

Perception of Afro-American Writers by Soviet Literary Criticism of the
1920-30s

The interest to the race problem in American literature appeared with the raise of the interest of Russian American Studies to Afro-American Literature. Firstly, this part of American literature was almost outside the interests of both Russian critics before the Revolution and Soviet critics. It can be explained by the fact, that Afro-American literature itself by the beginning of the XX century had been doing its first steps from folklore to professional literature. The race problem was rare for “white” literature as well. By the end of the XX century H. Beecher-Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had been a classical example of solving this problem in literature for Russian readers and critics. (Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is considered to be an exception. Here the race problem was presented with an incredible for American literature artistic force and skills.)

With the strengthening of the ‘black factor’ in American literature process in the XX century, the problems of development of Afro-American literature aroused new interest among young Soviet scholars, and occupied a good place among other objects for research. The representatives of Soviet American Studies since 20-s has been focusing their attention on the following problems: Afro-American culture, reflection of the race conflict in contemporary American literature, and peculiarities of “black” character in “white” fiction. Besides the fact, that Afro-American literature had started to be regarded as a part of general literature process in the USA, the next reason was the oppressed position of Afro-Americans in the country, which corresponded to the Soviet views on the lack of human rights in the capitalistic society. The term “capitalistic slavery” was used by critics very often concerning the western world in general, and it was applied to the USA as well. (Anisimov, Dinamov 1931)

The first works devoted to these problems presented surveys. This genre prevailed on the first stage of development of Soviet American Literary Studies. It

was closely connected with the publishing boom of the 20-s, when both Afro-American fiction and novel, written by white authors about the race conflict, occupied a great place among the translated fiction (See: Du Bois 1925; White 1925; Van Vechten 1927; Fosset 1927; McKay 1929). This tendency remained in Literary Criticism in the 30-s as well (See: Terehov 1939). But these information surveys contained some elements of review, which compared different works of fiction and led to some conclusions. So, M. Zenkevich studied English and American novelties of fiction, and defined the place of young and developing after the Civil War Afro-American Literature. He compared the first prose work of L. Hughes *Not without Laughter* and a famous in our country novel by K. McKay «Домой в Гарлем» (*Back to Harlem, может быть*): “Describing black working society Hughes goes farther than McKay... Paying a tribute of respect to black jazz band, songs and dances, Hughes is more reserved. He doesn’t depict Negroes¹ always dancing and singing in the ecstasy of wild joy. But this doesn’t mean that his novel can be called proletarian black novel. Working society to certain extent is narrow-minded and petty-bourgeois. Hughes doesn’t show us a true proletarian”. (Zenkevich 1931: 176) The critic felt by intuition some special race characteristics of the hero, but nevertheless, all the traditional ways of analysis of contemporary American novels and the searchers for progressive, according to the Soviet point of view, tendencies were transferred to Afro-American literature. So, it turned out, that “black” writers in the USA were trying to find a new proletarian hero, but race and ethnic peculiarities of their environment attracted their attention away from this process.

In the middle of 20-s Soviet Literary Criticism came up to artistic and social examination of the race conflict and the “black” phenomenon in American literature in general. V.M. Friche, the head of social school within Literary Studies, touched upon this problem in his article *Mammon’s Art* in 1927. He presented a social review of contemporary American literature, and only once mentioned Afro-American fiction. But this remark turned to be very important for Soviet American

¹ In Russian the word “Negro” or “nigger” doesn’t bear any negative connotation, that is why critics and writers use it even in formal texts.

Studies: “Though in the second half of the XIX century a Negro was not more than an object for fiction (Beecher-Stowe, Sims, Harris), on the threshold of the XX century he becomes a subject of fiction.”

S. Dinamov, the founder of Soviet school of American Studies, became an indisputable leader of this process, though he had only few works concerning the race problem. Among them there was a review article *Contemporary American Literature*, which included a special chapter *Literature of Negroes* (See: Dinamov 1926), and the report, mentioned above, *The Face of Capitalistic Slavery in the World Fiction*. Nevertheless, he made a great contribution to this topic in comparison with other scholars.

