hyperbole in the next verse; the damsel's poem, "a glowing epic" consisted of the line: "Peter Ross Eats Fishes." "Fishes" provided not only an illiterate plural form, it also provided a rhyme for "wishes" in the last line of the verse.

Ultimately the girl ends up wed to the "Tartar's 8 to 7 Cham!" and, ironically, she has achieved some success as a missionary; for she:

. . . by dint of tracts, at last,
Has got him tractable, and past
Rebelling at his pastor.

As Russell in his letters generally tended to discourage his correspondent's missionary impulse, it would appear likely that he finally resorted to this satirical technique in an effort to dissuade her. Certainly, his "missionary girl's" success is banal: she could have acquired a husband much more easily in Indiana.

This feminine quest for a mate provided Russell the framework of another short satirical poem "The Romaunt of Sir Kuss."³⁶ In this poem, Russell adopted the mock-heroic style to depict the elopement of a young woman spectator with a circus performer. Accentuating his lofty treatment of the trivial subject, Russell used several archaic words to further the association with medieval romances. One finds, for instance, "damsel," "bethink," "methinks," "hight," and "wended." And he endowed Sir Kuss, the Lochinvar of the poem, with chivalric virtues:

As leader of the pageant
There rode a gallant knight,
Imposing in appearance
And air--Sir Kuss--he hight--
Who, very knightly, daily
Rode foremost in the melee.

Russell heightened the disparity between style and subject in the conclusion of his poem. The elopement hardly culminated in the romantic tradition, for his heroine ultimately found herself in a precarious position:

Who thought when first they knew her,
She ever might aspire
To act Circassian Beauty
And walk upon the wire?
Yet such is her position--
Success attends ambition!

³⁶ Scribner's Monthly, XIX (November-April, 1780), 799.



One can scarcely imagine Guinevere on a tight-rope.

Russell, however, did more than simply belittle the old romances; he again satirized his contemporary writers. He affixed a Preface in which he gravely announced his poem would be:

(A brave ballad of a knight of prowess and his lady passing fair, wherein the clerk hath embodied choice store of morals, not developed unto expression, but left, as it were, in the raw, to be worked up at the reader's good pleasure.)

The irony in the first part of the Preface, itself a parody of the medieval romance style, is overt. The poem is anything but a "brave ballad"; his hero's abilities are surely not those connoted by a "knight of prowess." Nor does one find "choice store of morals" within the tale.

But the major satiric effect stems from the sarcastic irony of the last portion of the Preface. Here, as in "The Hysteriad," Russell has ridiculed his contemporaries by seemingly adopting their philosophy of composition. He echoed Whitman's "I swear I see what is better than to tell the best,/It is always to leave the best untold" ("A Song of the Rolling Earth," III, ll. 13-14). But he rapidly demolished the illusion with his trivial subject and anti-climactic ending:

I've nothing more to tell you;
This pointless tale--ah, well, you
See 'twas made to sell you!

While the wary reader had probably been forewarned by the unlikely name, Sir Kuss, the less alert reader now realizes how he has been deceived in the Preface. The unexpected honesty forces him back to re-evaluate the Preface and, consequently, to discover its inherent irony. For Russell promised a "Tale of Melibee," but provided a tale of "Sir Thopas." But, also ironically, he did comply with part of the Preface: in adhering to what he considered the strictures of contemporary poetry



he ridiculed it by writing an admittedly "pointless" tale.

Russell used another burlesque style, travesty, to attack chivalric romances in "The Knight & the Squire."³⁷ He gave rather cavalier treatment to the serious matter of a crusade by concentrating on a less-heroic aspect of warfare: profiteering on the part of provisioners. For the poem deals not with an heroic knight volunteering his services, but rather with an aged carpet-knight who has an eye for profit.

In the poem Sir Mortimer Eustance Fitz Clarence du Brown, hearing "of a crusade in the spring," confiscated his neighbor's cattle in order to profit from the expedition. However, his faithful squire, Patrick de Wachtamrhein, appalled at such conduct, seized the knight's castle and married the knight's wife. One immediately perceives the burlesque element even in the names bestowed on the principals. The incongruous "Fitz" and "du" emphasize the ludicrous affectation of one; the other, literally "watch on the Rhine," also the title of an old German anthem, goes to the other extreme.

Russell quickly juxtaposed religious war and money-making in the poem. As rumors of the crusade had been brought to Sir Mortimer by "palmer," he sent Patrick to elicit the truth. In the subsequent verse Patrick reported:

"Sir, war is declared, and a draft prepared,
For his Majesty must have men:
And gold has gone up ten."

The anticlimactic last line indicates the trend of the poem. Russell then elaborated on this theme:

³⁷ Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. 119.

Sir Mortimer rode with his banner displayed--
 Six cod-fish saltier-wise--
 But he did not go to crusade--oh, no!
 But in search of army supplies,
 Expecting the market to rise.

The verse bears some interesting connotations. The knight's pennant, for instance, besides being improbable, suggests a link between New England, an area Russell detested, and profiteering. The "codfish" would evoke an instant association with New England, especially Massachusetts, the home of the "codfish aristocracy." The "saltier-wise," on a prosaic level, suggests the preservation of foodstuffs: a source of inordinate profit for contractors during the Civil War, which would be the most recent crusade to the Northerners. Consequently, Russell has managed, under the medieval guise, to insinuate Northern profiteering.

But the "saltier-wise" has even more appropriate meaning. "Saltier" is an archaic form of "saltire," a heraldic device. Being archaic, it contributed to the medieval narrative; being heraldic, it accentuates the irony underlying Sir Mortimer's quest for profit as a holy cause. For surely there is irony in the displaying of a commercial coat of arms where one expects to find a noble, militaristic device. Just as surely there is irony in finding this honesty where one expects dissimulation: many men war for profit, but usually under a banner disguising their true motives.

A major irony in the poem lies in the poetic justice meted out to Sir Mortimer. Patrick, left in charge of the cattle, decried Sir Mortimer's absence of conscience and took the following steps:



So he seized Sir Mortimer's wealth and wife
 (Divorced by a chancery suit);
 Of the house he was head in Sir Mortimer's stead,
 And he sent off the latter, to boot,
 To crusade as his substitute.

The complete reversal of fortune for Sir Mortimer is clearly ironic: the man who set out to make a fortune from the fighting while avoiding battle himself finds himself impoverished and sent to the conflict. Russell doled out irony indiscriminately, however; Patrick's seizure, justified by his moral sensibilities, is patently as reprehensible as Sir Mortimer's larceny. In time of war, Russell seems to suggest, few men are altruistically motivated.

The poem includes one other significant note. In it Russell again resorted to dialect to single out an ethnic group, this time, a minority second only to the Negroes in suffering from malignant stereotyping: the Jews.³⁸ Before embarking on his larcenous expedition, Sir Mortimer outfitted himself at his "merchant-tailor man":

"I sell you dot pair brass pants so sheap--
 No? Mebbe you comes again
 Puy a rubber shtamp for to use in camp
 For to marg your clodings plain?"

While the speech may not be definitive, it seems safe to assume Russell was trying to reproduce a Yiddish dialect; for in Letter No. 35, Russell wrote of a general brawl: "It began with a 'rough-and-tumble' between two Jews. ('Clodinks' men of course--the Jews parted the garments of Christ at the crucifixion, and the whole race has been in the clothing business ever since. . .)." Generally Russell treated the Jews favorably in his letters; however, these passages reveal his penchant for mockery and stereotyping: two characteristics which predominate in his Negro-dialect poems.

³⁸ Rayford W. Logan, The Negro In American Life and Thought: The Nadir 1877-1901 (New York, 1954), p. 160.



One other non-dialect poem requires some detailed examination and brings the chapter full circle; for Russell launched another assault on modern writers in Letter No. 49. In this poem (See Appendix B),³⁹ as with "The Hysteriad," there can be little doubt of Russell's intentions. Russell prefaced this poetic effort with: "Notoriety seems to be coming my way--it is so easy to gain it, these days! I think somebody ought to show up this age; something to this effect. . . ." Russell, moreover, elaborated on the initial intent and actually charged them on three counts: their proliferation, their insistence on immediate recognition, and their lack of poetic talent.

Irony pervades the first verse:

He is a fool who idle stands
And grumbles at his fate,
And calls the gods to guide his hands
To dignify his state--
When means are lying in his way
Whereby, with idle ease,
All pleasing to be famous may
Be famous as they please.

Russell established a mock defense of the modern poets by apparently attacking everyone not included within their ranks. However, in so doing, he essentially derided the moderns; there can be little distinction in poetry which the universal "all" could write with "idle ease."

In the second verse, Russell continued this attack on the ease of achieving a contemporary reputation. Standards no longer existed, nor was it necessary to endure the century of approval prescribed by Dr. Samuel Johnson.

³⁹ This poem also appears with variations in A. A. Kern, "Irwin Russell," The Library of Southern Literature, ed. J. C. Harris and E. A. Alderman (Atlanta, 1907), X, 4618.



No longer are there heights to climb;
 No longer fights to win;
 You must not force the House of Time
 To gain your passage in:
 The gates are wide, the steps are few--
 Skip lightly by the throng,
 And enter with the pigmy crew
 Who strut before the strong!

In the second quatrain of the verse he resorted to the twisted cliché and the disparaging epithet to belittle his contemporaries. For "the gates are wide" is a distortion of the cliché derived from "strait is the gate" (Matthew 7:14); and "the pigmy crew" completes the diminishing effect of the verse.

In the third verse Russell voiced a common complaint: an objection to the number of would-be poets. Even old Juvenal had long since registered the same objection,⁴⁰ and Samuel Johnson had scored the "epidemical conspiracy for the destruction of paper (The Adventurer No. 115). Moreover, Russell maligned his contemporaries on two other points: the absence of rhyme and meter and implied plagiarism. His vehement objection to the former has already been noted in "The Hysteriad." The latter charge, however, lacks any such parallel; although on two occasions in his correspondence, he did indirectly accuse Sidney Lanier and Longfellow. In Letter No. 27, regarding four poems by Lanier, he wrote: "The two former were excellent--one of them unapproachable, although its story was taken entire from Mark Twain and Dudley Warner's 'The Gilded Age.'" And in Letter No. 28, after he had quoted a verse from Lanier, he added: "I think Mr. Longfellow saw that last stanza before he wrote his 'Rainy Day'--As for Plagiarism, isn't it wonderful that it has been so commonly and unblushingly practiced?" Consequently,

⁴⁰ Gilbert Highet, Juvenal the Satirist (New York, 1961), p. 47.

it seems reasonable to assume a charge of plagiarism in the final four lines of this verse:

So easily may be found
In old forgotten files--
So well, the fullest pens be ground
To make the sharpest styles!

Russell concluded the poem in a typically satirical fashion. In the final verse he reassumed the sham defensive pose of his opening and ironically urged the reader to take up the pen in the fashion of his contemporaries:

If you a saint now would be thought,
Hide not thy wish, but show it,
And when you do a thing you ought,
Go let the people know it;
Be quick to teach, and slow to learn--
Pray, preach--for, he advised,
That unconscious brings the best return,
Which most is advertised.

The final lines summarize his major objection to modern poetry. The "unconscious" implies his consistent charge of nonsense, of lack of reason; the "advertised" suggests his condemning of moderns as literary "drummers." Ultimately the total effect has been to reduce the modern poets' desire for recognition to absurdity.

From these passages one can ascertain Russell's bent for satire. He attacked indiscriminately. Lawyers, writers, women, politicians, self-styled cultural dictators, all were subject to his ridicule. And his range and mastery of satirical rhetoric is also evident: he employed nearly every rhetorical device from invective to irony. Moreover, he utilized the dialects of two socially estranged peoples, the Irish and the Jews, to stress their estrangement; consequently, one may anticipate that as a satirist he used the Negro dialect for the same purpose.



CHAPTER V
SATIRE: DIALECT POEMS

A man who is laughed at is triumphed over.
Thomas Hobbes

I

As Russell's literary stature is based primarily on his poems in the Southern-Negro dialect, it is necessary to preface a discussion of the i r satirical content with a brief summary of his language usage. His reputation in this genre has already been established in Chapter I, but the extent of his artistry may be best inferred from the praise accorded him by J. W. Johnson. Johnson, a Negro, wrote: "Irwin Russell (1853-79), a white poet, was perhaps the first to use the dialect in a literary verse form. A glance at his work will reveal how much Dunbar is indebted to him. . . ."¹ While this influence on a leading Negro poet suggests Russell's competence with dialect, there has still been an absence of critical accord on its authenticity.

Assessments of his dialect fall generally into three categories. Some critics disparage his performance; some contend the dialect is accurate; and some maintain an intermediate position, dismissing the issue as a secondary consideration.

On the first the influence of Joel Chandler Harris may be perceived. For Harris, in his introduction to Russell's poems, observed: "The dialect is not always the best,--it is often carelessly written. . . ." Later Fred Lewis Pattee acknowledged the validity of Harris' judgment.² G. William Nott also echoed Harris albeit rather ambiguously: ". . . not

¹ The Book of American Negro Poetry, ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York, 1959), p. 50.

² A History of American Literature Since 1870 (New York, 1968), p.290.



the greatest writer of Negro dialect in America."³ And even Auston Wharton, his boyhood companion, called Russell's dialect "precious, inaccurate, and conventional."⁴

The primary exponent of the opposite view was Maurice G. Fulton, who argued on the bases of Russell's demonstrated linguistic ability, discriminating sense of sound, and knowledge of dialectal peculiarities. Fulton apparently founded the final point on a letter cited by C. C. Marble in The Critic (October 27, 1888). In the letter Russell commented at length on the distinctive features of dialects in the South, noting: "That which obtains in the Southwest is the 'Virginia' form, which is totally different from the one used in South Carolina, eastern Georgia and Florida." From this Fulton concluded: "On the whole, it seems that Russell was a close student of dialect and that he used it with reasonable accuracy."⁵

Other critics, notably Marble, Smith, and Rand, concurred with Fulton. Marble in The Critic (October 27, 1888) attributed the accuracy of the dialect "in some degree" to the "closeness of his study of Chaucer and of Percy's Reliques." C. Alphonso Smith was rather sparing with his praise, simply remarking that Russell's "dialect, in grammar and rhetoric, is an improvement on everything that preceded it."⁶ But Clayton Rand asserted that Russell "mastered the Negro dialect."⁷ Perhaps more

³ "Irwin Russell, First Dialect Writer," Southern Literary Messenger, 1 (December, 1939), 809.

⁴ Fulton Collection, Box 4, Folder 7.

⁵ Maurice Garland Fulton, ed. "Irwin Russell," Christmas Night in the Quarters and Other Poems by Irwin Russell (New York, 1917), p. xxix.

⁶ "Dialect Writers," Cambridge History of American Literature (New York, 1918), II, 354.

⁷ Men of Spine in Mississippi (Gulfport, Miss., 1940), p. 204.

importantly, a Negro critic, Sterling Brown, has also acknowledged Russell's ability, noting that he "paid close attention to Negro speech."⁸

Finally, some critics have insisted that the question of fidelity in recording the Southern Negro idiom is of secondary importance. William Baskervill and A. A. Kern, for instance, held that Russell should be regarded primarily as a poet, rather than as a linguist attempting to preserve an accurate record of folk-speech. Baskervill suggested Russell used dialect in the manner of Shakespeare "as the only natural medium for the presentation of certain kinds of characters."⁹ Kern agreed, stating: "The dialect of Russell's poems is that spoken by the Mississippi negroes, and in the main his use of it is correct; but with him dialect was merely a means to an end--the representation of the negro character."¹⁰ In their judgments, Baskervill and Kern anticipated the conclusion reached by Raven I. McDavid, a modern linguist. McDavid, commenting on literary dialects, stated: "The purpose of the writer of literary dialect is not to represent a dialect but to use the suggestion of one to convey certain literary values. In proportion as he succeeds in representing the dialect faithfully, he is likely to fail as a literary artist, because deciphering the dialect will take too much of the reader's attention."¹¹

⁸ "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," Journal of Negro Education, 11 (January, 1933), 196.

⁹ Southern Writers: Biographical and Critical Studies (Nashville, 1902), I, 18.

¹⁰ "Irwin Russell," Library of Southern Literature (Atlanta, 1907), X, 4606.

¹¹ "The Dialects of American English," in The Structure of American English by W. Nelson Francis (New York, 1958), p. 541.

Russell himself provided evidence which seems to vindicate Baskervill and Kern. In Letter No. 15, he wrote:

A propos of letters--I can't resist the temptation to tell you about one I received today, from the editor of Scribner (Sic), accepting another negro piece. He desired me to make a slight alteration, and said: "'Nebuchadnezzar' is so good that we want you to touch it up a little. We like your dialects very much, and if we seem fastidious it is that we want the jewel to be flawless. . . . Please write off the revised stanzas, and let us have them soon." (The alterations desired were a change of two words.)

As "Nebuchadnezzar" is a dramatic monologue, any change would necessarily result in some distortion of the dialect. Consequently, there can be little doubt that poetic effect, not fidelity of dialect, was his primary concern. For had precise dialectal representation been his major objective, he surely would not have consented to any alteration required by someone so far removed from the Mississippi Negro as the editor of a New York magazine.

This does not suggest that he eschewed altogether the accurate representation of Negro speech. For he was concerned with it. This concern may be perceived in the dissatisfaction that he expressed with his efforts. In a letter dated June 30, 1878 (Letter No. 56), he confessed:

Since you are becoming acquainted with 13th amendment Doric, I would like to know whether you think I have caught it accurately in my "negro-dialect poems." There is a great deal more in the negro idioms than in the negro pronunciation, and more in the mode of thought than in the idiom. I am far from satisfied with the expression of some of my rhymed attempts.

The excerpt reveals that his interest in dialect and its accurate representation was more than superficial. Nevertheless, as a poet, not a linguist, he would necessarily have relegated it to a secondary role.

The comment on pronunciation in this passage also implies Russell's awareness of the similarities existent between Negro speech and white speech, a correspondence noted by many linguists. Donald J. Lloyd, for instance, declared: "Negro speech in America is not a distinct entity; generally it is the speech of whatever group of whites of whatever economic and social level the Negro has spent his life with."¹² George Philip Krapp, assessing J. C. Harris's dialect poems, made essentially the same observation: "The speech of Uncle Remus and the speech of the rustic whites as Harris records it are so much alike that if one did not know which character was speaking, one might often be unable to tell whether the words were those of a white man or of a negro."¹³ And even Summer Ives, who disagreed with Krapp, admitted that "the field records of the Linguistic Atlas, aside from a very few Gullah records, show hardly any usages in Negro speech which cannot also be found in rustic white speech. And there are many similarities in usage as Harris wrote the dialects."¹⁴

This does not imply that Russell recognized no distinctions between Negro pronunciation and white pronunciation. He simply considered pronunciation a less significant difference than the other qualities. Russell was probably close to the position held by Ives. For Ives, despite the Linguistic Atlas, argued that Harris had distinguished between Negro speech and white speech. Ives contended that Harris used many

¹² Donald J. Lloyd and Harry R. Warfel, American English in its Cultural Setting (New York, 1963), p. 18.

¹³ The English Language in America (New York, 1925), I, 250.

¹⁴ "Dialect Differentiation in the Stories of Joel Chandler Harris," Readings in Applied Linguistics, ed. Harold B. Allan (New York, 1964), p. 526.



items "which appear only in his representation of Negro speech." Among them Ives listed: d for voiced th; f for voiceless th in terminal position; omission of intervocalic r; omission of h in why and what; more loss of unstressed syllables; more levelling of preterit and past participle forms; and "exotic formations."¹⁵

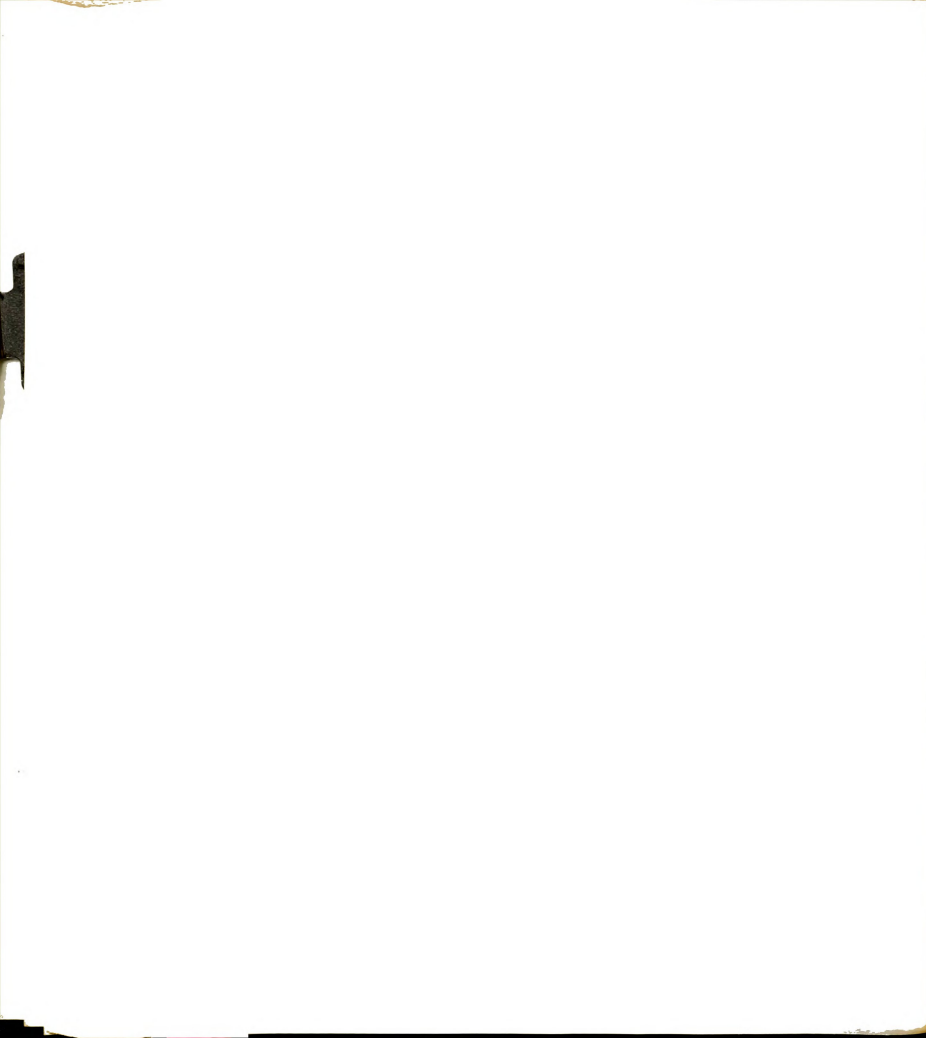
As Russell has influenced Harris, it seems reasonable to expect many of these characteristics in his poems. And one does find them. He consistently used d for voiced th, rarely deviating from this practice.¹⁶ A brief examination of "Norvern People," for instance, uncovers Dem (them), de (the), wid (with), dey (they), dar (there), widout (without), dat (that), and deir (their). The same poem also contains numerous examples of f for voiceless th; Norf (North), froo (through), mouf (mouth), and Souf (South). Russell also used the more customary t for this sound. In "Precepts at Parting," for instance, one finds troo (through); in "The Mississippi Witness," t'ink (think); and in "Uncle Cap Interviewed," t'ing (thing). Russell's distinctions are evidently well-founded as Lewis and Marguerite S. Herman have recorded that the th sounds appeared in one African dialect only, Swahili.¹⁷

But Russell deviated from the customary mode of portraying Negro speech in respect to the intervocalic r. His Negroes rarely dropped it although the trait is supposedly endemic among Southern Negroes. Instead one finds pore in place of the anticipated po' ("Norvern People"), shore rather than sho' ("Mahsr John"), and afore instead of afo' or 'fo'

¹⁵ Ives, p. 526.

¹⁶ Exceptions occur in "The Mississippi Miracle," Christmas Night in the Quarters, ed. Maurice Garland Fulton (New York, 1917), p. 178. All subsequent references to Russell's works are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

¹⁷ American Dialects: A Manual for Actors, Directors and Writers (New York, 1947), p. 191.



("Uncle Nick on Fishing"). On the other hand, they frequently dropped the postvocalic r when it was followed by a consonant. In "A Sermon for the Sisters," for instance, Russell wrote wahning (warning) and sahman (sermon). Curiously, Russell's practice in this respect conformed more closely to Southern white diction than to the accepted concept of Negro speech.¹⁸

On the other points noted by Ives, Russell's practice was more irregular. His characters customarily retained the h in what and why. And his treatment of unstressed syllables lends support to Baskerville and Kern, who insisted Russell had subordinated dialect authenticity. For his omission or retention of unstressed syllables was evidently governed by the exigencies of the verse. His representation of ignorant will illustrate. In "Norvern People," Russell wrote:

But lawsy! dey's ign'ant as ign'ant kin be,
An' aint got de presence ob min' fur to see.

Here he employed a syncopated form of ignorant to accommodate the meter: each line has eleven syllables; therefore, he dropped the middle syllable of ignorant to avoid breaking the rhythm. However, in "The Mississippi Witness," he retained this syllable for the same reason. Here he wrote:

'Bout how to turn State's ebbidence--dat's what dey's
dribin' at--
Now aint it strange some niggers is so ignorant as dat?

This line clearly requires retention to attain the fourteen syllable pattern used throughout the poem. This same verse further exemplifies Russell's bending of the dialect to fit his lines. The initial a has been dropped in about to conform to his meter. However, the verse's

¹⁸ Herman, pp. 208, 88.

first line reads "Whar wuz I? Oh! I members; I wuz jes about to say." In this line Russell kept the a to reach his fourteen syllables. Other examples of this practice abound in his poetry. Consequently, while elision of unstressed syllables may be characteristic of Negro dialect,¹⁹ one may reasonably assume that Russell employed the device without acute discrimination.

