

# Satin-Legs Smith and a Mississippi Mother

## Dissections of Habitus in Gwendolyn Brooks

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To read African American poetry with the help of Pierre Bourdieu is a challenge in at least three ways: With regard to his field theory, there is a tension between a genre that, since the end of the 19th century, seems most closely positioned toward the pole of autonomous literature on the one hand, and an oppressed group whose literature has only slowly emancipated itself from the economic dependence of a market dominated by whites, on the other. This in itself is a curious situation that warrants further elaboration, but to continue for a moment with the implications suggested by Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production*, one may also wonder to what extent poetry can provide the researcher with enough of a fictional world to detect homologies between the world of the author and the world of the text. The second task then is to show that poetry, with its traditionally more limited scope of the social, may yet contribute to a detailed analysis of it. A third challenge is not limited to poetry and concerns a possible connection between a sociology of the literary (field) and a literary (text) sociology: If the struggles for a position in the literary field shape a literary text so that literary criticism can overcome "the opposition between internal analysis (text) and external analysis (context)" (Bourdieu, "Passport" 245), how does that shape the text's vision of the social? Will the vision be particularly acute or will there be blind spots depending on the struggles – or are these two possible ways to use Bourdieu for literary analysis separate from each other?

I will not be able to provide full-fledged answers to the third challenge, but in the following I want to elaborate on it via an examination of poetry. I will develop my sense that while we may find literary insights into the social that we may ‘see’ more easily with the help of concepts such as symbolic violence, we and the text may also have blind spots that are possibly connected with the struggles we, at our time, and the text are engaged in. There is always, in one of Bourdieu’s frequently repeated phrase, “vision and division” (“The Social Space” 726; “Eine sanfte Gewalt” 227), and the reason they come to light through literature is that they are not synchronized when critics look at older texts. To demonstrate this, I have chosen two poems by Gwendolyn Brooks that seem well suited to make this argument because, first, they so clearly present a psycho-sociological analysis of an almost Bourdieusian kind. Secondly, both poems, though quite different in content and technique, have been read as social critique, directed at forms of domination based on race and gender, but they have also been accused of catering to white tastes (cf. Bryant 114-15). I would like to explore the plausibility of these readings and relate them back to the vision and division that may be found in them.

“The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” from Brooks’s first volume of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), might be called a sociological dissection of the habitus of a lower-class black man from Chicago in the 1940s. Its subject matter and modernist form bear the traces of Brooks’s socialization in the field of poetry. Like other African American poets at that time, such as Robert Hayden or Melvin Tolson, Brooks drew on the poetic experiments associated with Modernism on the one hand and the Harlem Renaissance on the other. In her case, James Weldon Johnson advised her to read T. S. Eliot (Kent, *A Life* 26), Langston Hughes encouraged her to turn to African American street life as subject matter for poetry (40), and Richard Wright established a contact with the publisher Harper & Brothers (62) and suggested an important revision of the initial manuscript: Without “Satin-Legs,” the collection lacked “one real long good [poem]” to pull everything together, he felt (63). He also thought the opening poem “the mother” to be weak since abortion was not a fit subject for poetry.<sup>1</sup>

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1 In contrast, cf. Harold Bloom, who devotes a large section of his chapter on Gwendolyn Brooks to “the mother” (15-16).

These names do not simply denote individuals but are important to understand the relations and dynamics in African American literature in the early 1940s: More than is the case for the novel or drama and theater, the process of consecration in poetry in the 19th and 20th centuries has often happened through single, charismatic figures or small ‘schools’ of poetry. Since there is so little money to be made with poems, strong institutionalized market mechanisms are missing before the entry of the university into the field of poetry. Thus, 19th-century poetry was dominated by figures such as Henry W. Longfellow or James Russell Lowell; the beginning of the 20th century saw the rise of “heretics” such as T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound who, by the mid-1940s, were well on their way to consecration themselves: Eliot received the Nobel Prize in 1954, Pound the Bollingen Prize in 1972. Though both poets had made efforts to reach a larger public (through drama, criticism, and not least Pound’s radio speeches), their poetry was initially directed against both Romantic personal expression and Victorian moral guidance in poetry. Against these popular forms, they advocated a detachment created by impersonal voices, impersonations or masks, and by irony.

