Joshua Eckhardt: On "The Negro's Tragedy"

[Textual note: "The Negro's tragedy" was first published without this title in the July-August issue of The Catholic Worker, where it is followed by "I turn to God for greater strength to fight? and "Around me roar and crash the pagan isms?.]

"The Negro's Tragedy" is an identity politics poem par excellence?complicated by the Christology that McKay develops throughout The Catholic Worker sonnets. The speaker feels the "Negro's tragedy" and wants to heal "his pain" in the first quatrain. In the second, such positive declarations give way to exclusionary ones: whites are excluded from the "Negro's ken," or point of view.

Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white

Can penetrate into the Negro's ken

("The Negro's Tragedy" ll. 5-6)

A second qualifier in addition to race has slipped in here: "Only a thorn-crowned Negro?.. This direct reference to the suffering Christ, mockingly crowned king of the Jews by Roman soldiers, draws from a later moment of Christ's ministry than does "Look Within." Indeed, Christ's ministry is all but over, and his Passion well underway, by the time he is beaten before Pilate. And it is just such a suffering Christ whom the "Negro? must follow, for McKay, if he is going to "penetrate" his own "ken," or understand and correct his own social position.

In the sestet, the "white man? is again excluded, here from writing McKay's book, which is "shot out of my blood."

So what I write is shot out of my blood.

There is no white man who could write my book

Though many think the story can be told

Of what the Negro people ought to brook.

Our statesmen roam the world to set things right.

This Negro laughs, and prays to God for Light!

("The Negro's Tragedy" ll. 9-14)

White men cannot do McKay's writing for him. Nor can they rightly perceive the "Negro's
tragedy? and the way it needs to be answered. One wonders just how sweeping a critique this is: how many are the ?many? who think they can tell the story of the ?Negro?s tragedy?? There were of course many white antiracists on the left?and in the Catholic Worker movement; to how many of them does McKay?s critique apply? The second to last line may invite a sigh of relief after this uncertainty when it specifies the offending parties as ?[o]ur statesmen.? If this can be taken as a specification of all of the whites earlier in the poem, then the target of this sonnet is no wider than that of ?Look Within??the U.S. government in its official ineffectiveness. But of course, there is no strictly linguistic reason why the subject of line 13 should modify the parties excluded from the ?Negro?s tragedy? earlier in the poem. And there is even less historical/political reason why it should, given McKay?s regular boldness in critiquing those on the left who would be, and often were, his allies.

In the last line, the ineffective statesmen and the misunderstanding whites are laughed off as?[(t)his? thorn-crowned? Negro? prays to God for Light!? This turn to God?to take the words of the sonnet that follows this one in The Catholic Worker?participates in a move McKay made in a much earlier sonnet, the 1919 ?To the White Fiends.? After turning racist associations of blackness and savagery against racists, "To the White Fiends" also asserts the unmistakably black speaker?s direct access to God. 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)

But ?To the White Fiends? is freeze-framed at creation: the originary moment in which the Almighty creates the speaker and bespeaks his special purpose to him. ?The Negro?s Tragedy? is set later in such a speaker?s life: corresponding to the late point in Christ?s Passion when the speaker shares Christ?s crown of thorns but, knowingly and triumphantly, laughs and prays to God for light (cf. the ?dark Passion? in the 1921 ?The White City,? l. 6).

The combination of this crown of thorns and confidence in prayer does not only develop McKay?s earlier religious imagery; it heightens the distinction between his religious imagery and Langston Hughes?. One could say that Hughes? ?Christ in Alabama? wears the same crown of thorns that McKay?s 1945 Christ-figure does, since the ?beaten and black? moment of Christ?s life was endured with a crown of thorns. In other words, like ?The Negro?s

Christ is a nigger,
Beaten and black.
O bare your back!

(?Christ in Alabama,? ll. 1-3)

Both Hughes? and McKay?s American Christ-figures are unmistakably black. The provocative implication Hughes makes by re-setting the holy family in the American south of the Scottsboro trial is that ?in Alabama? only ?a Nigger? can play Christ?s role, because only s/he participates in such suffering. In part, this is precisely what McKay says in this later sonnet: ?Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white / Can penetrate into the Negro?s ken.? But Hughes? rendition of the black Christ is more exclusionary because it implies that only a ?nigger? can follow Christ, at least ?in Alabama.? McKay?s version says nothing about the ability of others to follow Christ, but he makes clear that, in order to ?penetrate the Negro?s ken,? ?[o]nly a thorn-crowned Negro? will do.

A more substantive difference between McKay?s and Hughes? Christ-figures is forced by the third stanza of ?Christ in Alabama.? After successfully appropriating the Christian imagery that too often was used to justify racism, Hughes goes on to identify Mary with the ?Mammy of the South? and God the father with a ?White Master.? In re-casting the holy family as the illegitimate family of the slave plantation, Hughes goes too far to unproblematically maintain his appropriation of Christianity. This is because in the first two stanzas, racists are confined to the italicized third lines, responsible for persecuting Christ and Mary and so cut off from them. In the third stanza though, the role of God the father is reserved for the ?White Master?:

God?s His Father?
White Master above,
Grant us your love.

(?Christ in Alabama? ll. 7-9)

If the first stanza of the poem effectively steals Christianity away from racists, this third stanza would seem to give it right back, insisting that at least ?in Alabama? mastery is synonymous with whiteness and that, as one of the master?s tools, Christianity always already serves the ?White Master.? Colored in this way, the holy family does far more political harm than good. If both ?Christ is a Nigger? ?in Alabama? and God his father is a ?White Master,? ? then not even God?s son can access him without reinscribing the illegitimate family structure of the slave plantation.

McKay?s ?thorn-crowned Negro? ?prays to God for Light,? on the other hand, without being troubled by Hughes? pitfalls. This is as true of McKay?s early poems, such as ?To the White Fiends? and ?The Lynching,? as it is of the later ones. McKay never concedes Christianity or any other religion to racists, neither by coloring God nor by any other means. The difference
between McKay’s early and late religious sentiments can be seen more clearly vis-à-vis "Christ in Alabama." McKay’s early religious sonnets never achieve the specific shame and suffering of Christ, as Hughes so perfectly does in "Christ in Alabama." In "The Negro’s Tragedy," McKay approaches the force of "Christ in Alabama" much more closely: here McKay’s "Negro" is identified with the suffering, "thorn-crowned" Christ. The difference is that McKay’s Christ-figure can still laughingly pray to God. If Hughes’ Christ were to try to do that in Alabama, he would find himself quite forsaken, and probably starting the horrible poem over again with the white master cursing, "O, bare your back!"

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