

BY HAROLD A. JACKSON, JR.

The New Hermeneutic and the Understanding of Spirituals

I

Palmer, in his book *Hermeneutics*,¹ lists several hermeneutical approaches and then says that no hermeneutical approach as listed should be thought of as an absolute approach to the problem of understanding and interpretation.² It is my contention that Palmer is right in his observation, but not necessarily correct in his conclusion that Gadamer's approach to the hermeneutical problem is the best. I see, however, the Gadamerian approach to be the foundational step in the new hermeneutic; all the rest has been a prolegomena.

Hence, in this paper, I shall try to show that the dialectical approach to a text is probably the best way to understand that text, because it lessens the tendency on the part of the individual to come to the text with preconceived ideas of "seeing" the text. The dialectic is an approach in which the subject matter interrogates the would-be questioner. Thus the questioner does not interrogate the object, but the subject-object syndrome becomes the object-subject factor. Therefore, we do not see a world *in* the text, but *through* the text. The object puts to us the question of what called it into being. "When we see a great work of art and enter its world, we do not leave home as much as 'come home.' We say at once: truly it is so! The artist has said what *is*."³ However, this raises a question: Is it really true that we understand the new world which is opened to us by art, or a text, since we are already participating in the structures of pre-understanding which can make it true for us? Put another way: In our dialog with the text, how do we understand questions put forth by it when we have been pre-conditioned by our past as to what is true or not true?

This question will be dealt with in this paper, but I am not sure that it will be solved to the satisfaction of anyone — not even the author. Perhaps we can find part of the answer in Heidegger's approach to the hermeneutical problem.

1.

Heidegger looks at man as finite transcendence: finite because of his own specific being, and transcendence because he realizes that his possibilities can always transcend what he at any given moment realizes.

¹Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1969), chap. 3.

²*Ibid.*, p. 66.

³*Ibid.*, p. 168.

Because of his potentiality of being able to transcend himself within his own finiteness, he categorizes his thinking in order not to come to terms with non-being. "Objects" are placed under the power of him, the "subject," which cuts off dialog and never allows the "object" (text) to put the question to the subject. Categorical thinking "is no longer a matter of open responsiveness to the world but of restless efforts to master it."⁴ Hence, man wants to objectify his existence and seeks logical empirical solutions to clarify his being. He does this because he does not understand that his finite being is "thrown" into the being in which he participates. This is the being which allows man's finite being to be kept from non-being. Only when man tries to transcend being in order to control his destiny is he confronted with the threat of non-being. Not until he realizes that his categorical thinking is a manipulation of ideas and concepts will he be able to participate in being — not as one who controls his destiny, but as one who freely participates in that destiny. This latter participation Heidegger would call the participation of the "authentic man." Therefore, in answer to the question, we must say that a man who clearly

understands his prior relationship to reality, the clearer it will become to him that the understanding he has achieved needs further clarification as an interpretation of his relationship. Thus, understanding, as the interpretation of the prior relationship, allows one to see that relationship in a new light, which leads to a reinterpretation of it, which sheds still more light on prior relationship, which allows the need for further clarification, and so on.⁵

So, a man who brings the structured pre-understandings of only his world will not truly understand the new world that the text opens up to him. Pre-understanding is important, but it is the pre-understanding of the text; it is with this pre-understanding that one can ask the text the proper questions and in turn be interrogated by the text. Of course, the interrogation by the text is most important, and our pre-understanding of the text allows us to understand the question.

One can readily see that if a dialectical approach is made to a text, the involvement of language is very important — the language of the interpreter and the language of the text itself. Palmer says that "language shapes man's seeing and his thought — both his conception of himself and his world (the two are not so separate as they may seem). His very vision of reality is shaped by language."⁶ He stresses that language is something which must be heard rather than seen. Naturally, we cannot go back to the oral transmission of the word, but we must remember that the "primordial expressiveness of the spoken word" helps us to better understand what is meant.

