The Group Composition of Literary Works by Esoteric Writers in the Modernist Period: A Critical Interruption of Afro-Modernism and Antimodernism

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Abstract: Like the other "new modernisms" Afro-Modernism does not exist beyond its role as a critical catchword. The readings given to African-American texts of the modernist period have been subjected to reductive treatments that have overlooked many factors. In this paper I will examine an unacknowledged feature of modernist works that radically changes the understanding of many important texts. One assumption of the critics of literary modernism is that individualism is a touchstone of the movement. One sign of the inapplicability of individuality to American modernism is the occurrence of esoteric group composition. The esoteric does not come into consideration by the literary critics who have established Afro-Modernism, so it is not within the scope of those investigations that challenges to individuality have been considered.

Keywords: Afro-Modernism, Western Esotericism, African American literature, *Jubilee*, New Modernisms

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The school of the artist
is
the circle of wild horses,
heads centered,
as they present to the wolves
a battery of heels,
in the arctic barrens where
no magic grass of Blaucus
gives immortality.

(Tolson, "Omicron" 96)

I recently read Michael Basseler's essay, "Legacies of Modernism: Melvin B. Tolson's Dark Symphony" and Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage." Basseler examines the interest of critics in new modernisms and alludes to Afro-Modernism in his appraisal of what he calls "African American writers and the (problems of the) modernist legacy." Basseler's "Conclusion" neatly and concisely frames the entire matter of Afro-Modernism within the acceptable critical-aesthetic limits that have been allowed African-American writers by literary historians of modernism:

> For Tolson and Hayden, the legacy of modernism was a difficult one in many ways: On the one hand, their racial or cultural identity as African Americans denied them full membership in the club of high modernism, and even when critics credited them for their achievements, this often implied cultural biases and a certain condescension (e.g., in Allen Tate's preface to Tolson's *Libretto*). Moreover, both writers could not be easily absorbed into the white modernist canon, as their work questions many of the basic tenets of this movement, especially by pointing out the presence of Africa within Western cultural history. On the other hand, during their lifetime both writers were marginalized within the African-American intelligentsia, particularly during the 'Black Aesthetic' phase with its rejection of Western tradition, its nationalist agenda, its emphasis on direct communication to the masses, and its propagandist framework. Dissatisfied with the kind of modernism practiced by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, yet unwilling to sacrifice artistic autonomy for a Black nationalist ideology, Tolson and Hayden represent a middle generation of (African-) American writers whose significance could be understood only with some delay. Both are highly technical, experimental writers who have sometimes been ostracized as "library poets" and "intellectual exhibitionists" pining for white recognition, but this assessment hardly does justice to the depth and complexity of their poetic vision. (Basseler 1)

By formulating this finding, Basseler makes it evident that the widening influence of a set of assumptions about modernist literature has now become so firmly established that it is possible for critics to operate out of a seamless confidence that what they are saying about African-American authors and modernism is founded on bedrock. In reality nothing could be further from the truth. Before we even come to Afro-Modernism, it must be taken into consideration that what Basseler calls "the club of high modernism" (1) is discussed entirely without reference to esotericism: when Basseler brings T.S. Eliot's famous poem into view in his essay he conventionally reduces the poem's concerns to "Western civilization's demise" (12) and places the African-American poets as both participants and contrarians in that vaunted historical process. It is important to remember that like the other "new modernisms" that Basseler lists only to dismiss, Afro-Modernism does not exist beyond its role as a critical catchword. Interventions, taxonomies, "manifestos" (e.g., Afrofuturism), and theorizations are conveniences that serve the needs of critics to arrange what is really chaos into histories, periods, movements, aesthetics, schools, tendencies, and whatever serves to create *publishable* orders. Basseler concurs that Afro-Modernism belongs to the realm of the provisional and he virtually erases it—

