

REVIEW AND COMMENT

The Negro Writer and the Congress

THERE are not many Negro revolutionary writers. This may seem strange, but despite the widespread and harrowing changes of recent years, most Negro intellectuals have remained indifferent to the leftward movement of American thought. They have continued to play the part of the meek Moses or the Black Hamlet, trying to solve their individual problems within the orbit of capitalism; or they have remained reformist interracialists, truckling to bourbon paternalism. These intellectuals fail to realize the suicidal folly of their position. They seem completely unaware of the real tradition of the Negro people. But what is still more alarming is their inability to see and understand the roles of the Negro intellectuals who have misled them.

The Negro people have a splendid tradition of revolt. Before 1860, when the vast majority of Negroes were servants or slaves, tied to a feudal peasant economy, there were hundreds of insurrections. The uniform material conditions of the plantation economy encouraged Negro national unity. In the reconstruction period, the Negro peasantry fought with muskets for the division of the land of the plantation lords, only later to be forced back into serfdom.

It is this tradition which the Negro intellectual of today has forgotten. We must appropriate and carry it onward, in our writing, music and arts. Many have followed in the path of our intellectual misleaders — from Booker Washington to Du Bois—men who have always bowed to the commands of the American ruling class. Washington stepped in to carry on the program that suited the American capitalists in the troublesome post-bellum period. There was to be no division of the land. The Negro peasantry had to be quieted. Perhaps Washington was sincere, but his conscious mission was to pander to the interests of the white owners, North and South. His program of submissiveness, his deification of the puritan ethic of money and work, his insistence on a racial inferiority, find their concrete expression in the racial degradation and prejudice that exist today.

Washington was the pioneer of the Negro misleaders who followed him through American history. Dr. Du Bois is a more modern edition of these gentry. Du Bois' life has been that of the typical careerist — full of vacillations, hatreds, and pettyfogging. More than any other Negro intellectual, perhaps, he was the product of his time. He was born into the "gilded age" — although he wasn't allowed to take full part in it because of his color. It need not be denied that he contributed valuable early work—in sociology,

education, and literary criticism. But his high-hat demeanor, his disdain for the mass, his stewardship of the élite, his reformist-nationalist darker-race program and his latter-day segregationism outweigh his early contributions. Those who believe that his mission is to emancipate the Negro intellectual will soon learn that his destination is down a blind alley.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles Chestnutt were as much entertainers of a growing bourgeois class as Mark Twain and Bret Harte. They sought for certain bourgeois amenities, and this search is mirrored in their books. They, too, were products of their age; yet one feels that Dunbar could have written differently. He could have depicted the aspirations of the class he knew best, the Negro workers. But he fell into middle-class individualism.

During the period after the World War, European countries were on the verge of proletarian upheavals. But few Negro intellectuals knew anything of them. While the Negro people were being jimcrowed and lynched, the Negro intellectual refused to think. Post-war prosperity had lulled him to sleep; and a new form of corruption, the Harlem tradition, was inaugurated.

The American comfortable classes had prospered in the redivision of spoils and profits. They wanted new amusements and new thrills. They began to import Hindu and African fetishes. Talented young Negroes were put in the limelight by Carl Van Vechten and other sensation-seekers. Rich New Yorkers began to fawn upon and lionize the "new" Negro. Harlem became the center of the Negro intelligentsia. Negroes were glad that they could act, sing, paint, write, and entertain as well as white-skinned performers. They felt they had arrived at last. As Eugene Gordon has put it, they were "apotheosized" in "Nigger Heaven" and liked it.

Then came the crisis. Negro intellectuals have been declassed and pauperized. Many

have had to put an end to their cultural studies. Retrenchments have taken away many university positions. Confronted by the new onslaughts upon the miserable living standards of the Negro people and by the new wave of terror unleashed against us, we must become cognizant of the social reasons for these conditions and, with the Negro and white masses, take up the tasks which face us as the inheritors of the revolutionary tradition of our people.

First of all, we must understand that all our "Negro problems" are rooted deep in the economic development of the United States, in the perpetuation of the old slave system in the Black Belt, in the oppression of the Negro people as a national minority, as well as in the whole character of capitalist exploitation of the working masses. These are the bases upon which Jim Crow and Judge Lynch flourish. The salvation of the Negro intellectual, as well as of the Negro people, lies in identification with the revolutionary working-class movement throughout the world. This means that we must break away from our Negro misleaders — from the upper churchmen who squabble among each other for concessions thrown to them by the American capitalists, legislators and lackey assemblymen, and by the capitalist-kept Negro press which bolsters the myth of racial destiny and the hope of individual achievement.

As writers, our craft has a social basis; it is concerned with life and practical activity. Those of us who attend the Writers' Congress will come as individual writers. Our chief tasks will be to eradicate the distorted stereotypes of the Negro people prevalent in American literature and drama; to create a literature dealing with the struggle of the Negro masses for liberation; to portray the disintegration of the Negro petty bourgeoisie. By attending this Congress, we will play our part in helping to ward off fascism. To remain passive is to abet the terrors faced by the Negro people. We must take our place in the struggle against the foes of culture and progress.

