

SPLIT-GUT SONG

JEAN TOOMER AND THE POETICS OF MODERNITY



KAREN JACKSON FORD

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Abbreviations

C: *Cane*. Edited by Darwin T. Turner. New York: Norton, 1988.

Reader: *A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings*. Edited by Frederik L. Rusch. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

Wayward: selections from *The Wayward and the Seeking* as published in *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness*, edited by Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard Eldridge. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987.

CP: *The Collected Poems of Jean Toomer*. Edited by Robert B. Jones and Margery Toomer Latimer. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988.

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The Scratching Choruses of Modernity

FROM THE OUTSET, Jean Toomer's *Cane* has been recognized as a pivotal work in American literature. When it appeared in a small edition in 1923, it was heralded as the first book to treat African American life *artistically* because it replaced Negro stereotypes with complex, impressionistic portraits; clichéd tales of racial tragedy or triumph with subtle explorations of black artistic development; and supposed African American literary forms with modernist experimental structures. Though *Cane* would not become a popular success for another forty years, contemporary reviewers and critics regarded it as an inaugural event in American letters. It was again accorded literary primacy upon its republication in 1969 during the Black Arts movement for its unconventional style and its celebration of African American origins. Since then "the book that launched the Harlem Renaissance" (Bell, *Afro-American Novel* 321), the "seminal text for the New Negro Renaissance of the twenties and for the New Black Poetry movement of the sixties" (Gates 202), "the most frequently studied, the most respected of all the books of the Harlem Renaissance" (Turner, *C* 122) has also been pronounced a key modernist text, ranking in significance and style with T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* (1923).¹

Cane is a preeminent text for all these movements not simply because of its fresh treatment of African American subjects but because of its distinctive structure and style. The work gathers sonnets, ballads, free-verse poems, work songs, spirituals, popular songs, short stories, a quasi drama, and brief prose pieces into three separate sections in a rich collage of cultural forms, historical epochs, and national locales. Moreover,

Cane's prose is highly figurative and lyrical, contributing to many critics' sense that the volume is extending the limits of literary forms.² Readers have responded to *Cane's* variety of forms differently at different moments, at first expressing bewilderment, then ignoring its heterogeneity by classifying the book as a novel or a collection of short stories, and recently, arguing that it self-consciously defies any generic categorization.³

At stake in earlier readings of *Cane* as a novel or collection of short stories is the conviction that prose can offer a realistic portrayal of African American life and culture. This is a poetics of depiction or representation. From Frederick Douglass to Toni Morrison, obviously in quite different ways, black narratives have witnessed and interpreted African American existence. Indeed, so important is the task of documenting the actuality of African American life that Toomer is most frequently compared to naturalist Richard Wright and praised for depicting "the earthy realities of a Black past" (Bradley 684). Even those who acknowledge that *Cane* is not a strictly realistic novel can claim that it offers a "higher realism of the emotions." Through lyricism and impressionism, Toomer achieves an accuracy of representation that exceeds realism. Either way the argument is made, realism or "higher" realism, *Cane* is valued for its authentic depiction of African America.⁴

Conversely, more recent critics have emphasized the antirealistic aspects of the text, its impressionism, lyricism, symbolism, and disjunction. Here is a poetics of disruption. *Cane* rejects the burden of representation, disrupting formal conventions as a means of shattering racial expectations. *Cane* still performs a political function but now through the indeterminacy, not the authenticity, of racial identity. The text registers resistance to rigid racial categorizations in the ambiguity of its formal structures, and what is "represented" is the impossibility of a stable racial portrayal.⁵

While these approaches have produced important and discerning readings, they have also devalued the poems in *Cane*—not simply by oversight but by necessity. To come to terms with the poems is to unsettle many established notions about the book, and about African American literature more generally, especially the claim that *Cane* invents new literary forms to articulate a radical conception of racial identity.⁶ Moreover, guided through the text by the poems, our sense of the structural logic and thus the significance of the ending will change. For the poetry

of *Cane* tells quite a different story from the one many readers have sought in its pages, a story not of awakening, reconciliation, or promise but one of nostalgia, fragmentation, defeat.⁷ Toomer himself described the book in these terms to his publisher Horace Liveright when he sent in the readied manuscript:

The book is done.
 I look at its complacency and wonder where on
 earth all my groans and grunts and damns have gone.
 It doesn't seem to contain them
 And when I look for the power and beauty
 I thought I'd caught, they too seem to thin out
 and and [sic] elude me.
 Next time, perhaps . . . (C 154)

The letter, which is distinctive among Toomer's published letters for being formatted as poetry, is clearly elegiac. In the context of the whole document, the opening sentence is dirgelike: "The book is done." The repeated "and" in the penultimate line sounds less accidental than deliberately evocative of the elusiveness he laments. The faint hope in the last line echoes the ending of *Cane*—both gestures attempt to summon future possibility as an epilogue to tragedy. As I will show, focusing on the poems in *Cane* produces a text that accords poignantly with Toomer's discouraged letter to Liveright. *Cane* records the impossibility of representing the "power and beauty" Toomer associates with his material. As he came more and more to insist in the months and years following *Cane's* publication, "*Cane* was a swan-song. It was a song of an end" (*Wayward* 123). What's more, *Cane's* song of an end regards the very end of song, the inability of the modern black poet to transform the last echoes of the spirituals into a new poetry.⁸ The poems of *Cane* dramatize this failure, and it is in the poetry that the elegiac strains of the book are most evident.

Despite the fact that it is impossible to understand *Cane* without understanding the function of its poems, only one short article has focused on the poetry in the eighty years since *Cane* first appeared—and even there, only on the poetry of part 1.⁹ Many studies of *Cane* analyze the prose without so much as a reference to the poems, and even those that do treat the prose and poems in equal detail still conceive of the poems

as supplementary to the prose.¹⁰ The poems fare even worse in studies of *Cane*'s formal hybridity. To argue for a breakup of old forms or the invention of new ones, critics point to the prose, where lyric outbursts, ellipses, apostrophes, and dense figuration seem to signal generic defiance. In such a reading, the actual poems in *Cane* are almost an embarrassment, vestiges of a traditional notion of literary form that the book as a whole questions.¹¹

In fact, however, the poems in *Cane* are central to its structural logic; they do not simply round out the three sections, as even Toomer himself sometimes suggested, but rather define each section and give coherence to the whole volume. We must consider the poetry with these things in mind: how the poems relate to the prose, how the poems relate to each other, and how the poems relate to the three-part structure of the volume. That third issue, how the poems function in the larger structure of the book, was something even Toomer struggled to enunciate. When Toomer first conceived of the book, he planned to organize it by genre, with the poems occupying the middle section of the book. The completed volume, of course, is organized by region, with poems dispersed throughout. Yet the poems only gain force and meaning through their juxtaposition with other forms, and the tension between poetry and prose, and even among different kinds of poetry, functions as a figure for all the other conflicts in the book.

These other conflicts were initially elaborated by Waldo Frank in his introduction to the first edition: "Part One is the primitive and evanescent black world of Georgia. Part Two is the threshing and suffering brown world of Washington, lifted by opportunity and contact into the anguish of self-conscious struggle. Part Three is Georgia again . . . the invasion into this black womb of the ferment seed: the neurotic, educated, spiritually stirring Negro" (C 139). His abbreviation of this structure at the end of the introduction makes his interpretation even more explicit: "the simple slave Past, the shredding Negro Present, the iridescent passionate dream of Tomorrow" (140). Frank's thesis-antithesis-synthesis model for *Cane* suggests that the circular movement of the book—the southern past, the northern present, the northerner "returning" to the south—is at heart a forward journey: the future lies in a return to origins.¹² However, the poetry tells a different tale. Poetry, especially in the form of song, is associated with cultural origins in part 1, but the meaning of poetry shifts as the book proceeds northward and into the

present. There are ten poems in part 1, only five in part 2, and no actual poems in part 3. Significantly, the part 1 poems are *Cane's* greatest achievement; part 2 poems are, by design, weak and confused by comparison. That is, poetry flowers, falters, and ultimately falls silent in *Cane*, witnessing the impossibility of recovering one's roots, the failure of the "dream of Tomorrow" to take hold even in ancestral lands.

