

James Smethurst: "And We Still Wear Our Uniforms": Modernism, Community, and the African-American Sonnet in A Street in Bronzeville

A Street in Bronzeville closes with a sequence of twelve off-rhyme sonnets, "Gay Chaps at the Bar," which invoke both the African-American speaking subject and the tradition of "high" literature as it is popularly understood and yet undermine those invocations. As in the "Hattie Scott" series, the narratorial consciousness is absent from what is represented as ostensibly the unmediated voice of an African-American officer, or series of African-American officers, at the front during World War II. However, the voice of the soldier is so clearly "literary" that the reader is constantly and consciously reminded that this mask is indeed a mask, as in the title sonnet that begins the series: "We knew how to order. Just the dash/Necessary. The length of gaiety in good taste."

The "literariness" of the speaker's syntax is clearly self-mocking. On the face of it, the speaker, a "middle-class," self-consciously sophisticated, college-educated African-American man, mocks his own "attainments" in the face of death. But, as mentioned earlier, the very literariness of the syntax, and the choice of the archetypal "high" literary form of the sonnet sequence, reminds the reader that this satiric voice is not the soldier himself, but a narratorial consciousness that, when seen within the larger context of the collection, the reader assumes to be female. That the sonnets are narratorial reconstructions (and distortions) is further emphasized by the epigraph, which is drawn from a letter to Brooks and which, while self-consciously literate, is far more chatty and less "literary" than the following sonnets. The literariness of the poem's syntax is reinforced by the fact that a close reading inevitably draws the reader back to other poems in the collection. The lines "And we knew beautifully how to give to women / The summer spread, the tropics, of our love. / When to persist, or hold a hunger off" recall "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" as the mannered self-control (and mannered abandon) of the speaker demands comparison with the uncontrolled hunger of the poverty-stricken Smith. While the narratorial consciousness is obviously not unsympathetic to the speaker of the sonnet, there is a certain critique of the middle-class individual whose self-aware sophistication lacks the spirit of rebellion of the working-class subject, a rebellion that is viewed by the narratorial consciousness with a horrified admiration. A similar critique is found in the relation of the ninth line "But nothing ever taught us to be islands" to the poems immediately preceding the sonnet sequence, in which the experience of black women constantly prepares them to be "islands."

Formally, the choice of the sonnet sequence to end the collection may seem at odds with the self-reflexive meditation on the relation between "high" culture and "mass" culture in the construction (and the destruction) of community that has characterized the collection, in that "mass" culture or "popular" culture seems virtually missing from these closing poems. However, on closer inspection, the choice of the sonnet is apt. For the "Middle-class" American, black and white, with a reasonable amount of formal education, the sonnet as a literary form epitomized "high" culture. If an American of that era (or this one) were asked to name a type of poem (and could), he or she would almost certainly name the sonnet, unless they were among the relatively few avid readers of poetry (and even an avid reader of poetry

would probably think first of the sonnet rather than, say, the sestina or the rondeau). In short, the sonnet as a form could be seen as a popular-culture emblem of "high" culture (and in turn a sort of commercial marketing strategy) in much the same way as the name "Shakespeare." That the sonnet was in the popular mind the archetypal "high" poetic form particularly associated with notions of a pre-modern or traditional "high" European culture made it a particularly inviting target for numerous American modernists, black and white, male and female, who variously attempted to capture, recapture, recast, deform, or destroy it.

