Ernest J. Gaines’s Good News: Sacrifice and Redemption in *Of Love and Dust*

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In his 1967 novel, *Of Love and Dust*, Ernest J. Gaines depicts a world in which the lives of his, mainly, black characters are sharply limited by their race. On the Louisiana plantation where he comes to work in the summer of 1946 after being bonded out of jail where he has been awaiting trial for killing another young black man in a roadhouse fight, Marcus Payne is thrust into a milieu which accentuates, even more than his native Baton Rouge did, the liabilities of being black in the post-World War II South. But it does not appear to be Gaines’s primary intention to contribute merely another portrayal of the subjugation of blacks. Rather, he is undertaking a broader task than that, signalled by the presence in the novel of two major white characters, Cajuns, who, by virtue of the fact that each has contracted a sexual liaison with a black person, are marked in as real a sense as are the novel’s black characters. It is Gaines’s point that the same system that victimizes the oppressed victimizes the oppressor, that all are caught up in the web that racial prejudice weaves—not only the bayou Cajuns, but the “Big People” as well, for example, Marshall Hebert, the owner of the plantation where the action is played out.

Life on Hebert’s plantation operates according to the unwritten but universally known code that governs white-black relations there. Gaines has seized upon the most delicate and incendiary portions of that code, those that have to do with sexual relationships between black men and white women and between white men and black women, and fashioned a story in which Marcus’s relationship with Louise Bonbon, the wife of the plantation’s Cajun overseer, runs parallel in important ways to the overseer Bonbon’s relationship with his black mistress, Pauline Guerin. Each relationship in its own way violates the code, and each progresses from its initial grounding in lust or vengeance or violence to become a mutually loving union. However, the parallel only goes so far. Marcus emerges as a superior human being in his ability to withstand the pressures that transgression of the code imposes. Bonbon is unable to bear up against these pressures: in killing Marcus, he lays aside his sense of the young man’s stature and submits to the obligations of the code. Marcus is true to the end: when he might have fled and saved himself, he stays behind and, effectively, lays down his life for his friend, Louise.

Both his final act of self-sacrifice and his resistance to the racial status quo establish the exceptional nature of Marcus’s courage, and Gaines has laden his portrayal of the young man with details that suggest a messianic figure. Indeed, in the manner of Melville’s portrayal of his protagonist in “Billy Budd” and Faulkner’s depiction of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, Gaines has amplified his image of Marcus as messiah by establishing a number of specific parallels between him and Christ. In this...
latter context the recapitulation of events by the black narrator, Jim Kelly, amounts to an evangelistic celebration of Marcus. Jim’s story contrasts to the untrue court account, the “official” account, of the death of Marcus (here the parallel to “Billy Budd” is notable); it is the inverse of the “bad news.” Bishop, the novel’s Uncle Tom figure, is fearful of hearing from Jim, the news that Marcus is about to pursue his radical plan that flagrantly defies the code of racial behaviour.

The key to Jim’s credibility as a narrator is his confidant status. Like Nick Carraway of The Great Gatsby, he is able to salvage “greatness” for a character of nefarious reputation by virtue of being a good listener and a sensitive and intelligent man who has enough in common with his subject to be able to understand and identify with him. Jim is privy to the life stories of both Marcus and Bonbon (as well as to the apprehensions of many of the novel’s minor characters) because they “looked at [him],” as Bonbon does, “as somebody [they] could talk to” (p. 147); and the sensitivity that gives him a willing ear in the first place allows him to sympathize deeply with the two male protagonists when he becomes familiar with their respective backgrounds. However, Jim identifies with Marcus and Bonbon not only because of his own oppressed background as a black but also because he comes to recognize that the involvement of each in an intense love relationship with a woman has helped to transform his life in the way that his own life had been transformed by his relationship with his ex-lover, Billy Jean, whose memory he evokes frequently in the meditative portions of his narration. Jim’s final vindication of Marcus and assertion of the latter’s moral superiority proceeds from Jim’s knowledge of the similar backgrounds of his two subjects and of the remarkably like circumstances that characterize their lives on Hebert’s plantation. By establishing these similarities Jim is able to point more effectively to the moral superiority of the young black man over his Cajun counterpart.

