

THURMAN, WALLACE HENRY, 1902-1934 . THIS NEGRO LITERARY RENAISSANCE . New Brunswick, NJ : Rutgers University Press , 9999 . / 929

This Negro Literary Renaissance

I

There has been, we are told, a literary renaissance in Negro America. As proof we have a shelf of books recently published by Negro authors. These authors furthermore have won prizes, fellowships, critical acclamation and public applause. It is not important or congenial to mention that none of these works have been very good, or that most of the authors have no talent whatsoever. Nor is it considered good manners to query: How can there be a rebirth without an original awakening? A score of books by Negro authors have been published, therefore there has been a literary renaissance. Do not dare inquire if this renaissance is the result of mass rumblings or the revolt of a lunatic fringe. It exists. That is enough. Its champions must not be asked embarrassing questions.

What has happened is really no renaissance at all, nor is this movement an autonomous one. It is in reality but a legitimate outgrowth of a national phenomena, a microcosmic circle in a macrocosmic vortex. American literature now having become autochthonous, it is only natural that among other home-grown subjects suitable for literary treatment, native authors should also discover the American Negro. And it is also only natural that the Negro should in some measure become articulate and discover himself.

Precisely the same thing is happening in Negro America as has already happened in the far west (finding expression in Twain, Miller, Ward and Harte), in the middle west (note Norris, Dreiser, Sandburg, Anderson, Masters, Herrick, et al.), and concurrently in the south (vide Peterkin, Stribling, Heyward, Glasgow). It has also happened among the immigrant minority groups (read Rolvaag, Lewisohn and others). And because the same nation wide wind has chanced to stir up some dust in Negro America, whites and blacks deafen us with their surprised and vociferous ejaculations. Renaissance? Hell, it's a backwash!

II

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 found favor with critics, editors, or publishers. Negro journals conducted contests to encourage embryonic genius. Negro ministers preached sermons, Negro lecturers made speeches, and Negro club women read papers -- all about the great new Negro art.--242-- 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," having 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 first disturbing note in the "renaissance" chorus, although his initial volume of verse, *The Weary Blues*, did not evoke much caustic public comment from the Negro reading public. They 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 of them began deploring the author's jazz predilections, his unconventional poetic forms, and his preoccupation with the proletariat. But they were hopeful that he would soon 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. Hoping to introduce a truly Negroid note into American literature, its contributors had gone to the proletariat rather than to the bourgeoisie for characters and material, had gone to 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 confined himself 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. And it is hardly necessary to add that the authors of *Home to Harlem*, *Walls of Jericho*, and *The Blacker the Berry* have also been castigated and reviled.--243--

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 the kinks he insists on putting upon the heads of his fantastic figures. Negroes, you know, do not 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, 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 and power of the spirituals, that Negroes joined in the hallelujah chorus.

Negroes are, of course, in this respect the same as any other race. The same class of Negroes who protest when Mr. Hughes says: Strut and wiggle Shameless Nan Wouldn't no good fellow Be your man 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 classified them among the 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. Furthermore, 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, are unable to differentiate between sincere art and insincere art. They are unable to fathom the innate differences between a dialect farce 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 are 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 *Scarlet Sister Mary* 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--244--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 more 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.

Of course the position of the bourgeois Negro is not an enviable one, for fearing as he does what his white compatriot thinks, 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 happened to be a 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 little excitement among that sector of Negro society, save in Mr Toomer's home town, 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.--245--

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, which 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.

Countee Cullen's two volumes of verse were also conventional in theme and manner. True, Mr Cullen was possessed by a youthful exuberance which occasionally flamed with sensual passion, but for the most part he was the conventional Negro litterateur in all respects save that he had more talent than most of his predecessors. But, unfortunately for the Negro middle class, in addition to these "respectable" authors, there also emerged a group of "non-respectables" to join Langston Hughes. Gleefully did they write and full of the devil were their published works.

Recently however, Negroes have been somewhat mollified because in addition to Claude McKay's primitive delineations, they have also had respectable volumes by Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, somewhat mollified because they can hide *Home to Harlem*, *The Walls of Jericho*, and *Banjo* behind *Quicksand*, *Plum Bun*, and *Passing*. Thus they imagine that all is not yet hopeless. Thus they reason that after all white people may not be made privy to but one side of their lives. Thus they hide their heads in the sand and leave their posteriors conveniently in the air for further fannings.

