



# Complete Poems

CLAUDE MCKAY

Edited and with an Introduction by

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# INTRODUCTION: CLAUDE MCKAY—LYRIC POETRY IN THE AGE OF CATAclysm

*William J. Maxwell*

## A LIFE IN MOTION

This is the first complete collection of the poems of Claude McKay (1889–1948), proud child of black Jamaica, diehard bohemian, globe-trotting social radical, so-called playboy of the New Negro Renaissance, and author of ballads, sonnets, stories, novels, memoirs, and political commentary. Here, readers can find a comprehensive, fully annotated edition of McKay’s verse, 323 poems in all. Each of his five published volumes is included, as well as eighty-seven previously unpublished poems, representing all phases of his shifting career, and sixty-one uncollected works taken from prestigious and obscure English, Jamaican, and American journals. McKay’s widely recognized importance makes it hard to understand why such an edition was not published years ago. No other writer is as closely linked to the invention of twentieth-century black literatures across the Atlantic world, from Harlem, to the islands of the English-speaking Caribbean, to Francophone Africa and its New World relations. But perhaps the same breadth that distinguishes McKay’s contribution has delayed the collection of his verse. He and his work made a habit of defying the national borders that frame traditional literary history, and his manifold traveling challenges even novel comparative approaches to interracial modernism and transnational black culture.

McKay was pleased with what he styled his “vagabond soul . . . , an outlaw soul that cannot reconcile itself to the fact of limitation to any one country, or allegiance to any one nation” (letter to Harold Jackman). Immigration laws tightened in the aftermath of World War I only provoked his enlistment in the exodus of “Lost Generation” Americans to France in the early 1920s. For McKay, like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Paris was less the capital of French civilization than the motherland of rootless cosmopolitanism. The City of Light was brightened by resident world citizens, he explained, a motley *émigré* crowd of “radicals, esthetes, painters and writers, pseudo-

artists, bohemian tourists—all mixed tolerantly and congenially enough together” (*A Long Way from Home*, 243). Still, unlike Gertrude Stein, his fellow expatriate whose salon on the rue de Fleurus he refused to attend, McKay did not imagine that the indulgent community of the Left Bank was where the twentieth century was. Journeys to Berlin and Moscow, cities whose artistic and political avant-gardes mingled more explosively, had taught him otherwise. So had New York, London, and Kingston, Jamaica, chief ports along what is now often called the “Black Atlantic.” In the harbors of this sweeping territory opened by the savage modernization of the Atlantic slave trade, McKay observed exchanges binding blacks from Africa and America, Europe and the Caribbean—exchanges he was enough of a Pan-Africanist to weigh as answers to W. E. B. Du Bois’s “problem of the color line” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, xi). A devotee of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the Du Bois classic that “shook [him] like an earthquake,” McKay could not locate a twentieth century free from the horns of this international dilemma (*A Long Way from Home*, 110).

McKay himself supposed that his defiance of national identity differed from the expatriation of better-funded, less radical whites. His roving poverty was not always picturesque, he admitted, and could embarrass a man of the Left made to beg “a meal off people who are not at all sympathetic to my social ideas” (letter to Grace Campbell). As he recounted in his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, he maneuvered across frontiers as a “fellow-traveler in the expatriate caravan,” comfortable in such an elastic society but distanced by special racial motivations for roaming (243). Escaping from an American birthright judged to be puritanical and artistically barren was not his ticket to ride. He was a Caribbean arrival who had actively opted for his early years of American belonging and had discovered healthy dynamism in the American scene. In advance of the European refugees who made New York the bull’s-eye of modern art, he loved “the large rough unclassical rhythms of American life” and thought them worthy of vibrant, forward-looking painting and literature (244); he experienced no “sex problems” amid the country’s energizing “tumult and turbulence” (245). Instead, McKay decided that “[c]olour-consciousness was the fundamental of my restlessness”—not simply because even expatriate colonies in Europe could not “see deep into the profundity of blackness” but also because the most progressive force in modern black life was itself profoundly restless (245). The “rough body of the great servant class” of urban African Americans, not the itinerant collectors of cubism or the Francophile Harlem Renaissance intelligentsia, best tutored McKay in bohemian transience: “their spontaneous ways of acting and living for the moment, the physical and sensuous delights, the loose freedom in contrast to the definite peasant pattern by which I had

been raised—all served to feed the riotous sentiments smoldering in me and cut me finally adrift from the fixed moorings my mind had been led to respect, but to which my heart had never held” (“A Negro to His Critics,” 6). McKay’s scorn for fixed moorings thus never aimed to slight the Harlem cooks, maids, and longshoremen in whose company he was not content to stay. In his fondest heart and mind, his place in a generation of literary drifters was distinguished by fidelity to a changeable black working class. His vagabond soul would leap over political, linguistic, and racial fences but desired a portable home, whose “loose freedom” suggested how grounded black self-respect could cohabit with cosmopolitan mobility.

Despite his affinity for Harlem’s “great servant class,” McKay’s life in motion began in comfortable distinction. Casual biographies are wrong to endorse his description of himself as a peasant. McKay was born in 1889 in the mountainous rural village of Nairne Castle, Jamaica, when the Caribbean island still qualified as a British Crown colony. He was the last of Hannah and Thomas McKay’s eleven children and the one most accustomed to the advantages of his father’s climb from day laborer to affluent commercial farmer. By 1912, Thomas McKay owned a hundred acres of productive sugar land and a cane mill of his own, which qualified him to vote in Jamaica’s exclusive electoral system (James, 11; Cooper, 8). “He was senior deacon of the church,” his son remembered, “and something of a patriarch of the mountain country” (*A Long Way from Home*, 36).

Claude McKay enjoyed the view from his family’s high place in Clarendon Parish, where few others were both prosperous and dark-skinned, respected by the lighter “browns” and “whites” favored in the island’s prevailing color scheme (James, 4). Two mentors volunteered to provide him with a free and remarkably liberal education: his brother U. Theo, an eminent schoolteacher who favored Fabian socialism and such contentious agnostics as Aldous Huxley; and Walter Jekyll, an English-born gentleman of leisure who compiled the first scholarly collection of Anancy trickster stories and other veins of black Jamaican folklore. “The peasants were [Jekyll’s] hobby,” McKay later joked (*Banana Bottom*, 71), but the Englishman’s tutelage was serious, a demanding, Platonic blend of high intellectual standards and subdued sexual interest. McKay read all the Villon, Baudelaire, Milton, Pope, Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Elizabethan lyricists in the Englishman’s library and was introduced to German poetry and philosophy. Goethe, Schiller, and Heine became his high school textbooks, along with Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, whom Jekyll translated for his 1911 primer, *The Wisdom of Schopenhauer as Revealed in Some of His Writings* (James, 36).

Jekyll in turn studied all of McKay’s juvenile verse but was captivated by just a single poem, the dramatic monologue of an abusive driver scolding a

reluctant donkey in Jamaican creole. This elementary version of “Cotch Donkey” was “the real thing,” the folklorist advised, his pupil’s “chance as a native boy [to] put the Jamaican . . . into literary language” and to make an immediate sensation (quoted in *My Green Hills*, 66–67). McKay at first hesitated to go native, linguistically speaking; the heavy Germanic diet as much as English cultural imperialism made him skeptical of dialect’s scope. Melodic and intellectually adventurous Jamaican-language poems soon flowed, however, giving him precocious fame as the “Jamaican Bobby Burns,” just as Jekyll predicted. A writer for the *Daily Gleaner*, the elite newspaper in Kingston, promptly declared the twenty-one-year-old “an infant prodigy” and indigenous Jamaican “genius” and requested McKay verses to mark the paper’s anniversary (Stephenson, 6). McKay complied with the commission, brashly supposing that the London-minded *Gleaner* relaxed into black Jamaican creole when feeling its oats. As the paper spoke for itself in McKay’s commemorative poem, it promised “to keep [to] de front / [until] our Islan’-wul’ [world] go dead” (“The Daily Gleaner,” ll. 17–18). The peasants who inspired this *Gleaner* toast and similar poetry had become McKay’s hobby as much as Jekyll’s, but under the banner of Edwardian social reform. The Jamaican’s accent on the costs of tourism, alcoholism, and rural poverty was then practically unique in Caribbean literature. Entirely unique were moments of a contrasting Schopenhauerian pessimism filtered through the elisions of island vernacular. “Whe’ fe Do?” (What to do?) asked one poem, for affliction was inevitable, made to be accepted and endured.

Schopenhauer argued that art was the only human enterprise to escape subjection to an impersonal will, and McKay had good reason to agree—his early achievement as a poet allowed him to break free from an ethically wrenching, badly chosen first career as a constable outside Kingston. With help from Jekyll and other well-placed readers, he quit the police force and returned to the Clarendon breadbasket in 1911. A year later, he embarked on his first international relocation, spurred on by the growing Jamaican diaspora, which saw 146,000 black and “colored” islanders flee to the United States, Panama, or other Caribbean locales for improved social and economic prospects between 1888 and 1920. Alabama and Kansas briefly held him before he found refuge in New York in 1914, where almost one-quarter of adult Harlemites would be foreign-born by the mid-1920s. McKay’s stint as a Lost Generation expatriate was thus preceded by a less glamorous role in a massive population shift that would remake America’s racial landscape—the Great Migration of blacks from the plantation arenas of the Caribbean and the American South to an urban North eager for wage labor. Initially, McKay’s move was intended to realize a typically double-edged immigrant fantasy. He hoped to taste modernity and prosperity in the United States and honor in Jamaica, where a diploma in scientific

farming obtained at the Tuskegee Institute would improve the lot of embattled peasants in his native parish. His ex-policeman's rejection of the "semi-military, machinelike existence" at Booker T. Washington's academy reduced his dream to its American half (quoted in Cooper, 65), though his later poetic appreciations of the school's presiding legend provide a flattering contrast to the satire of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), a campus tribute by another gifted Tuskegee dropout.

