

Pastoral Realist: Complexity And Contradiction In Claude McKay's Poetry

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Claude McKay's work varies greatly from his several volumes of poetry to his novels and contributions to diverse academic and political publications. This extensive variety is also found within his poetry alone, which takes such forms as the English sonnet and the "dialect" poems he composed in Jamaican patois. In both his formal and informal styles of poetry, McKay exhibits a strong identification with the pastoral, an identification whose focus and implications vary greatly throughout his poetic work. McKay's concept and representation of the pastoral are informed by and grounded in his rural agrarian background and, as a result, exhibit an authenticity and realism far beyond the conventional and idyllic pastoral. In order to appreciate this authenticity, it is helpful to view McKay's depiction of the pastoral in the context of his other poetic forms and his political views, and those of his contemporaries.

Although his pastoral poetry is not limited to a depiction of the idyllic beauty that characterizes romantic poetry, McKay's "Flame Heart" and "After the Winter" can be read as classic examples of this style.¹ It is not difficult to understand "Flame Heart" as a Caribbean variation on many of the pastoral themes present in Keats's "To Autumn." The poems are thematically and structurally similar; both are written in the same pentameter and divided into three stanzas. The ripening and juicing of "purple apples" and the flowering of pimento and poinsettia evoke similar imagery to that of Keats's poem, but with details specific to McKay's Jamaica. The "wine-thrilled bodies" of the third stanza of "Flame Heart" are reminiscent of the euphoric image "drowsed with the fume of poppies" in the second stanza of "To Autumn," though the former connotes a quicker, more vital form of experience. Both poems also celebrate an indulgent feasting on earthly bounty (blackberries, hazelnuts, etc.) and enjoyment in the company of "ground doves" and "gathering swallows." Read in this pastoral tradition, "Flame Heart" becomes a classic romanticization of the Jamaican countryside. It might also be said that in the beautiful lyricism of the poem, McKay does for his Clarendon hills what Wordsworth did for his Lake District.

Despite these similarities, "Flame Heart" differs in several fundamental ways from Keats's "To Autumn." These differences are best understood in terms of memory and time. In "Flame Heart" the speaker is recalling a moment from ten years before. Although Keats creates a fantasy-like present season, McKay's poem is written in an almost painfully past tense voice that confesses: "I have forgotten" but strangely "still remember." McKay admits he has "forgot the special, startling season" while affirming, "we were so happy, happy, I

remember." And in doing so, he conjures up a "warm December" long past, to the extent that the reader may half question the reality of "Flame Heart's" beautiful imagery. Although it is not among his most overtly nostalgic poems, "Flame Heart" does exhibit a tone of nostalgia in re-creating McKay's youth in the country.

A similar technique is used in "After the Winter" in separating the speaker from an elusive future love on "the summer isle." The poem begins "Some day, when the trees have shed their leaves...we'll turn our faces southward," anticipating bliss to come at a future time. All of the romantic pastoral joys, the "laughing crystal rill," "the cotton tree," the cottage "beside an open glade," and the sexual imagery of shafted bamboo groves and "wide-mouthed" smiling orchids, are a dream of what is to come "After the Winter." While not exactly nostalgic, "After the Winter" is a poem of longing for a fantasy that differs from the speaker's present reality.

Among McKay's more simply nostalgic pastoral poems are "Sukee River," "The Tropics in New York," and "Home Thoughts," in which the speaker refers to specific people, places and events with great longing. In "Sukee River" McKay aches to know "What naked lad doth linger long by thee...while I am roaming in an alien land?" He confesses that he has been "faithless" to the river and promises, "I shall love you ever...nevermore from you I'll part." In "The Tropics in New York" he refers to the "parish fairs" that the fruit in the window brings so immediately to his mind. And in "Home Thoughts" the memory is even more immediate, so much so that the speaker affirms "This is no daytime dream, there's something in it / Oh something's happening there this very minute!" The immediacy of McKay's thought is vividly present, yet McKay finds himself as far from home as New York and England when writing these three poems.

Although he often longed for the idyllic paradise described in these poems, McKay never returned to Jamaica after leaving at the age of twenty-two. He did, however, live in many other places: the Soviet Union, Spain, France, and Morocco. One might ask why McKay wrote all of these beautiful pastoral poems in a self-imposed exile. Some clue as to why he chose to "embalm the days" in memory rather than revisit the island in body can be found in his first published book of poetry, Songs of Jamaica.² In many of these poems McKay depicts firsthand the reality of agrarian life for the peasantry in his parish of Clarendon.

