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By ALAIN LOCKE

From *Native Son* to *Invisible Man*: A Review of the Literature of the Negro for 1952

IN THE thirty years' span of my active reviewing experience, there have been in my judgment three points of peak development in Negro fiction by Negro writers. In 1923 from a relatively low plateau of previous problem fiction, Jean Toomer's *Cane* rose to unprecedented artistic heights. Not only in style but in conception it raised a new summit, as it soared above the plane of propaganda and apologetics to a self-sufficient presentation of Negro life in its own idiom and gave it proud and self-revealing evaluation. More than that, the emotional essences of the Southland were hauntingly evoked in an impressionistic poetic sort of realism; it captured as well some of the more distinctive tone and color of Negro living. Its only shortcomings were that it was a series of character sketches rather than a full length canvas: a succession of vignettes rather than an entire landscape — and that its author chose not to continue. In 1940, Richard Wright's skillful sociological realism turned a hard but brilliant searchlight on Negro urban life in Chicago and outlined the somber tragedy of Bigger Thomas in a well-studied setting of Northside wealth and Southside poverty. Artistically not the equal of the more masterful series of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, that preceded it, *Native Son's* narrative was masterful and its character delineation as skillful as any work of Dreiser's or Farrell's. The book was marred only by Wright's overreliance on the communist ideology with which he encumbered his powerful indictment of society for Bigger, the double pariah of the slum and the color-line. Wright was essentially sound in his alignment of the social forces involved, but erred artistically in the doctrinally propagandist tone which crept into his novel chapter by chapter until the angry, ineffective end. The greater pity it was — and is — that later he disavowed this ideological commitment that cheated him of an all-time classic of American fiction. Despite this, *Native Son* has remained all these intervening years the Negro novelist's strongest bid for fiction of the first magnitude.

But 1952 is the significant year of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a great novel, although also not without its artistic flaws, sad to say. Ralph Ellison is a protege of Wright, who predicted for him a bright literary future. Written in a style of great force and originality, although its talent is literally smothered with verbosity and hyperbole, *Invisible Man* is both in style

and conception a new height of literary achievement. The life story of its hero, obviously semi-autobiographic, ranges from the typical South of a few years back to the metropolitan North of New York and vicinity. Conceptually it runs also almost the whole gamut of class in American society and is interracial at all stages, even in the deep South from the benefactor patron of the college visiting for Founders Day to the sinister "crackers" of the rural backwoods. It is in fact one of the best integrated accounts of interaction between whites and Negroes in American society that has yet been presented, with all characters portrayed in the same balance and perspective. Ellison's philosophy of characterization, incisive, realistic, unsparing of physical and psychological detail — all his major characters are stripped bare to the skin and bone, so to speak — is close to the best European realism in that it is so three-dimensional. We see a grand caravan of types, all registered first person on the sensitive but rather cynical retina of the young Negro protagonist. In the South, the patronizing but well-intentioned school trustee, the piously hypocritical Negro school principal, the gauche, naive but not too honest students, the disillusioned, institutionalized war veterans, the townsfolk, the peasants of the countryside, white and black, and most particularly the unforgettable earthy peasant character of Jim Trueblood. In the North, the pageant resumes with all sorts and manner of men and women: the financiers of Wall Street and their decadent jazz-loving sons, factory workers, pro and anti-union varieties, the urban peasants and their homely oddities, parlor-pinks and hard inner-core communists, race leaders, educated and illiterate, each after his kind — and the Harlem community generally displayed finally at frenetic tension in its one big authentic riot. Stylistically all this unrolls in a volcanic flow of vivid, sometimes livid imagery, a tour de force of psychological realism. A double symbolic meaning piled on top of this realism gives the book its distinctive and most original tone and flavor: *Invisible Man* is actually a surrealist novel because of this, and but for its lack of restraint would rank among the very best of the genre. But the unrestrained bravado of treatment, riding loose rein at full gallop most of the time and the overprecious bravura of phrase and diction weight it down where otherwise it would soar in well-controlled virtuosity. Many readers will be shocked at Ellison's daring franknesses and dazed by his emotional intensity but these are an integral part of the book's great merit. For once, too, here is a Negro writer capable of real and sustained irony. *Invisible Man*, evidently years in the making, must not be Ralph Ellison's last novel.

