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Thesis Statement and Outline

Both texts, "From Spring and All", Chapter VI from William Carlos Williams (Williams 804), and "From the Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" from Langston Hughes (Hughes 806), deal with imitation – Williams writes about how there is nothing truly novel in the world, because everything is imitating the past; Hughes talks about how blacks should stop imitating cultural icons of white culture and be true to their own, "negro" culture.

- I. How do both writers describe the subject of imitation?
 - A. Hughes' "From the Negro Artist and Racial Mountain" is a contrast between 'negro' and 'American' (not 'white') culture and embracing 'negro' culture completely is seen as liberating act for African-Americans.
 - B. Williams' "From Spring and All" mocks the topic of 'Imitation' and declares everything new just another duplication of the past with only the imagination 'undeceived'.
- II. The different cultural experiences of both writers influenced their work
 - A. Hughes was black and more personally immersed in the subculture and the working class outside the universities. He also traveled later outside the US and started embracing African and non-American cultures.
 - B. Williams grew up as a White person and only travelled outside the US to Europe to learn. He committed to an American view of art and often wrote in between his work

as a physician, which may have contributed to his work being more technical and seemingly aloof, mocking.

III. "From Spring and All" states history is a procession of endless imitations.

A. "Every step once taken ... has been duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that preceded".

IV. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" talks about a personal appeal to the (black) reader not to strive for becoming more white – or the white person trying to use black culture for their own amusement.

A. "O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are" say the Negroes. Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you", say the Whites" to misappropriate black culture as a virtue signal ".

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the 20th century, specifically the 1920s, were a time in world history upending many parts of reality that people had come to believe were true. Science, especially the new disciplines of Quantum Mechanics and Relativity, showed that many laws had to be rewritten and that even simple observation of reality was not to be entirely trusted anymore, throwing centuries of scientific practice into doubt. The arts and music were in a complete revolution as well; artists found that classical structures were insufficient to express themselves, and new fields like impressionism, expressionism, cubism etc. developed.

Politically and economically, the industrial revolution had given rise to new forms of society like communism and socialism. Moreover, society had just seen a brutal war – World

War I – that had ended millions of lives, left countries devastated and parts of Europe a wasteland. Even worse, the War revealed that the deeds humans were capable of surpassed anything people ever believed to be possible. In the United States, especially the South, racism and Ku Klux Klan reared their ugly head and destroyed many black lives. The lynchings that took place prompted the Great Migration of blacks to northern cities.

It is this background that lets Langston Hughes compose his text “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, and lets William Carlos Williams write about “From Spring and All”. Both works deal with the subject of “Imitation”, yet each in its own way. A decade before Williams wrote his text, he had studied in Leipzig, Germany, before World War I, in a time of a great spirit of renewal and optimism, the so-called “Gründerzeit” (“Founder’s Time”), where many companies were started and people believed science could solve any problems. Before writing his text, Langston Hughes had just come to Harlem in New York City, when the “Harlem Renaissance” started to take off. It was a culturally very prolific time and blacks could, for the first time, breath freedom and express optimism after being brutally oppressed in the South.

HOW DO THE TEXTS “THE NEGRO ARTIST AND THE RACIAL MOUNTAIN” BY LANGSTON HUGHES AND “FROM SPRING AND ALL” BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS DESCRIBE THE SUBJECT OF IMITATION?

The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain. Langston Hughes thematizes the topic of imitation from the perspective of black artists imitating ‘White’ culture. Williams grew up in a time of great racial mass movements – the “Great Migration” was a flight from Southern White oppression. A decade before Hughes published his essay, the movie “Birth of a Nation” had

opened and created great enthusiasm especially among White people. Blacks were played by white actors with blackface, and they weren't displayed in a kind view, but instead as people that projected a lot of sexual energy and aggressiveness outwards. The way blacks were displayed in that movie fed into prejudices against them being seen as threatening sexual competitors by Southern Whites; indeed many lynchings happened after black people had been accused to sexually harass white women (Hodes 176).

