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OPPORTUNITY

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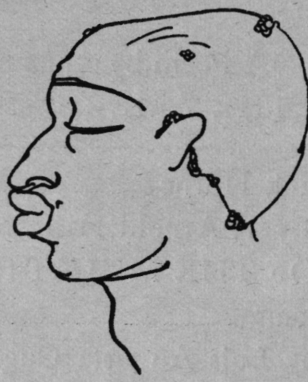
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17 MADISON AVENUE
NEW YORK CITY



CONTENTS

FOREWORD.....	By L. Hollingsworth Wood	
INTRODUCTION—By Charles S. Johnson.....		11
JUMBY—A Story by Arthur Huff Fauset.....		15
ON THE ROAD ONE DAY, LORD—By Paul Green.....		25
DUSK—A Poem by Mae V. Cowdery		26
DIVINE AFFLATUS—A Poem by Jessie Fauset.....		27
GENERAL DRUMS—A Story by John Matheus.....		29
GULLAH—By Julia Peterkin.....		35
REQUIEM—A Poem by Georgia Douglas Johnson.....		35
FORECLOSURE—A Poem by Sterling A. Brown.....		36
DREAMER—A Poem by Langston Hughes.....		36
THE DUNES—A Poem by E. Merrill Root.....		36
EIGHTEENTH STREET—An Anthology in Color by Nathan Ben Young.....		37
JOHN HENRY—A Negro Legend by Guy B. Johnson.....		47
THINGS SAID WHEN HE WAS GONE—A Poem by Blanche Taylor Dickinson		51
APRIL IS ON THE WAY—A Poem by Alice Dunbar Nelson.....		52
THE FIRST ONE—A Play in One Act by Zora Neale Hurston.....		53
THIS PLACE—A Poem by Donald Jeffrey Hayes.....		57
THREE POEMS—By Countee Cullen.....		58
NEW LIGHT ON AN OLD SONG—By Dorothy Scarborough.....		59
LA PERLA NEGRA—By Edna Worthley Underwood.....		60
THE NEGRO OF THE JAZZ BAND—Translated from the Spanish of Jose M. Salaverria by Dorothy Peterson.....		63
IDOLATRY—A Poem by Arna Bontemps.....		66
TO CLARISSA SCOTT DELANY—A poem by Angelina W. Grimke.....		67
JUAN LATINO, MAGISTER LATINUS—By Arthur A. Schomburg.....		69
AND ONE SHALL LIVE IN TWO—A Poem by Jonathan H. Brooks.....		72
A POEM—By Phillis Wheatley.....		78
THE RUNAWAY SLAVE AT PILGRIM'S POINT—By Elizabeth Barrett Browning.....		78
THE NATURAL HISTORY OF RACE PREJUDICE—By Ellsworth Faris		89
FACSIMILES of Original Manuscripts of Paul Laurence Dunbar.....		95

SYBIL WARNS HER SISTER—A Poem by Anne Spencer.....	94
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE AMERICAN RACE PROBLEM— By Eugene Kinckle Jones.....	96
ARABESQUE—A Poem by Frank Horne.....	99
PHANTOM COLOR LINE—By T. Arnold Hill.....	100
THE CHANGING STATUS OF THE MULATTO—By E. B. Reuter.....	107
SUFFRAGE—By William Pickens.....	111
CONSECRATION—A Poem by Lois Augusta Cuglar.....	114
UNDERGRADUATE VERSE—Fisk University.....	115
OUR LITTLE RENAISSANCE—By Alain Locke.....	117
MY HEART HAS KNOWN ITS WINTER—A Poem by Arna Bontemps.....	118
RACIAL SELF-EXPRESSION—By E. Franklin Frazier.....	119
OUR GREATEST GIFT TO AMERICA—by George S. Schuyler.....	122
EFFIGY—A Poem by Lewis Alexander.....	124
THE NEGRO ACTOR'S DEFICIT—By Theophilus Lewis.....	125
TWO POEMS—By Edward S. Silvera.....	127
DUNCANSON—By W. P. Dabney.....	128
YOUTH—A Poem by Frank Horne.....	129
THE PROSPECTS OF BLACK BOURGEOISIE—By Abram Harris.....	131
TO A YOUNG POET—A Poem by George Chester Morse.....	134
A PAGE OF UNDERGRADUATE VERSE—Shaw University, Lincoln University, Tougaloo College, Howard University.....	135
✓ VERISIMILITUDE—A Story by John P. Davis.....	137
MRS. BAILEY PAYS THE RENT—By Ira DeA. Reid.....	144
A SONNET TO A NEGRO IN HARLEM—A Poem by Helene Johnson.....	148
✓ TOKENS—A Story by Gwendolyn Bennett.....	149
A PAGE OF UNDERGRADUATE VERSE—Tougaloo College, Cleveland College of Western Reserve University.....	151
THE RETURN—A Poem by Arna Bontemps.....	153
I—By Brenda Ray Moryck.....	154
A GLORIOUS COMPANY—By Allison Davis.....	156
A STUDENT I KNOW—A Poem by Jonathan H. Brooks.....	157
AND I PASSED BY—By Joseph Maree Andrew.....	158
WHO'S WHO.....	163



