

## JEAN TOOMER AND THE BLACK HERITAGE

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This study tries to determine the roles of the past in Jean Toomer's Cane (1923), a work which the poet and critic William Stanley Braithwaite welcomed as "a book of gold and bronze, of dusk and flame, of ecstasy and pain." (1) In his The Negro Novel in America, Robert A. Bone calls Cane "by far the most impressive product of the Negro Renaissance" and ranks it "with Richard Wright's Native Son and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man as a measure of the Negro novelist's highest achievement." (2) Bowie Duncan's less emphatic realization "that in the book as a whole the variations on the theme of the relationship between the past and the present, the ideal and the real, are infinite" (3) provides a perspective for this paper. We will relate the results to various autobiographical statements to further explore Toomer's subjective view of the usefulness of Black heritage for the Black artist.

Part One of Cane consists of six stories separated from each other by five blocks of two poems. Toomer introduces his readers to the Afro-American past by employing spirituals and the blues. The author uses both to influence form and meaning of the first story. "Karintha" opens with a blues stanza which recurs in the middle and at the end. In central position, it is repeated in an abbreviated version; at the end it is extended by the echoing of the last words: "Goes down..." (4) The blues quote subdivides the story into two main parts. The variation can be explained as adaptation to the narrative speech which increases around the middle axis and slows down towards the end.

The blues lines are directly linked with the title character in a sentence following or preceding the blues quote:

Men had always wanted her, this Karintha, even as a child, Karintha carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down. (p.1)

Karintha is a woman. She who carries beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down. (p.2)

Karintha at twenty, carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down. Karintha... (p.2) (5)

This phrase serves as an emblem for the heroine's invariable qualities. But there is a change of the pattern. The author fills the gap between the two last lines, "Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon/...When the sun goes down," by dropping the irritating "eastern horizon" and connecting "dusk" with sundown. In the central blues quote, he achieves exactly the same result through abbreviation, thus integrating the blues more closely into the text. According to the critic Shirley Anne Williams, "Repetition in blues is seldom word for word and the definition of worrying the line includes changes in stress and pitch, the addition of exclamatory phrases, changes in word order, repetition of phrases within the line itself, and the wordless blues cries that often punctuate the performance of the songs." (6) Toomer not only repeats parts of the blues stanza but also uses blues techniques in his prose: Word echoes like /dust/, /dusk/, /hush/ and slightly varying repetitions indicating the chronology and urgency of events:

... this Karintha, even as a child, Karintha...(p.1)  
Karintha, at twelve,... (p.1)  
Karintha is a woman. She who carries beauty,... (p.2)  
Karintha is a woman. (p.2)  
But Karintha is a woman,... (p.2)  
Karintha is a woman. (p.2.)  
Karintha at twenty, carrying beauty... (p.2)

The pattern of repeated statements and the return to the beginning hints at the circular structure of the story and the blues. This is emphasized by the reversal of the 'blues-emblematic phrase'-order and the return to the original blues stanza. This slightly loosens the text-quote relation typical of the middle of "Karintha": Karintha's individual story fades away and the blues is restored to its function of analysis and general comment on tragic events. Karintha's becomes one of many tragedies; it is linked to the collective history via a cultural form of expressing and recording experience which eventually fades away as well.(7)

Toomer also has the blues break through the confinements of the quote by exploiting the tension between its first two lines:

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,  
O cant you see it, O cant you see it,... (p.1)

For the blues audience, description is followed by an appeal to see the ominous implications of the scene. In the story, the chorus of males witnessing Karintha's growth refuses to acknowledge its involvement: The chorus' subjective vision of reality, its contempt of life causes her to develop as a prostitute and child murderer.

After Karintha had killed her child in the second part of the story, "some one made a song:"

Smoke is on the hills. Rise up.  
Smoke is one the hills, O rise  
And take my soul to Jesus. (p.2)

Generally, the spiritual asks for salvation. However, in context it advocates the annihilation of all visible traces of sin in order to preserve the 'beneficial' state of ignorance. In contrast to the blues which pleads for awareness, the Christian expression supports moral debasement. Therefore Toomer does not integrate the spiritual into the story but employs it as a satirical aside. (8)

The blues pervades characterization, the setting, language, the theme of the story, and the structure of the action. It is heard by the narrator/author and the reader, not by the characters, though its spirit obviously moves Karintha and guarantees her survival.

The second poem, "Cotton Song," again confronts the Christian response to reality with a more secular one: (9)

Come, brother, come. Lets lift it;  
Come now, hewit! roll away!  
Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day  
But lets not wait for it. (p.9)

The religious and the secular traditions are linked by the introductory "Come, brother, come," typical of both spheres. (10) "Roll" recalls spirituals like "Roll de ol' chariot along" or "I'm a-rollin'" referring to spiritual movement towards heaven and liberation in terms of physical movement. (11) Toomer combines "roll away" with exhortations to the fellow workers: "Lets lift it" and "hewit." The transfer from work song to spiritual is achieved by the logical parallelism in lines 2 and 4: "Come now" expresses the same call for immediate action as "But lets not wait for it."

The injection of energy into the line "God's body's got a soul" which comes out as "Bodies like to roll the soul" in the second stanza brings the spiritual and the physical even closer together. Toomer thereby prepares the way for the subsequent disapproval of the one-sided spiritual waiting for Judgment Day: "Cant blame God if we dont roll."

In the third stanza, Toomer at first confirms the parallelism between work-song activity and the spiritual quest but then resumes the urgent desire for action expressed in the last line of the first stanza. In his new song he preserves the spiritual diction but deprives it of Christian modesty and humility by adding the hollers of the work song:

We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!

Nassur; nassur,

Hump.

Eoho, eoho, roll away!

We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day! (p.9)

Finally, the author repeats the second stanza which formulated the new relation between body and soul, i.e. the dependence of spiritual fulfillment on collective physical activity which might transpose liberation from heaven to earth. The work song undermines the spiritual form and secularizes its message.

"Carma" employs folksong as a structuring device subdividing the story into two sections. As in "Karintha," the song is slightly modified in center position. The first paragraph consists of a brief scenic introduction of the main character and a very long parenthesis displaying a collection of impressions evoking the particular atmosphere of the place. The narrator's subjective point-of-view is established after he has left "the men around the stove to follow her with [his] eyes down the red dust road." (p.10) He interprets his vision as "nigger woman driving a Georgia chariot down an old dust road. Dixie Pike is what they call it... The sun, which has been slanting over her shoulder, shoots primitive rockets into her mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower face. Hi! Yip! God has left the Moses-people for the nigger. 'Gedap.'" (p.10) This rather strange mixture of pagan and Christian elements - the conclusion sounds like a gospel song -, is transformed into a totally pagan scene in the parenthesis when the narrator hears "from far away, a sad strong song. Pungent and composite, the smell of farmyards is the fragrance of the woman. She does not sing; her body is a song. She is in the forest, dancing. Torches flare ... juju men, greegree, witch-doctors ... torches go out ... The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa." (p.10) The vitality of the women is guaranteed by their strong, instinctive ties with the rural environment and the race memories of their African origins, (12) which manifest themselves in dance. In his flashback to a scene of African ritual the narrator goes even further.

