4. *Emergence of the New Negro*

CLAUDE MCKAY, JEAN TOOMER, JESSIE FAUSET, LANGSTON HUGHES, COUNTEE CULLEN, RUDOLPH FISHER, JAMES WELDON JOHNSON, AND OTHERS

§ 1

By the time of the death of Booker Washington in 1915 the Negro, with Dr. DuBois as chief architect, had reared a complicated thought structure designed as impregnable against the shifting circumstances of that day. He was certain that he must assimilate the characteristics of white America, while at the same time he took pride in his own peculiar contribution to American civilization. He earnestly wished to develop a culture within a culture at the same time laughing derisively at those who urged a forty-ninth state for the colonization of Negroes. Whenever possible he ignored all consciousness of race, and yet he crowded into third-class accommodations for which he had paid first-class rates, cluttered up the segregated balconies of theaters, and made it a point of pride whenever he was accepted on the same terms as any other citizen. Negroes went to Harvard, Yale, Chicago, and fought for entrance into Bryn Mawr, and yet defended to exhaustion their avowals that Howard, Lincoln, and Spelman were "just as good." When a Negro married a white woman it was reason for jubilant comment, but a Negro girl's step across the line cost her family, friends, and reputation. One system of thought operated for the group; another for the individual.

All this was in the direction of adjustment. That in the beginning it was so inconsistent was because the serious effort was all on the part of the Negro, and within the group. The revolving wheel of the Negro's thought could find no firm traction on the surface of white America's conscious-

ness. Change came haltingly. Since the publication of Ray Stannard Baker's *Following the Color Line* in 1908 there had been a sporadic interest among southern whites in the deeper problems of race relations. The list of books about Negroes grew, and the items became more studious. For the most part, however, the country slumbered in Booker Washington's belief that the problem of race could be solved by erecting agricultural and mechanical schools and colleges for Negroes.

Then came the war in Europe. Thousands of foreign laborers, German, Italian, French, Austrian, were recalled. By early 1915 there was a serious labor shortage. The steel, munitions, and automotive industries in Pittsburgh and Carney's Point, Detroit and Tom's River were forced to cancel contracts they could not fill because hands were short. Prices and wages advanced. Industry sent representatives South to shark up labor. That spring the agricultural South had been hard hit first by flood and then by drouth, and hundreds of the Negro population were idle. Others, the floaters and transients in normal days, were attracted by the high wages offered by the northern industrialists. In the five years from 1915 to 1920 a half million Negroes moved North.[1]

The effect of this first great Negro migration upon the thought of white America was tremendous. In the South there was alarm that its labor supply would be seriously curtailed, effecting a breakdown in the agricultural trades, and especially in cotton. The first reaction was toward unhealthy repressive measures, but this soon gave way to an intelligent appraisal. For the first time since the Civil War the whole mind of the South was aware that the Negro was a free agent; that he suffered economic exploitation only when he could not help himself, and that, like any other people, he moved toward greater opportunities. The new sociolog-

ical interest in the Negro in the South was reflected in the increase in books on racial relations written from the southern point of view. They began to pour from the press. All of these were not temperate, but the majority were a distinct victory of mind over prejudice.

In the North the effect was no less telling. The North was getting a full measure of the race problem in industry and in such social problems as housing, health, education, and crime. Detroit, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Philadelphia, and scores of smaller cities saw rises of from 40 to 140 per cent in their Negro populations. Such increases demanded new adjustments on both sides. Not only (to paraphrase the title of one of the books of the period) was the Negro facing America, but America was facing the Negro. America at large was sociology-minded. Various cities engaged experts to work on the problems incident to the Negro. Social agencies established departments of Negro work. Negro organizations of local and national significance came into being for the specific purpose of bettering race relations. No longer did a few social-minded patrons and philanthropic titans limit the white race's actions and attitudes in regard to America's most absorbing problem, to the giving of money for the maintenance of inferior schools.

The Negro felt the strength of the new and vigorous interest more powerfully than he had felt the effects of the Civil War. Both a party to and subject of a multitude of studies, he was at no loss for want of a general attitude. The psychology of oppression by which he was dominated and to which he had given expression in apologetic language, defeatist poetry, and apostate prose controlled him still, though now it began boldly to express itself in harangues and declarations. Now that America had by its own will been made ready to listen, the Negro began that revelation

and vindication of himself, that impassioned study of his accomplishments, that declaration of his future that creates the masculine literature of the "New Negro."

In 1910 James Weldon Johnson had been content to pray, although with strength, humbly:

> God of our weary years,
> God of our silent tears,
> Thou who hast brought us thus far on our way;
> Thou who hast by thy might
> Led us into the light,
> Keep us ever in the path, we pray.
> Lest our feet stray from the places, our God,
> where we met Thee;
> Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world,
> we forget Thee:
> Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
> May we forever stand,
> True to our God,
> True to our native land.[2]

But in 1917, in the title poem of his volume *Fifty Years*, he declared:

> Far, far the way that we have trod
> From heathen kraal and jungle dens,
> To freedmen, freemen, sons of God,
> Americans and citizens.
>
> . . . . .
>
> A few black bondmen strewn along
> The borders of our eastern coast,
> Now grown a race ten million strong,
> An upward, onward, marching host.

