

## the harlem renaissance: towards a black aesthetic

addison gayle, jr.

During the Harlem Renaissance when Black people, as Countee Cullen notes, were only three generations removed from their ancestral homeland, a group of remarkable men and women converged on Harlem and transformed it into the literary capital of the world. They were a diverse group: they held different opinions concerning the function of art, their relationship with the United States and with each other. They were old and young, naive and sophisticated, college-educated, and self-taught, and they came from places as far away as the West Indies and as near as Washington, D.C. Yet, they had one thing in common—the determination, according to Langston Hughes, “to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.”

Such a determination may seem archaic in the 1960’s when Blacks have made expressing their dark-skinned selves into a religion. However, as late as 1925, to do so was not only unusual but revolutionary. To express one’s dark-skinned self meant to seriously evaluate the myths and stereotypes foisted off on the race by Blacks and Whites alike. “I never wanted to write dialect [poetry],” Paul Laurence Dunbar told James Weldon Johnson in 1900, “but I had to gain a hearing.”

To gain his hearing, the poet catered to the desires of the White reading public by distorting the Black experience in the manner of Thomas Nelson Page, Thomas Dixon and Joel Chandler Harris.<sup>1</sup> In Dunbar’s poetry and fiction, the simple, fun-loving, subservient Black becomes the metaphor for the dark race. He was prevented from expressing himself as he wished to and forced to adhere to the old myths and stereotypes by publishers and readers. The resultant damage to his self-esteem and his art is incalculable. In some of the saddest lines ever written by a Black writer, he tells of his personal despair:

He sang of love when earth was young,  
And love, itself, was in his lays.  
But ah, the world, it turned to praise  
A jingle in a broken tongue.<sup>2</sup>

Dunbar sought the praise of the White world. Like many Black writers, past and present, he made the spiritual pilgrimage to the Cathedral at Chartres where he stood in awe before this symbol of the artistic accomplishment of the western world. When the imaginary journey was over, having discovered the beauty and grandeur of western civilization, like James Baldwin, he returned with the belief that civilization and Whiteness were synonymous terms and that he who would be civilized must first shed his Black skin. For this reason, the heroes of his novels, Freddie Brent, Landry Thaler and Robert Van Doren, are White mirror images of himself.<sup>3</sup> “[He] did not say that he was looking at White characters from a [Black] point of view,” writes Saunders Redding, “he simply assumed inherent emotional, intellectual, and spiritual identity with his characters.”

Dunbar was not alone. Phillis Wheatley, the second American woman to write poetry and the first Black poet to gain renown, wrote inspiring lyrics to George Washington and his troops during the Revolutionary War. However, she seldom noted the plight of her Black brothers and sisters under slavery, and when she did it was usually done in denigrating terms:

Father of mercy! 'Twas thy gracious hand  
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.<sup>4</sup>

William Wells Brown was the first Black novelist, the first Black playwright, one of the first Black historians, a runaway slave, an orator and abolitionist. Yet, this gallant warrior, when dealing with Black people in fiction, adhered to the convention of the tragic mulatto established by the Plantation School of writers. In his two novels, *Clotel, or the Colored Heroine* (1853) and *Miralda; or the Beautiful Quadroon* (1861), his serious characters are quadroons, octoroons and mulattoes; those who, being closest to the gods, are worthy of salvation. Partly in reaction to this attempt by Black writers of the past to negate their “dark-skinned selves,” *The Messenger*,<sup>5</sup> one of the most militant journals of the Renaissance period, adopted as its motto:

I am an iconoclast  
I break the limbs of idols  
And smash the traditions of men.

The Renaissance writers were determined to adhere to the motto of *The Messenger*. Like Langston Hughes, the best of them sought a perch atop the racial mountain where, free in their own souls, they could express themselves and, concomitantly, the hopes, aspirations and fears of Black people. Living some twenty years prior to the advent of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), many arrived at Wright's truth long before he became famous. Hughes, Locke, Fisher and McKay, any one of them might have written in the Twenties, as Wright wrote in the Thirties: “The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a

serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep informed and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and molds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today. The Negro writer is called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live, and die. . . .”

