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Sterling Brown: A Living Legend

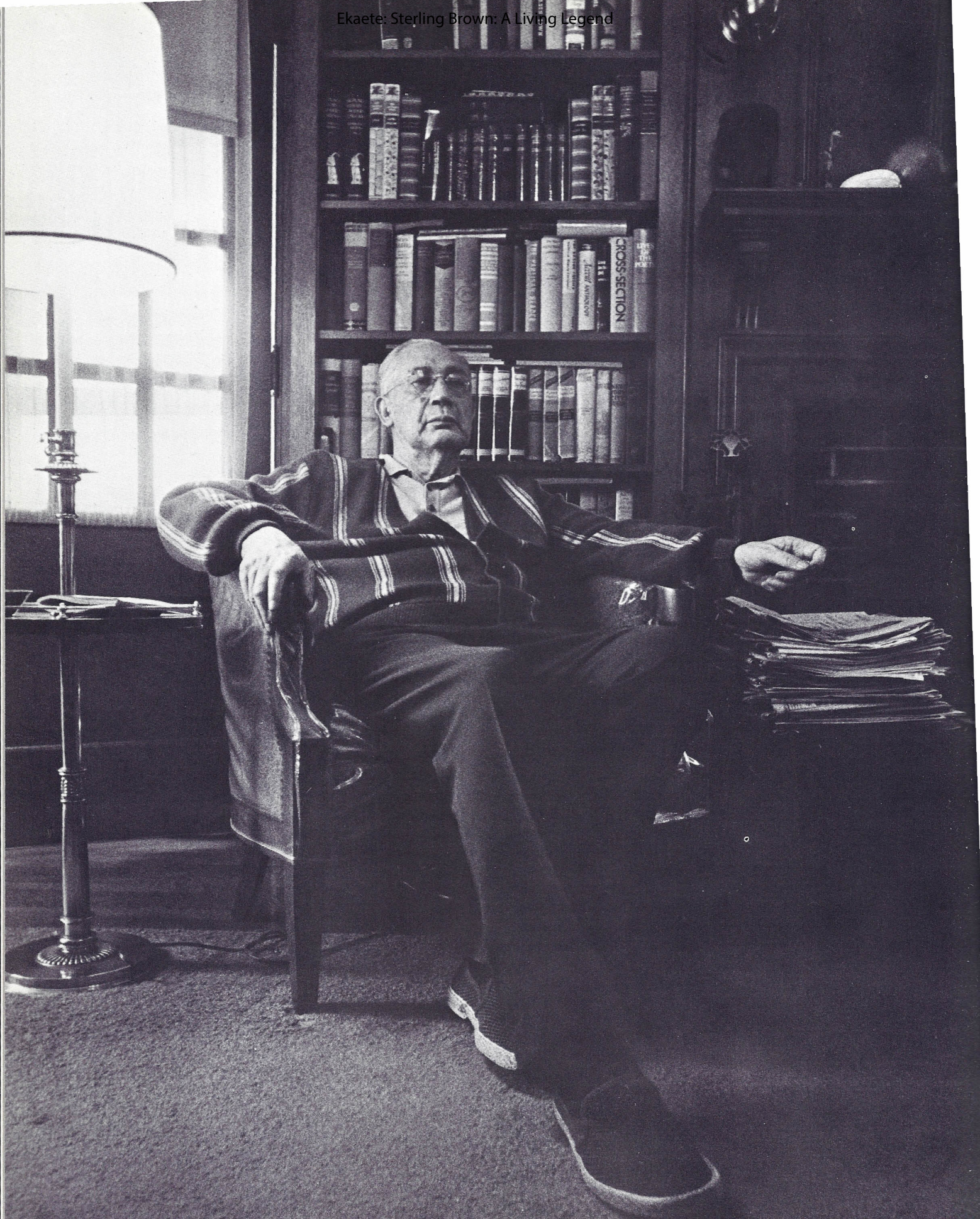
Genevieve Ekaete

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Sterling Brown

By Genevieve Ekaete

His tie is hanging loosely around his neck, his fingers popping to the tune of the music, as he taps his feet to the rhythm. Standing six-feet tall, his trim and sturdy form belies his 72 years.

The scene is in a basement classroom in Howard University's School of Social Work Building. The man is Sterling Allen Brown, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English and a poet, who came out of retirement to teach this course—"Seminar in Afro-American Culture."