Then should we speak but servile words,
Or shall we hang our heads in shame?
Stand back of new-come foreign hordes,
And fear our heritage to claim?

No! stand erect and without fear,
And for our foes let this suffice—
We've bought a rightful kinship here
And we have more than paid the price.

These were not the words of a passionate inexperienced youth. At the time they were written Mr. Johnson was forty-five; he had been teacher, lawyer, and United States Consul at Venezuela and Nicaragua. Next to Dr. DuBois, he understood the temper of his own people and the prevailing attitude of the whites better than any Negro of the day.

Fifty Years is not an isolated instance. Between 1917 and 1921 other Negro writers followed Mr. Johnson's lead. Waverly Carmichael, Joshua Jones, and Leslie P. Hill published volumes that had comparatively wide sales among both Negroes and whites. For the most part the work of these men was largely preparatory and gave but faint promise of the skill of the writers who were to crown the era of revival. Things of broad social consequence were happening too fast to permit utter concentration upon art. The return of American soldiers to the United States seems to have been a signal for a series of disturbances of wide significance. Causes were not far to seek. Negroes had not only replaced depleted foreign labor in the years prior to America's entrance into the war, but they had been used in many skilled capacities formerly filled by whites. In the North it was no longer general to refer to certain jobs as "white" jobs. Competition between Negroes and whites (and especially the returned soldiers of both groups) for these jobs in industry was

one cause. Another cause, no less potent, was the attitude of the Negroes themselves. They had fought "to make the world safe for democracy" and they wanted to share in the benefits of democracy. Julia Johnson in *The Negro Problem* notes that Dr. DuBois commented: "Under similar circumstances we would fight again. But, by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if, now that the war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land."

And Rollin Harte, who coined the term "New Negro," had this to say: "Here [is] the same spirit—the spirit, that is, of the new Negro. Hit, he hits back. In a succession of race riots, he has proved it. 'When they taught the colored boys to fight,' says a Negro newspaper, 'they started something they won't be able to stop'. . . . That huge, leaderless exodus . . . meant for the first time in his history the Negro had taken affairs into his own hands. Until then, things had been done to the Negro, with the Negro, and for the Negro, but never by the Negro. At last he showed initiative and self-reliance."[3]

There were bloody, costly riots in Chester, Washington, Chicago, and East St. Louis. The attitude of the race was reflected by the first important poet of the black renaissance, Claude McKay, in "If We Must Die":

Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us still be brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back![4]

§ 2

Out of these conditions grew a new sanity on both sides, a new respect for the hidden powers of each, and a desire to come together in a spirit of mutual helpfulness. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, appointed in 1919, created the guides by which interracial conferences have been held ever since. Gradually, as the bugaboo of the Negro as an agent of social destruction was exorcised, America began to look at her dark citizens for powers of positive good. She began to appraise the Negro folk songs and the spirituals (long popularized by singers from Fisk University and Hampton Institute), poetry, painting, and art. From 1919 to the present this interest has not slackened. It has found expression in the material of graduate theses, in sociological tracts, in magazine articles. It has added piquancy to moving pictures and the musical comedy stage. It has served Eugene O'Neill, Paul Green, and Marc Connelly in the drama; DuBose Heyward, Carl Van Vechten, Roark Bradford, Sherwood Anderson, and dozens of lesser writers in the novel; Virgil Thompson and Gershwin in music; and Lindsay and Sandburg in poetry.

Since the war Negro artists had been producing and awaiting a ripe time. Had they been left much longer to feed upon the interest that they as artists stimulated in their own group, their efforts would have petered out. An audience within the Negro group was not sufficiently large to support them, and consequently there could have been no profits for potential distributing agencies that might have handled the work of the writers. Of the two Negro publishing firms established between 1915 and 1922 for the purpose of issuing books by Negroes about Negroes,[5] one had to beg funds for its existence and the other was forced to close. To

a much greater extent then than now, Negro writers had to depend upon the will of white America. In about 1921, fortunately, America's interest in the Negro as he expressed himself was outrun only by her interest in expressing the Negro. In a very large measure this constitutes what has been called the Negro renaissance. James Weldon Johnson in "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" has this to say: "What has happened is that efforts which have been going on for more than a century are being noticed and appreciated at last, and that this appreciation has served as a stimulus to greater effort and output. . . . Several converging forces have been at work."[6]

That the Negro was stimulated to greater creative effort by the interest of white America is beyond doubt. It is remarkable, however, that his semi-dependent position as an artist (and especially as a writer) did not lead him in most instances into the production merely of what the white man wanted. Black and white America had come a long way in the two decades since 1900. Though there was still in the attitude of white America something of the playful indulgence of a giant for a pigmy, there rose up important numbers of critics and readers like Robert Kerlin, Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, Louis Untermeyer, V. F. Calverton, Joel Spingarn, and Henry Mencken who were sincere and strong in their belief that the Negro writer had a particular gift to make to American culture.

