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A. L. McLeod

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### Abstract

From 1890 to 1920 the United States experienced the transposition of a vast population of Negroes from a southern feudal peasantry to a northern urban proletariat, which resulted in the delineation of racial ghettos, or black belts, the most famous of which is New York's Harlem. This new racial experience called for a literary movement to express and interpret it, and the result was what is generally called the Harlem Renaissance, a post-war phenomenon projected on the plane of an increasingly articulate elite.

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From 1890 to 1920 the United States experienced the transposition of a vast population of Negroes from a southern feudal peasantry to a northern urban proletariat, which resulted in the delineation of racial ghettos, or black belts, the most famous of which is New York's Harlem. This new racial experience called for a literary movement to express and interpret it, and the result was what is generally called the Harlem Renaissance, a post-war phenomenon projected on the plane of an increasingly articulate élite. It was concurrent with mass unemployment, the jazz age, race riots, the European expatriation of the Lost Generation, and

was characterized by 'an angry, sceptical, restless mood' that could be discerned even in the cities of Canada.<sup>1</sup>

James Weldon Johnson, accurately described as 'the only true artist among the early Negro novelists'<sup>2</sup> and a literary critic of uncommon perspicacity, declared the Jamaica-born Claude McKay to be 'one of the great forces in bringing about . . . the Negro literary Renaissance',<sup>3</sup> and McKay himself acknowledged that he was more a forerunner than a principal in the movement. But he has consistently been identified with it because some of his early American poems expressed in language of consummate lyricism and exigent craftsmanship the deepest feelings of the black masses still waiting for their literary spokesmen. Yet he stood apart, a black writer adapting to white audiences.

McKay's initial literary acclaim resulted from the publication in 1912 of *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, an aggregate of 78 poems – largely of place, taste, tradition, and Empire – written in dialect that purports to capture the phonological and linguistic idiosyncrasies of West Indian pidgin, and characterized by McKay's mentor-editor as 'What Italian is to Latin . . . a feminine version of masculine English'.<sup>4</sup>

Walter Jekyll, an English dilettante living in Jamaica, had heard about 'a negro who was writing poetry' and arranged to see his work. As McKay recalls:

He read my poetry one day. Then he laughed a lot. . . All these poems that I gave him to read had been done in straight English, but there was one short one in the Jamaican dialect. That was the poem that he was laughing about. He then told me that he did not like my poems in straight English – they were repetitious. 'But this', he said, 'is the real thing. Now is your chance as a native boy to put the Jamaican dialect into literary language. I am sure that your poems will sell'.<sup>5</sup>

McKay discovered that dialect poems were much easier to write than poems in straight English: 'Poems seemed to flow from my heart, my head, my hands. I just could not restrain myself from writing. When I sent them to Mr Jekyll, he wrote back to say that each new one was more beautiful than the last'.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the young author redirected his instinctive predilection for the

use of standard literary English (with which he had become proficient through reading books lent to him by his brother, a school-teacher) to the language of colonial tutelage. It was one thing for Jekyll to collect Annancy tales and transcribe them into his approximation of the West Indian dialect, but it was almost nefarious to encourage a native youth aspiring to poetic expression to resort to dialect English: first, because there was no legitimate literary market among indigenes; second, because the European population would replicate Jekyll's response and laugh at his poems; finally, because – as Frantz Fanon tells us – 'The Negro of the West Indies becomes proportionately whiter – that is, he becomes closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the language'.<sup>7</sup> And only with that mastery does he ultimately gain his particular or universal audience.

The American vogue of dialect poetry had begun during the Civil War with the effusions of Irwin Russell, a white Southerner, which were lauded by Joel Chandler Harris for their depiction of the old-fashioned, unadulterated Negro, still dear to the Southern heart. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the first Black writer to use the form, sought to amuse white readers to whom the stereotype of Negroes as childlike poltroons was agreeable, and was commended by William Dean Howells, the doyen of author-critics and arbiter of philistine values in his day. But dialect verse, based on the minstrel tradition, actually presented caricatures and sentimentalized situations that bore little, if any, relation to the actual world of the American Negro. It is therefore remarkable that Claude McKay, working in a form so clearly circumscribed in content, theme, and style, produced individual poems of some artistic merit.

