Classic Poetry Series

Jean Toomer
- poems -

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Jean Toomer(26 December 1894 – 30 March 1967)

Jean Toomer was an American poet and novelist and an important figure of the Harlem Renaissance. His first book Cane is considered by many as his most significant.

Life and Career

Early Life

Toomer was born Nathan Eugene Pinchback Toomer in Washington, D.C. His father was a prosperous farmer, originally born into slavery in Hancock County, Georgia. Nina Pinchback was also of mixed ethnic descent. Her father was Louisiana Governor P. B. S. Pinchback, the first African American to become governor of a U.S. state. (Both of Toomer's maternal grandparents had white fathers. Pinchback's father was a planter and his mother was a mulatto slave who was freed before his birth. After Reconstruction, the Pinchbacks had moved to Washington, DC, where they became part of the "mulatto elite".

Toomer's father (also called Nathan Toomer) abandoned the family when his son was an infant, and the boy and his mother lived with her parents. As a child in Washington, Toomer attended all-black schools. When his mother remarried and they moved to suburban New Rochelle, New York, he attended an all-white school. After his mother's death, Toomer returned to Washington to live with his grandparents Pinchback. He graduated from the M Street School, an academic black high school. By his early adult years, Toomer resisted racial classifications and wanted to be identified only as an American.

Between 1914 and 1917 Toomer attended six institutions of higher education (the University of Wisconsin, the Massachusetts College of Agriculture, the American College of Physical Training in Chicago, the University of Chicago, New York University, and the City College of New York) studying agriculture, fitness, biology, sociology, and history, but he never completed a degree. His wide readings among prominent contemporary poets and writers, and the lectures he attended during his college years, shaped the direction of his writing.

Career

After leaving college, Toomer published some short stories and continued writing in the volatile social period following World War I. He worked for some months in a shipyard in 1919, then escaped to middle-class life. Labor strikes and race riots

occurred in several major cities during the summer of 1919, and artistic ferment was high. He devoted several months to the study of Eastern philosophies and continued to be interested in this. Some of his early writing was political, and he published three essays from 1919-1920 in the prominent socialist paper New York Call. They drew from the socialist and "New Negro" movements of New York. Toomer was reading much new American writing, for instance Waldo Frank's Our America (1919).

In 1921 Toomer took a job for a few months as a principal at a new rural agricultural and industrial school for blacks in Sparta, Georgia. It was in the center of Hancock County and in the Black Belt 100 miles southeast of Atlanta. His exploration of his father's roots in Hancock County, as well as being forced into witnessing the segregation and labor peonage of the Deep South, led him to identify more strongly as an African American. Several lynchings took place in Georgia during 1921-1922, continuing to enforce white supremacy with violence. In 1908 the state had ratified a constitution essentially disfranchising blacks; by Toomer's time, it passed laws to prevent outmigration and established high licenses fees for employers recruiting labor in the state. African Americans had started their Great Migration north and planters feared losing their pool of cheap labor. It was a formative experience for Toomer; he started writing about it while still in Georgia and submitted the long story "Georgia Night" to the Liberator in New York while there.

Toomer returned to New York where he became friends with Waldo Frank, who also served as his mentor and editor on his novel Cane. In 1923, Toomer published the High Modernist novel Cane, in which he used a variety of forms, and material inspired by his time in Georgia. It was also an "analysis of class and caste", with "secrecy and miscegenation as major themes of the first section". He had conceived it as a short-story cycle, and acknowledged the influence of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio (1919) as his model, in addition to other influential works of that period. He also appeared to have absorbed T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland and considered him one of the American group of writers he wanted to join, "artists and intellectuals who were engaged in renewing American society at its multi-cultural core."

Many scholars considered Cane to be his best work. A series of poems and short stories about the black experience in America, Cane was hailed by critics and is seen as an important work of both the Harlem Renaissance and the Lost Generation. Toomer resisted racial classification and did not want the book marketed as a black work. As he said to his publisher Horace Liveright, "My racial composition and my position in the world are realities that I alone may

determine." Toomer found it more difficult to get published throughout the 1930s, as did many authors during the Great Depression.

