

The Roving Critic

BY CARL VAN DOREN

THE NEGRO RENAISSANCE

Those white Americans who for sixty years have been insisting that the black American must keep in his place have generally been the sort who in another breath could insist that America is the home of opportunity for all men. If now they are disturbed at seeing that the negro's place is no longer what it was, perhaps they can be consoled by thinking that the opportunity was even greater than they realized. It was, after all, too much to expect that the colored tenth of the population, whatever its racial handicap, would not be touched by the gospel of progress which the other nine tenths swore by. That tenth has been touched. It has, in fact, learned its lesson so well that certain of its members decline to remain soil-bound peasants or obliging body-servants or even punctual artisans or melodious entertainers, and manage to become experts, capitalists, even scholars and poets. And in doing this they have done, in the face of American expectation, precisely what Americans at large have done during the past century and a half in the face of European expectation. On the eve of the Revolution the Rev. Andrew Burnaby, a fairly well disposed Briton, had announced that "America is formed for happiness, but not for empire." As

late as 1844 a British journalist, less well disposed, announced that "as yet the American is horn-handed and pig-headed, hard, persevering, unscrupulous, carnivorous . . . with an incredible genius for lying." If the whole of the nation could so disappoint prophecy, a part of it could hardly lag entirely behind.

The negroes, though delayed by slavery, have not lagged. In the symposium called "The New Negro,"¹ a group of them have undertaken to present their cause after two generations of freedom and to exhibit the best fruits of their achievement. The information of the work is extensive, the reasoning sensible, the temper all that could be desired. Compared with what the white Americans could have exhibited a century ago, when the total population of the United States was roughly equal to that of the colored Americans to-day, the book does not suffer. The fiction may not equal the best of Irving and Cooper, but the verse is higher in workmanship and poetical quality than the verse generally being written in 1826, and the prose discussions put to shame the vexed and feverish provincialism with which Americans then argued their case against Europe. If any evidence is needed, the volume is evidence

¹ "The New Negro," Edited by Alain Locke, Albert and Charles Boni.

that the new negro is a civilized and accomplished being, who not only has given to the nation its most joyous dances, which may have a barbaric strain in them, and its most characteristic music, which may be only a folk-art, but who has learned how to write lucid, cogent, and charming prose, which is one of the unmistakable signs of an advanced civilization.

It is no doubt true that the current enthusiasm for negro life and art is in some degree a fad which cannot stay at the high pitch of the past few months. But when the fad has passed it will leave behind such solid documents by white writers as Dorothy Scarborough's "On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs" (Harvard University) and Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson's "The Negro and His Songs" (University of North Carolina) and R. Emmet Kennedy's "Mellows: Negro Work Songs" (A. & C. Boni) and such sensitive fiction as Du Bose Heyward's "Porgy" (Doran), to say nothing of such veracious contributions by colored writers as "The New Negro" and James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson's "The Book of American Negro Spirituals" (Viking) and Countee Cullen's "Color" (Harper) and Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues" (Knopf). Something has been poured into the stream of native culture which cannot soon cease to tinge it. Something has been uttered to enlarge the imaginative sympathy between the races which is an absolute essential of any decent solution of the color problem in America.

Fads, of course, do not come without a reason. If the whites have been hospitable to negro themes and modes of expression, it is because there was something for them to be hospitable

to. It is probable that the historian of the episode will trace its roots to Harlem. So long as the negroes continued to be in the main a peasant race, they had little opportunity to make themselves heard. To the white governing class they seemed to be primarily comic or, at best, tuneful. With that gift of theirs which is at once discretion and courtesy, they kept to themselves the genuine impulses stirring within them. They developed a folk-lore and a folk-art which was little conditioned by the industrial system of the country as a whole. Then suddenly a greater number of negroes than had ever before been gathered into any city found themselves in Harlem. They had to struggle against serious difficulties still, but New York was at least cosmopolitan enough to leave them more or less to themselves and to permit them to form as complete a community as they could. A generation before, and the thing might have come too early. Oppressively aware of being freedmen, they might have made a successful effort to lose the traits which could remind them of their former slavery, and might have sunk into a drab, limping uniformity. Whether they might or might not have done this once, they did not do it in the twentieth century. The new generation had outgrown the earlier habit of self-depreciation, and some of them were outgrowing the later, and healthier, habit of self-assertion. They had the courage to cherish certain picturesque racial elements in their natures and customs. They moved from the point at which they were bound together by a common condition, in Mr. Locke's phrase, to the point at which they were bound together by a common consciousness.