The class consists of graduate and undergraduate students in the University's Institute for the Arts and the Humanities, and the Afro-American Studies Department. There is also a generous sprinkling of instructors and professors who are here to learn first-hand from the living great poet.

The class started off with Sterling Brown asking each student to give one or two aphorisms. They were circulating such maxims as "Soon won, soon lost," even as news of Vice President Agnew's resignation reached the class.

Before moving on to poetry-reading, Sterling Brown left the class with a tough aphorism to figure out: "Why does he hate me so? I never did him any favors."

He interrupted the poetry reading to offer purist orders: "Never use 'unique' or 'more or less' in my class. Anyone who does must go, more or less." To further drive home his point, he gave another illustration: "I am a millionaire, more or less. I have three dollars."

After the poetry-reading, when Sterling Brown played spirituals—which he later discussed—many moved close to the stereo set. Some were standing, tapping their feet and swaying to the music of Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes, as was their teacher.

Sterling Brown is much the same man at home—genial, talkative, vivacious, generous and hospitable. He puts one at ease very quickly. And his effervescence tends to spill over, as does his infectious humor.

"My legacy is my students"

As a youth, Sterling Brown went to the public schools of Washington, D. C. At Williams College, a predominantly white school in Massachusetts, he remembers being "a token Negro," a role he did not relish. He got a Master's degree in English literature from Harvard.

Sterling Brown surfaced nationally in the 30's as a notable poet. But only recently have his major works been republished. In 1973, *The Reader's Companion to World Literature* to which he contributed materials was reprinted, while the Howard University Press is in the process of reprinting *Southern Road*, his first book of poems which was published in 1932. And he plans to publish soon an original book of poems he wrote four decades ago. In recognition of his contribution to the arts, three universities, including Howard, have awarded Sterling Brown honorary doctorate degrees in the past three years.

Is this professional apogee at age 72? Is it that Sterling Brown reaches a peak every 30 or so years? Or, could it be that we are only belatedly discovering him anew? Brown's assessment is mind-boggling: "My production as a poet is a modest one. I'm not important as a poet. I am not an important American poet."

But he likes all the poems he has written. "Every one of them." He calls them his "babies," says he believes some are not as good as others, but won't say which. "I'd be a fool to tell you that."

His teaching is his greatest source of pride. "I've taught some damn good students and I'm teaching you now," he says to me. "My legacy is my students," he reiterates.

Sterling Brown's longest association—except with his wife—is with Howard University where he taught for 40 years (one year longer than his father, the late Sterling Nelson Brown) before retiring in 1969. He returned to Howard to teach again in the fall of '73. He says he has noticed some remarkable changes on the campus.

6 "I am very proud of these young students who are themselves. They are not being white. The pride and the loss of shame in being Negro is excellent." He chides some students, though, for spending far too much time on trivia—like "spending hours on flicking a corn-row," insisting on wearing danshikis and Afros. Thus Sterling Brown fails to recognize that the cumulative sum of these "trivia" has immeasurably reinforced the new sense of Black pride.

Recent "return to Africa" talks fall into Sterling Brown's "unproductive" category. He doubts that they are even sincere. "A lot of the talk is rhetoric. They are not going to Africa. They are not going to leave their Cadillacs. I have many friends who have been to Africa and have never been outside of a big city. They might as well be in Chicago. Some go over there and drink good liquor and have a ball. I don't call that saving the Motherland. I call that having a ball of your own." On second thought, he adds, "but I would rather have them talk about Africa and say they are going back than ignore and be ignorant of Africa as they once were."

He then goes on to sound a familiar note—that Howard, indeed all Black colleges—is in trouble. That shouldn't be, he argues. "The Black college is essential." And he uses Howard to illustrate: "The lack of money is hurting Howard. No white man at Williams (College) had to give to the white students what we at Howard have to give to many of our students. And that is an understanding of where they are, where they came from and where they've got to go. And we give extra. I have given extra. That's the reason I am not a writer of more books, because I gave my creative energy to the classroom, and to conferences and to people coming to this house and sitting down. And they have so stated." But Sterling Brown does not despair. He believes the "shrewd politicians" in the Congressional Black Caucus will "come up with something" to save Black colleges.





“... to the American white man, every Negro is radical ...”

“I am a radical,” declares Sterling Brown, moving to a favorite subject. Radical? But how?