He became very interested in the work of the spiritual leader George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, who had a lecture tour in the United States in 1924. That year, and in 1926 and 1927, Toomer went to France to study with Gurdjieff, who had settled at Fontainebleau. He was a student of Gurdjieff until the mid-1930s.

Marriage and Family

In 1931 Toomer married the writer Margery Latimer. The following year she died in childbirth in August 1932 and he named their only daughter Margery.

In 1934 he married a second time, to Marjorie Content. Because Toomer was notable as a writer, his two marriages, both classed as inter-racial, attracted notice and some social criticism. In 1940 the Toomers moved to Doylestown, Pennsylvania. There he formally joined the Quakers and began to withdraw from society.

Writing

Toomer wrote a small amount of fiction and published essays in Quaker publications during this time, but devoted most of his time to serving on Quaker committees and working with high school students. His last literary work published during his lifetime was Blue Meridian, a long poem extolling "the potential of the American race". He stopped writing for publication after 1950, although he wrote for himself, including several autobiographies. He died in 1967 after several years of poor health.

Legacy and Archives

Toomer's papers and unpublished manuscripts are held by the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

When Cane was reprinted in 1969, it was favorably reviewed as a "Black Classic", leading to a revival of interest in Toomer's work. More recently, collections of Toomer's poetry and essays have been published, as well as the reprinting of his 1931 book Essentials, which was self-published and included "Gurdjieffian aphorisms".

2002, Toomer was elected to the Georgia Hall of Fame.

A Certain Man

A certain man wishes to be a prince
Of this earth; he also wants to be
A saint and master of the being-world.
Conscience cannot exist in the first:
The second cannot exist without conscience.
Therefore he, who has enough conscience
To be disturbed but not enough to be
Compelled, can neither reject the one
Nor follow the other...

Jean Toomer

A Poem From Transatlantic

Stretch sea
Stretch away sea and land
We are following thee
Thy lead is dangerous
And glorius
Stretch thyself and us
And make us live
To mount the ladder of horizons
Until we step upon the radiant plateau.

Jean Toomer

A Portrait In Georgia

Hair-braided chestnut,
coiled like a lyncher's rope,
Eyes-fagots,
Lips-old scars, or the first red blisters,
Breath-the last sweet scent of cane,
And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame.

Jean Toomer

Banking Coal

Whoever it was who brought the first wood and coal
To start the Fire, did his part well;
Not all wood takes to fire from a match,
Nor coal from wood before it’s burned to charcoal.
The wood and coal in question caught a flame
And flared up beautifully, touching the air
That takes a flame from anything.

Somehow the fire was furnaced,
And then the time was ripe for some to say,
“Right banking of the furnace saves the coal.”
I’ve seen them set to work, each in his way,
Though all with shovels and with ashes,
Never resting till the fire seemed most dead;
Whereupon they’d crawl in hooded night-caps
Contentedly to bed. Sometimes the fire left alone
Would die, but like as not spiced tongues
Remaining by the hardest on till day would flicker up,
Never strong, to anyone who cared to rake for them.
But roaring fires never have been made that way.
I’d like to tell those folks that one grand flare
Transferred to memory tissues of the air
Is worth a like, or, for dull minds that turn in gold,
All money ever saved by banking coal.

Jean Toomer

Conversion

African Guardian of Souls,
Drunk with rum,
Feasting on strange cassava,
Yielding to new words and a weak palabra
Of a white-faced sardonic god--
Grins, cries
Amen,
Shouts hosanna.

Jean Toomer

Cotton Song

Come, brother, come. Lets lift it;
come now, hewit! roll away!
Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day
But lets not wait for it.
God's body's got a soul,
Bodies like to roll the soul,
Cant blame God if we dont roll,
Come, brother, roll, roll!
Cotton bales are the fleecy way,
Weary sinner's bare feet trod,
Softly, softly to the throne of God,
"We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!
Nassur; nassur,
Hump.
Eoho, eoho, roll away!
We aint agwine to wait until th Judgment Day!"
God's body's got a soul,
Bodies like to roll the soul,
Cant blame God if we dont roll,
Come, brother, roll, roll!