The present and the past of the black rural population are used to interpret Carma's tale. The narrator qualifies it twice as "crudest melodrama," (p.10) a literary category indicating his detachment or his attempt to make apologies to the reader. The first part offers explanations for the crude melodramatic behavior of the characters. The narrator seems to suggest that both the dancer from the first part, Carma, and himself are united by what Ralph Ellison has called "an identity of passions," (13) based on a unique historical experience in two continents. The folksong tries to lure the reader into this heritage of vital passions.

Between the two stories, "Carma" and "Fern," which depict their heroines' particularly close dependence on the land, Toomer placed two poems, "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk." These deal with an aspect complementary to that of "soil": the impact of the past. "Song of the Son" has quite frequently been interpreted as an autobiographical statement on Parts One and Three of *Cane*, documenting Toomer's actual fascination with Georgia and its symbolic meanings. The poem captures a historic moment, "just before an epoch's sun declines." (p.12) This epoch distinguishes itself by the songs from the soil's "plaintive soul" and "a song-lit race of slaves." Toomer evaluates the heritage and the end of the epoch in the fruit and tree imagery of the fourth stanza:

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,  
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,  
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare.

The narrator is preoccupied with the preservation of the songs by himself, the son of "land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree," who has returned just in time to be once more confronted with his heritage and to plant the seed for "an everlasting song, a singing tree." (14)

The first stanza begins with an incantation directed to the land and the soil to sing the plaintive songs which are never specified as either secular or religious. In the final stanza, the narrator himself begins to sing:

An everlasting song, a singing tree,  
Caroling softly souls of slavery,  
What they were, and what they are to me,  
Caroling softly souls of slavery.

Here the rhyme scheme of the preceding stanzas is even more simplified; in the repeated line, the elaborate verse texture contributes to the song quality. The son becomes the singer and re-creator of the songs of his father. The metaphor of the new singing tree which will produce many new songs suggests the vitality of the heritage which can be multiplied and saved from the destructive effects of time.

While "Song of the Son" focuses on the preservation of the heritage, "Georgia Dusk" explores its influence on reality. In the second stanza, the making of "folk-songs from soul sounds" is described as a subconscious act. Later on, the singing is connected "with vestiges of pomp, / Race memories of King and caravan, / High-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man." (p.13) The pine trees support the rhythm of the pagan song; in the last stanza, the pines will provide "the sacred whisper." The song of the men is blended with its Christian counterpart, "the chorus of the cane ... caroling a vesper to the star." The joint efforts of "voices" and "chorus," of the Old World and the New, is supposed to en-

noble and purify the people celebrating "an orgy for some genius of the South/With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth.":

O singers,.../Give virgin lips to cornfield concubines,  
Bring dreams of Christ to dusky cane-lipped throngs. (15)

The folksongs do not actually transform reality but offer an ideological superstructure linking the present with the past. Essentially, they serve as a means of self-deceit and, at the same time, assure the moral integrity of the narrator. It is he who evaluates the Georgia scene in the last stanza and invokes the active role of the songs defined as results of collective memory and experience.

"Fern", the fourth story of Part One, is as much a portrait of the narrator as it is one of its heroine. Fern's eyes constitute her outstanding feature: "Face flows into her eyes." (p.14) and "Like her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. Flowed into them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia's South." (p.15) Looking at Fern, the narrator has religious associations which initially are caused by her semitic nose:

If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta. (p.14)

...at first sight of her I felt as if I heard a Jewish cantor sing. As if his singing rose above the unheard chorus of a folk-song. And I felt bound to her. I too had my dreams: something I would do for her. (p.15)

In the first quote, an aesthetic activity gains a moral dimension: The mere sight of Fern liberates the spectator from his ego and allows him to give way to compassion. It is significant that he describes his reaction in an image quite unfamiliar to the Southern setting and thus formulates an alternative to the native manner of responding to Fern. In the second quote, the song of Jewish suffering even displaces the Southern folksong, the slavesong. The puzzling experience of Fern's closeness to the land and her denial of external, accepted realities brings forth a universal religious desire for sacrifice and veneration. (16) In the climactic scene, Christian and Jewish elements are blended. Fern falls into a trance when the narrator lets his male instincts take their course after intellectualizing the situation:

From force of habit, I suppose, I held Fern in my arms  
- that is, without at first noticing it. Then my mind

came back to her. Her eyes, unusually weird and open, held me. Held God. He flowed in as I've seen the countryside flow in. Seen men. I must have done something - what, I don't know, in the confusion of my emotion. (p.17)

Fern's reaction follows the patterns of Christian or pagan exorcism:

Fell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying. Her body was tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her. It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Christ Jesus. And then she sang, brokenly. A Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice. A child's voice, uncertain, or an old man's. Dusk hid her; I could hear only her song. It seemed to me as though she were pounding her head in anguish upon the ground. I rushed to her. She fainted in my arms. (p.17)

The fragments of Judeo-Christian and pagan ritual and thought do not save Fern and do not provide the narrator with a useful, transferable set of values. The fragments are used to describe emotions and appearances, but do not explain the essential, that simply happens:

Shortly after, I came back North. From the train window I saw her as I crossed her road. Saw her on her porch, head tilted a little forward where the nail was, eyes vaguely focused on the sunset. Saw her face flow into them, the countryside and something that I call God, flowing into them... Nothing ever really happened. Nothing ever came to Fern, not even I. Something I would do for her. Some fine unnamed thing. (p.17) (17)

This vagueness explains the conclusion of the story that calls on the reader to reject handed-down constructs and to expose himself to the actuality and strange vitality of Fernie May Rosen in her Georgia environment.

In the story "Esther" the heroine, who "looks like a little white child, starched, frilled," (p.20) is shown in four stages of her development. Her life between nine and twenty-seven is decisively influenced by her notion of King Barlo, a black itinerant preacher and cotton picker. At the age of nine Esther happens to see the black man preach a black folk sermon with the characteristic call-and-response pattern. In his sermon, he uses a folk tale of a mythical African who was brought to America and became the forefather of all Afro-Americans. The audience's naive identification

of the narrator with the hero of his parable transforms the religious ceremony into a secular rally formulating a political message on the basis of the slavery experience. Barlo's concluding words actually do remain within the traditional intellectual range of sermon and spiritual, though his tale obviously gave heroic status to the first Afro-American:

Barlo rises to his full height. He is immense. To the people he assumes the outlines of his visioned African. In a mighty voice he bellows: "Brothers and sisters, turn your faces t th sweet face of the Lord, an fill your hearts with glory. Open your eyes an see th dawnin of th mornin light. Open your ears-" (p.21)

When transmitting their experience, the witnesses supplement it with their Christian visions and pagan music. This reshaping in the tradition of the trickster stories and reality-thinking tales humorously exposes the immorality of Southern society.