Well, he voted for George McGovern in November of '72. “I still would vote for McGovern though I knew he wasn't going to win. I had to vote my conviction.” But that, in my opinion, is as far as his radicalism goes—at least when measured by today's standards. For, even as Sterling Brown himself explains: “I always say that to the American white man, every Negro is a radical who has been to the sixth grade and is against lynching. I have been to the seventh grade and I'm against a whole lot more than lynching.”

Sterling Brown is an unabashed integrationist. And his definition of integration lends a certain respectability to that word, a word now much scorned by the Black left. “I fight the people in anthropology because they tell me integration is assimilation.” He disagrees very strongly. “When a whole man can come into this society with his music and his preferences and be accepted, then he's integrated. That is rough. Assimilation is easier.” Assimilation, presumably, would mean submerging one's personality and preferences under pressure from the popular or predominant culture.

“I believe in Roy Wilkins. I'm a strong NAACP man, a life member. I believe Roy Wilkins is one of the best leaders we've had, though I know that civil rights is not enough. I mean eating a hamburger in a joint is not enough. There's a great deal more. But it doesn't come from talking and shouting.”

Sterling Allen Brown, despite his modesty and his protracted teaching career, is widely recognized as a man of letters of great stature. He may not have written a library of books, but neither has Ralph Ellison, his contemporary, who is, nevertheless, duly recognized. So, even as

Brown is quick to say for the record that he is not a major American poet, just as quickly do others refute that assertion. And the latter base their ascription of creative genius to Sterling Brown on many of his works which have earned him the label of folklorist.

His gripping poems are vivid and realistic portrayals of the “common folks” as they live, love, work and die. And they possess a certain immortality.

A poem like “Odyssey of Big Boy” portrays the roving and restive Black man who wanders from job to job and woman to woman. Big Boy is the first to admit:

*Done took my livin' as it came,
Done grabbed my job, done risked my
life;
Train done caught me on de trestle,
Man done caught me wid his wife,*

Another character, this time in “Long Gone,” goes even further to admit—with a note of desperation—that he is controlled by forces beyond his power, an assertion Blacks are still making today.

“No livin' woman got de right to do no man dat way.”

In “Georgie Grimes,” Sterling Brown paints a moving and familiar portrait of a sad phenomenon—Blacks killing Blacks. Georgie, after a hot exchange with his lover, which led to his fatally stabbing her, leaves town—never to return—muttering over and over again: “No livin' woman got de right/To do no man dat way.”

In “Slim Greer,” we encounter the flamboyant Black man who is only recently getting national attention for his extravagant outfits. He is much like the Brother you encounter on the city streets laying on you a well-rehearsed line, “Hi beautiful Sister, what you're doing tonight?”

Slim Greer is fast talking and serves his listeners with tall tales. He tells, for example, how in Arkansas he passed for white, while we are told that “. . . he not lighter/Than a dark midnight.” Sterling Brown, through Greer, ridicules Jim Crow laws,

8 much as did James Weldon Johnson in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

Not left out is the familiar portrait of Blacks drowning their misery in songs. In "Ma Rainey," the audience roars its approval and urges the woman to:

*Git way inside us,
Keep us strong*

*...
Sing us 'bout de hard luck
Roun' our do';
Sing us 'bout de lonesome road
We mus' go . . ."*

Then there is the superstition and pathetic fallacy, as a member of the audience explains: once after Ma Rainey had sung a sad song, it rained, thundered, stormed and "lightened."

All these poems were published in 1932, but the conditions they describe are as true of then as now. How does Sterling Brown do it? How does he capture the soul of these people and portray them with stark nakedness, utmost potency and in vivid, living color?

As he tells it, "I was kind of like a sponge. Today you get a tape recorder, but back then all you had was to put it down fast. You would hear a wonderful expression and run out and jot it down."

He mingled with the folks who crossed his path. Some were his students, some parents of students, and friends of his students. Others, he deliberately sought out.

While Sterling Brown confesses his unabashed admiration for folk speech, he claims he never knowingly idealizes or distorts the images of the folks. "I tried to give their portraits in a manner constant with them." And with the good ear he has, he did just that.