III

It is too bad that Negro literature and literary material have had to be exploited by fad finders and sentimentalists. Too bad that the ballyhoo brigade which fostered the so-called Negro art "renaissance" has chosen to cheer and encourage indiscriminately anything which claimed a Negroid ancestry or kinship. For as the overfed child gags when forced to swallow an extra spoonful of half-sour milk, so will the gullible American public gag when too much of this fervid fetish known as Negro art is shoveled into its gaping minds and mouths, and the Aframerican artist will find himself as unchampioned and as unimpressive as he was before Carl Van Vechten commenced caroling of his charms in *Vanity Fair* and the *Survey Graphic* discovered the "New Negro" in 1924. Less--246--so; for even in the prerenaissance days any Negro who managed to write a grammatical sentence was regarded with wonderment even by the emancipated white intellectuals. But now so many Negroes have written a book or a story or a poem that the pale-faced public is no longer astonished by such phenomena.

There has, of course, been some compensation. Certain Negroes have become more articulate and more coherent in their cries for social justice, and a few have also begun to appreciate the advantages of racial solidarity and individual achievement. But speaking purely of the arts, the results of the renaissance have been sad rather than satisfactory, in that critical standards have been ignored, and the measure of achievement had been racial rather than literary. This is supposed to be valuable in a social way, for it is now current that the works produced by Negro artists will form the clauses in a second emancipation proclamation, and that because of Negro artists and their works, the Aframerican will reap new fruits of freedom. But this will be true only inasmuch as the Negro artist produces dignified and worthwhile work. Slipshod, tricky, atmospheric bits will be as ephemeral as they are sensational, and sentimental propaganda, unless presented in a style both vigorous and new, will have the effect of bird shot rather than of shrapnel. Which is to say that the Negro will not be benefited by mediocre and ephemeral works, even if they are hailed by well-meaning, but for the moment simple-minded, white critics as works of genius.

During the hey-day of the renaissance, there appeared two book reviews in *Opportunity*, *Journal of Negro Life*. Both of the reviews were written by white poets, both books were by Negro poets. The first was of Countee Cullen's *Copper Sun*, and in dithyrambic prose the reviewer went to every possible verbal excess in praising the volume. According to him Countee Cullen was the Keats of American poetry -- equalling Housman and surpassing Edna Millay. There was more such lyric nonsense, all done in good faith, no doubt, but of no value whatsoever either to Mr. Cullen or to the race to which he belongs. The second review, while

less turgid and more restrained, was excessive in its praise of *God's Trombones*, and in neither piece was there any constructive criticism or intelligent evaluation.

These two reviews are typical of the attitude of a certain class of white critics toward the Negro writer. Urged on by their desire to do what in their opinion is a "service," they dispense with all intelligence and let their sentimentality run riot. Fortunately, most of the younger Negro writers realize this, and as certain Negroes have always done, are laughing up their sleeves at the antics of their Nordic patronizers. It is almost a certainty that Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes know full well that there are perhaps a half dozen young white poets in these United States doing just as good if not better work than they, and who are not being acclaimed by the public or pursued by publishers, purely because a dash of color is the style in literary circles today.--247--

If the Negro writer is to make any appreciable contribution to American literature, it is necessary that he be considered as a sincere artist trying to do dignified work rather than as a highly trained dog doing trick dances in a public square. He is, after all, motivated and controlled by the same forces which motivate and control a white writer, and like him he will be mediocre or good, succeed or fail as his ability deserves. A man's complexion has little to do with his talent. He either has it or has it not, and, despite the dictates of spiritually starved white sophisticates, genius does not automatically descend upon one because one's grandmother happened to be sold down the river "befo' de wah."

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.

IV

Charles W' Chesnutt and Paul Lawrence Dunbar were the first Negro novelists. Dunbar's novels are of no value whatsoever, being poorly conceived, poorly executed and poorly written. And although Chesnutt's novels have little literary value, they are interesting as psychological studies, the man having revealed therein his own peculiar complex.

He concerned himself mainly with those folk, who like himself were more white than black, yet nevertheless found themselves inextricably bound to the least desirable race. This, to him, was the most tragic aspect of the many sided race problem, and, so deeply did it goad him, that he spent his writing years, composing distorted, lifeless, fictional tracts, wherein he pled, passionately if indirectly, for his own admittance into the white race.

For that reason and that alone his books are of interest to the student of the Negro psyche.

