

Lola Ridge (1871–1941) in her first and best book resembles Sandburg. In political sympathies she was farther left than the other poets discussed in this chapter. Her enthusiasm was directed less to the ideal of American democracy than to the re-making of society through the triumph of the working class. She was born in Dublin, Ireland, spent her childhood and youth in Australia and New Zealand, and settled in New York City in the 1910s. She supported herself by writing fiction and advertising copy, modeling for artists, and working in a factory and had personal experience of tenement life. In her first volume, *The Ghetto and Other Poems* (1918), the title poem dwells on sights, sounds, types of character, and ways of life among the Jewish poor in Manhattan. The treatment is realistic, but the realism, like Sandburg's, is tempered by affection and by a romanticizing imagination. Her mind wings back, for example, from the city streets to the Israelite slaves in Egypt. The merit of the poem lies in Miss Ridge's vivid, sympathetic interest in her subject more than in the formal qualities of her expression. *Sun-Up and Other Poems* (1920) contains short lyrics, more or less in the style of Sandburg or Amy Lowell; the title poem recreates childhood experiences. *Red Flag* (1927) celebrates the Russian Revolution. There are also tributes to fellow artists and writers. *Firehead* (1929) is said to have been inspired by the Sacco-Vanzetti case, but it is a book-length narrative of the crucifixion of Christ. *Dance of Fire* (1935) is a collection of lyrics, including a sonnet sequence in three parts. An obscure symbolism of fire runs through the volume. Miss Ridge had never written in a wholly natural and limpid syntax and diction, and by this time her style had become highly "poetic":

The dawn is pearling through the locust tree
Adrip, and all the feathered air a choir
With multi-voice. O high antiphony!

To develop from "The Ghetto" to a difficult, mannered, symbolic style of writing with a traditional versification was not untypical of the evolution of American poetry between 1918 and 1935. The dedication and selflessness of Miss Ridge greatly impressed those who knew her, and her influence as a person may have been greater than that of her poetry.

CONSERVATIVE AND REGIONAL POETS OF AMERICA

WHEN reviewers referred in the 1910s and 1920s to "conservative" or "traditional" poets, they had in mind poets who continued to write in a Romantic-Victorian or Genteel way. The adjectives acquired their resonances—defensive, condescending, or dismissive—from the emergence and spread of "new" or "modern" ways of writing, which increasingly called into question hitherto accepted styles and uses of poetry. Regional poets were those who sought, as one of their primary aims, to exhibit the typical ways of life, traits of character, imaginative lore, and speech of a particular section of the country. Except in dwelling on such materials, however, the minor regionalists taken up in this chapter—figures such as Robinson, Frost, Sandburg, Masters, and the Fugitives are more appropriately discussed elsewhere—were not innovative. Many of them were college professors who took a quasi-scholarly interest in local history and customs and usually adopted in their poetry the received idiom. Other regional poets were hardly aware of the styles developing in the little magazines. Still others, wishing to be read by the people, were eager to continue the "open," accessible poetry that had been one of the triumphs of Romanticism. Unfortunately, as they saw the spread of an involved or oblique idiom in the writings of the avant-garde,

these more democratic poets tended to feel defensive. Some, asserting all the more their alliance with the folk, adopted the kind of colloquialism (that of Riley, for instance) that had been accepted—and in the process domesticated—by the Genteel Tradition as an ally against fundamental changes. In short, the motives and circumstances of the minor regionalists usually kept them within traditional styles, and for most of them an additional motive was that they wrote for a regional audience, not for New York sophisticates. As a group the regional poets contrasted in some ways with the “conservatives,” not only in subject matter but also in procedure, for they usually worked in a more popular style and with a more realistic treatment (although their realism was often that of calendar art), and they tended more to narrative verse. But if they are contrasted with the “new” poets, the regionalists resemble the conservatives much more than they differ from them and can be viewed with them in one perspective. Of regional and conservative poets we shall notice about thirty-five, all minor, but some extremely competent.

The general theme of this chapter is the traditional mode of poetry in the age of Modernism. For although the poems of Sara Teasdale, for example, or Elinor Wylie, Adelaide Crapsey, or Edna St. Vincent Millay somewhat resembled those written by Genteel poets twenty to forty years before, these twentieth-century poems could not be confused with earlier ones; the new tendencies influenced the traditional mode also. At least this was generally true, although such poets as John Erskine, Thomas S. Jones, and Percy Mackaye show that it was possible to ignore the new developments altogether. Most conservative poets were well aware of the Imagist movement and of the controversies surrounding it. They rejected free verse but strove for concision, concreteness of imagery, and spoken (rather than poetic or rhetorical) syntax and diction, at least, they strove more for these qualities than had been usual with Stedman, Moody, Santayana, or most other Genteel poets. Moreover, in the age of Robinson and Frost, of the Imagists and the Georgians, most poets who used the traditional modes also returned from the empyrean. They continued to associate poetry with the ideal, the beautiful, the emotionally intense, and the agreeable, but their poetic emotions and spiritual exaltations were registered in *vox humana*, they no longer pulled all the organ stops. Finally, some of them

addressed a wider range of experience and feeling than the Genteel poets had thought appropriate.

POETS IN TRADITIONAL MODES

Sara Teasdale (1884–1933) was born in St. Louis, and grew up a sensitive, dreamy girl with delicate health. Her early productions included sonnets on poetry, nature, art, and beauty, as well as blank-verse monologues by Guinevere, Helen of Troy, and other passionate women of the past. She was also writing a different, though equally familiar kind of poetry, the brief, lyric utterance of elemental emotion. This became her chief mode. She loves, she loves no more, she longs to be loved, she is not loved in return, or not so much as before; but who, when, how, and why are all omitted, for she wished to avoid anything that might complicate and so lessen her immediate emotional impact. For the same reason her idiom, which was genteel at the start of her career (“beauty—brighter thro’ the veil”), evolved toward plainness. “The poet,” she said, “must put far from him the amazing word, the learned allusion, the facile inversion, the clever twist of thought, for all of these things will blur his poem and distract his reader. He must not overcrowd his lines with figures of speech, because, in piling these one upon another, he defeats his own purpose. . . . The poet should try to give his poem the quiet swiftness of flame, so that the reader will feel and not think while he is reading.”

Christina Rossetti and A. E. Housman were among her favorite poets, and she emulated their restraint of style. As she approached middle age, her traditional skills became steadily more charged with expressive suggestion. The phrasing in her better poems is sometimes almost aphoristic. The “plot” is carefully structured, often with a surprise or paradox at the end of the poem. Her lines master the late-Victorian, elegiac cadence. Her prosody is formal and disciplined. A run-on line says much. Toward the end of her life, her moods seem to have changed or, more exactly, to have narrowed into melancholy. It is a distinguished melancholy—if the phrase does not seem precious—deeply felt, fairly faced and uttered, yet expressed with tact and austerity.

Sara Teasdale was one of the more popular poets of her day. Her businessman husband, Ernst Filsinger, is said to have known most of her poems by heart before he met her in 1914; doubtless many other readers were almost equally devoted. The first lines of some of her better-known poems are,

When I am dead and over me bright April
Shakes out her rain-drenched hair;

and,

Let it be forgotten, as a flower is forgotten,
Forgotten as a fire that once was singing gold;

and,

When, in the gold October dusk, I saw you near to setting,
Arcturus, bringer of spring,
Lord of the summer nights, leaving us now in autumn . . . ;

and the finely wistful "The Long Hill,"

I must have passed the crest a while ago
And now I am going down—
Strange to have crossed the crest and not to know,
But the brambles were always catching the hem of my gown.

Her best-known collection, *Love Songs* (1917), won two prizes and went through five editions in one year. In 1943 a Liberty Ship was named the Sara Teasdale.

Ridgeley Torrence (1875–1950) was poetry editor of *The New Republic*. The few poems he published are carefully phrased and cadenced and of remarkably different kinds. The best are "The Bird and the Tree," a ballad about a lynching, and "The Son," an effectively contrived poem in which the thoughts of a farm-wife move back and forth between crops, prices, weather, and her dead son. The last stanza of "The Son" is,

"It feels like frost was near—
His hair was curly.
The spring was late that year,
But the harvest early."

"Three O'Clock" is a cityscape. There are also poems in the vein of Housman, of Yeats, and of other poets, but Torrence's usual type of poem—so far as he had one—was the dreamy, cosmic

allegory, promising "light" and "beauty" somewhere beyond or within. These might often be called Pre-Raphaelite.

Arthur Davison Ficke (1883–1945) wrote lyrics, sonnets, and sonnet sequences, the most ambitious being "Sonnets of a Portrait-Painter." He did not shrink from clichés:

Dear fellow-actor of this little stage,
We play the hackneyed parts right merrily.

In 1915–1916, just after publishing these lines, Ficke joined with Witter Bynner in perpetrating the "Spectra" hoax. Poking fun at Imagism, Futurism, and the like, the two poets pretended to invent another modern movement. They issued a book of Spectrist poems, with a Preface to explain their principles. The literary world obliged by taking the movement seriously. *Others* magazine even devoted its January 1917 issue to *Spectra*. Ficke also wrote a "Guide to China" in sonnet sequence. Some of his poems were slightly tinged with the Decadence. He was first a mentor and then a lover of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Their affair prompted numerous sonnets on both sides.

Joyce Kilmer (1886–1918), an editor of *The Literary Digest*, is remembered for "Trees," which begins, as everyone knows:

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

Grace Conkling (1878–1958) taught at Smith College; her ballads and nature lyrics have much charm. Rudolph Valentino, the matinee idol, published his *Day Dreams* in 1923. The protected child of wealthy parents, Gladys Cromwell (1885–1919) handled the traditional forms sensitively, but her poetry took no hold of experience. She and her twin sister served with the Red Cross in France during the last year of the war. Shattered by what they had seen, they committed suicide on the boat going home. Leonora Speyer (1872–1956) did not begin to write until 1915. Her *Fiddler's Farewell* (1926) won the Pulitzer Prize. John Hall Wheelock (1886–1978) was a friend of Sara Teasdale, to whom he and his work represented an ideal of sensitivity and spiritual height. He wrote love poems of a rather abstract kind, nature poems, and poems in which, always maintaining euphony and dignity, he sought the meaning of the cosmos. His moods tended to plaintiveness, nostalgia, yearning, and melancholy. His poems were diligent and thoughtful, but tired.

