On "O Black and Unknown Bards"

Robert E. Fleming

Johnson's "O Black and Unknown Bards," a commemoration of the anonymous composers of the spirituals. In this justly popular poem Johnson allows his honest emotion to break through the conventional diction of turn-of-the-century popular verse and pays a beautiful tribute to the folk poets who produced the spirituals. He opens the poem by posing an unanswerable question:

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?

Throughout the poem he weaves lines from the actual spirituals "Steal Away to Jesus," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Go Down, Moses," and others--marveling at the ingenuity of the composers, who produced their works without any training and under the worst possible conditions. And it is not merely as artistic successes that Johnson views the songs, but as signs of the spiritual depths of their creators.

Himself an agnostic, Johnson nevertheless empathizes with the "hungry hearts" of the listeners for whom the songs were composed. Implicit in the poem is a recognition of the importance of religion in helping an enslaved people to survive with their spirits intact.

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