

Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction. With Mr. Turpin the case is different; the desire and motive are present, but his "saga" of four generations of Negro life seems to have been swamped by the subject matter.

These Low Grounds represents, I believe, the first attempt of a Negro writer to encompass in fiction the rise of the Negro from slavery to the present. The greater part of the novel is laid on the eastern shore of Maryland where Carrie, upon the death of her slave mother, is left to grow up in a whorehouse. After several fitful efforts to escape her lot, Carrie finally marries a visiting farmer, Prince, with whom she leads a life of household drudgery. Having helped Prince become the leading Negro farmer in the county, Carrie rebels against his infidelities and domination and, taking her two young daughters, runs away. Years later Prince discovers her and persuades her to return home. As she is about to make the journey, she is murdered by Grundy, her drunken and jealous lover. The two daughters return to the farm; Blanche remains with her father, but Martha flees North to escape the shame of pregnancy when her lover is killed in an accident. Martha's subsequent career on the stage enables her to send her son, Jimmy-Lew, to college to become a teacher. The novel closes with a disillusioned Jimmy-Lew comforted by his wife because of his bitterness over the harsh and unfair conditions of southern life.

The first half of the book is interesting, for Turpin deals with a subject which he knows intimately. Those sections depicting post-war Negro life in the North do not ring true or full; in fact, toward the conclusion the book grows embarrassingly sketchy, resolving nothing.

Oddly enough, Turpin seems to have viewed those parts of his novel which deal with the modern Negro through the eyes and consciousness of one emotionally alien to the scene. Many of the characters—Carrie, Prince, Martha—are splendid social types; but rarely do they become human beings. It seems that Turpin drew these types from intellectual conviction, but lacked the artistic strength to make us feel the living quality of their experiences. It seems to me, he should strive to avoid the bane of sheer competency. He deals with great characters and a great subject matter; what is lacking is a great theme and a great passion.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of Zora Neale Hurston's Janie who, at sixteen, married a grubbing farmer at the anxious instigation of her slave-born grandmother. The romantic Janie, in the highly-charged language of Miss Hurston, longed to be a pear tree in blossom and have a "dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace." Restless, she fled from her farmer husband and married Jody, an up-and-coming Negro business man who, in the end, proved to be no better than her first husband. After twenty years of clerking for her self-made Jody, Janie found herself a frustrated

widow of forty with a small fortune on her hands. Tea Cake, "from in and through Georgia," drifted along and, despite his youth, Janie took him. For more than two years they lived happily; but Tea Cake was bitten by a mad dog and was infected with rabies. One night in a canine rage Tea Cake tried to murder Janie, thereby forcing her to shoot the only man she had ever loved.

Miss Hurston can write; but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes.

Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears.

Turpin's faults as a writer are those of an honest man trying desperately to say something; but Zora Neale Hurston lacks even that excuse. The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is "quaint," the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the "superior" race.

RICHARD WRIGHT.

Mathematics for the Elite

ASPECTS OF SCIENCE, by Tobias Dantzig. The Macmillan Co. \$3.

SEVEN lean years ago Tobias Dantzig wrote a book about *Number, the Language of Science*, in which occurs the following passage—a thought so shrewd and invigorating that it was given a place of honor in Lancelot Hogben's brilliant classic, *Mathematics for the Million*: "It is a remarkable fact, that the mathematical inventions which have proved to be most accessible to the masses are also those which exercised the greatest development on pure mathematics."

Loyalty to this idea, so gracefully expressed by one of America's eminent "pure" mathematicians, enabled Hogben to write a book in which the queen of the sciences assumes her

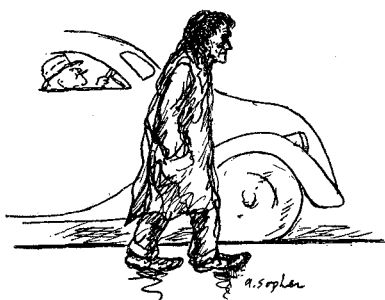
proper throne on our homely earth—whence, centuries ago, by the deceptive advice of Plato, she had sought refuge in the absolute. It is a real pity that we cannot say the same of Dantzig who, despite an exceptional intelligence, fine scholarship, and a style combining rigor with charm, persists in regarding not only mathematics but also science in general as forms of man's "quest for the absolute."

His new book opens on a note of faith in that "which has guided man onward and upward in his quest for the unknown." This generalization, at once so attractive and so meaningless, provides the background against which the accomplished author sketches the outlines of what in reality is man's pursuit of exactitude in his knowledge of nature. With admirable skill and genuine insight into the vast technical difficulties involved, Dantzig portrays the slow development of mathematical concepts, symbols, and operation from the intensely "rational" but aristocratic Greeks through the theological bigotries of the Catholic Inquisition as immortalized in the "recantation" of Galileo, down to the bewildering ferment and confusion of the modern "relativity" period.

As history in the restricted sense, and as an account of the basic concepts of mathematics from number and geometry to the calculus, tensors, matrices, and the infinite, the book makes absorbing reading—especially for those who enjoy their science highly seasoned with philosophical meditations on the nature of time, space, matter, and reality. Nor does Dantzig fail to point out the impact upon "pure" mathematics of the developments in the physical sciences, although here, too, the tendency is to treat the whole subject as a sort of "universe of discourse," uncontaminated by the human world of struggle.