Her personal experience at nine, her growing frustrations, and this reshaping of events cause that Esther, like the audience, further secularizes Barlo into a mythical black hero:

She spices it [his image] by telling herself his glories. Black. Magnetically so. Best cotton picker in the country, in the state, in the whole world for that matter. Best man with his fists, best man with dice, with a razor. Promoter of church benefits. Of colored fairs. Vagrant preacher. Lover of all the women for miles and miles around.(p.23) (18)

When Esther is confronted with her legend and Barlo does not fulfill her expectations, her world of make-believe is shattered: "There is no air, no street, and the town had completely disappeared." (p.25) Folk sermon and folktale have been used to blot out the dark and drab realities of life but were unable to permanently sustain a vision of individual and collective liberation. The conclusion of the story hints at the necessity of vision, even though Esther's has been destroyed by reality. (19)

The Christian title of the poem "Conversion" misleads the reader, since it depicts a pagan ritual of drinking and feasting. It is very poorly disguised by the "Amen" (p.26) and "hosanna" shouts before a "white-faced sardonic god." The Afro-American clings to his African roots though "yielding to new words and a weak palabra." Significantly, "palabra" preserves the African word for the white sermon.

The title of the last story "Blood-Burning Moon" is repeated in the spiritual-like verse which concludes each of

the three sections, "Red nigger moon. Sinner!/Blood-burning moon. Sinner!/ Come out that fact'ry door." (p.29) It refers to the folk superstition: "The full moon in the great door was an omen. Negro women improvised songs against its spell." (p.28) The moon in the great door of the cotton factory casts a spell over the people in the town. "Sinner!" does not denote a particular person, rather the entire atmosphere of moral entanglement. The factory building is described as a kind of fossil: "Up from the skeleton stone walls, up from the rotting floor boards and the solid hand-hewn beams of oak of the pre-war cotton factory, dusk came," (p.28) a structure in diverse states of preservation. The ruins of the past provide the setting, the fuel, as well as the motivating force for the final lynching scene.

Louisa's white lover, Bob Stone, derives his claim to her body from his idea of 'good old slavery days':

... his mind became consciously a white man's. He passed the house with its huge open hearth which, in the days of slavery, was the plantation cookery. He saw Louisa bent over that hearth. He went in as a master should and took her. Direct, honest, bold. None of this sneaking that he had to go through now. The contrast was repulsive to him. His family had lost ground. Hell no, his family still owned the niggers, practically. Damned if they did, or he wouldnt have to duck around so. (p.31)

These dreams urge him into direct confrontation with Tom Burwell, Louisa's black lover: "Some position for him to be in. Him, Bob Stone, of the old Stone family, in a scrap with a nigger over a nigger girl. In the good old days ... Ha! Those were the days. His family had lost ground. Not so much, though." (p.32) Bob takes on his shoulders the burden of his family history. He and Tom Burwell become victims of the past which still pervades Southern society. Either actively defying or accepting the traditional patterns, Louisa does not show that she understands the mechanics of human behavior. She is irritated and takes her refuge to singing: "The full moon, an evil thing, an omen, soft showering the homes of folks she knew. Where were they, these people? She'd sing, and perhaps they'd come out and join her. Perhaps Tom Burwell would come. At any rate, the full moon in the great door was an omen which she must sing to." (p.35) Superstition and song help to preserve Louisa's closed world of limited insight and life-saving self-delusion. She thus conforms with the traditional role of the Southern house slave. (20)

Let us summarize Toomer's use of the past in Part One of Cane! In the stories "Karintha" and "Becky" as well as in the poem "Cotton Song," the author uses the blues, the folk sermon, the spiritual, and the worksong as means of presen-

tation. (21) They are supposed to appeal directly to the reader who should understand them as the narrator's commentary on the plot. Toomer clearly distinguishes between the secular and the religious traditions. Whereas the spiritual and the sermon disguise reality, the blues and the worksong ask for action and reflection to analyse and change the facts.

The story "Carma" introduces a new method of handling the past. The narrator becomes one figure among the many who directly relate to the past, describe it and explore its practical uses for the present. The heritage is characterized as a blend of African and American elements which survive through the myth-making process, the conscious or subconscious process of identification with the experience of past generations. Toomer offers various positions. Not all of them help the characters or the narrator to cope with the reality of violence and suffering. Instead, the reader is given the impression of a very delicate relation between the past and the present.

Part Two of *Cane* takes the reader from rural Georgia to Washington's Seventh Street. (22) The Afro-American is further removed from his roots, the soil and the place of his slave experience. Distance from the past also becomes local distance. Slavery and the South figure in the following texts in memory, dream, and gesture. In "Rhobert," the spiritual "Deep River" closes the story of a man pressed underwater by middle-class values, represented by his house. In the story "Avey," essential emotions are only set free in uncultivated spaces where "the wind is from the South, soil of my homeland falls like a fertile shower upon the lean streets of the city." (p.46) The city cannot supply a meaningful life: "Told how they needed a larger life for their expression. How incapable Washington was of understanding that need. How it could not meet it." (p.46) In the end the narrator calls Avey "orphan-woman." (p. 47) He is still capable of perceiving and describing the broken link with the past. (23) Others can only vaguely feel it and dream of it. John in "Theater" hears the jazz songs: "Black-skinned, they dance and shout above the tick and trill of white-walled buildings. At night, they open doors to people who come in to stamp their feet and shout. At night, road-shows volley songs into the mass-heart of black people. Songs soak the walls and seep out the nigger life of alleys and near-beer saloons," (p.50) but his "body is separate from the thoughts that pack his mind." (p.50) Therefore he cannot follow the signals sent out by the chorus girl Dorris who dances and sings "of canebrake loves and mangrove-feastings." (p.53) When Dorris looks for a response in his face, "she finds it a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream." (p.53) The separation of art and life, of soul and body seems to be the dominant condi-

tion of the urban environment. (24) In "Calling Jesus," the soul slips back into the body only at night for dreams of regeneration through the past experience.

The critic Robert A. Bone said that "Box Seat" "comes closest to realizing his central theme." (25) The story starts with an invocatory paragraph in which "the nigger" is called upon to "stir the root-life of a withered people. Call them from their houses, and teach them to dream." (p.56) Dan Moore is doing just that by trying to introduce the emotive, the wild into "this sick world." (p.56) He fails to evoke the counterworld as his voice cracks and "he whistles. His notes are shrill. They hurt him." (p.56) He sees himself as a violent man, as "Jack the Ripper. Baboon from the zoo," (p.56) and shortly afterwards as savior and healer to the sick world.

Dan goes to see his girl friend Muriel who has adapted to middle-class standards. She cannot hear the rumble "of powerful underground races," (p.57) the sounds of a new world emerging from the slave experience. But Dan does not want to admit that Muriel is beyond salvation: "Her animalism, still unconquered by zoo-restrictions and keeper-taboos, stirs him. Passion tilts upward, bringing with it the elements of an old desire. Muriel's lips become the flesh-notes of a futile, plaintive longing. Dan's impulse to direct her is its fresh life." (p.59) His message is that "there is no such thing as happiness. Life bends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, in such a way that no one may isolate them. No one should want to. Perfect joy, or perfect pain, with no contrasting element to define them, would mean a monotony of consciousness, would mean death," (p.59) a perfect description of the Black heritage which he tries to revitalize and to spread amongst his ethnic group.

