

Literary Criticism on Poems by Langston Hughes

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Harlem”

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

by Langston Hughes

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(1921)

Critical Analysis:

Arnold Rampersad

The sun was setting as the train reached St. Louis and began the long passage from Illinois across the Mississippi and into Missouri, where Hughes had been born. The beauty of the hour and the setting--the great muddy river glinting in the sun, the banked and tinted summer clouds, the rush of the train toward the dark, all touched an adolescent sensibility tender after the gloomy day. The sense of beauty and death, of hope and despair, fused in his

imagination. A phrase came to him, then a sentence. Drawing an envelope from his pocket, he began to scribble. In a few minutes Langston had finished a poem.

...

With its allusions to deep dusky rivers, the setting sun, sleep, and the soul, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is suffused with the image of death and, simultaneously, the idea of deathlessness. As in Whitman's philosophy, only the knowledge of death can bring the primal spark of poetry and life. Here Langston Hughes became "the outsetting bard," in Whitman's phrase, the poet who sings of life because at last he has known death. Balanced between the knowledge of love and of death, the poetic will gathers force. From the depths of grief the poet sweeps back to life by clinging to his greatest faith, which is in his people and his sense of kinship with them. His frail, intimidated self, as well as the image of his father, are liquidated. A man-child is born, soft-spoken, almost casual, yet noble and proud, and black as Africa. The muddy river is his race, the primal source out of which he is born anew; on that "muddy bosom" of the race as black mother, or grandmother, he rests secure forever. The angle of the sun on the muddy water is like the angle of a poet's vision, which turns mud into gold. The diction of the poem is simple and unaffected either by dialect or rhetorical excess; its eloquence is like that of the best of the black spirituals.

From Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 1. Oxford University Press, 1988. Copyright © by Arnold Rampersad.

Onwuchekwa Jemie

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is perhaps the most profound of these poems of heritage and strength. Composed when Hughes was a mere 17 years old, and dedicated to W. E. B. DuBois, it is a sonorous evocation of transcendent essences so ancient as to appear timeless, predating human existence, longer than human memory. The rivers are part of God's body, and participate in his immortality. They are the earthly analogues of eternity: deep, continuous, mysterious. They are named in the order of their association with black history. The black man has drunk of their life-giving essences, and thereby borrowed their immortality. He and the rivers have become one. The magical transformation of the Mississippi from mud to gold by the sun's radiance is mirrored in the transformation of slaves into free men by Lincoln's Proclamation (and, in Hughes's poems, the transformation of shabby cabarets into gorgeous palaces, dancing girls into queens and priestesses by the spell of black music). As the rivers deepen with time, so does the black man's soul; as their waters ceaselessly flow, so will the black soul endure. The black man has seen the rise and fall of civilizations from the earliest times, seen the beauty and death-changes of the world over the thousands of years, and will survive even this America. The poem's meaning is related to Zora Neale Hurston's judgment of the mythic High John de Conquer, whom she held as a symbol of the triumphant spirit of black America: that John was of the "Be" class. "Be here

when the ruthless man comes, and be here when he is gone." In a time and place where black life is held cheap and the days of black men appear to be numbered, the poem is a majestic reminder of the strength and fullness of history, of the source of that life which transcends even ceaseless labor and burning crosses.

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Jean Wagner

Hughes's first poem, published in *The Crisis* in June, 1921, attracted the attention it did precisely because its author revealed the acute sensitivity to the racial past that Garvey, with his racial romanticism, was then trying to instill in the minds of all. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" heralded the existence of a mystic union of Negroes in every country and every age. It pushed their history back to the creation of the world, and credited them with possessing a wisdom no less profound than that of the greatest rivers of civilization that humanity had ever known, from the Euphrates to the Nile and from the Congo to the Mississippi. . . .