But although there is a certain primordial power in spoken language, we must in many cases be content with the written word. Yet, this

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1969), p. 35ff.

⁶ Palmer, p. 9.

written word "fixes" in history an event which has happened in time. Within this "language-event," language has saved for us the cultural experience of the text-makers; it is through this language-event that, as we open ourselves to the questioning of the text, we become *existent in it* and begin to *understand through it*. In this process of trying to find out what is the "hidden meaning" of the text, we come into conflict with other worlds; "it means reorganizing the problem of a conflict of horizons and taking steps to deal with it, rather than sweeping it under the rug. . . ."⁷

In trying to get to the meaning of a text through its language, there are three structural elements of existence which must be understood: world, understanding, interpretation. "World is not the whole of beings but the whole in which the human being finds himself already immersed, surrounded by its manifestations as revealed through an always pregrasping, encompassing understanding."⁸ In other words, "world" is that part of the world which man comes into contact with and which influences him.⁹ Palmer says that according to Heidegger "understanding" is "the power to grasp one's own possibilities for being, within the context of the lifeworld in which one exists."¹⁰ It is the basis of *all* interpretation. This self-understanding can be actualized when it realizes the potentiality of the self. That potentiality is to be able to stand in the NOW open to the possibilities that the future offers which are based on the traditions that the past has given us. However, this cannot be done if the self allows its world to tell it what it must do and be. When this happens, the self loses its being among beings and is not aware of non-being. There is no anxiety, but only tranquility. We know from Paul Tillich that when anxiety is a structural element in the human existence of man, man becomes aware of his total being. In that total self-understanding man can actualize himself in his openness to being and awareness of non-being. By being aware of non-being, man knows that his ontic self-affirmation is threatened "relatively in terms of fate, [and] absolutely in terms of death."¹¹ Hence, we find in understanding a historical stance, because self-understanding actualizing its potentiality is in essence temporal; thus, all potentiality is history — past, present, and future.

As for interpretation, it is grounded in the reality that comes to meet us. That is, we do not analyze the text, but rather it analyzes us. Consequently, when we approach a text, the text brings forth its own being and manifestations, and does not, cannot, rely on the meaning projected by our own being.

Thus, we can see that the three structural elements of human existence are interlocutory. Also, they all point to an ontological process of understanding and interpreting and not to an anthropomorphic one. This

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Vid.*, Achtemeier, p. 33.

¹⁰ Palmer, p. 131.

¹¹ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 41.

process goes far beyond the metaphysical systems of reason, freedom, love, or other expressions of will. Normally, these systems are simply interpretations of correctness or "rightness," but hermeneutics is concerned with revelation — hidden meaning. Therefore, language is the key to revealing the hidden meaning which lies behind the text. "Language is not an expression of man, but an appearance of being. Thinking does not express man, it lets being happen as language event."¹² It is the key because language-event is a historical process and as historical "... is life with a meaning, and language is the reality through which the brute process of events gains and perpetuates the meaning which makes it history." Carl Michalson maintains that language is historical; therefore, "historical language is history interpreting itself."¹³

Now we see that the three structural elements of human existence — world, understanding, and interpreting — cannot ontologically take place without language, and we find that language is historical; therefore, we can say that they are mediums of human existence through which our "world" is understood and interpreted. But, if language is also an appearance of being, then being is also a medium of human existence. Hence, we see that language, history, and being are very much related. Thus, we can agree with Gadamer that they are mediums which are interrelated and interfused.¹⁴

2.

Although language, history, and being are interrelated and interfused, we should deal with each in order to understand that interrelatedness and interfusion. Let us first consider being itself. Being is that life-force in which all beings participate and get their being. Within this being, non-being is also a participant.