And they swiftly flowered into utterance, much as New England, in the early part of the nineteenth century, flowered into Transcendentalism.

The scale is obviously not yet the same as it was in New England. No mature Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, or Thoreau enriches the pages of "The New Negro," although the poetry of Countee Cullen is as good as has been written by any American in his teens or early twenties, and the prose stories of Jean Toomer have exquisite promise. But there was no New-Englander in 1826 who could have produced a better survey of an international complication than Mr. Du Bois has produced in "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," or a better analysis of national conditions than appears in "The New Frontage on American Life" by Charles S. Johnson, or who could have shown himself more learned in various aspects of Americanism than Mr. Locke shows himself in various aspects of Afro-Americanism. In fact, the most striking impression of this book is that the negro is better as analyst than as artist. Perhaps this is because his greatest artistic endowment lies in the direction of dancing and music, which cannot easily be represented in print. But it is none the less true that he has a remarkable skill in stating his case, a skill which, it may be guessed, has come from a prolonged and bitter knowledge of it. At any rate, the art of the new negro in America has now a chance to be built upon a very firm critical foundation.

There is bound, however, to be on this plane of art something of the same conflict between white and black as there has always been in the United States between the majority and any

minority whatever. A profound national impulse drives the hundred millions steadily toward uniformity. How can the negro resist the impulse, when the main pattern of life is marked out for him by white institutions, and when, indeed, he can prosper at all only by adjusting himself at most economic, social, and moral points to the prevailing scheme? He cannot mark himself off by special costumes, by a distinctive dialect, by different industries or laws or religions. The best he can do, probably, is to have the courage of certain inherited sentiments and to feel sustained in them by racial consciousness. But this may be a factor of great importance in shaping his future. It may enable him to keep his religion rich and dramatic, instead of thin and formulaic; to permit his public ceremonies, as he does now, to be as gorgeous as he knows how to make them; to prefer, in his daily manners, variety rather than monotony, high color rather than low color, spontaneous rhythms rather than tight, regimented motions, full laughter rather than guarded snickers, metaphor rather than logical demonstration, comfortable song rather than uncomfortable silence. If the negro can by some miracle preserve these generous qualities for a century or so, he may become as fertile a soil for all the arts as for dancing and singing. Yet miracles do not happen. The negro will do a great deal for himself if he carries out a small part of this program which his friends predict for him. And he will thereby do a great deal for American culture generally. If these things happen, 1925 will be marked in the history of the nation as a memorable year, and as the beginning of a new epoch for the African race.

The Scent of Philosophies

There is a witty passage in George Santayana's "Dialogues in Limbo" (Scribner) which defines, as well, I think, as it can be defined, the method by which an expert perceives the inner qualities of a work of art. The fact that Democritus in the dialogue is speaking of philosophy, not art, makes no essential difference. "When the inner heat of the body is excessive (which heat is but rapid and disordered motion) actions and thought are bred too hastily, without attention to things; then in the shaking hand and rolling eye and words inapt and windy the physician easily recognizes the symptoms of delirium. So even in health the look and (as we say aptly) the air of a man will reveal his ruling passions, every secret impulse causing some deviation or special crowding of the rays that flow from him in moving or looking or speaking. Now these rays, so compacted and directed, are far from odorless. The sweet scent of love is exciting and to one himself amorous is irresistible; and the scent of anger is acrid, and that of sorrow musty and dank; the scent of every state of the soul, though nameless, being perfectly distinct. So a soul vibrating in harmony with the things that nourish and solicit her has an aura which, without spreading any sharp odor, refreshes every creature that inhales it, causing the nostrils and the breast to expand joyfully, as if drinking in the sea-breeze or the breath of morning. When, on the contrary, the soul issues from the eyes or lips turbid or clotted, by virtue of the distorted imprints which she bears of all surrounding things, she also stinks; and she stinks diversely according to