*Songs of Jamaica* was an immediate, if not a sustained, success: it was reviewed in several British colonies, and the edition of 2,000 copies was apparently justified, though there was insufficient demand for a reprint until 1972. McKay tells us that

The wealthy near-whites and the American and British residents all wanted to know me. Mr Jekyll trotted me out. Wherever I went, I read my poems in the dialect and they all caused great amusement among the upper-class people.<sup>8</sup>

Further, he indicates that Jekyll tried to get an acquaintance to place a copy on King Edward's table, because 'even though the book was not read, if it were mentioned in a London drawing room of consequence, and reviewed by society, it might have a sale as a curiosity'. Encouraged by events to try gilding the lily, Jekyll even toyed with the belief that 'Shakespeare might become interesting in the American Negro dialect'.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear, then, that the neophyte poet's audience had been determined for him by his mentor's insistence on the use of Jamaican dialect, so that the users of standard English would be amused by the efforts of a colonial native. While the technique of the poems is imitative of minor Victorian verse in their stanzaic and rhythmic patterns, the language is clearly presumed to be wholly unfamiliar to the audience, for the first 50 poems are glossed with 480 footnotes; only four poems lack notes. Even the title of the opening poem, 'Quashie to Buccra', is explained as meaning Black man speaking to White man. It is clearly redundant of Jekyll to comment in the Preface that 'Readers of this volume will be interested to know that they have here the thoughts and feelings of a Jamaican peasant of pure black blood'.

But what are those thoughts and feelings? In 'My Native Land, My Home', the poet reassures his audience that while

Jamaica is de nigger's place,  
No mind whe' some declare. . .

E'en ef you mek me beggar die,  
I'll trust you all de same,  
An none de less on you rely,  
Nor saddle you wid blame.

And in 'Old England' he sings a canticle to King and Empire that must have warmed many a planter's or civil servant's heart. The poet opens by telling us that he has an unconquerable longing in his heart

Just to view de homeland England, in de streets of London walk  
An' to see de famous sights dem 'bouten which dere's so much talk

An' to see de fact'ry chimneys pourin' smoke up to de sky,  
An' to see de matches-children dat I hear 'bout, passing by.

He then says that he would love to see Saint Paul's cathedral and hear 'some of de great Learnin' coming from de bishops', and to visit Westminster Abbey in order to

see immortal Milton an' de wul'-famous Shakespeare,  
Past'ral Wordswort', Gentle Gray, an' all de great sons buried dere.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, he assures us that he would then return to the Caribbean.

Unfortunately, this type of verse is to be found in the literary first fruits of most of the Commonwealth countries; and in Nigeria one of the poets, Dennis Chukude Osadebay, produced doggerel much worse in his *Africa Sings* as recently as 1952.

Apparently the youthful McKay realized that he had been used for the amusement of a local parlor audience, because in his autobiographical manuscript 'My Green Hills of Jamaica' he recalls that 'Back in my mind there had really been the desire to find a bigger audience. Jamaica was too small for high achievement. There, one was isolated, cut off from the great currents of life. . . . Some day I would write poetry in straight English and amaze and confound them'.<sup>11</sup> And this resolve reminds us of Frantz Fanon's observation that 'Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black man express himself properly, for then in truth he is putting on the white world'.<sup>12</sup>

Although he was immediately and inaccurately called the 'Burns of Jamaica', McKay left to pursue studies in agriculture in the United States. Then, withdrawing from academic work for a series of menial and manual employments, he says, 'I poured myself out with passion of love and hate, of sorrow and joy, writing out of myself, waiting for an audience'.<sup>13</sup>