Lonnie Coleman's *Clara* is uniquely different, but it deserves placement in the same high bracket of fiction of the first magnitude. Within a four- or five-year period, it is the top product of the fiction of Negro life by white southern novelists. Coleman, Georgia-born and Alabama-bred, needs no authentication as truly of the South; his easygoing intimate

knowledge of southern ways, Negro included, testifies sufficiently to that. No southern novel has gone further, also, in that ultimate candor of insight and outspoken courage toward which the younger generation of southern writers seems to be moving. In handling the interracial triangle of his plot from the woman's side and by putting the narrative first person in the words of Lillian Sayre, the white wife, Coleman approaches his subject the steep, bold way, but he succeeds. Lillian, marrying largely for convenience, finds herself not quite mistress of the Sayre household, already routinized by her husband's recently deceased mother under the competent management of Clara, the Negro housekeeper, who, with her mulatto son, Petie, lives in a small cabin behind the house. Rivalry begins instantly between the two women and mounts as it is goaded on by Clara's more seasoned knowledge of the husband's ways. Particularly is this so as with the passing years Sayre relapses into chronic alcoholism, partly in frustration from Lillian's frigidity. Clara stands out more and more in her bossy dignity as the pillar of the household, while Lillian appeases her unhappiness in doting on her godchild, Randall, her sister's son, who becomes the inseparable playmate of Clara's Pete. Soon Lillian's suspicions are aroused, and by bold accusation she learns from Clara that Petie is Sayre's child. Clara is forced to leave and that night her cabin burns to the ground. In Pluma, Alabama, Lillian is automatically above suspicion, so she has her moment of triumph.

But the household caves in after Clara's departure, and shortly Clara must come back to manage and to hold the roof up over an increasingly drunken Carl; Lillian's steadily declining maiden Aunt Aster; the growing exigencies of Randall and Pete, still bosom friends; and Lillian's own frustrated dependence. Tragic events, mutually endured, gradually alter the tensions—Carl's death, Randall killed in war, Pete successfully installed on Aunt Aster's farm, married to Lutie and happy father of a son, "Randy," after Randall. But Pete, disliked both for his success and his progressive farming, marked as "an uppity nigger," is in that community already doomed. The trigger incident finally happens—Toll Cannon, white reactionary with whom he has been feuding, is murdered; in Pluma's eyes "no one but Pete could have done it," and with similarly anonymous bullets, Pete himself is lynched. Lillian, resolutely matured by now, gathers up the remnants, and the triangle that began with prejudice, jealousy and hate resolves into a strange household trio for that community; Lutie, Clara and Lillian, protectively focussed in Lillian's house as mother, grandmother, foster-mother around Randy, Petie's child. In the bare telling the story of *Clara* seems melodramatic, but in full length reading it is a moving and convincing drama of character transformation. It has balanced, consistent characterization, three-dimensional, not type treatment for all, and makes Clara, who plays the title role, the most wholesome and dignified member of the cast.

Earl Conrad's *Rock Bottom* is the South documented well but too laboriously to register vitally. It, too, is told in the first person, by Leeha, the heroine who is supposed to move us as she moves from one vicissitude to another, from one sordid environment to the next. But all the way from Mississippi to Harlem, even in the bogs of Florida's muck swamps, she is a pasteboard pillar for propagandist indictments of society. Not that this is untrue, but all the more pity if it does not move to pity and terror. Why, we ask ourselves, knowing the earnest intentions of these tractarian authors? The answer is an old one; excess is never good art. *Rock Bottom* accordingly misses its target by shooting it, so to speak, to shreds. Thirty years of unrelieved sordidness and oppression are quite possible in life, unfortunately, but only a Gorky could have brought this sort of story out of its overdone effect.