Hughes and Wright are important for Brooks because of their self-confident embrace of urban African American subject matter, and perhaps also for their difficult relations with political organizations on the left, particularly the Communist Party. Due to the political developments of the 1930s and 40s, African Americans found their emancipatory struggles enmeshed with a number of groups, organizations, and institutions of the left in both politics and culture. These did not prescribe a common aesthetic – in fact, though there was a widespread belief in the importance of literature for racial emancipation (as there was in the Harlem Renaissance), there was no dominating doctrine about the relation between the two realms.

Langston Hughes’s poetry, like T. S. Eliot’s, challenged 19th-century sensibilities, but it did so primarily through the inclusion of urban African American experiences and vernacular forms, such as the Blues, which inspired his poetic experiments. When Hughes wrote “I, too, sing America,” he claimed an American heritage that goes back to Walt Whitman. To insist on the social responsibility of literature to include those previously excluded is not a tradition only upheld by racial minorities, but one that can also claim a ‘white’ genealogy. For reasons too complex to explain here, the American literary field always had a strong bias toward a heteronomy

embraced as necessary to a social function of literature. To be recognized as an important element of a democratic culture necessitates a certain popularity, and this leads to a greater permeability between popular forms produced for a mass audience and complex artistic forms produced for a limited audience: “[T]aste levels and aesthetic forms were never separated as categorically as in Europe” (Fluck 53).

Any poet entering the subfield of poetry in the 1940s would have felt the strong current of Modernism becoming the new accepted way to write. Its formal elements thus lose their exclusivity and become available for projects of a more politically conscious and socially responsive kind, such as explorations of the plight of workers or of urban low life. However, Hughes as a possible model and Wright as a direct supporter also point to a possible problem: Even though Hughes himself is often quite balanced with regard to the attention he gives to men and women, Wright’s comment on “the mother” points to a predominantly masculine stance in literary explorations of the ghetto where women hardly appear as mothers and are most likely to appear as Blues singers or prostitutes.

The opening lines of “Satin-Legs” at once position the speaker within the field as described above. With Latinate words and irony at Smith’s expense, the speaker establishes a defamiliarizing stance toward both the flashy male protagonist and his female lovers in their world of poverty and prostitution. The detached voice of a participant observer – someone familiar with the world of her objects of study yet distant enough to observe, analyze, and explain them – then begins to describe the Sunday routine of Satin-Legs with particular attention to his tastes in scents, clothes, music, movies, food, and finally women: He prefers strong aromatic lotions and oils to more subtle scents of flowers, cannot think of gardening as an aesthetic or educational occupation, likes colorful, spectacular clothes, has never heard classical music and probably cannot understand it, ritually boos white lovers in movies, and appreciates both in his food and in his women all the explicit signs that they will nourish his physical and sexual hunger. His taste is a marker of race, class, and gender; it has been formed by Smith’s individual life trajectory (his upbringing in the rural South, his migration to Chicago, his life in Bronzeville), as well as by the history of his ancestors, leading back to slavery. The way this socialization has shaped his taste can also be deduced from the poem: The reason why Smith likes strong smells and loud colors and why subtleties and understatement are

lost on him is that his senses are numbed by his environment. His partial blind- and deafness (“he sees and does not see,” “he hears and does not hear” 13) is a defense against the thwarted ambitions and betrayed promises, the misery and poverty that have surrounded him all his life. By contrast, a taste for “quiet arts” (15) needs education and material comfort over a couple of generations.

Taste then is a social, not an individual fact. It emerges as a set of aesthetic preferences at the intersection of social norms and economic and political interests – with this, Brooks anticipates a number of central claims Bourdieu formulates in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979/1984): Taste is “the product of upbringing and education” (xxiv) and “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (xxx). Smith’s taste arises out of the limits of his socialization (a lack of education, poverty) and thus mirrors and marks these limits while also being a means of momentarily transcending or perhaps forgetting them.

In the poem, these insights are brought forward in defense of Smith – or so it seems, initially. They are made, as the reader suddenly discovers in line 12, in an address to a (plural) “you” who advocate a very different taste: “You” appear to be so critical of Smith’s use of heavily scented bath oils that they are suspected of wanting to deny him these pleasures. Theirs is a restrained, unpretentious middle-class taste, as opposed to Smith’s loud expressiveness: Contrasts provided in the poem are those between the marble of sculpture vs. the flesh of his body; between Saint-Saëns, Grieg, Tchaikovsky, and Brahms vs. the Blues; between a “straight tradition” (11), “the quiet arts of compromise” (15), and “middle grace” (15) on the one hand and “baroque, / Rococo” (13) and “affable extremes” (15) on the other. There are two passages where the criticism of extravagance is given a more specific socio-historical context: One is the war-time insistence on restraint in consumption as a patriotic service, particularly with regard to the zoot suit, extensively described as “wonder-suits in yellow and in wine, / Sarcastic green and zebra-striped cobalt” (12); the second is a reflection on gardening as part of social reform in a progressivist style when we are entering the minds of “you”: “might his happiest / Alternative (you muse) be, after all, / A bit of gentle garden in the best / Of taste and straight tradition?” (11). Toward the end of the poem, when the description of his taste

