

**“Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain, and Saint-John Perse: Revisiting the Emergence of Caribbean Modernism and *Négritude*”**

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In 1931, on the day of his departure from Haiti back to the United States after spending the summer there, Langston Hughes briefly met the Haitian poet and novelist Jacques Roumain in Port-au-Prince. Though Hughes was somewhat of a recluse in Haiti, wanting to avoid being “lionized,” he decided to visit Roumain, who four years earlier had, upon his return from Europe to Haiti, helped to establish *La Revue Indigène* and the *Indigeniste* movement, a foundational precursor to *Négritude*. Very disturbed to hear that Hughes had been in the area for the entire summer, Roumain quickly organized a delegation, who surprised and embarrassed Hughes while he was eating lunch, coatless and shirtless, on the deck when the assembly of dignitaries arrived.<sup>1</sup> Immediately after Hughes’s departure from the island, Roumain wrote a tribute to Hughes for *Haiti-Journal*, the local newspaper in Port-au-Prince. The piece, which appeared in early August and was thus written without much time for research, indicates Roumain’s admiration for and detailed knowledge of Hughes’s life and work, including the influence of Whitman, his publisher, and even the specific journals where Hughes’s poems first appeared. “Langston Hughes est le plus grand poète noir de l’Amérique,” Roumain wrote,

et il n’est point, à mon sens, d’écrivain de sa race qui l’égale comme romancier.... Les publications nègres *Opportunity* et *Crisis*, les grandes revues blanches *Survey Graphic*, *Vanity Fair*, *The World Tomorrow* accueillirent ses poèmes.

Alfred Knopf, le grand éditeur New-Yorkais fit paraître ses volumes de poèmes: *The Weary Blues*, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, son roman *Not Without Laughter*, et lui assura le succès qu’il méritait. Langston avait proposé de vastes horizons à son expérience poétique:

*J’ai connu des rivières aussi vieilles que le monde et plus vieilles que le flot du sang humain dans les veines de l’homme.  
Mon âme est devenue profonde comme les rivières.*

Un beau, large mouvement whitmanien parcourt ces versets.<sup>2</sup>

The meeting between the two writers sparked a lasting friendship, where Hughes was extensively involved in key aspects of Roumain’s life and work. For example, in 1934 and 1935, Hughes published appeals for Roumain’s release in *The New Republic* and *New Masses*, when a Haitian tribunal had sentenced Roumain to three years in prison for his activities as a member of the Communist Party, shortly after he published a Marxist pamphlet criticizing the government. Celebrating Roumain as “the finest living Haitian writer,” Hughes called upon “all writers and artists of whatever race who believe in the freedom of words and of the human spirit, to protest immediately...the uncalled for and unmerited sentence to prison of...one of the few, and by far the most talented of the literary men of Haiti.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, Hughes and Roumain corresponded and met fairly often after 1931, including six years later in Paris, at the Second International Writers’ Congress, when Roumain was studying at the Institut de Paléontologie Humaine and the

Musée de l'Homme. In his speech at the final session of the Congress delivered on July 17, Hughes praised Roumain, saying that his work represents "the great longing that is in the hearts of the darker peoples of the world to reach out their hands in friendship and brotherhood to all the white races of the earth."<sup>4</sup> Their last meeting occurred in 1939, five years before Roumain's death when he was living in exile in New York City.<sup>5</sup> "Beyond the chronology of personal encounters of these two men," Carolyn Fowler observes, "there is a level on which a permanent and essential point of contact existed—and exists—between Langston Hughes and Jacques Roumain. It lies in the harmony...of their activity as journalists and essayists, an experience which reveals the same values in both men."<sup>6</sup>

Roumain's glowing words of praise for Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in the *Haiti-Journal* during the summer of 1931 provides a vivid context for grasping the larger significance of this poem for the development of Roumain's style and aspirations as a poet. Consider, for example, Roumain's "Quand bat le tam-tam," published in *Haiti-Journal* that same year:

Ton coeur tremble dans l'ombre, comme  
 le reflet d'un visage dans l'onde trouble.  
 L'ancien mirage se lève au creux de la nuit  
 Tu connais le doux sortilège du souvenir;  
 Un fleuve t'emporte loin des berges,  
 T'emporte vers l'ancestral paysage.  
 Entends-tu ces voix: elles chantent l'amoureuse douleur  
 Et dans le morne, écoute ce tam-tam haleter telle  
 la gorge d'une noire jeune fille.  
 Ton âme, c'est ce reflet dans l'eau murmurante  
 où tes pères ont penchés [sic] leurs obscurs visages  
 Ses secrets mouvements te mêlent à la vague  
 Et le blanc qui te fit mulâtre, c'est ce peu d'écume  
 rejeté, comme un crachat, sur le rivage.<sup>7</sup>

