

The Pluralistic Political Perspective of Langston Hughes's Poetry in the 1930's

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1. Introduction

Langston Hughes was a leading African-American poet, novelist, and critic in the early and middle 20th century. He started his literary career in the 1920's and continued to be an active writer until after World War II. Today his works are assessed and analysed mainly with regard to racial problems and questions about minorities in the United States. The above mentioned is a just evaluation of a man who concerned himself with these issues all through his life. However, the diversity of his poetry, especially in the 1930's, tends to be missed when it is framed in the official ideology of the U.S., as is often the case with the history of "American Literature." The purpose of my presentation is to retrieve a part of this diversity by focusing especially on his political poems concerning Communism in the 1930's and considering their relation to other aspects of his poetry.

2. On the Evaluation of Langston Hughes

We will begin with a brief summary of Hughes's position in the history of poetry in the U.S. Since the early 19th century up until the middle of the 1910's, New England had been the center of "American poetry." Then, *Poetry*, a magazine first published in 1914, started to break fresh ground on poetry in the U.S., introducing various important poets. Among them, Ezra Pound and T.S.Eliot would form a main stream of Modernism Poetry. Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay and others would be collectively called poets of the "Chicago Renaissance." This change was sometimes called the "New Poetry Movement." It is

supposed to be related to various social and economical factors such as the transition of the industrial structure in the U.S. and the settlement of the "New Immigrants," who came mainly from regions other than Western Europe after the late 19th century.

Following the "New Poetry Movement" and other cultural changes from the 1910's, African-Americans started to acquire their own voice for self-expression in the movement often called the "Harlem Renaissance" after the central place of it, or more generally the "Negro Renaissance." Langston Hughes is referred most frequently as a poet who, in this movement, created new forms to express the experiences and the reality of African-Americans; he introduced factors of popular music such as the blues, jazz and spirituals into literary poetry. Take "The Weary Blues," one of his most famous poems, for example:

"The Weary Blues" ('26)
Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway....
He did a lazy sway....
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul.
O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan —

"Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf."

... (50)

Besides this poem and others written in the pure blues form, his earliest works include poems affirming the beauty of African-American People. The image constructed around these poems, the "Poet Laureate of Harlem," still defines the public view on Langston Hughes today.

As well as the tendency we just saw, Hughes's poems which foreground his political attitude as a minority in the U.S. are also highly evaluated. A good example would be "Let America be America Again" :

"Let America be America Again" ('36)
Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain.
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed —
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

...

O, let America be America again —
The land that never has been yet —
And yet must be — the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's,
ME —
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

... (189-191)

The demand for the improvement of status for African-Americans inside American Democracy repeatedly appears throughout his works. It is surprising that he kept on expressing concerns for his minority and at

the same time earned his living as a writer.

Hughes continued to write poetry and other writings after the great economic crisis in 1929 through the 1930's, and well into after World War II. Most of his contemporary African-American writers ceased to be active literary figures after the end of the "Negro Renaissance." Hughes remained consistent in his fundamental concerns. *Montage of a Dream Deferred* written in '51, which incorporates in the contemporary trend of "bop jazz" and describes fragments of life in Harlem, shows that he kept up with popular music and continued to accurately describe the African-American life.

To sum up, on the basis of the images of the "Poet Laureate of Harlem" and the advocate of expanding the American Democracy to minorities, Langston Hughes is evaluated as a figure who played an important role as a cultural and sometimes political spokesman of African-Americans in the 20th Century.

3. Hughes as a Revolutionary Poet

However, does this assessment, mainly based on his images in the 1920's and constructed inside the ideology of American Democracy, cover all the possibilities of Langston Hughes? In reading his poetry of the 1930's, we cannot fail to notice a tendency which is absent in his poetry in the '20's, that is, his reference and commitment to Communism. His concerns for laborers and their problems already exist in his earliest poetry; nevertheless, we cannot find any Communistic idioms. Take the following poem for example of this new tendency:

"One More 'S' in the U.S.A." ('34)
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.
When the land belongs to the farmers
And the factories to the working men —

Now across the water in Russia
They have a big U.S.S.R.

The fatherland of the Soviets —
But that is mighty far
From New York, or Texas, or California, too.
So listen, fellow workers,
This is what we have to do.

...

But we can't join hands together
So long as whites are lynching black,
So black and white in one union fight
And get on the right track.
By Texas, or Georgia, or Alabama led
Come together, fellow workers
Black and white can all be red:

Put one more S in the U.S.A.

...