At no time in the history of Blacks in America has there been such an intensive campaign to create the values by which the race might survive than during the brief period known as the Harlem Renaissance. Better educated and more sophisticated than those who preceded them, the Renaissance writers discovered new truths about America. Despite the servile posturing and proclamations of Booker T. Washington, the zenith of race relations had not been reached; despite the patience of Black men—sorely tested as a result of lynchings, bombings and burnings—racial harmony was farther away than ever; despite the heroism of Black men on the field of battle in Europe and that of their brothers and sisters on the home front, democracy was still a word which had meaning only for White Americans. Out of the realization of these new truths, McKay cried out in anger and desperation:

Oh, Kinsmen; we must meet the common foe.  
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deals one death blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack.  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps in his calmer moments, the angry poet, like James Weldon Johnson, realized that “we would be justified in taking up arms or anything else if we could win, but I know that we cannot win.” To be sure, the military battle could not be won. A people with little knowledge of the art of warfare, with no weapons and no allies could not look for victory against the forces of a country whose egotism had been increased by its victories—no matter how slight—in the first World War. This does not mean that Black men practiced passive resistance. Their backs pushed against the wall, they fought with the little they had at their command. In race riots in Chicago, Detroit and New York City, they fought back and took a fair toll of the oppressor. However, there were no victories. Their losses were great. Although these warriors were courageous men, they fought a battle not of their choosing, at the wrong time and in the wrong places.

The decisive battle lay elsewhere. This was the opinion of Langston Hughes who, in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), wrote, “. . . it is the duty of the younger Negro artist . . . to change through the force of his art that old whispering ‘I want to be white,’ hidden in the aspirations of his people, to ‘Why should I want to be

white? I am a Negro—and beautiful.’” This was also the opinion of Alain Locke who wrote in *The New Negro*: “America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity, trying to found an American literature, a national art, and national music implies a Negro-American culture seeking the same satisfactions and objectives. . . . Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul. There is a fresh spiritual and cultural focusing. . . . There is a renewed race-spirit that consciously and proudly sets itself apart. Justifiably then, we speak of the offerings of this book embodying these ripening forces as culled from the first fruits of the Negro Renaissance.”<sup>7</sup>

The fruit was the pomegranate; for, like the pomegranate, the Renaissance had many seeds. There were those who continued to cling to the old values, who frowned on full scale war on tradition. They were writers of the stature of William Stanley Braithwaite, Benjamin Brawley and Jessie Fauset. Their position has been aptly summed up by Angelina Grimké:

We ask for peace. We, at the bound  
O life, are weary of the round  
In search of truth. We know the quest  
Is not for us, the vision blest  
Is meant for other eyes. Uncrowned,  
We go, with heads bowed to the ground,  
And old hands, gnarled and hard and browned.  
Let us forget the past unrest,—  
We ask for peace.<sup>8</sup>

For others—Locke, Toomer, Hughes and Johnson—peace was an illusion. Not only did these writers declare war on tradition, but they also sought to re-evaluate the political, social and cultural values which had been handed down from the past. The position of this group has been recorded by Claude McKay:

But the great western world holds me in fee  
And I may never hope for full release  
While to its alien gods I bend my knee.<sup>9</sup>

The result was a split into two opposing groups. To place these groups into perspective the use of the terms “Nationalism” and “Assimilationism”—terms which should not be taken as all-inclusive—is necessary. Assimilationism, cultural or political, is an attempt at accommodation. Inherent in the assimilationist ideal is the belief that White American culture is the *sine qua non* of human existence and that each Black man, to be civilized, must become a part of it. Politically it means, to use Ralph Ellison’s phrase, “to be an American Negro.” Culturally it means, in terms of Countee Cullen and James Baldwin, to be an American writer instead of a Black writer.

The major characteristic of Nationalism is its attempt to solidify the group conscience, to create unity among people of the same color, race or

locale. Accepting, *a priori*, the fact that Black men differ from White men, the nationalist argues against cultural sameness and in favor of cultural plurality. Therefore, politically, nationalism means gaining control of the institutions of the American society which control the lives of Black people; culturally, it demands an art which maximizes the differences between White and Black culture.