> One should keep in mind, though, that this idea of a non-hierarchical, non-linear, and democratic "patchwork modernism" is a rather recent—or postmodern—notion which conceals the fact that modernist discourse was actually quite clearly defined in terms of centers and margins, of "high" and "low." In this regard it is interesting, of course, that in a statement which seems to propagate the necessity to broaden our notion of modernism and which draws our attention to the cultural exclusiveness that has shaped the modernist discourse for many decades, Peter Howarth (perhaps inadvertently) backslides to the grand narrative that firmly reasserts T.S. Eliot (and thus a white male perspective) at its center. What the above quote obscures, in other words, is that for many writers "from the margins," modernism did not mean a sudden emancipation from cultural, let alone social, hierarchies but a double-edged sword, promising the possibility of "making it new" yet also highlighting their place outside the center and thus forcing them into a liminal cultural position. In fact, the very privilege to become "modern"—i.e., to liberate oneself from the clutch of tradition and to "make it new"—was withheld from writers who did not fit neatly into the cultural mainstream, be it because of their ethnic background or societal role. (Basseler 2)

These conditions have come about due to the general tendency of literary critics to assume that their readings of the texts that have interested them have been subjected to adequate close readings. In truth a vast trove of writings have been selectively read into the record as African-American and Afro-Modernist texts when they may not reasonably or usefully be described by those terms. While it sounds extreme to make this claim, I will say that in most cases the readings given to African-American texts of the modernist period have been subjected to reductive treatments that have overlooked many factors that should have come into play in trying to understand them. In this essay I will examine an unacknowledged feature of modernist works that radically changes the understanding of many important texts. One assumption of the critics of literary modernism is that individualism is a touchstone of the movement. Authors have been endowed with readings based on the assumption that individualism was prized above all else: it is widely argued that the central themes of experimentation and individualism are what make the entire modernist literary field quite cohesive in intent and theme amongst different authors (Armstrong 4).

One sign of the inapplicability of individuality to American modernism is the occurrence of esoteric group composition. The esoteric does not come into consideration by the literary critics who have established Afro-Modernism, so it is not within the scope of those investigations that challenges to individuality have been considered. What reigns over the critical appraisal of modernism, and so-called Afro-Modernism, amounts to something like a Flat Earth Society that is unable to parse its distance from reality. Just as the planet seems to be flat, modern literature seems to be suspended on individuality. As often happens in academic discourses, a paradigm that rests on suppositions and incomplete understandings makes powerful arguments until the paradigm must be set aside for an understanding that contains sufficiently more truth. We can think of such outworn discourses as eugenics, historical determinism, behaviorism, and classical mechanics. An example of a recent attempt to overthrow a paradigm is Joseph North's attack on literary criticism—"'a rapid, synoptic overview of the basic paradigms that have governed the academic criticism of literature in much of

the English-speaking world for the last century or so', with a view to radical reconstruction" (Mulhern n.p.).

As I have demonstrated in a long series of publications over the last twenty years, a sizeable contingent of canonical modernist American writers were followers of A.R. Orage—an esotericist trained in the Parisian school of G.I. Gurdjieff, The Institute for Harmonious Development of Man. Orage's school of American writers created a vast body of writings, many of them prize-winning, highly-regarded novels, poems, and plays. Literary critics have never recognized those writings for the esoteric concepts that they express. Often the works are considered eccentric or experimental, and in many cases scholars and critics have set them to the side of the works they investigate seriously. Even the writings that have been considered important have been understudied. In the cases where there has been concentrated attention on these writings, they have been subjected to very narrow considerations so that their difficulties have been overlooked. Novels written by the writers of the Oragean school of modernism exhibit common features that so far have remained invisible. (1) The texts are written in the code of the alchemists called *cabala*. This code is phonetic and presents to the reader a sliding scale of difficulties. (2) The texts contain passages of concentrated esoteric information that are often set apart from the other sections of the text. (3) The esoteric sections are called *legominisms*, and often they are identified by the inclusion of the word legominism in the text—though always the word is presented in the *cabala* code. The *legominisms* are further identified by the inclusion of intentional mistakes in the text. These intentional mistakes take many forms, including such textual mistakes as spelling errors and mistranslations, though more often the mistakes are errors made by the characters in the course of their activities in the narrative. (4) Instructions for reading the coded texts are often included in the texts, though, of course, the instructions are also coded. As written language is not commonly presented in this unfamiliar manner, it is difficult for many people to see that a text is coded in this way. At the same time, it must be pointed out that this is a traditional mode of handling texts and has been around for many hundreds of years. It is not so much obscure as merely beyond the concerns of contemporary literary critics and scholars. Again, it must be urged that if a text presents the names of tens of alchemists and the critics and scholars studying that text cannot name a single alchemist, it cannot be said that they are equipped to penetrate into the meaning of the text. (This is the case of such writers as Melvin B. Tolson and Ralph Ellison.) On the other hand, there are texts—such as the anthropological writings of Zora Neale Hurston—that present patent and transparent nonsense as science. And Hurston's fake anthropology, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1931), was used as the critical underpinnings of the Black Aesthetic (Larry Neal; Rowell 30-31) and Afro-Modernism (Kathy Lou Schultz; Schultz xvii). Here and in many other places these complex esoteric texts are taken at face value despite their extreme flouting of common sense.