McKay responded to his Alabama disappointment with a determined series of immigrant leaps. He shoved off for Kansas State as a less mechanized agricultural science major, where he excelled in Advanced Grammar and allowed himself to fail Stock Judging I (Cooper, 70). Within two years, he quit the "Little Apple" of Manhattan, Kansas, for the Big Apple proper, casting himself as both a hungry artist fleeing the provinces and an aspiring restaurateur. Once in New York, however, his lunchroom business and a conventional marriage failed, and he fell into the "rough body of the great servant class" of African Americans to whom he attributed his intellectual liberation. He began to migrate between New York and Pittsburgh as a head waiter on a Pennsylvania Railroad dining car and between literary opportunities and anticapitalist radicalisms in Harlem and Greenwich Village. Uptown and down, he found his inchoate socialism drawn toward revolutionary Marxism, his "heathen" art and temperament revitalized by the city's post-Christian era (*A Long Way from Home*, 12). In the outposts of Manhattan's "lyrical left" of the 1910s, sexual and political liberation, European free thought and American free manners, all blended without strain, and the revolution could be pursued by night as by day—a windfall to a youthful author exploring his bisexuality as he discovered his Bolshevism. By 1917, McKay had broken into the most lyrical of the city's leftist journals. Waldo Frank and James Oppenheim's *Seven Arts* featured "Invocation" and "The Harlem Dancer," two polished sonnets in proper British English that dramatized the internal exile of black westerners. Beginning in 1919, McKay's poems were regularly spotlighted in the *Liberator*, the Bolshevized successor to the *Masses*, the animated socialist monthly. Max Eastman, the *Liberator*'s dashing editor-in-chief, glanced at some volumes of Paul Laurence Dunbar before pronouncing McKay's work "the first significant expression of [the Negro] race in poetry" (introduction to *Harlem Shadows*, ix). Despite Eastman's limited knowledge of black literary history, he remained McKay's steadiest ally, editor, and financial backer into the 1940s.

Further travels, however, were needed to make McKay a New York bohemian star. In the style of the Village Bolshevik John Reed, he sailed to England in late 1919 as a left-wing diplomat without portfolio. McKay in London had little in common with the wide-eyed Jamaican tourist of his dialect poem "Old

England,” who longs “to see de famous sights dem ’bouten which dere’s so much talk” (l. 6). Instead of lingering over “de body of our Missis Queen, Victoria de Good” (l. 24), he consulted with radical African students and landed a job editing for the *Workers’ Dreadnought*, London’s outstanding Communist newspaper. When McKay returned to Manhattan after two years of studying, writing, and agitating, he had erased the political debts he had racked up as a colonial policeman and proved the transnational revolutionary daring that had become bohemia’s highest credential. Dining-car service was no longer necessary; he accepted a top editorial position at the *Liberator* and membership in Harlem’s most combative black nationalist faction, the African Blood Brotherhood. His first and only American poetry collection, *Harlem Shadows* (1922), was touted even outside these radical environs as a foundation for Harlem’s cultural renaissance.

McKay’s next logical excursion—to Moscow in 1923 to inspect the Bolshevik revolution he proclaimed “the greatest event in the history of humanity” (quoted in Federal Bureau of Investigation, 26 Jan. 1924)—kicked off a needed overhaul of Communist policy on the “Negro Question” but also earned him a fat FBI file. The die was cast for McKay’s lasting reputation as the gallant bomb-thrower of black poetry, appreciated by an improbable alliance of revolutionaries and sonnet-fanciers and feared by social conservatives who were not reassured by his well-mannered formal vocabulary. Lothrop Stoddard, the leading eugenic nativist of the 1920s, denounced “this most notorious member of that group of firebrands who are to-day busy spreading the sparks of a racial conflagration” (280). “Undoubtedly,” Stoddard reasoned, McKay-style foreign allegiance and access to “Bolshevik money” were to blame for the increasing militancy of African Americans (281). A. Mitchell Palmer, the Red-busting attorney general, could not agree more, immortalizing McKay’s verse in his lengthy report to the U.S. Senate, *Investigation Activities of the Department of Justice* (United States Department of Justice, 166–67).

The risks and results of McKay’s revolutionary touring differentiated him from the Lost Generation no less than did his part in the Great Migration. By the time he reached France in 1923, he could not easily go home to Harlem; FBI orders to block his return had been sent to customs officials in the ports of New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, Charleston, Wilmington, New Orleans, and Baltimore (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 23 Jan. 1923). Bureau agents in the last city paraded their caution in a bulletin addressed to a young J. Edgar Hoover, boasting of a “Local Police Department” on the “lookout” for one “Claude McKay (Colored)” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 23 Mar. 1923). At the same moment that the Harlem Renaissance gunned its engine, FBI vigilance made McKay a promising intellectual to watch in

many more places than literary New York, a welcoming locale he could not freely reenter had he tried. Few other writers of American consequence have been subject to so thorough an intelligence manhunt or so quickly made to follow a movement-building debut with such reduced freedom of movement.

Literary history, squeamish about McKay's communism, has rarely acknowledged the circumscribed, half-compulsory nature of his mature expatriate decade, 1923 to 1933. But McKay's long trek through Berlin, Paris, Marseilles, Barcelona, and Tangier was something of a mandatory drifting or a forced Black Atlanticism, required if not defined by stop orders at North American ports of entry. More than McKay's own antibourgeois wanderlust, clinched among New York's black working class, fueled the "chronic and perverse truancy" from Harlem that was found so wasteful by Alain Locke and other pillars of the U.S. New Negro movement (Locke, "Spiritual Truancy," 82). Regarded in the grimmest light, American intelligence agents may have succeeded in banishing the most radical instigator of Harlem's cultural rebirth from its New York metropolitan core. And with long-range repercussions: McKay's absence authorized Locke, editor of the renaissance-framing *New Negro* anthology, to presume that black Bolshevism would leave the Harlem scene. Comparable effects on West Indian literature may have stemmed from McKay's inability to revisit Jamaica, the birthplace he never glimpsed after 1912, despite numerous invitations. His conviction that English spies plagued him was sustained by a frank letter from Her Majesty's Office of Works, which confirmed that British authorities at the Foreign Office retained "a full record of [his] political and other activities" and would bar "his admission" to his native island and other "British Colonial or Protectorate territories" (Postgate). McKay's public pilgrimage to the Soviet Union and his participation in the world communist movement made it tough to go home again, whether home was defined as Jamaica's Clarendon hills or as the dives beneath Harlem's Sugar Hill. Walter White and James Weldon Johnson, Harlem Renaissance elders with contacts at the State Department, intervened on McKay's behalf before he could return to the United States for good in 1934.

McKay's vagabond soul was thus nurtured in a singular odyssey across frontiers and oceans, a voyage exceptional even in the era of modernism, the immigrant-built, tradition-smashing art style that dominated his post-Jamaican lifetime. Like the professional revolutionaries of Bertolt Brecht's 1939 poem "To Those Born Later," he was a habitual, politically motivated expatriate, "changing countries oftener than [his] shoes," sometimes involuntarily (III, l. 7). (He was made to flee "social revolutionary work" in Weimar Berlin "before [he] was deported," he conceded in a letter to Upton Sinclair.) But he was also uncommonly discontent with any one traveling agenda, slipping

back and forth among revolutionary, entrepreneurial, and artistic tourisms. Just as unusual was his sense of his racially appropriate restlessness and the antiradical surveillance that propelled and hindered it. On the one hand, this surveillance did its part to dislocate McKay from a number of black modernist movements, including the Harlem Renaissance. On the other hand, its encouragement of his world tour fed the most discreetly enthusiastic modernism in black literature. McKay's avoidance of free verse and other modernist formal experiments disguised his passion for literary innovation and incongruity—modernist values he learned to mine from the immigrant experience of distance, strangeness, and liberation.

Langston Hughes, a younger writer-wanderer who reckoned McKay the “best of the colored poets,” once informed his idol that “[w]riting is like travelling, . . . it's wonderful to go somewhere but you get tired of staying” (letter to Claude McKay, 25 July 1925; 13 Sept. 1928). McKay's own writing seemed to agree, since his prolific voyaging was matched by an impatient sampling of genres. Before dying of cirrhosis and heart failure in 1948, fifty-seven years from Nairne Castle, he published his peripatetic autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937); the deliberately primitivist but idea-packed novels *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933); the disparate and variously successful short stories anthologized in *Gingertown* (1932) and in the Russian-language volume *Sudom lincha* (1925), republished as *Trial by Lynching: Stories about Negro Life in North America* (1977); the pioneering Marxist account of African American history and culture, *Negry v Amerike* (1923), translated from Russian as *The Negroes in America* (1979); the much opposed, frantically anti-Communist guide to Harlem in the 1930s, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940); and four books of verse: the Jamaican dialect volumes, *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912), and the Standard English collections, *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920) and *Harlem Shadows* (1922). Over fifty uncollected poems cluster around two episodes of conversion: his introduction to communism in the late 1910s and early 1920s and his acceptance of a socially mindful Catholicism in the mid-1940s. Finally, dozens of unreprinted essays and reviews offer graceful but cutting evaluations of everything from Eugene O'Neill's plays to Moroccan anti-Semitism, from the meaning of *Home to Harlem*—self-analyzed—to the face-off between Nazi and African American troops.

