

ON *THE VINTAGE BOOK OF AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY*

Of all the books that have come through our office for possible review this year, the one I have found most welcome has been *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry* edited by Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton (New York: Random House, 2000). Four hundred pages in paper, it is a bedside companion into which I can dip and begin to repair, with the help of intelligent guides, our senile system of neglect. What's more it's fun. Any anthology that surprises with a deft turn on Emily Dickinson—"the flies / just stood around / and buzzed / when she died"—or with a startlingly radical "Frankie and Johnny" delivers much more than instruction.

The editors developed this anthology as an expansion of their *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans Since 1945* (Little Brown, 1994). Another attractive newcomer is E. Ethelbert Miller's *In Search of Color Everywhere: A Collection of African-American Poetry* (Stewart Tabori & Chang, 1994; paper 1996). Nor should one miss John Hollander's gathering of nearly one hundred pages of "Folk Songs and Spirituals" (and a roughly equal amount of "American Indian Poetry") in Volume Two of his *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century* (Library of America, 1993). Not all those songs are of African American origin, but many are; and the first lines of Hollander's first choice—"De talles' tree in Paradise,/ De Christian call de tree of life"—announce an intention, which I take to be to clarify and present a background of anonymous poetry for the African American tradition that is equivalent, more or less, to the ballads and other anonymous lyrics that begin most anthologies of English verse. Splice that to the present collection, which begins with the eighteenth century poets Jupiter Hammon, Benjamin Banneker, and Phillis Wheatley, and an "Oxford Book" of African American Verse would be at hand, and what a companion it would make.

That Harper and Walton entertain such thoughts is evident everywhere, especially as the poets sing of and to each other, reveling in their intersections. Rita Dove has a poem called "Banneker"; Hammon and Robert Hayden address Wheatley; Sterling A. Brown draws on the dialect voice of folk songs, while numerous other poets attach themselves to parallel musical traditions by writing to, for, and of Bessie Smith, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Muddy Waters.

The ambition of the anthology, however, is larger than clarifying the tradition of African American poetry. It is to correct our understanding of Ameri-

can poetry by placing the African American element closer to its center. The call is to redefine the mainstream by including in it what has been left out. Our neglect will be obvious to any who look around. Emblematic would be *The New Oxford Book of American Verse* (1976): 1060 pages of poems, 37 of them by African American poets and that many only if you credit the entire dozen pages given to folk songs and spirituals. The 1950 edition exceeded 1100 pages without a single page granted a black writer, so progress of a sort is being made, though hardly enough to earn that “*New*.” Editors who truly seek renewal would not have to look farther than the *Vintage Book* under review here to do a whole lot better.

“The Negro is America’s metaphor” Richard Wright has said. Harper and Walton elaborate Wright’s point, reminding us that African Americans are “a people uprooted from a traditional homeland and left to survive, endure, and create self and soul in a strange and hostile environment.” They upped the ante on the Puritan experience, so it could be said, and had no choice. Thus “the experience of American blacks offers not a marginal but an essential glimpse into this country.” No American transition from emigrant to immigrant to citizen endured greater hardship, required more daring or, as their musical and poetic traditions bear witness, developed a more educated heart. What African Americans have found to say about their experience becomes an invaluable American story. And so the challenge before us.

Harper and Walton’s brief introduction is worth more than an evening’s contemplation. I’ll pause over two ideas they advance. First, Gwendolyn 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 record of a people “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.”

Whoa, I say, instinctively. But instinct is not far from knee-jerk. I’ve taught Chaucer often; he’s my career-long favorite. For me to find Brooks’s scope and vision a match for his is unlikely. But that’s the point. I’ve learned to find it in Chaucer. I’ve taken the time to build it up. I’ve not made that effort with Brooks, nor have many. Until we try, until the effort continues long enough to create the chance, we cannot know; which is to admit more. Chaucer, Dante, and Joyce are “mainstream” because we rip-rapped and channeled the river. Our directed, cumulative attention did it. Only a generation ago, Joyce wouldn’t have entered the current. That he now “belongs,” that we don’t

resist his inclusion, suggests what could happen next. Meanwhile, this hint of pleasures that await us in Brooks, from “The Blackstone Rangers,” Mary Ann, a Rangerette, an Alisoun or Wife of Bath:

Mary is
a rose in a whisky glass. . . .
“Where did you get that diamond?” Do not ask:
but swallow straight, the spirals of his flask
and assist him at your zipper. . . .