When Muriel and Dan go to the Lincoln Theatre to watch a vaudeville show, Muriel is shut into her box seat, while Dan sits in the midst of the common people. There he has an experience which once again combines his missionary impulse with his idea of the past:

He shrivels close beside a portly Negress whose huge rolls of flesh meet about the bones of seat-arms. A soil-soaked fragrance comes from her. Through the cement-floor her strong roots sink down. They spread under the asphalt streets. Dreaming, the streets roll over on their bellies, and suck their glossy health from them. Her strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south. Her roots shoot down. Dan's hands follow them. Roots throb. Dan's heart beats violently. He places his palms upon the earth to cool them. Earth throbs. Dan's heart beats violently. He sees all the people in the house rush to the walls to listen to the rumble. A

new-world Christ is coming up. Dan comes up. He is startled. The eyes of the woman dont belong to her. They look at him unpleasantly. (p.62)

This pattern of Dan discovering his roots even in the urban environment and his 'folks' being incapable of following his prophecies is repeated in a memory of a Washington street scene, (26) and transferred to his relationship with Muriel. When she does not respond to the essential values of beauty in ugliness, of joy in pain, when the dwarf in the vaudeville offers her a blood-stained rose, Dan becomes sterile: "He is as cool as a green stem that has just shed its flower." (p.66) The conclusion of the story suggests that Dan will go on preaching his gospel of shaping the future through the past, even though the new black middle-class will not understand such a message. In the modern wasteland Dan is an outcast and a prophet for he can still hear and feel the "root-life."

In the introductory text to Part Two, "Seventh Street," Toomer characterizes the modern city as "a bastard of Prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and white-washed wood of Washington. Stale soggy wood of Washington. Wedges rust in soggy wood..." (p.39) "Nigger Life" is recommended as an antidote to the white-washed city world. But nigger life is degenerated by the proximity of the white world. Therefore the narrator, as at the beginning of "Box Seat," calls upon some Blacks to reform, to save this place: "Split it! In two! Again! Shred it! ...the sun. Wedges are brilliant in the sun; ribbons of wet wood dry and blow away." (p.39) The Afro-American is asked to explore his specific traditions, to liberate himself from the clutches of middle-class life. In the end, the narrator admits the futility of his desires and speculates on the responsibility for this situation. "Seventh Street" thus foreshadows Dan's call for action and his failure, the defeat of the ideal by reality, and that of root-life by city life. Seventh Street in Washington has not grown from the Dixie Pike and the African goat path. The old slaves have now become new slaves in the middle-class world and have become alienated from their organic past. (27) Part Two of *Cane* can be read as Toomer's "urban blues," a term suggested by the critic Catherine L. Innes for the story "Rhobert" and Part Two in general. (28)

In the "Harvest Song" the narrator is blind, hungry, deaf, and fatigued. He does not dare to watch his fellow workers because he "fear[s] knowledge of [his] hunger." (p.69) (29) The collective tradition only functions as dream and nightmare, not as an alternative to reality. This notion leads us directly into "Kabnis," the last part of *Cane*.

Kabnis, the hero of Part Three, is a Black intellectual and poet who has returned to rural Georgia from the Northern big cities to teach and to search for his ancestral roots. (30) He is immediately confronted with the landscape and history, the common folk living among the relics of the past, and with the new Black middle class of teachers, preachers, and shop owners. From the outset, Southern reality is linked with song and spiritual, both forms speaking of violence, humiliation, miscegenation, beauty and emotional release. Kabnis cannot reconcile his dreams and illusions of himself and the place with the immediate past and present: "He totters as a man would who for the first time uses artificial limbs. As a completely artificial man would ... how cut off from everything he is." (p.83) His dominant emotion is fear which gradually intensifies during a meeting of the middle class in the wagonmaker Fred Halsey's home. One subject discussed by this group is the dependence of the Black lower classes on the church. Significantly, the singing and shouting from the neighboring Negro church accompanies their talk. (31) The church is described in negative terms typical of Toomer:

The window looks out on a forlorn, box-like, whitewashed frame church. Negroes are gathering, on foot, driving questionable gray and brown mules, and in an occasional Ford, for afternoon service... The church bell tolls. Above its squat tower, a great spiral of buzzards reaches far into the heavens. An ironic comment upon the path that leads into the Christian land. (p.86)

All members of the Black middle class reject the emotions set free in the church. (32) Kabnis openly displays his "fear, contempt, and pity." (p.89) They all firmly deny the necessity and usefulness of emotional release and thus reject a traditional communal means of coping with reality. (33) Kabnis is still undecided about his own position; he is so affected by the singing and shouting as relics from the oppressive past that he panics when a stone is thrown through the window: "A splotchy figure drives forward along the cane- and corn-stalk hemmed-in road. A scarecrow replica of Kabnis, awkwardly animate. Fantastically plastered with red Georgia mud." (p.91) His friends have to untangle his confusion: "These aint th days of hounds an Uncle Tom's Cabin, feller. White folks aint in fer all them theatrics these days." (p.92) Kabnis' social and intellectual status prevent him from accepting the traditional modes of release. They rather stress his insecurity, his lack of an identity and further alienate him from his roots.

The alternative to this uprooted figure is Lewis, another Northerner who has come to the South to search for that meaningful connection between the past and the present which

could give strength to a revolutionary movement. He is "what a stronger Kabnis might have been, and in an odd faint way resembles him." (p.95) Shortly afterwards Kabnis is called "a promise of a soil-soaked beauty; uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him. Arm's length removed from him whose will to help..." (p.96) The encounter of the two fails; after "a swift intuitive interchange of consciousness ... a savage, cynical twist-about within him mocks his impulse and strengthens him to repulse Lewis." (p.96) Lewis' potential as a mediator between reality and heritage is stressed when he leaves the group and "a woman, miles down the valley, begins to sing. Her song is a spark that travels swiftly to the near-by cabins. Like purple tallow flames, songs jet up. They spread a ruddy haze over the heavens. The haze swings low. Now the whole countryside is a soft chorus. Lord. O Lord ..." (p.96) (34)

Section 4 to 6 of "Kabnis" are set in Halsey's workshop a month later. Kabnis has lost his teaching job and is now doing manual work as Halsey's handyman. His next confrontation with the past takes place during a feast of sex and drink arranged by Halsey in his cellar. In a dark corner, like in the stern of a slave ship, sits the old, mute and blind Black Father John: "He is like a bust in walnut. Gray-bearded. Gray-haired. Prophetic. Immobile." (p.104) (35) Lewis calls him "a mute John the Baptist of a new religion - or a tongue-tied shadow of an old," (p.104) and, later on, "symbol, flesh, and spirit of the past." (p.107) Kabnis hurls all kinds of insults at this man and eagerly tries to dissociate himself from this symbol of Black history. His denial becomes even more radical when the old man tries to teach them a lesson and calls the white men's basic sin their exploitation of the Bible as an instrument of suppression: "Th sin whats fixed ... upon th white folks ... f tellin Jesus - lies. O th sin th white folks 'mitted when they made th Bible lie." (p.115) Kabnis does not recognize the liberating quality of this statement; (36) instead, he fights the notion that the history of pain, suffering, endurance, and survival relates to him. This reaction provokes another comment by Lewis on Kabnis' inability to accept reality as a result of the past: "Cant hold them, can you? Master; slave. Soil; and the over-arching heavens. Dusk; dawn. They fight and bastardize you. The sun tint of your cheeks, flame of the great season's multi-colored leaves, tarnished, burned. Split, shredded: easily burned. No use ..." (p.107) (37)