The speaker's discovery of his own identity, or soul, in the depths of his grief and anger, figuratively rendered by the image of a face reflected upon the troubled water of a river; and the poem's restoration of continuity with remote African ancestry, landscape, and cultural practices are all reminiscent of Hughes's poem. Given Roumain's use of the second person pronoun, "you," the poem can be read as offering an apt response to Hughes's call in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers":

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.<sup>8</sup>

In Roumain's "Langston Hughes," which appeared in *Haiti-Journal* in October 1931, the echoes from Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" are even more pronounced. Roumain's syntax and diction, combined with his reference to rivers such as the Seine and the Congo, are elements adapted from "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" that Roumain conjoins with other techniques such as the use of American slang and reference to the blues sung in a cabaret at dawn (notably, phrased in the vernacular) from Hughes's *The Weary Blues*. According to J. Michael Dash, "Roumain saw in Hughes a commitment to the universal struggle of the proletariat.... His poem to Hughes is a touching tribute to the latter's ceaseless wandering and humanitarian ideals."<sup>9</sup> Given the stylistic emulation of Hughes we find here, this *hommage* also hints at Hughes's formative influence on Roumain's coming-of-age as a poet. It was Hughes, Roumain suggests, who first taught him how to value his relation to Africa, and thus to see Europe, the U.S., and the Caribbean with new eyes, fundamentally redefining his modernism, self-conception, and sense of purpose as a poet of the Americas:

Tu connus à Lagos ces filles mélancoliques  
Elles portent aux chevilles des colliers d'argent et soffrent nues comme la nuit  
encerclée de lune.

Tu vis la France sans prononcer de paroles historiques  
--Lafayette nous voici--

La Seine te parut moins belle que le Congo  
[...]

La mer a prêté à tes chants un rythme doux et rauque, et  
Ses fleurs d'amertume écloses de l'écume.

Maintenant dans ce cabaret où à l'aube tu murmures:

O jouez ce blues pou' moa

Rêves-tu de palmes et de chants de pagayeurs au crépuscule?<sup>10</sup>

Scholars have documented Hughes's influence on Aimé Césaire.<sup>11</sup> In the mid-1930s, Césaire wrote a *diplôme d'études supérieures* on the South as a fundamental topos in African-American poetry, and his conceptualization of *Négritude*, as well as his best known poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* were, as Césaire openly acknowledged in a 1941 issue of *Tropiques*, strongly indebted to Hughes.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the relatively straightforward narrative concerning Hughes's influence on Césaire, the murkier, and more complex story of whether or not there was a reciprocal exchange of poetic influences between Hughes and Roumain has yet to be fully understood. In what follows I will examine how Roumain's receptivity to Hughes's influence can be explained, in part, by the prior influence of Whitman on his work as mediated by both Jules Laforgue and Saint-John Perse. As we shall see, studying the relation between Hughes and Roumain also brings to light not only the possibility of Perse's indirect influence on Hughes, but also Perse's role in the cultivation of *Négritude* and contributions to the Caribbean literary heritage of Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Derek Walcott.

Roumain's awareness of how Whitman shaped the development of Hughes's poetics, and his own receptivity to the influence of Hughes were, at least in part, facilitated by their shared affinity with the Symbolist poet, Jules Laforgue, a pioneer of free verse in France who published translations of Whitman that were widely known in French intellectual circles as early as the 1870s. Betsy Erkkila argues that Laforgue's encounter with Whitman's poetry was formative and its effects far-reaching.<sup>13</sup> We can be fairly certain that Laforgue would have read translated passages of such poems as "Starting from Paumanok," in the two articles on Whitman that came out in *La Renaissance Artistique et Littéraire* and *Revue des Deux Mondes* during the summer of 1872.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Laforgue's translations of poems by Whitman (including "Inscriptions" and "A Woman Waits for me"), the first to receive wide circulation in France, appeared in three 1886 issues of *La Vogue*, a leading Symbolist revue.<sup>15</sup> Arnold Rampersad has discussed Laforgue's translations and influence on Hughes, and the Haitian scholar Pradel Pompilus has examined the influence of Laforgue on Roumain. "Il est piquant de constater que la libération rêvée par *La Revue indigène* n'est point totale," writes Pompilus. "Si le vers libre s'adapte plus aisément aux pulsations de chaque poète et s'il convient mieux que le vers régulier à une littérature qui veut s'émanciper, il demeure vrai que les modèles de Roumain, de Carl Brouard et de Philippe Thoby-Marcelin en matière de vers libre sont Tristan Corbière [...et] Jules Laforgue. Roumain, en particulier, ne se fit pas faute de suivre leur exemple."<sup>16</sup> One source of Laforgue's appeal for Roumain as well as Hughes could have been his birth in the New World. Born to French immigrant parents in 1860, in the port city of Montevideo—the capital of Uruguay, commonly known as the "Banda Oriental"—Laforgue had been brought to France at the age of six.<sup>17</sup> Another possible source would have been Laforgue's involvement with Decadence, vernacular tradition, burlesque forms of the *complainte*, comedy, and music hall performance.<sup>18</sup>