Russell's Negroes, like Harris's, experienced difficulties with verbs. There is a noticeable leveling of preterit and past participle as suggested by Ives. One finds grewed for grew and knowed for knew in "Wherefore He Prays," tuk for taken and cotch for caught in "Uncle Nick on Fishing," and heered for heard in "Blind Ned." Russell's Negroes also demonstrated a characteristic predilection for using the present tense,²⁰ especially the third person singular verb for the first person. Examples occur in nearly every poem. "I gibs," "I 'lucidates," "I 'members," and "I zires," for instance, all appear in "The Mississippi Witness."

Although Russell's characters occasionally used such an expression as "perzactly" ("The Mississippi Witness"), they generally did not share Uncle Remus's gift for creating "exotic formations." Their imagery, however, does reveal a kinship with Uncle Remus, and it also exemplifies what Russell meant by "Mode of thought." Their comparisons are usually of an earthy nature and in the idiom one would expect from an uneducated, agrarian people. In "Halfway Doin's," for example, the preacher urged his flock to labor diligently: "Fur when you sees a nigger foolin', den, as shore's you'r born/You's gwine to see him

¹⁹ Herman, p. 203.

²⁰ Herman, p. 212-213.

comin' out de small eend ob de horn." In "Christmas Night in the Quarters," the Deluge is described as an overflowing of the Mississippi. Another comparison with a satiric touch appears in "Blind Ned"; Ned observed: 'A violeen is like an 'ooman, mighty hard to guide/An' mighty hard to keep in order arter once it's buyed."

Russell's Negroes consistently demonstrated another language quirk commonly accepted as characteristic of Negro speech: the substitution of b for v. The Hermans account for this peculiarity by noting that "there is no 'v' sound in the African language."²¹ Russell's practice tends to support their findings, for he was quite consistent on this item. Any of his dialect poems ably illustrates this trait. On a single page of "Halfway Doin's," for example, Russell used lebby (levy), ebryt'ing (everything), whuteber (whatever), dribin' (driving), gib (give), ob (of), and hab (have).

The remainder of Russell's dialect repertoire is generally marked by inconsistency. Perhaps, therefore, its extent may be best demonstrated by a brief catalogue of the more significant features. One of them is his rendering of a and e, when they represent the sounds of the digraph /æ/ and the vowel /ɛ/. He customarily used cotch for catch ("Uncle Nick on Fishing") and fotch for fetch ("A Sermon for the Sisters"). Russell's lack of consistency on this point is not surprising, for the Hermans have recorded the dialectal instability of these sounds.²²

His practice with just was also sporadic. Sometimes he substituted

²¹ Herman, p. 190.

²² Herman, p. 190.



a d sound and wrote des ("Wherefore He Prays"), conforming to the accepted noting of Negro usage.²³ Usually, though, he retained the j and altered the vowel, writing jes ("Mahsr John"). And in "Uncle Cap Interviewed" he did neither: he simply wrote jus'. As the jes and jus' are both preceded by pauses and followed by a conjunctive like, it seems unlikely that the context affected Russell's choice.

Among the other persistent characteristics are the use of gwine for going, double negatives, and malapropisms. The first, however, is hardly confined to either the Negro or the South. McDavid, for instance, listed its occurrence in New England.²⁴ The last two are considered by the Hermans as being characteristic of Negro speech,²⁵ but one suspects their prevalence everywhere among the uneducated.

A final major point lies in Russell's use of "eye-dialect." He often employed this device which has no intrinsic bearing on actual pronunciation. His use of wuz for was, sez for says (See, for example, "Wherefore He Prays") continually recurs. But even his eye-dialect was inconsistent. In "Nebuchadnezzar" he wrote chickin' but elsewhere, in "Precepts at Parting," for instance, he dispensed with eye-dialect and used the accepted spelling. Among his other uses of this device, one finds staid for stayed ("Mahsr John"), c'u'd for could ("Norvern People") and sh'u'd for should ("Uncle Nick on Fishing"). Perhaps George Philip Krapp provides the best commentary on this use of eye-dialect: "The spelling is merely a friendly nudge to the reader,

²³ Krapp, The English Language in America, I, 250.

²⁴ "The Dialects of American English," in The Structure of American English by W. Nelson Francis (New York, 1958), p. 522.

²⁵ Herman, pp. 214, 222.



a knowing look which establishes a sympathetic sense of superiority between the writer and reader as contrasted with the humble speaker of dialect."²⁶

This use of eye-dialect, his apparent adjustment of dialect to poetic meter, and his acknowledged alteration at the behest of the Scribner's editor all suggest the validity of Baskervill's judgment: dialect was a secondary consideration to Russell. But he did not neglect the dialect, and one suspects that he not only possessed an acute ear but that he also recorded the dialect fairly well within the limitations imposed by a conventional alphabet and poetic exigencies. Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that the artistic criterion, not the linguistic one, was of primary importance to him. His dialect functioned primarily as a literary vehicle for his representation of the ludicrous Negro. The dialect immediately set the Negro apart and catered to the sense of white superiority, both essential for satiric effect. As Krapp has perceptively remarked: "One hears the illiterate speech of negroes more illiterately than one hears the illiterate speech of one's fellow-whites."²⁷

II

One could have anticipated the ultimate development of Russell's dialect verse from his first attempt in the genre. For it was sheer satire. In The Critic (November 3, 1888), C. C. Marble recorded Russell's account of this initial venture:

²⁶ Krapp, I, 228.

²⁷ Krapp, I, 248.



Well, one evening I was sitting in our back yard in old Mississippi 'Twanging' on the banjo, when I heard the missis--our colored domestic, an old darkey of the Aunt Dinah pattern--singing one of the outlandish camp-meeting hymns of which the race is so fond. She was an extremely 'ligious' character and, although seized with the impulse to do so, I hesitated to take up the tune and finish it. I did so, however, and in the dialect I have adopted, and which I then thought and still think is in strict conformity to their use of it, I proceeded, as one inspired, to compose verse after verse of the most absurd, extravagant, and to her, irreverent rhyme ever before invented, all the while accompanying it on the banjo, and imitating the fashion of the plantation Negro. The old missis was so exasperated and indignant that she predicted all sorts of dire calamities. Meantime my enjoyment of it was prodigious.

While the precise content of this composition is unknown, several important satirical elements were patently present. The intent to ridicule can hardly be questioned; Russell, himself, apparently was unable to resist the compulsion. The verse, evidently characterized by hyperbole as suggested by "absurd" and "extravagant," must be classified as some form of burlesque. And it apparently evoked a response compatible with satirical tradition.

It is not surprising, then, that much of Russell's subsequent dialect verse was satirical. As this first attempt apparently contained matter of an "irreverent" nature, one could expect Negro religious fervor to serve as a future object for Russell's satirical commentary. And it does. Negro preachers, for instance, were one of his favorite subjects. They dominate "The Mississippi Miracle," "Halfway Doings," and "A Sermon for the Sisters," and Brudder Brown plays an important role in "Christmas Night in the Quarters." Each of Russell's clergymen shares a common characteristic: the willingness to pervert religion for his own gain.



In "The Mississippi Miracle," the Rev. Dick Wilkins exemplifies the satirical dictum to utilize a mask, to let "someone speak for himself, or to take himself at his own evaluation."²⁸ As the narrator in this dramatic monologue, he does both. In the opening verse "De Rev'rind Dick Wilkins, D.D." expresses his misgivings at having followed a religious calling at the behest of Gabriel: "But now, sah, I's mightily jubous/'T was some oder Wilkins he meant." He explains his doubts by recounting the outcome of a revival meeting which he had conducted. When the meeting had reached the height of emotional fervor with "forty-odd mon'ahs. . .shouting!/'An forty more comin' in sight," Wilkins decided "To gib dem 'ar niggers a trile." His trial was a test of charity: he would set his empty whiskey barrel

. . . out dar on the bluff;
An' eb'ry good Christian's expected
To fotch 'long a pint o' good stuff.

Unfortunately everyone failed the test. When each man had "fotched up a flask," he turned the faucet and out came only water. Although Christ had turned water to wine before (John 2:6-9), the Reverend Wilkins seemed rather skeptical of His interfering to reverse the process on this occasion:

"A miracle!" shouted de sistahs.
"A miracle nuffin!" says I;
"I see froo de mattah--it's easy
"To tell you des how it come by:
"Each man fotchted a bottle of water,
"An' thought, when the cask wuz complete,
"By eb'ry one else bringin' whiskey,
"Nobody would notice de cheat!"

As a result Rev. Wilkins, displaying an unbecoming absence of Christian faith, decided "to let up on preachin'."

28 Ronald Paulson, The Fictions of Satire (Baltimore, 1967), p. 98.



Irony underlies the preacher's indignation at "de head brudders convicted/Ob such a contemptible crime." Like Chaucer's Pardoner Rev. Wilkins denounced the sin of which he himself was guilty; for neither his "trial" nor his reaction reflected any charitable instincts. Here, however, the irony is emphasized by his ignorance, for he is incapable of recognizing his own perfidy. But the reader does. For the reader has been forewarned by Wilkins' homely comparison of his flock with a farm:

De site wuzn't much fur to brag on:
'T wus mos'lly clay gullies an' sand--
But de craps, in de way ob collections,
Wuz good fur dat 'scription ob land.

Consequently the reader, from his superior vantage point, looks beyond the flagrant and hilarious guilt of the congregation to the preacher's failing to practice the Christian virtue on which he is exhorting others. The resulting theme recurs in Russell's satiric poems: Never trust a Negro.

Another source of satire in the portrait is the affectation of the title, Doctor of Divinity. Neither Wilkins' speech nor his actions reflect the educational or moral attainment connoted by the degree. As the assumption of this title occurs at the beginning of the poem, the reader would become immediately aware of the incongruity. In this conferring of an elevated title on an ignorant Negro, however, Russell not only added to the ludicrous effect, he also used a device which others were to successfully employ for the same purpose. For a propos to portraiture in Northern literary magazines, Rayford W. Logan has observed: "Negroes were made ludicrous by the bestowal of

titles. . . .²⁹

Incongruity also appears in Wilkins' conception of the trial, for its inspiration came to him at the moment of highest emotional pitch. Consequently there is a sharp contrast between the dispassionate minister who

. . . says with a beautiful smile:
 "My frien's, I'm a-gwine to propose you
 A small onsignificant test

and the shouting congregation. In this depiction Russell gave poetic voice to the standard conception of the Negro and his religious professions: the failure to practice what one preaches.³⁰ Moreover, Wilkins' conduct essentially conforms to Russell's conception of Negro ministers as reflected in his letters. In Letter No. 56, for example, Russell described a convention of one hundred fifty Baptist ministers as follows:

I hear today (but it was from a Methodist negro) that some of the preachers had been quarreling, and that they used ferocious language to each other, and nearly came to blows. . . . The religious excitement among the blacks is at white heat. They have a perfect jam and a regular circus at the A. B. church every night, while the A. M. E. preacher, who is running his concern in opposition, plays to empty benches. . . . Our cook went there Friday night. She told me that the shouting and stamping and raving was so overwhelming that she got frightened and . . . left the church. . . .

Russell concluded his description by noting:

Their morals are not improved by 'getting' 'ligion'--on the contrary, the loudest "mourners" are the most supreme scoundrels. This very convention has expelled several of its missionary preachers for criminal conduct-- Their real crime, in negro estimation, consisting of being found out. . . ."

²⁹ The Negro in American Life and Thought: the Nadir 1877-1901 (New York, 1954), p. 241.

³⁰ Logan, p. 242.



Although Russell's one-sided representation can hardly be considered objective, the portrait of Rev. Wilkins in conjunction with this excerpt suggests his alliance with the traditional position of the satirists': the insistence that they were merely portraying reality.³¹ But if Russell did portray reality, then Negro preachers as represented by Wilkins were guilty of affectation, hypocrisy, greed, and ignorance; and, as in the case of Wilkins, were defeated only by the natural disposition of the congregation for the same vices.

If "The Mississippi Miracle" were an isolated example of the lack of altruism on the part of Negro preachers, one could, perhaps, dismiss it as applying only to a particular minister. But such is not the case. As noted previously, the Negro preachers who appear in Russell's other poems share Wilkins' shortcomings, thus indicating a more universal application of these denigrating characteristics.

In "A Sermon for the Sisters," for example, Russell's Negro preacher capitalized on the text of vanity. Nearing the end of a long disquisition condemning wasteful affectation, the minister seized the opportunity to twist the message to his own advantage:

Now, sistahs, won't you copy him? Say, won't you take
 a lesson,
 An' min' dis sollum wahnin' 'bout de sin ob fancy
 fressin'?
 How much you spen' upon yo'self! I wish you might
 remember
 Yo' preacher ain't been paid a cent sense somewhar
 in November.

Russell's Negro ministers have a notoriously difficult time abstaining from self-serving commentaries on their sermons. One suspects Russell

³¹ See, for example, Alvin Kernan, The Plot of Satire (New Haven, 1965), p. 5.



of catering to the popular notion of the Negro's incapacity to concern himself with anything beyond his immediate ken. Andrew Johnson, for instance, had expounded on this notion in his Annual Message of December 3, 1867: "If the inferior gains ascendancy over the other, it will govern with reference only to its own interests--for it will recognize no common interest. . . ." Russell's Negro preachers, functioning as microcosms of the race, reflect this tendency. Nor were the congregations innocent: their parsimony hardly indicates an interest in the welfare of others. Curiously, however, this attribution of self-interest was rarely extended to include the Negro as capable of working without white instigation.³²

There are other satiric elements in addition to the irony of a minister's exploiting the text of his sermon. The concept of the satirist's donning a mask, or using a persona, is aptly demonstrated; for Russell had created his spokesmen before he created the poem. In a letter dated August 4, 1877 (Letter No. 41), he had written:

I have invented an old gentlemen of color, who rises in de 'batin' 'siety (say in the "Smother's Literary and Benevolent Society" of this place--commonly called "Smother's Malevolent" Society by its members) and begins thus:

I nebber breaks a colt afore he old enough to trabble;
I nebber digs my "taters" 'till dey plenty big to grabble;
An' when you sees me gettin' up instructin' ob de meeting'
You bet I's clumb de knowledge-tree an' done some apple-stealin'.

--but I have not yet decided upon what subject he shall be dogmatic. Perhaps, then, I'll make him theorize on the "labor question."

Instead of the "labor question," Russell chose a more common subject

³² See, for example, Vernon Lane Wharton, The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890 (New York, 1965), p. 82.

among satirists: feminine vanity. For, with the exception of minor revisions, this became the first verse of "A Sermon for the Sisters," a poem admonishing female members of the congregation for their affectation. Russell's practice, as delineated here, provides some insight into his satirical nature, for it practically serves as a paradigm for Robert C. Elliott's observation on the satirist's technique:

Most verse satires are enclosed by a "frame." Just as a novel by Conrad may be framed by a situation in which the story-teller Marlow sits on an eastern veranda, telling his tale. . . so the satire will be framed by a conflict of sorts between the satirist (or, more reasonably, his persona, the "I" of the poem) and an adversary. The adversary usually has a minor role, serving only to prod the "I" into extended comment on the issue (vice of folly) at hand. . . .³³

Russell's persona certainly commented at length on the vice of vanity as displayed in his congregation. And the conflict may be readily inferred from the poem's concluding lines:

I better close. I sees some gals dis sahmon's kinder
hittin'
A-whisperin', an' 'sturbin' all dat's near what dey's
a-sittin';
To look at dem, an' listen at dey onrespec'ful jabber,
It turns de milk ob human kin'ness mighty nigh to
clabber!

A-A-A-MEN!

But Russell, as noted, went a step beyond and mocked his spokesmen also. The first verse reveals the mockery. For the preacher culminated his catalogue of credentials--flashed much in the manner of Chaucer's Pardoner and for the same purpose of impressing an ignorant audience--with an ironically incongruous metaphor. The association of "knowledge-tree" and "apple-eatin'" with pride can be hardly overlooked; and, as vanity is a mirror of pride, one suspects Russell's preacher of being

33 The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art (Princeton, 1960), p. 110.

too ignorant to realize what he has admitted. The reader, however, recognizing the irony, would undoubtedly chuckle at the minister's inadvertent admission of the sin which serves as his subject.

The preacher's ignorance was not limited to this one incongruity. Later in the poem his struggle for profundity resulted in ridiculous pronouncements. After relating "How Jacob-in-de-Bible's boys played off upon dey brudder," the minister solemnly concluded: "My Christian frien's, dis story proobs dat eben men is human." He then added anachronism to the obvious:

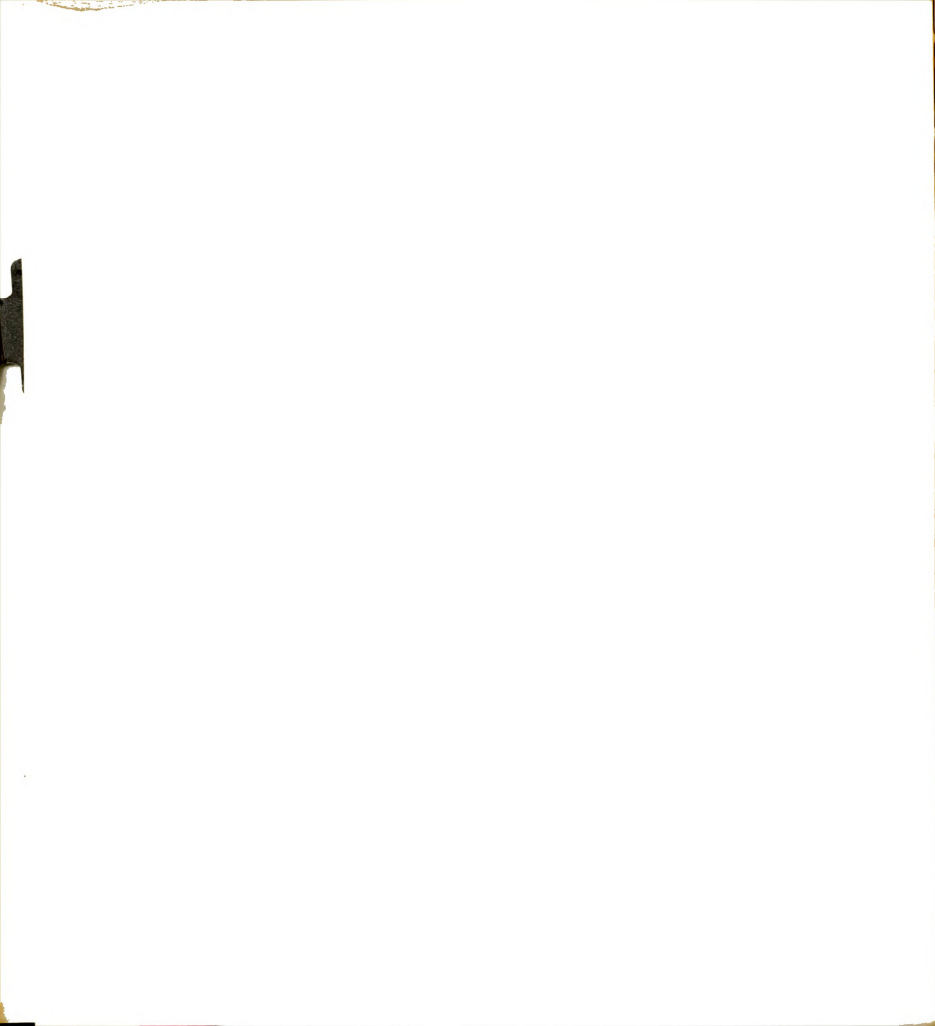
De cussidness ob showin'off, he foun' out all about it;
An yit he wuz a Christian man, as good as ever shouted.

This last line also includes another thrust at the emotionalism of Negro religion as Russell equated it with noise. Here again Russell appealed to a sense of superiority in his white audience; for, as R. W. Logan has discovered in a study of a popular Northern journal: "More than twenty-five anecdotes in Harper's developed the theme that Negroes valued their preachers in proportion to their ability to excite emotion.³⁴ Apparently the white Northerners had forgotten the emotionalism which had characterized The Great Awakening nearly a century and a half before.³⁵

Additionally, the satirical effect is heightened by the basic metaphor of the first few verses. Russell's preacher extended his allusion to "apple-stealin'" (The published poem reads "apple-eatin'") to a detailed comparison of apples and women. The elaboration of this

³⁴ Logan, The Negro in American Life and Thought, p. 245.

³⁵ See, for example, Albert D. Belden, George Whitefield: The Awakener (New York, 1953), p. 108.



homely metaphor, nearly medieval in effect, keeps foremost in the reader's mind the association of women with the sin of pride. The analogy also permitted Russell to engage in one of a satirist's favorite diversions: punning. He struck an appropriate note with "I lubs de ol'-time russets. . ."; for russets, meaning rough-skinned apples and rough cloth, fits suitably into each part of the analogy.

The unrelenting character of Russell's slighting conception of Negro ministers may also be perceived in the first draft of "Christmas Night in the Quarters." Although in this poem he essentially depicted the happy, contented freedman, a stereotype which will be considered in the next chapter, in his original manuscript he had included two verses disparaging the Negro preacher, Brudder Brown. These verses characterize Brudder Brown as a fitting companion for the Rev. Dick Wilkins, D. D., and the minister in "A Sermon for the Sisters." They also cast a shadow of irony over all of Brudder Brown's other utterances. Russell's original draft reads:

"An' now while I's a-pest'rin' you, I mout as well preceed
About anoder matter, what's a sin an' shame indeed;
Hit's dis: dere berry niggers, for whose benefick I prays,
Dey is de meanes', stingy lot, I's seed in all my days!

A rooster makes a sickly crow, wid nuffin' in his crow--
I nebber lays no profits up, frum layin' down de law:
Dese preshis lambs is gone astray--dey'll be in Satan's pen,
Widout dey antes up to me for herdin' 'em--Amen."

Brudder Brown not only interrupted his plea on the behalf of others to insert a personal behest, he also surpassed his brother ministers by adding threat to insult. But, essentially, one finds here the same old ingredients: self-interest on the part of both minister and flock.

The anti-climactic last line of the prayer and the disparaging



comparison inherent in the self-analogy also contribute to the satire. However, the primary effect of these two stanzas is to cause the reader to return and re-interpret such lines as:

See Brudder Brown--whose saving grace
Would sanctify a quarter-race--

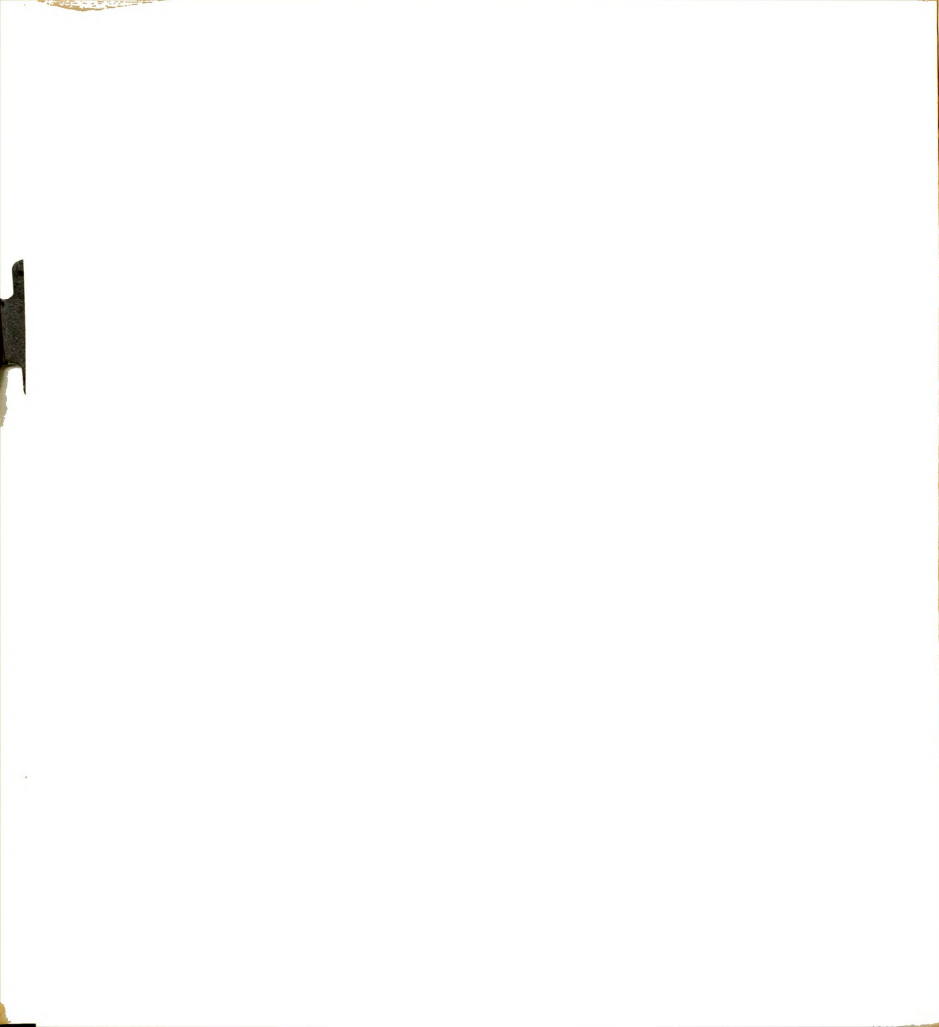
For the revelation of a rather militant self-interest attached to a benediction surely indicates Russell originally intended an ironic reading. Ultimately Russell deleted these verses, added others more in keeping with the general tone, and altered the order of appearance. Nevertheless, his first effort indicates his customary attitude towards Negro ministers as well as his natural bent for satire.

Russell used his favorite rhetorical device, anti-climax, to disclose the grasping propensity of the Negro preacher in yet another poem, "Half-way Doin's." While this poem, like "Christmas Night in the Quarters," features a minister who expounds solid Southern white doctrine on the Negro's role in society, Russell was apparently unable to resist an urge to satirize his minister. This preacher, as did all of the others, slyly seized the opportunity for self-aggrandizement inherent in the message of his sermon. After discoursing at length on the text, "Dat half-way doin's ain't no' count fur dis worl's or de nex'," he closed with the following exhortation:

I see dat Brudder Johnson's 'bout to pass aroun' de hat,
An' don't let's hab no half-way doin's when it comes to dat!