Thanks to this avid jumping from genre to genre—the written double of his nation-hopping—McKay's literary biography can be plotted as a long chain of somewhat contradictory “firsts.” He began as both the first black recipient of the Medal of the Jamaica Institute of Arts and Sciences and the first to use its stipend to leave the island permanently. As a result of this initial great migration, he became both the first black Jamaican poet acclaimed

for writing skillfully and seriously in Jamaican dialect and the first “African American” poet commended for investing elevated literary English and the time-honored sonnet form with the focused anger of the modern New Negro. He went on to create both the Harlem Renaissance’s first book of poetry, *Harlem Shadows*, and the first certifiably best-selling American novel by a black author, *Home to Harlem*. He ended his life proud to rate as both the first major black author to tour and praise the Soviet Union and the first to denounce Stalin’s leadership—initially as a disappointed “revolutionist of Communist persuasion” (letter to Max Eastman, [?] May 1925) and then as a Soviet-hating Catholic socialist. Aside from those high modernists who preferred boisterous revisions of literary form, few modernist camps could not view McKay as a sympathetic originator during some portion of his life. Today, when critics regularly announce the birth of the individualistic black author and writers politely decline the burden of stable racial spokespersonship, McKay’s dissonant explorations make him an unlikely elder statesman. Binding the varied whole of his audaciousness were just two unshakable faiths: first, commitment to a frank, thoughtful, and sensual portrayal of the diasporan black working class, a fluid Afro-proletarian realism free from piety; and second, confidence in the modern ideal of the critical literary intellectual, the model writer attentive to guild standards and the independent imagination but vocal and incorruptible when confronting social evil. Small wonder that McKay named one of his sonnets in honor of Émile Zola’s “J’Accuse,” the brave public letter that unveiled this model at the height of the Dreyfus affair.

#### A POETRY IN HIDING

As his fortunes sagged dangerously in the Great Depression, forcing him briefly into a New York State work camp, McKay became bitter that only one of his many “firsts”—*Home to Harlem*—brought him enough money to plan his next innovation in peace. Ironically, his expatriate decade of radical independence had led to the most grating financial dependency. Max Eastman and the rest of his 1930s friends received dozens of letters seesawing between anxious begging and stern intellectual correction—McKay would bite the hand even before it fed him. Sales of McKay’s verse were one reason why these letters were necessary. *Harlem Shadows*, his most successful collection, paid exactly \$491.79 in lifetime royalties (Cuff). But during the depression, as before, he romantically declared that he wrote poetry without regard for payment. Unlike grinding out marketable prose—“sweet hell when one knuckles down to it”—making verse was a splendid “pastime” (letter to Max Eastman, 7 Dec. 1929). The lyric mode escaped neither the duty of social criticism nor the sweat of serious revision; as the endnotes to this volume disclose, McKay chronically tinkered with seem-

ingly finished poems. But verse remained imaginatively apart from the battle of prose commodities he had to join to avoid groveling for meals.

During his stint in London, McKay let George Bernard Shaw in on his belief that poetry “had picked me as a medium instead of my picking [it] as a profession” (*A Long Way from Home*, 61). Shaw helpfully observed that life as a sensitive Negro poet would be more tragic than curious and advised that the handsome, compactly muscular McKay try boxing instead. If critics with greater insight could not guarantee his poetry an unprejudiced reception or a decent income, they could at least ensure it pockets of high esteem. The verse that chose McKay for a vehicle was second to none in the Jamaican and Harlem cultural renaissances, and its groundbreaking ventures in West Indian English and open racial defiance remain major turning points in historical narratives of Caribbean and African American literatures. For McKay himself, poetry counted as the treasured source of his first literary reputation and the eager subject of his last literary will and testament. Although his final wishes for his verse went unfulfilled, those who now recall McKay only vaguely are likely to know him for this literary “pastime.”

According to Winston James, the historian of Caribbean radicalism, generations of ordinary Jamaicans surpassed the initial enthusiasm of Walter Jekyll and the *Daily Gleaner* in learning McKay’s dialect poems by heart (140). Beginning with *Songs of Jamaica* and gaining muscle with the more somber *Constab Ballads*, these poems freed written creole from the trap of “darky” humor and apology, tackling subjects as thorny as police brutality (“The Apple-Woman’s Complaint”), antiracist Social Darwinism (“Cudjoe Fresh from de Lecture”), and the black and white schisms of colonial epistemology (“Quashie to Buccra”). Louise Bennett, the foremost Jamaican-language poet of the twentieth century, and J. E. Clare McFarlane, the island’s second poet laureate, agreed on the inspiration of McKay’s dignified transcription of Jamaican speech. The routine comparison between McKay and Robert Burns was not strained, wrote McFarlane, for the former also “expresses the soul of his people in a medium created by his people. It is small wonder that his dialect poetry went immediately to their hearts . . .” (quoted in James, 140–41). As James notes, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, the contemporary Barbadian poet and influential advocate of Caribbean “nation language,” has been less receptive, chastising McKay’s reliance on the imported rhythm of iambic pentameter, the rudimentary meter of English poetry. But Brathwaite’s lecture series *History of the Voice* admits the magnitude of McKay’s Jamaican volumes, “unique [in being] the first all-dialect collections from an anglophone Caribbean poet” (20). Brathwaite finally judges McKay “rather ambivalent about his negritude” (19), his custody of a self-sufficient black identity in the face of British colonialism—an ironic verdict given that one

of the founders of the Francophone negritude movement, Léopold Senghor of Senegal, cheered him “as the veritable inventor” of its nativist, anticolonialist aesthetic (quoted in Cooper, 259). Senghor and his Martinican colleague Aimé Césaire were especially taken with McKay’s *Banjo*, memorizing entire passages of a novel whose diaspora-wide fugue of black vernaculars is unthinkable without his earlier Jamaican lyrics.

McKay’s prominent place in recollections of African American poetry is surprisingly similar, despite his starring role in the brief eclipse of black American dialect verse in the early 1920s. The anthemic Shakespearian sonnet “If We Must Die,” one of the landmark political poems of the twentieth century, was immediately embraced for African American community use during the “Red Summer” race riots of 1919 and has been copied, recited, and committed to memory ever since—by radicals of all colors and their enemies in the U.S. Congress, by Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler, by Attica Prison inmates and FBI file-makers. Few factions in the Harlem Renaissance failed to place McKay’s Standard English verse—tender, formally accomplished, but fearless and piercing—among the rebirth’s opening manifestos. On the left, Arna Bontemps asked that 1917 be commemorated as the year of McKay’s poem “The Harlem Dancer,” “the anticipation and the theme of an early outburst of creativity later described as the Negro or Harlem Renaissance” (21–22). On the (near) right, James Weldon Johnson christened McKay the “most powerful voice” in postwar black poetry and “one of the principal forces in bringing about the Negro literary awakening” (166, 168).

McKay’s “violent sonnets” have dominated talk of his importance to African American literature in the post-renaissance era. Brilliantly torn poems, such as “Outcast,” “The White City,” and “Enslaved,” are honored for dragging the sonnet into the darkest corners of the twentieth century and for propelling disciplined expressions of black rage and resistance into the mainstream of African American literature. For black nationalist critics of the 1960s and 1970s, these furious but decorous lyrics qualified McKay as the century’s representative “Black poet at war” (Gayle, *Claude McKay*, 40). Addison Gayle Jr., the editor of *The Black Aesthetic*, shared Brathwaite’s grievance against McKay’s formal timidity but classed the Jamaican as the modern elder in whose path all “Black poets who direct their art towards Black people . . . are sojourners” (*Claude McKay*, 40). In both the Anglophone Caribbean and the African American case, McKay’s poetry thus wins a rare triple crown: a place in the oral memory of the people; prominence in the front lines of a black literary modernism; and historical stature as a flawed but trailblazing black nationalist ancestor. Among early-twentieth-century black poets, only Langston Hughes can be said to have built a weightier international presence.

McKay’s poems, however, have been much harder to come by than those

of Hughes and many lesser peers. This is not for lack of continuing attention to their author; in recent years, as modernist canons have reopened along with maps of the cultural traffic of the Black Atlantic, McKay's serial precociousness has been redefined as a vital path through modern writing. Accounts of English-language modernism as an interracial and international affair are increasingly likely to cite him; so is new work on the intersections among Harlem's renaissance, black radicalism, and gay New York. His abundant travels are now welcome fuel for postcolonial theory and criticism, no longer clear evidence of a Harlem truant who irresponsibly abandoned the renaissance he had sparked. As a result of this heightening interest, McKay's novels and short stories have all been republished. Even his Soviet treatise, *The Negroes in America*, and *Harlem Glory*, the fragmentary manuscript of a never-finished novel, have appeared in book form. Yet McKay's verse is still difficult to acquire without access to an excellent research library and a working photocopy machine—a mere fraction remains in print. Various anthology selections offer snapshot views; so does an economical Dover Thrift assortment, and Winston James's reprinting of thirty-one Jamaican poems in his enlightening study *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (2000). The once-standard *Selected Poems of Claude McKay*, published posthumously by Bookman Associates in 1953, includes a larger range of McKay's own preferred stock but contains only eighty-four poems, ahistorically arranged. Since its paperback reissue by Harcourt Brace in 1969, it, too, has fallen out of print, as has Wayne F. Cooper's valuable collection *The Passion of Claude McKay* (1973), with its twenty-page sampling of largely American verse.