A recent incident best portrays Sterling Brown at work. The scene was a hospital ward where he was admitted in 1973 for a minor operation. His subject, he describes as a "tough guy, a truck driver or something, a big, huge, mustachioed Black man" whom he admits "wouldn't have any parts of me out on the street." Despite the

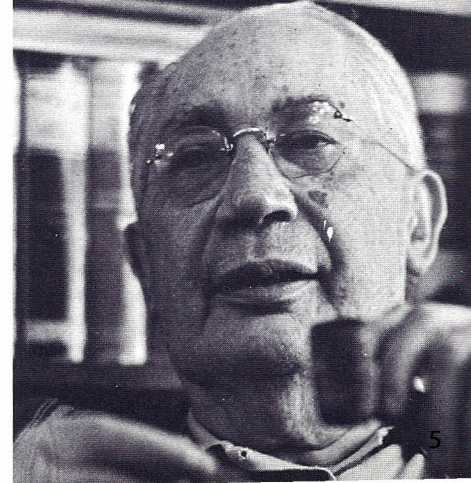
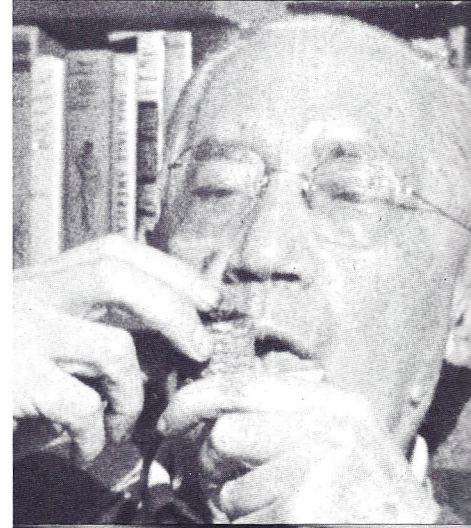
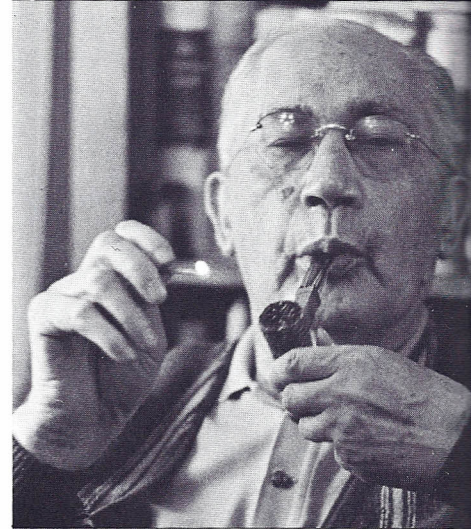
them, they became buddies. "This buddy of mine would walk into the room in that hospital night gown. We would sit down and talk. I don't need but five minutes to find something he's interested in," boasts Sterling Brown. "He's interested in the Redskins [Washington]. I'm interested in the Redskins."

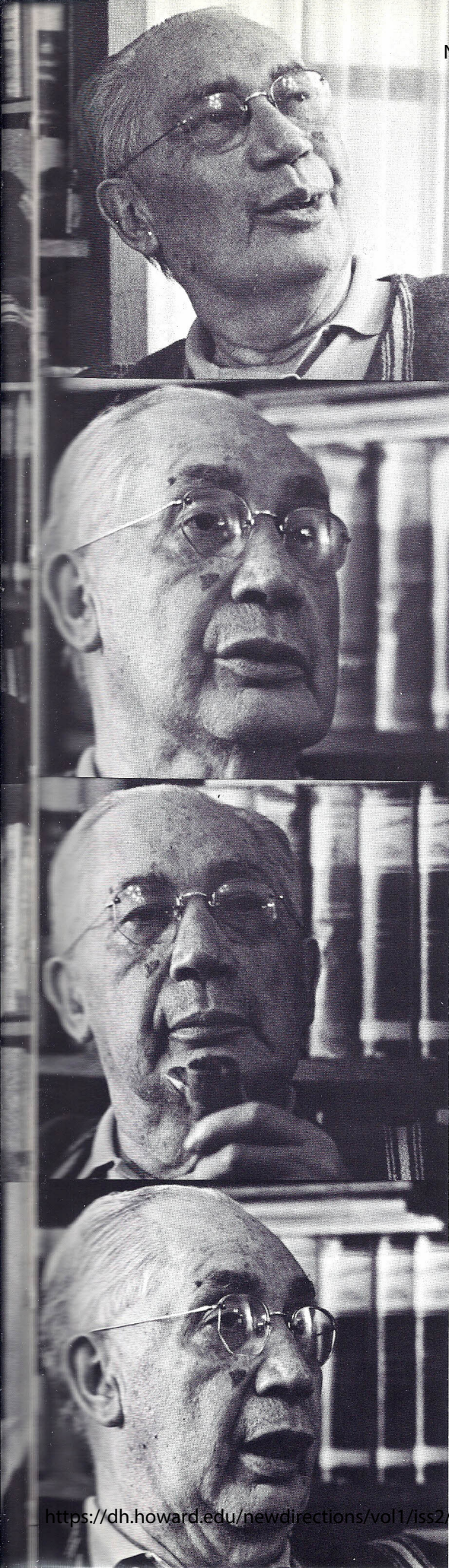
"... when Carl Sandburg said 'yes' to the American people, I wanted to say 'yes' to my people."

