

# The New Negro as Revealed in His Poetry

By CHARLOTTE E. TAUSSIG

IN approaching the subject of the new Negro, whether it be in his social or community life, his relations to his own or the white race, or in his artistic endeavors, it is necessary to readjust our minds and bring to its consideration a new point of view.

It is quite useless to try to understand these men and women who are selves in art, literature and music if we continue making a place for them to conjure visions of "Aunties" and "Uncles" and "Mammies." A new generation has arisen that is no longer only something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be kept down, helped up or in its place—a generation that is fast learning that if it can give of the best, it has a chance to be judged on a universal basis. As "J. Poindexter, Colored" says in the book of that name, by Irvin Cobb, "I ain't no problem, I'se a person. I crave to be so regarded." And that many of them are becoming persons who must be reckoned with in any survey of contemporary achievement soon becomes clear to anyone who makes himself familiar with the prose and the poetry that the Negro is producing today.

Some of this has great limitations. It is often self-conscious and is propaganda rather than straight writing. But much of it, and this is particularly true of the poetry, is of such merit that it bears comparison with the best of the moderns. And this from a race who sixty years ago were slaves, of whom one in ten could read and write.

Professor Kittredge, of Harvard, once said that culture is a by-product. A by-product of what? Surely not of slavery, or oppression or discrimination. And yet in considering Negro art, this race, with a background so little fitted to make for that illusive quality, has, in this short time prepared a field too broad to cover. I have had to weed out and eliminate. I find myself not only sympathetic to, but overwhelmed by the mass of material obtainable. Because of this, I have had more and more to confine my subject matter. I cannot give even a brief survey of the Spirituals and the Blues and the Folk Legends of which these people have such a store. And so I am confining myself to one form of their expression and in line with the general subject of this section, except for a slight historical background, to the more modern phase.

Elemental discussions of the new Negro poets, in relation to their changed psychology, outside of the Anthologies, are rare, despite the aroused public interest on this question. Miss Taussig has succeeded admirably in providing a picture of this change, and of a group of writers, who stood at the crest of definite periods of their race's cultural growth. Here we have a DE NOVO presentation, which is not only usefully informative, but stimulating in its appraisals. It is the substance of an address delivered before the Poetry Section of the Wednesday Club of St. Louis, the oldest and largest woman's club in the city—EDITOR'S NOTE.

I was asked the other day whether these poems were really good, whether they were being accepted by publishers and editors of magazines and awarded prizes on their worth; or because there was a rather sensational interest in the entire Negro question that was being catered to. I think the answer lies in the poems themselves.

## II.

It is true that we speak of the new Negro. He is new in many ways, but that deep-lying feeling, which is inherent in the race, has found expression in poetic form for a long time. There were recognized Negro poets even when slavery existed. In 1761, Phyllis Wheatly was brought to Boston and sold on the public block. She fell into the hands of a kindly woman who taught her to read and write. She was not a great poet, but after the publication of her small volume of verse, the Lord Mayor of London sent her an inscribed copy of *Paradise Lost*, which is still preserved in the Harvard Library.

In 1829, George Moses Horton published, with the help of some white friends, a book of poems, entitled *The Hope of Liberty*. He hoped to sell enough copies to buy his freedom. But his master refused to sell him to himself; and bitterly disappointed, he stopped writing.

In 1854, a volume appeared by Frances Ellen Watkins, which showed an advance in literary merit.

WITH Paul Lawrence Dunbar, we come to the first Negro poet who can be judged by the standards generally applied. He was born in 1872, nine years after his parents had gained their freedom. With the publication of his poems, there comes the first step towards the greater power and broader vision that the Negro is enjoying. Up to and during his time, there were individuals who overcame the almost insuperable obstacles placed in their path and achieved a certain, and, in some instances, a marked success in their undertakings. Booker Washington immediately comes to mind and William Stanley Braithwaite, whose anthologies of American verse are among the most discriminating of their kind. There are others, but in each case they stood alone—an educator here—an aspiring poet



there. Today we speak of Negro educators, Negro novelists, Negro musicians and Negro poets.

