

THURMAN, WALLACE HENRY, 1902-1934 . NEGRO ARTISTS AND THE NEGRO . New York, NY : Republic Publishing Co. , 1927 .

Negro Artists and the Negro

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When the Negro art fad first came into being and Negro poets, novelists, musicians and painters became good copy, literate and semi-literate Negro America began to strut and to shout. Negro newspapers reprinted every item published anywhere concerning a Negro whose work had found favor with the critics, editors, or publishers. Negro journals conducted contests to encourage embryonic geniuses. Negro ministers preached sermons, Negro lecturers made speeches, and Negro club women read papers -- all about the great new Negro art.--196—

Everyone was having a grand time. The millennium was about to dawn. The second emancipation seemed inevitable. Then the excitement began to die down and Negroes as well as whites began to take stock of that in which they had reveled. The whites shrugged their shoulders and began seeking for some new fad. Negroes stood by a little subdued, a little surprised, torn between being proud that certain of their group had achieved distinction, and being angry because a few of these arrived ones had ceased to be what the group considered "constructive" and had in the interim produced works that went against the grain, in that they did not wholly qualify to the adjective "respectable."

Langston Hughes was the major disturbing note in the "renaissance" chorus. His first volume of verse, *The Weary Blues*, introduced him as a poet who was interested in artistic material rather than in sociological problems. He went for inspiration and rhythms to those people who had been the least absorbed by the quagmire of American *Kultur*, and from them he undertook to select and preserve such autonomous racial values as were being rapidly eradicated in order to speed the Negro assimilation.

The Weary Blues did not evoke much caustic public comment from Mr' Hughes' people. Negroes were still too thrilled at the novelty of having a poet who could gain the attention of a white publisher to pay much attention to what he wrote. Quietly, and privately, however, certain Negroes began to deplore the author's jazz predilections, his unconventional poetic forms, and his preoccupation with the proletariat. But they were hopeful that he would reform and write in a conventional manner about the "best people."

Mr' Hughes' second volume, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, a hard, realistic compilation, happened to be published while Negroes were still rankling from Carl Van Vechten's novel of Negro life in Harlem, *Nigger Heaven*. It seemed as if this novel served to unleash publicly a store of suppressed invective that not only lashed Mr' Van Vechten and Mr' Hughes, but also the editors and contributors to *Fire!!*, a new experimental quarterly devoted to and published by younger Negro artists. Under the heading "Writer Brands *Fire!!* as Effeminate Tommyrot," a reviewer in one of the leading Negro weeklies said: "I have just tossed the first issue of *Fire!!* -- into the fire, and watched the cackling flames leap and snarl as though they were trying to swallow some repulsive dose."

Fire!!, like Mr' Hughes' poetry, was experimental. It was not interested in sociological problems or propaganda. It was purely artistic in intent and conception. Its contributors went to the proletariat rather than to the bourgeoisie for characters and material. They were interested in people who still retained some individual race qualities and who were not totally white American in every respect save color of skin.

There is one more young Negro who will probably be classed with Mr' Hughes when he does commence to write about the American scene. So far this writer, Eric Walrond, has--197--confined his talents to producing realistic prose pictures of the Caribbean regions. If he ever turns on the American Negro as impersonally and as unsentimentally as he turned on West Indian folk in *Tropic Death*, he too will be blacklisted in polite colored circles.

The Negro plastic artists, especially Aaron Douglas and Richard Bruce [Nugent], are also in disfavor, Douglas because of his advanced modernism and raw caricatures of Negro types, Bruce because of his interest in decadent types and the kinks he insists on putting upon the heads of his almost classical figures. Negroes, you know, don't have kinky hair; or, if they have, they use Madame Walker's straightening pomade.

Moreover, when it first became popular to sing spirituals for public delectation, the mass of Negroes objected vigorously. They did not wish to become identified again with what the spirituals connoted, and they certainly did not want to hear them sung in dialect. It was not until white music critics began pointing out the beauty of the spirituals, and identifying the genius that produced them, that Negroes joined in the hallelujah chorus.

Negroes are, of course, no different in this from any other race. The same class of Negroes who protest when Mr' Hughes says: Put on yo' red silk stockings Black gal. Go out an' let de white boys Look at yo' legs. Put on yo' red silk stockings, gal An' tomorrow's chile'll Be a high yaller ...have their counterpart in those American whites who protest against the literary upheavals of a Dreiser, an Anderson, or a Sandburg. And those American Negroes who would not appreciate the spirituals until white critics sang their praises have their counterpart in the American whites who would not appreciate Poe and Whitman until European critics classed them as immortals.

The mass of American Negroes can no more be expected to emancipate themselves from petty prejudices and myopic fears than can the mass of American whites. They all revere Service, Prosperity and Progress. True, the American Negro may be the more pitiful figure, since he insists on selling every vestige of his birthright for a mess of pottage.

The American Negro feels that he has been misinterpreted and caricatured so long by insincere artists that once a Negro gains the ear of the public he should expend his spiritual energy feeding the public honeyed manna on a silver spoon. The mass of Negroes like the mass of whites, seem unable to differentiate between sincere art and insincere art. They seem unable to fathom the innate differences between a dialect farce--198--committed by an Octavius Roy Cohen to increase the gaiety of Babbitts, and a dialect interpretation done by a Negro writer to express some abstract something that burns within his people and sears him. They seem unable to differentiate between the Uncle Remus tales and a darky joke told by Irvin Cobb, or to distinguish the difference, in conception and execution, between a *Lulu Belle*, with its cheap gaudiness and blatant ensemble, and an *All God's Chillun Got Wings* by a sympathetic, groping

Eugene O'Neill. Even such fine things as a *Porgy* or a *Green Thursday* are labeled inadequate and unfair. While *Nigger Heaven* -- ask Carl Van Vechten!

