“Heritage” in America: A Literary Stroll

by Werner Sollors

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds in Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

Countée Cullen, “Heritage”

Is heritage what needs to be visualized and thereby reaffirmed, or does Cullen’s poetic speaker conclude that one must resist the pull of one’s ancestry? Is there an answer to the question of “heritage”—the title of Cullen’s poem, and also a word that, like Africa, is a dactyl? Furthermore, is what the poem invokes actually his heritage, or is he imagining, or are others imagining for him, an “old world” as counter-image to the new? Cullen appears to have been skeptical of what others thought Africa should mean for him; in an essay that seems related to the poem “Heritage” he asked rhetorically: “Must we willy-nilly, be forced into writing of nothing but the old

atavistic urges, the more savage and none too beautiful aspects of our lives?” A contemporary anthology of African American Literature a bit heartlessly annotates *Spicy grove, cinnamon tree*: “Despite this line, the cinnamon tree is not native to Africa.” Be that as it may, the question remains, “What is heritage to me?” And it may be the eternal question of America, though the answer has not been the same for everyone over time.

The story of America’s relationship to its heritage is embodied early on, long before the United States came into existence, in Cotton Mather’s “Life of John Eliot,” a part of his *Magnalia Christi Americana* of 1702. Here the question was, though different in historical background, similar in rhetorical terms, “What is England to New England?” Mather describes the English background of the life of the apostle to the Indians of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in terms that make the significance of his nativity, his English heritage:

The Atlantic Ocean, like a river of Lethe, may easily cause us to forget many of the things that happened on the other side. Indeed, the *nativity* of such a man were an honor worthy the contention of as many places as laid their claims unto the famous Homer’s: but whatever places may challenge a share in the reputation of having enjoyed the *first breath* of our Eliot, it is New-England that with most right can call him hers; his *best breath*, and afterwards his *last breath* was here; and here ‘twas that God bestowed upon him sons and daughters.

He came to New-England in the month of November, A. D. 1631, among those blessed old planters which laid the foundation of a remarkable country, devoted unto the exercise of the Protestant religion, in its purest and highest reformation. He left behind him in England a vertuous young
gentlewoman, whom he had pursued and purposed a marriage unto; and she
coming hither the year following, that marriage was consummated in the
month of October, A.D. 1632.3
What Mather is proposing about Eliot’s “nativity” is to forget it. Do not worry about
John Eliot’s birthday and the place of his “first breath” (Widford, Hertfordshire, a
town Mather says he “cannot presently recover”), for Eliot really belongs to New
England, the place of “his best breath and afterwards his last breath.” Hence Mather
emphasizes the time of Eliot’s arrival in New England (November 1631—rather than
his birthday), praises him for the foundation he laid “of a remarkable country, devoted
unto the exercise of the Protestant religion,” not for any legacy he inherited, and
describes him as a family man, more on the basis of the woman he married and his
“six worthy children” than on the basis of his parentage, whose virtues are expressed
only in Eliot’s own general words: “I do see that it was a great favour of God unto
me, to season my first times with the fear of God, the word, and prayer.” Mather
gives little room to heritage as that “which comes from the circumstances of birth; an
inherited lot or portion; the condition or state transmitted from ancestors” OED 4).

This is how heritage is viewed, almost has to be viewed, from the point of
view of new beginnings. Mather’s encomium is for what Eliot did in his own life, that
is, become an exemplary Christian preacher in Roxbury, exert stellar family
government, and become a new “evangelist” who learned the difficult and “exotick”
Algonkin language and translated the Bible into it: Mather attempts to capture Eliot’s
essence with the anagram, TOILE. Eliot’s Up-Biblum God (1663) became one of the
early books printed in New England, and is currently used as a helpful tool for a
Mashpee language reclamation project. Mather’s John Eliot would thus seem to
represent early on the life of an American as a “new man,” an ancestor rather than a
descendant, a founding spirit rather than an heir.