The influence exerted by Whitman on both Hughes and Roumain as mediated by Laforgue helps to explain the surprising pattern of resemblances in their poetry. Hughes's "Pierrot" and "The Black Pierrot," for example, which were included in a section given the title of the latter in *The Weary Blues*, were clearly inspired by Laforgue, who extensively incorporated the Pierrot figure in his poetry. Long associated with the figure of the artist, Pierrot descended from the *commedia dell'arte*, a popular form of theater that originated in seventeenth-century Italy, and appealed strongly to nineteenth-century French writers, when the acrobat pantomime, Jean-Gaspard Debureau, popularized the image of Pierrot as a moonstruck, tragic clown. The Pierrot figure usually appears as a slave or a servant, and played an important role in the emergence of a popular, lowbrow cultural forms in nineteenth-century Paris, including the circus, street performance, and music-hall comedy.<sup>19</sup> Madhuri Deshmukh has explored how Hughes's transatlantic encounter with Laforgue's Pierrot allowed him to "recreate the aesthetic space that minstrelsy in the U.S. had stolen from black creativity."<sup>20</sup> Building on scholarship by Henry Louis Gates and Eric Lott that explains how, during the nineteenth century, the conventions of American blackface minstrelsy derived from the *commedia's* figures of the Harlequin and the Pierrot, Deshmukh points out that whereas the Harlequin mask was black, the Pierrot mask was white. By donning this mask in his poetry, she argues, Hughes's work occupied a liminal space between folk culture and high art, sharply criticized the racist stereotype of African Americans associated with blackface minstrelsy

and, in doing so, transformed the traditional Pierrot figure in an act of “signifying,” in Gates’s sense, that recuperated the realm of aesthetics for black expression.<sup>21</sup>

Like Hughes, in “La Danse du poète-clown,” first published in the *Revue Indigène* in 1927, Roumain adapts Laforgue’s pierrotic poetics for his own distinctive purposes:

Bondis parmi eux et danse.  
 Avec tes jambes fines et ton coeur triste.  
 Danse tout autour de la piste :  
 aérien , nu - et lance  
 à leur haine l'injure  
 de ton sourire. Tourne sur toi-même, ô pur,  
 à réchauffer ton désespoir,  
 tourne à ne plus les voir  
 tourne, déjà ils ne sont plus  
 que brume. Entends-tu  
 maintenant vivre la blessure  
 de ton coeur : ils furent  
 ils furent ! à mort, tourne,  
 danse, tourne, ô poète, ô flamme, ô clown.  
 Et chante aussi la mort  
 qui griffe ton corps.  
 Tes lèvres sont blêmes,  
 chante quand même,  
 tes pieds s'alourdissent, le lien  
 se casse. Va poète, crever dans la niche du chien.<sup>22</sup>

Roumain’s guiding dance metaphor recalls Hughes’s “Dream Variations” insofar as, in both poems, dance dramatizes resilience and resistance to oppression. There are many places where Roumain could have read Hughes’s poem, which was first published in *Crisis* under the title “Dream Variation” in July, 1924; subsequently reprinted a year later in the March 25 issue of *Survey Graphic* that became widely circulated anthology, *The New Negro*; and collected in Hughes’s 1926 volume *The Weary Blues*. Even if we dismiss the possibility of direct influence, however, the shared affinity with Laforgue helps explain the rapport between Roumain and Hughes, and would no doubt have facilitated Roumain’s adaption of Hughes’s style. Roumain’s speaker in “La Danse du poète-clown,” furthermore, is far more explicit in his rendering of angry despair, and does not offer the innovative trope of blackness, “Black like me,” which in Hughes is integral to the dream of free movement and thought, the promise of peace after a life well lived, and gentle rest at nightfall:

To fling my arms wide  
 In some place of the sun,  
 To whirl and to dance  
 Till the white day is done.  
 Then rest at cool evening  
 Beneath a tall tree  
 While night comes on gently,  
 Dark like me—  
 That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide  
 In the face of the sun,  
 Dance! whirl! whirl!  
 Till the quick day is done.  
 Rest at pale evening....  
 A tall, slim tree....  
 Night coming tenderly  
 Black like me.<sup>23</sup>

