

## AN INTERVIEW WITH GWENDOLYN BROOKS\*

**Q.** You've written in the poem "The Chicago Picasso," which appears in your latest book, *In the Mecca*, that "we must cook ourselves and style ourselves for Art, who/is a requiring courtesan." And in an earlier poem, "The Egg Boiler," the speaker says that the poet creates his poems "out of air . . . And sometimes weightlessness is much to bear." Let me ask you to comment on these passages. Are they fair statements of your feelings about art and the position of the poet?

**A.** Well, in "The Chicago Picasso," first of all I was asked to write a poem by the mayor of Chicago about that statue, and I hadn't seen it. I had only seen pictures of it, and the pictures looked very foolish, with those two little eyes and the long nose. And I don't know a great deal about art myself; I haven't studied it. So I really didn't feel qualified to discuss what Picasso was doing or had intended to do. So I decided to handle the situation from the standpoint of how most of us who are not art fanciers or well educated in things artistic respond to just the word "art" and to its manifestations. And I decided that most of us do not feel cozy with art, that it's not a thing you easily and chummily throw your arms around, that it's not a huggable

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\* Conducted by George Stavros on March 28, 1969, in Madison, Wisconsin. Unless otherwise acknowledged, quotations are from the following books of verse: *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945); *Annie Allen* (1949; for which Miss Brooks received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry); *The Bean Eaters* (1960); *Selected Poems* (1963); and *In the Mecca* (1968; nominated for the National Book Award in 1969). A novel, *Maud Martha*, was published in 1953 (reissued in 1967), and *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (for children) appeared in 1956. "We Real Cool," © 1959 by Gwendolyn Brooks, is from *Selected Poems* and is reprinted by permission of Harper & Row.

thing, as I said here: “Does man love Art? Man visits Art . . .” And we visit it, we pay special, nice, precise little calls on it. But those of us who have not grown up with or to it perhaps squirm a little in its presence. We feel that something is required of us that perhaps we aren’t altogether able to give. And it’s just a way of saying, “Art hurts.” Art is not an old shoe; it’s something that you have to work in the presence of. It urges voyages. You just can’t stay in your comfortable old grooves. You have to extend yourself. And it’s easier to stay at home and drink beer.

**Q.** Were you satirizing those people who do stay at home and drink beer?

**A.** No. No, I’m not satirizing them, because I’m too close to them to do that. I “stay at home” (mostly) and drink Pepsi-Cola. I can’t poke fun at them. But I do urge them—because after I saw the Picasso I admired it, and I’m glad it’s in Chicago—I do ask them to look at that statue or any other piece of art that might seem perplexing and consider it as we might consider flowers. We don’t ask a flower to give us any special reasons for its existence. We look at it and we are able to accept it as being something different, and different from ourselves. Who can explain a flower? But there it is. . . .

**Q.** I wonder if what you’re saying applies to the poet or what poetry is? Is poetry like a flower that one must look at and perhaps not explain but just accept because it is there?

**A.** I think a little more should be required of the poet than perhaps is required of the sculptor or the painter. The poet deals in words with which everyone is familiar. We all handle words. And I think the poet, if he wants to speak to anyone, is constrained to do something with those words so that they will (I hate to use the word) mean something, will be something that a reader may touch.

**Q.** Let me quote a passage from a statement you made in 1950 and see whether you think it is still valid.

**A.** Almost certainly not.

**Q.** You wrote, “But no real artist is going to be content with offering raw materials. The Negro poet’s most urgent duty, at present, is

to polish his technique, his way of presenting his truths and his beauties, that these may be more insinuating and, therefore, more overwhelming.”<sup>1</sup>

