

## Phillip Ernstmeier: On "The Cat and the Saxophone"

Langston Hughes' "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" marks a solid contribution to modern American poetry. Though written in 1923, during the swing and ragtime craze, its innovative break with poetic invention is remarkably analogous to radical changes in modern jazz styles pioneered by musicians including Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy, and Albert Ayler in the 1960s. In the place of preset chord progressions, melody, and harmony, "free" and "avant-garde" jazz emphasized pitch and tonal variation and the improvisation of thickly layered acoustic textures. For example, late in his career, John Coltrane's phraseology turned towards exquisite fragmentation, interspersed by screeches and squeals, defying jazz conventions and baffling most critics. "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" performs a similar experiment. It is less comparable to an "orchestra score," as Jean Wagner (MAPS) has suggested, and more commensurate with the advances of the 1960s avant-garde, which pressed jazz to a threshold.

"The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" lacks many expected and identifiable poetic features. Unlike "The Weary Blues" — one of Hughes' many "musical" poems — it is not directly representational; it does not orient a scene or relate a subject's experience. Indeed, though it is ostensibly arranged in verse, it does not explicitly contain images, rhymes, or tropes. Instead, it records the textures of a space, or a speakeasy. Formally, the poem is an assemblage of three texts: the title, which cannot be straightaway related to the poem; Jack Palmer's and Spencer William's popular ragtime song, "Everybody Loves My Baby, But My Baby Don't Love Nobody But Me," typographically distinguished by capitalized lettering; and pieces of conversation, spoken in the speakeasy, represented without quotation marks. Significantly, although the references to "daddy" and "mamma" suggest male and female speakers, the absence of quotation marks welcomes to the poem a plurality of speakers. Furthermore, their absence, along with the capitalized lettering, suggests that rather than being uttered, like a traditional poem, "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" was written to be seen, a fact reinforced by the unspeakable, visual sign concluding it: a simple exclamation mark (!!). Fragmented and juxtaposed, these texts oscillate back and forth, interrupting, reflecting, amplifying, and intensifying one another, like a jazz improvisation.

Through their exchanges, the texts perform a double operation: while insinuating certain images and emotions, they simultaneously stack together a richly exuberant ambiance. On the surface, "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" intimates a scene from 1920s popular culture. People are milling around a speakeasy, where they are not only socially enjoying drinks with company but, during the Prohibition era, are purchasing and consuming alcohol illegally: "Half pint, / Gin / No, make it / [ . . . ] corn" (2-4, 6). Simultaneously, a ragtime band is swinging LOUDLY. In this intoxicating environment, inhibitions are lost and spontaneity spreads contagiously. A woman, who seems unacquainted with her partner, suddenly demands a kiss: "Kiss me, / [ . . . ] / daddy" (10, 12). Then, there is the impulsive and overwhelming urge to dance — and to dance the wildly popular Charleston — conveyed through the affectionately exultant exclamation: "Charleston, / mamma!" (28-9). All of these atmospheric affects and impressions stimulate the reader at once. They are surrounded, soused by the sensations of risk, desire, and recklessness which come when all restraints are relinquished. Without images, without symbols, without metaphors, "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" imbricates an ambiance of inebriation, insouciance, delight, abandon,

and danger: a texture of frenzy, similar to ragtime, communicated through short, raggedy, syncopated bursts.

Interestingly, below the surface, Hughes imbricates these ambient textures by coordinating texts in extraordinary ways. Notable is the synthesis struck between "Everybody Loves My Baby" and the couple's dialogue by harmonizing their terms of endearment; the word "BABY," repeated throughout the ragtime tune, reverberates through variegated permutations: "honey," "daddy," "sweetie," "mamma" (8, 12, 20, 29). Similarly, in a most exquisite moment, texts coincide almost flawlessly.

DON'T LOVE NOBODY

daddy

BUT ME.

Say!

EVERYBODY

Yes?

WANTS MY BABY (10-6)

Originally, in Palmer's and William's lyrics, between "BUT ME" and "EVERYBODY" appears the word "Yes." But for the poem Hughes tweaks it. In the place of "YES" appears an equally monosyllabic and exclamatory "say!", and the affirmative "yes" that it replaces appears belatedly, slightly permuted, as a question: "Yes?" In this way, texts merge and diverge synchronistically. Like a jazz performance, "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" subjects "Everybody Loves My Baby" to a series of atmospheric and exhilarating intertextual confluences and displacements. In the poem, Hughes effectively rags the song lyrics, syncopates them, so accents fall, slightly delayed, between or behind metrical "beats," in vividly irresistible rhythms, and he noodles individual words, inflecting sounds with suggestive pitch and tonal modulations. He creates a "gut bucket" poetry, less concerned with constructing content than groove, texture, mood.

In this way, "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" is a "rag." Though neither the popular ragtime tune nor the speakeasy chatter contain concrete images, the title does convey a "cat" and a "saxophone," and a temporal period. If within the word "cat" can be deciphered "hepcat," Hughes' experimental poem becomes in its totality metonymic. "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" can be experienced as the evocation of the ambience created, after the nightclub has closed and all the squares have gone home, by a saxophonist blowing and burning late into night. Gushing from this cat and his saxophone comes the ragged, interjected, heavily inflected popular tune which constitutes "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)." In this sense, Hughes' poem is a bit, scrap, or remnant which after it has been used is discarded. Juxtapositions, atmospheric textures, and syncopations appear only in order to disappear metonymically, and to express, through the silent intervals after their erasure, a musicality too frenzied, too euphoric, too beautiful for words. In the end, language collapses; the poem is reduced to the strange, unspeakable exclamation mark ("!"), reserved in a space all to itself, which concludes it. Like the "gut bucket" technique, the "!" does not communicate a content, though its silence does elicit the vibration, felt throughout the poem, of effervescence and elation, undergone when all limitations have been removed and

"everybody" cuts loose.

Examining "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" in this way suggests that Hughes' poem possesses remarkable originality. James Smethurst (MAPS) has suggested that Hughes' "attempt to represent a number of simultaneous voices within a single work" (understood relative to Pinsky's "formal heteroglossia") renders it distinctly and definitively "modern." However, in this case, the poem's multivocality seems to be subordinate to its technical virtuosity. Similar modernist poems -- poems which attempt to emulate musical experience -- such as Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (1915), Eliot's Four Quartets (1936), or Tolson's "Dark Symphony" (1944) stress classical ("European") musical forms. Hughes' focus on jazz allowed him not only to explore new territory in American poetry; by implementing techniques of the genre, such as syncopation and improvisation, foreign to his contemporaries' stylistic choices, he could produce poetry of a wholly other order. Indeed, considering the resemblance between "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" and 1960s avant-garde jazz, his experimental verse may even have been ahead of its time. In it, the sax replaces the lyre of the lyric.

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