

The Negro's New Belligerent Attitude

By V. F. CALVERTON*
EDITOR, *The Modern Quarterly*

NEGRO ART and literature are, in many ways, as rich in ancient tradition as in modern challenge. The discoveries of archaeologists, dating from the explorations of over a century ago, have disclosed the remnants of an African culture that hitherto was almost completely unknown. Tennyson's youthful apostrophe to Timbuctoo has a deeper meaning and import today, and Timbuctoo now stands as but a single reminder of an ancient civilization that was, perhaps, as rare in diversity and as advanced in ways of life as any civilization, however adjacent or remote, of its time. The products of this civilization, and if we wish to include the civilizations of Ethiopia, Ghana, Melle and the Songhay in separate categories we may say of these civilizations, are eloquent testimony of their progress.

In the Songhay empire, for example, education was advanced to such a point that people came from all over the Islamic world to teach in its schools, and the savants of the Songhay were active as well in the Mohammedan countries to the north and east. In fact, throughout the Sudan, university life was fairly extensive. Ahmed Baba, one of the strongly arresting figures of his period, stands out as a brilliant example of the sweep of Sudanese erudition. An author of more than forty books upon such diverse themes as theology, astronomy, ethnography and biography, Baba was a scholar of great depth and inspiration. With his expatriation from Timbuctoo—he was in the city at

the time that it was invaded by the Moroccans in 1592, and protested against their occupation of it—he lost, in his collection of 1,600 books, one of the richest libraries of his day; and Ahmed Baba, although the most conspicuous, was only one scholar among many.

All through West Africa the negroes had established many centres of learning. In their schools and universities courses were given in rhetoric, logic, eloquence, diction, the principles of arithmetic, hygiene, medicine, prosody, philosophy, ethnography, music and astronomy. The negro scholars in many instances surpassed the Arabian. In Ethiopia their contributions to culture streamed far beyond the borders of their own nation in influence and power, as every new exploration and excavation of African materials reveals. We see rising before us, in the form of obscure manuscript, relics of apparel and architectural remains, the lives of peoples and the movements of civilizations once buried in the sands of a dead world. In this negro ancestry there were discovered rulers who expanded their kingdoms into empires, Generals who advanced the technique of military science, and scholars who brought with their wisdom an advancing vision of life.

When we realize, then, that the negro is not without a cultural past, we can readily understand his achievements in American art and literature in terms of environmental evolution. Most Americans, unacquainted with this past and unappreciative of the potentialities of the black peoples, interpret the developments in negro literature in ways that are absurd. One

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way is tragically familiar. Negro advance, according to this way of interpretation, is the result of the white blood infused in the black personality. The advocates of this interpretation have gone to great pains in their endeavor to prove that every negro genius is a product of white miscegenation. Their argument that it is only through the presence of white blood that black genius can arise is no more logical than the contention that it was only through the presence of black blood that Pushkin could develop into a white genius. Nevertheless this method of interpretation still prevails, even in circles that often pretend to be scientific. But there are other ways of interpretation that are scarcely less unfortunate in their logic—or lack of it. Another is the one that tries to treat the growth of the new negro literature as a fad, which, in its sudden flare, reflects nothing more than an interest in the curious. The negro, in the eyes of the critics, is an oddity, and as an artist and intellectual is stranger far than fiction. Their explanation of his recent success is based mainly upon what they consider an aspect of patronage on the part of the reading public and the publisher. His work is greeted from the point of view of race, and not of art. He is pampered as a negro, and his work is praised often when it ought to be attacked. As a consequence, they are convinced that in a few years, as this illusion in reference to his work has begun to vanish, the interest in negro literature will cease, and the urge in favor of its creation will correspondingly disappear.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO OUR CULTURE

Upon close analysis these interpretations are seen to be at once irrelevant and futile. In the first place, the negro did advance and achieve in Africa before white blood could make its intrusion, and many negro geniuses in America show very little trace of white blood at all; and, in the second place, the negro's contributions to American art and literature are far more free of white influence than

