

## RECENT NEGRO FICTION

Ralph Ellison discusses the growing achievements of Negro novelists in depicting the consciousness of an oppressed nation. The second article in a series on "The Negro in American Life."

RECENT American Negro fiction has been marked by a slow but steady movement toward a grasp of American reality. In quantity it has been small; in quality it has ranged from works that echo the worst efforts of the "Harlem" writers of the twenties to the high artistry of *Native Son*. The trend of the best of this writing has been toward an improvement and modernization of technique and enlargement of theme. Unlike the fiction growing out of the New Negro movement, it has, for the most part, avoided exoticism and narrow Negro middle class ideals. It is more solid in that it evolves out of a deep inner compulsion rather than out of a shallow imitativeness; it strives to attain an organic place in the lives of the Negro people, and if less prolific than Negro postwar fiction it has been more full of the stuff of America.

American Negro fiction of the 1920's was timid of theme, and for the most part technically backward. Usually it was apologetic in tone and narrowly confined to the expression of Negro middle class ideals rather than those of the Negro working and agricultural masses. Except for the work of Langston Hughes it ignored the existence of Negro folklore and perceived no connection between its own efforts and the symbols and the images of Negro folk forms; it was oblivious of psychology; it was unconscious of politics; and most of the deeper problems arising out of the relationship borne by the Negro group to the larger North American whole were avoided. Not that it contained no protest; it did, but its protest was racial and narrowly nationalistic. Hughes' fiction, however, showed an awareness of the working class and socially dispossessed Negro and his connection with the international scheme of things. This fiction, expressing this broader consciousness of the Negro group through advanced techniques and drawing upon folklore for its sources, was thus more vital and enduring than the work of most of his contemporaries.

When the continuation of the fictional trend started by Hughes is sought in recent Negro fiction, one encounters Richard Wright's set of five short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*. Taking for its characters Negro men and women at bay in the oppressive Southern environment, the book represents one of the few instances in which an American Negro writer has successfully delineated the universals embodied in Negro experience. The result is an imaginative exploration of Southern Negro types, from the simplest sharecropper struggling unconsciously in a world he does not understand, to men and

women aware of their fate and approaching it through political conviction. They are three-dimensional people, possessing an emotional and psychological complexity never before achieved in American Negro writing.

In Wright's *Native Son* we have the first philosophical novel by an American Negro. This work possesses an artistry, penetration of thought, and sheer emotional power that places it into the front rank of American fiction. Indeed, except for its characters and subject matter, it seems hardly identifiable with previous Negro fiction; but this, however, only in a superficial sense concealing factors of vital importance to the understanding of Negro writing.

*Native Son* and *Uncle Tom's Children* express an artistic sensibility overcoming the social and cultural isolation of Negro life and moving into a world of unlimited intellectual and imaginative possibilities. The technical, artistic, and intellectual qualities of these works are a reflection and a result of this process. To understand this is to grasp many of the problems of Negro life and fiction.

WHILE CONSTITUTING ten percent of the total population, Negroes are left outside of most American institutions. They are confined to the black ghettos of our large cities and they live in a Jim Crow world. They receive inferior wages, are restricted from participation in government throughout the country, and in most of the South they are not allowed to vote. The total effect of this discrimination has been to retard the Negro's penetration into American civilization. It has attempted to restrict him to the reflexes and responses of a peasant in the midst of the greatest industrial society in the world. During the past decade, to fight this discrimination, he has forged new instruments of struggle, and made alliances with labor and others in an effort to create a new society. In the South the Negro fights against a semi-feudal environment under an oppression reinforced by lynch mobs. There he possesses a fluid folk culture, for the most part unrecorded, and he has his own religion. In the North, although he enjoys a wider freedom of movement, he has sometimes been used as a strikebreaker, and until the CIO he was locked out of most of the trade unions. In the industrial North the Negro's folk culture became divided: there developed the shallow, imitative culture of the educated middle class Negro, and the partly urbanized, somewhat distorted folk culture found in Negro streets, slums, cabarets, and dance halls, and which now is becoming the basis of a new proletarian literature.

