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## Sonnet vs. Sonnet: The Fourteen Lines in African American Poetry

E dissi allora uno sonetto, lo quale narra del mio stato...

Dante, *Vita nuova*, XLI

Once Dante had mastered the "art of writing poetry," he put it to use in Chapter III of *Vita Nuova* (95-96) in the sonnet "To Every Captive Soul" ("A ciascun'alma presa"), which he composed "to make it known to many of the famous troubadours of that time," sharing it with "all of Love's faithful subjects," in order to elicit an answer from them.<sup>1</sup> As Guglielmo Gorni remarks, in Dante's times the sonnet was not, as it would be for modern readers, the highest formal expression of lyrical poetry; rather it was primarily "an invitation to converse," a "single voice launching an appeal to a chorus of voices". Nor was it merely an isolated text, but a metrical item likely to be read in association with similar compositions in a larger context (68).<sup>2</sup> These original features of the sonnet suggest a fruitful approach from which to begin our exploration of the ways African Americans have employed one of Europe's most refined poetical form, a practice which has involved major poets at different times in the history of black verse.

Indeed, when the African American sonnet began to acquire distinctive characteristics in the hands of some of the Harlem Renaissance poets, it was conceived as "an invitation to converse", a space from which a single voice launched an appeal to an implied audience in the attempt to elicit a reply or a reaction. Much like its medieval archetype, it appears to be a vehicle of communication rather than a mere display of a poet's technical skills or a conventional replica of European aesthetic manners, as were the majority of sonnets produced in the 19th-century in America.

In outlining a history of the African American sonnet, then, one does well to begin from this turning point in its evolution — the Harlem Renaissance period — when, once they had mastered "the art of writing poetry," certain black poets moved away from the norm, and gave this metrical form new vitality. In making it one of their chosen modes of expression, these poets succeeded in recovering the sonnet's original function centuries after its birth and within a very different cultural setting. In their hands, the fourteen-line structure turns into an ideal forum, a public space for dynamic argumentation of social and political themes directed to a specific category of readers.

A case in point is the celebrated 1919 poem "If We Must Die," by Claude McKay, one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance and the author of a significant number of sonnets built around the African American experience:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
 Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
 Making their mock at our accursèd lot.  
 If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
 So that our precious blood may not be shed  
 In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
 O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
 Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
 And for their thousand blows deal one death- blow!  
 What though before us lies the open grave?  
 Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
 Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.<sup>3</sup>

Divided into three quatrains and a closing rhyming couplet, the poem is formally an English sonnet tightly constructed around an idea (if we

must die, let us die with honor), which the poet develops in the first two parts. The hypothetical premise repeated at the beginning of lines 1 and 5 links these two sections through a dexterous handling of grammar and diction. The shift from the negative subjunctive in the second hemistich of the first line ("let it not be like hogs") to the affirmative in line 5 ("O let us nobly die") indicates a progression from fear to bravery, from passivity to action, from "an inglorious spot" to a noble position. The imagery in these two quatrains also marks a shift of focus: in the first two lines of each one the speaker exhorts his companions to revolt, while in the last two he calls attention to the oppressors. Placing the *volta* at line 9, instead of at line 13 as an English sonnet would do, is another sign of McKay's skilful handling of the sonnet form. The turn in fact signals the abandonment of the symmetrical structure and the hypothetical form, thus unbalancing the pace of the poem, as if he now intended to mimic the turmoil of an actual fight. Moreover, the thought in the third quatrain is fractured by the strong caesura at the beginning of line 9, by the irregular accents, and by line 12, which appears to be separated from the previous three lines, being in fact a bridge to the closing couplet. The structure of a Petrarchan sonnet looms behind the English one, with the sestet resolving what the octave has projected: the inevitable clash of the inhuman "cowardly pack" with the speaker's kinsmen and their certain, yet honorable, death. The alternate rhyme scheme further confirms the rhetorical framework of the sonnet: "hogs" connected with "dogs" underlines the bestial nature of the persecutors, while "inglorious spot" rhyming with "accursed lot" reminds the reader of the condition of the speaker's community; social resurrection through fighting and death is stressed by the rhymes "die-defy", "shed-dead", "foe-deathblow", and "brave-grave"; and the contrast between humanity and brutality is finally restated in the couplet, where the "fighting back" of the oppressed men is opposed to the "cowardly pack" of the oppressors.

Thus, a tactful handling of both technique and ideology guarantees

the poem's effectiveness. The space of the sonnet is inhabited by the dissenting voice of the black poet, who challenges the tradition this form stands for, replacing the love theme with an open attack on Western culture, its contradictions and hypocrisies. Moreover, it should be noted that, although written against the backdrop of the black urban uprising across the United States in summer 1919,<sup>4</sup> McKay's poem does not identify the fighting groups, thus achieving a resonance that goes beyond the American context. In his hands, the tight cage of the sonnet ultimately turns into a dynamic vehicle for freedom and social justice.<sup>5</sup>

As has been noticed,<sup>6</sup> the poem echoes the most famous speech in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (Act IV, Scene III), in which, prior to the battle of Agincourt, the king exhorts his troops to fight bravely and with honor against the overwhelming force of the French army. McKay exploits the episode, adapting its mode and diction to the racial violence in America, as evidenced by my italics in the following lines: "*If we are marked to die, we are enow / To do our country loss; and if we live, / The fewer men, the greater share of honor . . . For he to-day that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother . . . And gentlemen in England now a-bed / Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here . . .*"<sup>7</sup> This intertextual relation with Shakespeare's play not only conveys the speaker's trust in the victory of the oppressed over the oppressors (as Henry V's outnumbered army won over the French), but it also shows that the language of the European literary tradition can be appropriated by the black poet to construct new circuits of meaning. McKay's exploitation of this language performs what Ralph Ellison was to call "a technical assault against the styles which have gone before" (183) as a form of protest in art that does not, however, necessarily espouse a specific political or social program.

