

BOOK REVIEW

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The New Cavalcade: African American Writing From 1760 to the Present. Vol. I. Edited by Arthur P. Davis, J. Saunders Redding, and Joyce Ann Joyce. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1991. 966pp.

The history of anthologies of literature in this country tells a story. It is a story of platitudes and politics, servitude and emancipation, a story much like that of our nation's history. As the name *The New Cavalcade* suggests, this extraordinary book places the works of Black American artists solidly in the procession of American literature, the goal of the three editors, Arthur P. Davis, J. Saunders Redding, and Joyce Ann Joyce. Beyond accommodation and protest, this anthology attests to the achievement of Black artists: reaffirming the values of freedom and equality in a literature of their own experience and culture.

This achievement has been hard-won one Joyce Ann Joyce tells us in an essay on her co-editor: "Arthur P. Davis: An African-American Anthologist in a Euro-American Colony" (forthcoming in *African American Literary Judgments Reconsidered*, Howard UP). The third editor of *The New Cavalcade*, Professor Joyce, was chosen by Arthur P. Davis and the late J. Saunders Redding because she is a "scholar who had a deep knowledge about contemporary criticism and the recent great upsurge in publications by African American women" (*New Cavalcade* xix). She writes that a "brief look at the goals or aims of a sampling of White American anthologies published between 1927 and 1991 reveals that African-American literary art was dismissed as inferior by the same criteria that fostered segregation in the political, social, and economic realms that affected Black lives." Drawing on Paul Lauter's book, *Canons and Contexts* (Oxford UP, 1991), Joyce supports her premise with the fact that out of twenty-one major classroom anthologies, including many revised editions, "nine contained no works by black artists; three include only a few spirituals; four contained one black writer each (Dunbar; Phillis Wheatley, twice; Richard Wright); two printed some spirituals and

one black writer" (*Literary Judgments*).

Academic disenfranchisement—excluding Black American artists from the American literary canon—is codified in the texts that editors select to represent the literary tradition. In the Preface to *The Oxford Anthology of Literature* (1938), which includes writers from John Smith to Herman Melville, but excludes Black writers, editors William Mose Benet and Norman Holmes Pearson declare their anthology "an historical selection from the literary expression of the American people." Obviously, Joyce concludes, the phrase "American people" does not include African Americans and Native Americans.

Of the more widely used and more recent anthologies, *The Literature of the United States* (1953; 1961; 1966), edited by Blair, Hornberger, Stewart, and Miller, includes no works of Afro-American writers; the 1961 and 1966 editions let Uncle Remus tell the tale of eighteenth century life for Black Americans, continuing as Joyce says, the "White academy's tradition of using Joel Chandler Harris as spokesperson for Black plantation life and folk creativity" (*Literary Judgments*). The tradition of exclusion continues in the 1956 and 1967 Bradley, Beatty, and Long editions of *The American Tradition in Literature*; Amiri Baraka is the only Black writer in the two volume collection.

The Civil Rights movements of the sixties initiated Black Americans' march into the social and political citadels, a procession that in the next decade crossed the threshold of the academy. Both George McMichael's *Anthology of American Literature* (1974) and the revised *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1979) include black writers: McMichael eleven, Norton fourteen. But Phillis Wheatley and Gwendolyn Brooks are the only two black women writers included.

The voices of all America's people are not heard until 1990 when Paul Lauter proclaims "To the Reader" of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* that the "major principle of selection has been to represent as fully as possible the varied cultures of the United States." This diversity is reflected in "what is by far the widest sampling of the work of minority and white women writers available in any anthology of American literature. This selection includes material by 109 women of all races, 25 individual Native American authors... 53 African Americans, 13 Hispanics, ... and 9 Asian Ameri-

cans." This multicultural text redefines "American Literature" (xxxvi).