During the postwar period the first of these cultural divisions produced the New Negro movement and brought forth such writers as Countee Cullen, Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neil Hurston, Wallace Thurman, and Jessie Fauset, who expressed certain general ideas and tendencies which grew out of the postwar prosperity and the rise of a conscious Negro middle class. Aside from ignoring the folk source of all vital American Negro art, the fiction of this group was chiefly lyrical, and for the most part was unaware of the technical experimentation and direction being taken by American writing as the result of the work— itself a product and symptom of the breakup of a world—of such writers as Joyce, Stein, Anderson, and Hemingway. It was not addressed to Negro readers, but to a white audience that had recently "discovered" the Negro in its quest to make spiritual readjustments to a world in transition. Culturally this writing expressed the distortions wrought upon sensitive Negro personalities by American Jim Crow life. These writers were actually trying to establish contact with a world created by a boom period of capitalism, in which the realities and motive forces of society were obscured, and in which even their own difficult lives were thrown out of perspective in a rain of stocks, bonds, and dollar bills.

When the crash came, the vast distance between the real world and the illusion held by these Negro writers became manifest. Negro middle class ideals were swept away in the flood of unemployment, poverty, and the suppression of civil liberties brought on by the depression. Many American Negro writers ceased to write, and those who continued were faced with the problem of discovering new means of understanding the world and of analyzing its movements. Thus, under the sobering effect of the depression, Negro writing discovered the path mapped out by Langston Hughes: it became realistic. New techniques were used; new themes appeared, indicating a broader grasp of American reality and an awareness of the struggling Negro masses.

The depression years, the movement for relief, the rise of the CIO with the attending increases in union activity among Negroes, the Herndon and Scottsboro cases, the fight against the poll tax—all made for the emergence of a new proletarian consciousness among black people. Along with this came the Federal Arts Projects and the stimulus which they gave to Negro cultural activity.

And the Negro writer was not left unaffected. His was now a struggle to come to grips with and record those forces of the period that were moving the black workers and farmers to un-

precedented activity. And it was here that the relative newness of American Negro fiction and the isolation of Negro middle class culture was experienced as a handicap. The grinding impact of the depression upon the aroused Negro people was transforming its folk consciousness into a working class awareness. Negro communities sprouted picket lines, and shouted slogans showing an awareness of the connection between world events and Negro lives. And the writer who had stood aloof from the people, confining himself to transmitting the small, thin, compromising voice of the black middle class, found himself drowned out in the mighty protesting roar of the black masses. And when the writer attempted to transmit this new sound it was as though he had encountered a strange language; it cracked the crude mechanism of his prose. Yet the speech patterns of this new language had long been present in Negro life, recorded in the crystallized protest of American Negro folklore. It was only that now this protest was receiving intensification and amplification as a result of the folk Negro's reaction to mechanized capitalist suffering: the pressure was bursting the shell of the Negro people's folk consciousness. It organized the National Negro Congress and the Southern Youth Congress for social struggle. It now demanded articulation through prose mediums capable of dealing with the complexities of the society in which its new consciousness struggled to be born.

In American Negro literature there existed no background for dealing with such problems as were now emerging. For literature is a product of social relations, and the black middle class—despite its favored position—hardly less than the Negro workers has been excluded from participation in those social institutions in which the consciousness necessary for dealing with such problems is to be formed; this literature had developed no techniques for grappling with the deeper American realities. In American literature this background was to be found in the work of such men as Dreiser and Upton Sinclair; but Jim Crow is intellectual as well as social and political, and the themes and problems with which these writers were concerned were not recognized by Negro writers as being related to American Negro experience.

Fortunately, the growth of working class activity and thought in American life found expression in the general trends of North American writing during the thirties. The technical discoveries of the twenties were bent to the new social themes and given a new synthesis; the concepts of American democracy and social justice were revitalized. Such writers' organizations as the John Reed Clubs and the League of American Writers attempted to give these trends conscious direction. They created centers of literary and cultural discussion which encouraged the emergence of the major fiction of 1939 and 1940.

