IMAGE-MAKING: TRADITION AND THE TWO VERSIONS OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN

When the Irish poet Yeats sought to praise his tradition, he chose an image expressing the flow of culture: "Whatever," he said, "is written in what poets name / The book of the people." Yeats was trying to embody the energy that goes back and forth between the people and the individual artist. He was talking not only of culture's book, say, the Book of Kells, whose people look like birds, that most beautiful book to which Irish still go for images of themselves. He was talking also about the speech and song of a people. His words evoke acts of culture passed on and, in the case of Irish Americans, kept alive in memory during a different experience on these shores. For my part I speak from memories of boyhood which grow sharper as I get older. These memories nourish the traditions handed down to me by a grandfather who was until he died something of a stranger in America. More vividly than the details of his stories I remember the rhythms of his speech—how the color increased in his face and his words as his breath grew warm with whiskey poured from bottles he'd hidden from his teetotaling, lace curtain Irish wife. Sunday mornings we sat alone in the corner of a high-ceiling Victorian parlor whose sliding wooden doors he kept shut. We had an al-
liance, and somehow I knew I reminded my grandfather not of my father but of himself when he was a boy in Ireland. I knew too that whatever his tricks, his Irish coldness and parsimony, my grandfather loved me. He didn’t need to tell me. I saw it in his eyes filmed over with cataracts, heard it in his sighing brogue, absorbed it from the images he conjured and colored.

Both my grandfathers began as farmers. Barney O’Callaghan came to New Haven just off the boat. He came from the Irish midlands before the turn of the century, some said with a price on his head. In New Haven he worked the trolley cars for forty years. Jeremiah Dinnean, my mother’s father, another Irishman, left a farm in Pennsylvania Dutch country. He was six-foot-five, and by the time I knew him, his large, farmer’s hands shook so much he let me wipe the foam from the outside of his glass of beer. He was a cop in New Haven for more than thirty years.

My grandfathers did not have me aspire to the culture of Yale University; instead they told of battles with its rowdy students. As a boy I heard of Yankee snows and how at last in the twenties there came an Irish snow to New Haven and Yale University. In those days most Yale students were what the Irish called Yankees. And when it snowed, groups of Yalies gathered under cover of night to have sport at the expense of the trolley conductors. Standing on open air platforms, the motormen presented a not very challenging target for snowballs. More bitter to the Irish than the cold was the fact that New Haven cops, most of them Irish, were forbidden to pursue Yale students beyond the college gates.

That was the situation when an Irish Catholic was elected mayor of New Haven. Shortly after his swearing in there was, according to legend, a bad snowstorm in New Haven. That evening the trolleys clanked through the campus, down Elm Street I think, and, sure enough, some Yalies came out of the shadows to pelt the trolleymen with snowballs. Following custom, after the raid they ran for the gates safely ahead of pursuing city policemen. But when the cops reached the gates, they kep on, kept a commin’ as Sterling Brown would say. They barreled through and with their nightsticks gave a few students a talking to the like of which they’d never had before.

You can imagine the cries of outrage that went up over this alleged police brutality. The new mayor kept his counsel. He waited a day or two to make a statement. When he finally appeared, late, the room was crowded with reporters and prominent citizens. The mayor had no text. What he was about to do I have a feeling he did in homage to Robert Emmett and other Irish patriots who, condemned to death by the English, were asked in the best genteel colonial tradition if they had anything to say. More than a
few of these “speeches from the dock” were, from the British point of view, long and outrageously rabble-rousing. Emmett’s in 1803 lasted until thousands of Irish had gathered outside the court, hearing, half-hearing, or imagining they’d heard this diminutive young rebel’s fiery tale of oppression and his demand that no epitaph be written for him until Ireland had taken her place among the nations. At any rate, back in New Haven the mayor began in the voice of a hanging judge. “I want to commend,” he said, “the brave action of members of the New Haven police force two nights ago on the Yale campus.” Listening to my grandfathers tell it, I thought I saw the gasps take soldierly form and march toward the front of the room. “I am grateful,” the new mayor went on, “and I know the citizens of New Haven are grateful, to these policemen for exposing those hoodlums posing as Yale students. We know that no Yale student would throw snowballs at men making their living on the trolley cars.”

