Joshua Eckhardt: On "The Lynching"

"The Lynching" opens with the ascension of the victim's Spirit to his father in high heaven. It continues in this vein to offer what most readers (including McKay himself) would consider a patently inadequate explanation for the lynching:

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.

His father, by the cruelest way of pain,

Had bidden him to his bosom once again;

("The Lynching" ll. 1-3)

God the father himself has called the victim to heaven. While this religious account of lynching may explain the roles of the victim and his heavenly father in the event and do so to the frustration of the lynchers, it does not explain away the lynching itself; it does not alleviate the guilt of the lynchers. Indeed, the poem continues to affirm their guilt and to deny them any means of forgiveness: "The awful sin remained unforgiven? (l. 4). This effectively refuses lynchers any access to the divine-human relationship highlighted in the opening lines. The force of this line draws on the conventional association of lynching with the crucified Christ, made explicit in Countee Cullen's book jackets and Langston Hughes' "Christ in Alabama." This association is hinted at in the opening lines, which sound rather Christian with the father welcoming the son ascending, &c. But the association between the lynch victim and Christ is even more central when the analogy would seem to break down in line 4. If the awful sin remained still unforgiven, this is not simply because, unlike the crucifixion, the lynching is not adequate to atone for sins. Line 4 is quite clear that the lynchers' sin is not forgiven by any means, Christ's crucifixion included. Neither the lynch victim's nor Christ's murder is capable of forgiving unrepentant lynchers, viewing the body without sorrow, dancing around it in glee. They remain unforgiven.

In so far as "The Lynching" refuses racists any access to God, it participates in the same move made in the second half of "To the White Fiends." After turning racist associations of blackness and savagery against racists, "To the White Fiends" also asserts God's particular love for the persecuted African American before his enemies. The result is that whether the white fiends subscribe to the confused notions of black savagery in the first half of the poem, and/or the vaguely Christian framework in the second, they are restricted from their own ideological apparatus. In the second half, the speaker claims that the Almighty has created the former's soul out of darkness and set him on earth to be, paradoxically, a light.

But the Almighty from the darkness drew
My soul and said: Even thou shalt be a light
Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,
Thy dusky face I set among the white
For thee to prove thyself of higher worth;
Before the world is swallowed up in night,
To show thy little lamp: go forth, go forth!

(To the White Fiends? ll. 8-14)

The speaker only needs to answer this divine commission, and the savage fiends of the first half of the poem will have to run from his divine light. Understandably, this is a more optimistic ending than that of a poem about lynching. In ?To the White Fiends,? whether the speaker emphasizes his African lineage or his divine favor, he promises to confront the white fiends with forces inaccessible to them. ?The Lynching? cannot be so optimistic. The lynch victim has clearly not been kept from the savagery of the white fiends by either ?Afric? or ?the Almighty.? And so, to continue reading ?The Lynching? in terms of ?To the White Fiends,? God has lost another light, as the world is increasingly ?swallowed up in night.? In other words, as the victim?s spirit departs from the world in ?The Lynching,? it would seem that the divine light of ?To the White Fiends? departs with him. Indeed, in the second quatrain of ?The Lynching,? the only light is far above the earth.

All night a bright and solitary star
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,
Yet gave him up at last to Fate?s wild whim)
Hung pitifully o?er the swinging char.

(To the Lynching? ll. 5-8)

The rest of the poem is dominated by the unrepentant on-lookers who ensure the lineage of white fiends:

The women thronged to look, but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue.
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.

(?The Lynching? ll. 11-14)

These generations of lynchers would seem to have defeated both the African and the religious forces brought against them in ?To the White Fiends.? The divine light that God set aggressively upon the earth in ?To the White Fiends? has given the lynch victim over ?to Fate?s wild whim.? And God is reduced to a father welcoming his returning son far off.

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