The poets mentioned so far were influenced to some degree by the contemporary avant-garde achievement. But there was also a rear guard on whose work the new tendencies had no impact at all. These poets, most of whom were cultivated and informed about literature, remind us again how wide the gap between the Modernist modes and the general, cultivated taste of the age could be. John Erskine (1879-1951), a famous teacher of the Humanities at Columbia, initiated the Great Books program, which had immense influence on American higher education during the next generation, especially at the University of Chicago and at St. John's College. He wrote criticism, novels, and three volumes of poetry: *Actaeon* (1906), *Collected Poems* (1922), and *Sonata and Other Poems* (1925). His earlier verses were mournful, mythological, and Tennysonian. Later he also sporadically emulated Browning and Robinson. In everything except chronology, he belonged to the Genteel Tradition. Amelia Burr (b. 1878) was a less sophisticated writer. Her poems appeared in the magazines of large circulation for middle-class, family reading. So far as I have perused the several volumes she brought out between 1912 and 1923, she declaimed high-minded emotions. The verses of Thomas S. Jones (1882-1932) were of the openly sentimental and heart-warming type that was extremely popular in America. Two of his poems, "As in a Rose-Jar" and "An Old Song"—

Low blowing winds from out a midnight sky,
The falling embers and a kettle's croon—
These three, but oh what sweeter lullaby
Ever awoke beneath the winter's moon—

used to appear in old-fashioned anthologies of "modern" poetry. His idiom and versification were carefully worked in the Genteel way, and he had the command of musical cadence that one learns to expect even of minor poets in the Victorian tradition. Among his several volumes is *Sonnets of the Cross* (1922), a sequence that traces the progress of Christianity in the British Isles. Jones typically took pains to make these sonnets historically accurate. Percy Mackaye (1875-1956) wrote voluminously in an open-idiomed, low-pressured way. He was known chiefly for his poetic dramas. His first volume of lyrics appeared in 1909. One of his last works, *The Mystery of Hamlet King of Denmark*

(1950), consists of four dramas (more than 650 pages) in blank verse and deals with events at the court of Denmark antecedent to Shakespeare's play. Its challenge to Shakespeare was even more open and venturesome than Gordon Bottomley's dramatization of the earlier life of King Lear, for Mackaye not only used Shakespeare's story but also took over his dramatic form and even, to some degree, his Elizabethan English. The attempt obviously could not succeed, but it was a remarkable feat for a poet over seventy years old, living in a lonely cottage in Massachusetts after the death of his wife. One is glad that it was performed in 1949 at the Pasadena playhouse—the longest presentation in the theater since the productions of ancient Athens.

MILLAY, WYLIE, AIKEN, AND OTHERS

Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Harriet Monroe, Louis Untermeyer, Witter Bynner, Donald Evans, Adelaide Crapsey, and Robert Hillyer were the most important of the many poets who were essentially traditionalist, but at the time were usually numbered among the "new" poets. Either they had personal associations with the avant-garde or they adopted some more modern content or style. Many of these poets were self-divided. Like Harriet Monroe and Louis Untermeyer, they hungered for the old, opulent emotional idealism, but bravely tried to relish the spare, small, and dry accuracies of the new age. Or, like Edna St. Vincent Millay and William Ellery Leonard, they used the idiom and poses of the Victorian and Genteel tradition to voice modern sexual emancipation. Or, like Orrick Johns, they wavered amid styles; Johns sometimes imitated Housman, Kipling, or Whitman, and sometimes Kreyborg or Eliot.

The debt of poetry readers to Harriet Monroe (1860-1936) and Louis Untermeyer (1885-1977) is immense, but it is less for their verse than for their work as editors and promoters. The importance of *Poetry* magazine, which Miss Monroe founded and edited, was discussed in Chapter 14. She also prepared, with Alice Corbin, an influential anthology of *The New Poetry* (1917), which included both British and American poets and went through several editions. This anthology was gradually eclipsed by the deservedly famous ones of Louis Untermeyer. *Modern*

American Poetry appeared in 1919, *Modern British Poetry* in 1920; both are still in print, having gone through many revisions; over the years they introduced hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of readers to contemporary poetry. Untermeyer included between one and two hundred poets, each successive edition dropping some names and adding others. His taste was formed in the first decade of the century, and he had favorites (Frost, Sandburg, James Oppenheim) and suffered from imperfect sympathies (with Pound and Stevens); but he was catholic and fair. Certainly he was not out to undermine or build up any movement or party. For each poet he wrote a Preface, telling something about the poet's life and briefly reviewing the work. These Prefaces might ideally have been more sensitive to the poetry they discussed, but Untermeyer's style was vigorous and rapid (though sometimes spotted with meretricious antitheses and paradoxes). He made his poets interesting and mustered as much enthusiasm for each as he could. Though he did not neglect formal qualities, he dwelt on the emotion and vision of his poets—and he especially liked strong emotion and hopeful vision. Besides these anthologies of modern poetry, Untermeyer edited at least eighteen others of poetry of various descriptions. He also wrote prose fiction.

Untermeyer translated poetry and published twenty volumes of original compositions; they place him among "conservative" poets of the period, where he might not enjoy finding himself. Some poems pleaded for social justice and many had a light, half-humorous touch in handling serious themes; in both respects his work might have seemed slightly new or modern when it was published. In retrospect, however, he can be seen as one of many poets who participated in modern movements only cautiously and from a distance. His poetry was fluent, accessible, and facile; his parodies can still be read with pleasure.

Harriet Monroe was forty years old at the turn of the century. In her early verse she had accepted with full faith the Romantic and Victorian conventions (see *Valeria and Other Poems*, 1891). After 1900 she experimented with more modern subjects and forms—free verse, contemporary spoken idiom (she made a special point of avoiding mythological allusions), urban and industrial subject matters. She boasted that "The Hotel," a survey of the objects and goings-on in the Waldorf-Astoria, was "a pioneer in free verse." But in her work the new themes and

forms seem hardly less conventional than the old, and the poetry they led her to write was even more willed and external.

Alice Corbin (Henderson) (1881–1949), who helped Miss Monroe edit *Poetry* during its first years (1912–1916), was a better poet and emulated several contemporary styles with distinction. "Echoes of Childhood" drew on folksongs for swinging rhythms similar to the vein of Lindsay; "Love Me at Last" was worthy of Sara Teasdale in her better moments; "One City Only" was free-verse declamation (such poems were legion at the time); "Music" shows she had been reading Richard Aldington, and "In the Desert," Lawrence. After 1916 she lived in New Mexico, and the landscape, primitive life, and folklore of this region lent a new impulse to her verse. She had gifts for musical phrasing, for a careful and suggestive juxtaposition of images, and for conveying emotion.

Both Donald Evans (1884–1921) and Adelaide Crapsey (1878–1914) died before their remarkable gifts had fully matured. They were very different, however. Evans made a laborious living in newspaper work but cultivated a Dandyish pose unusual in the United States at the time. He probably influenced Wallace Stevens. His café sophistication seemed beguilingly European. His mild eroticism and exotic, luxuriant phrasing were doubtless meant to seem decadent. He composed realistic and satiric portraits of human failure, which remind us slightly of Robinson's. They are mostly ephemeral, but there are brilliant touches, as when he writes (of Mabel Dodge), "Her hidden smile was full of hidden breasts." "Dinner at the Hotel de la Tigresse Verte" is a splendidly comic, mordant poem: the lovers

were certain that they had forever
Imprisoned fickleness in the vodka.

Adelaide Crapsey is best-known for having invented a new form, the cinquain, a five-line poem in which the number of syllables in each line are two, four, six, eight, and two successively. The form imposes strict economy, and Miss Crapsey used it mainly for effects of emotional suggestion of an impressionistic kind, as in "The Warning":

Just now,
Out of the strange
Still dusk . . . as strange, as still . . .
A white moth flew. Why am I grown
So cold?

There has been some dispute as to whether she knew haiku, but on both external and internal evidence it seems probable that she did. The cinquains are similar in brevity, in concentration on an image or impression, in sensitive feeling and suggestion, and in their mood of quiet sadness. She also wrote more conventional poems which show the same disciplined manipulation of form. It is not form achieved for its own sake, but an expert use of formal means to direct distinct attention to each word or phrase. Her poems are severely impersonal, save for one written at the tuberculosis sanitarium at Saranac, "To the Dead in the Graveyard Underneath my Window." It voices the awareness of her early death and the protest against it that had been unexpressed but implicit in many of her other poems.

For approximately fifteen years, 1917-1932, Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) had a wide, enthusiastic following. Some critics ranked her among the best living American poets, and a great many readers formed their idea of the contemporary or modern poet from her example. The poem that made her famous was "Renascence," which she wrote at the age of nineteen. This archetypal effusion describes a mystic moment in which she finds herself buried and then brought back to life. Before she sinks into the grave, she beholds and feels herself crushed under the sorrows and sins of the cosmos; when she is reborn, she acclaims the world, life, and God. Her phrasing is inadequate to the experience it is supposed to present—

Ah, awful weight! Infinity
Pressed down upon the finite Me!—

but "Renascence" is partially redeemed by its directness, boldness, and naiveté. In contrast to this and similarly "cosmic" poems in which the Everlasting Yea strives against the Everlasting No, she made saucy pokes at bourgeois convention in *A few Figs from Thistles* (1920). Her "First Fig" was widely quoted—

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!—

and her "Second Fig" was equally high-spirited:

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand;
Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!

She also composed verses of radical political protest, and she wrote a great many sonnets, mostly love sonnets; admirers were reminded of such exemplars as Shakespeare and Elizabeth Browning, except that Miss Millay, the "female Byron," was sometimes more sensational:

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten . . .

Her sonneteering reached its ambitious climax in *Fatal Interview* (1931), a sequence of fifty-two Shakespearean sonnets marking the course of a love affair. Along with these more frequently discussed poems, she wrote a great many simply planned and phrased lyrics of traditional kinds.

The poems Miss Millay wrote as a schoolgirl in Camden, Maine, were typical of the provincial, self-taught, boldly naive American style that we observed, for example, in Edwin Markham. It is as though the young poet, reading anthologies, had compounded a style out of whatever might be found in them. This style divorced poetry from contemporary speech and ordinary reality, and was valued because it did so. Miss Millay employed and was probably delighted by poetic diction ("stretch-eth," "I would fain pluck"), including expletives ("I do fear") and poetic interjections ("nay!" "prithee"). "Renascence" awakens recollections of English Romantic and seventeenth-century poets. In short, Miss Millay offered with full sincerity the high-flying style and content that most Americans had expected of poetry before the Modernist revolution came along.

The response she evoked may testify to a hunger for this at a time when so much contemporary poetry seemed to many readers restricted and drab. From their point of view Frost and Robinson were prosaic, however skillful. The Imagists worked up minute visual glimpses, with perhaps a Japanese suggestiveness. The *Others* poets, such as Kreymborg, Stevens, and Mina Loy, were often viewed by such readers as slight and silly. Feminine lyricists, such as Sara Teasdale and Lizette Reese, were minor, Eliot satiric and exhausted. Miss Millay's rhetorical fine feathers, her huge hyperboles, apostrophes, and poses—

Sweet sounds, oh, beautiful music, do not cease!
Reject me not into the world again—

at least gave readers a strong sensation.

