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ON THE HILL

Arthur P. Davis



Arthur P. Davis

Touching
Lives



Davis and graduate student Charles DeArman

Touching Lives

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

It was one of those magnificent April days, the sky gently caressed with cloud wisps, the dogwoods abloom in their white and pink splendor, the benches on the Howard University campus filled with students engaged in flirtatious repartee, happy to be free, at last, of bulky overcoats and overheated rooms.

As three o'clock approached, some of the students drifted over to the gallery of the College of Fine Arts building where they were joined by a good sampling of students from previous generations. Neither the current students nor their older counterparts had come for the opening of a new exhibit. Not this time. They came, instead, to pay special homage to a special person who had touched all their lives in a special way.

That person was Arthur P. Davis, teacher, scholar and pioneering illuminator of the works of Black writers.

The reason for the homage: Davis' retirement from teaching at the age of 75.

Davis, who retains his title of University Professor, will continue to work at Howard part-time, pursuing his own scholarly projects and serving as consultant to the English department. But this fall, for the first time in a little over half a century, he will not preside in front of a classroom.

And so, those who know Davis, respect him and, yes, love him, came together on that balmy afternoon awash with the new beginnings of a new season to speak of what he has meant to them.

Edward Hawthorne, dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, assured those in the audience that "we have no intention of letting this gem leave the campus. Dr. Davis is a literary giant. He makes all our lives richer by just being here."

Estelle Taylor, chairman of the English department, told of the importance of Davis' graduate course, "Literature of the American Negro," in "those lean lean days when most people know nothing of their heritage." "For him," she added, "Black scholarship is a serious thing, not a rapping session."

Gregory Riggsby, the first student to re-

ceive a Ph.D. in English at Howard [1968] and now a University of the District of Columbia professor, compared Davis to a batsman in cricket, the popular game of his native Trinidad. "A batsman who has retired has merely displayed to the world that he is a dominating force," he said in his crisp, clear, accented English. "He is not out. Dr. Davis is an outstanding teacher and thus will never be out. Through his students and through their students there will be a continuation of his wisdom. People who don't even know what Dr. Davis looks like will know him through his ideas."

The testimonials rolled on, followed by the presentation of a commemorative album of the writings of past and present students, the reading of poems ("You is a folk tale man") and the singing of songs ("Touch Somebody's Life").

"The song seems appropriate," said Annie Perkins, the graduate student who served as mistress of ceremonies, "because you have touched all our lives."

'With the exception of Sterling Brown, I think I have sent out into the field of Black literature . . . more people than any other professor in the country.'

The man who touches lives stepped forward. A bespectacled, genial-looking, pale-beige-skinned-man dressed in a dark suit, Arthur P. Davis looked like what he is: a professor. But the professor was momentarily at loss for words. His emotions runneth over. "That last song did it," he said, his voice almost breaking. "This has been one of the happiest times in my life."

Then, that familiar twinkle came into his eyes as his wit quickly recovered itself. "I know some of this talk [about wisdom] is hyperbole. Anyone can be wise [he drawled out the word southern style] if you live long enough. It all comes from hanging in there." Laughter coursed through the room, erasing any residue of sadness.

Wisdom laced with wit: it is the A.P.D. trademark.

Characteristically, he clothes his erudition in a folksy manner, frequently professing to be "jes a po' country boy from the South." If so, he is one po' country boy whose achievements would stretch a long long way down some dusty southern lane.

Arthur P. Davis has been first and foremost a teacher, starting out at North Carolina College in Durham (1927-28), then at Virginia Union University (1929-44), Hampton Institute (summers 1943-49) and, since 1944, at Howard. While his initial specialty was 18th century English literature, he soon became drawn to what was at one time considered a new and startling field: Afro-American literature.