In Songs of Jamaica McKay treats experiences as diverse as the physical hardships endured by the local working class and the simple pleasure of flying a "pretty kite." While many of the poems are pastoral in the sense that they present people living closely and in relative harmony with the natural elements, they also open the reader's eyes to the less idyllic conditions in which working class Jamaicans forged an existence. The poems "Quashie to Buccra," "The Hermit," "Fetchin' Water," "Hard Times," and "Country Girl" address these

issues in several different contexts in order to portray this struggle through distinct speakers.

In the book's first poem, "Quashie to Buccra," a black field worker ("quashie" roughly translates as "fool") speaks to *buccra* or backra (a white onlooker) of the difficulty of the work. The speaker dispels any illusion backra might have about the work being easy or pleasant. In the poem's authentically rich oral dialect, McKay describes the hot sun, the stooping in thick brush and the digging of terraces, as well as the satisfaction the harvest brings on "reapin' day." The poem begins:

You tas'e petater an' you say it sweet,
 But you no know how hard we wuk fe it;
 You want a basketful fe quattiewut,
 'Cause you no know how 'tiff de bush fe cut.

McKay sets up the poem as the third world addressing the first world, revealing a pastoral reality whose sweetness is bought at the price of labor. Although the last couplet concedes that "de hardship always melt away" at the harvest, the poem emphasizes the physical cost of the "petater" crop in contrast to the petty "quattiewut" offered by buccra.

The poem "Fetchin' Water" takes this same theme of the outsider's perception of labor as charming or "gay" and contrasts it with the worker's reality. In the poem's first stanza, a little girl (the speaker's daughter) is carrying water as "dem touris'" watch, seeing only a quaint pastoral scene. However, the speaker says "dat is one way" and then brings the reader inside the superficially idyllic scene by incorporating a local proverb: stones on the river bottom "no feel sun hot." Although the rest of the poem narrates various chores, punishments, and parent-child relationships, in this first stanza McKay masks a powerful statement in this colloquial, regionalist poem. The gravity of McKay's revelation and the grace of its veiled delivery are especially apparent when held to the light of Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask": "We wear the mask that grins and lies/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes...We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries/to thee from tortured souls arise...but let the world dream otherwise."³ In "Fetchin' Water" McKay uses a complex form of signification by revealing the peasantry's reality behind one mask while speaking in terms that are less accessible to "dem touris'," thus placing a second mask.⁴

In Songs of Jamaica, McKay uses both formal style and diction along with the phonetic transcription of Jamaican vernacular. Among the effects of this combination is a depiction of the complexity and versatility not only of the poet, but also of the Jamaican people, who easily shift between patois Creole and formal English in speech. This use of code shifting or dialect mixing in the poems has since been misunderstood by critics such as Hathaway, an issue to which we will return shortly.

One particular poem in which this "intrusion of formal style and language

into dialect verse"⁵ occurs is "The Hermit." In this poem, the speaker initially idealizes the pastoral life: "Dwellin' wid Nature primitive an' rude / Livin' a peaceful life of solitude." This hermit then describes the "tropic roses," "wild cane," "waterfall," company of "loved swallows," and sweet music of "de woodland creatures." He imagines that in his seclusion he "shall view de wul', An' learn of all its doin's to de full." This statement of resignation to a solitary exile is evocative of King Lear's speech upon facing imprisonment with his daughter Cordelia: "Come, let's away...[We] will sing like birds...So we'll live... and laugh / At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues / Talk of court news... And take upon us the mystery of things / As if we were God's spies."⁶

While all of this high imagery, and the anostrophic inversions and formal diction such as "ever are" and "pelf" are present in McKay's poem, so are the softened fricatives of "de" (the), "dere" (there) and other features of the hermit's dialect. Hathaway has referred to this juxtaposition as "jarring" and "artificial in the context of the surrounding dialect" (Hathaway 35-36). The argument has even been advanced that this "subtle invalidation of the vernacular, combined with McKay's more formal voice, results in an inconsistent and... unconvincing volume of poetry" (Hathaway 37).