(176-177)

Let Louis Armstrong play it —
And you copyright it
And make the money.
You're the smart guy, White Man!
You got everything!
But now,
I hear your name ain't really White
Man.
I hear it's something
Fifty years ago —
That rich people don't like to read.
Is that true, White Man?

Is your name in a book
Called the *Communist Manifesto*?
Is your name spelled
C-A-P-I-T-A-L-S-T?
Are you always a White Man?
Huh?

(194-195)

The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes also includes some poems evidently agitating the Communist Revolution such as "Good Morning Revolution" ('32) and "Revolution" ('34). There are also other poems manifestly praising the U.S.S.R. In these poems, Hughes takes a political standpoint different from American Democracy. Hughes wrote from both these political standpoints in the same age, and, as consequence, his poetry shows the contradiction in his political attitude. We shall return to this point later. The point here is that this Communistic standpoint enables Hughes to grasp social relations missed when his poetry is written in the official ideology of the United States — American Democracy. A good example is:

"The White Man" ('36)
Sure I know you!
You're a White Man.
I'm a Negro.
You take all the best jobs
And leave us the garbage cans to empty
and
The halls to clean.
You have a good time in a big house at
Palm Beach
And rent us the back alleys
And the dirty slums.
You enjoy Rome —
And *take* Ethiopia.
White Man! White Man!

This poem shows the fact that the opposition between the white and the colored in their racial problem doesn't necessarily correspond with that between the dominant and the dominated in Colonialism and Capitalism. That means that the racial problem is more complicated than it seems in American Democracy.

Behind this poem is Hughes's actual experience in East Asia in 1933. After his travel in Russia, Hughes came through Siberia to the Korean Peninsula, Japan and then China, where he saw the colonial domination by the European countries and Japan. When stopping in Japan on the way back to America, Hughes was detained by the Japanese police and recommended to leave Japan immediately.¹¹

"Roar China!" , a poem written in '37, has the following lines: "Even the yellow men dropped bombs on Chapei[a Chinese district in Shanghai]/ The yellow men called you the same names/ The white men did." (199) Here, the invasion and colonization of China by the "yellow men" , the Japanese, is described. These poems especially interest the Japanese who had put themselves in the complex situation at that time.

In Hughes's poetry, the Communistic idioms effectively functions to reveal the complex relations in Colonialism and Capitalism all over the world in the pre-war era. However, his Communistic tendency in

his 1930's poetry has been nearly ignored in almost all criticism or general introduction of him. Furthermore, these poems are rarely read because they are often left out from the anthologies of "American Poetry" and his selected works.²¹ This omission results from the trend of red-hunting in the U.S. after World War II and, especially, from "McCarthyism" in the 1950's. Hughes was attacked by the Special Committee on Un-American Activity in 1944, and forced to concede his past mistakes as a radical before McCarthy's subcommittee on subversive activity in 1953. Moreover, the fact that these Communistic poems are absent from his books of poetry tells his self-censorship. His poetry in the 1940's seems to have retreated into the image of the "Poet Laureate of Harlem" in the '20's, or he probably created this image by himself after the 40's to avoid being obliterated as a writer.

When we try to evaluate all of his works today, it is all too obvious that we miss an important part of his works by neglecting the Communistic tendency in his 1930's poetry. Leopold Sedar Senghor, a poet and the president of Senegal, pointing out close links between the "Negro Renaissance" in the U.S. and the "Negritude" movement in Africa and the Calibean countries, stated that it is Langston Hughes who most influenced their movement.²² This shows that Hughes's works pass the boundary of the U.S. His Communism poetry, which reveals social relations in their own terms, is crucial for making the leap beyond the U.S. ideology.

If we concentrate only on his commitment to Communism, however, we fail to recognize the pluralistic nature of his poetry. We must explore the relation between these poems and other aspects of his poetry.

4. The Pluralistic Perspective of the Minority

In "Let America Be America Again," Hughes advocates the genuine expansion of American

Democracy to minorities in reality. This was a moderate political attitude that the African-American writer could take in the major discourses in the U.S. In contrast, poems such as "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." and "Revolution" clearly show the idea of the world-wide Communistic revolution and pass the limit of American Democracy.

Let's examine the media in which these poems were published. "Let America Be America Again" was published in *Esquire* in 1936. *Esquire* had been founded as a quality men's magazine for urbanites in 1933 and its readers were affluent whites. On the other hand, "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." was published in *Daily Worker*, a newspaper of the Communist Party, in 1934 and "The White Man" in *The New Masses*, a magazine affiliated with the Communist Party, in 1936. From this data, we know Hughes changed his political and ideological standpoint according to the nature of the magazine and, therefore, the readers.