Davis remembers that day back in 1943 on a visit to the campus when a member of Howard's English department confronted him with a question: "Why are you wasting your time fooling around with 'nigger literature' when you could be writing about 'real' literature?" The attitude implicit in the question was typical of the times even though Howard's attitude towards the legitimacy of the works of Black writers was far more advanced than that on most campuses. For the university was blessed by the presence of three of the seed-planters of Afro-American literature: Benjamin G. Brawley, Alain LeRoy Locke and Sterling A. Brown. Brown, particularly, in his undergraduate courses, his criticism and his poetry continually shared with Howard students the wealth that is Black literature. [See *New Directions*, Winter 1974, for a profile of this pioneer.]

In 1964, Davis began offering Howard's first graduate level course in the field: English 248-249 ("Literature of the American Negro"). Inaugurated at a time of exploding Black consciousness, it proved to be the right course at the right time. Quickly it became an institution not only because of its popularity, but perhaps more important in the long run, because of its productivity. From the ranks of its students emerged a stream of scholars —

6 Black and white — who fanned out to spread the word. Bragging like a proud papa, Davis says, "With the exception of Sterling Brown, I think I have sent out into the field of Black literature — both in writing and teaching — more people than any other professor in the country."

English 248-249 was one of those rare courses that actually changed lives. A case in point: Jeanne-Marie Miller, now a Howard administrator and an authority on Black drama. "I took the course the first time it was offered that summer," she recalls, "and I decided then and there that whatever talents I had would be devoted to attempting to enlighten people about Afro-American literature. Dr. Davis was directly responsible for my making a decision to do research in Afro-American drama. I liked the kind of exposure to Black literature he gave and I liked his balanced presentation. He took no stand on the literature but let it unfold itself to you and you would make your own decision about it. It's the same approach I am using today in my course [at Howard] in Afro-American drama. I try to give that same broad view."

In the classroom, Davis proved a master at blending facts, opinions, recitation and old-fashioned story-telling ("Can I tell you an anecdote?") to capture the intent of the writers he presented.

A visitor to some of his classes last spring was treated to some typical A.P.D.isms:

After a student had given an insightful report on poet Robert Hayden: "Hayden weaves several themes to create a harmonious whole. That's good artistry when one can do that."

After a lively discussion on "message" writing: "The line between propaganda and art is often vague. You could look at Dante's "Divine Comedy" as propaganda for Catholicism yet it is undoubtedly a work of art."

After a student had shared one critic's view on Richard Wright's use of "moral distancing": "I never thought of looking at Wright that way. That's what a good critic does. He opens your mind."

And in a more impish vein:

Apropos of nothing in particular: "That's the way I interpretate it? Have you heard anyone say interpretate?" [No answer.] You don't know too many ignorant people then."

Upon introducing a visitor to the class, the daughter of a former student: "I always remember my smart students. Not the dumb ones."

In answer to a question about an upcoming final: "It's not a hard exam. I *think* I could pass it."

Davis has no special formulas for good teaching, he explained later. One thing he does know, though, is that "You can't fool students. They can detect a phony. They know if you're really interested in them and if you know your subject. So I never tried to appear to know more than I do. I hope I have given my students a feeling that honesty in scholarship is as important as honesty in life."

'... The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs.'

While he had offers in the past to teach at predominantly-white colleges, he always turned them down. "I am not anti-white and a lot of Black nationalism — not all of it — I consider foolishness. I just feel more at home with Negro students. Also, I feel I can do more with them, that I have a better understanding of them."

When asked to compare more recent students with those in the past, he answers readily: "Students in the past were a little more conventional in their study habits and they tended to do more work. But they did not have the imagination present-day students have. In the past, a student might give me a paper on the life of Langston Hughes and discuss his works in general. Today, a student might write a long paper on the imagery in one Langston Hughes poem. It's more challenging teaching contemporary students. Students have grown today and, frankly, in some cases they have grown beyond me."

The classroom has been but one forum

for the wit and wisdom of Arthur P. Davis. There is also the A.P.D. of the books.

Isaac Watts: His Life and Works, published in the U.S. in 1943 and in England in 1948, is a study of a leading 18th century English hymn-writer and religious dissenter. Full of reference to now-obscure theological controversies and persona, the book today seems more a curiosity than anything else (especially in that it was penned by a "po' country boy from the South," and a Black one at that.) Yet it enabled Davis to begin honing the critical and writing skills which were to serve him so well later on.