In the end, Kabnis is as uprooted as in the beginning. (38) "Kabnis" closes with a rebirth scene in nature and Halsey's sister Carrie Kate kneeling and praying before Father John. This posture seems to be possible only for people like her who has been described as "lovely in her

fresh energy of the morning, in the calm untested confidence and nascent maternity which rise from the purpose of her present mission." (p.114) Carrie Kate brings food for Father John. Kabnis has proved unable to accept the slave past as part of his own heritage. He has come to know many pieces of history and the present reality but refuses to relate them to himself. His fragmentation, self-hatred, his acceptance of the white man's lie about the bastard Black race are not basically challenged by his return to the South. (39) As the critic Darwin T. Turner has remarked: "Kabnis negates the possibility that an intellectual Negro can achieve self-realization in the South." (40)

Looking back on the three parts of Cane, it is evident that Toomer thought that the Afro-American heritage lost its relevance under the pressures of social mobility and technical progress. The migration to the Northern cities alienated the Southerners from the soil that had guaranteed them a link with the experience of their ancestors. Even in the rural South, change dramatically diminished the awareness of a usable past. (41) In "Kabnis," only Lewis and Carrie K. figured as characters vaguely promising that the tide might be turned. Lewis demonstrated his desire to expose himself to the full scale of the Black experience and to assume the full risk of such a venture, an attitude atypical of the middle-class world. He wanted to follow his dream of the vitality of the past, about a reasonable chance to prevent the weakening process of the traditions though he was still uncertain about the extent of their validity. He resembles the narrator of "The Song of the Son" and Dan Moore in "Box Seat." Both share his intentions but seem to know more about the nature of their heritage. (42) The second positive character in "Kabnis" was Carrie K. who innocently and instinctively affirmed life's essentials, and possessed a natural readiness to forgive without previous analysis. This feature related her to some of the women from Part One, e.g. Karintha and Fern. (43)

A number of critical articles on Cane, particularly those dealing with "Kabnis," have studied its autobiographical background. Looking for textual evidence, we have to mention the involved narrator entering the book in "Fern" from Part One and leaving it in "Avey" in Part Two. His position is that of an irritated observer who tries to achieve close relations with events and with individual women but always falls short of these purposes. In these respects, he shares the fate of the struggling Kabnis and also of Lewis who leaves the South for the North, and is even rejected by the Southern blacks, though he had come closer to an understanding of their heritage than Kabnis. We can conclude that the rather detached observers failed to cope with actual persons and places representing the past.

In a letter Jean Toomer told Waldo Frank: "Kabnis is ME." (44) He extended this statement in a letter to MacGowan to "'Kabnis' is really the story of my own real or imaginary experiences in Georgia." (45) Already in 1922, Toomer had related himself to "Kabnis": "Lewis, in point of origin, is as authentic as Kabnis. For I myself am frankly the source of both of them." (46) These remarks ask for some biographical information.

In the fall of 1921 Jean Toomer spent three months in rural Sparta, Georgia. In a letter to The Liberator (August 19, 1922), he characterized this visit as "the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accounts about, and of which till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them. Now, I cannot conceive of myself as aloof and separated." (47) It is significant that Toomer speaks of his response to rural Georgia mainly in aesthetic terms. A statement from an unfinished manuscript, "Outline of an Autobiography," drafted in the early thirties, explains this attitude: "... this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals ... But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them 'shouting'. They had victrolas and player-pianos. So, I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out ... The folk-spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into Cane." (48) Toomer is even more discouraged in a letter to Lola Ridge, dated August 20, 1922: "It would surprise you to see the anemia and timidity (emotional) in folk but a generation or so removed from the Negroes of the folk-songs. Full blooded people to look at who are afraid to hold hands, much less to love." (49)

All these autobiographical passages reveal a skepticism missing in "Song of the Son". There Toomer introduced us to the keeper of the records who intended to save the past from oblivion through the preservation of its artistic expression, the songs of slavery. Whereas the actual confrontation ended in the disappointment of the figures and the narrator of Cane, the lyrical 'I' of "Song of the Son," the artist set about his task as a confirmed optimist, with a desire for identification with the heritage. For him it is not "a godam nightmare ... Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words" (p.110) like it was for Kabnis. Kabnis did respond to the song recurring in "Kabnis": "White-man's land./Niggers, sing./Burn, bear black children/Till poor rivers bring/Rest, and sweet glory/In Camp Ground." (pp.81, 85,103) (50) Jean Toomer, as the author of Cane, obviously

responded to the relics of the past, which he described in each part of his book though many of his figures could not cherish them because they were cut off from their past. Cane can be interpreted as Toomer's blues, (51) his "Song of the Son" (52) which includes the idea of documentation and an attempt of personal identification. (53) In this context, Cane would serve as an opposition to and transcendence of reality. This corresponds with Toomer's own definition of art as set down in a letter to Sherwood Anderson (1922): "It seems to me that art in our day, other than in its purely aesthetic phase has a sort of religious function. It is a religion, a spiritualization of the immediate." (54)

This theoretical statement foreshadows Toomer's separation between his biography and his art, a surprising fact to those readers who had identified the lyrical 'I' of "Song of the Son" with the author and had taken his autobiographical remarks as something other than poses of an artist. When his publisher Horace Liveright planned to sell Cane explicitly as a novel written by a 'Negro', Toomer wrote him: "... feature Negro if you wish, but do not expect me to feature it in advertisements for you. For myself, I have sufficiently featured Negro in Cane." (55) A comparison between Toomer's letter to The Liberator of August 19, 1922 with the letter written a fortnight later raises some doubts about the stability of these categories. (56) We know that Toomer never treated Afro-American themes again, that he denied his Black ancestry shortly after the publication of Cane. (57) He had changed from the "son" to "Kabnis," if we would interpret his attitudes in terms of his book. (58)

Toomer's repudiation of the Black heritage can be explained, first of all, by the commercial failure of Cane. The definition and exploitation of the Black folk culture together with a re-evaluation of the Black past occurred about one decade later, e.g. in the poetry of Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes, or in the rediscovery of the slave narratives. A second reason for Toomer's decision seems to be his own racial identity problem which he formulated very generally in an aphorism published in 1931 as part of the collection Essentials: "We are split men, disconnected from our own resources, almost severed from our Selves, and therefore out of contact with reality." (59) Many phases of Toomer's search are documented in his autobiographical writings. (60)

But we also have to take into consideration Toomer's status as a writer and member of the middle class, people who, as Harold Cruse has pointed out, "have rejected the basic art expressions of the Negro folk in music, dance, literature and theater. This was first noticeable during the 1920's at the height of the Negro literature and

artistic renaissance." (61) As we have seen in his autobiographical writings and in Cane, Toomer was very well aware of this process. In "Kabnis" he presented it as the intellectual's refusal to allow himself to be defined by the communal experience. In her poem "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith", Gwendolyn Brooks formulated this problem: "The pasts of his ancestors lean against/Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity." (62) The critic William Gardner Smith takes another view: "The Negro writer cannot achieve - at least, not as easily as the white American writer - this social detachment, however much he might desire it." (63) From his autobiographical notes and Cane we can conclude that Toomer certainly felt the tension between his theme and his social status.