Nonbeing is not a concept like others. It is the negation of every concept; but as such it is an inescapable content of thought and, as the history of thought has shown, the most important one after being-itself.¹⁵

Because man's finite being participates in being-itself, man is ever aware of his transcendence and strives to overcome the threat of his nonbeing and control the power of being-itself. Inasmuch as this is not possible, man becomes alienated from being and plunges into the labyrinth of further alienation. Since this is alienation from being-itself, it is also alienation from the self and true understanding. Paul Tillich in his book *The Courage to Be* says that the existential products of man's unawareness of nonbeing are fate and death. The threat of nonbeing ontologically is absolute in the threat of death and relative in the threat of fate. It is in fate that the self responds to the "they" of the world and never seeks

¹² Palmer, p. 155.

¹³ Carl Michalson, *Theology Today*, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Vid.*, Palmer, p. 177.

¹⁵ Tillich, p. 15.

to transcend its present to reach the possibilities which the future might offer. In this kind of situation, being is brought to expression by the event of language. And it is *through* language that one finds the "self-affirmation of [his own] being in spite of the fact of nonbeing."¹⁶ Language opens up the world of the essential self and allows that world to interpret itself so that the self may understand the world in which it participates.

As we look at history, we find that it is based upon events that have taken place in the past — near or distant. It is an accumulation of statistics and facts which can never "come into being" without the aid of language. Because history is the bedrock in which tradition is embedded, "... language is the reservoir and communication medium of the tradition: tradition hides itself in language, and language is a 'medium' like water."¹⁷

Finally, there is language itself. Although language is an appearance of being, it is within being that language is housed. Only by being a participatory element in being is language able to bring forth the "historical consciousness" of being. The same is true with history. Unless language is a participant in history, the coming into being of neither language nor history could take place. But because of the historical consciousness (prestructure of understanding or preunderstanding that we were talking about — historical consciousness is Gadamer's term which we shall use from now on) of being, we are aware that we stand in tradition and exist through it. On account of this awareness, being calls forth language in order that it (being) can come to appearance in the fullest affirmation of itself. When language comes to expression an "event" takes place, which means that history is made. Thus, history participates in language and language participates in history.

3.

Is there anything more that we can say about the hermeneutical approach and how we apply it to the text? There is certainly much more we can say, and we shall. But first, let us outline some pertinent things which we should be aware of as we go about our task. When dealing with a text, we should be aware that the text might have (1) a hidden meaning. We must remember that there are no "presuppositionless interpretations." When the text was formed, that present moment was seen and understood in light of the "preconceptions bequeathed from the past."¹⁸ Thus, the New Testament concept of Jesus as the Christ is hidden in the scriptures of the Old Testament. Hence, we must be aware that a text could be saying more than its manifest content reveals. We must be aware that not only was a historical consciousness present by the text-maker in the formation of the text, but we must take into considera-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Palmer, p. 176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

tion (2) our own historical consciousness. The "meaning" of the past is predicated on the questions the present puts to it. The past is not *in toto* of itself. Every event stands beside, under, and/or above any other event, as well as interacts with it. Thus, it not only gives meaning to itself but contributes meaning to other events — past and present. Hence, in this relatedness, the future takes on meaning. Therefore, it is impossible for us to approach any situation with completely open and unprejudiced minds. Our world causes us to bring preconceived ideas to every situation which, in turn, causes us to interpret any situation with a pre-understanding of our history. This historical consciousness is brought about by historical research, philological exegesis, and aesthetic consciousness. Another thing that we must be aware of is (3) the sociological and psychological factor. Why was the text written at a certain time in a particular situation and what was the mind-set of the people? Historical research can help us answer this question, but it can never tell us why such-and-such an event happened to some people and not others, yet all were from the same milieu. Lastly, we must be aware that (4) the text does the main part of the interrogating. We must have the same relationship with the text as the disciples had with Jesus. You remember that the disciples asked Jesus who he was. The reply, "Who do you say I am?" The answer, "Some say that you are . . ." The reply, "But who do *you* say I am?" We must expect that in questioning the text, we will be questioned; and we will have to give an answer before we pose another question.