Leopold Sédar Senghor once remarked that Hughes and Perse share a poetic heritage, a rhythm, that transcends racial, national, and cultural divides: “You will find this rhythm in French poetry;...you will find this rhythm in Saint-John Perse.... And it is this that Langston Hughes has left us with, this model of the perfect work of art.”<sup>24</sup> Given Hughes’s extensive involvement in the *Négritude* movement, Perse’s role is well worth considering. In addition to his critical commentary on Hughes’s poetry, Senghor also wrote a great deal about Perse, praising his originality and stylistic mastery, and asserting that his rootedness in Antillean realities was the source of his universality as a poet: “L’originalité de Saint-John Perse ne réside pas dans les figures qu’il emploie, mais dans la façon dont il en use: dans la maîtrise de sa lange.” Denouncing the tendency of critics to minimize the Antillean aspects of Perse’s work, he continued, “Ce qui fait, précisément, le génie de Saint-John Perse, c’est, encore qu’il soit créole, d’avoir été fortement enraciné dans sa terre antillaise, son métier de diplomate et sa curiosité omnivore—pour, d’un vol d’aigle, dépasser toutes ces déterminations et exprimer la Civilisation de l’Universel....Enraciné dans le présent et le particulier, il atteint au futur et à l’universel.”<sup>25</sup>

Exploring the intertextual relations between Hughes and Roumain enhances our understanding not only of Perse’s role in the emergence of *Négritude* but also of Perse’s contributions to the Caribbean literary heritage and poetry of Césaire, Glissant, and Walcott. Césaire, for example, would have come to know Perse’s work, not just through his colleague Senghor, but also through Perse’s influence on Surrealism in the 1920s. Patrick Chamoiseau, building on Glissant’s *Poétique de la Relation*, demonstrates the difficulty of constellating Perse and Césaire in a unified legacy without sacrificing their cultural specificity, a theme Walcott also addresses when he contends that, “Perse and Césaire, men of diametrically challenging backgrounds, racial opposites, to use the language of politics, one patrician and conservative, the other proletarian and revolutionary, classic and romantic, Prospero and Caliban, all such opposites balance easily, but they balance on the axis of a shared sensibility, and this sensibility, with or deprived of the presence of a visible tradition, is the sensibility of walking to a New World.”<sup>26</sup> In “Cérémonie vaudou pour Saint John Perse...,” first published in 1976, Césaire ascertains his animosity, as well as his indebtedness to Perse. Playing with the scientifically accurate botanical terminology Perse loved, Césaire adapts Perse’s incantatory style and infernal frontier setting, offering ambivalent words of praise for the pathbreaking achievement of his fellow Antillean and exile in his search for vanished cultural origins:

Celui qui balise l’aire d’atterissage des colibris  
 celui qui plante en terre une hampe d’asclépias de Curaçao  
 pour fournir le gîte aux plus grands monarques du monde

qui sont en noblesse d'exil et papillons de passage

[...]

le chercheur de sources perdues  
le demêleur de laves cordées

[...]

celui qui remplace l'asphodèle des prairies infernales  
par—sacrale—la belle coiffure afro de l'haemanthus [.]

In the poem's elated, obscure closing lines, Césaire's imagery of volcanic cataclysms, warfare, and conquest evokes the speaker's ambivalent desire to honor the past and perpetuate tradition. The poem figuratively implies that to do, while also avoiding the catastrophic violence resulting from racial and other social divisions, there must be a meaningful crossing of cultures, where poets successfully acknowledge and respond to each other:

et que l'arc s'embrase  
et que de l'un à l'autre océan  
les magmas fastueux en volcanas se répondent pour  
de toutes gueules de tous fumants sabords honorer  
en route pour le grand large  
l'ultime Conquistador en son dernier voyage.<sup>27</sup>

Taken together, Césaire and Perse represent an inescapable, important Caribbean legacy for Glissant as well as for Walcott. The persistent recurrence of shared imagery and settings, including birds, the sea as a space of origins, and archipelagos, shows how, as Kathleen Gyssels demonstrates, Perse's childhood memories in "Écrit sur la porte," the opening poem in *Éloges*, are recalled in Walcott's "The Star-Apple Kingdom." Whereas Césaire is centrally concerned with the lost past and heritage of an African mother-continent, Walcott and Glissant represent a generational divide with Césaire as one of the founders of *Négritude* insofar as they "distillate" from local cultures meanings that are universal in a global society.<sup>28</sup> Although Glissant, at times, is sharply critical of Perse, he nonetheless concludes, "Au-delà, Saint-John Perse est à tous nécessaire, et c'est le plus juste éloge à faire à son tour au poète."<sup>29</sup>

