

HOME AT LAST

The pilgrimage of Claude McKay

David Goldweber

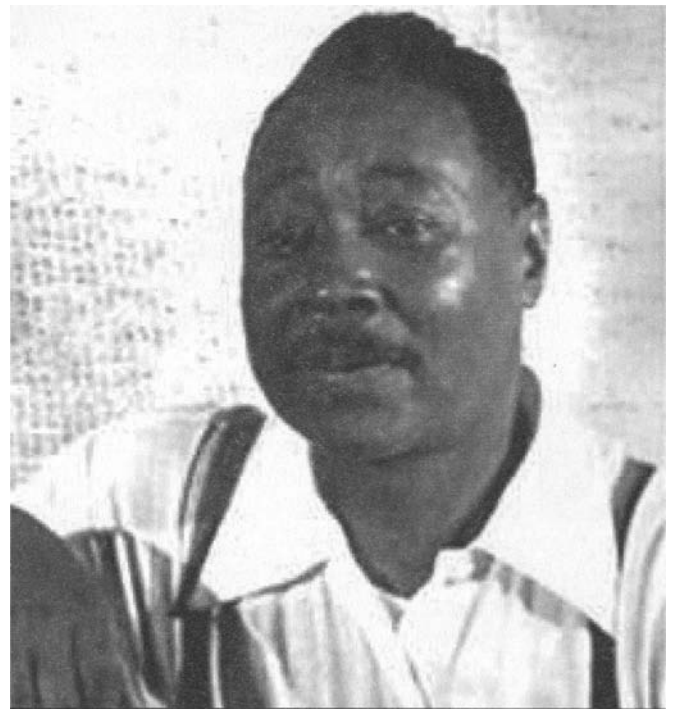
There have been a good number of conversions of twentieth-century intellectuals to Catholicism, but few are as intriguing as the conversion of the poet, novelist, and critic Claude McKay. McKay. Along with Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, McKay is considered one of the great poets of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. A man of contradictions, involved by turns with atheism, homosexuality, Islam, Soviet communism, and Marcus Garvey's Black Nationalist movement, McKay at last found that for him only Roman Catholicism offered peace, order, wonder, and truth.

Born in Jamaica in 1890, McKay moved to Harlem in 1915 to join the burgeoning literary scene. In Harlem he contributed articles to Garvey's *Negro World* and had a brief passion for men. With the publication of his *Harlem Shadows*, a volume of poetry in 1921, McKay became known as the most fiery and vociferous black poet of the day. His work lacked the jazzy inventiveness of Hughes and the stately craftsmanship of Cullen, but it compensated through the sheer force of its honesty and bluntness. In *Harlem Shadows*, McKay showed belligerence, sorrow, hatred for Western civilization, and rage against Christianity. The poem "Enslaved" blamed what McKay called the "Christian West" for ravaging the "Black Land" of Africa. The poem "Baptism" invoked Christianity in order to distort it, telling of an imagined antibaptism in which McKay saw himself baptized by the fires of white racism to become an avenging warrior. This poem was followed in the *Harlem Shadows* volume by the sonnet "If We Must Die"—McKay's most famous poem—which imagined a war between blacks and whites, the whites "mad and hungry dogs" and even "monsters" whose injustices are to be met with violence. Never a man to compromise, McKay became furious when an editor toned down his sonnet "The White House" by renaming it "White Houses" (and thereby blunting its political bite) for its inclusion in the *Survey Graphic* literature anthology of 1924. The editor, Alain Locke, was among the best known and most powerful figures of the black literary scene, but this did not stop McKay from writing an angry letter of protest threatening to become Locke's "intellectual enemy for all time" if such an event occurred again.

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Through the early 1920s, McKay continued to see Christianity only as a tool of oppressive white capitalists. He became involved with the Communist party, left the United States, and spent time in Europe, North Africa, and Soviet Russia. He seemed steadfast and resolute in his beliefs, intending never to return to the United States until it had overthrown its capitalist order. But then McKay began to change.

The seeds of McKay's attraction to Christianity began in the late 1920s after he became aware of the beauty of the great European cathedrals, especially the Catholic ones in Spain. At this same time he found himself disappointed with communism, which he increasingly found to be close-minded, partisan, and cold. In 1925, McKay extolled not Lenin's tomb in Moscow but Saint Isaac's Church in Petrograd. "What jeweled glory fills my spirit's eye," he wrote, "What golden grandeur moves the depths of me! ...Bow down in worship, humble and alone, / Bow lowly down before the sacred sight / Of man's divinity alive in stone." He could not shake the sense of something transcendent working in and through human life. For a brief time in the early 1930s, realizing he believed in God but not yet feeling ready for Christianity, McKay studied Islam, but was uncomfort-



able with it. Having become a fervent anti-Communist after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, McKay returned to the United States, changing his citizenship from Jamaican to American in 1940.

