

Richard Wright and Recent Negro Fiction

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Recent Negro fiction has been marked by a slow but steady movement toward reality. In quantity it has been small; in quality it has ranged from works which echo the exoticism of the Harlem writers to the high artistry of *Native Son*.

Many of the older Negro writers have failed to produce any fiction since the early Thirties, having either stopped writing completely, or having confined themselves to other forms. The production of those who have continued to write has been scant: Langston Hughes, while active in drama, autobiography and poetry, has produced no fiction since *The Ways of White Folks* in 1934. Arna Bon-temps has, besides several children's books, written *Black Thunder* and *Drums At Dusk*, two historical novels; while Zora Neil Hurston has published *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Tell My Horse*. Of the younger writers there have appeared E. Waters Turpin with two novels, *These Low Grounds* and *O Cannan*; William Attaway with *Let Me Breathe Thunder*; and Richard Wright with *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*.

The trend of this writing has been toward improvement and modernization of technique and enlargement of theme. Unlike the fiction growing out of the New Negro Movement, it has avoided exoticism and evolves out of an inner compulsion rather than out of a shallow imitativeness; it has been more full of the stuff of America.

Native Son marks the highest point of contrast between Negro fiction of the Thirties and that of the Twenties. The fiction which appeared during the post-war period was timid and narrow of theme, except in a few instances. Here appeared such writers as Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neil Hurston, Wallace Thurman and Jessie Fauset; all expressing certain general ideas and tendencies which grew out of the post-war prosperity and the rise of a conscious Negro middle class. Usually their work was apologetic and an expression of middle class ideology rather than the point of view of the Negro workers or farmers. Except for the works of Langston Hughes, it ignored the existence of Negro folklore and perceived no connection between its efforts and the symbols and images of Negro folk forms; it avoided psychology; was unconscious of politics; and most of the deeper problems arising out of the rela-

tionship of the Negro group to the American whole, were avoided. Not that it contained no protest; it did. But its protest was racial and narrowly nationalistic. In Hughes' work, however, there was an awareness of the working class and socially dispossessed Negro and his connection with the international scheme of things. Hughes' fiction, while employing advanced techniques, drew upon Negro folklore and thus was more vital and enduring than the work of most of his contemporaries.

Edward Waters Turpin has written of a Negro family, showing its evolution by generations through several periods of the country's growth. In his second book he has treated the Great Migration when, during the World War period, thousands of Negroes left the South to settle in the industrial centers of the North. These are new directions for Negro fiction, but Turpin's treatment of his material betrays the lack of a fully integrated world-view; a fact most glaringly revealed in his clinging to obsolete technical devices.

This last cannot be said of William Attaway, who has a promising first novel to his credit. Attaway's fiction shows an understanding of the aims of modern writing, but in choosing to relate the adventures of white boys-of-the-road, he has not given his attention to the major themes of Negro experience.

The effect of these novels is one of incompleteness, something is not fully formed in them. And when Negro magazine fiction is examined it is seen that the division between the themes of which Negro writers are becoming aware and the technique necessary for their expression is quite wide-spread. Yet the currents of American writing have reached even here, seeping through the barrier of *Jim-crow* and through the backward editorial policies of the magazines themselves. Until there is some organized and conscious effort, however, to bring theme and technique into focus, we can only expect this condition to change only slowly.

It is when we examine *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom's Children* against the background of other recent Negro fiction that we begin to see the full effect that political and cultural segregation has had upon Negro intellectual life.

In his monogram, *How Bigger Was Born*, Richard Wright explains how he came to possess the understanding which produced these works. As a member of the Chicago John Reed Club, he came into contact with white writers and began to crack the walls of his isolation. He explains:

"I met white writers who talked of their responses, who told me how whites reacted to this lurid American scene . . . and . . . I'd translate what they said into terms of Bigger's life. But what was more important . . . 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 . . . adapted them, until they became *my* way of apprehending the locked-in life of the Black Belt areas."

And when Wright wrote, his fiction showed a maturity possessed by few recent American novels. The attainment of such understanding amounts to a contradiction of the whole American jim-crow system. In terms of Negro fiction it represents the take-off in a leap which promises to carry over a whole tradition, and accomplished the merging of the imaginative depiction of Negro life into the broad stream of American literature. To the Negro writer it has suggested the path which he must take to reach maturity, and it has increased his social responsibility. His is the great problem of mastering American civilization through the techniques and discipline of his art—a process which constitutes the attainment of an emotional, physiological and intellectual discipline which is usually the heritage and privilege of those who control the nation's wealth. This is a difficult but necessary achievement if his people are to fight their battle with any sense of equality. It is no accident that the two most advanced Negro writers, Hughes and Wright, have been men who have enjoyed freedom of association with advanced white writers; nor is it accidental that they have had the greatest effect upon Negro life.

Today the Negro people are struggling in a world turned chaotic with reaction and war. They are under a handicap because they have historically been denied opportunities to become conditioned in the methods of organized struggle. It thus becomes the task of writers to help them overcome this handicap and to possess the conscious meaning of their struggles. The survival of American culture depends upon the general public awareness of its ideals and traditions, and this includes the Negroes as well as others. The American Writers' Congress is working in this direction by providing discussions on Negro writing problems and opportunities for Negro writers to establish contacts with white writers who know that the safety of American culture depends as much upon the spread of their craft knowledge as upon the growth.