It is through Davis' books and his dozens of articles and book reviews illuminating Black literature that he has made his major mark as a scholar.

With Sterling Brown and the late Ulysses Lee, he edited *The Negro Caravan*, that pioneering anthology of the works of Black writers. The book, which included short stories, poetry, essays, selections from novels, folk literature, drama and biography, was published at a time [1941] when the literary establishment kept its eyes closed to the legitimacy, indeed, to the existence, of Black literary creativity. *Caravan* forced open a lot of eyes.

As Julius Lester wrote in the introduction to a new 1970 edition, "Few books acquire the status of legends. But this is one . . . it acquired a place in the lives of black intellectuals and those able to acquire a copy congratulated themselves for being the recipient of one of the Lord's few modern miracles. . . . It comes as close today as it did in 1941 to being the most important single volume of black writing ever published."

Davis' name is affixed to the covers of two other important anthologies of Black writing. *Cavalcade: Negro American Writers from 1760 to the Present* (1971), co-edited with Saunders Redding, includes many of the same writers as its distinguished predecessor but extends its time-frame to embrace those writers of the '60's who chose to forge their craft into a tool of the Black revolution (however defined). *The New Negro Renaissance: An Anthol-*

ogy (1975), co-edited with Michael Peplow (an English 248-249 alumnus), concentrates its focus on that prolific literary period between 1910 and 1940—a period whose spirit was perhaps best captured by Langston Hughes in the following lines: “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If the white folks seem pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. Ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. . . .”

From the *Dark Tower*, Davis’ critical and biographical study of major Black writers from 1900 to 1960, takes its title from a poem by Countee Cullen, a leading figure of the New Negro Renaissance (and a man Davis personally knew). The book, published by Howard University Press in 1974, remains one of the Press’ best sellers and has been well-received by the critics. *Choice*, the influential book review magazine, for instance, included it in its list of outstanding academic books for 1974-75.

The volume represents a compendium of the ideas and insights Davis had developed in scores of articles and book reviews, classroom lectures, informal exchanges with fellow teachers, students and friends and in a series of 26 radio talks (*Ebony Harvest*) produced by American University in 1972-73. It is also a book that readily shows that Davis is one professor who not only knows how to research and to analyze but to *write*. Two samples:

On what happened when some writers stopped producing “protest” literature: “One must also remember that the protest tradition was no mere surface fad with the Negro writer. It was a part of his self-respect, part of his philosophy of life, part of his inner being. It was almost a religious experience with those of us who came up through the dark days of the twenties and thirties. When a tradition so deeply ingrained is abandoned, it tends to leave a spiritual numbness — a kind of void not easily filled with new interests or motivations.”

On Richard Wright, the seminal author of *Native Son*, etc.: “[Wright] did not believe

that black is beautiful. He felt that black life was ugly, brutal, violent, devoid of kindness and love. And he places much of the blame for this bleakness on that great fog of racial oppression that hung over the Negro like a tremendous, compelling natural force, expelling him from the finer things of Western civilization, dehumanizing and brutalizing him physically and spiritually. In one sense this is Wright’s only theme.”

There are certain key themes that run through Davis’ own approach to Afro-American literature, themes that have sometimes brought him into conflict with younger colleagues. In a series of interviews in his small, frequently-visited office in a “temporary” building on the Howard campus, and in his comfortable apartment near the university’s Dunbarton campus, he took time out to talk about some of them. At each meeting, the geniality of this manner matched perfectly the geniality of his countenance.

‘A Black literary critic can look more understandingly at the works of a Black writer than a white critic . . .’

