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By ARTHUR P. DAVIS

The Harlem of Langston Hughes’ Poetry

IN A very real sense, Langston Hughes is the poet-laureate of Harlem. From his first publication down to his latest, Mr. Hughes has been concerned with the black metropolis. Returning to the theme again and again, he has written about Harlem oftener and more fully than any other poet. As Hughes has written about himself:

I live in the heart of Harlem. I have also lived in the heart of Paris, Madrid, Shanghai, and Mexico City. The people of Harlem seem not very different from others, except in language. I love the color of their language: and, being a Harlemite myself, their problems and interests are my problems and interests.

Knowing how deeply Langston Hughes loves Harlem and how intimately he understands the citizens of that community, I have long felt that a study of the Harlem theme in Hughes’ poetry would serve a twofold purpose: it would give us insight into the growth and maturing of Mr. Hughes as a social poet; it would also serve as an index to the changing attitude of the Negro during the last quarter of a century.

When Mr. Hughes’ first publication, The Weary Blues (1926), appeared, the New Negro Movement was in full swing; and Harlem, as the intellectual center of the movement, had become the Mecca of all aspiring young Negro writers and artists. This so-called Renaissance not only encouraged and inspired the black creative artist, but it served also to focus as never before the attention of America upon the Negro artist and scholar. As a result of this new interest, Harlem became a gathering place for downtown intellectuals and Bohemians — many of them honestly seeking a knowledge of Negro art and culture, others merely looking for exotic thrills in the black community. Naturally, the latter group was much the larger of the two; and Harlem, capitalizing on this new demand for “primitive” thrills, opened a series of spectacular cabarets. For a period of about ten years, the most obvious and the most sensational aspect of the New Negro Movement for downtown New York was the night life of Harlem. The 1925 Renaissance, of course, was not just a cabaret boom, and it would be decidedly unfair to give that impression. But the Harlem cabaret life of the period was definitely an important by-product of the new interest in the Negro created by the movement, and this life strongly influenced the early poetry of Langston Hughes.

Coming to Harlem, as he did, a twenty-two-year-old adventurer who
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had knocked around the world as sailor and beachcomber, it was only natural that Hughes should be attracted to the most exotic part of that city — its night life. The Harlem of *The Weary Blues* became therefore for him "Jazzonia," a new world of escape and release, an exciting never-never land in which "sleek black boys" blew their hearts out on silver trumpets in a "whirling cabaret." It was a place where the bold eyes of white girls called to black men, and "dark brown girls" were found "in blond men's arms." It was a city where "shameless gals" strutted and wiggled, and the "night dark girl of the swaying hips" danced beneath a papier-maché jungle moon. The most important inhabitants of this magic city are a "Nude Young Dancer," "Midnight Nan at Leroy's," a "Young Singer" of *chansons vulgaires*, and a "Black Dancer in the Little Savoy."

This cabaret Harlem, this Jazzonia is a joyous city, but the joyousness is not unmixed; it has a certain strident and hectic quality, and there are overtones of weariness and despair. "The long-headed jazzers" and whirling dancing girls are desperately trying to find some new delight, and some new escape. They seem obsessed with the idea of seizing the present moment as though afraid of the future: "Tomorrow... is darkness / Joy today!" "The rhythm of life / Is a jazz rhythm" for them, but it brings only "The broken heart of love / The weary, weary heart of pain." It is this weariness and this intensity that one hears above the laughter and even above the blare of the jazz bands.

There is no daytime in Jazzonia, no getting up and going to work. It is wholly a sundown city, illuminated by soft lights, spotlights, jewel-eyed sparklers, and synthetic stars in the scenery. Daylight is the one great enemy here, and when "the new dawn / Wan and pale / Descends like a white mist," it brings only an "aching emptiness," and out of this emptiness there often comes in the clear cool light of morning the disturbing thought that the jazz band may not be an escape, it may not be gay after all:

Does a jazz-band ever sob?
They say a jazz-band's gay...
One said she heard the jazz-band sob
When the little dawn was gray.