Her themes were sometimes sensational—and so was the gossip about her. She lived in Greenwich Village, and became—or was reputed to be—a bohemian, politically radical and sexually emancipated. She had, one heard, a succession of lovers, and her poems seemed to confirm the fact; they were praised or condemned for telling of love and sex frankly and from a feminine point of view. She was a rebel in ways that were typical of the twenties and that made her seem a peculiarly “modern” figure. Her appeal lay in this combination of the conventionally “poetic” high style and theme with a more contemporary intimacy or frankness that seemed adventurous and liberating at the time. But of course the poet-as-rebel was itself a conventional Romantic role.

When Miss Millay’s reputation began to decline the reason usually assigned by reviewers for rejecting where they had once praised was either that she had changed for the worse or, at least, had made no progress toward the better—the “better” being usually conceived as a more mature attitude to life. Both assertions were questionable, though her *Conversation at Midnight* (1937) certainly revealed that philosophic reflection was not her forte. In general, the evolution of her own poetry affected her reputation much less than the evolution of poetry at large. She lost ground because of the gradual acceptance in the late 1920s and 1930s of what I have called the “high Modernist mode,” that is, because of the spread of critical expectations and criteria of which Eliot was the chief symbol and exponent.

With Miss Millay we may mention William Ellery Leonard (1876–1944), for he also combined traditional form and diction with a new, autobiographical intimacy. *Two Lives* (privately printed in 1922; published in 1925) told the painful story of his marriage in a sequence of sonnets. It had a brief success, but his less personal poems are better. Although weakened by Romantic clichés, they impress one by their intelligence and weight. He is remembered primarily for his *The Locomotive God* (1927), a prose autobiographical work of psychological interest.

Those who found Miss Millay excessively vehement and even blowzy often admired the elegant Elinor Wylie (1885–1928). She, too, lived among the bohemians in Greenwich Village, but she was not of them. She was wealthy, beautiful, and cultivated

and the impression she made by her presence favorably influenced the reception of her work. She sought to master a “small, clean technique,” as she put it, to turn out “brilliant and compact” stanzas comparable to “enamelled snuffboxes.”

Her phrasing was usually direct and vigorous, her verse firmly molded, her rhythms varied and controlled. She wrote epitaphs in Roman and songs in Elizabethan style. She read lyrics of the seventeenth century and emulated their grace, or paradox, or elaborate conceits. She adored Shelley. She wrote sonnets of personal emotion in the style of Elizabeth Barrett Browning or of Edna St. Vincent Millay. She could sound like Blake or Keats, Walter de la Mare or Housman. “Let No Charitable Hope” concluded with Henley’s “Invictus” note which was so widely imitated:

In masks outrageous and austere
The years go by in single file;
But none has merited my fear,
And none has quite escaped my smile.

As the metaphor of “enamelled snuffboxes” suggests, the strongest influence on her poetry was probably the aesthetic avant garde of England in the 1890s. In her last years, however, she wrote some poems of a length and “philosophic” ambition she would not have attempted earlier; these involved something of a departure from her former ideal of polished technique.

In “The Eagle and the Mole,” which Yeats thought “a lovely heroic song,” Miss Wylie voiced contempt for the “polluted” and “reeking herd” and praised the inviolate “eagle of the rock.” The attitude was typical of her, and had obvious literary sources in British poetry of the 1890s. In other poems she voiced a Shelleyan longing for the Eternal and the One. Along with such admirations and longings went a recoil from what seemed to her the crass, equivocal, and vaguely monstrous character of human nature and the world. Hence her heroic contempt and Shelleyan mysticism shaded over into fantasies of escape and hiding; in other poems, recoiling from this impulse, she embraced or resolved to embrace the monster, life. The presence of these opposed impulses frequently made her utterance tense and ambiguous, and the persistence and permutation of this conflict gave her work added interest.

Other poets whose work was modified by one or another of the contending modernisms of the age included Witter Bynner (1881-1968), Orrick Johns (1887-1946), Hermann Hagedorn (1882-1964), Hervey Allen (1889-1949), and Robert Hillyer (1895-1961). Bynner wrote poems of many kinds—sonnets and lyrics, free verse effusions, translations, meditations, monologues—and underwent diverse influences in successive phases. He took part with Ficke in the *Spectra* hoax and cultivated enthusiasms for Whitman, Housman, Chinese verse, Mexico, and the myths and dances of the American Indians. His spiritual autobiography veiled in allegory, *Eden Tree* (1931), was followed by *Guest Book* (1935), a collection of sonnets characterizing, sometimes satirically, persons he knew. Orrick Johns once seemed promising to both the “conservative” poets and to the avant-garde. *Asphalt and Other Poems* (1917) contained a series of trite poems in New York City dialect and a section of “Country Rhymes”; these were lyrics of a traditional kind:

So I took her where she spoke,
Breasts of snow and burning mouth . . .
Crying cranes and drifting smoke
And the blackbirds wheeling south.

In his next volume, *Black Branches* (1920), this slight, appreciative lyricist became an experimentalist, an unnatural phase that probably indicates a wish to keep up and in with the avant-garde. He practiced, however, the experiments of other poets and even tried his hand in the latest style of Eliot:

The daedal queen edulcorate
strove with her sleepiness at tea;
Theos, attending lounged and ate
the crumbs of social apathy.

Johns returned to the style of his “Country Rhymes” in *Wild Plum* (1926), and after that he published no more volumes, though he continued to write. He ended his life by taking poison. The lyrics of Hermann Hagedorn were slight but sensitive. He also wrote novels and an important biography of Edwin Arlington Robinson (1938). Hervey Allen published eight volumes of poetry in the 1920s. His forte was narrative verse, and his most successful efforts were “The Blindman,” a ballad, and “Children of Earth,” a long poem that slightly recalls Robert

Frost. *Earth Moods* (1925) was an epic history of the earth in free verse. He was best known for his biography of Poe, *Israfel* (1927), and his novel *Anthony Adverse* (1933).

Robert Hillyer’s poetic lineage may be traced through Santayana and Bridges, on the one hand, and through Robinson and Frost, on the other. In him the “genteel” ideal of poetry as reflection, consolation, and beauty combined with something a little harder, shrewder, more contemporary, and closer to actual speech. He was impeccably skillful within his self-chosen limits. If poetry were only the management of rhythm and syntax, smooth (or delicately roughened) diction, stanzaic form, assonance, and alliteration, Hillyer would have been one of the finest poets of his generation. Here he is in his Bridges vein:

There is always the sound of falling water here;
By day, blended with birdsong and windy leaves;

and here in a slightly more colloquial rhythm:

For forty years and more my hand has shown
The scar where once a fishhook tore the flesh.
The body bears these grudges of its own.

The self projected in his poetry was kindly, humorous, and nostalgic, resolved to be hopeful, and grateful for beauty and country calm. His feelings were rarely intense. Intellectually he resembled, as he said, Samuel Johnson’s old college friend Mr. Edwards, who had tried to be a philosopher but found that “cheerfulness was always breaking in.” His poetic “Letters” (“A Letter to a Teacher of English,” “A Letter to Robert Frost”), which he wrote in the 1930s, display the most skillful satiric use of Pope’s closed heroic couplet that has been achieved in this century, though Hillyer is much less concentrated and biting than Pope:

Taste changes. Candid Louis Untermeyer
Consigns his past editions to the fire;
His new anthology, resigned and thrifty,
Builds up some poets and dismisses fifty.
And every poet spared, as is but human,
Remarks upon his critical acumen.

Loyal to the poets and methods he loved, Hillyer found himself on the defensive as the Modernists became a highbrow vogue in

the 1930s, and his life was troubled by feuds with their critical disciples, feuds for which he lacked aptitude.

CONRAD AIKEN

If Conrad Aiken (1889–1973) was a conservative or traditional poet, his work did not much resemble that of other poets noticed in this chapter. He is discussed here mainly because to place him anywhere else would be even less appropriate. He belonged to the generation of Pound, Eliot, Stevens, and Williams, but, except for his college friendship with Eliot at Harvard, he was not associated with any of them. He was living in Boston in 1915, when Boston became, thanks to Amy Lowell, the American center of the Imagist movement. He was friendly with John Gould Fletcher at this time and intrigued by his “symphonies,” but Aiken was no Imagist. In fact, he attacked the movement in reviews and essays. He had no sympathy with the “democratic” and “Whitmanesque” tendencies in American poetry, nor, at the other extreme, had he a good word for the “word-jugglers and sensation-balancers,” as he called them—Maxwell Bodenheim, Wallace Stevens, Mina Loy, William Carlos Williams, and the other poets associated in the 1910s with Alfred Kreymborg and *Others*.

Because he wrote his finest poems in the 1930s he might be taken up in connection with a later period. But Aiken had no important influence on poets from the thirties to the present, neither did he reflect the tendencies of those years. He is a product of the ferment in American poetry of the 1910s; and once he had formed his own voice, method, and theme in the “symphonies” he began to compose in 1916, his development proceeded organically and independently. But to notice him with the conservatives has the advantage of recalling a label often applied to him in the 1910s and 1920s. He was called a conservative because he used traditional prosody, still more because he criticized all brands of Modernism with shrewd common sense. As Marianne Moore remarked, he was a reviewer who feared to displease no one—except himself.

His first volume, *Earth Triumphant and Other Tales in Verse* (1914), was in a traditionally Romantic vein and showed that he

had been reading Masfield. In the next couple of years he sometimes emulated Masters and sometimes Eliot. His “symphonies,” composed between 1916 and 1925 (such as *Senlin: A Biography*, 1918), attempted to adapt principles of structure from music. Aiken hoped to obtain “contrapuntal effects in poetry” through “contrasting and conflicting tones and themes.” “One employs what one might term emotion-mass with just as deliberate a regard for its position in the total design as one would employ a variation of form.” In theory, the intended “musical” form or effect would determine what ideas or emotions were presented as well as the method used to present them; “symphonic” poetry, as Aiken conceived it, would not even convey emotions so much as it would evoke their “shimmering overtones.” In fact, however, the “symphonies” enacted a strenuous, intellectual questioning. The general theme of *Senlin*, as he explained in *Poetry* (1919), “is the problem of personal identity, the struggle of the individual for an awareness of what it is that constitutes his consciousness; an attempt to place himself, to relate himself to the world of which he feels himself to be at once an observer and an integral part.” As he later summed up his lifelong article of faith: “Consciousness is our supreme gift. . . . To see, to remember, to know, to feel, to understand, as much as possible—isn’t this perhaps the most obviously indicated of motives or beliefs, the noblest and most all-comprehending of ideas which it is relatively possible for us to realize.”

In his subsequent poetry Aiken continued to pursue this “theme” and experimented with different formal means for embodying it. In *The Coming Forth by Day of Osiris Jones* (1931) he drew his procedure from Egyptian religious ritual. The dead Osiris must give to the judge, Memnon, a complete accounting of all that he has done in life. *Landscape West of Eden* (1935) expressed developing consciousness in changing landscapes. *The Kid* (1947) treated the westward expansion of America as a symbol of widening awareness. His finest volumes are the two sequences of *Preludes for Memnon* (1931) and *Time in the Rock* (1936). Aiken also wrote fiction, autobiography, and criticism and edited five successful anthologies. His work of more than sixty years in literature displayed intelligence, integrity, ambition, and power of growth. He was belauded by critics, such as R. P. Blackmur and Dudley Fitts, whose opinions can be re-

aviation; it describes notable pilots and flights in ballads, sonnets, and other short forms of verse.

