

WRITERS—PAST and PRESENT

PERHAPS the first noted defense of the Negro as a scholar and a writer was made by Abbe Gregoire in his "De La Litterature Des Negres," published at Paris in 1808, writes Eric D. Walrond in the Dearborn Independent. Prior to that the nation wavered as to the immortality of the "sentimental letters" of Ignatius Sancho and the "melancholy" poems of Miss Phyllis Wheatley. Yet, as far back as the seventeenth century, a Negro chimney-sweep in Holland, Beronicius, exhibited the phenomenon of a poetic genius. In Latin, Beronicius wrote two volumes of poetry entitled "Georgar," dealing with the peasants and the nobility. It was translated into Dutch verse and was re-printed in eight volumes at Middlebury in 1766. On the Middlebury edition, the print which serves as a frontispiece represents Apollo crowning the poet chimney-sweep with a laurel wreath.



Dr. DuBois

In Silesia, at about the same time, a mulatto servant at Glatz "excited the public attention by his romances." Also, two Ethiopian girls, Anne Yeamley, a milkmaid at Bristol, and Greensted, a servant at Maldstone, are represented as poets of rare merit. Other Negro poets who aroused public attention at this time were Castaing, a Turk, whose "pieces ornament different editions of poetry"; Cesar of North Carolina and Francis Williams, a Jamaican. Likewise, writing in Latin, Williams wrote the "Ode Ethiopissa."

Latin Prose Writers

Of the Latin prose writers of color of this period, Capitlen of the River St. Andre, a painter by instinct, was probably the greatest. On admission to the University of Leyden, Capitlen wrote a "Latin Dissertation on the Calling of the Gentiles," reputed to be rich in erudition, which was translated into Dutch and ran into four editions.

Away from the realm of poesy, one stumbles upon a characteristic form of Negro literature—a form handed down to Chesnut, DuBois and others. Othello's "Essay Against the Slavery of Negroes" paints in "strong colors the grief and sighs of black children, fathers, brothers and husbands, dragged from the country which gave them birth." Alongside may appropriately be put the tragic tales of Ottobah Cugoana, a native of Agimque, whose reflection on the "Slave Trade" and "Slavery of Negroes" are standard bits of Negro literature. "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Asudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa," published at Edinburgh in 1792, is the most famous of these. In many respects Vassa's story resembles the "Kassir Kraut" pen pictures drawn by Sante Sabulala in "Adventure." It is significant to note that Vassa was obliged to obtain affidavits from an admiral, an army captain, two old maids and a half a dozen married women in London to prove to the publishers and the public that he was the author of the work. Not only does the book reveal Vassa as a born story teller, but as a stylist and descriptive artist of classic charm. Of it Bishop Gregoire said: "This work is written with the naïveté, I had almost said roughness, of a man of nature. His manner is that of Daniel DeFoe in 'Robinson Crusoe.'" Vassa also wrote a poem of 112 verses on "Disquietude Arising from a Choice of a Religion."

Ignatius Sancho was born on a slave ship on the way to Cartagena. After his death in 1780, a fine edition of his letters in two volumes was brought out. Jefferson, while condemning him for his imagination and

eccentric march, acknowledged that he had "an easy style, and happy expression and that his writings breathe the sweetest effusions of sentiment." Here, indeed, was an artist, an adventurer, who knew life as only a Negro slave knew it; whose "epistolary style," says Abbe Gregoire, "resembles that of Sterne." "Sometimes he is trivial—sometimes, heated with his subject, he is poetical; but in general, he has the grace and lightness of the fancy style. He is playfully witty, when between the tyrannic empire of fashion on the one hand, and health and happiness on the other, he places the man of the world irresolute in his choice."

Tales of Slaves

Notable among the slave narratives of this sort is the "Experiences of Zamba," a Congolese king who was sold into slavery at Charleston, South Carolina. Published at London, in 1847, it provoked a stream of slave tales that literally cluttered the market. Some of them were mere sketches, of pamphlet size, and it seemed to be the fad of the day for every escaped slave to sit down and write his reminiscences.

Of Phyllis Wheatley, the African poetess, I can do no better than to quote from Mr. Arthur Schomburg's introduction to the "Poems and Letters of Phyllis Wheatley."