And yet, look at the opening passage again and note how deeply very specific
notions of “heritage” are inscribed into the life story, notions that come from the
“other side” of the “Atlantick Ocean.” The central metaphor of forgetting about the
past is expressed in explicitly traditional terms, namely in a Virgilian allusion to the
river of Lethe (Aeneid book 6, Lat. Death), on the other side of which souls reanimate
new bodies in a kind of rebirth ritual; and Mather also mentions Homer. The Bible
provides the central text that is invoked to merge past, present, and future. As a
Puritan minister, Mather’s Eliot “is devoted unto the exercise of the Protestant
religion, in its purest and highest reformation” and participates in evoking the legacy
of a chosen people reaching a new promised land both in New England and in the
afterlife upon Judgment Day. Calling Eliot an “evangelist” obviously connects him
typologically to the New Testament. Mather’s account of Eliot’s missionary work
with the Indians furthermore reminds the readers of their familiarity with the English
language (and of other European languages) in contrast to the Sesquipedalia Verba of
the Indians which Mather associates with the confusion of tongues at Babel.

Mather also mentions that Eliot was prompted to Christianize the Indians by
the scriptural maxim that in “the name of Jesus Christ . . . men must be saved.” The
Qu’ran may preach that “let a man’s religion be what it will, he shall be saved, if he
conscientiously live up to the rules of it,” but “our Eliot was no Mahometan,” Mather
quips, by which he means something like “no relativist.” The Indians had to become
Puritans so that their souls could be saved.

We seem to be looking at a paradox: Forgetting about a heritage, being reborn
in the American wilderness, starting something new rather than continuing a tradition
seems in itself to be deeply anchored in a European heritage that can be defined in
terms of Protestant religion, the culture of classical education, the English language,
traditional notions of family government, and perhaps even of old stories of new
beginnings (like the *Aeneid*). Even TOILE, Mather’s anagram, is only a
recombination of all letters in Eliot’s surname. In fact, is it possible at all to represent
the new without drawing on an inherited cultural apparatus? Can one escape heritage
except by drawing on it?

This paradox is present in many toponyms of the New World. The medieval
orientation of the tri-continental known world had Jerusalem at its center and was
surrounded by the ocean. Isidore of Seville’s T-O map so readily represents this view
and the connected thought that the peoples of the three continents were descended
from Noah’s three sons, Sem, Cham, and Japheth. The Europeans became slowly
aware after 1492 that there was another something to the west. The Alsatian scholar
and poet Matthias Ringmann and the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller
recognized that it was a continent and proposed the name “America” on their 1507
map—in honor of Amerigo Vespucci and also with the happy thought that finally
there was a continent that could be named after a man.

Now vast territories could be conquered, bought, or otherwise claimed by
Europeans and be named in the paradoxical way that combines the stress on novelty
(often embodied by the word *new*) with a familiar name of an Old World country or
town. Among the newly baptized territories were New Spain (and new Galicia), New
France and Louisiana, New Netherlands (and Belgium), New Sweden, and New
England, and the cities included New Amsterdam and New Orleans (while many
Spanish cities were named after Catholic saints and symbols). Was this a continuation
or a break with the European heritage—or perhaps both?
Of course, the land did not come to the Europeans by heritage (OED 1b) but by conquest. A mode of bequeathing land within a given colony needed to be regularized, and the first law of Massachusetts to do so was passed in 1648, with the word “inheritance” in it (OED 1 a. That which has been or may be inherited; any property, and esp. land, which devolves by right of inheritance and b. *spec. Sc. Law.* Land and similar property which devolves by law upon the heir and not on executors or administrators; heritable estate, realty. As distinguished from *conquest:* land inherited and not purchased.)

There were border and title disputes (e.g. between the Dutch and the Swedes about Delaware); and there were many conflicting maps: where did Louisiana end? And not to forget, there were many clashing ideas of what might be called “European heritage” and intracolonial political and religious conflicts galore. A Venetian, Don Diego de Molina, for example, who was arrested in Virginia because he was spying for Spain, wrote a letter to the Spanish ambassador in London (in 1613) that Virginia was a “new Algiers of America,” by which he meant a “gathering-place of all the pirates of Europe.” Molina worried that the Jamestown Englishmen intended to colonize such islands as the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo and Cuba, reported that the Indians told him of large silver and gold mines, and suggested at Point Comfort that “His Majesty,” with “eight hundred or one thousand soldiers…could reduce this place with great ease, or even with five hundred, because there is no expectation of aid from England.”