One final thing we should think of, which is related to awareness, is temporal distance. Gadamer believes that ". . . it is the function of time to eliminate what is not essential, allowing the full meaning that lies hidden in a thing to become clear."¹⁹ Negative prejudgments are eliminated by time and the prejudgments which lead to a true interpretation is able to come forth. "Only with the passage of time we can grasp 'what it is that the text says'; only gradually does its historical significance emerge and begin to address the present."²⁰

4.

It is always good to talk about the theoretical aspects of hermeneutics, but how do we make the theory applicable to the text? Heidegger says that we must have inner violence and struggle with the text before we can reach the "meaning" of the text. He maintains that this is so because the truth that is concealed in the text creates a paradox; it at the same time reveals and conceals meaning and places the interpreter on the boundary between what is said and what is unsaid. Consequently, the hidden meaning involves a process of constantly reinterpreting what is continually being disclosed.

Rudolf Bultmann, in dealing with the New Testament, views the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

kerygma of the scriptures as the key in unlocking the hidden meaning. He says that the kerygma is the proclamation that "Jesus Christ is Lord." Then he goes about demythologizing the scripture.

. . . demythologizing is directed against the shallow literalism in the modern way of seeing, the tendency of laymen and even theologians to regard language as merely information rather than as the medium through which God confronts man with the possibility of a radically new . . . self-understanding . . . it does not seek to strike down and destroy the mythical symbol, but regards it as a window to the sacred. To interpret the symbol is to recollect its original, authentic, but now hidden meaning.²¹

I believe that both things must be done. I believe that every text has an underlying message, which can be called the kerygma, but I think that violence must be done to some texts in order to get to this underlying message.

In order to illustrate more fully what I mean, I would like to deal with black expression in Black American experience. That expression is found mostly in the Negro Spiritual. Naturally, the expression is also found in the sermon of the black minister: In the black minister's preaching, the peculiar black experience in America comes to expression in a special way; the sermon constantly calls the black man to make a decision concerning his *de facto* enslavement. The decision calls for the freedom of the soul by accepting God's word, but it strikes close to the liberation of the whole man — body and soul. But this paper will not be concerned with the sermon of the black preacher, but rather the slave songs of black people.

II.

It has been claimed by some scholarship that the American Negro was influenced by the rural religious music of America; he took the tunes and the texts and fashioned them to his personal use, e.g., "To hide yourself in the mountain top, to hide yourself from God" becomes "Went down to the rocks to hide my face, the rocks cried out no hiding place."²² This might be true in some instances, but one must truly analyze black music in America before a statement such as the above can be made. William Edward Burghardt DuBois says that there are three stages in the music of Negroes in America. The first stage was that of pure African song: the African brought with him the song of his homeland, but it became meaningless to future generations of blacks who had no immediate contact with the homeland. This was especially true when the African language disappeared and was replaced by the language of the New World. The second stage was that of slave songs: the songs in this era were distinctively Afro-American in character. Because of the acquiring

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²² Sterling Brown gives several examples of these in his article, "Negro Folk Expression, Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads, and Work Songs," *Phylon*, Vol. XIV, No. 1 (March 1953), pp. 45-61.

of a new language and the remaining vestiges of the old African cults, the black songs were new expressions of being which found birth in the American slave society. They told of exile, death, and searching for meaning in life. The third stage is that in which Negro songs *were* influenced by the songs of the New World. DuBois says that there is another stage which can be mentioned, that is, "where the songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody, as 'Swanee River' and 'Old Black Joe.'"²³ He thought that the best songs were from the slave era and calls ten selected songs from this era "master songs." William Arnis Fisher, writing in 1926, agrees that the best songs are from the slave era. He says,

The best of these songs had their birth in the slave era when heartstrings were taunt, when in some sections all gatherings, even religious meetings, were forbidden and in darkness with secrecy and danger each must 'Steal away to Jesus.' In both texts and music the post-war Spirituals lack the elemental vigor, directness, naturalness and spontaneity of the earlier songs. The texts have become sophisticated and the music debased by the hybrid white American product — the gospel hymn.²⁴