In another McKay sonnet, "Birds of Prey," the Petrarchan form is combined with imagery that recalls the passages in Milton's *Paradise Lost* where Satan is likened to a predatory bird ready to destroy Adam and Eve's harmony in Eden:

Their shadow dims the sunshine of our day,  
As they go lumbering across the sky,  
Squawking in joy of feeling safe on high,  
Beating their heavy wings of owlish gray.  
They scare the singing birds of the earth away  
As, greed-impelled, they circle threateningly,  
Watching the toilers with malignant eye,  
From their exclusive haven — birds of prey.  
They swoop down for the spoil in certain might,  
And fasten in our bleeding flesh their claws.  
They beat us to surrender weak with freight.  
And tugging and tearing without let or pause,  
They flap their hideous wings in grim delight,  
And stuff our gory hearts into their maws. (174)

Here is Book III, lines 431-441, of Milton's poem, where Satan is bent like a vulture on his innocent prey:

As when a vulture, on Imaus bred,  
Whose snowy ridge of roving Tartar bounds,  
Dislodging from a region scarce of prey  
To gorge the flesh of lambs or yeanling kids  
On hills where flocks are fed, flies toward the springs  
Of Ganges or Hydaspes, Indian streams,

So, on this windy sea of land, the Fiend  
Walked up and down alone bent on his prey...

The posture of Milton's hero is echoed in McKay's lines; once again he introduces a political theme by borrowing and manipulating material from the tradition of the dominating culture. The contrast between evil forces, associated with dark tonalities, and their victims, associated with

the light ("sunshine" and "singing birds"), established by McKay in the octave of his sonnet, finds its resolution at the end of line 8, when the ominous shadows described above become "birds of prey," marking the *volta* of the poem. In the sestet the contrast between good and evil precipitates into bloodshed, vividly outlined by the speaker, himself a victim in the bloody clash. In this case, too, McKay's usage of personal pronouns ("them" versus "us") makes the sonnet resound beyond the American historical context, creating a poetical space within which power structures are challenged and the contradictions of modern democracies disclosed. The main trope the poet uses here — the wings of birds of prey — also recalls the image of the eagle, the emblem of empires in Western culture, from classical Rome to the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere Milton's hero serves McKay in his portrayal of the exclusion of blacks from their country's bounty and beauty and the consequent nourishment of hate and resentment that is their destiny. See, for example, the sonnets "The White House," "The White City," and "America." "Outcast" is another sonnet where McKay portrays the black as "a ghost," "a thing apart" and "out of time" because, we read, he is born "far from [his] native clime" and "[s]omething in [him] is lost, for ever lost, / Some vital thing has gone out of [his] heart." The turning point is in the second quatrain, where the black's hybrid cultural identity is acknowledged: "I would go back to darkness and to peace, / But the great western world holds me in fee, / And I may never hope for full release / While to its alien gods I bend my knee" (173). Among these "alien gods" there are the makers of the Western tradition and its forms, which are, as we have seen, inextricably woven into the language of McKay's sonnets, just as he is inextricably rooted in the Western culture that holds him "in fee."

In other sonnets, McKay draws material from Christian imagery and diction in order to address directly the God that is the poet's silent interlocutor, whom he questions about the reasons for human behavior

and whom he asks for sustenance. In the poem "Truth" he borrows Pilate's unanswered question to Jesus in the Gospel of St. John ("But what is Truth?") to weave a discourse on the elusiveness of the term:

Oh, what is Truth? So Pilate asked Thee, Lord,  
Two thousand years when Thou wert manifest,  
As the Eternal and Incarnate Word,  
Chosen of God and by Him singly blest:  
In this vast world of lies and hate and greed,  
Upon my knees, Oh Lord, for Truth I plead. (272)

In such texts the Gospel tradition meets with the sonnet form, which appears a suitable narrative space for developing themes and images reminiscent of African American folklore, the rhyme scheme and the implied musical accompaniment being another point of contact. In conclusion, the sonnet form is a mirror in which the African American poet's self and heritage are reflected: the colonized subject, having lost forever his or her original identity, interprets and reconstructs the colonizer's language and cultural patterns according to his or her marginalized perspective. That out of this a new eloquence is developed is not, in Tzvetan Todorov's words apropos of historical interpretations, "a superfluous ornament, but the mark of a greater 'truth-disclosure'" (140).

The sonnets of Countee Cullen, the other well-known Harlem Renaissance sonneteer, are fashioned in a manner similar to McKay's.<sup>9</sup> Whether they follow the English or the Italian model, or are a combination of both, they also stand out as literary forums for the black poet to address a social iniquity, and invite the reader to react. The fact that both the Jamaican-born McKay and Cullen were steeped in British poetry from early on explains only in part their adoption of traditional forms. Their recovery of formal poetry just at the time when free verse was shaping the new poetry of the 20th century, and theories about the

impersonality and the objectivity of art predominated, responds to an intentional strategy and accounts, as Carol Miller suggested, for "an alternative modernist consciousness" (51).<sup>10</sup> Tradition is resumed, appropriated and subverted by a strong poetical subject who transforms the established lyrical canons into what Adrienne Rich calls "a rebellious cry", "a poetics of resistance" (2).