Nevertheless, when reading Songs of Jamaica in the context of Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", one recognizes a young poet incorporating both "high-class" romantic pastoral themes and the struggle of the "low-down folks," into a complex and multifaceted volume of poetry.⁷ Smith observes that the book is especially poignant in that it was published during a period when "Negroes in great numbers shifted from an agrarian to an urban habitat."⁸ Songs of Jamaica is more than an ethnography or a genre study of, as Hansell has it, "peasant life, both rural and urban."⁹ But as McKay himself puts it, the poems "captured the spirit of the Jamaican peasant in verse, reproducing their primitive joys, their loves and hates, their work and play, their dialect" (Hansell 123). At the time of Songs of Jamaica's publication, states Cooper, "no black West Indian educated in the British imperial tradition had ever before attempted to use a local island dialect as his primary poetic medium."¹⁰ For this reason, in Songs of Jamaica we find what historians Bennett and Sherlock have called the island's "first self-portrait and the first classic in Jamaican and West Indian prose."¹¹

In these poems, McKay demonstrates not only his lyric genius but his intimate firsthand understanding of the agrarian reality that formed much of his early education; his parents were also farmers. Throughout Songs of Jamaica, McKay cites the scientific Latin names of various different West Indian floras and many of the poems include detailed representations of certain agricultural procedures. Of his youth, McKay says: "I was born and reared a peasant; the peasant's passion for the soil possesses me" (Cooper 1). This passion influenced

his decision to study at Tuskegee and Kansas State, enduring almost three years of disappointing curriculum in hope of eventually benefiting his island with modern agricultural techniques (Cooper 65-67). Considering this background, it is with substantial authority that the poet writes, for example, in "Hard Times":

De mo' me wuk, de mo' time hard,
 I don't know what fe do...
 And I am working like a mule,
 While buccra, sittin' in de cool,
 Hab 'nuff nenyam fe waste...
 De peas won't pop, de corn can't grow,
 Poor people face look sad.

The result is a painfully authentic depiction of agricultural failure and resulting hunger, an early version of what has more recently become popularized on the island as a "sufferah's song."

The realist and pastoral themes of McKay's poetry are not only key to understanding his later work but also underscore his outspoken political views as well. His later involvement in the Marxist movement can be understood in considering the economic and labor issues so prevalent in these poems. However, for a time McKay did idealize communism's capability of, as he put it, "liberating millions of city folk to go back to the land."¹² As Sister Mary Conroy interprets this statement: "The metaphorical extension of this idealism seems to be the hope that Communism would enable the harassed black man of the urban ghettos to return to the idyllic happiness of the peasantry" (Conroy 22).

McKay's views on Garvey's Pan-African movement are also recognizably informed by his view of pastoral reality. While the poet's sympathy and affiliation with his fellow Jamaican's movement varied at different times, McKay ultimately dismissed Garvey's African Zionism as overly simplistic. At one point McKay wrote that Marcus Garvey "talks of Africa as if it were a little island in the Caribbean Sea" (Cooper 155). Although McKay admired Garvey's "ability to stir the masses," he also recognized "the impractical, dangerously utopian nature of Garvey's goals" (Cooper 105).

Aside from his criticism of Garvey as a "West Indian charlatan...full of antiquated social ideas," McKay's actual opposition to the Back-to-Africa Movement seems to stem more from his disagreement with what he saw as an escapist ideal in Garveyism.¹³ Hansell recognizes McKay's insistence that "Afro-Americans...were more Western than African" and as such needed "someone to unite them here, and lead them here—or wherever they were—to unity, freedom, and equality" (Hansell 132). With this in mind, one can better appreciate McKay's political and social involvements in Europe, the U.S. and Russia, as well as his later poetry that dealt with an increasingly urban environment. Although McKay does not abandon or reject the romantic pastoral landscape in his later work, he does contextualize it in his actual urban cityscape.

In "Flame Heart" McKay writes that he has "embalmed the days" of youthful bliss "beneath the poinsettia's red." Cooper notes that during McKay's last summer in Clarendon he "had plenty of time to swim, party, and relax with friends," passing time before his August departure to Tuskegee in "almost idyllic pleasure" (Cooper 59). This is the memory McKay *embalmed* in his imagination and kept with him "through the restless adventures that lay ahead" (Cooper 62).

The melancholic contrast between this idyllic memory and McKay's now urban reality is made sadly apparent in much of his later poetry. "Spring in New Hampshire" contrasts quite plainly "the springing April grass" and "the silver speckled sky" with the drudgery of "wasting the golden hours indoors / washing windows and scrubbing floors." In this poem, McKay expresses the disparity between the speaker's desires and his actual situation.