It may be helpful to think of Fokkema and Ibsch who saw modernism as a specific code: what we have in the esoteric textuality of Oragean Modernism is the substitution of an alternative semiotic code for the standard modernist code (uncertainty, concentricity, detachment) that formed a simulated modernist text over an alchemical intertext that was written to conceal an esoteric system in a specific phonetic-syllabic cipher. During World War II, Germany believed that its secret codes for

radio messages were indecipherable to the Allies. However, the meticulous work of code breakers based at Britain's Bletchley Park cracked the secrets of German wartime communication, and played a crucial role in the final defeat of Germany. Codes are not an extravagance or a game, they are an important feature of modern culture. The importance of codes in the 21st century can be judged by the fact that the U.S. government spends 19 billion dollars annually on cyber-security, which is nothing but the pursuit of unbreakable codes. In the face of this, it is curious that literary scholars (who do pay lip service to the "coded" nature of texts) treat the Afro-Modernist texts as though they are transparent. In his discussion of signifyin(g), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. gives an example of the use of the signifying trope in a modernist text, Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "There are other aspects of critical parody at play here, too, one of the funniest being Jack's glass eye plopping into the water glass before him" (Gates 696). Gates reads the text as though his recognition of its assumed parody of Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942) has legitimately reached the limits of signifying/coding. *Invisible Man* is entirely an encrypted, esoteric roman à clef: the name "Gurdjieff" is rendered through Brother Jack as "gar-cheese"— from "cheese cake" and "sugar" (Woodson 1983-1985). Here Ellison uses the pronunciation that is approached by the last two syllables of "handkerchief"—the pronunciation of Gurdjieff's name that is considered most authentic. Brother Jack is Ellison's rendering of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff as a cyclopean monster; the followers of Orage had been cast out by Gurdjieff, and they had responded with a stream of unfavorable literary portraits. The Orageans embraced Gurdjieff's esoteric teachings; they rejected Gurdjieff the man. Gurdjieff stated that our aim is to "have one permanent 'I' or Ego" (Ouspensky 12). The humor of Ellison's portrayal of the despised Gurdjieff is derived from the mockery of Gurdjieff in accordance to his main developmental principle, for Ellison reduces the guru to having his one permanent "I" be a physical eye: in Ellison's parody Gurdjieff is spiritually demoted and shown to be a man with major flaws.

Many of these esoteric modernist texts go to extremes to indicate that they are coded. For instance, no critic has balked at being able to deliver a reading of Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage."

> "Middle Passage" was inspired by Stephen Vincent Benét's 1928 epic poem *John Brown's Body*, whose contrapuntal style and multiperspectivity it echoes, yet with a strong foothold in historical facts meticulously researched by Hayden himself during his stay at the New York City Public Library's Schomburg Collection in Harlem. The result of this blend of historical accuracy and poetic imagination is a text rich in complexities and ambiguities, "a poem whose linguistic surfaces are as varied as its voices and ultimately as deceptive as the references to calm seas in the slavers' logbooks." (10)

The deception to which Basseler refers are matters of literary subversion:

> Brian Conniff has suggested that Hayden explores Eliot's "theme of cultural 'schizophrenia'" and establishes a narrative framework in which historical sources are used "to turn Eliot's own poetics against his restricted vision of cultural decline." Where Eliot sees Western Civilization's

> demise by turning to its own cultural remnants—the "fragments I have shored against my ruins" —in a rather self-absorbed manner, Hayden reminds his readers of the troubled, haunting presence of Africans in Western history. A closer look at an intertextual reference that both poems share—Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—may serve to further illustrate the way in which Tolson's poem employs and at the same time undermines Eliot's modernist poetics of cultural decline. (Basseler 12)