It was to the sincerity of these men and to the devotion and encouragement of their own small racial audience that Negro writers tied. The discipline of their virtual silence in the war years had been good for them. The traditions which would have limited their appeal had atrophied; popular concepts were topsy-turvy. A truly *new* Negro had been born and grown into maturity during the years since 1900. He was a breathing amalgam of numerous tendencies. He was

race conscious and race proud, independent and defiant, conscious of his powers and not ashamed of his gifts. He came without apology and meaning no offense, but ready to defend himself when offense was taken. His position as an artist was exactly reversed from that of most of his predecessors. He lived and worked for his own people and discovered to his astonishment that by satisfying them he pleased also a vast but incidental white audience. He was not immediately a pioneer in new forms, for he was just beginning to fix his own artistic values, but the reception he got for being *new* and *different* encouraged him to think that at long last he was a part of America's cultural life.

The new Negro movement in literature began with a West Indian Negro. Claude McKay had already published a few dialect pieces[7] when he came to the States in 1912, drifting from Tuskegee to Kansas and on to New York. His first years in New York were concurrent with the early social thinking that had been stimulated by reason of the war. Working in an editorial capacity for the *Liberator* and *The Masses*, he must have felt the liberal currents that swept through the pages of those journals; but his infrequent poems gave no hint of his own social thinking. Even the volume *Spring in New Hampshire* reveals more of the conservative poet of nature than of the bitter revolutionary of a few months later. But his gifts stand out in that volume—his love of color, his lush imagery, his sensitive massing. The sometimes indefinable difference that marks the work of the new Negro writer is evident throughout *Harlem Shadows* and especially in such pieces as "Harlem Shadows," "The Harlem Dancer," and "The Tropics in New York."

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger root,
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,

Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,
Sat in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.[8]

It was Mr. McKay's third volume of poetry, *Harlem Shadows*, that attracted his darker audience most. In this volume he gives voice to the violence and bitter hatred that marked the interracial strife of the period just after the war. The proud defiance and independence that were the very heart of the new Negro movement is nowhere so strikingly expressed in poetry as in "To the White Fiends" and in "If We Must Die," already quoted.

Despite the awakening of a new artistic consciousness, however, there was at first much confusion in the new Negro movement in literature. The great tide of feeling which found release was not directed through one channel. While Claude McKay spat out his proud impatience, a few were indulging in slapstick, trying in song and story (and with the aid of certain popular white writers) to restore the older tradition to a state of health, and other writers were groping with curious shyness through the teeming byways of racial thought and feeling, searching for an alchemy, a universal solvent for transmuting the passions of the day into something sweeter than bitterness, more pure than hate. They were for the most part older writers who had an hereditary confidence in the essential goodness of man, in the theory of American democracy, and in the Victorian notion that

God's in his heaven;
All's right with the world.

They were of the comfortable middle classes, the bourgeois, school teachers, the wives of pork-fattened politicians and ministers, the sons of headwaiters and porters, spiritually far removed from the sources of new race thought. McKay, Toomer, Hughes, and the numerous lesser ones who came later were vagabonds, as free in the sun and dust of Georgia, in the steerage of tramp steamers, in the brothels of Lenox Avenue and the crowded ports of the Orient as in the living rooms of Strivers Row. These were the reservoirs through which pumped the race's hate power, love power, lust power, laugh power. The others, the conservatives, were tubs without depth, within whose narrow limits no storm could be raised. They posed themselves questions: Am I not just as well as I am? Must I be proud and glory in my race? And they sought to answer them.

We ask for peace. We, at the bound
Of life, are weary of the round
In search of Truth. We know the quest
Is not for us, the vision blest
Is meant for other eyes. Uncrowned,
We go, with heads bowed to the ground,
And old hands, gnarled and hard and browned.
Let us forget the past unrest,—
We ask for peace.[9]

We will not waver in our loyalty.
No strange voice reaches us across the sea:
No crime at home shall stir us from this soil.
Ours is the guerdon, ours the blight of toil,
But raised above it by a faith sublime
We choose to suffer here and bide our time.[10]

But the bourgeois could not restrain the flood tide. In 1923 came Jean Toomer's *Cane*, a revolutionary book that gave definiteness to the new movement and exposed a wealth of new material. A youth of twenty-eight fresh from the South when *Cane* was published, he held nothing so important to the artistic treatment of Negroes as racial kinship with them. Unashamed and unrestrained, Jean Toomer loved the race and the soil that sustained it. His moods are hot, colorful, primitive, but more akin to the naïve hysteria of the spirituals than to the sophisticated savagery of jazz and the blues. *Cane* was a lesson in emotional release and freedom. Through all its prose and poetry gushes a subjective tide of love. "He comes like a son returned in bare time to take a living full farewell of a dying parent; and all of him loves and wants to commemorate that perishing naïvete."[11] Hear how he revels in the joy and pain, the beauty and tragedy of his people:

Pour, O pour that parting soul in song,
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
Into the velvet pine-smoke air tonight,
And let the valley carry it along.
And let the valley carry it along.

O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,
So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,
Now just before an epoch's sun declines,
Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

In time, for though the sun is setting on
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;
Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone.

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes

An everlasting song, a singing tree,
Caroling softly souls of slavery,
What they were, and what they are to me,
Caroling softly souls of slavery.[12]

Great splotches of color and sensuousness make gaudy palettes of his pages:

A feast of moon and men and barking hounds,
An orgy for some genius of the South
With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth,
Surprised in making folk-songs from soul sounds.[13]

Cane was experimental, a potpourri of poetry and prose, in which the latter element is significant because of the influence it had on the course of Negro fiction. Mr. Toomer is indebted to Sherwood Anderson and Waldo Frank for much in his prose style, but his material is decidedly his own. Sometimes he falls short of his best abilities for lack of government, as in the story "Kabnis," which says and does much but obscures much more. Sometimes he succeeds splendidly, as in the sketches "Carma" and "Fern," in which feeling and language are restrained and genuine. But often he wallows in feeling and grows inarticulate with a rush of words.