American culture is of English. Indeed, we may say that the contributions of the negro to American culture are as indigenous to our soil as the legendary cowboy or gold-seeking frontiersman. And, in addition, it is no exaggeration whatsoever to contend that these contributions are more striking and singular in substance and structure than any contributions that have been made by the white man to American culture. In fact, they constitute America's chief claim to originality in its cultural history. In song the negro spirituals and, to a less extent, the blues; in tradition negro folklore, and in music negro jazz—these three constitute the negro contribution to American culture. Since Indian remains have been very largely exterminated, Indian culture, with its native originality, has been mainly lost; at least, not enough of it remains to challenge the contributions of the negro. When Dvorak sought to find an inspiration in the American environment for his New World Symphony, he inevitably turned to the negro. After all, the negro, in his simple, unsophisticated way, has developed out of the American *milieu* a form of expression, a mood, a literary *genre*, a folk-tradition that are distinctly and undeniably American. This is more than the white man has done. The white man in America has continued, in an inferior manner, a culture of European origin; he has not developed a culture that is definitely and unequivocally American. In respect of originality, then, the negro is more important in the growth of an American culture than the white man. His art is richer, more spontaneous and more captivating and convincing in its appeal.

The social background of negro life in itself was sufficient to inspire an art of no ordinary character. The very fact that the negro, by the nature of his environment, was deprived of education, prevented his art from ever becoming purely imitative. Even where he adopted the white man's substance, as in the case of religion, he never adopted his forms. He gave to whatever he took a new style and a new

interpretation. Indeed, he practically made it into a new thing. There were no ancient conventions that he, in his untutored zeal, felt duty-bound to respect, and no age-old traditions that instructed him, perforce, as to what was art and what was not. He could express his soul without concern for grammar or for the eye of the carping critic. As a result, his art, like all art that springs from the people, is an artless art, and in that sense is the most genuine art in the world. While the white man has gone to Europe for his models, and is seeking still a European approval of his artistic endeavors, the negro in his art forms has never gone beyond America for his background, and has never sought the acclaim of any culture other than his own. This is particularly true of those forms of negro art that have come directly from the people. It is, of course, not so true of a poet such as Phyllis Wheatley, or of the numerous negro poets and artists of today, who, in more ways than one, have followed the traditions of their white contemporaries instead of extending and perfecting the original art forms of their race. In the eighteenth century, when Phyllis Wheatley wrote, these negro art forms were scarcely more than embryonic. Today, on the other hand, their existence has become a commonplace to the white writer as well as to the black.

In a subtle way, negro art and literature in America have had an economic origin. All that is original in negro folklore or singular in negro spirituals and blues can be traced to the economic institution of slavery and its influence upon the negro soul. The negro lived in America as a slave for over 240 years. He was forced by the system of slavery into habits of life and forms of behavior that inevitably drove him in the direction of emotional escape and religious delirium. Existence offered him nothing to hope for but endless labor and pain. Life was a continuous crucifixion. The earth became a place of evil. As a downtrodden and suppressed race he had nothing to discover within himself that insured eman-

cipation or escape. His revolts had all proved ineffectual. Inevitably he turned toward the white man for the materials of his "under dog" logic. He accepted and absorbed the ideas of the ruling class, as do most subordinate groups and classes, until they became a part of his reaction. The white man's paradise suddenly became a consuming aspiration. He became enamored of it as a holy vision. His belief in it became a ferocious faith. Its other-worldly aspect only lent it a richer enchantment. There were no realistic categories to thwart or limit its undiminished beauty and magnificence. The scarcities of this world had no meaning in the infinite plenitude of the next. Gold could be had for the asking, and everything was as a dream would have it in a land beyond the sun.