Jean Toomer

Evening Song

Full moon rising on the waters of my heart,
Lakes and moon and fires,
Cloine tires,
Holding her lips apart.

Promises of slumber leaving shore to charm the moon,
Miracle made vesper-keeps,
Cloine sleeps,
And I'll be sleeping soon.

Cloine, curled like the sleepy waters whtere the moonwaves start,
Radiant, resplendently she gleams,
Cloine dreams,
Lips pressed against my heart.

Jean Toomer

For M.W.

There is no transcience of twilight in
The beauty of your soft dusk-dimpled face,
No flicker of a slender flame in space,
In crucibles, fragility crystalline.
There is no fragrance of the jessamine
About you, no pathos of some old place
At dusk, that crumbles like moth-eater lace
Beneath the touch. Nor has there ever been.

Your love is like the folk-song's flaming rise
In cane-lipped southern people, like their soul
Which burst its bondage in a bold travail;
Your voice is like them singing, soft and wise,
Your face, sweetly efflgent of the whole,
Inviolate of ways that would feile.

Jean Toomer

Georgia Dusk

The sky, lazily disdaining to pursue
The setting sun, too indolent to hold
A lengthened tournament for flashing gold,
Passively darkens for night's barbeque,

A feast of moon and men and barking hounds.
An orgy for some genius of the South
With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth,
Surprised in making folk-songs from soul sounds.

The sawmill blows its whistle, buzz-saws stop,
And silence breaks the bud of knoll and hill,
Soft settling pollen where plowed lands fulfill
Their early promise of a bumper crop.

Smoke from the pyramidal sawdust pile
Curls up, blue ghosts of trees, tarrying low
Where only chips and stumps are left to show
The solid proof of former domicile.

Meanwhile, the men, with vestiges of pomp,
Race memories of king and caravan,
High-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man,
Go singing through the footpaths of the swamp.

Their voices rise...the pine trees are guitars,
Strumming, pine-needles fall like sheets of rain..
Their voices rise...the chorus of the cane
Is caroling a vesper to the stars..

O singers, resinous and soft your songs
Above the sacred whisper of the pines,
Give virgin lips to cornfield concubines,
Being dreams of Christ to dusky cane-lipped throngs.

Jean Toomer

Harvest Song

I am a reaper whose muscles set at sundown. All my oats are cradled.
But I am too chilled, and too fatigued to bind them.
And I hunger.

I crack a grain between my teeth. I do not taste it.
I have been in the fields all day. My throat is dry.
I hunger.

My eyes are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time.
I am a blind man who stares across the hills, seeking stack'd fields of other harvesters.

It would be good to see them . . crook'd, split, and iron-ring'd handles of the scythes. It would be good to see them, dust-caked and blind. I hunger.

(Dusk is a strange fear'd sheath their blades are dull'd in.)
My throat is dry. And should I call, a cracked grain like the oats...eoho--

I fear to call. What should they hear me, and offer me their grain, oats, or wheat, or corn? I have been in the fields all day. I fear I could not taste it. I fear knowledge of my hunger.

My ears are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time.
I am a deaf man who strains to hear the calls of other harvesters whose throats are also dry.

It would be good to hear their songs . . reapers of the sweet-stalk'd cane, cutters of the corn...even though their throats cracked and the strangeness of their voices deafened me.

I hunger. My throat is dry. Now that the sun has set and I am chilled, I fear to call. (Eoho, my brothers!)

I am a reaper. (Eoho!) All my oats are cradled.
But I am too fatigued to bind them. And I hunger.
I crack a grain. It has no taste to it.
My throat is dry...

O my brothers, I beat my palms, still soft, against the stubble of my harvesting.

(You beat your soft palms, too.) My pain is sweet. Sweeter than the oats or wheat or corn. It will not bring me knowledge of my hunger.