This has been made possible because, in the last decade, something has happened to the race that even the sociologist and the philanthropist cannot account for. It has come about partially through the shifting of the Negro population, which has made the Negro problem no longer exclusively or predominantly Southern. The trend of migration has been not only North but to the city and the great centers of industry. This migration is not to be entirely explained by the demands of war, industry or increased terrorism in the South. Neither labor demands nor the Ku Klux Klan is altogether responsible, although both have been important factors. It can be partially explained by the promise of a place where there can be found greater opportunity, more social and economic freedom and a chance to improve conditions.

Harlem is, of course, the outstanding example of a Northern Negro community. It is a city within a city, the largest Negro city in the world. The statement has often been made that if Negroes were transplanted to the North in large numbers, the race problem, with all its acuteness, and with new aspects, would be transferred with them. 175,000 Negroes live closely together in Harlem, 100,000 more than live in any Southern city, and there is no record of race friction, nor any unusual record of crime. In a recent article in the *Survey*, a captain of police of the Harlem district is quoted as saying that, on the whole, it is the most law-abiding precinct in the city.

The Negro, and this applies especially to the educated Negro, is happier in Harlem than he can be in any other place in this country. There, group expression and self-determination have, for the first time, become possible. Each group has come with its own special motives and its own special ends. But the greatest experience of coming has been the finding of each other and the joining in common pursuits. In New York, Negroes publish their own newspapers, two magazines, *The Crisis* and *OPPORTUNITY*; maintain their news and circulation on a cosmopolitan scale, and any Negro with literary or artistic aspirations can find there the stimulus through association, that the white artist finds in his larger centers.

It is possible that these men and women, who are making a place for themselves in American literature, might have achieved success under less advantageous conditions. It is not necessary for all of them to live in Harlem; as a matter of fact, they don't. But it is open to them and sooner or later they drift there.

Fortunately, too, many of them have been able to go to college; some of them have studied or lived abroad, where for a time they were freed of a sense of race inferiority and with very few exceptions, all have founded their homes in the North, where segregation is less marked. Were this not the case, they might still have written good poetry. But as happened with the earlier, more isolated Negro poets, their writings would have continued to express only the emotions of their race. Today,

while much of it deals with their own problems and is written in characteristic folk speech, a larger part is of universal appeal. One of the dangers which we are facing is that as the Negro writer increases his powers and becomes more generally recognized, he will cease giving us the typical products of his race. Fortunately, however, just as Roland Hayes is maintaining the best racial traditions in his conceptions of the spirituals, so some of the Negro writers feel this same need when it comes to expressing the instincts and emotions of their own people.

### III.

Speaking of the place of dialect in Negro literature, James Weldon Johnson, whom we shall consider as the poet succeeding Dunbar, says: "It may be surprising to many to see how little of the poetry written by Negro poets today is in Negro dialect. Much of the subject matter which went into the making of traditional dialectic poetry they have discarded altogether, at least as poetic material. This tendency will, no doubt, be regretted by the majority of white readers, and it would be a distinct loss if the American Negro poets threw away this quaint and musical folk speech as a medium of expression; and yet these poets are working through a problem. They are trying to break away from, not the Negro dialect itself, but the limitations imposed by the fixing effects of long convention. What the colored poet in the United States needs is to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within, rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. He needs a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turn of thought and the distinctive humor and pathos of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations and allow of the widest range of subject and the widest scope of treatment."

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON has been a great asset to his race. He has published two volumes, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* and *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, which make it possible to gain a definite impression of the Negro's strivings and achievements. For the first time, in his *Fiftieth Anniversary Ode*, written in 1913, did a Negro poet break away from the brooding undercurrents which had characterized all their efforts.

After him, a new literary generation begins, giving us poetry that is racial in substance and context, but with the universal note and using consciously the full heritage of English poetry. Because he marks so definite a step in Negro poetry, I am using this poem as an example:

#### O BLACK AND UNKNOWN BARDS

O black and unknown bards of long ago,  
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?  
How, in your darkness did you come to know  
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?



Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?  
 Who first from out the still watch, lone and long  
 Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise  
 Within his dark kept soul, burst into song?

