William Maxwell: On "The White City"

Consider "The White City" originally printed in the October 1921 Liberator. In lieu of the application in "If We Must Die" of negative emotion to the positive end of joining kinsmen in struggle, this sonnet argues for hate as good medicine for a single black soul:

I will not toy with it nor bend an inch.
Deep in the secret chambers of my heart
I muse my life-long hate, and without flinch
I bear it nobly as I live my part.
My being would be skeleton, a shell,
If this dark Passion that fills my every mood,
And makes my heaven in the white world's hell,
Did not forever feed me vital blood.
I see the mighty city through a mist--
The strident trains that speed the goaded mass,
The poles and spires and towers vapor-kissed,
The fortressed port through which the great ships pass,
The tides, the wharves, the dens I contemplate,
Are sweet like wanton loves because I hate.

This poem obviously savors conceptual inversion. Like the young Louis Farrakhan's calypso tune "A White man's Heaven is a Black Man's Hell," McKay's text declares "the white world's hell" a heaven; hate not only feeds the speaker's "vital blood" but makes the monuments of the white city's power look "sweet like wanton loves" behind a scrimlike, Eliotic urban mist. The structural motivation behind the sequence of reversals is not only the binary logic of contradictive black and white worlds but also the production of loyal sonnet - the West's archetypal variety of love lyric - about titanic hate. This latter motivation is clarified at the close of the first quatrain, designed to ambush those anticipating another rehearsal of love's powers. The identity of the emotion "Deep in the secret chambers of [the speaker's] heart" is not revealed to be "life-long hate" until the middle of line three; even then line four goes on to cast this hate as something the speaker will bear as thousands of other sonnet voices have
borne unrequited desire: "nobly," while playing an assigned "part" in a theatricalized test. In the second quatrain, the program of imagining hate as an enabling emotion for the sonnet speaker is given specific historical resonance by the news that his hate is a punningly "dark Passion" directed at the "white world's hell." The third quatrain, joined grammatically with the concluding couplet into a virtual Petrarchan sestet, drops the hate-for-love substitution during a series of aestheticized metropolitan perceptions: "strident trains" rumble beneath "vapor-kissed" skyscrapers. The final lines, however, return the negative image of the sonnet's ruling emotion to the fore of the poem's ironic repertoire. The nonwhite speaker enjoys a type of futurist gaze unveiling the loveliness of the white city's steel, crowds, and byways, but only with the X-ray glasses of race hate, corrective lenses that supply glimpses of reckless pleasure: "The tides, the wharves, the dens I contemplate, / Are sweet like wanton loves because I hate."

The attitude of "The White City" toward the sonnet form is less severe than its stance toward those who own the "poles and spires and towers," manifestations of urban beauty and aspiration that in themselves recall the "ships, towers, domes" Wordsworth's 1802 sonnet "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge." McKay's inversion of sonnet conventions necessarily evokes and depends upon these conventions for its success. More pointedly, his poem's speaker is an inheritor of the sonnet persona that had developed along with the fourteen-line formula. True to type, the voice of "The White City" appears to have discovered a way to live deeply with intense emotion through a process sonnet historian Paul Oppenheimer calls "dialectical self-confrontation." Even as the poem's first two quatrains instill and thwart the expectation that love is locked in "the secret chambers of [the speaker's heart," they gesture to a barely concluded controversy over hate's powers of (self-)creation. The poem's initial line - "I will not toy with it nor bend an inch" - marks the public resolution of a private argument, a just-decided inner debate discernible in this same line's formal declaration of determination and in the melodramatic self-reassurance of the second quatrain:

My being would be a skeleton, a shell,
If this dark passion that fills my every mood,
And makes my heaven in the white world's hell,
Did not forever feed me vital blood.

The staging of this internal argument warrants Adorno's contention that in the modern lyric "the historical relationship of the subject to objectivity, of the individual to society, must [find] its precipitate in the medium of a subjective spirit thrown back upon itself." McKay's "I" reveals that he has learned to thrive on the subjective experience of socially instilled antagonism not by appealing to this emotion's object or to his implicit audience but by resolving a difference within his "secret . . . heart." Significantly, such resolution relies on the lyric sonnet's provision of more than a "shell" in which "dark Passion" may be poured. The speaker's praise of the explosive emotion with which he now refuses to "toy," along with his willingness to bear "life-long hate" in noble if actorly style, suggests that he has found in the sonnet persona one model for the New Negro who accepts anger's formative power.

"The White City" thus shows the lyric sonnet's merit for the New Negro - and vice versa. With
the latter demonstration, the poem makes itself accessible to readers schooled to respect lyric confessionalism above the insertion of black enmity into interracial discourse. Those who first introduced McKay to nonradical white U.S. publics indeed praised his equal possession of old-line lyricism and indelible blackness. As Liberator editor Max Eastman put it in his introduction to Harlem Shadows, McKay bucked his "age of roar and advertising" to protect the quality of "all the poets that we call lyric because we love them so much": "the pure, clear arrow-like transference of . . . emotion into our breast, without any but the inevitable words." His sonnets were thus for the singing and had a "special interest for all the races of man because they [were first] sung by a pure blooded Negro." This profile of McKay as the custodian of both full-throated lyric voice and full-blooded Negritude was among the earliest images of Harlem's renaissance projected outside uptown Manhattan. Whatever its racialist pitfalls, it was an image partially suggested by McKay himself, not by blundering into a constrictive white form but by forcing the encounter of the lyric sonnet and the Crusader-built New Negro. In stage-managing the "dark Passion" of a militant made black and bid to sing, McKay made hay from the form/content problem later ascribed to his reflexive failings and became a messenger of Harlem's radical rebirth to audiences who never believed that Communism would prove fatal to racism.


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