This disparity is more painfully developed in McKay's "Winter in the Country." The poem begins in a beautifully pastoral landscape: "Sweet Life! how lovely to be here / And feel the soft sea-laden breeze." And the speaker finds himself, whether mentally or actually, in a place "beyond [his] power to express." All of the senses are thrilled in "the spruce's fair / Free limbs to see, the lesser trees' / Bare hands to touch, the sparrow's cheep / To heed" etc. But halfway through the poem, the "serene, divine" experience turns in the fourth stanza: "But oh! To leave this paradise / For the city's dirty basement room." The speaker's "lifted heart" plummets into the base and realistic urban description of "crippled chairs / All covered up with dust and grim / With hideousness and scars of years." The "gaslights burning weird and dim" simultaneously "welcome" and alienate the speaker who, returning from his pastoral fantasy, is greeted by the mundane "table, bed, bureau, and broom." By juxtaposing these elements so strikingly within the same poem, "Winter in the Country" exemplifies the disparity of McKay's rural fantasy and his urban reality.

"When Dawn Comes to the City," further illustrates this disparity, contrasting "tired cars," "dull stars," and "tenements, cold as stone" with crowing cocks, neighing horses, and other animals he remembers by name, "calling from...the island of the sea." The poem shifts back to the increasingly hopeless city, now with "crazy, lazy cars" and "dying stars" before returning again "Joyously!" to "the island of the sea." Just as "Winter in the Country" returns the speaker to "the glory of the soft sunset" through "words," "When Dawn Comes to the City" also portrays the speaker longing to be elsewhere at the end of the poem. By flashing his bright memories of the Caribbean pastoral across his dull urban reality, McKay raises an indictment against the demoralizing indifference of the city.

The significance of McKay's Harlem poetry can be even better appreciated when viewed alongside that of another poet who expressed similar despair and frustration with this dawn of urbanization. Federico García Lorca, who lived in

New York briefly during the late twenties, expressed an almost identical sentiment in his "La Aurora." In this poem, García Lorca cries "alli no hay mañana ni esperanza possible" and "no habrá paraíso ni amores deshojados," depicting the same hopeless dawn of McKay's "When Dawn Comes to the City" and "Dawn in New York." In the latter, McKay reveals the city's dehumanization of the people, calling those finding their way home in the early morning "grotesques beneath the strong electric lights." McKay's description of the cars makes them almost more human than their passengers: "a few cars groaning creep...bearing their strangely-ghostly burdens by." In this dawn, "the mighty city" is transformed into a grotesque necropolis. In "La Aurora," García Lorca also depicts New Yorkers trapped in a numbingly meaningless routine in the poem's third stanza: "Los primeros que salen comprenden con sus huesos... que van al cieno de números y leyes / a los juegos sin arte, a sudores sin fruto." García Lorca presents this same abasement and dehumanization in his poem "El Rey de Harlem" where the city's "gran rey prisionero" is found in a "traje de conserje!"¹⁴

With such fierce aversion to their urban surroundings, one might wonder why these poets remained in New York. García Lorca actually fled what he referred to as "aquella selva mecanizada," a place that reminded him of "un Senegal con máquinas," immediately accepting an opportunity to present a lecture series in Cuba.²⁶ García Lorca recorded, "se han hecho (los negros de Harlem) el eje espiritual de aquella America...Fuera del arte negro no queda en los Estados Unidos más que mecánica y automatismo."¹⁵ It was to further this "Negro art" that McKay remained in New York for nearly a decade, publishing his poetry and contributing regularly to the *Liberator*.

While in Harlem, McKay continued to work into his poetry more subtle references to the disparity between the pastoral and urban life. "Harlem Shadows" follows a prostitute "lass" through "Negro Harlem" at nightfall, paying special attention to her feet. It begins, "I hear [her] halting footsteps" and the girl's feet are mentioned six more times before the end of the poem. Her weary feet, described as "thinly shod," evoke a closeness to the ground, even a connection to the earth or streets. In the last stanza McKay presents a "stern harsh world" that pushes the "little feet of clay." Aside from the earthly metaphor this line produces, the phrase is also evocative of the biblical account of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, in which the human figure with feet of clay is destroyed, representing the destruction of the kingdoms of men.¹⁶ As he also does at the end of "America," in "Harlem Shadows" McKay prophesies ruin for a civilization that has grown so out of touch with the humanity that has created it.

An alternate scenario for the situation presented in "Harlem Shadows" can be found in McKay's earlier "A Country Girl." The poem describes a "country girl" who, according to Hansell's reading, "has fled to the city and

taken up evil ways; she is probably a prostitute. Though homesick and saddened by her fall from virtue, she cannot leave the city, despite its admittedly evil atmosphere; for it also provides variety, excitement, and a kind of anonymity" (Hansell 130). However, her lover's offer is one of pastoral romance:

"Lelia, I want you to come out de sin,
Come home an' try a new life fe begin;
Mek up you min', gal, fe wuk wid you' han',
Plant peas an' corn in de fat country lan'.