With *Strangers and Afraid* and *Trespass*, we come to another overdone subject, the Harlem interracial, which threatens to become the Waterloo of so many serious but over-ambitious junior authors. There is a field here, but no one has quite mastered it. Of course, one of the first difficulties is to realize that life and character and circumstances are pretty much the same everywhere. There is no magic in the Harlem setting that will rectify a poor plot or vivify shallow characterization or evoke a philosophy of life when an author has none. But such things have to be there in any work of art, and color, skin color or local color, cannot compensate for the lack of them. Though obviously most seriously intentioned, Eugene Brown's story is merely an excursion into Harlem, and really should end with the discovery that Harlem and Flatbush are very much alike after all. And why not? Far too many think it should not be so, and go stubbornly on to proclaim the difference. Particularly on this moot subject of mixed marriage, all novelists should be instructed that it is an old human phenomenon; sometimes successful, in other cases not, but always for specific, never general reasons. The prejudices which with one couple would wreck a marriage would be cementing pressures in another instance: in telling a story, to be successful one must tell a specific story. A stock situation documented to death will never bring a real situation to literary life. The notebooks, yes, but when it comes to the crucial point of writing, young authors must have the courage to throw away the notebooks.

There is much more of moment and substance in *Strangers and Afraid*, and yet it, too, is not successful. Here the two protagonists are too much of a polarity: Lyle Bishop, the reformer, and Maccabee David, the perfect foil. The die is cast from the beginning, and once again the plausibility is gone. This novel is wrecked on the shoals of formula character, a little more interestingly than the average Harlem adventure, but wrecked just the same without the sense of a profitable struggle. I think sometimes that there persists, especially with the racially "enlightened," one dam-

aging vestige of the corporate prejudice from which they think they have detached themselves completely, and that is the notion that the Negro character is foredoomed to a defeatist end. The very essence of tragedy is the chance of evading defeat, which in good tragedy is indeterminate until near the end, or even when destined is fought out to the very end. This is not a novel of moving tragedy in spite of all its tragic happenings, and it well may stem from some such attitude, conscious or more likely sub-conscious.

Truman Nelson has novelized the Boston anti-slavery story of a celebrated fugitive case, that of Anthony Burns, espoused by Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips and the Ward Howes. He has done a colossal amount of research on this celebrated case, and used much, perhaps most of it in his novel, *The Sin of the Prophet*. It can never be asserted against it that it is not authentic; but even in the historical novel authenticity is but the beginning. And for all the dialogue, and the direct quotation of sermon, court pleas and conversations, this is hardly a genuine novel, but a case history. It is true, an important case history for the times and for the antislavery cause, as well as for the revelation of the inner niceties of difference of opinion among both abolitionists and their proslavery opponents, most of all for a portrait of a Boston divided deeply enough on the issue to cause violence and intrigue normally alien to its cold-blooded ways; but I will be much surprised if the novelization adds much to either the circulation or the comprehension of the facts. *The Case of Anthony Burns* could well have been the title, and the nonhistorically minded would have been forewarned.

Laughing to Keep from Crying is typical Langston Hughes. That means many things, among them uneven writing, flashes of genius, epigrammatic insight, tantalizing lack of follow-through, dish water — and then suddenly crystal springs. Fortunately, this is a motley of anecdotal scenes and stories, scattered from his own cosmopolitan experience — Africa, Hong Kong, Frisco, Paris and the like, but all pointing up to Harlem and its theme of color. The title story, a very good one, has the dominant key and clue: “Who’s Passing for Who?” It pokes ironic fun at the color line, as for example also does “Something in Common” — the encounter of a white Kentuckian and a color-weary Negro in a Hong Kong bar, where after falling out violently over the color question and being ejected by the bartender, they stagger back together to fight for their rights, presumably including the right to fight over the color question. This is a fair sample; as thumb nail sketches both are well observed and in that sense anecdotally good; one, however, is well told, the other, just an anecdote. And so it goes, not alternately as in this case, but spotty to the end. “Saratoga Rain,” a two-page cameo of incisive etching, suggests that this type of thing is Hughes’ forte, and that sustained development is not, whether it be plot or character. Why complain? Simply because from

the point of evoking it, Langston Hughes knows Harlem so much more surely than all the rest that his vignettes are, with all their faults, worth dozens of so-called "Harlem novels," and with just a little more art, Hughes could be Harlem's Daumier, or to change to the right figure, its Maupassant. How true what W. C. Handy says of another book of his, "Read it for yourself and have a laugh on Harlem, not at it." There's the difference — and the right approach for all writing about this province of Negro life: to see, feel and show not its difference but its different way of being human.