V

There are, as is pointed out in another portion of this section, two groups of contemporary Negro novelists, characterized by black America as the respectable and the damned. It is an

interesting commentary on the essential humanness of the Negro mob and on its typical mass intelligence to realize that only among the damned is there any show of promise, any kernel of talent.--248—

The respectable novelists are Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Walter White. Miss Fauset once wrote a novel entitled *There Is Confusion*, which is also an apt criticism of everything the lady has written. And it was probably no idle accident which caused her second novel, *Plum Bun*, to be typographically heralded in one of the Negro newspapers as Plum Bum.

Nella Larsen is superior to her respectable female comrade in that she has interesting ideas and an easy, readable style. She also has a great desire to be a daring lady novelist, which desire, however, seems doubtful of attainment, if her published novels are to be taken as guide posts toward any subsequent work. There is the germ of a good story in both *Quicksand* and *Passing*, but so ineptly does the lady develop her story, so devoid of life are her characters, and so childish are her denouements that the critical reader even begrudges her her original conception.

Walter White is a good journalist. His error is that of so many of his clan. Having a keen reportorial-trained eye and ear, and being able to write a good newspaper story, he is eventually seduced into writing a novel. If this novel should happen to be about things with which, in the pursuance of his craft, he has been intimately concerned, it is more than likely to be a sincere and passionate document, as was Mr. White's *Fire in the Flint*; sincere and passionate, if preachy, given to pointing out obvious morals, devoid of living characters, and not properly proportioned. Then, should he write a novel far afield from his journalistic purloins, as did Mr. White in his second novel, *Flight*, he makes a public exhibition of all his innate limitations.

Had Mr. White been a novelist rather than a journalist, the heroine of his second novel might have been one of the great characters in American fiction, for her creator, being in color her male counterpart, would have been able to make us privy to what the Negro who passes for white actually feels and experiences. As it is, this type of person still awaits an able interpreter, having been maltreated by Miss Fauset, Miss Larsen, and Mr. White, not to mention the numerous white novelists who have also shot the bolt without locking the door. And while on this question of novels concerning Negroes who cross the line, let us ask: when will some novelist emerge courageous enough to give a truthful delineation? To date, it has become a literary convention to have these fictional passers cross over into the white world, remain discontented, and in the final chapter hasten back from whence they came.

There are several thousand Negroes who each year lose their racial identity, and of this number less than one per cent return to their native haunts. There is in real life none of that ubiquitous and magnetic primitive urge which in fiction draws them back to their own kind. This romantic reaction is purely an invention of the fictioneers, and like sheep, they all make use of it, blindly following the leader over the cliff of improbability.--249—

Taking up the so-called damned Negro novelists, we find Claude McKay and Rudolph Fisher (I leave to others the author of *The Blacker the Berry*), who to date are the only Negro novelists

who seem to have both talent and an artistic perspective, the only ones whose characters are, to quote Dostoyevsky, not "puppets and walking dictionaries."

McKay is volcanic, emitting colorful streams of lava in such quantities that he smothers his story and almost suffocates his reader. No scalpel suffices, he must use an ax, chopping off huge chunks of novel and fervid atmospheric material, which he never thins out or trims. But he is courageous, sincere, and penetrating. He comprehends his own people and does not hesitate to set down that which he knows. His most glaring fault is a lack of discipline and concentrated effort. There is little evidence of pruning or revision. And he has a regrettable O'Neillish tendency to be the philosopher rather than the poet. This latter tendency was the cause of certain arid sections in the lush *Home to Harlem*, and it also was responsible for causing certain portions of the latter half of *Banjo* to sound suspiciously like a tract issued by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, although it must be admitted that in McKay's polemic there was more breadth than in the thing to which it has been compared.

Of all the Negro novelists, Rudolph Fisher wields the lightest pen, flooding the pages neither with the red ink of propaganda nor with the purple ink of passionate novelties. And he is, moreover, the most able storyteller in the group. Where McKay is diffuse and incoherent, Fisher is concise and clear. But where McKay has managed to blurt out something, Fisher has said nothing whatsoever.

In *The Walls of Jericho* he told a good story. He presented us with some amusing and lifelike characters. But he never stirred us, never provoked more than a mild smile. For that reason his first novel was an interesting but disappointing performance. It happened that Mr. Fisher had previously written some of the best short stories yet written about Negroes, and it may be pertinent to suggest that perhaps the short story is his medium rather than the novel. But at any rate here is a man to be watched, one of the few potential literary headliners Negro America has yet produced.