THE NEGRO SPIRITUALS

It was as an expression of this consecrated other-worldly ardor that the negro spirituals came into being and grew into form. There is more, far more, than the ordinary Christian zeal embodied in them. These spirituals are not mere religious hymns written or recited to sweeten the service or improve the ritual. They are the aching, poignant cry of an entire people. Jesus, to the negro is no simple religious Saviour, worshiped on Sundays and forgotten during the week. He is the incarnation of the suffering soul of a race. In such a spiritual as *Crucifixion* one finds this spirit manifest, and in such a spiritual as *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, we discover the other-worldly motif in a fine, moving form.

When we turn to the blues and the labor songs, the economic connection is more obvious. Here we have folklore in poetic form, springing spontaneously from the simple, everyday life of an oppressed people. The blues have a primitive kinship with the old ballads that is strikingly curious upon close comparison. While the rhyme-scheme employed in the blues is often less clever and arresting than that found in the ballads, the incremental repetitions are not less effective, and



CLAUDE McKAY
Author of *Home to Harlem*

the simple, quick descriptions are often as fine in this form as in the other. The labor songs, growing up as part of the workaday rhythms of daily toil, have a swing about them that is irresistibly infectious. The musical swing of the hammer, its sweeping rise and fall, is communicated, for instance, with rhythmic power in the song entitled *John Henry*:

Dis is de hammer
Killed John Henry.
Killed him dead, killed him dead,
Busted de brains all outer my pard-
ner—
In his head, yes, in his head.

And in the familiar levee song we meet with another but not less enticing rhythm:

Where wuz your sweet mamma
When de boat went down?
On de deck, Babe,
Hollerin' Alabama Bound.

The negro has retained unquestionably in his art a certain primitivism

that is wonderfully refreshing in contrast to the stilted affectations of the more cultured styles and conceptions. We come closer to life with these primitivisms, feel beauty in its more genuine, intimate and less artificial and cerebral forms.

These primitivisms of the negro are a singular evolution of our American environment. In describing them as primitive, we do not mean that they are savage in origin, or that the instincts of savagery linger in them, but we do mean that they are untutored in form and unsophisticated in content, and in these aspects are more primitive than civilized in character. The art of primitive peoples is often the very opposite in spirit to that of the American negro. The art of the African negro, for instance, is entirely without that exuberance which is so emphatically dominant in the art-expression of the American negro. African art is rigid, economical of energy, and almost classic in its discipline. The exuberance



COUNTEE CULLEN

of sentiment, the spirited denial of discipline and the contempt for the conventional that are so conspicuous in the art of the American negro, are direct outgrowths of the nature of his life in this country, not in Africa.

In jazz this vital and overwhelming exuberance of the American negro reaches its apex in physical dynamics. If the origin of jazz is not entirely negroid—that its fundamental form is derivative of negro rhythms no longer can be disputed—its development of attitude and expression in America has certainly been chiefly advanced by the negro. While the spirituals represent the religious escape of the negro, the jazz rhythms vivify his mundane abandon. Today this mundane abandon has become a universal craving on the part of youth in Europe as well as in America. Since the war the dance has become a mania. It is the mad, delirious dance of men and women who have had to seize upon something as a vicarious outlet for their crazed emotions. They have not wanted old opiates that induced sleep and the delusion of a sweet stillness of things and silence; they have not sought the escape which an artificial lassitude brings to minds tormented with worry and pain. What they have demanded is an escape that is active, dynamic, electrical; an escape that exhilarates and brings restfulness only from exhaustion. Jazz has provided that escape in increasing measure as its jubilant antics and rhythms have become madder and madder in their tumult of release. To the negro the riotous rhythms that constitute jazz are but an active translation of the impulsive extravagance of his life. Whether a difference in the calcium factor in bone structure or conjunction, accounting for an exceptional muscular resiliency, or a difference in terms of an entirely environmental disparity, be used to explain the negro's superior response to jazz, his supremacy in this new departure in music remains uncontested.

