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Book Reviews: The Wayward and The Seeking

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²⁴ ¹³ Merle Hodge, *Crick Crack Monkey* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1970), p. 84.

¹⁴ Joseph J. Williams, *Psychic Phenomena of Jamaica* (New York: Dial Press, 1934), p. 155.

¹⁵ Williams, p. 156.

¹⁶ Philip Sherlock, *Three Finger Jack's Treasure* (Jamaica Publishing House, 1961), pp. 18-19.

¹⁷ Leonard Barrett, "African Religions in the Americas," in *The Black Experience in Religion*, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (New York: Anchor Press and Doubleday, 1974), p. 321.

¹⁸ Williams, p. 173.

¹⁹ Roy Heath, "The Function of Myth," in *Caribbean Essays*, ed. Andrew Salkey (London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1973), p. 92.

²⁰ Williams, p. 173.

²¹ Heath, p. 93.

²² Petronella Breinburg, *Legends of Surinam* (London: New Beacon Books Ltd., 1971), pp. 14-15.

²³ Susan Feldman, ed., *African Myths and Tales* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. 1963), pp. 12-13.

²⁴ Feldman, p. 13.

²⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, "Dance, Songs and Tales from the Bahamas," *Journal of American Folk-lore*, 43 (1930), 294.

²⁶ Hurston, p. 294.

Books

The Wayward and The Seeking

A Collection of Writings
by Jean Toomer

Edited by Darwin T. Turner

Howard University Press

450 pp. \$14.95

Reviewed by Girma T. Wubishet

Most Americans, at one time or another, have found themselves torn apart by the race dilemma. And the professional ones among them—writers, engineers, lawyers, doctors and educators—have been victims of various society-imposed labels, "Indian," "Wasp," "Negro."

Jean Toomer, by his own admission a man of mixed races, was no exception. To his chagrin, he had been labeled and introduced to the literary world as a "Negro."

In "The Wayward and the Seeking," a

collection of Toomer's writings edited by Darwin Turner, chairman of the Afro-American Studies Department and professor of English at the University of Iowa, one reads about Toomer's problems with race. This book dispels some of the mysteries surrounding Toomer's personality. It sheds a new light on his lifelong effort toward a concept of one race—the "American race"—for all of the citizens of the United States.

Toni Morrison, author and literary critic, in a review which appeared in *The Washington Post*, July 13, 1980, ascribes Toomer's preoccupation with race to his marriages to two white women. Morrison argues that "the artist of an integrated marriage who finds his career at a standstill inevitably attributes this phenomenon to the racism of his field. . . ." If one agrees with Morrison's observation, Toomer appears to have devoted all of his time and energy developing the concept of "racelessness" as a cop-out or as an excuse for his failure to go beyond the plateau of excellence he had reached in his book, "Cane" (1923), which dealt with the beauty, passion and vulnerability of Black people, mostly southern Black people.

Soon after "Cane" was published, Toomer abandoned his career as well as the race. His publishers, insisting on placing him among Negro writers, asked him to feature himself as a Negro in a publicity campaign for "Cane." Toomer refused on the ground that he was not a Negro. The racism of the publishers manifested itself in what they demanded of him: to write only about Negro life.

Toomer avoided identification with either race in order to maintain a genuine association with Black people as well as white people.

Alice Walker, poet and novelist, in a July 13, 1980 review in *The New York Times*, wrote that the "fiction Toomer

wrote after *Cane* depicts only white people and never documents their racism in any way; it's as if Toomer believed an absence of black people assured the absence of racism itself."

In retrospect, one finds Toomer writing favorably about the near-white "colored" people, among whom he grew up:

. . . they were not conscious of being either colored or white. They had no active prejudices against black people or white people. Knowing that I had been of, and had come from, a white world, they were not curious about this world and certainly they did not feel that it was either superior or inferior. Segregation, if known to them, meant nothing. They had never run up against the color line.