REGIONAL POETRY

Regional poetry has been written in America with diverse motives. Among them are local piety and patriotism, fascination with the history, ways of life, types of character, folk lore, and speech of a geographical section, the wish to exploit in poetry a relatively unfamiliar subject matter and idiom, and sometimes a more commercial wish to cash in on popular nostalgia for the days of dory-fishing, or stovewood splitting, or sod-breaking, or bronco-busting, or turkey-in-the-straw. Regional poetry has been written in the twentieth century at every level of poetic ability and sophistication, from the complex artistry of Robert Frost to the knowing slickness of MacKinlay Kantor or to the warm naiveté of Jesse Stuart of Kentucky.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of this one, regional poetry was often taken up as a means of rebelling against the poetry of the Genteel Tradition. Yet most regional poets of the 1910s and 1920s were far from being rebels; many of them sought only to express the subjects they loved in what they understood to be the approved style of poetry. Madison Cawein presented Kentucky haunts in the language of Keats and Shelley; Edwin Ford Piper described a wagon train in the idiom and rhythm of English descriptive verse of the later eighteenth century. As conventions of poetic style changed, regionalists began to write in the newer ways; by 1927 Piper was adopting free verse, just as, a little later, Robert P. Tristram Coffin and August William Derleth picked up the style of Frost. But in these poets the modern styles were no less derivative than the Genteel one had been.

No just estimate of the strength of the regional impulse can be formed without keeping in mind the poets we treat elsewhere, such as Riley, Robinson, Frost, and the many who, though not primarily regionalist, nevertheless composed regional poems at times—for example, Sandburg in *Cornhuskers*, John Gould Fletcher in his poems on Arkansas life and history, Witter Bynner on rural New York, and Amy Lowell on New England. We here notice most of the other regionalists who are worth

mentioning from the start of the century to the present. The early period was the important one for regional poetry; few poets of the younger and middle generations are now writing in this vein.

Who should be included as a "regional" poet is not always easy to decide, for many poets reflect the life and speech of whatever milieu is familiar to them. Followers of William Carlos Williams believe as a matter of principle that poetry ought to be rooted in the local scene. Yet Frost is a regional poet, whatever else he is, and Williams is not. The essential difference is that Frost viewed rural New England as having a distinctive character of its own and valued it as a setting and subject of poetry. Williams, on the other hand, wrote about Rutherford and Paterson, not because these cities were regionally distinctive but because they were, he felt, representatively American. Turning to the local environment he knew intimately, he sought to find and express not a regional but an American sensibility. Both points of view derive from the Romantic period, when the feeling spread among educated persons that the distinctive life of a class, such as the peasantry, or of a historic period, or of a region, or of a nation might embody special values that were worth cherishing. The Scotch novels of Sir Walter Scott or Wordsworth's loving portrait of the Westmorland peasantry in "Michael" are examples. In the later nineteenth century the regional impulse was reflected in the local-color school of American fiction and with imaginative profundity in novelists such as Hardy, who combined the regional with the elemental and universal. Although regional poetry was already a well-established tradition, both types of fiction have something to do with the vogue of it in America in the early part of this century.

We may begin with Kentucky, where an indigenous culture survived among the hill people. Elizabeth Madox Roberts (1886-1941) was primarily a novelist and made her reputation with *The Time of Man* (1926), a moving study of the rural poor. The poems she wrote occasionally were collected in *Song in the Meadow* (1940). About half of these expert and sensitive lyrics might be called regional. "Stranger," for example, imitated a folk ballad sung with a banjo accompaniment, "A Ballet Song of Mary" used the archaic English that was still heard among the hills, and "Woodcock of the Ivory Beak" drew on local folklore. Her poems deserve to be better known.

Roy Helton (b. 1886) also exploited the idiom and imaginative lore of Kentucky in the first part of *Lonesome Water* (1930). His "Old Christmas Morning" is a fine ballad of feuds and ghosts:

"What should I see there, Sally Anne Barton?"

"Well, sperits do walk last night."

"There were an elder bush a-blooming
While the moon still give some light."

Helton was a less gifted poet than Miss Roberts, however, and the regional vein somewhat disguised the conventionality of his imagination, which appeared undisguised in the other parts of *Lonesome Water* and in *Come Back to Earth* (1946). James Still was born in 1906, became a librarian in rural Kentucky between 1932 and 1939, and then a college teacher. The poems of *Hound on the Mountain* (1937) have the hill country for their setting. Their imagery is vivid and concrete, their phrasing vigorous, and their incremental rhythms and syntax generate powerful emotion.

Jesse Stuart is a more ingenuous describer of the Kentucky hill country, where he was born in 1907. He believes that poetry should "communicate," that it should speak immediately and clearly to anyone. "I have never," he says, "tried to develop a style. I just feel the compulsion to write, and I write." No sophisticated modern poet could come forth with:

I'll stand beneath the gray-marked sycamore
And with soft hands I'll feel its scaly bark,
Not any man will ever love life more;

but a great many sophisticated writers at times have uneasy consciences because they feel they cannot feel, or would not care to express, such simple, wholesome emotions, and Stuart has received favorable attention in and around New York, where reviewers have compared him to Robert Burns. Kentuckians have given the prideful encouragement that local poets usually receive in the United States if they celebrate their region and also become known outside it. The special interest of many Southern writers in the literature of their own region has also contributed to Stuart's reputation. He is Poet Laureate of Kentucky; there is a Stuart room at Murray State College; and several university dissertations have been written on him, of which

one has been published. He has also written short stories, novels, and other types of prose.

DuBose Heyward (1885-1940) came from an aristocratic family in Charleston, South Carolina, but grew up poor. He met Hervey Allen in 1918, and in *Carolina Chansons: Legends of the Low Country* (1922) the two writers celebrated the region in traditional meters. Heyward's novel *Porgy* (1925) was intended as a study of black American character. He and his wife turned it into a play (1927), and Gershwin's celebrated musical *Porgy and Bess* (1925) was based on it. *Skylines and Horizons* (1924) included a group of poems depicting life in the Great Smoky mountains ("Skylines") and a number of lyrical and meditative utterances ("Horizons") suggested by the landscape and history of the South Carolina low country. In "The Negro," the only new section in his *Jasbo Brown and Selected Poems* (1931), two short narrative poems are "Jasbo Brown" and "Gamesters All." Although their subjects are a jazz musician and a group of crap-shooters, their idiom is genteel.

In the state of Maine a consciously homespun regionalist was Holman Francis Day (1865-1935), who was a newspaper editor and novelist as well as a poet. His first book, *Up in Maine: Stories of Yankee Life Told in Verse* (1900), follows the example of J. W. Riley in its uses of rural dialect, though the characters typify traditional Yankee virtues—integrity, independence, stoic endurance, and single-mindedness. *Pine Tree Ballads* (1902) and *Kin o' Ktaadn* (1904)—which takes its name from a mountain—also exploit the dialect and demonstrate a growing range and skill in realistic portraiture, which Day was better able to pursue, he felt, in the novels of Maine life to which he increasingly turned. Wilbert Snow (b. 1884) wrote poems that convincingly express his love for the country along Maine's Penobscot Bay. Since he was not only a professor at Wesleyan, but also Governor of Connecticut in 1946-1947, he may have felt a special need for the solace and refreshment his poetry dwells on. James Whaler (b. 1889) was also a professor, and published several studies of the poetry of Milton. In *Hale's Pond* (1927) he pictured life in the Maine woods in a sequence of eerily imaginative narrative poems. His subsequent *Green River* (1931) is not a regional work, but a poem about the naturalist Constantine Rafinesque.

Robert P. Tristram Coffin (1892-1955), who taught at Bow-

doin College, was a prolific writer of essays, biographies, novels, and poems. In the early part of his career he turned out a great many ballads; later he tended to present familiar scenes and types of character of coastal and rural Maine. Robert Frost was, he said, an influence in "opening my eyes to the poetry in common speech and people and in usual sights." His pictures and comments were slightly sentimental, nostalgic, often humorous, and competently executed in traditional meters and simple words. Like Riley, toward whom he descended as much as he rose toward Frost, he felt that the success or failure of a poem could be gauged by the response of an audience when he read it aloud, and he somewhat modified his style as experience taught him what would stir his hearers.

August William Derleth (1909-1971) also absorbed the poetry of Frost. His region was Wisconsin, and he claimed to be the "most versatile and voluminous writer in quality writing fields," but his poems are better than this boast might suggest. His rural setting is roughly similar to Frost's, and he shared some of Frost's virtues, such as sly humor and reflective point.

Going west across the Missouri, we come to *Barbed Wire and Other Poems* (1919) by Edwin Ford Piper (1871-1939). This volume depicts the lives of homesteaders in the early 1880s. Piper knew his subject thoroughly and worked with historical and stylistic diligence. At his best he mastered a fairly direct and pithy style, not far from the spoken idiom. *Painrock Road* (1927) presented similar material in a similar style, except that Piper now occasionally experimented with free verse, and some of these poems are Imagist. John Neihardt (1881-1973) lived among the Omaha Indians for six years. His later poems, composed in a forthright style, depicted frontier life. He wrote an epic of the West and was made Poet Laureate of Nebraska in 1921. Lew Sarrett (1888-1954) also wrote of the Indians and the wilderness.

Harold L. Davis (1896-1960) was primarily a novelist and did not publish a book of poems until 1942. He had a wide experience of life in the Western states as a shepherd, sheriff, and rancher. *Proud Riders and Other Poems* has two sections, "Far Western Pastorals" and "Narrative Poems." The pastorals are short poems of a loose-limbed, mildly thoughtful or cud-chewing description. The narratives exploit colloquial dialogue

in the manner of Frost. Davis, who knew several European languages, was a sophisticated poet, and his poems in both sections are "pastoral" in the same sense as the better Western movies; they present Western scenery, characters, and ways of life with considerable authenticity but still with a consciousness that they are simplifying in accordance with conventions.

The verses of MacKinley Kantor (b. 1904), a newspaper poet, were collected in *Turkey in the Straw* (1935). They are mostly ballads, recalling the life and history of frontier America. One section deals with the Civil War, in which Kantor is keenly interested. Although the volume was subtitled *A Book of American Ballads and Primitive Verse*, and some of the ballads are in dialect, they are anything but primitive, for they have a journalistic effectiveness in exploiting stock sentiment. The most obvious literary influence is that of Vachel Lindsay in poems such as "The Black Bison" and "When the Angels Came for Bryan." *Glory for Me* (1945) is a novel in verse. Poetry is only a sideline for this successful novelist and writer of screenplays.