This book's 323 poems thus aim to close the largest remaining gap in our evolving portrait of Claude McKay—and arguably the largest remaining gap in the historical record of black diasporan poetry as well. Undoubtedly, a handful of works have been overlooked and will eventually be located by other researchers, but a concerted effort has been made to discover and include every one of McKay's published and unpublished poems, from his first dialect ballad of 1911 to his final religious sonnet of 1947, many of which are not listed in McKay bibliographies. Certain of these unfamiliar poems and perhaps all of the unpublished sonnet sequence McKay called "The Cycle" may strike some readers as relatively flimsy, isolated from McKay's best by their rhythmic wandering or thematic eccentricity. Few other poets of World War II thought the sonnet appropriate to protesting wrongheaded letters to the editor, and there is some validity in the comment of Herbert Weinstock, an editor at Alfred A. Knopf, on McKay's work of the period: "Something, it seems to me, has happened to McKay during the last decade or two that has robbed him of self-criticism" (letter to Carl Cowl). But the unknown poems in the earlier "Clinic" and "Cities" groups can be as compelling as those that

first singled McKay out in Kingston and Harlem, and none of the rest are unfinished embarrassments the author tried to hide from posterity. McKay's unpublished verse remained that way purely because Knopf and other publishers refused to print it. In the 1940s, McKay searched without success for a firm willing to issue "The Cycle," and he fitfully shopped a book of his developing religious verse. Unpublished contributions to "The Clinic" and "Cities" clusters were included in a neatly typed notebook he titled "New Poems by Claude McKay" and tried to market separately and together with a reissue of *Harlem Shadows* upon returning to the United States in 1934. McKay's final editorial confidants Cedric Dover, Max Eastman, and Carl Cowl sought to save his reputation from his own plans to revive and expand it; they were particularly hard on his Catholic poems, several examples of which they cut from the career-spanning collection he approved in his last years. Pathetically, only McKay's obituary aroused publishers' interest in this summary document, transformed under Eastman and Cowl's direction from the *Collected* to the *Selected Poems of Claude McKay*. In contrast to their "best of" edition, *Complete Poems* assumes that the poet's hopes for an inclusive roundup are worth respecting.

#### WHY THE COMPLETE POEMS?

This book's bias toward inclusion is not solely a matter of honoring the dead. Both McKay's career and the wider cultural histories it helped shape are re-illuminated by access to his complete verse. Confronting his poetry as a whole offers two sorts of productive novelty: discovery and recontextualization. Evidence of McKay's enduring interest in verse belongs in the first category. The common impression that McKay moved from poetry to prose to obscurity is undone by proof of his commitment to the lyric throughout most of his writing life; narrative prose monopolized just the years from 1926 to 1931. Despite appearances to the contrary created by his publication record, McKay did not abandon his first literary love with his exit from Harlem in 1922. Hospitalized in Paris in 1923, he battled syphilis and depression with eerie verses that project personal illness onto postwar social decay, creating his own rhythmically grumbling *Waste Land* in the form of "The Clinic." A few years later, reflecting on his stockpile of urban memories while in better health, he launched the diverse metropolitan portraits of the "Cities" series—a project roughly contemporaneous with Brecht's poetic "Reader for Those Who Live in Cities" but more a judgmental grand tour than a guide to the commonplace alienations of urban living. The unpublished poem "We Who Revolt" and other self-referential lyrics from the mid-1920s justify both his stubborn bohemianism and his prescient (and un-Brechtian) anti-Stalinism. When

many of his counterparts were meeting the traumas of fascism, the Great Depression, and World War II with a renewed commitment to the realist novel, a destitute McKay returned to the concise demands of the sonnet's fourteen lines, devising one of the most polemical, most resentful, and most candidly oddball sonnet cycles in twentieth-century literature. As with depression and war, so with religious conversion: he digested and preached his new-found Catholicism through the prism of the sonnet form, impressing the fifty thousand engaged readers of the *Catholic Worker* in place of New York commercial publishers. Poetry thus became a mobile home for McKay. Like his willful tie to the Harlem working class, it provided ballast amid migration, underwriting nearly all phases of his literary journey. No other of his chosen modes linked his Jamaican and American selves or expressed the full arc of his ideological trajectory, from early strikes against the self-policing of the colonized to final warnings on the clashing "Pagan Isms" of the dawning cold war. Besides providing the first comprehensive look at McKay's verse, the *Complete Poems* constitutes a fair primer on his whole career.

Evidence of McKay's prolific work as a Communist poet, then as a left-Catholic one, also provides the novelty of discovery. When his sonnets from the *Workers' Dreadnought*, the English radical newspaper, are grouped with his abandoned poems in U.S. leftist venues, the *Liberator's* claim that McKay was "the foremost revolutionary poet" of the early 1920s seems unforced (*Liberator*, May 1922 subscription offer). The faith in young Soviet leadership that circulates quietly through *Harlem Shadows* blares out from such uncollected sonnets as "To 'Holy' Russia." The best "men who clung to sacred dreams," its speaker intones, knew that Russia's genuine holiness would emerge under the Bolshevik "arm of steel," not under the Orthodox Church (ll. 4, 5). After reading hymns of this explicitness, it should be more of a challenge to isolate the Harlem Renaissance that McKay heralded from the long history of radical balladry or from the shorter line of self-consciously proletarian poets into whose shoes he stepped in London. Such bugle calls as "Labor's Day" and "Song of the New Soldier and Worker" attest that the new direction of his violent sonnets depended on much-used socialist molds as well as on the first episodes of specifically New Negro militancy. Among these molds was a matrix well suited for turning such militancy to lyric account, a flexible pattern for synthesizing high political seriousness, dramas of militant antipathy, and a lofty, visionary vocabulary.

Comparably revealing is the mix of radicalism and religion in "The Cycle" sequence. When not captiously blaming Boston liberals, Jewish radicals, and Harlem commissars for McKay's depression burdens, these fifty-four poems, fifty of them sonnets, needle readers to recognize their mortal sins—while resisting "American Fascism" through renewed black solidarity ("Poem 29,"

l. 10). Numbers 23, 27, 29, and 36 in the sequence discriminate between legitimate opposition to “pagan Russia” and a neoconservatism that saw no Western evil. These and others also convey McKay’s approval of the “Double V” battle cry of African American soldiers during World War II: victory over Nazism in Europe and over racism in the United States. The whole of “The Cycle” argues that McKay’s turn to Catholicism, though prodded by a paranoid anticommunism developed in the late 1930s, was no negation of a life of political insurgency. With the inspiration of his old Greenwich Village friend Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, he would almost always mix socialism and anti-imperialism into his censure of the godless Soviet Union. (As he swore two years after his conversion and less than two years before his death, “I have never been a reactionary and I won’t be one now . . .” [letter to Max Eastman, 9 Sept. 1946]. He underlined the point by digging up snapshots of his Moscow trip when he was visited by FBI agents in 1947, messengers of McCarthyism to come [letter to Carl Cowl].) One of McKay’s abiding poetic interests, it now appears, was to revive the lyric sonnet as an instrument of radical persuasion, whether Communist or anti-Communist. McKay’s long pursuit of this seeming category mistake disallows the occasional argument that he came to reject his early American verse wholesale, dismissing a dead-end effort to stuff raging content into a suffocating form.

It is not the case, however, that all of McKay’s poems show him to be a chastely political creature, concentrating exclusively on rhyming platforms against race, class, and Soviet injury. To encounter the whole of *Harlem Shadows*, not widely reprinted since the 1920s, is to discover that McKay’s love poetry is extensive and purposefully exhibitionist, built to take no backseat. These erotic lyrics of the pre-“Clinic” period frame sex as droll and heroic narrative material, as an appropriate index of the developing self, and as a principal means to self-development in the first place (Stansell, 275). Despite their half-hearted allusions to the war between body and soul, they might single-handedly have roused William Sanger’s classic rant against New York’s free-love bohemia of the 1910s and 1920s: the “mantle of revolution,” he charged, merely cloaked a “hellhole of . . . promiscuity” (quoted in Stansell, 241).

In McKay’s quiet storm, mementos of this hellhole are everywhere. The primal scenes of free love are places of rest then favored in Harlem or Greenwich Village salons: a “purple mat” (“Flirtation,” l. 1) or a “couch of figured green” (“Flower of Love,” l. 9). Sexual acts are proportionally sacred and carnal, episodes of “quiet worship at [a] scented shrine” that permit worldly resurrection (“Commemoration,” l. 12). Beyond this familiar interweaving of Christian and erotic idioms, McKay promotes the more characteristically modern pleasure of confessing love’s low motives. A comic lyric with the conclusive title “Romance” advertises cynical candor as an aphrodisiac, bringing the

author of “If We Must Die” as close as he would come to Dorothy Parker or to the more serious modern lover Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose fluent free-love sonnets also influenced Countée Cullen, another first-wave Harlem Renaissance star dedicated to conventional poetic forms. The word *love* “is so sweet,” whispers one McKay bedmate to another, “We know it is not true. / What matters it? The night must shed her dew” (ll. 13–14). So much for Jean Wagner’s notion of the “total absence of humor” in McKay’s poems (247).