As Toomer sent the completed manuscript off, he described the structure of the book in contradictory terms that hint at the importance of poetry, emphasizing "form" at the expense of regional logic:

From three angles, CANE'S design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally from the South up into the North, and back into the South again. Or, From [sic] the North down into the South, and then a return North. From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with [the last story in part 2] Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into [part 3] Kabnis, emerges in [the first story in part 1] Karintha etc. swings upward into [two stories midway through part 2] Theatre [sic] and Box Seat, and ends (pauses) in [the final poem of part 2 and of the book] Harvest Song. (*Reader* 26)

Toomer's inconsistent portrayal of the book as both angular and circular, indeed as angles that somehow sketch a circle, captures his urge to form a whole out of disparate parts—to forge those angles (South, North; rural, urban; simple, complex) into a circle through the architectonics of the volume. Yet the oppositions that make up the lines of his "angles" remain resistant to resolution. If the book goes "from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms," we have assumed that these forms map onto the South, North, and South respectively. But he immediately offers not just an alternative reading, but a converse one—"or" North, South, and North. In one breath he associates simple forms with the South and complex ones with the North, but in the next breath he reverses those associations. And, in any case, what would those simple or complex forms be?¹³ In the first scenario, we might assume that folk songs and spirituals are simple forms associated with the primitive South, while prose vignettes and prose-drama are complex forms associated with the modern North—a fairly obvious distinction between

“old” and “new” modes. However, in Toomer’s alternate scenario, the forms associated with the North would be simple and those with the South complex. Here narrative might be considered *simply* direct and representational, attentive to historical accuracy, while lyric might offer something subtler—indirection, evocation, and emotional accuracy (perhaps this sense of the book is a holdover from when Toomer planned to organize it by genre, with poetry making up the second, “complex” section). But neither poetry nor prose is limited to one section, and Toomer’s description of *Cane* is difficult to square with the book we have.

The one form that does change from section to section, however, is poetry. Part 1, as is widely acknowledged, contains several poems in traditional forms (ballads, a sonnet, rhymed quatrains), while part 2 poems are all in free verse. Is this the development Toomer refers to as the move from simple to complex forms? Certainly the prose does not admit of such a pointed change. Toomer seems to have regarded poetry as simple when he associated it with “primitive” stages of culture and complex when he associated it with the regeneration or redemption of modern culture. That is, poetry originates in the primitive past as chants and songs that express and preserve the spiritual life of a people, but it has necessarily evolved into the arcane idiom of the modern poet-prophet. The poet’s task is to listen to the originary voices while transmitting their wisdom to a world grown deaf to the simple truth. In this sense, Toomer’s scheme suggests that the book moves from simple poetic forms (perhaps the spirituals, work songs, and ballads of part 1) to complex poetic forms (the free-verse imagistic poetry of part 2). Thus, the lyrical aspects of poetry (the euphony, rhyme, meter, assonance, repetition, and cadence for which part 1 is famous) recall the oral poetry of primitive singers, while antilyrical poetic devices (dissonance, disjunction, and visual imagery) comprise the instruments of the modern poet. Still, the terms “simple” and “complex” fall far short of distinguishing the poems from each other (the intricately structured sonnet “November Cotton Flower,” for instance, would be a “simple” form because it appears in part 1), and Toomer’s comment only suggests the importance of “form” without clarifying the form that form takes.

Another crucial detail of his comment, though, points to the special significance of the poems. The larger structural configuration, in

which part 1 captures the African American past, part 2 records the destruction of that way of life in the move to the urban, industrial North, and part 3 attempts a reconciliation and return to the South, vies here with Toomer's assertion that *Cane* begins at the end of part 2 with Paul's awakening, descends into Kabnis's dark night of the soul, emerges at the rural past of Karantha's world, and journeys through history to the urban present of John and Dan; finally, *Cane* ends at "Harvest Song," the last poem in the volume, a poem that longs for the agrarian past but acknowledges its failure to recover that moment. It is striking that Toomer conceived of *Cane* pausing at "Harvest Song," as if for him the book ends where the poems end.

