

## Robert Graves and His Contemporaries: A Textual Realignment

Robert Graves, Ernst Junger, Rupert Brooke, and Henri Barbusse are all writers whose names come readily to mind as members of a supposedly pre-established canon of World War I literary figures. Despite the obvious value of their works, it has always seemed to me that this kind of grouping is at best arbitrary and at worst a serious impediment to the understanding of the complex cultural situation following the Great War. After all, is it really necessary to have fought in the trenches of wartime Belgium or France to write a valid novel about the effect of the war on early twentieth century Europe or America? Specifically, I would like to examine the writers of the Harlem Renaissance in order to better understand the deep, subliminal effects of World War I on modern consciousness.

Immediately after the Great War a group of writers from the Northeast region of the United States, many of whom were women, were giving dignity to the African-American existence. Some of these women were published in the major anthologies of the time, while many were relegated to more marginal journals and magazines. One such woman was Beatrice M. Murphy, who contributed to *Crisis* and later edited two books of poetry, *An Anthology of Contemporary Verse: Negro Voices* (1938) and *Ebony Rhythm: An Anthology of Contemporary Negro Verse* (1941). She was born in Pennsylvania, but spent most of her life in Washington, D.C., where she received her education. As a poet, journalist, librarian, and stenographer, Murphy's career led her to publish in several newspapers, journals and anthologies. Although she has written many pieces for children, the poetry I have chosen, written immediately following the First World War, centers around emotional outpouring. Interestingly, the vicissitudes of emotional catharsis and torment she studies—separation, hatred, security, and flight—parallel very closely the themes studied by the aforementioned writers normally grouped in the canon of World War I authors.

### THE PARTING

‘Tis not the parting  
That means so much,  
Ah! No!—  
It is the frequent  
After meetings  
That carry  
The deeper sting.

When your eyes meet mine  
(Those eyes once full of love)  
In a chilling stare—  
Which your lips say  
A curt “good day”  
(Those lips once clung to mine)—  
When your arms  
(That held me once in such a tight embrace)  
Are raised now  
Only to tip your hat  
Or for formal handshakes—  
When we meet again  
At the old trysting places  
Among the old  
Familiar scenes  
And cannot recall  
Even by a glance  
The sweet memories  
That flock about us  
As bees about honey—

Ah! these! These  
Hold the deeper sting!

“The Parting” focuses on the pain that the speaker experiences at the dissolution of a love affair; however, it is not the parting of the two lovers that pains the speaker but the subsequent meetings, polite and formal encounters, and remembrances of the past in a dismal present which disturb the woman most. In the wake of the “war to end all wars,” full of hope and promise of reunions and new beginnings, it is interesting that the speaker expends a great deal of energy reliving the pleasantries of a failed relationship with full knowledge that reconciliation is not an option. This same intensity carries over into two other poems, “Hatred” and “Safeguard.”

## HATRED

My hatred for you is a beautiful thing  
Made up of songs you would not let me sing,  
It's tended in anguish and grows in pain.  
Your taunts were its sunshine; your scorn, its rain.  
When you gleefully hurled at me jibes and jeers,

I watered this plant with my falling tears.  
I rooted in bitterness and pruned with care,  
It grew very fast; and oh, how fair!

My hatred for you is a healthy thing.  
It thrives in winter as well as in spring.  
Sweet as the opening flowers in May;  
Perfect and lovely in every way;  
Strong as the love that once was your due,  
Nurtured with pride is my hatred for you!

#### SAFEGUARD

They tell me Time will soon erase  
The bitterness within my heart,  
Leaving only happy memories of you.  
I am so afraid this might be true;  
That from this bitterness may come  
One little thought which might be sweet  
Than this which now I know,  
That I am careful  
To remember only bitter things,  
To strive with all my might  
To keep my lamp of acrid hate  
Trimmed and burning bright  
With firm and steady glow.