When McKay departs from free-love orthodoxy, he does so in the name of freer love. Few erotic poems in *Harlem Shadows* employ gendered pronouns, inviting open identifications with lovers of different and common sexes, thus complementing the unbridled homoeroticism of the “Bennie” poems in the earlier collection *Constab Ballads*. The love-sick speaker with the “swarthy face” in “Commemoration” (l. 13) is the later volume’s norm; white phobias and black “uplift” caution be damned, McKay’s composite free-love hero is an explicitly colored man, a faithful descendant of the classical black Arabian poet Antar, whom McKay recommended to racists questioning the inherent good taste of Negro love lyrics (*A Long Way from Home*, 89). In the fantasy of “The City’s Love,” the French modernist Charles Baudelaire’s linkage of metropolitan crowds and fleeting erotic exchanges is pressed toward the literal, and “[f]or one brief moment rare like wine” the whole of white Manhattan cannot resist the black speaker’s come-hither (l. 1). “Oblivious of the color of my skin,” the speaker exults, “The great, proud city, seized with a strange love, / Bowed down for one flame hour my pride to prove” (ll. 3, 7–8). Access to all of *Harlem Shadows* invites us to recall that some of the boldest poems of a canonically bold poet have nothing to do with self-defense. It further reminds us that many of McKay’s best-known violent sonnets couch resistance as a technique of the self, an individual discipline of erotic banditry. “Baptism,” rather than the group-minded “If We Must Die,” is typical of this set. The lyric “I” has it, and an autonomous speaker grasps racism or a comparable intimate enemy as a “Desire,” a yearning intensity that, skillfully recirculated, “consumes [the] mortal fears” it instills in him (l. 11). Even McKay’s shining “hate lyrics” cannot refuse bohemian codes of expressive egotism and the cross-wiring of political and amorous dynamite. Read carefully, they anticipate the cocktail of sexual liberty and antiracist schooling stirred up in *Home to Harlem*—not to mention Du Bois’s famous assault on the novel’s “filth, after which I feel distinctly like taking a bath” (Review, 114). (McKay, a knee-jerk enemy of tact, probably enjoyed inciting this one-of-a-kind Du Bois literary striptease.)

*Complete Poems* thus encourages a discovery of McKay’s sheer range as a poet, inside and outside of individual works. Past the sonnets of racial tension that remain classroom mainstays, the full-grown poems of black Catholicism,

and the love lyrics favored by Eastman and other bohemian comrades-in-arms, the mass of his verse shows multiple stakes, themes, and tones. Everything from Christmas in Jamaica to May Day in Petrograd receives commemorative lines. Winston James finds a profusion of types in McKay's Jamaican protest verse alone: poems detailing the life of struggling peasants ("Fetchin' Water"; "Two-an'-Six"); poems exploring the binds of colonial discipline and self-discipline ("The Heart of a Constab"; "Flat-Foot Drill"); poems expressing an ambivalent Jamaican nationalism ("My Native Land, My Home"; "Peasants' Ways o' Thinkin'"); poems militating for the beauty of blackness and related "intimations of *négritude*" ("My Pretty Dan"; "Fe Me Sal"); poems in a female voice displaying "emergent feminist sympathies" ("Ribber Come-Do'n"; "A Midnight Woman to the Bobby"); even a suite of proto-vegetarian poems objecting to cruelty to animals, inspired in part by Schopenhauer's dictum that "[t]he *greatest benefit of railways* is that millions of draught-horses are spared a miserable existence" ("Cotch Donkey"; "Killin' Nanny") (55–138, Schopenhauer quoted on 121). McKay's Standard English protest poems present a similar breadth. Adjacent to the lyrics of black, working-class, and left-Catholic defiance discussed above, there are many poems bent on synthesizing rebellious categories ("Battle"; "Birds of Prey") and a smaller collection of more resigned elegies for weary urban workers, victims chained to airless subways and inflexible hours ("The Tired Worker"; "Subway Wind"). What's more, there is an allied subgenre that may be McKay's own invention, the poem of bohemianism *interruptus*, in which the start of the working day suddenly and painfully concludes free love, late hours, artistic stimulation, and other bohemian idylls ("Alfonso, Dressing to Wait at Table"; "Dawn in New York"). The playful, antiproducer pleasures of "Recuerdo" (1920), one of Edna St. Vincent Millay's best-remembered bohemian rhapsodies, are agonizingly confiscated from the heroes of these McKay sonnets, written in the same New York minute and milieu. More often "very tired" than "very merry," McKay's bohemian wannabes cannot go "back and forth all night on the ferry" without losing their livelihoods (Millay, ll. 1–2).

A related poem, "When Dawn Comes to the City," bridges the gap between McKay's songs of interrupted bohemianism and his larger collection of nostalgic lyrics on rural Jamaica. The speaker, waking to a bleak New York morning, watches "Dark figures start for work" and resolves that he would rather be "In the heart of the island of the sea, / Where the cocks are crowing, crowing, crowing" (ll. 6, 10–11). Not all of McKay's poems of tropical longing are as naively sentimental and lexically flabby as this thrice-crowing cock suggests. While at the top of his game, he was more than a garden-variety modern primitive searching for a cure to alienation amid the palms, breadfruit, and echoes of Gauguin. The hard-traveling Charlie Chaplin publicly recommend-

ed McKay's "Tropics in New York," perhaps because its unforced pentameter reflected movingly on the ironies of hunger "for the old, familiar ways" (l. 11). "Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root, / Cocoa in pods and alligator pears" strike the speaker as "Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs," arousing an itch for union with far-off Jamaican nature (ll. 1–2, 4). As the second quatrain reveals, however, the fruits and spices assume such power only because of their casual display in a New York grocer's "window, bringing memories" (l. 5); the tropics they typify are recollected in urban tranquility. In this vision of the Black Metropolis, the narrator may be as uprooted as the harvest he craves, but he knows just where to window-shop for nostalgic transport and romantic appetite, fellow products of Caribbean migration to the Big Apple.

The sonnet "In Bondage," meanwhile, confirms that the source of McKay's nostalgia was not just the exuberant crops of Clarendon Parish but also the books in its better libraries. The "Somewhere" that invites the yearning of the speaker is both rural Jamaica and the floating, fantastic terrain of the pastoral mode, the Edenic landscape where "the old earth is kind, and ever yields / Her goodly gifts to all her children free" (ll. 8, 3–4). Indulgence in this Eden remains guilt-laden and conditional, however. The speaker "would be wandering in distant fields" (l. 1), a contented second Wordsworth, but feels obliged to sample harsher territory, where he is "bound" to "black men" buried in "mean graves, / . . . simple slaves of ruthless slaves" (ll. 13–14). Bondage to a historically grounded, hard-suffering racial community, the subject of the concluding couplet, literally lies beneath twelve lines on the timeless enjoyments of Jamaica-as-pastoral—the pastoral mode's pleasures thus rest on the sweat of agricultural slaves, whose labor nursed the conceit that the earth might yield fruits without struggle and that romantic literary capital might grow from trees. Such poems resurrecting the Jamaican countryside reflect McKay's sincere regard for "My Native Land, My Home" and reveal a photographic memory of regional details less generic than "Bananas ripe and green." Confronted with the profusion of "yampy" yams, "bannabee" beans, "wis-wis" willows, and the "red dog-rose" in McKay's verse, *The Garden*, an English horticulture journal, actually reviewed *Songs of Jamaica* as a rhyming handbook to the flora of Clarendon Parish. At its most interesting, however, McKay's country music also explores the urban conditions of rural nostalgia and the social conditions of the pastoral, the essentially metropolitan literary mode from which it borrows attitudes and stage settings. The best of McKay's nostalgia lyrics thus rank him as the premier poet of the Clarendon hills and, at the same time, the vanguard poet of the Great Migration to Harlem and other points north. The first qualification is precisely what made the second possible, since the migration fostered unprecedented rural cravings as it manu-

factured enthusiastic black urbanites, demanding backward-looking romanticism along with ironic and militant rejections of the same.

Not all of McKay's Jamaican pastorals, then, pose the metropolis as a hollow opposite to rural virtue. Access to his later, unpublished poems, moreover, contradicts the proposition that his verse expresses an overall "antipathy to the city" (Wagner, 215). The title poem in the autobiographical "Cities" group, notes Winston James, dispatches this "antipathy" with deliberate speed. "I love all cities, I love their foreign ways," it avows, "Their tyranny over the life of man, / Their wakeful nights and never-resting days, / Their mighty movements seeming without plan" ("Cities," ll. 7–10). In McKay's mind, where contradiction was basic equipment for literary migration and intellectual headway, the tyrannical/beloved city was as agreeable a landscape for poetry as Clarendon. And sometimes as pastoral a landscape: in his "Cities" poems, as in the alleys and nightclubs of *Banjo* and *Home to Harlem*, natural metaphors transmit urban joys. A "lovely fountain bubbling" cleanses "bitter memories" in the mountain city of "Xauen" (ll. 1, 2), while old "Tetuan" offers the sight of "Africa's fingers" tracing "words and figures like exotic flowers" (ll. 3, 5). The Moroccan setting of this pair of urban portraits hints at the Afrocentric motif within the whole "Cities" cluster, his most memorable expatriate travelogue after *A Long Way from Home*. Exacting sketches of such European hubs as London, Berlin, and Paris—"a city more like bread / Than wine" ("Paris," II, ll. 5–6)—follow lavish tributes to Barcelona, Tangier, and Fez, saluted for their Moorish-"Africana" influence. A small album of colorful Harlem views ends the sequence, lambasting "Black Belt Slummers" but locating "[t]he deathless spirit of a race" in a "basement den" ("Harlem," II, l. 8; I, l. 1). McKay's 1912 dialect lyric "My Native Land, My Home" had answered charges that blacks were a nationless, "no-land race" with the boast that the "fertile soil" of Jamaica "is de nigger's place" (ll. 7, 29, 5). By contrast, his "Cities" group proposes that Africa and its far-flung diaspora deserved keys to many world capitals. McKay's life in transit broke him of the romantic need to locate the seedbed of black culture in the countryside alone. By the mid-1920s, he pictured this seedbed growing under a myriad of urban centers, liable to spread to cities beyond the Black Atlantic if carried by vagabonds of his general description.