Central to both philosophies is the question of identity. Would the Black man negate his identity by assimilation so that his culture and that of White America would become one? Would he undergo a baptism in the American mainstream which would wash away his Blackness and transform him into a White man? Or would he find his identity in the artifacts of Black culture handed down from the spiritualists of the past to the present? Would he refuse to be baptized in the presence of alien gods and, instead, choose to be, not an American Negro, but a Black man in America?

Two pre-Renaissance novels point up this dichotomy between the assimilationists and the nationalists, and an understanding of them is germane to an understanding of the major conflict among the writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

Marcus Garvey probably never read Sutton Griggs' *Imperium In Imperio*; but had he done so, he might have been accused of plagiarism. For the Imperium that Garvey desired to establish on African soil was established here in America in the novel of this virtually unknown nineteenth-century Black writer.

In *Imperium In Imperio*, published in 1899, a group of Black men, tired of their treatment by White Americans over the years, form a parallel government on American soil. This government also has a president, congress and a constitution. After years of preparation, of checking out prospective members, the Imperium meets in a secret session to "decide what shall be the relations that shall henceforth exist between us and the Anglo-Saxon race of the United States of America."

Several proposals are put forth during the deliberations. One speaker offers the assimilationist point of view: "We must remain here. As long as we remain here as a separate and distinct race we shall continue to be oppressed. We must lose our identity. I, therefore, urge that we abandon the idea of becoming anything noteworthy as a separate and distinct race and send the word forth that we amalgamate." Another speaker "advocated emigration to the African Congo Free States," which, he argued, ". . . was in the hands of the weak Kingdom of Belgium and could be wrested from Belgium with the greatest ease." The revolutionary argument was voiced by one speaker: "I am for war! . . . Whereas the history of our treatment by the Anglo-Saxon race is but the history of oppression, and whereas our patient endurance of evil has not served to decrease this cruelty, but seems rather to increase it . . . Be it resolved . . . That the hour for wreaking vengeance for our multiplied wrongs has come. Re-

solved secondly: That we at once proceed to war for the purpose of accomplishing the end just named, and for the purpose of obtaining all our rights due us as men." After much deliberation, the Imperium declares in favor of a separate state for Black people: "Resolved that we sojourn in the state of Texas, working out our destiny as a separate and distinct race in the United States of America." Conscious of American history, they did not expect to be given a state: ". . . let the troops proceed quietly to Austin, seize the capitol and hoist the flag of the Imperium . . . We will demand the surrender of Texas and Louisiana to the Imperium. Texas, we will retain. Louisiana, we will cede to our foreign allies in return for their aid. Thus will the Negro have an empire of his own, fertile in soil, capable of sustaining a population of fifty million people."

"I always confuse the present with the past," wrote Leopold Senghor. Knowing as much as we do about the Garvey movement of the 1920's and the movement for self-determination in the 1960's, we are apt to confuse the events in *Imperium In Imperio* with those of the present. Certainly it is not too far wrong to suggest that political Black Nationalism had its genesis in the novel of Sutton Griggs. Move the clock ahead twenty-one years, change the setting and, in place of the Black intelligensia, substitute the Black proletariat of the Universal Negro Improvement Association; for Griggs' hero, Belton, president of the Imperium, substitute the founder of the UNIA, Marcus Garvey; and we are in the era of the Harlem Renaissance wherein, with the advent of the Garvey movement, the dichotomy between the nationalists and the assimilationists is weighted in favor of the nationalists. And no document is more important in understanding this shift than James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an EX-Coloured Man*.

Johnson is the embodiment of the dilemma of the Renaissance writer. Ostensibly, he is a conservative whose aesthetic and political beliefs are based on pragmatism. Nevertheless, he does more than any other Black writer to break down the wall of tradition. In an introduction to *American Negro Poetry*, published in 1922, he attacks the dialect tradition which was brought to the height of its popularity by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Realizing that behind the dialect tradition lay the stereotypes which depicted Blacks in pathetic and humorous terms, he sought to substitute a language which more closely resembled the language of Black people. His volume of poems, *God's Trombones*, published in 1927, is an attempt to return to the true rhythms, nuances and speech patterns of that language.