Growing up in New Haven I heard and loved, and later on mocked and resisted this Irish “book of the people,” but always I absorbed it, and now I remember its words, rhythms and images with a feeling of wonder. Anecdotes were the skins on the potatoes, the brine on the corned beef when I was a boy. I saw the truth of them for myself when at sixteen I went to work in the mailroom of the old New Haven Bank on Chapel Street. The stories told by my grandfathers and my mother’s Aunt Lizzie (Hoo-Hoo was the name I gave her) attuned me to what I was hearing in the bank about Micks and Negroes—they didn’t say Negroes. I learned that there were choices to be made, allegiances to be declared—complex allegiances. “Well,” as I overheard an officer of the bank say about me one day, “if the little mick doesn’t work out, we can always bring in a nigger.” Learning these things I did not know of Frederick Douglass going to Ireland in 1846, welcomed by “The Liberator,” Daniel O’Connell, and coming across a music whose wild and mournful sounds reminded him of the sorrow songs of his own struggling people. Neither did I know anything about the record of the Irish on the matter of race in this country. I did not know that before the Civil War, as Frederick Douglass put it in a speech called “The Slavery Party” in 1853: “The Irish people, warm-hearted, generous, and sympathizing with the oppressed everywhere, when they stand upon their own green island, are instantly taught, on arriving in this christian country, to hate and despise the colored people. They are taught to believe that we eat the bread which of right belongs to them. The cruel lie is told the Irish, that our adversity is essential to their prosperity.” I knew and was taught nothing about the Draft Riots of 1863 in New York City where mobs of Irish, crazed at the
thought of leaving jobs and families to fight, they were told, for 
black freedom, went on a rampage of lynching and looting in the 
Negro section of the city. And I did not know of the counterpoise 
exerted by other Irish Americans like Al Smith’s father who risked 
his life to save Negroes from those 1863 mobs. He knew as would 
his son, the governor and presidential candidate, that on these 
shores Negroes were his countrymen as much as Irish. For myself, 
in that New Haven Bank, I was beginning to understand that what 
was happening had roots in the past, and that the written word 
held its moral power and purpose only if those who used it re-
membered its sources in the spoken word.

Going through college I worked with and for two black men. 
The improvising energy and unpredictable range of the stories we 
swapped suggested bonds beyond our own time and place. I felt 
kinship with the stoicism and fluidity by which Afro-Americans 
have kept the spirit flowing between the spoken and the written 
word. I want to be clear also about the intellectual force of Afro-
American culture. So let me put the connection on impersonal 
grounds. Writing my dissertation after the tough year of 1968, I 
was confronted with a problem of history and imagination in F. 
Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night. I went in vain to many 
sources before it hit me that the nub of the matter was race. At that 
point on the advice of the poet, Michael Harper, I went to The 
Souls of Black Folk by DuBois and to Shadow and Act and some 
other things of Ralph Ellison. There, clearly spelled out, I found 
the connections (morality and history; Civil War, Reconstruction 
and the 20th century) I had been feeling in the marrow of my 
bones.

Coming upon DuBois’ idea of double-consciousness it 
seemed to me that Fitzgerald, another outsider, had asserted 
something similar when he wrote in “The Crack-Up” that “The 
test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold in the mind two 
opposed ideas at the same time and still retain the ability to func-
tion. One should, for example,” he continued, “be able to see that 
things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them other-
wise.” Fitzgerald’s paradigm seems a shrewd if unintended de-
scription of the tension between double-consciousness and acts of 
liberation in Afro-American experience. For DuBois the condition 
of double-consciousness was tragic but not static. Along with 
double-consciousness, the Afro-American, in DuBois’ words, felt 
the “Longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his dou-
ble self into a better and truer self.” Determined to make things 
otherwise: Fitzgerald restated this theme near the end of his life in 
the assertion that he was “interested in the individual only in his 
relation to society.” Exactly so with double-consciousness—a
quality of experience felt in the tissues of generations of Afro-Americans.

Long before DuBois was born, slaves put the complexity of double-consciousness to strategic use in their culture. In how many spirituals did the allegory of escape and liberation ripple out from the biblical center? Some risked historical parallels:

Go down Moses, ‘way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharaoh to let my people go.

Others concealed flight to the north behind words referring to the promised land in the next world:

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus!
Steal away, steal away home, I aint got long to stay here.

Others made universal statements out of terrible particulars of slavery, like the separation of families:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long ways from home.

