
William J. Maxwell, ed. *Complete Poems: Claude McKay*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. 405p.

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In his 1989 study *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*, Cary Nelson initiated, as he put it, “an effort to revise our notion of the social function of poetry” by recovering “marginalized or forgotten poets—particularly women, blacks, and writers on the left” (xi). Challenging “assumptions underling the way modern literary history has been written” and processes of “canon formation,” Nelson implores those concerned with poetry and culture to recover the writings of long forgotten and overlooked poets and thus “revive interest in little-known figures” who wrote throughout the period his study examines (xi, 19). Nelson puts it trenchantly: “we no longer know we have forgotten” (3). For as his book reveals, literary history is “a selective story substantially constituted by its cultural presuppositions and restricted by its ideological filters” (6)—that is, literary history is a result of a process of “selective remembering and forgetting” (17).

Now as editor the University of Illinois’ American Poetry Recovery Series, Nelson is charged to follow up on the recovery work he began in *Repression and Recovery*. With Nelson’s guiding hand, the series has brought forth volumes on many now little-known, virtually lost poets, including nineteenth-century poet Sarah Piatt, a contemporary of Emily Dickinson; African American poet Frank Marshall Davis; a number of mid twentieth-century social protest poets, including Vincent Ferrini, Don Gordon, Joseph Kalar, Aaron Kramer, and Edwin Rolfe; and two collections—one of American poems about World War I, and one of American poems about the Spanish Civil War. Also included in the series is the first complete collection of poems by Jamaican-born Claude McKay, titled *Complete Poems: Claude McKay* (2004), introduced and edited by William J. Maxwell.

Prior to this collection, McKay’s writings were only available in limited form: in various anthologies, and in a few books of selections, all of which but one is now out of print. At that, the most collected by any one book was only 84 poems (ahistorically arranged)—in the posthumously published *Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (released originally in 1953, then picked up by another publishing firm and re-issued again in 1969). Since then, only three other noteworthy publications on McKay have made it to a book shelf—a non-critical thrift assortment of poems; Wayne F. Cooper’s *The Passion of Claude McKay* (1973), which samples only 26 poems but offers selections from McKay’s fiction, letters, and reviews; and Winston James’ reprinting of 31 Jamaican poems in his study *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay’s Jamaica*

and His Poetry of Rebellion (2000). Clearly, then, *Complete Poems* fills a large gap, in the process becoming the definitive collection of McKay's poems. This collection brings together for the first time all 323 extant poems that McKay wrote, from the Jamaican dialectic poems of 1911-12 to his final Catholic poetry of 1945-47. Of these 323 poems, 87 are previously unpublished, and 61 are uncollected poems initially published in English, Jamaican, and American journals.

This new chronological placement of McKay's prodigious poetic output, Maxwell observes, "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" (xxx). Maxwell's thoughtful and insightful Introduction rightly contests and corrects many previously developed inchoate notions about McKay as poet. McKay may have written angry, violent protest poems—"If We Must Die" is exemplary—but he also wrote much tender verse of love and passion, as the erotic poems of *Harlem Shadows* (1922) attest. McKay may have crafted the Harlem Renaissance's first book of poetry, *Harlem Shadows*, and produced the first best-selling American novel by a black author, *Home to Harlem* (1928), thus earning him the title of senior-spokesperson for that Renaissance, but beyond contributing these productions he was not very active in Harlem life after a youthful stint there. McKay has been typed as a radical turned conservative. McKay may have had an affinity for the form of the sonnet, but he was by no means a sell-out, wholly abandoning his native Jamaican tongue, evidenced in the early dialectic lyrics, for a so-called more refined, more "white" poetic style, as Maxwell's deft unpacking of McKay's masterful sonnet "America" succinctly reveals. McKay may have early on in his life embraced socialism and traveled to the Soviet Union, in the process earning himself a "fat FBI file" and resulting in his being barred from returning to the U.S. until 1934 (Maxwell xvi), but toward the end of his life he lost faith in socialism, taking up a leftist version of Catholicism in its stead. McKay has also been criticized for genre hopping—besides poetry, he wrote essays and reviews—but by no means is the "common impression that McKay moved from poetry to prose to obscurity" merited (Maxwell xxiii). As this collection reveals, the sheer range of McKay's poems and interests is difficult to account for with one thesis—he was a bohemian radical who later in life chose to adopt, as McKay himself put it, a "straight English" voice (*My Green Hills* 87), and he was also a recovering socialist turned leftist Catholic, equally adept at crafting dialectic lyrics, free-verse, and tightly wrought sonnets. And now with this volume, the whole of McKay's poetic output can finally receive the attention it deserves, which should result in revisionist assessments of the poems and a fuller appreciation of McKay's poetic genius.

Following Maxwell's Introduction, the book is divided into ten sections. *Complete Poems* chronologically begins with McKay's "Jamaican Periodical Poetry, 1911-12" and his *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912), all of which earned him an early reputation at home and abroad as the poet exemplar of Jamaica, who captured the yearnings and tensions of Jamaican life and the dialectic voice of a nation in lyrical verse. *Constab Ballads* is additionally of interest as it comments on McKay's short, failed gig as a Jamaican police officer. These works are followed by "Early English and American Poetry, 1916-22" and the book of verse which got him the most attention in the U.S. and placed him as a leader of the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, *Harlem Shadows*. Next is the circa 1923 collection "The Clinic," poems of McKay's experience being treated for syphilis and other ailments. After "The Years Between, 1925-34" is "Cities," circa 1934, a sort of poetic travel-guide of the good and the bad of a number of major cities McKay became intimate with during his years as an expatriate, including (to cite just a few) Barcelona, Fez, Morocco, Cadiz, Berlin, Moscow, Paris, London, and of course Harlem and New York. McKay exclaims in the poem that opens the collection, also called "Cities," "Oh cities are a fever in my blood" (223.1). Next up is "The Cycle," circa 1934, a collection of poems with which McKay endeavored to account for his changing attitudes as expressed in his poems; the opening poem to the collection, also titled "The Cycle," informs readers: "These poems distilled from my experience, / Exactly tell my feelings of today, / ... / But tomorrow, I may sing another tune, / No critic, white or black, can tie me down" (241.1-2, 9-10). The book concludes with the meditative religious verse McKay was penning during the long illness that led to his early death in 1948, "Final Catholic Poetry, 1945-47."

The University of Illinois Press' American Poetry Recovery Series and its editor Cary Nelson are making significant contributions to the study of poetry and to literary history in the U.S. The publication of the *Complete Poems* of Claude McKay, with its excellent introduction and very insightful endnotes by William J. Maxwell, is not just a worthy addition to this series: it is a landmark moment in the recuperation of one of the twentieth century's more significant and still largely unappreciated poets. Those interested in Caribbean and in African American poetry, in the Harlem Renaissance, in Modernism, and in U.S. literary history will find much of value in this definitive collection of McKay's poems. ✱