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Review of "On These I Stand" by Countee Cullen

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We have come a long way from the slave ships and the institution they supported. We still have a long way to go. Americans still retain the old notions, the prejudices, and hatreds that marked plantation life with its squalor, ignorance, and overseer's whips. We still are loath to accept a Negro as a poet of the first order; to recognize that cultural affinities grow not because of race or blood but because of intellect. The Negro is getting education in spite of difficulties and coming out of poverty where he, as an individual, and they, as a minority group, can develop their natural artistic tendencies without the perpetual fear of starvation.

Countee Cullen was such a man. Truly, he never knew the misery of life in the South following the Civil War but he felt prejudice, understood the cloud his people were, and are, under. His famous lines:

"Yet do I marvel at this curious thing,
To make a poet black and bid him sing!"

These remain in memory and we wonder what sort of man this was who expressed in melancholy, beautiful lyrics the disillusion, the torment, the yearning he felt for individual recognition and through this for a better attitude towards his people, our people, our black, unloved minority.

Reviewers have never done justice to "The Black Christ", his longest, most sustained piece of writing. They have hemmed, grimaced, wondered, picked at, but hardly realized its importance as a cultural contribution to American literature. His faults as poet are obvious and have been pointed out ably many times in the past. He is accused of lacking conviction, of giving the impression of force to come, the promise of fire, all resulting in a somewhat awkward style and a great deal of smoke. I am not going to try to defend him here but what I wish to emphasize that "The Black Christ" is the soul of the Negro, his need, and his God, bared in crystalline verse. Cullen was here at his best interpreting the anguish, the groping, half-blinded faith in some more hopeful future, the music and the terror of a Negro's life.
His preoccupation with death and the release it meant for him was an indication of an almost Baudelarian attitude, macabre, yet beautiful. He was also influenced by Romanticism, by Keats, but one could not call him a Romantic. Among his contemporaries he might be likened to Edna St. Vincent Millay, and "The Black Christ" compared to "Renascence", but this would still be insufficient. He was too much of a realist, he saw too clearly the trends, the immovable forces with which he struggled, to be merely a Romantic.

It is really hard to take any modern poet and state definitely, he is either this or something else. We lack the necessary perspective to do more than speculate. Countee Cullen was primarily an individual, an interpretive poet who believed with a faith that never lessened in the innate goodness of man, the beauty in his soul, and the light of divinity in his eyes.

None of his other poems have the magnitude of "The Black Christ" but many of them are charged with an awful poignancy, a sense of unhappy frustration, of waste, and loss. Four lines to Paul Lawrence Dunbar, another Negro poet, are some illustration:

"Born of the sorrowful of heart
Mirth was a crown upon his head;
Pride kept his twisted lips apart
In jest, to hide a heart that bled."

He uses many little vignettes, pathetic and heart-moving snapshots of life as it is fused with the dream of what it could be.

Probably the greatest reason that appreciation of his poetry has been neglected is that he wrote in essentially classic patterns in an age of innovation. Many of his fellow Negro poets followed the trend and gained more recognition; Gwendelyn Brooks through depiction of the sordid, and emphasis on the misery; Dunbar because of his dialectical expression of the calibre which pleased his white reviewers.

"On These I Stand" is a monument to a man's integrity, his unending conflict with color distinctions, his belief that love could save and restore
where hate destroyed and disfigured. Poets more skilled in verse technique, and others more emancipated from tradition, will follow, but to those who believe in the Negro not as a black animal but as a human being, who differs from the white only in pigmentation, the poems of Countee Cullen interpret the dignity and beauty of a human soul that could never admit defeat.