The Dutch colonial traveler Isaack de Rasieres wrote in a letter in 1628 that the settlers at Plymouth colony have instituted a government “after the English form,” and have “made stringent laws and ordinances upon the subject of fornication and
adultery, which laws they maintain and enforce very strictly indeed, even among the tribes which live amongst them. They speak very angrily when they hear from the savages that we [the Dutch] live so barbarously in these respects, and without punishment.”

Early colonial poetry continued the Virgilian tradition in praise of the new. For example, Marc Lescarbot wrote a mock epic in 1607 titled *La Defaite des Sauvages Armouchiquois par la Sagamos Membertou et ses alliez Sauvages, en la Nouvelle-France, au mois de Juillet dernier* (English “The Defeat of the Armouchiquois by the Sachem Membertou and his savage allies, in New France, in the month of July, 1607”) that begins with the lines

Je ne chante l’orgueil du geant Briarée

Ni du fier Rodomont la fureur enivrée

Du sang dont il a teint préque tout l’Univers

Ni comme il a forcé les pivots des enfers.

I sing not the pride of giant Briareus,

Nor the rage of proud Rodomont, made furious

By blood with which he dyed the universe;

Nor how he made the gates of hell reverse.

Even in negation (and negative catalogues would become one way of differentiating the New world from the Old in rhetoric), the legacy of Ariost’s *Orlando Furioso* is invoked.

And Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá’s *Historia de la Nueva Mexico* (1610) is a straightforward Virgilian epic poem that begins with the lines:

Las armas y el varon heroico canto,
El ser, valor, prudencia, y alto esfuerzo,
De aquel cuya paciencia no rendida . . .

The arms and valorous hero I sing,
The bravery, wisdom, and vigor in being,
Of him whose fortitude never surrendered . . .

New World--Old World: is it the wine or the bottle that is old?

In Puritan New England (and 17th-century England), the term “heritage” itself appears with some frequency, and notions related to it are being thematized often. As the example of Mather’s Eliot has already suggested, the Bible provides the context for a sense of heritage that looks back to sacred history and the Protestant reforms and forward to Judgment day.

Hence it is not surprising that the word “heritage” is often taken from biblical quotations (it appears 44 times in the King James Version of Scripture, and there are, of course, many more uses of its numerous synonyms). The Bay Psalm Book, the first book published in the English colonies in 1640, offers a poetic rendition of a Psalm (16), addressed to God:

Thou art maintainer of my lot.
To me the lines fal’n bee
In pleasant places: yea, faire is
The heritage for me.
I will Iehovah humbly-blesse…

Cotton Mather, in a poetic eulogy dedicated to Urian Oakes, whose name in line 3 proclaims to New England anagrammatically “SURE I AN OAK’ was to thee,” offers a prayer:
Lord! From thy lofty Throne
Look down upon thy Heritage. Lett none
Of all our Breaches bee unhealed. Lett
This dear, poor Land be our Immanuel’s yet!
Lett’s bee a Goshen still!

The hope for a divine heritage of eternal life also animates Edward Taylor’s 1691 Meditation (II.46), one of the many poems the witty Puritan minister wrote before administering the Lord’s Supper in a small town in western Massachusetts. The poem takes off from the Book of Revelation with the hope for redemption on Judgment Day. After three stanzas of repentance and contrition, a more glorious vision emerges as Taylor (who did not publish his poems in his lifetime) imagines God’s throne at the end of time:

The Crown of Life, the Throne of Glorys Place,
The Fathers House blancht o’re with orient Grace.

