

TOWARD A MORE DEMOCRATIC SOCIAL ORDER, by Wendell Thomas. Exposition Press, New York, 1956. 65 pages. \$2.50.

THE WONDERFUL O, by James Thurber. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1957. 72 pages. \$3.50

Reviewed by MARSHALL CRANE

WENDELL THOMAS has studied and taught at more universities than most of us have ever visited. He has lived and worked among men with various racial, political and cultural backgrounds. For the past decade he has been a member of a residential landholding "community" in the hills of North Carolina.

In the classic sense of the word he is not a utopian, but it seems to me that in this, his latest work, he does exhibit more than a few of the characteristics which we have come to associate with that label. For while the reader will never be in doubt as to the strength of the author's desire to make this poor world a better one, he may find his proposals for improving it rather puzzling in places.

This, I think, is partly due to Dr. Thomas' impressionistic style. All through the book his use of significant terms is vague and obscure. He announces that his theme is democracy, which seems plain enough. But it is anything but plain if we do not know what brand of democracy the author is talking about. In this book we are never quite clear as to whether his democracy is a form of government, a general type of public policy, a desirable attitude of mind in the private citizen, an incantation of some sort, or just a convenient cliché. "Freedom," "rights," "property," "land," "capital," "rent," "money," "religion," "ethics" are a few other terms whose meaning seems to vary from page to page.

Dr. Thomas does not make the error of confusing land values with wealth and capital, and he shows, on logical and ethical grounds, that ground rent is not interest. But when he starts searching for remedies for existing social maladies caused by its private appropriation his political economy does show definite signs of weakness. His plans for periodical redistribution of land, etc., would have little substance even if he had worked them out in some detail and presented them with a reasonable degree of clarity.

But probably he is at his worst, economically speaking, when he approaches the touchy subject of money. He is on fairly solid ground in pointing out that our present media of exchange are far from perfect standards of value. However, he believes that we should substitute for them some sort of currency based upon human labor, the value of which certainly reacts at least as violently to current conditions of supply and demand as our present monetary standards. And he fails to explain how the relative values of different types of labor and the costs of various commodities are to be determined in the extremely decentralized commonwealth which he favors.

The idea of using labor as a standard of value is not a new one, of course. But it was somewhat of a surprise to me to find it advocated in a work on "a more democratic social order," as I did not recall its employment in, or proposal for, any economy, large or small, in which the political authority lacked the power to dictate relative values and prices as it pleased.

Dr. Thomas' efforts have been directed toward a truly worthy end. It is unfortunate that his book does so little to further its achievement.

ONE does not write "reviews" of the classics. There are, after all, some limits to literary impertinence. And

any work of James Thurber's which was published last year is surely a classic by this time. But it has occurred to me that there must be quite a few—busy folks, "serious" folks, or just unlucky folks — who have missed *The Wonderful O*, as I did until a few hours ago. And to these unfortunate souls I would like to say: Read it as soon as you can!

Thurber fans expect to laugh, from the first page to the last, when they

open one of his books. I doubt if any found this one disappointing. But I have an idea that those who were looking forward to a chuckle with the inimitable creator of fables, fantasies, fairy tales, plaints, plays and pictures were a little surprised, even as they laughed. Thurber the satirist was not at all unfamiliar, but Thurber the poet and Thurber the political philosopher must have been complete strangers to many.