

A
Jean Toomer
Reader

Selected Unpublished Writings

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fact, they are likely to prove to be directly hostile. But with the youth of the race, unguided or misguided as they now are, there is a tragic need. Talent dissipates itself for want of creative channels of expression, and encouragement. My own means are slim, almost nothing. I have had and am still having a hard pull of it. But as I write these lines there are two young people whom I am barely keeping above surface by the faith and love I have for them. I would deeply appreciate your thoughts in relation [to] this matter. * * *

Do you ever come down this way? For Negro life, its varying shades, its varying phases of consciousness and development there is no better place. I would be glad to share with you whatever I possess.

The Negro Emergent

Where life is conscious and dynamic, its processes naturally involve an extension of experience and the uncovering of new materials. Discovery, in one form or another, is provided by nature for most of us. For the larger part, however, it is reserved to childhood and is attended with no more than a child's concern. Beyond this phase the range of experience is quite limited when seen in terms of human possibilities. Even so, experience may and often does yield isolated moments of discovery. And, rarely, these moments come with such frequency and intensity as to constitute a state. It is then that the fortunate individual undergoes an inward transformation while all the world about him is revealed in fresh forms, colors, and significances. He discovers himself, and at the same time discovers the external world. One may, of course, uncover new facts by means of old modes of thought, feeling, or conduct. This is partial, often false discovery. For it means, simply, the extension of a given organism to novel ground. But real discovery means precisely this: that new facts, truths, realities, are manifest to a transformed state of being. In one sense, these new realities themselves may be nothing more than new illusions. And discovery may be seen as a process which merely substitutes a fresh appearance for an old one. But if this fresh appearance is related to a deep inward change, and the state of being approaches wonder, then one may rightly term this act discovery.

If it were possible to glance at will about the human world and accurately see it in its varied phases and conditions, it would doubtless be seen that the state or process of discovery is constant, that it is always operative in some place, individual, or a group of persons. This glance, for the present, wherever else it rested would be certain to observe the impulse at

work within the Negro in America. For the Negro is discovering himself. I refer of course to individuals, and not to mass.

The Negro is emergent. From what is he emergent? To what is he emerging? An answer to these questions will define his present status and suggest his possibilities.

Generally, it may be said that the Negro is emergent from a crust, a false personality, a compound of beliefs, habits, attitudes, and emotional reactions superimposed upon him by external circumstance. The elements of this compound are numerous. I shall consider what appear to me to be the most outstanding. These fall roughly into two distinct groups. First, there are those factors which arise from the condition of being a black man in a white world. Second, there are those forms and forces which spring from the nature of our civilization, and are common to Americans. I shall treat of these in turn.

Because of external pressure, the Negro, unwittingly, has been divorced by attitude from his racial roots. Biologically, the Negro sprang from what he sprang from: a Negro, or a Negro and white stock. These bloods are in him. No attitude can change this fact, else it would have the power to deprive him of his physical existence. But since he himself has wished to force his slave root from his mind, and since his white root denies him, the Negro, psychologically and spiritually, has been literally uprooted, or worse, with no roots at all. From the anemia and chronic invalidism produced by this condition, the Negro is emergent.

Closely connected with his blood is the matter of his birth; not his birth in this generation, but the possible manner of birth of his great grandparents. Perhaps they were illegitimate. At any rate, he has been called a bastard. This charge has provoked feelings of shame or murder. When not openly expressed, the suspicion has been that it might exist in the white man's mind. Hence the Negro has closed himself and erected barriers, resistances, aggressions, for his own protection. But these things really enslaved the Negro, for, as the old saying goes, a wall restricts the city it surrounds. From this wall and reaction the Negro is emergent.

