Wayne Cooper: On "Claude McKay and the New Negro of the 1920's"

As used in the 1920's, the term "New Negro" referred to more than the writers then active in the Negro Renaissance. The New Negro also included the Negro masses and especially the young. "For the younger generation," Alain Locke wrote in 1925, "is vibrant with a new psychology." This new spirit he described as basically a renewal of "self-respect and self-dependence."

The new confidence which characterized Negroes in the twenties resulted from many forces. Prior to World War I, militant new leaders had arisen. By demanding immediately full civil liberties and an end to segregation, men such as W. E. B. DuBois had inspired a greater self-assertiveness in their people. World War I and the resulting mass migration of Negroes to the urban North further disrupted old patterns of life and created new hopes, as well as new problems. The fight for democracy abroad led to greater expectations at home. The bloody race riots of 1919 did not kill these hopes, although the remarkable popularity of Marcus Garvey and his black nationalism indicated the Negro masses could not forever contain their frustrated aspirations. As the Negro people entered the twenties, the "promised land" of the old spirituals still seemed far away. But their new militancy demonstrated that the long journey down the bitter desert years of history had strengthened, not weakened, their determination to reach the good life ahead.

That sudden flowering in literature called the Negro Renaissance gave voice to the new spirit awakening in Negroes in the twenties. In addition, the Negro Renaissance became a part of the general revolt by the writers of the decade against the gross materialism and outmoded moral values of America's new industrial society. Negro writers found new strength in their own folk culture. As Robert Bone has written, "The Negro Renaissance was essentially a period of self-discovery, marked by a sudden growth of interest in things Negro."

Of all the Renaissance writers, Claude McKay was one of the first to express the spirit of the New Negro. His first American poems appeared in 1917. Before the decade of the Negro Renaissance had begun, he was already winning recognition as an exciting new voice in Negro literature. A brief examination of his early career will perhaps reveal more clearly some of the important characteristics of the New Negro of the 1920's.

Claude McKay was born September 15, 1889, on the British West Indian island of Jamaica. There he grew to manhood. In 1912, at the age of twenty-three, he came to the United States to study agriculture at Tuskegee Institute. In Jamaica, McKay had already established a local reputation as a poet, having produced before he left two volumes of dialect poetry, Song of Jamaica and Constab Ballads.

These volumes revealed McKay to be a sensitive, intelligent observer of Jamaican life. Of black peasant origin himself, he used the English dialect of rural Jamaica to record lyrically the life of his people. In evaluating McKay's Jamaican verse, Jean Wagner has recently written:
Here, we are far from the dialect of the Dunbar school, inherited from the whites, who had forged it in order to perpetuate the stereotype of Negro inferiority, and at best fix them in their role of buffoons charged with diverting the white race .... All things being equal, McKay’s portrait of the Jamaican peasant is in substance that of the peasant the world over. Profoundly attached to the earth, he works the soil with a knowledge gained from age long habit; although a hard worker, the Jamaican, like his counterpart the world over, is condemned to exploitation.

On the eve of his departure to the United States, McKay appeared to be an ambitious, talented young man with a fine future in Jamaica. In his poetry he had closely identified himself with its people. He had also revealed a deeply sensitive, independent spirit, keenly responsive to the good and evil in both man and nature.

Like many before him, however, he was strongly attracted to the United States. Years later, he wrote that America then seemed to him, "a new land to which all people who had youth and a youthful mind turned. Surely there would be opportunity in this land, even for a Negro." Although far from naive, McKay had never experienced firsthand American racial prejudice, and he seemed to have been totally unprepared for its vicious effects.

His initiation into the realities of Negro American life must certainly have been a swift one. Landing in Charleston, South Carolina, in the summer of 1912, he proceeded to Alabama's Tuskegee Institute. In 1918, McKay recorded in Pearson's Magazine his first reaction to Southern racial prejudice.

It was the first time I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race, and my feelings were indescribable. At first I was horrified; my spirit revolted against the ignoble cruelty and blindness of it all. . . . Then I found myself hating in return, but this feeling could not last long for to hate is to be miserable.

Accompanying this statement were several poems, which, McKay said, had been written during his first year in America. "I sent them so that you may see what my state of mind was at the time." Among them was one of his most eloquent polemics--"To the White Fiends." This poem shows a personality unaccustomed to servility and murderously aroused against the brutish debasement of Southern prejudice. If the poet could not physically defeat it, he, nevertheless, could throw a revealing light on its moral inferiority.

