

to be as gorgeous as he knows how to make them; to prefer, in his daily manners, variety rather than monotony, high color rather than low color, spontaneous rhythms rather than tight, regimented motions, full laughter rather than guarded snickers, metaphor rather than logical demonstration, comfortable song rather than uncomfortable silence. If the Negro can by some miracle preserve these generous qualities for a century or so, he may become as fertile a soil for all the arts as for dancing and singing. Yet miracles do not happen. The Negro will do a great deal for himself if he carries out

a small part of this program which his friends predict for him. And he will thereby do a great deal for American culture generally. If these things happen, 1925 will be marked in the history of the nation as a memorable year, and as the beginning of a new epoch for the African race.

#### NOTE

1. *The New Negro*. Edited by Alain Locke. Albert and Charles Boni.

## WALTER WHITE The Negro Renaissance (1926)

A little over three hundred years ago, a handful of Negroes was landed on American soil at Jamestown, Virginia. For two and a half centuries other Africans were brought to America and they and their descendants held in bondage. In Africa, Negro artists, some of them of the same tribes and nations as those who were the ancestors of present-day American Negroes, had carved in ivory or wood gods and symbolic vessels and bowls used in their tribal worship. Many years later a few of these plastic creations were destined to be carried to Paris, and there and elsewhere profoundly influence what we call modern art. In Africa, too, there were given birth songs which are the ancestors, in a different genre, of our present day Negro spirituals. Of folklore there was an abundance—expressed in language which was of the very essence of poetry.

It was not until very recent years, however, that the talent from which sprang these creations met with any considerable encouragement in the United States. It is true that there were individual Negroes who achieved eminence as artists or, more often, achieved patronizing attention. Harry Burleigh as a musician; Bert Williams on the stage; Charles W. Chesnutt as novelist and writer of excellent short stories

of Negro life; Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois as scholar and master of an extraordinarily beautiful and powerful prose style; Paul Lawrence Dunbar as poet; and Booker T. Washington as educator, are a few of the more familiar names of those who attained eminence.

But with the new economic security which the Negro has attained, with the greater willingness of America to receive the gifts the Negro could make and with post-war eagerness for new forms and new sensations came the wave which has hurtled the Negro into a position as artist where, at least in and near New York, he comes dangerously near becoming a fad. In music there is the extraordinary success of Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, Lawrence Brown, Rosamond Johnson, Taylor Gordon, Julius Bledsoe, and Marian Anderson. In the field of the short story, there are Rudolph Fisher, Jean Toomer, and a number of lesser lights. In the field of novel writing there are not so many, but there are a dozen or so to my knowledge who are attempting the longer flight. On the stage are Paul Robeson again, Charles Gilpin, Evelyn Preer, Miller, and Lyles and many of lesser stature. In every field of the arts Negroes are emerging, adding a richness and colorfulness which America so sorely needs. Book after book

on Negro spirituals tumbles from the press the best of them, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, a best-seller. Soon, too, there will doubtless appear books on the less well-known but equally vital blues, work songs, and other secular music of the Aframerican.

In no one field, however, has so much been done as in poetry. Perhaps this is the most natural mode of expression next to song that the Negro possesses. To prove this, one needs but to run over the titles of many of the spirituals—for example—"Deep River," "Go Down, Death," "Singing with a Sword in My Han," "Ride On, King Jesus," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

Nor is this form of expression a new thing. Beginning in 1761 when a Negro girl, eight years old, Phillis Wheatley, was landed at Boston, sold as a slave, and later wrote creditable verse, on down through Countée Cullen and Langston Hughes, the stream has been unbroken though it has changed its course many times. I have been asked in this brief introduction to discuss trends in Negro poetry—always a difficult and dangerous thing to attempt.

There was little distinctive form to poetry written by American Negroes until Paul Laurence Dunbar came upon the scene. Well over one hundred American Negroes have published volumes of verse but until Dunbar, most of them followed the conventional schools which were then current. As has been said many times, Dunbar was the first Negro to view his people objectively. He did his best work in his dialect poems. Through them he was perhaps the first Negro to draw widespread attention to the Negro and to his possibilities as a subject for artistic treatment.

But Dunbar, on the other hand, did a certain amount of harm. Following the attention he received and the fame he gained prior and subsequent to his premature death in 1906, most Negroes who attempted to write verse, and most editors, wanted nothing from Negroes except dialect poems. So far as it goes, dialect has its advantages but, as has been pointed out by James Weldon Johnson, there are only two stops possible with this form—pathos and humor. The mould into which Negro poetry was set by Dunbar was broken only within the last twenty years.

James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois, William Stanley Braithwaite, and Claude McKay broke from the dialect school and in doing so caught up and gave form to the writing of poetry by Negroes. Perhaps no other factor was so potent in broadening the fields in which the Negro poet could wander as the publication in 1922 of *The Book of American Negro Poetry* with its introductory essay on *The Creative Genius of the Negro* by the editor of the volume, James Weldon Johnson.

The results of this renaissance just now are being seen through the publication of volumes like *Color* by Countée Cullen and *The Weary Blues* by Langston Hughes, these two writers being by far the best known of the younger school. With many other fields in which he is expending his energy, Mr. Johnson has written little poetry during the last few years. Claude McKay has, too, been silent for a longer while. Jessie Fauset has turned her attention to the writing of novels, while Mr. Braithwaite has devoted most of his time to the editing of his *Anthology* and to his publishing business.

To take the places of these, others have come—Mr. Cullen, Mr. Hughes, and a number yet to be heard from. In this newer school are not only those who are writing first-rate Negro verse but those who are forming excellent verse which takes no cognizance of race. Though on this point I do not expect agreement, yet I am glad that both Mr. Cullen and Mr. Hughes (and the others) are not going to the other extreme—of casting overboard the gifts of their experiences as Negroes in American life. From this springs a passion, a colorfulness, a strength which gives them most decided advantages over many of their white brothers who are writing verse.

The flower of the bush which has been so long sinking its roots into this rich and abundant soil of Negro life is just beginning to unfold. Mr. Cullen, Mr. Hughes, Anne Spencer, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and others will doubtless produce even more beautiful poetry than they have in the past. And back of them surges up a vast number of others whose voices as yet are faint but who with experience and training will yet be heard from to the enrichment of American poetry.