[A]lthough very conscious of the new criticism and trends in poetry, to which I am keenly responsive and receptive [McKay wrote in a prefatory note to his 1922 collection *Harlem Shadows*], I have adhered to such of the older traditions as I find adequate for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods ... I have not hesitated to use words which are old, and in some circles considered poetically overworked and dead, when I thought I could make them glow alive by new manipulation. (*Harlem* xx)

Such 'manipulation' was not new in black verse. As far back as the 18th century, Phyllis Wheatley inaugurated this technique inserting racial motifs in the European-derived metrical constructions collected in her only volume, *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* (1773). Texts such as "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North-America, &c" and "On Being Brought from Africa to America," firmly based on British models, show awareness of the condition of slavery. In stanza four of the former poem, she develops her political discourse about New England's freedom from Great Britain drawing on her personal experience: "Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song, / Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung, / ... I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate / Was snatch'd from *A/ric's* fancy'd happy seat..." (82).<sup>11</sup> And when the sonnet entered African American poetry in the nineteenth century,<sup>12</sup> two major black sonneteers, Henrietta Cordelia Ray and Paul Laurence Dunbar, made a first attempt at grafting racial themes onto the fourteen lines. Here is the



opening of Ray's tribute to "Robert G. Shaw," commander in chief of an African American regiment at the battle of Fort Wagner during the Civil War, followed by the beginning of Dunbar's eulogy of Frederick Douglass:

When War's red banners trailed along the sky,  
And many a manly heart grew all aflame  
With patriotic love and purest aim,  
There rose a noble soul who dared to die,  
If only Right could win. He heard the cry  
Of struggling bondmen and he quickly came ... <sup>13</sup>

Ah, Douglass, we have fallen on evil days,  
Such days' as thou, not even thou didst know,  
When thee, the eyes of that harsh long ago  
Saw, salient, at the cross of devious ways,  
And all the country heard thee with amaze ... <sup>14</sup>

Like all of the numerous impeccable Italian sonnets in Ray's portrait gallery of public and private figures, this one too is narrated from the outside in a voice which sounds detached from her subject matter, controlled as it is by a sense of decorum and deep reverence for the adopted metrical form and poetic tradition. Dunbar's voice, instead, immediately appears involved in the issue of slavery, as the "we" in the first line indicates. Yet, as Marcellus Blount argues, "even the most daring of [Ray's and Dunbar's] poems are cautious; the freedom they achieve somewhat constraint" (232), since the voice of each poet is covered by the literacy and gender conventions of the form itself and by the tradition inherited from African American political discourse. Still, these early examples allow us to observe a sort of pre-history of the black sonnet, a necessary apprenticeship providing the background for the

poets of the next generation who renewed the form. Moreover, these early poets' series of tributes to admired figures, including leaders of African American history, provide an interesting prototype for the sonnet sequences and long poems made up of stanza-like sonnets which post-modern and contemporary black poets have created in their attempt to develop a modern eloquence out of tradition, propose an alternative interpretation of this tradition, and come to terms with its complex relationship with race.

Gwendolyn Brooks employed the sonnet form in her early poetry, especially in her first collections, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and *Annie Allen* (1949). The last section of the former is a cycle of twelve sonnets entitled "Gay Chaps At the Bar" — a "souvenir", as the dedication declares, for the author's brother, Staff Sergeant Raymond Brooks, active in World War II, and for every other soldier (*Blacks* 64). Here are Brooks's words on the poems' genesis:

I first wrote the one sonnet, without thinking of extensions. I wrote it because of a letter I got from a soldier who included that phrase (the title of the series of twelve sonnets and of the first sonnet) in what he was telling me; and then I said, there are other things to say about what's going on at the front and all, and I'll write more poems, some of them based on the stuff of letters that I was getting from several soldiers, and I felt it would be good to have them all in the same form, because it would serve my purpose throughout. (*Report* 158)

Words from that first letter by Lieutenant William Couch stationed in the South Pacific are quoted in the epigraph ("and guys I knew in the States, young officers, return from the front crying and trembling. Gay chaps at the bar in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York"), thus introducing the theme of the sequence — a somber meditation on war by black (and white) soldiers whose experience in combat has turned their youthful cheerfulness into fear, their hopes into sorrow and doubt. Ghost-like, the

letter format stands behind these pieces, each one narrated by a different voice so that the entire cycle ultimately sounds polyphonic. The poet directs the soldiers' voices with mastery, channeling them into a unified work in which the chaps' words may continue to bear witness, moving from the private sphere of the letter to the public forum of poetry. Indeed, Brooks's pseudo record of others' testimony is a very refined literary operation, aiming at wedding the individual history of her "correspondents" with mainstream Western culture. In her macro-text, the twelve sonnets take on the role of stanzas, yet each retains its integrity as an independent poem inhabited by a distinctive voice.