Taken together, the unexpected variety of McKay's *Complete Poems*—rural and urban, Communist and Catholic, caustic and erotic—reveals that he is not simply the preeminent "poet of hate" in black letters, the great weapon of Harlem modernism against the Victorian fallacy that antagonism is fundamentally unpoetic (Wagner, 225). Positive passion was rarely far from the surface of McKay's verse, whether the subject was the black city, or the Clarendon hills, or sexual desire, or the Catholic Church, or the revolutionary

future, or, less obvious, the health and movement denied to the skeleton crew of “The Clinic.” In the decades before McKay denounced the “hate” that built “The Pagan Isms” (l. 4), his poetic airing of such “isms” was shot through with love. This is not to deny that a good deal of McKay’s finest work cultivates drama by inverting the sonnet’s orthodox emotion. Self-consciously and intriguingly, he sets “hatred for the foe of me and mine” against the expected “tender word” (“O Word I Love to Sing,” ll. 12, 9). But the hatred in question is generally “clean,” neither “mean nor spiteful,” as the philosopher John Dewey phrased it in his introduction to the *Selected Poems* (9). With the exception of the morbidly vengeful “Cycle” sonnets—his “bitter” poems, conceded the author (quoted in Riedl)—McKay aims his sharpest acrimony inward, not in the sense that he shows racism to produce black self-loathing but in the sense that his black protagonists explore the uncanny conversion of white hatred into self-nourishment. “My being would be a skeleton, a shell,” declares the voice of “The White City,” “If this dark Passion that fills my every mood, / And makes my heaven in the white world’s hell, / Did not forever feed me vital blood” (ll. 5–8). Such “dark Passion,” able to repair and redeem like compassion, its apparent opposite, courts conceptual impurity even in its cleanliness. McKay’s violent sonnets defend the anger of the oppressed in the style of Frantz Fanon, a younger Caribbean-born revolutionary with North African ties, but allow themselves to contemplate how hate may metamorphose into critical love of the oppressor. “Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,” admits the embattled suitor of “America,” “I will confess / I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!” (ll. 1, 3–4). McKay would not regret that “If We Must Die” remains his poetry’s calling card—he never renounced dynamic resistance to the “common foe” (l. 9). Still, within the varied paradoxical logics of the Shakespearian sonnet, dialectical Marxism, and the God of the Cross, he located continued inducements to suspect that hate and love were not frozen or isolated poles but aspects of the same process of impassioned confrontation.

So much for the novelties of discovery presented by McKay’s *Complete Poems*—readers of these poems may spot others or reasons to challenge those claimed here. What of the novelty of recontextualization? Above all, placing McKay’s Standard English verse on the heels of his Jamaican dialect work invites fresh reflections on the long dominant criticism of his poetry: the complaint that his (black/radical) themes are contradicted and undermined by his (white/conservative) forms, by artificial diction, lockstep rhymes, and methodical stanzas that he abandoned in his successfully integrated novels. The thesis that McKay’s verse suffers from form-content schizophrenia has had several allies: older generations of critics educated to value high modernist style wars or the criterion of balanced, organic form; younger generations of critics who

share some part of this, plus the assumption that self-respecting black poetry should employ blues stanzas, syncopated, jazzy line breaks, contrasting call-and-response typefaces, or other post-1925 conventions for rendering black oral modes into formal literature. McKay's reluctance to comment on his own poetics has done little to help his case; Ralph Ellison, among other direct inheritors of the Harlem Renaissance, found him "inarticulate when it came to discussing technique" ("The Essential Ellison," 346). Common to all the objecting parties is the sense that the modernity of McKay's verse is half-baked, split between his risky cheerleading for the radical crusades of his own era and his meek reverence for the poetic clichés of someone else's bygone century. According to these "critics' way o' thinkin'," McKay's poems imitate the anxious revolutionaries described in Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, cloaking their break with historical wrongs in embarrassing old outfits. The world-beating New Negro borrows Shelley's clothing or even Shakespeare's, and the regular forms of dead, distant generations commence to make every new thought old again.

The Jamaica-to-Harlem range of *Complete Poems*, however, emphasizes that McKay's mature palette of conventions represents a self-assertive choice, even a self-modernizing one. Admittedly, the chosen mode of self-modernization is counterintuitive. When read chronologically, McKay's verse begins with forms valued for novelty and indigenous blackness. Jamaican vocabulary and idiom fill his initial collections, verifying that he was a skilled and original champion of "nation language" in twentieth-century black verse. Forms valued for traditionalism and imagined universality then become the notice of McKay's emigration from the island; sonnets and a polished English romantic diction take center stage. The stylistic path of McKay's poetry thus appears to rewind time, to repeat the larger history of modern black poetry in reverse. Unlike his fellow Harlem renaissancers Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Helene Johnson, he seems to grow *into* imitation of premodernist white prototypes rather than out of it. But this impression of McKay as a historical recidivist holds up only insofar as we discount the progressive, internationalizing impulse of his post-Jamaican poetry. This poetry indeed adopted a defining strategy of modern minority renaissances from Dublin to Prague, traveling back in (formal) time to travel forward in (social) space.

In the last, rocky years of his life, McKay claimed that he adopted a "straight English" voice "to amaze and confound" his Jamaican readers; though they applauded his dialect poems, he feared that "they thought I was not serious" (*My Green Hills*, 87). As it actually happened, however, his adoption of the emperor's linguistic clothes first amazed and confounded readers in Harlem and Greenwich Village. Becoming a formal-English writer accompanied McKay's new life as an African American worker-intellectual and his new interest in the most controversial issues of U.S. race relations and the labor move-

ment. At the time of its conception, then, McKay's "straight English" was more concerned to penetrate the argumentative, liberated milieu of New York's lyrical Left than to please haughty, colonized tastes back in Jamaica; adopting this English spelled progress through the new, not return. Overt use of his own black nation language—rural Jamaican—would have isolated him from most of his new cohort, exiling him from continued poetic relevance. As McKay conceived the dilemma, "the Jamaica Negro dialect . . . which still preserves a few words of African origin, . . . is more difficult of understanding than the American Negro dialect" (*Harlem Shadows*, xix). Standard English, however conspicuously literary, better met the need for a medium of expanded radical communication. For one thing, it stood as the ironic lingua franca of the Anglophone black diaspora, both West Indian and American, that was then assembling in Harlem's Black Metropolis. For another thing, it qualified as a contact language for outreach to white comrades, first in the Village and then at London's *Workers' Dreadnought*. From the late teens forward, McKay therefore detected few contradictions among established English forms and voices, the daring of the best modern thought, and the immediacy and translatability of the best modern expression. He would remain, as he put it, "keenly responsive and receptive" to high modernist adventures but would adhere "to such of the older traditions as I find adequate for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods" (*Harlem Shadows*, xx). Use of set forms, he wagered in his brief author's note to *Harlem Shadows*, was compatible "with the highest degree of spontaneity and freedom" (xx).

But did McKay's wager pan out in his poems? Do signs of spontaneity and freedom, so prominent in his nomadic biography, still emerge from his well-wrought sonnets? McKay's reliance on the staple English meter of iambic pentameter—five units of an unstressed-stressed syllable pair—presents no impassable roadblock to contemporary enjoyment. After a century of habituation to free verse, his routine use of the traditional measure seems less an awkward, clinging trace of recent bad old days than a legitimate, expressive foreign language. Like present-day examples of the new formalism, McKay's poems suppose that the force of irregular meter is best felt when irregularly present—powerful reverberations are generated when he briefly slows or shakes the iambic framework. The critic Michael North remarks that the even stresses of the words "cocoa" and "grape fruit" in "The Tropics in New York" push "compromises on the generally iambic pattern, further clogging lines already very high in consonance," thus producing "an extraordinary effect of sensory presence" (111)—one of the same effects that the high modernist movement of imagism hoped to produce by loudly shattering the pentameter. By the same token, the generally noniambic, tepidly free meter of "Fixture," an unpublished poem in "The Clinic" group, becomes markedly poi-

gnant in context; its prayer for bodily mobility takes wing in breaking from the fixity of McKay's usual pace. Such subtle metrical variations of course do not fully answer the charge that McKay's measures are inattentive to black speech and song. Yet it is worth remembering that McKay presumed that even meter was every bit as black as polyrhythm, at least where the echo of Jamaican musics was concerned. "Of our purely native songs," he wrote, "the jammias (field and road), shay-shays (yard and booth), wakes (post-mortem), Anancy tales (transplanted African folk lore), and revivals (religious) are all singularly punctuated by meter and rhyme. And nearly all my own poetic thought has always run naturally into these regular forms" (*Harlem Shadows*, xx). On a good day, McKay's end-rhymed iambic pentameter thus promised to smuggle native Jamaican sounds into his addresses to a largely non-Jamaican audience. A wish-fulfilling dream of ethnic and national connection, perhaps, but is the fit between jammias, shay-shays, and jagged high modernist metrics more natural?

