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No Negro Renaissance?

By JOHN P. DAVIS, Cambridge, Mass.

An Answer to Dr. Hubert Harrison's Article "No Negro Renaissance"

Your editorial note to an article entitled "No Negro Renaissance" in the March 10th

issue of the Courier has saved you from the serious charge of charlatanism. But it has not saved

the author, Doctor (of what?) Hubert H. Harrison. "There be some men," wrote Ben Johnson, "who are born only to suck out the poison of books." Such a one is Mister (I use the title for want of a more authentic one) Harrison. Many a sultry Harlem night I have heard and seen this crude gentleman, who is so strangely proud that he "used to teach economics to whites," standing

on a soap-box at a street corner, with his shirt sleeves rolled up, spitting the "King's English" and sweating a white shirt with needless, demagogic gesticulations. And I confess there was nothing he said which reminded me of Demosthenes on the "Crown" or the discourses of Plato on justice. He seemed to be suffering from that dreadful malady, a little learning.

Along The Rialto (New York) By CHAPPY GARDNER

Lincoln audiences will see the Mayor of the future in the new vehicle of the 28th. This latest vehicle of fun by Joe Simms and Sydney Easton is being enjoyed to the utmost. Many of the former Shuffle Along and Running Wild stars are included in the versatile cast offering of exceptional mirth, dance and melody. The leads are successfully handled by Sydney Easton, Joe Simms, Bert Howell, "Don't" Hester, Bass, Camp, Arthur Lawson, Coley Grant, Arthur Noble, Robert Warfield, Addison Carey, Paul Floyde and Ed. Campbell. The entire chorus is hand picked, beautiful and works with snap and ginger.

4-11-44 at Lafayette
In greeting the big musical comedy success at the Lafayette this week New York City's particular homage to one of its sons, Eddie Hunter, the producer and chief laugh producer. Eddie was born here in Harlem, came up from the sidewalks of the great west side and well knows what New Yorkers want by way of amusement. If you hear him in his My O' My expressions this week you'll conclude he knows his stuff. Eddie is a comedian off their seats. Other featured leads are Geo. Cooper, Andrew Tribble, Anson Davis, Billy Mitchell, Lieut. Tim Bryman of overseas fame and one of the best band masters in the country tops the music with his symphonic jazz orchestra. This show is worth going miles to see.

At the Orpheum—Newark
Across the river at the popular and beautiful Race Theatre Jimmy Cooper's Okeh Revue entertains them for one week. And my what a show, what a jammed house. We squeezed in a corner to do our reviewing. Some crack acts and talented organization is checked full of novelties that grip the attention. It is fast, clean and entertaining. But beans and Susie are featured. Others on the bill working in the spot and sharing lion's share of public praise are Brown and Marguerite Guilford and Brown, Octavia Sumler, and the internationally famous five cracker-jacks. The Orpheum looks clean and stands out in its new decorations and spring trimmings. That's a big Walker.

Brooklyn For Mid-Nite Show.
Jimmy Marshall's company played to a packed house in Brooklyn Friday night, March 25th, at mid-nite, at the New United Theatre. Patrons were so well pleased that the management asked Jimmy for return date. From opening to closing the applause was heard and almost deafening at times. Every hit went over with a will. Dink Stewart the veteran with Byrnes doing comedy was a riot. Had 'em cracking their sides. Musical numbers were put over splendidly—I Love You received a big hand, as did "Mandy the Girl of Being Good" another nice number went over big. Fannie the finale number went first. The Sunday night 27 next as Jimmy's this new show opens at Royal in Baltimore week of 28th in Pittsburgh and other larger cities to follow. Returning to New York about mid-summer. Donald Hayward is in charge of well organized music.

The team of Grant and Perkins have been at the N. Y. A. Sunday night. Making first star. Race artists have been so honored. Will Vodrey has gone to London and will be the chief attraction of the Blackbirds of 1937. Also reported that "Blackbirds" will close in three weeks in London. Many of the company will return to the states. A "Whitebird" Revue goes into pavilion next famous by Florence Mills and company.

Hucker and Perlin are offered many vaudeville acts on the other side after Blackbirds close. Billy Norman (Muxey) and "Musical" Speller are teaming. They will shortly offer for public approval. Ought to hit. Julian Miller's Blues Chasers, four in number make a red hot jazz sensation. They can be seen nightly at Jolly Friars Club in Greenwich Village during the week of 28th and 40th. Its members are John Patterson, Bishop Hall, Clinton Thomas and Betty. Chief himself seated at the ivory keys.

Bob Slater and brother of the C. V. B. have offered you a truly job as manager for the coming season. No one has not accepted. Jimmy Feller for his one hand back stopping will be seen in this season probably with the Royals. The "War Horse" is far from being through.

of an article in the Modern Quarterly which he regards as epoch-making in Negro literature. Well sir, he has been guilty of had taste in airing his personal grievances and prejudices to the public; and of faulty critical ability in his dogmatic statements about Negro literature.

He has declared, primarily, that there was no Negro Renaissance at the present time. His definition of the word "Renaissance" would be interesting. I had always thought it indicated a revival, a rebirth, a quickening of the spirit of a movement, whose early vigor had subsided to a degree and sunk in importance from a previous acme of perfection. If such be the case, and I am convinced it is, then Mr. Harrison's statement that there was a continuous stream of Negro literature from 1850 to 1910 is irrelevant. Suppose there was. What of it? If, indeed, poets wrote, essayists existed and literature was produced—do these facts deny that today that same creative force does not exist in a more intense degree? Not at all. The publication of novels, books of poetry, plays, historical treatises and Negro Folk songs is unparalleled by any previous decade in American life. Of course, it need not follow that the quantity of these productions increase their quality. But I think it does. The most profound chauvinist cannot justly claim for the works of Phyllis Wheatley the same prominence as for those of Countee Cullen. True, there is art in them—true they are important as a historical beginning, but I had rather have her complete works irretrievably lost than almost any sonnet that Countee Cullen has written.