Jim’s “approval” of both Marcus and Bonbon and his awareness that the similarities between the two outweigh the differences fly in the face of the public image the two have on the plantation. Marcus’s murder of another young man has given him the status of convict and he is frequently so referred to on the quarter. His sullenness, his refusal to dress as a field worker, his reputation as a trouble-maker make him as undesirable in the community. Most of all his blatant usurpation of the place of Bonbon in the latter’s own home threatens the security of all. Bonbon is the dreaded white overseer who moves about armed, drives the field workers mercilessly, has raped black women in the fields, and has now for some time kept Pauline as his mistress and supported the twins born of their union. Yet for all its hatred and dread of Marcus and Bonbon, the plantation community views the two as polar opposites, embodying elements of the traditional white-black relationship: overseer-slave, oppressor-oppressed, sadist-victim.

But Jim does not subscribe to the public view. His sympathetic opinion of Bonbon, whom he has known for over three years, derives from his awareness of both the Cajun’s background and the present paradoxical circumstances of his life. If he was “brutal” as Aunt Ca’line
characterized him, it was “because he had been brought up in a brute-taught world and in brute-taught times” (p. 67). Bonbon tells Jim “about how poor he was as a child” and how “he had never gotten any more than a third-grade education” (p. 148). His marriage to Louise has been forced and he lives in constant fear of her family, who at one point have returned her to him after she has run away. Bonbon’s present predicament is most acutely made evident to Jim on the day the overseer asks him to drive Pauline and himself to Baton Rouge. Jim recognizes that he has been asked to play the role of surrogate consort: Bonbon cannot travel openly with Pauline “dressed like [she] was now or to have that powder smelling on her breast like Pauline did now” (p. 140). Jim sees that Bonbon “needed [his gun] everywhere he went. He needed it around his own Cajuns, he needed it around the Negroes in the field, and even needed it around these mulattoes who didn’t know him at all” (p. 144). Most of all, Jim realizes that the very attitude of racial supremacy Bonbon characteristically assumes becomes a liability, given his present needs: “He wanted to be with [Pauline]—yes, you could tell from watching them at the table how much he loved her and wanted to be with her; but he had to go to a black man, in a respectful way, and ask that black man for a room. He didn’t know how to do that. He didn’t know how to talk to a black man unless he was giving orders” (p. 145).

Jim has known Marcus for a shorter time than he has known Bonbon, but this disadvantage is compensated for by the racial heritage he has in common with Marcus as well as by the fact that since Marcus’s arrival on the quarter, Jim has spent most of his time in the young man’s company. Initially he is repelled by Marcus’s sullenness and insolence, attitudes that show up in Marcus’s general comportment and especially in his complete lack of compunction about his act of murder. Notwithstanding this, Jim is faithful to his promise to Miss Julie Rand, Marcus’s grandmother, to look after him: he offers him conversation, food and drink, and the right kind of clothing for field work. However, he cannot help but be impressed by Marcus’s sheer physical endurance and his silent refusal not to give in in the face of Bonbon’s sadistic supervision of his field work. A temporary rupture in Jim’s burgeoning appreciation of Marcus occurs when the latter disregards his warnings to avoid an entanglement with Louise and then his supplications not to persist in his relationship with her. But here again Jim’s antagonism towards Marcus evaporates in the face of the latter’s fearlessness and his daring of the racial status quo. Although it is not until late in their acquaintance that Jim learns more of the details of Marcus’s life in Baton Rouge, specifically his humiliating experiences working at the parking lot and during his subsequent incarceration for attacking his oppressor with a soft drink bottle, this information merely confirms by particulars what he already understands to be the nature of his friend’s earlier experiences.

Jim’s tendancy is to see beyond the obvious differences between Marcus and Bonbon and to perceive the two as of a kind, and the tendancy emerges in conscious and unconscious comment and observation. Early during the period of Marcus’s ordeal in the cornfields, he complains to Jim: “I ain’t go’n put up with this, Jim. I wasn’t cut out for it.”
Jim’s rejoinder, which astonishes Marcus and causes him to suspect his guardian of being a “whitemouth,” is “Nobody was. He [i.e. Bonbon] wasn’t either” (p. 46). Jim’s descriptions of the physical appearance of the two also betrays, although less obviously, his penchant for seeing the two as one. Of Marcus he says: “[He] was a pretty handsome fellow and he knew it. He was about six feet tall, slim but well-built; he had medium brown skin and a pile of curly black hair. He had light brown eyes, a kind of straight nose, thin lips, and a well-shaped mustache” (p. 57). His description of Bonbon is as follows: “[He] was about six-four or -five, and I must say he was an impressive-looking man. He was handsome—I think very handsome—but nothing pretty or cute. Marcus, I think, was pretty. Young gals would say that Marcus was ‘dreamy.’ Nobody would say Bonbon was dreamy, like nobody would say he was ugly. He was handsome in a rough way. He had a good build—maybe two hundred, two hundred and ten pounds. He had light gray eyes, a long, good-shaped nose, and a dry-shuck-color mustache. His mustache was lighter than his tan face and much lighter than his red neck” (p. 79). To be noted here is the intrusion of the image of Marcus into Jim’s description of Bonbon as well as the remarkably similar way in which portrayals proceed: from a consideration of overall appearance, to a comment on body build, to a detailing of facial characteristics.