Like its medieval archetypes, Brooks's sequence achieves unity by addressing a single theme, using specific metrical choices, and through repetitions of key words. The number twelve itself is reminiscent of authoritative 13th- and 14th-century models of such cycles as Folgore da San Gimignano's sonnets on the months. "Gay Chaps" can in fact be read as a temporal sequence — a fictional year during which the soldiers' innocence surrenders to experience. In any case, Brooks also brings us to the heart of the European lyric tradition, mediated once again by the sonnet sequences of the English Renaissance, from Shakespeare's to John Donne's.<sup>15</sup> Yet her brief "canzoniere" is, in her own words, "a sonnet series in off-rhyme" for "an off-rhyme situation" (*Report* 158). It stems, one might say, from the poet's negotiation with tradition, history, and her own perspective as an African American poet who claims a historically active, if not political, role for poetry.

The first sonnet in the cycle (*Blacks* 64-75) beautifully introduces all these themes:

We knew how to order. Just the dash  
Necessary. The length of gaiety in good taste.  
Whether the raillery should be slightly iced  
And given green, or served up hot and lush.

And we knew beautifully how to give to women  
 The summer spread, the tropics, of our love.  
 When to persist, or hold a hunger off.  
 Knew white speech. How to make a look an omen.

But nothing ever taught us to be islands.  
 And smart, athletic language for this hour  
 Was not in the curriculum. No stout  
 Lesson showed how to chat with death. We brought  
 No brass fortissimo, among our talents,  
 To holler down the lions in this air.

Following the model of the Petrarchan sonnet, this poem comes alive thanks to the license the poet takes. Abandoning both a rigorous rhyme scheme and strict iambic pentameter metrics, Brooks calibrates assonances, alliterations, slant-rhymes, accents, enjambments and punctuation in order to create language in motion, language in the making on the page, thereby mimicking the thought process of the speaker. Speaking through a collective "we," the soldier enumerates in the octave a black man's resources vis-à-vis war and death, each emphasized by a careful distribution of accents which make the voice rise when knowledge is deployed. Lines 1 and 8 begin appropriately with a spondaic rhythm. Line 5 reiterates the accented verb "knew," which rhymes, as has been noticed,<sup>16</sup> with the first stressed syllable of "beautifully," thus reaching a heightened effect by the position of these two words, placed as they are at the junction between anapest and dactyl. Such technique characterizes Brooks's prosody, as she plays with stressed and unstressed syllables also to control the length of the lines, constructed to match the speaker's revelation of the blacks' strategies to control their social behavior in the dominant culture. The strong *volta* at 9 ("But nothing ever taught...") reverses what is stated in the octave and reveals the hollowness and falsity of the rhetorical instructions imparted

to soldiers, which offer "[n]o stout / lesson" on "how to chat with death." Spondaic feet prevail in the sestet, so that the speaker's voice sounds for the most part high-pitched, mimicking, in this case, the fears of the soldiers at the front. It is here that, having abandoned the social mask, blacks attempt salvation through their own culture. The terms "to holler" and "brass fortissimo" recall African American folklore and music. To be "at the bar" takes on, then, a multiple meaning: it is not merely the bar of pleasant drinks, but also the color bar of segregation, the bar between life and death, and the bar that exposes a man to public judgment in combat or in court. And it is here, at the point where all cultural props break down, that the poet Brooks enters the poem, providing the soldiers, through her sonnet, with that "smart, athletic language" they lack to utter their newly learned war experience. Athletic indeed since, as we have seen, poetic norms have been twisted and bent to give expression to the "off-rhyme" voices of the marginalized subjects to whom Brooks's sonnet cycle pays the highest lyrical homage.

The defeat of language, along with the poet's search for a vehicle of expression suitable to war poetry, functions as a strong intertextual connection throughout the sequence. In sonnet 4, "looking," the speaking persona (the poet or a mother speaking to and for all mothers of soldiers) decrees the inadequacy and impotence of her maternal linguistic system at the moment of separation from her son:

You have no word for soldiers to enjoy  
The feel of, as an apple, and to chew  
With masculine satisfaction. Not "good-by!"  
"Come back!" or "careful!" Look, and let him go.  
"Good-by!" is brutal, and "come back!" the raw  
Insistence of an idle desperation  
Since could he favor he would favor now.  
He will be "careful" if he has permission. (1-8)

In the sestet the speaker advises the mother to substitute speech with looking ("Looking is better. At the dissolution / Grab greatly with the eye...") although of "little avail" — an invitation to dispense with rhetorical words and start over from the real data. The language fallacy also involves the poet, who has no effective eloquence to offer a mother in time of war. Her English sonnet can only register dissolution at more than one level.

Sonnets 10 and 11 explicitly mock the courtly love tradition embodied by the sonnet, whose stock imagery and linguistic conventions are so totally at odds with war. The first, "love note I: surely," is a soldier's un-rhymed poem to his lover, who stands also for his country:

Surely you stay my certain own, you stay  
 My you. All honest, lofty as a cloud.  
 Surely I could come now and find you high,  
 As mine as you ever were; should not be awed ... (1-4)

The adverb "surely" continues to scan the progression of the poem in the following lines, placed in strategic positions to mark a predictable love story with a lofty lover — scornful and merciless as she must be. But past and gone are the times when love was an ennobling feeling, as gone are the soldier's youthful innocence and gaiety, his unconditioned faith in his country's democracy, and the poet's apprenticeship with tradition:

Surely — But I am very off from that.  
 From surely. From indeed. From the decent arrow  
 That was my clean naiveté and my faith.  
 This morning men deliver wounds and death.  
 They will deliver death and wounds tomorrow.  
 And I doubt all. You. Or a violet. (9-14)

