Online Interviews With Gwendolyn Brooks Essay, Research Paper

from "An Interview with Gwendlyn Brooks" in Artful Dodge

When in Bloomington this February (1979), Brooks discussed her poetry with The

Artful Dodge while driving to the Ramada Inn after a day of reading and speaking. Amid

the traffic noises of Saturday night Bloomington she spoke of the direction of her poetry

is taking at present, a direction which promises yet more vital and direct poetry.

Steve Cape: Having heard you read several times, the readings seem a lot different from

the poems as they come off when I’m reading them from a book. Does the idea of oral poetry

seem more immediate or real to you than printed or written poetry?

Brooks: No. In fact, you might be surprised to know I have a visual appreciation for

poetry myself. I’d rather ready anybody’s work than listen to it. I can get something out

of listening, but you can’t pick up everything. But what I try to do in reciting is to

give whoever is listening an impression of how I felt when I wrote the piece. I try to

paint the poem on the air.

SC: Is there any use of mythology in your poems, any myths that you work from or play

with in the poems?

Brooks: No. I never really investigated mythology. My daughter enjoyed so much reading Bulfinch’s

Mythology, which we always had in the house but which I never read myself. I’m sure

though that there are African myths or their counterparts that much could be done with,

but I have not tried that.

SC: How would you describe your process of composition, or a poem coming into being?

Brooks: When I’m excited about something or moved by something, I take notes on it

immediately so I won’t forget or loose my inspiration.

SC: Gary Snyder when he was here last fall said the same thing, that when he got an

initial phrase or an idea, no matter when it was–if it was two in the morning–that he’d

write it down (Brooks: oh, yes) and then go to fill it out later. Does that seem like a

familiar approach?

Brooks: I’m always taking notes, and then when I have time and can recapture the mood,

I start (as I was telling the students this afternoon) forging a first draft, and that’s

what it is, real forging. And I try to use words that say what I want to say–not what one

of our very famous European poets has said. This is very difficult because all of us

American poets have been thoroughly brainwashed into believing that what has already been

published is it!

SC: In the short manual on black poetry writing that you wrote, [Gwendolyn Brooks,

Keorapetse Kgositsile, Haki R. Madhubuti (Don L.Lee), Dudley Randall, Black Poetry

Writing, Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975] you comment on poetry being a transient

thing and it serving an immediate purpose more than a person intentionally trying to write

for posterity or for something that will be permanent.

Brooks: That does not express what I have been doing; whatever I said to that effect

was about those black poets in the late sixties, some of whom, not all but some of whom

felt that black poetry shouldn’t be written with an eye to posterity billions and

trillions of years from now. They felt, some of them, that if they wrote a poem that

worked for black people today, it would have served its purpose, and if it died after the

poem had done what the poet wanted it to feel–again not all–feel that they do want to be

read thousands of years from now. I’m afraid that I’m weak enough to think that it would

be very nice if somebody could get some nourishment or healing or just plain rich pleasure

out of poems I’m writing today.

SC: Another thing from Black Poetry Writing that I’d like to get a comment on.

You broke black poetry down into three stages, a first stage that was a statement of

condition, and then moving to a poetry of integration, and then the present poetry being

more an assertive, positive, individualistic thing.

Brooks: I was describing my own three stages of creativity. One, I call my

"express myself" stage, because I was writing about anything and everything in

my environment just because I wanted to express myself–flailing about. And second, my

"integration flavoring" stage when I wrote a lot of poems which I hoped would

bring black people and white people and all people together, and they didn’t seem to be

doing that (laughter) in great numbers at any rate, and a third stage governed by that

little credo that some of the Black poets had in the late sixties, "Black poetry is

poetry written by blacks, about blacks, and to black," and then, I’m trying very

seriously now to create for myself, develop for myself a kind of poem that will be

immediately accessible and interesting, immediately interesting, to all manner of blacks,

not just college students though they’re included too. That kind of poem will feature

song, will be songlike, and yet still properly called poetry.

SC: Is that where you–?

Brooks: Are now.

SC: What about the future of black poetry in America, do you see any trends which you

think are going to be developed?

Brooks: I believe that events will dictate what turns black poetry takes next. A lot of

black poetry is being written now that seems to be interior poetry, poetry that goes

deeper into the interior to explore, but I believe that the writing concern will be coming

back outdoors just as soon as some things become blatantly obvious. A lot of stuff is

happening now that I believe will involve us all, and the poets, their writing, will

reflect what they’re experiencing, just as it did in the late 60’s.

SC: What would a few of these things be?

Brooks: Well, I’m sure your imagination can help you there–when you look at the

headlines and you listen to television, and you hear our various leaders urging Carter to

get over there and drop a few bombs (laughter).

SC: Everything getting more conservative….

Brooks: Well, I think that is what has been happening, but Conservatism can

go–look, I’m no sociologist but at least I think I can say this–Conservatism goes just

so far and then there’s a reaction against it, wouldn’t you agree to that? At least that’s

what’s been happening so far and I don’t expect the future to be much different. I do know

that the people, the blacks on the African continent, don’t seem inclined to lie down.

They’re getting fiercer and fiercer, and more and more interested in protecting

themselves. I don’t expect that to have a reverse. If you just let your imagination so

you’ll see that we’re in for some very lively poetry.

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—The Editors

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