

be clear, as with the steadily narrowing limit of supportable population the reproductive obligation of sex lessens, its unabated emotional compulsions tend to assume the proportions of a terrible—if ecstatic—enslavement. Already this appears in the current saturation of our art and literature with aspects of the struggle to rid ourselves, by rationalization, of this most ancient type of befuddlement. It is suggested in the querulous resort of certain of our intelligentsia to Europe, where achievement is not yet cleared of the mingled odor of amorousness and alcohol with which for five thousand years it has been penetrated. Under competent social scrutiny the confused and increasingly unsatisfactory handling of what are called sex problems is shown more and more to be involved with artificially induced extra-biologic states of sex attraction. Inevitably with the shrinkage of the reproductive obligation these extra-biologic states will be found to be of diminishing interest and effectiveness.

With our characteristically American sentimentality in respect to sex, it is natural that the instinctive urge to reduce the emotional obfuscations of amorousness to something like their biologic proportions would be indirect and more or less unacknowledged. The numerically popular success of the movement toward prohibition, though it draws a considerable quota of the experientially convinced, quite certainly draws other numbers motivated by the instinct to seek relief from urges that exceed their function, by destroying artificial excitements. And for at least five thousand years extra-biologic amorousness has been so identified with alcohol that our popular phraseology scarcely takes account of one without the other. It is not inevitable that such general and instinctive movements as this one for the riddance of alcohol should be altogether wise in their procedure or even widely intelligent. It is normal to all mass movement that the individual assent or resistance to any deep-seated urge should appear so variously motivated. There are no doubt numbers of the adherents of prohibition whose subconscious recompense is the satisfaction they take in the deprivations of other people; just as there are ardent protagonists who under the slogan of personal liberty are masking a love of drunkenness—alcoholic or amorous—for its own sake. Nor does it affect the essentials of the problem one way or another that much of the practical resistance to the Volstead Act is mere adolescent protest against regulatory discipline, the as yet unsocialized need of doing what we like because we like it.

The variety and incongruity of the reasons for and against are only further evidences of the power of deep-seated social urges to transcend all our logic and intelligence.

To any one who will take the pains to uncover the early phases of the prohibition movement, as revealed in the pamphlets, public pronouncements, and programs of that time, it will be plain that its biologic derivation was then much more nearly conscious than it is now. This also follows the law of the emergence of wars, the generative causes of which tend, as the reality of war approaches, to disappear under a cloud of incidental emotionalism. That Frances Willard herself was perfectly clear as to the complete implication of all our hopes of social betterment in the removal of the one great source of moral and intellectual befuddlement, I think there can be no doubt. In the effort to avoid or uproot whatever blurs the edge of reality—drink, or lust, or war, or moral enthusiasm—all of which are more or less interchangeable as individual motivation, it is natural that drink should be the first to be objectively attacked. It presents a visible measure of economic convenience as a hand-hold, and strategically undermines the others. With the elimination of alcohol amorousness loses much of its enticement, and it is quite possible that the waning popularity of war is partly owed to its diminished opportunity for indulging the confluent appetites for drink and lust. That the effort to eliminate the first three occasions of emotional obfuscation should be the occasion of an accession of the last, most insidious intoxication, is perhaps the worst thing that can be said of it. For any moral enthusiasm invariably gives rise to counter-enthusiasms of immorality, against which the first frequently arrests itself, sometimes to the degree of temporary defeat. As this appears to be the present state of the prohibition movement, falling over itself in a too rapid progress toward its goal, this would seem to be the moment for both sides to abate their mutual fury of attack in a mutual recognition of the nature of the urge in which the movement takes its rise. It might prove in the end as doubtful an advantage to escape too soon as to hug too long, and on mistaken premises, a traditional release and incitement. One feels certain that a completely rationalized society would waste no more time in argument, but assign drinking privileges in conformity with demonstrable inability to perform a biologic function or achieve a preferred emotional release without it. But then ours is not, possibly never has had a genuine desire to be, a completely rationalized society.

The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain

By LANGSTON HUGHES

ONE of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American

standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

But let us look at the immediate background of this young poet. His family is of what I suppose one would call the Negro middle class: people who are by no means rich yet never uncomfortable nor hungry—smug, contented, respectable folk, members of the Baptist church. The father goes to work every morning. He is a chief steward at a large white club. The mother sometimes does fancy sewing or supervises parties for the rich families of the town. The children go to a mixed school. In the home they read white papers and magazines. And the mother often

says "Don't be like niggers" when the children are bad. A frequent phrase from the father is, "Look how well a white man does things." And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all the virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money. The whisper of "I want to be white" runs silently through their minds. This young poet's home is, I believe, a fairly typical home of the colored middle class. One sees immediately how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns.

For racial culture the home of a self-styled "high-class" Negro has nothing better to offer. Instead there will perhaps be more aping of things white than in a less cultured or less wealthy home. The father is perhaps a doctor, lawyer, landowner, or politician. The mother may be a social worker, or a teacher, or she may do nothing and have a maid. Father is often dark but he has usually married the lightest woman he could find. The family attend a fashionable church where few really colored faces are to be found. And they themselves draw a color line. In the North they go to white theaters and white movies. And in the South they have at least two cars and a house "like white folks." Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art (if any), and an Episcopal heaven. A very high mountain indeed for the would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people.

