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Langston Hughes: Poetry and Resistance in the Capitalist Desert (1)

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  You're the very best friend

  I ever had.

  We gonna pal around together from now on.

- Listen, Revolution,

  We're buddies, see—

  Together,

  We can take everything:

  Factories, arsenals, houses, ships

  Railroads, forests, fields, orchards,

  Bus lines, telegraphs, radios

  (Jesus! Raise hell with radios!)

  Steel mills, coal mines, oil wells, gas,

  All the tools of production,

  (Great day in the morning!)

  Everything—

  And turn 'em over to the people who work.

Rule and run ‘em for us people who work. (CP 162-3)

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Kings, generals, robbers, and killers—

Even to the Tsar and the Cossacks,

Even to Rockefeller’s Church,

Even to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.

Goodbye,

Christ Jesus Lord God Jehovah,

Beat it on away from here now.

Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—

A real guy named

Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—

I said, ME! (CP 166)

When Kennedy succeeded Eisenhower in January, 1961, Langston Hughes, poet, novelist, and essayist—perhaps the most important African American writer of the 20th Century—was being widely recognized and hailed. Bu the time of Lyndon Johnson, Hughes had the entered the American Pantheon; he was invited to the White House and entertained foreign dignitaries in Harlem. In 1966, Johnson sent Hughes as a cultural ambassador to Africa, Europe, and Latin America, where he had friends and colleagues with whom he had worked for years—Nicolas Guillen, Aimé Césaire, and Leopold Senghor. Because Hughes was an historic leader of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s, his work had germinated the flourishing black literary culture.

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While most people, today, remember Hughes as a black icon and spokesman of the 1920s, he actually lived on for forty years in an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and terror. From the 20s until the 60s, he faced harsh criticism and oppression because of his political beliefs and actions; he was attacked for championing black women, black workers, and black culture; and he was pursued for political, religious, and sexual “deviance.” The American forces of terror made Langston Hughes withdraw his most radical and challenging poems. Terror and rejection forced him to create fictional characters and codes with which to express his socialism and his anger; intimidation made him secretive and subtle, changing his art and his expression, permanently. Between the 20s and the 60s, Langston Hughes was denounced, threatened, and hounded, not only by racism, but by that special species of terror known as “red-baiting.”

In the early poem “Negro,” Hughes sounds the rebellious note signaling that he is not going to be just another specimen of entertainment for the white world. He displays the bleak and brutal history of black people from Africa to Georgia, from the Congo to the Mississippi:

. . . . .

I’ve been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.

I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I’ve been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia

I carried my sorrow songs.

I made ragtime.

I’ve been a victim:

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.

They lynch me still in Mississippi. (CP 24)

In this 20s poem, Hughes sounds his first notes of rebellion. He uses the word black, as well as Negro, joining the new radical minority tradition, begun by W.E.B. DuBois. But even DuBois worried about Hughes’ direct and earthy representation of black workers and daily life in Harlem.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L292xH240/langston_hughes_and_children_s_garden_harlem_1955-aecc6.jpg

When Hughes follows *The Weary Blues* (1926) with his second book of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, in 1927, even his title creates controversy. But the poems in this volume go further—presenting women, workers, dancers, and lovers in direct and realistic Harlem scenes. In “Mazie
Dies Alone in the City Hospital,” Hughes writes, “I’d rather die in the way lived, â€” / Drunk and rowdy and gay!” (CP 126). Mazie dies alone, isolated and wishing for her wild ways, still. Hughes depicts life as it was lived in Harlem with its rent parties, jazz cabarets and hard work. He does not spare his readers the gritty details of Harlem—and he calls into question the equity of American capitalism.

But the reviewers, mostly white, reject his depictions of black life, black women, and black workers when they are exposed to the light of day. *The Pittsburgh Courier* called the book “piffling trash” that left the reviewer “positively sick.” The *Chicago Whip* called Hughes a “literary gutter rat, who perhaps alone will revel in the lecherous,

lust-reeking characters." Even the black reviewer in the Amsterdam News, in an article entitled, "Sewer Dweller," said, "The book is trash and reeks of the gutter and sewer" (Rampersad I, 140). From black and white, uptown and down, New York and beyond, the reviewers mounted the first salvo of a campaign to intimidate the young upstart, to silence him and put an end to his pictures of the Harlem. The terror campaign had begun: Don't show the truth, don't defend women, workers, prostitutes, and exploited people. Get a new theme—don't be a gutter-rat or we will exterminate you.

In "One More "S" in the U.S.A.," Hughes responds:

Put One More s in the U.S.A.
To make it Soviet.

One more s in the U.S.A.

Oh, we'll live to see it yet. (CP 176)

In 1932, Hughes and other black artists traveled to the Soviet Union to make a film called "Black and White," about race relations in the U.S. However, the group quickly fell apart, and Hughes traveled to the eastern republics of the USSR. There he wrote "Good Morning, Revolution," a response to Carl Sandburg's "Good Morning, America" (Rampersad I, 163). In this daring poem, Hughes makes common cause with his new comrade, "Revolution":

Good-morning, Revolution:
You're the very best friend

I ever had.

We gonna pal around together from now on.

Listen, Revolution,
We're buddies, see—

Together,

We can take everything:

Factories, arsenals, houses, ships

Railroads, forests, fields, orchards,

Bus lines, telegraphs, radios

(Jesus! Raise hell with radios!)

