

A Changing Race

A Review by D. R.

THE NEW NEGRO. Edited by Alain Locke. New York: Albert & Charles Boni. \$5.00.

FEW more "significant" books have appeared in the last twelve months than this synthetic volume epitomizing the spirit of the modern negro in America. This review of a book published nearly six months ago is a tardy but sincere tribute to a work of unquestioned merit and outstanding interest. Consider for a moment the American negro — snatched out of African barbarism, transported in misery and wretchedness, sold into slavery, treated for generations like a beast of the field, raised sometimes by the caprice of his owner into the ranks of inferior humanity; dowered suddenly with a political importance that he could neither understand nor profitably employ, wandering thenceforward in a civilization that exploited him but found no solid or stable theory for his useful development, compelled in a hostile world to work out his own salvation, to be polite and docile and at the same time to achieve economic independence with all the cards stacked and the juries packed against him, to be forever in the American scene a "problem," both to himself and to his white overlords — and then revere and admire, if you are honest, this volume of actual achievement — achievement not in the crafts, nor in the traditional negro docilities, but in the arts where centuries of white civilization have set definite standards of accomplishment and taste.

AT the outset one should — indeed, one cannot fail to — speculate on the color line as evidenced in the faces of the makers of this volume. How many of them are of unmixed African descent? To how great a degree has the admixture of "white blood" that one sees or suspects in most of them tempered the raw African quality of the genuine "black man"? Undoubtedly, the majority of the colored "intellectuals" in America today are of mixed descent — a fact which explains to a certain extent the revolt and the indignation in their souls. If one is half white and yet is treated by white people as wholly alien and inferior, the natural reaction is to disown the white element in one's heritage and to try to establish a compensating quality in the colored. The self-consciousness of the America negro is due both to his unhappy social position in a white world and, to a certain extent, to the knowledge that he is himself partly white. In any event, the whole trend of modern negro thought is to establish the

claims of the negro race to serious consideration along the lines of highest human endeavor, to claim for it an important place in the arts. Not for their courage as soldiers, their industry as workmen, nor for their happy, lovable nature do the negro leaders praise their people; rather they point to their cultural growth and significance.

THAT achievement, as this volume demonstrates, is considerable. In Africa the negro had developed a sense of form in sculpture and painting which contrasts favorably with that of other savage artists. A sense of music, curiously exact and cunning both in harmony and rhythm, seems bred in the negro bone. White civilization the world over, today, does homage to jazz, the distinctive negro contribution to modern popular music. Naturally gifted with a high emotional coefficient, the negro has applied his music to the expression of emotions, whether of the soul or of the body. The genuine and often lovely negro "spiritual" is as distinct in its way as the strange melancholy of the "blues" or the barbaric joy of jazz.

As poets, short-story writers, novelists, and intellectual authors, the negroes' performance has been only relatively important. They have a number of creditable authors on their lists, but none who is first rate. Indeed, in no category of the arts have the negroes produced a really outstanding figure, measured by any standards except their own. But, in view of their past history, in view of the few articulate years which life has as yet allowed them, their performances are amazingly good. It is fair to say that the chief interest of "The New Negro" is sociological rather than æsthetic. But judged by any standards, the volume is in no way contemptible.

In the first place, it is admirably edited and produced. In a thoughtful introductory essay, Alain Locke describes the change that has come into negro life and thought in the United States. Those who are unfamiliar with the new race capital of Harlem or with the books written, the music, and the theatre of that community, will be surprised and perhaps disturbed to learn that "the American mind must reckon with a fundamentally changed Negro. . . . The day of 'aunties,' 'uncles,' and 'mammies' . . . is gone." The negro has emigrated, not only from his traditional home, but from his traditional ideas; spiritually, he is coming of age. Abused, persecuted sometimes, constantly looked down on, as genuine admission into American democracy has been denied him

he has been forced to a racial solidarity. Only as his cultural and intellectual products arouse respect and curiosity is he conscious both of a changing attitude toward him on the part of intelligent white people and also of a new self-respect and confidence on his own part. "To all of this the New Negro is keenly responsive as an augury of a new democracy in American culture" — and, it seems to me, rightly so. This volume should prove to doubters the right of the American negro to serious consideration and respect as an artist, and it should increase that confidence in his future which is sung by so many modern negro poets:

We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame.

The book contains articles on the negro in American literature and a number of examples of his present-day work, both in prose and verse; articles on negro music with similar examples, on negro folklore, on African art, and on the negro "problem" in its social and economic aspects. The articles are sane, carefully thought out, moderate in tone, and surprisingly free from bitterness. They breathe a profound earnestness and a certain wistful optimism. In spite of us the negro has achieved self-respect. I, for one, after reading this book, am impressed with the hope and the feeling that the "negro problem" is not insoluble, that in spite of our shifts, evasions, *laissez faire* opportunism, in spite of our incurable tendency to turn our back on any complex question or to deny its existence, the negro himself is working out his salvation and finding his niche in the America of the future.

NO discussion of this book could be complete without a reference to the amazing illustrations in color by Winold Reiss. This young German has contributed a series of portraits of prominent negroes — men and women — which for draftsmanship, truth, and the beauty which is found in truth are hard to match in current illustration. They give in themselves a distinction to the volume, and in their silent appeal they reënforce the message of the text, which is the true purpose of such work. Mr. Reiss has specialized in an interpretation of folk types — Indians, peasants, and the like. In this instance, he has succeeded brilliantly. These portraits, taken singly, are impressive; as a group they mirror the changing negro world of today — earnest, thoughtful, confident.