Hayden not only indicates that the poem is written using the *cabala* phonetic code—"Calabar" ln. 71—his "historical accuracy" (Basseler 10) includes a number of purposeful inaccuracies that undermine the authority of the surface text. The figure called King Anthracite (ln. 79) could not have been given that name, since "Middle Passage" is set in 1800 and the term anthracite did not enter the language until 1790 and was not in even limited use until after 1810. The passage recalling the African King consists of the memories of an old man who would necessarily have encountered any "King Anthracite" (ln. 79) long before 1800. We can also note that the albatross (ln. 34; an allusion to Coleridge's "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner") killed in the poem is a bird associated with the polar regions, while the routes of the slave ships used the tropical latitudes. Intentional mistakes such as these were a convention used in esoteric coded texts to indicate the use of the *cabala* phonetic code. The mistakes were to alert careful readers so that they could discover the hidden level of the poems. What we see here is that Basseler is a critic who has depended on the former interpretations of critics who are equipped to read purported "Afro-Modernist" texts but is bent on instituting readings that are a return to the grand narrative of modernism: Hayden and Tolson did not write in either the "Afro-Modernist" or the modernist mode, and Basseler merely compounds an assortment of misreadings in pursuing his assessment of the relationship that Tolson and Hayden had to modernism.

Just to trouble Basseler's discussion of Hayden and Tolson, I will state that while these two poets are positioned as rivals in literary history (Smith 449; Hall 49-53) and authors of the isolated and remote type (Taylor 716; Farnsworth 77), we find that by means of the *cabala* Tolson's name is spread throughout Hayden's "Middle Passage" and Hayden's name appears at the opening of Tolson's *Harlem Gallery*. It must be understood that Hayden has reduced Tolson's name (indicated below by bold face type and running in both directions) to a constant presence, so that in no one place does the name stand out. The selection below does not do justice to the integral music of this way of doing things.

> "That Crew and Captain lusted with the co**mel**iest
> of the sa**v**age girls kept naked in the cab**in**s;
> that there was one they called The Guinea Rose
> and they cast **lot**s and fought to lie with her:
>
> "That when the B**o**'**s**'**n** piped all hands, the flames
> spreading from starboard already were beyond

control, the negroes howling and their chains
entangled with the flames:

"That the burning blacks could not be reached,
that the Crew abandoned ship,
lea**vin**g their shrieking negresses behind,
that the Captain perished drunken with the wenches:

"Further Deponent sayeth not."

Pi**lot** Oh Pi**lot** Me

(Hayden lns. 57-70)

Tolson handles many names in his dense, encyclopedic epic poem, so the coded names appear in a more concentrated fashion. Robert Hayden's name comes at the opening of the poem, with the initial syllable rendered in reverse but doubled as a finding aid—bar/bur: *"*In Africa, in Asia, on the Day / of Barricades, alarm birds bedevil the Great White World, / a Buridan's ass—not Balaam's—between no oats and hay" ("Alpha" lns. 12-15). As in Hayden's poem, Tolson's poem also manifests the obligatory "intentional mistakes": for instance, the sea turtle that is described as clawing its way out of the belly of a shark that is used as a metaphor for revolt is a creature with harmless flippers that lack claws ("Phi" 135); sharks routinely eat sea turtles after biting off their flippers. This biologically-grounded mistake is a close parallel to Hayden's albatross, and the similarities suggest that there was intimate communication between the two poets (The length and scope of *Harlem Gallery* allowed Tolson the opportunity to expand the theme of mistakes to the point where he has inserted a character—Mister Starks—["mistakes" in *cabala*] to make sure that the attentive reader did not overlook the importance of the errors in the poem: we should also note that there are many additional references to "errors" evident on the surface of *Harlem Gallery*, such "E. & O. E." ("Chi"), an embedded poem with the title of an abbreviation meaning "errors and omissions excepted.")