McKay's diction, or distinctive choice of words, forms a higher barrier to contemporary readers. His introduction to *Harlem Shadows* tips its hat to Wordsworth's influential attack on precious and unnatural aristocratic language. "[I]n all my moods," McKay reports, "I have striven to achieve directness, truthfulness, and naturalness of expression instead of an enameled originality" (*Harlem Shadows*, xxi). Yet McKay's rendition of the common language of twentieth-century men and women feels free to borrow from Wordsworth's own nineteenth-century lexicon. As North formulates the resulting paradox, such McKay lyrics as "O Word I Love to Sing" offer "stilted language complaining against itself without effect" (116). The speaker of this poem, quoted above, theatrically memorializes McKay's best-known poetic breakthrough: shaping "unwilling words" to fit a "hatred of the foe of me and mine" (ll. 11, 12). But not without saluting the same words for their irresistible obsolescence: the last stanza apostrophizes "tears of passion saturate with brine" (ll. 10).

Even as he aimed for "directness, truthfulness, and naturalness," McKay was not about to forego the pleasures of briny tears and other officially poetic people, places, and things. "I have not hesitated to use words which are old, and in some circles considered poetically overworked and dead," his author's note in *Harlem Shadows* continues, "when I thought I could make them glow alive by new manipulation" (xxi). Here, as in his comments on meter and rhyme, McKay underscores his conscious selection of the "old" amid the increasingly attractive arguments of high modernism—a modernism he intimates he knows full well and might well decide to practice. Hadn't he begun with the "new" or poetically underused dialect of black Jamaica? Wouldn't he move toward the forthright, hard-boiled vocabulary of "The Cycle" po-

ems, whose plain-speaking satiric diction made him “feel more like Pope and Swift or even Catullus than like Shelley and Keats and the Elizabethans”? (letter to Max Eastman, 21 Mar. 1945). In an important sense, McKay’s defense of old words in his author’s note has already adopted the core modernist value of “making it new.” He will rely on them, he stipulates, only when he can offer them a recontextualizing spark of life. Obeying the logic of cultural renaissance, the deep structure of his post-Jamaican poetics, McKay proposes to resuscitate tired diction through new management. “Invocation,” McKay’s inaugural American sonnet, in fact suggests that this particular rejuvenation project will direct his post-Jamaican career. A black “Ancestral Spirit” is asked to “[b]ring ancient music” to the speaker’s “modern heart,” and near-ancient wording—“[w]here hid’st thou”—is accordingly invoked as the key to becoming “[t]he worthy singer of my world and race” (ll. 1, 9, 4, 14).

“Where hid’st thou” and similar expressions may frustrate some of McKay’s twenty-first-century readers—especially those versed in high modernism, by now another antique vocabulary demanding footnotes and dictionaries. But these expressions in no way signal a poet who employed vintage English diction to deny the “Ancestral Spirit” of blackness. If this ancestral spirit was located as the African revivalism of the Harlem Renaissance first understood it—“hidden from . . . sight / By modern Time’s unnumbered works and ways” (“Invocation,” ll. 1–2)—then it might logically first speak again as it did in his poetry, in a solemn reborn ancient tongue. McKay seconded James Weldon Johnson’s opinion that the malignant replicas of “Negro dialect” clogging the pages of American magazines could not power a black renaissance. As far away as Moscow, the Jamaican thundered against “the decadent school of old critics who stubbornly cling to old dialect” (*The Negroes in America*, 75). “Old” indeed, he thought, and not worth new manipulation; unlike the relatively unexploited black Jamaican dialect, recently parsed by McKay himself, written simulations of its black American cousin had become one of “modern Time’s” deadening “works and ways,” what Johnson labeled an overplayed “instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos” (44). Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, and other fluent speakers of African American vernacular would prove Johnson and McKay shortsighted, ushering in the adult vocabulary of Harlem Renaissance literature in the late 1920s, but only in the wake of McKay’s throat-clearing grand style, intent on detaching black American poetry from the unusable dialect voice of its immediate past.

McKay’s affection for the sonnet, the “little song” of fourteen lines his grand style favored, these days requires a bit less historical translation. From the perspective of 1917, James Oppenheim, an editor of the *Seven Arts*, imagined that McKay’s use of a seven-hundred-year-old design clashed with his racial interests, if not his racial identity. Though McKay’s sonnets were “tra-

ditional . . . in form,” Oppenheim reassured his avant-garde audience that they “were clearly racial in theme” (quoted in North, 114). As Michael North argues, early considerations of McKay’s form-content problem endorsed a strange compromise: the end-rhymed, iambic pentameter sonnet counted as incurably premodern, but (black) racial content counted as inescapably up-to-date, so “dealing with racial themes could make even a relentlessly traditional poet a kind of honorary modernist” (114). More recent commentary, however, is less troubled by the two-fifths of McKay poems written in the pattern of Petrarch and Shakespeare. Though his meter and diction remain suspect, McKay’s parody or reinvention of the fourteen-line formula is now often viewed as the ultimate proving ground of his (more-than-honorary) modernism. Some critics flag his violent sonnets as successful modernizations of the form through fresh content alone. McKay favorites Baudelaire, Millay, and e. e. cummings are occasionally mentioned as accomplices, as is the genuinely long queue of African American sonnet writers from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Rita Dove, but this line of thought tends to ignore such fellow modern sonneteers long enough to exaggerate the originality of McKay’s escape from themes of love. Other critics, meanwhile, remove the quotation marks around McKay’s modernism by placing them firmly around his sonnets, now reconceived as sardonic, self-modernizing travesties of white usage. Houston A. Baker Jr., for example, the prominent African American literary theorist, contends that McKay’s poems in the form “are just as much mastered *masks* as the minstrel manipulations of Booker T. Washington and Charles Chesnutt are” (85). The Jamaican’s sonnets follow the lead of these wily southern survivors, Baker suggests, and adapt the outwardly obedient subterfuge of Anancy the spider, Bre’er Rabbit, and other trickster heroes of New World black folklore. In signaling black ironies from beneath the sonnet’s upright white mask, McKay performs the specifically black modernist maneuver Baker names the “mastery of form.”

Baker is right to mark McKay’s concern with demonstrating mastery of the “straight English” sonnet and his equal interest in angling such mastery toward black literary profit, as in the Harlem Renaissance blueprint of “Invocation.” Overlooked in his and other arguments for McKay’s instrumental marshaling of the form, however, is the strength of McKay’s persistent interest in *collaborating* with the sonnet. The form’s status as an old and prestigious template of white literary authority, bait for what Heine called the “traditionalism of the excluded,” was not its crucial draw; neither was its inviting need for the vitality that black content could supply. Its high seriousness and tight formal discipline were appreciated but not determining. Instead, McKay turned to the sonnet because it was all of the above, plus a long, many-authored volume of international cues to New Negro awakening. Not just a coat of American “whiteface,” the sonnet also provided an exceptionally trans-

national poetic design, born in medieval Italy but dispersed throughout more of the modern world than any other type of Western lyric. In McKay's conception, it ranked as a fellow vagabond equipped with centuries of worldly advice on living through the century of the color line. For him, the sonnet's thousand preceding voices whispered lessons for the emergence of black literary modernism, not recipes for this modernism's stillbirth.

Perhaps the best way to see this conception in action is to examine a single McKay sonnet in detail. The whole of "America," first printed in 1921 and included in *Harlem Shadows*, the *Selected Poems*, and many later anthologies, reads as follows:

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,  
 And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,  
 Stealing my breath of life, I will confess  
 I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!  
 Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,  
 Giving me strength erect against her hate.  
 Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.  
 Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,  
 I stand within her walls with not a shred  
 Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.  
 Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,  
 And see her might and granite wonders there,  
 Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,  
 Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

Lushly allusive, imagistically dense, hooked on formal and conceptual tension, this sonnet's refusal to smash the pentameter and other high modernist enemies nonetheless begs for high modernist modes of formalist interpretation. The first seven lines, an unbalanced, nonconforming unit of quatrain (a stanza of four lines) and virtual tercet (a three-line stanza), reach from the Harlem Renaissance to the English Renaissance to revive the sonnet motif of the cruel-fair mistress, the first of many collaborations with sonnet history. In McKay's hands, the cruel-fair motif tropes international (and interracial?) intimacy as sadomasochistic vampirism, with the "tiger's tooth" of feminine America both sapping the breath and inflating the potency of an erect but ungendered lyric "I." Even the ostensibly anguished first line, feeding both gall and "bread" to the speaker, promises the final hydraulic equilibrium of the affair, its "vigor flow[ing] like tides" from America to her lover. McKay's imagery of troubled yet sustaining currents dramatizes the traditional sonnet logic through which the cruel mistress fills out her victim, providing her lover with, in Michael Spiller's words, "effects . . . which, if distressing, are none the less manifesta-

tions of *him*” (156). The leading such effect in “America” is the speaker’s astutely equivocal love for the hand that strangles and feeds him—or her. Anticipating Walter Benjamin’s epigram on the proximity of civilization and barbarism, McKay’s persona confesses affection for the nation’s “cultured hell,” where a body can learn that America’s every document of grace, “vigor,” and “bigness” is a document of thievery.

