Michael North: On "The Tropics in New York"

When Harlem Shadows was published in 1922, it was received as "a clean break with the dialect tradition of Dunbar. Of course, Dunbar himself had tried to make a break from dialect poetry but without success, and though McKay seemed to succeed by continuing to write in standard English, it can hardly be said that the break was a clean one. Indeed, the gap between his standard English Poetry and the dialect was full of all sorts of entanglements, from which McKay was never to be free.

The linguistic dilemma of the standard English poetry McKay wrote in America is fittingly revealed by a break, the first stanza break in "The Tropics in New York," which expresses more effectively than anything else in the poem the break between the tropics and New York. The whole poem is structured around this break as a kind of double take, both for the author and for the reader. The first stanza chews over a catalogue of tropical names as if they were real enough to taste:

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,

Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,

And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,

Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs . . .

There is an implicit synesthesia here in the way certain repeated consonants, particularly the g's and r's and the g's and n's, give the lines a concrete, almost crunchy, sound. Some of the names, such as cocoa and grape fruit, also force compromises on the generally iambic pattern, further clogging lines already very high in consonance. The result is an extraordinary effect of sensory presence which is instantly and utterly dispelled by the stanza break.

Stanza breaks of any kind are relatively rare in McKay's American poetry, where the most characteristic form is the sonnet. Stanza breaks that do not coincide with a stop are even rarer. This stanza break jumps over a mere comma to a phrase that sets the preceding scene in an entirely new context: "Set in the window, bringing memories . . . ." What seemed present, close enough to smell and taste, is suddenly flung behind glass, and the tropical scene is revealed as a mere memory, evoked by a grocer's display. The effect, with its displacement and consequent disorientation, is almost modernistic, particularly in a book of
poetry that plays very little with point of view.

The shift in point of view coincides with a decided change in tone and diction. Where there was "cocoa in pods" there are now low-singing rills," and alligator pears give way to "dewy dawns" and "mystical blue skies / In benediction over nun-like hills." The language is the language of memory, softened by distance.

"Poetry," announcing itself as such - the word rill does not get much use outside of poetry - replaces what was insistently the language of sensory experience. In this way, "The Tropics in New York" resembles a rather more famous modern poem of memory, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," which also began with a young colonial's vision in a metropolitan shop window. There, too, the "clay and wattles" of a primary rural existence give way to the "glimmer" and "glow" of memorial longing. The resemblance suggests that, though alligator pears and wattles are particular, the language of memory is universal, for both poets rely on a certain dewy dimness to describe their longing for home.

Of course what really happens in both poems is that the particular language of the colony loses out to the generalized language of empire. In McKay's case the conflict between these two competing vocabularies is concentrated on a single word: hungry. When McKay says in the third stanza that he is "hungry for the old, familiar ways," he is certainly speaking metaphorically, and yet it may be that this trope, which governs the entire stanza retains a shadow of the literal reality described so vividly at the beginning of the poem. There is a special irony in the situation of the transplanted Jamaican staring at the fruit, imported from his homeland and carefully displayed behind glass. What was common at home, and commonly available, becomes a rare delicacy, not the recipient of prizes but a prize itself. But the Jamaican, offspring of the families who grow such valuable fruit, seems mysteriously to have fallen in value during his transplantation to New York - he can only gaze at the fruit with unsatisfied longing. What strange process is it that can bring both product and person so far from home and then erect a wall of glass between them? As it happens, McKay first came to America on a United Fruit Company passenger-cargo ship. "The Tropics in New York" is, at this level, about the radically different fates of passenger and cargo in the global economy, the cargo assimilated as an exotic treat, the passenger cut off from both tropics and New York.

As literal hunger, McKay's longing might mark the beginning of a visceral awareness of the costs of uneven development, not at all inappropriate for a writer who at this time was becoming deeply involved in radical politics. As metaphor, the same longing seems nothing more than standard romantic dispossession: "I turned aside and bowed my head and wept." The original readers of the poem were apt to place it in an even more specific context. Since the eighteenth century, pathetic songs about slavery such as "The Desponding Negro" had been a staple of the British music hall stage. Sometimes these were abolitionist tracts about the ravages of slavery, but as time went on the same emotional clichés were adapted to another genre especially popular in America: the freedman lamenting the old plantation. In either case the cliché depended on and reinforced the notion that Africans are out of place in modern urban civilization: in the South they may long for Africa, in New York for the South.

When "The Tropics in New York" was originally published in England, it was recognized as a sophisticated reworking of this minstrel show cliché. The Westminster Review said of Spring in New Hampshire:
The greater part of its contents are inspired by memories, made dearer by exile, of a childhood spent in a warm, semi-tropical country, and the intense fidelity of the negro to places and scenes familiar in early youth, the longing to return and revisit them expressed (and vulgarised) in the hundred of crude music hall songs which have captured the public ear both in London and New York.

The longing of an African for his home was, in other words, a popular commodity with a well-established market. Whatever McKay's own intentions may have been, and despite the superior technical achievement of the verse, his poems fed this market. In England I. A. Richards, who wrote the preface to Spring in New Hampshire, compared his poems to "the Spirituals," and in the United States Max Eastman, who wrote the introduction to Harlem Shadows, modified Jekyll's characterization of "the Negro" so that he was not merely quick of laughter but also quick "of tears."

Thus the fate of the passenger on the United Fruit cargo ship is not so different from that of the cargo: the company sells its fruit and he sells his longing for the fruit. But this means that McKay is further separated from his homeland by the very language he uses to express his separation from his homeland: even his sense of dispossession is already part of a vicarious experience to be enjoyed by a white readership. Thus the ultimate level of dispossession in the poem, beyond literal hunger and metaphorical nostalgia, is linguistic. There is no language for McKay to use about his experiences that cannot be worked into the synthetic, racial tradition created by white performers and writers. Leaving dialect behind and leaving the dialect tradition behind turn out to be two entirely different things.


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