“American Negro literature is essentially American literature,” observed Davis as he sat in his living room near a bookcase crammed with works of Black authors. “I disagree with the Black Arts Aesthetic. I do not think we are distinct and apart. As Professor [Sterling] Brown used to say, if we are ‘different’ that difference can too often be translated into ‘inferiority.’ A good American Negro writer is a good American writer. Period.” He then qualified his statement somewhat: “A person writes best about what he knows best. *All other things being equal*, a Black writer can write better on Black material than a white writer and I emphasize *all other things being equal*. But there is nothing to keep whites from writing good books on Blacks. One of the best books about Zora Neale Hurston [the New Negro Renaissance writer-folklorist], for instance, was written by a white man. [Robert C. Hemenway.]

Still Davis believes the Black writer does

7
have a special mission. This he defines as “a certain right, a certain obligation, even, to interpret his background and share his attitudes with the world. But this does not mean that every Black writer must do so or that every Black writer must do so all the time. For the Black writer to confine himself to ‘Black themes’ or ‘to make every poem political’, as [Amiri] Baraka once said, is too limiting. It’s writing according to line. So many things in a Black man’s life have no racial tag.”

His views on literary criticism, which he calls “one of our weakest disciplines,” are similar. “A Black literary critic can look more understandingly at the works of a Black writer than a white critic, again, *all other things being equal*. His blackness does give him more insight into and familiarity with the problems of Blacks. But a good Black critic needs no special equipment to criticize the works of Black writers. He would use the same criterion to criticize a book by Saul Bellow as by James Baldwin. A good Black critic should be a good critic. Period.”

Davis’ own approach to literary criticism is ostensibly simple: “I look at a work and react to it. If I like it, I find the reasons why. If I dislike it, I do the same. It’s very personal. I do not ground my criticism in a set of isms — whether Marxist, Freudian or those of the Black Aesthetic. I do not tell the work what to tell me.”

Among his favorite writers are Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown and Robert Hayden. Among younger writers he admires are Sonia Sanchez (“Something about her appeals to me.”) and Ishmael Reed (“a brilliant writer.”).

Davis proudly calls himself an “integrationist.” “That’s the word I use,” he explained. “Some use the term ‘universalist.’ But I’m not sure I know what that means.”

He also proudly calls himself “Negro.” “I remember being in a meeting at Howard in 1968 and I said something about Howard being a Negro school and someone said, ‘You mean ‘Black?’ And I answered, ‘No, God damn it! I mean Negro!’ And nobody bothered me again.”

8 His reasons for using "Negro" are various: "One, because of my age; I'm more accustomed to being called Negro. Secondly, because Negroes aren't black; they are various shades of brown. Thirdly, the work 'Black' gets confused with black as an adjective. If you say, 'Walter White was a blue-eyed blond Black,' you're doing violence to the language."

Still, in his writing Davis often has alternated "Black" with "Negro" and "Afro-American" "to keep sentences from being monotonous." And he has never tried to foist his preference for "Negro" on others. "If you choose to call yourself 'Black' I'm not going to fight you about it. Just don't make me use the word."

The tiresome business of "Negro" vs. "Black" once more taken care of, Davis returned to the subject of integration — and literature.

"When I started teaching," he recalled, "the standard literature anthologies included no Black authors. The time will come — and it is on its way — when textbooks on American literature will include more and more of the best Negro writers. I hope, too, in the future we shall become so integrated that a course like mine [English 248-249] will be an elective because *all* American literature courses will include Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes . . ."

As a self-avowed integrationist, as well as a veteran literary critic, Davis has had difficulties approaching those Black writers who would wield their craft solely into a weapon to slay the white man. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his controversial article, "The New Poetry of Black Hate." (First published in the June 1970 issue of the *CLA Journal*, later included in *Modern Black Poets: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 1972.)

In the article, Davis looks at poetry inspired by the manifesto once promulgated by Amiri Baraka: "We want 'poems that kill,' Assassin poems, poems that shoot/guns . . . We want a Black poem. And a Black World." For Davis, such poetry is "based on and motivated by 'poetic' hatred for white

Americans and for everything associated with them, including middle-class Negroes." Ironically, he finds "the reasons for hating whitey were far stronger in the days of this generation's fathers and grandfathers than they are now."

