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Jean Toomer's *Cane* as a Swan Song

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In his autobiographical writings and letters Toomer characterized *Cane* as "a swan song ... the song of an end."[1] And recalling his visit to Georgia in 1921 he observed: "With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city- and industry and commerce and machines. The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert" (142). In a letter Toomer was even more prophetic:

> Don't let us fool ourselves, brother: the Negro of the folk-song has all but passed away: the Negro of the emotional church is fading. A hundred years from now these Negroes, if they exist at all will live in art ...(Likewise the Indian) America needs these elements. They are passing. Let us grab and hold them while there is still time (151).

The central poem of the first part of *Cane*, "Song of the Son", takes the son back to the land of red soil "in time...just before an epoch's sun declines ...to catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, gone" (14). From a cluster of images of ripeness and decline the son derives his function as a recorder of songs who can transform the nearly bare tree into a "singing tree", creating "an everlasting song ...Caroling softly souls of slavery." The central poetic act of cultural retrieval is characterized as a private and a public effort. Reading this poem in the light of Toomer's statements on the fate of Black folk-culture, we have to concede that the son is able to transform a 'parting song' into an 'everlasting song' through his sensitiveness, personal involvement, and his creative talents. Art conquers impending doom as in Edgar Allan Poe's morbid aesthetics of the death of a beautiful woman as the ultimate poetical subject: "That 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*" (142). In his study of "The Unifying Images in Part One of Jean Toomer's*Cane*" Richard Eldridge links his interpretation of the poem with Toomer's biographical statements: "...Toomer's dusk poems often are commentaries on the sadness of a dying culture ...In the poem dusk is connected most clearly with Toomer's thesis of the 'swan song' of the black folk heritage."[2] The question is whether Toomer is exploiting a typically romantic mood and function of literature, namely creating art from the ruins of a culture as opposed to the concept of manifesting the strength of a culture suppressed but reinstituted into its legitimate position through a revisionist effort.

Both in *Cane* and in his post-*Cane* writings Toomer saw the decline of Southern folk-culture as part of the larger processes of migration, urbanization, and industrialization resulting in a general and fundamental crisis of values. Therefore his analysis would smoothly fit into a manifesto of the Southern Agrarians or the Modernists searching for a distinct and truly representative American cultural identity with a future based on an honest analysis of the present situation and the traditions. Actually the century had started with a number of swan songs such as Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907) or Henry James's *The American Scene* (1907) preceded by W.E.B. Du Bois's birthsong *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and followed by Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting-Pot* (1909) establishing the popular metaphor for the process of Americanizing "all the races of Europe."[3] Though intellectuals like W.D. Howells and H.L. Mencken acknowledged the achievements of Black artists, the modernists rather neglected these 'native' contributions and concentrated on

moving the American experience spatially and linguistically out of New England and further away from Europe locating it in the Mississippi Valley and the vernacular, thus elevating Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) into *the* American novel.[4] Toomer and a number of writers and critics of the Harlem Renaissance shared the general sense of an ending and, in spite of some restrictive tendencies, saw the tearing down of old fences as an invitation for Black culture to participate in the definition of a new American canon.

In "Seventh Street" the blacks from the rural South have arrived in the nation's capital. For Nellie Y. McKay "The prose poem captures the irony and pathos of that entry."[5] The general introduction to the middle section of *Cane* can be understood as a meditation on the vital interaction between socio-political and cultural processes, without being able to find final explanations. Framed by the impressionistic four-line-poem evoking the striving after material wealth and the speed of urban life as a stark contrast to the rural life in Part One of the book, Toomer describes the culture clash caused by the Great Migration in the rich imagery of his fragmentary prose.

In *'Who Set you Flowin'?' The African American Migration Narrative* Farah Jasmine Griffin has characterized the basic metaphors as those of violence and reproduction:

> Migrant blood becomes a metaphor for the culture that the migrants bring. Washington is a white woman, a stale and stagnant being entered forcefully by the black male migrant blood ... there is no imagery of coming doom and death of culture; instead it is the infusion of a new, fresh, and colorful culture.[6]

Reflecting on the function of the narrators, Griffin finds her positive view confirmed: "... they can seek out a form of balance between Southern spirituality and Northern ingenuity as does the narrator of the entire volume. The last choice proves to be the most difficult, painful, and ultimately rewarding."[7] And in her equally optimistic conclusion linking "Seventh Street" with "Blood-Burning Moon", the last story of the first section of the book, Nellie Y. McKay states: "From the blood and ashes of so many Tom Burwells, phoenixlike, a new people have begun to rise."[8] I do not share the idea of a single narrator but I also see a constant yearning for cultural synthesis as one of the most powerful messages. Consequently, Frederik L. Rusch designates "transformation and the quest for a meaningful identity" as central themes of the whole book though not, as McKay suggested, caused by Southern racism.[9]