"love note II: flags" is a coda to the previous poem. Here the soldier attempts to recover the lover, now metamorphosed into a flag fluttering out "against the pained / volleys. Against [his] power crumpled and wan" — a sarcastic allusion to the American flag, Old Glory:

Still, it is dear defiance now to carry  
Fair flags of you above my indignation,  
Top, with a pretty glory and a merry  
Softness, the scattered pound of my cold passion.  
I pull you down my foxhole. Do you mind? (1-5)

"Defiance" is a key word here: the soldier challenges war with memories of love as the poet challenges lyrical poetry by attacking its conventions. Historically sterile, reduced to a "sweet mournfulness," as we read in the close, the sonnet form is however empowered anew by Brooks, who entrusts to its lines a radical revision of its very tradition.

The next poem, "the progress," ends the sequence on a somber note. The theme announced in the title is ironically deconstructed by the speaker who, resuming the collective "we" of the first poem, looks ominously at the recurring cycles of history, at troops who continue to wear masks and play their part in a terrifying war pantomime:

And still we wear our uniforms, follow  
The cracked cry of the bugles, comb and brush  
Our pride and prejudice, doctor the sallow  
Initial ardor, wish to keep it fresh.  
Still we applaud the President's voice and face.  
Still we remark on patriotism, sing,  
Salute the flag, thrill heavily, rejoice  
For death of men who too saluted, sang. (1-8)

The sestet discloses the truth of the matter as fear, "a deepening hollow through the cold," takes over. "Cold," a word appearing in almost all the sonnets and thus functioning as a strong lexical link among them, is a synonym of death, contrasting the tropical warmth of the black soldiers mentioned in the first poem, which is swept away by the force of war. The ephemeral music of love (another re-occurring image in these texts) and its poetical counterpart in the end turn into the frightening sound of marching armies by means of a dexterous distribution of stresses: "Listen, listen. The step / Of iron feet again. And again wild."

Reading through the entire sequence, we are struck by Brooks's artistry in developing her narrative as she approaches her theme from multiple perspectives, each sonnet becoming a plastic, flexible element containing the myriad of voices, tonal nuances, and semantic layers of her densely imaginative language. Much like a musical motif played by a polyphonic orchestra, Brooks's well-tempered instruments render the sound of history, be it through black soldiers' meditations or through characters from the Chicago suburbs she was familiar with. It is in creating such a choral effect that the sonnet form finds its *raison-d'être* in her writing. Far from being restricting, it magnificently encompasses a broad gamut of social, political and human concerns. And as a cycle, it allows a constant shift of perspective from micro- to macro-text.

In her Pulitzer prize book, *Annie Allen*, Brooks's sonnets also fit into a larger context as stanzas or sections of a narrative. See, for example, the sequence "the children of the poor," five Petrarchan pieces at the opening of the third section. Or "the sonnet-ballad," third poem in the appendix to the second section, "The *Anniad*," Brooks's most virtuoso exploit in this volume with an impressive number of rhyme schemes. The originality of this poem's form is declared in the title:<sup>17</sup> a fusion of the highly traditional and the oral patterns of folk songs as a solo voice, a young woman's, chants her apprehension for her lover gone off to war:



Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?  
They took my lover's tallness off to war.  
Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess  
What I can use an empty-cup for.... (1-4)

The spoken fabric of the language, after all, never strays too far from Brooks's lines, and, at least in her poetry of the forties, the sonnet appears to be a point of intersection between the blues and lyrical poetry.<sup>18</sup>

Robert Hayden,<sup>19</sup> a contemporary of Brooks, wrote sonnets which primarily attract attention for their content. Whether personal or historical, his diction resonates with the deeply experienced, observed, viewed; his characters replenish the poems, expanding beyond the limits of language; and in the background are the metrical forms that support meaning. The sonnet "Frederick Douglass" takes its force from the first long phrase of the poem, constructed around a correspondence between Douglass and freedom:

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful  
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,  
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,  
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,  
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more  
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:  
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro  
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world  
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,  
this man, superb in love and logic, this man  
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,  
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,  
but with the lives grown out of this life, the lives  
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing. (62)

The reiteration of the demonstrative "this" keeps the man and liberty tightly linked, while expanding the stature of the African American leader. The conjunction "when," in building up a vision of the triumph of justice, has a similar function. Subverting the sonnet's canon, Hayden places his *volta* in the middle of line 10, at the beginning of the second phrase, where the intensity previously accumulated comes to an end to give way to a vision of human resurrection in the name of freedom. The term freedom, with its qualifications, frames the poet's thought, placed as it is at the beginning and evoked at the end. Although Hayden disrupts the sonnet form, it remains the backbone around which his powerful theme is entwined. Much like the Harlem Renaissance sonneteers, he inhabits tradition bringing into it the protesting voice — almost hieratic in this case — of black history. But his dream of freedom also effects the chosen form, reinterpreting it freely as if to make it reflect the theme it conveys. This technical liberty is even more evident in poems such as "The Burly Fading One" and "Letter" where the graphic arrangement of the fourteen lines — with spaces to mark the passage from stanza to stanza — makes them respectively an English and a Petrarchan sonnet.

