

After All These Decades, The Complete Poems of Claude McKay

Reviewed by Professor John Lowney

Complete Poems.

By Claude McKay

Edited and with an introduction by William J. Maxwell

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Who was the first poet acclaimed for his writing in Jamaican dialect and the first black writer to receive the Medal of the Jamaica Institute of Arts and Sciences? Who wrote the first book of poetry identified with the Harlem Renaissance, a book that expressed the righteous anger of the New Negro? Who was the first well-known black writer to tour the Soviet Union, and the first to subsequently condemn Stalin's leadership? Who was the first black writer to write a novel that made the best-seller lists in the United States? Who is most recognized in the Francophone Caribbean and West Africa as the literary "inventor" of *négritude*? Who is the most prominent writer whose poetry appeared regularly in the *Catholic Worker* in the 1940s? The answer to all of these questions is, remarkably, the same writer: Claude McKay.

From the publication of *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* in 1912 when he was in his early twenties, to his migration to the United States shortly thereafter and the acclaim for his 1922 *Harlem Shadows*, to his subsequent decade of travel in the Soviet Union, Europe, and North Africa, when he became famous as both a Communist activist and the popular author of such controversial novels as *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929), to his growing disillusionment with Communism and his conversion to Catholicism before he died in 1948, McKay's journey as an artist and activist was as tumultuous as that of any poet of the twentieth century. With the publication of the first edition of his *Complete Poems*, readers can now

experience the life's work of this writer who characterized himself as a "troubadour wanderer" in his autobiography, *A Long Way From Home* (1937). The *Complete Poems* is superbly edited by William J. Maxwell, the author of *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (Columbia University Press, 1999). In addition to the poetry he has assembled from periodical as well as book publications, Maxwell includes within his thorough explanatory endnotes the introductions to McKay's books by such figures as Walter Jekyll, Max Eastman, I.A. Richards, and McKay himself. Given that much of the poetry included in this volume either has been out of print for a long while or has never been published, the publication of McKay's *Complete Poems* is an event that will transform our understanding of African diaspora writing and international modernism.

McKay is best known in the United States as the writer of the New Negro anthem, "If We Must Die," a poem whose measured but defiant appeal—"O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!"—has inspired readers worldwide since its 1919 publication in *The Liberator*. Indeed, McKay's success in expressing the militant anger of revolutionary black resistance in elevated literary English and the sonnet form distinguished him as one of the foremost literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance. *Harlem Shadows*, his first and only American book of poetry, preceded the publication of first books by such renowned poets as Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes, and it earned McKay international acclaim as the proud voice of a new generation of African American writers. Only recently, however, have readers of McKay begun to question his reputation as the radical "black poet at war," as Addison Gayle, Jr. characterized him in 1972, a poet whose representative voice was presumably compromised by his reliance on English poetic diction and European poetic forms.

The McKay who has emerged in recent years corresponds with the African diasporic, black Atlantic, and Marxist internationalist reconsiderations of African American modernism, evident most recently in Brent Hayes Edwards' *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Nationalism* (Harvard University Press, 2003), Kate A. Baldwin's *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Duke University Press, 2002), and the collection of essays edited by Geveviève Fabre and Michel Feith, *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance* (Indiana University Press, 2001). As these studies have suggested, McKay's impact on Anglophone Caribbean, African American, Francophone Caribbean and

African, and Left literary cultures makes him a more important figure than literary historians have previously recognized.

Maxwell's introduction to the *Complete Poems* is the most thorough overview of McKay's poetic accomplishment to date. It also elaborates on previous biographical studies of McKay, such as Wayne F. Cooper's *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (Louisiana State University Press, 1987) and Winston James's *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (Verso, 2000). Most importantly, Maxwell reconsiders the myths that have shaped McKay's literary reputation, including those that were initiated by McKay himself. McKay was born in the rural mountain village of Nairne Castle, Jamaica in 1889. His family was hardly representative of the impoverished Jamaican peasantry, as McKay would later suggest. By the time that McKay was born his father had advanced from a day laborer to a successful commercial farmer. As a young man, McKay was the beneficiary of two mentors who provided him with an unusual education: his brother U. Theo McKay, a schoolteacher who supported Fabian socialism, and Walter Jekyll, an English-born gentleman who was a scholar of Jamaican folklore. Their mentorship informed his early poetry, which expressed a commitment to social reform in the vernacular of rural Jamaica. The opening lines of "Quashie to Buccra" exemplify how McKay addressed such topics as the social and psychological impact of rural poverty through the voice of Jamaican farmworkers: "You tas'e petater an' you say it sweet / But you no know how hard we wuk fe it" (19). This poem, like many others in his first two volumes of poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Volumes* (both published in 1912), contrasts the perspective of the agrarian worker with that of the landlord or tourist—"De fiel' pretty? It couldn't less 'an dat" (19). While the vernacular expression of pastoral themes in these volumes earned McKay a reputation as the "Jamaican Bobby Burns" (according to Jekyll), his frank treatment of controversial racial and colonial topics has assured the lasting popularity of his early poetry in Jamaica.