BLACK POETS OF AMERICA
THE FIRST PHASE

IN almost all our chapters on American poetry we could have dwelt also on the work of black poets. Paul Lawrence Dunbar could be discussed along with James Whitcomb Riley. Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, W. S. Braithwaite, and Georgia Johnson were among the poets who in the Modernist era continued to use traditional forms and idioms. Fenton Johnson was among the "new" poets in Chicago in the 1910s, and Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown were creative and original figures in the style of poetry, descending from Whitman, Lindsay, and Sandburg, that reflected a commitment to democratic, Populist, and later sometimes to Marxist ideals. Black poets seldom exploited the oblique, elliptical styles of Pound and Eliot—not at least until after the 1920s,—but they figured in every other important tendency of twentieth-century American poetry.

There are good reasons for devoting a separate chapter to their work. There is wide interest today in the history of the literary expression of black Americans. Also, within the general evolution of modern American poetry, that written by black Americans constitutes a distinct vein to a degree that the poetry in English of other minorities, racial or religious, does not. The following pages survey black poets from the 1890s through the 1920s, from Dunbar to the publication of Sterling Brown's *Southern Road* in 1932. This first phase anticipated in some

respects the more radical phase of black poetry that began in the 1960s, although leading poets of this later period, such as Imamu Baraka (LeRoi Jones), have often been savagely critical of black poets of the twenties.

Inquiring why or in what ways the poetry of black Americans is distinctive, we may begin by noting the obvious fact that black poets look with different eyes on the American past, seeing contours, points of emphasis, and meanings less perceived by most whites. For socioeconomic and psychological reasons the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome has meant less to black intellectuals as a source of values, ideals, historical precedent, or literary allusion. The content of black poetry responds to the sorts of personal experience that blacks in America are likely to have. Religious faith provides an example of the more subtle kinds of qualitative difference in the experience of black poets. They have been as likely as any others to break with Christianity in this century—perhaps more likely because of the association of Christianity with white dominance. But to repudiate Christianity was to break with the faith from which the community had historically derived much of its culture and social cohesiveness; it meant separating oneself from the majority of blacks. Yet the black intellectual might wish to feel his solidarity with the common people. Thus, for black writers the problem of Christian faith typically presented itself in dimensions and ramifications that were not quite the same for writers who were not black. These examples are mentioned only as representative of the many that might also be cited to illustrate why the themes, subject matters, feelings, and concerns of black poets have differed to some degree from those of American poets in general.

Similarly with the form and style of black poetry. But at this point one must distinguish between poets such as W. S. Braithwaite and Countee Cullen, on the one hand, and Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, on the other. The former were concerned to be recognized as poets, not as black poets, and their style was shaped accordingly. But poets such as Hughes and Brown drew forms and techniques from, for example, the spirituals and field songs of rural Southern blacks or from blues and jazz. In exploiting this material they resembled other modern poets who widened the resources of poetry by incorporating elements of popular culture. One might think of Lindsay's uses of jazz syncopation in "The Congo" or his incorporation of a re-

vivalist hymn in "General William Booth Enters Heaven" or of Eliot's adaptation of the music-hall skit at the end of part two of *The Waste Land*. Also, because the modes of expression they adopted were associated with one group of Americans particularly, Hughes and Brown might be compared to regional poets such as Frost. Their motives, however, were closer to Lindsay's or Sandburg's than to Frost's or Eliot's. They sought not so much to renew the poetic tradition by mingling it with something else as to express the black people, their attitudes, experiences, ways of life, and imaginative styles, in forms that would speak to them because they were theirs.

We are better able to appreciate their poems if we know the prototypes on which they are based. These are sometimes esoteric; for example, a poem may be modeled on a particular folksong. Moreover, the prototypes may be invoked only allusively. Also the prototypical element usually includes not just a form and idiom but also the tempo, pitch, emphasis, and modulation that would be used in speaking or singing. Nevertheless, even if one is not adverted to these things, the poems still communicate. Few readers of Sterling Brown's "Southern Road" have actually heard the singing of the chain gangs as they work on the road, but it is easy to imagine the prisoners swinging their sledgehammers to the rhythm of a song:

Swing dat hammer—hunh—
Steady, bo';
Swing dat hammer—hunh—
Steady, bo';
Ain't no rush, bebbly,
Long ways to go.

The only frequently invoked prototype that could cause serious confusion if one were not familiar with it is the blues song. In Langston Hughes's "Bound No'th Blues" one must be able to interpret the emotion by hearing the intonation and the rhythm. This can only be done by readers who have heard such songs sung. The last stanza, for example, goes:

Road, road, road, O!
Road, road, . . . road . . . road, road!
Road, road, road, O!
On the no'thern road.
These Mississippi towns ain't
Fit fer a hoppin' toad.

Many black poets composed in dialect, but the dialects were not the same, neither were they adopted for the same motives. The important distinction is between the dialect poetry of Dunbar and his followers around the turn of the century and that of poets such as Hughes and Sterling Brown in the next generation. Dunbar's dialect was a literary device modeled chiefly on the speech attributed for comic purposes to the "darkies" of minstrel shows, although he avoided the more demeaning characteristics of this speech, such as malapropisms and grotesque mispronunciations. The dialects used by Hughes and Brown, on the other hand, were authentic. They transcribed or at least adapted the linguistic individualities of actual groups of speakers, whether in the rural South or in Harlem. The passages quoted from Brown and Hughes may serve as illustrations and may be contrasted with typical lines from Dunbar's "When de Co'n Pone's Hot":

An' you want to jump an' hollah,
Dough you know you'd bettah not,
When yo' mammy says de blessin'
An' de co'n pone's hot.

As these lines illustrate, in his use of dialect, though not in the particular dialect he used, Dunbar was emulating Riley. The extent to which his motives for exploiting dialect were not racial is suggested by the fact that he also wrote poems in German, Irish, Scottish and Riley's own Hoosier dialects. To say that his motives were commercial would be an unkind simplification, but it should be stressed that the dialect he adopted was associated, through the minstrel tradition, with stereotyped interpretations of black life and character—the black as happy-go-lucky primitive—that had been created by white authors and confirmed the premises about racial differences that prevailed in America eighty years ago.

There were of course poets in the age of Dunbar who attempted to write in an authentic dialect which would not invoke sentimental and condescending stereotypes. James Edwin Campbell was one. But on the whole their effort failed, and black poets of Dunbar's time had only two literary idioms available to them. They could use the standard language or they could use a dialect that was racial but which, because of its literary and minstrel associations, imprisoned the characterization of

blacks within falsifying conventions. With this in mind, one appreciates the significance of the breakthrough that dissociated dialect from these conventions.

TYPES AND HISTORY OF BLACK POETRY

The classifications made in literary history are always unsatisfactory and must be continuously qualified. If black poets are treated separately as a group, the extent to which their work reflects the development of poetry in general must also be emphasized. With black as with white poets the differences between those of the turn of the century and those of the next generation were fundamental. They show not only in the handling of dialect but in the franker, bolder speech of the modern generation, in their technical inventiveness—in almost all the respects, including the sheer quantity of memorable poets, that I have emphasized in distinguishing the generation of Pound from that of Stedman and Santayana. But with black poets of the 1910s and 1920s, the distinction of "conservative" and "new" poets, hitherto stressed in discussing this period, is less significant. Certainly the distinction can be made. W. S. Braithwaite, Georgia Johnson, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen were among the conservative poets of the age, and Fenton Johnson, Jean Toomer, and Langston Hughes were "new" poets—though not in the same way. But black poets were not battling each other over new or old forms and styles. On the whole, one accomplished black poet was ready to welcome another, whatever his style, for the accomplishment was what mattered for racial pride.

In the 1920s there was, however, a running dispute as to whether poetry by blacks should or should not deal with specifically racial experience. Should it adopt distinctive idioms and forms? Should it address itself especially to a black audience? Or should it reject such demands as restrictive? Although such questions were important to the writers concerned, virtually all black poets wrote their best poems when they spoke out of a racial feeling or identification, race being, as James Weldon Johnson put it, "perforce the thing that the American Negro poet knows best."

Black poetry of this period is usually discussed in connection with the Harlem Renaissance. The phrase refers to the heightened vitality and achievement of black cultural life in Harlem in the 1920s. The causes of this flowering are not completely explainable. Doubtless the migration of Southern blacks into Northern cities was important, especially since blacks were also emigrating from the West Indies and Africa, and in Harlem, which had the largest population of black people of any city in the world, widely diverse traditions and cultures encountered each other. By the 1920s, moreover, new institutions, furthering the political, social, economic, and intellectual needs of black people, were beginning to have a noticeable impact on feelings and perceptions. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had been founded in 1909, the National Urban League in 1911, and in 1915 Carter G. Woodson had set up the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, with the influential journals it published. On a more popular level Marcus Garvey had a large following. He preached that all American blacks should emigrate to Africa and found a new nation there. No one went, but Garvey intensified feelings of racial solidarity. This was the age of blues and of jazz—an age in which music created by blacks first acquired a worldwide following. In Harlem itself whites and blacks mingled at every cultural level, from the audiences in nightclubs to the cafe conversations of intellectuals. The advent of little magazines and of more liberal or adventurous book publishers made it easier for black writers to handle racial themes honestly; blacks also edited little magazines of their own. All this made a more fertile milieu for poetry, if only because it quickened intellectual life and enhanced self-confidence. We should also keep in mind that the years of the Harlem Renaissance were the heady years of the spread of the "new" poetry in the United States and also of a more skilled accomplishment within the conservative tradition as these poets responded to the challenge of the new styles. The heightened creative achievement of black poets at this time was part of the same ferment and undoubtedly shared in the same general causes, whatever special circumstances were also influential.

The poets now usually associated with the Harlem Renaissance were not participants in an organized movement analogous to the Imagists. Neither did they possess a common tendency that

justifies thinking of them as a group. If they are discussed together, it is because their first important volumes came out at more or less the same time: Claude McKay's *Spring in New Hampshire* in 1920 and *Harlem Shadows* in 1922, Jean Toomer's *Cane* in 1923, Countee Cullen's *Color* in 1925, and Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues* in 1926. It was a sudden, unprecedented emergence of talented black poets. The momentum was kept up by new volumes from these poets and by James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* in 1929 and Sterling Brown's *Southern Road* in 1932; there were also less important works by other poets who established themselves in the twenties. Moreover, these poets illustrated, though in very diverse ways, the growing self-confidence and racial pride of black intellectuals. We have already noticed the use in poetry of the culture and idiom of the folk. There was also a tendency to identify with racial origins and history in Africa and the South, and, more significant, to find in this identification a source of self-respect. Protest against racial injustice was more defiantly voiced. And for the first time in American poetry the presentation of ordinary black people and experience was liberated from comic or sentimental stereotypes. None of these generalizations apply to all the poets of the Harlem Renaissance, however, and where they do apply to a poet, it may be to some of his poems only. In fact the differences between these poets are more obvious than the similarities. Although the "Harlem Renaissance" may be a useful term if it reminds us that there was a significant cultural development in this period, it can also be misleading if it suggests that there was a relatively coherent literary movement.

