

(This is the opening few pages of my most recently published academic work, which examines the friendship between two writers of the 1920's. I include it here to give you a sense of my academic writing's style and tone.)

Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank

Introduction

In March, 1923, Jean Toomer wrote to Waldo Frank about Flaubert's letters:

But in the matter of his life, and of his potentials as they come to me through certain of his letters, and from passages in his minor works, I feel an overwhelming waste and tragedy. A waste and tragedy other than that caused by his sensibility. . . . it seems to me that so much of his emotion was lost -- it spurted out in conversation and his letters.

Frank's reply was agreed. "[L]et us rather than cavil," he declared, "thank the Lord that the letters are there.... For in the original, we have a substantiated fugue of passionate and gloriously colored thematic movements." These observations would prove prophetic, ironic and unknowingly self-reflective. In the original of their own letters, Toomer and Frank's life and potential come through with a vibrancy and passion that cannot be matched by any secondary account. Spontaneous and unmediated, the letters reveal an intimate voice that is generally hidden from published writing. Unprotected by his public identity (and likewise unhampered by it), each man exposes himself to the other with direct and personal appeals. Favoring expediency over craft, most letter writers would rather get the message in the mail than worry about revision. Thus, these letters bristle with ego, ambition, intellect, compassion, pain, depression, joy, anxiety, and love. Reading their letters, we become unintended witnesses to an extraordinary story about literature, race and human complexity. We watch their complicated friendship unfold, and see raw emotional intensity, frankly confessional moments, and, ultimately, the bitter disappointment and pain of betrayal.

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Toomer and Frank met at a literary party in New York in 1920. Toomer was an aspiring musician and occasional writer, while Frank was an established writer and dedicated amateur musician. They were separated by just a few years—the writer was 31, the aspiring musician, 26—

and both were lonely and ambitious. They met again by chance, a week or so later in Central Park, where they walked and talked together for a long time. The musician returned home to Washington, D.C. and decided to try his hand at writing again. One of his first pieces in print defended Frank's work, celebrating the writer's vision for America. Touched by the vindication, the writer sent a letter to the young musician, offering an introduction to a noted music teacher and parenthetically complimenting the younger man's writing talent.

The two began corresponding regularly and with considerable intellectual and emotional intensity in March of 1922. In early September, they took an extraordinary journey South, where both traveled as black men (Toomer was multi-racial, though legally and socially considered black; Frank was Jew with a dark complexion). Each would struggle to shape the experience (and in many regards, the friendship itself) into the experimental and revolutionary literature that both valued so deeply. They exchanged work, encouraged and advised each other; Frank continually sought out publication and employment opportunities for Toomer, helping him find a way to finance a move to New York, where both believed that the younger man's artistic vision would find its fullest nourishment. In time, Frank brought Toomer's manuscript to his own publisher; it was accepted and contracted in the early days of 1923. Ebullient, confident and proud, Toomer redoubled his efforts to relocate to New York, and in late May, 1923, some 14 months after Toomer mailed Frank that first letter, he first crossed the threshold of the Frank family home in Darien, Connecticut.

The correspondence (and the friendship) suffered a devastating rupture once Toomer moved to Greenwich Village. Unbeknownst to Frank, Toomer soon embarked on an intense secret love affair (which was, however, not secret from mutual friends) with Frank's wife, Margaret Naumberg. What letters there are from this period clearly reflect some tension. On Frank's end, the failure of his marriage was evident, though Toomer's role in it was unknown to him at the time, and his tone reveals anxiety, self-doubt, and despair; in Toomer's letters, the shift in tone is clearly discernible once his literary success unfolds and his involvement with Naumberg begins. Thus, as the two men finally achieved the geographical closeness they longed for, their friendship essentially ended. Toomer found other mentors and other friends in New York and Frank escaped to Europe on an extended voyage where he mourned the failure of his marriage while collecting materials for a

book about Spain.

While critics have long been aware of the fact of a friendship between Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank, the rich contours of their mutual affection are generally dismissed; likewise, the complex details of their relationship tend to be reduced to a much simpler story than the letters reveal. Readers should remember that Frank was celebrated in his day and is virtually forgotten now, whereas Toomer, whose fame was then minor, is today widely taught as member of the Harlem Renaissance and has been the subject of numerous critical analyses of race and identity. At the time they met, Frank was such an established writer that many subsequent accounts of their relationship plug them into the tradition of white literary mentors who encouraged younger black writers in the early twentieth century.

Most accounts acknowledge that their friendship was brief and intense, but follow Toomer's autobiography in claiming that the split came about because Toomer felt betrayed. Frank's introduction to Cane, Toomer charged in later autobiographical writings, wounded him deeply, because Frank presented Toomer primarily as a black writer, rather than emphasizing the multi-ethnic identity he preferred. Their letters provide no evidence whatsoever to support Toomer's later claim that he felt betrayed by Frank's foreword; instead, they actually countermand that claim, not only by showing Toomer's enthusiastic gratitude for Frank's essay, but also in demonstrating Toomer's willingness to be identified as Negro even well after he read Frank's foreword. The letters show how Frank continually sought opportunities on Toomer's behalf, not just to publish poems and sketches, but to make money, to establish literary connections, to find housing and financial backing in New York. To be sure, Toomer's friendship served Frank well in a number of regards, providing him with intellectual companionship and unwavering acclaim. Yet the friendship that is both contained and revealed in these letters is a far more complex affair than what has been heretofore presented by critics, biographers and scholars.