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## Books

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## Harlem, Haiti and Havana: A Comparative Critical Study of Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain, and Nicolás Guillén

By Martha Cobb

Three Continents Press, Washington, D.C.  
178 pp. \$15 (\$7 paperback)

Reviewed by

Ellen Conroy Kennedy

A browse through Martha Cobb's welcome study is likely to send you back to Langston Hughes' *I Wonder As I Wander*, with its delightful anecdote about his first and second meetings with the aristocratic Haitian writer, Jacques Roumain. In 1931, Hughes and a friend had spent most of the summer in Haiti, stretching their meager funds by living close to the "people without shoes."

Feeling too indigent to socialize with the wealthy, urbane Haitians to whom he had letters of introduction from Walter White, Arthur Spingarn and James Weldon Johnson, Hughes ignored all but one. On his last day in Port-au-Prince, he called on a fellow poet, Jacques Roumain, for an hour of animated conversation.

Boarding a Dutch freighter on which he and his friend were sailing for Cuba the same afternoon, sweltering in the summer heat, Hughes stripped off coat, tie, good shirt and pants, changing into an old and none-too-clean pair of pants.

Sock-and-shirtless, he sat down for a picnic meal on the deck. As cargo was swung aboard and into the open hatch

*"... to my amazement, descending those iron stairs to wend their way through stevedores and cargo I saw approaching a long line of elegantly dressed gentlemen, some in tail coats and gloves, followed by... dark porters and barefoot boys bearing parcels and baskets.... I recognized among them Jacques Roumain.... He had assembled a group of Haitian writers and government officials to pay me honor at the last moment and to present me with bon voyage gifts.... I was caught greasy-handed,*

*half-naked—and soxless—by an official delegation of leading Haitians."*

Unabashed, Roumain introduced Hughes to his companions as "the greatest Negro poet who had ever come to honor Haitian soil."

Unless one is a specialist, and even then, the most satisfying way to read literary criticism such as Professor Cobb's worthy venture into pioneer turf, is as a guidebook. Gather the subject texts, like the inimitable Hughes', and keep them close at hand—for reference and for recreation. For Hughes, of course, one should look not only into *I Wonder As I Wander*, an autobiography, but also into a paperback edition of his *Selected Poems*, made up of his own choices from seven earlier collections.

As for the Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillén, one should peruse either *The Great Zoo and Other Poems* (Monthly Review Press) or *Man-Making Words: Selected Poems of Nicolás Guillén* (University of Massachusetts Press), both presented bi-lingually in the original Spanish and with translations and notes by Robert Marquez.

In the case of Roumain, while there is still no bi-lingual edition of his poetry, one finds a few poems in anthologies. (Hughes' haunting 1930s translations of "Guinea" and "When the Tom-Tom Beats," first published in *The Crisis*, are among several Roumain texts in my anthology, *The Negritude Poets*, Viking, 1975). Recently back in print also is the fine Langston Hughes-Mercer Cook translation of Roumain's poignant novel of Haitian rural life, *Masters of the Dew*, (Collier-Macmillan, 1971). More beautiful material for a film script than Roumain's novel, by the way, could hardly be asked.

And what wonderful material for a tri-lingual poetry reading Martha Cobb's book could inspire! Perhaps one, with the author herself as moderator, joined by two or three of the best French, Spanish and English poetry-readers on the Howard

University campus, where Cobb chairs the Department of Romance Languages.

Martha Cobb deserves applause for her choice of these three writers, and for her intriguing comparative approach. Though she begins with an introductory section summarizing the history of Black writing in this hemisphere, two-thirds of the concise study is devoted to an analysis of texts by each of the trio. They were, of course, contemporaries, all born in the first decade of the century. The biographical material, while of interest, is summary, necessarily drawn from secondary sources, and in a study of this sort, properly incidental.

Cobb's focus is literary and esthetic. She compares and contrasts the writers and their texts, sometimes in telling juxtaposition, sometimes with classical explication, in the time-honored French academic manner. She puts Guillén's verbal rendition of Afro-Cuban musical forms side by side, for example, with so well-known an evocation of urban Black folk music as Hughes' "The Weary Blues." One readily sees the parallel between two poets who drew their material from the ordinary life and speech about them.

Hughes, Roumain and Guillén—who became friends because of their admiration for one another's poetry—wrote in three different languages (English, French and Spanish), in various genres, but often on similar themes (particularly social themes), and sometimes in similar styles. African interjections, surviving in Afro-Cuban speech, are prominent in Guillén's early work, while Roumain and Hughes tend to use "Africa as a symbolic referent [for] the sentiments and aspirations of Black people," Cobb notes.

For each of the three friends, too, as Cobb observes, the need to write "was intimately related to social ideas and ideals." Like a number of Black American poets in the 1960s and 70s, Jacques Roumain came to see poetry both as "social statement and as force for change."

In a 1940 speech, the aristocrat-turned-communist declared: "Art must be a weapon on the front line in the service of the people." We will be hearing more of this fascinating figure—a man encompassing many contradictions, between wealth and poverty, the finest French culture and that of the simplest peasant, the pursuits of poetry and scholarship as well as of social justice—tragically dead in 1944 at the early age of 37.