Senghor's cryptic reference to shared rhythmic tendencies in Hughes and Perse demonstrates that we have yet to ascertain the full extent and impact of Hughes's poetic engagement and presence in Caribbean regions. Is it possible that Perse's influence reached Hughes through the mediation of Roumain? Unlike Césaire in "Cérémonie vaudou pour Saint John Perse...," Roumain never wrote a poem ambivalently acknowledging his indebtedness to Perse.<sup>30</sup> As we have seen with regard to Laforgue, Perse's Caribbean origin was likely a source of his appeal for Roumain, and Roumain's own receptivity to Hughes's influence could have been aided by his prior encounter with Whitman's poetics as mediated by Perse. In the very first article on Perse's poetry, written at the suggestion of André Gide for *La Phalange* in December 1911, Valéry Larbaud compared Perse and Whitman, and Derek Walcott has commented on Whitman's influence on Perse's style.<sup>31</sup> In *Forged Genealogies*, Carol Rigolot offers a densely

contextualized, illuminating analysis of how Whitman figures in the development of Perse's poetics. She informs us that Perse owned and heavily annotated Léon Bazalgette's two-volume translation of Whitman, which first appeared in 1909, and would also have read Gide's edition of Whitman's selected poems. During his years of exile in New York and Washington, he clipped and saved articles about Whitman from American newspapers and magazines. And although Perse was always careful to note his differences from Whitman—thanking Katherine Biddle, for example, in an 1955 letter, for distinguishing his rigorous, exacting and precise internal metrics from Whitman's free verse—Rigolot reminds us that in a public eulogy for President Kennedy, Perse alluded to the apostrophic second section of *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, implicitly comparing his own task as a poet to that of Whitman, who had written such a beautiful elegy on the death of Lincoln.<sup>32</sup> Like Whitman, Perse was vitally interested in the vocabulary of trades and vocations. Both poets attempted to reconcile the presence of concrete realistic details with an mythologizing stance and an incantatory style; both were concerned to write poems commemorating conquest, and the end of a war; and both, as Erkkila has shown, make frequent use of anaphora, exclamation, parentheses, and dashes, among other grammatical and stylistic devices.<sup>33</sup> Although Perse will, on occasion, avoid Whitman's end-stopped lines, Arthur Knodel observed that his verse abounds with expansive catalogues, a technique that is strikingly reminiscent of Whitman.<sup>34</sup>

Rigolot has explored recollections of Whitman in Perse's *Vents*, but there is also strong evidence of Whitman's influence in *Anabase*. In Perse, as in Whitman, the practice of accumulative amplification is a formal means of expressing a desire for territorial expansion, as seen in Perse's recollection of Whitman in Canto 8 of *Anabase*, where the frontier setting circumscribes a dense constellation of Whitmanian symbols. There is a westward migration to the frontier, where the phrase "Chemins du monde" recalls Whitman's inviting refrain in "Song of the Open Road" ("Allons! Whoever you are come travel with me"), and the landscape is full of swaying grass:

Un pays-ci  
n'est point le mien. Que m'a donné le monde que ce  
mouvement d'herbes? . . .

[...]

Mais au delà sont les plus grands loisirs, et dans un  
grand  
pays d'herbages sans mémoire, l'année sans liens et  
sans anniversaires, assaisonnée d'aurores et de feux.

[...]

Chemins du monde, l'un vous suit. Autorité sur tous  
les signs de la terre.

[...]

Un grande principe de violence commendait à nos

moeurs.<sup>35</sup>

For Perse, and for Whitman, *Isaiah* 40 presents a biblical antecedent for grass as a symbol of ephemerality that contrasts with the immutability of scripture:

All flesh is grass,  
 And all its beauty is like the flower  
 of the field.  
 The grass withers, the flower fades,  
 when the breath of the Lord blows  
 upon it;  
 surely the people is grass.  
 The grass withers, the flower fades;  
 but the word of our God will stand  
 for ever.<sup>36</sup>

And in Whitman's "Song of Myself," as in Perse, the grass is associated with leisure:

I loafe and invite my soul,  
 I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.<sup>37</sup>

Perse, however, calls attention to the violence implicit in Whitman's figurative comparison of grass and spears, as his speaker in Canto 8 forgoes ease and leisure in order to undertake his military expedition. The ambivalent reference to "un/grand/pays d'herbages sans mémoire" anticipates the struggle with tradition Rigolot identifies in *Vents*, where "the poet gives priority to newness and creativity over past authority," but in *Anabase* such passages also hint at motives for conquest and the legacy of what Richard Slotkin calls "regeneration through violence" on the frontier.<sup>38</sup> Whereas the military conqueror in *Anabase* yearns for "Autorité sur tous les signs de la terre," hegemonic dominance over a worldwide empire of signs, Whitman's speaker in "Song of Myself" affirms his individuality as a hopeful nation of one, transmuting the grass symbol in *Isaiah* so that, instead of representing the ephemerality of the flesh in contradistinction to the eternal Word, in "Song of Myself" Whitman's leaves of grass symbolize a living tradition and celebrate universal democratic values:

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;  
 How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

[...]

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,  
 And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,  
 Growing up among black folks as white [...]

[...]

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,  
 This is the common air that bathes the globe.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to Perse's Leader, for whom the motion of the grass signals a restless desire to belong to another country than the one where he currently resides, Whitman's speaker

asserts his belief in the grass as evidence of divine craftsmanship, opening the possibility of death as a peaceful return to nature with the promise of immortality:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,

[...]