On the one hand, he admires the boldness of this new generation of writers that "fears nothing, has no shibboleths." On the other hand, he finds its anti-white obsession ultimately monotonous: "Too much of this hate poetry is repetitive, mouthing over and over again the same revolutionary slogans and themes; some of it is guilty of bad taste, not moral but aesthetic, in using filth and obscenity only for the purpose of shocking the Establishment." He also questions the authenticity of the hatred expressed: "After reading a considerable number of these poems, I get the same impression I receive from reading too many pastorals — the forms and conventions tend to stand out more clearly than anything else."

Even some of Davis' most fervent admirers disagree with some of the ideas he expressed in this article, especially its central premise that this was, in fact, "poetry of Black hate."

Ramona Hyman, a graduate student in the English department, loves to drop by Davis' office to chat. She calls him "a big influence on my life," "a folk tale," "a wealth," and that crowning compliment: "He's good people." Yet she believes he is off base in this particular article. "I don't think it was a poetry of Black hate," she argues. "I think it was a poetry of Black love. What these writers did was write about the hateful things in Black life because they loved Black life so much." (Davis' answer: "My mind is not subtle enough to take that in.")

Similarly, Stephen E. Henderson, director of Howard's Institute for the Arts and the Humanities and author of *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, calls Davis "mistaken" in his interpretation. "If you call these poets 'poets of Black hate' you would have to call people like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes poets of Black hate," he contends. Then he adds: "Besides, you

have a right to hate, particularly if you have been abused for centuries." (Davis' rejoinder to this one: "I can't answer that. He is right. You do have that right.")

"I was not saying this poetry is not good for all people," Davis elaborated in one interview. "Nor was I telling these poets, 'You shouldn't be writing this kind of thing.' I was saying that for Arthur P. Davis this poetry has too much hate. Also, I don't think it will last. I just can't see hatred as a motivating force for poetry over a long period of time. It's like building on a sand foundation. In spite of everything I believe deep down, all of us are human beings and we do not hate all the time."

Haki Madhubuti is one of the "new poets" some might place in Davis' categorization. In his own defense, Madhubuti says, "I have never written from a position of hate. I wrote from a position of Black love. What Arthur interprets as hate is a distrust of our enemies and a profound love of our own people." Madhubuti, who has been writer-in-residence at Howard, quickly points out that his disagreement with Davis is philosophical, not personal. "My view is that white people are the enemies of Black people and I hit on that in my work. I am more political. Arthur is more literary. It's more a generational thing." Overall, he lauds Davis for "his meticulousness, his vision, his caring for Black literature." "You can't talk about the beauties of Black literature and then act the opposite. Arthur P. Davis mirrors the literature."

Then, too, Ramona Hyman urges younger readers to put "The Poetry of Black Hate" in perspective. "That's one of the most important things I learned from Dr. Davis," she says, "to put a writer's works in perspective — in terms of his age, class, education, influences. . . ."

Arthur Paul Davis was born on November 21, 1904 in Hampton, Va. His father, Andrew Davis, had been born in slavery and had been held in his mother's arms as she watched the Battle of the Monitor and the Merrimac. One of the earliest graduates of Hampton Institute [class of 1872], Andrew Davis became a master plasterer and contractor whose work

graced many of the finest homes in the area. At home, he served as a model of proud manhood for his eight children (a ninth died in infancy). Davis wrote of his father in a January 1950 article in the *Negro History Bulletin*: "Though born in slavery and reared in the South, he had grown up in that period immediately following the Civil War when the South grudgingly and briefly awarded the Negro equality. He never outgrew his early conditioning in freedom; as a result he walked through life as a *full* man, making few if any concessions to race."

What's more, Andrew Davis *knew*, from intense personal experience, that whites were neither special nor superior.

'Harlem in the 1920s was a delightful place, particularly so to a youngster reared in a small southern town.'