"I'm like Chaucer," he goes on to elaborate. "Chaucer got in with everybody—crooks, priests, non-priests. Someone would tell Chaucer a bunch of lies and Chaucer would say, 'And I said his opinion was good.' Now, it's an awful opinion and Chaucer was a wise man. To keep this cat talking, he said, 'And, I said his opinion was good.' That is me," says Sterling Brown, as he brings us back to the heart of our subject. 'I am a yes-man. To get this guy talking, I'll agree that today is Sunday and that the month is March.' (The day is actually Thursday and the month is October.) Then he quickly trails a caution: "Not too blatantly, now. Because then he'll suspect something." He adds, almost as an afterthought, "But I don't jot him down in malice. In most of my poems, I'm with the guy. I am he for the time."

What motivates a middle-class Black man and a Harvard graduate—son of a distinguished minister and professor at Howard's School of Religion—to devote his life to portraying less well-to-do folks?

Being Black is the key. (Or, Negro, as Sterling Brown would rather say it.) According to him, he was indignant at the corrupted folk speech publicized by "white comic writers like Octavus Roy Cohen." From his experience, Brown says, he knew his people didn't talk that way. It wasn't enough for him to enjoy them to "Stop knowing it all!" He had to bring





his people down on black and white to counter the proliferating distortions from other sources. And this he did a little later on the road to becoming a great poet.

Earlier, much earlier on that road, Sterling Brown recalls, "I didn't consciously choose to become a poet. I loved poems and started writing typical English literature poems—love and death, the useful poems. But when I started teaching, I read the new realistic poetry in American life." He read Robert Frost's handling of the ordinary people of New Hampshire. He read Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg. Reflecting now, he says, "their democratic approach to the people was certainly in line with my thinking. And when Carl Sandburg said 'yes' to the American people, I wanted to say 'yes' to my people."

"The railroad was a symbol of escape for the Black man and for me."

Sterling Brown also likes to say, "My influence is the blues, the spirituals, my wife, my friends. And I am blessed with friends." And the list continues, as he adds folk people he has met who, though he was their teacher, taught him things he never could have learned from books.

Take Big Boy Davis, for example. Sterling Brown fondly remembers him as a "folk artist, a wandering guitar player." He taught Sterling Brown about Stagolee and John Henry, folk-heroic characters he later immortalized in his poems. "He had a tremendous memory and a lot of wit. But he could not read and write." Big Boy taught Sterling Brown railroad songs, and railroads figure prominently in his poems.

In poem after poem, trains are mentioned. In "Long Gone," the main character itches to ride on the train. Big Jess in "Break of Day" worked for the railroad and had his cabin "Longside the tracks." That is precisely the point Sterling Brown was trying to make. With a little prodding,

he makes it perfectly clear: "The railroad was a symbol of escape for the Black man and for me. It was an escape from the boredom of life. And if you see what they (Blacks) were escaping from you can understand. Others jump in a car and go *but* the Black man has to hit it on the railroad. It was also the chance for a job."

