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剑桥美国小说新论·23
(英文影印版)

New Essays on

*Their Eyes Were
Watching God*

《他们眼望上苍》新论

Michael Awkward 编



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导 读

北京大学英语系教授 陶洁

近年来,美国文学在我国很受欢迎。大专院校英语系纷纷开设美国文学选读和专题课,学生从中学到的大部分内容是美国小说。不仅如此,在本科毕业论文、硕士论文或博士论文方面,学生所选题材也大多为关于某部美国小说或某个美国小说家。然而,我们的学生往往热衷理论而对作品或作家缺乏深入细致的了解和分析。他们往往先大谈理论规则,然后罗列一些例证,不能很好地把理论和文本融会贯通,恰如其分地结合在一起。在这种情况下,我们需要一些好的参考资料来帮助学生更好地认识和理解他们在阅读或研究的作品和作家。《剑桥美国小说新论》正是这样一套优秀的参考书。

这套丛书的负责人是曾经主编过《哥伦比亚美国文学史》的艾默里·埃利奥特教授,并且由英国剑桥大学出版社在上世纪80年代中期开始陆续出书,至今仍在发行并出版新书,目前已有五十多种,不仅出平装本还有精装本。一套书发行二十多年还有生命力,估计还会继续发行,主要因为它确实从学生的需要出发,深受他们和教师的喜爱。

《剑桥美国小说新论》的编排方式比较统一。根据主编制定的原则,每本书针对一部美国文学历史上有名望的大作家的一本经典小说,论述者都是研究这位作家的知名学者。开篇是一位权威专家的论述,主要论及作品的创作过程、出版历史、当年的评价以及小说发表以来不同时期的主要评论和阅读倾向。随后是四到五篇论述,从不同角度用不同的批评方法对作品进行分析和阐



释。这些文章并非信手拈来,而是专门为这套丛书撰写的,运用的理论都比较新,其中不乏颇有新意的真知灼见。书的最后是为学生进一步学习和研究而提供的参考书目。由此可见,编书的学者们为了帮助学生确实煞费苦心,努力做到尽善尽美。

这五十多种书有早期美国文学家库珀的《最后的莫希干人》,也有当代试验小说大师品钦的《拍卖第49号》和厄普代克那曾被《时代》杂志评为1923年以来100部最佳小说之一的《兔子,跑吧!》;有我们比较熟悉的麦尔维尔的《白鲸》,也有我们还不太了解的他的《漂亮水手》;有中国学生很喜欢的海明威的长篇小说《永别了,武器》,令人想不到的是还有一本论述他所有的短篇小说的集子。有些大作家如亨利·詹姆斯、威廉·福克纳等都有两三本作品入选,但它们都分别有专门的集子。丛书当然涉及已有定论的大作家,包括黑人和白人作家(可惜还没有华裔作家的作品),但也包括20世纪70年代妇女运动中发掘出来的如凯特·肖邦的《觉醒》和佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿的《他们眼望上苍》,甚至还有我国读者很熟悉的斯托夫人的《汤姆叔叔的小屋》。当年这部小说曾经风靡美国,在全世界都有一定的影响,后来被贬为“政治宣传”作品,从此在美国文学史上销声匿迹。70年代后随着要求扩大文学经典中女性和少数族裔作家的呼声日益高涨,人们才开始重新评价这部作品,分析它对日后妇女作家的影响、对黑人形象的塑造,甚至它在美国文学的哥特式传统中的地位等等。

这样的例子还有很多,例如威廉·迪恩·豪威尔斯和他的《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》。以前人们只肯定他在发展现实主义文学和理论方面的贡献,对他的作品除了《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》评价都不太高。但在这本新论文集子里编者对已有定论进行挑战,强调豪威尔斯的小说、他的现实主义跟当时的社会经济文化现状有很大的关系。他的小说既有其文学形式,又是一种社会力量。另外一位19世纪新英格兰作家萨拉·奥尼·裘威特过去一向被看成是乡土作家,现在学者们用女性主义观点强调她的《尖枞树之乡》对美国文学的贡献,分析当年的种族、民族主义和文学市场