Such experimentation with the fourteen lines is frequent in post-modern and contemporary American poetry, both by black and white poets. It is therefore necessary to establish criteria for identifying a sonnet when we meet compositions of sonnet length, because they are not always meant to be sonnets.<sup>20</sup> In order to be a sonnet a poem must retain some relation to its archetypal model besides mere length, and it must present at least one of the sonnet's constitutive elements: a recognizable rhyme scheme or metrical norm, rhetorical devices keeping the parts connected, a certain typographical arrangement on the page, and a complete thematic development. The poet's intention to write a sonnet, declared in the title, in the content or in extratextual material, is also a way of recognizing a sonnet even though its morphology has been radically altered. Among various reinterpretations since Brooks's sequences, the

stanza-like sonnet in a long poem has continued to stand out as a distinctive response of American poets to the potential of the form. In their hands it has turned into a most pliable tool to construct narratives — or modern 'canzonieri' — an open space which can be expanded *ad infinitum*, yet remains a discreet frame apt to control and order material and voices within a measured discourse redolent of literary echoes and traditions. Although this practice certainly involves both black and white poets,<sup>21</sup> contemporary African Americans have made a special contribution with texts in which, once again, the Western tradition meets their own historical and cultural heritage.

In Rita Dove's *Mother Love* (1995), the sonnet is the primary element in the poet's combinatorial technique. The work takes the form of a narrative collage on the mother-daughter relation, calling upon the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. The number fourteen (its half and its double), rather than meter or rhyme scheme, is here the principle that structures the volume's thirty-five poems into seven sections." All but five are sonnets, though irregular, or poems related to this form; three — "Persephone in Hell," "The Bistro Styx," and "Her Island" — are narratives within the narrative, poetical cycles of which the last two are, respectively, a sequence and a crown of sonnets. The numbers 14, 7, and 28 are therefore more than just figures: they play metaphorically with womanhood as a totality that is split into two halves, daughter and mother, and then doubled into two adults as the daughter breaks loose from the mother to live her own life. This is the very theme of the classical myth Dove chooses to revisit, recast into a late twentieth-century drama of loss and regeneration.

In the prefatory note to the volume, "An Intact World," Dove attributes to the sonnet form historical value as a talisman, if not a defense, against dissolution and chaos:

The sonnet is a *heile Welt*, an intact world where everything is in sync, from the

stars down to the tiniest mite on a blade of grass. And if the "true" sonnet reflects the music of the spheres, it then follows that any variation from the strictly Petrarchan or Shakespearean forms represents a world gone awry.

Or does it? Can't form also be a talisman against disintegration? The sonnet defends itself against the vicissitudes of fortune by its charmed structure, its beautiful bubble. All the while, though, chaos is lurking outside the gate.

The ancient story of Demeter and Persephone is just such a tale of a violated world.

Sonnets seemed the proper mode for most of this work . . . Much has been said about the many ways to "violate" the sonnet in the service of American speech or modern love or whatever; I will simply say that I like how the sonnet comforts even while its prim borders (but what a pretty fence!) are stultifying; one is constantly bumping up against Order. The Demeter/Persephone cycle of betrayal and regeneration is ideally suited for this form since all three — mother-goddess, daughter-consort and poet — are struggling to sing in their chains.

If "chains" is to be understood as the biological cycle of life, the endless patterns of order-disorder in history, innocence-knowledge, death-rebirth, etc., then to write within prescribed formal molds appears a necessary choice reflecting the poet's intent to adhere anthropologically to human nature. Dove's singing "in chains" is therefore a protest *en travesti* against the pseudo-democracy of free verse, while the unorthodox forms of her sonnets become the objective correlative of a world where chaos and disintegration are inescapable. Her operation is an anti-mimetic response to such reality, a discipline that keeps her poetry at a distance from the magma where all is possible. And her "violated" sonnets, as talismans against disintegration, suggest a way of organizing poetical material so as not to get lost in the chaos, the creation of a new order parallel to what happens in the natural world once Persephone is condemned to live in Hell for one-third of the year. Here is one of these

texts, *Persephone*, *Falling*, which joins poetical tradition, mythical plot and the poet's subjectivity as female, American and black:

One narcissus among the ordinary beautiful  
flowers, one unlike all the others! She pulled,  
stooped to pull harder—  
when, sprung out of the earth  
on his glittering terrible  
carriage he claimed his due.  
It is finished. No one heard her.  
No one! She had strayed from the herd.

(Remember: go straight to school.  
This is important, stop fooling around!  
Don't answer to strangers. Stick  
with your playmates. Keep your eyes down.)  
This is how easily the pit  
opens. This is how one foot sinks into the ground. (9)

The break between octave and sestet and the strong *volta* at line 9 recall the Italian form, while the few end- and internal rhymes and the overall phonic texture create internal cohesion. The parenthetical block inserts what may be a personal memory of the poet, activated by the mythological story — a technique Dove uses in other poems to include comments and different perspectives within the sonnet, or to add new information.

*Mother Love* ends with a crown of sonnets based on Dove's visit to temples in Sicily, the land of Persephone. The very last restates the cyclical image she has used throughout to tell the endless story of mothers and daughters: "Only Earth — wild / mother we can never leave . . . knows / no story's ever finished; it just goes / on, unnoticed in the

dark that's all/around us: blazed stones, the ground closed" (77). The sonnet proves indeed to be "the proper form" for this work.