Tolson's narrative involves the relationship of two heavily-masked characters, The Curator and Dr. Obi Nkomo: "What am I? What are you? / Perhaps we / are twin colors in a crystal" ("Eta" 50). Tolson alludes to the joint identity of the two seemingly disparate characters who share an "occult identity" ("Phi" 135), relating them to a scientific effect: "Crystal twinning occurs when two separate crystals share some of the same crystal lattice points in a symmetrical manner. The result is an intergrowth of two separate crystals in a variety of specific configurations. The surface along which the lattice points are shared in twinned crystals is called a composition surface or twin plane" (Spencer 582). As a twinned crystal, Tolson and Hayden constituted a conjoined unit of literary production that not only produced texts in unforeseen ways but also carried out a program of deceptive public activity. A notorious spat between Tolson and Hayden took place during a festival at Fisk University in 1966, where Tolson and Hayden were on a panel with Margaret Walker and Arna Bontemps. All four of the panelists were followers of A.R. Orage and were esotericists. Tolson, Bontemps, and Walker

outwardly portrayed themselves as Marxists, while Hayden played the role of a Bahá'í. Thus, the entire affair was esoteric theater. The panelists were carrying out an exercise in which they assumed roles and consciously deceived the audience for their own purposes. Without any notion of the esoteric content of the Tolson-Hayden exchange at Fisk (in which Tolson went so far as to obscurely reference Gurdjieffian concepts, "the tri-dimensionality of being," the esoteric division of man into three centers), James C. Hall recognizes their shared "antimodernism" and questions, "Is the event what is seems to be?" Hall even points to an invisible subtext: "Tolson can in no simple way be construed as being in direct dispute with Hayden" (Hall n.p.). *Harlem Gallery* is complexly layered over Wyndham Lewis's radically modern, satirical novel, *The Apes of God*, a title that is given directly seven times and alluded to throughout the entirety of Tolson's poem. The central characters in Tolson's *Harlem Gallery*, The Curator and Dr. Obi Nkomo, are Lewis's Horace Zagreus and Pierpoint. Vincent Sherry identifies Pierpoint as Lewis: "Never glimpsed in the novel, this potent but enigmatic figure is most clearly identified with the absent author" (Sherry 110). Tolson's joke is that Pierpoint / Lewis never appears in Lewis's London because he is an African, but he then appears in Harlem as Nkomo, an explicit mask for Melvin Tolson: "His wits in their Sunday best, / he [Nkomo] wears the mask and grins, "Aloha!" ("Iota" 57; emphasis added). In the poem The Curator and Nkomo stage a debate that is subsequently used as a script for the counterfeit dispute between Tolson and Hayden at the conference at Fisk University:

As The Curator spoke, there was no
mule-deer's-tail contrast
of white and black in the way he said it:
"I remain a lactosopist
fascinated by
the opacity of cream,
the dusk of human nature,
'the light-between' of the modernistic."
Doctor Nkomo's snort
was a Cape buffalo's.
You brainwashed, whitewashed son
of bastard Afroamerica!
The Curator grinned
his Solomonic grin,
for the nettle words were stingless like
a mosquito bee.

(Tolson, "Upsilon" 123)

The above passage is an elaborate allusion to the Stag Hunt Mosaic (Greek c. 300 BCE). Inscribed on the mosaic is the legend *gnosis epoesen*, indicating that the artist was Gnosis—knowledge. Similarly, the Tolson-Hayden debate masked an esoteric content or *gnosis*.

It is the common understanding that Hayden and Tolson were marginalized figures; Hall remarks that they share a refusal to be *discarded* (53; emphasis added). Hall also details the reductive treatment of Hayden by his critics (53). When these poets are viewed from the standpoint that they were Oragean Modernists, a very different picture emerges. In the first place, Adam Trexler shows that the political, philosophical, and aesthetic theories developed in *The New Age*, edited by A. R. Orage, provided a crucial foundation for modernist poetry. Eliot hailed Orage as the best literary critic of his time. As participants in a literary movement initiated and directed by Orage, it is unlikely that Tolson and Hayden saw themselves as being removed from the literary center. Tolson's satirical handling of Wyndham Lewis in *Harlem Gallery* belies any notion that Tolson was in awe of the white modernists or that he was writing for a white audience. In addition, it must be kept in mind that Orage had amended Gurdjieff's system by the application of Nietzsche's idea of the superman: Orage saw the attainment of a higher state of consciousness as the becoming of the Superman. The reason that the followers of Orage were able to freely engage in a constant masquerade was their understanding of themselves as belonging to an order of humanity that was far above that of normal people—all of whom were said to be "asleep." In their writings, Tolson and Hayden aimed at a "vertical audience," so they were not subject to the rules of conventional literary production.