"Dere is no life, gal, so pleasant, so good,
Contented and happy you'll eat your lee food;
No one at home know 'bout wha' you've jes' said,
So, Liel, of exposure you needen't be 'fraid."

The fact that the girl flatly rejects her lover's proposal bespeaks McKay's realism in portraying the likely deterministic nature of the situation and its unfortunate conclusion. In this respect, McKay's work can be viewed as a microcosm of the greater progression of literature from the pastoral through regionalism, realism and then even to naturalism.

Certain value comes with recognizing another literary form apparent in the tension between McKay's pastoral and realist writing: the picaresque. Although this form is more readily recognized in McKay's novels, is not absent from his poetry. Many of the characters in Songs of Jamaica embody the hunger, struggle and roguish vitality characteristic of the classic pícaro. Like the first person narrative voice of the typical pícaro character, these poems speak, as Cooper aptly observes, "with a naïve and disarming candor" (Cooper 36). Having emerged "as a distinct form of...antipastoral narrative," the picaresque typifies the dichotomy of realism and pastoral idealism found in McKay's poetry¹⁷. More specifically, these poems can be read as participants in the American picaresque as defined by Halliwell, in that they especially focus on the pícaro's struggle to reconcile "the conflict between the natural and civilized worlds" and place "special emphasis on the particular qualities of the landscape and the trials of the protagonist in forging an existence in the face of difficult and exacting circumstances" (Halliwell 1003). These qualities are most apparent in McKay's Harlem and Jamaica poetry in which he incorporates realist, picaresque, romantic pastoral and regionalist elements.

The complexity of McKay's work is evident not only in the many forms discussed here, but also in his poetic agility, both with formal English diction and styles as well as his informal vernacular compositions. James Smethurst has said of McKay that he "articulates the need of the exiled black intellectual to return to the common black folk."¹⁸ In speaking both the language of the peasantry of his home as well as that of the elite intelligentsia, McKay's work is, itself, a bridge connecting the oppressed "v'ice" of the people with that of the

educated intellectual. In reference to the colonial self-concept of Jamaica, McKay at one time regretted: "Greatness could not exist in the backwoods. Nor anywhere in the colony. To them and to all the islanders greatness was a foreign thing" (Bennett and Sherlock 339). Cooper writes that Claude McKay, before leaving Jamaica, "knew his dialect verse was good as dialect verse" but wanted to "prove himself a real poet" by "producing poems...that reflected the great traditions of English verse" (Cooper 58). This is only the beginning of what the poet accomplished in demonstrating both to literary world and to those back home that greatness was no foreign thing.

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- ¹ Claude McKay, Harlem Shadows (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922).
- ² Claude McKay, Songs of Jamaica (Kingston, Jamaica: Aston W. Gardner, 1912).
- ³ ³ Paul Lawrence Dunbar, The Complete Poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1913).
- ⁴ ⁴ Henry Louis Gates, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- ⁵ Heather Hathaway, Caribbean Waves (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999) 36.
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- ⁶ William Shakespeare, King Lear, 5.3.8-17.
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- ⁷ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," The Nation 23 (June 1926): 122.
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- ⁸ Robert A. Smith, "Claude McKay: An Essay in Criticism," Phylon 9.3 (1948): 270.
- ⁹ William H. Hansell, "Some Themes in the Jamaican Poetry of Claude McKay," Phylon 40.2 (1979): 123.
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- ¹⁰ Wayne F. Cooper, Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987) 35.
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- ¹¹ Philip Sherlock and Hazel Bennett, The Story of the Jamaican People (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1998) 399.
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- ¹² Sister Mary Conroy, "The Vagabond Motif in the Writings of Claude McKay," Negro American Literature Forum 5:1 (1971): 22.
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- ¹³ David E. Cronon, Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) 203.
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- ¹⁴ Federico García Lorca, Poeta en Nueva York (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2003).
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- ¹⁵ José Luis Cano, García Lorca: Biografía ilustrada (Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, 1962) 80-81.
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- ¹⁶ The Holy Bible, King James Version (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 1979) Daniel 2.
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- ¹⁷ Martin Halliwell, The Encyclopedia of the Novel vol.2 m-z (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998) 1001.
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- ¹⁸ James Smethurst, Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience Ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New Mr.