William Fisher gives some reasons why the Spirituals degenerated into the debased hybrid gospel hymn. First, the slave songs and slavery were so interwoven that the music brought to mind the era of bondage; second, the new "freeman" turned his back on the past, thus the music of the past was forgotten; third, the new black songs took on the character of the white hymns and revival songs because the younger generation of freedmen took up white people's ways; and lastly, the newly freed black was ashamed of the music of his ancestors because he thought that it was a sign of an unprogressive era. William Fisher then quotes from Miss Lucy McKim's "Songs of the Royal Contrabands" in *Dwight's Journal of Music*:

. . . they are valuable as an expression of the character and life of the race which is playing such a conspicuous part in our history. The wild, sad strains tell, as the sufferers themselves never could, of crushed hopes, keen sorrow, and a dull daily misery which covered them as hopelessly as the fog from the rice swamps. On the other hand, the words breathe twisting faith in rest in the future — in 'Canaan's fair and happy land,' to which their eyes seemed constantly turned.²⁵

From Miss Lucy McKim's quotation, it is difficult to understand why such "soulful" music as the Spirituals started to degenerate to the hybrid gospel hymn. Fortunately, however, that degeneration did not take place completely and the Spiritual is preserved for posterity; but, because of the language of the Spirituals and the religious expressions which came forth, they were misunderstood by white Americans who sought to

²³ William E. B. DuBois, "Of the Sorrow Songs," *The Souls of Black Folk in Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 382.

²⁴ William Arnis Fisher, ed., *Seventy Negro Spirituals* (Boston: Oliver Ditson Co., 1926), p. viii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

preserve this indigenous music. The Spirituals are not the happy songs of religious experience but songs of sorrow and blues. Wayman B. McLaughlin says that

The spirituals are sacred folk-music born out of the aches, pains, and joys of existence. The soul-life of a people is here woven into a testament of mystery and holiness. Nymph-like, amid shadows and echoes, the singers of this music weaved out of the matrix of economic, social, and religious circumstances a web of being which was ultimate and personal. Thus, these songs reflect light and darkness in the heave and flow of a personal reality.²⁶

McLaughlin goes on to say that "... one of the most fruitful ways of thinking about spirituals may be in terms of symbolical language and mystical meaning."²⁷ In black singing one cannot always get at the meaning of a song except through the symbolic and mystical aspects which underlie that meaning. This brings us to the aspect of the hermeneutical process as it relates to the Spiritual and its text.

1.

When we approach the text of a Spiritual, we find that the language of the text is the most outstanding thing. And the moment we are aware of that language, we sense that it ought to be heard rather than seen. However, we cannot always take advantage of hearing a Spiritual sung (and rightly sung); therefore, we must resort to the printed word.

Written language fixes in history an event. In the case of the Spiritual, that event is the whole episode of the slave experience. The language of the Spiritual allows us to become alive in the text, which further allows us to participate in the event of slavery itself. Thus we are able to see and understand the world of the text-makers *through* the text.

But before we are able to come to a full understanding and an adequate interpretation of the text, we must become aware of some of the previous things we said about the text. One of these things is the aspect of the hidden meaning. You remember that we said that there are no presuppositionless interpretations — all preconceptions are bequeathed from the past; the text can say more than it reveals; a writer has a historical consciousness. An illustration of hidden meaning can be found in the Spiritual, "Steal Away to Jesus."

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus
Steal away, steal away home
I ain't got long to stay here

My Lord, he calls me
He calls me by the thunder
The trumpet sounds within-a my heart
I ain't got long to stay here.

²⁶ Wayman B. McLaughlin, "Symbolism and Mysticism in the Spirituals," *Phylon*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1 (March 1963), p. 69.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

As one makes a superficial observation of the text, he would think that the slave, in moments of religious ecstasy, was saying that one should meditate on Jesus because death will catch up with him sooner than he thinks. The stanzas indicate that all of nature is calling him to the Lord.