A. I still do feel that a poet has a duty to words, and that words can do wonderful things, and it's too bad to just let them lie there without doing anything with and for them. But let's see, I said something there about it being the *Negro* poet, and that's no longer the acceptable word; black is the word. [Reads:] “The Negro poet's most urgent duty, at present, is to polish his technique, his way of presenting his truths and his beauties . . .”—1950. You know, the world has just turned over since then, and at that time I felt that most strongly, most strongly—I was very impatient with black poets who just put down anything off the tops of their heads and left it there. But something different is happening now. Black poets today—when I say black poets I mean something different from that old phrase “Negro poets”—black poets are becoming increasingly aware of themselves and their blackness, as they would say, are interested in speaking to black people, and especially do they want to reach those people who would never go into a bookstore and buy a \$4.95 volume of poetry written by anyone. And I think this is very important, what they're doing. I didn't bring a new little book just off the press called *Don't Cry, Scream*, by Don Lee. Don Lee is an exception. He is changing all the time and is interested very much in what words can do, but there is also a brief to be put forward for those who are just very much excited about what is going on today and are determined to get that rich life and urgency down on paper. And I don't think we can turn our backs on those people and say airily, “That is not good poetry,” because for one thing the whole concept of what “good poetry” is is changing today, thank goodness. I think it's a very healthy thing.

Q. Would you feel then that technique and traditional form mean less to black poets writing today?

A. I think form should be considered after I speak about technique, because I believe that later on—who knows, ten years or twenty years from now—what I said back there in 1950 will again be justifiable; by then the rawness will have come to some maturation. Hopefully

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<sup>1</sup> *Phylon*, XI (1950), 312.

something will have been decided, and the poets will then have time to play more with their art.

Q. You mentioned Don Lee. Who else do you think is promising? I know you are very interested in encouraging the work of new poets.

A. Yes, there are some very interesting ones. James Cunningham, who is teaching, incidentally, at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is very good and desperately improving himself. Etheridge Knight. Walter Bradford (*Poems From Prison*) is another comer in this thing; Don Lee, whom I've mentioned. Carolyn Rodgers has put out one little book very much respected by the younger poets, those who know her, and is about to bring out another one. Jewel Latimore is about to bring out a third little book. Ebon Dooley. These are people who are very well known in Chicago, and their poetry is almost adored. I went to a reading of a little group of poets just a couple of weeks ago in the Affro-Arts Theater in Chicago, and it was packed with young people chiefly, who had come to hear poetry. This was unheard of a few years ago.

Q. How about poets who are more widely known? How do you fit LeRoi Jones among these writers?

A. Oh, he is their hero! He's their semi-model, the one they worship. I personally feel that he is one of the very good poets of today, and people hearing this who have no real knowledge of his work, but have just seen a couple of "inflammatory" passages in the newspapers, might say, "Well, what in the world do you mean? That's no poet." But he is a most talented person. His work works.

Q. What do you feel makes Jones' the voice of his generation?

A. Well, first of all he speaks to black people. They appreciate that. And he's uncompromising in his belief that the black people must subscribe to black solidarity and black self-consciousness.

Q. Is it his message or a poetic method that makes his poetry appeal particularly to blacks?

A. If it is a "method," it comes just from the sincere interest in his

own people and in his desire to reach them, to speak to them of what he believes is right.

Q. Is he employing any traditional forms, would you say, that may be associated with blacks, say, jazz rhythms . . . ?

A. Yes, he and a number of the other black poets such as Larry Neal are interested in supplying black poetry with some strains of black music which they feel is the true art of the black people. They worship Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, and whenever they can they try to push such music into their work. Sometimes the poetry seems to grow out of the music.

Q. You've said that poetry is an entirely different thing now from what it was twenty years ago. Do you feel, as some readers of yours have said, that your own poetry has abandoned its lyrical simplicity for an angrier, more polemical public voice?

