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 Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey
 Wilson Jeremiah Moses
 Excerpt
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I

Introduction
Reality and Contradiction

A Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.
 Emerson

“CONSTANT ANXIETIES” AND THE JOY OF STRUGGLE

To be engaged in the eternal struggle of the human mind – to contemplate the tensions and ambiguities of a perpetually mysterious universe – was Alexander Crummell’s definition of heaven. The necessity and the pleasure of mental exertion must eternally engage both the living and the dead, he asserted in his address, “The Solution of Problems: The Duty and Destiny of Man.” “Grappling with indeterminate questions is one of the inevitabilities of life”; and it was even more than that. “This fashion of our life” presages eternity, he asserted. It “fills us with perplexities and breeds constant anxieties, but these are the heritage of all God’s spiritual creatures, above and below; for both angels and men are created for the unending, the everlasting ventures and anxieties of their spirits in the deep things of God.” The poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, showed little knowledge of the man when in his elegy, “Alexander Crummell: Dead,” he thought to tempt the old battler with an invitation to eternal rest. Crummell’s concept of heaven was incompatible with the poet’s ideas of relaxation or repose. Indeed, Crummell defined poetry as the “ofttimes agonized strain of the heart of man to pierce the mystery of being, and to solve the inscrutable problems of existence.”¹

¹ Alexander Crummell, “The Solution of Problems: The Duty and Destiny of Man” The Annual Sermon of the Commencement of Wilberforce University, June 16, 1895. Reprinted from *A.M.E. Church Review*, April 1898.

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When Crummell expressed these ideas at a Wilberforce University commencement in 1895, W. E. B. Du Bois was present, and on his way to formulating a similarly rigorous conception of “our spiritual strivings.” Du Bois well knew the truth of Crummell’s doctrine of “everlasting anxieties and agonized strain.” More than once he quoted lines from Goethe’s *Faust*, “*Entbehren sollst du; sollst Entbehren!*,” which he translated as “Thou shalt forego; shalt do without!” And, as a nineteenth-century American Negro, Du Bois certainly understood the bitter tone in which Goethe had intended Faust to speak them. But as a sensitive reader of poetry, Du Bois – a Faustian character in his own right – did not overlook the ironic twist at the climax of Goethe’s drama, that “doing without” can imply something higher than mere frustration. He came to utilize Goethe’s phrase as a reminder of the fundamental paradox that self-fulfillment comes from self-denial. The inescapable theme running through classical stoicism, Christian mysticism, and Faustian Romanticism is that the pathway to salvation is uphill and rocky.

POWERLESS MORALITY AND BLACK POWER

Reality is made up of contradictions. The clash of ideologies and personalities, symbolized by the confrontation between Alexander Crummell and Frederick Douglass at Harper’s Ferry on May 30, 1885, is mentioned more than once in these pages. This clash was important as an instance of the irreconcilable collision between the primacy of morality and the primacy of power – sometimes unnecessarily in conflict. The conflicts between Crummell and Douglass, or between Du Bois and Garvey, for example, highlight something other than mere differences in strategy. They indicate basic differences in how their authors viewed racial reform. Douglass’ rhetoric was based on an appeal to the moral traditions of European Christian civilization and the assumption that social reform was primarily a moral issue. Intensely aware of America’s conviction of moral superiority, he sought to manipulate the rhetoric of American perfectionism to promote racial equality. Crummell was certainly no less Christian than Douglass and no less Eurocentric, but viewed reform as primarily a matter of institution building. Believing that moral suasion was no substitute for political and economic pressure, Crummell said, “What this race needs in this country is power.”²

² Alexander Crummell, “The Social Principle Among a People,” in Alexander Crummell, *The Greatness of Christ and Other Sermons* (New York: Whittaker, 1882), pp. 294–311.

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“The collision of immoral power with powerless morality” identified by Martin Luther King, Jr. as “the major crisis of our times” was actually present during Reconstruction.³ The moral exhortations of Frederick Douglass were becoming ineffective in Crummell’s view that the real needs of black people must be met by internal institutional development. The debate was taken up in the twentieth century when Du Bois implied that Booker T. Washington had abandoned the moral crusade. He accused Washington of “failure to realize and impress the point” that the striving of black folk must be “aroused and encouraged by the initiative of the richer and wiser environing group.”⁴ Implicitly, Washington had forgotten the power of the old abolitionist moral rhetoric. Washington was never so naive as to ignore the uses of moral preachments, but his social gospel assumed that Christian morality was impossible in the absence of economic progress.

