

James Smethurst: On "Langston Hughes in the 1930s"

No portion of Hughes's literary career has been more commonly dismissed than that of the 1930s. Even many of Hughes's admirers compare unfavorably his writings of the 1930s to his work in other decades. In this view, Hughes's 1930s efforts in many different genres--including short and long fiction, poetry, drama, reportage, song writing--largely sounded over and over the same ham-fisted didactic note, lacking the lyric humanism and folk wit of his work in the 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s. This asserted nadir of Hughes's literary efforts is almost always related to his engagement with the CPUSA.

That Hughes was, with the exception of Richard Wright, the black writer most identified with the Communist Left during the 1930s is undeniable. Hughes's frequent publication of "revolutionary" poetry in the journals and press of the CPUSA, his activity in Communist-initiated campaigns such as the drive to free the Scottsboro defendants and on behalf of the Spanish Republic, his willingness to lend his name to Communist-led or Communist-influenced organizations (e.g., the John Reed Clubs, the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, the National Negro Congress, the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, the League of American Writers), and his public support of the Soviet Union (including his signing of a statement in 1938 supporting the purges of the Old Bolsheviks and others by Stalin) all marked him as an open member of the Communist Left--whether or not he formally joined the CPUSA. As noted in chapter I, Hughes's Left sympathies antedated the Great Depression. But it is unquestionably true that Hughes's participation in the Left increased astronomically during the 1930s and had a marked impact on the form and content (to use a favorite phrase of Left cultural critics of that time) of Hughes's poetry.

But, in fact, what is formally most interesting about Hughes's poetry in the 1930s is that the wide variety of voices, styles, and themes employed by Hughes in the late 1920s and early 1930s and addressed to equally disparate audiences become largely unified by the end of the decade in a manner that is crucial to the development of his later work. This process of unification results in *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942) and, ultimately, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), in which formerly distinct addresses and addressees are combined to imagine a single audience and a single subject. Or, to draw on Bakhtin's discussion of the novel, if a diversity of speakers and auditors could be said to be retained by Hughes, this diversity is contained within a single volume in a dialogic relation rather than in different volumes and journals speaking to different audiences. The poetic voice that Hughes creates, unlike the voice established in most of the work of Sterling Brown, is not that of the individual narratorial consciousness, but of a simultaneously unitary and multiple urban community. While the persona of the poet-narrator may appear in a poem, as it does in "Air Raid Over Harlem," the poet-speaker is a liminal figure, who is both inside and outside the community, and whose only authority is that arrogated by the community. This relatively unified poetic voice, or collection of voices, bespeaks the existence of a new kind of audience, one which Hughes had a major part in creating, particularly through his work in the cultural institutions of the Communist Left. Ironically, despite Hughes's activity within the cultural (as well as more strictly "political") organizations and institutions affiliated with the CPUSA, his poetry frequently received mixed or poor reviews from left-wing American critics.

The range of addresses and addressees in Hughes's poetry reached its zenith in the early 1930s. During this period Hughes largely abandoned the types of poems that had made his 1927 *Fine Clothes to the Jew* so notorious in the black press: poems formally rooted in the secular and sacred musical forms of the blues and gospel music, as well as in black rhetoric and representing as speaking subjects such "low-life" characters as prostitutes, gamblers, murderers, drunks, and suicides. Instead Hughes's published poems fell into three general categories aimed at three relatively discrete audiences: "uplift" and comic poems aimed largely at an African-American audience that was outside the cultural orbit of the CPUSA, and outside the groups of black intellectuals associated with relatively elite institutions and journals such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* in such urban centers as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington; "literary" poems (as exemplified by those in the privately printed collection *Dear Lovely Death*, which if not "high" modernist were aimed at an audience that was consciously "literary" and "modern"); and Hughes's "revolutionary" or militant poems aimed at an audience defined largely by the cultural institutions of the CPUSA and the Comintern. As we shall see, the distinctions between these categories and their intended audiences are quite real. However, on closer examination Hughes's general formal strategies, and his sense of the work of the different types of poems, are not as far apart as they appear.

