

college textbook. He had been fired to distinguish himself as a classical scholar by having, in his childhood, run across Henry Clay's sarcastic statement that when he had heard a Negro conjugate a Greek verb or decline a Greek noun, he would believe in the potential equality of the Negro mind to the white.

The only Creole grammar in English was written by a Negro scholar, J. J. Thomas, and although it was published in 1869 it has not been superseded. Two standard works on law, Scott's book on interstate extradition and Cosey's book on land titles, are the work of Negro authors. In the field of physics there is Robert T. Browne's *The Mystery of Space, A Study of the*

Hyperspace Movement. In pedagogy, there is Gilbert H. Jones's *Education in Theory and Practice*. And a Negro graduate of West Point, Colonel Charles Young, has written a standard work on military tactics, *Military Morale of Nations and Races*.

The contemporary Negro renaissance in the arts is making a significant and interesting contribution to our culture; there is no longer any doubt of that. But that it is a renaissance of anything more than our interest in the work of colored writers and artists is doubtful. The tradition of creative expression and of scholarship among the colored race is too old to be still considered new.

MARTHA GRUENING

The Negro Renaissance (1932)

"Being a Negro writer in these days is a racket and I'm going to make the most of it while it lasts. I find queer places for whites to go to in Harlem . . . out-of-the-way primitive churches, side-street speakeasies and they fall for it. About twice a year I manage to sell a story. It is acclaimed. I am a genius in the making. Thank God for this Negro Literary Renaissance! Long may it flourish!"

In these words a minor character in Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* expresses in terms of cynical self-interest what has for some time been only too apparent to some of those interested in the artistic expression of the Negro. Elsewhere in the book its hero is shown in the midst of a black and white gin party. "This," he kept repeating to himself, "is the Negro Renaissance and this is about all the whole damn thing is going to amount to. . . . It is going to be necessary, he thought, to have another emancipation to deliver the emancipated Negro from a new kind of slavery."

Yet it is only seven years ago that some of us who today find an echo of these savage words in our hearts hailed with high hopes the beautiful and colorful volume *The New Negro*,

edited by Alain Locke, and accepted its premise of a younger Negro generation on the threshold of a new era of accomplishment. They were no longer bound together, Locke wrote confidently, "by a common problem, but by a common consciousness" and "shedding the chrysalis of the Negro problem they were achieving something of a spiritual emancipation."

It was inevitable that this prophecy could only be partially fulfilled. From that consciousness of which Locke wrote, and probably far more from individual impulse, unregimented by any such herd instinct, has come in the intervening years some real achievement. And much more might have come if the so-called Negro Renaissance had not been ballyhooed and exploited commercially and socially, until it has been, to a large extent, degraded into a racket. It was always too much to hope that 12,000,000 Americans of any race or color could, in our chaotic civilization, achieve a solidarity of thought and experience which would result in genuine expression. The finest products of the Renaissance have been distinctly individual as, for instance, the extraordinary work of Jean Toomer. But Toomer has published little,

if anything, since *Cane* appeared in 1923. Meanwhile the mystical and probably mythical concept of a common Negro consciousness has for some time been superseded by a very definite consciousness, common alike to white and black writers of a very definite and marketable fashion in literature and art for all things Negro. Among Negroes this has resulted, among other things, in the kinds of writing which are the objects of Wallace Thurman's attack.

Infants of the Spring, like Thurman's earlier *The Blacker the Berry*, is in a sense a pioneering book. It is the first serious and aggressive attempt that I know of by a Negro writer to debunk the Negro Renaissance in a thoroughgoing manner. It is bitter, disillusioned, and probably unfair in its wholesale rejection of nearly everything being done by Negro artists and writers. But in spite of this and in spite of its somewhat crude and journalistic writing, there is an exhilaration to be gained from its angry honesty. It will no doubt be glibly denounced as "unconstructive," and indeed, it makes no pretense of being anything else. For it is simply the hearty individual expression of an individual disgust with life in general, and with the Negro Renaissance in particular, by a writer too keenly sincere and individualistic to find an easy escape from its sterility by such frequently suggested and ready-made panaceas as flight into communism, back to a problematical "African Inheritance" or into the ranks of the bourgeois Negro writers who "have nothing to say, and who write only because they are literate and feel they should apprise white humanity of the better classes among Negro humanity."