Such statements by Toomer create the illusion that the mulattos were the ideal example of genuine human beings. Therefore, the importance of such statements lies not so much in the truth they reveal about mulattos, but in the information they provide about Toomer's favorite people. In contrast, one finds Langston Hughes, in his autobiography, "The Big Sea," belittling the well-to-do neighborhood and praising the "down-to-earth" people:

From all this pretentiousness Seventh Street was a sweet relief. Seventh Street is the long, old dirty street, where the ordinary Negroes hang out, folks with practically no family tree at all, folks who draw no color line between mulattoes and deep dark-browns, folks who work hard for a living with their hands.

It is difficult to accept Toomer's assessment, as well as Hughes', on their face value, especially when one considers the American society where the psyches of people are continually pricked by racism.

Toomer's life demonstrates his ability to intermingle with both Blacks and

whites. He explains that though he was of French, Welsh, Black, German, Jewish and Indian ancestry, his "growing need for artistic expression" pulled him "deeper and deeper into the Negro group." He continues:

And as my powers of receptivity increased, I found myself loving it in a way that I could never love the other. It has stimulated and fertilized whatever creative talent I may contain within me. A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folksongs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accents about, and of which till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them. Now, I cannot conceive of myself as aloof and separated.

While the above statement portrays the growth and maturing of Toomer, it also unfolds the prevailing myths, lies and distortions about Blacks that might have turned his attention away from Black people.

Toomer studied agriculture at the University of Wisconsin, where he came in direct contact with white people. His adjustment at the university was difficult. He writes:

Part of the difficulty was directly due to my anticipation of what could happen if I was called upon to put my racial position to the test. The rest was due to other matters, personal and scholastic, which we need not go into here. However, before two weeks were out I was in the current of my new life, taking this white world as a matter of course, forgetting that I had been in a colored group. I began being active in freshman affairs, was fairly popular, was proposed for the class president,

made friends, went places, and studied when I had to.

Toomer noted that he met a fellow where he lived who "turned out to be prejudiced against everyone who was not white, bourgeois, and Christian." Toomer continues: "From him I learned that there was a prejudice against people who did menial work, a prejudice against backward peoples who were heathen and benighted. . . . As a nest of prejudices he was quite a sight—and this sight was instructive to me. Besides, I had the pleasure of hating him a little more than he hated me."

Further, Toomer adds that "Wisconsin was a good place; but, in my condition, not the place for me." What Toomer meant by "in my condition" is not spelled out to the reader—an example of his obscurity. But one can assume that his contact with members of the white group might have made him racially self-conscious.

Throughout his life, Toomer was baffled by the fact "America views life as if it were divided into white and black." Thus, he devoted much of his time and energy to educating both races. He maintained that "all of the main races are mixed races—and so mixed that no one can unravel them in all their blended complexity." He saw that the term "colored" did not "define their organic actuality." He accounted man's development to the "result of the interplay between the environment and the person."

A good example is his own work, "Cane," which underscores the universal aspect of man, as "earth-being" rejuvenating, receiving and contributing to the land. However, Toomer fails to see the economic, social and political grounds that contribute to the very nature of racism. His artistic and racial sensitivity is not fully convincing because of this failure.

Toomer's writings in "Cane" have been tainted by his insistence on defining himself and his racial position. He saw himself as "naturally and inevitably an American, neither white nor black."

His refusal to acknowledge the racism around him is more pronounced in "The Wayward and the Seeking." His writings reflect how out of touch he was with the temper of his society. The year 1919 was "The Red Summer," a period that ushered in the greatest interracial strife the nation has ever witnessed, with 25 race riots. In 1927, the Ku Klux Klan, having infiltrated the North, enjoyed its greatest strength since Reconstruction days. During the same period, Black people had been relegated to the lower rungs of the economic, social, educational and political ladders. An artist could hardly ignore the system of oppression and discrimination from which Black people suffered during the '20s, the '30s and the '40s. Yet Toomer did. Perhaps his neglect of social ills had a great deal to do with the focus of his whole time and energy. In his own words: "What I am and what I may become, I am trying to find out." Like Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston, Toomer was a searcher, not completely satisfied to find his identity in either Black or white circles.

In essence, his efforts lie in exploring, discovering, and projecting only the positive aspects of his life and values. He notes how it was a natural view of his parents "to live and let live," adding that he was "not conditioned to hold family, class, political, racial, regional, or religious preconceptions and antagonisms." On rare occasions, he does reveal some mildly negative aspects of his life, such as being a classroom cut-up and a teacher's problem. But so far as his values are concerned, he is a humanist, naturalist, and universalist.

