

Claude McKay and the Preacher's Complaint

Daniel B. Kasten

"What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun."

Ecclesiastes 1 : 9

The words of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes have echoed through the ages and supplied a constant and solemn refrain for the would-be innovator: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity... Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us." (Ecclesiastes 1 : 10) There are, of course, those who would scoff at the Preacher. Look at our rockets; look at our computers; history is bunk! Perhaps, but the Preacher was not talking of technology; he was examining the marrow of the human spirit. Is not the meaningless sound and fury of Macbeth the same as the emptiness of modern man or the "vanity" of the Preacher? Is the twentieth century prisoner of fate really different from Oedipus? It seems that, at least at one level, the Preacher was right.

Nonetheless, contemporary readers seem to be constantly searching for something new. In the 1960's Americans witnessed the birth of two of these "new" developments in literature and in life style. One was the rise of romanticism and primitivism. Suddenly everyone was seeking to rediscover nature and to release himself from the shackles of the machine age. Instantly, everyone who was "in" became fascinated with the land, with mysticism, and with such noble primitives as Native Americans and the exotic tribesmen of Papuan New Guinea.

The other "new" development was an explosion of social discontent and protest. Street marches became passé as campuses closed and entire cities were racked by bombs, bullets, and flames. Two sparks, perhaps related, ignited this inferno: the senseless horror of Vietnam and the black fury of social and racial inequality.

But the Preacher's message remains, "It has been already in the ages before us." Modern romanticism and primitivism have roots much older than Rod McKuen's glossy collections. What are the Psalms, *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Nibelungenlied*? What are the *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Leatherstocking Tales* if not reflections of man's urge to break from his life of drudgery and routine and to soar as high and as free as Noah's dove in a reborn world? Man's desire to be a child of nature is much older than the *Whole Earth Catalogue*; it long predates Rousseau; it is his eternal quest for wholeness, for meaning, for the lost Eden.

The other "new" development, social protest, is almost as old. The struggle against injustice is as old as organized society. Antigone set no precedents by disobeying civil authority. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were indeed fortunate to have their furnace cooled by an angel. God did not choose to calm the fire for Socrates,

for Joan of Arc, or for Martin Luther King. Nonetheless, protest has been a major theme for as long as literature has recorded the thoughts and actions of mankind. Though only in recent times has equal opportunity become a conceivable goal of any national state, the struggle to cast off oppression is as old as social inequality.

So, hard as we try to ignore him, the Preacher cannot be forgotten. In matters of genuine human consequence, there *is* nothing new under the sun. Primitivism and protest were not inventions of the sixties. The beginning of man's search for wholeness and dignity must have been concurrent with the acquisition of his most precious possession and greatest burden: the human spirit.

In the United States during the 1920's, there arose a movement which once again reaffirmed the unquenchable soul of man. Unto the artistic stage stepped the so-called "New Negroes." Their work, like the "new" developments of the 1960's, was as old as humanity. Their task was not to invent the human soul, or even black Soul. Their movement was not a birth but a rebirth, a renaissance, of that which is eternal in man, white and black. The Harlem Renaissance was simply the first important black expression of what had always been. In the vanguard of this new-old movement was a young Jamaican, Claude McKay.

McKay, whose first American poems were published in 1917, was the earliest, though probably not the greatest, of the Black Renaissance writers. However, though he belonged to the same time, he was in many ways not really a part of the Harlem Renaissance group. He was, after all, ten years older than the other writers of the Renaissance. Perhaps more importantly, he did not even live in the United States during most of the 1920's, and he did not become an American citizen until 1940.

A small Jamaican village is, indeed, a strange genesis for a prominent American poet, but such a village was, in fact, the 1899 birthplace of Claude McKay. The youngest of eleven children born to peasant farmers, McKay received his early education from a free-thinking brother who was a village schoolmaster and from Walter Jeckyll, an English resident of the island.¹ Growing up in rural Jamaica, he experienced no direct racial prejudice, since everyone in his section of the island was black. The joy of these early years, free from the curse of color which plagued him all his life after he left Jamaica, is reflected in the two books of verse which Jeckyll helped him to get published before McKay left the island. *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* express McKay's contentment in a natural paradise and present clear portraits of the simple but fulfilled lives of black Jamaican peasants.

But the Jamaican scene could not contain the aspirations of young McKay. In 1912 he came to the United States, ostensibly to study agriculture at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. It seems clear, however, that he really came not so much to study as to find a larger public, to escape from his isolation, and to benefit from the stimulation and vitality of life in America. He stayed at Tuskegee only a few months before transferring to Kansas State College where he remained from 1912 to 1914. By 1914 McKay had had enough of Kansas and of agriculture and set out for New York in search of fame and fortune. He thus completed his move from rural to big city life, a move that was representative of the south to north migration of so many black

Americans which was then just beginning.