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nonetheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.<sup>40</sup>

I have tried to show that a prior engagement with Whitman's poetics on the part of both Laforgue and Perse would have enhanced Roumain's own receptivity to Hughes's influence. It remains to be seen whether, and how, Roumain became a plausible conduit by which Perse's influence, and French modernism more generally, could have reached Hughes. Fowler and Roger Dorsinville have shown that, paradoxically, *Les Indigenistes*, the movement in Haitian poetry co-founded by Roumain, adapted lyric practices established by their avant-garde contemporaries, as part of a larger effort to demystify, and clarify, their region's cultural association with metropolitan France, and to discover a conception of *Antillanité* that would highlight the distinctive qualities of Caribbean poetics.<sup>41</sup> The points of intersection among Roumain, the Surrealist group, and Perse and his circle are too numerous to mention in detail. We know, for example, that the October 1927 issue of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* noted the publication of *La Revue Indigène*, the journal that Roumain was directly involved with, and that Roumain refers to, and was influenced by Arthur Rimbaud, a poet who had been previously influenced by Perse's *Éloges*.<sup>42</sup> Roumain was also associated with another revue, *Commune*, which ran briefly from July 1933 through August 1939, and whose personnel included Surrealists such as Roumain's close friend, Louis Aragon (who was instrumental in the publication of Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*), and Gide, a poet Roumain greatly admired. Alrich Nicolas has noted "la place consacrée dans [*La revue indigène*] à l'un des plus grands 'passeurs' et médiateurs de la littérature contemporaine, l'écrivain Valéry Larbaud," the poet-critic who was one of the first and strongest promoters of Perse's work, and who was undoubtedly interested in the emergence of poetry in Haiti and in the Caribbean as a whole partly as a result of his relations with Perse.<sup>43</sup>

Roumain and Perse also share a number of striking similarities, both with regard to their poetry and their life experiences. Like Perse, in his early poems "Le Buvard: Orage" and "À jouer aux billes," Roumain draws on frontier imagery, amalgamating topographically ambiguous landscapes that bear simultaneous reference to the Caribbean and the United States: in "Le Buvard: Orage," "Le vent chassa un troupeau de bisons blanc dans la vaste prairie/du ciel"; and in "À jouer aux billes," Roumain alludes to James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*.<sup>44</sup> As in Perse, in poems such as "Langston

Hughes,” Roumain’s verses are at times long and Whitmanian. Like Perse, Roumain assiduously avoids the use of Creole in his early poetry: “Créole,” a poem Roumain published in *Haiti-Journal* in July, 1931, evokes the standpoint of a white Creole reminiscent of Perse’s speakers in *Pour fêter une enfance* and *Éloges*, and also contains the one of the very few creole expressions (“A vot’ sèvice, moussié”) in Roumain’s poetic *oeuvre*; and Roumain’s only poem written entirely in creole, “M’ Allé la Rivière,” was composed in 1935 while Roumain was in prison.<sup>45</sup> Like Perse, Roumain was conscientiously devoted to what Dash calls “le mélange d’observation détaillée et de stylisation poétique,” a simultaneous commitment to complex figuration and to scientific, botanical accuracy that is evident in his fiction, and in his “Contribution à l’étude de l’ethnobotanique précolombienne des grandes antilles,” published in February 1942.<sup>46</sup> Last, but certainly not least, both writers belonged to an elite social class, worked as statesmen, and were eventually driven into exile. In 1939, at the same banquet-reception where he would meet Hughes for the last time before his death, Roumain expressed his commitment to internationalism, political action, and art in terms that could well have been employed by either Perse or Hughes. “At this very moment,” he said,

the entire world, because of the war, is facing problems which affect our fate in a most fundamental manner: Politically the facts cannot remain localized and isolated any longer in time and space. They are immediately internationalized by the very substance of a war for a new redivision of the world. They have made as one the destiny of all mankind, no matter to what country or race they may belong...

The moral result of this interdependence is that we writers, who like to believe ourselves to be reflecting the consciousness of the universe, have once and for all lost the right—if ever it was ours—to the artifice of solitude and to the mysticism of introspection. This more or less subtle phraseology is but a screen of smoke, hiding, imperfectly a panic to desert. It is a renunciation of the primordial mission of a man of thought: *to be a man of action*.<sup>47</sup>

