

Arnold Rampersad: On Arna Bontemps's Poetry

Because of the significance of religion and religious feeling in his life and work, Arna Bontemps stands apart from most of his peers in the Harlem Renaissance. Born in 1902 in Louisiana but reared in Los Angeles, Bontemps grew up at home and in school under the tight discipline of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Coming to Harlem from Los Angeles in 1924, he taught for seven years at the Harlem Academy run there by his church. Although his closest friend among the figures of the Harlem Renaissance was Langston Hughes, his poetic career in the 1920s developed largely independent of Hughes's standards and interests. Bontemps wrote neither dialect verse nor jazz and blues poetry, which would have offended his brethren in the church. Sometimes he expressed racial feeling (as in "A Black Man Talks of Reaping") but he did so only mildly, for the most part; a sense of decorum suffuses his work. His one break with tradition was in eschewing rhyme in favor of a restrained, often stately free verse well suited to his meditative utterances.

Most of Bontemps's published poems appeared in the 1920s, although a pamphlet of his verse, *Personals*, appeared in London near the end of his life. His most successful poem is almost certainly "Nocturne at Bethesda," from the twenties:

I thought I saw an angel flying low, I thought I saw the flicker of a wing
Above the mulberry trees; but not again. Bethesda sleeps. The ancient pool that healed A
host of bearded Jews does not awake.

Without a specific allusion to time and place, the poem mourns the loss of spiritual values where once God was immanent. When, finally, it appears to turn, tentatively, on an optimistic note ("Yet I hope, still I long to live") the idea of a saving racial destiny enters the poem. If then is indeed an afterlife, and if the speaker returns to this world, "it will not be here; / If you want me you must search for me / Beneath the palms of Africa." Characteristically of Bontemps, however, the work ends on a doubting, even forlorn sound: "There is a simple story on your face; / Years have wrinkled you. I know, Bethesda! / You are sad. It is the same with me."

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