

4-1-1981

Book Reviews: The Collected Poems Of Sterling Brown

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Recommended Citation

Henderson, Stephen E. (1981) "Book Reviews: The Collected Poems Of Sterling Brown," *New Directions*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 14.

Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol8/iss3/14>

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deals with the underlying social reality in softened but concrete manner. Employing social commentary as a theme, he attacks the American society that puts profits before people. Example, in a dialogue of the three characters, Newbolt, Law and Mary Carson in "Natalie Mann":

Newbolt

...but don't you think there are more immediate problems which we ought to clear up first, before going so far afield? Lynching and Jim-crowism, for example?

Mary Carson

They are the outgrowth of materialism, my dear, and will die out of their own accord when it does.

Newbolt

But in the meantime, hundreds are being brutally butchered, and millions made to suffer the injustices of segregation.

Law

Besides, how are you going to combat this materialism that you speak of unless you go for its concrete manifestations?

Mary Carson

Thought, Mr. Law, is the ruling power of the world. Beautiful thoughts will supplant evil ones. They will reshape the whole contour of the world.

In "The Sacred Factory," an expressionistic drama, Toomer deals with his spectacle of humanity's disintegration. He severely castigates the spiritual disintegration of America. The play evokes the emotional and spiritual quality of man.

In his aphorisms and maxims, Toomer's religious and mystical views are felt. Here, he transforms his personal experiences and the wisdom he gained from the philosopher George Gurdjieff into universally meaningful criticisms of life. The writings in this section also reflect Toomer's departure from literary

creativity to philosophy, psychology, and spiritual reforms. His prevailing themes are human nature and human values.

Nature is natural. Human nature, by nature, is all right. It is the acquired or false "nature" of men that is all wrong.

Therefore our aim must be, . . . to remove whatever is obstructing our normal development.

Change human nature? Not at all. Get rid of obstructions and cultivate human nature.

In the "Editor's Note" of the drama section, Darwin Turner praises Toomer. "Most of Toomer's white contemporaries who wrote serious dramas about black protagonists, such as Edward Sheldon, 'The Nigger' (1909), Eugene O'Neill 'The Emperor Jones' (1920) and even Ridgely Torrence 'Three Plays for a Negro Theater' (1917) evaded criticizing America's treatment of its black citizens," Turner notes. "Toomer attacked white America for judging blacks according to spurious standards of morality and art, repressing black artists, and exploiting black women."

It is often difficult to discern where the real Toomer begins and where the fictitious Toomer ends. As Turner well notes, Toomer appears as "a delightful personality—candid, self-assured, persuasive, witty, poetic, and informative." Based on Toomer's presentation of his own values, readers sense him to be a reconciler, unifier, humanist and universalist. Whether or not he truly practiced his preaching in real life has yet to be answered.

Darwin Turner has made a solid contribution to the literary world by editing and shaping the works of this literary figure.

It is evident that despite his insistence on "racelessness," Toomer was troubled by an audience not receptive to his

philosophy. Though his development of the concept of "racelessness" was theoretically and philosophically viable, it could not be realized in a society which for 300 years had emphasized the separation of whites from non-whites.

Toomer's penchant for conjuring an idyllic "American race" may have touched the emotions of many, but for others, it constitutes a painful deception that denied their past suffering. □

The reviewer is a poet who is currently studying for a doctorate in the English Department, Howard University.

The Collected Poems Of Sterling Brown

Edited by Michael S. Harper
Harper and Row, New York
257 pp., \$12.95

Reviewed by
Stephen E. Henderson

At long last we have, in *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, a representative collection of the poet's work in a single accessible volume. Those of us who have read his poems over the years and who have heard his dynamic readings tend somehow to forget that Sterling Brown's 1932 classic, *Southern Road*, had been out of print for years before it was reissued in 1975. We tend to forget, too, that many of the poet's more familiar poems are not included in *Southern Road*—poems such as "Old Lem" and "Remembering Nat Turner." These are scattered through a wide variety of publications, textbooks and anthologies, some now out of print and accessible only to the dedicated student.