Ambivalent attitudes toward the relationship between moral and economic determinism were present in most black thinkers. The Civil War and the Emancipation that followed it were the culmination of a great moral struggle, in which black folk could not claim that they had seized their own freedom by unilateral force. White moralism had been crucial, but the question now was whether moral appeals would sufficiently spur on white progressives to complete the work of liberation; if not, then the task demanded the development of independent black power. There was an additional problem – the quest for power meant flirting with the corrupting influences of power. Abolitionism existed on the high ground of universal morality and immutable truths; Reconstruction demanded attention to the mundane requirements of industry and agriculture. Despite the steady failure of Reconstruction, Douglass could not abandon the once-successful abolitionist strategy of appeals to reason, morality, and justice. At times, he seemed to repress his own obvious suspicions that power may be incurably irrational, and that justice and morality are often defined by little more than the will of the strongest.

Alexander Crummell, his Christian optimism buttressed by clerical training in “moral science,” certainly viewed the triumph of abolitionism as a proof of moral suasion as a historical force, but his Christian perfectionism was linked to the social gospel of economic and industrial reform. Frederick Douglass, while vastly more secular than Crummell, seemed to

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), p. 37.

Although, King never behaved as if he thought morality could be separated from power.

⁴ *Souls of Black Folk*, p. 58.

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believe that truth and justice had irresistible metaphysical power in the providential course of history.⁵ The metaphysical presumption of the inevitability of moral progress was a current in the thinking of Washington, Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey. Booker T. Washington's progressivism was rooted, not only in economic utilitarianism, but in a faith that his program would receive the support of progressive whites. Du Bois, even in his later writings, constantly alluded to ideals of the social gospel, although increasingly supplementing its rhetoric with the Marxist dogma of inevitable progress. Garvey, too, believed in moral progress, and his ideas combined Christian teleology and Christian perfectionism with a Darwinian conception of racial competition.

The Civil War and Emancipation had convinced many black leaders that the world was progressing morally. Ironically, the power of abolitionist moral preachments had resulted in a great military struggle, in which freedom had been proclaimed by fiat and imposed at gunpoint. None would have challenged Theodore Roosevelt's belief that the exploits of Christian abolitionist soldiers in the war had represented a struggle for the survival of the moral fittest. Moral power had been enforced by the might of the United States Army. During the Civil War, Crummell made the startling proclamation that nothing civilizes a man so effectively as putting a gun in his hands.⁶ There was something oxymoronic and contradictory about the concept of moral force, especially when the force involved was patently militaristic.

Other contradictions emerged. Crummell, like Douglass, believed that African Americans could not progress as a whole unless individuals developed personal responsibility for individual accomplishment, but Crummell believed that individual brilliance had little social meaning unless the race as a whole could demonstrate its collective genius for contributing to civilization. "Character," for Crummell, was "the great thing," but the collective "social principle" of "Civilization" was "the primal need of the race."⁷

⁵ See Douglass' essay inspired by the trial of Galileo, "It Moves, or the Philosophy of Reform: Address . . . 1883," in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. 5, pp. 124–45.

⁶ Crummell referred to the arming of African militias in Liberia, but the intended audience was American, where free blacks were agitating for admission to the Union Army. *African Repository* (September 1861), p. 277.

⁷ Alexander Crummell, "The Social Principle Among a People" and "Character, the Great Thing," in Bragg, *Afro-American Group of the Episcopal Church*. "Civilization: The Primal Need of the Race," in *American Negro Academy Occasional Papers*. For increased depth, witness Crummell's move toward reconciliation of the contradiction in his address at the Atlanta Exposition of 1895, "Civilization as a Collateral and Indispensable

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FREDERICK DOUGLASS: THE INDIVIDUALIST AS RACE MAN

The uneasy relationship between the individual ego and the racial self is symbolized by the preachments of Frederick Douglass, especially after Emancipation. So often did he emphasize individual accomplishment that he was sometimes accused of lacking race pride, and he did not deny the assertion.⁸ “I have seen myself charged with a lack of race pride. I am not ashamed of that charge. I have no vindication to offer.” Nonetheless, he went on to make reference to his “fifty years of uncompromising devotion to the cause of the colored man.” And here was the contradiction to which I point in the present volume. Douglass’ claim to fame was as a “representative man,” who had experienced not only the ontological condition of blackness, but the social status of a slave, in an environment that made the words “Negro” and “slave” practically synonymous. The constant invocation of his former slave status was a gambit enabling him to engage in the identity politics that were his bread and butter.