A third reason for Toomer's new self-definition can be found in his subjective understanding of the functions of an artist. Writing about a subject requires a natural detachment which prevents the close identification which is advocated in some of the pieces of Cane. (64) The author's feeling that the notion of being a Black writer excluded him from universal themes undoubtedly reinforced his desire to dissociate himself personally and artistically from the Cane-years. In his book Harlem Renaissance, Nathan Irvin Huggins depicts the basic dilemma: "... the race consciousness that is so necessary for identity most likely leads to a provincialism which forever limits the possibility of achieving good art; but without it the perplexities of identity are exacerbated by confusion of legitimate heritage." (65)

In his autobiographical papers Toomer had called Cane "a swan song. It was the song of an end. And why no one has seen and felt that, why people have expected me to write a second and a third and a fourth book like 'Cane', is one of the queer misunderstandings of my life." (66) Paraphrasing Ralph Ellison's definition of Black folklore, we can say that Toomer had made the first drawings of his group's character. He had tried to save from oblivion mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of his group. (67) Singing more than one swan song would have harmed his artistic inventiveness. The Black past provided Toomer with a means of artistic expression and yet remained a problem in his attempts at self-definition.

Langston Hughes has depicted this ambiguous situation of the Black artist when he faces his heritage in the poem "Afro-American Fragment": "Not even memories alive/Save those that history books create,/Save those that songs/Beat back into the blood-/Beat out of blood with words sad-sung/...and yet/Through some vast mist of race/There comes this song/I do not understand,/This song of atavistic land,/Of bitter yearnings lost..." (68)

## Notes

- (1) "The Negro in American Literature," in The New Negro, ed. Alain Locke (New York, 1977), p. 44.
- (2) Rev.ed. (New Haven, 1965), p. 81.
- (3) "Jean Toomer's Cane. A Modern Black Oracle," CLA-Journal 15 (1972), p. 328.
- (4) Jean Toomer, Cane (with an "Introduction" by Darwin T. Turner) (New York: Liveright, 1975), p. 2. All subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.
- (5) In the first quote "this" frames in the blues quote by referring back to the title. In the last quote an open end or a period of muteness and silence is suggested by "Karintha..." as in the final "Goes down..." of the blues.
- (6) "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry," in Afro-American Literature. The Reconstruction of Instruction, eds. Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto (New York, 1979), p. 77.
- (7) According to one authority, the rural blues is characterized by "Spontaneous beginnings, fade-away endings." ("Poetry, Prose, and the Blues," in Humanities Through the Black Experience, ed. Phyllis Rauch Klotman (Dubuque, Iowa, 1977), p. 108).
- (8) This contradicts Saunders Redding's general remark: "His moods are hot, colorful, primitive, but more akin to the naive hysteria of the spirituals than to the sophisticated savagery of jazz and the blues." ("The New Negro," in Studies in "Cane", ed. Frank Durham (Columbus, Ohio, 1971), p. 52). See also Darwin T. Turner, In a Minor Chord (Carbondale, Ill., 1971), p. 29; "Even in the South, however, the religious power fails to provide what is needed," and Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Ethos: Voices from the Cave", in The Negro Mood and Other Essays (Chicago, 1964), pp. 50-51.  
The various Biblical echoes in Cane are dealt with in Odetta C. Martin's article "Cane: Method and Myth," Obsidian 2 (1976), pp. 5-20.  
In the second story, "Becky," the Christian tradition and its forms of expression play a similar role. The plot summary which introduces and concludes the text strikes a chord of futility: "Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons. She's dead; they've

gone away. The pines whisper to Jesus. The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound." (p.5) The story uses the narrative and response structure of the Black folk sermon. The interpolated statements and exclamations, "The pines whisper to Jesus ... O fly away to Jesus ... O thank y Jesus ...," (p.5) "O pines, whisper to Jesus; tell Him to come and press sweet Jesus-lips against their lips and eyes ... O pines, whisper to Jesus ... Pines shout to Jesus ...," (p.6) establish a contrast to the bigoted reactions of "white folks and black folks" (p.5): "The railroad boss said not to say he said it ... No one ever saw her," (p.5) "But nothing was said, for the part of man that says things to the likes of that had told itself that if there was a Becky, that Becky was now dead ... No one dared ask ... Nobody noticed it." (p.6) Emotional release is not granted in the end, as the folk sermon is not heard by the characters. Significantly, the author changes over to the circular structure of the blues by repeating the plot summary. This particular use of the two folk traditions asks the reader to reconsider the validity of the law of God and the law of society.

- (9) See a different approach to this poem in Udo O.H. Jung, "'Spirit Torsos of Exquisite Strength': The Theme of Individual Weakness vs. Collective Strength in Two of Toomer's Poems," CLA-Journal 19 (1975), pp. 261-267. Jung suggests that "Inter-personal and intra-personal separation, and the ways and means of overcoming such isolation is Jean Toomer's theme." (p.261) Cf. also Bernard Bell, "A Key to the Poems in Cane," CLA-Journal 14 (1971), pp. 251-258.
- (10) William C. Fischer has called "Cotton Song" a work song and jubilee. See "The Aggregate Man in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel 3 (1971), p. 204.
- (11) The rolling activity and the idea of liberation/resurrection would also recall the spirituals "De Angel Roll de Stone Away" and "He Rose from the Dead." Its third stanza reads: "Down came an angel, and rolled the stone away,/And the Lord shall bear His children home." Self-liberation would contrast the more passive concept of resurrection.
- (12) In the poem "Face" which precedes "Cotton Song," the brows of the woman are described as "recurved canoes/quivered by the ripples blown by pain..." (p.8)
- (13) Ralph Ellison, "Some Questions and Some Answers," in Shadow and Act (New York, 1966), p. 255.