If the persons of Marcus and Bonbon tend to be identified in Jim’s consciousness, Gaines conspires in other ways as well to have the reader draw unmistakable parallels between the young convict and the Cajun overseer. In other words, the two are not associated merely in Jim’s mind: the novel’s structure is such that one is forced to see them in this light. Not only do Marcus and Bonbon develop inter-racial relationships, but these relationships are yoked together by the circumstances of their occurrence also. The most striking evidence of this is the coincidence of the beginning of the Marcus-Louise idyll at Bonbon’s house with Bonbon’s magical two hours with Pauline in the rented upstairs room in Baton Rouge. Jim makes it possible for the Bonbon-Pauline liaison to occur, and for all his expressed guilt about being accessory to it, is moved by the evidence it offers of genuine love between the two. When he is told about the Marcus-Louise meeting by Aunt Margaret upon his return from Baton Rouge, he is immediately reminded of the Bonbon-Pauline encounter. What is more, the reader is drawn to see the analogy between the two relationships by Aunt Margaret’s rhetorical question to Jim, “Look like you went to that saloon much as I went to that door?” (p. 171) Aunt Margaret’s question draws attention to yet another similarity between the two love relationships in question. Margaret had gone to Louise’s door to try to prevent the consummation of an affair that was bound to have disastrous repercussions; in Baton Rouge, Jim is made aware of the dangers inherent in the Bonbon-Louise relationship. Aunt Margaret is expressing her own, and Jim’s, frustration at being unable to prevent danger as well as their sense of the relationships’ inevitable progress towards some tragic end.

Jim comes to realize long after he has known it of Bonbon’s and Pauline’s relationship, that the bond between Marcus and Louise, though forged in a destructive fire, has united them in a loving union. Bonbon's
attentions to Pauline had begun in the fields where she was one of any number of the victims of his lust. “But something had happened to Bonbon” as Jim describes it, “But after being with so many, now he settled for one” and has been a regular visitor to her house for the past “seven or eight years” (p. 62). The difficulty he has expressing his love to Pauline and the twins, Billie and Willie, is a result of his emotionally deprived background and of the racial constrictions imposed by the relationship. Bonbon’s love for Pauline and their twin sons is clearly demonstrated by his fidelity to his mistress and by his secret gifts to the boys. It has taken Pauline longer to fall in love with Bonbon: her distrust of his intentions has kept her on her guard. But “after so many years . . . she couldn’t help but fall in love with him. She knew he loved her more than he did his wife up the quarter or his people who lived on the river” (p. 66). Jim notes especially her patient attention to Bonbon in the face of his reticence and her blissful remembrance of their moments together in the bedroom in Baton Rouge.