The anti-climax functions in the classic manner: the reader at this point may begin to wonder if the entire sermon was designed for the final exhortation.

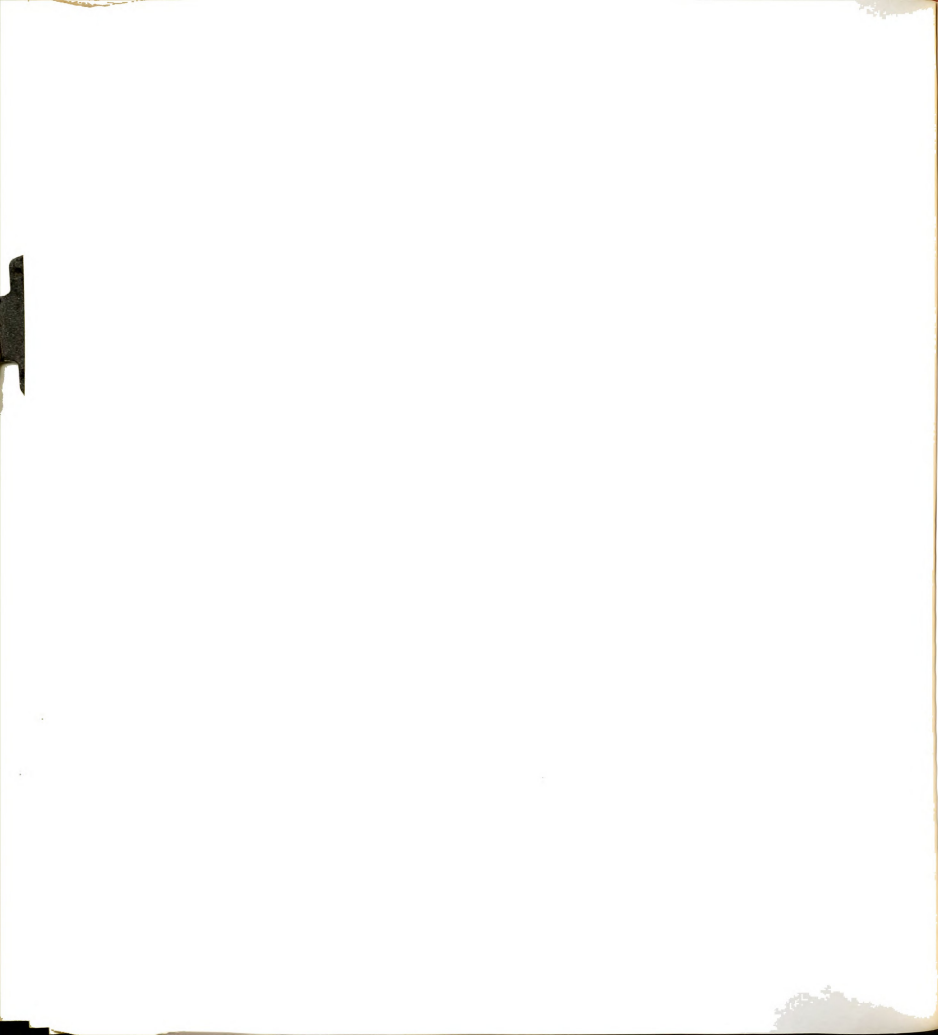
One may readily ascertain, then, that Russell portrayed his Negro



ministers and their congregations with an almost monotonous consistency, emphasizing their greed, hypocrisy, and ignorance. One suspects, however, that Russell's attitude regarding the motivations of white ministers' was hardly different. In Letter No. 45, for example, he casually observed: "Rev. E. C. Gates, Baptist theological student, aetat 18, has been here preaching several sermons. During his college vacation he is traveling about for the house of J. Baptist & Co.--in other words, converting souls; and taking up collections to pay his expenses next session. . . ." Considering Russell's view of Christian virtues, one wonders if, perhaps, the satire was not dual-edged. He may well have derived immense satisfaction from the irony in a Northern audience's laughing at Negroes displaying shortcomings of which they themselves were guilty.

III

A subtle irony also prevails in "Dat Peter." In this poem Russell ironically mocked the affectation of the "uppity" Negro who had attended college; for Peter had "been to Oakland, and his larnin' is profound/I heered him sayin' yes'day dat de yearth kep' turnin' round!" The example of Peter's learning hardly constituted profundity in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Nor was Oakland, actually Alcorn University, noted for superior scholarship despite its inception as the black counterpart to the University of Mississippi. Few of its students completed even one full session, and only forty-six graduated in a twenty-year period ending in 1890. Vernon L. Wharton perhaps best summarized the institution's accomplishments: "As a normal school, Alcorn continued to perform a useful function, training teachers who, at least, were able to instruct their pupils in reading, writing, and



the fundamentals of arithmetic."³⁶

This inferior education at Oakland contributes to the mimicry motif of the poem: as Oakland was a poor imitation of the white university at Oxford, so was Peter a poor imitation of the white scholar. Russell's Negro spokesman made the contrast explicitly:

He wears a suit ob store-clo'es, an' a fine fibe dollar hat!
Who eber heered de like afore ob sich gwine on as dat?
He iles his har, he do; an' goes a-sparkin' eb'ry night;
Why Peter,
Dat Peter!
I guess he thinks he's white.

Russell's ridicule reflects the Southerner's distaste for the educated Negro and confirms the satirical intention of the poem. This antipathy was early noted, for instance, by Carl Shurz, who, after numerous interviews with Southerners, concluded: "the popular prejudice is almost as bitterly set against the Negro's having the advantage of education as it was when the Negro was a slave. . . . Hundreds of times I heard the old assertion, that 'learning will spoil thenigger for work,' and that 'Negro education will be the ruin of the South.'"³⁷ "Dat Peter," with his oiled hair, limited learning, and amorous propensities, personifies the Southern fear.

And Russell emphasized the point by another contrast, this one between Peter and the poem's spokesman. For the spokesman is an old, obviously uneducated Negro, who expounds the following doctrine:

I really think ef Peter would rent a leetle patch ob land,
An' settle down to crappin', dat he'd hold a better hand
De debbit's gwine to set him back afore his game is done.

³⁶ The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890, p. 254.

³⁷ W. E. B. Dubois, Black Reconstruction in America (New York, 1935), pp. 135-136.

Apparently Peter's affected aping of white behavior has not deceived Russell's old spokesman. He recognized that beneath the "fibe dollar hat" there stood another Negro.

Russell had once commented to a minister that the expression, "You can paint a crow white and he'll pull up corn," used in a sermon, was "sensible and graphic." Critics contend that by his comment Russell recognized the necessity for a "change of heart."³⁸ In view of "Dat Peter," the connotation of crow, and Russell's customary irony, one suspects a better interpretation would be: "Paint a Negro white and he'll still be a Negro."

Russell's "Precepts at Parting" bears on the same theme: the absurdity of Negroes who mimic white behavior. Herein Russell again employed an old-fashioned Negro as his narrator to ridicule "dem fancy young niggers, what's 'shamed fur to look at a hoe/An' acts like a passel ob rich folks, when dey isn't got nuffin to show." Russell emphasized this theme with a rhetorical device common in satire, the disparaging comparison. Negroes who had forgotten their proper places in society were compared to

. . . a young rooster, a-settin' up top ob de fence
He keeps a-struttin' an' a-crowin', an' while he's a-blowin'
his horn,
Dem chickens what ain't arter fussin's is pickin' all ob
de corn.

The denigrating effect of the analogy adequately conveys Russell's views of Negroes who have broken from the traditional pattern.

Even the structure of the poem contributes to this denigration of the Negro. For Russell cast the poem in the context of a father's

³⁸ See, for example, A. A. Kern, "Biographical Notes on Irwin Russell," Texas Review, 11 (1916), 144.



parting admonition to his son. An enlightened reader, his memory nudged by the word precepts in the title, would immediately recall the passage containing Polonius' advice to Laertes, surely the best-known archetype of this form (Hamlet, I, iii). And bearing this parallel in mind, the reader would as surely delight in the disparity between the young, white, aristocratic youth enroute to Paris and a freedman about to become a waiter "aboa'd ob de Robbert E. Lee." The contrast becomes especially pronounced at the end of the poem. There is a marked difference between Shakespeare's stilted and flowery,

This above all; to thine own self be true
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man,

and Russell's twisted proverb presented in his typically anti-climatic fashion:

I's kep' you as long as I's gwine to, an' now you an' me
we is done--
An' calves is too skace in dis country to kill fur a
prodigal son.

Negro affectation, which was mocked in "Dat Peter" and "Precepts at Parting," was reduced to absurdity in "The Mississippi Witness." Russell, in this poem, portrayed a Negro witness's ludicrous attempt at profundity. The Negro's testimony is replete with malapropisms, double negatives, and grammatical errors. All of his "ebbydence" is in the nature of a non sequitur, and it all reveals his ignorance. Despite his intellectual shortcomings, however, the witness expressed himself with assurance, and therein lies much of the irony.

The irony becomes apparent in the very first verse with the witness's pompous assurance:



Yoah Honah, an' de jury: Ef you'll listen, now, to me,
 I's gwine to straighten up dis case jes like it ought
 to be.

Dis heah's a case ob stealin' hogs--a mighty ser-ous
 'fense--

An' you'll know all about it, when I gibs my
 ebbidence.

The repetition of the witness's confidence in his ability to "straighten up dis case" suggests Russell was leaving nothing to chance: he wished to cement the impression of egotistical confidence in the reader's mind to contrast with the totally illogical testimony to follow. The witness's solemn labeling of hog-theft, a relatively minor crime, as a 'mighty ser'ous 'fense' also adds to the denigratory characterization. Russell has, essentially employed a popular disparaging symbol. For petty theft, especially of hogs and chickens, was a common charge against the Negro. Russell himself frequently equated Negroes specifically with hog stealing in his correspondence. In Letter No. 38, for example, he expressed mock sympathy for the 'po' darkey hog-thief'; and in Letter No. 31, he alluded to hogs missing from their 'accustomed 'wallers'." Hog stealing somehow seems to lack the glamor of 'cattle-rustling' or horse theft, major crimes with which Russell's Negroes were never charged. Apparently even their larceny was carried out on an inferior scale.

In the second verse Russell quickly struck an ironic note by contrasting the validity of the testimony with his witness's previous assurance. For the opening testimony hardly indicates the remainder will have any significance. The witness declared:

Dis Peter Jones, de plainer, is a member of de chu'ch
 But Thomas Greene, de fender, goodness knows he's
 nuffin much;
 A lazy, triflin' nigger is dat berry Thomas Green--

The non sequitur argument suggests the popular Southern view of the Negro's inability to think logically on the finer points of the law, an argument often advanced in the South's adamant refusal to accept Negro testimony and Negro jurors.³⁹ Russell, traditionally in the mainstream of Southern thought, had also deplored the same. In a letter dated June 10, 1877, (Letter No. 38), he had written: "I have seen important suits, which involved the nicest distinctions of law, left to the decision of a jury of twelve such ignorant darkeys, who had to get the bailiff in charge of them to write down the verdict--not one of them being able to read or write at all."

Having established the comic irony inherent in his witness's professions of perspicacity, Russell concentrated on exaggerating the Negro's pomposity and ignorance. The poem serves well as an example of a satirist's permitting his enemy to destroy himself, for in the next verse the witness attains the ultimate in profundity:

Now gib me stric' contention while I 'lucidates de
 fac';
 Dere's two whole sides to eberyt'ing,--de front one
 and de back,--

The malapropism, the irony in the over-simplification, and the complete irrelevance of the testimony emphasize the disparity between manner and material: the Negro, attempting to ape white speech and mannerisms, becomes totally absurd. His effort to mimic the whites, for instance, results in a malapropism such as contention. The use of big words, however, provided writers with a common stock in trade for portraying the illiterate Negro and was hardly peculiar to Russell.⁴⁰

³⁹ See, for example, Wharton, The Negro in Mississippi, pp. 134-137

⁴⁰ See, for example, Logan, The Negro in American Life and Thought, p. 245.



In the subsequent verses Russell resorted to the wildest hyperbole, despite his later insistence that he had simply recorded the truth. His Negro witness, who had as yet uttered nothing relevant, strayed even farther afield by recounting the means of turning "State's ebbydence." The Negro, implied Russell, was like a child, totally incapable of concentrating on a single point and only able to recite like a parrot.

The witness, before launching into his explication of the "P'int of law," disparaged the ignorance of his fellow Negroes: "Now ain't it strange some niggers is so ignorant as dat?" The reader, already aware of the witness's own intellectual deficiencies, can surely detect the irony in this accusation. But even the wary reader is hardly prepared for the narrative which follows:

Why, when you wants to turn it, you jes has to come
to town,
An' find de Deestric Turner---he'll be somewhar
loafin' 'roun'--
An' den sez you, "Mahsr Turner, sah, I zires my
compliments;
I's come in town to see you, fur to turn State's
ebbydence."

Three points are immediately apparent in this verse: a pun on the office of district attorney, a sly thrust at the white official who held the office, and still another instance of asininity resulting from an attempt to mimic white speech. One suspects Russell distorted his dialect a bit to portray the "Deestric Turner" as the custodian of

. . . a big mersheen
An' dar you catches hol' de crank, an' den you
turns away,
Untel at las' dar's somefin clicks, an' den you's
come to A.

Nor should one be surprised at the innuendo in "loafin' 'roun'"; as



an attorney Russell would have been in constant opposition to the holder of this office. Furthermore, Russell's correspondence reveals that he held no great esteem for many of the other members of the Claibourne County bar (Letter No. 35). On the last point, the ludicrous reversal in the effort at formal speech is evident.

While the testimony had been absurd and irrelevant the old Negro continued unaware of these failings; for he concluded:

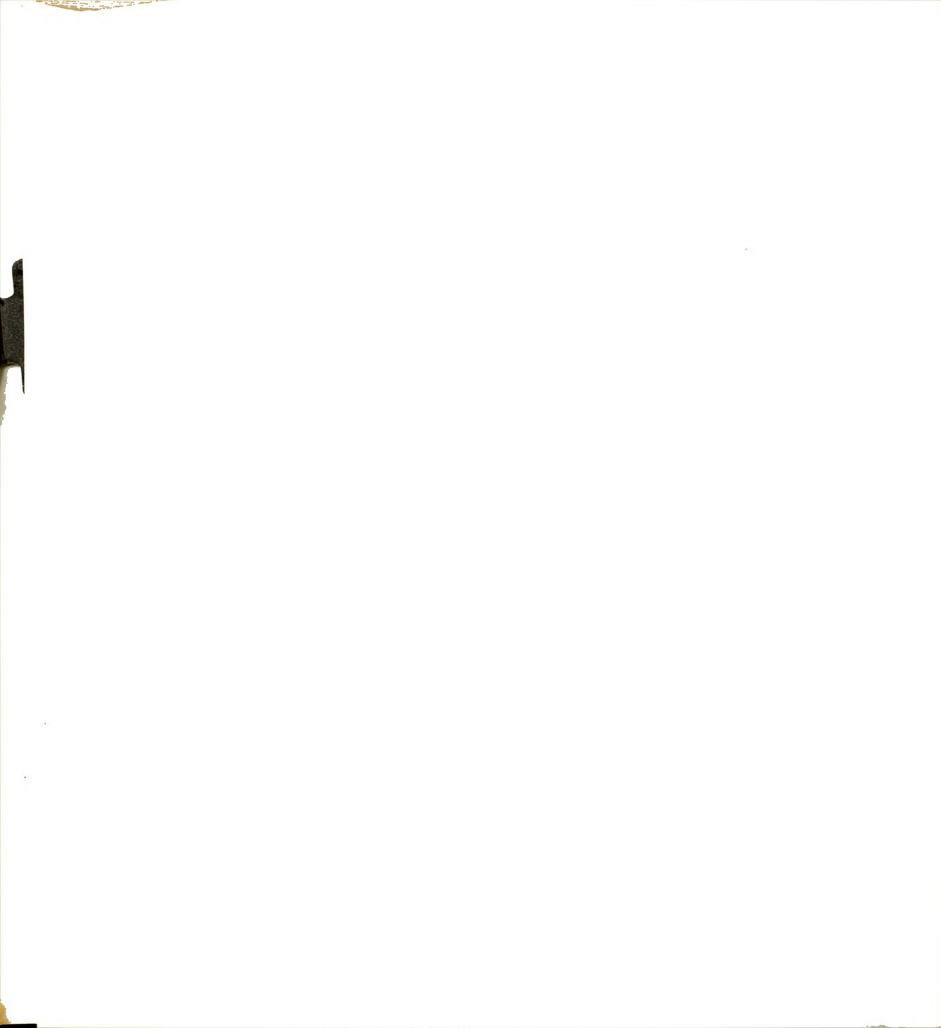
Well, gemmen ob de jury, dis head case is understood.
 I doesn't know de hog wuz stole, but Peter's word
 is good.
 He up an' sesso manfully, dout makin' any bones;
 An darfore, sahs, ef I wuz you, I t'ink I'd
 'cide for Jones.

One can scarcely miss the comic irony of the conclusion. He has said nothing even remotely conducive to an understanding of the case; but, in his ignorance, he is not cognizant of the fact. In short, he is a fool. The conclusion is also reminiscent of another famous account of irrelevant testimony: that in Gulliver's Travels (Book IV, Ch. 5). In Gulliver's the lawyers "never desire to know what claim or title my adversary hath to my cow"; Russell has gone one step beyond Swift: his witness doesn't even know if a crime has been committed.

One final note must be added. Despite the absurdity of the testimony Russell has insisted on its authenticity. In a letter dated December 3, 1876 (Letter No. 30), he wrote:

The "Mississippi Witness" is by no means exaggerated. The fact is you can't caricature negroes--their real absurdities cannot even be done justice to on paper. The idea of "turning States evidence" by a crank at the Deestric' Turner's office, is no invention of mine, but is given almost verbatim as an old darkey promulgated it in sober earnest.

Russell evidently remained steadfast to the satirical tradition,



maintaining that he was simply portraying reality.

This same self-assured ignorance became the dominant trait of Uncle Nick in "Uncle Nick on Fishing." In this poem, however, Russell also used his Negro narrator to satirize the whites; for Uncle Nick's naive observations result in the ironic unmasking of the late-rising "gen'men" who come a-fishin' from de town!" The irony of Uncle Nick's comments appears in:

Now, Jarsey kyarts is springy--so, to hab a studdy
seat,
De gemmen's 'bliged to ballus her wid suffin good
to eat;
An' Jarsey kyarts runs better--so de gemmen seems
to think--
By totin' 'long a demijohn of suffin good to
drink.

He continues in this vein for the next two verses, noting their apparent lack of interest in fishing, for "dey hunts a shady place, an' settles on de grass/An' pruzently you heahs 'em: 'Dat a spade? I has to pass!'"

In view of Russell's already established estrangement from society and his natural bent for satire, his mocking of the white burghers could be expected. But Negro ignorance was once again his object. Uncle Nick exceeds even the Mississippi witness in self-esteem. For he excels even Saint Peter:

St. Petah wuz a fisherman, an' understood his
trade;
He staid an' watched his cork, instid ob laz'in in
de shade.
De gemmen is copyin' arter him--dey better be!
Or--It's a science fisherman--'t'u'd do to copy me.

Ironically, however, Uncle Nick's "science" consists of donning his "ol'est clo'es," being "berry 'tic'lar 'bout de season ob de moon,"



spitting on 'de bait," not allowing anyone to step 'acrost yo' pole. . .
 Widout dey steps it back ag'in, afore a word is spoke," and other
 "vari's lettles sarcumstances." Few of these could justify the title
 "science fisherman."

A penchant for stealing was another characteristic commonly attributed to the Negro,⁴¹ and Russell did not neglect this trait. In one poem, "Wherefore He Prays," he not only portrayed a thieving Negro, he depicted his thief so as to emphasize the naturalness of this quality of a Negro. For his thief has no sense of property or morals, and the entire poem revolves around the irony of a thief's complaint at being caught. The thief, by his incongruous complaint, is made to exemplify the southern conception of the Negro as unable to refrain from petty larceny, a quality Russell frequently remarked (See, for example, Letter No. 40).

The poem begins with the narrator complaining to the "jestis ob de peace" about "de way dat Mahsr Henry went an' done me." The Negro then related the sequence of events which culminated in his appearance:

Las' spring I foun' a little chicken runnin' in de
 road;
 I tuk it to de quarters, an' kep' it till it
 grewed.
 I nebber stole it; kase de law sez ebrythin' you
 fin'
 Belongs to you; an' so, ob co'se, dat chicken, he
 wuz mine.

The Negro's naive application of the childish "losers weepers; finders keepers" seems innocuous enough; however, subsequent events suggest the chicken was not as unattached as it appeared to be. For when he

⁴¹ Logan, p. 242.

decided to eat the chicken, he needed wood for the fire:

Sez I, "You kill de chicken. Does you think I's
 los' my sense?"
 And I went to Mahsr's wood-pile, in de corner ob
 de fence.
 I looked an' didn't see nobody, heard nobody
 speak,
 An' so I toted off enough to do me fur a week.

The extravagance of the theft contributes to one of the primary motifs of the poem: the supposed Negro tendency toward extremes.

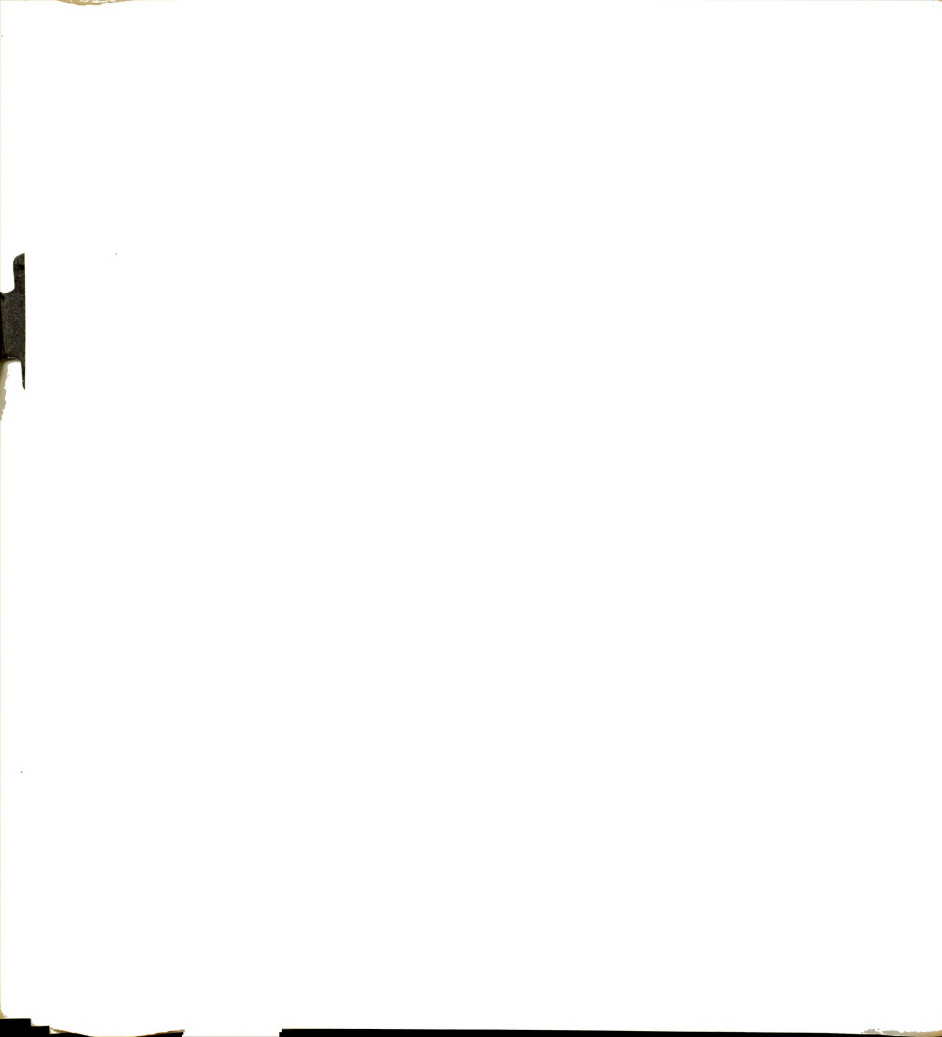
The following verse indicates a key point associated with this motif:

I nebber thought ob stealin' when I tuk dat wood
 away,
 For ebry stick I 'spected to return some oder day;
 An' ef a man cain't borry wood what's layin' out
 ob nights,
 I'd like fur you to tell me what's the good ob
swivel rights?

Significantly, Russell has used italics to emphasize swivel rights.

The Negro, suggested Russell, lacked any moral sense and, consequently, interpreted civil rights as a license to steal with impunity. One suspects that Russell deliberately used the expression in the true sense of swivel, hinting that the extension of civil rights to the Negro may well rebound on its Northern proponents. Surely the property conscious North would have taken a dim view of this Negro's concept of civil rights.

Russell also implied that the Southerners, who knew the Negro best, were able to cope with him. The boiling of the chicken was impeded when "somefin went boo-room! boo-room! right in de chimney-place,/An' all de fire an' ashes come a-scootin' in my face." Russell then used understatement to describe the aftermath:



De wood, de pot, de chicken, dey went flyin' crost
 de floah,
 An' me an' Phyllis had important bizness at de
 doah.

The denouement reveals the basis for the Negro's complaint. For the Southern white prevailed in this dramatization of the "Nigger in the wood-pile" cliché. "Mahsr Henry," aware of the theft, had "put a poun' o' powder in a holler stick. . . ." As a consequence the aggrieved narrator demanded:

I scorns to be imposed on; an' I 'peals unto de law
 To go fur Mahsr Henry, sah, an' bring him up to taw.