ILLUSTRATIONS



Cover.....	By Charles Cullen	
Frontispiece.....	By Charles Cullen	
Pen Drawings in Contents.....	By Richard Bruce	
Drawing for <i>Jumby</i> —By Aaron Douglas.....		14
Drawing for <i>On the Road One day, Lord</i> —By Aaron Douglas.....		22
Drawing for <i>General Drums</i> —By Aaron Douglas.....		28
Reproduction of African Sculptures from Barnes Foundation.....		76
A pen drawing of Phillis Wheatley—By W. E. Braxton.....		78
Illustrations for <i>Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point</i> —By Charles Cullen.....		80
A drawing—By Baron Von Rucksteschell.....		88
A pen drawing of E. K. Jones—By Francis Holbrook.....		97
Four drawings for Mulattoes—By Richard Bruce.....		103
A drawing—By Charles Cullen.....		116
A drawing—by Aaron Douglas.....		130
A drawing from <i>Copper Sun</i> —By Charles Cullen.....		136

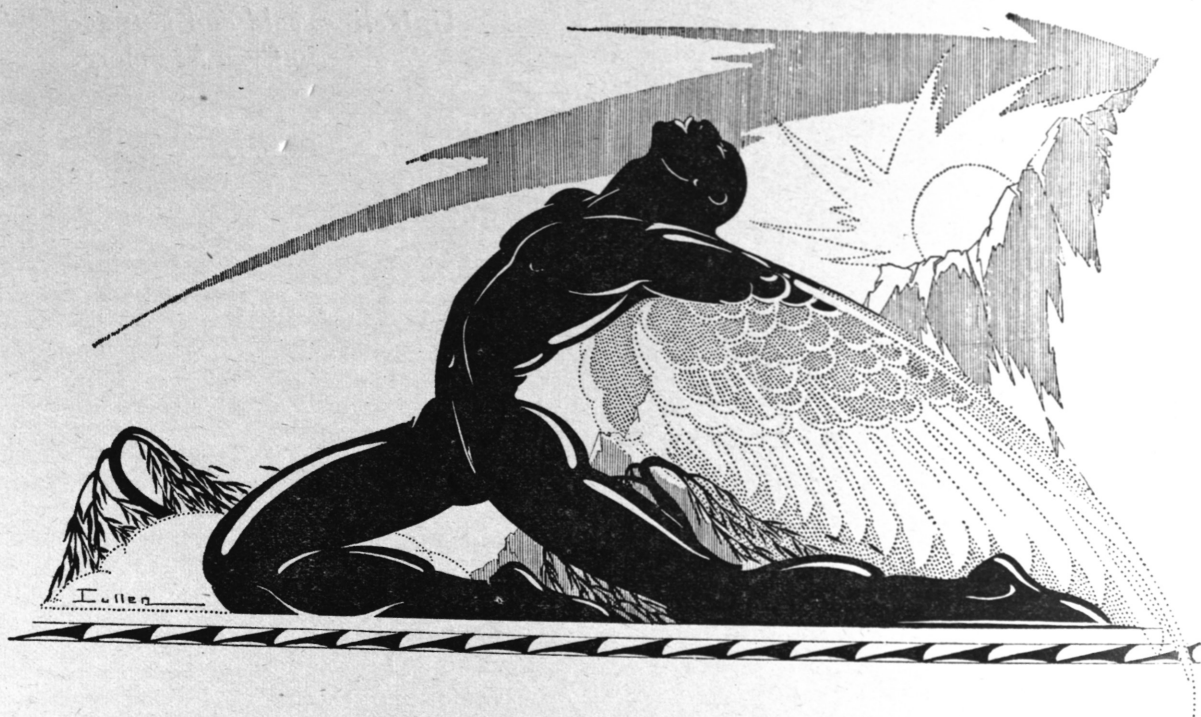


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Mezzo tint from a painting by P. Van Dyk del.....	68
Facsimile of privilege to print and title page of book by Latino.....	71
Four paintings by Sebastian Gomez, the Negro of Spain:	
Jesus Tied to a Column.....	73
The Sacred Family.....	74
Immaculate Conception	74
The Immaculate Conception	75
Facsimile of pamphlet of <i>An Elegy</i> —By Phillis Wheatley.....	77
A mezzo-tint of Ignatius Sancho from a painting by Gainsborough.....	79
Reproduction of a portrait of Francis Barber by Sir Joshua Reynolds.....	79

The child that does not cry,
Dies on its mother's back.