The esoteric features of novels are far more in evidence than they are in esoteric poems. Novels provide far more cover for the effects that esoteric texts ideally require. Often the poets must find ways to encode their texts so minimally that it would be impossible for a reader who was not previously aware of the presence of esotericism to discover the true nature of the text. By contrast, were a reader to study carefully, it would soon be evident that such prose works as Thornton Wilder's *The Eighth Day* or John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* were esoteric texts—not to mention Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, whose title renders the word "legominism" in the *cabala* code.

I have shown in a number of essays that Margaret Walker was a follower of A.R. Orage and that her poems fall into the category of modernist esoteric literary writings. Walker is a highly regarded writer, whose prize-winning poetry has been widely anthologized and studied. Heretofore, it has been consistently stated that Walker was aligned with the aesthetics of Black Marxism (Mills 136-169; Smethurst 58). Her novel, *Jubilee* (1966), is a curious work of fiction in several regards. *Jubilee*, a Houghton Mifflin Prize Novel, is said to have been one of the intellectual beacons of her generation, and *Jubilee* is considered one of the most influential novels of the 20th century. At the same time, there have been few studies of the novel. When *Fields Watered with Blood* (2002), the primary collection of treatments of Walker's writings was reviewed, Sally Ann Ferguson remarked upon the insufficiency of the critics who examined *Jubilee*. The essay in *Fields Watered with Blood* that parallels my concerns in this essay is "Trumpeting a Fiery Sound: History and Folklore in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*" by Jacqueline Miller Carmichael. According to Ferguson, Carmichael's essay takes up superfluous concerns. In her essay, Carmichael addresses the quilt-making described in *Jubilee*:

> Demonstrations of such skills and talents are created by Walker as she provides a colorful and exciting quilt-making scene for the women while the men

> are building Vyry's third and permanent home in Alabama. Seeing the house built is enough excitement, but Vyry fairly bursts with pride and interest in the quilts. There are six quilts, and each housewife has a different pattern. Vyry's consists of pomegranates, with deep orange fruit and green stems and leaves, on a white background. Warren E. Roberts acknowledges the patchwork quilt as the most popular of several kinds of quilting. According to Roberts, the patchwork quilt involves patterns of pieces of cloth of different colors and sizes sewn together. Roberts says that "not only is the technique of quilting traditional, but designs of great variety, often with colorful names, were also passed from one quilter to the next." (Walker 70)

Carmichael's discussion of the quilt-making episode is rudimentary and advances no argument. She goes on to completely disregard the actualities of the folklore of quilt-making in favor of making an unfavorable point about the craft-oriented nature of the scholarship of quilt-making.

> In Susan Roach's essay "The Kinship Quilt: An Ethnographic Semiotic Analysis of a Quilting Bee," there is concern that folklorists are not turning out any substantial body of quilting scholarship. Roach argues that "the dearth of articles on quilt-making in folklore journals indicates this neglect." John Michael Vlach shares the same concern. Mach says that "of the recent books on quilting, almost no attention is paid to the creators of a great art form; the concentration is on 'how-to' descriptions." (Walker 72)

It is ironic that Carmichael mentions the quilting bee (and the building of the house) that occupy the closing section of *Jubilee* with no concern for the craft of either activity. In the text of the novel a point is made about Vyry's order for a multiplicity of quilting frames for the quilting bee, and the text details the work individually done simultaneously on six quilts by six women—thus the novel markedly emphasizes the multiplication of the activity of quilting. Dorothy Gill Barnes, an expert on quilt-making states that "At the most seven women plus the hostess could comfortably sit around the quilting frame. Why not invite the best?" (web). There simply is no such thing as a quilting bee as described in *Jubilee*, with several individual quilting frames: such an activity is not a quilting bee, and such an activity could not have taken place.