The incongruous irony of the Negro's indignation would strike any audience as absurd.

Russell extended his theme of Southern white superiority in another poem entitled "Business in Mississippi." Herein a lying, wheedling, deceitful freedman failed in an attempt to defraud a white merchant. Throughout the poem the Negro is represented as an irresponsible, child-like figure who resorts to the most overt prevarications when foiled. Again the emphasis is on the naturalness of these character traits in the Negro and on the idea that the white Southerners could manage him.

After an attempt to ingratiate himself with the merchant through flattery, the Negro offered a bale of cotton for sale. The merchant, wise in the ways of the Negro, declined a proffered sample, and set out to examine the bale. The Negro's protestations are marked by a hyperbolic piling up of negatives and by irony:

Dere di dn't nebber nobody lose nuffin off ob me.
 Now, what's de use ob gwine dere an' a-zaminin'
 ob de bale?
 When people trades wid me dey alluz gets an
 hones sale;

I ain't no han' fur cheatin'; I beliebes in actin'
 fa'r,
 An' ebry-body'll tell you dey alluz foun' me
 squar'.

The suspected irony of "I beliebes in actin' fa'r" is confirmed in the following verse. Moreover, the Negro, his fraudulent effort uncovered, becomes an emblem of hypocrisy as he declares his innocence:

. . .What! de cotton ain't de same
 As dat's in de sample! Well, I'm blest, sah, ef it is!
 Dis heah must be my brudder's sample--Yes, sah, dis is his.

Unabashed at having his subterfuge discovered, the Negro tries again. And again he is thwarted as the merchant discovers rocks in the bale. The unrepentent Negro remains unruffled at the discovery:

My stars! I mus' be crazy! Mahsr Johnny, dis is fine!
 I's gone an' hauled my brudder's cotton in, instead
 ob mine!

This picture may be "strikingly characteristic and true to life,"⁴³ if one accepts prevarication, fraud, and hypocrisy as naturally endowed traits peculiar to the Negro. But the portrait is essentially a comic one which evokes laughter at the baffled freedman while fostering the sense of white superiority.

But on at least one occasion, in "Selling a Dog," the Negro succeeded in deceiving the white. But the success hardly redounds to the glory of the black race as the white victim, "Marster Will," was obviously a youth. For the Negro narrator addressed his client as "little genmen" or "young marster." The Negro, who experienced no twinge of conscience, is hardly an appealing figure; actually, he is one of the least attractive of Russell's characters. After using

⁴³ William Malone Baskervill, Southern Writers: Biographical and Critical Studies (Nashville, 1902), I, 27.

lies and subtle flattery to conclude the sale, the Negro exults:

Dar! I's done got rid of dat ar wretched dog
 at las'!
 Drownin' time wuz comin' fur him mighty precious
 fas'!
 Sol' him fur a dollar--well! An' goodness knows
 de pup
 Isn't wuf de powder it'd take to blow him up!

The hypocrisy and complete lack of moral sense that enabled him to defraud the young white would scarcely endear "Uncle Pete" to a white audience. But the refrain which recurs in Russell's works is conspicuously present: Never trust a Negro.

IV

The Negro was not always the instigator of fraud; in "The Walking Match"⁴⁴ he was the victim. Significantly, however, the white man who perpetrated the hoax was a Northerner. The satire is dual-edged: Negro gullibility stemming from greed and ignorance, and Yankee perfidy.

Briefly, the poem centers on a white man's gulling of two Negroes by piquing their curiosity about competitive walking. He then proposed a contest between the two Negroes with each to contribute five dollars as his share of the prize; the winner to receive both bills. The white man was to hold the money and judge the contest. The reader may readily anticipate the outcome.

The Negro spokesman immediately implies his own ignorance:

Dis story's got a moril, an' it ain't de berry wust;
 An' for fear I might forgit it, I puts de moril fust;
 De guidin' princerpull ob life, my 'sperunce shows is true,
 Is not "Don't jedge ob oders", but--Don't let dem jedge ob you.

⁴⁴ The unpublished poem is taken from Katherine Taylor Baskerville, "Life and Writings of Irwin Russell," unpubl. thesis (Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, 1929).

But the twisted cliché is an appropriate moral. For the subsequent events bear testimony to the justice of its admonition. And the poem's conclusion will force the reader to re-examine the moral with an added insight on "judge."

After punning with judge, Russell continued in the same quibbling vein by insinuating that the other Negro also possessed a rather limited intellectual capacity: "Joe Post an' me was settin' on de fence. . . ." The transposition of values suggested by "Post" and "fence" in the same line can scarcely be unintentional.

Irony of understatement appears in the third verse. Commenting on the white man's appearance, the narrator observed:

De gretes' men is of'en berry kurless how dey goes--
Why, I, myself, ain't extry, when you comes to spek ob clo'es.

This implied comparison of an itinerant Southern Negro with "de gretes' men" seems incongruous; and one suspects the narrator of litotes. This same verbal irony recurs later as the Northerner feigns surprise at "Dis ignorance. . . in sech lookin' men as you."

After appealing to the Negroes' greed, the Northerner "cut a mighty switch f'm out de hedge"; the stick was to serve as a starting device. Here Russell employed sheer slapstick:

"Now, ready, boys! Don't rush de start, but comin'
back be quick!";
An' den he whirled de switch, an' handed me an' Joe a
lick--
An' sech a lick! I tell you 'twas enough to make us go--

As one could anticipate, the Negroes, on completing the race, discovered "when we got up to de scratch, / De judge had got plum out o' sight, an' won de walkin'-match!" Ironically the non-participant was the only winner; and the anti-climactic ending emphasized the pertinence of the

opening moral. The theme is only slightly altered from the familiar one: instead of "Never trust a Negro," one has "Never trust a Yankee," only a small distinction.

The two-pronged satire also becomes evident. Russell ridiculed the mental dullness and cupidity of the Negroes but he also mocked the Northern reader, implying that the North exploited the Negro. In essence, part of the irony stems from the Northern reader unknowingly laughing at a representation of his own hypocrisy: Russell's poem "rubs the reader's nose in the dirt of which it is trying to make him aware."⁴⁵

The North's relationship with the Negro also provided the subject matter for "Norvern People." Utilizing his customary dramatic monologue, Russell satirized Northern intentions by having his narrator reveal the Negro's conception of the North. As could be expected, the view is probably more compatible with that of the Southern white; for underlying the narrator's ludicrous pronouncements, there is a persistent warning to the North: the Negro is motivated only by self-interest; the only leveling which will occur will be the regression of white civilization to his level.

And the intellectual level of the freedman is quickly established. He assumes that all Northerners "dresses in blue" and also possesses a distorted sense of geography:

Dey libs up de country, whar ellyphunts grows,
Somewhar 'bout de head ob de ribber, I s'pose;
Whar snow keeps a-drappin', spring, winter, an'
fall,
An' summer-time don't nebber get dar at all.

⁴⁵ Ronald Paulson, The Fictions of Satire (Baltimore, 1967), p. 15.

One suspects that an educated Northern reader would be amused rather than impressed by this display of learning which features an incongruous association of tropical animals and an arctic climate. This disparity between reader and narrator provides technical emphasis to Russell's latent warning. It graphically illustrates the margin which the whites must close.

The following verse illustrates the Negro's self-centered interest in the North. He regards the North as a cornucopia which inexplicably became exhausted:

Up dar in dey town dar's a mighty great hole
 Dey dug fur to git at de silber and gol'
 I reckon hear lately it mus' ha' cabin in--
 I wish I c'u'd see a good two-bits ag'in!

This motif recurs in the next verse accompanied by sarcastic irony:

Dey puts up supplies for us Christuns to eat,--
 De whiskey, de flouah, de meal, an' de meat;
 Dey's drefle big-feelin', an' makes a great fuss,
 But dey can't git along widout wukin' for us.

The Negro's exaggerated sense of self-importance renders ridiculous the 'drefle big-feelin'' and 'great fuss.' The Negro, suggested Russell, was totally unappreciative of Northern efforts on his behalf.

Irony pervades the subsequent verses. The ignorant Negro narrator berates the Northerners: 'But lawsy! dey's ign'ant as ign'ant kin be.' After accepting the Northerners' material gifts while deriding their motivations, the Negro now disparages the Northerners' intellectual capability. It would seem that, at this point, few Northerners would be disposed to regard the Negro with sympathy.

Nor would the Northerners look favorably on the Negro's offer:



So sometime in chu'ch I's a-gwine to serjes
 Dat some-un be sent what kin talk to 'em bes'--
 (An' mebbe dat's me) fur to open deir eyes,
 Recomstruc de pore critters, an' help 'em to rise.

The ironic reversal in the offer to "recomstruc" would scarcely appeal to a Northern audience already tired of the Negro problem. And the innuendo of "hep 'em to rise" would hold even less attraction.

Russell concluded in the same vein:

We'll fotch 'em down heah, de las' one ob de batch,
 An' treat 'em like gemmen, an' rent 'em a patch--
 Why, dat's de Merlinnium! Dat's what it am;
 An' us is de lion, an' dey is de lamb!

The theme is overt. If the Northerner desires social equality with the Negro, he must regress to the level of the freedman; for the Negro will not rise. The idea is reinforced by the Negro conception of himself as the carnivorous lion and the North as the lamb: an image which aptly concludes a poem wherein the Negro has viewed the North only as a means of sustenance. Russell may also have been suggesting that equality would come only with the Millennium, a distant prospect to him.

A veiled warning to the North also appears in "Nebuchadnezzar," Russell's favorite poem⁴⁶ and perhaps his most damning caricature of the Negro. The poem is balanced on a disparaging comparison which implies the Negro was in essence lower than a mule. For Russell did not compare the Negro to the mule; he compared the mule to the Negro with the consequent implication of the Negro's inferiority.

This comparison occurs near the middle of the poem which depicts a Negro's altercation with his refractory mule. After considerable difficulty with the animal, the Negro exclaims: "He minds me like a

⁴⁶ Maurice Garland Fulton, ed. Christmas Night in the Quarters and Other Poems by Irwin Russell (New York, 1917), p. xxvi.



nigger." Significantly, a Negro is not as stubborn as a mule; the mule is as stubborn as a Negro. The reader, alerted by the simile, can now draw other parallels between Negroes and mules, and association which endured in the Southern mind. Half a century after Russell, an eminent Southern historian was to write: "Those Negroes on the coast and rivers were little above the intellectual level of the mules they drove."⁴⁷ Other parallels may be perceived in the poem. The Negro, for example, like this mule, was frequently characterized as "pow'ful fond of dancin'" and "prancin',"⁴⁸ stereotypes exploited by Russell himself in "Christmas Night in the Quarters."

The analogy also permitted Russell to convey another Southern axiom: the Negro would not work unless forced.⁴⁹ Russell made this point ironically. In the first part of the poem, the Negro muleteer, apparently successful in his efforts to elicit labor from the mule, gloated:

Dis nigger ain't no fool.
Some folks dey would 'a' beat him;
Now, dat would only heat him--
I know jes how to treat him:
You mus' reason wid a mule.

However, at a particularly propitious moment, the irony becomes apparent:

⁴⁷ Claude G. Bowers, The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln (Cambridge, Mass., 1929), p. 358.

⁴⁸ Francis Pendleton Gaines, The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and the Accuracy of a Tradition (Gloucester, Mass., 1962), p. 7.

⁴⁹ James Wilford Garner, Reconstruction in Mississippi (New York, 1901), p. 133.



He's as gentle as a chicken,
 An' nebber thinks o' kickin'--
Whoa dar! Nebuchadnezzah!
 Is dis heah me, or not me?
 Or is de debbil got me?
 Wuz dat a cannot shot me?

The abrupt comic contrast emphasized Russell's theme: the Negro is an absurd buffoon; but anyone believing he can be reasoned with is even more absurd. Again Russell echoes the same old line: in Southern terms, "Never turn your back on a nigger."

As the poem is partially sheer slapstick, not surprisingly much of the humor stems from the mishap occurring to someone supposedly impervious to injury, a favorite device of modern cartoonists.⁵⁰ A mule's kicking a white man may be the subject for tragedy; but his kicking a Negro is comedy as may be readily ascertained from the hilarious illustration of this poem in Scribner's (Vol. XII; May-October, 1876). Sterling Brown has remarked this characteristic depiction of the Negro: "the scantlings used by white masters on their menials never hurt, since they struck the head. . . ."⁵¹ And evidently Russell subscribed to this thesis. For in a letter dated December 28, 1877 (Letter No. 49), he wrote:

I was sufficiently wide awake, however, to enjoy the fun that for about a quarter of an hour, was made on Main Street by a negro and a mule. The negro was "funny drunk", and the mule characteristically stubborn. On the mule's back there was a piece of bed-quilt, over that a ragged bit of carpet, and on that an old saddle without any girth or surcingle. The nigger, finishing his "cutting-up" about the street, prepared to go home. He turned his hat inside out, and stuck the brim up "steamboat fashion", and got on his mule. He allowed the bridle to rest on the

⁵⁰ Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa, 1967), p. 210.

⁵¹ The Negro in American Fiction and Negro Poetry and Drama (New York, 1969), p. 92.



mule's neck, while he sat back as far aft as possible, rested his hands on his knees, got a good hold with his heels and shouted: "Kmup yuh! ol' step-an-fetch-it! The mule started off dashingly, went just about six feet, and then stopped as energetically as if he intended to stay there a week. Up and over went the darkey, "landing" perpendicularly on his head in the mud. Of course it didn't hurt him, and it really was a very amusing scene.

These final words mark Russell's oft-expressed conception of the Negro as a ludicrous being, impossible to caricature. Consequently, given his natural inclination for satire, it is not surprising that he victimized the Negro. His poems covered a wide range of Negro foibles: affectation, hypocrisy, greed, ignorance, deceit, prevarication, and others. And he used a wide range of technical devices: exaggeration, incongruity, understatement, punning, disparaging symbol and comparison, slapstick, cliché-twisting, anti-climax, hoax, and, above all, irony. All tend to confirm the judgment of Maurice Garland Fulton who, in his unpublished biography of Russell, asserted: "the field of social satire. . . was after all, the bent of his temperament."⁵²

⁵² Fulton Collection, Box 7, Folder 6.



CHAPTER VI
NEGRO STEREOTYPES

It is the common wonder of all men, how among so many
millions of faces, there should be none alike.

Sir Thomas Browne

I

The persistence of the white writers in stereotyping Negroes and then insisting on the realism of the portrayals caused Ralph Ellison to object: "Perhaps, but you've left out this, and this, and this. And most of all, what you'd have the world accept as me isn't even human."¹ Russell, as a pioneer in the use of the Negro dialect, helped to establish some of the stereotypes rejected by Ellison. For Russell contributed to the characterization of the comic Negro through his satirical portraits. And in other vignettes, he depicted the happy-go-lucky, irresponsible Negro and the faithful retainer.

As Russell's primary inclination was to satire, one would anticipate his greatest impact to be on the portrayal of the comic Negro. And it is. The same ludicrous traits which dominate Russell's picture of the Reconstruction Era freedman recur in the twentieth century. The more recent Negroes have also been depicted as absurd, affected, and incongruous. They, too, appear to have existed solely for the amusement of the white reading populace, and, with the higher incidence of literacy among the later Negroes, to show "Negroes what

¹ "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," Images of the Negro in American Literature, eds. Gross and Hardy (Chicago, 1966), p. 116.

whites wanted them to resemble."²

Several white authors have exploited this vein. Among them are E. K. Means, Irwin Cobb, Hugh Wiley, and Octavus Roy Cohen.³ Cohen's Negroes, for example, displayed a predilection for malapropisms, an affectation in their mimicking the whites, and a seeming imperviousness to injury highly reminiscent of Russell's caricatures. As many of Cohen's productions appeared in the influential and popular Saturday Evening Post,⁴ perhaps a brief comparison of some of his work with Russell's will best indicate the trend of American thought regarding the Negro.

Malapropisms proliferate in his stories. In Bigger and Blacker, for instance, one finds hexagon for lexicon, aversions for aspersions, and aroma for arena.⁵ In the same work Cohen utilized dialect for much the same effect sought by Russell. However, whereas Russell had exercised some care for accuracy, Cohen did not. Sterling Brown has justly condemned Cohen's attempts as "a Negro dialect never heard on land or sea. . . ."⁶ Examples of his monstrous constructions are "Actin' is the fondest thing I is of" and "as though fightin' lions was the fondest things you was of."⁷ One suspects that Russell would

² Sterling A. Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," Journal of Negro Education, 11 (January, 1933), 190.

³ John Herbert Nelson, The Negro Character in American Literature (College Park, Maryland, 1968), p. 123.

⁴ Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," 189.

⁵ Octavus Roy Cohen, Bigger and Blacker, (Boston, 1925), pp. 7, 13, 227.

⁶ "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," 189.

⁷ Bigger and Blacker, pp. 186, 234.

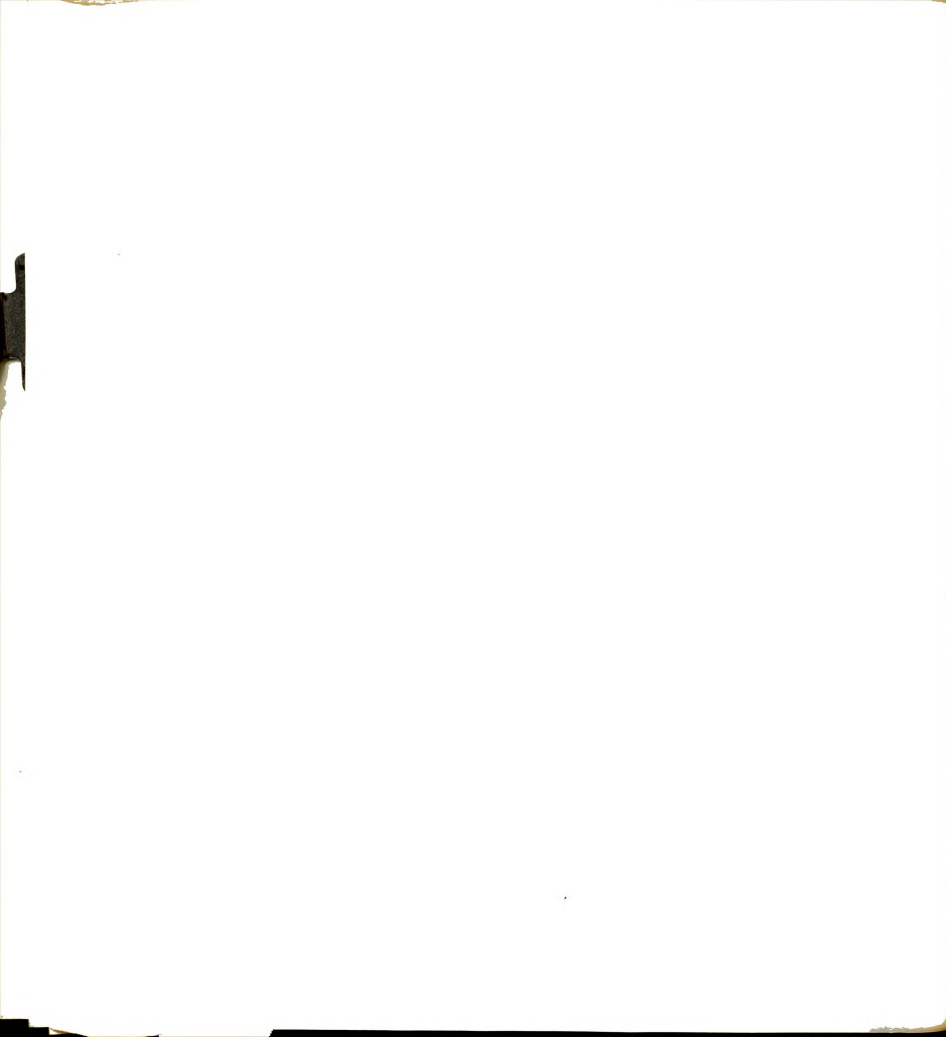


have cringed at such overt barbarisms; nevertheless, the objective was the same: to stress the Negro's difference from the Anglo-Saxon norm.

Many of the malapropisms and grammatical perversions in both Russell and Cohen stemmed from the affectation of their characters, the exaggerated effort on the part of the Negro to imitate white speech patterns. Additionally both writers ridiculed other marks of affectation in the Negro. Russell, in "Dat Peter," mocked the younger Negro with his "store-clo'es," oiled hair, and "fine fibe dollar hat" which caused the old narrator to exclaim: "I guess he thinks he's white." And fancy raiment drew the wrath of the minister in "A Sermon for the Sisters." Cohen's Negroes displayed the same penchant for extravagant dress or for imitating the white. An example is J. Caesar Clump, motion picture director for the Midnight Pictures Corporation, Inc. Clump provided Birmingham with a black counterpart to the popular image of the white Hollywood director, complete with riding breeches and shiny puttees.⁸ And many of Cohen's other black creations possessed the same predilection for eye-catching attire.

Nor was the affectation limited to language and dress. In "Dat Peter" Russell ironically belittled Peter's educational attainment through innuendo: attendance at Alcorn during the Reconstruction rarely resulted in an exemplary education. Peter may act like a white, but Russell made it clear that he was not. Cohen's Negroes were often equally incongruous. Lawyer Chew, a ubiquitous figure throughout Bigger and Blacker, serves as an example. The disparity between his mannerisms and language, and his professional stature as

⁸ Bigger and Blacker, p. 39.



black Birmingham's leading attorney, emphasized the difference between white and black lawyers. For Lawyer Chew was not exempt from farcical situations hardly becoming such a prominent personage. Lawyer Chew's encounter with a horse-trough and the resultant scorching of his only available trousers, for example, provided the nucleus for an entire episode (pp. 257 ff). The message is still the same: Negroes are funny, especially when they ape the whites.

Inherent in this depiction lies another idea held in common by these two authors: the Negro's natural absurdity. No matter what he does, the Negro is comical. Russell's adherence to this notion has already been documented; Cohen's requires little verification. Often the natural antics of the Negroes in the Midnight Pictures' productions exceeded the planned script in hilarity. The Enoch Tapp episode in Bigger and Blacker serves as an example. Enoch, unhappy at his wife's appearance as a bathing beauty in a movie, attended a filming session wherein his wife was photographed while attached to a turning mill-wheel, an "agonizingly funny scene." Not knowing that the wheel was devised so that Mrs. Tapp could be removed before going under the water, Enoch rushed to her rescue. To the great amusement of the onlookers, his consequent entrapment inside the turning wheel necessitated a continual running in place on a virtual treadmill to avoid drowning. The alert director, Clump, captured it all on film, including Enoch's final dive into a shallow pond. The result was Enoch's emergence as a star (pp. 81-88). Cohen's point is clear: Clump could disregard the script with impunity, for Negroes were just naturally funny and absurd.

The Tapp episode in Bigger and Blacker implies still another link with Russell's characterizations. Russell, in "Wherefore He Prays"



and "Nebuchadnezzar" portrayed Negroes in potentially hazardous situations without arousing any sympathy for them. An exploding log and a kicking mule are infinitely more hilarious when the victims are outsiders; for as Henri Bergson has noted: "laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry. . . ."⁹ And, at least partially, the reader's amusement must be derived from his conviction of the Negro's being impervious to injury: a notion to which Russell agreed in Letter No. 49.

Cohen evidently shared this belief with Russell, for he depicted several incidents in Bigger and Blacker where great hilarity prevailed when characters were placed in potentially dangerous situations. In one instance, "the spectators shrieked with laughter" at the sight of a diminutive Negro actor, Potts, being lifted bodily and hurled back into a burning shack by a stream of water from a fire hose. (p. 69). In another, mustard oil was rubbed into Potts' costume to force him into pummeling another actor in a fight scene in order to extricate himself and seek relief (pp. 176-7). Underlying the humor in each case is the same notion: one cannot hurt a Negro.

Each of these incidents was also characterized by another trait often exhibited by Russell's Negroes: a natural disposition for deceit and subterfuge. In many respects Cohen exceeded Russell's portrayal in such poems as "Selling a Dog" and "Business in Mississippi." And his Negroes were as ready to capitalize on fortuitous circumstances as were Russell's preachers to adapt an opportune text. Two brief

⁹ Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York, 1914), p. 6.



examples will suffice to show these parallels. In the incident involving Potts and the firehose, for example, Florian Slappey was the intended victim. Slappey owed a gambling debt to his arch-enemy Potts. Orifice Lattimer, *Midnight's* president, offered Slappey enough money to pay the debt if Slappey would agree to perform certain unspecified services. These services, as Slappey discovered after accepting the offer, included being Potts' double in the previously described scene, an ignominious fate for poor Slappey, who managed, however, to emerge unscathed.

In another episode, Slappey, acting as a friend, used the story of Androcles and the Lion to trick an understandably reluctant actor into the arena with a lion. The actor discovered too late that Slappey was really in league with *Midnight's* directors (pp. 227 ff.). Nearly every episode in the book contains equally devious behavior by the Negroes. Apparently deceit is such an intrinsic part of Negro character that even it can be used for comic purposes.

If Sterling Brown has surmised correctly that Reconstruction literature developed the stereotype of the comic Negro who "came into his own in the present century,"¹⁰ Russell's importance seems manifest. His Negroes possessed the absurdities that dominated Reconstruction writing. And these absurdities persisted in the works of Cohen and others who portrayed the comic Negro in the early twentieth century.

¹⁰ "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," 189.



Often their works bear as specific a resemblance to Russell's as did Cohen's. Sterling Brown has noted, for instance, that a distinctive trade-mark of E. K. Means' stories is "panic-stricken Negroes 'skedaddling,' their 'ponderous feet beating a wild tattoo of panicky retreat upon the sodden turf.'" ¹¹ The account is reminiscent of Russell's "An' me an' Phyliss had important bizness at de doah" in "Wherefore He Prays." The difference is only in technique: Means used hyperbole; Russell, understatement. But the effect is the same.