It is especially by their type of novel and by the uncritical acclamation with which examples of it have been received, I think, that the Negro Renaissance has been debased. One can almost establish a standard novel that will combine the worst features of all of them. Almost inevitably it will have a foreword by some professional foreworder like Carl Van Vechten or maybe Zona Gale, stating among other things how novel and unique it is. If it is in the Carl Van Vechten tradition it will probably have a glossary of Harlesemese and certainly it will include a scene in which a Harlem ball or soirée is invaded by

uplifting or merely curious palefaces, who are promptly knocked out by the ease, beauty, and sophistication of the rainbow-tinted members of the gathering. It is also practically obligatory for at least one member of the white group to make the very natural faux pas of mistaking some Negro light enough to "pass" for a Nordic, and to behave with a complete and pitiable lack of savoir faire when he discovers his mistake. To find this wearisome is not for a moment to deny that such incidents occur frequently in real life; a very great number of light Colored People must have experienced white uncouthness of this kind, but writing suffers as much from a stencil based on such incidents as it does from stencils of the Uncle Tom and Mammy variety to which these same writers very properly object. The real argument of these Negro novels could be summed up in almost every case as follows:

"I am writing this book because most white people still believe that all Colored People are cooks called Mandy or Pullman porters called George—but they aren't. They think we all live in cotton-field cabins or in city slums, but actually some of us live on Edgecombe Avenue or Chestnut Street. We don't all shout at Camp Meetings or even all belong to the Baptist or Methodist Church. *Some of us are Episcopalians.* If you were privileged to visit our homes (which you aren't, for we are just as exclusive as you are) you would find bathtubs, sets of the best authors, and *etchings* on the walls! That's how refined we are. We have class distinctions, too. Our physicians' wives snub our hairdressers and our hairdressers our cooks, and so on down the line. The daughters of our upper classes are beautiful and virtuous and look like illustrations in *Vogue*. They are also far more attractive than white girls of the same class, for they come in assorted shades of bronze, tan, fawn, beige, hazel, chestnut, amber, cream, gold, lemon, orange, honey, ivory, and persimmon. You would, of course, be attracted to the heroine of this book, but as you are white, you are, in nine cases out of ten, a cad with dishonorable intentions. We'll allow the tenth case out of pure magnanimity. But in any case the heroine would scorn you because in the last chapter she will marry the dark hero and be happy ever after. She might,

being human, have been tempted perhaps for a moment by the wealth and power you represent and by the immunity from insult and discrimination which 'passing' would mean for her, but even if she weren't too noble and loyal to yield to such temptation in the end the call of race would be too strong for her. Joy isn't on your side of the line, nor song, nor laughter, etc., etc." We have heard all this many times before, and we are likely to hear it many times again.

Nearly all these novels have been wholly devoid of literary merit, but they have a certain documentary value in revealing what is on the minds of a large portion of the Negro Intelligentsia, as well as of many Negroes who do not technically belong to it. Among recently published novels Jessie Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree* is an outstanding example of this type. This, her third novel, like its predecessors is dedicated to the proposition that there are Colored ladies and gentlemen and that these constitute Colored Society. As propaganda this is no sillier than the stale counter-propaganda to which it is a retort, but the fact remains that a rather serious waste of Negro intelligence and sensitiveness is still going into the writing of such books. What is obvious from them is that the long frustrated, ambitious, struggling Negroes of the upper and middle classes still accept and jealously cherish the values of capitalistic civilization. They accept these values very much as they move into white neighborhoods as white people abandon them. And in this acceptance there has been much more than the snobbery and silliness which books like Miss Fauset's make pathetically and ludicrously evident. It represents two generations of struggle and achievement away from slavery toward a promised land, a goal which as they near it has all the unsubstantiality of a mirage. One may even concede that the struggle was noble and the achievement praiseworthy, and still feel that new day of the Negro Renaissance, if it comes, will not be made by those unable to detach their emotions from this mirage. Moreover, everything that can be said in favor of this goal was said once and for all, far better and more movingly than it has ever been said since in Du Bois's eloquent *The Souls of Black Folk*. And even

The Souls of Black Folk, somehow, dates a little today. It is, for all its beauty, a little Victorian, moralistic, and slightly rhetorical; but it is moving as its successors are not because it is passionate and militant, where they are merely complacent, because its author was in those days the leader of a forlorn hope, rather than a Negro Babbitt.

Negro Babbitry exists and there is no reason why it should not be depicted; so do Intellectual Negro groups and Negro Smart Sets, but the Negro novels written about them have very generally been novels of neurosis. Instead of novels of Negro life they have been *prospectuses*, designed to sell to white readers the idea of Negro upper classes. But if there have been few if any good novels written about the Negro Bourgeoisie there have been at least three first rate novels about Negro Proletarian life. All three were written by Negro poets. Negro poets have very generally been spare-time poets—and proletarians. They have been cooks, dishwashers, floor-scrubbers, shoe-shiners, waiters, stevedores, Pullman porters, stokers, or have worked at any of the various forms of rough and casual menial labor open to American Negroes.