A. Those are the things that people say who have absolutely no understanding of what's going on and no desire to understand. No, I have not abandoned beauty, or lyricism, and I certainly don't consider myself a polemical poet. I'm just a black poet, and I write about what I see, what interests me, and I'm seeing new things. Many things that I'm seeing now I was absolutely blind to before, but I don't sit down at the table and say, "Lyricism is out." No, I just continue to write about what confronts me . . . . I get an idea or an impression or I become very excited about something and I can hardly wait till the time comes when I can get to the paper. In the meantime I take notes, little bits of the idea I put down on paper, and when I'm ready to write I write as urgently and directly as I possibly can. And I don't go back to mythology or my little textbooks. I know about the textbooks, but I'm not concerned with them during the act of poetry-writing.

Q. In one of the "Sermons on the Warpland," you quote Ron Karenga to the effect that blackness "is our ultimate reality."

A. I firmly believe it.

Q. Then am I right in saying these "Sermons" are almost apocalyptic or prophetic? They seem rather . . . .

A. They're little addresses to black people, that's all.

Q. The last poem in the group ("The time/cracks into furious flower . . .") suggests that there will be a rebirth.

A. Yes. . . . There's something I'd like to say about my intent as a poet that you touched upon a moment ago and which has some connection with that business of abandoning lyricism, et cetera. Changes in my work—there is something different that I want to do. I want to write poems that will be non-compromising. I don't want to stop a concern with words doing good jobs, which has always been a concern of mine, but I want to write poems that will be meaningful to those people I described a while ago, things that will touch them.

Let me tell you about an experience I had in Chicago. I went around with a few of these poets that I've just mentioned. They go to housing projects and out in the parks sometimes, and just start reading their poetry; and right around the corner—across the street from the Wall in Chicago, the Wall of Respect. . . .

Q. That's the one you write about in "The Wall."

A. Yes. Well, right across the street is a tavern, and one Sunday afternoon, some of the poets decided to go in there and read poetry to just whoever was there. I went with them. One of them went to the front of the tavern and said, "Say, folks, we're going to lay some poetry on you." And there had been a couple of fights in there, people drinking, and all kinds of exciting things going on; and some of us wondered how they were going to respond to poetry. But the poets started reading their poetry, and before we knew it, people had turned around on their bar stools, with their drinks behind them, and were listening. Then they applauded. And I thought that was a wonderful thing, something new to me. I want to write poetry—and it won't be Ezra Pound poetry, as you can imagine—that will be exciting to such people. And I don't see why it can't be "good" poetry, putting quotes around "good."

Q. Are you suggesting that poetry should be restored to one of its original forms, that of the voice of the prophet, speaker to the people . . . ?

A. I don't want to be a prophet.

Q. . . . Or a social voice, a voice that can be heard. Do you think that poetry as it's now being written and heard by the people is becoming a social force?

A. Some of these people do want their poems to become "social forces"; others haven't, I believe, really thought of such a thing. And I am not writing poems with the idea that they are to become social forces. I don't feel that I care to direct myself in that way. I don't care to proceed from that intention.

Q. Let me ask you about the character portraits in your poetry and in your novel, *Maud Martha*. In *the Mecca*, your most recent volume, portrays life in a large city apartment building. *A Street in Bronzeville* gave similar vignettes of people in the city. The same, I think, can be said for all your work.

A. It's a fascination of mine to write about ghetto people there.

Q. Are your characters literally true to your experience or do you set out to change experience?

A. Some of them are, are invented, some of them are very real people. The people in a little poem called "The Vacant Lot" really existed and really did those things. For example: "Mrs. Coley's three-flat brick/Isn't here any more./All done with seeing her fat little form/Burst out of the basement door . . ." Really happened! That lot is still vacant on the street where I was raised. (My mother still lives on the street.) "Matthew Cole" is based on a man who roomed with my husband's aunt. And I remember him so well, I feel he really came through in the poem. "The Murder" really happened except for the fact that I said the boy's mother was gossiping down the street. She was working. (I guess I did her an injustice there.) "Obituary for a Living Lady" is based on a person I once knew very well.

