

# Ivan Goll, “The Negroes Are Conquering Europe” (January 1926)

## Abstract

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French-German poet Yvan Goll (1891-1950) was born in Alsace-Lorraine and grew up bilingually. A staunch pacifist, he moved to Switzerland at the outbreak of the First World War to avoid being called up for military service. While his poetry was initially influenced by Expressionism, he later became one of the main representatives of literary Surrealism in France. After the end of the war, he lived with his wife, the journalist Claire Goll, initially in Paris and for a time in Berlin, where he worked with Kurt Weill, among others. In this article from the magazine *Die literarische Welt* from January 1926, Goll describes his impressions of the “*Revue Nègre*,” which he had attended in Paris. This revue, in which only black artists performed (who were referred to as “Negroes” at the time), had its première in Paris in October 1925 and made Josephine Baker famous. Her high-voltage, exaggerated dances fascinated her European, mostly middle-class audiences. Goll admiringly contrasts the liveliness and energy of African American dance and music with the tiredness of Europe and its “failing strength,” yet in doing so he resorts to exoticizing categories.

## Source

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### The Negroes Are Conquering Europe

The Negroes are conquering Paris. They are conquering Berlin. They have already filled the whole continent with their howls, with their laughter. And we are not shocked, we are not amazed: on the contrary, the old world calls on its failing strength to applaud them.

Yesterday some of us were still saying, art is dead!—the terrible confession of a lifeless, enervated, hopeless age. Art dead? Then original art, superior art, lives again! The last art was: disintegration of the ego; disintegration of the world; despair over the world in the ego; the constant, mad revolution of the ego about itself. We experience that in all the twenty-year-old novelists finding fame in Paris just now—and there are dozens of them. Benn wrests the one bloody book in his life from his torment and calls it—still young—*Epilog*. That is almost more tragic than [Heinrich von] Kleist’s suicide. And what otherwise is not the product of such pain remains precious and fin-de-siècle, thin and frivolous.

And yet, why complain? The Negroes are here. All of Europe is dancing to their banjo. It cannot help itself. Some say it is the rhythm of Sodom and Gomorrah.... Why should it not be from paradise? In this case, rise and fall are one.

The *Revue Nègre*, which is rousing the tired public in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées to thrills and madness as otherwise only a boxing match can do, is symbolic.

Negroes dance with their senses. (While Europeans can only dance with their minds.) They dance with their legs, breasts, and bellies. This was the dance of the Egyptians, the whole of antiquity, the Orient. This is the dance of the Negroes. One can only envy them, for this is life, sun, primeval forests, the singing of birds and the roar of a leopard, earth. They never dance naked: and yet, how naked is the dance! They have put on clothes only to show that clothes do not exist for them.

Their revue is an unmitigated challenge to moral Europe. There are eight beautiful girls whose figures conjure up a stylized purity, reminiscent of deer and Greek youths. And at their head, the star, Josephine

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Baker. They have all oiled their curly hair smooth with a process just invented in New York. And on these rounded heads they don hats of manifold fashions, from 1830, 1900, or by the designer Lewis. This mix exudes a glowing irony. A belly dance is performed in a brocade dress by Poiret. In front of a church that could have been painted by Chagall, dressed in bourgeois skirts like women going to market, they dance around a white, bespectacled pastor strumming a banjo (American Negroes are pious and faithful Christians—you only have to listen to their modern songs to know that!). They dance a dance one might expect in a lunatic asylum.

It confronts us all, it confronts everything with the strange impression of a snarling parody. And it is a parody. They make fun of themselves when they perform the “Dance of the Savages” with the same mockery, wearing only the usual loin cloth and—a silk brassiere.

And here we see original art becoming one with the latest. These Negroes come out of the darkest parts of New York. There they were disdained, outlawed; these beautiful women might have been rescued from a miserable ghetto. These magnificent limbs bathed in rinse water. They do not come from the primeval forests at all. We do not want to fool ourselves. But they are a new, unspoiled race. They dance with their blood, with their life, with all the memories in their short history: memories of transport in stinking ships, of early slave labor in America, of much misfortune. Sentimentality breaks through. They become sentimental when they sing. “Swanee River” and “Give Me Just a Little Bit”—these universal hits in provincial jazz apply the rouge on civilization. Alas, these primeval people will be used up fast! Will they have the time to express what is in them in an art of their own making? It is doubtful.

The leader, director, and principal dancer of the troupe is Louis Douglas, the equal of the perfect Baker. He is the only one who wears a dark black mask, while all the others are nearly light brown. He has a gigantic white mouth. But his feet! They are what inspires the music. The orchestra takes its lead from them, not the other way around. He walks, he drags, he slips—and the beat rises from the floor, not from the flutes, which merely offer their accompaniment in secret. One number is called “My Feet Are Talking.” And with his feet he tells us of his voyage from New York to Europe: the first day on the boat, the third in the storm, then the trip by railroad and a race at Longchamp.

The musicians play *with*, they do not merely play along! They are located left of the stage, then soon enough they are following after a dancer or tossing off their remarks in a song. They are genuine actors. They also help to emphasize the parody. They laugh continuously. Whom are they making fun of? No—they aren’t making fun of anyone: they are just *enjoying*, the playing, the dancing, the beat. They enjoy themselves with their faces, with their legs, with their shoulders; everything shakes and plays its part. It often seems as if they had the leading roles.

But the leading role belongs to Negro blood. Its drops are slowly falling over Europe, a long-since dried-up land that can scarcely breathe. Is that perhaps the cloud that looks so black on the horizon but whose fearsome downpours are capable of so white a shine? [Claire Goll’s] *The Negro Jupiter Robs Europe* [*Der Neger Jupiter raubt Europa*] is the name of a modern German novel just now coming out. The Negro question is pressing for our entire civilization. It runs like this: Do the Negroes need us? Or are we not sooner in need of them?

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