Then there are the factors which have to do with a century and more of slavery. The practice of using the Negro as slave laborer and concubine, and the consequent attitude of white men toward black women. The assertion that the Negro is inherently inferior, that he is a slave by nature. The Negro's child-like reliance upon the whites. The free admission of white superiority; the forced admission when the free type did not come naturally. The split within the Negro group due to difference of color and economic preferences, often stimulated by the white group. Disdain and contempt on the part of those of lighter color and better position;

distrust and jealousy on the part of the others. Economic poverty. Reactions from [these?] factors.

The effects of the Civil War upon the Negro and the Negro problem are as yet to be accurately known and balanced. Certain of its influences, however, are clear. It freed the Negro nominally; it increased the Negro's bondage to white resentment and white fear, (and, in a large measure added political exploitation to the already existent forms, while doing but little more than modify these forms). For the white southerner resented the Negro's forced liberation. Because of the unrest stimulated in the Negro by abolitionist propaganda and the legal paper-fact of freedom, the white man had additional cause to fear him. Nor will the South forget the sporadic dominance of Negroes during Reconstruction. From such factors as these the modern insistence on what the Negro's place is, the emphatic and sometime brutal measures taken to keep him in it, have their source. And these in turn give rise to the Negro's need for defining his own place and attempting to establish himself therein. In a word, the whole question of social equality, with its mutual bitterness. From this question the Negro is emergent.

But the Civil War and the mock-freedom which followed it, caused a more subtly unfortunate condition. Prior to the war, the Negro, though in slavery, had his roots within the soil. He had an emotional allegiance to the soil and country which he sprang from. I am aware that such a picture of the Negro lends itself to poetic exaggeration, but that it is not wholly fanciful is evident from the folk-songs. Since the war the Negro has been progressively divorced from both. For a time, he could not hear beauty even in his own spirituals; white southerners were often closer to his heritage than he was. He could not love the soil when those above him tried to force his face into it—and then allowed him no real possession. He was too well aware of the fact that he could not generously partake of America, to respond to it. He felt himself the least of aliens, though he knew himself in essence to be native. He might be patriotic. But patriotism is a lean substitute for poetry. The Negro is finding his way to them.

And, ever since emancipation, well intentioned white men, aided by Negroes, have been trying to plaster a white image on a black reality—to superimpose Boston on Georgia. This has led to an over-valuing of academic study; a prejudice against hand-training. It became a matter of shame that the men whose muscle had built the South could not read Caesar in the original. But, that the image is white is secondary. That it is an *image*, is primary. Because of it, the Negro has become a victim of education and false ideals. In terms of mastery, the results have been both ludicrous and pathetic. But this is true of most educational attempts, though it is less apparent in white examples. For Negroes had a

special cause for their submission and desires: the white man claimed that the Negro was mentally inferior. Here was a chance to disprove that statement. The Negro would cram his brain with theories, dates, the Greek alphabet, and become equally civilized. He has done so; he is beginning to question the profit of his efforts. For he now seeks a balanced life, based upon capacity, wherein *all* faculties are given the necessary usage. He is beginning to discard the image for reality.

I think particularly of the illusion that the white American is free in fact, that he is actually free. Because the white man is not racially oppressed, the Negro has tended to picture him as existing in a state of perfect freedom and happiness. Economically, all sorts of avenues and opportunities are imagined to be open to him, so that, if he but wishes and works for it, the fruits of the earth will come into his possession. Every white boy has a *real* chance to become a millionaire and land in the White House. There has been a strong tendency to think of the white man as being psychologically free: he can think, feel, and do just what he pleases. It is assumed, among other things, that the white man *voluntarily* oppresses the Negro, that he freely hates him, that white mobs are acting from free will when they lynch a Negro. In brief, the white man is seen to exist above the laws of necessity and determinism. Indeed, he is believed to sit beside the throne of God, already. This attitude, more than any other, has stimulated the Negro's wish to be like the white man, to be white in fact. It is now being realized, however, that the mass of whites, save in the single instance of racial oppression, are as bound and determined as the mass of blacks, that the fundamental limitations are common to humanity, and that their transcendence demands something more than the mere possession of a white skin, or of a white psychology.