E. CLAY.

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Formula for a Best Seller

A HOUSE DIVIDED, by Pearl S. Buck.
A John Day Book. Reynal & Hitchcock,
New York. 353 pages. \$2.50.

I AM indebted to a fellow novelist for a sure-fire formula on how to write a best seller, and this review affords an appropriate occasion for passing it on. The first step in the process is to select a hill. If it is a hill in Alaska, there is gold in it. If by some miracle it is located in Kansas, it yields wheat. If it exists in the deep South, it is puffy with cotton. And if it is in China, it produces soybeans. A man and his wife live in a shack on the hill. The man's father, great-grandfather and on, back and back to that fabulous day when God tripped up on mankind and flooded the world, have all lived on this hill in a little shack. The man is poor. He is very poor. But he is hardy, and sturdy, and he is rugged. He and his wife are very poor, and they have little to eat. They struggle. He wakes up the rooster in the morning, and is out with his hoe. He plants, and sometimes there is a little crop, and sometimes there is none. Because there is nature. Sometimes it snows. When it does not snow it rains. When it is not raining, it hurricanes. When it does not hurricane, it earthquakes.

There are diverse and sundry manifestations of nature. And the man and the woman in the little shack on the hill live and work, and they love each other. So that at the appropriate dates in the calendar, babies are born without benefit of a doctor. And then the man and his wife, they work even harder. And there is snow. And there is rain. And there is sleet. There is winter, spring, summer, autumn. The sun comes up. The sun goes down. Time passes, and the man and his wife in the shack on the hill become gray-haired. But off on yonder horizon, there is another hill, and in it another man and his wife live, and they are also very poor. And the son born to the first hill marries the daughter born to the second hill, and the newlyweds now own two hills. And the son of the first hill awakens the rooster each morning and goes out with his hoe. And the sun comes up. And the sun goes down. And winter comes, and then spring, and then summer, and then autumn. And it rains, snows, sleets, earthquakes, hurricanes. And times passes. And more time passes until the son of the first and second hill marries the daughter of the third hill. From then on, the formula demands a knowledge of multiplication, and the multiplication is gauged in terms of the number of volumes one is writing—one, two, or a trilogy. For at the end, out of the good earth, there has grown a rich family and a great house on a hill.

In her much publicized *The Good Earth*, Pearl S. Buck did not stick precisely to formula, but the narrative followed it sufficiently to pass muster. And in addition, her characters were unwritten-about Chinese instead

of Scandinavians, hardy Englishers, Irishmen in peat bogs, or immigrants on the western plains of America.

Net result—one best seller.

And out of the loins of the sturdy man from the shack on the hill there grew a son who was destined to be other than a poor man in a shack on a hill who awakened the rooster each morning and went out to hoe and plant soybeans. And his story was chronicled in a tale of *Sons*. For he was the one known as the Tiger, and he became a general and a Chinese war lord with all the accoutrements of a great warrior in the pages of fiction. He owned a sword. He had muscles in his arm, and when he swung that sword, the very wind did stir and groan and wail and keen, so mighty were those muscles in those arms. And God have mercy on the soul of any one who stuck his neck in the path of that sword. And he had a moustache. He twirled and pulled his moustache in a manner that would have dragged envy from the very bowels of a Hollywood director. And he had a face, because even generals have faces these days. And when he saw an enemy he frowned, and that terrible frown of his worked like a left jab from Jack Dempsey. And he had a voice, because even generals have voices. And he did not speak mildly, even as you and I. He did not precisely talk. He roared. He bellowed. In simple language, he shouted. And there was dynamite in them there nostrils of the Tiger. So he became a general and a war lord in the interior of China.

Net result—a best seller.

And the general with the sword, the voice, the moustaches, and the frown like a right cross from Jack Dempsey had a son. And the son was a very sensitive moon-calf who liked

poetry better than he liked war, and he actually did not know what he liked. So he ran away to the far city on the coast. There he went to school. There a maiden held his hand, and other maids did dance with him in the new foreign ways of dancing, and there did come into his blood a hotness. And he sometimes could not sleep at night with that hotness in the blood. And when the maids saw him, their hearts did get hot too, and there was the hotness in the hearts of maids, and the hotness in the blood of the sensitive young moon-calf who did not know what he did desire, but the hotness was just not hot enough. So he remained a pure young man. And he could not dedicate himself to pleasure or to revolution. But in due time he did rise up and rebel against the marriage his father did plan for him, and he joined the secret revolutionists. And they were arrested, but just as his comrades were sent off to death, his freedom was purchased. And he was sent to the foreign country to learn the new foreign knowledge.

And in the foreign country learning the new foreign knowledge, he did study hard, and he was lonely, and he was sensitive, and he was not always happy. And he did meet a girl who knew the new foreign ways of the foreign country. And her parents knew the old ways of the foreign country, because they had been educated by Protestant wowsers and they wanted to save him in the blood of the lamb. And he and the girl, they did look at the flowers early in the morning. And the girl, she kissed him. And there was that hotness in his blood, and that hotness in her heart, and it was still a hotness not quite hot enough.

And he did graduate *cum laude*, and return to his land with the new foreign clothes and the new foreign ways, and he wished to serve his country. And during the six years that he was away, the revolution had come, and

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