Douglass was not alone in wrestling with this contradiction – however original and unique were his means of addressing it. In less personalized form, the contradiction between individualism and social identity loomed in the best-known essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson and George Bancroft. Both men addressed the paradox noted by Carlyle and Hegel that the greatest individuals were really only representative men. The material forces of history produced not only a mind-spirit, but a world-historical figure who was its expression, an inconvenient problem for the Emersonian notion of self-reliance and Bancroft’s ideas about rugged individualism. Marx and Engels attempted to reconcile the contradiction that was implicit in George Bancroft and Ralph W. Emerson and later addressed by Theodore Dreiser in the Nietzschean figure of Frank Cowperwood. If the most dynamic leaders are, willy or nilly, driven by their environments, then Emerson, Bancroft, Marx, and Dreiser are caught up in the same paradox of determinism and free will that bedeviled the Puritans.

If philosophies are nothing more than the products of historical forces, then I have wrongly faulted Frederick Douglass for not conceiving a

Instrumentality in Planting the Christian Church in Africa,” in J. W. E. Bowen, ed., *Africa and the American Negro, Held under the Auspices of the Stewart Missionary Foundation of Gammon Theological Seminary in Connection with the Cotton States and International Exposition, December 13–15, 1895* (Atlanta: Gammon Theological Seminary, 1896).

⁸ The editors of *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Vol. 5, p. 404, cite letters by J. Willis Menard and Edward P. McCabe “which accuse Douglass of lacking race pride.” *Washington Bee*, April 20, May 4, 1889.

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program for Reconstruction. Alternatively, his refusal to preconceive a project for racial advancement was, perhaps, his strongest point. Perhaps he was correct in his presumption that a certain laissez-faire was the only adequate response to the questions of the hour. Perhaps his philosophy of “Free the slaves and leave them alone,” was the wisest thing that the federal government might have done. But his position was not always so simply articulated. He was not above asking Charles Sumner to find his son a sinecure in the Freedman’s Bureau, big government in its most extreme form, and the Bureau was hardly an exemplar of laissez-faire policy.⁹ On the other hand he denied any interest in accepting the headship of the Bureau, if it were offered to him. Whether his refusal derived from a lack of confidence in the Johnson administration or from some philosophical objection to its big government functions is unclear.

From the perspective of his severest critics – today, as in the past – Douglass’ one great fault was his second marriage to a woman of his father’s race, as he once put it. Such critics conveniently develop amnesia during African American history month, when his leonine visage gazes down from countless bulletin boards in American elementary schools. Douglass is the heroic icon, the man who refused to be a slave, who resisted the slave breaker Covey, who escaped to the North and took up the cause of abolition in thundering tones, like the awful rush of ocean waters, to paraphrase his own imagery. He was better than most of us, possessing physical courage as remarkable as his extraordinary intellect. Unable and disinclined to find faults in Douglass’ character, we are reluctant to find fault with his reasoning. In our refusal to address the contradictions that Douglass attempted to reconcile, we fail to appreciate formidable powers of reasoning that he brought to his heroic internal struggles.

Douglass was elegantly inconsistent on the entire question of black identity politics, which he supported or opposed as the spirit moved him. He voiced the demands of a race, while denying the value of racial consciousness. He constantly reminded white Americans of slavery, while insisting that black Americans should cease to make racial demands. Douglass vacillated between an assimilationist “melting pot” conception of American history and preachments of a multiethnic ideal. Toward the end of his life he seemed to recognize the changing landscape of American race relations and tried to reconcile the reality of multiculturalism with his idea of African American cultural assimilation. For Douglass, the ultimate goal of American democracy had always been in progress toward the

⁹ Douglass to Sumner, April 29, 1865, in Foner, ed., *Douglass*, Vol. 4, p. 165.

