William J. Maxwell: On "If We Must Die"

Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," the poem most often judged to be the inaugural address of the Harlem Renaissance, was first printed above an article on Bolshevism and religion in the July 1919 Liberator. In the eyes of its author, however, the sonnet was unveiled before a group Andy Razaf might have styled as the renaissance's chefs: the black employees of the Pennsylvania Railroad dining car where McKay waited tables. "It was the only poem I ever read to the members of my crew," McKay claimed, and "they were all agitated" (A Long Way 31). The excited response of McKay's coworkers was to be echoed by the dozens of African-American journals that reprinted the poem repeatedly into the 1920s. The Crusader hailed "If We Must Die" with speed: its September 1919 issue featured the sonnet a few pages ahead of a reprise of Razaf's martial ballad "Don't Tread on Me." The pressing historical stimulus for The Crusader's embrace was the Red Summer, whose color McKay ecumenically traced to "the outbreak of little wars between labor and capital and, like a plague breaking out in sore places, between colored folk and white" (A Long Way 31). The immediate goal of the republication was to spark further black boldness in all these battles. To the Crusader, McKay's sonnet was the ideal text for a militant sampler. With steely propriety, the poem put forth the creed of a New Negro whose modernity rested on self-defense as much as on Marxism and the metropolis:

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 accurséd 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 death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

Though "If We Must Die" famously does not designate the racial identities of "kinsmen" and their enemies--nowhere is the "foe" of the speaker revealed to be an "ofay"--it must have struck the Crusader as a poem written to their specifications. Appearing in the wake of the armed African Americans who had made race rioting unprecedentedly dangerous to whites, the sonnet was hard to dissociate from the journal's plea that the weapons of interracial warfare stay double-edged swords. The "I" of the modern lyric, opposed to the collective, if not free from the social determination of individuality itself, here became a "we" promoting the visceral comradeship the Crusader likewise tied to a willingness to die for imagined "kinsmen." The correlation of suicidal retribution with martyrdom on behalf of a blood brotherhood; the rhetorical performance of an evolution from potential animal fear ("If we must die, let it not be like hogs"), to certain masculine fortitude ("Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack"), all seemed to render Crusader policy into iambic pentameter. From the moment "If We Must Die" was reprinted in the journal, McKay was stamped as a Crusader poet of choice, a fluent historian of the magazine's postwar code of radical remasculinization.