in women and food converges in terms of excess and lack of control, we know that aesthetic values are also seen as moral values: The disapproval of Smith's tastes by "you" is also a disapproval of him as a man.

It is this implied moral condemnation of Smith that is rejected by a defense of his taste. But while the sociological explanations refute any psychologizing charges of innate aesthetic and moral deficiencies, they do not establish an idea about the value of that taste – it simply is what it is. In today's parlance we would probably say: It is part of his identity and thus no longer subject to discussions of value. This is by now a widespread assumption in cultural studies, sometimes accredited to Bourdieu.<sup>2</sup> What we realize through the poem is the fact that aesthetic relativism – all tastes being equally valuable – stands in an uneasy relation to social reforms tied to education in taste: school gardening, free or subsidized concerts, music and art lessons in school, etc.: If tastes arising from wealth and those arising from poverty are considered equally valuable they do not provide an angle to argue for change.<sup>3</sup> If, however, some tastes, and by implication some forms of art (or food, or music, or clothes), are regarded as better than others, this is elitist in its value judgment (because the taste is likely to be that of the dominant social formation) but at the same time this assumption can be consistently used to argue for an education of taste as part of social reform. This is the position "you" hold and that is refuted by the speaker – so what is the poem's stance? That we should at least consider social change is made clear in the most explicitly political passage of the poem:

Ah, there is little hope. You might as well—  
Unless you care to set the world a-boil  
And do a lot of equalizing things,  
Remove a little ermine, say, from kings,

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- 2 Cf. During: "Bourdieu has been important to cultural studies [...] because, for him, cultural production [...] has particular functions and particular laws which [...] demystify the old opposition between 'high' and 'low' or, to put this more accurately, mean that high art has no more inherent value than other forms of cultural production." (89)
- 3 Cf. Honneth on Bourdieu in *Die Tageszeitung*. The problem is the foundation of norms, which, Bourdieu would argue, are never "universals" but historical outcomes of power struggles.

Shake hands with paupers and appoint them men,  
 For instance—certainly you might as well  
 Leave him his lotion, lavender and oil. (11-12)

Whatever the stance on revolution, we understand that the relativist position suggested at the end is not borne by a genuine respect for men like Smith, nor by the belief that the strong scents of lotions and oils Smith prefers and the flowers “you” prefer are equally valuable. It is rather a cop-out, a cheap solution once one realizes that only a redistribution of wealth, power, and access to education can change the differences in taste and thus the hierarchies demarcated by them. Therefore, an exploration of taste, when tied to the attempt to change it, is a far more radical endeavor than we all (the speaker, “you,” and the reader) may have thought. Aesthetic preferences are not played out in a world apart from politics and economics but tied to them. Whosoever is not prepared for radical change may well “[I]eave him” his oil (12). Why not stop then? Since the poem now asks the reader explicitly to “proceed” and “inspect” Smith more closely (12), it seems more interested in exploring his taste than it is in change.

There is no critical consensus as to the politics of this poem, and the divisions begin, understandably, with the question of who is addressed. The majority of critics initially regarded the addressee with the bourgeois taste and reformist intentions to be white (cf. Bolden 37; Miller 103-04; Smith 36; Stanford 164). Recently it has been conceded that these attitudes may have been found amongst a black middle and upper class as well. Marsha Bryant, for instance, states: “Brooks interrogates both her middle-class black readers’ notions of respectability and her liberal white readers’ fascination with black urban life, resisting their respective tendencies to view Smith as either a bad example or a representative figure” (117). On the other end of the spectrum, Bill Mullen believes the “you” to be the black strivers deeming themselves to be above Smith and “straining to escape its [poverty’s] mark” (163).