Taken together as a body of music, the spirituals said what they meant and meant more than they said.

Again, I am struck by the Irish connection. For the Irish too concealed the historical meaning and political intent of their songs behind seemingly harmless, everyday metaphors. To the English who heard it, “Nell Flaherty’s Drake” was a somewhat high-blown but amusing song; to Irish ears it was biting, purposeful, subversive satire as well. Nell Flaherty is a metaphor for Ireland, her drake is the slain Robert Emmett. The “dirty savage” who “most wantonly murdered me beautiful drake” refers to the English. Clearly, the song is a call to arms for the Irish to carry on the struggle:

Well, the only good news
that I have to infuse
is that old Paddy Hughes
and young Anthony Blake
so Johnny Dwyer and Corny McQuire
they each have a grandson
of me darlin’ drake.

Such songs provided cover and inspiration for contemporary rebels and were a source of pride to the Irish people.
In 20th century America black musicians, no matter if they knew the name of W.E.B. DuBois or his phrase, were double conscious as they used stereotypes to break stereotypes down. I’ll invoke as their motto Michael Harper’s stunning line in his poem for Charles Parker: “inside out Charlie’s guts.” The pun alludes to the paradox that turning white popular culture inside out meant, for black artists, the risk of turning their own guts inside out. Louis Armstrong turned stereotype topsy-turvy in Black and Blue.

“Even a mouse ran from my house,” he croons plaintively, humorously, and he ends his song with the refrain: “What did I do to be so black and blue?” The question is not left unanswered. Not on your life (or his). No, Louis has the last word all right, but strategically, in the way of the trickster, the lineage of Br’er Rabbit. His answer is a wicked blast on his horn held an impossibly, defiantly long time. Were they vocalized, its notes would consist of phrases simple and direct. What did I do? Nothing at all. Nothing at all—and why don’t you kiss my ass.

Then there’s the turning inside out of watered down, stereotyped popular music as if the jazz musician had taken upon himself the burden of saving American culture from itself. One such composition is the Miles Davis/Cannonball Adderly version of Autumn Leaves in which the musicians choose not to parody Roger Williams. Instead they improvise on his theme a profound and growing, moving, unforgettable thing reminiscent of Bach and Beethoven, Stravinsky and the anonymous composers of the sorrow songs, of these masters’ utter transformation of the popular music around them.

One of language’s powers is the assertion of kinship. Through words we make images of ourselves, our history, our world-images of relationship. Sometimes imperatives of kinship open up the language. From the beginning Afro-American culture held the spoken and the written word in necessary tension. To survive as a people, Afro-Americans handed down spoken traditions based on struggle and the possibility (inevitability) some day of freedom. Reading and writing were forbidden, yet slaves needed some of their number equipped to send and receive written messages in order to communicate with allies in the north. Not to mention the advantage of having the coachman who brought the master’s newspapers secretly able to read and pass on the information. By contrast, on many a dangerous occasion the spoken word—elusive, evasive, flexible, accessible, immediate—was a more effective weapon than the written word.
In a line going back to slavery time Afro-Americans have had a tradition of using technological forms and images while keeping alive a sense of the distinct integrity of human personality. The masters of the underground railroad were often slaves or former slaves. Denied access to railroads as transportation, black folks and their white allies improvised an epic metaphor and organizational structure that accomplished the liberation of human beings. Even here, as Frederick Douglass wrote in some exasperation, there lurked the distinction between having a metaphor in your head and living it in your bones. In his 1845 Narrative Douglass tells of some abolitionists making with their loose tongues an “Upper-ground Railroad” of the “Under-ground Railroad.” “I have never approved of the very public manner, in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the ‘Under-ground Railroad,’ but which, I think, by their open declarations, has been made, most emphatically, the ‘Upper-ground Railroad.’ Its stations are far better known to the slaveholders than to the slaves.” Even when free, Douglass carried living memories of slavery; however hard abolitionists pressed him, he did not reveal his method of escape until all slaves were free.

Later in the 19th century that laboring man John Henry tested his power against the power of a new machine:

John Henry said to his captain,
A man ain’t nothin’ but a man,
But before I’ll let dat steam drill beat me down,
I’ll die wid my hammer in my hand,
Die wid my hammer in my hand.