- (14) See also Michael S. Harper's use of the tree imagery in his poems "Corrected Review" and "History as Apple Tree," in Images of Kin. New and Selected Poems (Urbana, Ill., 1977), pp. 64-65 and pp. 142-143.
- (15) "virgin lips" and "dreams of Christ" echo the Christian terminology of the preceding stanza. It is possible to connect this poem to the earlier sections of Cane ironizing Christian traditions.
- (16) Toomer is presenting these emotions as folk belief into which also the educated narrator is apt to take refuge: "I felt strange, as I always do in Georgia, particularly at dusk. I felt that things unseen to men were tangibly immediate. It would not have surprised me had I had a vision. People have them in Georgia more often than you would suppose. A black woman once saw the mother of Christ and drew her in charcoal on the courthouse wall ... When one is on the soil of one's ancestors, most anything can come to one..." (p.17)
- (17) In the article "Jean Toomer's 'Fern': A Mythical Dimension" (CLA-Journal 14 (1971), pp. 274-276), Hargis Westerfield associates the nail with the sufferings of Christ. In my opinion Toomer uses this Christian symbol ironically.
- (18) Together with "Fern," this story can be interpreted as an investigation of the myth-making process.
- (19) See Sherwood Anderson's treatment of the theme in "I Want to Know Why" (1919).
- (20) See e.g. Malcolm X's distinction between 'house slave' and 'field slave' in The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Grove, 1966), pp. 239-240.
- (21) See William C. Fischer, "The Aggregate Man..." p. 202: "Toomer recognized, as almost every major black American writer has, that music is a primary mode of expression of Afro-American experience. Song, not surprisingly then, is central to Toomer's conception of the way his writing must speak to the reader. In the instances where it is used in the prose sketches, song is an authenticating medium that communicates subjective qualities about people's experiences that literary prose is less able to convey." See also Gene Bluestein, "The Blues as a Literary Theme," in The Voice of the Folk (Amherst, Mass., 1972), pp. 117-140 and Bernhard Ostendorf, "Black Poetry, Blues, and Folk-

lore: Double Consciousness in Afro-American Oral Culture," Amerikastudien 20 (1975), pp. 209-259.

- (22) Only the last story, "Bona and Paul," is set in Chicago.
- (23) In the story "Avey" the involved narrator, who entered the book in "Fern" makes his final appearance.
- (24) See Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain and the Redemption of Art: A Study in Theme and Structure of Jean Toomer's Cane," American Literature 44 (1972), pp. 286-287.
- (25) The Negro Novel..., p. 85.
- (26) See Cane, p. 65: "Dan: Strange I never really noticed him before... And the crossing-cop leaving his job to come over and wheel him away..."
- (27) See Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (New York, 1971), p. 57: "The city made a difference, in Locke's mind, because it forced the Negro from the simple to the complex life, from rural homogeneity to urbanpluralism; he was forced to see himself in broad and sophisticated terms."
- (28) "The Unity of Jean Toomer's Cane," CLA-Journal 15 (1972), p.312.
- (29) In a letter to Waldo Frank (Dec. 12, 1922. Quoted in Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain...", p. 279) Toomer described the significance of "Harvest Song" as follows: "From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into Kabnis, and ends (pauses) in Harvest Song..."
- (30) See Alain Solard's interpretation of Kabnis as "the revolted poet" (p.178) in "The Impossible Unity: Jean Toomer's Kabnis," in Myth and Ideology in American Culture, ed. Regis Furend (Villeneuve-d'Asq, 1976), pp. 176-194, and William J. Goede, "Jean Toomer's Ralph Kabnis: Portrait of the Negro Artist as a Young Man," Phylon 30 (1969), pp. 73-85. See also Halsey's remark when he offers Kabnis a drink: "... th boys what made this stuff have got the art down like I heard you say youd like t be with words." (p.93)
- (31) Note Toomer's treatment of the trinity of social institutions, school, courthouse, and church. (pp.83-86)

- (32) See E. Franklin Frazier, The Black Bourgeoisie (Glen-coe, 1957), Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro In-tellectual (New York, 1967), and Lerone Bennett, Jr., "The Black Establishment," in The Negro Mood and Other Essays (Chicago, 1964), pp. 25-45.
- (33) See S.P. Fullinwider, "Jean Toomer: Lost Generation, or Negro Renaissance?," Phylon 27 (1966), p. 70-71; also Nathan Irvin Huggins (Harlem Renaissance, pp. 179-189) who rejects this view by distinguishing Toomer's vision from "pagan primitivism and fancied Africanism." See also Mark Irving Helbling, "Primiti-vism and the Harlem Renaissance," Diss. Univ. of Minne-sota, 1972, on Locke, McKay, Toomer, Anderson, and Frank. Jean Toomer took up the problems of race and Christianity in his play Balo.
- (34) The song becomes a spiritual in the end. The vocabu-lary and the Messiah symbolism recall the story "Box Seat."
- (35) Cf. the description of Halsey's living-room portraits (pp. 85-86) and the paragraph on the old slave in "Box Seat." (p.65)
- (36) Cf. Father John to the grandfather figure in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man!
- (37) I do not agree with Frank Durham's interpretation of this and Father John's statement ("Jean Toomer's Vision of the Southern Negro," in Studies in "Cane", ed. Frank Durham (Columbus, Ohio, 1971), p.112): "When he does speak at last to the by-now-utterly-degraded Kabnis, his words are almost meaningless, about white folks making a lie out of the Bible - a dull, dead truism without enlightenment."
- (38) Like many other critics, I do not share Arna Bontemps' view that "Kabnis" is a languishing idealist finally redeemed from cynicism and dissipation by the dis-covery of underlying strength in his people." (Quoted in Darwin T. Turner, "Introduction" to Jean Toomer. "Cane" (New York, 1969), p. xii).
- (39) See Charles W. Scruggs' comments on Toomer's use of the myth of Cain in "Kabnis" ("The Mark of Cain...", p. 283).
- (40) "The Failure of a Playwright," in Studies in "Cane", p. 90.

- (41) See Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain...", p. 277: "The themes of the novel appear to arise from the conflict between a world that is technological, culturally white and spiritually sterile, and one that is agrarian, culturally black and richly primitive."
- (42) In a letter to Lola Ridge (1922) Toomer wrote: "Lewis has the sense of direction and the intelligent grip that Kabnis lacks. Whereas Kabnis has the emotion which I could not possibly give to Lewis without bringing Lewis into the foreground more than I care to do in this instance." (Quoted in Alain Solard, "The Impossible Unity...", p. 193, n. 6). See also Robert A. Bone's comment (The Negro Novel..., p. 87): "Lewis, by way of contrast, is a Christ figure, an extension of Dan Moore."
- (43) See Patricia Chase, "The Women in Cane," CLA-Journal 14 (1971), p. 272.
- (44) Quoted in Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain...", p. 282, n. 14.
- (45) Quoted in Alain Solard, "The Impossible Unity...", p. 193, n. 12.
- (46) Letter to Lola Ridge, Dated Sept. 1922. Quoted in Solard, p. 193, n. 5.
- (47) Quoted in Darwin T. Turner, "Introduction" to Jean Toomer. "Cane", p. xvi.
- (48) Darwin T. Turner, ed., The Wayward and the Seeking. A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer (Washington, 1980), p. 123. Cf. a similar statement on p. 129.
- (49) Quoted in Mabel Mayle Dillard, "Behind the Veil: Jean Toomer's Esthetic," in Studies in "Cane", p. 5.
- (50) See Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain...", pp. 284-285: "It is beautiful because it makes sense out of evil and suffering, such evil and suffering for example, as the lynching. It is art because it removes experience to a realm where we can cope with it, if not understand it. This explains why Toomer has included this refrain throughout the story: ... To sing goes beyond resignation. It is a positive act, an artistic expression created not simply in the face of adversity, but because of it."

