



CLAUDE MCKAY

(1889 – 1948)

FESTUS CLAUDIUS "CLAUDE" MCKAY WAS A JAMAICAN WRITER AND POET, AND WAS A CENTRAL FIGURE IN THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE. HE WROTE FIVE NOVELS, AUTHORED COLLECTIONS OF POETRY, A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES, TWO AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL BOOKS, AND A NON-FICTION, SOCIO-HISTORICAL TREATISE ENTITLED HARLEM: NEGRO METROPOLIS. HIS 1922 POETRY COLLECTION, HARLEM SHADOWS, WAS AMONG THE FIRST BOOKS PUBLISHED DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE.

AROUND THE AGE OF NINE, MCKAY WAS SENT TO LIVE WITH HIS OLDEST BROTHER, URIAH THEODORE, A TEACHER, TO BE GIVEN A PROPER EDUCATION. DUE TO HIS BROTHER'S INFLUENCE, MCKAY BECAME AN AVID READER OF CLASSICAL AND BRITISH LITERATURE, AS WELL AS PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY. WITH THE TIME HE HAD ON HIS HANDS, HE WOULD READ POEMS DURING THAT TIME AND OTHER MATERIAL AND WAS PARTICULAR ENAMORED WITH WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE. WHEN MCKAY WAS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, HE BECAME VERY INTRIGUED AND PASSIONATE ABOUT POETRY, WHICH HE STARTED TO WRITE AT THE AGE OF 10. IN 1907, MCKAY MET WALTER JEKYLL, WHO BECAME A MENTOR AND AN

INSPIRATION FOR HIM, WHO ALSO ENCOURAGED HIM TO CONCENTRATE ON HIS WRITING. JEKYLL CONVINCED MCKAY TO WRITE IN HIS NATIVE DIALECT, AND THEN SET SOME OF MCKAY'S VERSES TO MUSIC. JEKYLL HELPED MCKAY PUBLISH HIS FIRST BOOK OF POEMS, SONGS OF JAMAICA, IN 1912. THESE WERE THE FIRST POEMS PUBLISHED IN JAMAICAN PATOIS (DIALECT OF MAINLY ENGLISH WORDS AND AFRICAN STRUCTURE). MCKAY'S NEXT VOLUME, CONSTAB BALLADS, WAS BASED ON HIS EXPERIENCES OF JOINING THE CONSTABULARY.

MCKAY LEFT FOR THE U.S. IN 1912 TO ATTEND TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE. HE WAS SHOCKED BY THE INTENSE RACISM HE ENCOUNTERED WHEN HE ARRIVED IN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, WHERE MANY PUBLIC FACILITIES WERE SEGREGATED; THIS INSPIRED HIM TO WRITE MORE POETRY. AT TUSKEGEE, HE DISLIKED THE "SEMI-MILITARY, MACHINE-LIKE EXISTENCE THERE" AND QUICKLY LEFT TO STUDY AT KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY. AT KANSAS STATE, HE READ W. E. B. DU BOIS' SOULS OF BLACK FOLK, WHICH HAD A MAJOR IMPACT ON HIM AND STIRRED HIS POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT. BUT DESPITE SUPERIOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, IN 1914 HE DECIDED HE DID NOT WANT TO BE AN AGRONOMIST AND MOVED TO NEW YORK CITY.

MCKAY DIVESTED HIMSELF FROM MANY ASPECTS AND GROWING PRESCRIPTIONS OF MODERNISM. BY THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY, THE SONNET FORM HAD BECOME AN ANTIQUATED POETIC STYLE, BUT MCKAY FOUND IT AN IDEAL A MEDIUM TO CONVEY HIS IDEAS. MANY MODERNISTS, HOWEVER, REJECTED AND CRITICIZED HIS USE OF THE SONNET. HAVING SPENT TIME AMONG THE ARTISTS OF PARIS IN THE 1920S, HE WAS INTIMATELY ACQUAINTED WITH THE DYNAMICS BETWEEN PAINTERS AND MODELS AND THE MANNER IN WHICH MODERNIST PAINTERS PRESENTED AFRICAN SUBJECTS AND AFRICAN CULTURE. MCKAY SAW FIRST-HAND HOW THE LARGER SOCIAL HEGEMONY BETWEEN EUROPEAN WHITE SUPREMACY AND PEOPLE OF AFRO-CARIBBEAN DESCENT COULD PLAY ITSELF OUT BETWEEN THE ARTIST AND ITS SUBJECT. MCKAY CRITICALLY RECALLED THE EXPERIENCE IN VARIOUS WAYS IN MANY OF HIS MOST NOTABLE WORKS. IN DOING SO, HE SHONE A CRITICAL LIGHT ON A CORNERSTONE OF MODERNISM AND ONCE AGAIN PUSHED BACK AGAINST A SYSTEM IN WHICH HE FOUND HIMSELF.

MCKAY FLOURISHED AS A POET DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE. DURING THIS TIME, HIS POEMS CHALLENGED WHITE AUTHORITY WHILE CELEBRATING JAMAICAN CULTURE. HE ALSO WROTE TALES ABOUT THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF LIFE AS A BLACK MAN IN BOTH JAMAICA AND AMERICA. MCKAY WAS NOT SECRETIVE ABOUT HIS HATRED FOR RACISM AND FELT THAT RACIST PEOPLE WERE STUPID AND COULD NOT LOOK PAST THEIR SHORTSIGHTEDNESS AND HATRED. MCKAY WAS AFRAID OF THE DANGERS THAT WERE HAPPENING ALL OVER THE UNITED STATES. THE HANGINGS, THE SHOOTINGS, THE MURDERS. MCKAY'S POETRY BROUGHT AWARENESS TO THE RACIST TREATMENT THAT MANY BLACK INDIVIDUALS FACED. HE DIED FROM A HEART ATTACK IN CHICAGO AT THE AGE OF 58.