The last two stanzas evoke an almost ecstatic vision of Heaven:

Can’an in golden print enwalld with jems:
A Kingdome rim’d with Glory round: in fine
A glorious Crown pal’de thick with all the stems
Of Grace, and of all Properties Divine.
How happy wilt thou make mee when these shall
As a bless’t Heritage unto mee fall?

Adorn me, Lord, with Holy Huswifry.
All blanch my Robes with Clusters of thy Graces:
Thus lead me to thy threshold: give mine Eye
A Peephole there to see bright glories Chases.

Then take mee in: I’le pay, when I possess,

Thy Throne, to thee the Rent in Happiness.

Taylor wittily employs detailed metaphors of secular property (housewifery, threshhold, peephole—even paying rent) in order to represent the location of God’s Throne, a neat mixing of two meanings of heritage.

If New England thinking about heritage overwhelmingly centered on the heavenly father, the colony-motherland relationship was, of course, also imagined as a generational, intrafamiliar affair. Written at the time of the Civil War in Britain, Anne Bradstreet’s “A Dialogue between Old England and New; concerning their present Troubles, Anno, 1642” may not be a typical poem, but the changing generational tone of an apparently caring but pretty cocky-sounding daughter New England talking back to her nourishing mother England is indeed noteworthy:

Dear Mother cease complaints & wipe your eyes,
Shake off your dust, chear up, and now arise,
You are my Mother Nurse, and I your flesh,
Your sunken bowels gladly would refresh,
Your griefs I pity, but soon hope to see,
Out of your troubles much good fruit to be;
To see those latter dayes of hop’d for good,
Though now beclouded all with tears and blood:
After dark Popery the day did clear,
But now the Sun in’s brightness shall appear.

Here one senses just a touch of the offspring’s protest against the parent, and this rhetoric vis-à-vis Britain would, of course, intensify in the 18th century.
The employment of “heritage” changed with Nathaniel Ward’s wildly rhetorical *Simple Cobbler of Aggawam* (published in England in 1647 under the pseudonym Theodore de la Guard): “Much lamented Sir, if you will please to retire your Self to your Closet, whither you may most safely come, and make your Peace with God, for the vast heritage of Sin your Intombed Father left upon your score, the dreadful Imprecation he poured upon the heads of his tender Posterity in Summersets and Overburyes Case, published in Seachamber by his Royal command; your own sinful Mariage, the Sophistication of Religion and Policy in your time, the Luxury of your Court and Country, your connivence with the Irish butcheries, your forgetful breaches upon the Parliament, your compliance with Popish Dogs….” And “A thousand pities it is such gallant Spirits should spend their lives, honours, heritages and sweet relations in any Wars where, for ought many of them know, some false mistake commands in Chief.” The religious reproach—common in so many fire-and-brimstone sermons—here takes on a geographic opposition of purer colony vs. wayward motherland, characterized both by a religious “heritage of Sin” and the wasting of its people’s lives and heritages.

It was in the revolutionary period that the mother-child relationship of England and America was most radically questioned and American identity redefined, now with less of a religious stress and with more diverse origins: America’s heritage could no longer be just English.

Thomas Paine, in *Common Sense* (1776), still articulated his sense of novelty of the new enterprise in the language of biblical typology:

We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birth-day of a new world is at hand, and a race of men perhaps as numerous as all
Europe contains, are to receive their portion of freedom from the events of a few months. Yet he mocked the parent-child metaphor of England and the American colonies that had been used in British parliament against the spoiled colonial offspring and turned toward family tragedy:

But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families. . . . Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This new World hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from EVERY PART of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home, pursues their descendants still.

Paine also points out that: “there is something very absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island.” And widening the sense of American kinship, Paine proclaims that

all Europeans meeting in America, or any other quarter of the globe, are COUNTRYMEN; for England, Holland, Germany, or Sweden, when compared with the whole, stand in the same places on the larger scale, which the divisions of street, town, and county do on the smaller ones; Distinctions too limited for Continental minds. Not one third of the inhabitants, even of this province, [Pennsylvania], are of English descent. Wherefore, I reprobate the phrase of Parent or Mother Country applied to England only, as being false, selfish, narrow and ungenerous.
But, admitting that we were all of English descent, what does it amount to? Nothing. Britain, being now an open enemy, extinguishes every other name and title: and to say that reconciliation is our duty, is truly farcical. The first king of England, of the present line (William the Conqueror) was a Frenchman, and half the peers of England are descendants from the same country; wherefore, by the same method of reasoning, England ought to be governed by France.

*Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), written in English by Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur—who adopted the name “J. Hector St. John” upon coming to America in 1759 and published so as to create the impression that he was an English-born farmer. Crèvecoeur came up with nothing less than a new myth of an American heritage:

What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European, or the descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and those present sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.

This may be one of the origins of the melting-pot metaphor that became common more than a century later, and with the image of the “broad lap of our great *Alma
Mater” America seems to displace the English, Dutch, and French mothers who have been left behind. But a cataloguer in the British library, Samuel Ayscough (1745-1804), was not happy with this “J. Hector St. John” and deduced that the author could not have been a simple English farmer: How can this simple and uneducated cultivator of the earth introduce “scraps of Latin,” evincing “that the author has assumed a character which he ill supports” (9), citing “Alma mater” as a case in point.” And: “A simple cultivator of the earth ought to have told a plain tale, without the brilliancy of imagination, or the ornament of figures. But these letters discover the characteristic declamation of the Frenchman, the frothy metaphors of the rhetorician, and the distinguishing verbiage of the petty philosopher of France.” (9-10).

Both Englishman Paine and Frenchman Crèvecœur (passing for English) were still (like Cotton Mather) looking backwards (to Noah, to “alma mater,” the multi-breasted Ceres figure at Ephesus), but their much more forceful thrust toward the future (a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world) and their conscious uncoupling of America from its English origins (Not one third of the inhabitants, even of this province, [Pennsylvania], are of English descent) did indeed redefine an American “heritage” (The new World hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from EVERY PART of Europe). Whether advanced for political or aesthetic motives (neither of them offered any deeply religious sense of “heritage”), their metaphors of finding “asylum” and being “melted into a new race of men” became commonplace.

The rhetoric of the American Declaration of Independence supported much anti-aristocratic thinking, and the favoring of non-hereditary governments and structures in general. The United States was formed as a new country on these new principles, and the decades following the revolution witnessed much rhetoric.
accompanying an increasing emphasis on the freestanding individual, “free of the trammels of the past,” as the new ideal. “Individualism” (of French origin, 1827 in US, Tocqueville called attention to the phenomenon) and “self-made man” (1832, US origin) are among the telling new coinages of the period. Heritage now became fully understood as what the new democracy would create, not as the inheritance from Britain or from older political systems anywhere (though the opening to multinational heritage would make possible for later American writers to find their heritage pretty much anywhere on the globe). The written Constitution was understood as a blueprint and model.

It was, of course, Ralph Waldo Emerson who extended such notions onto the areas of literature and culture. Let me just remind you of the famous opening of his essay, *Nature* (1836):

> Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Emerson’s essays could easily be mapped onto a set of binary opposites, advocating
the new, original, and direct insight over any traditional sense of heritage.

Sepulchres of the fathers (Luke 11:47)\textsuperscript{14} original relation to the universe

Tradition insight

Through their eyes face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12)\textsuperscript{15}

History of their revelation revelation to us

Dry bones of the past (Ezekiel 37:4) new men, new thoughts

Masquerade, faded wardrobe our own works and laws and worship

In short, three biblical allusions support the claim of a fresh start….