He believes, ". . . in life nothing is only physical, there is also the symbolical:

26 White and Black, West and East, North and South, Light and Darkness, Day and Night. In general, the great contrasts—the pairs of opposites. And I, together with all other I's, am the reconciler."

Further, he shows that he is both theoretical and practical, "I've strived for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling. I've tried to let them—French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish and Indian, live in harmony." This diverse ancestry might have stimulated him, spurred him to action—to actively seek for the amalgamation of races into the "American race."

Toomer adumbrated the concept of an "American race" and expanded it in fiction, poetry, and drama. He dealt, for the most part, with the relationship of men and women and their quest for survival.

"The Wayward and the Seeking" gives one an insight into the personality of this gifted writer, who for a long time has been regarded as a mystery in the literary world. The book has autobiographical fragments, yet is editorially coherent: "Earth Being" (1928); "Outline of an Autobiography" (1931-32); "On Being an American" (1934); "Incredible Journey" (1940), three short stories: "Withered Skin of Berries"; "Winter on Earth"; "Mr. Costyve Duditch"; poems including "The Blue Meridian," Toomer's definitive statement of his vision of America and the universe.

Also included are two plays, "Natalie Mann" and "The Sacred Factory," which illustrate Toomer's sensitivity to women, as well as a selection of aphorisms and maxims, which focus on human nature and human values.

The three short stories that are included in this book focus on man's problems with ego and emotion. In "Withered Skin of Berries," Toomer explores a

woman's yearnings for psychological identity, and he considers the problems of racial identity and bigotry. He expresses the feelings of characters in tight, concrete details embracing their physical environment:

...*Black souls, tropic and fiery, dream of love. Sing joyful codas to forgotten folk-songs. Spin love to the soft weaving of her arms. Men listen to her lisplings and murmurs. White souls awake to adolescent fantasies they thought long buried with the dead leaves along the summer streets of mid-western towns. Solvents of melancholy burn through their bitten modes of pioneer aggressiveness to a southern repose. They too spin love to the soft weaving of her arms. White men, black men, only in retrospective kisses, know the looseness of her lips . . . pale withered skin of berries. . . .*

"Winter on Earth" fuses Toomer's lyricism and his Gurdjieffian thought. (Toomer was a disciple of the philosopher Georges Gurdjieff, founder of the Institute for Man's Harmonious Development. His association with and attachment to this school of thought turned his attention from literature to lectures and the promotion of spiritual ideas). In this story, Toomer examines man's failure to achieve harmony with himself, his fellow man, and his universe. "Mr. Costyve Duditch" sketches a man who has grown out of harmony with himself. Employing satirical style, Toomer characterizes Duditch as a wanderer who travelled world wide but who did not utilize his experience and exposure to interact with people effectively.

In his poems, Toomer expounds the spiritual disintergration of America as a result of war, materialism, crime, and the Depression. He emphasizes the importance of universal love as a panacea for man's social, political, and economic

ills. It must be noted that until his death in a Pennsylvania nursing home in 1967, Toomer increasingly subordinated literary creativity to philosophy, psychology, and spiritual ideas. His poems reflect that trend. They also deal directly with social reality and indirectly with the ugliness of racism.

"The Blue Meridian," the longest of all the selections, is a poetic tribute to the ancestral races of America. Here, Toomer calls for the need of human beings to embrace the "symbol of Universal Man" and outgrow clan and class, color, nationalism, creed, and all other differences that contribute to their division.