In his *Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History*, R. S. Crane declares:

A writer has always . . . a contemporary audience in view, the specific character of which is bound to influence to some extent, often without full awareness on his part, the invention and handling of his matter . . . Every

work, no matter how perfect its art, inevitably reflects its audience ... through the moral, social, psychological and literary conventions it employs. Less distinguished works of any age tend to be mere formulary productions in which everything is determined in their writers' preoccupation with what the general public expected, or would resent, in writings of a certain kind.<sup>14</sup>

This is essentially a paraphrase of Aristotle's commentary in Book II of the *Rhetoric*, and is widely accepted, though some also see merit in Walter S. Ong's thesis that 'the writer's audience is always a fiction'.<sup>15</sup>

While waiting for his audience, McKay met Frank Harris, the editor of *Pearson's Magazine*, who was impressed with the young Jamaican's outpouring of 'love and hate, sorrow and joy', and published some of his poems. Subsequently, others appeared in Max Eastman's *The Liberator*, Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Worker's Dreadnought*, and I. A. Richards' *Cambridge Magazine* – all liberal bourgeois journals devoted to progressive causes and supported almost entirely by the white intelligentsia, socialist *rentiers*, and others of literary-political interests. Thus, almost inadvertently, and clearly 'without full awareness on his part', McKay's future audience was determined; and it influenced both invention and handling of his content. The Negro Question was only one of the interests of these periodicals – perhaps even a peripheral one – and such poems as 'The Harlem Dancer', 'Joy in the Woods', and 'Summer Morn in New Hampshire' (mainly orthodox sonnets of place and mood which give incontrovertible proof of McKay's exigent craftsmanship) were surely more agreeable than the strident truculence of such poems of social protest as 'If We Must Die', 'The Lynching' and 'To the White Fiends'.

Eastman, paraphrasing Shelley, told McKay, 'You are the leading revolutionary figure in the Negro world',<sup>16</sup> and the poet was apparently convinced; but oblivious to the restraints imposed by the selection or acceptance of any contemporary audience, he then demanded that *The Liberator* devote additional space to the Negro Question. The more realistic Eastman countered that 'If we publish too much material about the Negro, our white readers would dismiss the *magazine*, not the material. They would stop



buying and reading it'.<sup>17</sup> The result was an editorial contretemps and McKay's departure for the Third International, meeting in Moscow, in search of a different audience.

Contrary to Eastman's estimate and McKay's own fancy, he did not enjoy a leadership role in the black community: in fact, he was not even accepted as a member of its literary elite. Jean Wagner explains it this way:

Many of the Black Renaissance intellectuals never considered Claude McKay as one of their group. They were a bit afraid of this intruder from Jamaica who just popped up in Harlem one fine morning . . . and preferred the company of Leftist extremists to the elegant ambience of the salons. On the other hand, while the Renaissance was in full swing in America, McKay was wandering through Europe and North Africa, and so he cut himself off from the center of the black world that Harlem had meanwhile become. Further, his whole character, intransigent and violent, and the passion with which he lashed out at his friends of both races often gave him a reputation for being unsociable and rebellious.<sup>18</sup>

Further, McKay was obsessed with the Negro Question in the abstract: not a noted realist, he was concerned about long-range and universal problems, while the Harlem writers were more immediate and parochial but practical in their outlook. When he was in the Soviet Union he affected to be an African, a symbol of the universal black man rather than a Jamaican or an American Negro, and he had no compunction in usurping the role of the mulatto who was an official member of the American delegation. And he was never really an American Black; he remained at heart a West Indian. (It must be remembered that McKay retained his British citizenship until 1940.) Most important, it seems, he never identified with the urban Black of the United States: his orientation was always to an Edenic countryside of myth and memory: 'My island of Jamaica', he writes in his literary testament (completed just before his death and still unpublished), 'was like a beautiful garden of human relationships . . . We all grew up like wildflowers, like an exotic garden planted by God'. And it was this vivid recollection, this fond remembrance of a distant time and place that provided him with the basis for his repeated an-

tithesis of *la vie naturelle* and *la vie mécanique*, to the clear advantage of the first.