Though *Cane* was in the nature of an experiment (the conclusion to which we are fearful of never knowing, for since 1923 Toomer has published practically nothing) it established the precedent of self-revelation that has charac-

terized the writings of Negroes on all levels ever since. At first completely absorbed in fulfilling his opportunity for release, the new Negro had no time for new forms. In his anxiety and relief he did not reflect that he was pouring new wine into old bottles. In truth, he was somewhat distrustful of his new place in the sun. He was afraid of being a fad, the momentary focus of the curiosity of dilettantes, charlatans, and student sociologists. It was common sense for him to attempt to establish himself on something more solid than the theatrical reputation of Florence Mills or the *bizarreries* of what many people thought to be the Greenwich Village influence. New forms were faddish froth: material the marrow. And what more arresting material than the self-revealing truth!

Thus by 1924 the new movement was definitive and hard. Jessie Fauset, whose first novel, *There Is Confusion*, appeared in 1924, gave the precedent added validity. Perhaps because she was a woman and a little shocked at the kind and quality of truth in Toomer, she deserted Toomer's people and his type of revelation, choosing the cultivated Negro society of Philadelphia and New York for her milieu. Her race pride did not turn to the Negro's heritage in the soil, but to his heritage in ancient lineage and in culture. The result was that her characters are so commonplace as to seem actual transcriptions from unimaginative life, and her novels often bear a striking resemblance to the duller novels of white middle-class society. The novelist herself states the case in the foreword to *The Chinaberry Tree:*

"But of course there are breathing-spells, in between spaces where colored men and women work and love and go their ways with no thought of the [race] 'problem.' What are they like then? So few of the other Americans know. . . . His forebears are to him quite simply the early settlers who played a pretty large part in making the land grow. He

boasts no Association of the Sons and Daughters of the Revolution, but he knows as a matter of fact and quite inevitably his sons and daughters date their ancestry as far back as any. So quite as naturally as his white compatriots he speaks of his 'old' Boston families, 'old Philadelphians,' 'old Charlestonians'. . . . Briefly he is a dark American who wears his joy and rue very much as does the white American. He may wear it with some difference, but it is the same joy and rue."

It was with this always in mind that Miss Fauset wrote not only her first novel and *The Chinaberry Tree*, but *Plum Bun* and *Comedy: American Style* as well. No other Negro novelist so thoroughly offsets the artificial glamor associated with the Negro by such novels as *Nigger Heaven*, *The Blacker the Berry*, *Prancing Nigger*, and *Sweet Man*. The deeper problem of all Miss Fauset's novels is of course race, and yet her Negro characters are no more concerned with it than are the white characters who occasionally enter. Treatment of this kind gives the problem an incidental air, avoids the heavier going of propaganda, and at the same time makes it serious enough to command attention. Her novels, too, leave no room for doubt that the new Negro meant to go beyond mere self-revelation. From that moment in *There Is Confusion* when Peter Bye enters, bringing with him the complexities of racial dependence and interdependence, we realize that the novelist is trying to say something and get somewhere.

§ 3

From the elemental hysteria of Langston Hughes's "Saturday Night"[14] to the chilled and competent beauty of Helene Johnson's "Fulfillment"[15] is a long flight of song, not always perfectly sustained and not always perfectly suited to the tableaux to which it is instrumental. But the tableaux do not suffer from this. They suffer rather by reason of their own limitations.

The stage is crowded with figures, so crowded that eventually their attitudes and postures come to seem cramped and artificial. It was crowded long before Arna Bontemps reinspired the half-legendary men and women of *Black Thunder*, to add others to an already extraordinary pageant. There are Claude McKay's black roustabouts, Jake and Banjo, who roved the world like giants; there are the degenerates, the parasites, the vampires who slunk through Wallace Thurman's slimy demi-world; there are the courageous but futile professional men and women of Walter White's far South; northern metropolitan centers yield Rudolph Fisher the wholesome, hard-working, fun-loving, cracker-hating laborer, and the religious domestic who works in the white folk's kitchen. Rich man, poor man, zealot, fool, flapper, matron, bigot, prostitute—the ignorant, the intelligent, the wholesome, the foul are there in great numbers and in a variety of attitudes and in a multiplicity of still-born events. A prodigious, revealing pageantry.