The review of the year's fiction should include mention of Frank Yerby's most recent best-seller achievement, *Saracen Blade*, one of his best and most elaborate historical romances. In this, Mr. Yerby vindicates once more the right of the Negro as artist to any theme and province he chooses as a freeman of the world of letters. This particular work shows cumulative maturity in his chosen field, and its success with the general public will be an incentive to younger Negro writers that may spread our creative production over wider subject-matter fields than usual.

Poetry and Belles-Lettres

Langston Hughes as poet has received this year the recognition of a translation of a volume of selected poems in Spanish, doubly appropriate because of a long standing constructive interest of his in Cuban, Haitian and other Latin American poets and writers. The quite neglected field of literary criticism comes in for welcome mention at last: serious sustained work in straight criticism, Dr. Nathan A. Scott's *Rehearsals of Discomposure* and Helen Chesnutt's biography of her father, which has a valuable dimension of literary criticism because of the light it sheds on his literary philosophy and on his relations with his publishers and literary contemporaries.

Dr. Scott's scholarly and thought-provoking contribution is a series of essays in philosophical criticism dealing with four great literary figures of contemporary culture, Franz Kafka, D. H. Lawrence, Ignazio Silone and T. S. Eliot. What he is interested in is the twentieth century concept of man, what he calls "the human predicament" as it presents itself to these representative modern thinkers. After chastising formal academic philosophy for its evasion of this urgent problem, Dr. Scott goes on with an acute, enlightening analysis of what he considers the common denominator problem of these more sensitive artist-thinkers, who do attempt to resolve the confusions of our contemporary culture. Dissatisfied with what he regards a superficial diagnosis of their reaction as "disillusionment," Dr. Scott suggests viewing it as "spiritual withdrawal" or "cosmic isolation and exile," connecting it with existentialism as a parallel phenomenon. With a conviction that the common question is more significant as "the modern intellectual's dilemma" than any individual answer, he

then compares the several specific solutions, and concludes that the grand overall objective of creative thinking in our time is the quest for the re-discovery of inner, life-sustaining values. Whether we agree or not with Dr. Scott's suggestion that a rethinking of Christianity along more mystic but more humane lines is the goal of the search, all serious readers can agree on the indisputable value of his incisive comparative analysis of some of the most significant trends in contemporary thought.

The Chesnutt item is drawn from the family treasury of Charles Waddell Chesnutt's private correspondence as well as from the memories of an objectively intelligent daughter. It gives us definitive light on the personality background of a man who, with time, looms more and more as the important literary Negro of his generation. His stature should be considerably helped by this revelation of high seriousness on the race question, for his group loyalty was really deeper than that of many of his more vociferous contemporaries. Or at least, it was based on more intelligent courage, the resolution to tell the full objective truth about Negro-white relations as he saw them in his day. This was disinterested truth telling, since it is evident from the account of his family life and of his interracial circle of admiring friends in Cleveland, that as a personal problem, race discrimination was already satisfactorily solved for him. This justifies quite meaningfully Miss Chesnutt's subtitle, calling him a "pioneer of the color line."