对她写作的影响。用封底宣传语言来说,这本集子对美国文学研究、女性主义批评理论和美国研究等方面都会引起很大的兴趣。

还有一本书似乎在我们国家很少有人提起过——亨利·罗思的《就说是睡着了》。此书在20世纪30年代曾经风靡一时,此后长期销声匿迹,60年代又再度受到推崇。现在这部小说则是上面提到的《时代》杂志100部优秀小说中的一部,被认为是上个世纪头50年里最为出色的美国犹太小说、最优秀的现代主义小说之一。评论家认为集子里的文章采用心理分析、社会历史主义等批评方法探讨了有关移民、族裔和文化归属等多方面的问题。

这套集子里还出现了令人信服的新论点。很长时间内海明威一直被认为是讨厌女人的大男子主义者。但在关于他的短篇小说的论述里,作者通过分析《在密执安北部》,令人信服地证明海明威其实对妇女充满同情。不仅如此,这一论断还瓦解了海明威在《太阳照样升起》中充分暴露他的厌女症的定论。

然而,作者们并不侈谈理论或玩弄理论名词,所有的论断都是既以一定的理论为基础,又对文本进行深入的分析;既把理论阐述得深入浅出,又把作品分析得丝丝入扣,让人不由得信服。他们能够做到这一点完全是因为他们了解学生的水平和需要。

我认为《剑桥美国小说新论》是一套很好的参考书。北京大学出版社购买版权,出版这套书是个有益于外国文学研究教学的决定。

Series Editor's Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretation has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many American novels had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretative issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel's acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising, interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of The American Novel Series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical guides to

American novels now widely read and studied. Each volume is devoted to a single novel and begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the novel's composition, publication, history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of the American novel, and inspire new respects for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

Emory Elliott

University of California, Riverside

Contents

Series Editor's Preface

page vii

1

Introduction

MICHAEL AWKWARD

page 1

2

The Personal Dimension in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

ROBERT HEMENWAY

page 29

3

"Crayon Enlargements of Life": Zora Neale Hurston's
Their Eyes Were Watching God as Autobiography

NELLIE MCKAY

page 51

4

The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk:
Zora Neale Hurston

HAZEL V. CARBY

page 71

5

Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale
Hurstons: Feminist Cultural Studies

RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS

page 95

Notes on Contributors

page 125

Selected Bibliography

page 127

Introduction

MICHAEL AWKWARD

IN *Dust Tracks on a Road*, an autobiography written at the urging of her editor, Bertram Lippincott, Zora Neale Hurston expresses some dissatisfaction with her second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which was published in 1937. She says of the novel:

I wrote "Their Eyes Were Watching God" in Haiti. It was dammed up in me, and I wrote it under internal pressure in seven weeks. I wish that I could write it again. In fact, I regret all of my books. It is one of the tragedies of life that one cannot have all the wisdom one is ever to possess in the beginning. Perhaps, it is just as well to be rash and foolish for a while. If writers were too wise, perhaps no books would be written at all. It might be better to ask yourself "Why?" afterwards than before.¹

Hurston voices the frustrations of an artist brought up in an oral culture like that of her birthplace, Eatonville, Florida, a source of inspiration throughout her writing career and, as she informs us on her autobiography's first page, the first black community in America "to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America." In Eatonville, as Hurston writes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, storytellers sat on the porch of Mayor Joe Clarke's (Starks's in the novel) store and "passed around pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see" (48). Whereas these storytellers were able to retell, modify, and perfect the tales with which they entertained and enlightened other members of the community, authors such as Hurston had to be content with the successes they managed to achieve in written work which, with the seeming clarity of hindsight, might appear incomplete and hastily composed. Clearly, this is how she felt retrospectively about *Their Eyes Were Watching*

God, a work written to capture “all the tenderness of my passion” (and, it seems, at least some of her ambivalence about the physical and psychological violence) experienced during the relationship that inspired the novel.²