"We offer no defense as to the merits of Phyllis Wheatley's poems, but we are going to rest our case solely on the class of poetry of her day. During the period in which her poems were published the American republic had not yet been born. It was in its first stage of embryonic life. The poems to George Washington bring her within the range of living witnesses of the creation of a nation; in this poem we have noticed for the first time the words 'first in peace.'"

"Phyllis Wheatley's first poem was published in 1770, five years before the dawn of the American Revolution, and nearly 30 years before the dawn of the French Revolution and the birth of German idealism. That is to say, young Phyllis wrote before the mighty outburst of the human spirit which gave rise to Goethe, Schiller and Heine in Germany, and Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and Shelley in England. Her poetry was a poetry of the eighteenth century, when Pope and Gray reigned supreme; and that her poetry compared favorably with the other American poetry of her age is by no means to her discredit. There was no great American poetry in the eighteenth century and Phyllis Wheatley's poetry was as good as the best American poetry of her age."

Phyllis Wheatley is a jewel—priceless to the literature of the Negro in America."

Period of Decline

Of the poets from Phyllis Wheatley to Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, in his recent "Book of American Negro Poetry," tells us that many showed marked talent, but barely a half dozen demonstrated even mediocre mastery of technique. And yet there are several that deserve attention. George W. Horton, Frances E. Harper, James M. Bell and Alberry A. Whitman. The educational limitations of Horton were greater than

the others; he was born a slave in North Carolina in 1797, and as a young man began to compose poetry without being able to write it down. Later he received some instruction from the professors of the University of North Carolina, where he was employed as a janitor. He published "The Hope of Liberty" in 1829.

Mrs. Harper, Bell and Whitman would stand out if only for the reason that each of them attempted



Jas. W. Johnson

sustained work. Mrs. Harper published her first volume in 1854, but later published "Moses, a Story of the Nile," a poem which ran to 62 closely printed pages. Bell, in 1864, published a poem of 28 pages in celebration of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. In 1870 he published a poem of 32 pages in celebration of the ratification of the fifteenth amendment to the constitution. Whitman published his first volume, of 253 pages, in 1877; in 1884 he published "The Rape of Florida," an epic poem written in four cantos and done in the Spenserian stanza, and which ran to 97 closely printed pages. The poetry of both Mrs. Harper and of Whitman had a large degree of popularity; one of Mrs. Harper's books went through more than 20 editions.

Dunbar, the Dean

We now come to Paul Laurence Dunbar, dean of American Negro writers. Born in Dayton in 1872, Dunbar worked as an elevator operator; his education was limited. His first volume, "Oak and Ivy," was published in 1893 at his own expense. Peddling his own poems became so distasteful that he swore he would prefer to go unsung rather than do it again. And he did not have to. William Dean Howells took an interest in him and wrote an introduction to "Lyrics of Lowly Life," which appeared a few years later. In his dialect poems, irresistible in humor and pathos, and his short stories of Southern Negro life, a master of his art, Dunbar depicted the Negro as he is. Yet that does not mean that he was not capable of classic prose. Realizing that a Negro poet is expected to sing the songs of the cotton fields in the language of the cotton fields, Dunbar wrote dialect. He is the author of four novels, "The Love of Landry," "The Fanatics," "The Sport of the Gods," and four volumes of short stories, "Folks from Dixie," "The Strength of Gideon," "In Old Plantation Days" and "The Heart of Happy Hollow." Volumes of verse were "Lyrics of the Hearthside," "Lyrics of Love and Laughter" and "Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow."

There is only one Negro writer with whom we may compare Dunbar, and that is the late Charles W. Chestnut, the novelist. Not so very long ago a book reviewer for a New York paper told us he thought "it was time for the Negro to return to the age of Chestnut; that there is so much bite and venom and vituperation in his work." Exactly. But why Chestnut? Why not Dunbar? Author of "The Conjure Woman," a volume of short stories; "The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line," a biography of Frederick Douglass, and three novels, Chestnut not only did not interpret the soul-movements of the Black Race, as Dunbar did, but he was—especially in "The Marrow of Tradition"—a purpose novelist, a propagandist. Indeed, Chestnut, from his lofty pedestal, saw the red monster of race prejudice in all its sordid colors and leveled his javelin at it. It is regrettable that there is not the slightest doubt that Chestnut knew how to write, and wrote trenchantly.