Historically, with regard to a real as well as an implied audience, everything is possible. As Brooks’s contemporaries Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake point out in their sociological study *Black Metropolis* (1945), there had been an influx of African American migrants to Chicago in the last decades of the 19th century. In the interviews conducted by Drake these early migrants claimed, probably casting the past in an all-too-rosy light,

that there had been plenty of opportunities for work and almost no racism before a second wave of migrants from the South arrived in the so-called Great Migration. Throughout the beginning of the 20th century, there were tensions within the black population of Chicago between the old arrivals and the newcomers: As so often in migrant history, the people who arrived earlier felt their achievements of integration threatened by the newcomers (cf. Cayton and Drake 174-213). The more established and ‘respectable’ black middle and upper class might plausibly constitute the addressee of the poet; perhaps the repeated lines “you forget” (11) support the idea that there are people who could know the conditions Smith springs from if they would only care to remember.

On the other hand, the repeated “you forget” after the mentioning of baroque and rococo is also a general reminder that taste is historical and that what they now look down upon was once an acceptable style cherished by social elites. This reading does not have to assume an exclusively black readership. It is also possible to read Brooks’s poem as imagining a “you” consisting of black and white readers united by the belief in a “straight,” modest, unpretentious style as both aesthetically and morally superior to Smith’s. Likewise, it is not necessary to distinguish between an interest in either respectability or voyeurism along racial lines, as Bryant does: The allusions to Progressivist reform and “counsels on control” (15) allow us to assign the respectable taste to whites as well. Likewise, as Christopher Bigsby points out in a short history of the term “liberal” in the context of *The Second Black Renaissance*, when pertaining to a belief in reform rather than more radical change “liberal” may refer equally to Blacks and whites (6) – just as the critique of the liberal position as ineffectual was uttered by whites (Edmund Wilson) and Blacks (Richard Wright) alike (17-18). The lines above might well be read as directed toward whites who need to understand that human worth and dignity is a right and not a privilege. Or, like Richard Wright’s poem “Child of the Dead and Forgotten Gods,” as impatient with a liberal position of primarily whites but also Blacks who believe that the situation in urban African American ghettos can be improved by gentle moral and aesthetic education. Or as ridiculing the black bourgeois who have reduced race rebellion to “consumer preference” (Mullen 164).

A concomitant divisive issue is the poem’s stance toward black vernacular culture and its representative. There is a tendency to see Smith either as

hampered and constrained by circumstances, which are thereby condemned, or else as celebrated for his vitality and triumph over circumstances. A crucial instance is a judgment about Smith's pursuit of love and sex where, clearly, taste and morality converge. For R. Baxter Miller, Smith's date with the "ironic 'lady'" (106) is not celebratory but ironic. He also finds the juxtaposition of the Blues with 19th-century composers ironic and believes that the poem ultimately does not approve of Smith's preferences and escapism. He sees a discrepancy between Brooks's humanist values and a man who cannot escape his demeaning environment and becomes absurd in the end. A more recent example is Bill Mullen's reading, likewise pointing to "an ironic play of elements" at the end of the poem, comprising sex and mass-marketed food (the "Woolworth mignonette" 16) in a rewriting of Wright's *Bigger* Thomas: "Smith is an acclimated and unalienated *Bigger* blindly and ravenously at home among the comestibles." (166)

According to Judith Saunders, however, "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" is rather a reworking of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" – with Brooks alluding to Eliot's poem throughout, establishing an ironic contrast between "a man of low status and low income who nevertheless manages his life more competently than does his wealthy, high-status counterpart in Eliot's poem" (16). Saunders concludes: "The effect of allusion in Brooks's poem, finally, is to compel appreciation of Smith's un-subdued vitality. Refusing to succumb to despair or self-pity, even in an environment that would excuse such surrender, Smith triumphantly reverses nearly every one of Prufrock's failures." (17) Though Saunders also wants to read the poem as "an unmistakable indictment of the economic and social system responsible for Smith's circumstances" (16), the final assessment of its overall effect approaches current trends in psychology and sociology concerned with "resilience" – the power to withstand otherwise devastating circumstances. A celebration of someone who triumphs in the face of poverty and deprivation is not easy to reconcile with social criticism. Saunders wants to be careful not to read a devaluation of African American popular culture into Brooks's poem. Miller from a humanist point of view and Mullen from a Marxist one want to condemn the conditions (including the insufficient artistic choices available) that severely limit men like Smith in either their humanity or in their consciousness of racial and class identity.