Yet with all this negative treatment and the attempts to misappropriate black culture (for example, the 'discovery' of Jazz by whites or even the use of 'blackface'), Hughes saw to his dismay that blacks felt their only way of becoming famous was by producing culture that was 'white' or at least pleasing to white people. It is that kind of imitation that Hughes speaks out against. Indeed, right in the first sentence of the excerpt we are reading (Hughes 806), he points out that "One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, 'I want to be a poet – not a Negro poet,'; ... 'I want to write like a white poet'; ... 'I would like to be a white poet'; ... 'I would like to be white.' And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself" (806). The power of this passage comes from the intensification of his statement. He deduces that someone who negates his wish to be a poet of his own culture wants to be from a different culture – note his usage of the words "write like a", "be a" and "be" white. For Hughes, this desire to "run away spiritually from his race" is the "mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America." (806). The other interesting notion in this paragraph is that Hughes does not contrast 'Negro' and 'white', but 'Negro' and 'American'. This may have its origin in his travels in the 1920s to Europe and Africa, where he developed more of an appreciation towards non-American cultures, yet it is a curious observation, for one could argue that those who want to become an 'American' artist do not want

to “run away spiritually” from being black, but simply being inclusive of all Americans. This, however, may not have seemed possible to Hughes at that time, since racism against blacks was widespread and the Ku Klux Klan experienced an upswell in membership.

However, Hughes also thinks that trying to appease whites means holding back black culture, because whites don't want to be too challenged – else they would not pay (“Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you”) (806). In this context, Hughes does not only criticize the tendency to tone down black culture to appease whites, he goes one step further and declares blacks being too hesitant expressing their own culture (“Most of the colored people who did read ‘Cane’ hated it. They are afraid of it.”) (807). Once more, it is curious that Hughes does not allow for the possibility that the work ‘Cane’ really was lacking in quality. He does not bring any more proof, he simply takes it as a given that ‘Cane’ “contained the finest prose written by a Negro in America” .

He specifies his claims of cultural subservience against whites when he talks about the “Philadelphia clubwoman” who is “ashamed to say her race created it”. For him, this is due to cultural indoctrination by Whites (807). He sees black people not wanting a true picture of themselves, but to make whites believe “that all Negroes are as smug and as near white in soul as she wants to be.” (807). A very interesting phrase is ‘in soul’, especially in conjunction with the conclusion of the text “We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (808). For Hughes, standing for your own race means becoming free, and the mountain is a clever symbol of a transformation: from obstacle to a summit that can be climbed.

From Spring and All. A very different view of 'Imitation' can be experienced in Williams' text 'From Spring and All' (Williams 804). In the first sentence, we learn that there is basically no new creation. In the "imagination", all "human flesh has been dead upon the earth for ten million, billion years". Nothing new can be created, since the "bird has turned into a stone", and there is an egg inside his heart that is "unlaid, remained hidden". The egg is a symbol of a new beginning and new creation; if it remains unhatched, then there is no new creation. How, then, will life go on? In cycles of imitation: "evolution has repeated itself from the beginning" (804). What that means is made clear one paragraph later: every step ever taken "has been duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that preceded in the dead ages gone by." In case the reader still has doubts if that constitutes imitation, the author is merciless: "A perfect plagiarism results" (805). The only room the author leaves for new creativity is in the imagination, which is "only ... undeceived" (805). He repeats that assertion later on: "Only the imagination is undeceived". It is interesting to note here that this sentence about the imagination being undeceived appears directly after noting that everything is new. That way, the author emphasizes the central point he is making: that everything people declare to be novel is actually just part of an endless repetition. The imagination is undeceived that even art is not new: "indeed men look about in amazement at each other with a full realization of the meaning of 'art'" (805).

HOW DO BOTH TEXTS DIFFER IN HANDLING THEIR MATERIAL?