The Marcus-Louise relationship is conceived if not in an act of violence, certainly in the spirit of vengeance that has motivated both the principals. Marcus’s attention to Louise is prompted initially by his desire for retaliation against Bonbon not as much for the latter’s inhuman treatment of him as for his long-time appropriation of the black woman who has lately refused his own advances. Bonbon’s affront to Marcus’s pride of race enrages the young man to the point that the fear of being lynched is subordinated to his desire of avenging his rival by the ultimate rending of the code: the taking of the white man’s wife sexually. Louise is similarly motivated in her inviting smiles to Marcus: Bonbon must be made to pay “for the suffering she had gone through while he slept in Pauline’s bed . . . for the suffering she had gone through on that bayou with her brothers and papa” (p. 164). For Louise too the dread of physical hurt is transcended by the insistent need for revenge. Her seduction of Marcus will provide her with the proof, “the mark on her flesh” (p. 165), that will trigger the escalation of events which is her only hope of freedom: Marcus will inflict “the mark”; Bonbon will have to avenge the affront and kill Marcus; Marshall Hebert, now free of his debt to Bonbon, will dispose of him; Louise will be free at last. But neither Louise’s nor Marcus’s manipulative intent persists and their relationship rapidly develops into a mutually satisfying and transforming one. The change in the nature of the Marcus-Louise relationship is signalled for Aunt Margaret by its evolution from “the loud, booming noise” (p. 159) of the first encounter to the calm of the ensuing ones. To be noted is the similarity of this circumstance to the evidence for Aunt Ca’line and Pa Bully—who have been close by as the Bonbon-Pauline relationship develops—of a significant change in that relationship. “So now the shook mattress was quiet,” Jim recapitulates (using details reminiscent of Faulkner—one of several Faulkner echoes in the novel). “There wasn’t any need for all the noise, because now Bonbon and Pauline’s love was much softer—more tender. Aunt Ca’line and Pa Bully could hardly hear the mattress at all from their room” (p. 66).

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If the Marcus-Louise and Bonbon-Pauline relationships function in remarkably similar ways and highlight the real likenesses between the two
male protagonists, the events leading immediately to Marcus's violent death establish the moral superiority of the young man in Jim's eyes. Bonbon's farewell visit to Jim, in which the overseer provides his version of Marcus's tragic end, corroborates Jim's final positive assessment of Marcus and leaves him feeling that "all the human understanding [Bonbon and I] had had between us was over with now" (p. 278). Jim's disillusionment with Bonbon arises, of course, from the fact that the Cajun has killed his friend and hero and thwarted a young family's escape into a better world. As well, Jim is aware that Bonbon's action, by the latter's own acknowledgement, belies his capacity to assert his personal integrity by continuing to live outside the accepted code. Jim's recapitulation of Bonbon's account of his murder of Marcus expresses this awareness: "He told me he didn't want to fight Marcus, he was hoping Marcus would run from him. If Marcus had made any attempt to run, he would have let him go, and there wouldn't have been a thing said about it. But when Marcus didn't run, he had to fight him. Not just fight him, but he had to kill him. If he hadn't killed Marcus he would have been killed himself. The Cajuns on the river would have done that" (p. 277).

It is their contrasting responses to the demands of the code that draw the essential line of demarcation between Marcus and Bonbon. The same action that produces Jim's split with Bonbon confirms his affirmation of Marcus. In the version of events according to the record "Marcus had stolen Marshall Hebert's car and was trying to run away with Louise when Bonbon accidentally caught them. Marcus started a fight and Bonbon killed him trying to protect himself" (p. 277). But in contrast to this "false news," Jim advances the versions told by Bonbon and by the terrified observer, Sun Brown, which corroborate each other. Sun Brown's story is clear about Marcus's defensive attitude during the confrontation. "... [He] jumped on the ground to fight. Bonbon moved toward the house quickly now. When he came to the end of the gallery he stooped over and picked up something by the steps. Sun could tell that it was a scythe-blade, and not a hoe or a shovel, from the way Bonbon swung it at Marcus. Marcus ran to the fence and jerked loose a picket that was used there for a prop. He and Bonbon started fighting. Marcus was blocking the scythe-blade more than he was trying to hit with the picket" (pp. 275-276). Understandably, Bonbon's account repeats only implicitly Marcus's defensive posture. Both accounts are unequivocal and explicit, though, on Marcus's refusal to run from the scene when he had the opportunity to do so. Sun Brown's silent supplication to Marcus—"He was screaming inside—'Run, boy; run, run, run,'" (p. 275) draws special attention to the significance of Marcus's standing fast: his gesture effectively says "This boy will not be kept running." Marcus's refusal to take on the aggressor's role against Bonbon—as he has in the past against his roadhouse victim—and especially his refusal to abandon Louise suggests the radical nature of his transformation: the young man who has told Jim shortly after arriving on the plantation "any man's a fool to die over a woman" (p. 78) lays down his life for his friend. Bonbon was transformed by love as well, but Marcus's capacity to defy the code to the very end makes him clearly distinct from the Cajun overseer.

