

## Stormy Weather

Langston Hughes' autobiography, "The Big Sea," records the travels that brought him to the place he occupies in literature today. Negro writing of the twenties. A review by Ralph Ellison.

THE BIG SEA, by Langston Hughes. Alfred A. Knopf. \$3.

LANGSTON HUGHES' autobiography, *The Big Sea*, is a story of the writer's life from his birth in 1902 up to 1930. It is a highly exciting account of a life which in itself has encompassed much of the wide variety of Negro experience (even within the Jim-Crow-flanked narrowness of American Negro life there is much variety). Before he was twenty-seven, Langston Hughes had lived in Kansas, Missouri, Ohio, New York, and Washington, D. C., on this side of the world; and on the other side he had lived in France and Italy and he had visited Africa. He had known the poverty of the underprivileged Negro family and the wealth of his successful businessman father. He had taught school in Mexico, gone to college at Columbia, shipped to Africa on a freighter, worked as a doorman in Paris, combed the beaches of Genoa, bussed dishes in a Washington hotel, and had received the encouragement of Vachel Lindsay for the poetry he was making of these experiences.

Hughes' family background is no less broad. It winds and spreads through the years from a revolutionary grandmother whose first husband had died with John Brown, to include a great-uncle who was a Reconstruction congressman from Virginia, US minister to Haiti, and the first dean of Howard Law School. Hughes' early life was marked by economic uncertainty, while his father, who left his wife and child to seek freedom in Mexico, was a rich man. Despite its revolutionary source there was even room on Hughes' family tree to include a few bourgeois Washington snobs. This wide variety of experience and background is enough in itself to make *The Big Sea* an interesting book and to recommend it as an important American document. It offers a valuable picture of the class divisions within the Negro group, shows their traditions and folkways and the effects of an expanding industrial capitalism upon several generations of a Negro family.

But *The Big Sea* is more than this. It is also a story told in evocative prose of the personal experiences of a sensitive Negro in the modern world.

In the wake of the last war there appeared that phenomenon of literary and artistic activity among Negroes known as the Negro Renaissance. This movement was marked by the "discovery" of the Negro by wealthy whites, who in attempting to fill the vacuum of their lives made the 1920's an era of fads. Negro music, Negro dancing, primitive Negro

sculpture, and Negro writing became a vogue. The artificial prosperity brought by the war allowed these whites to indulge their bohemian fancies for things Negroid. Negro writers found publishing easier than ever before. And not strange to the Marxist is the fact that the same source which furnished the money of the period had also aroused the group energy of the Negro people and made for the emergence of these writers. But this in a different way.

The wave of riots and lynchings released by the war ushered in a new period in the struggle for Negro liberation. Under this pressure Negroes became more militant than ever before in attacking the shortcomings of American democracy. And in the sense that the American Negro group is a suppressed nation, this new spirit was nationalistic. But despite its national character, the group was not without its class divisions. It happened that those who gave artistic expression to this new spirit were of the Negro middle class, or, at least, were under the sway of its ideology. In a pathetic attempt to reconcile unresolvable, these writers sought to wed the passive philosophy of the Negro middle class to the militant racial protest of the Negro masses. Thus, since the black masses had evolved no writers of their own, the energy of a whole people became perverted to the ends of a class which had grown conscious of itself through the economic alliances it had made when it supported the war. This expression was further perverted through the bohemian influence of the white faddists whom the war had destroyed spiritually, and who sought in the Negro something primitive and exotic; many writers were supported by their patronage.

Into this scene Langston Hughes made his first literary steps. Two older writers, Claude McKay and James Weldon Johnson, have treated the movement in their autobiographies. But neither has given a realistic account of the period or indicated that they knew just what had happened to them. Hughes himself avoids an analysis, but his candid and objective account of his personal experience in the movement is far more realistic than theirs. For the student of American letters it should offer valuable material.

There are many passages in *The Big Sea* in which Hughes castigates the Negro bourgeoisie, leaving no doubt as to what he thought of its value. Declining its ideological world, he gained his artistic soul: he is one of the few writers who survived the Negro Renaissance and still has the vitality to create. While his contemporaries expressed the limited strivings of this class, Hughes' vision carried him

down into the black masses to seek his literary roots. The crystallized folk experience of the blues, spirituals, and folk tales became the stuff of his poetry. And when the flood of 1929 wrecked the artistic houses of his fellows, his was balanced firm upon its folk foundation. The correctness of his vision accounts for his development during that period of his life which follows the close of this book, and which we hope will be made the material of a forthcoming volume.

In his next book, however, we hope that besides the colorful incidents, the word pictures, the feel, taste, and smell of his experiences, Langston Hughes will tell us more of how he felt and thought about them. For while the style of *The Big Sea* is charming in its simplicity, it is a style which depends upon understatement for its more important effects. Many NEW MASSES readers will question whether this is a style suitable for the autobiography of a Negro writer of Hughes' importance; the national and class position of the writer should guide his selection of techniques and method, should influence his style. In the style of *The Big Sea* too much attention is apt to be given to the esthetic aspects of experience at the expense of its deeper meanings. Nor—this being a world in which few assumptions may be taken for granted—can the writer who depends upon understatement to convey these meanings be certain that they do not escape the reader. To be effective the Negro writer must be explicit; thus realistic; thus dramatic.

*The Big Sea* has all the excitement of a picaresque novel with Hughes himself as hero. This gives the incidents presented a unity provided by a sensitive and unusual personality; but when Hughes avoids analysis and comment, and, in some instances, emotion, a deeper unity is lost. This is that unity which is formed by the mind's brooding over experience and transforming it into conscious thought. Negro writing needs this unity, through which the writer clarifies the experiences of the reader and allows him to recreate himself. Perhaps its lack of this unity explains why *The Big Sea* ends where it does.

For after 1930 Hughes was more the conscious artist. His work followed the logical development of the national-folk sources of his art. Philosophically his writings constitute a rejection of those aspects of American life which history has taught the Negro masses to reject. To this is accountable the power of such poems as *Ballad of Lenin*, *Letter to the Academy*, *Elderly Race Leaders*, *Ballad of Ozzie Powell*, and *Let America Be America Again*. It is the things which he rejects in American life that make for the strength

the Negro writer. This amounts to the recognition of the new way of life postulated by the plight of the Negro and other minorities in our society. In accepting it the writer recognizes the revolutionary role he must play. Hughes' later work, his speeches before the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture at Paris and his presence in Madrid during the Spanish war, shows his acceptance of that role.

Because he avoided the mistakes of most Negro writers of the twenties, Hughes' responsibility to younger writers and intellectuals is great. They should be allowed to receive the profound benefits of his experiences, and this on the plane of conscious thought. Then, besides the absorbing story of an adventurous life, we would be shown the processes by which a sensitive Negro attains a heightened consciousness of a world in which most of the odds are against his doing so—in the South the attainment of such a consciousness is in itself a revolutionary act. It will be the spread of this consciousness, added to the passion and sensitivity of the Negro people, that will help create a new way of life in the United States.

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