Locked in his Jim Crow world, the average American Negro writer received the effects of these organizations at second-hand, by an

## Writers and the War

*Following is the statement issued by the League of American Writers, calling for immediate aid to Great Britain and the Soviet Union. The League, which has 700 members, has addressed its statement to all writers and writers' organizations. A copy has been sent by airmail to Erskine Caldwell, a vice president of the League who is at present in Moscow, with a request that he transmit it to the Union of Soviet Writers. Copies have also gone to Sylvia Townsend Warner, who represented British writers at the League's Third American Congress in 1939, and to writers of China and Latin America.*

*An expression of solidarity in the fight against fascism has also been issued by 130 writers, scientists, educators, and artists—including three Nobel Prize winners—urging material assistance to the USSR, Great Britain, and China. Among the signers are Prof. Franz Boas, Ernest Boyd, Lin Yutang, Klaus Mann, Lion Feuchtwanger, Dr. Mary E. Woolley, Prof. Irving Fisher, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Richard Wright, Rockwell Kent, William Gropper, James Montgomery Flagg, Louis Bromfield, Ida Tarbell, and Ben Hecht.*

SINCE its inception in 1935, the League of American Writers has sought to preserve and promote the democratic traditions of our country by fostering a literature that springs from the lives and needs of the people. To this end the League has urged that the welfare of the American people requires participation in every genuine anti-fascist struggle—whether it be that of the Spanish people, the Chinese people, or the people of Germany.

When there was still peace in the world, we fought to maintain it. We called on American writers to support collective action by England, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union. We knew that such collective action would secure peace, and peace would be fatal to fascism. But at Munich, our people and our country suffered a great defeat. And out of Munich came a war which carried with it the same danger of defeat for the peoples of all countries, including our own. Made by the same men and forces that perpetrated Munich, the war did not win the confidence of our people. We were not persuaded that it was a genuine war against fascism.

But now the alliance between Great Britain and the Soviet Union provides the peoples of all countries with an unprecedented opportunity to rid the world of Hitlerism. And a world free of fascism is essential to the democratic institutions and culture of the United States. Therefore, the League advocates all immediate and necessary measures in support of Great Britain and the Soviet Union to insure the military defeat of the fascist aggressors. We believe such support has now become vital to the welfare and security of our country. We look forward to the release of our colleagues from the concentration camps of Europe, the return of exiled writers to their native land, and the extirpation of the gravest threat to our existence as free writers.

However, there are traitors in our country who seek to ally us not with the enemies of fascism but with Hitlerism itself. The American Quislings, led by Lindbergh, Hoover, Wheeler, and Coughlin, wish to strengthen Hitlerism at the expense of democracy everywhere—including American democracy. Their policy of appeasement led to the defeat of the Spanish Republic, the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, and the downfall of France. It is the policy which would result in the destruction of our freedom. So also would attempts to use the struggle against Hitlerism for imperialist rivalries.

The fight against fascism cannot and must not be conducted at the expense of civil liberties, trade union rights, academic freedom, and living standards in the United States. Only a greater democratization of our economic, political, and cultural life will insure our triumph over Hitlerism. The League will continue with renewed vigor its opposition to censorship, and its efforts to provide more extensive outlets for anti-fascist literature. The League supports the full rights of labor, including the right to strike. It is unalterably opposed to anti-Semitism and discrimination against Negroes and the foreign born. The League believes it is essential that our Latin American neighbors be assured the same unequivocal freedom we advocate in other parts of the world.

Victory is in sight for mankind. The united effort of all anti-fascist writers in the United States and all other countries will hasten this victory. The free writers of the world will live to record the death of fascism.

almost unconscious act of absorption. For this reason, although recent American Negro fiction has shown new techniques and expressed new ideas, it has done so usually in a manner which revealed that the assumptions upon which the techniques were based, and the general working class world view from

which the ideas derive, have not always been understood. What is positive here, however, is that even while still somewhat bare of sharp, universal implications, the best of this writing has presented a realistic effort to fulfill a vital function.