Nor is this an isolated example. Hugh Wiley's novels are also marked by the same wild flight on the part of the Negroes. In one instance, the flight evolved from precisely the same initial larceny--chicken-theft--which led to the precipitate withdrawal in "Wherefore He Prays." ¹² Wiley also clearly shared with Russell and Cohen the concept of the Negro's natural absurdity. He even used a situation identical to one employed by Cohen in Bigger and Blacker: a departure from a movie script to capitalize on the Negro's innate comical traits. In this incident Wildcat, Wiley's itinerant hero, and cohort, Demmy, are employed as extra "Arab horsemen." The director immediately recognized the possibilities inherent in their wild antics. Wiley recorded: "In spite of their make up and their guns and the long flowing robes, the Arab effect was lost in the sea of normal characteristics displayed by the pair and it was here that the director being mentally ambidextrous, sensed the ludicrous

¹¹ The Negro in American Fiction and Negro Poetry and Drama (New York, 1969), pp. 87-92.

¹² Lily (New York, 1922), pp. 157-159.

element in the film and switched it to a comedy feature.¹³

Moreover, examples of Negro deceit abound in Wiley's work,¹⁴ and a recurring comic device is the depiction of some unsuspecting black being butted by Wildcat's mascot goat, Lily, traveling at "something less than the velocity of an overdue cannon ball." As in Russell, however, no harm was done for "the crash of the impact was drowned in a gale of laughter and a chorus of encouraging yells."¹⁵ Clearly the comic Negro had changed little in half of a century: he was still an absurd figure, given to subterfuge, and utterly impervious to serious injury.

II

An apparent desire to perpetuate the myth of a benevolent slavery led many Southern writers to draw a stereotype nearly indistinguishable from the "comic Negro." This is the portrait of a carefree fun-loving, irresponsible coon-hunter who was rarely concerned with anything beyond the present moment and usually enjoyed himself immensely. It is essentially the "contented slave" image reborn in the post-bellum South. Inherent within this picture lies the implication of the Negro's natural simplicity which makes him happier under a paternalistic white domination.

One method of emphasizing this image in literature was to have an old-fashioned Negro spokesman expound the Southern doctrine and condemn the unhealthy aspirations of the new generation black.¹⁶

¹³ The Prowler (New York, 1924), p. 163.

¹⁴ See, for example, The Prowler, pp. 21 ff.

¹⁵ Lily, p. 242.

¹⁶ Francis Pendleton Gaines, The Southern Plantation - A Study in the development and the Accuracy of a Tradition (Gloucester, Mass., 1962), p. 63.



With this clearly implied preference for the old ways, each spokesman became an extension of the "contented slave" stereotype. In addition to this self-characterization a more striking impression would result from an espousal of Negro subservience made by a Negro--albeit a fictitious creation--rather than by a white Southerner. As Russell's favorite genre, the dramatic monologue, was particularly suited for this purpose, one would logically expect him to exploit this vein. And he does.

The motif recurs in several poems. In "Halfway Doin's"¹⁷

Russell's Negro minister admonished his congregation:

Dis worl' dat we's a-libbin' in is like a cotton-row,
Whar ebery cullud gentleman has got his line to hoe;
An' ebery time a lazy nigger stops to take a nap,
De grass keeps on a-growin' fur to smudder up his crap.

It is more than a homely analogy. A major complaint advanced by white Southerners after the Civil War accused the freedman of a lack of industry; and, in the South, a Negro's primary function was to provide manual labor.¹⁸ And the minister belabored the issue:

Fur when you sees a nigger foolin', den, as shore's
you're born,
You's gwine to see him comin' out de small eend
ob de horn.

In "Precepts at Parting"¹⁹ Russell stripped away any possible ambiguity and made his point overtly. The elderly Negro narrator

¹⁷ Christmas Night in the Quarters and Other Poems, ed. Maurice Garland Fulton (New York, 1917), p. 74. All references to Russell's works are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

¹⁸ See, for example, James Wilford Garner, Reconstruction in Mississippi (New York, 1901), pp. 133-138.

¹⁹ Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. 69.

excoriated "dem fancy young niggers, what's 'shamed fur to look at a hoe,/An acts like a passel ob rich folks when dey isn't got nuffin to show." The narrator followed this scornful condemnation of the younger set with a concise statement of Southern propaganda:

You'll easy git 'long wid de white folks,--de Cappen
an' steward an' clerks,--
Dey won't say a word to a nigger, as long as dey notice
he works;
An' work is de onlies' ingine we's any 'casion to
tote,
To keep us gwine on troo de currents dat pesters de
spirichul boat.

The impact is scarcely subtle: the Negro's role is to labor; as long as he does so, he need not fear.

Russell was just as direct in "Uncle Cap Interviewed,"²⁰ Uncle Cap, who is 'mighty ol'!/A hundred an' eleben years dis comin' Christmas-day," bridged several generations. But his view of the more recent ones was disparaging:

Dey ain't wuf shucks, dese young folks dat's
a-growin' up now'days;
I nebber seed no niggers yit dat had such triflin'
ways.
I b'lieve dis country's gwine to smash--I knows,
at any rate,
Dat t'ings ain't like dey used to wuz in ole
Virginny State.

In "Dat Peter"²¹ Russell's spokesman summarized what was essentially Russell's stance. The old Negro observed:

I really think ef Peter would rent a leetle patch
ob land,
An'settle down to crappin', dat he'd hold a better
hand;
De debbil's gwine to set him back afore his game
is done:

²⁰ Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. 84.

²¹ Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. 155.

The spokesman here, as in the other poems noted, is an advocate of Negro inferiority. His commentary is a tacit admission of white dominance as the natural state of affairs. Negroes, urged Russell's spokesmen, would be well-advised to adhere to their time-honored labors and disregard any ambitions to emulate the whites.

This Southern attitude changed little in over half a century, persisting well into the twentieth century. Striking parallels, for instance, exist between "Dat Peter" and passages in John B. Sale's The Tree Named John. Russell and Sale each used an old-fashioned Negro to voice his views of the more recent Blacks. Both of their Negro spokesmen castigated the modern, educated Negro. Both of their spokesmen argued that the Negro would be better off following the old ways. Both of their spokesmen suggest a religious bent which colors their opinions of the new Negro. And, rather curiously, both denunciations stemmed from precisely the same source: a modern Negro's contention that the world was round.

In "Dat Peter" the old narrator's ire was aroused by Peter's "say" in yes'day dat de yearth kep' turnin' round! Dat 'pears to me ridiculous. . . ." In The Tree Named John the tirade was inspired by young John's questioning Aunt Betsy on the veracity of Bird's statement that the earth was round and revolved about the sun. Aunt Betsy's rejoinder required two pages. Here are the highlights in abbreviated form:

"Sis Nervy, Ah wuz jes tellin' Sis Em'ly no longer ago n' yestiddy dat a heap a dese hyere sinful young niggers had a heap mo' better be prayin' den runnin' roun' playin' ball. . . . dese no 'count, half'growed, eddycated, ball-playin', sinful young niggers what 'ud be a heap better off ef dey wuz out in de fiel' wuckin' f'un sunrise to sunset 'nsted uv gwine roun' talkin' sich foolishment ez

dat. . . . Eddycation is all right fer some folks, but den w'en hit comes to dese Bible 'sputin', smart young niggers, you kin gi' dem all de eddycation dey needs wid a plow-line. . . ."

Aunt Betsy's final comment serves a three-fold purpose: it illustrates the enduring quality of this stereotyped image of the subservient, contented Negro; it implies the unchanging Southern attitude; and it exemplifies the technique of using a Negro narrator to utter Southern propaganda contributing to the stereotype. For Aunt Betsy concluded: 'We'n you eddycate him you jes done made a no 'count, uppity, know-it-all out 'n 'im en sp'ilt a good fiel' han' t' boot.'²²

Despite his fondness for the dramatic monologue, Russell did employ more direct means to portray the simple, happy, irresponsible Negro, contented with his subservient status. "Christmas Night in the Quarters,"²³ his most noted work, best demonstrates this quality, for it is characterized by the Negro's sheer joy of living. The poem literally teems with words denoting or connoting gaiety, thus creating an almost irresistible impression that the Negro was really happier in this inferior role. Russell quickly depicted this quality:

At Uncle Johnny Booker's ball
The darkeys hold high carnival.
From all the countryside they throng,
With laughter, shouts and scraps of song--
Their whole deportment plainly showing
That to the frolic they are going.

The passage sets the tone of the poem. For throughout the remainder

²² John B. Sale, The Tree Named John (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1929), pp. 30-32.

²³ Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. 3.



levity reigns in the land of cotton. Except for the brief interludes containing old Jim's homey political philosophy and Brudder Brown's blessing, the poem becomes a long account of dancing, singing and story-telling, interrupted only by the supper that:

. . .The most inventive modern poet,
In fine new words whose hope and trust is,
Could form no phrase to do it justice!

But a necessary ingredient for this happiness was the Negro's implied simplicity. Indeed, Russell even argued explicitly that the joy was directly derived from this naturalness. For Russell depicted the Negroes as childlike people who were able to enjoy themselves so immensely primarily because of their childlike traits. He even emphasized the childishness by explicit contrast with the white race. In opposition to the whites who were bound "by pedants' rules," Russell described the Negroes:

Untrammelled thus, the simple race is,
That 'works the craps' on cotton-places!
Original in act and thought,
Because unlearned and untaught,
Observe them at their Christmas party:
How unrestrained their mirth--how hearty!
How many things they say and do,
That never would occur to you!

Beneath the Rousseauistic screen lies the bald message: to disturb the idyllic existence of such a people by the imposition of white civilization's strictures would be patently unkind.

Even the Negroes, suggested Russell, were well aware of the difference: because Brudder Brown's blessing not only reflected the Negro's naivete, it also acknowledged racial disparities. Brudder Brown pleaded:

But 'cordin' to de gif's we has, we'll do de bes'
 we knows
 An' folks don't 'spise de vil'let-flow'r, bekase it
 ain't de rose.

The analogy carries an implicit admission of inferiority.

Following Brudder Brown's prayer the Negroes returned to their enjoyment. The dancing, interrupted only by the supper which ended "not soon," was immediately resumed:

The fiddle strikes the same old tune;
 The dancsers pound the floor again,
 With all they have of might and main;

Nor are those too young or too old to participate in the dancing excluded from the frolic. For Aunt Cassy held forth in another area closely associated with the Negroes: superstition.²⁴ Russell painted the scene:

Old gossips, almost turning pale,
 Attend Aunt Cassy's gruesome tale
 Of conjurors, and ghosts, and devils,
 That in the smoke-house hold their revels;

Perhaps the simple nature of Russell's Negroes may be best discerned in the homely account telling why the "'possum's tail" is hairless. Uncle Booker, accompanying himself on the banjo, concluded the night-long festivities with a hilarious version of the Deluge and its consequent effect on the opossum. The narrative, couched in homely terms, deviates somewhat from Christian doctrine and reflects the Negro's tendency to interpret the Bible in terms of his everyday existence. To the Negroes' limited imagination Noah was able to predict the flood because "he tuk de Herald, an' he read de ribber column."

²⁴ See, for example, Julia Peterkin, Roll, Jordan, Roll (New York, 1933), pp. 148-158.

The flood was described in the same fashion:

Den sech anoder fall ob rain!--it come so awful hebbly,
De ribber riz immejitly, an' busted troo de lebbbee;

Moreover, unlike the Biblical Ark, this one held supernumeraries;
for the practical Negro, associating each incident with something
tangible in his own experience, recognized the necessity for a crew:

De people all wuz drowned out--'cep' Noah an'
de critters,
An' men he'd hired to work de boat' 'an' one to mix
de bitters.

In the account there is again a tacit acceptance of Negro
inferiority. The white interpretation of Ham's metamorphosis as
punishment for deriding his father was acknowledged; for, here,
Ham was already a Negro occupying an appropriately menial position:

Now Ham, de only nigger what wuz runnin' on de
packet,
Got lonesome in de barber-shop, an' c'u'dn't stan'
de racket;

But it was Ham who created the "fust banjo." In an effort to over-
come the loneliness, Ham "steamed some wood an' bent it/An' soon he
had a banjo made--de fust dat wuz invented." But he needed strings
and resorted to the following means to obtain them:

De 'possum has as fine a tail as dis dat I's a-singin';
De ha'rs so long, an' thick an' strong--des fit for
banjo-stringin'
Dat nigger shaved 'em off as short as wash-day
dinner-graces;
An' sorted ob 'em by de size, frum little E's to basses.

Booker concluded the banjo song on a happy note:

An' curi's, too--dat nigger's ways: his people nebber
los' 'em--
For whar you finds de nigger--dar's de banjo an' de
'possum!

His ending was appropriate. These two symbols eventually became

inseparable from the happy, carefree Negro stereotype in the plantation tradition.²⁵

Even Russell's choice of subject was fortuitous. For the holiday provided the opportune time to portray the Negro at play and consequently create an impression of endless joy, an impression which, perhaps, would be rather difficult to sustain in a cotton field. However, Christmas in the South was traditionally the event of the year, with the celebration lasting several days. Russell has recorded the Southern attitude:

Christmas is Christmas, in the Land of Cotton. We don't pay much attention to New Year's Day or Thanksgiving and none whatever to the Fourth of July--the latter day was never "celebrated" to any extent in this country, but I don't know why--and, as Christmas is the only holiday we observe it very minutely. In fact, we rather believe that Christmas belongs to us--that the Christmas of the "Norvern people" is nothing more than a poor imitation of the real "sho 'nough" Christmas that we have--but that is nevertheless as good as they deserve.

And later writers also seized the same opportunity to depict the happy Negro during this holiday. Julia Peterkin wrote of the "week of jubilation that begins Christmas Eve morning and lasts through New Year's night."²⁶ Stark Young interrupted his historical novel to dwell on the joys of Christmas. He stressed the benevolence of the whites and the happiness of the blacks who took their gift money "into town to buy gifts for their children" prior to festivities comparable to "Christmas Night in the Quarters."²⁷ The

²⁵ F. P. Gaines, The Southern Plantation (Gloucester, Mass., 1962), pp. 6, 7.

²⁶ Roll, Jordan, Roll (New York, 1933), p. 244.

²⁷ So Red the Rose (New York, 1934), p. 78.



impression endured: Negro life under a paternalistic white rule was "an unbroken Mardi Gras."²⁸

But among the most striking parallels to "Christmas Night in the Quarters" are Roark Bradford's Ol' Man Adam and His Chillun and Marc Connelly's The Green Pastures. Both of these authors adopted Russell's point of view and provided hilarious black versions of Biblical events. In essence, they elaborated on Russell's poem by extending to other Biblical events the same treatment Russell had accorded to the Deluge. This indebtedness to Russell may be perceived in the similar accounts of the Deluge: The Ark is described as a riverboat; the flood is a bursting of the levees; and Noah incurs the ridicule of scoffing onlookers.

In "Christmas Night in the Quarters" Russell wrote:

An' so he sot his hands to work a-cl'arin' timber-
patches,
An' 'lowed he's gwine to build a boat to beat de steamah
Narchez.

Bradford's Noah set out to build a "Stern-wheeler, like de Grace. . . ."²⁹
And Connelly's Noah asserted his craft was "gonter have jus' one great
big stern wheel, like de Commodore" (Part I, Sc. ix). Unable to
conceive of an ark, the Negro in each case envisioned its nearest
counterpart in his own experience: a riverboat.

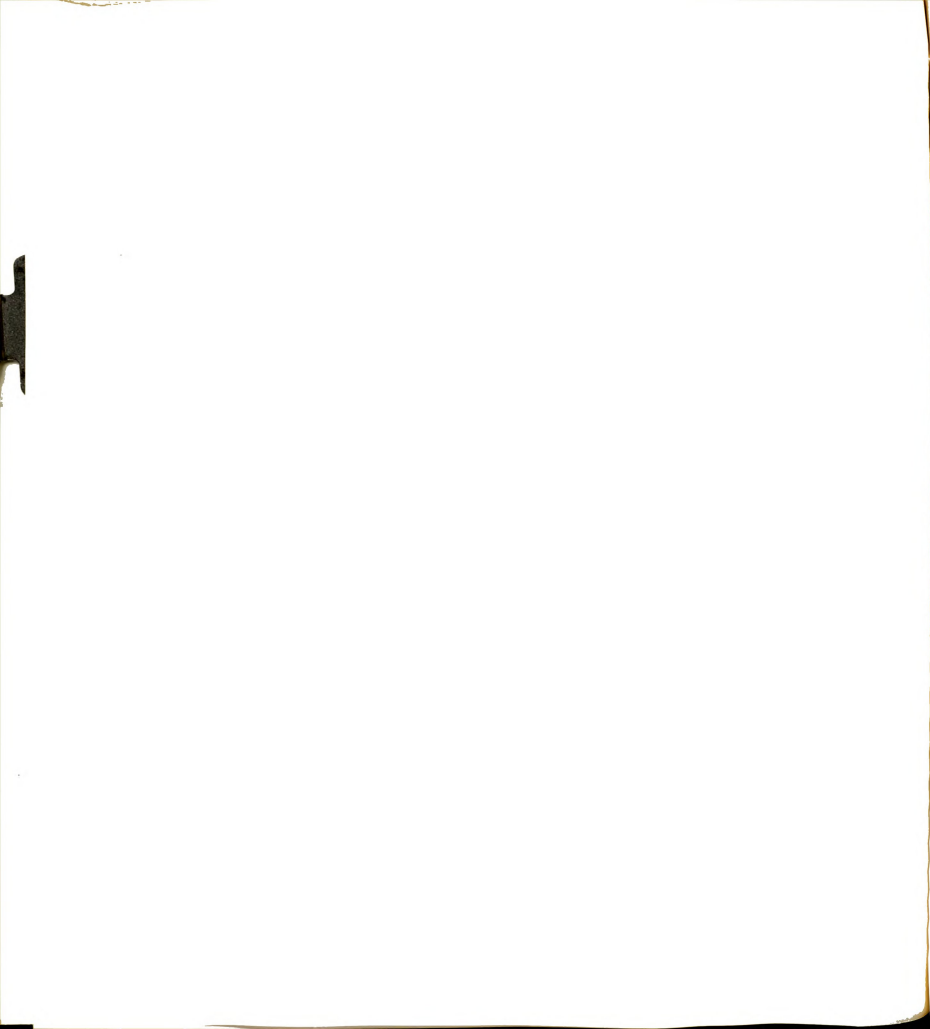
Russell described the deluge:

Den sech anoder fall ob rain!--it come so awful hebby,
De ribber riz immejitly, an' busted troo de lebbie;

Bradford's Noah carried on the following dialogue with the Lord:

²⁸ Gaines, p. 164.

²⁹ Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun (New York, 1928), p. 27.



"Gonter bust de levvees, is you, Lawd? say Noah.

"When de levees bust," say de Lawd, "dat's jest gonter be de startin' of de wet weather" (pp. 26-27).

And in The Green Pastures, the Lord informed Noah: "Dey's gonter be a deluge, Noah, an' dey's goin' to be a flood. De levees is gonter bust. . ." (Part I, Sc. viii). Again the Negro is characterized as intellectually incapable of extension beyond the sphere of his limit experience.

And on the final point the parallelism is as evident. Russell acknowledged Noah's tribulation:

Ol' Noah kep' a-nailin', an' a-chippin' an' a-sawin';
An' all de wicked neighbors kep' a-laughin' an'
a-pshawin';

Reaction in Ol' Man Adam An' His Chillun was much the same. The response ranged from "Old Noah is plum crazy" to the mockery of the young people who wanted "dat texas bigger. . . . Efn hit was bigger, us could have an excursion and dance" (p. 28). Connelly, recognizing the dramatic potential in the heckling of Noah, presented the most extensive account. One woman bluntly declared: "Look yere, Noah, whyn't you give up all dis damn foolishness?" Later Flatfoot scores with the other spectators:

Flatfoot: I must say! Look like a house wit' a warpin' cellar.

Noah: Dis yere vessel is a boat.

Flatfoot: When I was a little boy dey used to build boats down near de ribber, where de water was. (Part I, Sc. ix)

These three writers --a poet, a novelist, and a dramatist--have presented remarkably similar versions of the Deluge. Each, of course, was governed by the exigencies of his genre resulting in disparity in duration. Russell, the poet, was necessarily the most aphoristic, and Connelly, with the mechanics of the theater



to consider, prolonged the scene. But all three reflected the same basic point of view; and Russell was first by more than fifty years. I should add, incidentally, that a famous modern Negro comedian's account of Noah and the Flood also bears a remarkable resemblance to Russell's banjo song.

The side-splitting account of the Flood presented in terms of the Negro's contemporary way of life dramatized the character trait that Russell was eulogizing in "Christmas Night in the Quarters": a childlike simplicity. And later Southerners hesitated to relinquish this idea. In 1930 John Gould Fletcher reiterated fundamentally the same conception of the Negro as presented in "Christmas Night in the Quarters." Fletcher, maintaining that the Negro was by nature more suited to a subservient role, declared, a propos to higher education for the Negroes: "Tuskegee and the Hampton Institute. . . are adapted to the capacity of that race and produce far healthier specimens of it than all the institutions for 'higher learning' that we can ever give them."³⁰

This stereotype also persisted in fiction. In Roark Bradford's John Henry the folk-hero is consistently characterized as a "nachal man."³¹ In his Kingdom Coming, the leading character, Grammy, attains stature as a muleteer on the plantation; however, he is unable to cope with the varied evils of existence in New Orleans after the war and dies facing a Yankee firing squad.³² Cohen's

³⁰ "Education, Past and Present," I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition, ed. John Crow Ransom et al. (New York, 1930), p. 121.

³¹ See, for example, John Henry (New York, 1931), pp. 2, 8, 93.

³² Kingdom Coming (New York, 1933), p. 319.

Negroes possess the native shrewdness of Russell's but, again, are hardly distinguished by intellectual powers.³³ Hugh Wiley's Negroes are equally indifferent to intellectual pursuits. His hero, Wildcat, can neither read nor write; but trusting in "Lady Luck," he meanders successfully through a series of escapades marked by gambling, sleeping, and eating--seemingly his three major functions in life. Throughout all, the theme remains constant: the simpler the Negro, the happier the Negro.

Even more serious works perpetuated this idea. T. Bowyer Campbell, for example, portrayed the rise and fall of Black Sadie, the illegitimate daughter of a hanged rapist, who rose to the heights of success as the darling of the New York art world. But Sadie was never happy in this social milieu. Eventually, forced to flee to avoid complicity in a murder, Sadie, "tired of New York; tired of Yankee white folks," departed. Enroute, however, she met her former lover with predictable results:

Peter had a little place in Virginia, near Washington. He wanted to farm. He had bees. Sadie would like it. Sadie thought she would. How satisfactory everything was!³⁴

Campbell's implication is familiar. It is the same idea that resulted in Russell's spokesman admonishing his son to beware of "dem niggers what runs on de ribber" in "Precepts at Parting." It is the same idea that resulted in John Henry's being dismissed by a judge with the warning to beware of "city niggers."³⁵ It is the same idea that permeates "Christmas Night in the Quarters": the Negro is happiest

³³ See, for example, "Auto-Intoxication," Highly Colored (New York, 1921), pp. 1-59.

³⁴ Black Sadie (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), p. 302.

³⁵ John Henry (New York, 1931), p. 63.



in a childlike, unspoiled, natural state.

In addition to these poems Russell portrayed the happy Negro in two short stories: "Sam's Four Bits" and "Sam's Birthday."

Although both deal with a young Negro lad, they do exhibit some persistent characteristics of the plantation tradition: the easy-going, carefree life of pickaninnies, the benevolence of the white master, and, in diminutive form, the irrepressible good spirit of the improvident, irresponsible Negro.

In "Sam's Four Bits," Sam, "as bright a little darkey as ever toted a bucket of water on his head, or whisked a fly brush over a dinner table,"³⁶ received a windfall for Christmas. In addition to the normal "awinge," apple, and candy, his stocking contained a silver coin. Resisting the entreaties of Aunt Phyliss to store the money for safe-keeping, as she "ain't seed so much silber befo' since reb times," Sam retained the coin. The entire story then focuses upon Sam's antics with the coin, emphasizing its value to him.

His adventures with the coin were many and varied. Aunt Phyliss imprinted a cake with it, allowing Sam to have his coin and eat it at the same time; he played a game wherein he deliberately lost the coin and then found it, thus redoubling the pleasure of acquisition; he even fought a skirmish with his arch-enemy, old Jack, a rooster, that had seized the coin on one occasion before Sam's arrival. After various similar incidents disaster struck.

³⁶ James Wilson Webb, "New Biographical Material, Criticism, and Uncollected Writings of Irwin Russell" (University of South Carolina, 1940), p. 151.

While resting on an old well, Sam was seized with ecstasy while day-dreaming of a 'whole heap of fo'biteses' and, unfortunately, kicked his coin into the well. Sam's reaction, however, despite his exaggerated attachment to the coin, is predictable: "I don't keer. What's de difference? De ol' fo' bits was more trouble den it was wuff, no how!" (Page 160).

And Negroes in the twentieth century faced financial setback on a larger scale with similar equanimity. Wiley's Wildcat, for instance, with his blithe trust in Lady Luck, was rarely phased by such financial difficulties.³⁷ Perhaps T. Bowyer Campbell has best summarized the white conception of the entire stereotype "Easy come, easy go, niggers."³⁸

III

Russell also portrayed a third major stereotype: the faithful retainer. This type appears in an attenuated form in two poems, "Mahsa John" and "Uncle Cap Interviewed." But in an unpublished short story, "Prince King," Russell created a faithful black whose devotion defies belief.

In "Mahsa John,"³⁹ Russell resorted to his favorite genre, the monologue, to exploit the idealized master-slave relationship. His narrator, while reminiscing nostalgically of the good old days before the war, reveals his own loyalty and affection while expressing admiration for his former master. The depth of his regard may

37 The Prowler (New York, 1924), p. 267.

38 Black Sadie (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), p. 303.

39 Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. 63.



be ascertained from the first verse; for Master John does not suffer by comparison with two great Americans:

I heahs a heap o' people talkin', ebrywhar I goes,
 'Bout Washintum an' Franklum, an' sech gen'uses as does;
 I s'pose dey's might fine, but heah's de p'int I's bettin'
 on:
 Dere wuzn't nar a one ob 'em come up to Mahsr John.

