Margaret Walker

New Poets

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During the past twenty years of literary history in America, Negroes have enjoyed unusual prominence as poets. At least ten books of poetry by new poets have received serious critical comment in leading literary magazines and columns. If we can believe the additional comments in anthologies of American poetry and books of literary criticism, Negroes writing poetry have gone a long way toward achieving full literary status as American writers; and they have thus attained a measure of integration into contemporary schools of literary thought.

A backward look into American life during these two decades should provide a reason for this literary development and resurgence. It must also accountably tell the background of such poetry, and at the same time provide a basis for predicting the future of poetry written by Negroes in America. Let us, therefore, consider, first, the socioeconomic and political factors which have influenced the poetry of the past twenty years.

During the Twenties we spoke of the New Negro and the Negro Renaissance. At that time such figures as James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer emerged as the spokesmen of the New Negro. Rich white patrons or "angels" who could and did underwrite the poetry of Negroes by helping to support Negroes who were interested in writing poetry did so as a fad to amuse themselves and their guests at some of the fabulous parties of the Twenties. They considered the intelligent, sensitive, and creative Negro as the talented tenth, exotic, bizarre, and unusual member of his race; and they indulgently regarded the poetry of the Negro as the prattle of a gifted child. Negro people as a mass showed little appreciation for poetry and offered very little audience for the Negro writing poetry. Whatever Negro people thought about the poetry written about Negro life did not seem to matter. In the final analysis the audience and the significant critics were white. Negroes as a whole knew too little about their own life to analyze correctly and judge astutely their own literary progress as poets. Isolated from the literary life of whites and confused by the segregated pattern of economic and political life, it was only natural that the point of view of these writers was limited. They lacked social perspective and suffered from a kind of literary myopia. They seemed constantly to beg the question of the Negro's humanity, perhaps as an answer to the white patron's attitude that Negroes are only children anyway. *God's Trombones* by James Weldon Johnson, *The Weary Blues* by Langston Hughes, *Color* and *Copper Sun* by Countee Cullen, and *Harlem Shadows* by Claude McKay were published during the Twenties. Each was received as justification that the Negro race could produce geniuses and that it was nothing short of remarkable that "God should make a poet black and bid him sing." Titles of books as well as eloquent short lyrics such as "O Black and Unknown Bards," and "I, too, sing America . . . I am the darker brother" all reflected an intense desire to justify the Negro as a human being. These books sold well among whites but none of them ranked in a "best-seller" class. People did not buy poetry, certainly not poetry by Negroes. It was a day of individual literary patronage when a rich "angel" adopted a struggling poor artist and made an exotic plaything out of any "really brilliant Negro."

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The halcyon days of individual patronage of the arts were ended with the stockmarket crash at the end of the Twenties. The gay hayride of the flaming and gilded Twenties had come to a jolting stop and the depression of the Thirties began to make its first inroads into American life. Hoover persisted so long in predicting that prosperity was just around the corner that it became a standing joke. Men appeared on street corners selling apples, and there was talk of an American dole such as England had already experienced. Early in 1932 before the repeal of prohibition and the ending of the speakeasies that had been an institution of the Twenties, it was a common sight to see streets of large cities littered with sprawling drunkards. The parks were full of unemployed men, shabby and helpless, wearing beaten and hopeless faces. Grant Park in Chicago was a notable example. Evictions were common and Communism was on the march. What chance did the luxury of art have at such a time?

Roosevelt's New Deal not only averted a bloody social revolution in 1932 and 1933 by bracing the tottering economic structure of the country, but it also ushered into existence the boon to art and letters in the form of the

Works Progress Administration. The WPA meant two things of far-reaching significance to Negroes who were writers. It meant, first, (as it meant to whites) money on which to exist and provision for the meager security necessary in order to create art. It meant, second, that Negroes who were creative writers, and poets especially, were no longer entirely isolated from other writers. In cities above the Mason-Dixon line where the Writers Projects drew no color line a new school of black and white writers mushroomed overnight into being.

