

Anglo-American Reviews

MCGANN, Jerome, ed. 2017. Martin R. Delany, *Blake; or, The Huts of America: A Corrected Edition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Pp. xxxviii + 335. ISBN 9780674088726, Paper \$20.50.

By the time Martin Delany was writing his novel *Blake*, in the late 1850s, he had lost patience with the white-led abolitionist movement and was committed to black self-emancipation. Insurrection and emigration were possible actions, but, besides the practical difficulties — from money to a place for resettlement — “Delany believed”, says Jerome McGann in this new edition, “that black emancipation was impossible without the ‘elevation’ of black consciousness” (xiii). *Blake* tells the story of a black man in his mid 30s, Henry Blake, born free in Cuba, who, after being enslaved in the American South and having his wife sold away, becomes a revolutionary. McGann suggests that *Blake* is more polemic than work of art, and that Delany (1812–1885), born free in West Virginia, who had been a newspaper editor, physician and activist, used the “conventions of traditional fiction to make an argument about what black emancipation in America meant and how it was to be achieved” (xv–xvi). The novel thus asks a “which comes first” question: consciousness or action? It takes seriously the need and possibility for black-led action, but McGann reads both the story and its textual condition as indicating an ultimate priority for Delany: emancipation is a matter of self, and readers are included.

After his wife Maggie is sold, Henry declares his liberated state to the man who had claimed to own him: “I’m not your slave, nor never was, and you know it!” (21). Maggie’s departure wakes him up, and in Henry’s case he can truly say that he was born free and his enslavement was a scam. He wants to extend this revelation to all. The slave industry put all involved into an altered state of consciousness, drugged in a sense, with slaves forgetting their original freedom and whites their humanity. (This may explain, in part, why Henry will sail across the Atlantic to Benin, aboard a slave ship. The story asks that we remember where many Americans came from, as well as the barracoons and the middle passage.) Henry would prefer that his awakening was widely shared, that others also instantly understood “[t]he authority of the slaveholder ceases the moment that the impulse of the slave demands his freedom” (274). But they struggle to remember and

“self-reliance was the farthest thing from their thoughts” (124). How could he “make them sensible that liberty was legitimately and essentially theirs” (102)?

Before Henry travels to Cuba to rescue Maggie, he circumnavigates the South and primes slaves for insurrection. When he sails to Benin, his presence inspires one of the ship’s owners to renounce his villainy (208), and the Portuguese slave trader in Benin likewise promised “never again to traffic in human beings” (222). These moments of rescue and enlightenment read as conventions of traditional fiction and wane in the latter part of the novel as it confronts the lesson that history had mainly taught: that heroic action and emancipated consciousness were difficult to achieve, share widely, and sustain. Delany could send escaped slaves on the Underground Railroad to Canada, he could arrange love marriages, and he could reunite a shattered family — but what, as the novel moved toward a conclusion, was realistically plausible? The plot in the final chapters is stuck in a holding pattern and earlier declarations are revised. After Maggie and Henry reunite, she says, “as we are now both free and happy, let us attend to our own affairs. I think you have done enough”. He replies, “I am not free” (194). As others are, so is he. On the other hand, when his cousin Placido — the character is based on a Cuban poet of that name executed by the Spanish in 1844 for his role in a failed insurrection — says to Henry that “every day convinces me that we have much yet to learn to fit us for freedom”, he responds: “I differ with you, Placido; we know enough now, and all that remains to be done, is to make ourselves free, and then put what we know into practice. We know much more than we dare attempt to do. We want space for action” (199). Henry Blake is ready, but if self-emancipation must come before action, what must happen?

As history would have it, the novel’s polemical impact was muted by the Civil War. *Blake* has 74 chapters and 26 were published in the *Anglo-African Magazine* in the first half of 1859. Publication halted as Delany was leaving for Nigeria, on a research mission for an emigration plan. He was back in the US by the end of 1860, and McGann believes some revisions were made to the novel, which was then serialized again, from November 1861 to April 1862 in the *Weekly Anglo-African*. It’s that run of the 74 chapters that is the copy-text for McGann’s edition, as it was for the first book version of *Blake* in 1970, edited by Floyd J. Miller. (“No manuscripts or proofs appear to have survived” [MCGANN, xxxiii]). The novel we have today is most probably incomplete. It ends with the possibility of insurrection in Cuba, but inconclusively; moreover, there are no extant copies of the five May 1862 issues of the *Weekly Anglo-African*. (There is no *Blake* in the next extant issue, in June.) McGann notes that “we do not know how

many further chapters were printed, if any” (xxxiv), but both he and Miller believe that the final six or so chapters are missing. (A headnote for *Blake* in January 1859 indicated there would be “some 80 Chapters”.) The end of American slavery, together with the work of Reconstruction, not only rendered the novel’s action proposals (insurrection and emigration) seemingly irrelevant; they also upended the favor shown to self-emancipation first — the laws changed before blacks could collectively feel and declare “that liberty was legitimately and essentially theirs” (102). The war affected Delany too as “he became an even more active accommodationist than [Frederick] Douglass” (xxvii). A biography of Delany in 1868, by Frank A. Rollin, made no mention of *Blake*.