In this respect, the figure of the black piano player in the title poem is highly symbolic. Trying beneath "the pale dull pallor of an old gas light" to rid his soul of the blues that bedeviled it, he played all night, but when the dawn approached:

The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

It is hard to fool oneself in the honest light of dawn, but sleep, like dancing and singing and wild hilarity, is another means of escape. Unfortunately, it too is only a temporary evasion. One has to wake up sometime and face the harsh reality of daylight and everyday living.
And in the final pages of *The Weary Blues*, the poet begins to sense this fact; he realizes that a "jazz-tuned" way of life is not the answer to the Negro's search for escape. The last poem on the Harlem theme in this work has the suggestive title "Disillusionment" and the even more suggestive lines:

I would be simple again,
Simple and clean . . .
Nor ever know,
Dark Harlem,
The wild laughter
Of your mirth . . .
Be kind to me,
Oh, great dark city.
Let me forget.
I will not come
To you again.

Evidently Hughes did want to forget, at least temporarily, the dark city, for there is no mention of Harlem in his next work, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, published the following year. Although several of the other themes treated in the first volume are continued in this the second, it is the only major production in which the name Harlem does not appear.

But returning to *The Weary Blues* — it is the eternal emptiness of the Harlem depicted in this work which depresses. In this volume, the poet has been influenced too strongly by certain superficial elements of the New Negro Movement. Like too many of his contemporaries, he followed the current vogue, and looking at Harlem through the "arty" spectacles of New Negro exoticism, he failed to see the everyday life about him. As charming and as fascinating as many of these poems undoubtedly are, they give a picture which is essentially false because it is one-dimensional and incomplete. In the works to follow, we shall see Mr. Hughes filling out that picture, giving it three-dimensional life and being.

The picture of Harlem presented in *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942) has very little in common with that found in *The Weary Blues*. By 1942 the black metropolis was a disillusioned city. The Depression of 1929, having struck the ghetto harder than any other section of New York, showed Harlem just how basically "marginal" and precarious its economic foundations were. Embittered by this knowledge, the black community had struck back blindly at things in general in the 1935 riot. The riot brought an end to the New Negro era; the Cotton Club, the most lavish of the uptown cabarets, closed its doors and moved to Broadway; and the black city settled down to the drab existence of WPA and relief living.

In the two groups of poems labeled "Death in Harlem" and "Lenox Avenue," Hughes has given us a few glimpses of this new Harlem. There

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1 *The Dream Keeper* (1932) is not considered a major publication and will not be examined here. It is a collection of Mr. Hughes' poems edited by Miss Effie L. Powers and designed for young readers.
are no bright colors in the scene, only the sombre and realistic shades appropriate to the depiction of a community that has somehow lost its grip on things. The inhabitants of this new Harlem impress one as a beaten people. A man loses his job because, "awake all night with loving," he cannot get to work on time. When he is discharged, his only comment is "So I went on back to bed . . ." and to the "sweetest dreams" ("Fired"). In another poem, a man and his wife wrangle over the family's last dime which he had thrown away gambling ("Early Evening Quarrel"). Harlem love has lost its former joyous abandon, and the playboy of the cabaret era has become a calculating pimp who wants to "share your bed / And your money too" ("50-50"). In fact all of the lovers in this section — men and women alike — are an aggrieved lot, whining perpetually about being "done wrong." Even the night spots have lost their jungle magic, and like Dixie's joint have become earthy and sordid places: "Dixie makes his money on two-bit gin," he also "rents rooms at a buck a break." White folks still come to Dixie's seeking a thrill, but they find it unexpectedly in the cold-blooded shooting of Bessie by Arabella Johnson, in a fight over Texas Kid. As Arabella goes to jail and Bessie is taken to the morgue, Texas Kid, the cause of this tragedy, callously "picked up another woman and / Went to bed" ("Death in Harlem"). All of the fun, all of the illusion have gone from this new and brutal night life world; and as a fitting symbol of the change which has come about, we find a little cabaret girl dying forlornly as a ward of the city ("Cabaret Girl Dies on Welfare Island").

There is seemingly only one bright spot in this new Harlem — the spectrum-colored beauty of the girls on Sugar Hill ("Harlem Sweeties"); but this is only a momentary lightening of the mood. The prevailing tone is one of depression and futility:

Down on the Harlem River
Two A.M.
Midnight
By yourself!
L cwd, I wish I could die —
But who would miss me if I left?