The cry of these writers was the cry of social protest: protest against the social ills of the day which were unemployment, slums, crime and juvenile delinquency, prejudice, poverty, and disease. The New Deal struggled to alleviate these social ills while the writers led the vanguard of literary protest and agitation for a better world. The decade of the nineteen-thirties therefore became known as the socially-conscious Thirties. Negroes joined the ranks of these socially-conscious writers and Negroes who were writing poetry in particular were poets of social protest. At least three new poets appeared during the Thirties with books of poetry of obvious social significance.

Southern Road by Sterling Brown appeared in 1932. It was chiefly concerned with the plight of Negroes in the South. Ballads in this volume such as the "Slim Greer Series" are some of the finest in the annals of American poetry regardless of the color of the author. One of Mr. Brown's later poems, "Old Lem," which first appeared in magazines and anthologies in the Thirties, is an outstanding example of social protest and clearly reflects the mood of the period.

I talked to old Lem
And old Lem said:
"They weigh the cotton
They store the corn
We only good enough
To work the rows;
They run the commissary
They keep the books
We gotta be grateful
For being cheated;
Whippersnapper clerks
Call us out of our name
We got to say mister
To spindling boys

They make our figgers
Turn somersets
We buck in the middle
Say, 'Thankyuh, sah.'
They don't come by ones
They don't come by twos
But they come by tens.

Black Man's Verse and *I Am the American Negro* by Frank Marshall Davis appeared in 1935 and 1937 respectively. These two volumes of poetry, although technically rough and uneven, were scathing books of social protest. An example of such social protest may be seen in the following excerpt from one of Mr. Davis' poems, "Portrait of the Cotton South":

Well, you remakers of America
You apostles of Social Change
Here is pregnant soil
Here are grass roots of a nation.
But the crop they grow is Hate and Poverty.
By themselves they will make no change
Black men lack the guts
Po' whites have not the brains
And the big land owners want Things as They Are.

Black Labor Chant by David Wadsworth Cannon, who died before his volume of verse was published in 1939, celebrated the Negro's joining ranks with the upsurging Labor movement, particularly the CIO, and continued in general in the vein of social protest.

Although the outbreak of the Second World War changed the note of social significance, bringing as it did prosperity at home in the United States, and ushering into the world the Atomic Age, the strong note of anxiety it bred was not felt at first in the literature of the period. For at least a decade longer the poetry of American Negroes continued to reflect the mood of the Thirties. A half dozen books of poetry published during the Forties reflect either a note of social protest or a growing concern with the terrible reality of war.

Heart-Shape in the Dust by Robert Hayden appeared in 1940 followed by *For My People* by Margaret Walker in 1942. *Rendezvous With America* by Melvin Tolson was published in 1944; *A Street in Bronzeville* by Gwendolyn Brooks in 1945; and *Powerful Long Ladder* by Owen Dodson appeared in 1946.

The first three poets each reflected in varying degrees the note of social protest in their respective volumes of poetry. The last two poets showed a growing concern with the grim reality of war.

Contrast the tone of the poems of the Twenties with examples of the poetry of the early Forties reflecting as they did the social consciousness of the Thirties. From Robert Hayden's early work, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, an excerpt from the poem, "Speech," follows:

> Hear me, white brothers,
> Black brothers, hear me:
> I have seen the hand
> Holding the blowtorch
> To the dark, anguish-twisted body;
> I have seen the hand
> Giving the high-sign
> To fire on the white pickets;
> And it was the same hand,
> Brothers, listen to me,
> It was the same hand.

From Margaret Walker's poem, "For My People":

> For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding, trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people, all the faces, all the Adams and Eves and their countless generations;
>
> Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.

From Melvin Tolson's poem, "Dark Symphony":

> Out of abysses of Illiteracy
> Through labyrinths of Lies,
> Across wastelands of Disease . . .
> We advance!
> Out of dead-ends of Poverty,
> Through wildernesses of Superstition,

> Across barricades of Jim Crowism
> We advance!
> With the Peoples of the World . . .
> We advance!