the various errors which her rotten constitution has imposed upon her. Hence, though it be a delicate matter and not accomplished without training, it is possible for a practised nose to distinguish the precise quality of a philosopher by his peculiar odor, just as a hound by the mere scent can tell a fox from a boar. And when the hound of philosophy is keen, this is a surer method of discerning the genuine opinions and true temper of philosophers than are their own words; for these may be uttered by rote without self-knowledge, or made timidly conformable to fashion or policy; whereas the trail which, without intention, a mind leaves in passing through the air is a perfect index of its constitution."

Michael Webb and More

One penalty of writing a popular book is that the author, when his next book appears, is sure to have it said of him (1) that he has not written the book he wrote before or (2) that he has written the book he wrote before. The accusations are both intended to be deadly. Sometimes, indeed, they are brought against the same book by the same person. Of course neither criticism ought to be regarded as an accusation. To speak accurately, any book by any author is in its essentials like every other book by that author, and none of them is like any other in its details. The differentiation of a writer from book to book is always growth, whether the grade, according to some standard outside him, be upward or downward. Take the case of W. E. Woodward, who less than three years ago flared picturesquely into reputation with "Bunk," a novel packed with brilliant, miscellaneous ideas which strained the seams of the

plot. "Lottery," which followed it, told a straight story, with some coruscations, it is true, but still a straight story. At first glance, Mr. Woodward's newest novel, "Bread and Circuses," seems to be only a return to the audacious waywardness of "Bunk," if not a mere sequel to it. Yet the glance which fails to linger upon "Bread and Circuses" will make a bad report of its nature, for it actually represents a more considerable advance than did "Lottery." What seems to me to have happened is that Mr. Woodward found he had by no means exhausted the possibilities of Michael Webb, the hero of his first book, and resolved to give him another turn on the stage which had eagerly greeted him before. He therefore sets Michael up as a kind of resident philosopher at an inn among the Connecticut hills, fills the inn with properly diversified guests, and lets Michael's philosophy play upon them. This by itself would make a book, for that philosophy is remarkably shrewd and beguiling. But something better happens. The guests, like the living wickets in "Alice in Wonderland," do not remain wickets alone. They get up and walk around, perfectly alive. Though this may disturb Michael's game, it increases the general variety of the entertainment. And in certain of the episodes dealing with these incidental personages, Mr. Woodward goes further, I think, than he has ever gone before in the art of the novelist. The story of Martha Trellis is as good a story of oncoming madness as I have ever read. The novelist Ernest Torbay and his secretary Jean Coleridge are lodged in my memory with strong, subtle barbs. The interior monologue which reveals the secrets of

Alice Wayne is masterfully conducted. Much as I value and enjoy Mr. Woodward's general ideas, I am now convinced of a thing which I suspected when I read "Bunk," that he has an even greater gift for detecting human motives than for analyzing social conditions. And I cannot help believing that he has said his say, at least for the present, about things at large, and would do wisely to devote himself through a series of novels, a series which I hope will be long, to the presentation of individuals shown going about their personal and emotional affairs. There are more persons than ideas; and they are the only subjects about which a novelist can speak truly.

A Comedy of the Fathers

Current life furnishes only part of the material for comedy. There is also history. Claude G. Bowers, whose book on "The Party Battles of the Jackson Period" delighted many readers four years ago, has once more mounted the stage in "Jefferson and Hamilton" (Houghton Mifflin), and has picturesquely narrated the conflict between those two leaders from the accession of Washington to the election of Jefferson to the Presidency. The major plot, of course, is the rise and fall of the Federalists, those excellent men whose chief fault was that they could not understand the temper of the young nation which they had delivered, for the reason that it was American when they had expected it to be as British as its mother. But Mr. Bowers has diversified his comedy with many minor plots, dug out of the best secondary sources with a good deal of research and recounted with a great deal of spirit. Jefferson is the hero of the book.