One important writer among the new Negroes stands out as having contributed nothing or little to this conglomeration. That writer is the poet Countee Cullen. He for himself (as well as others for him), has written numerous disclaimers of an attitude narrowed by racial influence. He may be right. Certainly *Caroling Dusk*, his anthology of "verse by Negro poets," represents a careful culling of the less distinctive, that is to say, the less Negroid poetry of his most defiantly Negro contemporaries. Nevertheless it remains that when writing on race material Mr. Cullen is at his best. His is an unfortunate attitude, for it has been deliberately acquired and in that sense is artificial, tending to create a kind of effete and bloodless poetry in the manner of Mr. Braithwaite. The essential quality of good poetry is utmost sincerity and earnestness of purpose. A poet untouched by his times, by his conditions, by his environment is only half a

poet, for earnestness and sincerity grow in direct proportion as one feels intelligently the pressure of immediate life. One may not like the pressure and the necessities under which it forces one to labor, but one does not deny it. Donne, as he grew older, oppressed by the thought of his ultimate physical decay and the weight of his (often imaginary) sin, wrote of God and repentance. Aseeth with the romantic notions of the French revolution, Wordsworth elevated all of nature, including man, to a common kinship in the Divine. Now undoubtedly the biggest, single unalterable circumstance in the life of Mr. Cullen is his color. Most of the life he has lived has been influenced by it. And when he writes by it, he *writes;* but when this does not guide him, his pen trails faded ink across his pages.

To argue long about Countee Cullen—his ideas, his poetic creed, and the results he obtains—is to come face to face with the poet's own confusion. It is not a matter of words or language merely, as it was with Dunbar: it is a matter of ideas and feelings. Once Mr. Cullen wrote: "Negro verse (as a designation, that is) would be more confusing than accurate. Negro poetry, it seems to me, in the sense that we speak of Russian, French, or Chinese poetry, must emanate from some country other than this in some language other than our own."[16]

At another time: "Somehow or other I find my poetry of itself treating of the Negro, of his joys and his sorrows—mostly of the latter—, and of the heights and depths of emotion which I feel as a Negro."[17]

And at still another:

> Then call me traitor if you must,
> Shout treason and default!
> Saying I betray a sacred trust
> Aching beyond this vault.

I'll bear your censure as your praise,
For never shall the clan
Confine my singing to its ways
Beyond the ways of man.[18]

The answer to all this seems to be: Chinese poetry translated into English remains Chinese poetry—Chinese in feeling, in ideas.

But there is no confusion in Mr. Cullen's first volume, *Color*, which is far and away his best. Here his poetry (nearly all of it on racial subjects, or definitely and frankly conditioned by race) helps to balance the savage poetic outbursts of Claude McKay. Countee Cullen is decidedly a gentle poet, a schoolroom poet whose vision of life is interestingly distorted by too much of the vicarious. This lends rather than detracts. It is as if he saw life through the eyes of a woman who is at once shrinking and bold, sweet and bitter. His province is the nuance, the finer shades of feeling, subtility and finesse of emotion and expression. Often however, with feline slyness, he bares the pointed talons of a coolly ironic and deliberate humor which is his way of expressing his resentment at the racial necessities.

Once riding in old Baltimore,
  Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
  Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small
  And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
  His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
  From May until December;

Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.[19]

Again, in "To My Fairer Brethren":

Though I score you with my best,
Treble circumstance
Must confirm the verdict, lest
It be laid to chance.

Insufficient that I match you
Every coin you flip;
Your demand is that I catch you
Squarely on the hip.

Should I wear my wreathes a bit
Rakishly and proud,
I have bought my right to it;
Let it be allowed.[20]

When he leaves work of this kind for the heavier moods and materials so popular with Hughes, McKay, Horne, Alexander, and *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* poets, Mr. Cullen bogs down. He is the Ariel of Negro poets. He cannot beat the tom-tom above a faint whisper nor know the primitive delights of black rain and scarlet sun. After the fashion of the years 1925-1928, he makes a return to his African heritage, but not as a "son returned in bare time." He was not among the Negroes who were made Africa conscious and Africa proud by the striding Colossus, Marcus Garvey, by Vandercook's *Tom-Tom*, and O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. Cullen's gifts are delicate, better suited to bons mots, epigrams, and the delightfully personal love lyrics for which a large circle admire him.

The title poem of his third volume, *The Black Christ*, illustrates at once the scope and the limit of his abilities. Bitter and ironic in its mood, revealing but slight narrative and dramatic powers, the poem is feeble with the childish mysticism of a bad dream, penetrating the realm of emotional reality no more than does a child's relation of a nightmare. Here in this poem Mr. Cullen's lyricism is smothered, his metrical faults exaggerated, and his fear of stern reality italicized.

§ 4

The fact that the new Negro had something to say was not completely swamped in his mania for self-revelation. Jessie Fauset's novels and the better poems of Countee Cullen give definite voice to an increasing store of ideas, opinions, and conclusions. Walter White's melodramatic novel, *The Fire in the Flint*, and his painstaking study, *Rope and Faggot*, both examinations of certain aspects of the social order, get at the mind by way of the emotions. Robert R. Moton, then principal of Tuskegee, made an attempt to catalogue and explain Negro thought on almost all the important relations of mankind. George Schuyler's incisive mind cut through many a fog bank of wishful, wistful reverie. The short stories and the first novel of Rudolph Fisher, the most talented narrative artist in the group, under all their technical skill and appearance of mere cleverness say things to the mind. Dr. DuBois, silent for a time, except in the pages of *The Crisis*, thought aloud in *Dark Princess*.