A close reading of *Jubilee* suggests that Margaret Walker used the quilting bee and house building episodes at the close of a *Jubilee* to disclose that a group of esoteric modernist writers was responsible for the ensemble authorship of *Jubilee*, in the same way that quilts are sewn by a group of women. The esoteric nature of the text of the chapter on quilt-making and house building in *Jubilee* is indicated by "compound mistakes" of an intentional nature. First, we learn that Vyry's husband has forgotten the quilt frames (Walker 437): this act of forgetting introduces the quilts through a mistake. We can count the inauthentic quilting bee that I have discussed above as yet another mistake. When we look at the text that describes the quilting bee, we find the following:

> The house was enough excitement, but Vyry fairly burst with pride and interest in the quilts. There were six quilts and each housewife had a different pattern. Mrs. Shackelford was making the Rose of Sharon for her daughter, Betty-Alice, and every woman "oohed" and "aahed" over her *workmanship*. She was going to quilt it with the big rosy flowers known to some as the single hibiscus outlined in her most exquisite stitching. Mrs. Lapsley was quilting the Star of California and she had used a combination of red and blue calico for the huge six cornered star, while a third lady, Mrs. Flake, was making the Star of Texas in brilliant red and white. Perhaps the most *original* pattern was a monkey wrench used by Mrs. McElroy with each monkey wrench in a different color on a field of white and brown. The double wedding ring was Mrs. Medford's pattern with pastels for the interlocking circles. Vyry was making pomegranates with deep *orange* fruit, green stems and leaves, on a white background. Each woman sewed industriously through the morning and at dinner time they compared notes with admiring glances and comments to see how much they had accomplished. (*Jubilee* 440; emphasis added)

The intentional mistakes indicate that the names of the women are to be read as esoteric information: Shackleford / hack, Lapsley / lapse, Flake / fake, Medford / fraud. The exception to the deceit indicated by this list of names is McElroy— / real McCoy. The subject of this passage is the Gurdjieff Work, as indicated by "workmanship" (440; see above), and A.R. Orage is indicated by "orange" (440) and "original" (440). On the esoteric level, the burden of the passage is to point to the more than thirty esoteric novels written by Frank Yerby under the guise of popular costume novels. (Yerby's name is indicated in Walker's text by the words "monkey wrench used by" [440]). What this coded passage imparts is that Yerby established the pattern for the esoteric historical novel that was used to write *Jubilee*. It remains to be seen how Walker's novel compares structurally to those by Yerby—a concern beyond the scope of this paper.

The house that is built for Vyry's family develops an intentional mistake of a different type. A house must be built on the level in order to be useful. The house in question is built in a strange way:

> Vyry and Innis had long ago decided on the exact spot for their house. It would crest the hill, and there from the front porch they would look off along the Big Road and beyond it into the thick woods and pine forest that rose on high red-clay hills bordering the road to Crenshaw County. The back porch would be built up a story high from the ground with a long flight of back steps and space to walk under the back of the house. In the northern direction were more red-clay hills, and the morning sun would filter through the kitchen windows. On either side of the house were stands of pine trees. Down the back hill a path led to the brook with clear water running over round pebbles and stones with a clear view of the veins of golden sandstone rising in a wall of graduated steps to its source, an underground spring bubbling in another thicket of jack oaks, sweet gums, pines, and dogwood. (Walker 439)

It is not that such a house could not be built, but it could not be built in a day by a few men, as was the house in *Jubilee*. To make a house that allows one to walk under the back of the house requires

the house to be built on stilts. Once the house was begun on raised ground, it would be very laborious to complete the construction. Given the conditions under which the house in *Jubilee* is being built, the design of the house is a considerable mistake. The description of the house building text imparts significant esoteric information when it is decoded. (1) Several names may be extracted from the first part of the passage—Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ann Petry, and Margaret Walker; (2) Instructions for reading the passage are given in the description of the "brook" which states that some names are "clear" while others are, so to speak, more difficult, being up "a wall of graduated steps" (439) and thus more difficult to read. The last part of the message is nearly indecipherable. That should not be surprising given that what it says is the most revealing information that Walker divulges in her novel. The phrase in question is "an underground spring bubbling in another thicket of jack oaks, sweet gums, pines, and dogwood" (439). What it says is that there is an underground publishing ring in Chicago and New York. (There is also the suggestion that this ring is one of a series of "interlocking circles" [440] of such esoteric writing groups.) We may extrapolate from this statement that the novel *Jubilee* is not the work of one writer but at the least the work of Walker, Brooks, Hurston, and Petry. Thus when we read in the description of the mistaken, improbable quilting bee that "Each woman sewed industriously through the morning and at dinner time they compared notes with admiring glances and comments to see how much they had accomplished" (440) that Walker is describing the production of the novel, *Jubilee*, and not the six quilts. In other words, Walker has reversed the method of the quilting bee in order to point to the reversal of the mode by which conventional novels are written, so that the novel *Jubilee* is revealed to have been written in the manner of a quilting bee.