The sonnet was a form especially favored by African-American writers in the twentieth century until at least the early 1950s. Houston Baker Jr.'s concepts of "mastery" and "deformation of mastery" are both useful in considering this tradition, in which some African-American authors demonstrated their "mastery" of the archetypal "high" form in fairly straightforward fashion while others "deformed" the sonnet in various ways, often by writing overtly "political" or "social" poems rather than the love lyrics generally associated with the form. Much more rarely do African-American poets "deform" the sonnet through the recasting of the sonnet in a representation of African-American vernacular speech and other forms of vernacular culture--though some have fragments with a double identity as vernacular speech (for example, "holler" in "gay chaps at the bar") embedded in them--with, as we have seen, Hughes's "Seven Moments of Love" section of *Shakespeare in Harlem* one of the few examples. Sometimes the sonnets written by African-American writers do not follow exactly the rhyme scheme of either the Petrarchan or Shakespearean sonnets seen as most "traditional" by American readers and writers, as in the case of a number of poems in the "Vestiges" section of *Southern Road*. However, nearly all make use of exact rhyme and are conservative in their use of typography, line break, punctuation, and so on--unless, again, one counts Hughes's "un-sonnet sequence." This relative African-American formal conservatism contrasts with the formal radicalism of the sonnets of many white modernists, notably e.e. cummings and Wallace Stevens. If one can speak of the African-American sonnet tradition, it is one that can be generally seen as both self-consciously "deformative" in content and conservative in its execution of formal "mastery"--at least on the printed page since, as noted in chapter I with respect to McKay, a spoken version might be another thing.

Thus, while it is worthwhile to link, as D. H. Melhem does, Brooks's use of the sonnet here to the sonnets of various New Negro Renaissance writers (though why Melhem leaves out earlier writers, notably Dunbar, in her brief genealogy of the African-American sonnet is puzzling), Brooks's sonnets are formally quite different from those earlier sonnets. This difference is most obvious in Brooks's avoidance of exact end-rhyme, employing instead near rhyme, slant rhymes, assonance, alliteration, and, on occasion, no suggestion of rhyme. This avoidance of end-rhyme calls attention to the rhyming conventions of various types of sonnets while avoiding them even as the conventions are invoked, particularly when the rhyme scheme of the not-quite rhymes fits, or nearly fits, the pattern of a "typical" sonnet, as in the seventh poem in the series, "the white troops had their orders but the Negroes looked like men," which would be a regular Petrarchan sonnet if the not-quite-rhymes were exact. These sonnets self-consciously remind the reader of a "regular" sonnet, the popular middle-class icon of "high" literature, and the use of the various sonnet forms by African-American writers, and yet evade that regularity. This studied invocation and evasion parallel both the mocking "literariness" of the syntax of the "middle-class" African-American soldiers speaking--in fact writing--and also the horrified inability of these soldiers to quite put all their sophisticated understanding of the rules of sports, love, college and "good" grammar back together again in the face of the war.

As Ann Folwell Stanford points out, the war here is not simply the war in Europe and the Pacific but also the war "at home" against racism, with the sonnets embodying the slogan of the "Double V" (victory abroad and victory against Jim Crow at home) first popularized by the African-American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Perhaps the sonnets also, as Stanford claims, "are, finally, prophetic warnings: They look back at the devastation of war, and forward toward a time of revolution and rebellion that was to come in the Sixties" (though this seems to remake Brooks from the standpoint of her later participation in the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s). There is a sense of past and present apocalypse in the sonnets, particularly in the final sonnet:

How shall we smile, congratulate: and how Settle in chairs? Listen, listen. The step
Of iron feet again. And again wild.

But the sonnets also explore the difficulties and contradictions of such revolutionary moments where apocalyptic events have dislocated past knowledge of community and identity determined by the interface of race, region, class, and gender. This identity crisis is seen as good in many respects since the old system of social identity was oppressive in the extreme, especially for the African-American subject. And yet such a crisis is profoundly unsettling, notably for the "middle-class" black subject who feels he or she has something to lose as well as gain. Thus these subjects in the sonnets are preoccupied with often imprisoning social guideposts--etiquette, religion, patriotism, racial and economic caste, romantic love--that they feel they are losing even as they desperately try to retain them so that their lives can continue to make sense. In this, the ending of Brooks's collection is closely related in spirit to Hughes's *Montage of A Dream Deferred*, in which a spirit of edgy rebellion and fear pervades. The problem for the individual is coming to terms with what it would mean to win the wars at home and abroad, with what such a world would look like, and with how community, and the identity of the individual within the community, could be imagined.