Borrowing Andrea Zanzotto's well-known neologism *hypersonnet*, we can call "Testimony," a long poem occupying the sixth section of Yusef Komunyakaa's collection *Thieves of Paradise* (1998), a double *hypersonnet*. This "quasi libretto,"<sup>23</sup> as the poet referred to it, in fourteen sections of two stanzas with fourteen lines each, lyrically narrates the life and art of the jazz musician Charlie Parker, from when he left Kansas City to his death. Each pair of poems stands for a line in a seemingly English sonnet. If we observe the narrative of the musician's life, we realize that biographical events are covered in the first twelve sections (with perceptible breaks before parts IV, VIII, and XII to underline the passage from quatrain to quatrain), while the last two, being *post mortem*, appear separate, in correspondence to the closing couplet of an English sonnet. In the last four poems, in fact, the focus shifts from Parker himself to the indifference of the media to the human predicament of this musician, broken at thirty-four by drugs and alcohol, and to the legends which soon began to circulate about him. But though the pattern that such a reading suggests is rather appealing, "Testimony" actually breaks the rules of the sonnet, reshaping it into a new form, one that is suitable to the creation of a contrast between the straightforward biographical data and the lyrical and imaginative impulse of Parker's music. Komunyakaa calls his form the "ghost sonnet," that is a shadowy metrical presence that keeps the fourteen lines tight and yet is, at the same time, elusive because of its extreme flexibility and irregularities.

Written as a radio libretto commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and later performed by an orchestra of thirty-two musicians, eleven singers and one actor at the Sydney Opera House, Komunyakaa's double *hypersonnet* develops a language which strives to bring poetry closer to music, thus recovering the etymological meaning of the form — a "little song" for musicians. As in Brooks's war sequence,

here too the final effect is polyphonic, since each pair of sonnets is narrated by a different voice and inhabited by a cast of figures who not only evoke the bebop age with all its protagonists, but also contribute to render a choral effect. This effect is further strengthened by the linguistic experimentation of Komunyakaa, who works on various registers to evoke the jazz idiom of the hipsters of the 1940s and 1950s, collating scraps of Bird's biography and artistic innovations with black music heritage to create a harmonious whole. Here is one of Kornunyakaa's "song lyrics" — the second poem of the third section, where the poet attempts to translate Bird's music into images, imaginatively improvising on his sound track:

Purple dress. Midnight-blue.  
Dime-store floral print  
blouse draped over a Botticellian  
pose. Tangerine. He could blow  
insinuation. A train whistle  
in the distance, gun shot  
through the ceiling, a wood warbler  
back in the Ozarks at Lake  
Taneycomo, he'd harmonize  
them all. Celt dealing in coal  
on the edge of swing. Blue  
dress. Carmine. Yellow sapsucker,  
bodacious "zoot suit with the reet  
pleats" & shim sham shimmy. (93)

To conclude, retracing the presence of the sonnet in African American poetry leads us to abandon the traditional association of formal poetry with conservatism. In the hands of black poets, the sonnet becomes the site of a refined poetical syncretism between Western

tradition and ethnic heritage, a potentially revolutionary and highly innovative mechanism of resistance against cultural hegemony. From the Harlem Renaissance protest sonnets, to Brooks's and Komunyakaa's polyphonies, to Hayden's thematic usage of the form and Dove's talismanic poems, the fourteen lines in African American poetry have opened a space within tradition where, at least aesthetically, a dialogue between races and cultures seems possible. From these lines, as in their medieval prototypes, an invitation to converse is launched, by means of the great variety of hybrid forms black poets have devised. Ultimately, the sonnets are a powerful synecdoche of the historical drama of slavery and freedom, reflecting the poet's history in the tension between metrical norm and the subject's voice. That seminal topos in black literature, freedom, is born here out of the formal chains of the sonnet, to which the poet entrusts the high ethical role of testimony. Long live the sonnet, then, bearing as it does the seeds of a message that resonates well beyond literary contingency.

## NOTES

1. Here is the well-known original passage: "propuosi di farlo sentire a molti li quali erano famosi trovatori in quello tempo: e con ciò fosse cosa che io avesse già veduto per me medesimo l'arte del dire parole per rima, propuosi di fare un sonetto, ne lo quale io salutasse tutti li fedeli d'Amore e pregandoli che giudicassero la mia visione, scrissi a loro ciò che io avea nel mio sonno veduto." The English translation is mine.

2. Gorni writes: "Il sonetto presenta connotati sensibilmente diversi da quelli che il lettore e l'autore moderno (ma già anche la tradizione lirica che fa capo al Petrarca) son disposti a riconoscere come caratteristici di quel genere metrico; sonetto non già come espressione dell'assoluto poetico, forma isolata e in sé perfetta della liricità, bensì, in prima istanza, come proposta colloquiale, voce singola che fa appello a un coro di voci, individuo metrico candidato all'aggregazione testuale con altri suoi simili."

3. *Complete Poems* 177. This poem has often received critical attention. I have benefited from Smith, Blount, Keller, Miller, Rich, and James.



4. McKay relates its genesis in *A Long Way from Home* 31-32, rpt. *Complete Poems* 332-333.

5. Winston Churchill read this poem to British troops in Japan during World War II. It was also found on the body of an African American soldier killed in combat and, copied by hand, in the Attica prison in 1971, in the aftermath of an inmate uprising. These last two facts are reported in Miller 52. Yusef Komunyakaa (*Blue Notes* 6) reports that "If We Must Die" was also read into the Congressional Record by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge.