We see here the spectacle of a city feeling sorry for itself, the most dismal and depressing of all spectacles. Hughes has given us a whining Harlem. It is not yet the belligerent Harlem of the 1943 riot, but it is a city acquiring the mood from which this riot will inevitably spring.

The Harlem poems in Fields of Wonder (1947) are grouped under the title "Stars Over Harlem," but they do not speak out as clearly and as definitely as former pieces on the theme have done. The mood, however, continues in the sombre vein of Shakespeare in Harlem, and the idea of escape is stated or implied in each of the poems. In the first of the group, "Trumpet Player: 52nd Street," we find a curious shift in the African
imagery used. Practically all former pieces having an African background tended to stress either the white-mooned loveliness of jungle nights or the pulse-stirring rhythm of the tom-tom. But from the weary eyes of the 52nd Street musician there blazes forth only "the smoldering memory of slave ships." In this new Harlem even the jazz players are infected with the sectional melancholy, and this performer finds only a vague release and escape in the golden tones he creates.

In "Harlem Dance Hall" there is again an interesting use of the escape motif. The poet describes the hall as having no dignity at all until the band began to play and then: "Suddenly the earth was there, / And flowers, / Trees, / And air." In short, this new dignity was achieved by an imaginative escape from the close and unnatural life of the dance hall (and of Harlem) into the freedom and wholesomeness of nature and normal living.

Although it is rather cryptic, there is also the suggestion of escape in "Stars," the last of these poems to be considered here:

O, sweep of stars over Harlem streets . . .
Reach up your hand, dark boy, and take a star.

One Way Ticket (1949) and Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951), especially the latter work, bring to a full cycle the turning away from the Harlem of The Weary Blues. The Harlem depicted in these two works has come through World War II, but has discovered that a global victory for democracy does not necessarily have too much pertinence at home. Although the Harlem of the 1949-51 period has far more opportunity than the 1926 Harlem ever dreamed of, it is still not free; and the modern city having caught the vision of total freedom and total integration will not be satisfied with anything less than the ideal. It is therefore a critical, a demanding, a sensitive, and utterly cynical city.

In One Way Ticket, for example, Harlem remembers "the old lies," "the old kicks in the back," the jobs it never could have and still cannot get because of color:

So we stand here
On the edge of hell
In Harlem
And look out on the world
And wonder
What we're gonna do
In the face of
What we remember.

But even though Harlem is the "edge of hell," it still can be a refuge for the black servant who works downtown all day bowing and scraping to white folks ("Negro Servant"). Dark Harlem becomes for him a "sweet relief from faces that are white." The earlier Harlem was a place to be shared with fun-seeking whites from below 125th Street; the new city is a sanctuary from them.
So deep is the unrest in this 1949-51 Harlem it may experience strangely conflicting emotions. Like aliens longing sentimentally for the "old country," it may feel momentarily a nostalgia for the South, even though it has bought a one way ticket from that region. In "Juice-Joint: Northern City," we find sad-faced boys who have forgotten how to laugh:

But suddenly a guitar playing lad
Whose languid lean brings back the sunny South
Strikes up a tune all gay and bright and glad
To keep the gall from biting in his mouth,
Then drowsy as the rain
Soft sad black feet
Dance in this juice joint
On the city street.

The deepest tragedy of a disillusioned city is the cruelty it inflicts on its own unfortunates, and this bitter Harlem wastes no pity on a poor lost brother who was not "hep":

Harlem
Sent him home
In a long box —
Too dead
To know why:
The licker
Was lye.

The longest and most revealing Harlem poem in One Way Ticket is the thumping "Ballad of Margie Polite," the Negro girl who "cussed" a cop in the lobby of the Braddock Hotel and caused a riot when a Negro soldier taking her part was shot in the back by a white cop. In these thirteen short stanzas, Langston Hughes has distilled, as it were, all of the trigger-sensitiveness to injustice — real or imagined; all of the pent-up anti-white bitterness; and all of the sick-and-tired-of-being-kicked-around feelings which characterize the masses of present-day Harlem. It is indeed a provocative analysis of the frictions and the tensions in the black ghetto, this narrative of Margie Polite, who

Kept the Mayor
And Walter White
And everybody
Up all night!

