

## INTRODUCTION

It is highly likely that the story of the people known as African Americans—the chronicle of their journey from captivity to an ever-evolving and complicated status as full members of American society—will become one of the most inspiring narratives in the development of human aspiration from the Dark Ages to the Space Age. The poetry of this group, ranging from the plaintive classicism of slave-born Phillis Wheatley:

*Filled with the praise of him who gives the light,  
And draws the sable curtains of the night,  
Let placid slumbers soothe each weary mind,  
At morn to wake, more heavenly, more refined.*  
(“An Hymn to the Evening”)

to the jazzy irony of Elizabeth Alexander, born some two hundred years later, in her dramatic monologue of the global sports hero Muhammad Ali:

*I said to Joe Frazier,  
... Always  
keep one good Cadillac.  
And watch how you dress  
with that cowboy hat,  
pink suits, white shoes—  
that's how pimps dress,  
or kids, and you a champ,  
or wish you were, 'cause  
I can whip you in the ring  
or whip you in the street*

has served as pulse and barometer of both the panoramic American scene and the lives, individual and collective, of the members of one of its most integral ethnic groups.

America was the first true experiment in democracy in human history; the treatment of African Americans has been both this

country's greatest triumph and its greatest failing. "The Negro," Richard Wright wrote, "is America's metaphor"—a people uprooted from a traditional homeland and left to survive, endure, and create self and soul in a strange and hostile environment. The experience of American blacks offers not a marginal but an essential glimpse into this country—its darkest and brightest aspects, its promised equality and entrenched hierarchy, the violence upon which it was founded and the hope toward which it fitfully moves.

Our founding documents, despite their rhetoric—"we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"—were never intended by their authors, many of them slaveholders, to be inclusive. But through what Kenneth Burke calls "the power of the negative" (when we say that we *are* something, for example a democracy, this implies that we are *not* something else, a feudal state), we are constantly prodded toward their stated truths. African Americans have from the outset been at the heart of this push-and-pull. As Ralph Ellison wrote: "Materially, psychologically, and culturally, part of the nation's heritage is Negro American, and whatever it becomes will be shaped in part by the Negro's presence. Which is fortunate, for today it is the black American who puts pressure upon the nation to live up to its ideals."

There is another sense, beyond this reminder of the distance between our ideals and fact, in which African American culture and its artifacts are not just of marginal but of central importance to the nation. To be "American" is to be in constant search of one's identity. Richard Slotkin, in his brilliant trilogy *Regeneration Through Violence, The Fatal Environment, and Gunfighter Nation*, argues that our national identity has in large part been formed by insecurity, Europeans needing in this strange land to justify their leaving the "old country" by claiming as their own the virtues and native mores of the new land, while at the same time asserting cultural superiority over the new land's native inhabitants by claiming as their own the Old World's values.

Our national identity has thus been formed as a constant flux of appropriation and contrast from and with the margins of society. This pattern continues to the present day—witness popular slang and pop music, with its use of black "hip-hop" beats and attitude, as they play against the persistent racism of our social institutions in what Ellison termed the "antagonistic cooperation" that unifies the country. Understanding this paradox of the mainstream's rela-

tionship to minority groups is essential in assessing any aspect of black culture—for as much as it has been mocked and dismissed as "ethnic," this culture is and always has been a fundamental part of who we are, who we *all* are, shaping everything from dress and music to speech itself, in what Ellison called the stretching, modifying, and expanding of the "American tongue."

Insofar as their culture and work *can* be separated out, African American artists, in this instance African American poets, forced by the dominant culture, which constantly negates them, to question what it means to be human, American, and black, have kept closest in their writing to the definitive American quest for identity. Their work represents a unique blending of the public and private, as the lonely existential search for self-definition and transcendence becomes by necessity a public journey toward voice and freedom. This quest for identity and a belonging that will not compromise the self is the theme, if there can be said to be one theme, that animates the tradition from its beginning. To quote the spiritual, the endeavors of these authors are those of a "true believer far from home."



The first black American poets, to follow the analysis of Robert Hayden, turned exclusively to British models of poetic practice, to Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Jonathan Swift, and other contemporaries. Phillis Wheatley's neoclassical stylings lack the element of personal psychology that we today consider an essential part of the American literary tradition, but this is true of all American poetry until the mid-nineteenth century. Emerson's intellectual declaration of independence with its celebration of the self, it should be remembered, was not written until 1837.