Q. What about the characters in *Maud Martha*? I'm thinking of Clement Lewy, a boy who comes home every day to prepare his own meal while his mother is at work. Or the character of the young truck driver who finds that he cannot any longer abide his home life and one day simply abandons his family.

A. Again, not based on any specific persons.

Q. There is a quality of pathos about all of your characters and compassion in your treatment of them. Many of them make a pitiful attempt to be what they cannot be.

A. Some of them. Not all of them; some of them are very much interested in just the general events of their own lives.

Q. Let me suggest one of the frequently anthologized poems, “A Song in the Front Yard,” about a girl who “gets sick of a rose” and decides she’d like to leave the comfort and pleasure of the front yard to see what life would be like in the back.

A. Or out in the alley, where the charity children play, based on my own resentment when I was a little girl, having to come inside the front gate after nine—oh, earlier than that in my case.

Q. Isn’t there a yearning to get away in many such portraits?

A. I wouldn’t attach any heavy significance to that particular poem, because that was the lightest kind of a little poem.

Q. How about a poem like “Sadie and Maud,” a little lyric, I think in quatrains, contrasting Maud, who turns out to be a lonely brown “mouse,” and Sadie, who “scraped life/With a fine tooth comb”?

A. Those are imaginary characters, purely imaginary.

Q. What about “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” where the hero spends much of his morning in his lavender bath. . . .

A. . . . and in his closet, among his perfume bottles.

Q. And his neckties and umbrellas which are like “banners for some gathering war”?

A. Not his umbrellas; I think I called it hats “like bright umbrellas,” which implies that he is protecting himself under that fancy wideness . . . . You probably don’t remember the zoot-suiters; they were still around in the forties, in the early forties. They were not only black men but Puerto Ricans, too, who would wear these suits with the wide shoulders, and the pants did balloon out and then come down

to tapering ends, and they wore chains—perhaps you’ve seen them in the movies every once in a while. That’s the kind of person I was writing about in “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith.”

**Q.** You write about young men in other poems perhaps like that. “Patent Leather” was an early poem describing a character who talks about his “cool chick down on Calumet,” and he wears patent leather. Then there’s “Bronzeville Man with a Belt in the Back,” and more recently, “We Real Cool.”

**A.** In “Patent Leather,” a young woman is admiring a man (and that admiration is no longer popular) who slicks back his hair, so that it looks like it’s smooth as patent leather, and shiny. “Bronzeville Man with a Belt in the Back”—“belt in the back” was a popular style for men some years ago; and this man feels dapper and equal to the Fight that he must constantly wage, when he puts on such a suit.

**Q.** How about the seven pool players in the poem “We Real Cool”?

**A.** They have no pretensions to any glamor. They are supposedly dropouts, or at least they’re in the poolroom when they should possibly be in school, since they’re probably young enough, or at least those I saw were when I looked in a poolroom, and they . . . First of all, let me tell you how that’s supposed to be said, because there’s a reason why I set it out as I did. These are people who are essentially saying, “Kilroy is here. We are.” But they’re a little uncertain of the strength of their identity. [Reads:]

We real cool. We  
Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

The “We”—you’re supposed to stop after the “We” and think about their validity, and of course there’s no way for you to tell whether it should be said softly or not, I suppose, but I say it rather softly be-

cause I want to represent their basic uncertainty, which they don't bother to question every day, of course.

Q. Are you saying that the form of this poem, then, was determined by the colloquial rhythm you were trying to catch?

A. No, determined by my feeling about these boys, these young men.

Q. These short lines, then, are your own invention at this point? You don't have any literary model in mind; you're not thinking of Eliot or Pound or anybody in particular. . . ?

A. My gosh, no! I don't even admire Pound, but I do like, for instance, Eliot's "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, "Portrait of a Lady," and some others of those earlier poems. But nothing of the sort ever entered my mind. When I start writing a poem, I don't think about models or about what anybody else in the world has done.