—*An African Proverb.*



A DRAWING, by Charles Cullen

OUR LITTLE RENAISSANCE

By ALAIN LOCKE



NOW that the time has come for some sort of critical appraisal, what of our much-heralded Negro Renaissance? Pathetically pale, thinks Mr. Mencken, like a candle in the sunlight. It has kindled no great art: we would do well to page a black Luther and call up the Reformation. Fairly successful, considering the fog and soot of the American atmosphere, and still full of promise—so “it seems” to Mr. Heywood Broun. I wonder what Mr. Pater would say. He might be even more sceptical, though with the scepticism of suspended judgment, I should think; but one mistake he would never make—that of confusing the spirit with the vehicle, of confounding the artistic quality which Negro life is contributing with the Negro artist. Negro artists are just the by-products of the Negro Renaissance; its main accomplishment will be to infuse a new essence into the general stream of culture. The Negro Renaissance must be an integral phase of contemporary American art and literature; more and more we must divorce it in our minds from propaganda and politics. Otherwise, why call it a renaissance? We are back-sliding, I think, into the old swamp of the Negro problem to be discussing, as we have been of late, how many Negro artists are first-rate or second-rate, and how many feet of the book-shelf of leather-bound classics their works to date should occupy. According to that Hoyle, the Grand Renaissance should have stopped at the Alps and ought to have effected the unification of Italy instead of the revival of Humanism.

To claim the material that Negro life and idiom have contributed to American art through the medium of the white artist may seem at first unfair and ungracious; may even be open to the imputation of trying to bolster up with reinforcements a “wavering thin line of talent.” But what is the issue—sociology or art—a quality of spirit or complexions? The artists in question themselves are gracious enough, both in making their acknowledgements to the folk spirit, and in asserting the indivisible unity of the subject-matter. Only recently, confirming her adoption of Negro material as her special field, Mrs. Peterkin has said: “I shall never write of white people; to me their lives are not so colorful. If the South is going to write, what is it they are going to write about—the Negro, of course.” Still more recently, the distinguished author of *Porgy* applauds shifting the stress from the Negro writer to the “Negro race as a subject for art” and approves of “lifting the material to the plane of pure art” and of making it available to the American

artist, white or Negro, “as native subject-matter.” And if there is any meaning to the term universal which we so blithely and tritely use in connection with art, it must be this. There is no other alternative on the plane of art. Indeed, if conditions in the South were more conducive to the development of Negro culture without transplanting, the self-expression of the “New Negro” would spring up just as one branch of the new literature of the South, and as one additional phase of its cultural reawakening. The common bond of soil and that natural provincialism would be a sounder basis for development than the somewhat expatriated position of the younger school of Negro writers. And if I were asked to name one factor for the anemic and rhetorical quality of so much Negro expression up to the present, I would cite not the unproved capacities of our authors but the pathetic exile of the Negro writer from his best material, the fact that he cannot yet get cultural breathing space on his own soil. That is at least one reason for the disabilities of the Negro writer in handling his own materials with vivid and intimate mastery.

More and more the younger writers and artists are trekking back to their root-sources, however. Overt propaganda now is as exceptional as it used to be typical. The acceptance of race is steadily becoming less rhetorical, and more instinctively taken for granted. There was a time when the only way out of sentimental partisanship was through a stridently self-conscious realism. That attitude stripped the spiritual bloom from the work of the Negro writer; gave him a studied and self-conscious detachment. It was only yesterday that we had to preach objectivity to the race artist to cure the pathetic fallacies of bathos and didactic approach. We are just beginning perhaps to shake off the artifices of that relatively early stage; so to speak the Umbrian stiffness is still upon us and the Florentine ease and urbanity looms just ahead. It is a fiction that the black man has until recently been naive: in American life he has been painfully self-conscious for generations—and is only now beginning to recapture the naivete he once originally had. The situation is well put in a stanza of Mae Cowdery’s poem—

“Goal,”

I must shatter the wall
Of darkness that rises
From gleaming day
And seeks to hide the sun.
I will turn this wall of
Darkness (that is night)
Into a thing of beauty.

I will take from the hearts
Of black men—
Prayers their lips
Are 'fraid to utter,
And turn their coarseness
Into a beauty of the jungle
Whence they came.

So, in the development of the materials of Negro life, each group of artists has a provincialism to outgrow; in the one case narrowness of vision, in the other, limiting fetters of style. If then it is really a renaissance—and I firmly believe it is, we are still

in the hill-town stage, and the mellowness of maturity has not yet come upon us. It is not to escape criticism that we hold it thus; but for the sake of a fair comparison. The Negro Renaissance is not ten years old; its earliest harbingers cannot be traced back of the beginning of the century; its representative products to date are not only the work of the last three or four years, but the work of men still in their twenties so far as the producing artists are concerned. Need we then be censured for turning our adjective into an affectionate diminutive and for choosing, at least for the present, to call it hopefully "our little renaissance"?



MY HEART HAS KNOWN ITS WINTER

By ARNA BONTEMPS

*A little while spring will claim its own,
In all the land around for mile on mile
Tender grass will hide the rugged stone.
My still heart will sing a little while.*

*And men will never think this wilderness
Was barren once when grass is over all,
Hearing laughter they may never guess
My heart has known its winter and carried gall.*

PREMONITION

By ARCADEO RODANICHE

*The moon looks like a bleached face
against the sun
that moves on
along the edge of night
which ruins the abysmal lands of yesterdays;
and as it hovers
over the mist of times unborn,—
staring at tomorrows—
it pales with dread
at the sight of the chaos it beholds
undergoing gestation
in the womb of time yet to come.*