In each of these three illustrations of poetry published during the early Forties may be detected the note of social protest, a growing perspective beyond the point of view of race, and a militant attitude not evidenced in the poets of the Twenties.

Gwendolyn Brooks and Owen Dodson published in 1945 and 1946 and their works show a growing concern with the problem of war. They show more than any of the aforementioned poets a growing global perspective which has become a keynote of current poetry. In her volume, *A Street in Bronzeville,* Miss Brooks writes about "Gay Chaps at the Bar":

> We knew how to order . . .
> But nothing ever taught us to be islands
>
> . . . .
>
> No stout
> Lesson showed how to chat with death. We brought
> No brass fortissimo, among our talents,
> To holler down the lions in this air.

In Owen Dodson's poems, "Black Mother Praying," and "Conversation on V," the question of race is presented within the framework of war. The following excerpt is taken from "Conversation on V:"

> V stands for Victory.
> Now what is this here Victory?
> It what we get when we fight for it.
> Ought to be Freedom, God do know that.

Common Peoples Manifesto by Marcus Christian was published in 1948. It has probably not received as widespread critical notice as it deserves, but in several reviews mention has been made of its "considerable merit." It, too, reflects the social note of protest that was typical of the poetry of the Thirties.

The period of greatest intensification of the social note in poetry written by Negroes extends roughly from 1935 to 1945. Summing up the period, generally speaking, we can see that the New Negro came of age during the Thirties. He grew away from the status of the exotic, the accidentally unusual

Negro, the talented tenth of what the white audience chose to consider an otherwise mentally infantile minority group whole masses were illiterate, disfranchised, exploited, and oppressed. Negroes became members of a new school of writers who were no longer isolated because of color, who were integrated around the beliefs that created the New Deal. They were the poets of social protest who began to catch a glimmer of a global perspective, who as spokesmen for their race did not beg the question of their humanity, and who cried out to other peoples over the earth to recognize race prejudice as a weapon that is as dangerous as the atomic bomb in the threat to annihilation of culture and peace in the western world.

Any literary development of the Negro in the Thirties was directly due to his social development. During the Thirties the Negro people made great social strides. The New Deal opened many avenues of opportunity and development to the masses of Negro people. The economic standards of the Negro race rose higher than ever in the history of his life in this Country. As a result of free art for all the people, a cultural renaissance in all the arts swept the United States. This created a new intelligentsia with a genuine appreciation for the creative arts and a recognition for all cultural values. Labor was stimulated by the unionization together of black and white labor and this in turn strengthened the political voice of the people. Consequently the literary audience widened and the Negro people themselves grew in intellectual awareness.

Three books published during the Forties, however, show a marked departure from the note of social protest. These books are *From the Shaken Tower* by Bruce McWright, published in Great Britain in 1944; *The Lion and the Archer* by Robert Hayden and Myron O'Higgins, published as a brochure in 1948; and Gwendolyn Brooks' Pulitzer Prize-winning volume, *Annie Allen*, which was published in 1949. Each one of these books is less preoccupied with the theme of race as such. Race is rather used as a point of departure toward a global point of view than as the central theme of one obsessed by race. This global perspective is an important new note in poetry. The tendency is toward internationalism rather than toward nationalism and racism. Because modern inventions have shortened the time involved in transportation and communications to such an amazing degree our world has shrunk to a small community of nations and mankind is forced to recognize the kinship of all peoples. Thus we have a basis for new conceptions that of necessity lead us in new directions.

These new poets of the late Forties also remind us that there are other factors in the writing of poetry that are equally as important as perspective.

They focus our attention on craftsmanship with their return to an emphasis on form. The new poetry has universal appeal coupled with another definite mark of neoclassicism, the return to form. They show an emphasis placed on technique rather than subject matter, and a moving toward intellectual themes of psychological and philosophical implications which border on obscurantism. These poems are never primitive, simple, and commonplace.