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egalitarian values of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson's egalitarian presumptions contained the moral force of the United States's "un-developed destiny." The use of the term "destiny" is significant, for it implies confidence in a progressive future. He repeated the term two sentences later, when he referred to the Declaration as "the ringbolt to the chain of your nation's destiny."¹⁰

ALEXANDER CRUMMELL: THE ANGLOPHILE AS AFROCENTRIST

Not all African Americans were committed, as was Frederick Douglass, to the unrealized ideals of Jeffersonian individualism. Certainly not Alexander Crummell, who placed himself in a Hamiltonian tradition consistent with the main currents of African American thought. The young Du Bois adopted certain elements of Hamiltonian thought, which were consistent with his later Marxist interpretation of African American history. Few African Americans have seen the usefulness of exploiting a Hamiltonian theory of American life. Crummell was a notable exception but his popularity is as dead as that of Alexander Hamilton. Like Hamilton, Crummell has become something of an embarrassment to egalitarian Americans and has been pushed to the margins of history or buried in the footnotes of scholarly treatises.

Viewed from the shallow perspective of twentieth-century liberalism, Crummell became a practically unmitigated villain. He did not pretend to be democratic, nor was he a multiculturalist. His brand of feminism is outmoded, although he was progressive on women's issues, and his ideas conform to the Victorian perfectionism of Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Margaret Murray Washington. His feminism was, therefore, on the trajectory that leads to twenty-first-century gender liberalism. On other issues, however, he does not remind us of present-day liberals. For example, he urged a moratorium on recriminations over slavery, and placed the burden of black uplift almost entirely on African Americans. In his belief in the doctrine of Anglo-Saxon cultural supremacy he was absolutely consistent.

But Crummell also contradicted himself, for his speeches and sermons frequently recalled as passionately as did Douglass' the sufferings of the race under slavery. He never specifically denied the legitimacy of claims for reparations from a white nation that owed debts to its formerly enslaved population, but such demands were fleeting and abstract. Crummell's

¹⁰ Foner, *Douglass*, Vol. 2, p. 185.

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appeals to the white conscience were usually framed with reference to the Christian's duty to bring good out of evil, to work for the saving of souls, and to improve material civilization in accord with the divine plan. Over a period of sixty years, whether in Africa or in America, the essential feature of Crummell's program was always self-help.

Crummell's black nationalist Eurocentrism has frequently roused the indignation of those who are sentimental about black popular culture. Afrocentrists are indignant that Crummell promoted establishing the English language in West Africa. And yet for obvious reasons, these same persons publish in English and with American university presses. They do not publish in Hausa with a Nigerian publisher, although Hausa is the African language with the largest number of native speakers. Crummell's promotion of the English language is conceptually naive, but no more naive than the approaches of some of his twentieth-century critics. The language of a pan-national movement must be capable both of transcending and undermining regional nationalisms. "Languages of state" must be able to effectively communicate across tribal boundaries and must do so without playing tribal favoritism. Better a language that we all hate equally than a language that some of us view as the speech of a favored caste or class.¹¹

Crummell was always a churchman and a man of letters; he was by turns missionary, businessman, educator, Liberian nationalist, and African explorer. By intellectual temperament he was consistently the irascible public moralist, cultural elitist, and dark ironist. Crummell was presumed to have been of "unadulterated" black ancestry, a matter of some importance to his contemporaries, but ultimately conjectural, as such matters usually are. Denied admission to Yale University and the Episcopal Seminary in New York on racial grounds, he eventually passed examinations and took an "ordinary" degree from the University of Cambridge in England. Well versed in political theory (classical and modern), he embarked, in 1853, on a missionary career in the Republic of Liberia, where he devoted much of his life over the next twenty years to the cause of African nationalism. Then, in 1871, a violent coup led by a faction identified with mulatto dominance forced him to flee the country. He

¹¹ For example, see Tunde Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), pp. 70–91. Crummell, "The English Language in Liberia," in *Africa and America* (New York: Scribner, 1862). Senegal and Congo are French speaking. Angola and Mozambique are Portuguese speaking. Arabic is the only non-Western language with immediate potential as an African print language, but its adoption would carry strong political implications, as would adoption of any other non-African language.