- (51) See Gorham B. Munson's subdivision of Cane into blues scenes in "The Significance of Jean Toomer," in Studies in "Cane", p. 97, or Todd Lieber's interpretation of Cane as dealing with Black Culture, the consequences of denial, and the theme of search for the past in the individual parts of the book ("Design and Movement in Cane," CLA-Journal 13 (1969), pp. 35-50).
- (52) See Donald G. Ackley, "Theme and Vision in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in Black Literature 1 (1970), pp. 45-65.
- (53) See James A. Emanuel's definition of the Black artist: "To the black artist serving as the culture hero of his race, his material is the unsorted mass of what is being called the black experience; his purpose is to memorialize in beauty and in truth the essence of that heritage. His method, if he is faithful to himself as a man and as an artist, must be sanctioned in his own being whenever it cannot be purely individual." ("Blackness Can: A Quest for Aesthetics," in The Black Aesthetic, ed. Addison Gayle (Garden City: Anchor, (1972), p. 192). See also Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, p. 180: "Cane is a forthright search for the roots of the Negro self: the son to know the father."
- (54) Quoted in Udo O. H. Jung, "'Nora' Is 'Calling Jesus': A Nineteenth Century European Dilemma in an Afro-American Garb," CLA-Journal 21 (1977), p. 253. It is not accidental that Toomer discussed this theme with this author, as Sherwood Anderson wished to save black folk culture from the pressures of the Industrial Age (see Dark Laughter, 1925). In this field, Anderson agreed with his contemporaries Gertrude Stein (see the figure of Melanctha in Three Lives, 1909), Vachel Lindsay (see "The Congo," 1914), and Waldo Frank who joined Toomer on his trip to Georgia (see Alan Trachtenberg, ed., Memoirs of Waldo Frank (Amherst, Mass., 1973), pp. 102-108). The context is indicated by the term 'primitivism' (see Michael Bell, Primitivism. The Critical Idiom 20 (London, 1972)). At this point we should also point out that a number of Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance objected to the view that a return to the folk culture was a creative act (see the positions of Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois!). The "spiritualization of the immediate" can also be illustrated by Toomer's folktale about the origin of the first folksong as retold in his play Natalie Mann (completed in 1922. See Darwin T. Turner, ed., The Wayward and the Seeking, p. 301). See also the defi-

nition of the social function of the spirituals in "The Spiritual in Song and Story," in Humanities Through the Black Experience, ed. Phyllis R. Klotman (Dubuque, Iowa, 1977), p. 74: "The act of creating spirituals as well as the act of participating in singing them helped establish a feeling of community and provided a semblance of equilibrium by helping the slave redefine who he was in relation to the function dictated him by his environment." See also Sterling Stuckey's contribution to a definition of 'slave folklore' in his article "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," in New Black Voices, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York, 1972), p. 457: "Slave folklore, then, affirms the existence of a larger number of vital, tough-minded human beings who, though severely limited and abused by slavery, had found a way both to endure and preserve their humanity in the face of insuperable odds." (See also Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," in Shadow and Act (New York: Signet, 1966), pp. 172-173.

- (55) Letter, dated Sept. 5, 1923. Quoted in Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain...", p. 276, n. 2.
- (56) The critic C. P. Fullinwider ("Jean Toomer. Lost Generation...", p. 400) has commented on this problem: "Thus for a period of perhaps a year or two, the period during which he composed Cane, Toomer found a new identity-giving absolute in the Negro folk-spirit. But the absolute had, at best, a tenuous hold on the poet. He proved no more enduring than those that had gone before."
- (57) See Gorham B. Munson's account of this period in "The Significance of Jean Toomer," Opportunity 3 (1925), pp. 262-263 and Toomer's own report in Darwin T. Turner, ed., The Wayward and the Seeking, p. 127. See also Countee Cullen's attitude as described by Stephen H. Bronz in Roots of Negro Racial Consciousness. The 1920's: Three Harlem Renaissance Authors (New York, 1964), p. 91: "Determined not to be regarded as a specifically Negro poet, he tried to escape a confrontation with the realities that his times and his race imposed upon him."
- (58) The critic William C. Fischer ("The Aggregate Man..." p. 211) comments on the relation between biographical data and Cane: "It is, in this respect, an autobiographical prophecy of Toomer's own eventual assimilation ... his failure to solidify himself in the collective identity of his people."

- (59) Darwin T. Turner, ed., The Wayward and the Seeking, p. 423.
- (60) See "Autobiographical Selections," in The Wayward and the Seeking, ed. Darwin T. Turner, pp. 9-133.
- (61) The Crisis..., p. 83.
- (62) In Understanding the New Black Poetry, ed. Stephen Henderson (New York, 1973), p. 173.
- (63) "The Negro Writer: Pitfalls and Compensations," in The Black American Writer I, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 75.
- (64) See Gerald Moore, "Poetry in the Harlem Renaissance," in The Black American Writer II, p. 72: "The creative tension in Toomer's work springs from a certain sense of distance between himself and the life of the black poor; a distance he refuses to sentimentalize and forces to work for him."
- (65) Harlem Renaissance, p. 308. Ralph Ellison's contribution to this discussion can be found in "The Art of Fiction. An Interview," in Shadow and Act, p. 171. See also Robert G. O'Meally's article "Riffs and Rituals: Folklore in the Work of Ralph Ellison," in Afro-American Literature. The Reconstruction of Instruction, eds. D. Fisher and R.B. Stepto (New York, 1979), pp. 153-169. James Baldwin has formulated the problem more positively, thus contradicting the poetic statement of Gwendolyn Brooks: "To accept one's past - one's history - is not the same thing as drowning in it." (The Fire Next Time (New York: Dell, 1964), p. 111.) See also Lerone Bennett, Jr., The Negro Mood and Other Essays (Chicago, 1964): "The conscious Negro, as artist and demonstrator, takes his stand within the context of his tradition and projects himself outwardly with the full knowledge that a man is most human when he is most himself." (54) and "... it is the affirmation of the old truth that a man must be at home somewhere before he can create a home anywhere." (56)
- (66) Darwin T. Turner, ed., The Wayward and the Seeking, p. 123. See also his letter to Waldo Frank (1923) as quoted in Brian Joseph Benson and Mabel Mayle Dillard, Jean Toomer, TUSAS 389 (Boston, 1980), pp. 25-26, and Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain..." pp. 290-291; also James Baldwin's reflections on the impossibility of a return to the South in "Nobody Knows My

Name. "A Letter from the South," in Nobody Knows My Name (New York: Delta, 1962), pp. 98-116.

- (67) "The Art of Fiction..." p. 172.
- (68) In Black Voices, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York, 1968), p. 425.