

## **Sterling A Brown, The Last of The Harlem Renaissance Greats: In Memoriam**

by

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Gone in the work of poet like Sterling Brown is the felt necessity to produce only recognizably standard forms.

What replaces this drive is an unashamed and bold dedication . . . to rendering the actual folk voice in its simple, performative eloquence. . . .

The indisputably modern moment in Afro-American discourse arrives, I believe, when the intellectual poet Brown, . . . gives forth the deformative sounds of Ma Rainey.

-Houston A. Baker, Jr., **Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance** (1987), p. 92-92.

Though Sterling A. Brown, who died early this month (February 7, 1989) at the age of 87 could not strictly speaking be considered to have been a member of the great constellation of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, writers and artists who were gathered together on and off in Harlem between 1925 (the date of the publication of *The New Negro* edited by Alain Locke, an anthology of writings, African-American and African art giving cultural expression to this particular historical moment) and 1929 (the Stock-Market crash indicating the deep crisis of monopoly capitalism), nonetheless, in many ways, the cultural determinants informing this first black literary movement of the twentieth-century, were also central in mapping the cultural and political geography of Brown's poetic imagination. The need to capture the transformation of a large segment of African-Americans from their position as agricultural and plantation workers in the South into industrial working class in the urban North, the reinstatement of Negro folk speech in poetic and literary languages, the denunciation of the oppression of black people and the modelling of poetic and literary figurations after the great blues music, so central to the literary project of the Harlem Renaissance poets (Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen), were also central to Brown's poetic sensibility.

That Sterling A. Brown occupies a pre-eminent position in African-American literary culture is attested to by the publication in 1979 of a huge anthology of African, African-American and West Indian writings dedicated to him. This anthology, *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, and Scholarship* (edited by Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto), has contributions ranging from Ralph Ellison through Toni Morrison to Alice

Walker, and from Chinua Achebe to Derek Walcott. In a Foreword to this anthology, the distinguished African-American historian, John Hope Franklin, designates Brown as the Dean of African-American letters interlinking the Harlem Renaissance and the present. Indeed, Sterling A. Brown was not only a great poet, but he was also a formidable scholar having taught at Howard University for approximately fifty-years. The publication in 1941 of *The Negro Caravan: Writing by American Negroes*, an anthology assembled by Brown (with assistance from Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee), was a literary event of the first order, in that this assemblage is one of the most comprehensive ever attempted to define the cultural geography of African-American literary culture. For instance, not only do Negro Spirituals march hand in hand in this caravan with the writings of Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. DuBois, among many others, but they are also accompanied by a remarkable essay, "The Negro Dance," by the major African-American dancer and choreographer, Katherine Dunham, attempting to interrelate and integrate to each other, at a conceptual level, the forms and structures of dancing in Africa, Haiti and North America.

The importance of Sterling A. Brown as a scholar, should not be seen as his having been a perceptive and comprehensive anthologist, for he was also a solid literary critic. His book of 1937, *The Negro in American Fiction*, established the critical credentials which enabled him to edit *The Negro Caravan*. Of particular interest in the former book, is Brown's evaluation and assessment of Paul Laurence Dunbar, his great predecessor and teacher in the incorporation of Negro folk speech, of whom he writes: "But Dunbar usually places hardships of Negro life in the city, as in 'Jimsella', with pastoral distrust of the city and faith in the rural virtue." Though Brown, in many ways, was a direct descendant of Paul Laurence Dunbar, the crucial difference between them was that the former's poetic voice was in tune with the Blues. The dividing historical moment is the mass movement in the early part of the twentieth-century of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North. That movement called forth a different poetic voice, the poetic voices of Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown.

From the moment of publication of his first book of poetry in 1932, *Southern Road*, a book in literary terms defining the end of the Harlem Renaissance, Sterling A. Brown has always been seen in relation to, and in contrast with, Langston Hughes. The first to interlink their names together was Alain Locke, perhaps the first major African-American literary critic, who in an essay of 1934, "Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk-Poet," written for Nancy Cunard's *Negro Anthology*, made the following pertinent distinction between them: "Then Langston Hughes came with his revelation of the emotional color of Negro life, and his brilliant discovery of the flow and rhythm of the modern and especially the city Negro, substituting this jazz figure and personality for the older

