



ILLiad TN: 578872

Call #:  
<http://rapidill.org/redir.ashx?id=MTY5MjA4Nz>  
I=  
Item Loc : Ejournal - P

**Journal Title:** Atlantic Studies : Literary ,  
Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Europe ,  
Africa and the Americas

**Volume:** 4 **Issue:** 2  
**Month/Year:** October 2007  
**Pages:** 305-7

**Article Author:** Matt Sandler

**Article Title:** Claude McKay, Complete Poems

**ILL Number:** -4854111



10/20/2011 1:09 PM



**Interlibrary Loan**

Updated LDL

Sent

**Borrower:** RAPID:ORU  
**Patron:**

Ship via - PDF Odyssey

**Shipping Address:**  
NEW: Main Library

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Complete Poems*

Claude McKay

William J. Maxwell, ed.

Urbana: University of Illinois P., 2004

464 pp. \$39.95 hbk. ISBN: 0 252 02882 1

The contribution of William J. Maxwell's publication of Claude McKay's *Complete Poems* is momentous, particularly for Atlanticist literary studies. The volume contains important never-before published poetry and reintroduces readers to McKay's most well known work in ways that will renew its interest considerably. Maxwell's notes are extensively informing, almost to the point of making this a variorum edition; he gives substantial textual history for each poem, including variations from different drafts and publishing contexts where available. His annotations bear evidence of a sharp literary-historical impetus and very scrupulous standards for textual editing. In the interest of preserving the original context of the poetry, Maxwell includes the prefatory prose to particular volumes by McKay himself, as well as his mentors Walter Jekyll and Max Eastmann.

McKay's early volumes in Jamaican dialect have received thoughtful attention from Michael North and from Winston James's selected republication and thorough analysis in *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaican Poetry of Rebellion* (2001). *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* are provided here without abridgment for the first time since their initial appearance in 1912 and with substantial notes—by Maxwell with extensive reference to Jekyll, who annotated the originals for educated white audiences. These inclusions should provide a formidable test to readers with over-confident and limited conceptions of the relation between poetic form, national language, and literary history.

McKay's cosmopolitan itinerary, which has recommended his fiction to critics interested in trespassing on the traditions of national literatures, is much in evidence here. The sharply exilic perspective of his writing in and about the United States is palpable in the justly celebrated poems of the early Harlem Renaissance, as well as in verse written from the 1930s and 1940s, a period during which McKay was previously thought to have given up verse for the rough and ready, Hemingwayesque prose of his novels and social commentary. A previously unpublished suite of poems on cities makes for a dizzyingly peripatetic reading. Kingston, New York, Berlin, London, Paris, Marseilles, Fez, Marrakech, Tangiers, St Petersburg, Moscow and more are represented in sometimes bitter, sometimes enrapt tones that will surprise readers only familiar with more famous poems of nostalgia for his Caribbean homeland like "Tropics in New York." His stays in France and the USSR have received significant examination from Brent Edwards and Kate A. Baldwin recently. However, this volume makes available to researchers notable moments of literary engagement in Weimar Berlin, England, and Morocco, which have yet to be examined with an eye for the valences of transnational encounter.

*Atlantic Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, October 2007

ISSN 1478-8810 print/1470-4649 online/07/020305-08

DOI: 10.1080/14788810701510951



Many of McKay's critics have noted with wrong-headed apology that he was not a particularly complex versifier. The *Complete Poems* afford the opportunity to reconsider this diagnosis along lines less beholden to high modernist conceptions of literary experiment. McKay emerges as one of the foremost practitioners of the sonnet form—along with Edna St. Vincent Millay, Miguel Hernandez, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Ted Berrigan—in the 20th century. Maxwell convincingly reads the sonnet "America" as setting at odds a myriad of metrical prerogatives of the sonnet form (Spenserian, Shakespearean, and Baudelairean), with a detachment and a *sprezzatura*—the appearance of effortlessness or nonchalance—that sits by while empires fall. Infusing it with biting political and social commentary offset by an extremely blasé neo-Romantic sensibility, the sonnet is quickened at McKay's fingers.