These different readings are possible not just because of some general ambiguity but because of a logical inconsistency at the core of the poem, linked to a particular use of Modernist aesthetics for which Gwendolyn Brooks was recognized and praised: her tight control over meter and rhyme, latinate words, alliterations, and, tied to it, an all-pervasive irony resulting from the discrepancy of complex poetic means and subject matter. Irony is important here because it is a rhetorical means of division, of inclusion and exclusion: It separates people who can discern what is really meant as opposed to those who only understand what is said. In Eliot's "Prufrock," different layers of irony appeal to a readership ready to support the avant-gardist onslaught against the 19th century: These readers acknowledge the self-ironic, disillusioned, and dispassionate stance of the aging Prufrock but they will not make the mistake of identifying themselves with that voice – and the poem, of course, does not ask them to. While irony leading to satire is part of social critique with a clear target, the more diffuse irony of "Prufrock" is not easy to reconcile with social engagement. In Brooks's poem, it seems at times as though "you" is the target of satire, but since Smith is also treated with ironic detachment, neither the target nor the speaking position can easily be identified. This is irritating because the poem engages in normative discussions and thus demands a standpoint.

Two motifs can be examined to illustrate this further: The recurring motif of hunger and need for food could be read as suggesting that even though Smith is able to "go out full" (15) at Joe's Eats, he is not satisfied on a deeper level. There is a diffuse need for scent ("There must be scent, somehow there must be some" 11), as well as a general neediness: "People are so in need, in need of help. / People want so much that they do not know" (12). On his way to breakfast, Smith "swallows sunshine with a secret yelp" (13); in the street there are "men estranged / From music and from wonder and from joy / But far familiar with the guiding awe / Of foodlessness" (14). What a man can bring to music includes "what he ate / For breakfast—and for dinner twenty years / Ago last autumn: all his skipped desserts" (14). In the cinema, "it is sin / For his eye to eat of" (15) the whiteness of the heroine – announcing the convergence of sexual and dietary nourishment at the end. We may conclude from these examples that even though Smith is a kind of performance artist himself, his aesthetic

hunger is not satisfied – his performance only serves the purpose of gratifying his hunger for food and sex.<sup>4</sup>

Another motif occurring throughout the poem which not only describes Smith but also seems to judge him is the faux pomp of an anachronistic, vaguely medieval kind. It is announced in the opening lines: “Inamoratas, with an approbation, / Bestowed his title. Blessed his inclination” (10) and continues with words like “royal” and “reign,” the comparison of his closet to a “vault / Whose glory is not diamonds, not pearls, / Not silver plate with just enough dull shine” (12), and the comparison of his “hysterical ties” with “narrow banners for some gathering war” (12). It might be too much to compare his layers of clothing with an armor, but when he “Squires his lady to dinner”, the woman wearing “Queen Lace stockings,” (15) we are back with the discrepant image of aristocrats in the ghetto which ridicules both the squire and his lady. Confusingly, the above-quoted temptation to do equalizing things is also phrased in terms from that semantic field: “Remove a little ermine, say, from kings, / Shake hands with paupers and appoint them men” (12). It is confusing because Smith has been described as both “king” and “pauper,” with one figurative gesture of the poem being to remove his royal pretensions and reveal his nakedness underneath for everyone to see.

Perhaps the great distance that results from the many ironies surrounding Smith reflects Brooks’s social distance to him in class and gender. Her portraits of black women (as in the poems “the mother,” “hunchback girl: she thinks of heaven,” or “a song in the front yard”) carefully interweave inside and outside, depicting the life of the mind in a particular environment. However, Brooks does not shy away from portraying the minds of men, too: In *A Street in Bronzeville*, “Satin-Legs” is balanced by “Negro Hero,” a monologue by a soldier who is acutely aware of the hypocrisies

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4 Furthermore, the claim that the men in the street are “estranged / From music” (14) also devalues the choices on offer in the ghetto, such as the Blues. Here as in other places we may suspect that the speaker, though explaining Smith’s taste, is secretly in agreement with “you” that Smith’s choices are inappropriate and deplorable. Formally, the poem certainly favors “control” which can be detected in tightly composed lines with internal rhymes and alliterations such as: “He waits a moment, he designs his reign, / That no performance may be plain or vain” (10).

involved in fighting a war in a segregated army for democracy elsewhere. Of all characters in the volume, it is Satin-Legs – the would-be artist and designer, the one still hungry for aesthetic experience – who is almost exclusively characterized with regard to his appearance and whose inner life is strangely vague and empty: “the pasts of his ancestors lean against / Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity.” (14) He possesses no self-consciousness and thus no race- or class-consciousness. Instead, he has been made to think that “he walks most powerfully alone, / That everything is—simply what it is” (15). He is not consciously affected by the misery of his environment, he is neither prefiguring a black aesthetic for the poet, nor is he a possible agent of social change – he is no threat to the social order. It is in lieu of his blurred vision and fogged mind that the poet can use his performance for a display of her skills in portraiture without revealing her own stance. Ironically, the skillful portrait of a hollow figure becomes a centerpiece to the volume while leaving open a central question, namely that of the relation between literature and expressive culture on the one hand, and political action on the other.