Jean Toomer

Her Lips Are Copper Wire

whisper of yellow globes
gleaming on lamp-posts that sway
like bootleg licker drinkers in the fog

and let your breath be moist against me
like bright beads on yellow globes

telephone the power-house
that the main wires are insulate

(her words play softly up and down
dewy corridors of billboards)

then with your tongue remove the tape
and press your lips to mine
till they are incandescent

Jean Toomer

November Cotton Flower

Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,
And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,
Failed in its function as the autumn rake;
Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
All water from the streams; dead birds were found
In wells a hundred feet below the ground--
Such was the season when the flower bloomed.
Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
Significance. Superstition saw
Something it had never seen before:
Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,
Beauty so sudden for that time of year.

Jean Toomer

People

To those fixed on white,
White is white,
To those fixed on black,
It is the same,
And red is red,
Yellow, yellow-
Surely there are such sights
In the many colored world,
Or in the mind.
The strange thing is that
These people never see themselves
Or you, or me.

Are they not in their minds?
Are we not in the world?
This is a curious blindness
For those that are color blind.
What queer beliefs
That men who believe in sights
Disbelieve in seers.

O people, if you but used
Your other eyes
You would see beings.

Jean Toomer

Portrait In Georgia

Hair--braided chestnut,
coiled like a lyncher's rope,
Eyes--fagots,
Lips--old scars, or the first red blisters,
Breath--the last sweet scent of cane,
And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame.

Jean Toomer

Reapers

Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones
Are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones
In their hip-pockets as a thing that's done,
And start their silent swinging, one by one.
Black horses drive a mower through the weeds,
And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds,
His belly close to ground. I see the blade,
Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade.

Jean Toomer

Seventh Street

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts,
Bootleggers in silken shirts,
Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,
Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks.

Seventh Street is a bastrad of Prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. Stale soggy wood of Washington. Wedges rust in soggy wood. . . Split it! In two! Again! Shred it! . . the sun. Wedges are brilliant in the sun; ribbons of wet wood dry and blow away. Black reddish blood. Pouring for crude-boned soft-skinned life, who set you flowing? Blood suckers of the War would spin in a frenzy of dizziness if they drank your blood. Prohibition would put a stop to it. Who set you flowing? White and whitewash disappear in blood. Who set you flowing? Flowing down the smooth asphalt of Seventh Street, in shanties, brick office buildings, theaters, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets? Eddying on the corners? Swirling like a blood-red smoke up where the buzzards fly in heaven? God would not dare to suck black red blood. A Nigger God! He would duck his head in shame and call for the Judgement Day. Who set you flowing?

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts,
Bootleggers in silken shirts,
Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,
Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks.

Jean Toomer

Song Of The Son

Pour O pour that parting soul in song
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night
Into the velvet pine-smoke air tonight,
And let the valley carry it along.
And let the valley carry it along.
O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,
So scant of grass, so proligate of pines,
Now hust before an epoch's sun declines
Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.
In time, for though the sun is setting on
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;
Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone.
O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes
an everlasting song, a singing tree,
Caroling softly souls of slavery,
What they were, and what they are to me,
Caroling softly souls of slavery.

Jean Toomer

Storm Ending

Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads,
Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,
Rumbling in the wind,
Stretching clappers to strike our ears . . .
Full-lipped flowers
Bitten by the sun
Bleeding rain
Dripping rain like golden honey—
And the sweet earth flying from the thunder.

Jean Toomer

Tell Me

Tell me, dear beauty of the dusk,
When purple ribbons bind the hill,
Do dreams your secret wish fulfill,
Do prayers, like kernels from the husk
Come from your lips? Tell me if when
The mountains loom at night, giant shades
Of softer shadow, swift like blades
Of grass seeds come to flower. Then
Tell me if the night winds bend
Them towards me, if the Shenandoah
As it ripples past your shore,
Catches the soul of what you send.

Jean Toomer

The Lost Dancer

Spatial depths of being survive
The birth to death recurrences
Of feet dancing on earth of sand;
Vibrations of the dance survive
The sand; the sand, elect, survives
The dancer. He can find no source
Of magic adequate to bind
The sand upon his feet, his feet
Upon his dance, his dance upon
The diamond body of his being.

Jean Toomer

Unsuspecting

There is a natty kind of mind
That slicks its thoughts,
Culls its oughts,
Trims its views,
Prunes its trues,
And never suspects it is a rind.

Jean Toomer