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“Though years have flown by”: A Letter from Nella Larsen to Carl Van Vechten

Notwithstanding the numerous volumes and critical essays devoted to Nella Larsen, the author of such renowned novels as *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) remains an elusive figure whose brilliant and all-too-brief literary career is still surrounded by an aura of mystery.

Biographers and, to a lesser extent, literary critics have examined Larsen's correspondence in order to shed greater light on the life and the poetic of this important modernist novelist. To quote William Bedford Clark, Larsen's letters “provide us with an implicit portrait of their author” and afford “rare insight into the creator of characters like Helga Crane and Clare Kendry, for the letters bear the unmistakable personality of the woman who penned them and cover the vital period leading up to and immediately following her brief career as a writer of fiction” (193).

Larsen's letters do, in fact, offer precious clues about her refined and eclectic reading habits, about her preference for “the Europeans [sic] and the American moderns,” including “Huysmans, Conrad, Proust, and Thomas Mann” (Larsen, “To Charles S. Johnson” 160), as well as about the numerous intertextual references and allusions that characterize her fiction and that represent a significant aspect of her modernist literary sensibility.¹ Larsen's correspondence also foregrounds her active participation in the intellectual debates and social events of the Harlem Renaissance, as it emerges from her comments on writers and artists such as Carl Van Vechten, James Weldon Johnson, Gertrude Stein, Ethel Waters, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Roland Hayes, Walter White, Claude McKay, and Rudolph Fisher.

The letter here presented in its entirety is included in the Carl Van Vechten papers located in the Beinecke Library at Yale University.² It exemplifies well Larsen's “[a]lternately witty, cynical, and self-effacing”

(Clark 193) style as a correspondent, a style through which Larsen negotiated her emerging visibility and uncertain status as a black woman writer in an era when the publishing industry was still white-dominated.

The wittiness, familiarity, hyperboles, and ostensible immediacy of the letter reveal the strong individuality Larsen retained in her close friendship with a famous white sponsor like Van Vechten. They reveal also the deliberate writerly awareness with which she deployed irony and a shared knowledge of the cultural politics of the time to establish with him a dialogic complicity that challenged the social boundaries and sharply stereotyped black/white dichotomies that still prevailed in her segregationist times, despite the fact that in the 1920s the “Negro” was in vogue, as Langston Hughes famously noted.

Larsen’s comments on her 1928 Harmon Foundation application³ and on the completion of her novel “Nig” (which would eventually be published in 1929 under a different title, *Passing*, and dedicated to Carl Van Vechten and his wife Fania Marinoff) also exemplify the lightness of touch with which in her letters to Van Vechten she discusses her literary works and projects, balancing self-promotion and self-critique in ways that show indirectly her determination as a professional writer.

The characteristically “oblique” (McDowell xxxi) style that dominates Larsen’s personal letters evokes and illuminates the sophisticated artistry of her fiction, where letters play a significant role. In her novels and short stories letters become tools of psychological exploration of her characters, functioning at times as objective correlatives of the heroine’s personality or fears, as, for instance, in the memorable opening lines of *Passing*:

It was the last letter in Irene Redfield’s little pile of morning mail. After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender. Not that she hadn’t immediately known who its sender was. (143)

As Larsen's letters to Van Vechten shed greater light on the force and beauty of her fiction, the recovery and systematic analysis of her correspondence with several other important figures of her time emerge as a long-neglected archival and interpretive project that will prove crucial to the study of American modernism.

Notes

¹ Among the critics who have analyzed Larsen's intertextual practices, see: Brickhouse, Dittmar, Fabi, Fleming, Giorcelli, Lay, and McLendon.

² Excerpts from this letter have appeared in Larsen's biographies.

³ In the literary competition sponsored by the Harmon Foundation, Larsen was awarded the bronze medal for second place in 1929.

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