African American poets writing before the Civil War—Jupiter Hammon, George Moses Horton, George Boyer Vashon, James M. Whitfield, and Frances E. W. Harper, among others—tended with few exceptions abstractly to explore the questions of slavery and freedom, drawing heavily on myth and allegory. While their poems are generally equal in quality to those written in the same period by Anglo Americans, they are of interest today largely for their socio-historical relevance (George Boyer Vashon, James M. Whitfield, and Frances E. W. Harper published often in abolitionist periodi-

cals) and for the feat of their having been written at all under conditions of slavery, social isolation, educational deprivation, and poverty.

The autobiographical element, the quest for self-discovery and voice characteristic of the American Renaissance launched by Emerson and exemplified in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, did not enter African American poetry until after the Civil War, in the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Anne Spencer, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and William Stanley Braithwaite. The more intricate and personal literary journeys of these authors mirrored in part the changed national aesthetic, and in part the more gnarled and complex social situation that developed as the straightforward hopes of Emancipation and Reconstruction collapsed into Jim Crow in both the North and the South. In his intensely lyric meditations of love, yearning, and lamentation, Dunbar questions his personal and public status quo, expressing desire for a life and experience beyond that prescribed for blacks:

*I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,  
When he beats his bars and he would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core.*

The fabled Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s represents a crucial turning point in the tradition, for at this point it could first be said to have become self-conscious, aware of itself as a tradition. In this period the first anthologies of African American poetry were compiled. Harlem Renaissance writers and critics encouraged an experimentation with form paralleling that of the modernists; works like Jean Toomer's *Cane* embody a new melding of genres, tenses, and viewpoints equal to the highest literary accomplishment of any American. The small details, triumphs, and disappointments of black daily life that had occasionally been explored by poets like Dunbar and Georgia Douglas Johnson were brought to the fore and celebrated as valid subject matter by this new generation, by Toomer, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Sterling A. Brown (discussed in further detail below). And poets like Cullen developed a nuanced, critical awareness of the black poet's paradoxical relationship to the mainstream—

marginalized and dismissed for being black and choosing black subject matter, yet conscious of great literature as an attempt to encompass just such questionings of society and self: "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: To make a poet black, and bid him sing!"

Robert Hayden, born just after these masters of the Harlem Renaissance, is another of the tradition's luminaries. One of the most skilled practitioners in the English language, Hayden was dedicated in his work to an exploration of soul and race that has influenced all African American poets since as well as changed the way we see and read his literary ancestors. With poems such as "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley" and "Paul Laurence Dunbar," Hayden strove to foreground the often-overlooked personal suffering (much of it socially imposed) that informed the work of these poets, giving them, as he once said, an inner life. In "Middle Passage," "Runagate, Runagate," and "The Ballad of Sue Ellen Westerfield," Hayden explored collective and folk experience further to animate and foreground a painful, otherwise forgotten past. And in another vein, that of "The Night-Blooming Cereus" and "Ice Storm," he voiced his own private loss and longing:

*The trees themselves, as in winters past,  
will survive their burdening,  
broken thrive. And am I less to You,  
my God, than they?*

Gwendolyn Brooks, born just four years later, is another master of the tradition—pushing the rural folk subjects and voicings skillfully treated by Sterling Brown into the modern, industrial North, creating a record of an entire people that goes beyond anything in the mainstream American tradition and must be compared in its scope and vision with the work of Chaucer, Dante, and Joyce. Brooks has so deeply influenced how we see the black South Side of Chicago, the inner lives of its inhabitants, that she can be said to have helped create it in the popular imagination. Her 1950 Pulitzer Prize was the first ever awarded a Negro writer (Margaret Walker had, in another signal moment, been awarded the Yale Younger Poets Prize earlier in the decade), and in many ways marked the arrival of black poets into the national elite. But Brooks's public, socially engaged career seems in the end to have won her no more of the wider culture's regard than did Hayden's quiet, almost monk-

ish one gained him, reflecting again that problematic relationship of black writers to the mainstream: both poets have been underappreciated, underknown, and underpraised.