As a youth he had gone North and for 10 years lived as a white man. Observed Davis about his father in an article in *Common Ground* (Winter, 1944): "After ten years 'across the line,' he found it was better to be a *poor* Negro than a *poor* white; he came back, married my brownskin mother, and never left home or race again. He, of course, used to tell us many anecdotes about his experiences on the other side. With such a background, there was little danger of our growing up with the feeling of racial inferiority which the pattern of southern living tends to create in the Negro."

Arthur P. Davis, with his flaming red hair, freckles and green eyes, was often called "plug ugly" by some of his darker-skinned playmates. "As a little 'yaller' boy, I early learned I had to fight the color line both within and without the group," he wrote in the *Common Ground* article. "But I also learned that the internal fight was trivial and insignificant compared with the real fight—the outside."

The Davis family numbered amongst the town's leading Black families (though "Black," of course, was not the terminology of the day). These families, light in complexion, middle-class in values, were often

regarded by other Blacks as "nothing but a bunch of 'dicty niggers,'" Davis commented in the same article. Yet underneath any trappings of class consciousness, Davis observed, "we were not a bad lot, and we never gave ourselves any great airs. Lacking the sophistication of the older Negro families in the large cities, we were plain, simple, and relatively uneducated folk, determined to be decent and simple, determined also to see to it that the children grew up to be well-mannered law-abiding citizens."

Determined to see, too, that the children developed a healthy respect for learning. Andrew Davis took it for granted that his sons would do well in school. And Davis, the youngest of the lot, early showed he had no intentions of disappointing him. In 1922, he graduated as valedictorian of his high school class at Hampton Institute. In his valedictory address he urged his classmates to heed the call "to discover our own talents, to respect our own personalities, to develop our own powers, and by so doing to stir up the gifts that are within us that we may give to the world our own best selves."

Davis received a scholarship to study at Columbia College but first spent a year at Howard (where an elder brother was in medical school) in order to earn the language credits he would need to attend the Ivy League school. Howard, after Hampton with its predominantly-white teaching staff, was an eye-opener for this unsophisticated southern boy. ("Meeting a man like Alain Locke—brilliant, cosmopolitan, interested in African art—was a whole new experience for me.")

He was to meet Locke again when he attended Columbia. It was a good time to be at Columbia and to live in nearby Harlem for those were the flourishing years of the New Negro [or Harlem] Renaissance. Even though Davis was juggling his studies, part-time jobs (e.g. waiter, elevator operator, settlement house worker), and a budding romance with a young librarian named Clarice Winn, he could not help but get caught up in the fervor of Harlem at that time.

He met writers like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Wallace Thurman. He visited the 139th Street apartment furnished by Aleelia Walker, daughter of the pioneering Black cosmetics entrepreneur, as a meeting place for young writers and artists. He joined the Sunday parade up and down "The Avenue" (7th Avenue near 135th Street) and once saw W.E.B. DuBois, dressed in morning coat and striped trousers, and Marcus Garvey, in similar formal attire but with the added touch of a gold-headed walking stick, deliberately snub each other as they passed. He took in Bojangles Robinson at the 135th Street YMCA, heard Fats Waller at the Lafayette Theater, attended funky rent parties where he ate his fill of chitterlings, pig feet and hopping-john [rice and black-eyed peas].

"Harlem in the 1920's was a delightful place, particularly so to a youngster reared in a small southern town," Davis observed in an article in the *Negro American Forum* (Fall, 1968). "But this enjoyment [of Harlem] was not the phony exotic primitivism which the white folk came uptown nightly to find in cabarets and other hot spots. Our enjoyment was in part the pride of having a city of our very own—a city of black intellectuals and artists, of peasants just up from the South, of West Indians and Africans, of Negroes of all kinds and classes."

Meanwhile, at Columbia, Davis was making his way in an almost lily-white world. He was one of the few Black students in attendance and that special status seemed to confer on him a special burden. "I felt the whole 'race' rode on my poor weak shoulders, that somehow if I failed, I would be letting down all Negroes," he reminisced in an article published in *Obsidian* (Winter, 1978). "Many Negroes of my generation assumed that attitude when they attended northern white schools. It helped to make us more competitive."