What did the new Negro have to say? What was he thinking? Truth to tell, he was becoming a first-class cynic with decidedly red tendencies. First of all, he deserted the church, that staunch bulwark of bourgeois conservatism, in great numbers. He started laughing at religion, and many began to use it merely as the tool of charlatanism. He lost rapidly all sense of ethical progression and, like his white contem-

poraries, acquired an exaggerated sense of the value of what he called economic stability. The Republican party became no longer the only party, for through deflection to the Democrats the Negro passed on to Socialism, Communism, and even Nihilism. Though he laughed at the gaudy uniforms, jeered the unmanned and rotting ships of the Black Star Line, and derided the Utopian ideas of the leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, he was shocked by Marcus Garvey.[21] He was shocked, alarmed, amazed at the gigantic demonstration of the herd instinct, and confused, confounded, and humiliated by the public disclosures of graft and incompetence. His illusions crashed about him. The hounds of inferiority bayed on his trail. He began to believe that but two ways were left open to him: the bitter indifference that begins the end, and escape—escape through conformity (possible only to the white-blacks), or through desertion of the "American way," or through absolute and unequivocal submission, or through atavistic reversion.

Most of this brooding thought was nourished by the work of certain white writers whose books have had a wide public since 1925. Certainly Julia Peterkin's *Black April* and *Scarlet Sister Mary*, with their return to old concepts and stereotypes (which she helped revive), did not further the Negro's self-respect. Dowd's pseudo-scientific *The American Negro* gave an air of authenticity to the utterances of the prejudiced southern press. The savage primitivism of DuBose Heyward's Porgy, Crown, and Bess, and of Eugene O'Neill's Brutus Jones seemed to indicate that the Negro was no more than a brute, while Carl Van Vechten's polite, light *Nigger Heaven* pictured him as absorbing all the vices and none of the virtues of white civilization.

In various guise the futility, the pessimism, the atavism began to appear in the literature of the new Negro. Langston Hughes might declare in extenuation, as he did in 1926, that the new Negro was bent upon writing what he wanted

to write, that he stood, as it were, free on the mountaintop; but he did not mention that even there on the mountaintop he breathed the noxious air of desperation ascending from the valley. Not in joy but in desperation did the same poet write:

Me an' ma baby's
Got two mo' ways,
Two mo' ways to do de Charleston!
Da, da
Da, da, da!
Two mo' ways to do de Charleston!

Soft lights on the tables,
Music gay,
Brown-skin steppers
In a cabaret.

White folks, laugh!
White folks, pray!

Me an' ma baby's
Got two mo' ways,
Two mo' ways to do de Charleston![22]

Nor did he try to be brave and laughing with that bitter desperation of joy when he wrote:

We cry among the skyscrapers
As our ancestors
Cried among the palms in Africa
Because we are alone,
It is night,
And we're afraid.[23]

Hughes is the most prolific and the most representative of the new Negroes. By training and experience he is at the opposite end from Cullen, that is to say, he is a Negro divinely capable of realizing (which is instinctive) and giving expression to (which is cultivated) the dark perturbation of the soul—there is no other word—of the Negro. There is this difference between racial thought and feeling: what the professors, the ministers, the physicians, the social workers think, the domestics, the porters, the dock hands, the factory girls, and the streetwalkers feel—feel in a great tide that pours over into song and shout, prayer and cursing, laughter and tears. More than any other writer of the race, Langston Hughes has been swept with this tide of feeling. This accounts for the fresh green of him, the great variety of his moods. "The tom-tom laughs, the tom-tom sobs," and between laugh and sob there is a scale of infinite distinctions.

But there is artifice, the cultivated, in him too. Certain of his pieces like "Cabaret" and "Saturday Night" quite evidently are tomfooleries as to form, but other pieces showing the strong influence of the midwestern poets are seriously experimental. Unless we consider as experiments the short stories of Frances Ellen Watkins and her retention of dialectal patterns without the dialect speech sounds, Negro writers had never experimented with form, and none since Dunbar had seriously tackled the problem of language. Mr. Hughes, more concerned with form than language, interested himself in a poetic design that would fit his material. The result is the Blues and the Shout. To the first he has given a strict poetic pattern; "one long line repeated, and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the second line in repetition is slightly changed and sometimes, but very seldom, it is omitted." The Shout also has a pattern, definite but flexible. It takes its name from the single line of strophic and incremental significance which is shouted or moaned after

each two, three, or four line stanza. There is also evidence that Mr. Hughes more recently has been experimenting with short story forms.

Mr. Hughes's experiments do not touch his more deeply moving verse. Is it that the bizarre forms, like the bizarre language of dialect, impose limitations upon expression? When he wishes to get beyond these, Mr. Hughes resorts to the purer verse forms as in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Cross," and "I, Too." Certainly none of the Blues, no matter how full of misery, and none of the Shouts, no matter how full of religion, ever get beyond a certain scope of feeling. He can catch up the dark messages of Negro feeling and express them in what he calls "racial rhythms," but it is as the iteration of the drum rather than the exposition of the piano. He feels in them, but he does not think. And this is the source of his naïvete.