McKay's closeness to Catholicism began in earnest in 1942, after he became seriously ill with hypertension and edema. Through his friend Ellen Tarry, a noted black writer and a Catholic convert, McKay received medical help at the Catholic-run Friendship House in Harlem. Established in 1938, Friendship House provided medical services, study clubs, and recreational facilities for the Harlem poor, and preached against the spread of atheism and communism. McKay was impressed with the Friendship House staff for helping him through his illness without attempting to convert him. He visited their headquarters regularly in the following months and grew convinced that the Catholic church was the best hope for preserving humanity's spirituality in the face of narrow-minded modern-day "isms." A year passed, and, while attending Mass and exploring Catholicism, McKay realized where he was heading. In 1943 he began writing a long sonnet sequence called the "Cycle Manuscript." In the first of these sonnets, usually considered the sequence's best, McKay anticipates his conversion:

These poems distilled from my experience,
Exactly tell my feelings of today,
The cruel and the vicious and the tense
Conditions which have hedged my bitter way
Of life. But though I suffered much I bore
My cross and lived to put my trouble in song,
I stripped down harshly to the naked core
Of hatred based on the essential wrong!
But tomorrow, I may sing another tune,
No critic, white or black, can tie me down,
Maybe a fantasy of a fairy moon,
Or the thorns the soldiers weaved for Jesus' crown,
For I, a poet, can soar with unclipped wings,
From earth to heaven, while chanting of all things.

It was the social aspects of Catholicism that McKay found initially compelling. In a June 1943 letter to Mary Keating, one of McKay's friends at Friendship House, he wrote that he was considering converting more for "social" reasons than "religious" ones. But he would not let himself commit without sincere belief.

In early 1944, Keating helped McKay get a job in the newly established Friendship House headquarters in Chicago, the only Friendship House still operating today. Friendship House Chicago had the backing of Bishop Bernard Sheil. Known as "labor's bishop" or "the people's bishop," Sheil was first noticed in 1939 when, as an auxiliary bishop, he sided with the Chicago meatpacking workers in their fight to be recognized as a union. His fame grew as the leader of the Catholic Youth Organization (which swelled from a small

Chicago boys' club in 1930 to 10 million members nationwide by the mid-fifties). He was also an outspoken opponent not only of communism but also of anti-Communist fanatics (Sheil's anti-McCarthy speech of 1954 was the first public statement by a prominent Catholic clergyman). He also preached fervently against racism and anti-Semitism, and made efforts to get the CIO and other unions to admit black workers. He founded an adult-education school (the Sheil School of Social Studies) and a radio station, worked with Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, and was given the title of archbishop by Pope John XXIII in 1959. Articles and notes by or about Sheil appeared variously in the 1940s and '50s in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*. *Commonweal* reported on Sheil and the Friendship Houses no fewer than a dozen times.

In the spring of 1944, McKay moved to Chicago and began working as Sheil's advisor on black affairs and on Soviet communism. He also began to study Catholicism directly and to consult with Chicago priests. Day by day he felt himself becoming ready to convert, but he needed to be fully convinced. In a June 1944 letter to his lifelong friend Max Eastman, McKay wrote: "If and when I take the step I want to be intellectually honest and sincere about it. From the social angle I am quite clear and determined. I know that the Catholic church is the one great organization which can check the Communists and probably lick them. But there is also the religious angle." Eastman, still a Communist sympathizer, told McKay he considered Catholicism a form of totalitarianism, but McKay's faith was growing stronger. "By becoming a Catholic," wrote McKay, "I would merely be giving religion the proper place it had in my nature and in man's nature." He did not deny validity in other religions, but he felt Catholicism was his birthright as a son of the Western world. At last, in a letter of August 16, 1944, McKay declared: "I do believe in the mystery of the symbol of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, through which all of humanity may be united in brotherly love." He was baptized on October 11 of that year. A few days after his conversion he wrote that Catholicism will be "the final stage of my hectic life."