Q. Let me ask you about some of your poems that are in specific forms, however—sonnets . . . .

A. I like to refer to that series of soldier sonnets.

Q. "Gay Chaps at the Bar."

A. A sonnet series in off-rhyme, because I felt it was an off-rhyme situation—I did think of that. 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 title 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 purposes throughout.

Q. Then you find it challenging to write in a particular form, like the sonnet, when the occasion seems to lend itself?

A. I really haven't written extensively in many forms. I've written

a little blank verse, and I have written many more sonnets than I'm sure I'll be writing in the future, although I still think there are things colloquial and contemporary that can be done with the sonnet form. And, let's see, free verse of course I'll be continuing to experiment with, dotting a little rhyme here and there sometimes as I did in part of *In the Mecca*. But I'm really not form-conscious. I don't worship villanelles, for instance.

**Q.** But then you have written formally, as you say, with sonnets, quatrains, the literary ballad, the folk ballad, "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed." Have you given up writing ballads?

**A.** I don't know. I might write other ballads, but they would be very different from those that I have written so far. I see myself chiefly writing free verse, experimenting with it as much as I can. The next book, I'm pretty sure, will be a book of small pieces of free verse.

**Q.** Do you consider the opening lines of *In the Mecca* as being typical of what you're trying to do in that poem? "Sit where the light corrupts your face./Miës Van der Rohe retires from grace./And the fair fables fall. . ."—and continuing. They're rather irregular free verse lines.

**A.** Sometimes I shall perhaps do something on that order. (You are, of course, speaking of the lines that follow those three.) But then I can't guarantee it. Suppose I thought of a poem that was free verse but didn't have such a variety of lengths of line; that would still be all right.

**Q.** A much-admired poem from *Annie Allen* is the one beginning "A light and diplomatic bird/Is lenient in my window tree./A quick dilemma of the leaves/Discloses twist and tact to me." Do you feel this is representative of your lyrical expression?

**A.** No, I wouldn't say that this is a representative poem, a poem that represents my usual sort of expression. This is to be considered as part of the story of *Annie Allen*. She's unhappy here, and she's looking out of the window at a tree near the window, and she sees a little bird, and she envies this bird because, of course, who knows?, the bird might have been as miserable as she was; but for all that she can tell he is able to absorb his own grief, and she has a little

fancy conceit here: she's saying that he's singing out of pity for her. "He can afford his sine die./He can afford to pity me . . . ." Tell me how to be well balanced; tell me how to "bleach" (sic) away the impurities. It's really a very simple little thing that has no comparison, say, to a poem like "kitchenette building." I believe I have written more "kitchenette building"-type poems than I have written about birds singing and feeling sorry for a girl who's temporarily overwhelmed by grief.

Q. What was behind the title, "The Anniad," in the first place? Is this a classical reference?

A. Well, the girl's name was Annie, and it was my little pompous pleasure to raise her to a height that she probably did not have, and I thought of the *Iliad* and said, I'll call this "The Anniad." At first, interestingly enough, I called her Hester Allen, and I wanted then to say "The Hesteriad," but I forget why I changed it to Annie . . . . I was fascinated by what words might do there in the poem. You can tell that it's labored, a poem that's very interested in the mysteries and magic of technique.

Q. Technique—you've written, for example, seven-line stanzas. Is there any reason for that?

A. Lucky seven, I guess. I like the number seven. That really is probably not the reason; I really can't remember exactly, but I imagine I finished one stanza, then decided that the rest of them would be just like that.

Q. I think the seventh stanza is typical of not only the meter but the imagery and symbolism: "And a man of tan engages/For the springtime of her pride,/Eats the green by easy stages,/Nibbles at the root beneath/With intimidating teeth./But no ravishment enrages./No dominion is defied."

A. What a pleasure it was to write that poem!

Q. Was what you're trying to do in a stanza like that different from what you had done up until that time, and why was it such a pleasure? The writing in general seems to differ from the earlier writing because it is more cryptic, more compressed. Is there any sense in

which you feel you were trying something totally new here in the poem?