How should we consider this apparently frivolous choices of political standpoints. In fact, as a consequence, Hughes was attacked by both the left and the right. Now we need to look at the problem from a different angle.

Hughes's earliest poems were published in the organs of the associations of African-Americans. For example, the first publication of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," his first poem to be published, was in *Crisis*, a bulletin of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People founded by W.E.B. Dubois. "The Weary Blues" was first published in *Opportunity*, a magazine subtitled "A Journal of Negro Life."

From the 1920's to 1930's, Hughes expanded his activity from the narrow circle of the minority to the media where he could get hold of a much wider audience. Taking the social situation at that time into consideration, the fact that he earned his living by writing in various media as a minority has more political implication than his ideological statements. By moving among the different ideological discourses, he

expressed the reality of the minority in the U.S. and the possibility to improve it. By using the published form, he could reach a wide variety of readers.

We can see the model of Hughes's political attitude in his consistently positive evaluation of jazz. The evaluation of this new popular genre of music in the 1920's and 30's in general was ambivalent. Hughes's introduction of jazz and the blues into poetry was attacked by contemporary African-American intellectuals because they supposed these kinds of music represented corrupted aspects of their race. In the U.S.S.R., jazz had already been banned as decadent music of Capitalism by the 1930's. On the other hand, it is well-known that Kurt Weill, the composer of *The Threepenny Opera* with Bertolt Brecht, introduced jazz into operas and, mostly because of this, was attacked by Nazis. For him, jazz was a form of resistance. In this context, it is noticeable that Hughes was consistent in his positive evaluation of jazz. Why did Hughes put so much emphasis on this ambivalent genre of popular music?

The primary reason is, of course, that African-Americans greatly contributed to the birth of this first genre of music that can be called genuinely "American." Added to this, the very fact that jazz is commercial is important because we inevitably belong to the Capitalistic world and our expression is made possible only in it. Hughes wrote in his essay named "Jazz as Communication" : "Somebody is going to rise up and tell me that nothing that comes out of Tin Pan Alley is jazz. I disagree. Commercial, yes. But...What do you think Tony Jackson and Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver and Louis Armstrong playing for? Peanuts? No, money, even in Dixieland." (*The Langston Hughes Reader*, 492)

Jazz is music born in the process of the formation of the mass-media society in the U.S. and all around the world. It is true that it is commercial music. However, we cannot miss the fact that the social situation generating it opened a new place of expression for a minority. Until then, African-

Americans could only give their expression in the white-dominated culture. Before Hughes, African-American poetry in the U.S. had been divided into two parties: those who wrote like the white and those who wrote as the white expect the black to write. To get around this alternative, Hughes took part in the possibility born in the commercialism of the mass-media society, which was symbolized by jazz. This was a strategy by a minority to surface the voices which had no places in the official discourse.

Taking these situations into consideration, the continuity between Hughes's jazz poetry and his Communistic poems is brought into light. The possibility of Marxism, if we reconsider it now, consists in the analysis of actual Capitalism to show us which measures we should take inside it. Historically, Communism is the most important attempt to grope for such measures. Through jazz and Communism, Hughes explores how we should determine our position in Capitalism and the mass-media society.

Here, we considered Langston Hughes's poetry in the 1930's to find out the possibility missed in the official evaluation of him as an African-American poet advocating American Democracy. Hughes says in the essay already mentioned that jazz is for him a "montage of a dream deferred." (*The Langston Hughes Reader*, 494) His poetry includes the pluralistic political perspective made possible only from the standpoint of the minority. We can re-read them collectively as a political montage of his time. Our task is to read in his works the possibilities which cannot be confined in one ideology.

* This is a translation of the presentation given in Japanese at Ritsumeikan University Institute for International Language and Culture Studies on November 2nd, 1998.

* The number in the parenthesis after the quotation of each poem indicates the page on which it appears in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*.

Notes

- 1) For biographical information of Langston Hughes from the 1920's to 1930's, see Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*.
- 2) An exception is Faith Berry, *Good Morning REVOLUTION: Uncollected Social Protest Writings by Langston Hughes, in which Hughes's political writings are collected*.
- 3) This reference to Leopold Sedar Senghor's opinion is taken from a cassette tape, *Voices & Visions: Langston Hughes*.

Bibliography

- Hughes, Langston, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.
- *The Langston Hughes Reader*. New York: George Braziller, Inc, 1958.
- *Good Morning REVOLUTION: Uncollected Social Protest Writings by Langston Hughes*. ed. Faith Berry. West Port: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1973.
- Voices & Visions: Langston Hughes*. New York: Mystic Fire Audio, Inc, 1996. (cassette tape)