What technical advances have these poets of our new classical age shown over the poets of the Twenties and the Thirties?

Looking back to the Twenties one quickly recognizes that the poets of the Negro Renaissance varied technically from the strictly classical and conventional poetry to the utterly unconventional. Countee Cullen was an outstanding example of the true classicist who had been schooled thoroughly in versification and all the types and forms of poetry. His classical education was clearly reflected in his poetry. On the other hand, Langston Hughes introduced the pattern of the "blues" into poetry. He made no pretense of being the poets' poet, of writing intellectual poetry, or conforming to any particular school of aesthetics. The pattern of the "blues" was, nevertheless, the first new Negro idiom introduced into American poetry since the time of Paul Laurence Dunbar and his Negro dialect that was typical of the antebellum plantation life. The poetry of Negroes that was published during the Thirties was primarily free verse. Technically there were no innovations.

Currently, the new poets, however, are so concerned with form that they are often interested in form to the exclusion of everything else and thus are in danger of sacrificing sense for sound, or meaning for music. As a result of this tendency much of recent poetry by white writers in America has been labelled obscurantist. Can this charge be safely levelled at recent poetry by Negroes?

Such a charge has already been levelled at *Annie Allen* when the book was mentioned in a recent issue of *Phylon*. It was then stated that the poem, "the birth in a narrow room," has too many elliptical or truncated lines. This seems a minor technical matter of not too great importance since it does not actually destroy the meaning of the poem. The lines under question follow:

> Weeps out of western country something new.
> Blurred and stupendous. Wanted and unplanned.
> Winks. Twines, and weakly winks
> Upon the milk-glass fruit bowl, iron pot,
> The bashful china child tipping forever
> Yellow apron and spilling pretty cherries.

Does this make sense? Obviously when one reads the entire poem in terms of the title, the poem does make sense, and that should be all that really matters.

The fact that Miss Brooks displays an excellent knowledge of form, whether in the versatile handling of types of forms of poetry included in *Annie Allen* or in the metrical variations in the volume, can be readily seen as proof of this new emphasis upon conventional form. She skillfully handles a number of stanzaic forms including couplets, quatrains, the Italian Terza Rima, and even in the Anniad, the difficult rime-royal or the seven line stanza named for Chaucer. Here is a perfect example:

Think of thaumaturgic lass
Looking in her looking-glass
At the unembroidered brown;
Printing bastard roses there;
Then emotionally aware
Of the black and boisterous hair
Taming all that anger down.

In addition to these conventional forms she includes several poems written in free verse as well as occasional lines of blank verse. In regard to types she includes short lyrics, ballads, and sonnets written with veteran aplomb. As a whole, *Annie Allen* is a fine delineation of the character of a young Negro woman from childhood through adolescence to complete maturity, but with slight racial exceptions it could apply to any female of a certain class and society. The entire volume is tinged with an highly sophisticated humor and is not only technically sure but also vindicates the promise of *A Street in Bronzeville*. Coming after the long hue and cry of white writers that Negroes as poets lack form and intellectual acumen, Miss Brooks' careful craftsmanship and sensitive understanding reflected in *Annie Allen* are not only personal triumphs but a racial vindication.

There may be more reason to level the charge of obscurantism at the poetry of Myron O'Higgins in *The Lion and the Archer*, written in collaboration with Robert Hayden. Although the vocabulary is no more intellectual than that of Miss Brooks, and there are several magnificent poems in this brochure—new in note, and vital—there seems more obscurity and ambiguity in the use of poetic symbols and imagery, as for example:

But that day in between
comes back with two lean cats
who run in checkered terror
through a poolroom door
and bolting from a scream
a keen knife marks with sudden red
the gaming green
. . . a purple billiard ball
explodes the color scheme.

Robert Hayden shows a decided growth and advance in this volume over his first, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, which was uneven and lacked the grasp of a true Negro idiom which he seemed to be seeking at that time. His sense of choric movement and his understanding and perspective of peoples have increased to a telling degree and he writes now with due maturity and power:

Now as skin-and-bones Europe hurts all over from the swastika's
hexentanz: oh think of Anton, Anton brittle, Anton crystalline;
think what the winter moon, the leper beauty of a Gothic tale, must see:
the ice-azure likeness of a young man reading, carved most craftily.