plantation stereotype . . . Sterling Brown, more reflective, a closer student of the folk-life, and above all a bolder and more detached observer, has gone deeper still, and had found certain basic, more sober and more persistent qualities of Negro thought and feeling; and so has reached a sort of common denominator between the old and the new Negro." In an Interview of 1973 with Stephen Henderson and Steven Jones, Brown confirms this proximity to Langston Hughes: "I wanted what Milton said about poetry. I wanted it to be simple, sensuous and impassioned, and I still stand by that. A lot of critics . . . don't think that there's a critical position behind what Langston and I were doing . . .". Though there was a singular unity in their literary projects, the difference in their poetic sensibilities was partly shaped by brown's embracing of Paul Laurence Dunbar, in contrast to Hughes' rejection of him, as was the case with practically all the Harlem Renaissance poets. Another reason for the difference, is Hughes's passion for Africa and Brown's sublime indifference.

Both Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown belonged to the international literary movement of Modernism. Whereas the former was in its expressionist wing, the latter was in its impressionist wing. What united them, was how to render their different poetic voices in the Blues form. In one of the poems, "New St. Louis Blues," consisting of three movements, and assembles in Southern Road , we find Sterling A. Brown singing the following:

Market Street woman have her hard times, oh my Lawd,  
Market Street woman have her hard times, oh my Lawd,  
Let her git hat she can git, 'fo dey lays her on de cooling board.  
Also the last poem in The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown ,

"Long Track Blues," coming from the book No Hiding Place , speaks for itself:

Red light in my block,  
Green light down the line;  
Lawdy, let yo' green light  
Shine down on that babe o' mine.

From this poetic affirmation of the Blues, it was not far for Brown to celebrate the great Blues singer, Ma Rainey, in a poet named after her in Southern Road :

Dey comes to hear Ma Rainey from de little river settlements,  
From blackbottom cornrows and from lumber camps;  
Dey stumble in de hall, jes a-laughin' an' a-cacklin',  
Cheerin' lake roarin' water, lak wind in river swamps.

It is this combination of the Blues form and the Negro folk-speech, at a very high

poetic level, that has made Sterling A. Brown one of the central points of the American poetic imagination.

The significance of Sterling A. Brown within the American poetic imagination is beyond estimation. With the passage of time his true dimensions will emerge. Some of the dark corners of this poetic imagination will emerge in brightness. For instance, through coincidence unexpected contrastive relationships are revealed. Twenty-years ago, an extraordinary young African-American poet died a violent death at the age of thirty-four. Henry Dumas, whose poetry reveals a deep presence of Africa, is in many ways totally different from Sterling A. Brown, who barely gave cognizance to the existence of Africa. Dumas' "Emoyeni, Place of the Winds," collected in his book of poetry *Play Ebony Play Ivory*, is a remarkable evocation of Africa:

Emoyeni, passing passing  
 from the tongue of the zulus  
 comes this word  
 Emoyeni place of the winds

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come  
 it is time to make the time  
 I see with my skin and hear with my tongue  
 emoyeni form the sky  
 emoyeni the tongue of many years passing . . .  
 In another poem, "Afro-American," this evocation is deeper:  
 my black mother is a long-haired sensuous river  
 where the Kongo flows into the Mississippi she  
 is coming where my father's blood rises in jets  
 and like rain, glows, transformed red, tan, black  
 I am growing in the bosom and in the loins of America  
 born and knitted in the soil, when I finish growing  
 you can pick me up as you would a rare and fabulous  
 seed and you can  
 blow Africa  
 on me as you would a holy reed.

Within the American cultural context, Henry Dumas is a moment of the intercrossing of Langston Hughes and Sterling A Brown, as much as within an African international culture, he is a moment in the blending of David Diop and Langston Hughes. In an unexpected way, Africa was never too far from Sterling A. Brown's great poetic imagination. It was not for nothing that in 1976 Leopold Sedar Senghor paid tribute to Sterling A. Brown in the following words: "Sterling Brown is an original militant of Negritude,, a precursor of our

movement. We were greatly affected by Mr. Brown and other writers of the Harlem Renaissance. I became aware of his work in the 1920's through the reading of Opportunity magazine. I subscribed to Opportunity for many years. I read much Black American literature . . . I was very pleased to have met Sterling A. Brown in 1966 . . . His poetry is a true expression of militant Negritude."