Her statement reflects some of the difficulties that Hurston experienced in navigating between two distinct narrative traditions – a black oral tradition characterized by active interchange between responsive storytellers and participatory listeners, and a (written) Western literary tradition where, typically, the author composes and the reader reads in isolation from the author – and suggests her interest in infusing the American novel with expressive potentialities derived from Afro-American culture. This statement and the narrative of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, framed by a conversation wherein the protagonist, Janie, presents herself as a storyteller who will provide her audience – her best friend, Pheoby – “de understandin’” (7) of her life story, suggest Hurston’s experimental impulse, her desire to employ the novel form as a means to preserve and transmit Afro-American oral narrative practices. In the frame of her novel, Hurston approximates the relationship between speaker and listener in Afro-American expressivity, offering in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called a “speakerly text.”³

Hurston’s autobiographical comments also read as a prophetic warning against the types of “rash and foolish” judgments about her life and work that have led to a devaluation of her accomplishments. Her novel was not widely recognized as an important achievement until long after an impoverished Hurston, seriously ill after suffering a stroke in 1959, died of heart disease in 1960 without funds to provide for a proper burial. In fact, although the novel did receive a few positive reviews from critics – for example, Sterling Brown wrote in a review for *The Nation* that the novel “is chock-full of earthy and touching poetry” – the initial impression of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in Afro-American literary circles was that it was a seriously flawed text. Such a view was expressed by Alain Locke in the journal *Opportunity*. Despite his belief that Hurston was a “talented writer” with a “gift for poetic phrase, for rare dialect and folk humor,” Locke, an enthusiastic earlier supporter of Hurston’s work and her teacher at Howard University,

viewed the novel as an "over-simplification" of the Afro-American situation in the post-Reconstruction South, and felt Hurston had not "come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction." Even more harsh than Locke in his appraisal was Richard Wright, the most widely read and celebrated black American writer during the last two decades of Hurston's life. Wright saw *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as lacking material that lent itself to "significant interpretation." Further, Wright argued, in a review that appeared in *New Masses*, that the novel evidences Hurston's shameless pandering

to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is "quaint," the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the "superior" race.⁴

Such negative reactions were to become quite common, and made an unbiased evaluation of Hurston's work nearly impossible during her lifetime. Locke's and Wright's responses seem largely to have been inspired by two perceptions that were to persist, virtually unquestioned, until recently: (1) that the black artist's primary responsibility was to create protest fiction that explored America's historical mistreatment of blacks, boosting black self-esteem and changing racist white attitudes about Afro-Americans in the process; and (2) that in both her public life and her work, Hurston was, to use poet Langston Hughes's phrase, "a perfect 'darkie,' in the nice meaning [whites] give the term — that is a naive, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro."⁵ Nothing that Hurston ever wrote convinced her contemporaries of the limitations either of didactic polemical fiction or of derisive biographical criticism of her work. And none of her defenders during her lifetime was able to read these limitations as persuasively as contemporary scholars such as Barbara Johnson, who has asserted:

While Hurston has often been read and judged on the basis of personality alone, her "racy" adoption of "happy darkie" stance, which was a successful strategy for survival, does not by any means exhaust the representational strategies of her writing.⁶

Hurston. . . . They are a tradition within the tradition – voices that are black and women’s.”¹³

Public utterances about Hurston by contemporary Afro-American women novelists suggest the accuracy of this last statement. Indeed, the author of the prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker, has been the single most instrumental figure in the recent establishment of Hurston’s literary reputation. Walker published several provocative essays during the 1970s which brought Hurston’s work to the attention of many, and said of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “There is no book more important to me than this one.” Walker also paid her debt to Hurston by locating and marking her previously unmarked grave with a tombstone designating her literary forebear as “A Genius of the South.”¹⁴ Other writers have more recently acknowledged the impact of Hurston’s work on their own. For example, Gloria Naylor, author of *The Women of Brewster Place*, has asserted that Hurston’s vivid description of a hurricane’s destructive force in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* contributed to her own delineation of a hurricane in her latest novel, *Mama Day*.¹⁵

If Hurston is indeed correct in her assertion that “[i]t might be better to ask yourself ‘Why?’ afterwards than before,” one question we might profitably ask is why her novel was neglected for so long. Why was *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a work now viewed by a multitude of readers as remarkably successful in its complex, satisfyingly realized depiction of its Afro-American female protagonist’s search for self and community, ever relegated to the margins of the canon? Before we can begin to answer this crucial question, we must first acknowledge several essential facts about the novel’s initial and contemporary reception. First of all – unlike, for example, Harriet Wilson’s recently discovered 1859 novel, *Our Nig* – *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was not totally ignored by book reviewers upon its publication. In fact, it received a certain amount of attention, albeit cursory and largely misinformed, both from important figures within Afro-American literary circles like Wright and Locke, and from white book reviewers working for prominent periodicals like the *Saturday Review* and the *New York Post*, some of whom appeared to have liked Hurston’s novel much more than did her Afro-American contemporaries. One such re-