But Langston Hughes is not all naïvete either. His short stories are a case in point. The title story of his volume of stories, *The Ways of White Folks*, and such stories as "Cora Unashamed" and "Camp Meeting" are caviar to the general. Such stories as these map the broad highways of indifference, of primitivism, of futility down which the Negro artist is escaping to his end—or his beginning. The beautiful black Cora, unadapted and unadaptable, was lost in the complexities of a society of which she should have been a part. Mr. Hughes, if you will, makes us see how undesirable such a society is, but the fact remains that the individual must conform to society. It is victory to live in Rome. Cora knew neither victory nor defeat—simply nullification. And it is the same with the characters in the novel *Not Without Laughter*. Aunt Hagar is as the door between that world from which the Negro had struggled since slavery, the world of poverty, of strife, of the inescapable consequences of being black, and that other world of smug phys-

ical comforts, of middle-class respectability into which her daughter Tempy had passed as into heaven. But to the other daughters, Annjee and Harriet, Tempy's world is no more satisfactory than their own. They do not want these imitation worlds of white folks' making.

This same futility becomes blank despair in the novels of Nella Larsen. The chief personages of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, white to all superficial appearances, attempt to find life across the line. Helga Crane of *Quicksand*, she of the Swedish mother and the Negro father, is driven back by hereditary primitivism; first in a Stockholm theater where she hears two American Negroes singing the blues and jazz of Harlem, and then in a Harlem feast of prayer:

"As Helga watched and listened, gradually a curious influence penetrated her: she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own breast: she felt herself possessed by the same madness: she too felt a brutal desire to shout and fling herself about. Frightened by the strength of the obsession, she gathered herself for one last effort to escape, but vainly. In rising, weakness and nausea from last night's unsuccessful attempt to make herself drunk overcame her. She fell forward against the crude railing which enclosed the little platform. For a little moment she remained there in silent stillness, because she was afraid she was going to be sick. And in that moment she was lost,—or saved. The yelling figures about her pressed forward, closing her in on all sides. Maddened, she grasped at the railing and with no previous intention began to yell like one insane, drowning every other clamour while torrents of tears streamed down her face. She was unconscious of the words she uttered, or their meaning: 'Oh, God, mercy, mercy. Have mercy on me!' but she repeated them over and over." And in the end she goes with sadistic ruthlessness to her final, sordid defeat. Clare Kendry, the heroine of *Passing*, who though married

into the white race makes periodic returns to her own, seeks escape in death, in a horrible and unpremeditated suicide.

Dr. DuBois's *Dark Princess* has been mentioned already for its delineation of the defeatist attitude. Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death*, Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*, Countee Cullen's *One Way to Heaven*, and Walter White's *Fire in The Flint* are no different in kind. Even the prose of Claude McKay, with its sensationalism and its melodramatic devices (which have caused it to be said that he writes with too thoughtful an eye on the white-consumer public), is made morbid by the futilistic speculations of Ray in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, and nauseating by the atavistic reversion of the young teacher-preacher in *Banana Bottom*.

> Each page into the book of life I turn
> I view as ashes of a cankered urn.

Two bright spots relieve the Stygian depths of the picture drawn by most of the new Negro novelists: one is the satire *Black No More*, by George Schuyler, and the other is the comedy-romance *The Walls of Jericho*, by Rudolph Fisher. That Mr. Schuyler could poke fun and Dr. Fisher could laugh amid the dreary wastes of psychopathic imaginings is evidence that all measure of sanity was not gone.

§ 5

What happened in Negro literature from the appearance of Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* in 1926 until 1935 is obvious. First of all, Negro writers, both poets and novelists, centered their attentions so exclusively upon life in the great urban centers that the city, especially Harlem, became an obsession with them. Now Harlem life is far from typical of Negro life; indeed, life there is lived on a theatrical plane that is as far from true of Negro life elsewhere as life in the Latin

Quarter is from the truth of life in Picardy. The Negro writers' mistake lay in the assumption that what they saw was Negro life, when in reality it was just Harlem life. Very shortly, for literary purposes anyway, Harlem became a sort of disease in the American organism.

Again, it was not upon the New Yorker (as distinguished from the Harlemite) that the Negro writers concentrated. Driven by the restless demons of their own forebodings, doubts, despairs, they sought the food necessary to the appetites of these spiritual and intellectual furies. The very things that caused their illness they fed upon. They needed whores, pimps, the sweetmen; *bistros*, honky-tonks, spider-nests; the perverse, the perverted, the psychopathic. They found them, of course, in abundance. In this it might be said, somewhat in extenuation, that they seemed to follow fashion.

It is to this last—the following of fashion—that certain critics would affix all the blame for what it has pleased one of them to call "the degraded literature." But it was more than just fashion: the thing the new Negro followed was soul-deep. Popular writers follow the fashions in literature in order to make money. No one of the new Negroes can be accused of making money, or even of wanting to make money. Langston Hughes was undoubtedly right when he declared of the younger Negro artists: "If the white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. . . . If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either."[24] It just happened that *Nigger Heaven* created a variation on a demand that the Negro writers were spiritually and psychologically prepared to fill. This literature would have been anyway. Some of it, as a matter of fact, had been written before *Nigger Heaven*. It is literature of escape. Literature of escape becomes necessary to a people in times of great moral and so-

cial stress. McKay and Hughes, Thurman and Larsen were no more immune to the catastrophic pressure of the war and the changes with which its aftermath affected their common lot than were Faulkner and Hemingway, Remarque and Sherriff safe from such pressure and the changes in their own lives. Negro mothers, too, bore children into the "lost generation."