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,  
 That from degraded rest and servile toil  
 The fiery spirit of the seer should call  
 These simple children of the sun and soil.  
 O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,  
 You—you, alone, of all the long, long line  
 Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,  
 Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

Johnson seems to be almost a generic name for Negro poets. There is Charles Bertram Johnson, the minister of the Second Baptist Church of Moberly, Mo., a native-born and reared Missourian, whose poetry has the virtue of sincerity and a definite melodious quality; Fenton Johnson, who takes the ideas embodied in the spirituals and transposes them into modern verse; and Georgia Douglas Johnson, who is generally considered the outstanding Negro woman poet of the day. She was born in Atlanta and received her academic education there. Later she specialized in music at Oberlin. Her first book of lyrics was entitled *The Heart of a Woman*. Mrs. Johnson is a poet who is neither afraid nor ashamed of her emotions. Through all her poems one can sense the longing for a fuller chance at life. Without one word or hint of race in all the book, there lies between its covers the full tragedy of her people.

I give a short poem of Mrs. Johnson's and one by Angelina Grimké, in order that we may hear from more than one woman:

#### MEMORY

Georgia Douglas Johnson

What need have I for memory  
 When not a single flower  
 Has bloomed within life's desert  
 For me one little hour?

What need have I for memory  
 Whose burning hours have met  
 The course of unborn happiness  
 Winding the trail regret?

#### THE BLACK FINGER

Angelina Grimké

I have just seen a beautiful thing  
 Slim and still,  
 Against a gold, gold sky,  
 A straight cypress,  
 Sensitive  
 Exquisite,  
 A black finger  
 Pointing upwards.  
 Why, beautiful, still finger are you black?  
 And why are you pointing upwards?

#### IV.

From now on the process of elimination must be drastic. One would like to dwell at length on Jean Toomer, Anne Spencer, Lewis Alexander, Lucien Watkins, Joseph Cotter, and many others. But it seems wiser to concentrate on the three Negro poets who represent the high-water mark of the new Negro poetry—Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. I shall consider them according to their age and not their merit. Each can well bear to be judged on his own.

Claude McKay was born in Jamaica in 1889 and received his early education there. He came to the United States in 1912 and for the two succeeding years was a student at the Kansas State University. Since then he has devoted himself to journalism and writing. In 1921 he visited Russia and he has spent much time in France and Germany. He was formerly associate editor of *The Liberator* and *The Masses*.

Let me quote from Max Eastman's introduction to McKay's volume of verse, *Harlem Shadows*, and briefly from an article by another critic. Mr. Eastman says: "These poems have a special interest for all the races of man because they are sung by a pure blooded Negro. They are characteristic of that race as we most admire it, they are gentle simple, candid, brave and friendly, quick of laughter and of tears, yet they are still more characteristic of what is deep and universal in mankind. There is no special or exotic kind of merit in them, no quality that demands a transmutation of our own natures to perceive. These poems move with a sovereignty that is never new to the lovers of the high music of human utterance. They have in them the pure, clear arrow-like quality that reminds us of Burns, Villon and Catallus and all the poets that we call lyric." And Robert Littell writing in the *New Republic* says: "If Mr. McKay and the other Negro poets do not always stir us unusually when they travel over poetic roads so many have traveled before they do make us sit up and take notice when they write about their race and ours. Claude McKay strikes hard and pierces deep." The following poem is indicative of his powers:

#### Like A Strong Tree.

Like a strong tree that in the virgin earth  
 Sends far its roots through rock and loam and clay  
 And proudly thrives in rain or time of dearth,  
 When the dry waves scare rainy sprites away;  
 Like a strong tree that reaches down, deep, deep,  
 For sunken water, fluid underground,  
 Where the great ringed unsightly blind worms creep,  
 And queer things of the nether world abound;  
 So would I live in rich imperial growth,  
 Touching the surface and the depth of things,  
 Instinctively responsive unto both,  
 Tasting the sweets of being and the stings,  
 Sensing the subtle spell of changing forms,  
 Like a strong tree against a thousand storms.