The Last Ride of Wild Bill, a brilliant mock heroic work did not appear in print until 1975, when it was published by Broadside Press along with 11

28 other narrative poems. Although most readers might have heard of Brown's other unpublished work, they were unaware how diverse and good this work was. A surprise of pleasant nature awaits them in this latest collection. Even the dedicated students will find something new, not only in the individual poems but in the sense that they create of an expanded gallery of Brownian portraits and an increased awareness of the poet's range and skill. They will find that the poet's interest in folk heroes and folkways extends to West Indians in New York as well as to Creoles and Cajuns in Louisiana.

They will find poems that are political in the populist spirit of Carl Sandburg, Langston Hughes and Frank Marshall Davis. In "The New Congo," for example, they will find a scathing satire on the pretension and hypocrisy of the race leaders who exploit the masses. The scene is familiar, the language fresh, the portrayal devastating. And, at the same time Brown exposes the hypocrisy in the real world, he demolishes the racial stereotypes of the songwriters, and the poets like Vachel Lindsay:

*Suave big jigs in a conference room,
Big job jigs, with their jobs unstable,
Sweated and fumed and trembled
'round the table
Trembled 'round the table
Sat around as gloomy as the
watchers of a tomb
Tapped upon the table
Boom, Boom, Boom.*

As usual, the masses are realistically portrayed, as in two light-hearted satires on the Marcus Garvey movement, "Negro Improvement League" and "The Temple." In the first poem, the narrator wonders at the ostentation of a Harlem parade. Then the real meaning of racial advancement dawns on him:

*For who was there but Gwendolyn
With a frock she looked quite
stunning in
And a brand new hat, near worthy of
Her impudent brown face

Her rougish shoulders, and her neat
And pretty legs, and naughty feet
In patent leather slippers, all
Were really quite too bad

Progressive Ethiopians,
Societies for Race Advance,
Should go down on their knees, and
thank
Her mother and her dad.*

The Collected Poems, edited by fellow poet Michael S. Harper of Brown University, is the fifth in the National Poetry Series for 1980. It is indispensable to anyone interested in the diversity of American poetry.

The poems in this collection are divided into eight parts, with each giving the reader more than a glimpse of the richness of Brown's creative thought.

Part One, "Harlem Stopover," reveals talent not generally known before. "Negro Improvement League," for instance, is not only a delightful satire but a skillful exercise in versification. "The Temple" is an interesting rendering of West Indian folk speech. "Roberta Lee" will remind readers of the familiar "Cabaret," a small masterpiece in *Southern Road*.

Part Two, "The Cotton South," contains five poems, including the famous "Old Lem" and "Sharecroppers," a heroic tale of union organizing.

Part Three, "Down in Atlanta," contains six poems including the quietly powerful "An Old Woman Remembers." What the woman remembers is the race riot of 1906, and she recounts the brutality heaped upon Black folks. Black folks fighting back, leaving their

jobs, their drinking, and even their praying.

*All came back home—they had been
too long away—
A lot of visitors had been looking for
them.
They sat on their front stoops and in
their yards,
Not talking much, but ready; their
welcome ready:
Their shotguns oiled and loaded on
their knees.*

*"And then
There wasn't any riot any more."*

Part Four, "Rocks Cried Out," contains one of Brown's finest poems, "Remembering Nat Turner," and other previously unpublished work of which two should be mentioned. "Memo: For the Race Orators," which treats the theme of betrayal and "Call for Barnum," a chilling study of the lyncher as an entrepreneur. For an appreciation of the power of the latter poem, one should compare it with poems on lynching by Richard Wright, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay.

Part Five, "Road to the Left," identifies Brown with the proletariat themes of the 1930s and with the progressive writers of the period. A collection of vignettes entitled "Side By Side" is modelled on *The Spoon River Anthology* of Edgar Lee Masters and addresses the separation and exploitation of Blacks and poor whites. The theme appears in *Southern Road* also but is concentrated here and provides an important glimpse of the poet's feelings and political thought.

Part Six, "Frilot Cove," contains poems written about the Creoles and the Cajuns. Among the more striking studies are the moving tragedy of "Let Us Suppose," the pathos of "Cloteel," the heroism and the folklore of "Parish Doctor," the quiet drama of "Uncle

Joe," and the romantic sentiment of "Louisiana Pastoral."

