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## VI

## THE NEW NEGRO LITERARY MOVEMENT.

The New Negro Literary Movement is not the note of a re-awakening; it is a halting, stammering voice touched with sadness and the pathos of yearning. Unlike the Celtic revival it is not a potent influence in the literature of to-day; neither is it the spirit of an endeavor to recover the song that is lost or the motive of an aspiration to reclaim the soul-love that is dead. Somehow it can not be measured by the standard of great achievement; and yet it possesses an air of distinction and speaks in the language of promise. It is the culminating expression of a heart growth the most strange and attractive in American life. To most of us it is as oddly unfamiliar as though it breathed and spoke in the jungles of its forbears. True, we have stopped in the busy ways and listened to a voice, as we thought without a soul, with bated breath and delighted ear and wondered why. But in the sum-total of our notion of things worth while this voice—seeking in its own tender, strangely accentuated way to give light and love and song to the soul of democracy—finds no place. No soul lost in the world's wild sway of shadow and anguish ever shed gentler tears; no heart touched with the play and gold of light ever laughed so joyously. From Phyllis Wheatley to Paul Dunbar has been one long day of sun, cloud and—pain. In the contemplation of what I am pleased to call "The New Negro Literary Movement," it might be well to consider from whence it came, what it promises, and whither is it tending. One chilly spring morning in the last half of the eighteenth century Boston Common was alive with an eager, surging throng absorbed in the buying of a shivering group of Africans. Near the end of the sale a comely, black girl is brought to the block and

after a period of indifferent bidding is sold to a Mrs. Wheatley. At that moment there came to the moving impulse of American life the soul-faith of the Negro with its fidelity of heart and its virgin love for the motive of democracy. There is no need to attempt to find a high place in the range of the American branch of English Literature for the work of this savage. There is smaller need to point out how completely and how sanely she mastered the expression of her time. But as the first effort of the alien-African spirit to fill a place in the life-motive of the alien-democratic spirit of the north temperate zone, what she has bequeathed to us is unique, significant and, mayhap, permanent. In the disclosure of the aim and spirit of American democracy the voice of this child of the Benighted Strand speaks with astonishing clearness. She possesses the accent of its every hope, she evinces every desire of its pulsing singleness of purpose. In another quieter, subtler way it presents to us that different yearning that somehow is not yet accustomed to the cold, grey skies of the north and the blatant, noisy swirl of her peculiar notion of intercourse and civilization. What if the great weight of mass, magnitude and physical agencies should fail us at the critical moment? Is power all? May not sweetness of temper bring us more? Phyllis Wheatley sings in the sweetness of temper and from this distance her song seems oddly out of harmony with the stress and harshness of the endeavor to put our beloved Republic on its feet. This may appear "mighty like" straining a point to endeavor to set apart the poetry of this African girl as the beginning of Negro literary movement. But it is so close to the truth of things that there is no other way out of the dilemma. There is a difference, not instinctive but temperamental, between the Caucasian and the African. There has never been a lack of sympathy between the kinds, it is the unlikeness of temperaments, which we mistake for inherent differences, that makes the trouble. If we take this unlikeness of temperaments seriously it accounts, very materially, for the distinctness of outline in which the "Race Problem" insistently menaces the peace and quiet of American life. We can not escape from it and

we do not try to escape from it. In the question of this Negro literary movement it does not matter that as yet it evidences no strikingly original features. To get at the bottom of its significance we must go deeper than its method of expression before we will find the truth, beauty and color of its purpose. It has made an almost frantic effort to shape itself in the likeness of its environment. The form and method of its utterance is modelled on the lines of the undefiled standards of the highest English literary expression. A first hand reason why its position is not pronounced and its influence stands for little else than naught. That group of ante-bellum writers and speakers among whom the most prominent were Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Charles L. Reason, John Vashon and Francis Ellen Watkins, suffer with the single exception of Douglass, the fate of obscurity born in this womb of unnaturalness. Here and there we catch the spirit of the fervor and fragrance of the tropics, but when we reach out for its substance it eludes us and presents in its stead a train of unsatisfying longing and disappointed seeking. Yet, notwithstanding this absence of original, virile achievement, there is a decided charm in determining the outline of its course through the maze and tangle of the Republic's activities and the perplexing trend of its thought and hope. Let us consider for a brief while its most apparent characteristics. We look in vain for the great or promising novel and for the distinctive and enduring poem. This voice speaks in the main, with the accent of controversy. Its language is the essence of elegance, refinement, courage, but it does not convince. Many times the music has gone out of the voice and its pleading and debating becomes the hoarse utterance of baffled protest. Aweary of the unequal contest it finally turns to an inquiry of itself. At first the freedman could not comprehend the teachings of his own preachers. He turned the unwilling ear of skepticism to the story and was not sure that he stood in the presence of Truth. A not unnatural attitude. Most of us forget that truth, whether found in the life of the jungle or in the gilded halls of civilization's boulevards, is