The largest part of Hughes's poetic production during the 1930s was his "revolutionary poetry," often seen as his weakest or strongest work according to the political bent of the critic. Given the anti-communism that has dominated American intellectual life since the 1940s, the predominant critical view has been that these poems are among Hughes's slightest. (As we shall see, critics associated with the Communist Left in the 1930s often did not value Hughes's work much more than the anti-Communist critics.) Few of these scholars who dismiss Hughes's work of the 1930s consider the poetry formally in any specific way. (For that matter, the proponents of Hughes's revolutionary poems rarely consider formal questions, either.) All in all these critics seem to accept the assumption that has been frequently attributed to intellectuals and artists most closely connected with the CPUSA: that the form of the revolutionary poem is, or should be, transparent, allowing the clear viewing of the message or "line." This poetry is seen as beyond form, but somehow filled with an unmediated, and generally false, meaning--to read one of these poems is to read them all. In short, such poetry is sloganeering and a slogan, as everyone knows, is inherently uninteresting except perhaps sociologically.

Such undervaluation of Hughes's revolutionary poetry misses the sly voice inhabiting the poems. This voice usually means what it says, but never quite says all that it means in a straightforward way. Instead it remains elusive through a skillful use of syntactic manipulation, rhythm, and other formal devices, conveying multiple meanings to multiple audiences. In this regard, it is ironic that with the plethora of critical discussions of the trope of the trickster and his or her linguistic polysemy, virtually none examine the work of Hughes, and certainly none consider his revolutionary poetry in this manner. Perhaps another way to say this is that there is a lyrical music to much of the 1930s poetry that requires the same sensitivity to tone and nuance as has been brought to bear on Hughes's blues poetry, most notably by Steven Tracy. What has also been generally missed in Hughes's revolutionary poetry is the continued connection with modernism formally and thematically as Hughes, like nearly all other radical poets of the 1930s, writes quite consciously with the legacy of earlier modernist art and literature in mind.

One of the most interesting things about "Broadcast on Ethiopia," for example, is the use of the literary equivalent of the modernist montage: wild shifts of voice, typography, diction,

rhythm, rhyme, line length, stanzaic form and its interpolation of song, prose items, expressions of mass culture, and sound effects often occurring simultaneously. Of course, the use of these typically modernist devices was certainly not restricted to Hughes, but was common among many left-wing poets, including Kenneth Fearing, Muriel Rukeyser, Joy Davidman, and, as will be examined in the next chapter, other black writers such as Frank Marshall Davis.

Hughes differed from a number of these Left poets, particularly Fearing and Davidman, in that Hughes's work in the 1930s basically argued that popular culture was a field of contestation with the ruling class, whereas Fearing and Davidman (and novelist Nathaniel West), like many American intellectuals of the Communist Left, saw mass culture as a hegemonic web of social control anticipating the later critiques of the Frankfurt School. Although they did not generally attempt to represent an alternate "people's" culture (as did Sterling Brown), Fearing and Davidman drew on mass culture in ways to show mass culture as an instrument of containment of revolutionary impulses (or genuine human feeling). In this respect, Hughes is essentially optimistic, even in his most despairing radical poetry, (such as "Broadcast on Ethiopia"), where Fearing and Davidman are pessimistic--as are a surprising number of Left poets in the 1930s. Hughes embraced the aesthetic possibilities suggested by Popular Front ideology very early when many other Left poets and artists retained a sort of Third Period aesthetic, preferring either pessimism, as did Fearing and Davidman, or else locating poetic value in "popular" forms of the "folk" supposedly outside of mass culture, as did writers Sterling Brown and Don West and the participants of the Left folk song movement of the Popular Front.

While the modernist literature of the 1920s has often been opposed to the proletarian literature movement of the 1930s, to a large extent the older Left writers and readers associated with journals such as *New Masses* saw themselves as proceeding out of modernism, particularly in matters of form. Thus Hughes, in part, made use of a sort of pastiche or montage technique to reach an audience of the Left intelligentsia brought up on literary modernism. As in the case of "Broadcast on Ethiopia," it could be argued that the coupling of modernist form and generic modernist sentiment ("Civilization's gone to hell") with the specific content of the poem was in itself a sort of assessment of "high" modernism, perhaps referring to Pound's engagement with Italian fascism. Of course, reflecting Hughes's abiding interest in drama, many of the effects that seem modernist on the page can also be seen as instructions for oral performance in which the different voices would not seem so disruptive as on the printed page. Even so, the poems Hughes wrote and read for primarily African-American audiences in the early and middle 1930s, particularly southern black audiences, were more formally conservative than the "revolutionary" poetry. As seen above, the poetry Hughes wrote for southern African-American audiences in the early 1930s shared thematic concerns, and even broad formal strategies, with his "revolutionary" poetry. But where simultaneous voices existed, they were more explicitly labeled in such a way as to reduce the experience of fragmentation or dislocation than was the case with his explicitly "Left" work.

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