He appeals to his readers with logic, and his intent ought to be appreciated:

*Unlock the races,
Open this pod by outgrowing it,
Free men from this prison and this shrinkage,
Not from the reality itself
But from our prejudices and preferences
And the enslaving behavior caused by them
Eliminate these—
I am, we are, simply of the human race.*

In the same poem, Toomer glorifies and romanticizes his own creation, "the American race," wherein his ethnocentrism prevails:

*We are the new people,
Born of elevated rock and lifted branches,
Called Americans,
Growing towards the universal Human Being;
We are the breathing receptacles.*

The two dramas that are included in this collection "Natalie Mann" and "The Sacred Factory" signal the change in the style of Toomer's writings. Instead of writing in generalities about spiritual and mystical ideas, Toomer

deals with the underlying social reality in softened but concrete manner. Employing social commentary as a theme, he attacks the American society that puts profits before people. Example, in a dialogue of the three characters, Newbolt, Law and Mary Carson in "Natalie Mann":

Newbolt

...but don't you think there are more immediate problems which we ought to clear up first, before going so far afield? Lynching and Jim-crowism, for example?

Mary Carson

They are the outgrowth of materialism, my dear, and will die out of their own accord when it does.

Newbolt

But in the meantime, hundreds are being brutally butchered, and millions made to suffer the injustices of segregation.

Law

Besides, how are you going to combat this materialism that you speak of unless you go for its concrete manifestations?

Mary Carson

Thought, Mr. Law, is the ruling power of the world. Beautiful thoughts will supplant evil ones. They will reshape the whole contour of the world.

In "The Sacred Factory," an expressionistic drama, Toomer deals with his spectacle of humanity's disintegration. He severely castigates the spiritual disintegration of America. The play evokes the emotional and spiritual quality of man.

In his aphorisms and maxims, Toomer's religious and mystical views are felt. Here, he transforms his personal experiences and the wisdom he gained from the philosopher George Gurdjieff into universally meaningful criticisms of life. The writings in this section also reflect Toomer's departure from literary

creativity to philosophy, psychology, and spiritual reforms. His prevailing themes are human nature and human values.

Nature is natural. Human nature, by nature, is all right. It is the acquired or false "nature" of men that is all wrong.

Therefore our aim must be, . . . to remove whatever is obstructing our normal development.

Change human nature? Not at all. Get rid of obstructions and cultivate human nature.

In the "Editor's Note" of the drama section, Darwin Turner praises Toomer. "Most of Toomer's white contemporaries who wrote serious dramas about black protagonists, such as Edward Sheldon, 'The Nigger' (1909), Eugene O'Neill 'The Emperor Jones' (1920) and even Ridgely Torrence 'Three Plays for a Negro Theater' (1917) evaded criticizing America's treatment of its black citizens," Turner notes. "Toomer attacked white America for judging blacks according to spurious standards of morality and art, repressing black artists, and exploiting black women."

It is often difficult to discern where the real Toomer begins and where the fictitious Toomer ends. As Turner well notes, Toomer appears as "a delightful personality—candid, self-assured, persuasive, witty, poetic, and informative." Based on Toomer's presentation of his own values, readers sense him to be a reconciler, unifier, humanist and universalist. Whether or not he truly practiced his preaching in real life has yet to be answered.

Darwin Turner has made a solid contribution to the literary world by editing and shaping the works of this literary figure.

It is evident that despite his insistence on "racelessness," Toomer was troubled by an audience not receptive to his

philosophy. Though his development of the concept of "racelessness" was theoretically and philosophically viable, it could not be realized in a society which for 300 years had emphasized the separation of whites from non-whites.

Toomer's penchant for conjuring an idyllic "American race" may have touched the emotions of many, but for others, it constitutes a painful deception that denied their past suffering. □

The reviewer is a poet who is currently studying for a doctorate in the English Department, Howard University.

The Collected Poems Of Sterling Brown

Edited by Michael S. Harper
Harper and Row, New York
257 pp., \$12.95

Reviewed by
Stephen E. Henderson

At long last we have, in *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, a representative collection of the poet's work in a single accessible volume. Those of us who have read his poems over the years and who have heard his dynamic readings tend somehow to forget that Sterling Brown's 1932 classic, *Southern Road*, had been out of print for years before it was reissued in 1975. We tend to forget, too, that many of the poet's more familiar poems are not included in *Southern Road*—poems such as "Old Lem" and "Remembering Nat Turner." These are scattered through a wide variety of publications, textbooks and anthologies, some now out of print and accessible only to the dedicated student.

The Last Ride of Wild Bill, a brilliant mock heroic work did not appear in print until 1975, when it was published by Broadside Press along with 11