The 1917 reprint of *The Autobiography*, which was originally published in 1912, appeared five years before Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows* and enhanced the cultural dichotomy so central to the Harlem Renaissance. Like James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, *The Autobiography* is the picture of an artist trapped between two worlds. In Johnson's

novel, the artist's dilemma is symbolized by a protagonist who is the illegitimate son of a White man and a Black woman. The father and mother symbolize two different worlds. The world of the father is that of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart—that of the mother, the world of jazz, the blues and folklore. The question posed by the novel is clear: As an artist, more specifically a musician, to which world will the protagonist dedicate himself? He chooses the White world but does so with the realization that he may not have made the best choice. "I cannot repress the thought," he tells us at the end of the novel, "that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage."

Like Johnson's protagonist, the Renaissance writers were forced to choose between two worlds—one of opulence and splendor, already in existence, the other of poverty and hope, waiting to be born. They were confronted with the problem of breaking with tradition while having no substitute for it. They realized that the models handed down to them from the White world were inadequate for the creation of a nationalistic literature, yet they had little time in which to create new artistic forms and many of them doubted that such new forms could be created. This explains, in part, the continued adherence of Renaissance critics—Brawley, Braithwaite, Locke and DuBois—to the aesthetic criteria of the past. Again, as with Johnson's protagonist, they were not certain that the new world could be brought into being.

No one realized this fact more than Wallace Thurman, a bitter, frustrated man whose *Infants of the Spring* (1932) does as much to burlesque the novels of the Renaissance writers as Jane Austen's *Juvenilia* does to burlesque the novels of her eighteenth-century predecessors. His portrait of his fellow writers is vivid and to the point: a group of men and women who, although possessing a great deal of talent, talk and dance away their creative energy. Having chosen to wage war by means other than physical confrontation, the Black writer did not bring his creative energies to this task and thus failed to create new images for Black people. ". . . some Harlemites," wrote Langston Hughes, "thought the millenium had come. . . . They were sure the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke."

The millenium did not come. The New Negro did not materialize in art. Despite innovations in traditional forms—Hughes' interjection of the blues into the poetic structure, McKay's use of the sonnet form to portray anger and protest, Toomer's exploitation of the rich possibilities of the language and Johnson's fusion of ancient oratorical patterns with the modern stanzaic structure—the Renaissance writers lacked an aesthetic which might have given form and direction to their art. This lack of an aesthetic prevented them from producing new art forms, creating new images and solving the problem of identity.

In reality—and especially is this true of the novelist—the image of the New Negro differed little from the stereotypic Negro of the works of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Of course, there were improvements over the old model: the New Negro was a man disgusted with western civilization and, like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, wary of becoming part of a mechanized world. However, in the novels of McKay, Cullen and Hughes, the New Negro does not attempt to create new values, but rather, like Jake of McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), he searches for mystical, romantic ones whose only attraction is that they differ from those handed down by Booker T. Washington.

In *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Harold Cruse censures the writers of the Renaissance for their failure to produce a nationalistic literature.<sup>10</sup> The censure is misdirected. Far more culpable than the writers were the critics who, imbued with archaic notions of what art should be, were incapable of laying down the theoretical guidelines for the evaluation of Black art. They failed to produce standards based on the artifacts of Black life—from which the Black writer might create an indigenous literature—which had existed since slavery. Seeking accommodation with society instead of war, these critics demanded obedience to bankrupt critical standards and, in so doing, postponed the battle for cultural separatism now being waged in America by young writers of the Seventies.

However, despite the lack of these standards, much was accomplished and the Renaissance writer, although he did not travel the road to a Black aesthetic, at least mapped out the contours of such a road. As a result of the Garvey movement, the Black critic examined his African heritage; as a result of the large migration of Blacks from South to North, he examined the Southland—the first home away from the old world; as a result of the continued intransigence of White Americans, he questioned his loyalty to American society. Therefore, some writers *were* able to break with the White western world which, for so long, had held them in bondage.