What is a man? When should he challenge and resist forces outside himself? John Henry resists to the death because the steam drill seems an alien, belittling force that takes no account of his skills as a man. He dies from the effects of his combat, but, according to many accounts, dies having bested a steam drill. Dead, John Henry and his stance live on in the energy of countless variations of his story which make him an archetype of his people’s heroic (and successful) resistance to dehumanization.

Remember Invisible Man. What saves him when electrodes begin to annihilate his memory and with it his identity as a distinct human person? Not his name, he forgets that. What saves him? Not any of the other serials of modern identification. What saves him are memories of folk characters: Buckeye the Rabbit and Br’er Rabbit—images passed on through generations of folk telling, folk-saying. They are images of the trickster reversing conditions of death and defeat imposed by seemingly superior forces.
Remember Invisible Man’s response to the robot at the end of a nightmare of castration. “We must stop him,” he cries out of his pain. This response is not one of argumentation and debate. Like John Henry’s, the response is of self-assertion. It is also plural: we must stop him. Extending John Henry’s 19th century will into the 20th century, Invisible Man feels that the individual needs help confronting a massive technology which, after all, emerges from society as a whole. His is a national imperative urging the assertion of human values in the development of technology’s forms. In the end Invisible Man internalizes double-consciousness to the point of being himself a trickster in the canniest American/Afro-American tradition. What else do you call a man who siphons off energy to light an underground hole where he reconstructs himself and prepares to emerge to play a “socially responsible role,” presumably to prod his countrymen into reconsideration of their nation’s first principles? What else but a trickster, a confidence man and, to use an old-fashioned word, a patriot whose mission is to reconnect the lines between self and society?

In much of Michael Harper’s poetry, technology and personality form a crossroads, a landscape at cross-purposes. In Debrident, for instance, Harper plays street idiom against a desolation of technological language. The two styles are separate but not equal. One is the spoken language of personality improvised according to shared, felt experience—occasions held in common. The other is an automatic, official argot for which the tongue has been chloroformed, the soul embalmed. Listen:

A sniff in the fallen air—
he stuffs it through the chains
riding high:
“traveling” someone calls—
and he laughs, stepping
to a silent beat, gliding
as he sinks two into the chains.

ARMY HONOR GUARD
IN DRESS BLUES,
CARRIED OUT ASSIGNMENT
WITH PRECISION:

John Henry Louis—in life Dwight Johnson, in Harper’s imagination one in a line of men whose lives speak for the community—has his body torn asunder. According to the images in the poem the cultural reason behind his death is that the body politic and, in Harper’s words, the “body poetry” of America are torn asunder. In bitter commemoration Harper writes the last section of De-
bridement in variations of technologese. Doing so, he confronts the possibility of the end of style and idiom as we know them. What will happen to personality, culture, and society, the poem asks, if the people and the poets allow language to fall into the hands of technologies uninfused with values of feeling and imagination?

In the fiction of Ernest Gaines a person’s character and experience are tested in the reverberations of his language. The words people speak and the way they speak them reveal the scale of their experience. I illustrate with two occasions in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. In the first it is 1865, and the recently emancipated twelve-year-old Miss Jane encounters the captain of a riverboat she thinks will ferry her across the Mississippi toward her destination, Ohio.

"Who y'all for?" he said.
"We ain't for nobody," I said. "We free as you."
"All right, little free nigger, y'll got money?" he said. "It take a nickel to ride on here. Y'all got a nickel each?"
"No sir."
"Then get right straight off," he said.

A hundred years later Jane Pittman asks this same question of a young Civil Rights worker who has been talking to her in highfaluting, snap your fingers and we'll change the world idiom:

I was getting fed up with that boy.
"Boy, who you for?" I asked him.
"Joe and Lena Butcher," he said.
"They teach you to talk like that?" I said.
"Ma'am?"
I just looked at him.
"That's re trick," he said.
"Well, I can do without your re trick here,"
I said. "If you can't say nothing sensible, don't say nothing."

Who you for is Southern idiom shared by black and white. Denotatively, the meaning is simple: who do you belong to? Coming when it does, it is a riling question for young Jane Pittman because at last she has no master; she belongs, in the sense of ownership, to no one. One of the wonderfully complex things about her obsession with Ohio is Gaines’ point (and hers retrospectively) that in her child’s brave eagerness she misses some of
the deep connection between kinship and landscape. Ohio is an idea. Luzana is the space she lives and moves in, a place—the moral landscape she is kin to even as she tries to leave.