Jazz reflects something of the essential irresponsibility, or rather the irresponsible enthusiasms and ecstasies,



DR. W. DU BOIS

that underlie negro life here in America, and which give to negro art such singular distinction in verve and spontaneity. While jazz in its inferior forms is a vulgar removal far from the idea of the exquisite which prevailed in music before our day, it nevertheless has the virtue of great originality and the vigor of deep challenge. In a very significant sense, indeed, it remains as the only original contribution to music that has been made by America.

If the spirit of jazz is captured almost to a point of precision in these lines from *Runnin' Wild*:

Runnin' wild; lost control,
Runnin' wild, mighty bold,
Feelin' gay and reckless, too,
Carefree all the time; never blue;
Always goin' I don' know where,
Always showin' that I don' care,
Don' love nobody, it ain't worth while;
All alone; runnin' wild,

it would be a serious and most reprehensible exaggeration to maintain that

it is this mood which permeates all negro art in America. In fact, much of contemporary negro poetry is as far removed in spirit from the jazz motif as the poetry of John Milton is from that of T. S. Eliot. There is, indeed, an overseriousness, even an affected dignity, in the work of many negro poets. This tendency to an artificial loftiness of utterance, verging often upon the pompous, is more marked in the work of the negro writers of the nineteenth century than of the twentieth. In many cases education removed the negro writer further from his people and inclined his work in the direction of imitating the artificial standards of other groups, rather than of advancing and perfecting those of his own. As a result, a certain naturalness and fine vigor of style were lost. While this tendency has not disappeared, a reaction has already set in against it, and today negro writers have begun to develop a more candid approach.

RECENT NEGRO LITERATURE

In the poetry of Langston Hughes, for instance, there is a freshness even in artifice that was absent in the poetry of the nineteenth century negro. Even Dunbar, who was the leading negro poet prior to our own day, avoided the affectations and conceits of his contemporaries only in his poems of dialect. In the verse of such writers as Albert A. Whitman, Mrs. Harper, George Moses Horton, James Madison Bell, Joseph Seamon Cotter and James David Corrothers this literary fallacy is unpleasantly conspicuous. They aspired to the stately, when they should have aimed at the simple. Their poetry, as a consequence, was hopelessly inept and sentimental. It is only with the present day, and the emergence of the contemporary school of negro poets, led by such figures as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer and Claude McKay, that this type of verse has been condemned with scorn.

If the recent developments in negro literature cannot be characterized as a renaissance, they certainly must be noted as marking off a new stage in

the literary history of a people. Without question the work of Jean Toomer, Rudolph Fisher, Burghardt DuBois and Walter White, in fiction; Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, in verse, and Alain Locke, Franklin Frazier, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, Abraham L. Harris and George Schuyler, in the essay, has been distinguished by fine intelligence and advancing artistic vision. Surely at no other period, and certainly never in so short a time, have so many negro writers of genuine talent appeared. If among these writers no great artist or great thinker has so far evolved, there is no reason for despair. The great achievement of Roland Hayes on the concert stage and of Paul Robeson in the theatre gives promise at least of similar success in the literary art of the future. The appearance of these numerous artists and the growth of this newer spirit on the part of the negro is really not so much a rebirth in the sense of a renaissance as it is the hastening of an old birth which had formerly been retarded in its growth and evolution.

Steadily the trend in this new negro literature has developed in favor of the vigorous instead of the exquisite. Challenge has become more significant than charm. The submissive acquiescences of the Booker T. Washington attitude and era have now become contemptuously anachronistic. The sentimental cry of a nineteenth century poet such as Corrothers,

To be a negro in a day like this—

Alas! Lord God, what ill have we done?

has been superseded by the charging defiance of a twentieth century poet such as McKay, in his poem, *If We Must Die*:

If we must die—let it not be like hogs,

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry
dogs,

Making their mock at our accursed lot.

* * * * *

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but—fighting
back!

The admission of inferiority which was implicit in so much of the earlier verse, the supplicatory note which ran like a lugubrious echo through so many of its stanzas, has been supplanted by an attitude of superiority and independence on the part of such poets as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Bennett.