Yet unlike Countee Cullen, and perhaps because he was the only poet of the Negro Renaissance who had a direct, rather disappointing contact with Africa, Hughes rarely indulges in a gratuitous idealization of the land of his ancestors. If, in spite of everything, the exaltation of African atavism has a significant place in his poetry up to 1931, the reason is merely that he had not yet discovered a less romantic manner that would express his discomfort at not being treated in his own country as a citizen on a par with any other. If he celebrates Africa as his mother, it is not only because all the black peoples originated there but also because America, which should be his real mother, had always behaved toward him in stepmotherly fashion.

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George Hutchinson

Hughes had come to Whitman by way of such Midwestern rebels as Carl Sandburg prior to the twenties. His was the democratic "transnational," socialist, "comradely" Whitman pushed by Horace Traubel and the *Masses* circle (as opposed to the Whitman of "cosmic consciousness" Toomer responded to). Nonetheless, he early sensed the affinity between the inclusive "I" of Whitman and the "I" of the spirituals, whose fusion shaped one of his first

published poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

Readers rarely notice that if the soul of the Negro in this poem goes back to the Euphrates, it goes back to a pre-"racial" dawn and a geography far from Africa that is identified with neither blackness nor whiteness--a geography at the time of Hughes's writing considered the cradle of all the world's civilizations and possibly the location of the Garden of Eden. Thus, even in this poem about the depth of the Negro's soul Hughes avoids racial essentialism while nonetheless stressing the existential, racialized conditions of black and modern identity.

From *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. Copyright © 1995 by the President and Board of Fellows of Harvard College.

Joyce A. Joyce

Hughes captures the African American's historical journey to America in what is perhaps his signature poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Dedicated to W E. B. Du Bois and using water or the river as a metaphor for the source of life, the poem traces the movement of black life from the Euphrates and Nile rivers in Africa to the Mississippi. Hughes subtly couches his admonishment of slavery and racism in the refrain "My soul has grown deep like the rivers." The first time the line appears in the poem it follows the poet's assertion that he has known rivers "ancient as the world and older than the flow of / human blood in human veins." The poet here identifies himself and his blackness with the first human beings. The second and only other time the line appears in the poem occurs after the poet has made reference to Mississippi, New Orleans, and Abe Lincoln. He places the lines "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" at the end of the poem, this time suggesting that he is no longer the same man who "bathed in the Euphrates" and "built [his] hut near the Congo." He is now a black man who has experienced the pain of slavery and racism, and his soul now bears the imprint of these experiences.

From "*Bantu, Nkodi, Ndungu, and Nganga: Language, Politics, Music, and Religion in African American Poetry.*" In *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*. Ed. Joanne V. Gabbins. Copyright © 1999 by the Rectors and Visitors of the University of Virginia.

Adrian Oktenberg

The identification of Hughes as a folk poet obscures the fact that he is a brilliant poet of ideas, and radical ideas at that. The concepts of negritude and soul, the politics of Black Power, the psychology of black rage, are so familiar to children of the sixties that it comes almost as a shock to realize that Hughes was presenting articulate and concrete images of them in his poetry in the twenties and thirties. While these ideas did not originate with him, he embodied them in verse of such fluency and power that it seems undated half a century

later. Moreover, he consistently combined them with the basic premises of revolutionary socialism, and this sympathy is evident--hard to miss--in his work not only of the thirties but to the end of his life.

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers," then, is only the beginning of a long chain of poems by Hughes which confront, distill, extend, and transform the historical experience of black people into an art both limpid and programmatic. As in all of Hughes' hallmark poems, its distillation is as extreme as any in Issa's haiku. The "I" of the poem is not that of "a" Negro but "the" Negro, suggesting the whole of the people and their history. Most of the consonants--*d's, n's, l's, s's*—are soft, and of the vowels, long *o's* reoccur, contributing by sound the effect of an ancient voice. The tone of the repeated declarative sentences is muted, lulling. Every element of the poem combines to suggest that when the Negro speaks of rivers it is with the accumulated wisdom of a sage. The function of a sage is to impart the sometimes secret but long accumulated history of a people to its younger members so that they might make the lessons of the past active in the future. This impartation occurs in the central stanza of the poem:

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

Moving by suggestion, by naming particular rivers and particular activities performed nearby, the poem implicates the whole history of African and American slavery without ever articulating the word. "I bathed in the Euphrates" and "I built my hut near the Congo" are the normal activities of natural man performed in his natural habitat. That may be an unnecessarily anthropological way of putting it, but the lines are the equivalent of the speaker having said, "I made my life undisturbed in the place where I lived." The shift--and the lesson--occurs in the next two lines. Raising the pyramids above the Nile was the act of slaves, and if ever "Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans," it would have been in the context of American slavery and the Civil War. Implicit in the history of a people who had first been free and then enslaved is the vision of freedom regained, and therein lies the program. The final line of the poem, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers," suggests wisdom in the word "deep." The wisdom imparted by the poem, beyond the memory of the suffering of slavery, includes a more deeply embedded memory of freedom. This is perhaps the more powerful memory, or the more sustaining one, and even if deferred, will reemerge in one form or another.

From "From the Bottom Up: Three Radicals of the Thirties." In *A Gift of Tongues: Critical Challenges in Contemporary American Poetry*. Ed. Marie Harris and Kathleen Aguero. Copyright © 1987 by The University of Georgia Press.

R. Baxter Miller

The double identification with penetrative time and receptive timelessness appears perhaps most notably in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (*Crisis*, June 1921), a poem dedicated to the late W. E. B. Du Bois. "Rivers" presents the narrator's skill in retracing known civilization back to the source in East Africa. Within thirteen lines and five stanzas, through the suggestion of wisdom by anagoge, we re-project ourselves into aboriginal consciousness. Then the speaker affirms the spirit distilled from human history, ranging from 3000 B.C. through the mid-nineteenth century to the author himself at the brink of the Harlem Renaissance. The powerful repetend "I've known rivers. / Ancient, dusky rivers" closes the human narrative in nearly a circle, for the verse has turned itself subtly from an external focus to a unified and internal one: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers." Except for the physical and spiritual dimensions, the subjective "I" and the "river" read the same.

When the Euphrates flows from eastern Turkey southeast and southwest into the Tigris, it recalls the rise as well as the fall of the Roman Empire. For over two thousand years the water helped delimit that domain. Less so did the Congo, which south of the Sahara demarcates the natural boundaries between white and Black Africa. The latter empties into the Atlantic ocean; the Nile flows northward from Uganda into the Mediterranean; in the United States the Mississippi River flows southeast from north central Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. Whether north or south, east or west, "River" signifies the fertility as well as the dissemination of life in concentric half-circles. The liquid, as the externalized form of the contemplative imagination, has both depth and flow. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" reclaims the origins in Africa of both physical and spiritual humanity.

From *The Art and Language of Langston Hughes*. Copyright © 1989 by The University Press of Kentucky.

Rachel Blau Duplessis

The Congo, called by Lindsay the "Mistrel River," and astir with cannibals and witch-doctors, is reinterpreted as a pastoral, nourishing, maternal setting in Hughes: "I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep." "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was composed in 1920 on the train to Mexico when Hughes was still in his teens (eighteen to be exact), and published a year later in *Crisis*. This poem was written as an internal dialogue with his father whose "strange dislike of his own people" baffled and disturbed Hughes, and, of course, implicated his son as object of that dislike (Hughes 1940, 54-56; Rampersand 1986, 37-40). In this poem, Hughes joins affirmative blackness to a universal human quest, by putting into a global context the racial stresses and demands of the United States.