Around the turn of the century most black poets wrote in the traditional and conventional styles of the age. They declaimed noble emotions or they murmured melodiously in the wake of Tennyson or Swinburne of "Long nights, long nights and the whisperings of new ones" or they fondly remembered Sewanee Hills in neat verses:

Sewanee Hills of dear delight
Prompting my dreams that used to be . . .

No poets of this kind were unusually gifted, though Roscoe Jamison, J. D. Corrothers, W. H. A. Moore, and G. M. McClellan may be mentioned. Interpreting their work with emphasis on

the fact that they were black, Sterling Brown points out that their refusal to write in dialect meant also a rejection of stereotypes of Negro life and character. Too often, however, their reaction . . . seemed to mean something else. References to race were avoided or else couched in abstract, idealistic diction. Valuably insisting that Negro poets should not be confined to problems of race or pictures of Negro life, these poets often committed a costlier error out of timidity at being Negroes: they refused to look into their own hearts and write.

He adds that "the lives of many of these poets were exciting; the difficulties met and surmounted would have been fine material for poetry," but "they chose to write conventionally about the peace of nature. . . . Among their adventures, that which meant most to them, apparently, was their obtaining an education. . . . But worship of education meant a worship of the traditional and bookish." These are important insights, but one must stress that the "timidity" of these poets was typical also of most white poets of the time, who similarly turned from their own experience to "write conventionally about the peace of nature."

The dialect poets of the turn of the century wrote of the simple joys and sorrows of (usually) rural life. They posed no threat to genteel premises. They wrote of the poor, but showed that they were happy. Their speakers were black, but voiced no racial protest. Their style was conventional in everything save diction, and this was humorously intended. Their work, especially that of Dunbar, was welcomed in family magazines such as the *Century*. Among Dunbar's numerous imitators were C. B. Johnson, R. G. Dandridge, W. T. Carmichael, J. D. Corrothers, J. W. Holloway, and D. W. Davis.

Dunbar did not live to see the revitalizing of American poetry that began after 1910, though before the Harlem Renaissance. The most important black poets of the 1910s were Fenton Johnson, W. S. Braithwaite, and Georgia Johnson. Mention should also be made of Benjamin Brawley and Edward Smith Jones, though their poems are now little read. Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art* (1910) was one of the early, extended studies of this subject; Jones is remembered for the moving story of his walk of hundreds of miles from his home in the South to Harvard University. Having arrived in Harvard Square, he was arrested for vagrancy. In jail he wrote a poem entitled "Harvard

Square." This was published in the newspapers and caused so much favorable publicity that he was able to bring out a volume of his poems in the following year (1911). Unfortunately, the poems are wooden.

In the 1920s there was a burst of new talent—Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Arna Bon-temps, and Gwendolyn Bennett. James Weldon Johnson accomplished his finest work in this decade, and Sterling Brown emerged in the early 1930s. On the whole, the most significant developments in this period were: the participation of black poets such as Toomer and Hughes in avant-garde movements and methods; the use of folk idioms and forms by Hughes, Brown, J. W. Johnson, and others in a poetry written with full seriousness and integrity; and the increasing influence on poetry of political and racial ideologies and purposes. In the last respect, the work of black poets was again typical of a more general development.

PAUL LAWRENCE DUNBAR AND THE MINSTREL AND PLANTATION TRADITIONS

Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872–1906) was the first widely known American black poet. He achieved this by catering to popular sentiment and humor, and his verse showed remarkable skill in these ways. He also had more earnest aspirations. The depiction of black people in his dialect poems was influenced by three sources: the representation of small-town and rural life in James Whitcomb Riley, minstrel shows, and the South's post-Civil War "plantation" literature. Riley and the minstrel shows are still somewhat familiar. The songs of Stephen Foster, for example, were composed for the minstrels. These performances in blackface included dances and dramatic skits as well as songs, and the depiction of blacks could be grotesquely comic and degrading as well as sentimental.

The "plantation" tradition in literature developed before the Civil War, partly in response to abolitionist works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was not till after the war, however, that it achieved its greatest victory over fact and the feelings of readers. These many stories and poems portrayed life on antebellum

plantations as having been idyllic. "Mahrs" and his lady were benevolent and protective. Black slaves were devoted and child-like, though guileful in stealing watermelons; they spent much of their time singing, dancing, and eating. Nowadays black people were far less happy—a point often made by attributing such sentiments to former slaves. *Befo' de War* (1888), a collection of poems by Thomas Nelson Page and Armistead C. Gordon, is one example. Dunbar did not push this theme as far as Page and Gordon did, but "Chrismus on the Plantation" shows how far he could go. In the poem the bankrupt master after the war calls his ex-slaves together. He is forced to sell the plantation. Tears are shed, and then one of the blacks voices the feeling of all. Whether master can pay them or not, the former slaves will not desert him:

Er in othah wo'ds, you wants us to fu'git dat you's been kin',
An 'ez soon ez you is he'pless, we's to leave you heah behin'.
Well, ef dat's de way dis freedom ac's on people, white or
black,
You kin jes' tell Mistah Lincum fu' to tek his freedom back.
We gwine wo'k dis ol' plantation fu' whatever we kin git,
Fu' I know hit did suppo't us, an' de place kin do it yit.

The minstrel shows and the "plantation" literature were very popular. Their representation of black men and women was widely assumed to be authentic. Had Dunbar seriously challenged these stereotypes, he would have violated the doctrine of compromise and accommodation rather than confrontation, which was preached by leading blacks in his time; moreover, a more realistic description of black people would have been neither credited nor published. The extent to which conventions were accepted as realities is illustrated by W. D. Howells. Reviewing Dunbar's *Majors and Minors* (1895), Howells compared him with Robert Burns, seeing Dunbar as a peasant poet voicing the actual feelings and experience of his race.

The facts were remote from this interpretation. Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, the son of freed slaves. In high school he wrote poems that received local recognition. At the age of nineteen he took a job as an elevator boy. In the elevator he spent much time reading the English poets of the past and even more time studying the poems published in *The Century* magazine. In such early efforts as "The Ol' Tunes," "The Old Apple Tree,"

"The Old Homestead," and "An Old Memory" he brilliantly imitated the manner of Riley, sometimes using Riley's Hoosier dialect. His reputation quickly spread, and by the age of twenty-five he was well-known. Success brought no happiness, for he was found to be tubercular, and his marriage was embittered by incompatibilities and, finally, separation. During his short life he produced stories, novels, minstrel shows, and six volumes of verse.

Dunbar's poems in dialect give much pleasure from their shrewd, kindly humor, their skill in portraying character through dialogue or monologue, their deft handling of "plot," their unscrupulous appeal to sentimental self-indulgences, and their strong, lively rhythms. Reading them, one should keep in mind that Dunbar was a talented showman, who composed for public performance. "A Negro Love Song," for example, was written in 1893, when he held a job as a cook in a Chicago restaurant. In free moments the kitchen help would get together and talk about their amours. Waiters passing through the group would clear a path by calling, "Jump back, honey, jump back." The poem Dunbar fashioned out of this circumstance has obvious potentialities for effective recitation in the repetitive emphases and counterpoint of the refrain. The last stanza goes:

Put my ahm aroun' huh wais',
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
 Raised huh lips an' took a tase,
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
 Love me, honey, love me true?
 Love me well ez I love you?
 An' she answered, "Cose I do"—
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

Though Dunbar was known for his poems in dialect, he wrote more frequently in ordinary, literate English. One finds poems of love and nature, moral declamation, celebrations of such heroes as Robert Gould Shaw and Booker T. Washington, and poems for schoolboys such as "The Colored Soldiers" and "Black Sampson of Brandywine." It seems likely that his use of dialect and the stereotypes that went with it troubled his conscience. He told James Weldon Johnson, "I've got to write dialect poetry; it's the only way I can get them to listen to me." The remark was accurate—his audience wanted only his poems in

dialect—yet since his death readers have gone carefully through his other poems, and the ones in dialect continue to be more frequently reprinted. Although some of his poems in literate English are fine—"We Wear the Mask," for example—they are not better than many other poems composed more or less in the same forms and styles by other poets in the same period. His poems in dialect, on the other hand, are unique achievements.

POETS OF THE 1910S AND 1920S

William Stanley Braithwaite (1878–1962) was born in Boston of West Indian parents and made his living in the editorial room of the Boston *Transcript*. He was well-known in the 1910s and 1920s as a reviewer and as the editor of numerous poetry anthologies; the most important of the latter were the annual anthologies of magazine verse he brought out between 1913 and 1929. He was ready to praise and print all schools, but his personal ideas about poetry were genteelly conventional to a remarkable degree, as were his own lyrics. These were often whimsical, sometimes vaguely mystical, and usually insipid. Whether for reasons of poetic decorum, as he understood it, or for more personal or psychological reasons, his poetry did not handle racial themes. The feelings he voiced came from poetic tradition:

Mind free, step free,
 Days to follow after,
 Joys of life sold to me
 For the price of laughter.
 Girl's love, man's love,
 Love of work and duty,
 Just a will of God's to prove
 Beauty, beauty, beauty!

Fenton Johnson (1888–1958), who was born in Chicago and lived there most of his life, brought out at his own expense three volumes of poetry in the 1910s: *A Little Dreaming* (1913), *Visions of the Dusk* (1915), and *Songs of the Soul* (1916). These volumes contain genteel verses ("The Awakening of Poesy," "Eulogy of the Fairies") and dialect poems in the vein of Dunbar; they do not include the poems for which Johnson is remembered. In 1916 he sponsored and edited a little magazine, *The Champion*

Magazine, followed by *The Favorite Magazine*, which, according to its title page, was "The World's Greatest Monthly." In both he published short stories, essays, and poems. He also placed some spirituals in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*. In the late teens he seems to have been working on a fourth book of verse, to be called *African Nights*. Although this volume was never published, eight short pieces from it were included in Alfred Kreymborg's annual anthology of avant-garde poems, *Others*, in 1919.

In the *African Nights* Johnson departed from his earlier styles and depicted the life of black city dwellers in free verse similar to Sandburg's. "Tired," which articulated the hopelessness and apathy of the impoverished blacks, clearly belonged to the age of *The Waste Land*:

Let us take a rest, M'Lissey Jane.
I will go down to the Last Chance Saloon, drink a gallon or two
of gin, shoot a game or two of dice and sleep the rest of the
night on one of Mike's barrels.
You will let the old shanty go to rot.