The African American poetic tradition from the post-World War II period to the present day has fragmented into several different, at times contradictory, strands, reflecting the complexities for both blacks and the nation at large of the movement into the modern and postmodern eras. Poets such as Jay Wright, Michael S. Harper, C. S. Giscombe, and Rita Dove have continued Hayden's quest to locate the self in relation to the past; those in the Black Arts Movement and cultural nationalists, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) among them, have sought a more engaged and politically "relevant" poetic practice, one that would fuel or guide the kinds of radical political transformations these practitioners believe still necessary to the full purchase on the American promise.

A younger generation, featuring such poets as Yusef Komunyakaa, Thylas Moss, and Reginald Shepherd, is benefiting from an unprecedented access to the institutional life of the poetic establishment. These poets enjoy as well the postmodern freedom of the practitioner to draw from the whole of their tradition and of the world tradition, to publish any kind of poem, from blazing political tract to private love lyric—often in the same book or magazine—in any style, from four-beat rap quatrains to Spenserian sonnets. These poets at their best have used this freedom as a tool in exploring the complexities of their private lives as well as the related complexities and contradictions inherent in a nation that has given unprecedented wealth and personal freedom to so many African Americans while leaving many more mired in the socially constructed nightmares of the inner cities and impoverished rural South.



**B**ut no broad outline such as the preceding of the African American tradition could serve to convey its importance and its troubled relationship to the mainstream so much as understanding in some depth the career and body of work of perhaps its most accomplished practitioner, Sterling A. Brown.

A consummate literary critic, writing seminal texts on African American art and folklore and having studied the Irish Renaissance with an eye toward applying its lessons to the situation of black Americans, Brown was also an extraordinary poet, capable of fusing his critical awareness with narrative, rhythm, meter, and tone to create a singular reflection of a people's experience and consciousness.

From the "adopt" and "adapt" phases of African American poetry—its adoption of rhetoric and form from English poetry in Wheatley and others and its adaptation of these forms to distinctly black subjects in the Harlem Renaissance—this tradition could be said to have come into its own with Brown's "adept" creation of an entirely new prosody. Though often confused with the work of "dialect poets," poets who simply forced black speech into English forms in some of their poems (Dunbar and Hughes among them), Brown's poetic project was in fact quite different. His life's work was to foreground the "folk." He strove to show that rural southern blacks in particular, while generally dismissed by white Americans, even those who worked for social reform, as passive sufferers, had in fact developed a system of active strategies for encompassing the harsh economic and social situations in which they found themselves. Brown's poetry does not ennoble his subjects but serves to underscore their preexisting nobility.

Just as Yeats drew from folk myths to "create" a national identity, to voice the experiences and aspirations of a people written out of history, so did Brown turn to black folk myths, folk expressions, work songs, blues, and spirituals. His verse is not "dialect," for no one talks like his narrators talk: rather, Brown distilled the rhythms of black speech and song, merging them with English form and rhetoric to create a wholly invented language that, as such, takes us both through and beyond history into myth, beyond the apparent face of things into the commonality of human hopes and ambitions hidden by social forms.

In the refrain of "After Winter,"

*Butter beans fo' Clara  
Sugar corn fo' Grace  
An' fo' de little feller  
Runnin' space*

Brown distills and prosodically sifts the words of a sharecropper to underscore his striving and deep humanity. The first line of this refrain consists of three trochees (stressed-unstressed), and the second line, also of three beats, continues this rhythm. In the third line Brown shifts the rhythm to iambic (unstressed-stressed) to create a tension strikingly resolved in the final line—where the shift back to trochaic rhythm comes as a slight surprise but at the same time (as it represents a return to the trochaic metric contract established at the refrain's beginning) feels "right," like a true resolution. The hard sound of the *Ru* in *Runnin'*, which contrasts with the soft vowels and consonants of the rest of the stanza, and the two beats of the final line, which oppose the three-beat lines throughout, give this line still further emphasis. With his creative patterning of vernacular speech, Brown thus makes his stanza act out the emotion of his speaker—his tenderness and delicacy in the first lines and, in the last, the sheer force of his hope and determination.