Brooks received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1946 and the first Pulitzer ever awarded to an African American for her second volume, *Annie Allen*, in 1950. Through these prizes, she developed a reputation that allowed for a more powerful stance toward literary institutions, such as publishing houses, universities, editors, that were, of course, still predominantly white. This may be seen in a poem that goes way beyond the portrayal of poor urban Blacks and crosses the color-line to offer a socio-psychological portrait of a white woman. Equally daring is its allusion to a spectacular instance of racism in the South, which, because of its media coverage, shook a national public. Brooks’s “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” (1960) juxtaposes and parallelizes Mamie Till, mother of Emmett Till, and Carolyn Bryant, the woman Till had allegedly whistled at. Emmett was tortured and killed by Bryant’s husband and his half-brother. In 1960, most people reading Brooks could be assumed to know about Till and the trial, in which the murderers were acquitted (cf. *Metress*). Contrary to what one might expect from the title, the first poem is actually about Carolyn, followed by only four broken lines called “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” which attempt to capture a psychological state by using the colors black, gray and red to express the inner turmoil of Mamie Till. While an image of her state of mind

is the last thing we are left with, she is not given a voice and thus the poem contrasts markedly with the first, much longer one.

Taken together, these aesthetic choices have irritated critics with regard to their moral implications. The discussions about the long poem revolve around the question to what extent Brooks sympathizes with Carolyn and portrays her as a victim of a racist patriarchal order: Does the poem follow a process of gradual awakening, how far does this awakening approach a realization of complicity and guilt, and is this enough to be morally and politically satisfying? An example of a harsh judgment is George E. Kent, who, in 1981, criticized Brooks for considering “a white woman, who was the source of the lynching of an early adolescent Black boy, simply as mother” (“Aesthetic Values” 90). A more recent article concludes instead: “Brooks’s apparent sympathy for the white woman as the pawn of dominating white men is subverted as she deconstructs the romance within the woman’s mind and thereby holds the woman responsible for her complicity in the myth, and consequently, in the murder.” (McKibbin 667)

In this poem, ambiguity results from a technique that often fuses the voice of the protagonist, Carolyn, with the voice of the poet in such a way that we can never be sure to what extent the insights about the complex power relations encompassing race and gender are supposed to belong to Carolyn Bryant, or rather only to the poet. What Brooks thus achieves is to illuminate the limits of insights into the very structures of oppression we are socialized into – to speak with Bourdieu: insights into the ways in which habitus prepares people to be susceptible and respond to symbolic violence. In particular, the poem dramatizes the simultaneity of a cognitive process and bodily practices: While Carolyn’s thoughts discover discrepancies between the events of the lynching and the justifying narratives, she is also practicing and enacting consent with her role as a Southern woman while doing household work. But we may also see in some passages, once we pay attention to the technique being used to render consciousness, a desire on the part of the poet that a crime like the murder of Till would be the type of crisis “in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Reflexive Sociology* 131) – which could produce insights into the workings of ideology and a more rational way to act.

The narratological instruments that may help to describe the technique used in Brooks’s poem are the same Stefanie Mueller uses in her study of

Toni Morrison, namely a combination of the terms provided by Gerard Genette and Dorrit Cohn (cf. Mueller 50-53). For simplicity's sake I will only use Cohn's three major terms here: Among the techniques used to present consciousness in fiction she distinguishes between "quoted monologue," "narrated monologue," and "psycho-narration" (Cohn 105). While the first is the attempt to render an internal voice directly, without mediation, the last one presents these thoughts mediated by a narrator, for instance by using mental verbs. Narrated monologue is situated in between the two: "Tense and person separate it from quoted monologue [...]; the absence of mental verbs (and the resulting grammatical independence) separates it from psycho-narration" (104). Narrated monologue is more oblique than quoted monologue, but more direct than psycho-narration. Imitating the way a figure may speak to herself "casts that language into the grammar a narrator uses in talking about him, thus superimposing two voices that are kept distinct in the other two forms" (105). The result may be some ambiguity and uncertainty as to who we listen to, and this is precisely the way the poem begins:

From the first it had been like a  
Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.  
A wildness cut up, and tied in little bunches,  
Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite  
Understood—the ballads they had set her to, in school.

