Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both,* New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997. Reviewed by Alessandro Portelli.

At the end of the opening paragraph of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,* James Weldon Johnson's anonymously published 1912 novel, the narrator confesses to "a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society." [1] The savage joke is implicit in the title: in a society structured upon rigid and impassable, "natural" distinctions and definitions of racial identity, the very mention of an *ex-colored* person is bound to sound as a threat. As in the standard scene, included in this as in other turn-of-the-century African American novels, in which the "black" character who is passing for "white" sits undetected in a Jim Crow railroad car and monitors the whites' discussion of the "Negro problem", this segregated other may indeed by hiding in the midst of white society - he may actually be, in Charles Bon's imagined words to Henry Sutpen, "the nigger who's going to sleep with your sister".[2] If this is possible, no identity is safe - which Johnson underlines by publishing the book anonymously - and no hierarchy is stable and secure.

And yet, Johnson's narrator speaks of a joke "on society", not just on *white* society. The joke, then, is also on Johnson's implied African American readers who may think they have a stake in keeping identities separate, or who subscribe to the belief that mixed blood is a contradiction leading inevitably to tragic consequences.

In his admirable *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both,* (which includes articulate discussions of both *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Absalom, Absalom!),* Werner Sollors carries Johnson's "joke" to its logical conclusions, demolishing the very

concept of stable racial identities. Revising Sterling Brown's seminal description of the "Tragic Mulatto" stereotype, Sollors points out that "in many cases literary Mulattoes were able to cross racial boundaries that were considered fixed, real, or even natural. This ability is what made them such ideal questioners of the status quo": rather than pitiful and "tragic", the character of mixed descent may be the living symbol of a rebellion against hierarchies and categories based on such spurious concepts as "race" or "blood".[3] Perhaps, this is why, signifying ironically on a whole tradition of African American fiction, Johnson spoke of *"little* tragedies", as if to point out that there is nothing *inherently* tragic in interracial identity, unless it is generated by cultural and social paranoias of racial superiority.

Like *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,* Werner Sollors's extraordinarily but unobtrusively erudite book crosses boundaries that have been considered fixed, real, or even natural in literary history and criticism, moving freely across time, space, disciplines. The first three chapters display an impressive historical range, as they trace the origin of certain racial definitions and ideologies through sources reaching from ancient Egypt to our own time. The book begins with an investigation of the creation myths concerning the origin of human "races", of the concept of race itself, as well as the imagery of a pre-lapsarian and pre-racial Eden (a theme taken up again in the final chapter, which shows how happy ends to interracial narratives are often predicated upon the image of an utopian "elsewere" where impossible dreams may become reality). The second chapter is a discussion of the complex theme of *Natus albus/Natus Aethiops,* that is, of the belief that even very diluted traces of black "blood" may suddenly surface in the birth of what the South popularly called a "black baby" (also told in the classic Neapolitan song, "Tammurriata nera"). The third chapter is an articulate de-construction, through a close reading of biblical text and commentaries, of the so-called "curse of Ham", according to which Africans are descendants of Noah's son cursed for having seen his father's "nakedness".

The range of sources brought to bear in the discussion of the "curse of Ham" is particularly impressive, including Christian,

Jewish, Arabic commentaries. This is just one example of the book's geo-cultural range. Although it is rooted in the ground of American studies, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* frames the discussion in a wide comparative context. The thematic treatment of the motif of the "bluish tinge" in the fingernails as a revealing sign of racial identity, for instance, is traced back to Maurice Labat's *Nouveau voyage aux Isles de l'Amérique* (1722), then through Victor Hugo's *Bug-jargal* (1826), Eugene Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1843), Theodor Storm's "Von jenseit des Meeres" (1865), all the way to Frank Yerby, Chester Himes, Robert Penn Warren in the 1940s and '50s. The outcome of this remarkable array of scholarship is to point out that the obsession with detecting racial identity is by no means exclusive to the United States, even though it reached particularly acute stages there - and that, indeed, to a certain extent America drew some of the images and themes from European precedents. The complicated, often ludicrous, construction of the legal outlines of Jewish identity in the Italian racist laws of 1938 could well be read in the light of Sollors's chapter on the "calculus of color".

The thematic approach exemplified in the chapter on fingernails is the cornerstone of the book's theoretical approach. Fiction is "about" something, Sollors claims in the introduction, and thematic analysis allows to create a path through a myriad of different texts in a plurality of languages and genres, revealing deep-seated cultural tensions, anxieties, and beliefs as well as recurring narrative devices, symbols, images. The discussion of the thematic approach culminates in the chapter on *Absalom, Absalom!*. Here, Sollors points out that thematic criticism is valuable for a reading of this text precisely because so much of Faulkner's novel lies outside recognizable thematic patterns. Thus, thematic criticism (but this ought to be valid for all other methodological approaches) is valuable both for what it does, and for what it cannot do. While thematic criticism fully illuminates a myriad of texts of relative originality and artistic merit, the fact that so much of *Absalom, Absalom!* seems to lie beyond the limits of its heuristic power is precisely what allows us to recognize and define the difference between these works and an original, innovative work of art.

Literary theory is supported also by other disciplines. Anthropology and legal history sustain the chapter on the "calculus of color" (the complex mathematics used to designate intermediate figures between black and white - quadroons, octoroons, and so on - and to legislate bans on intermarriage) and on the role of the French "code noir" in shaping narrative plots around legal definitions. The anthropological approach comes to fruition in the masterful discussion of the relationship between incest and miscegenation. These two taboos have often been grouped together historically, legally and ideologically, yet, as Sollors points out, they represent actually opposites: miscegenation is a taboo of difference, incest a taboo of sameness. What they have in common is, finally, the fact that both violate the boundaries of acceptable sexual exchange. Which is perhaps why, I would add, the interplay of incest and miscegenation is often accompanied by a subtext of homosexuality, as is the case with *Absalom, Absalom!* and, more subtly, "The Bear".

Neither Black Nor White Yet Both is, in conclusion, a step forward in our awareness that race is historically and culturally constructed, and that the struggle against racism must be carried out also on the plane of scholarship, research, criticism, close reading of texts. The book has little respect for political pieties, and for this reason is also politically valuable, as it dispels any lingering essentialist myths about identity and makes identity politics much harder to play from all sides. While it casts interracial identity in a positive light (sometimes perhaps downplaying the confusion and pain that it can generate in societies where race lines are embedded in institutions and collective form of behavior), yet it does not subscribe uncritically to *mestizaje* as a generalized anthropological ideal. Indeed, it might have reminded readers more forcefully than it does that a number of cases of mixed racial descent are the result of rape (though by no means neglected, gender is not the most fully developed dimension in this multiple cultural exploration).

In *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), W. E. B. Bois famously announced that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line". At the end of the century, with ethnic

wars raging across the planet, Sollors's contribution, like James Weldon Johnson's before him, is to make the color line increasingly *problematic*. If there is such a thing as *a* color *line,* books like this make it almost impossibly hard to draw it. Perhaps, the color line itself is the "savage joke" that society has been playing upon us, and it's time it was subverted and turned back.

1 James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,* New York, Hill and Wang, 1960, p. 4.

2 William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!,* New York, Vintage, 1987, p. 446.

3 Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both,* New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 245.