In "Hatred," the speaker describes her hatred for someone in terms of beauty: songs, sunshine, foliage, winter and spring. Apparently, all of the elements of life that she has been unable to experience in the stifling relationship are realized in the transformation of her hatred towards the individual. Hatred, a usually consumingly destructive emotion, is turned into a channelling of positive energy which manifests itself into reveling in the observation of rain and new growth. The object of her scorn has suppressed her voice in the past, but her hatred motivates her to sing. This individual has caused the speaker great pain with taunts and jeers, but she has directed her focus toward the nurturing and care of some lovely growth. And so, where hatred might have been destructive for the speaker, through great fervor and passion, she moves from the past into a healthy future.

With a similar tone, "Safeguard" speaks to the individual's need to hold fast to the hatred and bitterness she feels toward a past lover. The speaker

is certain that "Time" will inevitably remove the bitterness she feels and replace it with fondness, and so she tenaciously holds to the safeguard in her mind and heart; she remembers only the horrible elements of the relationship. The reader is led to understand that the relationship has had a deleterious effect on the speaker, such that it is crucial that she never return to its emotional hold. And so, she remembers the pain with great energy—strives firmly and steadily with acrid hate. With an energy very similar to the kind the speaker expends in "Hatred," the present speaker causes the safeguard, the memory of the past emotional discomfort, to bring about positive growth from extremely negative feelings.

It is interesting here to include one other poet's work in relation to another of Murphy's poems. Georgia Douglas Johnson, one of the most well-known artists of the Harlem Renaissance, born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1880, received her education at Atlanta University in Oberlin Conservatory. After marrying, she moved to Washington, D. C., where she began contributing her poetry to magazines. In examining Murphy's poem "The Guest" in relation to Johnson's "Escape," we see the poets' different treatments of a similar topic, that of sorrow becoming an unwelcome visitor.

#### ESCAPE

Shadows, shadows,  
Hug me round  
So that I shall not be found  
By sorrow:

She pursues me  
Everywhere,  
I can't lose her  
Anywhere.

Fold me in your black  
Abyss,  
She will never look  
In this,

Shadows, shadows,  
Hug me round  
In your solitude  
Profound.

## THE GUEST

Sorrow came to me  
Dressed in somber gown;  
Weary-eyed and worn  
Wearing heavy frown.

Nobody wanted Sorrow—  
She was so wan and thin!  
Sorrow knocked at my door;  
I had to let her in.  
I took away her clothes,  
Dressed her in gaudy gown;  
Then I vaunted sorrow  
In front of all the town.

“See,” I told my neighbors,  
Laughing recklessly,  
“This is my new house guest.  
Sorrow lives with me.”

And my neighbors envied me—  
Thought I was so smart—  
Nobody knew but Sorrow  
That she broke my heart.

Where both women choose to personify “Sorrow” as a female, Johnson’s speaker is able to elude her completely devastating presence; the speaker of Murphy’s poem unwittingly lets her in as a permanent resident. In some sense, Johnson’s ability to hide herself in the shadow’s black abyss causes her to gain comfort and protection; the shadows hug and fold her in, away from sorrow in profound solitude. Moreover, Johnson’s songlike stanzas evoke the wailing sounds of the Jazz Age. The first lines, “Shadows, shadows, hug me round” slide into “so that I shall not be found” and end profoundly “By sorrow.” The poem is not long but utilizes both aesthetic forms of poetry and even the Blues to relay to the reader that escape brings solace.

In “The Guest,” “Sorrow” comes as a pitiable creature with a thin frame, weary eyes and a heavy frown. Since no one else wants “Sorrow,” the speaker tries to meet her face to face. Unfortunately, the speaker is unable, unlike the woman in Johnson’s poem, to escape “Sorrow’s” destruction. Though she tries to pretend with gaudy clothes that all is well, “Sorrow” has effectively completed her job. However, since she is a guest, “Sorrow” develops an

intimate relationship with Murphy's speaker which she does not with Johnson's.

The themes of death and broken relationships in the works cited above in some way speak to the horrors of war, within and without. This post-war poetry offers new insight into the development of a literary movement in America characterized by a heightened awareness of political, sexual, and racial inequity. Where these African-American women write to heal themselves of wounds wrought by various circumstances, the collection of works adds new ideas to those expressed by their male contemporaries. Some had returned from Europe's pain and darkness to recognize and to examine similar pain in their own country; some had not.

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