In Montage of a Dream Deferred, Mr. Hughes' latest volume of poems, the Harlem theme receives its fullest and most comprehensive statement. Devoting the whole volume to the subject, he has touched on many aspects of the city unnoticed before. His understanding is now deep and sure, his handling of the theme defter and more mature than in any of the previous works. In this volume, the poet makes effective use of a technique with which he has been experimenting since 1926 — a technique he explains in a brief prefatory note:

In terms of current Afro-American popular music ... this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting
changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions [sic] of the music of a community in transition.

According to this scheme, we are to consider the whole book of ninety-odd pieces as really one long poem, marked by the conflicting changes, broken rhythms, and sudden interjections characteristic of a jam session. This “jam session” technique is highly effective because, tying together as it does fragmentary and otherwise unrelated segments in the work, it allows the poet, without being monotonous, to return again and again to his overall-theme, that of Harlem’s frustration. Like the deep and persistent rolling of a boogie bass — now loud and raucous, now soft and pathetic — this theme of Harlem’s dream deferred marches relentlessly throughout the poem. Hughes knows that Harlem is neither a gay nor healthy but basically a tragic and frustrated city, and he beats that message home. Because of the fugue-like structure of the poem, it is impossible for the reader to miss the theme or to forget it.

This 1951 Harlem is a full and many-sided community. Here one finds the pathos of night funerals and fraternal parades: “A chance to let / the whole world see / old black me!”; or the grim realism of slum-dwellers who like war because it means prosperity; or the humor of a wife playing via a dream book the number suggested by her husband’s dying words. This is the Harlem of black celebrities and their white girl admirers, the Harlem of vice squad detectives “spotting fairies” in night spots, the Harlem of bitter anti-Semitism, and the Harlem of churches and street corner orators, of college formals at the Renaissance Casino and of Negro students writing themes at CCNY. It is now definitely a class-conscious Harlem, a community of dicties and nobodies; and the Cadillac-riding professional dicties feel that they are let down by the nobodies who “talk too loud / cuss too loud / and look too black.” It is a Harlem of some gaiety and of much sardonic laughter; but above all else, it is Harlem of a dream long deferred; and a people’s deferred dream can “fester like a sore” or “sag like a heavy load.”

Whatever else it may or may not believe, this Harlem has no illusion about the all-inclusiveness of American democracy. Even the children know that there is still a Jim Crow coach on the Freedom Train.

What don’t bug
them white kids
sure bugs me;
We knows everybody
ain’t free.

Perhaps the dominant over-all impression that one gets from Montage of a Dream Deferred is that of a vague unrest. Tense and moody, the inhabitants of this 1951 Harlem seem to be seeking feverishly and forlornly for some simple yet apparently unattainable satisfaction in life:
"one more bottle of gin"; "my furniture paid for"; "I always did want to study French"; "that white enamel stove"; "a wife who will work with me and not against me." The book begins and ends on this note of dissatisfaction and unrest. There is "a certain amount of nothing in a dream deferred."

These then are the scenes that make up the Harlem of Langston Hughes' poetry. The picture, one must remember, is that of a poet and not a sociologist; it naturally lacks the logic and the statistical accuracy of a scientific study, but in its way the picture is just as revealing and truthful as an academic study. As one looks at this series of Harlems he is impressed by the growing sense of frustration which characterizes each of them. Whether it is in the dream fantasy world of The Weary Blues or in the realistic city of Montage of a Dream Deferred, one sees a people searching — and searching in vain — for a way to make Harlem a part of the American dream. And one must bear in mind that with Langston Hughes Harlem is both place and symbol. When he depicts the hopes, the aspirations, the frustrations, and the deep-seated discontent of the New York ghetto, he is expressing the feelings of Negroes in black ghettos throughout America.

By HYACINTHE HILL

Last Request

Bury me at the base of the cherry tree
Let the roots entangle me
So that I may be drawn up into the trunk
And out along the branches;
Green-haired in summer, bald in winter
I will stand erect faithful to the sun
And give to every man who asks a cherry in season
As I have in this life
That spring may pause in wonder at my flowering.