There are, in addition to factors already considered, several other quite important ones. But for the present I will do no more than mention them. A painful self-consciousness, which makes it difficult for the Negro to meet even the well disposed of another race. A suspicion that he is being patronized. An emotionalism on the one hand, an emotional sterility on the other. The list could be continued.

Nor is it necessary that I give a detailed account of those forms and forces which arise from the nature of our civilization and are common to Americans, for these have received extended treatment: their features and effects are familiar to every one. The chaos and strain of these times, the lack of functioning religion, religious pretense and charlatanism, the reaction from these to materialism, industrialism, the ideal of material success, a devitalizing puritanism, herd psychology, the premium placed on individuality, the stupidities, lies, and superstitions that Mr. Menken has warred on, and so on, and so on. In general, all these elements can be

grouped under the head of environmental influences as opposed to essential nature. From these, as I say, the Negro is emergent.

Precisely what, however, do I mean by emergent? Do I mean that the Negro is escaping or trying to escape from these things, that he denies their existence in him and is seeking to forget them? On the contrary, for the first time the Negro is fully recognizing that they do exist in him: this constitutes one aspect of his discovery. The Negro can no more leave them behind than a gull can leave water—but in both cases detachment is possible. The Negro is emerging to a place where he can see just what these factors are, the extent to which he has merely reacted to their stimuli, the extent to which he has been controlled by them. In a sense, he is adjusting to this feature of his reality. Further, he is discovering a self, an essence, interior to this crust-compound.

It would be premature to seek a final definition of this essence, for the act of discovery is only recently initiated, and, moreover, it is for the individual himself to reveal it in his own way and time. Nevertheless, I have already suggested certain of its features: it may be serviceable that I now bring these together and tentatively expand them.

The Negro has found his roots. He is in fruitful contact with his ancestry. He partakes of an uninterrupted stream of energy. He is moved by the vital determinants of racial heritage. And something of their spirit now lives within him. He is about to harvest whatever the past has stored, good and evil. He is about to be released from an unconscious and negative concern with it.

He is discovering his body. "For no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it."^{*} These words are beginning to have real meaning. Save that it shares the derivation and genesis of things created, what matter who made it, the manner of its birth, the outward conditions that its parents were subject to? Here is it, this amazing instrument. It is strong and pliant, capable of work and lovely movements. In color and type it seems to include the varieties of humanity. Artists and anthropologists have been drawn to it. Now the Negro is finding it for his own experience. Let others talk about it if they have a mind to.

Beneath the reactive type, the Negro is touching emotions which have to do with the primary facts of existence. These flow with that lyricism which is so purely Negro. Sometimes they come in jerks and spurts, yet more powerful than a merely modern rhythm. Rarely, they suggest no strain or time at all, having blended with the universal. Liberated from past excess and recent throttling, love and passion may now pass in joy between man and woman. Pain is seen to be of the texture of life; not due

to racial oppression, only. Likewise with fear, conflict, frustration, and tragic circumstance. Above all, the Negro finds that the poverty of creed has not killed his religious impulse. He is on earth, so placed; somewhere is God. The need to discover himself and the desire to find God are similar. Perhaps that strange thing called soul, hardly an existence, rarely mentioned nowadays above a whisper, the Negro in his search may help uncover.

The Negro is led through himself outward to the surrounding world. He feels his own milieu to be desirable; its beauty, ugliness, passion, poverty, rhythm, and color. There is truth in the statement that Harlem differs from other communities in shade merely, but not in pattern. But it should be remembered that this shade appeals to something more than the eye of a Negro. He wishes to generously partake of it; he wishes to press beyond its boundaries, for he knows that neither his nor any similar group provides the range to satisfy a large capacity and keen appetite for experience. He is frank to recognize the advanced status of the white creative world in the matters of discovery and experiment. He wishes to learn from it. But now he does not meet it as a white world, for he recognizes there his own impulse, gone farther, more matured. He meets it as a world of similar values. While he is uncovering the life of Harlem, he is exploring New York. While he finds out things about himself, he learns what other men have found out of themselves. In short, he is emerging to the creative level of America.