The poem (as is well known) lists four key rivers, all "ancient as the world" (Hughes 1926, 51; dedicated in *Weary Blues* to W. E. B. Du Bois). Three of the four flow through regions of

colored peoples; they are "rivers in our past"—the word "our" is marked (Hughes 1940, 55). The fourth is a river still reverberating with the past hundred years of American history; it is the river on which, Hughes says, Lincoln "had seen slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life (ibid.). With an "I" strongly indebted to Whitman as mediated by Sandburg, and with a diction drawn from spirituals, Hughes describes the the Mississippi down which he was traveling as he wrote the poem, as having a strong racialized meaning both by its often brown appearance ("I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset"), by the possibility of a cross-race mixing or single-race affirmation of different colors ("muddy" turns more "golden" -- a word appearing in "The Congo" as well), and by its historical meaning under slavery.

Thus Hughes journey doubles Lincoln's, and the concern with slavery, in the context of Hughes relationship with his father discloses a crisis of autonomy on a personal level, and a political rejection of a black man identifying with whites, for a white man (Lincoln) identifying with blacks. In contrast to the voyeuristic fantasies of "The Congo," this poem is a statement about vocation, an emancipation into blackness: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (Hughes 1926, 51).

From *Gender, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934*. Ó 2001 Cambridge University Press.

Critical readings of Langston Hughes' Poem, "Harlem,"

Harlem

BY LANGSTON HUGHES

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

(1951)

Critical Analysis

Tom Hansen

In a superficial reading of Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" (later titled "Dream Deferred") one sees only its obvious simplicity. It asks, and provides a series of disturbing answers to, the question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" (line 1). A closer reading reveals the essential disunity of the poem. It is a ground of unresolved conflict. Various elements of its outer body, its form, contend with each other as well as with various elements of its inner body, its structure: that "sequence of IMAGES and ideas which unite to convey the meaning of the poem" (Thrall 473).

Five of the six answers to the opening question are interrogative rather than declarative sentences. However, due to its tentative "Maybe," the sole declarative sentence is far less potent--less truly declarative, one might say--than the final line, that final, forceful, emphatically italicized interrogative, which, in spite of the fact that it is merely one more in a series of questions, is the conclusive, though not the sole and exclusive, answer to the question posed in line 1. The result of all this is a poem so out of joint that its five questions strongly assert and its single assertion tentatively suggests.

In contrast, the poem's typography seems more logical-up to a point. The first and last lines, original question and final answer, begin at the left margin. The five intervening answers are indented, forming a longer stanza of four questions and a much shorter stanza of one declarative sentence. The former are so dramatic that the latter hardly seems to merit the emphasis it receives by being set off as a stanza by itself.

Had Hughes allowed stanza divisions to complement rhyme scheme by making the last three lines into a single concluding stanza and dividing the sevenline stanza between lines 5 and 6, the resulting three stanzas would more clearly reflect the structure, the inner body, of the poem, which consists of three paired oppositions: "dry up" and "fester," "stink" and "sugar over," and "sag" and "explode." But Hughes did not do this. Rhyme is integrated with structure in a way that typography is not. If the typography had been, structure would be that much more evident, and the poem would appear to be more logically divided into stanzas.

The imagery of its oppositions progresses from the visual ("dry up" and "fester"), to the olfactory ("stink") and, in part, gustatory ("syrupy sweet"), to the kinesthetic ("sag") and organic ("explode"). This outward-to-inward progression of imagery subtly draws the reader into the poem--or the poem into the reader, who begins by seeing "out there" the drying up and the festering and who ends by feeling "in here" the slump and the explosion.

Questions that are answers; a penultimate answer so tentative that it more resembles a question; stanza divisions which partially obscure our perception of the poem as a trio of paired oppositions progressing from outer to inner; a rhyme scheme which--at odds with the typography--reinforces the division into paired oppositions, all result in a poem in conflict with itself, pulled in different directions by some of its most basic constituent elements. Yet this surely calculated failure is the measure of the poem's success. Its dis-integration mirrors the continuing failure of American society to achieve harmonious integration of blacks and whites. Few poems so well illustrate Charles Olson's sometimes puzzling dictum, "Form is never more than an extension of content" (Allen 387).