Steel mills, coal mines, oil wells, gas,

All the tools of production,

(Great day in the morning!)

Everything—

And turn ‘em over to the people who work.

Rule and run ‘em for us people who work. (CP 162-3)

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For the Hughes of the 30s, the answer was clear: the Soviet Union was showing the way to end racism and exploitation. He never was able to escape from this simple statement of revolutionary belief, which dogged him for decades afterwards.

Still traveling across the Soviet Union in ’32, Hughes writes “Good-bye, Christ,” in which he talks directly to Christ, saying that His time had passed; it’s time for Christ to step aside and make room for a new hero:

Kings, generals, robbers, and killers—
Even to the Tsar and the Cossacks,

Even to Rockefeller’s Church,

Even to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.

Goodbye,

Christ Jesus Lord God Jehovah,

Beat it on away from here now.

Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—

A real guy named

Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—I said, ME! (CP 166)

In these poems, he celebrates the Soviet revolution and ridicules Christ and religion because he feels free to speak his mind from abroad, from the heart of the Marxist revolution. Glorifying the Russian Revolution and rejecting Christ's power, Hughes boldly speaks his mind. When the poem reached the USA, a long series of recriminations and attacks began to take their toll on him, profoundly affecting his public reception into the future. "Good-bye, Christ" became the rallying point for the KKK and critics, alike, inspiring continual attacks and downright terror by Christian fundamentalists, as well as anti-communists.

When he tried to get a collection of these revolutionary poems accepted at Knopf, he was stymied by his friend and literary patron, Carl van Vechten who told Hughes that "the Revolutionary poems seem very weak to me: I mean very weak on the lyric side. I think in ten years, whatever the social outcome; you'll be ashamed of these" (Rampersad I, 266). His new poems were rejected, not because they were less accomplished than his earlier work, but because they insisted on representing the "low-life" of Harlem and announcing his sympathies with Russia. Hughes feels the chill of an advancing glacier of terror.

Hughes ended his time overseas in Japan, where he played cat and mouse with the authorities, who did not trust an American poet returning from Russia. Japanese police questioned him for several days about his socialist activities in Vladivostok, and expelled him as a "persona non grata," telling Hughes he "should leave without communicating with any Japanese" (Rampersad I, 274). The journalists, who interviewed him, and even a high school acquaintance, were all later arrested or expelled for talking with him. In Hawaii, he was met by an FBI agent and he announced that Japan was a fascist country. Deported from one country and harassed by his own, Hughes realizes that he is a marked man, that his sympathies, his ideas, and his work set him apart from the prevailing beliefs—even in Depression America.

Years later, Hughes' trip to Russia and his Marxist poems would come back to haunt him. When Texas Southern University first offered, and then denied him a poet-in residence job, the denial could be traced to white supremacists and anti-Communists who protested against his hiring. These threats and intimidations foreshadowed the hundreds of firings of left-wing professors and writers in the 50s. Hughes called this dual anti-red and anti-black oppression "literary sharecropping" (Scott 157).

Back in the U.S.A., in 1934, Hughes brings out *The Ways of White Folks*, which presents stories of dutiful blacks confronting their white bosses. The book does not earn him many friends among the white bourgeoisie. Because he is seen socializing with white women in Carmel, California, where he stays at a friend's cottage, rumors circulate around town that he is about to be physically attacked. The white upper class feels he constitutes a "bad influence" on black people in the town (Rampersad I, 293). The Carmel Sun editor accuses him of subversive activities, corrupting white women, and preaching revolution, writing: "Russia would be a good place for Hughes" (Rampersad I, 294). It did not matter that these attacks were false; a poet who spoke radical ideas and hob-nobbed with the white elite had to be taught a lesson. These terrorist threats on his life force Hughes to flee Carmel.

Hughes ridicules the right wing thugs, calling them political opportunists, in his essay, "The Vigilantes Knock at My Door." In the face of domestic terror, he refuses to pull in his horns. He invokes the revolution in his work, fighting censorship, disapproval, elitist prejudices, and racial discrimination, boldly and forthrightly. In the 30s, Hughes fights terror with rage, giving as good as he gets. Hughes becomes the poetic and polemical writer he was meant to be—growing from the lyrical bard of "The Negro Sings of Rivers" and "The Weary Blues" to a powerful political advocate for racial equality and socialism.

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By 1939, out of funds and opportunities, he is hired to write “Way Down South,” a Hollywood movie about the 1840s. On the movie set, the producers are condescending toward him because of his race, telling him he is lucky to have a job, and they force him to eat outside the studio, rather than with others in the commissary.

When “Way Down South” comes out, one leftist reviewer derides the movie as “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with Bobby Breen as Little Eva,” calling Hughes an Uncle Tom (Rampersad I, 372). Stung by critiques from the left and from black writers, Hughes feels betrayed by his own supporters. Their attacks make him more and more wary of expressing his opinions openly.

Later, in 1940, at a reading in Pasadena, California, he is picketed by evangelicals whom he had mentioned in “Good-Bye, Christ.” Hughes, surprised and stung by their demonstration, withdraws the poem, calling it one of his “youthful aberrations” (Rampersad I, 393). But then the communist press attacks him for withdrawing the radical poem. Attacks from left and right render him more and more circumspect. Adrift and depressed, he looks for a new style to respond to the suppression of his ideas. He needs to publish and he needs to make money, but his former publishers have abandoned him.

Post-scriptum :

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