Toomer's autobiographical statements apparently support these conclusions, however, through a reversal. In a letter of August 19, 1922 to the editors of *The Liberator* he referred to his own "seven blood mixtures" and looking back on the beginnings of his artistic career, justified his temporary preference for the black element in him:

> I have striven for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling. Without denying a single element in me, with no desire to subdue, one to the other. I have sought to let them function as complements. I have tried to let them live in harmony. Within the last two or three years, however, my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper and deeper into the Negro group. And as my powers of receptivity increased, I found myself loving it in a way that I could never love the other. It has stimulated and fertilized whatever creative talent I may contain within me.[10]

In a letter to his publisher written about one year later Toomer vehemently protested attempts to identify him with a single constituent of his composite heritage: "I do not expect to be told what I should consider myself to be ... I have sufficiently featured Negro in *Cane*" (157).

"Seventh Street" echoes the dynamics of Toomer's often contradictory search for identity, the basic ambiguities of the dislocation and traveling of a culture, an uncertainty about the results of the clash, and his enthusiasm about transformations. The necessity of

calling the migrants to action, the ominous repetition of "Who set you flowin'?", and the equally sinister and ironic references to religion leave the reader as puzzled as the narrator and defy a one-dimensional interpretation.

"Seventh Street" is a meditation on many subjects such as the tension between self-determination and superimposed mental and physical activity, on the gains and losses of dynamics and stasis. In the context of the subsequent stories, poems, and dramatic scenes set in Washington, D.C., Harpers Ferry, and Chicago a pragmatic skepticism prevails. In the "shanties, brick office buildings, theaters, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets" (41) people are choked by the new materialism, are unable to overcome social or racial divisions, and repress their basic longings only to be reunited with their soul while sleeping "cradled in dream-fluted cane" (58). The surviving fragments of black rural culture function as quite ineffective alternatives in the destructive urban environment and merely deepen the sense of displacement though the narrator is aware of the "loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms" (41) beyond the zooming and whizzing of the modern city.

So, what is left when the vague hopes for a revival have vanished like the promise of a reconciliation of races, classes, and cultures in "Bona and Paul"? McKay and other critics have read "Kabnis", the third part, as a cautiously optimistic statement: "The hope in 'Kabnis' is for the wisdom to understand the meaning of the Northern and the Southern experiences in an effort to transcend it."[11]

Ralph Kabnis, teacher and poet from Washington, D.C. and New York City, goes to Georgia to explore his roots by exposing himself to nature, the people, and their culture. His Northern education creates all sorts of misunderstandings of Southern ambiguities and complexities. More often than not he feels irritated, oppressed, ridiculed, in fear or panic, at the mercy of unidentified forces and agents. It is only in the last scene that Kabnis finally confronts old, mute, and deaf Father John as the symbol of the past who is nourished by young Carrie Kate. He feels the challenge of the ambiguous symbolism of the cellar setting, the fragmented utterances and the mere gestures of this scene giving only a faint glimpse of hope for survival or even renewal. After a violent and emotional denial of any personal moral obligations Kabnis tentatively accepts this setup as somehow meaningful without really understanding it. His rather unconvincing surrender, his expression of self-hate, the darkness of the place and the general atmosphere of decline are ironically contrasted by the splendors of a sunrise: "Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town" (117).

Kabnis's situation can be compared to the dilemma of the protagonist of *The Education of Henry Adams* who discovers that neither his nineteenth century education nor the new theories of the human condition enable him to understand the new age. What limited insight Kabnis gains in Georgia is not presented as a 'phoenixlike resurrection' or a fusion of the Northern and Southern Black experience as his Northern self gradually disintegrates and is totally deconstructed in the end. Still, the third section of *Cane* postulates that in the South Black culture is still more tangible than in Washington, D.C. for a well-intentioned black Northerner though he is not able to construct a coherent whole as sound basis for a redefinition of his identity out of the various bits and pieces. Likewise, the pictographs introducing the individual sections do not form a complete circle.

The conclusion of "Kabnis" contradicts the optimism of "Song of the Son" from the first part though we have to bear in mind that the son returned with a purpose requiring a higher degree of objectivity than Kabnis's search for identity. Moreover, Toomer's confession "And Kabnis is ME" (151) and his subsequent refusal to "feature Negro more than once" reflect these tensions between object and subject, closeness and distance, between an imperfect, disintegrating reality depicted and artistically transformed into perfect,

“everlasting“ (14) stories and poems. The notion of the setting of “an epoch’s sun“ (14) shaped *Cane* as a monumental swan song for the vanishing Black folk-culture but at the same time into a swan song for the first stage of Toomer’s restless search for complete knowledge of himself. In some respects he foreshadows James Baldwin’s position in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955): “I have not written about being a Negro at such length because I expect that to be my only subject, but only because it was the gate I had to unlock before I could hope to write anything else.“[12]