It is significant that most of the older writ-



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ers have failed to produce any fiction since the early thirties, having either stopped writing completely, or having confined themselves to other forms. Scanning the fiction list for older writers, one discovers only the names of Arna Bontemps and Zora Neil Hurston. And since we are here concerned with new trends it is perhaps well that a brief summary deal with the recent work of these two writers first.

After his splendid pioneering contribution to historical fiction with *Black Thunder*, Arna Bontemps has followed through with *Drums at Dusk*, an historical romance. But while the first was a novel of importance, the second must be classed with such works as *Anthony Adverse*. Despite its projection against the background of the violent Haitian uprising of the 1790's, the focus of the novel is narrow; it possesses neither the technical qualities nor high seriousness of *Black Thunder*, and seems to terminate at the point where its main action should have begun. It is as though Bontemps stopped briefly to boil the pot while preparing more serious themes.

In her turn Zora Neil Hurston's latest work, though possessing technical competence, retains the blight of calculated burlesque that has marred most of her writing. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells the story of a Southern Negro woman's love-life against the background of an all-Negro town into which the casual brutalities of the South seldom intrude. Her next work, *Moses Man of the Mountains*, a fictional biography, is presented as the American Negro's conception of the life of Moses. Taking the Hebraic legend which presents Moses as giver of laws, Miss Hurston gives us Moses as conjureman. This work sets out to do for Moses what *The Green Pastures* did for Jehovah; for Negro fiction it did nothing.

Turning from the older writers to the new, the scene brightens. In his first novel, *These Low Grounds*, Waters Edward Turpin has written of a Negro family, depicting its evolution by generations through several periods of the country's growth. In *O Canaan*, Turpin has treated the great migration which, during the first world war period, brought thousands of folk Negroes from the agricultural South to the industrial centers of the North. These are new directions in American Negro fiction, the very selection of which speaks a new awareness in Negro writing. But Turpin's handling of his material betrays that this awareness has not been organized around a clearly defined set of assumptions; he seems to have drawn no clear-cut conclusions about the role of the Negro in American life. And symptomatic of all this is Turpin's tendency to cling to obsolete technical devices. In the sense that a technique is both a reflection and an instrument of consciousness, Turpin's relation to his material is that of an obstetrician attempting with obsolete instruments to aid a birth he sees only cloudily through blurred vision. The new consciousness of the Negro people struggles to be born: Turpin has approached it, thus far, with faltering hands and near-sighted eyes. The

positive thing, however, is that he has approached it.

In a sense, this is also true of William Attaway, whose first novel, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, while promising important works to follow, relates the adventures of white boys-of-the-road—in itself no criticism—leaving the themes of Negro experience for later consideration. Attaway has shown an understanding of the aims of modern writing; there remains the harder, truly creative task of gearing his prose to Negro theme and emotion.

The general effect of these novels is one of incompleteness; something is not fully formed in them. And when American Negro magazine fiction is examined, it is seen that the division between the themes of which the writer is becoming aware, and the techniques necessary to give them dynamic treatment, is quite deep. Viewed from the problem of consciousness, it seems that this division is traceable to the Jim Crow retardation of the natural flow of the Negro folk consciousness into the machines and institutions which constitute the organism of North American society; it presents a socio-political problem. And until some organized effort is made to resolve this division, by stepping out ahead of the slowly changing economic and social reality and, by clarifying Negro consciousness, accelerating the tempo of the Negro people's efforts in effecting that change, it is a division that will heal but slowly. This will mean of course far more than attaining the consciousness of the American bourgeois, for the institutional support of bourgeois consciousness is rapidly disintegrating under the pressure of capitalism's decay. The new Negro consciousness must of necessity go beyond the highest point of bourgeois consciousness and work toward the creation of conditions in which it might integrate and stabilize itself; it demands new institutions, a new society.