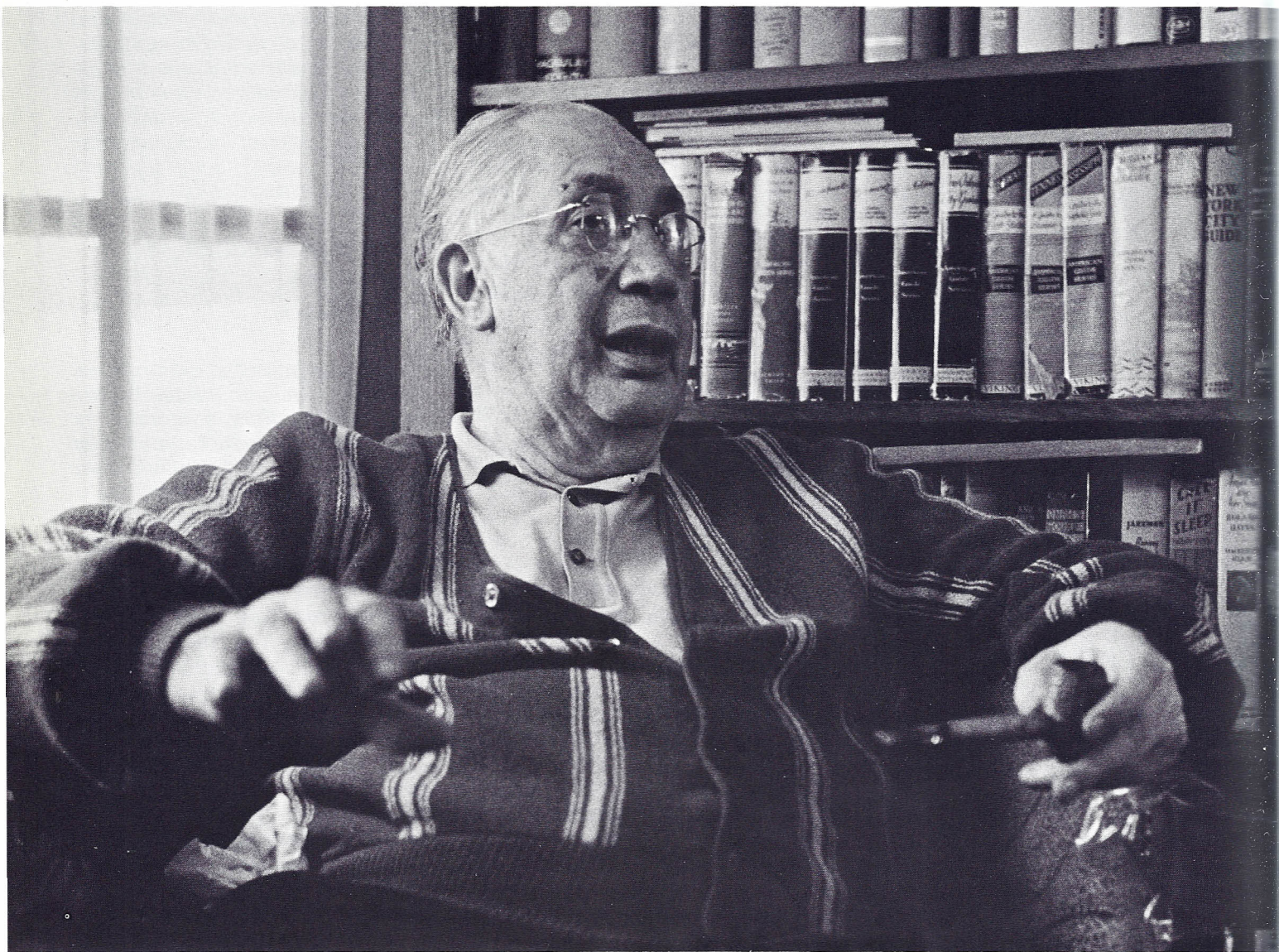
"I have no relationship to any Harlem Renaissance."

Sterling Brown dodges questions like: How does our men's restiveness affect our family life? by striking a modest pose: "I'm not too good on philosophy and the big words. I am neither didactic nor philosophical nor profound. I don't deal in generalizations. I deal in specifics." In the same spirit, he declines to advise other artists. "A writer is a privileged person but no duty is enjoined upon him. So, be free as the bird."

On the other hand, there are subjects he will discuss endlessly. Some that seem to make his blood boil and rush a generous supply to redden his face. One such subject is the Harlem Renaissance of the early 20's. He disclaims any association with it. "I have no relationship to any Harlem Renaissance. When they (the luminaries of that era) were down there flirting with Carl Van Vechten, I was down south talking to Big Boy. One of the most conceited things that I can say is I am proud that I have never shaken that rascal's hand."