Nathaniel Hawthorne, conflicted about his Puritan heritage, often tried to balance traditionalist, conservative and future-oriented motives, reflecting the tension in human desire between the wish to escape ancestors and the yearning to fulfill them. As Hawthorne put it in his sketch “Main-Street” (1849): “Let us thank God for having given us such ancestors; and let each successive generation thank Him, not less fervently, for being one step further from them in the march of ages.”\textsuperscript{16} His novel *The House of the Seven Gables* may similarly be seen as a negotiation between, on the one hand, the daguerreotypist Holgrave’s initial Emersonian impulse for permanent renewal, “the moss-grown and rotten Past is to be torn down, and lifeless institutions to be thrust out of the way, and their dead corpses buried, and everything to begin anew” and, on the other, the thinned-out and weakened Pyncheon heritage, viewed from the point of view of an ironic narrator who, at the beginning of Chapter VI (“Maule’s Well”) uses even the description of the Pyncheon hen-coop to make comments on the problem of too narrow a sense of heritage:
Nor must we forget to mention a hen-coop of very reverend antiquity that stood in the further corner of the garden not a great way from the fountain. It now contained only Chanticleer, his two wives and a solitary chicken. All of them were pure specimens of a breed which had been transmitted down as an heirloom in the Pyncheon family, and were said, while in their prime, to have attained almost the size of turkeys, and, on the score of delicate flesh, to be fit for a prince's table. In proof of the authenticity of this legendary renown, Hepzibah could have exhibited the shell of a great egg, which an ostrich need hardly have been ashamed of. Be that as it might, the hens were now scarcely larger than pigeons, and had a queer, rusty, withered aspect, and a gouty kind of movement, and a sleepy and melancholy tone throughout all the variations of their clucking and cackling. It was evident that the race had degenerated, like many a noble race besides, in consequence of too strict a watchfulness to keep it pure.17

Using animals as symbols of pure-bred descent lines to make fun of aristocratic pretensions has remained a staple in American literature.

No one has done that more excessively than Mark Twain in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889). In Chapter 40, time traveler Hank Morgan ridicules the whole idea of royalty and knighthood and also makes fun of his medieval amanuensis Clarence’s limited political ideas:

[Clarence] believed that no nation that had ever known the joy of worshiping a royal family could ever be robbed of it and not fade away and die of melancholy. I urged that kings were dangerous. He said, then have cats. He was sure that a royal family of cats would answer every purpose. They would be as useful as any other royal family, . . . they would be laughably vain and
absurd and never know it, they would be wholly inexpensive; finally, they
would have as sound a divine right as any other royal house, and “Tom VII.,
or Tom XI., or Tom XIV. by the grace of God King,” would sound as well as
it would when applied to the ordinary royal tomcat with tights on. . . . “The
worship of royalty being founded in unreason, these graceful and harmless
cats would easily become as sacred as any other royalties, and indeed more so,
because it would presently be noticed that they hanged nobody, beheaded
nobody, imprisoned nobody, inflicted no cruelties or injustices of any sort, and
so must be worthy of a deeper love and reverence than the customary human
king, and would certainly get it. . . . ; within forty years all Europe would be
governed by cats, and we should furnish the cats. The reign of universal peace
would begin then, to end no more forever...... Me-e-e-yow-ow-ow-ow -- fzt! --
wow!” 18

So does the American postrevolutionary sense of heritage rest on a thoroughly
anti-hereditarian impulse, as such mockery might suggest?

This question alerts us to the sharp paradox that with the notion of racial
difference (and the word “race” itself a semantic inheritance from 15th-century Spain
and Provençal and Italian horsebreeders before then) very strong ideas about
immutable hereditary features have continued to coexist with the strongest
articulation of the ideology of individualism and self-made men. If heredity as
religious or cultural patrimony could be kept or abandoned at will by American
descendants, slave status and the following Jim Crow regime did not permit such
fluidity. Were these mutually reinforcing beliefs? Was the person who was free to be
anything he wanted to be, enjoying this freedom because others were enslaved? Did
the caring or not caring for patrimony coincide with the harsh rule of matrilineal slave
status ("whether children bound or free depends solely on condition of mother"), following the Latin maxim *partus sequitur ventrem*, first institutionalized in Virginia in 1662?