Roumain's political conversion, in 1932, may well have inspired his most important work, *Masters of the Dew*, which stands alone, a gem. *Ebony Wood*, the little sheaf of poems with its title-metaphor for the slave trade, is yet untranslated in its entirety. Ironically, however, its considerable impact in excerpts is much diminished, this reviewer feels, when read as a whole, because of passages which depend too exclusively on litanies of proletarian rhetoric.

Cobb also shows what Faith Berry's *Good Morning Revolution* (1973) demonstrated about Langston Hughes, that the writings of all three were deeply influenced by radical political ideas during the 1930s and 40s. All three were sympathetic to Republican Spain during the Civil War, visiting the country as war correspondents. And all three wrote poems about this 1937 war experience. Hughes alone was never a party member, skeptical perhaps after his Russian experience that any single political doctrine could remedy the social ills he so well perceived and depicted. Hughes was also the only one of the three to gradually drop ideological references from his work.

It is interesting to recall Hughes' well-known manifesto of 1926, the one that begins: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If the white folks seem pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter." Among the generations of Black intellectuals it later influenced were, of course, the French-speaking Léon Damas, Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. But Martha Cobb's research has turned up another, less familiar, literary credo of Hughes. "I do not write chiefly because I'm interested in form—in making a sonnet or a rondeau—" said the poet in an undated newspaper interview: "I am not interested in doing tricks with rhymes. I am interested in reproducing the human soul. . . ."

What is exciting, and occasionally

thrilling, about these three writers is the extent to which, out of the ordinary life of the ordinary people of their times in Harlem, in Haiti and in Havana, they were able to accomplish just that. □

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*Ellen Conroy Kennedy is writer, editor and translator. Her credits include translation of works by French, Caribbean and African writers, among them, Albert Camus, León Damas and Cheikh Anta Diop.*

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## To BE or Not To BOP Memoirs—Dizzy Gillespie With Al Fraser

Doubleday & Co., New York  
552 pp., \$14.95

Reviewed by Gregory S. Kears

Dizzy Gillespie is innovative. He loves and lives music. He can play Bebop. Bebop. Like the crazy blue notes created by "Bird's" brain/lips/ax. Like a summer with a thousand Julys, Dizzy goes to your head. His legendary up-bent horn. Bebop. Bebop. Play, man.

To conclude that Dizzy Gillespie is a musician is sort of like deciding that Julius "Dr. J" Erving is a basketball star. Or like saying that the late Bruce Lee was a karate expert. These men transcended the norm. Each moved beyond the world of what was normal and delved into the uncharted, risky realm of the theoretical to create something new and dynamic.

In the case of "Dr. J," basketball became the poetic expression of the spectacular dunk shot. In the case of Bruce Lee, the body became the cosmic connection between the soul and the spirit.

With Dizzy, well . . . it became what is now called bebop. The year was 1942 and he was playing solo trumpet in Earl "Fatha" Hines' band. He was only 25.

Oddly, one does not really get to know Dizzy Gillespie in these memoirs, not intimately. There are simply too many unexplored areas. For example, what was Dizzy's principle psychological/motivational reaction to a merciless father who would routinely whip the children "just in case we thought of doing something bad.?"

The only explanation Dizzy offers his readers for his father's travesties is that his father "wanted us all to be tough." Later Dizzy claims to have loved (and undoubtedly feared) his father and his childhood.

Dizzy never had children of his own. And

the only *explanation* offered in the book is one by his wife Lorraine (one of the more colorful of this all-star entourage), who simply states: "I don't regret [not] having any kids. See, that's why people don't understand me. I feel like if God wanted me to have children, I woulda had plenty of them." Interesting ontological rambling, even humorously ironic, yet hardly the intimacy one should expect.

Even with the help of Al Fraser, a fairly well-regarded musicologist and teacher at Cheyney State College in Pennsylvania, one is none the wiser. And Fraser's off-the-cuff conversation and pretentiously penetrating questions, although well-intended, hardly enlighten the reader.

In *Memoirs*, one gets the notes but not the subtlest nuances. One hears the music, but it frequently comes off dull and contrived, as if Dizzy responded to scads of form questions and built his life around the answers.

The redeeming quality of this work, however, is that it is strangely saved by the many *purple passages* of Dizzy's remembrances and broodings about the fantastic people he had known, admired and worked with.

Credit must be given to Fraser, despite his pesky omnipresence, for overcoming an obviously Herculean task of editing the hundreds of hours of taped interviews with the greatest names in jazz, from Dicky Wells to Charlie Parker to Sarah Vaughan to Roy Eldridge and a host of lesser luminaries. The result is an unpolished, yet often exciting oral history of not only John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie, but an important chronicle of jazz music's most dramatic evolutionary period. The book is rich with illustrations.

The great Cuban trumpeter Mario Bauza, whom Dizzy met at the Savoy in New York in 1937, says that there were two movements (as far as trumpet goes) in American music in the last 50 years. One was Louis Armstrong and the other was Dizzy Gillespie. Bandleader Woody Herman is quoted as saying, "Diz to me was the beginning of an era. And Pops [Louis Armstrong] was the beginning of an era. And during that span from Pops, everyone else in-between is not terribly important."

Those accolades must be placed into perspective, at least within the context in which Dizzy developed.

Certainly, by the middle to late 1930s jazz, as a legitimate music form, had solidified. White bands began picking up