Love’s another departure. . . .

Acquaint yourself with context, track the ironies of relation and counter relation within Brooks’s South Side storytelling, and we may just decide that Chaucer, for one, would be glad to keep her company.

But these editors go further. Not only do they argue for an American tradition that includes and is nurtured by the African American, they would correct African Americans’ perception of their own tradition by placing Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989) at its center as “perhaps its most accomplished practitioner.” Brown gets roughly twice as many pages as Dunbar, Hughes, Hayden, or Walcott, and it’s hard to regret a single one of them. This has been a long project on Harper’s part. In 1980 he edited Brown’s *Collected Poems* and has long demonstrated his loyalty to that poet, who spent most of his life at Howard University, teaching others, establishing learned guidelines for the study of African American literary traditions, and educating himself in world poetry with studies of, for example, Heine, Hardy, Housman, Dickinson, Baudelaire, Arnold, Yeats, and Frost.

Brown was particularly drawn to regional notes in some of these poets, to the ballad form (Hardy, Housman), to the accents of real speech (Hardy, Frost), and to Yeats’ use of Irish folk traditions to articulate an Irish Renaissance. Harper argues that Brown went beyond Dunbar and Hughes, “who simply forced black speech into English forms in some of their poems,” and developed his own prosody. “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 . . . as passive sufferers, had in fact developed a system of active strategies for encompassing the harsh economic and social conditions in which they found themselves” (xxix). The twenty-five pages of Brown in this volume provide some evidence. They contain the “Frankie and

Johnny” already mentioned, several ballads featuring Slim Greer, and open with an unnamed farmer beginning to breathe more easily “After Winter”:

He snuggles his fingers
In the blacker loam
The lean months are done with,
The fat to come.

Able, finally, to “snuggle” into the land, as a child of the land, he thinks immediately of his own children:

*“Butter beans fo’ Clara
Sugar corn fo’ Grace
An’ fo’ de little feller
Runnin’ space.*

The clipped pace of the final lines suggests that running space remains in doubt. Brown probably suffers from being too syntactically and prosodically able; thus his work may have been neglected because he could seem dependent on white models. Which relates him to whom? Richard Wilbur? My dreamed-of anthology would feature generous selections of both.

Like Chaucer, Brown writes with a largeness of spirit that rises above the personal on wings of wild good humor. Precisely focused on viciousness and wrong, he reaches well beyond personal griefs or slights. A warmth of humor envelopes the whole without letting anyone off the hook. So “Slim in Atlanta”:

Down in Atlanta
De whitefolks got laws
For to keep all de niggers
From laughin’ outdoors.

Never does Brown tip his hand that this absurd proposition, that black laughter in Atlanta shall be confined to a telephone booth, is more than a tall tale. It proves however a metaphor with bite.

Slim Greer hit de town
An’ de rebs got him told,—
“Dontcha laugh on de street,
If you want to die old.”

Den dey showed him de booth,
An' a hundred shines
In front of it, waiting'
In double lines.

The absurdity of the circumstance grows while Brown keeps a straight face. Greer commandeers the booth, and laughs until an ambulance must come for his brother sufferers. Finally

De state paid de railroad
To take him away;
Den, things was as usual
In Atlanta, Gee A.

Which is not to say repaired. All the while, though, the larger black response has been “to laugh,” that is, perhaps, to create poetry and music that we have failed to hear.

Brown is a gift and holds his own against the adventure of Harper’s claim. But there is much more in this volume than a brief review can mention. Toi Derricotte’s “Invisible Dreams” I might have known before, but did not, and I’ll go back to it. I want to hear more from Marilyn Nelson whose “Emily Dickinson’s Defunct” I’ve already alluded to:

. . . Under all the
gray old lady
clothes she was
dressed for action.

Another particular pleasure is a generous selection from “Letters from a New England Negro” by the late Sherley Anne Williams (1944-1999). We once ran a 40-page version of her “Letters” (11/4, 1980), a play in which many of the passages are poems.

D.H.