Langston Hughes is one of these poets, who having spent much of his life in the world of labor has inevitably been close to the life of the masses of his race. It was out of this experience that he wrote *Not Without Laughter*, which is not only uniquely moving and lovely among Negro novels but among books written about America. It is affirmative in a sense in which no other book by an American Negro is, for it is the story of a Negro happily identified with his own group, who because of this identification tells what is essentially, despite the handicaps of poverty and prejudice, the story of a happy childhood. The poverty was never sordid; for one thing it was country poverty in a growing small town of the Middle West, and the child had a backyard to play in, in which there was an apple tree, and flowers as well as clothes lines.

"Here the air was warm with sunlight and hundreds of purple and white morning glories laughed on the back fence. Earth and sky were fresh and clean after the heavy night rain and . . . there was the mingled scent of wet earth

and golden pollen on the breeze that blew carelessly through the clear air." It was poverty, but never sodden or defeated though the child's grandmother toiled all day at her washtub washing the white folk's clothes and his mother sweated all day in the white woman's kitchen, while his handsome, vagabond father went fishing and played the guitar; even though eventually there was no place in Stanton for his pretty, fun-loving Aunt Harriet but the sinful house in the "bottoms" where on

summer evenings little yellow and brown and black girls in pink and blue bungalow aprons laughed invitingly in door-ways and dice rattled with the staccato gaiety of jazz music on long tables in rear rooms; pimps played pool; bootleggers lounged in big, red cars; children ran in the streets until midnight with no voice of parental authority forcing them to an early sleep; young blacks fought like cocks and enjoyed it; white boys walked through the streets winking at Colored girls; men came in autos; old women ate pigs' feet and watermelon and drank beer; whiskey flowed; gin was like water; soft indolent laughter didn't care about anything, and deep nigger-throated voices that had long ago stopped rebelling against the ways of this world rose in song.

It was poverty enlivened by singing and laughter, by strong, if casual, family affection and occasional family quarrels; by carnivals and camp meetings, by lodge meetings and regalia after the day's work was done, for: "Evening's the only time we niggers have to ourselves—Thank God for night—'cause all day you give to the white folks." Simple and touching, yet by some miracle always avoiding sentimentality, the story is told with a happy tenderness which recalls Katherine Mansfield's dictum that in fiction the beginning of art is *remembering*. It has the courage of its tenderness for Negro things, a serene and robust acceptance of the common things, the sights and smells and sounds, the folk-ways and idiosyncrasies of the people who made up one little Colored boy's background; and through this acceptance and evocation of

them it communicates the very feeling and texture of life.

The only other American novel I know which seems to me comparable with *Not Without Laughter* is Willa Cather's *My Antonia*. Both books have, in common, somewhat the same quality of radiant sanity. Both communicate, in spite of relatively small canvases, a feeling of earth and sun and air, of a strong life with deep folk-roots. In both a poetic quality is due in part to the fact that the story is told reminiscently through the eyes of a child reflecting a child's curiosity and sensibility and wonder, and that the child in each case was a potential poet. In both there is ugliness and hardship and pain, but in both these incidents are dominated by a triumphant vitality, an open-eyed resilience in the face of life. And this, too, is a quality that is characteristic of Langston Hughes and which sings through his poems whether he is writing of Beale Street Love or Railroad Blues or of

The steam in hotel kitchens
And the smoke in hotel lobbies
And the slime in hotel spittoons
Part of my life

and is implicit in his high-hearted chant, "I, Too":

I, too, sing America
I am the darker brother
They send me
To eat in the kitchen
When company comes
But I laugh
And eat well
And grow strong.

Tomorrow
I'll sit at the table
When company comes
Nobody'll dare
Say to me
"Eat in the kitchen"
Then.

Besides
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed.

I, too, am America.