Firstly, it was S. Dinamov, who began using such an important notion as “black Renaissance” as a term in Literary Studies. He defined it chronologically and connected it with “white revival” – a great flight of American fiction in the 20-s. He paid attention to black folklore as a stage of development in the previous century, and distinguished W. Du Bois’s publicist work *The Souls of the Black Folk* (1903) and his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) as the beginning for the growth of Afro-American self-consciousness and their original culture. After S. Dinamov other critics highly appreciated these books. “The book *The Souls of the Black Folk* gives a start to the movement for black culture. He showed that blacks have their own original art, music, folklore and culture, that they are not savages at all. Literature of racial protest starts with his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*” (Black Literature in America 1928: 80)

Secondly, S. Dinamov made some interesting observations and conclusions while analyzing numerous works of Afro-American writers, that appeared in Russian in the 20-s. He appreciated peculiarities of their plots and compositions, and made some reflections about the writers’ language and style. But it was done casually without paying a special reader’s attention to the subject. In the first place, S. Dinamov needed racial and ethnical problems to show to the readers with all the clearness, that the crisis of capitalism in the USA had reached its climax, because such a great number of people were continuing living as slaves.

A very important conclusion concerning Afro-American literature was made by S. Dinamov on analyzing the novel by *Walter White A Blow on a Flint Удар по кремню*: “It is clear that racial component in black literature is shown more boldly, than class component, and that international criteria is substituted by national one” (underlined by S.D.) (Dinamov 1926:87-88). So, S. Dinamov surpassed his time only by mentioning this problem without going deep into it. Other critics also made some attempts just to approach the raising of the problem, but it was less convincing and demonstrative. For example, A. Zhingovatov characterized the position of all black people regardless of their social background, as life on the top of the volcano waiting for the explosion. He compared the position of Afro-Americans in the USA with that of Jews in Russian Empire. He moved from the analysis of the same *Walter White’s A Blow on a Flint Удар по кремню* to the creation of social and ethnic picture of “black” America. He distinguished two wings in Afro-American public movements. One was defined as “black Zionism” and was presented by a group of low-class bourgeoisie with its motto “Back to Africa”. Another was a proletarian movement which brought its supporters under Socialistic and Communist banners. (Zhingovatov 1926: 166-167). Today it’s obvious, that such a speculative view on the social stratification of Afro-Americans is rather funny and ridiculous, but in the 20-s such kind of statements was sincere. Unfortunately, in 1931 S. Dinamov, who had held a high post by this time, changed his own point of view on this problem. Reflecting on the same *W. White’s* novel, the critic made a different conclusion, which didn’t come logically from the analysis of the work of fiction, but it was suitable for current politics and ideology: “Black proletarians under the leadership of the Communist Party and together with black intellectuals will reach their aims and obtain annihilation of “free slavery” of Negroes in America” (Dinamov 1931: 65).

S. Dinamov was one of the first Soviet critics, who raised a very important problem in the study of “black” problem in American literature – this was the problem of image of Afro-American in “white” literature, or the problem of black American from the point of view of the participants of the race conflict. A lot of

interesting observations were made in the process of analyzing the novels by Carl Van-Vechten *Nigger Heaven* and Waldo Frank's *The Holiday*. This aspect of the problem wasn't developed in his further works, but in the works of other scholars. They were interested in perception of typical cultural and ethnic features of black Americans by white writers. Estimating the novelties of Afro-American fiction, critics used to include the works written by white authors about Negroes in their reviews. So, I. Kashkin characterized M. Gold and H. Audem as the writers "feeling vitally both social aspects of the problem of Negroes, and the peculiarity of black art – its musicality" (Kashkin 1928: 146). In the other anonymous review, which has already been mentioned, the estimation of such kind of literature was harsh: "White writers usually deal with the life of Negroes. Some of them misinterpret it wickedly, because they are enemies of blacks. Others mock at Negroes. For some of them the problem of Negroes becomes a kind of exotic, which an American reader has a weakness for". (Black Literature in America 1928: 80). That means that a white writer wasn't considered to be able to go deep into the inner world of a man of other race.