In fact, a generic hierarchy does organize the volume, and lyric poetry is quite conventionally at the top of this hierarchy. The lyric strain is the voice of memory, beauty, and cultural authority. Lyric poetry in traditional forms, moreover, constitutes the most persuasive and authoritative voice in the book, a powerful, idealizing discourse that the volume clearly prizes. Free-verse poetry carries some of the same cultural weight, but Toomer uses it to expose the vicious realities and bitter disappointments of racist America rather than to conjure an ideal time and place. Echoes and snippets of folk songs, on the other hand, erupt throughout the text to mark loss and cynicism but exert only a renegade, disruptive power over the text's meanings.¹⁴ The short stories and prose portraits seem associated with realism, though *Cane*'s documentary impulse is always qualified by a nagging lyricism that insists on the inadequacies of a strictly realistic mode. Finally, a quasi-dramatic form uneasily delivers narrative as stage directions, conveying a sense not of action being narrated and character being developed but of puppets being pulled on their strings. Certainly, much twentieth-century drama would reduce realistic characters to modernist puppets, but Toomer's use of the method in a short story context only deepens the sense that something is amiss in the form of these stories. That is, the prose and drama in *Cane* work against the idealizing impulse of lyric. It should come as no surprise, then, that the most successful poems appear in part 1, the least successful poems in part 2, and that poetry is absent in part 3. The beauty and authority of lyric poetry belong to the idealized past that part 1 desires to represent; the corruption and loss of such cultural authority belong to part 2; and the fact that lyric poetry cannot be recovered even

when the narrative returns to the South in part 3 points to the function of lyric in *Cane*: its function is to fail.

The priority of poetry is perhaps more immediately obvious in the thematics of *Cane* than in its structure. It is no coincidence that most of the men in the book fancy themselves poets since poetry is the volume's privileged mode. For instance, "Song of the Son," a poem in part 1, is typically understood to express the mission of the book: to capture the last echoes of the slave songs in contemporary poetry.¹⁵ Through the poem's speaker, usually taken to be Toomer, the past becomes "[a]n everlasting song, a singing tree" perpetuated in the songs of the son (14). Numerous male characters in *Cane* share this ambition to be the poet of their people. The narrator of "Avey" recites his poems to her in the hopes of evoking "an art that would open the way for women the likes of her" (48), Dan Moore imagines himself a poet-prophet in "Box Seat" (66, 67), Paul in "Bona and Paul" is assumed to be a poet (79), and Kabnis, the title character of the third section, longs to interpret the South in poetry: "How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul" (84). Poetry and song are near-synonyms in *Cane*, their equivalence suggesting the evolution of folk songs and chants into literary poetry, and narrators or narrator-characters valorize song in "Karintha," "Carma," and "Fern"; the corruption of song is equally momentous in "Becky," "Esther," "Blood-Burning Moon," and "Rhobert." Poems like "Cotton Song," "Song of the Son," "Evening Song," and "Harvest Song" formalize an obsession with song evident even in the phrases of the prose: "supper-getting-ready songs" (3), "her body is a song" (12), "an evening folk-song" (17), "a Jewish cantor sing[ing]" (17), "[f]ragments of melodies" (23), "improvised songs" (30), "jazz songs" (41, 52), "a promise-song" (48), "discordant snatches" of song (53), "[s]inging walls" (55), "the life of coming song" (58), "street songs" (59), "forgotten song" (59), a "sentimental love song" (68), the night winds' song (83), a "sleep-song" (84), church singing (90–93), "a soft chorus" (98), a "womb-song" (105), and a "birth-song" (117). And spirituals, folk songs, and popular songs are referred or alluded to throughout *Cane*: "Roll, Jordan Roll" (11), "Deep River" (43, 83, 87, 105), "My Lord, What a Morning" (93), "Little Liza Jane" (77), "Dixie's Land" (89), "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?" (108), "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" (98), and "Rock-A-Bye, Baby" (84, 117).