A. No, not something new. I was just very conscious of every word; I wanted every phrase to be beautiful, and yet to contribute sanely to the whole, to the whole effect.

Q. Taking this as a typical stanza, you have indications of spring-time again, growth—greenery, “nibbles at the root beneath”; I imagine this is the root of their love . . . .

A. Yes, you understand how the young man is courting her, and it’s a—really, I could have said what I wanted to say in two lines, you know; I could have said, well, he came and he pursued her, but she was all ready for the outcome, in fact, eagerly awaiting it.

Q. I was just suggesting that the stanza seems closely and carefully textured.

A. Yes, and so was every stanza in that poem; every one was worked on and revised, tenderly cared for. More so than anything else I’ve written, and it is not a wild success; some of it just doesn’t come off. But it was enjoyable.

Q. Can you tell me what you’re doing next?

A. I’m very excited about what I’ll be doing in the immediate future, and I’m retiring from teaching so that I can give my real attention to working with poetry . . . . I imagine the future poems will seem more like some of the poems in *A Street in Bronzeville*.

Q. Please go on.

A. They’ll deal with people, that I know; and I won’t be trying to prove something as I write. I want them to be pictures of black life as I see it today. This of course would include people who do not think they’re thinking about the great fight that’s going on.

Q. From what you say about how you want your poetry not to teach anything but to stand on its own . . . .

A. Well, I don't say that I don't want it to teach anything; I'd merely say that when I write it, I don't have preaching in mind.

Q. Perhaps you agree with Ellison and Baldwin, who have attacked Wright's use of the protest novel, and believe that the protest novel should be replaced by something less social. Ellison said that the novelist ought to write on "the full range of American Negro humanity."<sup>2</sup>

A. No, I don't feel that way at all. I feel that the poet should write out of his own milieu. Now, I'm not "full-range" qualified, I less than some others perhaps, less than a poet like Margaret Walker, who knows much more than I do about everything. But I am in the black community; I see what's going on there. I talk with these people. I know how many of them feel. I am not in the banker's community. I'm not acquainted, that I know of, with any Wall Street high influences—people who run the country, as they say. So therefore I would not attempt to write about them. Perhaps Ralph Ellison is acquainted with every aspect of American life; I can merely say that I'm not, so therefore I can't write about America inclusively. But that's all right—I'm not sorry. You know, William Faulkner felt that if he just stayed with Yoknapatawpha County he was all right, and that in just concentrating on that single area—and that single multiplicity!—of life, that that would be "general" enough for his purposes.

I started out talking about Bronzeville, but Bronzeville's almost meaningless by now, I suppose, since Bronzeville has spread and spread and spread all over. Bronzeville, incidentally, was not my own title. That was invented by the *Chicago Defender* long, long ago to refer to the then black area.

Q. Is it still called that?

A. Once in a while you'll see on a store "Bronzeville Tailor Shop" or something like that, but almost nobody talks about Bronzeville.

Q. It's not a term as specific as Harlem in New York City, for example.

A. No.

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<sup>2</sup> *Shadow and Act*, quoted in Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy, eds., *Images of the Negro in American Literature* (Chicago, 1966), p. 20.

Q. I know you've been living in Chicago most of your life and consider yourself a Chicago native, so there's a great feeling of place in your poetry—in *Maud Martha*, too. Do you try to evoke place in your work?

A. No, I start with the people. For instance, *Maud Martha* goes to the Regal Theater, which is almost dead now, but had a great history in Chicago. She looks at the people; she looks at the star; she looks at the people coming out of the theater. But suffice it to say that I don't start with the landmarks.

Q. A number of your poems, too, reflect your family life, certainly your mother, and you have written poems about motherhood. "The Motherhood" is part of the "Annie Allen" series. It's extremely effective, I think. Do you feel that there is much of your experience as a mother which has gone into those poems?