An early commentator on American mores who called attention to this paradoxical connection was Alexis de Tocqueville’s travel companion Gustave de Beaumont in his novel *Marie, ou l’Esclavage aux Etats-Unis, Tableau de mœurs américaines* (1835). The narrator Ludovic is in love with Marie, whose mother turns out to have some African ancestry, slowly begins to learn the power of racial thinking in America: there is no escape, as race is the only heritage believed to be *permanent*. This makes racial outcasts different from confidence-men and *parvenus* who may change their names, and makes them worse off than swindlers, bankrupts, bigamists, and thieves:

Public opinion, ordinarily so indulgent to fortune-seekers who conceal their names and previous lives, is pitiless in its search for proofs of African descent. . . . There is but one crime, of which the guilty bear everywhere the penalty and the infamy; it is that of belonging to a family reputed to be of color.-- Though the color may be effaced, the stigma remains. It seems as if men could guess it, when they could no longer see it. There is no asylum so secret, no retreat so secure as to conceal it.19

The search for signs of African heritage many generations later could be relentless—Moreau de St. Méry mentions that even Creoles with 1/512 of African ancestry can be identified by a mark on their fingernails, a notion that goes back to Alexis Littré’s 1702 report to the Académie française.
“In-this-re-publi-can-land-all-men-are-born-free-and-equal. . . .Except-the-
tribe-of-Hamo,” Herman Melville wrote in Mardi and a Voyage Thither (1849)20,
going back to the story of Noah and his three sons that we saw on the T-O map.

A fuller reading of Charles W. Chesnutt’s novel The Marrow of Tradition
(1901) could illuminate the issue of an even invisible black heredity as a powerful
force that divides an allegorical American family, and tragically separates two look-
alike half-sisters, Janet and the white Olivia:

Blood is thicker than water, but, if it flow too far from conventional channels,
may turn to gall and wormwood. Nevertheless, when the heart speaks, reason
falls into the background, and Janet would have worshiped this sister, even
afar off, had she received even the slightest encouragement. So strong was this
weakness that she had been angry with herself for her lack of pride, or even of
a decent self- respect. It was, she sometimes thought, the heritage of her
mother’s race, and she was ashamed of it as part of the taint of slavery.21

Moving toward a tentative conclusion of this paper, though not a resolution of
the dilemma I have outlined, I wish to report a joke from the 1940s that speaks to the
problem. A black man who is asked to go to the Jim Crow part of the train tells the
conductor: “I done quit the race.” This is the punch line, and it is a joke because the
assumption is that while quitting most types of heritage is permissible, at times even
encouraged, leaving one’s black race is impossible.

In his poem “Heritage,” Countée Cullen may have expressed the wish to be
free from ancestry, yet he would always appear to others as someone whose heritage
must be African, no matter whether there are any cinnamon trees there or not.

2 Early, ed., *My Soul’s High Song*, p. 568.


9 Bible. O.T. Psalms. English. Bay Psalm book. 1640. *The whole Booke of Psalmes faithfully translated into English metre. Whereunto is prefixed a discourse declaring not only the lawfullness, but also the necessity of the heavenly ordinance of singing Scripture psalmes in the churches of God.* [Seven lines of Scripture texts] 1640 Psalm p. 16.

10 1682 Mather, Cotton, 1663-1728. Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 319 (filmed) A poem dedicated to the memory of the Reverend and excellent Mr. Urian Oakes, the late pastor to Christ’s flock, and praesident of Harvard-Colledge, in Cambridge. Who was gathered to his people on 25d 5mo 1681. In the fifty’th year of his age. [Seven lines of quotations] [4], 16 p. (4to), here p. 15.

11 (Repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 120.
Individualism is a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth. Our fathers were only acquainted with *egoïsme* (selfishness). Selfishness is a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with himself and to prefer himself to everything in the world. Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. *(Democracy in America*, II.i). At


One only has to think of Obama’s ancestral Irish cottage. See


Woe unto you! for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and your fathers killed them.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.


Hawthorne employs the word “heritage” in Chapter IV, for the property of Waldo County that the Pyncheons want. *The House of the Seven Gables* at


Translated for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (25 September 1845): 68. See also the more recent English translation by Barbara Chapman, *Marie; or, Slavery in the United States* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958). See also Jean