On the second occasion Jane Pittman is indignant at words whose easy promises fly in the face of the life she herself has lived. A hundred and ten years on her back, she has earned the right to ask the young organizer many questions with the same three words. Who’re your parents? Your people? Not who owns you but who do you belong to? What’s your tradition, your community? She calls him boy because his immature use of language lacks a sense of relatedness and experience. Tradition and kinship, who knows better than she, are not fixed conditions. They require rigorous acts of shaping and discovery. Jane Pittman has lived these things in her language. She and others in the quarters derive integrity from the authenticity of talk, of speech. She is angry at the young man because his language is shallow, artificial, imposed, because to her ears he does not use but is used by his language. Knowing he is a home boy who’s gone off and learned an alien idiom makes matters worse. In her view his retrick betrays (tricks or manipulates) the very people he seeks to move. How, Jane Pittman is asking, can language cut off from experience and the feel of tradition lead to action which will make people free? Her answer is a spoken word akin to her life and the lives of those listening and speaking to her. Her book needs to be and is, to go back to Yeats, a “book of the people.” In Gaines’ work, as in the work of many other Afro-American writers over the generations, the active presence of the spoken in the written word has been a first principle.

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Afro-American culture has been honed over the long haul, the familiar struggle. The companion to its resilience is a toughness of spirit—an unsurprised awareness that forces of dehumanization are at work in society. I have spoken of American/Afro-American culture as if one such intricate, diverse, indivisible texture exists. To say so is to make the question of kinship a question of nationhood. To say so is also to ask how authenticity and tradition converge for those who present Afro-American experience to a mass audience. In this connection The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman has undergone something of a middle passage in American culture.

First an anecdote. After Ernest Gaines finished Miss Jane Pittman, a popular monthly magazine made preliminary arrangements to serialize. When he learned the novel was a novel and not in his words an “authentic autobiography,” the editor decided not
to run Miss Jane Pittman. This question of authenticity is a variation on the question of what is truth. The magazine editor’s response suggests that the problem may not be what is true but who should tell the truth to a mass American audience. It’s as if he were back on the ground of Twain and Faulkner—where, mostly, black folks’ lives are expressed, in the end, on white folks’ terms—unaware that Gaines’ novel is a descendant in a rich lineage of slave narratives and autobiographies. If someone says the story of Miss Jane Pittman is authentic because Gaines has convinced him she was a historical person who really told her story into a tape recorder, what does it mean for that person to turn around and claim Miss Jane and her document are less authentic because the story has flowed from the imagination of a novelist? Does it mean that at least some white Americans will accept their racial history as true if it comes to them with conventional, literal authenticity, i.e., primary historical sources, but not if that same history takes its form from the mind and traditions of a black artist? What further questions does his perception of reality and imagination raise about race as a condition of American life?

The film version of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is a more complex variation on the same issue. Many critics judge the film one of the most important and memorable achievements of network television. Some, admittedly before Roots, said it rivalled coverage of President Kennedy’s assassination in impact, although the film was a single two hour program. Clearly, CBS thought the American people should see and hear the story told in Gaines’ novel; clearly too the changes made in the film version provided a commentary on the nature of image-making in American popular culture.

What can we tell about the shape of human values from the changes made in Gaines’ material? Much of the answer involves looking at changes made in who frames the story and how it is brought to the same end with images and a sense of history very different from those in the novel. Part of the answer may lie in the relationship between authenticity and truth. At any rate in each version the truth of the material and its integrity of form depend on several related considerations:

1. History and historical consciousness—the past in the present moment.
2. Personality: the characters’ scale.
3. Story(telling): who tells, what’s told, what’s the occasion, the landscape of the story?
4. Resolution: is the ending closed or somehow open, continuing?
First is the sense of history. As I reread American Literature, I am convinced that much of what is unresolved about national identity revolves around the facts and moral meaning of the Civil War-Reconstruction Period, especially as the nation re-enacted the principles written into the Declaration of Independence. This theme, like that of acknowledged and unacknowledged kinship accounts for much of the historical tension in the work of Melville, Twain, James, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and, of course, Ellison. Looking at accounts of Reconstruction in the two versions of Miss Jane Pittman, I see a distinction between complexity and ambiguity that bears not only on the Reconstruction but provides a clue to why the film changes the form and frame of the novel. In Gaines there is complexity but no ambiguity, no confusion. In the chapter, "A Flicker of Light; and Again Darkness," Gaines distills many sources, facts and experiences into an account of Reconstruction as black folks lived it, and as they remembered, interpreted and handed it down to those who came after. Jane Pittman knows what happened to her and her people, and she knows the meaning of what happened. During the two phases of Reconstruction she lives on the same plantation. It is owned first by a Mr. Bone, and the living is fair and promising, if not easy. Of these years she says:

But we seldom had trouble with the secret groups. Bone was important in the Republican Party and he always had soldiers out there guarding his place. Every time the colored politicians came they brought guards and stationed them at the gate and 'long the road. A mile or two away we would hear that somebody had got beaten up or killed, but we knowed it could never happen where we lived.

Of the ensuing Compromise of 1877 she says:

He said the Yankees was already tired of fighting for us. Some of them was sorry they had ever gone to war. Besides that the Yankees saw a chance to make money in the South now. The South needed money to get on her feet and the Yankees had the money to lend. And that was the deal: the Secesh get their land, but the Yankees lend the money.

Soon Bone pulls out along with the last of the Union troops, and an unreconstructed Confederate named Colonel Dye takes over. Of the Dye years Jane says:

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It was slavery again, all right. . . . You didn’t need a pass to leave the place like you did in slavery time, but you had to give Colonel Dye’s name if the secret group stopped you on the road. Just because the Yankee troops and the Freedom Beero had gone didn’t mean they had stopped riding. They rode and killed more than ever now. The colored people wrote letters to Washington, sometimes a group would get up enough nerve to go there in person, but the troops never did come back. Yankee business came in—yes; Yankee money came in to help the South back on her feet—yes; but no Yankee troops. We was left there to root hog or die.

Elsewhere Gaines has said that conditions didn’t really change much in the rural South from the end of Reconstruction until after he had left in the late 1940’s. Painstakingly, repetitively, he shapes Miss Jane’s impressions of Reconstruction from records, folk accounts and also, it seems clear, from the work of DuBois and the historians who followed him like John Hope Franklin.

In the film Cicely Tyson as Jane Pittman speaks a jumble of words about Reconstruction—some from the novel, others from sources difficult to pinpoint. But her central point is clear in its meaning, values, and popular sources. She says:

But Reconstruction never really worked.
It wasn’t too long ‘fore carpetbaggers,
black and white, moved in to take from
the South what the war didn’t.

Nowhere in the novel does Jane Pittman say any such thing. Despite Gaines’ complex, concrete account, the screenwriter slips into Jane Pittman’s mouth a vision of Reconstruction right out of D. W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, a film version of Thomas Dixon’s novels unequivocal in its expression of white supremacy’s propaganda line. But these words are not the last word on Reconstruction in the film. There follows a montage whose images give her words the lie and create confusion about what did happen. We see Klansmen ride through the quarters in the dark and set fire to a school. We see a mulatto man lynched while his wife and baby look on screaming in terror. We wonder at the intent of conflicting words and images. Are these words the price the screenwriter thought he had to pay for images of Ku Klux Klan murder and terror? If so, is not the right of black Americans to speak to their countrymen, memories of a history shared by everyone—is not this right undone? The film does not answer, but the question leads us to other changes.
Consider the character, Ned Douglass. Gaines made him a man feelingly and intelligently rooted in his time and place. Coming back to rural Louisiana after fighting in the Spanish-American War, he takes a carefully considered, complexly militant position on issues similar to those in the DuBois-Washington controversy. As a local leader, Ned Douglass struggles, aware of the heroic tradition behind him and the almost certain martyrdom ahead. During his sermon at the river he calls the men listening to him warriors and outlines a last ditch plan should “the white man tell you to leave this country or die in it.”

Let everybody go except one young man in each family. Let that young man hide in the swamps, hide in the fields, anywhere he can hide hide. When the rest are safe, let these young men set fire. As many fields, as many woods, as many houses and barns and cribs as he can. Let him run, run, run till his black legs refuse to move, till his black arms hang to the ground. Show them, warriors, the difference between black men and niggers.

The screenwriter keeps the distinction between black men and niggers but bowdlerizes the sermon excising the above and making no mention of the several references to warriors. In the film Ned’s remarks are a consistently watered down version of Afro-American values and traditions of crucial importance to the novel.