Claude Mackay [sic] is another vagabond poet who has brought a somewhat similar experience to rich fruition in his novels *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*. Mackay [sic], too, has worked in the white man's kitchens, and on wharves and trains and the stokeholes of steamers. He has known the life of a down-and-out beachcomber on the waterfront of Marseilles, and that of a poor farm boy in Jamaica. Older and more mature than Hughes, more complex and possibly deeper, he seems to have reached by a more difficult path an adjustment which in Hughes is instinctive. While his early associations seem to have had somewhat the same happy quality as Hughes' childhood and a far more beautiful setting—what hardships there were were due to poverty rather than to color—if one may judge by his writings he seems to have experienced the full cruelties of race and class struggle after his arrival in America in 1912. He was the first of the Negro intellectuals to be a radical in the political and economic sense as well as a militant rebel on behalf of his race. His novels *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* are full of a deep and bitter wisdom, but also full of humor and zest for life. *Home to Harlem* specializes in those aspects of Harlem life that are not mentioned in polite Harlem society, at least if white people are present: Promiscuous and happy love making, drinking, jazzing, shooting and razor flashing; the life of the high yellow "sweet-back" and of the black women who work for him; instinctive, rhythmic life—frequently joyous, but with undertones of cruelty and savagery.

These aspects are presented convincingly through the consciousness of two very different types of Negro—Jake, a simple, uneducated, American working man who delights in most of them, and Ray, the exiled sensitive Haitian student. Ray finds in Harlem the extremes of joy and despair and finally flees from it because he was entangled with a girl and feared that some day "the urge of the flesh and the mind's hankering after the pattern of respectable comfort might chase his high dreams out of him and deflate him to the contented animal that was a Harlem Nigger strutting his stuff. 'No happy-nigger strut for me' he would mutter

when the feeling for Agatha worked like a fever in his flesh. . . . And he hated Agatha and, for escape, wrapped himself darkly in self-love."

Jake returning to Harlem from overseas could find joy on Seventh Avenue where "the lovely trees were a vivid green flame and . . . the smooth bare throats of brown girls were to-kens as charming as the first pussy willows." He could find it at the Congo, the amusement place, entirely for the unwashed of the black belt. You could go to the Congo and turn rioting loose in all the tenacious odors of service and the warm indigenous smells of Harlem, fooping or jig jaggging the night away. You would if you were a black kid hunting for joy in New York. But,

Ray felt more and his range was wider and he could not be satisfied with the easy simple things that sufficed for Jake. Sometimes he felt like a tree with roots in the soil and sap flowing out and the whispering leaves drinking in the air. But he drank in more of life than he could distill into active animal living. Maybe that was why he felt he had to write.

He was a reservoir of that intense emotional energy so peculiar to his race. Life touched him emotionally in a thousand vivid ways. Maybe his own being was something of a touchstone of the general emotions of his race. Any upset—a terror-breathing, Negro-baiting headline in a metropolitan newspaper or the news of a human bonfire in Dixie could make him miserable and despairingly despondent like an injured child. While any flash of beauty or wonder might lift him happier than a god. It was the simple, lovely touch of life that stirred him most. . . . The warm, rich brown face of a Harlem girl seeking romance . . . a late, wet night on Lenox Avenue when all forms are soft shadowy and the street gleams softly like a still, dim stream under the misted yellow lights. He remembered once the melancholy-comic notes of a 'Blues' rising out of a Harlem basement before dawn. He was going to catch an early train and all that trip he was

sweetly, deliciously happy, humming the refrain and imagining what the interior of the little dark den he heard it in was like. 'Blues' . . . melancholy-comic. That was the key to himself and his race. That strange, child-like capacity for wistfulness and laughter. . . .

Going away from Harlem . . . Harlem! How terribly Ray could hate it sometimes. Its brutality, gang rowdiness, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires. But, oh, the rich blood-red color of it! The warm accent of its composite voice, the fruitiness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its blues and the improvised surprise of its jazz. He had known happiness, too, in Harlem, joy that glowed gloriously upon him like the high noon sunlight of his tropic island home.

Banjo is a bitter and devastating picture of the white man's civilization as it looks to the black man at the bottom of it, and of the free and instinctive life which the irresponsible and uneducated black man can still manage to live in an ever tightening, mechanical white civilization. "For civilization had gone out among these native, earthy people, had despoiled them of their primitive soil, had uprooted, enchained, transported and transformed them to labor under its laws, and yet lacked the spirit to tolerate them within its walls."

That this primitive child, this kinky-headed, big-laughing black boy of the world did not go down and disappear under the hurried rush of the trampling white feet; that he managed to remain on the scene, not worldly wise, not "getting there," yet not machine-made, nor poor-in-spirit like the regimented creatures of civilization was baffling to civilized understanding. Before the grim, pale rider-down of souls he went his careless way with a primitive hoofing and a grin. From these black boys he could learn to live . . . how to exist as a black boy in a white world and rid his conscience of the used up hussy of white morality. He could not scrap his intellectual life and be entirely like them. He did not want or feel any urge to "go back" that way. . . . Ray wanted to hold on to his

intellectual acquirements without losing his instinctive gifts.