But more rapidly than he emerges toward it, the white world of America takes steps towards him. The Negro is being studied in relation to the general economic problems. The problems of population. He challenges attention from those who are sincere in their democracy. His social and educational aspects are being investigated and aided. Psychoanalysis has interesting data concerning him. Articles about him are appearing with increasing frequency in the leading magazines and newspapers. Books are coming out, and publishers are receptive of Negro material. Clubs, societies, and forums wish to hear about the Negro. All this is indicative of a certain type of discovery. I had in mind particularly, however, the discovery of the Negro by creative America.

Speculations as to the Negro's genius, whether or not it was distinct, if so, what would be its contribution, how best to aid its growth—questions such as these foreshadowed direct contacts. And then they came, men who had rid themselves by search and struggle of what the Negro in his efforts toward creation is now contending with. Men who are relatively free to meet life in its own terms and respond to it, not merely through the conventions of thought, emotion, or of conduct. The influence of this discovery is mutual. It is deep-seated. It may prove to be profound. For

^{*}[From the New Testament, Ephesians, 5:29.—Ed.]

each brings the other an essential complement: a living contact made from different levels of experience.

Thus far, the most striking evidence of discovery is the change in Negro life as expressed by attitude. To himself, the Negro says: I am. Need it be pointed out how many centuries of struggle bear their fruit inviolate within this affirmation? The Negro says: I am. *What* I am, I am searching to find out. Also, what I may become. When he faces these mysteries the Negro is humble. It is permitted that he be so; for by this act all racial factors: black, white, birth, slavery, inferior, superior, prejudice, bitterness, resentment, hatred, aggression and submission, equal, reactions, patronage, self-consciousness, false shame and false pride—gravitate to conscious placements. The crisis of race becomes a fact within a general problem. Hitherto, the Negro has been utilized by this crisis for its purposes. The question is, How may he use it for his own? And the concern is with new values.

Discovery itself is such a value. It is the first, for all higher ones depend upon it. But it may not be pursued unattended by dangers. To these, the Negro is now subject. To say, I am. To search to find out what I am and what I may become. This is the true state and temper. But it is all too easy to substitute for this, fanciful excursions and pride oneself for real achievement. Likewise can a feeling of the exotic be mistaken for wonder. One may be thought by others to be novel, and incur no risk. But if one feels himself to be exotic, then the chances are that he will never advance beyond infantilism and inflated personality. Discovery is accompanied by respect for materials. For by means of it one becomes conscious of what a thing really is. One could not touch sand in such awareness, and not respect it. * * *

Discovery implies receptivity to all things: the rejection of no single one, save it be unreal. Prior to the present phase, because he was denied by others, the Negro denied them and necessarily denied himself. Forced to say nay to the white world, he was negative toward his own life. Judged by appearance, he considered appearances seriously, and had no time to find out what lay beneath the creature that America had made of him. And since he rejected this creature, he rejected everything. Something has happened. I have tried to suggest the nature of this happening. An impulse is at work within him, transforming rejections to acceptances, denials to affirmations. It is detaching the essential Negro from the social crust. One may define the impulse; it would be premature to name the substances that may be revealed by it. I think it best not to attempt it. For should there be set up an arbitrary figure of a Negro, composed of what another would have him be like, and the assertion made that he should model himself after it, this figure, though prompted by the highest inter-

est, would nevertheless share the false and constricting nature of all superimposed images. Rather, I would be receptive of his reality as it emerges (being active only by way of aid to this emergence), assured that in proportion as he discovers what is real within him, he will create, and by that act at once create himself and contribute his value to America.

[1924?]