Van Vechten, author of *Nigger Heaven*, has generally been recognized as the father and patron of the Harlem Renaissance. Sterling Brown says, not so. "He corrupted the Harlem Renaissance and was a terrible influence on them. He was a voyeur. He was looking at these Negroes and they were acting the fools for him. And the foolisher they acted, the more he recorded them."

Another thing that gets Sterling Brown almost as angry is any suggestion that the



term "Negro" be shelved for the more fashionable "Black."

Defiantly, he intones endlessly, "I am not going to be forced into using the term 'Black.' I am a Negro, as DuBois was a Negro, as Dunbar was a Negro, as Paul Robeson was a Negro, as Langston Hughes was a Negro, as Countee Cullen, as James Weldon Johnson, as Mordecai Johnson. As they are proud to be called Negro, I am proud to be called Negro. I am going to say 'Negro' as long as I am a Negro. And I am going to be a Negro until the day I die."

Then he recalls how ironic it all seems now; for not so long ago "when you used the word 'black' you got your head beat off. Just as when they called me 'yellow' I beat their head off. What is good about 'Black' now is that no longer is it a term of contempt."

He believes the new hair-styles, dan-shikis and the term "Black" are trivia, "the flicker and not the flame." And Sterling Brown speaks from bitter experience. He has suffered from the currents of change. As a child, he grew up when the predominant consensus was "White is Right." As an old man, he is living through "Black is Beautiful." Light-complexioned, Sterling Brown himself admits that "When I have my hat on, they can't tell I am a Negro." This has several times put him through emotional pain and incidents he describes as "grotesque."

Take one incident of three or four decades back. He took a cab in Atlanta driven by a Black man. His destination—a white section of town where he was to meet some white friends who were working on the Federal Writers' Project. When he told the driver where he was going, the driver said: "Don't no niggers live out there."

"I know they don't. But I've been invited," Brown assured him. "Would you take me there?"

"I can't if you're white," came the curt response.

Sterling Brown's retort of "I'm not white, you know damn well I'm not white," set the driver off to an exploration

He pulled out his flash light and examined Sterling Brown closely. Fortunately, he didn't have on a hat to obstruct the driver's scrutiny. The driver deliberately examined his passenger's hairline.

"The hairline, the hair, is the give-away, not the complexion," explains Sterling Brown, giving me my first lesson in the methodology for race identification. But the driver was obviously not satisfied with what he saw. He stopped at the back door of a big club and called two waitresses and a cook to come out and look at Sterling Brown to find out whether he was "colored or not."

When they got to Sterling Brown's destination, the driver dropped him a hundred yards from the door, leaving his flash to follow Sterling Brown all the way to the door.

Looking back, Sterling Brown says, "All this builds up a hesitancy on your part. You don't know which way to move. It builds up a consciousness of absurdity that you can't overcome with reason."

His wife, Daisy, also has a story to tell about the color schism which is still with us.

Four years ago at a night dedicated in honor of Sterling Brown at Howard, she was not allowed into the room where her husband was to read his poems. Neither was *he* for a while. Both of them were taken for white. As Mrs. Brown tells it, she was not allowed into the room until one Courtland Cox, whom she describes as "tall and black and bearded" sensed what was happening, came over and put his arms around her. Everything became all right, temporarily, and she heaved a sigh of relief and said: "Thank God for you Courtland."

But the relief was not enduring. Once inside, "they were just staring at us." "Not only staring, just glaring," her husband corrects.

"We passed a girl and she said, 'Is she Black?'" Mrs. Brown continues, "I've been Black, if you want to use the term, (She uses "Black" reluctantly, almost apologetically) seventy years and more. And to

have these kids say that, it hurt. I can't help it if my skin is white, but it hurt. I said I wished Ossie Davis would turn up." Ossie Davis was in the room. As if he had read her mind, he came over. "He came and hugged us. And I said, 'Thank God for Ossie.'"

"Any glorification of Black that brings about cruelty is bad."

"Any glorification of Black that brings about cruelty is bad," Sterling Brown says wisely, as his wife of 47 years who obviously was shaken by what happened four years ago, looks on. Mrs. Brown is petite and light-complexioned, with a full head of gray hair which can easily be taken for blonde.

Fair skin and all, Sterling Brown says he never had any identity problem. He always knew he was Black. To those who have told him that they didn't know for a while that they were Black (or Negro)—and many have—he responded with characteristic, and sometimes stinging, wit: "Didn't you have any mirror in your house?" □