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returned to the United States and settled in Washington, D.C., where he established St. Luke's, an African American congregation of the Protestant Episcopal Church.¹²

Crummell identified strongly with the Federalist tradition and particularly admired “that great political prophet, Alexander Hamilton.”¹³ In our own era, the Federalists have only rarely and sporadically been the recipients of any praise, either from the left or from the right. There have been some interesting exceptions. Students of American history have learned well the truism that Hamilton was antidemocratic – and they are correct, for even more readily than James Madison, he feared the tyranny of the majority. On the other hand, Hamilton's abolitionist credentials are vastly more authentic than those of the more “radical” Thomas Paine. But Crummell never alluded to Hamilton's abolitionism, and he may not even have been aware of it. It was Hamilton's commitment to law and order that Crummell found agreeable, for nineteenth-century black Americans had unpleasant experiences with the democratic impulses of Jacksonian mobs.¹⁴

Crummell's black nationalist thought overlapped that of Edward Wilmot Blyden, his colleague at Liberia College and, like Crummell, a staunch Pan-Africanist.¹⁵ Crummell believed, as did Blyden, that African Americans must be converted to monotheism, but unlike Blyden he did

¹² William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863), pp. 165–69. William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising* (Cleveland: Geo. M. Rewell & Co., 1887), p. 530–35. Wilson J. Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study in Civilization and Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹³ Details on this and other aspects of Crummell's life and works may be accessed through index and footnote references in W. J. Moses, *Alexander Crummell*.

¹⁴ Stephen F. Knott, *Alexander Hamilton and the Persistence of Myth* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002) appraises Hamilton's reputation in American history, and has a solid bibliography. Richard Brookhiser favorably contrasts Hamilton with Jefferson in *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Free Press, 1999). Forrest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Norton, 1982) is essential.

¹⁵ Thomas W. Livingston, *Education and Race: A Biography of Edward Wilmot Blyden* (San Francisco, CA: Glendessary Press, 1975); V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Hollis Lynch, ed., *Black Spokesman: Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1971); Edith Holden, *Blyden of Liberia* (New York: Vantage Press, 1967); Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832–1912* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964); Hollis R. Lynch, ed., *Selected Letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden* (New York: KTO Press, 1978). For antihistoricism at its worst, see Tunde Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998) from Crummell's published essays, meretriciously filtered through Anthony Appiah, who revealed no interest in Crummell prior to his article in *Massachusetts Review* (Autumn 1990), where he (interestingly) identified my *Alexander Crummell* (New York: Oxford, 1989) as an unpublished manuscript.

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not advocate a half-way covenant with Islam as an intermediate stage. Crummell was impatient, especially in his later years, with the opinion that slavery had aided in the process of conversion. A letter of 1853 and a speech of 1882 both reveal that Crummell passionately denied that slavery had any Christianizing or civilizing influence on the masses of Africans or African Americans.¹⁶

Crummell's philosophy resembles the Roman Catholic doctrine that salvation comes from beating the self into submission. The religion of the black masses was frequently characterized by him and his contemporaries as an Africanized Calvinism in which salvation was usually associated with an emotional conversion experience. Crummell believed that virtue came from the rational, not the emotional, side of human nature. It has been suggested that his predilections, like those of many Episcopalians, were "high church." Interesting as is the issue of high church sympathy at least once imputed to him, it is more important to note that his doctrinal base was unequivocally "strict church," that is to say he placed much stress on the "law of Moses" and implicitly on a "doctrine of works." His thoughts on the subject were succinctly expressed in his sermon "The Episcopal Church in Liberia."¹⁷

There was no room in Crummell's missionary theory for antinomianism – the idea that faith without works could save the soul; no room for the idea that enthusiastic spirit possession is a step along the pathway to a higher realization of Christian truth; no room for Islam as the opening wedge for Christianity; no room for Jesuitism or for any other incomplete or imperfect form of monotheism. Such forms of religion were all distractions. Rational Victorian Protestantism was the only way. He held swooning and visions in extreme contempt and believed that the church must be of this world. The Gospel enjoined obligations to feed the hungry and clothe the naked; it could not be separated from the political economy of the material world, rigorously constructed by the social engineers of a muscular Christian army.

Blyden and Crummell, along with E. J. Roye, the Liberian president assassinated in the coup of 1871, specifically advocated intermarriage with the native peoples as a fundamental component of nation building. They sought to involve the native peoples in government-financed public

¹⁶ Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1887; reprint University of Edinburgh Press, 1967), p. 24. For Crummell's dissent see *Africa and America: Addresses and Discourses* (Springfield, MS: Willey, 1891), p. 319. Also see Moses, *Crummell*, index entries to Blyden, Islam, religion under slavery.

¹⁷ Crummell, "The Episcopal Church in Liberia." Microfilm edition of his papers: Schomburg Collection.