This attachment to his island paradise was an obvious impediment to establishing rapport with southern share-croppers who had been translated to the brownstone tenements of Harlem: and they were unlikely to become his audience when he wrote, 'I love to think of Communism liberating millions of city folk to go back to the land'.<sup>19</sup>

But the real explanation of his failure to gain an identifiable Black audience may rest in his candid acknowledgement in 'My Green Hills' that in Jamaica 'Our opinion of American Negroes was that they were all clowns, more or less'.

With such a premise, the only tenable conclusion is that McKay quite early, and as a result of a cultural imperative, decided that his literary audience must be white; his youthful and continuing association with freethinkers of socialist leanings further narrowed it, and the break with *The Liberator* further impelled him towards communism. As the only feted black in Moscow he found yet another – and more demanding – audience to adapt to.

The immediate literary consequence of McKay's 'magic pilgrimage' (as he called the Russian visit) was a speech to the Fourth Congress; in addition, there was a short correspondence with Trotsky, and a booklet containing three short stories: 'The Mulatto Girl', 'Soldier's Return', and the eponymous 'Trial by Lynching', which emphasize the horrors of Southern life for Negroes, the poignancies of inter-racial associations, and the close relationship between capitalist enterprise and racial policy. In a prefatory note to 'Trial by Lynching', the Russian translator describes McKay as 'a member of the American Workers' Party, which adheres to the Comintern and develops communist propaganda among negroes'. Understandably, such a disclosure would not endear him to United States immigration officials, but the only copy in the United States was not available in English until 1976.<sup>20</sup>

Early in 1923 McKay completed *The Negroes in America*, which he had been commissioned to write for the State Publishing Department of the U.S.S.R., and which has only now been trans-

lated. This clearly shows the extent to which McKay had distanced himself from the mainstream of the American black community: he openly criticizes Booker T. Washington and his moderates, Dr W. E. B. DuBois and his 'Talented Tenth' policy, A. Philip Randolph and the black trade unionists, and virtually all others. Finally, in two appendices he establishes himself as a *bona fide* member of the Communist Party, and by so doing, gained a moment's attention in a foreign land and cut his ties with Harlem.

Leaving the Soviet Union, McKay became 'a troubador wanderer' (to use his own phrase), and settled mainly in Marseilles and Morocco, where he produced four works of fiction. *Home to Harlem* (1928), a structurally weak novel of life in the Black Belt, was criticized by Dr DuBois as a filthy and degenerate work that catered to the prurient interests of Whites; *Banjo* (1929), set in Marseilles, was again salacious and pandered to those curious about the licentiousness of directionless Blacks; *Gingertown* (1932), a collection of short stories, offered vignettes of the feckless in both Harlem and Jamaica. But it was apparent that McKay was now as far from the essence of one place as the other: his writing lacked both veracity and verisimilitude. Gladys Wilson, a friend, wrote to him, 'But Claude, when you write of Harlem . . . somehow it doesn't click. Of course, you have been away for ten years and many changes have taken place'.<sup>21</sup> Stylistically, his writing was becoming anachronistic, structurally it was becoming episodic, and substantially it was becoming anathema. Finally, in *Banana Bottom* (1933) he wrote a novel about missionaries and a native victim of rape, set in a Rousseauesque version of Jamaica where the Blacks - McKay's 'no-land race' - enjoy 'laughter and melody . . . simple, sensuous feelings and responses', and 'the compensating security of big-bosomed women'.