The relation of this to Brooks's own project is obvious. *A Street in Bronzeville* is obsessively concerned with the problems of the literary representation of the individual African-American subject in an "authentic" manner that is also "literary" and of the relation of the "folk," "popular," and "high" discourses to social hierarchy and social power. Much of the collection before the final sonnet sequence calls upon the resources of these various discourses while investigating what the cost of such usages might be. The stance of the narratorial consciousness in these meditations on the problems of "authenticity" and artistic "achievement" is quite ambivalent. A sort of Faustian pact is seen as necessary to create the poems, with the narratorial consciousness aware at all times of the cost--not the least of which is the inability to speak with absolute sincerity and conviction. The sonnet sequence prominently links the question of the process of artistic construction to the recurring themes of manners, tradition, and belief in the construction (and reconstruction) of identity with the inevitable attention to form that the adoption and unusual adaptation of the sonnet as a poetic vehicle inevitably entails for even a casual reader. Finally, the narratorial consciousness is able to imagine the breakdown of tradition, manners, and language itself. But it is unable to imagine the new order; the "iron feet" bring dread, not elation--which is not to say that this inability to see a clear future means that this chaos is bad, simply that it is terrifying. In this respect, Brooks's sonnets here have to be among the most successful poems dealing with the terror of modernity in American letters.

Margaret Walker's claim that she was a "thirties" writer, while Brooks was essentially a "forties" writer, has a certain validity insofar as Brooks was considerably removed from the 1930s folkloric-high culture model associated with Sterling Brown and shaped in the ideological debates of the late New Negro Renaissance and the Third Period. Yet as we have seen, her work is closely related in form and in spirit to the self-reflexive work of many writers during the Popular Front, including such African-American writers as Hughes and Frank Marshall Davis, who were concerned with issues of class, racial, and/or gender oppression while meditating on the problems of attempting to write for a imagined popular audience in a way that was authentic, literary, and truly popular. There is an obvious, and much remarked, relationship of *A Street in Bronzeville* to the "modernists," which became even more pronounced in *Annie Allen* (1949) as the cold war intensified. But this relationship did not distinguish Brooks from many writers of the literary Left who had similarly complicated relationships to "high" modernism. While Brooks in *A Street in Bronzeville*, like the writers of the Popular Front, is concerned with issues of social justice and injustice, she creates a model where constructs of counter-hegemonic community, racial and class solidarity, and a simultaneously "popular" and "literary" discourse are provisional, imperfect, and unstable. This does not mean that this community is not "real," only that it needs to be constantly questioned with the result that the narratorial consciousness of the poems and the African-American speaking subjects which the poems attempt to represent and give voice to are never easy in communal identification. Neither is there the certainty--as there is generally is in Hughes's work--that the narratorial consciousness of the poet-intellectual-outsider is able to authentically recreate the folk or popular voice if he or she is sufficiently honest and receptive.

Brooks examined critically within an African-American context many of the thematic and formal concerns of Left writers in the 1930s: the connection of political vanguardism and artistic vanguardism; the problems of "realistic" formal representation and re-creation of the working-class-popular subject by a non-working-class artist; the relationship of "high" modernism and folk or popular modernism; the nature of mass culture; the relationship of class, gender, race, and nationality and the construction of community; the compatibility between a jeremiadic revolutionary or apocalyptic rhetorical mode and a liberal, progressive rhetorical mode.

From *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946*.
Copyright © 1999 by Oxford University Press.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Gwendolyn Brooks [2]

Author:

James Smethurst [3]

Poem:

Gay Chaps at the Bar [4]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/james-smethurst-and-we-still-wear-our-uniforms-modernism-community-and-african-american>

Links

- [1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>
- [2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/gwendolyn-brooks>
- [3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/james-smethurst>
- [4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/gay-chaps-bar>