Add to this the portrayals of Ned’s character in the moments before he is murdered. In the novel he engages the entire universe around him. Earth, Sky and companions: Ned Douglass is one with all three landscapes. Time merges into being as for one full moment he is utterly of the place. Only then does he break the spell running at the assassin Albert Cluveau in vain heroic resistance. The film on the other hand makes Ned a spectator. Looking hastily, almost furtively at the ground, he seems apart from the landscape. When his time to die comes, he goes toward his assassin in a slow, mannered walk. The film-makers seem not to have understood that Ned Douglass is both stoical, fatalistic, and determined with all his energy to make things other than they are right up to the instant he dies. Are not his rights as a man undone? The film does not answer, and this question leads us to the changes made in the frame of the story.

Gaines’ frame—the young history teacher coming back to the quarters to get Miss Jane on tape for his students—flows from his experience and the experience of many of his race in the decades after World War II. This was a time of migration away from the rural South for countless young blacks, and the question ad-
dressed is how folk traditions were to be carried on by those who left. Recognized or unrecognised, this is an imperative of American life for people of all descents. Gaines' teacher holds dear his cultural kinship ties with Miss Jane; he comes back determined to preserve her story and her voice through the technology at his disposal: a portable tape recorder. This is a contemporary variation on an oral tradition going back to slavery and hundreds of years before to the tribal cultures of West Africa. Coming generations of students will learn Miss Jane's story as it is retold and interpreted by their teachers. Also hearing her voice, they will hear her story as she told it, experiencing for themselves something of the power of her presence.

For this screenwriter Tracy Keenan Wynn substitutes what is perhaps his story, his encounter with the culture of black folks while he is on location in rural Louisiana. For the young black history teacher, a figure for Gaines himself, Wynn substitutes a young white feature writer on assignment for a New York magazine. The two different approaches speak strongly about tradition and its lack. The feature writer spends a few days interviewing Jane Pittman; the history teacher works with her over a period of eight or nine months. Like the teacher, the feature writer taps Miss Jane, but he translates her story into the page (and the screen) without the communal experience so crucial to Gaines' teacher's realization of folk traditions. Certainly, the movie could have been made with either of these frames, or others, so the issue seems one of vision and values. Or does it, entirely? If this and other changes express cultural values larger in scale than a screenwriter's identification with his material, it may be that technology's power to create a simultaneous mass audience is somewhat responsible. This much we can say: the majority of the 50 million viewers were white. Presumably one assumption behind the change from black history teacher to white feature writer is that a mass white audience would identify more easily and readily with Jane Pittman if her highly charged racial story were filtered through the eyes of one of their own. The trouble is that in the racial context of America such assumptions re-enforce the old conventions that white people will not listen to black people on certain subjects, i.e., the list compiled by Richard Wright in Black Boy. The CBS movie's change raises questions about television's willingness to take risks, to extend the milieu of its audience and to be guided by values other than those allegedly verified in marketing surveys. The bitter social irony in all this is that Gaines' interlocutor is closer to the mass audience than Wynn's. Everyone has personal knowledge of history teachers; how many of us have ever seen a feature writer?
A related cutting edge of this change in frame is that how you tell a story to some extent determines its meaning. In the film, contingencies of the feature writer's magazine tend to contain Jane Pittman's story, restrict it in time and space. The reporter must rush because he has been ordered to Houston to cover the John Glenn space shot. A brief interest span is built into the conventions of the film's narrative form. This, I suppose, is true to the conventions of television. The audience watched Miss Jane Pittman between, say, a situation comedy and the eleven o'clock news. All this may be too bad, the movie version suggests, but that's the way it is.

On the contrary, the frame of Gaines' novel releases Miss Jane into a time and space of multiple dimensions, open-ended scale. She waits for her time. Her importance is the young teacher's importance, and because he is certain of both, the teacher learns a basic truth about history during his interviews with Miss Jane Pittman and her friend, Mary Hodges:

If I were bold enough to ask: "But what about such and such a thing?" she would look at me incredulously and say: "Well, what about it? And Mary would back her up with: "What's wrong with that? You don't like that part?" I would say, "Yes, but-" Mary would say, "But what?" I would say, "I just want to tie up all the loose ends." Mary would say, "Well, you don't tie up all the loose ends all the time. And if you got to change her way of telling it, you tell it yourself."