In New York he held numerous menial jobs while finding his way into the radical bohemian culture which was forming around Greenwich Village. After the War he became associated with Max Eastman, editor of the most openly Marxist publication in America at that time, *The Liberator*.²

Like his white contemporaries, McKay experienced the emptiness of the Lost Generation after the War. In 1918 he wrote that World War One had proven the "hollowness of nationhood, patriotism, racial pride, and most of the things one was taught to respect and reverence."³ Following the pattern set by white intellectuals of post-war America, McKay sought to escape the vacuity of the times by moving to Europe. He went first to England where in 1919 and 1920 he worked for a socialist newspaper. He then returned briefly to New York and was, for a short time, the co-editor of *The Liberator*. However, in 1922 he began a twelve-year self-exile from America. Because of his Marxist leanings, he was naturally drawn to the Soviet Union. In 1922 he made a triumphant tour of Russia. He met with Soviet leaders, attended the Fourth Party Congress, and was hailed as a representative of the coming Revolution in America.⁴

McKay was not, however, completely won over to the Russian model of communism, and he left the country to take up residence in Paris. In the twelve years which followed, McKay changed his residence often in France, Spain, and Morocco. Like most of his fellow expatriots, he found that meaning and inner peace were as elusive in Europe as they had been in America. He did not even feel comfortable in the expatriot subculture: "They couldn't understand the instinctive... pride of a black person resolute in being himself and yet living a simple, civilized life like themselves."⁵

Despite the fact that much of McKay's writing was done abroad, his themes were primarily American. His major concerns, primitivism and racial commentary, were shared by most of the other writers of the Black Renaissance. All of them were demonstrating a new spirit of self-respect and self-dependence which arose within the black intellectual community in the 1920's. Perhaps the fight for democracy abroad led to greater expectations at home for post World War One blacks.

McKay, himself, did not care to identify with the New Negro school of writers. He felt that they were too influenced by the Euro-American tradition. He recognized that literature, by its very nature, is bound to a people, and he felt that a true renaissance had to get down to the black racial roots. In his poem "The Negro's Tragedy," he says that "Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white/Can penetrate into the Negro's ken."⁶ McKay strongly disagreed with those middle class blacks who did not want to discuss the lives of that majority of American blacks who were poor and uneducated and who failed to subscribe to the white standards of morality. "Getting down to our natural roots and building up from our own people is not savagery," he said, "It is culture."⁷ Gradually, McKay lost his affinity for communism, but he remained convinced of the worth of the common Negro. He believed that in the black working people there existed an uninhibited creativity and joy in life that

Europeans and white Americans had lost.

It was this belief in the common man and his boyhood memories of Jamaica which provided the framework for many of his poems and for all three of his novels. Jamaica remained, for McKay, an island paradise, and recapturing the simplicity, the freshness, and the lost innocence of the island and its people became one of his major literary themes. Other black writers of the time looked to Africa as their natural home, but for McKay, home was Jamaica. His Jamaican poems capture the exotic, earthy qualities of black peasantry, but his peasants are universal and could be exchanged for those of any other country. As they till the soil in the traditional ways, they achieve a kind of harmony with the land and with themselves which makes them the envy of those caught in the web of civilization and material prosperity. He saw in the idyllic life of the tropics all that is antithetical to the tension, ugliness, and gloom of Western civilization. The primacy of Mother Earth and hatred of the city are common motifs in his Jamaican poems. His peasants are proud, though poor. Differences between them and their white landlords are economic rather than racial. The Jamaican dialect of his poems is authentic, not the stereotyped illiteracy which Paul Lawrence Dunbar had borrowed from white writers. McKay, unlike Dunbar, sought to be truly the voice of the folk.⁸ The longer McKay stayed away from Jamaica, the more he yearned for it. In one of his later poems, "A Song of the Moon," he laments that the romance and beauty of the Jamaican moon is lost in the city, "Its silver seems so antique and so severe/Against the glow of one electric globe."⁹

In his fiction as well as in his verse, McKay explored the primitive spontaneity of natural man and found it superior to the programmed efficiency of Western man. He was not, of course, the only artist to be drawn to the primitive. Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* and Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* are examples of white writers' interest in the same topic. In fact, in the 1920's many whites came to look on blacks as an uninhibited force in tune with life. This white appreciation was undoubtedly partially responsible for the surge in the popularity of black art in the 1920's

McKay sought throughout his life to understand and to achieve the harmony which he was sure existed in the common black man. Though his attack on the fraudulence and duplicity of Western civilization was similar to that of his white contemporaries, he saw salvation in a return to ethnic purity and simple living. McKay thought that the trend toward cultural standardization was robbing the world of its charm and diversity.