These changes mirror the changes in the professoriate of the academy—all those sixties radicals are scholars and administrators now—and in the tradition that institution creates. But what of one of the oldest and strongest literary traditions in this country—the tradition of the African American artist? In 1941 Arthur P. Davis co-edited his first anthology of Afro-American literature, *The Negro Caravan*. It was not the first anthology of Black literature, but it was the first anthology including all time periods and genres up to its publication. It was, Joyce concludes, an implicit response to the editors of *The Heritage of American Literature*, who see "literary merit in only that African American literature that is non-confrontational and amusing" (*Literary Judgments*). By including antislavery pamphleteering, fugitive slave narratives, and novels, this book announced to the academic world that Black artists would take their rightful place in the procession of the literary figures of the American people.

It was thirty years later that Davis, together with J. Saunders Redding, presented *Cavalcade: Negro American Writing From 1760 to the Present*, a one volume work published in 1971 by Houghton Mifflin. Though containing only 80 writers to Caravan's 104, *Cavalcade* incorporated more primary works and criticism by women and added more comprehensive bibliographical information (*Literary Judgments*).

In 1991, twenty years later, in the tradition of *Lauter's Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Arthur P. Davis, J. Saunders Redding, and Joyce A. Joyce present the first of two volumes of *The New Cavalcade: African American Writing From 1760 to the Present* published by Howard University Press. Though organized basically the same as the original *Cavalcade*, this edition adds twenty-one writers not in the earlier *Cavalcade*, and includes the works of more than fifty women.

The purpose of this anthology, the editors write in the "General Introduction" is twofold: to "show the evolution of African American writing as literary art and to provide the historical context that gives meaning to this writing as the expression of the black American's special experience in this nation." What is implicit, though, is the creation of a canon of writing by Black Americans; hence the explanation of the term "Af-

rican American writing" used in the title of the book. Some Negro writers—Frank Yerby and Robert Hayden—for example, "write like whites," their referents "Anglo-Saxon American derived." Most black American writers, though, are "twin-rooted, and while one root is nourished by the myths, customs, culture, and values traditional in the western world, the other feeds hungrily on the experiential reality of blackness. These writers have a special vision. They are persuaded by a special mission. In their work they combine the sermon and the liturgy, the reality and the dream, the IS and the OUGHT TO BE."

(xxi)

Building a literary tradition necessarily means assessing the literary merit of the writers. The editors do not back off from making judgment calls, proclaiming that the "basis on which works were chosen for inclusion is primarily literary merit." However, they add, "no author has been left out because we disagree with his critical attitudes, his politics, or his stand on certain issues. . . . Our selections, for example, represent practically every major African American critic from Alain Locke to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and their varying and often strongly conflicting critical stands. OUR criticism is found in the headnotes and chapter introductions" ("General Introduction" xxi).

Chronological in arrangement, the four parts serve as guideposts for the historical and literary procession of African Americans writing in this country. The Introduction to "Part 1 Pioneer Writers: 1760-1830" provides the metaphorical structure for the entire volume: accommodation, protest, and escape, the response of Black Americans to the denial of their humanity. "Part 2 Freedom Fighters: 1830-1865" contains eleven writers, among them Sojourner Truth, Charlotte L. Forten, and of course, Frederick Douglass. The introduction provides the literary backdrop of white writers like William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

"Part 3 Accommodation and Protest: 1865-1910" contains eleven writers, some of whom, like Booker T. Washington, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, Charles Chesnutt, and Paul Laurence Dunbar,

have become more familiar names because of their inclusion in recent anthologies. The procession in "Part 4 The New Negro Renaissance and Beyond: 1910 to 1954" is one that most students of American literature will recognize since names like W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Richard