The central difference between both is the level of perspective. While Hughes talks about culture as someone immersed in the culture, Williams is significantly more aloof. For example, Hughes talks about a mountain as an obstacle that one can climb on. This connects the reader with actual

movement within the text. He or she can see themselves experiencing the climb as a way for the soul to become free: “We build our temples . . . , strong as we know how, and we stand on top . . . , free within ourselves.” (Hughes 808). This is a strong appeal to everyone to start working together and becoming free by embracing your own culture. Hughes also talks about his own experiences in the first person. That makes the whole text very personable, and Hughes appears as a strong leader who leads the reader away from imitation into freedom by embracing the individualism. Hughes also uses many examples from his direct environment. When he talks about the “Philadelphia clubwoman”, his readers will relate. When he talks about “Puritan standards” (807), they will as well.

Williams text is much more experimental. It does not tell a coherent story, it jumps between different perspectives and threads, going from chapter six to chapter two, then chapter nine. He does not use the first person very often, he rather recounts in an aloof way what happens around him. His language is rather naturalistic, possibly informed by his medical profession, when he talks about how “human flesh has been dead”. His descriptions are also precise. He uses concrete numbers: “million, billion years” and how within the heart of a bird an “egg” remained “hidden” (Williams 804). He also creates a distance from the reader, because he declares basically everything around us worthless. Nothing is new, because it has all been duplicated. It’s almost as if he was telling the reader it was not worth it to appreciate even art – “Now indeed men look about in amazement at each other with a full realization of the meaning of ‘art’”. Apart from the one sentence “only the imagination is undeceived” (805), it is disheartening to identify with the text and relate to it. The whole text is written in a mocking tone, and even though Hughes could have embraced a satirical style as well, he chose not to. The result is that the reader can relate better to Hughes’ text.

WHY DO THE TEXTS DIFFER?

It may be a mix of personal experiences and professional background that leads to differences. Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, which was a rural neighborhood, and traveled to Europe to study medicine (Autobiography 3). He went back to the United States and practiced as a physician, writing his prose in between his work. This might have given the work a slightly more distanced character, since medical papers are kept as well in a distanced, yet precise style. In addition, as a scientist, it may have fallen easy to Williams to be more detached from the his writings, since scientists and doctors have to be willing to abandon a hypothesis when a better theory comes around. Hughes, on the other hand, worked in professions as simple as 'busboy', which made him much more directly connected to the day-to-day happenings and cultural expression. He lived in Harlem during the "Harlem Renaissance" and thus his environment may have felt like home to him.

Secondly, Williams was decidedly against the expatriate lifestyle of some of his colleagues and stayed attached to the United States (Brody 60). After his travels to study, he stayed in the United States, embracing American culture. Hughes, on the other hand, left the country in the 1920s and became more attached to African and non-American culture. Interestingly, of both authors, Hughes is the one who appears in his writings more connected to the reader. One of the reasons for that may have been the historical and cultural background – for blacks, the Harlem Renaissance provided the opportunity to breathe freely and the great chance to establish their own culture, and Hughes thrived during that period. For white people, new art forms were emerging, mostly from Europe that upended traditional art embraced in the 19th century. However, World War I dampened the optimism of the 1900s. In this context, Williams'

text can also be seen as a reaction to the disappointed cultural optimism. Nothing is truly new and there is no escape from the perpetual cycle of life and death.

CONCLUSION

Both Langston Hughes and William Carlos Williams treat a common subject – “Imitation” in diametrically opposite way, even though both writers lived at the same time in geographically very close areas. While Williams had experienced a great spirit of renewal in Germany of the beginning of the 20th century, Hughes – as a black man – was very well aware of the oppression and murders black people had experienced in the Southern United States. Williams’ background is one of great optimism and Hughes background could be enough to instill pessimism in his writings. The more disheartening it must have been for him to see that black people were squandering a great opportunity for cultural renewal through their desire to be respectable to white culture which had nothing but oppressed them. Why move away from oppression only to spiritually subordinate oneself to the oppressor’s culture?

The tragedy of World War I was one of the biggest shocks to the mostly white European culture at the beginning of the 20th century, for it replaced the great optimism of the 1900s. Williams mockery of renewal emerged from this background; it is possible he saw life and death close enough to experience enough repetition to know that nothing that seems new can ever create something that hasn’t been there before.

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