Think you I am not fiend and savage too?

Think you I could not arm me with a gun

And shoot down ten of you for every one of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?

Be not deceived, for every deed you do
Soon tiring of what he described as "the semi-military, machine-like existence" at Tuskegee, McKay transferred to Kansas State College, where he remained until 1914. In that year he was given several thousand dollars by an English friend. Having decided his future lay in writing, not agricultural science, he took the money and went to New York City.

Once there, literary success did not come quickly. In fact, during his first year in New York, little time seems to have been devoted to writing. As he described it, through "high-living" and "bad investments" he soon managed to lose all his money. His marriage to a Jamaican girl shortly after his arrival in New York lasted almost as briefly as his money. "My wife," McKay wrote in 1918, "wearied of the life [in New York] in six months and went back to Jamaica." McKay himself made a different decision. "I hated to go back after having failed at nearly everything so I just stayed here and worked?porter . . . janitor . . . waiter--anything that came handy."

He also wrote, "If I would not," he said, "graduate as a bachelor of arts, I would graduate as a poet." Within two years, Waldo Frank and James Oppenheim accepted for Seven Arts Magazine two of his sonnets, "The Harlem Dancer" and "Invocation." A year later he was discovered by Frank Harris, who brought him to public notice again in Pearson's Magazine. Shortly afterwards, McKay met Max Eastman and his sister, Crystal. A lifelong friendship resulted.
At the time, Max Eastman was editor of The Liberator, then America's most openly Marxist literary magazine. Through the Liberator, McKay quickly became identified with the radical-bohemian set in Greenwich Village. In 1919, Eastman and his staff were eagerly praising the young communist government of Russia, violently denouncing the repressive post-war hysteria at home, and writing stories and poems that ranged from fighting proletariat propaganda to tender pieces of home and mother. Few magazines, then or now, could match the Liberator in enthusiasm. Despite its flamboyancy, however, it was rich in talents. "On the surface," Robert Aaron has written, "The Liberator reflected the aimless, pointless life of the village." Yet, as Aaron pointed out, after World War I, it displayed a "toughness and militancy in its social attitudes" which belied its bohemian character.

Into such an atmosphere McKay fitted well. Eastman has described him then as a very black, handsome, high-spirited young man, with peculiar, arched eyebrows which gave him a perpetually quizzical expression. Another old radical, Joseph Freeman, remembered also in his autobiography McKay's charm and wit.

If McKay was sometimes given to abandoned gaiety, in the summer of 1919 he had good reason to exhibit a greater seriousness, as well as toughness. 1919 was the year of the Great Red Scare, one desperate phase of the effort to return to pre-war "normalcy." For Negroes, the year turned into a nightmare of bloody riots and violent death. From June until January there occurred no less than twenty-five riots in major urban centers throughout the country. The Chicago riot of July was the worst. When it was over, authorities counted 38 Negroes and whites dead, over 520 injured, and 1,000 families homeless. Like all Negroes, McKay felt the emotional effects of such battles.

In the July issue of the Liberator there appeared, along with six other poems, his now famous "If We Must Die." Today, it is the one poem by which McKay is most widely known. "If We Must Die" was a desperate shout of defiance; almost, it seemed a statement of tragic hopelessness. At the same time, it loudly proclaimed that in Negroes the spirit of human courage remained fully alive. Here is the poem which brought McKay to the alert attention of the Negro world. If not a great poem it, nevertheless, must certainly have expressed the attitude of many Negroes in 1919.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed in vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

After his appearance in The Liberator, McKay entered more fully into the literary world. His career through the twenties reads, in fact, like a romance of the decade itself. Through the generosity of friends, he went to England in late 1919 and stayed for more than a year, working part of the time for Sylvia Pankhurst's socialist paper, The Workers' Dreadnought. While there his third book of poems, Spring in New Hampshire, appeared.

Upon his return to the United States in 1921, he became for a brief time co-editor of The Liberator with Michael Gold. Before leaving that job because of policy differences with Gold, McKay's first American book of poems, Harlem Shadows, appeared. During this period, he also made a brief first acquaintance with many leading Negro intellectuals, among them James W. Johnson and W. E. B. DuBois. But before the end of 1922, he was off again, this time to Russia.