George M. Horton, writing in 1845, and Alberry A. Whitman, in the latter part of the 19th century, have both written delightful poetry, poetry which, it is to be regretted, has been lost to the knowledge of the average layman. But their work based on purely critical standards

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suffers in comparison with the modern decade. The reason does not lie in the inherent inferiority of these writers, but rather in the environmental conditions of their life. Had they the public ear or the stimulus which is offered to Negro writers today they might have created an infinitely better type of literature. But the fact remains that they did not. One of the great tragedies of American letters is the fact that the poetry audience at the beginning of the 20th century would only listen to Dunbar when he mumbled his beautiful thoughts in dialect. He could have written as beautiful non-dialectic poetry as anyone of his day (and in some instances he did). But however much enthuse over Dunbar, I cannot but realize that because of his handicaps he was hindered from writing poetry as perfect as that of many modern writers.

Mr. Harrison is miserably misinformed when he makes the statement that no Negro leaders have ever discovered any of our prominent writers. He evidently has not kept abreast of the times. Had he read continually the Crisis or the Opportunity he would have found many writers who are now noteworthy, contributing their first faltering lines to one or the other of these periodicals. I have no data at hand to verify the statement, but I make bold to say that both Hughes and Cullen published poetry in the Crisis before they were ever heard of by the white reading public. Sure, Arna Bontemps' first appearance was in a colored periodical as was that of John Matthews, Waring Cuney and many others whom Mr. Harrison probably does not regard very highly.

The "Doctor" has been downright naughty and deserves to be spanked for his malignant allusions to Langston Hughes. He intimates that Hughes is a "kid" who hasn't written anything but "jeune jazz" poetry. Now this old sage, who has taught economics to white people (although he hates this white patronizing attitude—oh, yes), has again gotten mixed up in his diction. Jeune and jazz as two co-ordinate adjectives are well nigh impossible save in the most strained construction. Jazz personifies exotic, rhapsodic vigor; jeune, quite the opposite.

Continuing his discussion of Hughes, Mr. Harrison denies that his two books are poetry and also that since Hughes is engaged in reading Paradise Lost for the first time, he is, therefore, unqualified to write poetry. Well, sir, as regards the first of these accusations, it may be tersely said that tastes differ—that poetry from age to age takes on the color of the age (witness the "metaphysical poets")—that in this age of relativity and changing "jazz poetry" or more correctly "impressionistic poetry" is the vogue. Mr. Hughes has preferred imagery to classical standards. At times he shows certain imperfections. But his is "glorious imperfection" which might well be envied.

The second statement is laughable. Now I admit the virtues of Paradise Lost. But to postulate that a poet is not ready to write until he has read this or any other piece of literature is highly ludicrous. Would Mr. Harrison have our poets write a Harlem Lost? He is obviously in favor of mechanical imitation of accepted models. This

entire school of thought is not original with Mr. Harrison. It is the School of Rules traceable in the literature of 15th century Italy, 16th century France and 17th century England. It is highly artificial and non-productive of any great body of creative literature. Mr. Harrison has read Milton, let him equal Hughes. To say that a poem is a mechanical thing and that poetry is to be learned like mathematics is to deny nature, to deny life. The writings of Milton or Shelley or Keats have not been and will never be the necessary part of a poet's equipment. As a matter of fact, 18th century England began with Edward Young's Conjectures on Original Genius (Read it, Mr. Harrison, read it), and 19th century Germany, in the work of the Schlegels—was very much in favor of the untrained genius, the untutored poet. In short, Mr. Harrison's talk about Milton is a bag of wind.

Again speaking of Hughes, Mr. Harrison says: "How then can we get literature from those who haven't lived, who haven't even read." Poor Mr. Harrison he is so mis-informed, so shallow. Has he ever stood beneath a Burutu moon? Is life to be found underneath the open sky on the Caribbean Sea—or under the penetrating rain of Taos—or on the steps of Saint Mark's as gondolas glide by and white doves feed out of your hand? Langston Hughes has felt, has lived

all this. Would God I had! Would the Devil Mr. Harrison had. Or is life only in Harlem? If so, I venture to say that Hughes has caught more of the spirit of Harlem in 20 days than Harrison has in all his 20 years there.

Likewise Mr. Harrison is regrettably myopic in dealing with the writing of Dr. DuBois. And in slighting Dr. DuBois, he slight's a master of English prose style. If Mr. Harrison had read more of Dryden and less of his own writings, he would have seen the real beauty in so trenchant, so poignant a book as Darkwater. If he were wrapped up in a mingled ego and inferiority complex he could not help, however, much he may disagree with Dr. DuBois on personal grounds, seeing the depths of style and matter in "The Passing of John." And these last are Dr. DuBois' less mature writings. As a stylist he has few equals among his contemporaries. And it is time that Mr. Harrison knew it.

In the main he has been forced to agree that Cullen, MacKay and one or two others are good writers. But even here his dogmatic criticism is revealed. The rest of his article hardly deserves mention. His best interests were served if he were to stick to street-corners and soap boxes and teaching economics to white people rather than do the difficult thing of posing as a literary critic.

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