It is understandable that scholars have depicted Hughes as part of a literary camp that is starkly opposed to high modernism. I hope, however, that studying the relations among Hughes, Roumain, and Perse will aid a continuing effort to understand Hughes’s placement within the global cross-currents of what Rampersad calls “populist modernism” as well as high modernist and avant-garde influences.<sup>48</sup> Although we might be tempted to interpret Hughes’s poetics solely as an affirmation of racial and cultural difference, the symbolic confrontation and commingling of day and dusk in “Dream Variations,” like Hughes’s fertile crossing of influences belies such an oversimplified reading. Certainly, Hughes’s work is grounded in the distinctive idiom of African-American vernacular culture, but Roumain’s insight regarding the Whitmanian movement of Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” suggests that it would be a mistake to overlook the presence of other, equally vital poetic influences. As Hughes himself once said, “I do not believe there were ever any beautiful ‘hate’ poems. I think the dreams in my poems are basically everybody’s dreams. But sometimes, on the surface, their complexion is colored by the shadows and the darkness of the race to which I belong. The darkness has its beauty, and the shadows have their troubles—but shadows disappear in the sun of understanding.”<sup>49</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956; rpt. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 31.
- <sup>2</sup> Jacques Roumain, "Présentation de Langston Hughes," *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Léon-François Hoffmann (Paris: Collection Archivos, 2003), 635-636.
- <sup>3</sup> Langston Hughes, "An Appeal for Jacques Roumain," [Letter to the Editor], *New Republic* (December 12, 1934), 130; Hughes, "An Appeal for Jacques Roumain," *New Masses* (January 1935), 34; Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, vol. 9: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 554-555.
- <sup>4</sup> Langston Hughes, Address to the Second International Writers Congress, Paris, July 1937, *Good Morning, Revolution: Uncollected Writings of Social Protest*, ed. Faith Berry (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1973), 99.
- <sup>5</sup> Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 29-32, 319; "Dinner Reception to be Given Haitian by Writers and Artists," *New York Age*, 11 November 1939, 7.
- <sup>6</sup> Carolyn Fowler, "The Shared Vision of Langston Hughes and Jacques Roumain," *Black American Literature Forum* 15.3 (Autumn, 1981), 87.
- <sup>7</sup> Jacques Roumain, "Quand Bat le tam-tam," *Oeuvres complètes*, 44.
- <sup>8</sup> Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. A. Rampersad and D. Roessel (New York: Knopf, 1994), 23.
- <sup>9</sup> J. Michael Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 69.
- <sup>10</sup> Jacques Roumain, "Langston Hughes," *Oeuvres complètes*, 47.
- <sup>11</sup> Michel Fabre, "Du mouvement nouveau noir à la négritude césairienne," *Soleil éclaté*, ed. Jacqueline Leiner (Tubingen: Gunther Grass Verlag, 1984), 149-59; Lilyan Kesteloot, *Black Writers in French*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1991), 56-74.
- <sup>12</sup> Aimé Césaire, "Introduction to Negro American Poetry," *Tropiques* 3 (October 1941), 42; Charles Rowell, "It is through poetry that one copes with solitude: An Interview with Aimé Césaire," *Callaloo* 388 (Winter 1989), 51.
- <sup>13</sup> Betsy Erkkila, *Walt Whitman Among the French: Poet and Myth* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 69-70.
- <sup>14</sup> Emile Blemont, "La Poésie en Angleterre et aux États-Unis, III, Walt Whitman," *La Renaissance Artistique et Littéraire*, No. 7 (June 1872), 54-56; No. 11 (July 1872), 86-87; No. (July 1872), 90-91; Therese Bentzon, "Un Poète américain, Walt Whitman: 'Muscle and Pluck Forever,'" *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 42 (June 1872), 565-82.
- <sup>15</sup> Jules Laforgue, "*Les Brins d'herbe*: traduit de l'étonnant poète américain, Walt Whitman," *La Vogue*, 1, No. 10 (June 1886), 325-28; 1, No. 11 (July 1886), 388-90; 2, No. 3 (Aug. 1886), 73-76.
- <sup>16</sup> Arnold Rampersad, "Langston Hughes and Approaches to Modernism in the Harlem Renaissance," *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations*, ed. Amritjit Singh et al. (New York: Garland, 1989), 63; Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1: 1902-1941, I, Too, Sing America* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.; New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 62; Pradel Pompilus, "De l'épique à la poésie entraînée," *Oeuvres Complètes* by Jacques Roumain, 1499.