In his art, McKay seemed able to resolve the problems of black intellectuals with a retreat to primitivism, but his own life was less consistent. He, like all educated people who long for the simple life, experienced the impossibility of really going back. In his autobiography he admitted that "My damned white education has robbed me of much of the primitive vitality, the pure stamina, the simple unswaggering strength of the Negro race."¹⁰

McKay's three novels were an investigation of his inner conflict between reason

and instinctive action. His first novel, published in 1928 and hailed by Langston Hughes as "the first flower of the Harlem Renaissance,"¹¹ was called *Home to Harlem*. It focuses on the contrast between the uncomplicated lives of the common Harlem folk and the frustration and anxiety of educated blacks. In the book McKay seems to suggest that only the instinctive primitive can be happy in a white dominated society. The intellectual is doomed to wander, like McKay, in search of self.¹²

McKay's second novel, *Banjo*, also emphasizes the value of happy irresponsibility in the face of civilization. In one of his more sober and didactic moments, Jake, the leading character in *Banjo*, resolves that civilization will not take the love of color, joy, beauty, vitality, and nobility out of his life and make him like one of the poor masses of its pale creatures.¹³

McKay's last novel, *Banana Bottom*, was set in Jamaica. It contrasts the uninhibited, pastoral existence of the natives with the dour, sterile lives of the white missionaries living among them. As in the two other novels, the leading character of *Banana Bottom* rejects the "civilized" value system in favor of the primitive values of the black folk culture.

Although McKay's early poetry and his three novels, written between 1928 and 1933, stress primitivism, the major theme in most of his best poetry was the fight against evil and racial oppression. Unfortunately, a number of his protest poems are spoiled by triteness and obvious didacticism. He was so emotionally involved with the subject that he sometimes lost control of his poetic tools.

His anger and frustration at white oppression were, of course, well founded. In 1912, soon after coming to the United States, he commented, "I was horrified; my spirit revolted against the ignoble cruelty and blindness of it all."¹⁴ This revulsion against racial prejudice is evident in most of his major poetry. He once commented that color was his main psychological problem and the source of his restlessness.¹⁵ McKay felt that racial evil was gnawing at America like a cancer. He felt that because of the country's immense size and power, America was unable to recognize and treat the disease which was destroying it. In his poem "America in Retrospect" McKay warns, "I see your great allsweeping lights that blind/Your vision to the shadow over you."¹⁶

McKay shunned the black nationalism of Marcus Garvey whom he regarded as a charlatan, but he was strong in his racial pride and in his resolve to face white oppression with an unbowed spirit. In his poetry he expressed the New Negro's determination to protect his human dignity, his cultural worth, and his right to a decent life. This determination is emphasized in McKay's poem "The Wild Goat," which makes the unmistakable point that freedom is more important for him than the material comforts offered by white society. His spirit could not be bought.

Though he refused to accept racial inequality in any form, McKay did not hate his adopted country. In his poem "America" he proclaims, "I love this cultured hell that tests my youth./Her bigness sweeps me like a flood."¹⁷ Thus, he seemed to feel real pride in his soiled country. But despite his expressed love for "this cultured hell," McKay was full of hatred for the racial status quo. This hatred flashes like

fire in "The White City": "Deep in the secret chambers of my heart/I muse my life-long hate."¹⁸ In "Baptism" he promises that he will withstand his ignoble treatment and grow stronger because of it: "I will come out, back to your world of leaves/A stronger soul within a finer frame."¹⁹ McKay was, of all the black artists of the Renaissance, the poet of hate. Hate seemed to help him achieve a personal equilibrium in the face of bigotry.

One of McKay's poems, more than any other artistic statement of the period, was a call to arms in the battle against oppression. The poem was a black response to the race riots of 1919 which left hundreds of blacks dead and thousands homeless in cities across the country. "If We Must Die" first appeared in the July, 1919, issue of *The Liberator*. Its disciplined sonnet form, which McKay often used, contrasts strikingly with the bitter challenging fire of its content:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murdering, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.²⁰

This stirring poem seemed to speak for the masses. All across America it was read in black churches, schools, clubs, and at mass meetings. The sonnet's universality is demonstrated by the fact that Winston Churchill read it to the British House of Commons as a reminder of his countrymen's bulldog determination to face the Nazi threat and, if necessary, to die in defense of democracy.

