

THE GREAT MIGRATION

William Attaway's powerful novel of the Negro exodus from the South to the industrial North. The projection of a new though incompletely realized theme. Reviewed by Ralph Ellison.

BLOOD ON THE FORGE, by William Attaway. Doubleday Doran. \$2.

THOSE who found William Attaway's first novel, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, pleasant reading but rather thin, will be happily surprised by *Blood on the Forge*. For Attaway, a young Negro writer, has produced a work of unmistakable power, easily one of the season's best novels. In contrast with his first book, which dealt with white characters, this is a novel of Negro life. Attaway has mined that vital body of Negro experience known as the Great Migration, which, during the first world war period, swept thousands of Negro farm folk into industrial areas.

In the spring of 1919 three Negro brothers escape a lynch mob and leave Kentucky for the mill country of the Allegheny valley, where they become steel workers. After the excitement of the big pay and broader freedom of movement wears away, their experience is disastrous. One of them is blinded; another killed; and the third, whose injury is spiritual rather than physical, takes the blinded one with him to Pittsburgh, hoping that mill conditions there will be less hazardous.

Attaway has sought to depict the essential meaning of the migration, to show the Negro entering industry, and, through a system of symbols, to light up broader regions of Negro experience than are specifically dealt with in this volume. He is especially sensitive to the disillusionment sustained by Negroes through the migratory experience.

The boys' journey begins when they accept the offer of a "jackleg" who has been recruiting workers in their district of Kentucky. They do not mind being packed with hundreds of others into sealed boxcars and smuggled out of the state—a procedure made necessary by the planters, who sought to keep their cheap labor supply in the South. The "jackleg," however, proves to be an agent of a perverse underground railroad. For in the North the boys find themselves victims of an even greater violence than that which they escaped. This violence (that of industrial capitalism), is more frightening because it is mysteriously concealed; more awe-inspiring, because it does not seem, as in the South, to spring from the conflict of interests between black men and white rulers, but to erupt from giant inhuman machines. The impersonal brutality of the mill strikes upon their folk sensibilities "like the smoking hell out of a backwoods preacher's sermon."

This is a story of transition and contrasting values. In the first part of the novel we are shown the naive, almost formless person-

alities of the farm workers in their "natural" sharecropper setting. Then the main portion of the narrative centers in the mill town, where we see the quick-silver personalities caught within the hot, hard forge of industry. The boys' names—through which Attaway symbolizes three basic attitudes to the world of steel—now become meaningful: Melody embodies the artistic principle; Big Mat, the religious; and Chinatown, for want of a better term, the pagan. We see the new routine of toil (product of a way of life technologically years ahead of that from which they've come) grinding down upon the brothers. Under it Big Mat's vague religion and mythology become inadequate; Melody, whose relationship to his world has always been expressed through his guitar, gives musical utterance to a new attitude, the blues; and the "blow-top" Chinatown's life becomes a mad ritual of "whiskey, whores, and wheelbarrows."

THUS, in this world of changing values all the old rules of living are melted away. Big Mat loses his religion and forgets the wife he left down South. Anna, the Mexican girl who takes her place, admires his great physical strength at first, but later learns to regard him as a "black peon" who has exchanged the soil for a mill. Her rejection of him sends Big Mat to the depths of his humiliation; he suffers a psychological loss of his virility. Nor do the others escape. Melody also is tormented with frustrated love for Anna; and as the mill effects its disintegrating process he lays aside his guitar and becomes silently uncreative. Chinatown, always the most poorly equipped of the three, loses his eyes and reverts to childhood. Big Mat's struggle to achieve a sense of dignity moves him to become a deputy and

he is killed, attacking a striking worker. And at the end we see the saddened Melody guiding Chinatown toward the mills of Pittsburgh. We leave them in conversation with a blind Negro soldier, their voices small and lonely against the booming rhythms of the train which sweeps them along.