Herself: the milk-white maid, the "maid mild"  
Of the ballad. Pursued  
By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince. (61-62)

It is only with the personal pronoun in the fourth line that we realize we are witnesses to the thoughts of a woman. Her socialization into the gender role of a white Southern woman with the help of the two major institutions, school and literature, as something only insufficiently understood, is cast as narrated monologue. We are to assume that she is speaking to herself, saying "It has been ... like ... the ballads I have never quite understood – the ballads they set me to, in school," and yet through her voice we also hear the voice of the poet. In fact, we may never be entirely sure whether Carolyn is able to state quite clearly that she is reminded of ballads as "a

wildness cut up and tied in little bunches” (61) but has never quite understood them. As Cohn puts it: “By leaving the relationship between words and thoughts latent, the narrated monologue casts a peculiarly penumbral light on the figural consciousness, suspending it on the threshold of verbalization in a manner that cannot be achieved by direct quotation.” (103)<sup>5</sup>

The ballad or romance is instrumental in having made the speaker white and female, captured in the repeated puns “milk-white maid, the ‘maid mild’” (62). To be made white and female primarily means to be passive: to be set to ballads, to be pursued and rescued by men. It also means to be willingly subservient and unaggressive (“maid mild”), as well as pure and associated with nourishment (“milk-white”). The reward for corresponding to this image is to be desirable as erotic object, and this “was worth anything” (62). The phrase suggests a dim awareness of a price to be paid and the later repetition that she must be “worth It” (64) corroborates this. Indeed, the idealization of the white Southern woman and the attention and protection offered to her – seemingly out of adoration – is in fact a veiled instrument of masculine domination: Women in general “circulate as symbols fit for striking alliances” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Reflexive Sociology* 173), their function being part of an exchange system which creates alliances between families. Bourdieu formulates this with regard to masculine domination and its symbolic exchanges; when race as a second form of symbolic domination is added, the alliances go beyond single families. That Carolyn never quite understood the ballads is important because a literary socialization into female submission is not easy to recognize as such and thus not easily opposed. That something is going on is only recognized by admitting not to understand – it is the poet, as we see a few lines later, who understands that this socialization is turning the schoolgirl into a person prone to be subjected to repeated forms of symbolic violence. That Brooks here uses the same kind of vaguely medieval imagery for her male protagonist as in “Satin-Legs,” i.e., the “Fine Prince,” betrays this woman’s view of male practices as curiously anachronistic.

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5 For Melhem, it is only later that Brooks renders the mind of the woman: “By the third stanza, via *style indirect libre*, Brooks has clearly stepped into the psyche of the white Mississippi mother, who has imagined herself a rescued maiden in a romantic tale.” (105)

The poem interrupts its forays into the mind of the white woman with descriptions of actions and gestures, such as burning and hiding bacon, putting on lipstick because of the need to be pretty and “worth It,” and finally being embraced and kissed by her husband who has just slapped one of her children. Through dramatic irony we are made to see that her role as mother and wife has nothing to do with romance: The Fine Prince is someone to serve breakfast to and likely to be angry about the waste of bacon. He is prone to violence and may consider his actions as a gift she must subsequently prove worthy of. But this does not mean that the romance is revealed or deconstructed as meaningless or that the poem would underline the “meaninglessness of the myth as a fantasy in the first place” (McKibbin 667). What the actions reveal is the power of romance and gender ideology over mind *and* body, revealed in thought *and* in action. Far from meaningless, the myth does not only serve as justification of physical violence (the lynching), which is comparatively easy to see through: Even Carolyn recognizes that falseness during the course of her musings. The myth, romance, or ballad also allows for and exercises multiple forms of symbolic violence the white woman is inevitably subjected to and cannot escape from.