Giving his review to the novel *Nigger Heaven* by a famous white writer Carl Van-Vechten (and making his contribution to solving the problem of "a Negro in the white man's eyes"), E. Lann complained, that this unsuccessful from the literary point of view novel introduced the writer to Soviet readers. The remarkable thing is that the critic found the cause of this failure not in the aesthetic flaws. On the contrary, he highly appreciated "lightness in the plot development", and "perfect composition". The main flaw, he believed, was an ideological error of the writer, who had decided to study the race problems. (It's necessary to notice, that bright artistic merits of the novel were mentioned by other critics as well. I. Kashkin compared this novel to the first novel by the author, familiar to Soviet readers - C. McKay's «Домой в Гарлем». He called this novel a bright book, which in its artistic aspects surpassed the second novel, but which was weaker in its social aspects. (Kashkin 1928: 143). This was a great achievement, made by E. Lann in the critical study of the topic, which added to it deep social

characterization without disturbing the analysis of the novel as a piece of fiction. The critic showed how the situation in Afro-American movement influenced the plot, the structure of the novel and the characters' motivation. "Making his hero-a Negro intellectual suffer in unbearable conditions, and making his friends constantly discuss "a nigger problem", the writer forced all the characters of the novel to rush about Booker Washington's and Du Bois's recommendation. The first taught his contemporaries to be zealous and hard-working, and believed that financial success of Afro-Americans could have leveled them with white people. Du Bois, in his turn, raised the glove of racial hatred". (Lann 1928: 218)². Unfortunately, then the critic himself lessened the value of his own observations, and chose the line of least resistance for a Soviet scholar. He demonstrated to his readers, what, according to his opinion, a writer had had to do to solve the problem. The review was reduced to just another primitive conclusion, that the writer "had lack of vigilance". This vigilance meant that the writer had had to find the third way of solving the problem. "If Van-Vechten wanted to remain a real master, he had to notice those intellectuals, who divided the problem of "new Negroes' Mecca" not according to the vertical line of Booker Washington and William Du Bois, but according to the horizontal one of not racial but class struggle". (Underlined by E.L.)

It was good, that through the prism of artistic means the critic paid the readers' attention to the social and ethnical aspects of the problem in 1928. But then he was imprisoned by the contradiction between the aesthetic estimation of the work of fiction and its social and political significance, which was typical for a Soviet critic. All the artistic merits of the novel couldn't compensate Van-Vechten's ideological errors. That is why the final conclusion was presented according to the traditional "Soviet absurd": "It's a pity, that our reader is

² Unfortunately, Carl Van-Vechten remained unknown for Soviet readers, though this novel was often mentioned in the surveys of contemporary American literature in connection with racial problem and the image of an Afro-American in "white" literature. E. Lann's review remained the only source of information about the writer, where you could found that Van-Vechten had been called O. Wilde's and Huysmans's follower, that he was a great music connoisseur, and took his original position of "a European aesthete" in American literature. One of the reasons for this was that "less than anything else he was able to solve any problems".

introduced to this outstanding author by *Nigger Heaven*, though the novel has vivid details, living characters and tragic end”. (Lann 1928: 219).

In the 30-s critics followed the same way in their studying of the race conflict, trying to underline and strengthen its social factor. The 30-s, especially the end of the decade, discovered new names and deepened the artistic potential of Afro-American fiction. But for Russian critics the main criteria was their belonging to the Communist Party, or, at least, the writer’s sympathy to the communist idea. For example, A. Terehov in his survey in 1939, admitted R. Wright as a brightest phenomenon in Afro-American fiction. By that time Soviet readers and critics had been already acquainted with Wright’s book *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), a part of which was quickly translated the same year. But even in this short review there was no place for any discussion of the artistic expressiveness of the young writer. Wright’s innovations and originality in the interpretation of the race conflict wasn’t mentioned by A. Terehov. The main criteria of the author’s significance turned to be his progressive ideological position: “Wright doesn’t look for sympathy. The black communist writer addresses to his people, appeals for struggle and revolutionary actions”. (Terehov 1939: 361). It seems that the progress in the artistic salvation of the race conflict for Soviet Literary Criticism is obvious: at last “black” writer has overcome his racial narrow-mindedness and rose up to his class significance. But S. Dinamov’s conception about the predomination of the race factor in Afro-Americans’ self-consciousness turned to be more accurate, though it’s important to notice, that the scholar himself was sorry for establishing this fact. Russian American Studies, even when analyzing complicated and contradictory works of fiction, used to shut its eyes to all these difficulties, and put in the works under study only those ideas, that suited current ideological canon.

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