McKay was among the first Negroes to go to Russia after the Civil War which had brought the Communists into undisputed power. He arrived during Lenin's period of ideological retrenchment, when the New Economic Policy allowed a limited amount of free enterprise and personal freedom. Because of his black complexion, McKay immediately attracted the attention of people in the street. Although not a party member, or even definitely committed to Marxist principles, McKay's popularity with the crowds in Moscow and Leningrad helped win him favor among higher party circles. Sen Katayama, then Japan's leading Communist, got McKay admitted to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. But above all, as McKay wrote James Weldon Johnson in 1935, "It was the popular interest that irresistibly pushed me forward." His trip soon turned into one long triumph of personal popularity.

After meeting Trotsky in Moscow, he was sent on a long and elaborate tour of Soviet army and naval bases. Besides Trotsky, he met Zinoviev and other top Communists, as well as many leading Russian literary figures.

Despite McKay's sincere attraction to the Communist Revolution, he never fully committed himself to its ideology. In the 1930's, he was viciously attacked by American Communists for going back on his principles; but, as he wrote James Weldon Johnson in 1935, he went to Russia as "a writer and free spirit" and left the same. He wrote Johnson then and later repeated in his autobiography that he had desired in 1922 the title, "creative writer," and had felt it would mean more to Negroes in the long run.

Throughout the twenties, and to a large extent throughout his life, McKay remained what
Frederick Hoffman called the "aesthetic radical." This was the artist who, typical of the twenties, stoutly affirmed the value of his non-social personality. He considered himself "the natural man," willing in an age of conformity to be only himself. That McKay shared this attitude is evident in all his writings.

Like other Negro writers of the twenties (most notably, Langston Hughes), he shared, to some degree, the same feeling of alienation that characterized Gertrude Stein's "lost generation." Thus, in 1918, McKay could write: "And now this great catastrophe [World War I] has come upon the world, proving the real hollowness of nationhood, patriotism, racial pride, and most of the things one was taught to respect and reverence." His affiliation with The Liberator and his trip to Russia were part of a personal search for new moral and social standards.

McKay's trip to Russia marked the beginning of his long twelve-year exile in Europe. From Russia, he went briefly to Germany, then to France, where he lived for a number of years. In the late twenties, he journeyed to Spain and then to Morocco in North Africa where he remained until his return to the United States in 1934.

Why did McKay spend twelve years wandering through Europe and North Africa? He never felt himself to be a typical expatriate. In his autobiography, he gave perhaps the main reason for his long expatriation.

Color consciousness was the fundamental of my restlessness . . . my white fellow-expatriates could sympathize but ... they could not altogether understand . . . unable to see deep into the profundity of blackness, some even thought ... I might have preferred to be white like them . . . they couldn't understand the instinctive . . . pride of a black person resolute in being himself and yet living a simple civilized life like themselves.

The place of Negroes in the modern world was the one great problem that obsessed McKay from his arrival in the United States until his death in 1948. For a while after World War I, he undoubtedly thought that in Communism Negroes might find a great world brotherhood.

In the twenties, he turned from international communism but not from the common Negro, with whom he had always closely identified. He came to the conclusion that in Negro working people there existed an uninhibited creativity and joy in life which Europeans, including Americans, had lost. In their folk culture lay strength enough for their salvation. McKay felt Negroes should not lose sight of their own uniqueness and the value of their own creations while taking what was valuable from the larger European civilization. He laid much emphasis on the need of Negroes to develop a group spirit.

Among Negro writers of the twenties, McKay was not alone in his discovery of the folk. In fact, of central importance to the Negro Renaissance was its emphasis on Negro folk culture. Jean Toomer, for example, celebrated the black peasants of Georgia, and in the following verses, associated himself with their slave past:

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes
An everlasting song, a singing tree,
Caroling softly souls of slavery,
What they were, and what they are to me,
Caroling softly souls of slavery.

In enthusiastic outbursts, youthful Langston Hughes was also loudly proclaiming the worth of the common folk.

