Heather A. Hathaway: On "Outcast"

From the moment of his arrival in the United States in 1912, then, to the beginning of his twelve year excursion abroad in 1922, McKay struggled to find a place for himself in America. Many of the poems that he wrote during this period reflect a profound and distressing alienation from his adopted culture. His well-known poem "Outcast," perhaps most poignantly reveals the multitude of allegiances he sought, only to find himself in the end alone, "far from [his] native clime," out of place and "out of time." The first quatrain of this English sonnet expresses the speaker's desire to be a part of a rather mystical conception of Africa, "the dim regions whence [his] fathers came," where his "soul would sing forgotten jungle songs." Here, he would live in "darkness" and in "peace. But lines six through eight acknowledge that he is inescapably a product of the "western world" and will forever "bend [his] knee" to the "alien gods" that control it. The third quatrain explains, however, that this homage exacts a heavy toll:

Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thine has gone out of my heart,
And I must walk the way of life a ghost
Among the sons of earth, a thing apart.

According to McKay, in succumbing to the "alien gods," the poem's speaker has lost part of an essential Blackness that is rooted in Africa. The ultimate tragedy comes when, realizing this loss, he also realizes the massive gulf that separates Black from White in the Western world and in the United States in particular, and thus realizes his suspensions in a racial no-man's land, unlinked to all others but himself. While McKay's poem "Mulatto" laments a comparable, though more literal, suspension between White and Black worlds through the voice of a genetic Mulatto, "Outcast" reveals the poet's own self-perception as a cultural Mulatto. It depicts his rather romantic conceptions of Africa, and his self-determined inability to possess fully a type of essential Blackness because of his ineluctable attraction to and contact with the "White" aspects of Western culture. As he comments in A Long Way from Home, "My damned white education has robbed me of much of the primitive vitality, the pure stamina, the simple unswaggering strength of the Jakes [the urban vagabond in Home to Harlem (1928)] of the Negro race."

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