Marcus's tri-partite role of victim, saviour and bearer of a new
dispensation come together in his violent death. In giving up his life he asserts the essential value of his relationship to the white woman. At the same time his death is the culmination of a life of opposition to the acceptance of white dominance and hence an implicit assertion of black equality. As well, the conclusion of the novel leaves open the possibility of the reunion not only of Bonbon and Pauline, but also of Bonbon’s white daughter, Tite, and the mulatto twins, Billie and Willie, in a family that will comprise two generations of black and white. Ironically, it is Marcus’s death at the hands of Bonbon that makes this inter-racial family possible, his last “[sticking] his foot in that door . . .,” into “the house that slavery built” (p. 216) to use Bishop’s words.

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In his essential innocence, his victimization, his attempts to establish a new order, and his immolation in the process of defending and maintaining that new order, Marcus is a figure of Christ, and Gaines had done much, for the most part unobtrusively, to exploit his protagonist’s Christ-like quality. Of Love and Dust can be read as Jim Kelly’s good news about Marcus Payne.

The evangelistic element in Of Love and Dust is introduced early, at the time of Jim’s first meeting with Miss Julie Rand. Miss Julie is one of a host of black matriarchs who people the fiction of the American south: one thinks of Faulkner’s Dilsey, of Phoenix Jackson in Eudora Welty’s short story “The Worn Path,” of Gaines’s own Miss Jane Pittman. All possess qualities of natural wisdom, long-suffering and love. In Of Love and Dust these qualities Miss Julie shares with her southern sisters underlie her function as prophet. Jim is immediately struck by her combination of antiquity and sagacity and by the way in which she is literally surrounded by pictures of Christ. At the time of her visit to the plantation he repeats similar details, reiterating his impression of her ancient wisdom and theocentricity: “Miss Julie waved the fan before her face a couple times. It was one of those old pasteboard fans that undertakers donate to churches every four or five years. It had a picture of Jesus Christ on one side. . . . In the daylight she looked even older. Her skin had the color of a ripe prune. It was just as wrinkled as a ripe prune. But her eyes were still quick, sharp, piercing and knowing” (pp. 111-112). In the context of such descriptions, Miss Julie’s simple, repeated declarations that Marcus is a “good boy” take on the tone of incantations and predict the young man’s commitment to a loving relationship and the supreme act of love that ends his life. Furthermore, Miss Julie’s wish that human intercourse not be obstructed by racial barriers, stated plaintively in her question to Jim at their first meeting, “You think there will ever be a time . . . [when] him and Pauline will be able to live together like they want?” (p. 14) is given promise of fulfillment in the projected reunion of Bonbon and his extended family.

Miss Julie’s role as a prophet sets the stage for Marcus as a Christ figure: Marcus becomes the promised one who rejects the status quo and replaces it with a new code of love. Once Marcus has been able to transcend the racism and harshness of his own past and becomes transformed himself by his love for Louise, he exerts a transforming effect on others, and this facet of his life is rendered by Gaines in ways that suggest both general and specific parallels to Christ. Marcus transforms most
visibly that person who is most directly touched by his love, Louise. Jim notes that “Aunt Margaret had never seen [Louise] so happy before,” (p. 206) and quotes Aunt Margaret as saying that Louise “worshipped him” (p. 205). When Louise becomes fearful that his trial will not take place, Marcus reassures her:

“Just give him time, honey,” Marcus would say to her. “He trying to make me sweat. Now, you got faith in me, don’t you?”
“Yes.” she would say.
“And that’s all that count,” Marcus would say. (p. 233)

Marcus’s power to transform extends beyond Louise as well. Although not touched in the intense personal way Louise is by Marcus’s love, Jim has the insight to see and the courage to accept what Marcus is about and his early feelings of dislike and apprehension dissolve:

No, I didn’t blame Marcus any more. I admired Marcus. I admired his great courage. . . . I wanted to tell him how brave I thought he was. He was the bravest man I knew, the bravest man I had ever met. Yes, yes, I wanted to tell him that. And I wanted to tell Louise how I admired her bravery. I wanted to tell them that they were starting something—yes, that’s what I would tell them; they were starting something that others would hear about, and understand, and would follow. “You are both very brave and I worship you,” I was going to say. (p. 270)

Given the prophetic dimension in the portrayal of Miss Julie and the attitude of veneration that Marcus evokes in Louise and Jim during the last few days of his life, the sacrificial nature of Marcus’s death tends to sustain him in his Christ-like aura. As well, Jim’s last words to Aunt Margaret as he leaves the plantation close off the novel with a pointed reminder of Marcus’s Christ-like affinity: “I was thinking about what that preacher said at Marcus’s funeral. ‘Man is here for a little while, then gone’” (p. 281). While taken at a literal level the preacher’s words can be seen to refer merely to man’s fragile mortality, their turn of phrase is suggestive of Christ’s words in John 13:23, “Yet a little while I am with you,” spoken to the apostles at the last supper, the preamble to the new commandment “That you love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:24).