Both the history and the analysis of Negro music enjoy unusual contributions this year. Rex Harris' small but scholarly booklet, *Jazz*, is illuminating both for the layman and the expert, and treats jazz as a world phenomenon, with adequate documentation of its European developments; while Barry Ulanov's work is restricted by title to the history of jazz in America. It, too, brings the common sense and the expert approaches together fruitfully. Particularly sane is Mr. Ulanov's rejection of "the legend of African origins," confirming, as he says, "the average man's impression of the Negro as a jungle-formed primitive whose basic expression is inevitably savage." Jazz, for him, is correctly an American social development, and his close analysis of its various schools and idioms is a valuable contribution to the subject. In addition to an enlightening discussion of the various locales and what they have contributed to jazz idiomatically, Ulanov gives us an almost complete genealogy of the outstanding jazz musicians, Negro and white. These biographical details are in themselves a priceless contribution; and his discussion of these player-composers by instrument groups adds greatly to our understanding of jazz style development. Harris, on the other hand, is a special devotee of the New Orleans school, and though he therefore exhibits definite partiality to New Orleans and St. Louis, in return he has given us one of the best documentations of the early roots of jazz in these two seedbed cen-

ters. With the voluminous literature of the last decade or so, there is little more now to be said on the subject.

Historical and Sociological

In the third volume of *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Dr. Foner brings his monumental edition and biography of Douglass through the critical period of the Civil War. Admirably edited and documented, and for the most part objectively interpreted, this is indispensable reading for whomever would really understand the intricate issues of slavery, emancipation, the inner politics of the abolition movement, and the fateful vicissitudes of the Civil War. How near this or that historic decision came to disaster, including the Emancipation Proclamation, is a lesson all need to learn, as also how to admire and evaluate the resourceful strategy which combined with Douglass' fixed convictions to make him so powerful an advocate of freedom's cause. He emerges from the record of these five years, 1860-65, in the full stature of a statesman, and this account, documented point by point, establishes it as has no previous study.

Similar recognition and gratitude are due Herbert Aptheker for another arduous editorial task, the compiling from tons of old records, most of them nearly inaccessible to any but the research historian, of *A Documentary History of the Negro People*. With a pardonable stress on the rebel traits and reactions — and it is indeed noteworthy to see how continuous this strain is in Negro leadership, especially in the earlier years, 1790-1860, there has been gathered together from all sides an amazing mass of evidence showing how much a collaborator the Negro was in the fight for his own freedom. The full gamut of Negro cultural activity is also well represented from church and politics to labor, social welfare and artistic and literary expression, again a rather unusual coverage. Along with the full time span of the Negro's whole articulate life in this country, this, then, is a unique offering. It is good to remember, though, that it was Carter Woodson who laid down the model for all this sort of work, especially in his little known *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800-1860* (1926). *The Negro Freedman*, a contribution of Dr. Henderson H. Donald, is a welcome but somewhat superficial sketch of the conditions of the Negro in the early emancipation period. Of course, the evidence itself is patchy for this period, and biased pro or con; but still there ought to be enough indirect documentary evidence to check by — sufficient, for example, to avoid accepting obvious bias and hearsay for fact as well as to safeguard against over-inclusive generalization. These occur more than occasionally, particularly in the sections on religious and social customs and "on social classes and traits." *The Romance of African Methodism* by George A. Singleton has somewhat similar flaws, in this case more faults of perspective and overheroic interpretation than of incompleteness of historical facts.

We come finally, in this group, to a brief discussion of a significant and probably very influential book, Carl Rowan's *South of Freedom*. *South of Freedom* represents effective and skillful journalism, detailing the positive as well as the negative challenges of a changing South. Its great virtue and special service, it seems to me, is his presentation of the situation as still a challenging touch-and-go between the forces of reaction and the forces of progress. One comes away with the feeling that the American South is an open battleground in a current war for political, economic and cultural democracy — this time involving Negro reactionaries, the vested interests of segregation as well as the white die-hards on the one side and the liberal white South, the "New South" of the younger generation for the most part, and the progressive Negroes on the other. As Mr. Rowan vividly documents it here and there over a wide area of the South, deep, middle and southwest, a reader gets a dramatic account of a struggle, the scope and import of which few actually realize — even those who are engaged and involved in it. But in Rowan's sharp, graphic account it reads like a war correspondent's journal of a tour crisscross the South along six thousand miles of American democracy's internal battlefield.