different, true, absolute. Different in its manifestations of habit, true in its fidelity to virtue, absolute in its relation to the stronger faith, the better love, the higher life. And so we find Frederick Douglass denounced, Cordelia Ray ignored and Fanny Jackson chained to the desk of a commonplace public school room by their own kith and kind. But no single force or combination of forces could hinder the birth of the child. The new literary movement came to the Negro race when the war of social and industrial economics was being bitterly and unrelentingly waged. It did not, it could not flourish. But it grew sturdily, persistently, if not with an acute sense of proportion and a delicately adjusted notion of the motive of beauty and the originality of purpose. During the post-bellum period it was still, in the main, controversial in scope and character, with the difference that it was in a perceptible measure concerned with beauty and beauty's general manifestations of form and harmonies. In December, 1892, there was organized at Wilmington, North Carolina, a society of Negro authors. Bishop Benjamin W. Arnett was elected the president and I. Garland Penn was chosen as the secretary. Both are authors of considerable note among their people. As I remember them now Anna J. Cooper, the author of "A Voice of a Black Woman;" John C. Dancy, the editor of the *A. M. E. Zion Church Quarterly*; Mrs. Francis Ellen Watkins-Harper, poet and novelist, and some lesser names I can not bring to mind at this moment, were members of the society. It was a distinct departure, as distinct as it was short lived. Mrs. Cooper struck the note of the society's purpose when she declared in the course of her address to the meeting that, "We must begin to give the character of beauty and power to the literary utterance of the race." It was not long after this meeting that Paul Dunbar was discovered by William Dean Howells. Dunbar sings a song of alluring attractiveness and has been hailed as not only a large figure in the literary life of his race, but he has been greeted as an associate in the bigger world of American letters. Since we have grown away from the glamor of this remarkable young Negro's first

successes we are not quite sure where we will place him in the new Negro literary movement. He is so apt and attractive that our admiration for his unquestioned cleverness stuns the judgment and makes one uncertain what to do. I think we may take his "When Malindy Sings" and put it in the company of America's great lyrics. I am not so sure of the enduring life of the large bulk of his work in verse and story. His stories certainly present no imposing picture of any phase of Negro or American life; and yet I would be ungrateful indeed if I did not feel thankful for what this splendid type of his race has contributed of value to the literary output of the American Negro. Charles W. Chesnut is another of the large figures in this literary movement. As a minor short story and novel writer his work commands high respect and displays the firmest hand and the clearest vision of any of the present-day story writers of Negro blood. Perhaps the largest figure in the new Negro literary movement is William E. Burghardt-DuBois. His "Souls of Black Folk" is the one book written by a Negro which has arrested the attention of the entire American people. There is an old Arabic song which says:

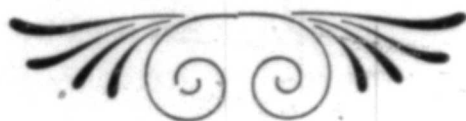
"One saith that love is filled with sweetness \* \* \* \* Nay,  
I who am wise have never found it so!  
Love is to suffer, day on endless day,  
And see fresh blood from new wounds gush and flow."

The "Souls of Black Folks," tells the story of the Negro's love that suffers. It is the laying bare of the "new wounds gush and flow." It is the attitude of the new Negro toward the new life. No one can afford to ignore the presence of the new Negro any more than he can consistently ignore the presence of the new life. Each is here to stamp the impress on the onward impulse of modern democracy. Each demands its own works, its own laws, its own worship. In this book of Prof. DuBois' we hear the first demand and get the first clear outline of the final purpose of the new Negro literary movement. We can not tell what it will bring us of good or evil. But when we come to a willing recog-



dition of the existence of a potent, if alien influence which is at work giving a new character and import to the literary expression of the entire race, we are going a long way in the direction of reaching a true understanding of the highest precept and purpose of the final democracy.

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