This is a superficial reading of the *Spiritual*, but let us look at it more carefully. First, there is an experiential memory which comes from out of the past that helps form certain preconceptions. One such memory is the African practice of secret meetings where children were taught the morality of the African cult.²⁸ Also, an African tribe would hold "camp meetings" in order to demonstrate the solidarity of the tribal morality structure. These meetings were religious, because every aspect of African life was religiously oriented whether it involved the medicine man or small children at play. This memory never left the newly planted African, and for the generations which came after him it took on intrinsic value. Secondly, as we look at this particular *Spiritual* for its hidden meaning, we find that the writer has a historical consciousness which gives special meaning to the text.

Because large assemblies of blacks were prohibited by law in the South, the slave leaders had to resort to all kinds of insidious ways to convene secret meetings. The religious song was one such device. It was this fact of history which was in the mind of the author of "Steal Away." There is evidence that Nat Turner was the author of the *Spiritual*. Miles Mark Fisher asys that

Negroes stole way from numerous plantations to African cult meetings just as Nat Turner of insurrectionary notoriety convened his companions by the ironical singing of 'Steal Away.' The external evidence of Turner's revolt against slavery concides with the internal evidence of this song. He knew that should he be caught meeting with other Negroes the oft-repeated burden of the song would be true: 'I hain't got long to stay here.' Yet, he was in a quandary how else to act when his personal Lord was calling him like a patrol officer with a trumpet by 'the thunder,' 'by the lightening,' 'by green trees' bending at will and by signs of the judgment. He who sang so sweetly stood 'a-tremblin'" as he understood full well that he was a 'poor sinner,' to say the least. . . . The circumstances all point to Nat Turner of Southampton County, Virginia, as the author of 'Steal Away,' about 1825, the time of his call to be a prophet.²⁹

With this kind of evidence in, preconceptions bequeathed from the past and the historical consciousness of the writer, we can see that the text says more than it reveals.

The *Spiritual*, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," is another text in which there is hidden meaning. Unless one does violence to the text, the meaning will remain hidden and it will never be able to be understood in the same historical consciousness of the text-maker. Thus, in order to get behind the text, we must attack it with all the tools at hand.

²⁸ *Vid.* Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), p. 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

Therefore, if we understand that the writer of a text has a historical consciousness, we must assume that that consciousness takes place within some historical process. We have already said that language is a historical process where history interprets itself through language-event. However, in order for language and history to take place, the life-force of being must be present. And it is when all three of these interrelate and interfuse with each other that interpretation occurs.

Thus it is through language that we come to a text, and it is through language that a text is interpreted. And it is the text that brings forth its own being, and does not depend upon us for an interpretation. Being is brought forth because the text as language-event stands in history where interpretation occurs.

Therefore, language is the tool with which we do violence to the text. As we understand that the writer of the text has a historical consciousness where preconceptions are formed, we must understand our own historical consciousness. Then we must formulate a dialectic with the past and the present in order for the text to come forth with its truth. This dialectic takes place in the form of research in which every aspect of the language-event is brought into its proper perspective as to the relationship of the practice of the present with the tradition of the past. In our research we find that every event interacts with another event and the way in which we interpret that event depends upon some presuppositions from previous events. Thus, we learn that every future interpretation is dependent upon past interpretations, and past interpretations point to the way in which the future can be interpreted. Because past interpretations influence the future, it is inevitable that some traditional things in a culture are constantly carried over in the historical process. This is especially true in some linguistic practices, e.g.,

in language, the African tradition aims at circumlocution rather than at exact definition. The direct statement is considered crude and unimaginative; the veiling of all contents in ever-changing paraphrases is considered the criterion of intelligence and personality.³⁰

Miles Mark Fisher relates an incident of seventy-six priests who were executed because they talked in ambiguous terms about the death of a certain king instead of saying unequivocally that he was dead. Fisher also relates the *bo akutia* custom in which an African who was aggrieved with another took a friend to the house of his adversary. "The offended person then vilified his friend in the presence of the adversary for whom the abuse was really intended."³¹ Indirect statement was further accomplished by substituting fictitious names in stories of real persons or by allegory where certain words were fitted to objects described.