As the critic Felipe Smith detects, the second seven-line unit in “America” expands the figure of the cruel national mistress into a mistress-mother with a phallic womb, at once “exploiting and nourishing the entrapped immigrant ‘stand[ing] within her walls with not a shred / of terror, malice, not a word of jeer’” (336). But this erotically charged standing also commends McKay’s own discreet habitation within the walls of the sonnet form, its boxy fourteen lines often imaged, after John Donne’s “Canonization,” as a “pretty room” (l. 32). In another act of collaboration with the form’s past, the author, as well as his persona, accepts the theory of bottled resistance historically favored by sonneteers, the principle that the subject is essentially ensnared or confined but lives to undertake careful combat within barriers, whether those of America or “America” the sonnet (Spiller, 9). However, in place of the usual “paradigm / of straining forces harmonized sincerely” described by Iain Smith (ll. 13–14), McKay and his lyric “I” accommodate the strains of their confinement with avowed deceit. They move to treat their beloved enemies—America and the sonnet—to the polished insincerity of the courtly “rebel.” The shift from queen’s lover to king’s traitor forecasts the concluding, vengeful dream of America-as-faded-empire: the final quatrain opens with the speaker’s self-racializing biblical pun (“Darkly I gaze . . .,” a play on 1 Corinthians 13:12) and closes with the prophecy that monuments of national strength will collapse under the punishment of time. Through broad allusions to Shelley’s earlier sonnet on the ruined colossus of Ozymandias, the poem ultimately projects America’s descent from vital mistress to antiquated wreck, from invigorating “cultured hell” to deathly Egyptian knock-off, its “granite wonders” turned derivative memorials of mighty collapse. To *The Waste Land*’s post-war string of morally sacked culture capitals—“Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London” (ll. 378–79)—McKay’s New Negro soothsayer would add Jazz Age Washington or New York City, or at least the granite-white stretch of Manhattan below 125th Street. In “America,” the history of the sonnet’s distinctive motifs and tenets, its long roll call of cruel-fairs and romantic memorials, thus becomes a territory of productive association. The form’s deeply set conventions tempt rebellious or cynical repetition, but they also invite radical predictions of the collapse of twentieth-century empire. McKay wars with help from the sonnet no less than he wars against it.

What is still lacking from this take on “America,” however, is what is miss-

ing from most: adequate consideration of the crux at which the poem's total drama breaks and pivots. The reference is to line eight, which through simile ties the way in which the speaker stands within America's walls to the style in which "a rebel fronts a king in state." The gravity of the line is secured by its place at the inner seam of the poem's irregular design: McKay sets a proper English or Shakespearian sonnet rhyme scheme (*a b a b c d c d e f e f g g*) against customized Italian or Petrarchan sonnet stanzas (4 + 3 + 3 + 4 lines, with the first group of three tightly bound through a common subject, if not a common sentence). As a four-part Shakespearian tune flows from the end rhymes, "America" thus solders one seven-line conceptual sequence onto another, each composed of an ingenious half-Petrarchan block (stanzas of 4 + 3 rather than 8 + 6 lines, perhaps inspired by Baudelaire's sonnets in "enclosed" form, which McKay learned to read in the original French). Joined at their shorter, three-line ends, the sequences together form a kind of verbal mirror, with the syntax of the first half inversely reflected in the second. The overall effect of the sonnet's self-divided form—rhymes against stanzas, first block against the mirroring second—is fittingly discordant. Great expectations are placed on the "Yet" that launches both line eight and the turn into the second conceptual unit, but the line's announcement of reversal is muffled by a final rhyming link to the "hate" that comes before it (in line six, to be exact). Still, in this case, McKay's ambivalence is relatively plainspoken. Line eight introduces an extended analogy between the persona's love for America and the ambivalent posture of the revolutionary secret agent.

In the inverting camera obscura of the poem's second half, McKay's speaker is reenvisioned as a covert renegade with unchallenged access to a head of government. Courtly political intrigue rather than courtly love has become the reigning enterprise. Like the knowing grandfather in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a kindred "spy in the enemy's country" made to "give up [the] gun back in the Reconstruction" (16), McKay's protagonist selects weapons of indirection, verbal cunning, and the silent collection of intelligence. All the same, through a mysterious channel of inside information, this secret agent knows of the violent future to be dealt by "Time's unerring hand"—through a whimper of fate or perhaps a bang from a well-placed explosive, a humanly accessible motor of history much in the postwar news. Not far outside the walls of McKay's poem, thirty-eight U.S. politicians and industrialists were in fact sent mail bombs for May Day in 1919, and Attorney General Palmer's front porch was blown apart soon after, leading American intelligence officials to conclude that a violent takeover by Bolshevik agents was a legitimate threat (Kornweibel, 5). The poem's thick layers of allusion and anachronism would appear to disallow the reference to these actual acts of sabotage, but McKay's revival of Elizabethan court discourse, at least, does not simply mask

the possibility that his final lines exploit a vivid contemporary fear of underground Red violence. The Renaissance sonnets from which McKay draws were themselves products of a court culture of rebellious surveillance, in which aristocratic author-soldiers, Sir Philip Sidney among them, propelled early modern intelligence and the rise and fall of great powers (Archer, 3). When the noble lover in the first seven lines of “America” gazes darkly into the mirror of the second seven, he or she thus glimpses an apocalyptic but majestic reflection, a secret agent of political revenge who threatens momentarily (Palmer’s house or the White House?) yet speaks with historical dignity (in the cadence of Elizabeth’s courtly spy-writers, as well as Petrarch, Shakespeare, Shelley, and possibly Baudelaire). By the close of the poem, then, McKay’s radical speaker has discovered strength and similarity in the sonnet persona, not so much a serviceable mask as a neatly fitting historical incitement. In “America,” as in “Baptism,” “The White City,” and similar violent sonnets, McKay’s clarion voice of the New Negro discovers keys to racial contemporaneity in a venerable and transnational lyric form. The old-made-new logic of cultural renaissance, the guiding spirit of McKay’s post-Jamaican formal vocabulary, also governs his deployment of the sonnet’s pretty room, where the detection of resonant historical correspondences finally outweighs the gamesmanship of historical parody.

Professional readers of McKay’s poetry have thus exaggerated the severity of the clash between his mutinous themes and his well-groomed sonnets. When all is said and read, his *Complete Poems* inform us that the deciding battle of his verse was not a blood match between content and form but the struggle to produce a faithful lyric poetry of modern cataclysm. From Jamaican dialect ballads to final Catholic appeals, McKay spent his most original poetic energy building short, nonnarrative poems in which a classically individuated, introspective lyric “I” muses on the least lyrical of topics: intense or intractable social antagonism. Emerging “dialogic” forces, from interracial conflict to the clashing “Pagan Isms,” receive complex treatment in a “monologic,” or single-voiced, address. What Baudelaire called the “shock experience” of modern life is graphically rendered without shocking disruptions of formal order. Revolutionary violence is preached and threatened, condemned and converted into love, inside frames of serene tension.

Instead of confounding the radical modernity of McKay’s poems, the earnest tastes of his lyric “I” ensure that the disruptions of this modernity will be sensed and measured in full. The ability of the tradition-minded lyric speaker to withstand the twentieth-century catastrophes he himself describes provides the poems’ enduring suspense and constitutes their essential content. McKay makes certain that his speaker walks the rockiest modern road. What other lover of “tender word” and “melody so slender” has been tasked

with processing so much barbarous and liberating “cultured hell”? In the space of 323 poems, McKay’s lyric “I” confronts two world wars; multiple epochal waves of voluntary immigration and involuntary exile; the urbanization of whole black populations and the rural immiseration of others; the legal emancipation of women and the invention of free love; the melees and temporary accommodations of world capitalism and an eagerly internationalizing communism; the revolution of both of these economic enemies imagined as a global constant; the rise and fall of fascism and Stalinism; and two post-war waves of forcible anticolonialism in culture and politics. The “Age of Cataclysm,” one of Eric Hobsbawm’s tags for the “short twentieth century” between the opening of the World War I and the close of World War II, is an apt name for the aspirin age that McKay has his speaker swallow whole, but lyrically. To cast the resulting theater as a common divorce of form and content is to mistake the central undertaking and overarching narrative of McKay’s poetry and to badly mistake the capacity for historical responsibility through which his impulsive, vagabond soul shaped more than one black modernism.

#### ORGANIZATION AND EDITORIAL POLICY

*Complete Poems* is intended as both a convenient reader’s edition and the first critical edition of McKay’s verse, with extensive scholarly matter confined to the notes at the back of the volume. In the pages that follow, McKay’s poems are arranged in the chronological order of their date of first publication, given at the end of each poem. The date of probable composition situates previously unpublished pieces within the same chronology. An exception is made for those items included in six of the seven collections—some published, some not—that McKay conceived of as discrete, unified poetic works. *Songs of Jamaica*, *Constab Ballads*, *Harlem Shadows*, “The Clinic,” “Cities,” and “The Cycle” are presented whole, despite the earlier or later publication dates of some of their component parts. The London volume *Spring in New Hampshire* does not receive this treatment because of its lack of historical importance and the less debatable fact that the great majority of its contents was quickly reprinted in the larger *Harlem Shadows*. The section of notes that follows the poems, however, allows for easy reconstruction of *Spring in New Hampshire*’s ingredients and page order (see in particular the note to “Flowers of Passion”). The prefatory material of *Spring in New Hampshire* is also reprinted in this section, as are the various dedications, introductions, and author’s notes to *Songs of Jamaica*, *Constab Ballads*, and *Harlem Shadows*.

The text given for individual poems with several variants is generally that of the last published, typescript, or manuscript version. However, all changes separating one variant from the next are documented in the endnotes, and alternate wordings, passages, or entire versions are provided, making this what textual critics call a “variorum edition.” (McKay surprisingly emerges as a restless reviser of his poems, driven to modify titles, punctuation, and everything in between.) The endnotes also give the full publication history of each poem, including all reprintings by McKay, by his executors, and by pivotal black canon-makers, such as Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson. My explanatory remarks on individual lines are meant to clarify literary and historical allusions, to begin untangling the knottiest tropes and arguments, and to guide non-Jamaican readers through the unfamiliar but rewarding hills of McKay’s early dialect work. Few of these remarks aspire to sustained, persuasive interpretation. It is my hope, of course, that this collection will inspire and enable readers to take up where it leaves off—McKay’s life in verse deserves it.

### Note

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