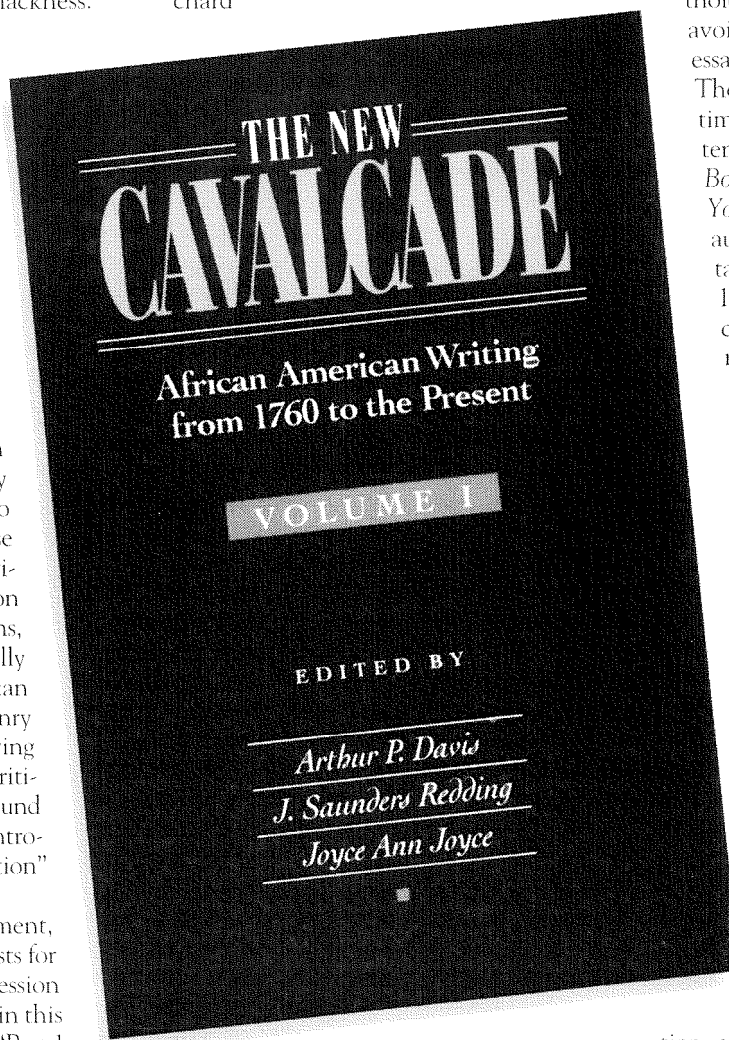
an ordained priest in the Episcopal church"), May Miller, Elma Stuckey, and Ann Petry.

The fact that the critical apparatus undergirding the texts is informed and intelligent contributes to the solidity of the work, but equally impressive is the distinctiveness and lightness of the editorial voices. Unlike the generic, homogenous style we read in most anthologies (Lauter's *Heath Anthology* avoids that tedium with individual essays by scholars for each section), *The New Cavalcade* actually sings at times. Take for example this sentence: "Wright's second work, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945), is a great American autobiography, written in the militant spirit of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, one that broke completely with the race-praising, name-dropping, best-foot-forward tradition of most of the black autobiographies written before *Black Boy*" (706).

Adding further to the readability is the format for each writer's selected bibliography. Rather than being dropped down and printed in smaller type, the bibliographical and critical information is incorporated into the text of the essay. As a result, students get a sense of the importance of scholarship and critical study, the life blood of the preservation of this literature.

Most of the writers in Volume I of *The New Cavalcade* are currently taught in African-American and in American literature classes.

Their march, in the tradition of American literature, with all American writers. And they speak, in their own special voices, for all Americans. In *Shadow and Act* Ralph Ellison, "speaking from [his] own special area of American culture," reminds us that "to embrace uncritically values which are extended to us by others is to reject the validity, even the sacredness, of our own experience. It is also to forget that the small share of reality which each of our diverse groups is able to snatch from the whirling chaos of history belongs not to the group alone, but to all of us. It is a property and a witness which can be ignored only to the danger of the entire nation." ●



Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Margaret Walker now appear even in freshman readers.

As in most anthologies, a survey of the literary and cultural milieu introduces each of the four sections. What *The New Cavalcade* adds is a critical context provided by writers like Alain Locke, Walter White ("dynamic chief executive of the NAACP, literary counselor of young black writers, and authority on lynching"), Sterling A. Brown, J. Saunders Redding, Arthur P. Davis, and Therman B. O'Daniel. More women join the cavalcade with Nella Larsen, her contemporary Jessie Fauset, Pauli Murray ("first black woman to become