Exotica and Africana

Liberia by R. Earle Anderson, which he correctly subtitles "America's African Friend," recognizing her past and future usefulness as a keystone base of our transcontinental military air routes, is a realistic but appreciative analysis of a country in transition. It forecasts for Liberia both a great economic and cultural development, which is all the more certain now because of the new development plans for the adjacent Gold Coast and Nigeria. The author is unusually fair in his appraisal of the Liberian government and of native life and customs, giving more justice to both than probably any previous study. The reading public, for example, needs to know that tribal bride-buying is a family contract of amends for the loss of a family worker, subject even to repayment if the wife is "divorced," and that the ancient custom of women trekking behind, carrying heavy burdens on their heads, stems from the time when the man was traditionally kept unburdened to be ready to fight or protect from any hazards of the journey. Liberia, or any other country, seen through such understanding lenses, is well served by its foreign observers. In this case, the situation seems full of promise, especially as the tragic rift between Americo-Liberians and the natives seems, at last, on the constructive mend.

Of the increasing number of books on South Africa, the most incisive seems to be Dvorin's *Racial Separation in South Africa*. By any account, it is an appalling story, this fantastic outbreak of hysterical racism. But it must be faced, as in this study, with realistic intelligence. Obviously

liberal, Dvorin makes sure not to be partisan in his factual statements, and although warrantably apprehensive, does see some possibility, with a divided white opinion, of some eventual solution.

Strange Altars by Marcus Bach adds still another item to the unending bibliography of Haitian voodoo "research," research in quotation marks. Without condemning either the motive or the genuine interest of many of these books, this one included, one must at last realize that no amount of dramatic description adds up to what is now needed on this subject of Haitian voodoo: detailed study of the rites and symbolic interpretation of the rituals, a job for professional anthropologists only. Neither Mr. Bach, nor his worthy sponsor, the ex-marine Doc Reser, for all their special entree and kindly interest, is capable of that.

The literature of Negro African art, hitherto scant, has grown to an all-time high. After last year's competent treatise by Professor Wingert, *The Sculptures of Negro Africa*, now come two studies of equal competence but superior de luxe format. The Ladislas Segy and Paul Radin volumes are among the most beautiful art books produced in America in the last quarter century; the former, *African Sculpture Speaks*, is exclusively devoted to African sculpture and a stylistic study of its tribal varieties while the latter, *African Folk Tales*, written with the collaboration of Elinore Marvel and James Johnson Sweeney, is a superb collection of African folk tales paralleled by equally superb reproductions (165 folio plates) of African sculpture tribally arranged. The higher levels of African culture, as known already to the present-day cultural anthropologist, are now graphically available to the lay reader, who cannot — if he has a grain of artistic and literary sensibility — ignore or misinterpret them. These tales, many of them cosmological myths of deep symbolic significance, and these plastic creations are indisputable evidence of qualities and culture traits comparable to the better known culture traditions of the whole human race. One yearns for the time when such knowledge and its transforming evaluations will percolate down to the level of generally educated men and women. That they are not yet so disseminated, even among educated American Negroes, is just to be put down to contemporary medievalism or cultural lag. Consider the evidence objectively, especially since the Greeks and the Teutons were "pagan" and the Jews non- or at least pre-Christian: some African creation myths are as "good" or meaningful as any, Genesis included, and some African fables are, even in their moral values, equal to the parables of the New Testament. Considering the billions of dollars worth of psychological damage missionary and racist misconceptions of Africa and the African have wrought, on both countless Negro and Caucasian minds, books such as these, though relatively expensive, are cheap and welcome antidotes — good medicine for the mind diseased.

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By GERHARD FRIEDRICH

Vital Statistics

Write then that he was born on many days
 And in strange places — prisons, schools, and ships,
 In burning cities, even in the blaze
 Of sun-drenched woods (October from his lips
 Sounds like a sacred word). He came to life,
 Not once, not suddenly, but by degrees:
 "Who has not often felt the surgeon's knife
 On embryonic masqueradings?" —

These

Are all the vital facts. Waste not your time
 With dull details. His birth is not complete,
 And may not be for years. Perhaps his crime
 Is unbelief; yet gladly he would greet
 The light that he has never seen unfurled,
 The dawn and daybreak of a tortured world.