Such poems troubled black writers of the older generation in somewhat the same way that the "sordidness" and "defeatism" of Eliot's poem was shortly to cause protest in 1922, since most readers still expected poetry to express a more liberal, optimistic, and high-minded vision. To a writer like James Weldon Johnson, whose emotions were deeply engaged in the racial struggle, such a poem seemed to despair of the battle, and he read it almost as if it were a betrayal. Today the bitterness of Fenton Johnson appears as much and as effectively a revolutionary stance as the noble hope of James Weldon Johnson ("Fifty Years") or the indomitable defiance in despair of Claude McKay ("If We Must Die"), but it is significant for the history of attitudes toward poetry and racial struggle that the older generation might not sympathize with a revolutionary gesture of this type.

In the 1920s the Johnson family, which had been comfortably off, encountered hard times. Fenton Johnson was no longer able to publish his books and edit his magazines and sank into obscurity. In the 1930s he worked in a writer's project of the W.P.A. He continued to compose poetry; some of these later poems have been published since his death but most were destroyed in the flooding of a cellar where they had been stored.

Neither by her family nor by her art was Georgia Johnson (1886-1966) related to Fenton Johnson. She resembled Sara Teasdale or Elinor Wylie in that she was a writer of short, musical lyrics in traditional forms, who flourished amid the ferment of Modernism and profited from the emphasis on concise, vigorous language within the modernist milieu. She published three books of verse between 1918 and 1928, and a fourth in 1962.

As a boy in Jamaica, Claude McKay (1889-1948) explored the world of books in the library of his older brother, a freethinking schoolteacher. At nineteen he became a policeman, but he was also writing verse. *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* (both published in 1912) contained fluent expressions of local black experience. Many of these poems were in the island dialect, and McKay was praised as a Robert Burns of Jamaica. He went to the United States, ostensibly to continue his education but actually because he was fascinated and appalled by its size and turbulent energies. He also hoped to develop as a poet and to reach a wider audience. In 1914 or 1915 he moved to Harlem, where, having used up his money, he worked as a porter, bartender, waiter, longshoreman, and houseman. Throughout this period he was publishing poems in magazines. His next book, *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920), was published in London; it was followed by *Harlem Shadows* (1922). By this time he was interested in Communism and went with Max Eastman to Russia, where the two writers spent a year. He then settled in France, turning out four books of prose fiction during the next ten years. After 1932, disillusioned with the development of the Communist state in Russia and increasingly depressed, he wrote little. In 1942, again living in the United States, he became a Roman Catholic convert. He spent his last years in poverty and obscurity as a teacher in Catholic schools in Chicago.

In mode and style McKay was confidently old-fashioned. Most of his poems voiced personal feelings directly, with many "oh's!," "ah's!," and even an occasional "alas!" He deployed rhetoric boldly and adopted such traditionally poetic phrasing as the "sable sheet" of night and "Peace, O my rebel heart." In rhythm, diction, and construction his many sonnets have their closest prototypes in those of Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. He most approached a modern style in renderings of black life

in Harlem, but he wrote no more than eight of them. In sentiment and method some of these poems recall the Impressionism of the 1890s. In theme or content, however, McKay's work had a liberating impact on younger black poets. In many poems—for example, in his poems of love and sexual passion—he spoke out of a full, rich humanity that was not informed primarily with a racial self-consciousness. He was able to voice freely and directly his ambivalent feelings about America and about white culture. He cried resounding defiance, especially in "If We Must Die," a poem written in response to the race riots of 1919, which were terrifying to the black community. The poem was reprinted in an English anthology during the Second World War and maybe stirred the Edwardian heart of Winston Churchill, who is said to have read it in the House of Commons. The sestet goes:

Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
 Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
 And for their thousand blows deal 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!

Jean Toomer (1894–1967), who came from a New Orleans creole family that had moved to Washington, D.C., was light-skinned, and sometimes thought of himself as white rather than black. As he later put it, "My position in America has been a curious one. I have lived equally amid the two race groups. Now white, now colored. From my point of view I am naturally and inevitably an American." He studied law at the University of Wisconsin and at City College in New York, but abandoned law for literature. Making friends among the literary avant garde, he was able to publish short stories, poems, and critical pieces in little magazines. In 1923 *Cane* appeared, his first and, as it turned out, his only important work. A brilliantly promising book, it was typical of the experimental milieu of the early twenties. It mingled short stories, dramatic sketches, and poems to build up an imaginative impression of the rural South. In the materials it presented it sought the symbolic and the mythical, like other contemporary works in the high Modernist modes. It

also shared their tragic vision of human life. It highlighted the ambiguity and self-conflict of human feelings, the violence and degradation of human nature, and the extent to which actions and emotions are formed by history, in this case by the psychic and social structures grounded in the history of the South. Although the protagonists cannot control their own destiny nor even know the deep forces that shape it, they take on a kind of splendor in their helplessness, for they are perceived with lyric intensity and endowed with mythical significance. Faulkner was not to begin to publish his major novels for another six years. Toomer's achievement was perhaps all the more unusual in that he had no firsthand experience of the rural South except for a brief period when he taught school in Sparta, Georgia. That an urban sophisticate who could pass for white should have written such a book, confronting a racial and historical past he could easily have ignored, was obviously a fact of much personal significance.

After publishing *Cane*, Toomer fell under the spell of George Gurdjieff, who taught the way to attain world or even cosmic consciousness. Toomer studied with this master in France, then expounded his system in various American cities. His marriage to a white Gurdjieffian disciple caused a certain amount of scandal; and the novels Toomer now wrote defended his system and his marriage and were rejected by publishers. In fact, after *Cane* hardly anything was published for the rest of his life, though he continued to write. He devoted himself in his later years to the study of psychiatry, mysticism, and the religious teachings of the Quakers.

Some of Toomer's later poems have now been published, but since they are likely to interest few readers, we may here notice only the fifteen lyrics included in *Cane*. They are uneven in quality and dissimilar in kind. They show that Toomer had sensitively read the Imagists and Frost and that he had heard or read the folk- and worksongs of Southern blacks. The poems were scrupulously planned: symbols and their interrelations were closely thought out and the course of emotion was carefully plotted. But Toomer's sensuous and imaginative fecundity sometimes got out of hand, obscuring his intentions. His most moving lyric is the "Song of the Son," which articulates, so far as

any single poem does, the personal and imaginative impulses that led Toomer to write his book:

Pour O pour that parting soul in song,
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
Into the velvet pine-smoke air to-night,
And let the valley carry it along.
And let the valley carry it along.

O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,
So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,
Now just before an epoch's sun declines
Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

In time, for though the sun is setting on
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;
Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone.

Countee Cullen (1903–1946) was the adopted son of a Methodist minister in Harlem. He took his surname from his adoptive father, having been born Countee Leroy Porter. Just when and in what circumstances he was adopted is uncertain. One story goes that he came as a child with his mother, or possibly with his grandmother, to New York, where he lived in poverty until his mother (or grandmother) died. At this point the fifteen-year-old was placed with the Cullens by the National Urban League. But his widow said that he was born in Louisville and adopted as a baby, his mother being unwilling or unable to keep him. In any case, the Reverend Cullen was a central figure in his life, and Cullen's career owes much to the fond encouragement he received.

He was writing verse in high school and at New York University, accomplished verse in traditional forms, and recognition came early and easily. His poems were accepted by *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, the prominent magazines of the day for blacks, and by *Harper's*, *The Century*, *The Bookman*, and *Poetry*. In 1925 Witter Bynner, Carl Sandburg, and Alice Corbin awarded him a prize for poetry by college undergraduates; in the same year Harper published his first book, *Color*. That a young black poet had been accepted by a well-established publisher was a significant augury of hope and opening opportunity for black writers. Within two

years more than six thousand copies of the book had been sold.

At the age of twenty-four or five Cullen became an assistant editor of *Opportunity*, with responsibility for literary criticism. *Copper Sun*, his second book of verse, came out in 1927, and in the same year he also edited *Caroling Dusk*, an admirable anthology of poetry by black contemporaries. But his star, now at its zenith, fell swiftly. His argument in the Preface to *Caroling Dusk* that black poets should not accept the restrictions of racial themes and forms offended some persons, especially since he warned against the too-indulgent standards that may debilitate a poet who writes for a particular group. Others, though agreeing with him on these points, felt that his talent was failing. Troubles increased when he married the daughter of W. E. B. DuBois. The marriage took place within the Reverend Cullen's church, with most of the notable figures in the black community attending the ceremony. After a few months it ended in divorce and whispered scandal.

In 1929 his final volume of poems, *The Black Christ*, appeared. He still continued to write—a novel in 1932, translations, two books for children, a play—but he seems to have felt that his literary career, which had opened with such promise only five years before, was essentially over. In 1934, the Depression having dried up his sources of income, he became a high-school teacher of French in Harlem, and this work increasingly absorbed his interest and energy. He died at the age of forty-three.

Cullen formed his poetry on the example of the established poets of the English language. He emulated many but especially loved and identified with Keats, whom he viewed as an apostle of beauty. His use of traditional procedures was further confirmed by study at Harvard with Robert Hillyer, who assigned exercises in different traditional stanzas and meters. Many of his poems might have been written by a somewhat blander Housman, by a Keats with less imaginative and verbal intensity, or by a Shelley with less fantasy:

Silver snakes that once a year
Doff the lovely coats you wear,
Seek no covert in your fear.

Cullen was not merely derivative; what he took over, he made his own. But too often the effect of his lyrics was diminished because they could not support the comparisons with other poets

that they brought to mind. His best poems are generally those in which he expressed with moving directness his feelings as a black in America.

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was born in Joplin, Missouri, to educated and ambitious parents. They separated while he was a child, and his father went to Mexico, where he became a successful businessman. His mother moved from job to job, and the young Hughes lived sometimes with her and sometimes with his maternal grandmother, whose first husband had followed John Brown at Harpers Ferry. He was a bookish child and started writing verse in grammar school. In high school he was introduced to the poetry of Masters, Lindsay, Sandburg, and Amy Lowell, and his writing was much influenced by these new poets, especially Sandburg. When he graduated from high school, he visited his father in Mexico. There was little sympathy between them because, Hughes said, his father “had a great contempt for all poor people,” holding that “it was their own fault that they were poor.” On this trip he wrote one of his better-known poems, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” His father decided that Hughes should study engineering, and Hughes chose Columbia in order to see Harlem. He had no interest in engineering, however, and quit college after one year, thus forfeiting the financial support of his father, with whom there was a complete break. After holding a number of jobs, he embarked for Africa as a mess boy. On a subsequent voyage he jumped ship in Rotterdam and made his way to Paris, arriving with seven dollars in his pocket. He found jobs as a doorman and a dishwasher and then traveled to Italy with two Italian friends. His passport and money were stolen in Genoa, leaving him stranded for a while, but eventually he worked his way back to New York on a ship.