In the work of Richard Wright we have a hint of how, through imagination and conscious artistry, the American Negro writer as an individual might overcome the limitations imposed upon him. And it is when we examine *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom's Children* against the background of the above listed fiction, that we see the full effect that political and cultural segregation has had upon Negro writing. In his monograph, *How Bigger Was Born*, Wright makes an attempt to explain how he came to possess the sensibility out of which he produced *Native Son*. As a member of the Chicago John Reed Club he encountered attitudes, assumptions, and aims toward American civilization that were inarticulate in the Negro's folk consciousness. He explains:

I met white writers who talked of their responses, who told me how whites reacted to this lurid American scene. And as they talked I'd translate what they said in terms of Bigger's life. But what was more important still, I read their novels. Here, for the first time, I found ways and techniques of gauging meaningfully the effects of American civilization upon the personalities of people. I took these techniques, these ways of seeing and feeling and twisted them, bent them, adapted them, until

they became *my* ways of apprehending the locked-in life of the Black Belt areas. This association with white writers was the life preserver of my hope to depict Negro life in fiction, for my race possessed no fictional background in such sharp and critical testing of experience, no novels that went with a deep and fearless will down to the dark roots of life.

And when Wright wrote, his fiction showed a maturity possessed by few American novels. But one very important factor is omitted here: that of the effect upon Wright of his participation in an organization (the Chicago John Reed Club) concerned with all of the intense issues affecting American life and which profoundly influenced the flow of American events. Wright, through exercising his function as secretary of that organization, and through his personal responsibility, forcing himself to come to grips with these issues and making decisions upon them, built up within himself tensions and disciplines which were impossible within the relaxed, semi-peasant environs of American Negro life. This mounted almost to the attainment of a new sensibility, of a rebirth. For the writer it was an achievement equal only to the attainment of positions of advanced trade union leadership by Negro workers. Contradicting the whole Jim Crow system, it postulated the existence of a group whose vision rejected the status quo. *Native Son*, examined against past Negro fiction, represents the take-off in a leap which promises to carry over a whole tradition, and marks the merging of the imaginative depiction of American Negro life into the broad stream of American literature. For the Negro writer it has suggested a path which he might follow to reach maturity, clarifying and increasing his social responsibility. The writer is faced with the problem of mastering the culture of American civilization through the techniques and disciplines provided by his art—a process that constitutes a leap into the possession of a physiological, emotional, and intellectual discipline, which usually is only to be attained through the unlimited freedom provided by ownership of the means of production. The writer's responsibility is greater because this is a difficult and necessary achievement if his people are to fight their battle with any sense of equal preparation. It is no accident that the two most advanced American Negro writers, Hughes and Wright, have been men who have *experienced freedom* of association with advanced white writers (not because the men from whom they have learned were unique because of their whiteness, but because in the United States even the possession of Western culture is controlled on the basis of color). Nor is it an accident that Hughes and Wright have had, as writers of fiction, the greatest effect upon Negro life.

In their broader implications, the problems of American Negro fiction are not problems of the Negro writer alone. They are the problems of all who are interested in the defense of American culture. Working class and political thinkers have shown an increasing awareness of the great American social and

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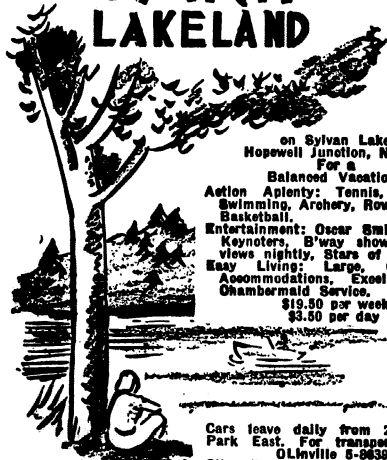
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political forces that pivot on the Negro group. The Negro vote figures prominently in national elections, and the outcome of many recent labor struggles has depended upon the stand taken by Negro workers. Usually the workers have been with the unions. Interesting in this connection is the recent incident at the Ford River Rouge Plant, where although Negro unionists and the majority of the Negro community supported the strike, a group of Negro underworld characters were used in Ford's fascist-like attempts to break the union, revealing one instance of how demoralized and culturally dispossessed Negroes might be used by an American fascism.

Today the Negro people are struggling in a world chaotic with reaction and war. They are struggling under a handicap because they have been historically denied opportunities to become conditioned in working class methods of organized struggle. It thus becomes the task of fiction to help them overcome this handicap and to possess the conscious meaning of their lives.