A. Chiefly my experience, not my own mother's experience.

Q. Your own experience as a mother, yes. I'm thinking of poems such as those beginning "People who have no children can be hard" or "What shall I give my children? who are poor,/Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land,/. . . my sweetest lepers" or ". . . shall I prime my children, pray, to pray?"

A. Yes, all questions I would ask of myself. My mother certainly wouldn't ask such a question of herself, that last one. She feels firmly that you must pray, and that only good can come of it.

Q. What of religion in your poems? I noticed that two or three of your references to men of the church are at least uncomplimentary. For example, there's Prophet Williams in *In the Mecca*—a faith healer.

A. Yes, he was based on an actual man that I worked for in the Mecca building. Haven't I told that story? Well, when I was nineteen, and had just gotten out of junior college, I went to the Illinois State Employment Service to get a job. They sent me to the Mecca building to a spiritual adviser, and he had a fantastic practice, very lucrative. He had us bottling medicine as well as answering letters. Not real medicine, but love charms and stuff like that he called it,

and I delivered it through the building; that was my introduction to the Mecca building. You've probably heard of the Mecca. John Bartlow Martin has written about it.

Q. Let me ask you about your novel, now that we've raised that question. It's been described as poetic prose. What did you set out to do in writing *Maud Martha*?

A. Well, I wanted to give a picture of a girl growing up—a black girl growing up in Chicago, and of course much of it is wrenched from my own life and twisted, but about its being poetic in parts, I suppose that could hardly be avoided, if it is a thing to be avoided, because even in writing prose I find myself weighing the possibilities of every word just as I do in a poem. This was true when I used to write reviews, too.

Q. Did you have any form in mind? I'd like to know how you decided upon the form of the novel—the small chapters, about thirty-four of them, the small prose sections fitting together into something like a mosaic.

A. Well, I had first written a few tiny stories, and I felt that they would mesh, and I centered them and the others around one character. If there is a form I would say it was imposed, at least in the beginning, when I started with those segments, or vignettes.

Q. Would it then be fair to say that the unity of the novel is simply the central point of view of Maud Martha herself as she grows up?

A. Yes, certainly.

Q. Have you given any thought to writing another novel?

A. No, because I don't feel that that is my category. No.

Q. Have you given any thought to writing a play?

A. Yes, small verse plays that will not be acted at all, but will just be published as poems, really. That doesn't mean that I've begun them, but they're in my mind. I do want to do that someday.

Q. Do you feel that writing in this form will help you develop different themes?

A. Well, if I can be said to be “using themes,” I believe that the small verse plays would concern themselves with those same themes. I see no reason why the form should dictate different subjects. No, I believe I’ll go right on writing about black people as people, and not “polemically,” either.

Q. I meant to suggest that perhaps a more explicit social theme than you’re willing to impose upon your poetry could be presented in, say, the drama. I’m thinking of the plays of Jones and Baldwin.

A. Well, that would depend, I believe, upon the climate of America—if it changes, well, we all have to respond to the changes; that’s what black people are doing now.

Q. How do you feel about that climate in regard to what the black writer is doing now? Do you think his task is becoming easier, more difficult, more important?

A. I think it is the task or job or responsibility or pleasure or pride of any writer to respond to his climate. You write about what is in the world. I think I would be silly, and so would LeRoi Jones, to sit down now under the trees and write about the Victorian age, unless there’s some special reference we could make to what’s going on now.

Q. Then your poems about Malcolm X and Medgar Evers, for example, are part of a continuing interest in poetry that involved you with matters of the day. Is that correct?

A. No, I didn’t involve myself with Medgar Evers’ assassination—I merely reacted to it, and I described what he had done, the effects he had had on the assaulting elements of his society, and I ended, most beautifully, I thought: “People said that /he was holding clean globes in his hands.”

Q. What did you mean when you said he had departed from “Old styles, old tempos, all the engagement of/the day—the sedate, the regulated fray . . .”?