So great is the emphasis on song in *Cane* that despite the preponderance of prose in the book and the fact that many readers have been inclined to read *Cane* as a prose work, Toomer himself is typically regarded first and foremost as a poet. Virtually every commentator on *Cane* refers to Toomer as such, and several argue that he is not merely the poet who wrote the book but a poetic force within *Cane* who interrupts narrators, especially at moments of crisis, and rescues the action from the prose. For instance, the third part of *Cane* is a portrait of an aspiring artist, "Kabnis." Kabnis longs to be a poet-prophet of his race, but racism has paralyzed him with fear and self-doubt, and he gives up his dream in the end. Still several readers claim that the story "Kabnis" succeeds even though Kabnis the character fails because the poet steps in as Kabnis trudges away in defeat and saves the ending with a lyrical affirmation of renewal in the famous description of sunrise that concludes the volume: "Lewis leaves, and Kabnis gives up teaching, but the poet remains to catch the 'birthsong' of a new day's sun and to create the 'Song of the Son' through *Cane*" (McKay 177).¹⁶

The notion that "the poet" can reverse Kabnis's decline, indeed can reverse an epoch's decline, as the "Song of the Son" promises, presupposes his tremendous power and importance. Toomer's repeated creation of characters who strive to be poet-prophets, and his own personal efforts to fulfill such a role, suggest something more than the cultural prestige that poetry has always enjoyed or even the supposed primacy of song in African American culture.¹⁷ The prevailing sense of the poet's importance was heightened for Toomer by his interest in Peter Demianovich Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum*, a mystical treatise on consciousness, which Toomer was reading during the writing of *Cane*. Alice Poindexter Fisher has demonstrated that Toomer became familiar with Ouspensky's work sometime during 1922 (505). The relevance of Ouspensky's ideas to Toomer's conception of poetry is striking. Ouspensky claimed that knowledge of the noumenal world comes in mystical sensations, and these sensations must be translated for the uninitiated:

Ouspensky states that only a poet can communicate both the mystical, emotional feelings of an experience and the concepts inherent in that experience. Thus, "Poetry endeavors to express both music and thought together. The combination of feeling and thought of high tension leads to a higher form of psychic life. Thus in art we

have already the first experiments in a language of the future.”
(Fisher 508)

Fisher attributes Toomer's radical language experiments to Ouspensky's conception of the artist as prophet, one who must create a new idiom in order to communicate the noumenal world to the masses (508), and Toomer's valorization of the poet may originate here as well. In any case, Toomer clearly linked poetry and spirituality, refusing to remove the flawed poem “Prayer” from *Cane*, even when Frank, his trusted friend and literary mentor, urged him to drop it, insisting “its *idea* is essential to the spiritual phase of *CANE*” (qtd. in Scruggs and VanDemarr 130). That a poem does “essential” work for the book despite its weakness—moreover, work that the prose cannot do—suggests Toomer's conviction that poetry is the genre of truth. Further, as we shall see, “Prayer”'s flaws are precisely what make it true in the context of the part 2 poems.

Considering *Cane*'s exaltation of the poet and his poems, it is surprising that the poems have always occupied an uneasy position in that most poetical of volumes. Toomer himself was uncertain about the status the poems would have in the book, assigning them changing roles as he composed *Cane*. When he first began to imagine collecting his work into a single volume, in July of 1922, he envisioned *Cane* this way: “I've had the impulse to collect my sketches and poems under the title perhaps of *Cane*. Such pieces as K.C.A. [“Karintha,” “Carma,” “Avey”?] and Kabnis (revised) coming under the sub head of *Cane Stalks and Chorouses* [*sic*]. Poems under *Leaves and Syrup Songs*. Vignettes under *Leaf Traceries in Washington*” (*Reader* 11). This design seems to suggest the centrality of the prose pieces, especially those set in the South; they are the “stalks” that will support the poems and vignettes, yet he refers to them with the lyrical term “choruses,” meaning not songs or poems *per se* apparently but choral qualities related to both African American musical culture and Greek drama. The actual poems in this scheme are peripheral to the prose but nevertheless important, as the leaves of the cane stalk are integral to its proper functioning. Still, “leaves” indicates something less substantial than the stalk. “Syrup Songs,” in contrast to these organic metaphors, regards the poems as the product of a human refining process, perhaps even suggesting that the poems are more finely wrought than the prose pieces. Yet even here, “syrup” connotes something sweet