And in the second verse he added even greater praise: "He shorely wuz de greates' man de country ebber growed."

The remainder of the poem continues in the same vein with the old narrator recounting specific details of his former master's greatness, details such as "lookin' awful big an' wise," wearing "de berry bes' ob planters' linen suits," keeping "a nigger busy jes a blackin' ob his boots," and with diamonds "in his shirt as thick as it would hol'." But despite his being "pow'ful rich," with a "heap o' lan'," and a "thousan' niggers," John was reduced to poverty by the war. But his former slave's affection endures, for even he recognizes the pathos in the change:

Well, times is changed. De war it come an' sot de
 niggers free,
 An' now ol' Mahsr John ain't hardly wuf as much
 as me;
 He had to pay his debts, an' so his lan' is mostly
 gone--
 An' I declar' I's sorry for my pore ol' Mahsr John

The abrupt change emphasizes the disparity now existing. And as the reduction of such grandeur affects even the old servant with sorrow, surely, suggests Russell, others could not be unaffected. Moreover, the old slave concluded on a further note of loyalty:

But when I heahs 'em talkin' 'bout some sullybrated
 man,
 I listens to 'em quiet, till dey done said all dey
 can,

An' den I 'lows dot in dem days 'at I remembers on,
Dat gemman war n't patchin' onto my ol' Mahsr John.

Russell's narrator demonstrated the same pride, loyalty, and affection commonly attributed to Negroes in more favorable representations. Actually even some of the later "comic" Negroes exhibited these same qualities. Wiley's Wildcat, for example, continually spoke of "my white folks," echoing Russell's spokesman's "my ol' Mahsr John" Nor did Wildcat lack pride in his "white folks"; for in answer to Demmy's question about Captain Jack, Wildcat responded: "He's mah white folks. You mus' a-knowed 'bout him. Won de wah in de A.E.F. agin' dem German boys."⁴⁰ Pride, affection, and loyalty are patently present.

Russell's Uncle Cap in "Uncle Cap Interviewed"⁴¹ also reminisced of the old days and, at least indirectly, reflected the same pride in his former master. After excoriating the more recent generation of Negroes for their "triflin' ways," Uncle Cap extolled his former master's importance; for among many important people who visited:

Dar's Ginnle Wahin'ton, for one; he lived acrost
 De road;
 I s'pect you've heerd of him, sah? He wuz one ob
 dem I knowed.
 He rode about de country on a big old dapple-gray,
 An' used to come an' dine with mahsr 'bout ebery
 udder day;
 De fines'-lookin' gentleman dat I mos' eber seed--
 He tried to buy me; but old mahsr told him, "No,
 indeed!"

The social status of a man who received such a visitor "ebery udder

⁴⁰ Lily (New York, 1922), p. 140.

⁴¹ Christmas Night in the Quarters, p. 84.



day" was hardly to be questioned.

Moreover, the passage suggests the close bond of affection between slave and master. His master clearly placed a high value upon Uncle Cap by his refusal to sell to such a distinguished personage. Consequently, Uncle Cap may justly take pride in the implied compliment.

Curiously, self-pride emanating from his value as a slave formed an integral part of Uncle Cap's character. In a previous passage, he had proudly asserted:

No! I'm from ole Virginny, an' fur dat de Lord
be praised!
Virginny niggers always wuz de best dat you could
buy;
Poor white trash couldn't get 'em, 'ca'se de prices
wuz so high.

Uncle Cap was hardly unique in this respect. Gaines has noted that a common device in the plantation tradition was to "emphasize the slave's exaltation in having commanded a good price."⁴² Uncle Cap's pride, then, is pardonable: he was priceless.

The enduring quality of this conception may be perceived half of a century later in Bradford's Kingdom Coming. Messenger, the father of the novel's hero, explained his value with some pride: "Us . . . is all fancy niggers. Did my master put us up, de biddin' 'd go way up yonder. He turn down two thousand dollars for a fine mare which he traded for me, and dat puts my price way up."⁴³ And in Hergesheimer's Quiet Cities, the quick purchase of Juba at a high

⁴² The Southern Plantation (Gloucester, Mass., 1962), p. 201.

⁴³ Kingdom Coming (New York, 1933), pp.52-53.



price was greeted by the other slaves in the market with a "chorus of good-natured exclamation. . . ."⁴⁴ Perhaps the most extravagant account of this strange pride coupled with unbelievable affection for the master appears in Will Harben's "The Sale of Rastus." Herein, Uncle Rastus, near death, feigns ideal health to bring a higher price for his impoverished owner.⁴⁵

In both of these poems by Russell, the faithful retainer stereotype has been evident. But "Prince King," represents his fullest treatment of the type. In this story, Russell portrayed an idealized relationship between ex-slave and former owner that approaches excessive sentimentality. It was, however, a stereotype dear to the South. Gaines, in his discussion of the plantation tradition has observed:

A great part of the tradition is dedicated to depicting the persistence of this stubborn loyalty into the post-bellum period; the devotion which, recognizing no freedom, grew stronger as family fortunes waned. . . . All things considered, this is, with the exception of negro comedy, the largest single native; the clan of Hopkins Smith's *Clad* is second only to the tribe of Jim Crow.⁴⁶

Having frequently contributed to "the tribe of Jim Crow," Russell in this tale turned to the second most popular convention. His Uncle Prince King exhibited all the necessary prerequisites of the plantation tradition. He was a loyal, cheerful, somewhat comical, rustic philosopher who felt a real affection for his employer, Captain Joe.

⁴⁴ Quiet Cities (New York, 1928), p. 126.

⁴⁵ Sterling Brown, The Negro in American Fiction and Negro Poetry and Drama (New York, 1969), p. 84.

⁴⁶ The Southern Plantation, p. 217.



In "Prince King"⁴⁷ Russell immediately presented the titular character's attractive qualities. Echoing the message of "Christmas Night in the Quarters," he stressed the "natural" character of "the poet, Uncle Prince King, colored," who "made his songs as he 'scraped' the cotton and 'hilled' the corn of Captain Joe--who was also Mahs'r Joe--and sang them at night and on Sunday. And the people caught them up and sang them after him." Prince King's worthiness seems manifest: he has remained with his old master and he keeps the other Negroes happy and singing, an enduring element in this tradition. Just how enduring may be ascertained from Joseph Hergesheimer's wistful picture:

"The cotton hands were leaving the fields, the women bright moving patches of color, coming into the scaffold yards. There were soft staves of song, laughter, and long calls."⁴⁸

Prince King's homely talents were not limited to composing philosophical pieces such as "Keep de stret line, You'll get whar you gwine"; he was also an accomplished musician on his "fine four-dollar fiddle." Once again Russell has conformed to the tradition which endowed the blacks with an intrinsic musical genius.⁴⁹

But Prince King did depart from the tradition in one respect: he was not a church member. However, to Russell, this would be a virtue, rather than a fault; for Russell, as documented in Chapter II, held a rather uncomplimentary view of organized religion.

⁴⁷ Fulton Collection, Box 7, Folder 2, Reproduced in Appendix B.

⁴⁸ Quiet Cities (New York, 1928), p. 125.

⁴⁹ F. P. Gaines, The Southern Plantation (Gloucester, Mass., 1962), p. 198.

Consequently, this devotion does have other significance. Given Russell's penchant for satire, a reader may be tempted to look askance at this sentimentalized tale. But Russell's attribution of his own religious ideas to Prince King suggests his sincerity. Unlike the satiric portraits in "The Mississippi Miracle" and other poems, Prince King retained a certain dignity. Responding to the Captain's questioning of his non-attendance of religious services, Prince King replied:

"Oh-oh! Dat won't do for me, sah. De ol' 'ooman an' de gals kin go an' set up in the amen cornah, an' holler, an' groan, an' go on--dat's nat'ral for dem, 'kase sech is dey nater: but me an' my boy, sah, we's week-day people!"

However Russell immediately returned to the tradition by recording Captain Joe's reaction to the answer:

"Saepe salet similis filius esse patri,
Et sequitur levites filia matris iter."

The Latin quotation contributes to the classical image of the "cultured Old South,"⁵⁰ an image which has been carefully nurtured for years.

In 1930, for instance, John Crow Ransom could still write: "The South is unique on this continent for having founded and defended a culture which was according to the European principles of culture." He then went on to characterize the Southern education which contributed to the culture: "a certain amount of learning, which was not as formidable as it might have been; but at least it was classical and humanistic learning."⁵¹ A decade later, however, Wilber J. Cash shattered the

⁵⁰ Sterling Brown, The Negro in American Fiction and Negro Poetry and Drama (New York, 1969), p. 2.

⁵¹ "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," I'll take My Stand, ed. John Crowe Ransom et al. (New York, 1930), pp. 3, 14.



illusion. After admitting the existence of "more colleges and students, in proportion to population, than the North; that many planters were ready and eager to quote you Cicero and Sallust," Cash still reached the unflattering conclusion: "In general, the intellectual and aesthetic culture of the old South was a superficial and jejune theory, borrowed from without and worn as a political armor and a badge of rank; and hence. . .not a true culture at all."⁵² But Russell, of course, was concerned with the myth, not the facts.

Prince King's idyllic existence was soon interrupted. For while hoeing, he was disturbed by a horseman "galloping madly along the highway." The message flung at Prince King made "Uncle Prince drop his hoe, sink upon the ground, and sit shivering as if it were January instead of July, and no great hot sun had warmed the air to ninety-six degrees in the shade." Here Russell interrupted his narrative in order to prepare the reader for subsequent events. He described at length the "very strong and true friendship--a real affection" that "existed between Prince King and his present employer and former owner, Captain Joe." Russell wrote:

The Captain was a confirmed old bachelor; and, having no other object to set his heart on, he gave it all to this humble friend of his. If Prince wanted a few dollars the captain was as good as a bank for him and he knew that his help was assured in every trouble. On the other hand Prince would have given his life for the Captain, any day; and the latter knew it well.

The passage does more than accentuate the idealized relationship of the plantation tradition. It provides technical credibility: the reader must be cognizant of the strong bond between the two men or

52 The Mind of the South (New York, 1941), pp. 91-94.



he may reject the melodramatic conclusion of the story.

Russell quickly reinforced the strength of this bond. Prince informed Captain Joe of the horseman's message: "The yeller fever is bruk out in town, sah." In accordance with the old South's code of noblesse oblige, the Captain immediately determined to lend his assistance in town. Prince responded: "Is you, Sah? Den I'm gwine, too." Russell's account, even after his carefully laid groundwork now appears excessively sentimental: "The Captain rose from his chair, and the hands of the two men met. There was more expressed in that strong grasp than either could have said."

The two men, "this white man and this black man," labored long and diligently, "alleviating pain, saving life, or paying the necessary attention to the dead as far as might be." They were, wrote Russell, "a blessing to the people, and the people blessed them." When the fever had nearly exhausted itself, the two men attended "The last of their 'cases'. . . a poor laborer--An Irishman," a patient appropriate for the revelation of their degree of selflessness. Russell's dialogue is ironic and ominous:

"Nothing can save him, Prince."
 "No, sah, he'll go soon. But what you shakin' dat-a-way,
 for, Mahs' Joe?"
 "Feel my hand. I have a chill, I believe.--Well, Prince,
 it's no use trying to hide it--you know as well at I do
 what's the matter."
 "Oh, my God! you set right still till I kin get somebody,
 Got de fever, got de fever!"

Ironically, the Irishman recovered. But the Captain weakened despite the attention of Prince King who "sat on the floor and watched him, and wept over him."

Russell heaped on the pathos. A doctor, upon arrival, discovered



that

The faithful nurse had himself been stricken down. He had taken off his clothes, dragged his straw and blankets up beside his master's, and laid down there. . . . There they lay side by side, master and man, until the second evening of Prince's illness; when the Captain died.

As trite as this picture may seem, Russell was apparently not content. He reached even greater heights--or depths--of sentimentality. For Prince King, realizing that the Captain was dead, "rose and staggered to the well" where hung a violin which he had previously noticed. Soon the nurse and others, attracted by "strange, unearthly music," rushed in and found "Prince lying with his head pillowed on his master's body, feebly holding the violin, and playing upon it something that was music, but not melody."

But Russell went even further. He concluded:

The strain grew fainter--fainter--ceased. The instrument dropped by his side; and all of life there was remaining in him seemed to be thrown into his voice, and he turned over and clasped the dead body in his arms and pressed its cheek lovingly with his own, and sang:

Oh, I'll be happy in de place whar I's a gwine:
Happy, whar dey's nebber any scornin';
Yes, I'll be happy, when I leab de worl' behin'
An' meet my Mahs'r in de mornin'.

Then his head dropped.
Prince King had followed his master.

The story of "Prince King" is admittedly an idealized, overly-sentimental glorification of what the South regarded as the proper relationship between the races. Captain Joe symbolized the paternalistic white planters who were genuinely fond of their Negroes; Uncle Prince King has few peers in the role of devoted follower.

One should not be too hasty in condemning Russell for this tale which is, perhaps, far too maudlin for modern tastes. For he was writing



in a different milieu and many of his fellow Southerners held the same conviction. Edgar Allan Poe had written of the "degree of loyal devotion on the part of the slave to which the white man's heart is a stranger, and of the master's reciprocal feeling of paternal attachment to his humble dependent. . . ."⁵³ Thomas Nelson Page in his "Little Jack" described an old Negro who expressed a similar joy at the prospect of rejoining his dead master.

Furthermore, Maurice Garland Fulton, the most astute of Russell's critics, praised this tale as a worthy forerunner of James Lane Allen's "Two Gentlemen of Kentucky."⁵⁴ And striking parallels do exist between "Uncle Prince King" and the later story. Allen's Colonel Romulus Fields, like Russell's Captain Joe, was a "model master." He had secured passage of "milder laws" and, as could be anticipated, had bought "more than one poor wretch. . .to save him from separation from his family. . . ."⁵⁵ And Allen's counterpart to Prince King, Peter Cotton, the Colonel's former slave, also "remained inseparable from his person and altered fortunes" (p. 31). Moreover, Allen eulogized the friendship between slave and former master in the manner of Russell: "this devoted friendship between ex-slave and former master was the last steady burning-down of that pure flame of love which can never again shine out in the future of the two races" (p. 43). Nor does Allen's account of the deaths of his characters fall far short of

⁵³ Brown "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," JNE, 11 (January, 1933), 182.

⁵⁴ Fulton Collection, Box 7, Folder 2.

⁵⁵ "Two Gentlemen of Kentucky," After Appomattox: The Image of the South in Fiction 1865-1900, ed. Gen Baro (New York, 1963), p. 29.



Russell's narrative in sentimentality. The Colonel, "putting one arm around Peter's neck," placed "the other hand softly on his head, and looked long and tenderly into his eyes." Colonel Fields' final request was that Peter "be laid close to me. We can take the long sleep together" (p. 52). Peter, unlike Prince King, "lingered a year" and then visited the Colonel's grave: "It would seem that, impelled by love and faith, and guided by his wandering reason, he had come forth to preach his last sermon on the immortality of the soul over the dust of his dead master." Shortly thereafter Peter was laid "beside the Colonel" (p. 54).

Considering these parallels, one may adjudge Russell's sentimentality in "Prince King" as overdone, but not unique. Furthermore, as the story is undated, it may have been written after Russell's arduous labors during the epidemic of 1878. If so, it would help explain the excessive emotionalism which was so foreign to his character.

As a stereotype of the faithful retainer, Prince King had many ancestors who equaled his devotion and a few descendants who approached it. Poe's Jupiter in "The Gold Bug," who "had been manumitted before the reverses of the family, but who could not be induced, neither by threats nor by promises, to abandon. . . his right of attendance upon the Footsteps of his young 'Massa Will'," is one predecessor. James Fenimore Cooper's Caesar in The Spy (1821) and William Gilmore Simms' Hector in The Yemassee (1835) are others.⁵⁶

Among his descendants, in addition to the previously noted Peter Cotton, is F. Hopkinson Smith's Chad--short for Nebuchadnezzar. Chad was another faithful retainer completely unaffected by his master's change

⁵⁶ F. P. Gaines, The Southern Plantation (Gloucester, Mass., 1962), pp. 19-26.



of fortunes. And, in some respects, he even exceeded Prince King and Peter Cotton; for he was "chambermaid, cook, cutler, body-servant, and boots," and "by the marvellous tales of the magnificence of "de old fambly place in Cartersville"" he had "established a credit among the shopkeepers on the avenue which would have been denied a much more solvent customer."⁵⁷

This type, in an attenuated form, endured well into the twentieth century. Aunt Betsy in Sale's The Tree Named John, for example, suppressed an urge to live with her own children in order to remain and cook for "mars John."⁵⁸ Vestiges may even be perceived in William Faulkner's Dilsey, for Irvin Howe has suggested that her character ". . . emerges not so much as a living, breathing individual human being, but more as an institution, a tradition which held the Compsons together."⁵⁹ The description could be applied with equal justice to Russell's Prince King, Allen's Peter Cotton, or Smith's Chad.

IV

While the stereotyped image of the Negro persisted well into the twentieth century, there was, at the same time, a reaction to this depiction. The turning of the tide becomes noticeable after World War I as attitudes toward the South and Southern fiction, especially in regard to the Negro, began to change. In fiction there was a growing trend toward the characterization of the Negro as a human being rather than as a type.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ "The Colonel's House in Bedford Place," After Appomattox, ed. Gene Baro (New York, 1963), p. 214.

⁵⁸ The Tree Named John (Chapel Hill, N. Carolina, 1929), p. 148.

⁵⁹ "William Faulkner and The Negroes," Commentary, XI (October, 1951), 362.

⁶⁰ Margaret Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York, 1956), p. 164.



This trend toward realistic portrayal of the Negro, as with all literary movements, was not abrupt or without regression. The various novels noted in the previous section indicate clearly that stereotyped Negro characters appealed to the popular taste in the 1920's and early 1930's. This taste may well reflect the resurgence of racism which occurred shortly after World War I as the more militant Negroes, buoyed by nearly a third of a million black veterans, struggled for first-class citizenship that even the North was reluctant to concede.⁶¹ Nevertheless, spurred on in part by the Harlem Renaissance, the general tenor of the movement has been steadily away from stereotype and to realism.⁶²

Despite this relatively recent movement, the Reconstruction-Era Southern writers must be acceded the laurels of victory. Their stereotypes and sentimentalized portraits of the Old South endured for nearly half of a century. On a more immediate level, they had succeeded in converting "the Northern disbeliever." As a prominent historian has concluded: "the cumulative effect of the literature of Southern themes was to soften the tension of sectional relations and produce a popular attitude of complacency to Southern problems."⁶³

As the principal Southern problem was the Negro, one result of this "complacency" was acquiescence to the Southern solution. The Southerners insisted the issue was a domestic one and that they alone must be free to determine the proper relationship between the races. The extent of this

⁶¹ C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, 2nd ed. (New York, 1966), p. 114.

⁶² Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," JNE, 11 (January, 1933), 186.

⁶³ Paul H. Buck, The Road to Reunion 1865-1900 (Boston, 1947), pp. 219, 235.

Southern triumph may be perceived from C. Vann Woodward's retrospective analysis: "It was quite common in the 'eighties and 'nineties to find in the Nation, Harper's Weekly, the North American Review, or the Atlantic Monthly Northern liberals and former abolitionists mouthing the shibboleths of white supremacy regarding the Negro's innate inferiority, shiftlessness, the hopeless unfitness for full participation in the white man's civilization."⁶⁴ That Southern literature contributed to the creation of these "shibboleths" seems beyond question. For by 1888, even Albion W. Tourgee, a vehemently pro-Negro author, had conceded "the predominance--if not the historical truth--of Southern fiction and the Southern interpretation of Reconstruction."⁶⁵

And even more complete victory may yet lie with the Reconstruction Southern writers. The pervasiveness of their Negro characterizations in the plantation tradition has led to speculation that the type existed as a reality and not as a racial stereotype.⁶⁶ This thesis has been advanced by Stanley M. Elkins in a paper before the Ninth Newberry Library Conference on American Studies. Elkins, using a broad analogy between American Negro slavery and German concentration camps, argued that the childish role required of the Negro ultimately resulted in "a recognizable personality type." In essence, Elkins postulated that the Negro was not "inherently inferior," as believed by the Southern writers; but that the

⁶⁴ The Strange Career of Jim Crow, p. 70.

⁶⁵ Theodore L. Gross, "The Negro in the Literature of the Reconstruction," Images of the Negro in American Literature, ed. Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy (Chicago, 1966), p. 83.

⁶⁶ "Slavery and Negro Personality," American Negro Slavery: A Modern Reader, ed. Allen Weinstein and F. O. Gatell (New York, 1968), p. 246.



necessity of playing an infantile role "produced noticeable effects upon the personality itself."⁶⁷

Although Elkins argued persuasively, the consensus of his audience, equally distinguished scholars in the social sciences, was critical. Elkins' method was attacked by Daniel J. Boorstein, who "found highly suspect the kind of generalization Elkins was making." Boorstein, joined by Norman A. Graebner, also scored Elkins for a lack of "common sense consideration" in his analogy, noting the disparate purposes of slavery and the concentration camp. Arthur S. Link flatly declared Elkins was guilty of "false analogy." And Avery O. Craven was convinced that Elkins' "picture of American Slavery had 'no reality whatever'"; moreover, he concluded: "I don't think you can draw valid generalizations from a false stereotype." Perhaps Jules Zanger's argument was most telling:

Since "we have ample evidence that the white Southerner today is continually fooled" as to the Negro's actual nature and attitudes, how can we accept Mr. Elkins' argument that Sambo must have been an objectively existing personality type because "mere role-playing" could not have "fooled" the ante-bellum South?⁶⁸

If one assumes the falsity of Elkin's position--as did many of his colleagues--then Irwin Russell can hardly be considered the "faithful delineator" of the American Negro. As has been demonstrated, he depicted the same stereotypes portrayed by other authors. This does not imply that no such Negro characters existed; such an implication would be patently absurd. Even Sterling Brown has acknowledged: "Since there is no stereotype without some basis in actuality, it goes without saying

⁶⁷ "The Question of 'Sambo'," Newberry Library Bulletin, V (December, 1958), 16-17.

⁶⁸ Newberry Library Bulletin, V, (Dec., 1933), 22-32.



that individuals could be found resembling Page's loyal Uncle Billy or Stark Young's William Veal. . . or even Uncle Tom and Florian Slapppy."⁶⁹ But Russell's Negroes, as did those of other Southern authors, consistently displayed the same old traits, creating an impression of universal absurdity among the blacks.

⁶⁹ The Negro in American Fiction and Negro Poetry and Drama (New York, 1969), p. 3.



CONCLUSION

Russell remains a significant figure in Southern letters. Although he did not accurately preserve the image of the Reconstruction Negro, he was a pioneer in using the dialect for literary purposes. Unlike many of his predecessors and followers, Russell did record Southern Negro speech with some consideration for authenticity; however, he subordinated precise transcription to poetic effect. Moreover, he was among the first in Southern letters to focus primarily on the Negro. Prior to Russell, the Negro had appeared principally as a supporting figure, frequently included for local color or comic relief. But in Russell's poems and in much of the later Southern literature the Negro is the dominant character.

Russell's effect on this literature has been fully documented. He exerted an immediate influence on such authors as Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page. Even the noted Negro poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, followed in the tradition established by Russell. The full extent of Russell's impact on more well-known authors may be perceived in John Herbert Nelson's critical analysis in The Negro Character in American Literature:

Others--John Trotwood Moore, for example, or Paul Lawrence Dunbar--have echoed Belfrage, yet on the whole Russell's work has proved the more vital model and inspiration. . . . Russell's most conspicuous follower, however, was the gifted young North Carolina poet, John Charles McNeill. . . . In most respects McNeill's work equals that of his master, yet one cannot help noticing that he had a master. (p. 122).

Russell's influence had even more immediate results; for, as Nelson added, by the mid-eighties, "negro dialect writing was a fashion of the hour" (p. 106).



In view of this influence, it seems only reasonable to conclude that Russell was instrumental in the development of Negro stereotypes. For, as we have seen, the characteristics exhibited by Russell's Negroes persisted well into the twentieth century. Hugh Wiley's Wildcat and Cohen's residents of Birmingham's Darktown displayed many of these traits: a propensity for lying and larceny; an innate absurdity and ignorance especially noticeable when mimicking the speech and actions of the whites; an irresponsible, carefree attitude suggesting their infinite contentment in a subservient role; and, among other traits, an apparent imperviousness to injury. The effectiveness of this portraiture has already been suggested in Elkins' thesis which is based in part on the prevalence of this "Sambo" stereotype in literature.

But the stereotyping also served a more immediate purpose: it fostered the image of a ludicrous being that Northerners found difficult to accept as an equal. It extended the same conceptions of the Negro that evoked this judgment from Leon Litwack: "the minstrel shows, newspapers, and magazines combined to produce a Negro stereotype that hardly induced northerners to accord this clownish race equal political and social rights."¹ These stereotypes, catering to the superiority of the Northern white audience, ultimately helped produce "the acquiescence of Northern liberalism."²

This catering suggests the role in which Russell's literary stature must eventually be assessed: that of a satirist. His natural bent was

¹ North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860 (Chicago, 1961), p. 99.

² C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, 2nd ed. (New York, 1966), p. 69.



to satire. His correspondence indicates an almost unconscious resorting to satirical wit. In his letters he employed a wide variety of the rhetorical devices associated with satire, ranging from simple invective to verbal irony. Nor was his subject matter limited: He mocked his correspondent's apparently inordinate reliance on dictionaries of quotations (See, for example Letter No. 7); he excoriated the Returning Boards (See Chapter III).