Competitive Davis was. He majored in philosophy. ("I don't have the least idea why. Philosophy sounded 'big,' 'difficult.'") and he did well, well enough to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa, an honor which earned him a front-page article in the *New York Times* as the first Black Phi Beta Kappa at

10 Columbia. ("It was a false alarm. I was the second.") But when two *Times* photographers came to take Davis' photo for the story, they took one look at his near-white complexion and put their cameras away. "No dice," one complained. "He looks too much like the others."

Majoring in philosophy might have proved that Davis could handle a "big," "difficult" subject, but he knew philosophy couldn't put bread on his table. ("There was only one Negro school with a philosophy department [Howard] and Alain Locke was in it. So I knew they didn't need me.") So he decided to earn an M.A. in English at Columbia. The topic of his thesis: "Jeremy Collier and the Reformation of the English Stage."

"No, it wasn't considered odd for a Black person to be writing on such a subject," Davis answered in response to the obvious question. "At the time academicians didn't think there were any Black authors worth writing on. Also, there was our own thinking at the time. We would have been insulted if someone had suggested we write on someone like Paul Laurence Dunbar. We didn't want to be put in a racial niche. Our attitude was, 'Give us a chance and we'll show you we can do anything you can do—and do it just as well.'"

With similar motivation, Davis chose Isaac Watts as the subject for his Ph.D. dissertation (which was to become his first book). Research on Watts took him to London (financed by fellowships) and brought him into contact with an intellectually stimulating group of African, West Indian and Black American students, among them, Ralph Bunche.

By the time Davis received his Ph.D. in 1947, he was a husband (having married his favorite librarian), a father (to one Arthur Paul Jr.), an English teacher at Virginia Union University and the author of numerous scholarly articles on literature as well as popular articles for such publications as *Negro Digest* and *The Crisis*.

In 1947, also, he published his only work of fiction, *How John Boscoe Outsung the Devil*, a short story which originally ap-

peared in *Common Ground* and was later included in several anthologies.

The story, inspired by a man Davis knew at Hampton, is a folk tale in the John Henry-Paul Bunyan mold. It tells of John Boscoe with "the sweetest and deepest bass anybody had ever listened to on this earth," who gets so possessed by pride that he challenges the devil to a singing contest. When it looks like "Ol' Satan" will win, John realizes the folly of his overinflated pride and begs forgiveness: "Oh, Lord, I know I been a sinful and a prideful man! I know I been 'side myself with my own biggityness . . . And, Lord, that voice you gave me to bring souls to you, I done used to feed my own vanity and pride." The Lord, heeding John's plea, fills his voice with new power. John wins the contest and returns home a much-humbled man.

Davis enjoyed writing about John Boscoe and his foolish pride but he didn't pursue fiction. ("I don't really know why.") He did, though, pursue journalism.

'I came here in 1944 during the golden years . . . Howard was a great place then and it is a great place now.'

While at Virginia Union and at Howard, he wrote a popular column for the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* called "With a Grain of Salt." In his inaugural column on October 16, 1942, he cited his mission: "In these articles, I can assure you of one thing only: you will find no pompous pronouncements concerning economics, politics, or the race problem. . . . And above all you will find no racial opportunism. . . . On the contrary, though right or wrong, though taking the popular or the unpopular approach, I shall 'call 'em as I see 'em'—but always with a generous grain of salt."

In more than 800 weekly columns, he discussed a wide range of concerns, among them: his son's "addiction" to comic books (which he bemoaned until he came across one featuring a heroic Black World War II soldier); Richmond ("a Southern matron old enough to be sensible yet young enough to be appealing"); and Franklin D.

Roosevelt's death ("As I listened to the eulogies on the radio, as I talked with men on the street, as I stood uncovered and watched the funeral procession stream silently by, I felt for the first time a part of, a oneness with the soul of America. I was an American mourning with other Americans the loss of a man whose charm, whose 'saving common sense,' whose sublime simplicity, and whose large soul took all of us—black, white, Jew, Catholic, aristocrat, and laborer—and fused us into a spiritual whole.")