In his introduction to Langston Hughes' volume, *The Weary Blues* which has gone through four editions, Carl Von Vechten says: "At the moment I

cannot recall the name of any other person who at the age of twenty-three has enjoyed so picturesque and rambling an existence as Langston Hughes."

Hughes was born in Joplin, Mo., in 1902. He was educated in the public schools of Lawrence, Kansas, went to high school in Cleveland, and spent one year at Columbia University. During his youth he lived for a time in Mexico City. When he left college he worked for a truck farmer on Staten Island; as a delivery boy for a New York florist, and then signed up as a sailor for a cruise of the Canary Islands, the Azores and the west coast of Africa. Returning to New York with plenty of money and a monkey he shipped again, this time for Holland. Again he came and went west, landing finally in Paris where he was employed as doorman of a night club; and later as second cook, and then waiter at one of the larger restaurants. Since 1924 he has divided his time between Harlem and Washington and has devoted himself to writing.

**L**ANGSTON HUGHES more than any of the other Negro poets breaks away from the traditional form. His poems have often almost an air of informality. They reveal the shifting scenes and places which have made up his life. They portray a ceaseless hunger for warmth and color and beauty, and almost invariably they are personal in tone, although they are not confined to an exclusive mood, and in his language form he uses a Biblical simplicity. Most of his poems are short. I have chosen to quote:

#### Dream Variation

To fling my arms wide  
In some place of the sun,  
To whirl and to dance  
Till the white day is done.  
Then rest at cool evening  
Beneath a tall tree  
While night comes gently  
Dark like me—  
That is my dream.

To fling my arms wide  
In the face of the sun,  
Dance, whirl, whirl!  
Till the quick day is done.  
Rest at pale evening—  
A tall slim tree—  
Night coming tenderly  
Black like me.

The John Reed Memorial Prize awarded through the magazine *Poetry* was given to Countee Cullen for this *Threnody for a Brown Girl*, in 1925. He has also won the Witter Bynner prize. Cullen is the most prolific of these younger Negro poets. In his volume entitled *Color* of which over 6000 copies have been sold to date, he makes acknowledgement to these magazines for permission to reprint (I give this

as an indication of the place he is taking): *The American Mercury*, *The Bookman*, *The Century*, *The Crisis*, *The Conning Tower of the New York World*, *Folio*, *Harpers*, *Les Continents*, *The Messenger*, *The Nation*, *Opportunity*, *Palms*, *Poetry*, *The Southwestern Christian Monitor Advocate*, *The Survey Graphic*, *The World Tomorrow*, and *Vanity Fair*. He is the youngest of these poets having been born in New York City in 1903. He went to the public schools and New York University where he was graduated a Phi Beta Kappa man in 1925. Young as he is, he has taken the new movement a step beyond even the strength displayed by Claude McKay. The bitterness revealed by those who have preceded him is with him converted into a question. It almost seems as if he were treasuring a dream that it may be given to his generation to solve the unsolvable problems of his race. His poems are beautiful in form, they cover a wide range of subject, reveal originality and in his longer poems he shows the ability to sustain, perhaps the most difficult achievement in artistic creation. Judas Iscariot, an entirely new conception, is particularly interesting as coming from a race which so naturally has the fullest sympathy for the outcast, but it is unfortunately, too long for quotation. The following sonnet is exemplary of his general style:

#### Yet Do I Marvel.

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,  
And did He stoop to quibble could tell why  
The little buried mole continues blind,  
Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,  
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus  
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare  
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus  
To struggle up a never-ending stair.  
Inscrutable His ways are, and immune  
To catechism by a mind too strewn  
With petty cares to slightly understand  
What awful brain compels His awful hand.  
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:  
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

I hope in presenting this subject, I have not seemed to let my sympathy get the better of my judgment. I have tried to approach it without any sense of race conflict. I have found that I could read these poems with the same disregard of the fact that they were written by a Negro as I can *The Three Musketeers*. That is, I can dissociate myself from the struggle and the pathos and the pity of their situation. It is this which makes me stand in awe of what these men and women are doing, in spite of what we have done to them. And I ask myself whether we who are so responsible, dare scorn any who so truly seek the light. After all, haven't they earned the right to say this—

I, too sing America,  
I am the darker brother.