McKay's subsequent journey to the "black mecca" of Harlem hardly corresponds with the archetypal narratives of migration to New York. He in fact spent two years in Manhattan, Kansas before he ever set foot in New York City. McKay initially came to the U.S. to pursue a diploma in agricultural science at the Tuskegee Institute, with the intention of returning to Jamaica to help improve the lives of farmers in his native parish. Disappointed by the military discipline at Tuskegee, however, he transferred to Kansas State University to continue his studies. When he left college for

New York in 1914, he became involved with bohemian literary and radical political circles in Greenwich Village and Harlem while supporting himself as a waiter on a Pennsylvania Railroad dining car. At this time, he began to publish his poems in the *Liberator*, the Communist journal that had succeeded the *Masses*. Another chapter of McKay's migrant life began in 1919: he embarked for London, where he spent two years as a poet, a radical activist, and editor of the Communist newspaper, the *Workers' Dreadnought*. When he returned to New York in 1921, he had become as well known as an activist as he was as a poet. He became an editor for the *Liberator* and a member of the radical black nationalist African Blood Brotherhood, and in 1922, his first (and only) American book of poetry, *Harlem Shadows*, was published. It was immediately acclaimed as the most compelling expression of the New Negro cultural renaissance. The poems he published in *Harlem Shadows* included his most militant indictments of racial injustice, sonnets such as "The White House," "America," and "Enslaved," whose passionate, often violent rhetoric contrasts dramatically with their formal properties. The tension between emotional intensity and formal restraint is inscribed within the metric "feet" of poems like "The White House":

The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,

And passion rends my vitals as I pass,

A chafing savage, down the decent street,

Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass. (148)

This same book also includes such introspective poems of urban alienation as "Tropics in New York" and "Subway Wind," poems which nostalgically contrast an idyllic childhood Jamaica of "fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills, / And dewy dawns, in mystical blue skies" (154) with the harsh streets of Manhattan. New York is more often a dynamic site of refuge and renewal, however. Among the most remarkable poems from *Harlem Shadows* are McKay's love poems, which are often passionately erotic and which, significantly, given that McKay was bisexual, rarely identify the gender of the lover who is addressed.

With such an auspicious U.S. literary debut, why would McKay then leave for Europe and not return to New York until 1934? Maxwell's introduction is most revealing about this period of travel, which is usually attributed to the poet's wanderlust. A year after the publication of *Harlem Shadows*, McKay

departed for Moscow to participate in the Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International, where he played an important role in shaping policy on “the Negro question.” As a result of his revolutionary activism, the FBI moved to prohibit his return to the U.S., sending orders to block his entry to port cities around the nation. He was also virtually prohibited from returning to Jamaica, as British authorities likewise barred his entry to British colonial or protectorate territories. Contrary to the mythic narratives of modernism, whether of the Lost Generation or the Great Migration, McKay’s period of travel was in fact more compulsory than voluntary. While his writing of this period is recognizably modernist in its transgressive crossing of boundaries, it is also informed by a consciousness of racial injustice that is likewise transnationalist. This is evident especially in the “Cities” poems, a series of urban portraits in various forms that is published in its entirety for the first time. These poems restlessly evoke the “changing moods” of cities where McKay had visited or made his home, however temporarily: Barcelona, Tanger, Fez, Marrakesh, Tetuan, Xauen, Cadiz, Berlin, Moscow, Petrograd, Paris, London, and, once again, Harlem.

The poetry that McKay wrote after returning to the U.S. is not well known. During the 1930s he wrote more prose fiction and nonfiction than poetry, including his autobiography and a history of Harlem, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940), that was supported by the Federal Writers’ Project. McKay spent the last decade of his life impoverished and intellectually isolated, however, as he had renounced Communism at the time of its greatest impact on African American cultural work, especially in Harlem. The poetry that he wrote before his 1948 death was no less aggressive in its social criticism, however, as the previously unpublished 54-poem sonnet sequence, “The Cycle,” demonstrates. This sequence is uncompromising in its satirical treatment of political and intellectual hypocrisy. No poem is fiercer, for example, than the critique of U.S. imperialism that begins “The white man is a tiger at my throat.” This poem, written during World War II, states bluntly:

*Europe and Asia, Africa await
A new Fascism, the American brand
And new worlds will be built upon race and hate*

And the Eagle and the Dollar will command. (259)

This poem was initially published in the *Catholic Worker*, the pacifist-socialist newspaper edited by Dorothy Day that became the primary venue for McKay's poetry in the 1940s. While McKay's conversion to Roman Catholicism is often dismissed by his readers as a retreat from his radical convictions, the poetry he published in the *Catholic Worker* suggests otherwise. The Catholic vision embraced by his poetry focused on black suffering—"It is the Negro's tragedy I feel / Binding me like a heavy iron chain" (260)—and as reverent as this poetry is, it is no less incisive in its exposure of social injustice.

Because McKay's life as a writer was comprised of so many apparent contradictions, he remains a controversial figure. The publication of the *Complete Poems* will surely complicate and intensify debates about his significance, as it collects for the first time in one volume his Jamaican vernacular poetry, his revolutionary political poetry, his nostalgic pastoral poetry, his erotic love poetry, and his Catholic religious poetry. The fact that he chose to compose in conventional forms after publishing his pioneering vernacular verse contradicts basic assumptions about the development of modern poetry, as McKay's most radical poetic statements are expressed through the presumably outmoded form of the sonnet. The fact that he appealed to a wide working-class and trans-Atlantic black readership through his renewal of the sonnet as a mode of public discourse suggests the inadequacy of models of modernism that would dismiss this accomplishment. As Maxwell writes in his introduction, "Taken together, the unexpected variety of McKay's *Complete Poems*—rural and urban, Communist and Catholic, caustic and erotic—reveals that he is not simply the preeminent 'poet of hate' in black letters ... Positive passion was rarely far from the surface of McKay's verse, whether the subject was the black city, or the Clarendon hills, or sexual desire, or the Catholic Church, or the revolutionary future" (xxix-xxx). The "passion" of McKay's poetry has already moved several generations of readers worldwide, but the scope of this passion has not been sufficiently recognized. Thanks to Maxwell's dedication as a scholar and editor of the *Complete Poems*, readers now have the opportunity to experience the extraordinary course of McKay's life as a poet.

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