Joshua Eckhardt: On "Look Within"

The first sonnet McKay published in The Catholic Worker?"Look Within" (in the January 1945 issue)?is a prayer for strength to speak out against "the Fascist yoke / Of these United States" during its accordingly hypocritical war against European fascism (ll. 5-6). It offers an intriguing counterpoint to another poem on World War II (published four and a half years earlier) by Edna St. Vincent Millay, McKay?s partner in revamping and de-romanticizing the English sonnet tradition, whom he met in France after his trip to the Soviet Union. The occasion of "I Forgot for a Moment" is the speaker?s brief forgetfulness of the struggles in Europe, a lapse in political consciousness. "I forgot for a moment," her speaker admits, "France; I forgot England; I forgot my care:

I lived for a moment in a world where I was free to be
With the things and people that I love, and I was happy there.
I forgot for a moment Holland, I forgot my heavy care.

("I Forgot for a Moment" ll. 1-4)

The trouble for McKay?s speaker, on the other hand, is not being distracted from Europe by the fantasies possible in relatively peaceful U.S. conditions, but just the opposite: being distracted from U.S. fascism by the less immediate European variety.

The prayer performed in the opening five and a half lines of "Look Within" ends referencing fifteen million other prayers, those of the "fifteen million Negroes [who, like the speaker] on their knees / Pray for salvation from the Fascist yoke of these United States" (ll. 4-6). The speaker?s prayer then merges with these fifteen million others. This nation-wide chorus of praying voices gains strength when?in the next line and across "two thousand years"?Christ?s voice is added to it.

Remove the beam
(Nearly two thousand years since Jesus spoke)
From your own eyes before the mote you deem
It proper from your neighbor?s to extract!

("Look Within" ll. 6-9)

The critique leveled at the hypocritical, fascist U.S. is straight from the gospel (Matthew 7:4-5; Luke 6:41-2). While the poem?ts last lines are freer interpretations of the New Testament (Matthew 23:27-8), they continue employing this method of denouncing U.S. foreign and
domestic policy in the words of Christ.

But Jesus said: You whitened sepulchre,

Pretending to be uncorrupt of sin,

While worm-infested, rotten through within!

("Look Within" ll. 12-14)

Here again it is Christ’s voice, joined to the prayers of the sonneteer and fifteen million of his contemporaries, that most vehemently accuses the U.S. of large-scale, hypocritical, and downright sinful, racialized fascism. "Look Within" initiates a strategy that McKay develops throughout the twelve sonnets that he published in The Catholic Worker—the last published during his lifetime—of welcoming Christ as his political ally, indeed as his loudest and most subversive fellow agitator.

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