History, he learns, is not clean, tidy or pat. History is possibility. Like the human condition of which it speaks, history is dirty, messy, chaotic, even intuitive and mysterious.

In his summary at the end of the "Introduction," the young teacher applies the lesson. "Many," "almost," "both black and white," "some," "others," "not everything," "in most cases": these words verify Miss Jane's story at the same time they qualify it. Not everyone sees things the same way. The teacher's language underlies the importance of Jane Pittman's spoken history precisely because it is hers, because no one else sees it exactly as she sees it. Such complexity is or ought to be a principle of history spoken, written and taught in a nation founded on equality and diversity whose coins are stamped with the paradoxical motto, e pluribus unum. The teacher is fulfilling his vocation. He teaches his students and of course the wider audience of his countrymen the method along with the facts of history.

Finally, there are the very different endings of novel and film
versions of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Gaines ends on the plantation when Jane, hearing of Jimmy’s murder, decides to lead some of the people to a civil rights action in Bayonne. The last sentence, understated as any highly charged experience is in the telling, is a masterful statement:

Me and Robert looked at each other there a long time, then I went by him.

This is confrontation intensified, softened, and unspeakably complicated by the human contact involved. The language is wrought so that grace and courage, resistance and the continuity of struggle are realized in the very rhythm of the words. The meaning also is simple and complex at the same time. Whatever gains are achieved through social and political action which divides people are worth winning only if the human bond is unbroken. This is why Jane Pittman risks the pain and complexity of contact with Robert Samson at the end.

Unlike the novel, the film allows us to guess at nothing. Everything is supplied. Heartstrings are plucked on cue as Miss Jane is escorted to the courthouse, then left alone to make her way slowly, tortuously up the path to the drinking fountain. Never mind that the cultural burden of the novel is that generations look after one another in word and need. Never mind the ominous, half-suggested, half-suppressed feeling that because this old old black lady is allowed by some cops to drink from the white folks’ fountain, nothing necessarily is changed for her race.

Why are we moved by the ending of the film? To some extent I think the tears are tears of gratitude. We are moved that Jane Pittman defies society’s laws and takes her drink. But we may be grateful that the film-makers have spared us images of violence and rejection. We may be grateful that the images’ intent is essentially of catharsis and serenity rather than risk and struggle. We may be grateful that as we watch (we are at, not of the action) Jane Pittman hobble to and from the fountain we hear a soothing orchestration suggesting a sentimentalized *We Shall Overcome*. Certainly, we are spared the harsh sweetness of the blues, of pain straining the voice to a stoicism which cannot be given but, like Jane Pittman’s freedom, must be earned over and over again.

Certainly, television’s problem/solution format spares us the continuing racial struggle. The typical network program begins with a problem, solves it, ties up the loose ends, and at the end of fifty minutes or so moves the audience along to another program. Looking at the film ending of *Miss Jane Pittman*, we might think that the Civil Rights struggle is over, that freedom and justice for all
were achieved in 1962. Just as looking at *Roots* we might think that black folks were free and more or less equal, and prosperous landowners by 1870. Jane Pittman and the family in *Roots* are metaphors for a people. In both films aesthetics converge with history and politics. If television projects images of equality achieved in the past, how does its mass audience react to evidence that this great issue remains unsolved? I fear that the opposition between the problem/solution format and human history may move the networks and their audience away from the commitment to democratic complexity and its ensuing imperative of racial equality.

I make this case. Despite the film's references to contemporary events, like Teddy Kennedy's senate candidacy and the space shot of 1962, its image-making removes us from the everyday continuity of history. Maybe it's the old distinction between looking and seeing; in too many of the film sequences we look at but are not made to see, and seeing, truly become part of the experience. The images are too freely, too fully given in the simple sense of one to one meanings. They do not demand the commitment of imagination necessary for human beings to become active witnesses. The novel on the other hand catches up readers in its flow of images and asks of everyone some contribution in the task of image-making. This task requires not the presumption of empathy but a complex quality of sympathy which comes from seeing the common truth of distinct experience. It comes from struggling with memories and making of them images of our grandfathers, our Aunt Lizzies and Aunt Augusteens, and from making of their important, unrecorded lives images of ourselves, our lives, our generations.