

William J. Maxwell and Joseph Valente: On "Heritage"

One unexpected truth about minority revivalism is that it does not tend, or does not always tend, to enthrone some ethnically distinctive version of the past as its preferred image of the future. Often the writers of the Celtic and Harlem Renaissances adopted a metonymic approach to their racial and cultural heritage: they sought to instrumentalize the associations of a hidden past as a means of reclaiming an unprecedented and as yet unimaginable future in the name of the people. Gwendolyn Bennett's "Heritage," among the Harlem Renaissance's most anthologized poems, provides a case in point. Here, snippets of modern longing for Africa, imagined as the classical cradle of black historical becoming, are spliced to derive a liberated but indefinite racial future. Bennett's speaker yearns to "see," "hear," and "breathe" ancient scenes of West African natural beauty and East African imperial grandeur, but with all senses fixed on the ultimate charge of "feel[ing] the surging/ Of my sad people's soul,/ Hidden by a minstrel-smile." This desired "present" emotion obviously depends on an instrumental marshaling of the Pan-African past, but promises no clear historical destination for Afro-America beyond a combustible break with minstrel indirection.

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