But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority—may the Lord be praised! The people who have their nip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance! These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself. Whereas the better-class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear. And they are not ashamed of him—if they know he exists at all. And they accept what beauty is their own without question.

Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their "white" culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country with their innumerable overtones and undertones, surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand.

To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears. But let us look again at the mountain.

A prominent Negro clubwoman in Philadelphia paid eleven dollars to hear Raquel Meller sing Andalusian popular songs. But she told me a few weeks before she would not think of going to hear "that woman," Clara Smith, a great black artist, sing Negro folksongs. And many an upper-class Negro church, even now, would not dream of employing a spiritual in its services. The drab melodies in white folks' hymnbooks are much to be preferred. "We want to worship the Lord correctly and quietly. We don't believe in 'shouting.' Let's be dull like the Nordics," they say, in effect.

The road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high. Until recently he received almost no encouragement for his work from either white or colored people. The fine novels of Chestnutt go out of print with neither race noticing their passing. The quaint charm and humor of Dunbar's dialect verse brought to him, in his day, largely the same kind of encouragement one would give a side-show freak (A colored man writing poetry! How odd!) or a clown (How amusing!).

The present vogue in things Negro, although it may do as much harm as good for the budding colored artist, has at least done this: it has brought him forcibly to the attention of his own people among whom for so long, unless the other race had noticed him beforehand, he was a prophet with little honor. I understand that Charles Gilpin acted for years in Negro theaters without any special acclaim from his own, but when Broadway gave him eight curtain calls, Negroes, too, began to beat a tin pan in his honor. I know a young colored writer, a manual worker by day, who had been writing well for the colored magazines for some years, but it was not until he recently broke into the white publications and his first book was accepted by a prominent New York publisher that the "best" Negroes in his city took the trouble to discover that he lived there. Then almost immediately they decided to give a grand dinner for him. But the society ladies were careful to whisper to his mother that perhaps she'd better not come. They were not sure she would have an evening gown.

The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. "O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites. Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write "Cane." The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read "Cane" hate it. They are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent. Yet (excepting the work of DuBois) "Cane" contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial.

But in spite of the Nordicized Negro intelligentsia and the desires of some white editors we have an honest American Negro literature already with us. Now I await the rise of the Negro theater. Our folk music, having achieved world-wide fame, offers itself to the genius of the great in-

dividual American Negro composer who is to come. And within the next decade I expect to see the work of a growing school of colored artists who paint and model the beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world. And the Negro dancers who will dance like flame and the singers who will continue to carry our songs to all who listen—they will be with us in even greater numbers tomorrow.

Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. I am sincere as I know how to be in these poems and yet after every reading I answer questions like these from my own people: Do you think Negroes should always write about Negroes? I wish you wouldn't read some of your poems to white folks. How do you find anything interesting in a place like a cabaret? Why do you write about black people? You aren't black. What makes you do so many jazz poems?

But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. Yet the Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not like me to write about it. The old subconscious "white is best" runs through her mind. Years of study under white teachers, a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals, and Puritan standards made her dislike the spirituals. And now she turns up her nose at jazz and all its manifestations—likewise almost everything else distinctly racial. She doesn't care for the Winold Reiss portraits of Negroes because they are "too Negro." She does not want a true picture of herself from anybody. She wants the artist to flatter her, to make the white world believe

that all Negroes are as smug and as near white in soul as she wants to be. But, to my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, 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!"

So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet," as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose.

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing Water Boy, and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

[In last week's Nation Negro art was discussed from an opposing point of view by George S. Schuyler.]

The Color Question in South Africa

By RUTH S. ALEXANDER

[The color problem in South Africa has been made more acute by the policy of the present Government, which frankly favors repression of both the native and the Indian inhabitants. The Government aims to diminish, ultimately to eliminate, the Indian population; it has proposed a measure restricting the areas in which Indians may live, thus establishing virtual ghettos; taking away the right to buy or lease land except in narrowly limited districts in Natal; and creating other limitations on the rights of people already living under heavy restrictions.]

Cape Town, May 1

ON April 23, in a quiet and rather tense House, the Minister of the Interior, Dr. Malan, announced that, owing to a formula which had been agreed upon between his own Government and that of India, the Asiatic bill would be postponed, pending a round-table conference to discuss the whole Asiatic problem in South Africa. The crux of that formula—oh, blessed word—is the sentence which states:

The Government of the Union have impressed on the Government of India that public opinion in South Africa

will not view with favor any settlement which does not hold out a reasonable prospect of safeguarding the maintenance of Western standards of life by just and legitimate means.

General Smuts, for the Opposition, gave the Government his rather lugubrious blessing, and the House agreed formally and unanimously to the postponement. The time and place of the conference have not yet been announced, but the oppressive bill, in any event, cannot come before Parliament until next year.

On this result of their visit the Government of India deputation, consisting of Mr. Paddison, an Englishman; two Indian members of the Council of State; and the Indian secretary of the deputation, Mr. Bajpai, have every reason to congratulate themselves. That their tact, their knowledge, and their unflinching courtesy under conditions calculated to try that courtesy to the uttermost were important elements in bringing it about cannot be doubted. In view of the feeling in South Africa on what General Smuts called "this very great and difficult question," the Government, in consenting to the round-table conference, has

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