A. [Reads:] “. . . the antique light, the Moral rose, old gusts,/tight whistlings from the past, the mothballs/in the Love at last our man forswore.” He just up and decided he wasn’t going to have anything else to do with the stale traditions of the past and the hindrances and restrictions that American response to horrors had been concerned with.

Q. In other words, an impatience with injustice and continuing oppression.

A. Yes, he decided he would just “have none” of it anymore and would do something about righting things for his people.

Q. In your poem “The Wall,” which accompanies the other dedication, “The Chicago Picasso,” you write about “legislatures/of ploy and scruple and practical gelatin.” Can you explain what you meant by that?

A. [Reads:] “On Forty-third and Langley/black furnaces resent ancient/legislatures”—first of all, the “black furnaces” are the very excited people that were out there in the street that day, and they resented the restrictions and the injustices—legal injustices, too—that had been visited upon them through centuries, hence “ancient.” “Ploy”; “scruple”; “practical gelatin”—*that is the injustice of a gelatinous nature that we are exposed to and for which we are told, in effect, that this is just something that has to be: “You can see that, can’t you, folks? It’s the practical way of doing things.”* Expert deceit.

Q. Is there a controlled anger in the way you characterize the legislature?

A. Yes, I believe there’s a controlled anger here! “Legislatures,” however, does not refer to Washington men or Springfield men! (Perhaps you would have liked it better if I’d said “legislatings.”)

Q. I’m trying to press the point that your poetry in its most recent form is more socially aware than in the earlier work.

A. Yes, although many people hated *The Bean Eaters*; such people as would accuse me of forsaking lyricism for polemics, despised *The Bean Eaters* because they said that it was “getting too social. Watch

it, Miss Brooks!" [Laughs] They didn't like "The Lovers of the Poor"; they didn't like "The *Chicago Defender* Sends a Man to Little Rock: Fall, 1957," which I don't care too much about—or at least I'd like to remove that last line ["The loveliest lynchee was our Lord"].

*Q.* How do you feel about some of your other poems, now that you've mentioned those with specific social commentary? Is it fair to classify them in the same way—for example, the "Beverly Hills, Chicago" poem or "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon"?

*A.* I couldn't put these poems in a second little book, under the title "Social Poems," "Social Speech." I just feel that they're poems. I think that the wonderment or resentment is inside the person who is making the accusation, if it is an accusation, and usually when people talk about the social content of the poems, they are accusing you of doing something dastardly.

*Q.* I didn't mean to do that. But one more point. You wrote in 1950 that poetry must do double duty: "At the present time, poets who happen also to be Negroes are twice-tried. They have to write poetry, and they have to remember that they are Negroes." Then several lines later: "*They are likely to find significances in those subjects not instantly obvious to their fairer fellows. The raindrop may seem to them to represent racial tears . . . . The golden sun might remind them that they are burning.*"<sup>3</sup>

*A.* That's carrying it a stretch too far, as poets will do, I suppose; but at least in Chicago we have had spirited conversations about whether a black poet has the right to deal with trees, to concern himself with trees. And one of the things that I've always said was, certainly, certainly a black poet may be involved in a concern for trees, if only because when he looks at one he thinks of how his ancestors have been lynched thereon. Well, that's a way of saying that in the black experience *everything* is important just as it is in the white experience.

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<sup>3</sup> Langston Hughes, ed., *New Negro Poets U.S.A.* (Bloomington, Ind., 1964), p. 13.

Q. And it can be important in its own right, can't it? It is, of course, possible for anyone to look at a tree and see just a tree, or . . . ?

A. It is possible, but if a black person looks long enough, he just might think of other things that a white person might not . . . especially if you've seen some of the pictures in *Jet* magazine of what has happened on some of those trees—horrific.

Q. This comes around to what we were talking about at the beginning, that the black writer has more to see because perhaps more has happened to him.

A. That's probably true. He has the American experience and he also has the black experience; so he's very rich.