It is important to note, though, that Gaines’s exploitation of Marcus’s affinities to Christ pre-dates the time of his involvement with Louise and entry into a life marked by active love. From the time of his first contacts with Jim, Marcus speaks in words that are simultaneously credible in a realistic context and revealing of his special status. At times his statements have marked similarity to those of Christ as recorded in the New Testament; at other times, they are general pronouncements suggestive of the supernatural qualities of Christ. In an early conversation with Jim concerning the length of his confinement on the plantation, Marcus answers the question “When you figuring on running?” with “You won’t know the day or the hour,” (p. 30) a reasonable facsimile of the bridegroom’s counsel to the foolish virgins in Matthew 25:12-13. In the same conversation he responds to Jim’s comment “You got a lot to learn in this
world” with “I done forgot more than plenty people’ll ever know” (p. 31). In a later exchange, when Jim praises Marcus for toughing a week’s hard labor with the words “I didn’t think you could do it,” he answers, “I can do anything” (p. 78).

Such statements maintain the Christ-like status of Marcus established in Miss Julie’s prophecy and prepare the way for his later sacrificial and redemptive roles. They suggest also that Marcus’s life on the plantation, even before he falls in love with Louise, is marked by a Christ-like presence. From the outset Marcus steadfastly refuses to conform to the role expected of him as a black convict-worker on a white man’s plantation. His rejection of this role as manifested in his dismissals of Jim’s invitations to wear the brogans and khakis of the field worker. Rather, he insists on wearing his own colorful pants and shirts and dress shoes, despite their total impracticality for the job. Early in his stay, his flashy clothing is the only method he has of rejecting his convict status and asserting his individuality. He wears his own clothing with pride, and Jim notices the care he bestows on it and the order in which he keeps it: “And, oh, he had everything hanging so pretty-like. He had his suits, his shirts, his ties all on a little line. Then he had six or seven pairs of dress shoes up against the wall in a nice little row” (p. 23). Marcus’s clothes symbolize his commitment to a new order; indeed, his refusal to don the garb of the oppressed is at one point stated in terms that suggest his princely calling. “I’ll never put that convict shit on my back,” he tells Jim. “I’m used to silk” (p. 31).

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The conception of Marcus Payne as a Christ figure however is not merely a strategem to draw attention to the young man’s special status and function. It occurs as part of a larger context in which Jim Kelly especially, and the black residents of the plantation generally, are seen as living out lives in which religious belief and practice have in one way or another become devoid of relevance.

Jim raises his problem of belief early in his narration and reverts to it frequently for some time; then it disappears entirely as an explicit concern. Apparently a lapsed Catholic—he makes the Sign of the Cross “every night to stay in practice” (p. 19)—Jim has lost the sense of a providential God. He bemoans the “Old Man’s” seeming indifference in the face of the scorching sun that preys on the field workers: “And how about You, do You care? I don’t think so—because if You did, it looks to me like You would send us a little breeze, wouldn’t You?” (p. 38) He has given up on God and imagines Him as a naturalistic presence, as one who had “quit listening to man a million years ago. Now all He does is play chess by Himself or sit around playing solitary with old cards” (p. 51).

The ineptitude of the church to provide anything more than a solace for pain, that accepts as an unchangeable given the racial status quo, is best expressed by Marcus, who has been raised a church-goer. His account to Jim of the roots of his own religious skepticism provides the novel’s most succinct comment on the church’s ineffectuality. Marcus has been telling Jim about his efforts to put a stop to his victimization by Big Red, his black boss at the Baton Rouge parking lot.