Symbolic violence is a concept that helps to explain how grave instances of physical violence, such as lynching, but also how unequal distributions of power could be normalized. It helps to understand the complicity of the oppressed that is necessary to maintain unjust social orders. Its shortest formulation might be to say that it is “a mis-cognizing based on the unconscious adaptation of subjective structures to objective structures” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Reflexive Anthropologie* 203).<sup>6</sup> Symbolic violence relates to the concept of habitus in that the socialization of the body and mind also serves the function of a somatization or incorporation of domination. Nowhere is this more visible than in the example of masculine domination as “the paradigmatic form of symbolic violence” (*Reflexive Sociology* 170). Thus we realize that despite her doubts, Carolyn’s recognition of her husband’s power happens through her little gestures as part of the

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6 My translation of “... symbolische[n] Gewalt als jener Verkennung, die auf der unbewußten Anpassung der subjektiven an die objektiven Strukturen beruht.” A more extensive definition from Bourdieu’s *Pascalian Meditations* and its discussion can be found in Mueller (39).

household routine. *Vice versa*, it is the household routine as a field for her as wife and mother that will reaffirm her habitus so that her doubts will not lead to an overall crisis.

But the poem is also a document testifying to the poet's hope for an enlightening effect of the crime. Here are the lines that follow upon Carolyn's increasing awareness that neither Emmett, nor her husband and his half-brother easily fit into the roles of villain and prince: Emmett is too young and the "Prince" too childish. Finally, we read:

[...] So much had happened, she could not remember now what that foe had done  
 Against her, or if anything had been done.  
 The one thing in the world that she did know and knew  
 With terrifying clarity was that her composition  
 Had disintegrated. That, although the pattern prevailed,  
 The breaks were everywhere. That she could think  
 Of no thread capable of the necessary  
 Sew-work. (63)

The narrated monologue of the long passage imagining Emmett's surprise when facing his murderer leads into psycho-narration creating "the impression that the narrator is formulating his character's inarticulate feelings" (Cohn 106). Translated into direct speech the lines sound improbable: "I did know and knew with terrifying clarity that my composition has disintegrated. That I can think of no thread ..." It is not Carolyn but the poet who uses a variety of metaphors ("composition," "pattern," "sew-work") for an ideological framework that helped the white woman to understand herself and which is now questioned. But is the poet reliable? The narrated events and thoughts and feelings do not quite support the view of a collapsing ideology: While disturbed by her recognition of her complicity in a murder, the white woman has continued to act in agreement with her role. The poem actually demonstrates, in spite of the lines above, the limitations of any kind of ideological insight – or conversely, the strength of masculine domination in conjunction with the racial order. While the white woman cannot help to realize the discrepancies between romance and the events in Mississippi, she is still, in mind and body, submitting to the symbolic and physical violence the ballads prepared her for, and thus she is acknowledging its 'rightness.'

The poem ends with a form of rebellion that is, like the recognition of domination, likewise outside conscious control or will: As her husband kisses her, “a sickness heaved within her” (67), which she associates with the courtroom and Till’s mother. Finally, the disgust turns into hatred and we may surmise that the woman no longer feels united with her husband through their common whiteness but feels alienated from him because of her gender – but this diagnosis is clearly a level above Carolyn’s mind. Thus the technique of weaving in and out of a consciousness as in a narrated monologue allows Brooks to render the mind of her character in such a way that we are allowed to enter it, maybe even familiarize ourselves with it. If skillfully used, this technique then also allows us to see the limits of that consciousness and thus to understand what the character in front of us does not understand or is only dimly aware of. Just as the concept of ‘taste’ allowed us to appreciate the subtleties of “Satin Legs,” the concept of symbolic violence helps us to understand the contradictory physical and mental processes in “Mississippi Mother.” But on top of that I argued in both parts of my article that the poems do not only reveal but also conceal; they offer new visions but also divisions that might be related to the time and place in the literary field, itself embedded in a field of power. In “Satin Legs,” economic and social conditions clearly shape the tastes and self-fashioning of a young urban black man. The poem defends his everyday aesthetic practices but does not attribute any emancipatory power to them. There is a great distance to the figure whose peers are clearly neither included in an implied readership nor in an implied political vision.

What “Mississippi Mother” registers, primarily through the interference of a poetic voice producing three metaphors in a row, is the hope that the murder of Emmett Till will lead to a kind of reflexivity that may unmask the workings of race and gender to white women. It would be supported by the discovery of white mothers of what it means not to be able to protect their children from male violence. The hope that this may cut through the division of white versus black has a long literary tradition, underlying abolitionist work and anti-lynching literature in the sentimental mode. But the routines of the kitchen, which are neither sentimental nor romantic, betray the weak foundations of these hopes as the technical skills of the poem are all employed to underline the stubborn persistence of habitus.

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