The effect of all this is powerful. Attaway has done several things quite well. He has carefully observed the farm folk in their natural surroundings, and (though his ear sometimes plays him false) he has heard them speak. He takes us into the poetic essence of their speech, as when he records and depicts for us the "wishing game," a naive form of unrecorded literature—closely akin to the airplane scene in *Native Son*—in which the individual dream and wish is dramatized verbally and shared collectively.

The contribution of *Blood on the Forge* lies mainly in its projection of new themes. Spanning two areas and eras of Negro experience, those of the semi-feudal plantation and industrial urban environments, Attaway's source material received its dynamic movement from the clash of two modes of economic production. The characters are caught in the force of a struggle which, like the steel furnaces, roars throughout its pages; they are swept out of the center of gravity of one world, blindly into that of another. When, however, we examine the conclusion of the novel to see how the struggle has registered in the consciousness of the characters, we are disappointed. We find Big Mat dead, Chinatown blind, and Melody no more understanding the forces which grip him than when he first encountered them. From this one gets the impression that the book is simply a lament for the dying away of the Negro's folk values. The author seems to sanction the conclusions of the crippled character who, wandering in and out of the novel as a symbol of fate, keeps insisting that "It's wrong to tear up the ground and melt it up in the furnace . . . ground don't like it." But this explanation of the Negro's degradation and suffering when he enters industry is that of a pre-industrial toiler viewing a complex, mechanical world which he cannot understand. Such a viewpoint includes only one pole of the contradictory experience from which the novel is composed. Fortunately, however, of the thousands of Negroes who passed through the experience, all were not left merely uprooted and brutalized (as E. Franklin Frazier's *Negro Family in the United States* makes us aware) and what happened to those who were not is a necessary part of the story.

Attaway's incomplete picture puts him,



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artistically, in the position of a sort of sorcerer's apprentice who has released powerful forces but does not know the key word for keeping them under control. Hence the episodic quality of the novel; the substitution of tagging (Melody, Big Mat, Chinatown) for character development; and the fact that the meaning of incidents and situations is rendered not in terms of the character's thoughts and emotions, but in the author's own terms. The power of *Blood on the Forge* lies not so much in Attaway's presentation as in the tremendous vitality and appeal of the book's basic situation. There is no center of consciousness, lodged in a character or characters capable of comprehending the sequence of events. Possibly this would have called for an entirely new character. But at the same time it would have saved the work from finally disintegrating into a catalogue of meaningless casualties and despairs. Inclusion of such a consciousness would not have been a mere artistic device; it would have been in keeping with historical truth.

Conceptually, Attaway grasped the destruction of the folk, but missed its rebirth on a higher level. The writer did not see that while the folk individual was being liquidated in the crucible of steel, he was also undergoing fusion with new elements. Nor did Attaway see that the individual which emerged, blended of old and new, was better fitted for the problems of the industrial environment. As a result the author is so struck by the despair in his material that he fails to see any ground for hope for his characters. Yet hope is there, as in Big Mat's profoundly human reaction to his predicament. Actually only Big Mat's solution to his problem was hopeless. His motivations, the intense desire to live and maintain a sense of dignity, have also produced the most conscious American Negro type, the black trade unionist. At the end of this book readers are left with the question of what is to be done by such characters as these Negro boys. For when Melody leaves for Pittsburgh, he carries not a new consciousness, but a symbolic watch-fob made of the steel in which the superstitious cripple has been destroyed, and Big Mat's old backless Bible. Even his guitar is left behind.

Certainly, as the writer shows us, few folk values withstood the impact of the industrial era; certainly there was great suffering and dissolution; and certainly there was a wide distance between the Negro people and the trade union movement during the period covered by the novel. But that distance was not absolute. Some Negroes, even then, found in unionism a large part of the answer to their suffering. And it was these, at the beginning only a few, who by pursuing their vision despite the antipathy of some white unionists and bosses alike, established those values embraced by a growing number of Negroes today.

In raising these problems Mr. Attaway has touched some of the central problems of American experience. He has also proved himself one of the most gifted Negro writers.

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