6. Keller's essay discusses some of the sources McKay used in constructing his sonnets, including Shakespeare.

7. The opening line of McKay's poem also echoes Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, 111.1.93: "If I must die, / I will encounter darkness as a bride, / And hug it in my arms" (see "Notes to the Poems," *Complete Poems* 333).

8. In the sonnet "Tiger," a fierce attack on the American rhetoric of freedom and democratic missions in the world that McKay develops by associating the stripes of the American flag with the stripes of the feline of the title, the eagle figures among other emblems of the United States: "Europe and Africa and Asia wait / The touted New Deal of the New World's hand! / New systems will be built on race and hate, / The Eagle and the Dollar will command." This poem was first collected under this title in *Selected Poems* 47. Its original version as poem 36 in the series "Cycle Ms." is now included in McKay, *Complete Poems* 359: "Europe and Asia, Africa wait / A new Fascism, the American brand, / And new worlds will be built upon race and hate / And the Eagle and the Dollar will command."

9. See for instance the frequently anthologized sonnets "Yet Do I Marvel," originally published in Cullen's first collection of poems, *Color* (1925), and "From the Dark Tower," from his second volume, *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929).

10. Besides McKay and Cullen, other black poets of the modernist age wrote sonnets. Among them were Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, James Weldon Johnson, and Melvin Tolson.

11. We can also observe a similar process in Anglo-American poets. I am thinking, for

example, of William Cullen Bryant's sonnet "To Cole, The Painter, Departing for Europe", where the poet establishes the terms of a comparison between American and European landscapes in the attempt to develop a mythology of the American wilderness to oppose to the myth of Europe. Such a declaration of cultural independence stands against the backdrop of an English sonnet.

12. The sonnet first appeared in American poetry between 1776 and 1779 when Colonel David Humphrey, a Yale University graduate, aide in camp of George Washington and member of diplomatic missions in Europe in the early years of the Republic, composed twelve occasional poems in this form. Since then, the sonnet has continued to enjoy great popularity among American poets, reaching its first apotheosis in the 19th century in the hands of the most popular and celebrated authors of the Romantic age. Expert versifiers such as Longfellow and Bryant produced Italian and English sonnets which still stand out among their best works. Both professional and amateur American writers of verse must have regarded the fourteen-line composition as the ideal mold to contain their emotions and moods, if it is true that over two hundred "poets" wrote sonnets between the time of the Revolution and the first three decades of the 20th century.

This data comes from an old study on the subject by Lewis Sterner who, however, does not include in his impressive list African American sonneteers. Besides Ray and Dunbar, other early black authors of sonnets are Frances E. W Harper, Joseph Seaman Cotter, and Rosalie Jones. For an overview of the history of the sonnet form in American poetry see Francini, "In forma di sonetto."

13. Several of Ray's sonnets are homage poems to admired historical or artistic figures of the Western tradition, from the Venus of Milo to Beethoven, Shakespeare, Milton, to Petrarch's Laura. One, "Toussaint L'Ouverture," is dedicated to a black historical figure. Another one, addressed to her father, who was actively involved in the abolition cause, touches the race issue.

14. In like manner, Dunbar wrote his own tribute to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Here is the first quatrain of this Petrarchan sonnet: "Why was it that the thunder voice of Fate / Should call thee, studious, from the classic groves, / Where calm-eyed Pallas with still footstep roves, / And charge thee seek the turmoil of the state?" (Hayden, *Kaleidoscope* 25).

15. By elaborating on the British sonnet tradition, African American poets managed to recover the form's original features. As is well known, the Petrarchan archetype was brought from Italy to England in the Renaissance by Wyatt and Surrey, who established the less rigid *abab cdcd efef gg* pattern, more suitable to English, a language less rich in rhyme than Italian. Shakespeare, Spenser, Sidney, Donne and Milton heightened the sonnet form, and introduced a wide variety of rhyme schemes, line length, and themes. By the time Wordsworth and Keats, the Rossettis, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Hopkins and Swinburne revived it in the 19th century, the English sonnet had a claim to its own autonomous tradition, much broader in themes and metrical variations than the still relatively rigid Italian sonnet. These British sonnet canons were immediately available to American poets for their formal training. Brooks, however, relates that the first book of poetry she became familiar with was *The Complete Paul Laurence Dunbar*. She was then about 11 and already wrote poems; shortly after, she introduced herself to the work of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen (*Report* 56 and 170-73).

16. Williams 218. Discussions of Brooks' sequence are also included in Blount; Melhem, Schweik, Folwell, and Smethurst.

17. On her "sonnet-ballad" Brooks wrote: "Its one claim to fame is that I invented it" (*Report* 186).

18. Brooks declared: "There are things colloquial and contemporary that can be done with the sonnet form" (*Report* 157).

19. A third sonneteer of this generation is Margaret Walker. Six sonnets close her first book of poetry, *For My People* (1942).

20. For instance, of the seven fourteen-line poems included in Hayden's *Collected Poems*, two ("Those Winter Sundays" and "Monet's 'Waterlilies'") do not appear to be sonnets, not having elements that would clearly identify them as such.

21. Especially with the emergence of the New Formalist movement in the 1980s. On this subject see Finch.

22. On Dove's numerology in this collection see Cushman.

23. Unpublished interview. The following comments on this text are from personal conversations with the poet.

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