In "Southern Road," Brown abstracts the rhythms of a work song to make it slightly more regular and so to emphasize the grinding, repetitive nature of the chain gang. In the following stanza he brilliantly compresses the tragicomic awareness of their situation through which the chain gang's men, society's lowest of the low, endure and so transcend it:

*White man tells me—hunh—  
Damn yo' soul;  
White man tells me—hunh—  
Damn yo' soul;  
Got no need, bebbby,  
To be tole.*

Few poets in the African American tradition have approached Brown's level of vision and accomplishment, and no poet has been so overlooked. Brown received no awards for his poetry, though other, more immediately accessible black poets were feted in this time; and his third book, *No Hiding Place*, did not find a publisher until it was included in his *Collected Poems*.

This dismissal of Brown by the white publishing establishment, white critics, and even black critics, goes to the heart of the problem of the African American literary tradition and, beyond that, to

the problem of the color line itself. In his book of essays *Goin' to the Territory*, Ralph Ellison described a situation of the kind that Brown attempted in his work to encompass. Ellison wrote of a group of speakers from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964:

To the facile eye, one of the men who talked there might well have been mistaken for the Sambo stereotype. He was southern, rural; his speech was heavily idiomatic, his tempo slow. A number of his surface characteristics seemed to support the stereotype. But had you accepted him as an incarnation of Sambo, you would have missed a very courageous man—a man who understood only too well that his activities in aiding and protecting the young Northern students working in the Freedom Movement placed his life in constant contact with death, but continued to act. Now, I'm not going to reject that man because some misinformed person, some prejudiced person, sees him as the embodiment of Uncle Tom or Sambo.

Brown's life's work was to hold up the face of this man and make us look behind it. He aimed to take his reader through the looking glass in a sense—into that part of society that "society" has defined itself against. His work was dismissed because the face he held up *is* in fact a looking glass: to see that face accurately we would first have to see ourselves, to see those things about ourselves and the country we have made that we still, even at this late date, do not like to see. The problem of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party worker's identity is the problem of *our* identity; the centuries-long struggle for identity of African Americans in this country is not just a *part* of who we are, it *is* who we are. Ellison concluded his paragraph: "What's inside you, brother; what's your heart like? What are your real values? What human qualities are hidden beneath your idiom?"



Language has an essential role in the life of the United States; more than a tool for communication, it is the very stuff out of which the nation is made. From the simultaneous promise and betrayal of the founding documents—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that

all men are created equal" on the one hand, to "three-fifths of all other persons" on the other—what Americans have dared to dream, and say, has had a way of coming true. African Americans have pulled America with them from the latter quotation toward the promise of the former in their long journey, in Ellison's stretching, modifying, and expanding of the American tongue beyond its first intentions.

As a nation we have regularly fallen asleep in the comfortable notion that we have reached the promised land, only like Jay Gatsby to be jarred awake by tragedy—John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the *Challenger* and *Columbine*—to the reality that somewhere in our constant rush forward we have lost our bearings, things are not as we thought they were.

This existential void is the space in which African Americans have been forced to live; shut out of society, they have been forced to hear the invisible echoes, the tonalities above and below our rhetoric. And they have developed cultural strategies, most notably the blues with its tragicomic vision, to teach themselves and by extension all Americans to survive and endure. From the jazz age of the 1920s to the beat 1950s, the politically torn 1960s and '70s, and the turbulent youth culture of today, the American mainstream has turned to black cultural forms to voice its heartache and discontent as well as its hopes and ambitions. The African American poetic tradition has borne witness to that space just out of sight that is the web of personal, social, and biological realities that in the end circumscribes us all—lamenting and celebrating what the poet Cornelius Eady has termed "this/Rent party above the/Slaughter-house."

Torn from a past we have already forgotten and hurtling through the unknown world to an uncertain future, the heroes of American myth have all been "poor wayfaring strangers"—Hawkeye, Ishmael, Huckleberry Finn, the Invisible Man, and Shane. African American poets—Wheatley, Dunbar, Brown, Hayden, Brooks, Dove, and hundreds of others—have been on this same quest, the quest that is the true theme of American literature:

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
Long ways from home, long ways from home,  
True believer far from home.*

It is our hope that this book may help to carry that quest forward, doing honor to those who have gone on, encouraging those who read and those who write in the present day, and preserving one piece of our cultural heritage and promise for those Americans to come.

Michael S. Harper  
Anthony Walton  
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