*James Weldon Johnson*

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED MAN

FIFTY YEARS AND OTHER POEMS

THE BOOK OF AMERICAN NEGRO SPIRITUALS
*(Edited with a Preface)*

THE SECOND BOOK OF AMERICAN NEGRO SPIRITUALS
*(Edited with a Preface)*

GOD'S TROMBONES—SEVEN NEGRO SERMONS IN VERSE

BLACK MANHATTAN

SAINT PETER RELATES AN INCIDENT OF THE RESURRECTION DAY

# THE BOOK OF AMERICAN NEGRO POETRY

*Chosen and edited*

WITH AN ESSAY ON THE NEGRO'S CREATIVE GENIUS

*by*

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

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distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow of the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment.

Negro dialect is at present a medium that is not capable of giving expression to the varied conditions of Negro life in America, and much less is it capable of giving the fullest interpretation of Negro character and psychology. This is no indictment against the dialect as dialect, but against the mold of convention in which Negro dialect in the United States has been set. In time these conventions may become lost, and the colored poet in the United States may sit down to write in dialect without feeling that his first line will put the general reader in a frame of mind which demands that the poem be humorous or pathetic. In the meantime, there is no reason why these poets should not continue to do the beautiful things that can be done, and done best, in the dialect.

In stating the need for Aframerican poets in the United States to work out a new and distinctive form of expression I do not wish to be understood to hold any theory that they should limit themselves to Negro poetry, to racial themes; the sooner they are able to write *American* poetry spontaneously, the better. Nevertheless, I believe that the richest contribution the Negro poet can make to the American literature of the future will be the fusion into it of his own individual artistic gifts.

Not many of the writers here included, except Dunbar, are known at all to the general reading public; and there is only one of these who has a widely recognized position in the American literary world, William Stanley Braithwaite.



Mr. Braithwaite is not only unique in this respect, but he stands unique among all the Aframerican writers the United States has yet produced. He has gained his place, taking as the standard and measure for his work the identical standard and measure applied to American writers and American literature. He has asked for no allowances or rewards, either directly or indirectly, on account of his race.

Mr. Braithwaite is the author of two volumes of verses, lyrics of delicate and tenuous beauty. In his more recent and uncollected poems he shows himself more and more decidedly the mystic. But his place in American literature is due more to his work as a critic and anthologist than to his work as a poet. There is still another rôle he has played, that of friend of poetry and poets. It is a recognized fact that in the work which preceded the present revival of poetry in the United States, no one rendered more unremitting and valuable service than Mr. Braithwaite. And it can be said that no future study of American poetry of this age can be made without reference to Braithwaite.

Two authors included in the book are better known for their work in prose than in poetry: W. E. B. Du Bois whose well-known prose at its best is, however, impassioned and rhythmical; and Benjamin Brawley who is the author, among other works, of one of the best handbooks on the English drama that has yet appeared in America.

But the group of the new Negro poets, whose work makes up the bulk of this anthology, contains names destined to be known. Claude McKay, although still quite a young man, has already demonstrated his power, breadth and skill as a poet. Mr. McKay's breadth is as essential a part of his equipment as his power and skill. He demonstrates mastery of the three when as a Negro poet he pours out the bitter-

Fifty Years, *which Brander Matthews grouped with the noblest American commemorative poems, and* O Southland, The White Witch, *and* Brothers *he brought a virility and fire none the less powerful for being under firm control. In many of his lyrics there is the beauty of quiet sincerity.*

God's Trombones *startled critical acclaim. In this book were seven sermons and a prayer, couched in the polyrhythmic cadences of* The Creation. *Although in his earlier volume Johnson had included a dialect section, "Jingles and Croons," he nevertheless was convinced of the narrow limitations of traditional dialect. Wishing for these re-creations and interpretations of old Negro sermons the dignity, the sweep and splendor that are indisputably theirs, he turned to the model of Synge dealing with the Aran Islanders and sought to express "the racial symbol from within rather than from without." The enthusiastic reception of the poems established how right he was in his choice. Because of his great sympathy for subject matter which in lesser hands might have degenerated into grotesqueness Johnson has done more than the high task of "fixing something of the rapidly passing old-time Negro preacher." He has fashioned something of lasting beauty. Such poems as "Go Down, Death" and "Listen, Lord" must be placed among the noblest and most moving poems of American literature. The volume won the Harmon Gold Award for literature.*

*An approach hitherto neglected by Negro poets is to be seen in* Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day. *For the greater part, in leisurely couplets, the poem comments ironically on American prejudices. Not at all blatant propaganda, the poem is incisive though restrained, and in the best sense witty. With its sly mockery it combines a deeply moving quality. In this most recent book are all the qualities of Johnson's best work: understanding, imagination, sincerity, and poise.*

*He was awarded the Spingarn Medal in 1925.*

STERLING A. BROWN



## THE CREATION

(*A Negro Sermon from* GOD'S TROMBONES)

And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said:
I'm lonely—
I'll make me a world.

And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That's good!

Then God reached out and took the light in His hands,
And God rolled the light around in His hands
Until He made the sun;
And He set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,