Negroes in America feel certain that they must always appear in public butter side up, in order to keep from being trampled in the contemporary onward march. They feel as if they must always exhibit specimens from the college rather than from the kindergarten, specimens from the parlor rather than from the pantry. They are in the process of being assimilated, and those elements within the race which are still too potent for easy assimilation must be hidden until they no longer exist.

Thus, when the publishers of Mr. Hughes' second volume of verse say on the cover that "These poems, for the most part, interpret the most primitive types of American Negro, the bell boys, the cabaret girls, the migratory workers, the singers of Blues and Spirituals, and the makers of folk songs," and that they "express the joy and pathos, the beauty and ugliness of their lives," Negroes begin to howl. This is just the part of their life which experience has taught them should be kept in the background if they would exist comfortably in these United States. It makes no difference if this element of their life is of incontestable value to the sincere artist. It is also available and of incontestable value to insincere artists and prejudiced white critics.

The Negro artist is in a no more enviable position than is the emerging, or sometimes, for that matter, even the arrived artist, of other races or countries. He will receive little aid from his own people unless he spends his time spouting sociological jeremiads or exhausts his talent in building rosy castles around Negro society. He will be exploited by white faddists, and sneered at by non-faddists. He will be overrated on the one hand, and under-praised on the other.

Neither is the position of the bourgeois Negro an enviable one. Fearing as he does what his white compatriots think, he feels that he cannot afford to be attacked realistically by Negro artists who do not seem to have the "proper" sense of refinement or race pride. The American scene dictates that the American Negro must be what he ain't! And despite what the minority intellectual and artistic group may say, it really does seem more profitable for him to be what he ain't, than for him to be what he is.

The first literary works that came out of the so-called "Negro renaissance" were not of the riling variety. *Cane*, by Jean Toomer, was really pre-renaissance, as it was published too soon to be lifted into the best-seller class merely because its author was a--199--Negro. And, as Waldo Frank forewarned in his introduction to *Cane*, Jean Toomer was not a *Negro* artist, but an *artist* who had lost "lesser identities in the great well of life." His book, therefore, was of little interest to sentimental whites or to Negroes with an inferiority complex to camouflage. Both the personality of the author and the style of his book were above the heads of these groups. Although *Cane* reeked with bourgeoisbaiting revelations, it caused so little excitement among the bourgeois sector of Negro society, save in Mr. Toomer's hometown, Washington, D. C., where the main criticisms were concerning his treatment of Negro women.

Fire in the Flint by Walter White, *Flight* by the same author, and *There Is Confusion* by Jessie Fauset were just the sort of literary works both Negroes and sentimental whites desired Negroes to write. The first, a stirring romantic propaganda tale, recounted all the ills Negroes suffer in the inimical South, and made all Negroes seem magnanimous, mistreated martyrs, all southern whites evil transgressors of human rights. It followed the conventional theme in the conventional manner. It was a direct descendant of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and it had the same effect on the public. White latter-day abolitionists shook their heads, moaned and protested. Negroes read, boiled and bellowed.

Less sensational and more ambitious, the second novel from this author's pen sought to chronicle the emotional and physical peregrinations of a female mulatto with such a preponderance of white blood in her veins that she could be either Caucasian or Negro at will. Miss Fauset's work was an ill-starred attempt to popularize the pleasing news that there were cultured Negroes, deserving of attention from artists, and of whose existence white folk should be apprised.

All of these works of fiction, as well as the two outstanding works of non-fiction, *The Gift of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois, and *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke, that appeared during the heated days of the "renaissance" were considerate of the Aframerican's *amour propre*, soothing to his self-esteem and stimulating to his vanity. They all treated the Negro as a sociological problem rather than as a human being. I might add that only in *The New Negro* was there even an echo of a different tune. The rest were treatises rather than works of art.

These works were all designed to prove to the American white man that the American Negro was not inferior *per se* and therefore, were honored and blessed by Negroes.

Color, a volume of verses by Countee Cullen, was also conventional in theme and manner. True, Mr. Cullen was possessed by a youthful exuberance that occasionally flamed with sensual passion, but for the most part he was the conventional Negro literateur in all respects save that he had more talent than most of his predecessors. He could say: Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: To make a poet black, and bid him sing.-
-200--or wish To do a naked tribal dance Each time he hears the rain and finally 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.

This last poem was enough to endear Mr. Cullen to every bourgeois black soul in America, as well as to cause white critics to surpass themselves in calling attention to this Negro poet's genius, a thing far more important to them than his genius. And, since Mr. Cullen, unlike his contemporary, Mr. Hughes, has not and perhaps never will seek the so-called lower elements of Negro life for his poetic rhythms and material, and since, he, too, assumes the conventional race attitude toward his people rather than an artistic one, he will probably remain endeared to both bourgeois black America and sentimental white America, more because of this attitude than because of his undisputed talent or his intense spiritual sensitivity.

Fortunately, now, the Negro art "renaissance" has reached a state of near sanity. Serious and inquisitive individuals are endeavoring to evaluate the present and potential significance of this development in Negro life. They are isolating, interpreting, and utilizing those things which seem to have a true esthetic value. If but a few live coals are found in a mountain of ashes, no one should be disappointed. Genius is a rare quality in this world, and there is no reason why it should be more ubiquitous among Blacks than Whites.