To a certain extent, the New Negro's emphasis on the folk was heightened by the new attitude toward Negroes exhibited by many white writers of the twenties. After World War I certain white writers such as Gertrude Stein and Waldo Frank thought they saw in Negroes beings whose naturally creative expressiveness had not been completely inhibited by the evil forces of modern civilization. As the twenties progressed, Negroes and their arts enjoyed a considerable vogue. Primitive African art became popular among many intellectuals. Jazz, of course, became popular in the twenties. Negro singers found a greater public receptivity, and the blues entered American music. In many respects, American Negroes had in the twenties a favorable opportunity for a reassessment of their past accomplishments and future potentials.

The great emphasis on the primitive and the folk led however to some naive delusions. Just as whites had previously built a stereotype of the happy, simple-minded plantation Negro, many people in the twenties stereotyped Negroes as unfettered children of nature, bubbling over with uninhibited sexual joy and child-like originality. To the extent that Negro writers accepted such an image, they limited the depth and richness of their own evaluations of American Negro life.

While he was in Europe, McKay produced three novels which reflected his own interest in the Negro folk. They were Home to Harlem (1928), Banjo (1929), and Banana Bottom (1933). He also produced a volume of short stories entitled Gingertown in 1932. To a considerable extent, McKay's view of the Negro common folk was influenced by the newer stereotype of Negroes. Home to Harlem, his first novel, is the story of Jake, a Negro doughboy, and his joyful return to Harlem after World War I. Jake seems to have been McKay's ideal type--an honest, carefree worker whose existence, if a rather aimless one, is not complicated by pettiness or unnecessary worry over things that do not immediately concern him. Contrasted to Jake is Ray (McKay himself), an educated Negro, who is torn between two ways of life--Jake's and the more serious though conventional one imposed upon him by education. While the virtues of the common folk are contrasted to the doubts and confusion of the educated, McKay takes the reader on a tour of Harlem cabarets and rent parties.

His unvarnished view of Harlem night life delighted many white readers of the twenties and
dissayed not a few middle-class Negroes. The latter felt that an undue emphasis on the Negro lower class would damage their fight for civil rights and further delay their just battle for liberty. McKay was not the only writer of the Negro Renaissance to upset respectable Negro society. One of the chief results of the Negro Renaissance was to force the Negro middle class to reevaluate their relationship to the Negro masses.

McKay's second novel, Banjo, told the story of the Negro beachboys of Marseilles, and further contrasted the free life of common Negroes with the frustrations of those caught in the more sophisticated web of modern civilization. In his third novel, Banana Bottom, he idealized the folk culture of Jamaica.

In some ways, Claude McKay differed radically from the typical New Negro writer of the twenties. For one thing, he was a Jamaican and did not become an American citizen until 1940. For another, he was older by some ten years than most writers of the Negro Renaissance; and except for a brief period, he did not live in the United States at all in the twenties.

He was also unique in the extent to which he associated with the larger literary world. Most Negro writers of the twenties had depended on Negro publications for a start. McKay's first successes were in white magazines--Seven Arts, Pearson's, and The Liberator. As an editor of The Liberator for a brief while, he was probably the only Negro writer of the time to hold such a position on an important American publication. McKay was at least partly responsible for the greater degree of communication that existed between Negro and white writers in the twenties. On the eve of his departure for Russia in 1922, James Weldon Johnson gave him a farewell party, and invited prominent writers of both races. Years later Johnson wrote to McKay concerning that event:

We often speak of that party back in '22.... Do you know that was the first getting together of the black and white literati on a purely social plane. Such parties are now common in New York, but I doubt if any has been more representative. You will remember there were present Heywood Broun, Ruth Hale, F. P. Adams, John Farrar, Carl Van Doren, Freda Kirchwey, Peggy Tucker, Roy Nash--on our side you, DuBois, Walter White, Jessie Fauset, [Arthur] Schomburg, J. Rosamond Johnson--I think that party started something.

Although McKay's career differed somewhat from that of the typical Negro writer of the twenties, he represented much that was characteristic of the New Negro. His movement from rural Jamaica to the big city and the literary world of the twenties is itself symbolic of the larger movement by Negro people from the rural South to the broader horizons of the urban North. His early interest in Communism was only one indication that the New Negro would no longer be unaffected by world events. World War I had ended American isolation for both Negroes and whites.

In his prose, McKay stressed the value of the common Negro and joined other Negro Renaissance writers in a rediscovery of Negro folk culture. But it is for his poetry that McKay will be longest remembered. For in his poetry, he best expressed the New Negro's determination to protect his human dignity, his cultural worth, and his right to a decent life.

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