His language, despite his open and entitled revolutionary spirit, is often bound in layered density. He is fond of compound epithets and adverbs that contribute to the arch character of his voice, but just as often, he winds them down to the invariably lower-class subjects of his work. In "Dawn in New York" (1920), these compound words track to the upward and downward movement of light and dark, grandiloquent and hard-boiled:

The Dawn! The Dawn! The crimson-tinted, comes  
Out of the low still skies, over the hills,  
Manhattan's roofs and spires and cheerless domes!

...

The shadows wane. The Dawn comes to New York.  
And I go darkly-rebel to my work (172–3).

The riptide paradoxes of McKay's poetry are treacherous, and the absorption of his life in his work is Byronic in scope. The importance of sexuality in his wandering has recently come in for some examination with respect to his prose, but there is a great deal to consider in connection. "Bennie's Departure" and "Consolation," found in *Constab Ballads*, relate the high-wire balance of furtive and brazen in the speaker's love of another man in the barracks of a Jamaican police academy. Later, the poems of *Harlem Shadows*, which score McKay's loose affiliation with the free-love movement pitch a dance of garish abandon and cold reserve:

Last night I gave you triumph over me,  
So I should be myself as once before,  
I marveled at your shallow mystery,  
And haunted hungrily your temple door.  
I gave you sum and substance to be free,  
Oh, you shall never triumph any more! (196)

These adventures fuel McKay's vagabondage, and one of the joys of this volume is to see the reappearance of imagery and diction from the sexier poems in the more political ones. An Atlantic nostalgia and ferocity encircle and protect his ecstasies. What is finally extraordinary about his verse is the way that it can remain unquestionably revolutionary, and yet stand aside the pettiness of *realpolitik*. This is accomplished through a worldly humanism mixed of detachment and affect, rather than guided by a false and arbitrary sentimentality:

This mood that seems to you so passing strange,  
 This that you wrongly call a cynic smile,  
 Is nothing but the sequence of a sea-change—  
 I have been running round a little while. (218)

In these moments, McKay's charm disarms as it takes arms, and his revolt takes hate on vacation. Maxwell is agile to point out that McKay "slipped back and forth among revolutionary, entrepreneurial, and artistic tourisms" (xviii). Among the many questions raised by this volume, one of the most vexing regards what to do with the literary history of an individual who will not stay put, when literary history is so tied to place and nation.

Matthew Sandler  
 Columbia University  
 © Matthew Sandler, 2007

*How Far is America From Here? Selected Proceedings of the First World Congress of the International American Studies Association, 22–24 May 2003*

D'haen, Theo, Paul Giles, Djelal Kadir and Lois Parkinson Zamora, eds.  
 Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.

636 pp. €128, US \$160 hbk. ISBN-10: 9042017562; ISBN-13: 978-9042017566

When it was founded in June 2000, the International American Studies Association was designed to promote the interdisciplinary study of American culture and society on regional, national, transnational, and global levels. Three years later the organization held its first World Congress, posing the question, how far is America from here, in order to examine the issue of American identity. Specifically, to what extent is American culture and society a hemispheric and/or global matter; is there an American identity operating solely within the borders of the United States, or does it also extend throughout the Americas, if not also worldwide?

For those of us who were not able to attend the Congress, held 22–24 May 2003 in Leiden, the Netherlands, the resulting publication offers a rich assortment of musings and explorations on this topic. The volume contains forty essays, sub-divided into six categories: (1) American Studies from an International American Studies Perspective; (2) International, Transnational, Hemispheric America; (3) American Social, Ethical, and Religious Mentalities; (4) Comparative Perspectives, Literary Counterpoints; (5) American Identities; and (6) Space and Place in American Studies. Given that there were 57 distinct sessions at the Congress, with nearly 200 different presenters representing more than 30 countries, the editors presumably had to do considerable winnowing as part of their process of selecting essays for publication.

Since the volume contains neither an introduction nor conclusion—only half a page of acknowledgments—it is difficult to say on what basis these particular essays were chosen. Perhaps native English speakers were over-represented in the submission of papers for publication; but the fact remains that of the 42 contributors, 16 are affiliated with an institution in the United States, and another four from Canada and the UK. The suggestion here seems to be that America is not very far from the English-speaking world.