That is why, as history in any broad social sense, *Aspects of Science* falls far short of adequacy. How, for example, is it possible for a man trained in the rigors of "exact" reasoning to describe the French revolution (which gave us a constellation of scientists of the first magnitude) as resembling "more a convention of executioners and hangmen than it did an assembly of enlightened emancipators"? And why the constant undertone of melancholy that confuses the admitted failure of a mechanical materialism with the supposed futility of a genuine dialectical materialism whose achievements in the Soviet Union (which he does not once name) are damned with faint praise in a single tired paragraph?

The fault, as we have come to know it so well through the "God-seeking" of Jeans, Eddington, Whitehead, and the physiologist J. S. Haldane—not to be confused with his son, the biochemist J. B. S. Haldane—is a fault in attitude and approach, an inability to distinguish between the valid technical difficulties of a given human technique and the thoroughly spurious failures due to the form of society within which the techniques must operate. Curiously enough, Dantzig himself notes that such practical-minded Greek geometers as Eudoxus, Archytas, and even the peerless



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Archimedes were frowned upon by the aristocratic Plato and his disciples. He even quotes Plutarch to show that "in this manner mechanics was severed and expelled from geometry, and, *being for a long time looked down upon by philosophers, it became one of the arts of war.*" (Emphasis mine—H. W.)

What an opportunity Dantzig missed here. In those few words, written some two thousand years ago by an amiable Greek humanist, lies part of the secret of the stagnation of science under capitalism, of its literal chaining to the purposes of destruction by a class which is again turning to "philosophy" as a weapon against social progress. Let us suppose that the fine talents of a Whitehead had been trained and matured in a society that did not sever science from life, did not expel it from the humdrum liberty and happiness of all men and women, can anyone say that Whitehead would then have regarded modern science as merely a variant of the Greek idea of fate?

A striking example of the prevailing anti-thesis between "scientific" thought and social thinking may be found in Dantzig's comments on "shocks" in his chapter on "Signals."

"Our awareness of existence," he writes, "for which consciousness is another name, is stimulated by shocks. When violent and rare, these shocks remain engraved upon our memory; when mild and frequent, they create in us the sensation of rhythm. *But violent or mild, rare or frequent, shocks are our only means of recording experience, and we know no other method of measuring time than by counting shocks.*"

Is there not, implicit in every word of that paragraph, and especially in the words which I have emphasized, a fundamental tenet of Marxism: that all of human history, as all of nature, is summed up in the one word, change: "violent or mild, frequent or rare"? Strange that a mind capable of enunciating a thought so profoundly revolutionary could not have realized that human history, also, is measured by shocks; that he should end his book on a note of defeat: "So let us hear the conclusion of the matter. Read your instruments and obey mathematics; for this is the whole duty of the scientist."

That was not the whole duty of Galileo; certainly not even half the duty of Charles Darwin, Louis Pasteur, and Ivan Pavlov.

HAROLD WARD.

A British Slant on the Far East

THE FAR EAST COMES CLOSER, by Hessel
Tiltman. J. B. Lippincott Co. \$3.

MR. TILTMAN is an Englishman, a member of the "upper classes," a white man, and a keen, experienced reporter. As an Englishman, he thinks that there is an "unwritten law" committing Great Britain and the United States "to make common cause" in the Far East. As a member of the "upper classes," he thinks that Japan is "the greatest civilizing force in Asia" because "one can rely upon every train reaching its destination to a split second." As a white man,

he accepts the "white man's burden," not as an old-fashioned and indiscreet phrase, but as a practical objective for Anglo-American co-operation. Finally, as a reporter who managed to be on the spot when history was made both in China and Japan, he tells a good many tales out of school, and integrates a remarkable amount of interesting, useful, and important information.

It is that kind of book. There are prejudices, contradictions, and crudities in it. There is also intimate knowledge and careful synthesis of the innumerable problems which go to make up the puzzle in the Pacific. It is a book which has to be read vigilantly, with one eye on the page and the other on the author. But for all that, it repays the effort.

The book starts out in 1931 when Japan invaded and conquered Manchuria, and ends somewhere in the early part of 1937 when General Hayashi was still premier of Japan. It stops just short of the emergence of Prince Konoe as the conciliator between the conflicting ruling groups in Japan. It was Prince Konoe's ability to submerge the internal differences between the politicians, the capitalists, and the militarists in favor of a common external front which made possible the present aggression.

To a certain extent, the book projects right into the present. Several persons made the headlines two months ago, who had previously been virtually unknown outside of China. Mr. Tiltman has a good deal of informative data and gossip about a number of them, such as General Sung Cheh-yuan, the gentleman who was at the head of the now defunct Hopei-Chahar Political Council, and Yin Ju-keng, the Chinese traitor who was at the head of the equally defunct East Hopei Autonomous Government. Unfortunately, the book has practically nothing to say about the Chinese Communists, either of their past or their present. The book is strong as narrative, rather than as analysis. I liked best of all Mr. Tiltman's revealing interview with Mr. Eiji Amau, until recently the crafty and successful spokesman of the Japanese foreign office—successful because he said so little though he spoke so much—and the dramatic, authentic, eye-witness account of the 1936 assassinations in Tokyo. Indeed, Mr. Tiltman is least entertaining and informative when he depends on his file rather than on his eyes and ears.

One of the significant aspects of the book is that the author, primarily concerned with preserving the British empire in the East, leans towards an international alignment of forces different from that supported by most of those influential Englishmen who have their eyes glued on Europe. The latter are apt to pray for a peace-at-any-price reconciliation with Germany. Without surrendering any of the British possessions to the Nazis, they would try to deflect Hitler's course from the empire to the Soviet Union, even to the extent of entering into an active anti-Soviet partnership. But Mr. Tiltman is