Such is the Spiritual "Swing Low." Under ordinary circumstances where we do not attempt to carry on a dialog with the text, we think that the song is expressing some other-worldly desire. The first thing

³⁰ Le Roi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1963), p. 31.

³¹ Miles Mark Fisher, p. 9.

that we say is that the slaves were looking toward heaven as the place where they could escape "de trouble of dis worl'." But as we stand in this present moment and realize that the events of the present are conditioned in what took place in the past, we discover the text in its total being. We put to it the question: What are you saying? And the question is put to us: What do you say I am saying? According to what answer we give, the text will either say: "How can you say that when your present dilemma is a result of past events?" or "In the view of the present situation, you have discovered the truth of what is."

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home.

The truth of what "is" is that this Spiritual, like many others, was a code song which indicated that it was time to leave the plantation. Miles Fisher says that after Nat Turner's revolt, many slaves wanted a chariot to come from out of the skies and take them to Africa. But if we continually keep our dialog with the Spiritual, a better answer can be given to the song. Because of the research which the text requires of us, we found that Africans resorted to veiled and indirect language; much of this indirectness occurs in allegory. Therefore, "home" in the Spiritual is not heaven, but the freedom land of the North. The "chariot" is not some rig the angels put together, but the symbolic train of the underground railroad.

I looked over Jordan and what did I see
.....
A band of angels coming after me
.....
If you get there before I do
.....
Tell all my friends I'll be there too
.....

In many of the Negro Spirituals "Jordan" is that symbolic river which separates the "freedom land" from the land of enslavement. It points back to the Old Testament story of the Hebrew children crossing the Sea of Reeds, and includes the flavor of the New Testament because it was in the Jordan that John the Baptist baptized men into a new life of freedom. And, of course, Jesus was baptized there. There are other symbolic statements: "band of angels" is that small group of men who were to take them on their journey; "if you get there before I do . . . tell all my friends I'll be there to . . ." is not that they will meet in the great by-and-by after death, but that soon they too will be parting from the plantation and will meet with the others in the freedom land.

The language of the Spiritual must be thought of in terms of what Ernst Fuchs calls the "language of self-understanding." It is the language of faith which "is the language of an existence that understands itself." The Spiritual is the medium through which the black man made an affirmation of himself as man; and through this medium, he portrayed

his existence before God. Although the nature of the language of the Spiritual cannot be separated from the reality in which it participates (slavery), there is a reality which lies behind the existence of the language (the historical African consciousness).

2.

This brings us to the question of why the Negro Spiritual was called into being. Could it be because the black man in slavery was so weary of his condition that he hoped for a better life somewhere? Africans were brought from their homeland to a land where they were "not only physical and environmental aliens but products of a completely alien philosophical system."³² Le Roi Jones says that

Herskovits . . . points out that most of the 'myths' about the Negro past were formed by the new masters' refusal to understand that the Africans were not governed by the same mores and culture references as Western man, that they had come from an alien land and culture. But one of the most persistent traits of the Western white man has always been his fanatical and almost instinctive assumption that his systems and ideas about the world are the most desirable, and further, that people who do not aspire to them, or at least think them admirable, are *savages or enemies*.³³

Therefore, in the wake of being thought of as savages or enemies of western culture, the slave had to deal with his world. In his dealings with this world, he had to come to grips with the environmental pressures which influenced him.

As we have already seen, the African world had a great influence on the slave, especially if he was of the first generation of slaves in America. The African's belief was in the supernatural, which made it inconceivable to participate in any aspect of life that did not include the worship of the gods. In America, however, the African found that the white man conducted his life without fear or thought of the gods. Also in America the threat to the very being of the African was challenged and his identity was dissolving into the realm of nonentity. Thus, in an attempt to deal with his world, the slave called the Spiritual into being. The Spiritual is the cry of the innermost depths of the soul which allows a person to make an affirmation to life even in its darkest moments.

³² Jones, p. 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