The prototype for esoteric literary collaborations may have been the *ménage à trois* dedicated to writing *Mule Bone*. While this episode has attracted a great deal of attention because it involved Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, an important aspect has never been factored in—the fact that the third person, Louise Thompson Paterson, and Hurston were both Oragean Modernists. It was common for the Oragean Modernists to operate on two levels, so that some members of a public group were unaware of the esoteric inner circle that was calling the shots. These methods allowed the esotericists to manipulate groups as they saw fit, without the knowledge of uninitiated members. In Gwendolyn Brooks's esoteric novel, *Maud Martha*, (with the coded title "Earth is doom[ed]") she describes the operation of the South Side Writer's Group, a leftist association of creative writers:

> The *original* SSWG consisted of Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, Theodore Ward, Frank Marshall Davis, Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs, Arna Bontemps, Fenton Johnson, and Fern Gayden. Of that group, Walker, Davis, and Bontemps were Orageans. The SSWG grew to include twenty participants including Gwendolyn Brooks and Marian Minus who were Orageans. Gwendolyn Brooks's novel *Maud Martha* is an encrypted account of the SSWG from the esoteric point of view. In *Maud Martha* Brooks explains that Richard Wright was used as a front by the esotericists and that he had no idea what was really transpiring in the SSWG. (Woodson 6)

In her untrustworthy account of writing her highly-regarded poem, "For My People" Walker relates the input of the members of the SSWG into her poem:

> In an interview with John Jones, Walker recalls that "For My People" "was written in fifteen minutes on a typewriter, with the exception of the last stanza of strophe [sic], and then I took that to the project and showed it to Nelson Algren, who told me that I ought to say what I wanted for my people, and then I'd have a poem; and of course I knew what I wanted to say there—another world, another whole earth to come into being. And I never changed in the ideas of that last stanza. The poem's creation indicates the confluence of influences within the work of the South Side Writers' Group, as well as the group's personal and artistic investments in black nationalist culture and interracial cooperation. This also draws attention to the import of creative dialogue among writers in this period. (Gordon 174 n.7)

Since socialist realism is grounded in individual composition, there is no theoretical support for the process of group composition that Gordon valorizes in her description of the SSWG: it simply does not sound like the means by which "Afro-Marxist" (25) literature is to be produced. We can also wonder at the utility of Algren's input, since he was not a poet. On the other hand, as we have seen, this sort of composition by committee was the working method of the Oragean Modernists.

The existence of interlocking underground rings composed of modernist, esoteric writers is unprecedented in American literary history. Moreover, there is no provision for such an apparatus in the understanding of modernism. Modernism is assumed to be a matter of individual composition and experiment. As a movement, Modernism valorized the individual. Arnold Jaffe argues that "the authorial imprimatur became an important feature of modernist literary production . . . designed to infer distinction on individual texts through associations with an inimitable, often remote genius" (Kalliney 418). Orage's esoteric modernism was aimed at the production of "objective" literature and was not conceived of as self-expression. The texts were produced in order to disseminate esoteric ideas in popular literary forms but under the veil of a code. Given the difficulty of producing these texts, one solution was the use of groups of writers working on the same text. In addition, because they belonged to an extensive network of esotericists that were placed in important positions in publishing and journalism, they were able to have their works published, reviewed, and to win prizes due to the influence of their colleagues. At this point, there is only a rudimentary idea of how these esoteric literary rings operated. As more of their texts are read closely and decoded, a clearer understanding of their methods will emerge. It will be interesting to see what developed after the death of Orage in 1934.

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