Through his column, Davis caught the eye of many of the nation's Black intellectuals. One of them was Sterling Brown, who in 1937 had conceived the idea of *The Negro Caravan* and later invited Davis and Ulysses Lee, then a student, to come on board as co-editors.

Working on *The Negro Caravan* crystallized Davis' interest in Afro-American literature. "I felt here was a genuine field, a relatively new field and there were only a few people working in it, Sterling, one or two others. I somehow sensed that this [Afro-American literature] was an important segment of American literature. Secondly, I liked the literature. It's been a revelation, a constant discovery."

Despite his pale complexion and despite his insistence on calling himself "Negro," Davis says no one has ever challenged him for adopting Afro-American literature as his field. Nor has his commitment to Black folk, in general, ever been challenged. Not even in the tumultuous '60s. "I think it's because everything about me is so typically Negro—the way I talk, my sense of humor. Everything but my color."

Not surprisingly, Davis has no regrets about shifting his scholarly gaze from the writing of 18th century England to that of Black Americans through the years. Nor does he have any regrets about staying at Howard so long.

"I came here in 1944 during the golden age of Howard," he told those assembled at that commemorative program last spring. "Howard was a great place then and it is a great place now. It is a seminal American university. . . . I know a lot of

people who retire and they have so many gripes. I've served under three presidents, four vice presidents for academic affairs, two graduate deans and six chairmen of the English department and I don't have a gripe of any kind. Nobody shortchanged me. Nobody done me in."

"I've gotten almost sentimental about Howard," he had confessed earlier. "And, frankly, Howard has been very good to me — bringing me back for seven years after retirement on full salary, asking me back part-time..."

Davis says he supports the idea of compulsory retirement, in general. "There's got to be a way to get rid of no good teachers and to enable younger faculty members to have a chance to advance. But there should be enough play in the rule that exceptions can be made. Some scholars are doing their best work at 65." [Davis, for instance, has three books plus numerous important articles to his credit since that age.]

He is now finishing up an autobiography he has been working on over the last few years. ("I'm not satisfied with it yet. It lacks a certain something.") He also plans to work on a history of Afro-American literature based on the wealth of frequently-overlooked material in M.A. theses produced by graduates of Howard's English department. He will continue to serve on the Commission of Management and Operations of Howard University Press, and on the Policy Advisory Board of the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities. And, as usual, he will keep out a welcome mat for the many past and present Howard students and teachers who flock to him for scholarly advice or to just sit around and shoot the breeze.

"I have a little bit of sadness about not teaching anymore," Davis admitted, "but I also know old people have a tendency to stay on too long."

There is sadness in other corners of his life, as well. Two years ago, shortly before a 50th wedding anniversary, Clarice Davis died. By all accounts, they had what today often seems a rarity: a very happy marriage. Says Davis, his voice softening with



affection, "Clarice was the kind of woman everyone liked. Everywhere she went — in the library system, the neighborhood, wherever — she made friends. The word for her was 'gentle.'" There are other painful absences in his life, too: all but one of his sisters and brothers; friends; colleagues; former students...

But there are also joys: family (his son, now an assistant principal at a D.C. junior high school; his teacher daughter-in-law; his especially beloved 16-year-old granddaughter to whom he dedicated *From the Dark Tower*; and all the others in the larger Davis clan whose numbers include a nephew and niece who are making their own marks on Black literature — the Yale scholar-administrator Charles Davis and the poet Thulani Davis); his enduring love for good books and for good conversation; his ongoing scholarly projects; and, of course, his students. For, he says, "My students have been my lifeblood."

It's been a nourishment that has flowed both ways. As Gregory Rigsby observed at

that commemorative program, "There are those professors who allow you to take and those who give. They give so much of themselves that you become a part of their very sphere. That distinguishing feature — the giving of self — is what marks Dr. Davis above all else." □