There is something of wonder in the fact that a quiet little book of brilliant poems appearing in 1927 was not overlooked. The book was *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, and its author was James Weldon Johnson. Like its foremost contemporaries (*Fine Clothes to the Jew* had appeared the same year and *Weary Blues* the year before), *God's Trombones*, too, made a return to the primitive heritage, but not in the sensational and superficial way of the younger writers. "The Creation" and "Go Down Death," two of the seven sermons, are among the most moving poems in the language and certainly rank with the best things done by American Negro poets. But it is not enough merely to say this, for it explains nothing of another significance.

In 1917 Mr. Johnson's first volume of poems, *Fifty Years*, was published. A section of this book was called "Croons and Jingles" out of consideration for the limitations of the dialect the author used in such pieces as "Sence You Went Away":

> Seems lak to me de stars don't shine so bright,
> Seems lak to me de sun done loss his light,
> Seems lak to me der's nothin' goin' right,
> Sence you went away.

Under this section also Mr. Johnson made limited use of folk material. *The Book of American Negro Poetry* was issued in 1922. It was not nearly so definitive as the title implies, but

Mr. Johnson's preface as editor indicates that he had given important thought to folk material and its mode of expression. In that scholarly essay he said: "What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish. . . . He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, 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 subjects and the widest scope of treatment." This same preoccupation is also evident in Mr. Johnson's preface to *The Book of American Negro Spirituals.*

Then came *God's Trombones* as a brilliant example of the maturing of his thoughts on folk material and dialect. Aside from the beauty of the poems, the essay which prefaces them is of the first importance for it definitely hails back from the urban and sophisticated to the earthy exuberance of the Negro's kinship with the earth, the fields, the suns and rains of the South. Discarding the "mutilations of dialect," Mr. Johnson yet retains the speech forms, the idea patterns, and the rich racial flavor.

O Lord, we come this morning
Knee-bowed and body-bent
Before thy throne of grace.

. . . . . .

And now, O Lord—
When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow—
When I've been called everything but a child of God—
When I'm done travelling up the rough side of the mountain—

O—Mary's Baby—
When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death—
When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet—
Lower me to my dusty grave in peace
To wait for that great gittin' up morning.[25]

But more important still is Mr. Johnson's acknowledgment of his debt to the folk material, the primitive sermons, and the influence of the spirituals, for it is undoubtedly Mr. Johnson's return to these things that has influenced the gratifying new work of Sterling Brown in poetry and Zora Neale Hurston in prose. What Mr. Johnson has said of Sterling Brown in the preface to *Southern Road* might also be said (and Miss Fannie Hurst nearly says it) of Zora Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Mules and Men*. Mr. Johnson said: "For his raw material he dug down into the deep mine of Negro folk poetry. He found the unfailing sources from which sprang the Negro folk epics and ballads such as 'Stagolee,' 'John Henry,' 'Casey Jones,' 'Long Gone John' and others. . . . He has made more than mere transcriptions of folk poetry, and he has done more than bring to it mere artistry; he has deepened its meaning and multiplied its implications."

To understand what Mr. Johnson means, to know how this new work differs from the old, one has only to read such things as "Southern Road," "When De Saints Go Marching Home," "Frankie and Johnny," and "Memphis Blues," quoted below:

I

Nineveh, Tyre,
Babylon,
Not much lef'

Of either one.
All dese cities
Ashes and rust,
De win' sing sperrichals
Through deir dus' . . .
Was another Memphis
Mongst de olden days,
Done been destroyed
In many ways . . .
Dis here Memphis
It may go;
Floods may drown it;
Tornado blow;
Mississippi wash it
Down to sea—
Like de other Memphis in
History.

II

Watcha gonna do when Memphis on fire,
Memphis on fire, Mistah Preachin' Man?
Gonna pray to Jesus and nebber tire,
Gonna pray to Jesus, loud as I can,
Gonna pray to my Jesus, oh, my Lawd!

Watcha gonna do in de hurricane,
In de hurricane, Mistah Workin' Man?
Gonna put dem buildings up again,
Gonna put em up dis time to stan',
Gonna push a wicked wheelbarrow, oh, my Lawd!

Watcha gonna do when de flood roll fas',
Flood roll fas', Mistah Gamblin' Man?
Gonna pick up my dice fo' one las' pass—

Gonna fade my way to de lucky lan',
Gonna throw my las' seven—oh, my Lawd!

III

Memphis go
By Flood or Flame;
Nigger won't worry
All de same—
Memphis go
Memphis come back,
Ain't no skin
Off de nigger's back.
All dese cities
Ashes, rust. . . .
De win' sing sperrichals
Through deir dus'.[26]

Certainly the first and second sections of *Southern Road* and the tales in *Mules and Men* mean something. They mean a sweet return

In time, for though the sun is setting on
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;
Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone.[27]

It is this that must happen; a spiritual and physical return to the earth. For Negroes are yet an earthy people, a people earth-proud—the very salt of the earth. Their songs and stories have arisen from a loving bondage to the earth, and to it now they must return. It is to this, for pride, for strength, for endurance, that they must go back. Sterling Brown says it in "Strange Legacies":

Brother,
When, beneath the burning sun
The sweat poured down and breath came thick,
And the loaded hammer swung like a ton
And the heart grew sick;
You had what we need now, John Henry.
Help us get it.