The break was not complete. And even now, the Black writers of the Seventies remain as torn between the two worlds as were the Black writers of the Twenties. Once again history repeats itself and the Black artist is forced to create in the absence of new and different critical criteria. Some—Ellison and Baldwin are the most well-known—still adhere to these canons of criticism vouchsafed by critics whose only contact with Black culture is through their Black servants. Others, like LeRoi Jones and Ishmael Reed, less concerned with White academic critics, deal with the artifacts of Black life realistically in an attempt to create images of the Afro-American in the 1970's.

Once again, the critics are remiss. Many adhere to the standards erected by Archibald MacLeish, Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate—standards applied to Black literature by Robert Bone, Theodore Gross



and Herbert Hill. Unwilling to believe with Saunders Redding that Black men are different from White men, such critics continue to use an aesthetic which is inapplicable to Afro-American literature. They continue to adhere to the myth of the sanctity of western values and ethics even though these values and ethics are being attacked by two-thirds of the people of the world. They refuse to believe with the youth of this nation that the time for change is long past and that the era of bending to other people's gods belongs to the slop jar of history. Like the critics of the Harlem Renaissance, contemporary Black critics have refused to realize the most salient fact of the Black man's existence: to be Black in America is to be at war with the American society and of no man is this more true than the Black artist.

However, the situation is far from bleak. Across the country, Black critics are attempting to formulate new aesthetic standards. They have learned much from the artists of the Renaissance and, steeped in the critical traditions of Sterling Brown, Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes and Saunders Redding, they move beyond these critics to search for new codes by which to evaluate the literature of a great people. In this renaissance of the 1970's, they remain the brightest hope; and although history may well record their failure to formulate new standards for Black artists, it must also note that, against superhuman odds, against assault from Blacks and Whites alike, they persevered and continued to "fight the good fight."

City University of New York

My own theories of a Black aesthetic are developed in *The Black Aesthetic*, an anthology of writings by Black artists which will be published by Doubleday later this year.

## footnotes

1. Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Dixon, White southern writers who gained eminence during the post-Reconstruction period, were instrumental in shaping and perpetuating, through their fiction, those myths about Black life which would dominate American literature for more than fifty years. In the ante-bellum novels of Page and Harris, Blacks were portrayed as docile, fun-loving, rather simple-minded creatures, whose days on the plantation were one long series of "shuffles and songs." At the other extreme lay the stereotypes of Thomas Dixon whose writings characterized Blacks as depraved and brutal subhumans whose savage impulses were kept in check only by the presence of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.

2. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "The Poet," *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York, 1913), lines 5-8.

3. Freddie Brent is the protagonist of *The Uncalled* (1898), Landry Thaler appears in *The Love of Landry* (1900), while Robert Van Doren is the hero of *The Fanatics* (1901).

4. Phillis Wheatley, "To the University of Cambridge, in New England," *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (Philadelphia, 1930), lines 5-6.

5. *The Messenger*, a monthly periodical, was edited by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen and published from November, 1917, through May/June, 1928. Its militancy can best be exemplified by a statement which appeared in its first issue (November, 1917, vol. I, no. II) in which the editors describe their goal as ". . . fighting for the economic and intellectual emancipation of the working man."

6. Claude McKay, "If We Must Die," *Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (New York, 1953), lines 9-14.

7. Quotation cited: *The New Negro*, ed., Alain Locke (New York, 1968), xvi-xvii. *The New Negro*, originally the title of an anthology of the writings of young Blacks of the Renaissance,

was published by Alain Locke in 1925. However, the phrase "New Negro" itself soon became synonymous with the literary movement more formally referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. Of Alain Locke, author of the anthology just cited, historian Saunders Redding has said: ". . . Phi Beta Kappa Scholar, Rhodes Scholar, and professor of philosophy at Howard University, no man did more to stimulate, direct and stabilize the new intellectualism than he." (*They Came in Chains* [New York, 1950], 262.)

8. Angelina Weld Grimke, "Surrender," *Caroling Dusk*, ed., Countee Cullen (New York, 1927), lines 1-9.

9. McKay, "Outcast," *op. cit.*, lines 6-8.

10. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967), 519.