In Bruce McWright there is authentic reporting of World War II but even the title of his book, *From the Shaken Tower*, reflects the questions of our present-day age. War has further denounced the ivory towers because war is the grim reality that ends the romantic dreams and airy castle building. The poets of the Thirties said that ivory towers were not fit habitations for poets anyway; they should be social prophets, preachers, teachers, and leaders. Now, with the threat of annihilation hanging over the civilized world of western culture, whether by atomic or hydrogen bomb, with the tremendous wave of social revolution sweeping through the world, men have felt themselves spiritually bankrupt. There is therefore a wave of religious revival, especially in America, whether through fear and hysteria, or from a genuine desire for inner self-analysis, reflection and introspective knowledge that may lead, thereby, to a spiritual panacea which we seek for the ills of the world. Whether to Catholicism, Existentialism, or Communism, modern man is turning to some definite belief around which to integrate his life and give it true wholeness and meaning. Consequently there has already been noted among white writers a decided religious revival. Whereas Marxism was the intellectual fad of the Thirties, religion has become the intellectual fad at present in America where the political and economic structures have definitely reverted to an extremely conservative position. The religious pathway of T. S. Eliot, prophet of the spiritual wasteland, technical pioneer, and most

influential name among poets during the Thirties, has been followed by W. H. Auden. Robert Lowell, a Pulitzer Prize poet of a few years ago, is a Catholic convert. Thus far no Negro recently writing poetry has reflected this religious revival, but we may well expect this tendency.

Negroes not only have grown up as poets technically with volumes of poetry showing a growing concern with craftsmanship, social perspective, and intellectual maturity, but they have also begun to reap the rewards in the form of laurels due them for their labors. They have received a greater measure of consideration from literary critics and judges of literary competitions than ever before in the history of writing by Negroes in America. Not only have Negroes succeeded in winning many philanthropic grants such as Rosenwalds and Guggenheims which have provided the wherewithal to pursue creative projects and develop burgeoning talents, but also many other honors and awards have been granted to poets of the Negro race. These have included grants from the Academy of Arts and Letters and the Yale Award for a promising younger poet. Now in 1950 has come the signal achievement with the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry to Gwendolyn Brooks for her volume, *Annie Allen*. This is the first time in the history of this Prize that a Negro has won this national honor. With this announcement comes not only the recognition of the fact that poetry by Negroes has come of age but also that the Negro has finally achieved full status in the literary world as an American poet.

What, then, is the future of the Negro writing poetry in America? It would seem from these remarks that the outlook is bright and hopeful. It is a fact that some of the most significant poetry written in America during the past two decades has been written by Negroes. Now, what is the promise? Is there hope that it will be fulfilled? Is the Negro as a poet doomed to annihilation because he is part of a doomed Western world, or is that Western culture really doomed? Is our society already a fascist society? If it is, what hope has our literature? If these are only bogeymen, then whither are we turning? Is our path toward religious revival, neoclassicism, internationalism as a result of global perspectives and world government, or what?

From such young poets as M. Carl Holman must come the answer. Deeply concerned with the psychological, yet aware of our physical world, he shares a growing understanding of our spiritual problems with some of the most mature craftsmen practicing the art of poetry. He bears watching as a poet who is technically aware and intellectually worthy of his salt.

If we are truly in a transitional stage of social evolution, a state of flux, of cataclysmic socioeconomic and political upheaval that will ultimately and

inevitably shape our literary life, this will soon be clear. Now, the shape of our emerging society is dimly shadowed by many imponderables. The future of the Negro writing poetry in America is bright only if the future of the world is bright, and if he with the rest of his world can survive the deadly conflicts that threaten him and his total freedom, the awful anticipation of which now hangs over his head like the sword of Damocles.