- <sup>17</sup> David Arkell, *Looking for Laforgue: An Informal Biography* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1979), 15.
- <sup>18</sup> Michael Collie and J. M. L'Heureux, "Introduction," *Derniers Vers* by Jules Laforgue (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1965), 5.
- <sup>19</sup> Adriane Despot, "Jean-Gaspard Debureau and the Pantomime at the Theatre des Funambules," *Education Theater Journal* 27.3 (October, 1975), 364-376; Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 11.
- <sup>20</sup> Madhuri Deshmukh, "Langston Hughes as Black Pierrot: A Transatlantic Game of Masks," *The Langston Hughes Review* 18 (Fall 2004), 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Deshmukh, "Langston Hughes as Black Pierrot," 6; Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (Oxford UP, 1987), 51-52; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford UP, 1993), 21; Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford UP, 1988), 14-22.
- <sup>22</sup> Jacques Roumain, "La Danse Du Poète-Clown," *Oeuvres complètes*, 17.
- <sup>23</sup> Langston Hughes, "Dream Variations," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. A. Rampersad and D. Roessel (New York: Knopf, 1994), 358.
- <sup>24</sup> Quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Preface to *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. H. L. Gates and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), x; also quoted in Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1*, 403. I have not been able to find the original source for this quotation, but nonetheless the main point it illustrates is important and warrants close consideration.
- <sup>25</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Saint-John Perse ou Poésie du Royaume d'Enfance" (1962), *Liberté*, vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), 352-353; Senghor, "La Poésie Nègro-Américaine" (1950), *Liberté*, vol. 1, 108, 115, 118-119, 120-121.
- <sup>26</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau, *Césaire, Perse, Glissant: Les liaisons magnétiques, un essai* (Paris: Philippe Rey, 2013); Carrie Noland, "Césaire, Chamoiseau, and the Work of Legacy," *Small Axe* 19.3 (November 2015), 115-116; Derek Walcott, "The Muse of History," *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 51-52.
- <sup>27</sup> Aimé Césaire, "Cérémonie vaudou pour Saint John Perse..." *Aimé Césaire: The Collected Poetry*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 374.
- <sup>28</sup> Kathleen Gyssels, "Scarlet Ibises and the Poetics of Relation: Perse, Walcott and Glissant," *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 31.1 (Autumn 2008), 105-106, 107; Véronique Bonnet and Natalie Schon, "Maritime Poetics: the Atlantic, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean Sea in the Work of Saint-John Perse, Édouard Glissant, and Derek Walcott," *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 3.2 (Spring 2002), 13-22.
- <sup>29</sup> Édouard Glissant, "Saint-John Perse et les Antillais," *Le Discourse Antillais* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 433.
- <sup>30</sup> Aimé Césaire, "Cérémonie vaudou pour Saint John Perse..." *The Collected Poetry*, trans. C. Eshleman and A. Smith (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983), 374.
- <sup>31</sup> Saint-John Perse, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 1227; Derek Walcott, "The Muse of History," *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 50.

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- <sup>32</sup> Carol Rigolot, *Forged Genealogies: Saint-John Perse's Conversations with Culture* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001), 145, 147-48, 150.
- <sup>33</sup> Betsy Erkkila, *Walt Whitman Among the French*, 217.
- <sup>34</sup> Arthur Knodel, *Saint-John Perse: A Study of His Poetry* (George Square: University Press Edinburgh, 1966), 46.
- <sup>35</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road" (IX, l.114), *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. H. Blodgett and S. Bradley (New York: Norton, 1965), 154; Saint-John Perse, *Anabase* (VIII), *Oeuvres complètes*, 107, 108.
- <sup>36</sup> *The Book of Isaiah 40:6-8, The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version*, ed. H. G May and B. M Metzger (New York: Oxford UP, 1977), 869.
- <sup>37</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (I, ll.4-5), *Leaves of Grass*, 28.
- <sup>38</sup> Carol Rigolot, *Forged Genealogies*, 155.
- <sup>39</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (VI, ll.99-101, 106-08; XVII, ll.359-60), *Leaves of Grass*, 33, 34, 45.
- <sup>40</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (XXXI, l. 663; LII, ll.1339-47), *Leaves of Grass*, 59, 89.
- <sup>41</sup> Carolyn Fowler, *A Knot in the Thread: The Life and Work of Jacques Roumain* (Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1980), 20, 22; Roger Dorsinville, *Jacques Roumain* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981), 31, 64.
- <sup>42</sup> Léon-François Hoffmann, "Introduction," *Oeuvres complètes* by Jacques Roumain, xli.
- <sup>43</sup> Alrich Nicolas, "Jacques Roumain et l'Allemagne," *Oeuvres complètes* by Jacques Roumain, 1315.
- <sup>44</sup> Jacques Roumain, "Le Buvard: Orage," *Oeuvres complètes*, 21; Roumain, "À jouer aux billes," *Oeuvres complètes*, 29.
- <sup>45</sup> Jacques Roumain, "Creole," *Oeuvres complètes*, 176; Roumain, "M'Allé la Riviè," *Oeuvres complètes*, 94.
- <sup>46</sup> J. Michael Dash, "Jacques Roumain romancier," *Oeuvres complètes* by Jacques Roumain, 1363.
- <sup>47</sup> Jacques Roumain, "Discours de Jacques Roumain," *Oeuvres complètes*, 693-694.
- <sup>48</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1*, 29.
- <sup>49</sup> Langston Hughes, "My Poems and Myself," LHP 735 (July 12, 1945), *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, vol. 9: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, 255-56.