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viewer, George Stevens, wrote in the *Saturday Review of Literature* that except for some weaknesses in execution, “the narration is exactly right, because most of it is in dialogue, and the dialogue gives us a constant sense of character in action. No one has ever reported the speech of Negroes with a more accurate ear for its raciness.” He ended his review by calling *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a “simple and unpretentious story, but there is nothing else quite like it.” Another reviewer, Hershel Brickell of the *New York Post*, favorably compared Hurston’s ability to render sensory experience to that of D. H. Lawrence.¹⁶

Hurston was by no means an obscure or unknown writer. As Hemenway explains, “She had been granted honorary doctorates, published in national magazines, featured on the cover of the *Saturday Review*, invited to speak at major universities, and praised by the *New York Herald Tribune* as being ‘in the front rank’ not only of black writers but of all American writers.”¹⁷ And although *Their Eyes Were Watching God* did not receive the acclaim that greeted, for example, Wright’s *Native Son* three years later, it did, nonetheless, receive a certain amount of attention from major publications, and several positive reviews. Despite this recognition, Hurston’s novel quickly disappeared from the minds of readers and critics, selling fewer than 5,000 copies before going out of print.¹⁸

Also, we need to recognize that, if *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was not widely read until the late 1970s, critics did, as early as the 1950s, sing its praises and argue for its central position in the American literary tradition. For example, Robert Bone offered in 1958 what appears to be the first glowing praise of Hurston’s novel by an influential American literary scholar. Bone called it “Miss Hurston’s best novel, and possibly the best novel of the period, excepting *Native Son*.”¹⁹ After the 1960s, a decade in which Hurston’s contributions were generally ignored (an exception is Julius Lester’s dedication of his book *Black Folktales* to the “memory of Zora Neale Hurston, who made me glad I am me”), the early 1970s witnessed a sharp increase in statements by critics frustrated by the continued marginality of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. For example, June Jordan characterized Hurston’s second novel as “the prototypical Black novel of affirmation” and as “the most successful, convincing, and exemplary novel of Blacklove that we

have." Larry Neal, who saw in it evidence that Hurston possessed "a rather remarkable understanding of a blues aesthetic and its accompanying sensibility," considered *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "clearly her best novel." In addition, Roger Whitlow called the novel "one of the fine works of American literature of this century," and Addison Gayle called it "a novel of intense power . . . [that] evidences the strength and promise of African-American culture."²⁰

These and other discussions kept alive an awareness of Hurston's novel until a time when members of the literary academy were more able to appreciate *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Such a time was signaled by two significant changes that occurred in the 1970s: the establishment of feminist literary criticism within the academy as an important interpretative strategy, and the emergence of culturally specific forms of evaluation of Afro-American texts grounded in the black American oral storytelling traditions and discursive practices, or what I call throughout this introduction "Afrocentric criticism."

Indeed, Henry Louis Gates is correct in his suggestion that the efforts of his generation of black and feminist critics have established Hurston as an important part of the canon of American literature.²¹ The emergence of feminist criticism was crucial because it brought new attention to neglected works by women authors such as Hurston, and developed interpretative practices adequate to the explication of these works. The burgeoning of Afrocentric strategies of analysis was equally important to the re-discovery of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for such strategies provided readers with the capacity to respond to elements crucial to a comprehension of Hurston's artistic sensibilities.

The previous obscurity of Hurston's novel was not the result of benign neglect. Rather, it was a product both of the difficulty that Afro-American and female writers generally encountered in having their work taken seriously by critics, and of Hurston's aesthetic and ideological differences with other members of the literary community about the function of art and the depiction of Afro-Americans in literature. And contemporary acclaim for Hurston's novel results from the emergence to prominence of literary critics whose ideological perspectives and assumptions about aesthetics