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"I prayed so much. I even mentioned Big Red's name in church. But instead of me saying 'Jesus, go with Big Red,' I said, 'Jesus, please make Big Red stop taking my money.' When I said that, the church cracked up. Everybody started laughing. Even the preacher on the pulpit. Everybody laughing and coughing and wiping they eyes. Because, you see, Jesus didn't do things like that. Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead, but He didn't stop people from taking your money. That wasn't a miracle—not even a little miracle." (p. 251)

On the quarter, church is well attended Sundays and evenings, but any notion of the institution’s redressing or even addressing the manifold injustices of life on Marshall Hebert’s plantation is as alien to it as the idea of the Baton Rouge congregation’s facing up to what Big Red has done to Marcus.

It is interesting to note the presence of certain recurring patterns of juxtaposition and of simultaneous incident in Of Love and Dust that in the context draw attention to the displacement of both sectarian and non-sectarian religion by human love. The initial stages of the Bonbon-Pauline love relationship are described against a background of allusion to the plantation church services, which are going on simultaneously. As Bonbon begins to visit Pauline in her house the sound “of the people . . . singing in the church” (p. 64) can be heard. And the following conversation between Aunt Margaret and Jim as they watch Marcus in Bonbon’s yard on the day of his first rendez-vous with Louise suggests, especially on the part of Jim, an emphasis on human intimacy and a scepticism about Divine providence:

She looked at Marcus. “Black trash,” she said quietly.

She looked at me.

“Sometimes I think the Master must be ’sleep.”
“Think He’s tired.”
“He must be something.”
“What’s [Louise] doing in there?”
“Laying’ cross that bed resting.”
“For this evening, huh?”
“Not if I can help it,” Aunt Margaret said. She looked at Marcus raking leaves against the fence. “Not if I can help it, you dirty thing.” (p. 139)

As well, Jim’s reflections about his sense of being abandoned by God are often placed side by side with, or are not far removed from, his reveries of the old days with Billie Jean. For Jim, love heals, not God: the oppressive working-day heat that the Old Man chooses not to relieve with a breeze is assuaged by the memory of Billie Jean. “But I had something going for me . . . so every now and then, to forget the sun and the dust I thought back to the good times with Billie Jean” (p. 34).

Jim’s “finding” of Marcus fills the void left by the departure of both God and Billie Jean; once Marcus becomes a significant entity in Jim’s life thoughts of an indifferent God and of Billie Jean disappear from Jim’s narration. Effectively, Marcus is the answer to Jim’s reiterated insistence on the necessity of human self-reliance. Most of Jim’s speculations on God and the human predicament include the notion that man must take his fate
into his own hands. Jim’s last extended meditation on the subject, as he sits in a bar in Baton Rouge bewailing his role as a lonely overseer of two relationships God Himself has abandoned, is the most revealing in this regard. Here, after the usual references to God’s indifference, he continues: “No, it wasn’t the Old Man. I had put my own self in this predicament. I had come to this plantation myself, when my woman left me for another man in New Orleans and when I was too shame-face to go back home. I had heard that Hebert needed a man who could handle tractors and I had come here for the job. No it wasn’t the Old Man, it was me” (p. 147).

Jim Kelly’s prolonged escape into the relatively secure world of the Hebert plantation is brought to a forceful end by the example of Marcus Payne, the epitome of self-reliance. His voluntary departure from the plantation and his refusal to accept Marshall Hebert’s letter of recommendation, acts of self-assertion and willingness to cope for himself, are inspired by Marcus’s grand acts in kind. Jim’s recounting of the novel’s events memorializes not only his young hero’s sacrifice, but celebrates its redemptive impact as well.

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NOTES

2. While it is not my primary intention in this essay to discuss Of Love and Dust within the context of the history of black Americans, it is clear that Marcus Payne is representative of that tradition in black life and expression that upholds the special status of the black person as assuming a messianic role in American life (See, for example, Wilson Jeremiah Moses, Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982.)

Lehman College Conference

A conference on the theme “Imagining New Worlds: Factual and Figural Discovery During the Middle Ages” will be held at Lehman College, CUNY, on 12-13 May 1989. Principal speakers include John Block Friedman, Gregory G. Guzman, Rachel Jacoff, and David Woodward. Topical sessions in a wide range of medieval disciplines will feature additional speakers, chosen in a call for papers, and formal responses from designated chairpersons. Interested participants should send a 500-word abstract, with a short bibliography and vita, by 1 December 1988, to Prof. Scott D. Westrem, Dept. of English, Lehman College/CUNY, Bronx, NY 10468. Inquiries about the conference should be sent to the same address.