

## William J. Maxwell: On "America"

For critic-spies trained in modern literature departments, "America" is an invitation to old or new formalisms. Lushly allusive, semantically knotty, imagistically dense, hooked on conceptual tension, the sonnet's refusal to liquidate iambic pentameter and other high modernist enemies nonetheless begs for high modernist interpretive protocols. The first seven lines, an unbalanced, nonconforming unit of quatrain and virtual tercet, reach from the Harlem Renaissance to the English Renaissance to revive the sonnet motif of the cruel-fair mistress. In McKay's game hands, this 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 here dramatizes the traditional sonnet logic through which the cruel mistress fills out her victim, providing her lover with "effects...which, if distressing, are none the less manifestations of him" (Spiller 156; emphasis in original). 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 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, as a "pretty room[...]" (l. 32). 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 struggle within barriers, whether those of America or "America" the sonnet (Spiller 9). However, in place of the sonneteer's recommended "paradigm / of straining forces harmonized sincerely" (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 Time's punishment. Through broad allusions to Shelley's 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 postwar string of morally sacked culture capitals-"Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London" (ll. 378-379)-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.

What is still lacking from this take on "America" is what is missing from most: adequate consideration of the crux at which the poem's 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 faithful 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). While 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 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* (1952), 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. Even so, 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 sonnet, 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 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 of "America"'s first seven lines 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 presently (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).

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