VI

Eric Walrond is the unknown quantity among Negro authors. None is more ambitious than he, none more possessed of keener observation, poetic insight or intelligence. There is no place in his consciousness for sentimentality, hypocrisy or clichés. His prose demonstrates his struggles to escape from conventionalities and become an individual talent. But so far this struggle has not been crowned with any appreciable success. The will to power is there, etched in shadows beneath every word he writes, but it has not yet become completely tangible, visibly effective.-250--

Tropic Death, his only published volume, leaned too heavily on folk lore and folk dialect. There was no adequate refining, although in every story the author latched on to some essential characteristic of the peasant West Indian, and every once in a while would blind the reader with painfully illuminating passages. The element of universality was also consistently suggested.

But the author, it is concluded, had the same struggle with his material that he had with his prose style. He was not yet completely able to master them. They both eluded him at the very

moments when he most needed to hold them under control. As a consequence his work was abortive and obscure. As he could not transcribe West Indian dialect so that it would be completely comprehensible to the reader, so he could not successfully open up the conduits of his consciousness and let his reader receive the full flow of expression. He knows what he wants to say, and how he wants to say it, but the thing remains partially articulated. Somewhere there is an obstruction and though the umbilical cord makes frequent contacts, it never achieves a complete connection.

Thus he remains an unknown quantity, with his power and beauty being sensed rather than experienced. It is for this reason that his next volume is eagerly awaited. Will he or will he not cross the Rubicon? It is to be hoped that he will, for he is too truly talented, too sincere an individual and artist to die aborning.

VII

Cane by Jean Toomer is the most unheralded and artistic book yet written by an American Negro, the only one so far which can sincerely be considered as a contribution to the high places of the nation's literature. It has had little vogue. Its author belongs to the left wing of American art and letters, and to date only the left wing critics have seemed to appreciate him.

"He is imitative," some cry, "on every page of *Cane* are echoes of Waldo Frank." These critics should reread both Frank and Toomer, then they should also study the other leaders of the impressionistic, expressionistic schools. They might then become apprised of other influences in Toomer's development.

Compare any page of Frank and Toomer. Frank's staccato prose is hard; it glistens like stalactites, and is not always pleasing to the ear. Toomer's prose is warm, mellow, pulsing with fire and passion. It is: Redolent of fermenting syrup, Purple of the dusk

For example:--251--

Nigger woman driving a Georgia chariot down an old dust road. Dixie Pike is what they call it....The sun, which has been slanting over her shoulder, shoots primitive rockets into her mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower face....

(The sun is hammered to a band of gold. Pine needles, like mazda, are brilliantly aglow. No rain has come to take the rustle from the falling sweet-gum leaves. Over in the forest, across the swamp, a sawmill blows its closing whistle. Smoke curls up. Marvelous web spun by the spider sawdust pile. Curls up and spreads itself pine-high above the branch, a single silver band along the eastern valley. ...A girl in the yard of a whitewashed shack not much larger than the stack of worn ties piled before it, sings. Her voice is loud. Echoes, like rain, sweep the valley. Dust takes the polish from the rails. Lights twinkle in scattered houses. From far away, a sad strong song. Pungent and composite, the smell of farmyards is the fragrance of the woman. She does not sing; her body is a song. She is in the forest, dancing. Torches flare...juju men, greegree, witchdoctors...torches go out....The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa.

Night.

Foxie, the bitch, slicks back her ears and barks at the rising moon.) Now compare that with any passage from Waldo Frank's *Holiday*!

Toomer's growth is apparent throughout *Cane*, a volume by the way which defies classification, it being a miscellany containing prose sketches, poems, short stories, and bastard experiments. In the beginning we feel him grasping for a firmer hold on his medium. His step is slow. The ebb and flow of words is not well timed, and sometimes they stumble over their own subtlety. But by the time one finishes "Kabnis," the last piece in the book, one knows the author has emerged victorious, and one cries: More! More!

Toomer is a mystic and a true artist, groping, searching, delving deep within, soaring to the constellations. There is music in his prose, subtle harmonies, plaintive melodies, insinuating rhythms. And above all he is the most emancipated and intelligent Negro yet to appear. Not for him the dark morass of races. He stands on a mount ...eyes cast alternately earthward and alternately heavenward, relentlessly searching for some meaning in the meaningless universe.