

Kathryne V. Lindberg: On "We Real Cool"

Of this poem Hortense Spillers, praising the "wealth of implication" in this "[l]ess than lean poem," says it is "no nonsense at all." Finding original artistry, in-crowd and in-race code, and a full range of traditional poetic techniques in Brooks's poem, Spillers says that Brooks's players "subvert the romance of sociological pathos" and, quite comfortably, she has them read Brooks's lines, thus:

They make no excuse for themselves and apparently invite no one else to do so. The poem is their situation as they see it. In eight [could be nonstop] lines, here is their total destiny. Perhaps comic geniuses, they could well drink to this poem, making it a drinking/revelry song.

I would like to bring Helen Vendler's recent mention of Brooks into conversation with Spillers's earlier tribute. Speaking with the well-earned authority of her position as a major reader of the Western canon and an influential critic of new poet candidates to that tradition, Vendler writes about the new national poet laureate in *Callaloo*, the most important wider-than-academic journal of black and Third World poetry. She generously praises and candidly corrects (explicitly not in the sense of "political correctness") the "Identity Markers" Rita Dove marshals to "confront . . . the enraging fact that the inescapable accusation of blackness becomes, too early for the child to resist it, a strong element of inner self-definition." At one point, Vendler economically dismisses Brooks in questioning one of Dove's "relatively unsuccessful historical excursions in a lyric time-machine." Not to make too much of a few lines, I quote her dismissal in full: "This [Dove's early 'odyssey'] may owe something to Gwendolyn Brooks's 'We Real Cool,' but it avoids the prudishness of Brooks's judgmental monologue, which though it is ostensibly spoken by adolescents, barely conceals its adult reproach of their behavior."

Even though Vendler indicates that Brooks's poem is not properly addressed to the white critical tradition, her response does not fail to register, however unwillingly, Brooks's double movement at to narrow and to expand the usual distance readers of poetry traverse in becoming?or resisting becoming?"We," whether real cool or not. By making Brooks admonish the adolescents, Vendler makes pretty clear who isn't We-not to say who "We" isn't. It seems that, however fallen, Brooks, the poet, simply must share the critic's position above those pool players. Curiously, from their different aesthetic and experiential positions, Vendler and Spillers both give valid readings of the poem, and it is no accident that they fix on the pronoun that hangs out there like the prepositions from William Carlos Williams's famous wheelbarrow.

Not to dwell overlong on the ethos or impact of the very different constructions invited by Brooks's "We," I add Brooks's own commentary on the poem, which is delivered as stage directions for her public readings:

First of all, let me tell you how that's ["We Real Cool"] supposed to be said, because there's a reason why I set it out as I did. These are people who are

essentially saying, "Kilroy is here. We are." But they're a little uncertain of the strength of their identity. The "We"?you're supposed to stop after the "we" and think about validity; of course, there's no way for you to tell whether it should be said softly or not, I suppose, but I say it rather softly because I want to represent their basic uncertainty. (RFPO, 155-56)

Characteristically, Brooks invites both identification with and objectification of the young men?depending, perhaps on such categories as the race, gender, age of her/their audience. There is something cunning and deceptive both about the openness of Brooks's "We" and her variable distance from both the pool players to whom it refers and the people?at least since its Broadside republication?it seems to rename. Rather like the young white man who, in Brooks's Story about Baraka, heeded a call not intended for him, or the "You" of "Primer for Blacks," that shifty pronoun works a critique on audience overidentification and poet's supposed representativeness. After all, isn't she supposed to correct the young punks, not to follow them as new leaders? But which she? The writer of "We Real Cool," The Bean Eaters (1960)? Or the writer of the 1967 broadside "We Real Cool"? And should the differences of context text and thus of content be fixed?either in the sense of "healed" or "halted"? Brooks put(s) her readers, specifically a black audience that is not limited to the no-longer-New Blacks of the sixties, to work on such questions.

Rather than stand as the highly decorated, proper, and representative lady and/or poet for her race (the "lady ?negro poet?"), Brooks chose to transform a black audience into poets or, as William Blake might say, prophets. Brooks's address is wider than Whitman's mutual embrace of writer and his people. More literal, literary, and liberating are her encouragement and publicity in favor of young poets than the hope that one day, perhaps crossing to Brooklyn on a ferry, one might think her thoughts. Indeed, it might be that her greatest offense against the literary and academic establishment(s)?the refusal to rest on her (canonical) laurels and apparent dismissal of the capital "P" of Poetry, which is also her refusal to repeat the talented-tenth or exclusive single, sanctioned post of (non-) representative poet, such as Hughes in the Harlem Renaissance?encrypts her most direct engagement of literary history.

Despite a fair amount of thunder and fire, her statement is no "No in thunder," but a generous "Yes" to those systematically excluded from the academic and elitist poetic apparatus.

Lindberg, Kathryn V. "Whose Canon? Gwendolyn Brooks: Founder at the Center of the 'Margins.'" *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*. Ed. Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996. 283-311.

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