Hughes had already published poems in *Crisis*, and he now met Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, and other figures prominent in the black community. He went to Washington, D.C., where his mother was living, and, failing in his effort to obtain a scholarship to Howard, took a job as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel. Vachel Lindsay stayed at the hotel one day, and Hughes copied out three of his poems and laid them on Lindsay’s table beside his plate. The next morning he read in the newspapers that Lindsay had discovered a busboy poet. Helped by this publicity, he was able to publish his first volume, *The*

Weary Blues, in 1926. He now received a scholarship to Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania, and his second volume of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), came out while he was a college student.

Hughes was fully embarked on an astonishingly productive literary career. In the course of his life he wrote fifteen volumes of poetry, six novels, three books of short stories, eleven plays, children’s books, autobiographies, biographies, histories, opera librettos, essays, articles, radio scripts, and songs for musicals; he also translated from Spanish and French and edited several anthologies. He gave public lectures and readings, taught in Mexico and in universities in the United States, and served as war correspondent during the Spanish Civil War.

The excellence of his poetry lies in its directness, vitality, inventiveness, actuality, humor, and sanity. He did not seek compression of phrase; “Dig and Be Dug / in Return” was his motto. Reading Hughes’s verse, one should keep in mind that he was, like Dunbar, an effective reciter of his poems, and that they were conceived more or less for public performance. In many of his poems he caught the rhythms of jazz or the blues:

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—
“I got the Weary Blues
And I can’t be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can’t be satisfied—
I ain’t happy no mo’
And I wish that I had died.”

He boldly exploited the modern freedom of poetic content and form in order to render the life, feelings, and speech of people in Harlem. Though his presentation was naturalistic, it was in some ways a sentimental naturalism. Remarkably many of the characters in his poems are whores, gamblers, drug addicts, gangsters, drunks, and the like, so that Hughes’s Harlem becomes a lurid place remote from the actual city. The feelings of his protagonists were those implicit in the music on which he based his poetic forms. In jazz pieces they tended to be vital and insouciant and in blues they tended to be despondent, but in either case they reflected conventions. Nevertheless, Hughes’s rendering of contemporary black experience was more realistic

and vivid than that of any other poet before or during the 1920s. He looked further into the heart than any black poet except Toomer, sensitively noting the ambivalences and psychic harms to which blacks are vulnerable in America.

In the 1930s Hughes, along with many other intellectuals, was impressed by Communist teachings and began to coalesce racial themes with ideological ones. Blacks were oppressed not only as a race but as members of the working masses, and Hughes spoke both for them and for the proletariat generally, including the white proletariat which was envisioned as brother to the black. *Scottsboro Limited* (1932) is a one-act play on the celebrated case in which eight blacks, convicted on flimsy evidence of raping two white girls, were sentenced to death in Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931. At the end of the play the eight condemned youths clasp hands with eight Communist workers, and the two groups utter in antiphony and chorus their united promise of a utopia that will end both "greed" and the "color line's blight." In the 1940s and 1950s he was one of several poets—one thinks especially of Rexroth and Patchen—who gave public readings of their poetry to the accompaniment of a jazz band, hoping thereby to develop a new popular art. Portions of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), a seventy-five-page impression of Harlem, easily lend themselves to such performance. The first section is a "Dream Boogie" and concludes:

What did I say?

Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away!

Hey, pop!
Re-bop!
Mop!

Y-e-a-h!

(Hughes's technical inventiveness was at its far-out freest in this poem. One section even consists of a sequence of "Neon Signs.") His next volume of poetry, *Ask Your Mama* (1961), was explicitly written for a musical accompaniment. "The traditional folk melody of 'The Hesitation Blues'" is the leitmotif, he pointed out, and "in and around it, along with the other recognizable melodies employed, there is room for spontaneous jazz improvisa-

tion." The margins contain further directions for the musicians. A final volume of verse, *Black Misery*, was published posthumously in 1969. Hughes was sometimes ready to call an utterance a poem on easier terms than he should have, but the whole oeuvre makes a remarkably broad, rich, forceful, appealing impression. Though his poems already are widely read and admired, his reputation and his readership seem likely to increase in the future.

Arna Bontemps (1902–1973) wrote novels and other prose as well as poetry. He also edited several anthologies of poetry by blacks. Of his own verse he said with typical modesty that it was all composed in the early 1920s, during and just after his years in college, at a time when he knew nothing "of new criticism or a new look in poetry." The statement should not be taken literally; Bontemps was one of many poets who usually composed in traditional idioms and measures and yet learned from the "new" poetry to articulate a wider range of experience and feeling and to write in a tauter, more economical way. Waring Cuney (b. 1906) is known for "No Images," which he wrote as a college student. Like his other poems, this is a brief, free-verse lyric, sensitive in feeling but with no marked power of phrase. Of the lyrics of Gwendolyn Bennett (b. 1902), "Heritage" is the most frequently quoted because of its theme, though it is not her best poem. It begins,

I want to see the slim palm-trees,
Pulling at the clouds
With little pointed fingers. . . .

I want to see lithe Negro girls,
Etched dark against the sky
While sunset lingers.

Anne Spencer (b. 1882) was librarian of the Dunbar High School in Lynchburg, Virginia. She published no book of poems until *African Panorama* (1970), but her work was familiar from the poems included in anthologies. She was a meditative poet, articulating conventionally poetic responses in elaborate imagery and phrase.

James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) became principal of the black grammar school he had attended in Jacksonville, Florida,

and transformed it into the first black high school there. He then moved to New York City, where he collaborated with his brother in writing songs and musicals. From 1906 to 1913 he was in the United States consular service in Venezuela and Nicaragua. During this period he wrote *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), an anonymously published novel that deals with the subject of "passing." He became a field secretary of the NAACP and then its general secretary, resigning his post in 1930 to take a professorship at Fisk University. He was killed in an automobile accident.

Some of Johnson's early poems were in Dunbar's minstrel dialect, but he soon rejected this, recognizing that dialect imposed comic or sentimental conventions through which the black writer was tempted to falsify his subject. His memorable lyrics are in standard English. "O Black and Unknown Bards" is an eloquent tribute to the unknown creators of the spirituals. "Fifty Years" asserts, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, the equal right of black Americans to freedom. "Brothers" describes a black burned to death by a white mob. The black, brutalized by fifteen generations of oppression and the stored-up hate within his people, has committed a crime; the whites torture him with ferocious cruelty. In the perspective of the poem the black criminal and the white mob are "brothers," for both show human nature degraded by the tragic history of black and white relations in the United States. In the power of its grisly detail and in the charitable profundity of its insight the poem reminds one of Faulkner, though in style it recalls Markham's "The Man with the Hoe," especially in its declamatory opening.

Johnson was intent on conveying, as one leading theme, the pride that blacks should take in the historical and cultural achievements of their race in America. The same intention prompted him to compile the first anthology of poetry by blacks in America, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), which was prefaced with "An Essay on the Negro's Creative Genius." He edited with his brother, J. R. Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925) and *The Second Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1926). The work for which Johnson is most remembered is *God's Trombones*, which caused a sensation when it was published in 1927. Impressed with the power and dignity of Synge's ren-

dering of the imagination and speech of the Irish peasantry, Johnson wished to create a similar monument—and literary movement—for his own race. *God's Trombones* consists of seven sermons by a black preacher. Though Johnson did not use dialect, his free-verse paragraphs are in the rhythms of this indigent oratory and his imagery caught the simplicity and grandeur of the preacher's imagination, nurtured on the Bible:

And now, O Lord—
 When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow—
 When I've been called everything but a child of God—
 When I'm done travelling up the rough side of the mountain—
 O—Mary's Baby—
 When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death—
 When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet—
 Lower me to my dusty grave in peace
 To wait for that great gittin' up morning.

The use of the redundant auxiliary ("done"), the biblical, concrete imagery ("cup of sorrow"), the anaphora ("When I've . . . When this . . ."), and the allusion to well-known spirituals ("Mary Had a Baby, Yes, Lord" and "In Dat Great Gittin' up Mornin'") are typical of Johnson's style in this work. In an actual church sermon the last line would be a signal to the congregation to break into singing the spiritual.

Sterling Brown (b. 1901) attended Williams College, received an M.A. from Harvard, and taught literature, mainly at Howard. *Southern Road* (1932) was perhaps the most moving volume of poems published up to that point by a black American. Since then he has brought out pithy critical studies and anthologies of literature by black writers, but no subsequent books of poetry. The power of Brown's writing in *Southern Road* comes from his sympathy with the folk imagination as it is embodied in songs and ballads; he uses the folk speech as the basis of his own poetic idiom. These poems are in dialect, but the dialect is authentic and evokes none of Dunbar's minstrel associations. Hardy must have been a favorite of Brown's, for although there is no obvious influence from Hardy in his poems, the two poets invite comparison. Both make effective use of story or story elements, both are fascinated by the folk imagination, and both feel a warm sympa-

thy with the humor, shrewdness, and stoic endurance they observe in the folk. Both invest their rural laborers with tragic grandeur and feel the mute, hopeless pain of existence. Both invidiously contrast the urban and the contemporary with the rural life of the past. A major difference between Brown and Hardy is that Brown remains closely dependent on his sources of inspiration in the songs and ballads of the people. He wonderfully recreates and potentiates these forms, so that, for example, in the lines we quoted at the start of the chapter he raises the type of song sung by chain gangs into a moving work of art. When he deserts these models altogether, as in his poems in standard English, he becomes less imaginative.

"Odyssey of Big Boy" is based on folk songs of the John Henry type; the speaker tells the jobs and women of his life and becomes a half-mythical, heroic image of the black laborer. "Long Gone" is spoken by a railroad man who is leaving his woman because the pull of the rails on his imagination is making him restless. The Slim Greer ballads present a rogue who is too quick and shrewd to be caught. He tells his exploits with a typically American, comic hyperbole. Brown was also interested in the blues as a type of folk expression; "Memphis Blues" and "Tin Roof Blues" adapt their form and content from such music. The feelings expressed in these poems are often bitter and satiric, as is appropriate to the blues style. They deal with urban blacks, and Brown seems to have regarded this group as deracinated and lacking in the strong, traditional values of the black rural South. Among his pieces in standard English, "Strong Men," an elaboration of a line of Sandburg's, is perhaps the most impressive in its urgent, cumulative eloquence.

With the publication of *Southern Road* in 1932 the first creative phase of black poetry reached its climax. Poetry by black people had achieved not only a new level of interest and excellence but also a tradition and an identity on which succeeding generations of poets could build, or against which they could react. During the next twenty to thirty years there was not the same sudden emergence of a wealth of new talent. Generally speaking, the younger poets who established themselves, Melvin Tolson or Gwendolyn Brooks, for instance, were skilled, sophisticated wordsmiths, completely aware—to refer back to Bontemps' modest disclaimer—of the "new" poetry in all its aspects and of

the New Criticism. In the sixties, however, still another type of verse emerged, composed by young men and women who allied themselves with the personalities, and adopted the conventions of the "beat" poets. They were reacting against the formal, cerebral poetry that had to be created in slow, deliberate touches, and that seemed reprehensibly disengaged from the crying need, as these poets felt it, for political, social, and ideological revolution.