Part Seven, "Washington, D. C.," consists of a previously unpublished poem and others that are not generally accessible, including the technically accomplished "Puttin' on Dog," with its infectious dance rhythms.

Part Eight, "Remembrances," is a group of romantic lyrics ranging in style from formal love lyrics and nature poems to the love song "Isaiah to Mandy" and one of the poet's best known blues, "Long Track Blues."

Despite some important omissions and a few textual errors, this volume goes a long way toward giving the reader a comprehensive look at the poetry of Sterling Brown, professor emeritus at Howard University.

The reviewer is director of the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities at Howard University, and author of "Understanding the New Black Poetry."

The Salt Eaters

By Toni Cade Bambara
Random House, New York
295 pp., \$9.95

Reviewed by Harriet Jackson Scarupa

"I need another sixties. The energy of the seventies just don't do me nuthin." So says one character in "Broken Field Running," a short story in Toni Cade Bambara's collection, "The Sea Birds Are Still Alive."

Through this collection and her previous one, "Gorilla, My Love," Bambara has earned a reputation as one of our premiere writers of short stories, stories that have been likened (by Mari Evans) to "shavins off our Black experience—like chocolate. Bittersweet, that is."

In her first novel, "The Salt Eaters," Bambara takes some of the themes she has explored in her short stories—e.g.

the contrast between '60s activism and '70s narcissism—and weaves an intricate poetic mesh. The result is at times perplexing, at times exhilarating, but never boring.

The novel opens with a demanding question: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" It is a question posed by Minnie Ransom "in her flouncy dress and hip shoes with flowers peeking out of her turban and smelling like coconut Afro spray." Minnie is a healer, "the real thing," for she is "known to calm fretful babies with a smile or a pinch of the thigh, known to cool out nervous wives who bled all the time and couldn't stand still, known to dissolve hard lumps in the body that the doctors in the county hospital called cancers."

Right now Minnie holds center stage in a room in the Southwest Community Infirmary in a southern town called Claybourne. Before her, on a stool, sits one Velma Henry, a radical community worker who has succumbed to despair. Velma had worn her identities like a string of cowrie beads: activist, nationalist, feminist, environmentalist, wife, mother, daughter, goddaughter, sister, friend, neighbor. . . . But now she has added another bead to her string of identities: attempted suicide. Which is why she is now sitting in the Southwest Community Infirmary, hospital gown covering her body, expression frozen on her face, and listening to Minnie as she demands: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" And again: "Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well."

Bambara never tells us *exactly* what led Velma to seek the final solution through slashed wrists and gassed lungs. Instead, she suggests, implies, assumes, hints, evokes, juxtaposing the *pas de deux* of Minnie and Velma in

the healing room against bits and pieces of Velma's life and of those who are connected to it and against snippets of myths that speak of our heritage.

Bambara's is not the tale of one particular woman's neurosis—in the manner of so many of the "women's books" being penned these days. Hers is the tale of all who are committed, still, to making the world a better place at a time when such sentiment almost seems anachronistic and of all those who tend to put everyone else's needs before their own. Does Velma's mental collapse indicate her selfishness, her surrender to self-centeredness? Perhaps. But one of her friends offers another explanation: "Velma's never been the center of her own life before."

Just as she has in her short stories, Bambara proves oh-so-adept at striking the chords of our common experience. To put everyone's life before one's own seems that special weakness of women, especially Black women. To seek escape from relentless pressures in sickness—whether mental or physical—is a temptation we've all experienced. To live amidst decaying ghettos and poisoned air, to watch former "revolutionaries" fritter away their time in "id ego illogical debates" [Bambara's words], to repeatedly confront racism and sexism and militarism and all the other destructive isms, to simply pick up a newspaper with its monotony of horrors, to do all this and more and still manage to hold onto hope—and one's sanity—is no mean feat. Or as the inimitable Minnie puts it, "wholeness is no trifling matter."

Bambara challenges us to confront this reality and then, through Minnie, she throws a second challenge our way: "Decide what you want to do with wholeness."

And so, the chord is struck: wholeness is no trifling matter. Then, too, Bambara's is no trifling talent.