The novel disappeared until the mid 20th century, when Delany’s life story was recovered, and as “the lineal children of *Blake* are *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1965), and George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* (1970)” (McGANN 2017, xv), the moment had come in 1970 for Miller’s edition, from Beacon Press (still in print). By 1970, perhaps for the first time, a black audience existed for Henry Blake, a militant antebellum figure whose questions were still awaiting resolution. Miller — at the time a doctoral student in history — supplied an introduction, a note on the text, and endnotes. McGann’s 2017 edition follows suit, with each essential paratext updated and expanded; as well, he offers corrections based on a comparison of the two periodical publications, which Miller apparently did not do. Whereas Miller set *Blake* in the literary context of its time, referencing Henry Bibb’s autobiography (1849), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and Solomon Northrup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), McGann points to figures of Miller’s time, like Malcolm X. The textual history of *Blake* thus includes the publications in 1859–1862 and the 1970 edition too; each moment — ours included — needs historicizing. (*American Periodicals* has already published [28.1, 2018, pp. 73–89] a roundtable discussion on McGann’s edition, with McGann himself a respondent.) How each generation ignores or reads *Blake* tells us something about race in America, past and present, and about activism and self-reliance.

We need a new edition of *Blake* not only because Delany has increasingly become a major nineteenth-century figure, alongside Douglass, but also because the Miller one has many “weaknesses”, McGann asserts, including “the basic text it presents — it is full of errors — and [. . .] the account it gives of the work’s textual and historical context” (xv); as well, it “fails to expose the remarkably innovative character of the work’s structure” (xxx) and its “providential design” (xx). McGann’s readings of the novel’s religious discourse — how it attempts to “redeem sacred scripture

from its racist American history” (xx) — and its structure are illuminating, and the latter in particular can help us speculate on the novel’s ending, in its missing chapters. Although I find Miller’s edition informative, he did not, it is true, take notice of the “pattern of repetitions between Part I and Part II”, how the “plots and counterplots [in Mississippi] are reprised in Cuba” (xviii). Part I ends with emigration to Canada and McGann surmises a like end to Part II. But to where? According to McGann, *Blake* ultimately argues “the necessity of emigrating from white racist America, emigrating ‘to Afraka,” and “‘Afraka’ is not ‘Africa.’ It is an orthographic sign that there is ‘a world elsewhere’ of black actualities and black truth” (xxv). McGann is citing a song by the slave-ship’s fool, Gascar: “I’m a goin’ to Afraka, / Where de white man dare not stay” (212). By the 1850s, places and peoples left alone by whites were vanishing. Where is “Afraka”?

This “elsewhere” place has its echo in the un-narrated or absent conclusion. Indeed, as both McGann and Miller have suggested, it’s almost as if the missing chapters are intentional. Whether interpreted from a 1970 or 2019 perspective, they can speak to the inconclusiveness of the Civil War’s outcomes for blacks and a lack of reparations. As Miller said, “the very inconclusiveness of the novel as it now exists — the rebellion in process [in Cuba, which may spread to the US] — is perhaps more relevant today than any ending Delany could possibly have conceived” (MILLER 1970, xxv). For McGann, the textual condition “calls out to later readers of *Blake*, not least of all ourselves and our children” and invites our participation in writing a just conclusion (xvii). We are still asking how emancipation in America, black and otherwise, is to be achieved, and still working toward action with revelation.

James Baldwin, in a 1984 interview, offered a sort of conclusion that Delany would, I suggest, find apropos the questing spirit of his *Blake*:

Do you have good fantasies about the future?

I have good fantasies and bad fantasies.

What are some of the good ones?

Oh, that I am working toward the new Jerusalem. That’s true, I’m not joking. I won’t live to see it but I do believe in it. I think we’re going to be better than we are.

What do you think gay people will be like then?

No one will have to call themselves gay. Maybe that’s at the bottom of my impatience with the term. It answers a false argument, a false accusation.

Which is what?

Which is that you have no right to be here, that you have to prove your right to be here. I'm saying I have nothing to prove. The world also belongs to me. (GOLDSTEIN)

Henry Blake also wanted to live in a world where no one would have to call themselves free; it was a false accusation that you weren't; there was nothing you had to prove. That Baldwin was, in a sense, repeating Blake's pre-Civil War lament indicates that post-Civil Rights there was still much to be done, for gay men, gay black men, black women, and on. As long as one American says "you have no right to be here" to another, the bad fantasy lingers.

Correcting the text and updating the supporting materials are reasons enough for a new edition. But there is, as well, something about the text's history — how it started its run in 1859, then stopped, then started over in 1861 only to have its conclusion vanish — coupled with Blake's indefinite revolutionary aims that bestirs McGann. The text itself resists. Let's assume that the May 1862 issues of the *Weekly Anglo-African* did offer the novel's conclusion — McGann is drawn to a kind of intentionality in their loss. Although he speculates on a probable conclusion, he is more interested in how the missing chapters throw the novel open to future readers and unresolved histories. We also watch him find the limits of his work and the archive; in his own conclusion we hear "I don't know" (xxviii) and a comment on the past as a "never-to-be-unalienated" world (xxix). His *Blake* reminds us that the work of editing is never complete.

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