In Cullen's lines,
My love is dark as yours is fair,
Yet lovelier I hold her
Than listless maids with pallid hair
And blood that's thin and colder,

one discovers this attitude expressed with exquisite conviction. In Gwendolyn Bennett's stanza,

I love you for your brownness
And the rounded darkness of your breast,
I love you for the breaking sadness in your voice
And shadows where your wayward eyelids rest,

we are confronted with it again in definite form. Hughes gives to this same attitude a touch of African aspiration:

We should have a land of trees,
Bowed down with chattering parrots
Brilliant as the day,
And not this land where birds are gray,

and in *America* he whips it into a prophetic challenge:

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.

George Schuyler, in prose, has given this same attitude a sharp, ironic turn. His clean-cut, biting style, inevitably in keeping with his theme and purpose, is at times superb. He meets his mate-

rials with a directness that compels by its vigor. His writing is never sentimental; rather it has a hard, metallic brilliance that convinces without endeavoring to caress. In *Our Greatest Gift to America*, which deals in satiric form with the negro's position in this country, Schuyler's criticism is acute and devastating.

As the racialism of the negro has become more assertive and radical, a new attitude has begun to reveal itself in his fiction. There has been a marked tendency in the past, except in stories of dialect, for negro writers to centre their attention upon the more enlightened and prosperous members of the race. In *Fire in the Flint*, for instance, Walter White has chosen a doctor for his protagonist; in *There Is Confusion*, Jessie Fauset has featured a dancer as her star; in *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen has selected a school teacher for her main character; and in *The Dark Princess*, DuBois has made an aristocratic woman into his heroine. Today, in the novels of Rudolph Fisher and Claude McKay, the class of characters has shifted. In *The Walls of Jericho* and *Home to Harlem* the main characters are proletarian types, piano-movers and stevedores, who are endowed with little education and less culture. The lives of these lower types are seen to be as fascinating and dramatic as those of the upper. In fact, a certain native drama is revealed in the lives of these colored folks that is absent in the lives of most white people in the same class of society. This added drama flows from the freer and more irresponsibly spontaneous way in which these black men live. In time, no doubt, these proletarian types, since the negro, dating from his vast migrations from southern to northern latitudes during and immediately after the war, is becoming rapidly proletarianized, will occupy an increasingly large part in the entire literary scene.

This new challenge on the part of the contemporary negro was first expressed in 1912 by W. Burghardt DuBois in his famous Atlanta speech, which was dynamic in its various



Courtesy the Theatre Guild

"REACHING FOR THE SWINGING
CHARIOT"

Negro spiritual sung in a scene from the Theatre Guild's production of *Porgy*, acted entirely by negroes

provocations. This speech in its statement of purpose chalked off the beginning of a new era in the intellectual life of the American negro:

We plan an organization so effective and so powerful that when discrimination and injustice touched one negro, it would touch 12,000,000. We have not got this yet, but we have taken a great

step toward it. We have dreamed, too, of an organization that would work ceaselessly to make Americans know that the so-called "negro problem" is simply one phase of the vaster problem of democracy in America, and that those who wish freedom and justice for their country must wish it for every black citizen. This is the great and insistent message of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

This meant that the Booker T. Washington philosophy, which had prevailed for over a generation, had at last been criticized and condemned. The intellectual acquiescence encouraged and endorsed by Booker T. Washington was supplanted by a doctrine of resistance. The American negro henceforth, through the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other organizations, would fight rather than surrender. The World War, of course, was enormously instrumental in strengthening this change of attitude on the part of the negro, and, as we have seen, this change in intellectual conviction, this shifting from an attitude of compromise to one of challenge, is reflected in the literature of the negro during the recent decade.

If this new literature of the negro in America does not constitute a renaissance, it does signify rapid growth in racial art and culture. It is a growth that is as yet unfinished. Indeed, we may say it illustrates a growth that in a dynamic sense has just begun. It indicates more than the rise of a literature. It marks the rise of an entire people, and in one sense may be properly described as a new emancipation, but this time spiritual.