He was apparently well-read in the satires of his predecessors in this genre. He often alluded to these predecessors: Juvenal, Persius, Fielding, Swift, and Gifford, among many. He also frequently confessed his preference for the satirical poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moreover, he was self-admittedly a student of this literature.

It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that he used this satiric talent for a purpose. Satirists have always insisted that they exercise their powers to correct social evils. In the eyes of a Reconstruction Era, white Southerner the major social evil was the inversion in racial roles emanating from the Northern victory. But Russell, an informed reader of Northern newspapers, was undoubtedly aware of the antipathy to the Negro which still prevailed in the North. Being politically conscious, he exploited this antipathy.

In short, he possessed the attributes of a satirist; displayed the intentions of a satirist; and used the rhetorical devices of the satirist. Unlike most satirists, however, Russell succeeded. The dimensions of his success may be perceived in Nelson's reaction to the movement toward realism: "In becoming an over-serious type the negro has lost some of the old buoyancy of spirit, the delightful naivete, the happy spontaneity



of word and act which distinguishes the characters of Russell and Harris."³ There is some truth in Ronald Paulson's conclusion: "ultimately the most effective satire. . . would be the one that passed as something else."⁴

³ The Negro Character in American Fiction (College Park, Maryland, 1968), p. 121.

⁴ The Fictions of Satire (Baltimore, 1967), p. 152.

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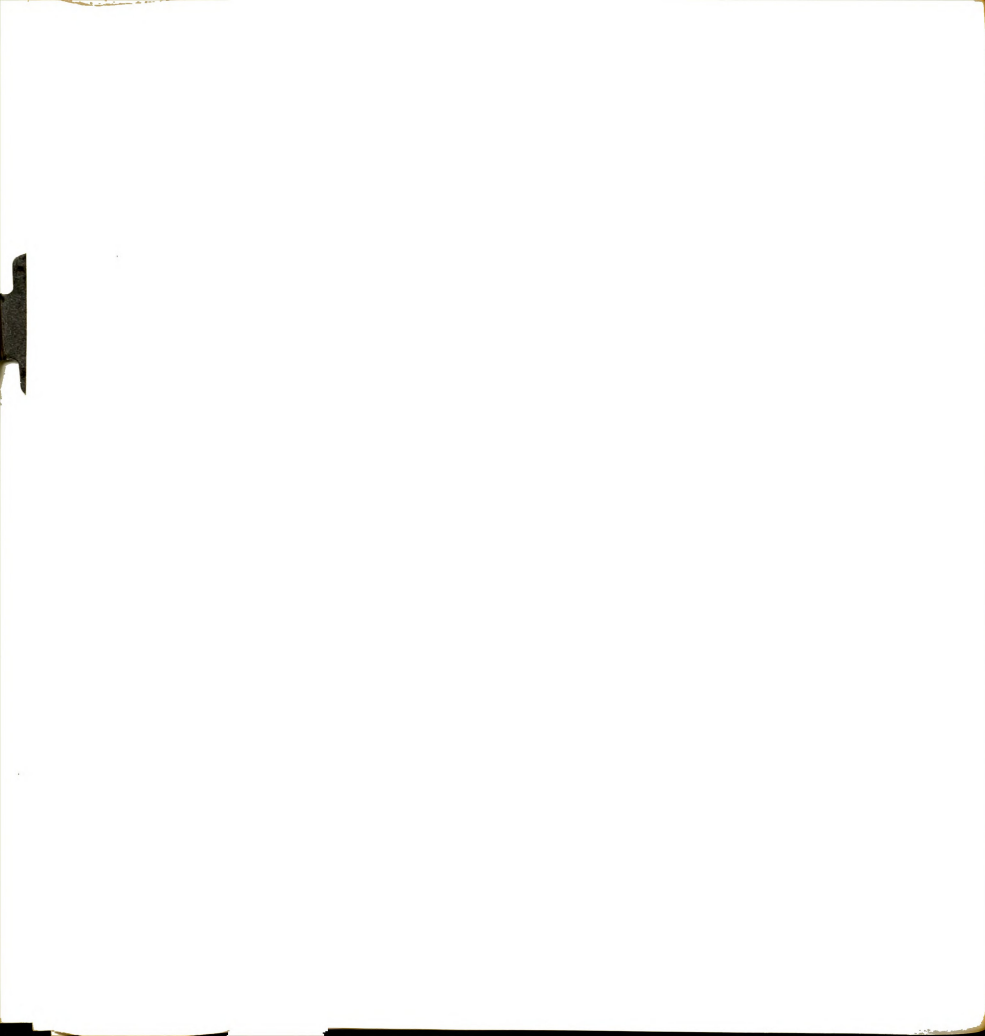


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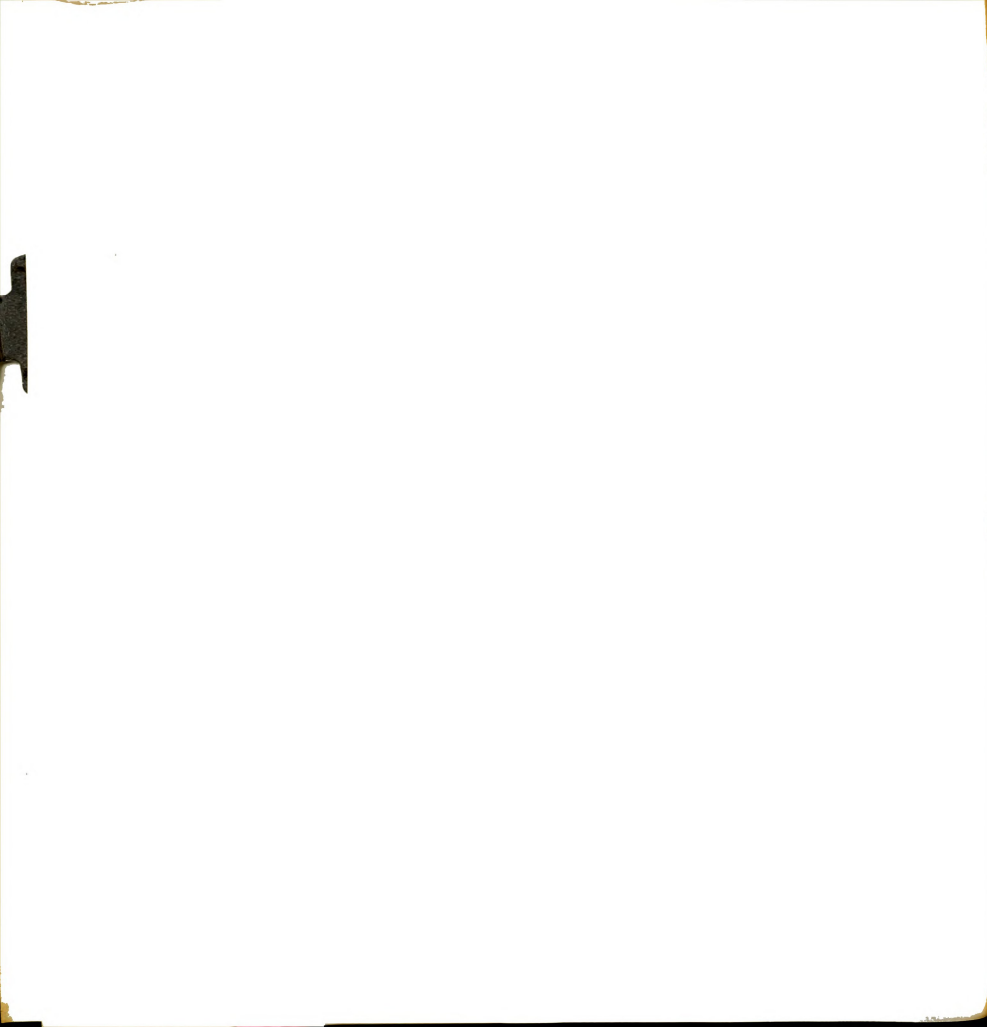


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APPENDICES



APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

The letters in this series were all reproduced in typescript by Fulton from the originals which had been provided by the husband of Russell's former correspondent. While it is difficult to establish their authenticity absolutely, the following items certainly seem conclusive in favor of such acceptance.

1. Professor Fulton was a reputable scholar with several major publications. Therefore, these items constitute prima facie evidence of authenticity:
 - a. He had intended to publish the letters as Part II of the Mississippi Sketches and Letters.
 - b. He had included sizeable extracts in the manuscript of his unpublished biography of Russell.
 - c. In the 1917 edition of Christmas Night in the Quarters Fulton had appended to the biographical sketch a reference to the letters and also briefly summarized some of their pertinent biographical data. It appears highly unlikely that he would have falsified such information.
2. The Fulton Collection contains letters from the husband of Russell's correspondent which indicate Fulton had possession of the letters for several months (Box 2). In a handwritten letter dated April 19, 1917, he wrote:

My dear Professor Fulton:

On my return, I find your letter of ninth April, and in view of the fact that the Irwin Russell letters must be



in your hands at once, if any use is to be made of them, I am forwarding them all to you today, by express.

In a later letter, typed, but bearing the same signature, he wrote:

My dear Professor Fulton:

I am pleased to hear that the Irwin Russell letters seem to you also to contain material worthy of permanent record. It is entirely satisfactory to me that the letters be left in your custody for the summer.

3. Russell's sister in her correspondence with Fulton (Box 4) frequently alluded to the letters. In one letter she wrote: "Getting all those letters copied was certainly an undertaking . . ."; in another: "no hurry about sending the original letters to me. ----says that he will not be in California till late in September."
5. Russell often included the same material in letters to various personages. The letters in this series have several passages paralleling those in letters to Miss Clara Russell, a cousin (Box 8), and passages in fragments written in Russell's hand (Box 7). However, as these were all in Fulton's possession, perhaps the most effective comparison can be made with a letter not made public until 1964, nearly half a century after Fulton transcribed these. On the left is an excerpt as it appeared in R. Baird Shuman's "Irwin Russell's Christmas," Mississippi Quarterly, (1964), p. 82. On the right is the same

account as it appeared in Letter No. 49.

I was sufficiently wide awake, however, to have a good laugh at a negro and a mule, who gave us a regular circus performance on Main street, for about half-an-hour. The fellow was seasonably drunk and the mule characteristically stubborn. On the mule's back there was an old piece of bed-quilt. . . . "K'mup yuh, ol' step-an'-fetch-it!" Old step-and-fetch-it "cameup" in the liveliest sort of style: went about six feet in a great hurry, and then stopped as energetically as if he intended to stay there a year. Up and over went the nigger, landing perpendicularly on his head in the mud. Of course it didn't hurt him a bit. . . .

I was sufficiently wide awake, however, to enjoy the fun that for about a quarter of an hour, was made on Main street by a negro and a mule. The negro was "funny drunk", and the mule characteristically stubborn. On the mule's back there was a piece of bed-quilt. . . . "Knup yuh! ol' step-an-fetch-it! The mule started off dashingly, went just about six feet, and then stopped as energetically as if he intended to stay there a week. Up and over went the darkey, "landing" perpendicularly on his head in the mud. Of course it didn't hurt him. . . .

Considering these points, it seems logical to conclude that Russell did write the letters and that Fulton did transcribe the letters with reasonable accuracy.

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

WANTED, AN ORACLE*

It is a mistake to suppose, that what is commonly known as Public Opinion is by any means the expression of a spontaneous general sentiment. Public Opinion, (unlike certain public nuisances,) is not born, but made; and there are individuals whose regular occupation and sold business is the manufacture of it---for which employment, doubtless, they are specially designed by providence: it being impossible to discern any other purpose for which they can have been created or evolved.

Our town is small. Therefore it has all the more need of an oracle: for it is a fact---a curious truth in social science---that the required amount of Opinion, to meet the necessities of any community, is always in an inverse ratio to the community's size.

Until lately, Colonel Carver has been our Chief Inspector of Moral Weights and Measures. A theoretically practical man, he was; who was never known to do anything, himself, either useful or otherwise; yet pronounced favorably or unfavorably upon the acts of others, according to the manner in which they squared with his standard of utility. As the latter was too small to measure most things, the judgments of the Colonel were usually condemnatory. When they were so, he delivered them in a gibberish that must have descended to us from the anthropoid ape---for instance, "fiddle-faddle" was his synonym for sentiment, and "fol-de-rol" for argument; and he expressed general disapprobation by the mysterious monosyllable: "pht!" In the mouth of the Colonel, "Pht!"---without a vowel---was a most pointed and powerful word. When he said that, doom then and there went forth against something or somebody. By the aid of "pht!" he could and did overthrow any opposition that logic or fact might set up against him; and so terrible was the potency of this talismanic word, when introduced by the Colonel in one of his side-walk lectures, that upon its utterance Taste & Common-sense would instantaneously fly the spot---and never dare, for hours afterwards, to so much as peep around the corner.

There is no evidence that the Colonel ever read anything; yet his reputation as a literary critic was firmly established. So he was held high authority in matters of art---upon all of which, that came under his notice, he invariably discharged deadly volleys of the most alliterative words in his apish vocabulary---yet he scarce knew the difference between a painting and a statue. It was thus forever: he knew nothing and criticized everything. And the people listened to him, and believed in him, and quoted his sayings (as well as they could), and adopted his opinions as their own. And there are Colonels and Colonels.

* Fulton Collection, Box 7, Folder 2, I have retained the spelling and punctuation of Professor Fulton's copy. This story is not to be reproduced without written permission from the University of Arizona.

Nobody knows how our Colonel got his title. Colonel he was when he came among us, and Colonel he remained. There arose a strong universal feeling that he ought to be General; but nobody ventured to promote him. His authority, however, could not have been greater if he had been Commander-in-chief. He was an elderly man. His deportment was very precise. His voice had a decided, autocratic tone; and he never laughed---for the excellent reason that he was never amused. His garments being cut in regular geometrical figures---from which curved lines were carefully excluded, and into which his tailor introduced as many angles as possible---he would have served excellently as a lay-figure for a class in the rudiments of drawing. Short, florid, and polygonal was the Colonel; with close-cut iron-grey hair, false teeth, and a double spring eye-glass. His gait was haughty. His glance was stern---and he had a chronic cough of criticism. Such was the outward appearance of our judge of small matters---whose jurisdiction was unlimited, and from whose fiat there was seldom an appeal.

Yet, through the Colonel had by some inexplicable means secured to himself the monopoly of his business, and turned out an article of Public Opinion that was generally considered satisfactory, there was one individual who would have nothing to do with his wares, and who took advantage of every occasion to depreciate their value. This scoffer, who was an eccentric old bachelor physician, was wont to irreverently liken the Colonel to a pair of spectacles through which every object appeared distorted---or to a town-clock that never pointed to the right time---or to any other unreliable thing that he happened to think of. He refused to believe in the Colonel. He would not even "accept" him. Probably, however, he would have been content to have preserved an armed neutrality, if the Colonel had left him in quiet enjoyment of his own favorite province.

It was the delight of the Doctor to collect a crowd about him, and hold it entranced, for an indefinite period, by a metaphysical monologue upon any subject that suggested itself. Philosophy was his hobby. He rode it at every opportunity, up hill and down dale, with the pertinacious enthusiasm that belongs only to moralists and fox-hunters---two classes, be it observed, that have many points of resemblance. Substitute an idea for a fox, and a stupid audience for a rough country, and the strong likeness is at once apparent. The Doctor always went straight at his fox, regardless of obstacles. Sometimes, of course, he lost the scent, and was consequently delayed or thrown out entirely; but he was never known to shirk fences or take "short cuts".

Now, it often happened, that just as the Doctor would arrive at the choicest part of his discourse, up would come the Colonel and abstract the attention of the listeners; appropriating the same entirely to himself and what he had to say, and utterly demolishing the most beautiful trains of speculation or deduction that the mind of man could conduct---at least, so thought the Doctor. This occurred many times; and the Doctor grew more and more enraged, each time. And finally he swore, by all the philosophers from Plato down, that upon the very next repetition of the offense he would declare open war against the Colonel, and wage it to extermination.

One day soon after the formation of this doughty resolution, the Doctor was sitting, with several others, upon the verandah before the hotel.



It was four o'clock in the afternoon; that hour so peculiarly adapted to general meditation; when dinner---with the average American---has ceased to occupy the mind, and supper has not yet become an object of solicitude. Each man smoked, musingly. The wind blew from the west, just then, and the little waifs that traveled with it occasionally fell in the verandah. One---a little curled fragment of white paper---rolled to the Doctor's feet, and he picked it up and examined it. Evidently, it had been torn from some school-boy's exercise; for, besides a rude figure of a rude figure of a man, made up of irregular circles and straight lines, with the accompanying inscription "bill jackson---A Fool---" the paper had written upon it, near a corner, " $X + Y = Z$."

"Ahem!--- ' $X + Y = Z$;' read the Doctor, aloud. "That is a short formula---and yet, gentlemen. It includes the universe.

Long puffs from all the smokers.

"It includes the universe:" repeated the Doctor. "There is nothing that is not expressed by it. Even the great problem of human existence is simply this equation: $X + Y = Z$; in the regarding which it would perhaps be better if we gave more attention to the past X and the present Y , independently, and without reference to their relation to the future Z . In fact, we are entirely given over to the contemplation of Z . Therefore Madame This makes her own fortune by telling those of other people; and Professor That has crowds of students of the life to come, at his 'seances', to hear the departed Franklin and Bonaparte blow horns and ring dinner-bells. If we had a good atlas of the next world, with descriptive text, we should cease to care anything about futurity---for Z , gentlemen, is only interesting because it is unknown."

Nods, sagacious grunts, and vigorous smoking.

"This natural human propensity," resumed the Doctor, "to pursue the search after Z , is what makes mystery attractive, and gives a peculiar charm to the Incomplete. Give us a possible Z to find---we take the greatest delight in looking for it. Let it once be found---we have no further thought for it. If the lost tribes of Israel should be found, they would no longer interest us more than do those tribes which have never been lost. Slawkenberginus's tale would seem inspired, if we found out that were the contents of the Ass'es pannier."

Here the Doctor looked around for approval; and his auditors, who had never before heard of Slawkenbergius, unanimously assumed a very dignified expression of countenance, and waved their pipes slowly in token of acquiescence. Satisfied, the learned lecture proceeded:

"It is upon this principle that literary fragments are so deliciously tantalizing. Who has not felt their magic thrall? Even the infant mind, becoming cognizant of the fact that 'A was an Anchor, and shot at a frog,' finds exquisite pleasure in speculating upon the probable result of the shot. Did he hit the frog? And," if so," was the wound mortal? These are the questions which agitate the soul of the young student, who

is working at algebra without knowing it. But the rhymor, remorselessly leaving the further history of A in obscurity, makes an abrupt transition to that of B---who, we are informed, 'was a Butcher'. Perhaps this is y the result of deep design. Perhaps the bard realized that his readers would be more apt to think about and remember A, if that character was thus made to stand in the place of Z. Well---when we grow older, and cease to deal with A and B in their primitive individual capacities, we yet have like experiences with their combinations. We should not set half so much store as we do, by Christabel, Edwin Drood and A. Gordon Pym, if we knew their complete histories. Novels have been written backwards-- notably, "Caleb Williams" was---but who ever read one backwards? A story read in monthly installments id ougly interesting, because we are so long left to theorize as to its denouement. And, gentlemen, vowel-writers once had a custom which they have been very unwise to discard: that of representing the hero as "Mr. C---", denominating the heroine as 'Miss L~~ick~~, and denoting their place of residence by some such form as 'the lovely village of 'T-----, or 'the great manufacturing town of -----burgh.' This style ought never to have been abolished. Care one ever so little about a place or a character, he cannot refuse to bestow some degree of attention upon the same, when it is veiled with the mystery of a three-em dash or a half-dozen of asterisks. It is only another instance of that universal passion, which prompts us to give up all the follow Z".

The Doctor paused to take breath. The others were too far gone to exhibit any emotion, this time. Thomas Dobson awoke with a start---he had "dropped off" just as the Doctor was talking about "Mr C dash, Miss L six stars, the village of T dash N, and Blankburgh." A frown gahered upon the Doctor's brow. He looked up, and the frown deepened; for he beheld the Colonel, coming across the street diagonally. Hastily, the Doctor re-commenced in manner following:

"The ramifications of this great thought are endless, and its illustrations are innumerable. These three letters, X, Y and Z --which, curiously enough, are, in their simplest form, diagrams representing three fundamental propositions of Euclid---include the sum of mathematics; and beyond mathematics there exists (or fails to exist) nothing, real or presumptive, A or not-A. But while there are so many Z's being constantly sought, is it not strange that so few are found? The social, or the political, or the financial Z is never arrived at---being in every case an inconstant and variable quantity. Many investigations, instead of finding Z, attain only the knowledge and experience of the value of A, which is a very different thing. And there are men---I know some of 'em--- who never get at their own Z's, because they are eternally busying themselves about those of other man. I tell you---"

"pht!" interrupted the Colonel, who had arrived, and had been listening impatiently for a moment.

Did you ever see a cast of Powers's great statue of "Patience descending from the monument?" Don't be in too great a hurry to say "Yes, of course"---because Powers never made any such statue. But if he had, the figure would doubtless have borne a facial expression precisely similar to that assumed by the Doctor at this unseemly interruption.

"Sir," said he, grimly, 'will you gratify me by explaining the meaning and tendency of that observation?"

"You do talk such namby-pamby stuff; "cried the Colonel.

"Ah---namby-pamby---" observed the Doctor, in a thoughtful way,---
 "namby-pamby. I know 'Namby'---that is the name of a sheriff's officer
 in 'Pickwick.' But 'pamby'---Colonel, what is the signification of 'Pamby'?"

"Pht!" ejaculated the nonplussed Colonel, marching off hurridly.

"I thought so," self-communed the Doctor, "I thought so. Just as easy!" And he smiled, beatifically.

Mr. Dobson went home and remarked to his wife that "the Doc. kinder chawed the Colonel, while ago;" but proved totally incompetent to explain the manner of the mastication.

It was a small thing, certainly; but when a balloon is punctured by a needle, how rapidly the tiny orifice is torn to a goodly rent---how quickly the sphere collapses! "Rem acu tetigisti," said the Doctor to himself; and followed up his thrust. Daily, hourly, he pursued the Colonel into all the side-walk caucusses that assembled to listen to his dicta---and persisted in earnestly enquiring into the meaning and derivation of his curious words and phrases. In these, only, could the Colonel criticize. His ignorance of all things was too complete to allow of his forming any reasonable judgment, that could be expressed in ordinary English; his talk was altogether oracular, from taste and long habit; and this fustian, which was totally independent of logic or fact, was altogether indispensable to him. Now the Doctor would question, and the Colonel would ignominiously fly. No man was ever so easily discomfited. What else could have been expected? What humbug can resist attack? Where are the romances of chivalry, since the chronicle of Cid Hamet Benengeli? Where Della Crusca and Laura Matilda, after the Baviad and Moeviad? The Doctor's was but a petty proceeding; but people began to notice it, and to wonder at it, and to smile at it---and to ask themselves, finally, whether after all it was possible that the Colonel was no wiser than Solomon.

Soon there appeared in the "Weekly Howitzer" the following communication "from a talented townsman":

"(For the Howitzer.

"The Influential Citizen.

"In Torbolton, ye ken, there are proper young men,
 And proper young lasses and a', man,---Burns.

"So there are in Beersheba. And our happy village can likewise boast of wit, refinement, virtue and patriotism, to a degree that the rival hamlet of Dan attempts vainly to emulate. But, alas! there is an evil which balances these blessings: we are possessed of an Influential Citizen.



It is our own fault that this thing is true. It generally is our own fault, in cases of calamity---it rains upon the Just, because he has been fool enough to let the Unjust borrow his umbrella.

"You know the Influential Citizen. The man, he is, who meddles with all things, and never understandingly. He pilots the Church, and stands it on a mud-bank; he engineers his local political party, and immediately there is an accident on the narrow-gauge. What does he not handle, and ruin? Perhaps, of all metaphorical likenesses, he is best represented by one of old Gower's---not, however, originally intended to apply to him:

"And as the mill, which circumgyreth fast,
Still gryndeth all that into it is cast:
Refusing naught that is to it assygned,
Contented is, and willing still to grynd--"

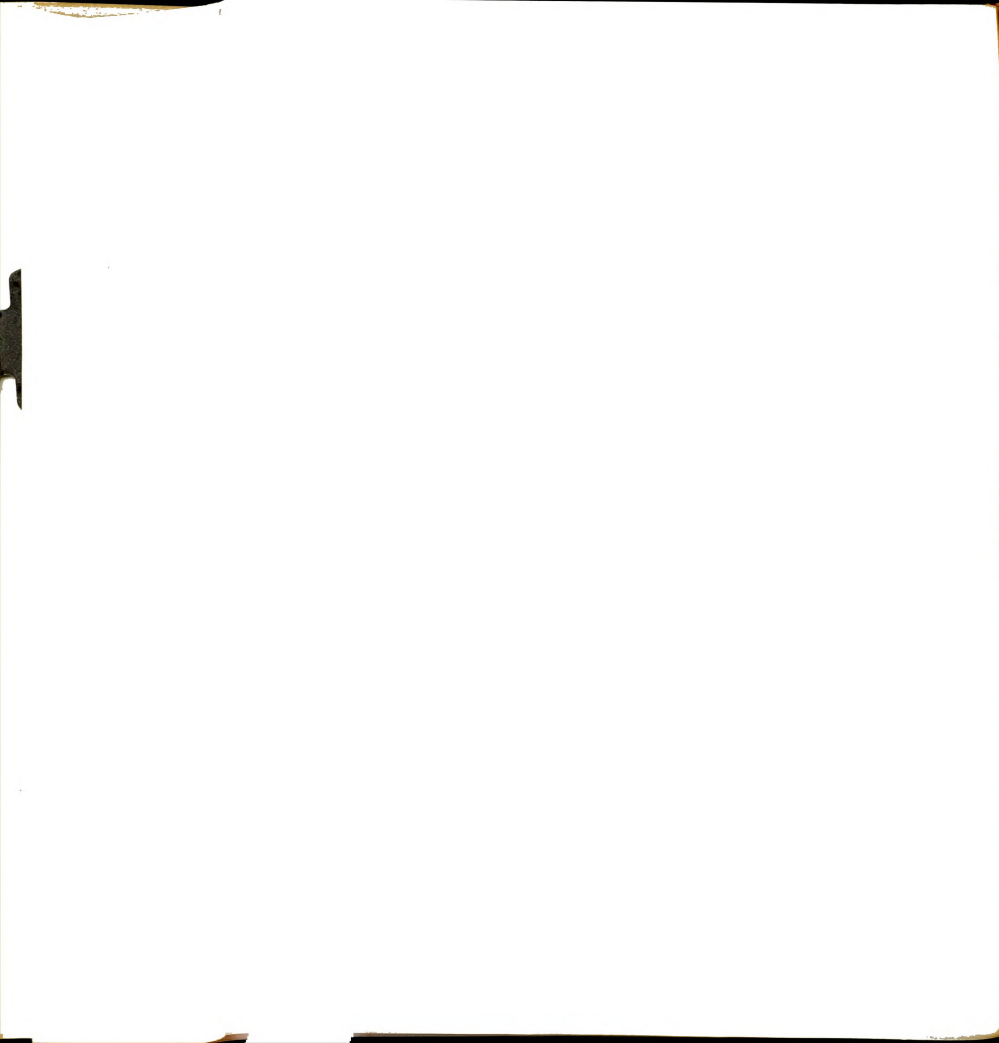
So--(to complete the simile)--all is grist that comes to the mill of the Influential Citizen; to whom the world is but a River Dee, turning his wheel, and floating down grain for his grinding.