DuBois Errs

Another Negro novelist who fell by the wayside is Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, editor of the Crisis. It is no idle cant to state that Dr. DuBois is one of the most brilliant prose writers in America today. Oh, if he would only stop writing history and sociology and stick to the art of fiction! Then critics like Charles Hanson Towne would not be able to talk—as he does in his review of T. S. Stripling's Negro novel, "Birthright"—about the decadence of Black writers; of the inability of the Negro to write a great novel about himself. But DuBois, a wizard at words, is probably serving his Race best in his present position! Among his exhaustive writings are "John Brown," a biography, 1909; "The Quest of the Silver Fleece," a satirical novel, 1911; "The Souls of Black Folk," a series of classical essays, 1903; and "Darkwater," a collection of essays, prose poems, and short stories, 1920 "The Comet," in the last volume, is

a short story of the highest artistic merit.

Modern Poets

Coming down to the modern poets, William Stanley Braithwaite, literary editor of the Boston Transcript, is foremost. Although a poet of beauty and distinction, most of Mr. Braithwaite's time is taken up with the editing and compiling of the annual, "Anthology of Magazine Verse." Besides being the author of two sturdy volumes of verse—"Lyrics of Life and Love," 1914, and "House of Falling Leaves," 1908—Mr. Braithwaite edited the "Poetry Review of Cambridge," 1916; collected and edited "The Book of Elizabethan Verse," "A Book of Georgian Verse," and "The Book of Restoration Verse." He is general editor of the "Contemporary American Poets Series." Of the Negro poets today, there is James Weldon Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Claude McKay, Theodore Shackelford, Leslie Pinckney Hill, Fenton Johnson, and others, whose reputations are secure.

It is well to speak also of Prof. Kelly Miller, author of "Out of the House of Bondage"; Dr. William H. Ferris, author of "The African Abroad"; Hubert H. Harrison, author of "When Africa Awakes"; Mrs. Maud Cuney Hare, author of "The Message of the Trees."

There is the "Revolutionary Group" that is pulling away from the culture and imperialism of the old guard, striking out and conquering new fields. There is Rufus Perry, son of the author of "The Cushite," whose "Sketch of Philosophical System" is not only the work of a serious thinker but a skillful writer; J. A. Rogers, a young West Indian, whose "From Superman to Man," "As Nature Leads," and "The Approaching Storm" are used by the University of Chicago in connection with its sociological and anthropological studies, and Miss Angeline Grimke, whose "Rachel" is a promise of greater things in the drama.

Young's Exchange

It is important to note that an attempt is being made to nourish and perpetuate it. At 181 West 135th street, New York city, is Young's Book exchange. Its owner, George Young, is engaged in collecting rare and out-of-print books by Negro authors with the ultimate view of republishing the worth-while ones. It Mr. Young's plans mature the public will have access to works like Dr. Edward W. Blyden's "Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race," "Life of Banneker, the Afro-American Astronomer," "Frederick Douglass' Story of His Life," "The Works of Professor Kelly Miller," and books of that sort.

One reason why the Negro has not made any sort of headway in fiction is due to the effects of color prejudice. It is difficult for a Negro to write stories without bringing in the race question. As soon as a writer demonstrates skill along imaginative lines he is bound to succumb to the temptations of reform and propaganda. That is why it was possible for Alexandre Dumas and Pushkin in Russia to write colorlessly; and it also explains why Negro poets and novelists in Spanish-America are not limited by the narrowness of color. It is not a strange thing to find educated Negroes objecting strenuously to stories that do not depict the "higher form" of Negro life, stories whose characters are not all Negroes.

Friends of the Negro, like Miss Ovington, sigh at the vast patches of color open to the Negro fictionist—the soft rhythmic stream of life in the Negro quarter. From Dixie issues the murmur of voices—the melodies of black millions—crying for a dusky satirist, a DuBois, to pen a tragic epic on "The Glory and Chivalry of the South."



Claude McKay