All of these works are examples of Crane's 'mere formulary productions in which nearly everything is determined by their writers' preoccupations with what the general public expected', and are therefore properly described as undistinguished. Alain Locke, a Harlem Black, accused McKay of having become a 'black twin' of Frank Harris, and of being 'caught in the egocentric predicament of aesthetic vanity and exhibitionism' and hence

guilty of apostasy to Jamaica, Harlem, and the Left.<sup>22</sup>

After his return to the United States in 1934, McKay wrote two prose works; the first was *A Long Way From Home* (1937), an apologia enlivened by anecdotal reminiscences of people and places, comments on 'reactionary criticism', and romanticized reflections on life in Marseilles 'Among a great gang of black and brown humanity . . . all herded together in a warm group . . . The odors of dark bodies, sweating through a day's hard work, like the odor of stabled horses'.<sup>23</sup> It was against just such conditions that Harlem had rioted. His *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940) is a quasi-sociological mélange of commentary clearly intended for the delectation of white voyeurs. Father Divine, Marcus Garvey, black entertainers and politicians are subjected to an iconoclastic, sometimes satiric, scrutiny, while the final fifty pages (ostensibly on organized labour among Negroes) degenerates into an anti-communist screed. The one-time partisan attacks 'the intellectuals and intelligentsia . . . who were fooled and stampeded by Communist tactics', expresses a preference for Fascism *vis-à-vis* Communism, now again supports Booker T. Washington, and advocates segregation and the separate development of Blacks – i.e., *apartheid*.

His apotheosis and absolute alienation from the literary fellowship of Baptist Harlem came with his conversion to Roman Catholicism, his writing for the *Catholic Worker*, and his declaration in 'My Green Hills' that 'the Protestant Church . . . from the beginning of its existence was the concubine of imperialist aggressors . . . Catholicism has remained a sister of mercy'. Understandably, he moved to Chicago and thus removed himself physically as far away from the black masses that he had wanted as an audience as he had already done emotionally and intellectually.

In essence, McKay's failure to become the literary voice of America's vast black community was the result of his constant adaptation to white audiences, and his inability to see himself as an urban Negro, which was a consequence of his Jamaican background. As Fanon tells us, the West Indian schoolboy

subjectively adopts a white man's attitude. Little by little one can observe in the young West Indian the formation and crystallization of an attitude and a way of thinking that are essentially white . . . But the West Indian does not think of himself as a black man; he thinks of himself as a West Indian. The Negro lives in Africa. Subjectively, intellectually, the West Indian conducts himself like a white man. But he is black.<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES

1. Desmond Pacey, 'The Writer and His Public, 1920-1960', in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, edited by Carl F. Klinck et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 477.
2. Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 46.
3. James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 1930), p. 266.
4. *The Dialect Poetry of Claude McKay* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), p. 5.
5. Claude McKay, 'My Green Hills of Jamaica' (unpublished MS), p. 99.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
7. Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), p. 34. (My translation.)
8. McKay, 'My Green Hills of Jamaica', p. 50.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
10. Milton is buried in St Giles, Cripplegate; Wordsworth at Grasmere; Shakespeare at Stratford-on-Avon; Gray at Stoke Poges. To err is human.
11. McKay, 'My Green Hills of Jamaica', p. 117.
12. Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
13. Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p. 4.
14. R. S. Crane, *Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 68-69.
15. Walter S. Ong, 'The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction' *PMLA*, 90, 1 (1975), 9-21.
16. Letter from Max Eastman to Claude McKay, 12 April 1923, in *The Passion of Claude McKay*, edited by Wayne Cooper (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p. 89.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
18. Jean Wagner, *Les Poètes Nègres des États-Unis* (Paris: Librairie Istra, 1963), p. 211. (My translation.)
19. 'How Black Sees Green and Red', *The Liberator*, IV (June 1921), 20.
20. Claude McKay, *Trial by Lynching: Stories about Negro Life in North America*, edited by A. L. McLeod (Mysore, 1976).

21. Letter, 23 March 1923. James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University Library.
22. Alain Locke, 'Spiritual Truancy', *New Challenge*, 2 (1937), 81-84.
23. McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, p. 277.
24. Fanon, p. 140. (The writer's translation.)

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