"There are influential citizens of this sort, all the world over. They have generic characteristics---but individual peculiarities as well. Stupid, they are, and malicious, all of them. With regard to our own particular Influential Citizen---but softly, softly; this won't do!

"We have strangely forgotten just what it was we set out to say, in this paper. We should therefore conclude it here---but it occurs to us to ask this question:---Does any gentleman who reads this journal know exactly what the word "Pht!" implies, or whence it comes? It is of such power, as an expression of sentiment, that we are inclined to concede it a cabalistic value---but, unlike that word which is obscurely hinted at by certain adepts, as having been the real Stone of the Philosopher, transmuting base metals into royal gold, "Pht!" has the property of degrading what is really excellent into what is apparently worthless.

"And---this is a little nut, but it has a Colonel."

This characteristic effusion of the Doctor's was read and pondered upon. The Colonel began to decline in public estimation. And as when a stone rolls from the top of a hill it gathers velocity as it goes, (and is as roughly used in its descent, be-like, as those Great Names that are said to go majestically Down The Ages), so does he who falls from the summit of esteem get quickly to the bottom thereof, and meet with much loss and affection in transitu. First, the Colonel lost his listeners. Then the public nose turned up at him. And before another week passed he found it impossible to appear upon the street without hearing such a chorus of "Pht! Pht!" that the circumambient air seemed full of ghostly tom-cats. In short, the Colonel soon found that life in Beersheba was, for him, a hollow mockery; and he accordingly went to take up his residence in that place of fashionable resort, commonly described as "parts unknown." And the Doctor "smiled, and was a villian."



So it has come to pass, that, for many days, there has been no Public Opinion in Beersheba. Men and women have come and gone as they listed; attended to their own affairs judiciously, or not, as they pleased; believed, thought, and acted according to their reason or impulse, and substituted independent judgment for slavery to an "ipse dixit;" and there has been no obtrusive ass to question or control their proceedings.

This state of things must not exist any longer. It is Anarchy it is confusion. It is Chaos. If it is allowed to continue, what will become of those bulwarks of civilization, the venerable Frauds of Society? If people think for themselves, down will go all the idols, presently, and all the worthy charlatans will be set to begging, or,---horrible thought!---to working. The thing is too monstrous. It must not be. We must have another Oracle, and that without delay.

That is why Beersheba cries in her distress upon her sister towns and villages throughout the land---thinking that some one of them can haply supply her need---and says:

"If in your bounds ye chance to light
Upon a fine, fat, fodge wight,"

who happened to be out of the way when Nature served out brains, and whose assurance and pomposity are of the highest possible degree; send him along to us, if you please, at your very earliest convenience---and your petitioner shall ever pray, etc.

THE STRANGE AND SURPRISING ADVENTURES

of

THE BOLD YOUNG MISSIONARY GIRL? *

-1-

"Hard by the iron-bound Wabash coast -
Where Blue Jeans Williams rules the roast,
 Without one cent a-keerin' --
There dwelt a lovely lass, d'ye see,
Who sweetly smole, and said: 'Te he!
 I'm off for old Teheran.

"In anderuns I'll hob and nob
With wives of Khans, and eat Kabob,
 And have galore fiversion -
How gay 'twill be! The card for me
Is to 'get up and go' per se,
 And be a jolly Persian.

"Some travelers that I recall
Have gathered fortune, fame and all:
 Why not such luck for me, then?
By sun and stars, and earth beneath!
I'll straightway jump my native heath,
 And go and teach the heathen.

"My own dear Indianny ain't
The sort of place to pay a saint,
 Dispensing gospel bounty;
(Though native heathen here amount
To twenty more than man can count;
 With more in Posey County;)

"So I will hie me far away
To Persia's strand, anent Cathay,
 And nobly run the mission;
To be a martyr well I wish -
To brave the Sha, and tell him 'Pish!
 Behead me on suspicion!"

She packed her trunk, and strapped her shawl;
Then skipped aye from out the hall -
 The 'bus so promptly meeting -
And took the E. H. T. & C.
Spoke no farewells - yet, all agree,
 She left her friends a-greeting.

* Letter No. 64.

Now, Persia takes you long to reach;
 And when you're there, before you teach
 You first must gain the knowledge.
 Of how to talk - like pretty Polli
 And you must hang - not sus. per coll.,
 But hang around a college.

The damsel wearied of Deri,
 Arabic, and the Osmenli,
 The Tartar and the Slavic:
 Said she: "I wish I'd never come,
 To gohto school myself, by gum!
 (That gum they call Arabic.)"

Just then a trumpet blew, "Tra-tra." -
 In waltzed his majesty the Shah,
 And called up every scholar:
 Examined all, both great and small -
 They missed each question he did call,
 Which much inflamed his choler.

He clutched her grammar in his hand -
 Frowned hard - yet didn't give command
 As all his hearers dreaded -
 ("Call the roll! he would have said,
 To see who's foot and who'll be head
 When ranged to be beheaded!!") -

For lo! his eyes fell on the page,
 And rapture took the place of rage:
 Said he: "Oh! gaze upon it,
 This poem here, in Saadi's style!
 The damsel said: "I done it."

For where the "Preface" head-line ran,
 A glowing epic thus began:
 "Peter Ross Eats Fishes."
 "You wrote this?" - said the shah - "jes' so;
 For telling what I wished to know,
 You now shall know my wishes: -

"Those eyes of fire - blue-lights they be -
 I find have somehow 'lit on me;
 That nose! - no nose diviner;
 My guards, without, are dressed in line -
 Choose quickly: Say, wilt thou be mine,
 Or delve, in chains, a miner?"



Now, Persian monarchs, all their lives,
 Have - marry come up! - a hundred wives,
 Which truly's very shocking!
 (Shahs must have gold, full many a crock,
 To buy, at Christmas-time, the stock
 To fill each striped stocking!)

Our heroine, though well she knew
 This tearful truth, what could she do?
 She marched, with slaves to fan her;
 Not wed with this improper man
 In this improper manner!

"These Persian savages, of course,
 Aren't up to quick and cheap divorce
 Like ours at home; - I'll follow,
 But for the p'leece I'll loudly call,
 And tell my mind before them all,
 When I'm before the mollah.

The palace reached, and all prepared,
 The robes of state got out and aired,
 (For they were packed in camphor,)
 She said her say. The Shah was calm.
 Said he: "Be silent! You, madame,
 I do not care a cl-m for,

But these are words I may not pass -
 A guard here! and - my morning glass!"
 For 'twas his time for luncheon -
 A hideous black, all harms and hunch,
 Brought in to him a whisky punch.
 And whisked her in a puncheon.

Full soon the cask rolled down the hill,
 And then it kept a-rolling still -
 Our heroine inside it -
 Until it reached the river's side,
 When in it plumped, and took the tide,
 Whatever might betide it.

An hour, an hour, two hours had passed:
 The barrell struck the strand at last,
 And someone called a cooper;
 They got her out; she'd caught the croup,
 And was so weak she had to stoop,
 Though hardly in a stupor.

A man advanced. Said he: "I am
 The Tartar's 8 to 7 Cham;
 I'm here on warlike mission;
 Ha! ha! - and wilt thou wed with me?
 He stamped - Hercules, ex pede -
 She joined the expedition.

The Cham is said, by those who roam,
To be just like our shams at home:

A fraud not hard to master;
His wife, by dint of tracts, at last,
has got him tractable, and past
Rebelling at his pastor -

Except at times, when urged too far
Beyond his peace, by wordy war,
He points, as if to warn her,
To what by far too many a wife
Has feared and dreaded all her life:
A barrel in the corner.

MORAL.

Mark well, young woman! Sure as fate,
If you your free unwedded state
For marriage wish to bartar,
You'll not succeed by being smart,
Or being sweet; but just be tart!
I'm bound you'll catch a Tartar!



UNTITLED *

He is a fool who idle stands
And grumbles at his fate,
And calls the gods to guide his hands
To dignify his state--
When means are lying his way in
Whereby, with idle ease,
All pleasing to be famous may
Be famous as they please.

No longer are there heights to climb;
No longer, fights to win;
You must not force the House of Time
To gain your passage in:
The gates are wide, the steps are few--
Skip lightly by the throng,
And enter with the pigmy crew
Who strut before the strong!

What poet fails, who has designs
To lead the latest schools,
Whose proudest boast is--making lines
Without the aid of rules?
So easily may points be found
In old forgotten files--
So well, the dullest pens be ground
To make the sharpest styles!

If you a saint now would be thought,
Hide not thy wish, but show it,
And when you do a thing you ought,
Go let the people know it;
Be quick to teach, and slow to learn--
Pray, preach--for, be advised,
That unconscious brings the best return,
Which most is advertised.

* Letter No. 49.



THE WALKING MATCH *

"SUCSESSES ARE WON BY THE CLEVER,
DISTRESS WE INHERIT OR BUY."

Dis story's got a moril, an' it ain't de berry wust;
An' for fear I might forgit it, I puts de moril fust:
De guidin' princerpull ob life, my 'sperunce shows is true,
Is not "Don't jedge ob oders", but--Don't let dem jedge ob you.

Joe Post an' me was settin' on de fence, de oder day,
A-talkin' varis mattahs in a philersophic way,
When, des as we wuz mos'ly through wid eb'rything we knowed,
We seed a white man walkin' up de middle ob de road.

He stopped when he got up to us, an' passed de time o' day.
I tuk him for a tramp; but den ob so'se I couldn't say;
De gretes' men is of'en berry kurless how dey goes--
Why, I, myself, ain't extry, when you comes to spek ob clo'es.

He sot down on de fence wid us, an' how dat man did talk!
He said he owned a kerrige, but he'd alluz rader walk;
'An', by-de-way," says he, "I s'pose you knows about de strong
Excitement ober walkin' in de Norf whur I belong."

We tol' him no, we didn't, an' says he: "Kin dis be true?
Dis ignorince is shockin' in sech lookin' men as you;
De want ob education in dis section I lament,
An' I shill write about it to my friend de Prezident!

"To monsterate what walkin'-matches is, look heah," says he;
'I takes an' marks a line acrost de road by dis big tree;
Now dis heah is de winnin' p'int, an' whar de jedge mus' stand,
An' hol' a piece ob cane, or limber saplin' in his hand.

"Now, s'pose you likes to try it, den I'll be de jedge, you see;
You bofe puts down fibe dollars, an' you gibs it heah to me;
Walk down the road a mile--den back--de fus' one dat arribes
Will be de winnah ob de match, an' take in bofe de fibes!"

Now, we wuz gettin' pow'ful interusted in de game;
I looked at Joe inquirin'-like--he looked at me de same:
We tuk out ouah fibe-dollarses, and gub 'em to de jedge;
We tuk 'em--den he cut a mighty switch f'm out de hedge.

Says he: "Stan' cluss togedder, wid yo' heels upon de line,
An' when I teach you wid de switch, den dat'll be de sign;
Go down de road to--le'me see--de second bridge will do--
Turn dar, an' when you's back again de walkin' match is froo.

* Katherine Taylor Baskerville, "Life and Writings of Irwin Russell,"
unpublished thesis (Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, 1929).



"Now, ready, boys! Don't rush de start, but comin' back be quick!";
 An' den he whirled de switch, an' handed me an' Joe a lick--
 An' sech a lick! I tell you 'twas enough to make us go--
 We fa'rly flew--now me ahead, an' den it would be Joe.

I couldn't git away from him, or he away frum me,
 We reached de bridge togedder, an' we turned back for de tree,
 An' half-way back we struck a shade so nice, I says to Joe,
 "We isn't no steam-injins--'spose we stop a while to blow."

We sot a little, restin, den we started on ag'in,
 An' neck an' neck togedder on de home-stretch we come in;
 But shuckin's! we diskivered, when we got up to de scratch,
 De jedge had got plumb out o' sight, an' won de walkin--match!



PRINCE KING*

--' '---

By Irwin Russell

--- ---

If you have not heard of him, I will presently tell you a story to make your wine relish. Drink then,---so, to the purpose. Harken now whilst I give you notice, to the end that you may not, like infidels, be by your simplicity abased, that in his time he was a rare philosopher, and the cheerfullest of a thousand.---Rabelais.

* Fulton Collection, Box 7, Folder 2. I have retained the spelling and punctuation of Professor Fulton's copy. This story is not to be reproduced without written permission from the University of Arrizona.



HOW A POET LIVED AND DIED

---"---

By Irwin Russell

---"---

There is a certain portion of the State of Mississippi, known as "The cane hill district", which has never received its due attention from the outside world. No artists have depicted its scenery, and no tourists have abused its isma in "guid black print." Yet all travelers who have traversed it, (or tried to,) on their way to Texas, and all book agents and exhibitors of living wonders who have penetrated it, declare unanimously that it is the most interesting of regions. On the cane hills, and in the valleys between them, the intrepid explorer observes many rare and curious objects and subjects, the like of which can nowhere else be found; and while he is apt to be surprised at the total absence of Art, he finds full compensation in the astonishing abundance of Nature.

There it was that Nature produced a natural poet---and to the credit of the country be it said, an unnatural poet was never known there.

The poet, Uncle Prince King, colored, made his songs as he scraped" the cotton and "hilled" the corn of Captain Joe---who was also Mahs'r Joe---and sang them at night and on Sunday. And the people caught them up and sang them after him. So did they cherish and repeat his shorter effusions, which were usually composed in the interest of philosophy. And not only did these become proverbs in the mouths of the immediately surrounding multitude, but extended over at least a dozen plantations adjoining; and some of his choicer couplets, such as: "Keep de stret line, you'll git whar you gwine," came into general use even so far away as Hankerson's Ferry, which was fully seventeen miles, by"the dirt road," from the poet's abode.

Like other primitive bards, Uncle Prince King practiced music as well as poetry. He had a fine four-dollar fiddle, internally labeled: "Andreas Guarnerius fecit cremona sub titulo Santa Teresa," and on this he performed to the delight of all who heard. He played the touching melody of "The Buckeyed Rabbit" with a dreamy sweetness that was all his own---rendered "The Mississippi Sawyer" in a new and striking style---and executed "Chicken in the Bread Tray," with the appropriate rappings on the fiddle with the fingers, so well that, as he said, no other fiddler in the country "could touch him on it."

With such gifts and tastes, of course Uncle Prince was not a member of any church. His wife had often exhorted him to mend his ways, but in vain. Even Captain Joe, for want of something else to do, had asked him, once:

"Do you expect to ever get to Heaven?"

"Don't know, sah; hope so."

"Then why don't you join the church?"

"Oh-oh! Dat won't do for me, sah. De ol' ooman an 'de gals kin go an' set up in de amen cornah, an' hollar, an' groan, an' go on---dat's nat'ral for dem, 'kase sech is day nater: but me an' my boy, sah, we's week-day people!"

And off went Uncle Prince; while the Captain, muttering:

"Saepe solet similis filius esse patri,
Et sequitur leviter filia matris iter."

went in quest of his pipe and his book---both of which were very old, very strong, and very good.

Meanwhile the poet walked along with his hoe on his shoulders, singing his latest song, composed in honor of his dog.

Pot-Liquor

Pot-lickah, sah, consound you,
Why don't you smell around you?
Be libely, now--I'm bound you
Come across 'em--

Dey's a Kin ' ob sensuation
In dis niggah's copperation,
Like a in'ard rebbylation
Ob a 'possum.

Come, go ahead, Pot-lickah!
Dis ain't no time to flickah;
So moobe a little quickah
If you please, sah!

Go in dat bresh, an' bring out,
Or drike de possums! King out,
An' don't forgit to sing out
What you sees, sah.

Kain't be eaten?

By you, you pizen rebel,
For meanness, straight an' lebel,
I' clar de berry debble
Would be beaten!

It's gin'ally de custom
To train your dogs an' trust 'em

But sometimes you mus' bust 'em
For dey own good--

An' so wid people which has
Misused dey moral riches:
Mus' punish dem: not sich as
Nebber Known good.

Uncle Prince had scarcely sung this characteristic lyric three times over, when he reached that part of the gin-field where he intended to work. At it he went, loosening the earth around the cotton-plants and clearing away the "cocoa" grass; lightening his toil by composing a new song, and singing bits of it as they occurred to him. His songs might almost be called improvisations, he made them so quickly and easily. Once let him lay hold of an idea, and he would soon put it in verse---his sort of verse.

About eleven o'clock that morning, Prince was hoeing near the end of a "row", within a few feet of the fence---beyond which ran the public road. The day was unusually warm, even for that season in that place. Prince straightened himself up and leaned on his hoe to rest, saying to himself:

"I do think dat sun ain't more'n half-a-mile off, today. A-well if it do shine in de day-time, when I's 'bled to work, its alluz out o' de way at night, when I has time to play: dat's one consolation, anyhow. Ahoomh! Who's dat a-comin' so fas' from town, I wondah? Looks like he's gwine for a doctor; but he's gwine de wrong way."

A horseman was galloping madly along the highway. As he passed he half turned in the saddle, and shouted a few words which made Uncle Prince drop his hoe, sink upon the ground, and sit shivering as if it were January instead of July, and no great hot sun had warmed the air to ninety-six degrees in the shade. He recovered his stability of nerve after a little time, arose, took up his hoe and walked away; but his face bore a serious and sad expression, and he shook his head in a melancholy way, as he muttered:

"What's guine to come ob it all? What'll happen?"

A very strong and true friendship---a real affection---existed between Prince King and his present employer and former owner, Captain Joe. The Captain was a confirmed old bachelor; and, having no other object to set his heart on, he gave it all to this humble friend of his. If Prince wanted a few dollars, the Captain was as good as a bank for him and he knew that his help was assured in every trouble. On the other hand, Prince would have given, his life for the Captain, any day; and the latter knew it well. So, when Captain Joe looked up from his book, that morning, and saw Uncle Prince approaching the house, apparently in trouble, he threw down the volume, and with as much anxiety as curiosity awaited his tidings. They were short enough:



"The yaller fever is bruk out in town, sah."

For a minute or two no other word was spoken. Then the Captain questioned, and Prince repeated al that the horseman had shouted to him.

"Twenty-three already?" said the Captain:" then there'll be at least sixty cases by to-morrow morning. Prince, I'm going to town; to stay there, and help.

"Is you, sah? Den I'm gwine, too."

The Captain rose from his chair, and the hands of the two men met. There was more expressed in that strong grasp than either could have said.

The epidemic was long and very deadly. Disease and sorrow reigned everywhere in the town. And always where there was sickness, and often where death came, this white man and this black man stood together--alleviating pain, saving life, or paying the necessary attention to the dead as far as might be. While one slept, the other worked. They were blessing to the people, and the people blessed them.

The last of their "cases" was that of a poor laborer---an Irishman---whose room, in a dilapidated tenement, was furnished only with a broken bedstead and a small unpainted table. They had procured straw and some blankets, with which they had made up beds for themselves on the floor--beds, so called by courtesy. Besides vials, etc., furnished by the Howard association, there was nothing else in the place---except the Irishman's violin, which hung against the wall. Uncle Prince had often looked longingly at the instrument; but it was no time or place for music.

The Irishman breathed heavily---he had long been unconscious.

"Nothing can save him, Prince."

"No, sah, he'll go soon. But what you shakin' dat-a-way for, Mahs' Joe?"

"Feel my hand. I have a chill, I believe,---Well, Prince, it's no use trying to hide it---you know as well as I do what's the matter".

"Oh, my God! You set right still till I kin git somebody. Got de fever, got de fever!"

Uncle Prince rushed out, and returned with assistance; but in the meantime the Captain had undressed and thrown himself upon his straw bed, and it was then too late to remove him to better quarters. So there he remained. Prince King watched him and cared for him night and day. Meanwhile the Irishman lingered on, and even began to be better.

As happens in every severe attack of yellow fever, the Captain had fever for seventy-two hours exactly---as exactly as a watch could measure the time---no more, no less---after which came the time of greatest danger:



the period of exhaustion and insensibility. He could sleep then, however; and as he slept Uncle Prince sat on the floor and watched him, and wept over him.

When the doctor came again, he found another patient. The faithful nurse had himself been stricken down. He had taken off his clothes, dragged his straw and blankets up beside his master's, and laid down there. A Howard nurse was sent to attend them. There they lay side by side, master and man, until the second evening of Prince's illness; when the Captain died. The other was not greatly delirious, and he saw and understood what had happened. The nurse had left the room for a few minutes. Prince rose, and staggered to the wall where the Irishman's violin hung.

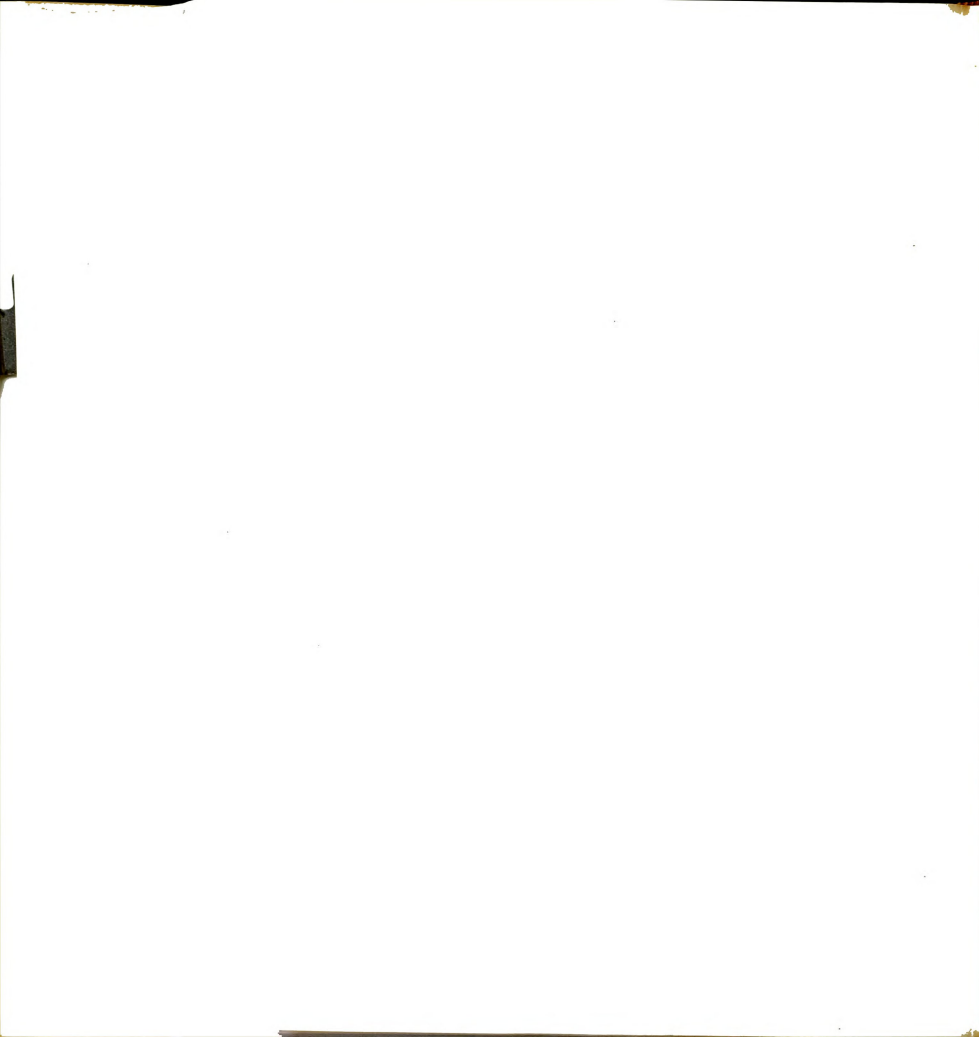
Strange, unearthly music began to sound from the squalid little room. The nurse and one or two others ran in. They found Prince lying with his head pillowed on his master's body, feebly holding the violin, and playing upon it something that was music, but not melody. As they could see that nothing could prevent his following Captain Joe very soon, they would not disturb him. He did not notice them. The strains grew fainter---fainter---ceased. The instrument dropped by his side; and all of life there was remaining in him seemed to be thrown into his voice, as he turned over and clasped the dead body in his arms and pressed its cheek lovingly with his own, and sang:

Oh, I'll be happy in de place whar I's a gwine;
Happy, whar dey's nebber any scornin;
Yes, I'll be happy, when I leab de worl' behin!
An' meet my Mahs'r in de mornin!

Then his head dropped.

Prince King had followed his master.





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