But also he knew that though it was easy enough for Banjo who in all things acted instinctively it was not easy for a Negro with an intellect standing watch over his instincts to take his way through the white man's world . . . but of one thing he was resolved: civilization should not take the love of color, joy, beauty, vitality and nobility out of *his* life and make him like the mass of its poor pale creatures. . . . Could he not see what Anglo-Saxon standards were doing to some of the world's most interesting people? Some Jews ashamed of being Jews. Changing their names and their religion . . . for the Jesus of the Christians! Educated Negroes ashamed of their race's intuitive love of color, wrapping themselves up in respectable gray, ashamed of Congo sounding laughter, ashamed of their complexions . . . ashamed of their strong appetites. No being ashamed for Ray! Rather than lose his soul, let intellect go to Hell and live instinct.

Writing of this kind is, of course, very exasperating to the Negro Intelligentsia. Some of them may protest with justice that they are being *themselves* in conforming to the standards of the white civilization in which they live, since it seems to them good except in so far as it discriminates against them; that they are not merely Negroes but Americans as well, dark Americans, to be sure, but still fulfilling themselves legitimately through the usual American channels. This clash of views is not limited to Colored Americans. Every racial minority in America, with the possible exception of the Irish, is divided between those of its members who wish to sink themselves, their blood and their differences in the majority, and the proudly or defensively race conscious who wish to take their stand on this blood and this difference. Among Colored People, particularly, the logic of facts may actually be with the first group. Owing to the extravagance of anti-Negro prejudice any person, however white, is classed as Colored if he is known to possess a single drop

of Colored blood. A "Negro" thus arbitrarily created is not necessarily being himself any more when he sings spirituals or jazzes, than when he follows what are usually accepted as white behavior patterns. If Negro art has struck deeper roots, as I think it has, in the soil of the race conscious attitude it is because it has been the more affirmative and liberating. Conformity to white standards, on the other hand, has very generally meant conformity to the most standardized elements in our civilization—its negations, its drabness, its gentility. But this is not, I think, inherently or eternally true and even today the best writing is by Negroes in whom this consciousness is transcended. Thus *Not Without Laughter* is not merely a chronicle of Negro family life. The story of hard working, stay-at-home Annjee's helpless love for her vagabond husband, of Harriet's rebellion against her mother's puritanism, the true and sensitive picture of Sandy's boyhood and adolescence are rich and warm and full-flavored because of certain Negro qualities that Langston Hughes knows and loves, but the book's hold on our emotions is independent of these. They merely enhance the truth of what the perceptive artist in Hughes has felt about love between a man and a woman, about the clash of the generations, and the awakening consciousness of a boy. *Home to Harlem* has given us the most poignant and unforgettable picture of the substratum on which our commercial civilization is built in the half-dozen pages which describe

ALLISON DAVIS

Our Negro "Intellectuals" (1928)

For nearly ten years, our Negro writers have been "confessing" the distinctive sordidness and triviality of Negro life, and making an exhibition of their own unhealthy imagination, in the name of frankness and sincerity. Frankness is no virtue in itself, however, as any father will tell his son, nor is sincerity.

Ray, the Negro student waiter, tossing in a half-waking nightmare in the vermin-infested bunkhouse of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Here Color is an added element of torture and humiliation in the life of the underdog. It makes escape from this life difficult if not impossible, but it is only part of the picture into which Mackay [*sic*] has distilled the very essence of the horror and despair the cruelty at the roots of our civilization must awaken sometimes in any sensitive mind. Color again is an element, but only one element in the entrancingly comic feud between the Negro cook and the Negro waiters on the dining car which ended with the cook's discomfiture and demotion. Color again plays an important part in the sweeping epic of *Banjo*, but *Banjo* is an immensely rich book because it is far more than a story of Color. It is a story of beachcombing and vagabondage, of the clash not only between black and white, of civilization and primitive races, but of civilization at grips with itself, and of the detached and frequently humorous clarity, with which the beachcomber, black or white, who keeps clear of it except for the occasional necessity of working or panhandling sees it for the thing it is.

"A good story," Ray says at one point, "in spite of those who tell it and those who hear it is like good ore that you might find in any soil—Europe, Asia, Africa, America. The world wants the ore and gets it by a thousand men, scrambling and fighting, dying and digging for it. The world gets its story in the same way."

has been frankly and sincerely preoccupied with sex, but has not escaped an insidious puritanism. It is a question, the one is being sincere, the sincerity of which