

# SHORT CIRCUITS

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF STERLING A. BROWN. (Harper & Row, \$12.95): "Lemme be wid Casey Jones," Sterling A. Brown wrote in the poem, "Odyssey of Big Boy,"

*Lemme be wid Stagolee,  
Lemme be wid such like men  
When Death takes hol' on me,  
When Death takes hol' on me . . .*

Sterling Brown's father was born a slave. Sterling Brown was a classmate of Du Bois and is currently professor emeritus at Howard. We're always closer to our past than we think we are, as this superb volume testifies. Brown's poems—written in the 1920s and '30s—deal most insistently with the souls of black folk and problems of race in American culture and consciousness: not a trendy topic for 1980, and certainly a dusty irrelevancy for the gaggle of stones 'n' bones academic obfuscators who are the poets of fashion these days, but a concern that proves Brown a most important (almost) octogenarian (he'll be 80 in May). A current reading of Brown's poetry tells us: The more things change, the more Atlanta and Buffalo and Greensboro remain.

*White man tells me—hunk—  
Damn yo' soul;  
White man tells me—hunk—  
Got no need, bebbly,  
To be tole.*

Not that Brown's oeuvre should be considered solely one of political protest or artistic sociology. His eye penetrates too deeply, his poetic and social sense too broadly, for such reductionism. In addition to his profundity in matters race—"I am an integrationist," he has said, "an integer is a whole number"—Brown is a master humorist, balladeer, storyteller, sonneteer, folklorist, mythmaker, historian, dialectician, tragedian, satirist,

sentimentalist, blues hound, caricaturist, and cartographer of cultural geography. His work is informed by great characters (in both senses of that term,) and it's his faith in the common man and woman, and not just in heroic figures like Nat Turner and John Henry and Ma Rainey, that comprises the heart of Brown's art. Indeed, it's his knack for fleshing out the extraordinary anecdote in the ordinary life, the brutally graceful phrase found in the most common vernacular, and the potential for artistic elegance inherent in folk forms that distinguishes Brown as a central American poet of this century.

*Look at old Scrappy puttin' on dog,  
Puttin' on dog, puttin' on dog,  
Look at old Scrappy puttin' on dog,  
Steppin' like nobody's business.*

A contemporary of Hughes, Toomer, and Cullen, Brown's first major book of poetry, *Southern Road* (1932), proved to be his last. His second book, *No Hiding Place*, found no publisher, and it wasn't until 1975 that a chapbook, *The Last Ride of Wild Bill and Eleven Narrative Poems*, was brought out by a small press in Detroit. So the new collection is remarkable not only for its content—all three of the above works, plus a needed bibliography of his essays, reviews, short stories, books of criticism, and recordings—but also for its very presence. Thematically, the collection reveals the length of Brown's reach as he spars with America, jabbing at the differences between, and oft-hidden congruities, of black and white, rich and poor, public and private, tragic and comic; the landscape is rich with dramatic portraits of lynchers, lovers, numbers runners, the cotton-mouthed in cotton fields, the poor knee-deep in backwater blues, fed-up workers, unfed children, rail yard creepers, and Black & Tan cabaret



Sterling A. Brown

THOMAS VICTOR

leapers. Oh yes, he rhymes. He rhymes and swings. His use of the forms and feeling of spirituals, work songs, blues and jazz—fresh in the early '30s—has weathered extremely well. At a time when so much modern poetry seeks to be "difficult," it's invigorating to read some that seeks only to be deep—in images, rhythms, meanings. And Brown's is.

*(1) Ma Rainey,  
Sing yo' song;  
Now you's back  
Whah you belong.  
(Git way inside us,  
Keep us strong . . .*

—David Breskin

NEW YORK: Poems, edited by Howard Moss (Avon, \$5.95 paper): According to Lewis Mumford, the earliest cities in ancient times began not as trading posts or political centers but as sacred sites. They

were temples first. Only later did they acquire military, commercial, and industrial functions. This suggests that, though we may not be aware of it, sacred purposes may still provide the hidden deep structure of a city, even of such a monument to capitalism as our own metropolis. Perhaps there is a spiritual system beneath the chaos of New York, which we fail to recognize. Perhaps our avenues are really naves, our side streets pews and aisles. It may be that we are all practicing a religion whose name we do not know, and which strikes in us moods of exhilaration and despair that we wrongly attribute to mundane aspects of city life. Perhaps New Yorkers are not in fact frenetic and agitated, as they are thought to be; perhaps we are only davening.

If so, then the book Howard Moss of *The New Yorker* has assembled ought to serve as our principal liturgical text. Moss has brought together poems about the city from all sorts of poets, arranged in alphabetical order from Aiken (Conrad) through Lee (Al) to Zweig (Paul). There are major sacred themes, for instance, the Brooklyn Bridge, which judging from the loftiness of language and amount of poetic attention is New York's most cosmic object. Hart Crane wrote:

*Through the bound cable strands, the  
arching path  
Upward, veering with light, the flight  
of strings.—  
Taut miles of shuttling moonlight  
syncopate  
The whispered rush, telepathy of  
wires.  
Up the index of night, granite and  
steel—  
Transparent meshes—fleckless the  
gleaming staves—  
Sibylline voices flicker, wavering  
stream  
As though a god were issue of the  
strings. . . .*

Not all poets have seen the Brooklyn

**NOW MORE FOR LESS**

One large roll thru drawer takes the place of a double drawer.

Willis On Women  
On Women W  
Willis On Wo

## ARTBEAT

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performances, and symposia: on February 8, "Racism in the Arts and Society;" on February 15, "The Inequities of Funding"; on February 22, "Building a Cultural

ists who will show are Benny Andrews, Larry Rivers, Raphael Sawyer, Howardina Pindell, Alice Neel, Romare Bearden, Milton Glaser, Candice Hill Montgomery, Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Davidson, and Jorge Soto. Support for the show has come from the Alternative Museum, Cityarts