If this poem and much of McKay's later poetry seem filled with vituperation, it should be remembered that probably no American artists have ever faced greater frustration than the black writers of the 1920's. Richard Wright comments, "The middle class Negro writers were condemned by America to stand before a Chinese Wall and wail that they were like other men, that they felt as others felt."²¹

Throughout most of his life, McKay's response to white indignities was to adopt an attitude of moral superiority. He remained proud of his blackness and felt that moral degeneration was the price blacks must pay for rejecting their ancestry. He attempted in his poetry to help the Negro believe in himself as a person of intrinsic value.

McKay's strength and sense of moral superiority are demonstrated in several of his poems. In "To The White Fiends" he emphasizes that revenge would be sweet but that God has given him the mission to prove himself of higher worth than the whites. A similar theme is evident in "The White House," a protest against Jim Crow segregation laws: "Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate/Against the potent poison of your hate."²² And in "My House" he affirms his pride in the blackness which houses his spirit:

I know the delight of being strange,
The penalty of difference in a crowd,
The loneliness of wisdom among fools,
Yet never have I felt but very proud,
Though I have suffered agonies of hell,
Of living in my own peculiar cell.²³

The last years of McKay's life seemed a sharp contrast to all that went before. Several years before his death he was converted to Roman Catholicism. He saw his conversion as a victory over his passions and as a source of meaning in an empty world. His final four years, 1944-48, were spent teaching in Catholic schools in Chicago. His last poetry, religious and passive, had lost its sting. Claude McKay, the angry young artist, ended his writing career with the almost submissive verse, "Oh, segregation is not the whole sin/The Negroes need salvation from within."²⁴

Thus one of the most talented writers of the Black Renaissance retired from the arena of racial struggle. However, he left behind an important body of work which must qualify him for inclusion among the ranks of significant black artists. His principal theses, romantic primitivism and social protest, were not new. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes was astute as a critic of the arts: There *is* nothing new under the sun. Claude McKay, like most other distinguished artists, will be remembered not so much for his innovations as for his treatment of human emotions which are universal and eternal.

Notes

1. Countee Cullen, *Caroling Dusk* (New York: Harper, 1927), p. 83.
2. James O. Young, *Black Writers of the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), p. 56.
3. Ibid., p. 59.
4. Michael B. Stoff, "Claude McKay and the Cult of Primitivism," *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, ed. Arna Bontemps (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1972), p. 144.
5. Young, p. 60.
6. Claude McKay, "The Negro's Tragedy," *Black Voices*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: Mentor, 1968), p. 373.
7. Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 247.

- 8 Ibid., p. 205.
9. Claude McKay, "A Song of the Moon," *The Poetry of the Negro*, eds. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 98.
10. Stoff, p. 142.
11. Ibid., p. 130.
12. Ibid., p. 134.
13. Ibid., p. 137.
14. Wayne Cooper, "Claude McKay and the New Negro of the 1920's," *The Black American Writer*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, 1969), p. 55.
15. Stoff, p. 136.
16. Wagner, p. 234.
17. McKay, "America," *Black Voices*, p. 374.
18. McKay, "The White City," *Black Voices*, p. 374.
19. McKay, "Baptism," *Black Voices*, p. 372.
20. McKay, "If We Must Die," *Black Voices*, p. 372.
21. Abraham Chapman, "Introduction," *Black Voices*, p. 45.
22. McKay, "The White House," *Black Voices*, p. 375.
23. Wagner, p. 257.

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The Preacher in the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes maintains that "There is nothing new under the sun." While this contention is ridiculous in the areas of technology and material progress, it has considerable validity in matters of the human spirit, the domain of the arts.

The recent literary and social movements for a return to nature and toward liberation of all types are hardly new ideas. A previous, though not initial presentation of those premises occurred in the 1920's in the form of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement of black artists centered in New York's Harlem district.

One of the first members of the Renaissance movement was Claude McKay, a Jamaican black who came to the United States to study agriculture and remained to pursue a writing career. During his youth on the idyllic island, he experienced the slow-paced rhythms of life which he ever-after longed for in his poetry and novels. His exposure to American racial injustice provided the basis for his second principal artistic theme of social protest.

McKay's refusal to accept American racial discrimination drove him to self-exile, first in the Soviet Union and later in western Europe. But even living abroad he was unable to escape his anger and continued to feel the need for building pride in blackness. In these efforts he strove for independence from the Euro-American literary tradition.

He cried out against the evil of racial inequality and in much of his work attempted to demonstrate the superior moral position of black peasants to their white overlords. He expressed love for America but felt great frustration at the nation's refusal to fulfill her potential as a land of opportunity for all.

Near the end of his life, McKay was converted to Roman Catholicism. His subsequent poetry was mostly religious in tone and lacking in the vigor which characterized his previous work.

Like most significant artists, he will be remembered less for genuinely new ideas than for his treatment of universal human themes.