McKay continued to support Catholicism for social principles as well as religious ones. He wrote, in a 1946 letter, that he had become able "to think of people with wonder and love as I did as a boy in Jamaica, and the Catholic church with its discipline and traditions and understanding of human nature is helping me a lot." In the March 1946 issue of *Ebony*, McKay published a one-page explanation, "Why I Became a Catholic," which associates Protestantism with bigotry, slavery, and greed; Catholicism with tolerance and compassion. He warns black Americans to beware "the materialistic Protestant god of progress" and declares, "In joining the Roman Catholic church, I feel proud of belonging to that vast universal body of Christians, which is the greatest stabilizing force in the world today—standing as a bulwark against all the wild and purely materialistic 'isms' that are sweeping the world." McKay was extreme in his remarks, but he was sincere in what he wrote and believed. In

a September 1946 letter he assures his friends that he became a Catholic for "sincere religious reasons."

McKay went on to teach at the Sheil School, work in the Catholic Youth Organization, and contribute poems to Dorothy Day's *Catholic Worker*. Some of McKay's friends and some of his early biographers were suspicious of his conversion, seeing it as a sort of capitulation and job opportunity after a life of involvement with unsuccessful causes. But recent biographers (Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* [Louisiana State University Press, 1987] and Tyrone Tillery, *Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity* [University of Massachusetts Press, 1992]) have noted McKay's lifelong spirit of independence, refusal to compromise, and commitment to honesty. His decision was neither quick nor easy; it was the result of very deep and serious thought.

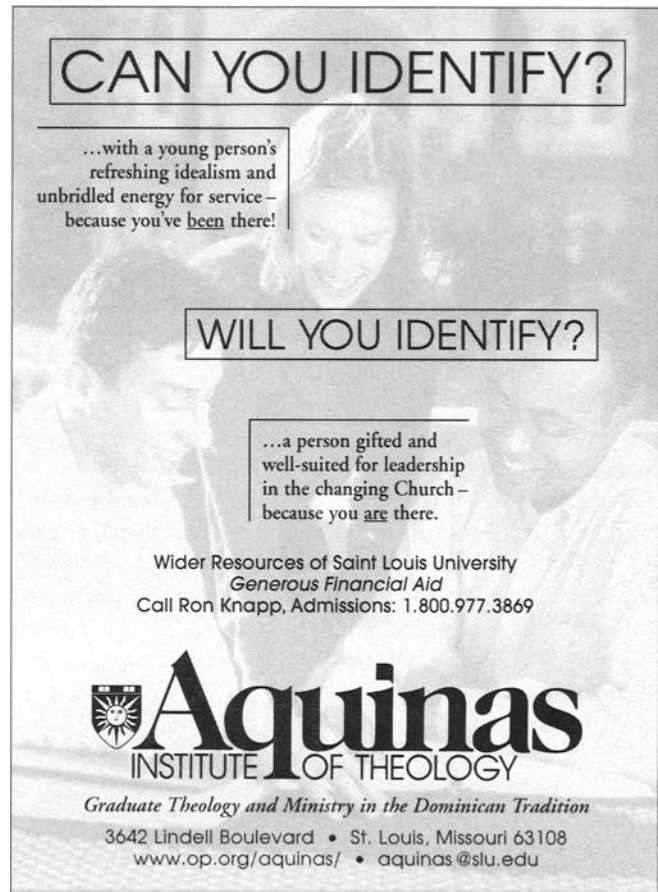
And perhaps a part of McKay saw a glimpse of heavenly light even in his most dark and angry times. The 1921 *Harlem Shadows* held much resentment and hatred, yet the volume's opening poem was a sensitive lyric titled "The Easter Flower." Here, McKay acknowledges he is a nonbeliever, yet admits he cannot but feel a brief holy reverence:

Far from this foreign Easter damp and chilly
My soul steals to a pear-shaped plot of ground,
Where gleamed the lilac-tinted Easter lily
Soft-scented in the air for yards around;
Alone, without a hint of guardian leaf!
Just like a fragile bell of silver rime,
It burst the tomb for freedom sweet and brief
In the young pregnant year at Eastertime;
And many thought it was a sacred sign,
And some called it the resurrection flower;
And I, a pagan, worshipped at its shrine,
Yielding my heart unto its perfumed power.

We might also turn to the closing poem of that volume, "Through Agony," where McKay at once confronts romantic and spiritual torments. It opens: "All night, through the eternity of night, / Pain was my portion though I could not feel." It ends:

The mists will shroud me on the utter height,
The salty, brimming waters of my breast
Will mingle with the fresh dews of the night
To bathe my spirit hankering to rest.
But after sleep I'll wake with greater might,
Once more to venture on the eternal quest.

Perhaps this younger McKay would not have been so surprised at his older self, whose "quest" for coherence and community had discovered a humanism and spirituality united in Catholicism that brought him inspiration and brotherhood. McKay died quietly of heart failure in a Chicago hospital in 1948, having become, after so many years of emptiness and bitterness, a man of hope and peace. □



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