These are difficult times for all writers: there is the threat of official and unofficial censorship: publishing difficulties and general economic problems. But if these times are difficult for the writer, they are great times for literature. These are times when the laws of society are laid bare for all who would understand to see; when emotions are to be observed stripped naked. For the conscious writer these are times for intense study; times, for those who see beyond the present chaos, of great themes. The Negro writer's task is to steep his sensibilities in a multiplicity of happenings, to create, as it were, a storehouse of emotional and intellectual insights to be transformed into the art of the future. Negro writers must work hard and with unfaltering faith in the face of the difficulties to come. For these difficulties shall create the themes for the American Negro fiction of tomorrow.

There must be no stepping away from the artistic and social achievements of *Native Son* if the Negro writer is to create the consciousness of his oppressed nation. And in answer to the old theory that publishers will not accept honest Negro writing, there again stands *Native Son*. The solution of the problem of publication seems to lie, partly, in the mastery of life through the mastery of the intense ways of thinking and feeling that are artistic techniques. This also is the answer to the social effectiveness and growth of American Negro fiction.

RALPH ELLISON.

### Fable and Paradox

THE TRANSPosed HEADS, a Legend of India by  
Thomas Mann. Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.

It is altogether proper that the past should provide the material for an art that casts light upon the present in which the writer dwells. But has Mann really done anything like this with the remote legendary material of India? The original form of this little tale was obvious and simple. It was a fable, a moral tale, with a specifically conditioned social

point. Under Thomas Mann's hand it becomes something else indeed—a finger exercise in paradoxes, an ironist's gymnastic in subtlety.

In the old story there were two youths—Nanda and Shridaman—the one a jolly child of the senses, the other an ascetic student of the Vedas. They are friends precisely because each loves what he lacks. (This, says Mann, is the basis of our striving for the beautiful—that we may never possess it ourselves.) They both desire Sita of the Beautiful Hips, although it is only Shridaman, the fellow with the headpiece, who gets her as a wife.

The symbolizations are obvious. But we may pause to ask why this twentieth century novelist is interested in an abstract dialogue of body and soul. Why has he found the highly dualistic Brahman philosophy so congenial, product as it was of a profoundly oppressive class relationship between a conquering Aryan social group and a primordial Dravidian populace? Of what relevance to our times is this transposed parable which sees the world divided into rigid castes of reality, the eternally separate material and spiritual, the Nanda and Shridaman components that strive to possess life—or Sita? It is curious also to observe how the realistic descriptions of these two symbolic figures correspond with the ancient but familiar social distinctions. Shridaman is light of skin with prominent nose and aristocratic ways—an obvious Aryan. Nanda, while no Sudra is definitely of lower social origin, is dark-skinned, goat-nosed, the Dravidian man of the people.

The fable continues. Sita naturally loves both men—she loves both mind and flesh. This leads in time to complications so distressing that one fine day the two young men hew off their heads in a wayside temple. The goddess of the temple gives the young wife the power to reattach the heads of both husband and friend. And here the transposition occurs. For somehow the clerkly head of the husband is skewered onto the sturdy outdoor body of the friend and Nanda's ordinary noggin is fastened to the second-rate appendages of Shridaman. Who is now the lady's husband? The old story decided firmly in favor of the man with the husband's head who is now composed of the most excellent features of both. But here Mann takes up his sequel. It seems that no facile transpositions can save us from life's fundamental dichotomy. We find the husband slowly sloughing off the athletic muscles and sensuous habits of his new body while its former owner, in his loneliness, builds up the priestly limbs he has acquired till he is almost the old Nanda again. And Sita, the reconciling principle of life, would again love them both—and cannot love one alone. So, says Mann in effect, the problem is insoluble. Spirit and body are complementary but never integral. On the other hand, division is fatal. Our three friends must end up on a mutual funeral pyre.

My first response to this devious episode was that it was concerned with an amazingly abstract conundrum, and that our drawing a blank at the end was the logical conclusion to