Even the vague promises of an epiphany granted to Kabnis are denied to the large majority of characters in *Cane* like the storyteller of “Fern.“ McKay proposes that in this story from the first part of the book “the narrator further explores his relationship to the folk culture. Here he examines his inability to achieve full access to the source of his creative inspiration.“[13] The narrator feels a strong attraction but the object of his desire remains a mystery which he can only describe indirectly and pass on unresolved. The essence of his experience is hinted at in reactions of people meeting Fern: "... made your own sorrow feel trivial" (16) and "Men in her case seem to lose their selfishness" (18). Though less nervous and panic-stricken in his responses he shares Kabnis’s odd sense of place:

> 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 ... When one is on the soil of one’s ancestors most anything can come to one... (19).

The confusion of the narrator, who admits that he was “suspected of being prejudiced and stuck-up“ (17) is further increased by Fern’s limited articulateness recalling Father John’s:

> Her body was tortured with something it could not let out ... 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 (19).

For the narrator Georgia in general and Fern are full of portents that some of the fragments of this culture could offer at least a partial insight into a wholesome system of values from the past but still strong enough to affect his life. But there is neither revelation nor epiphany in “Fern“, only the puzzlement and appeal of an unresolved mystery. The notion of what probably once has been and of what could be under different circumstances (without the forces which “set you flowin’“!) turns the story into another ‘plaintive song.’

Before returning to the modernist context let me briefly summarize: Starting from Toomer’s own qualification of *Cane* as a swan song I explored two themes, the present and future state of Black folk culture and the possibility of retrieving and preserving it. The autobiographical statements and the book qualify its author and his characters as people who see folk-culture in solution both in the Southern homeland and in the Northern (trans-)plantation, though “Seventh Street“ raises some hope of an evolution through fusion into a new concept of American identity.[14] Part II, however, soon returns to the pessimistic assessment though it excludes some of the violence and vulgarity of the more comprehensive picture in Parts I and III. Apparently Toomer’s narrators and characters do not consider folk-culture in its present situation strong enough to “assert ... a dissociation of sensibility from that enforced by American culture and its institutions.“[15] Retrieval and mediation of such a thinned-out and inarticulate culture turn out to be possible only in the form of a swan song composed by an artist maintaining a delicate balance between distance and closeness. And who was better qualified for this task than “a potentially locomotive type“[16] like Toomer, who was prepared to sing two swan songs at the same time, one for the “parting, ... plaintive soul“ (14) of Black Southern folk culture and a second one, compensating some of the bitterness of the first, as a farewell to the first stage of his artistic career and self-exploration!

Langston Hughes certainly complied with Toomer's definition of the function of the artist as mediator but together with Sterling Brown and Zora Neale Hurston contradicted the swan-song metaphor. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) he explicitly refers to the common people of Washington's "Seventh Street" as perpetuators of a vital and dynamic heritage:

> These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations.[17]

As mentioned earlier the search for a usable past was a central pre-occupation of the modernists, which quite often manifested itself in the traditional form of the New England jeremiad as a 'plaintive parting song' forever on the verge of becoming a praisesong because its didactic subtext pointed to a better future. Toomer's substantial modification of his swan-song metaphor implies a similar dialect producing the birthsong of a new race and of a new culture out of a process of consummation:

> As I see America, it is like a great stomach into which are thrown the elements which make up the life blood. From this source is coming a distinct race of people. They will achieve tremendous works of art, literature and music.[18]

The first chapter of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," written before the Great Migration and the revisions of the modernists includes an evaluation of Black culture reflecting the author's struggle for its recognition on the basis of its distinct qualities, thus establishing a line of argument continued, for example, by Langston Hughes's' "I, too, sing/am America" (1925):

> ...there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folk-lore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness.[19]

Substantiating his position in the chapters on the Black Church and the sorrow songs, Du Bois advertised those sections of Black culture celebrating the triumph over suffering, strategies of empowerment and survival mediating values familiar to American audiences and, at the same time, safe from negative stereotyping.[20] However, Du Bois's 'dream deferred' of a new pluralistic American culture and his turn towards internationalism and Pan-Africanism made him dissociate Black culture from the American context and define it as Afrocentric within a larger Third-World framework as applied in *The Negro* (1915) and *Dark Princess* (1928).

Alain Locke, the mentor of the Harlem Renaissance, also explained the distinctiveness of Black culture with its African roots though he did not follow Du Bois's shift of geographical focus, rather kept on exploring the nature and functions of African-American folk-culture throughout his long career as critic and philosopher. George Hutchinson has commented on Locke's achievements:

> He tried to further a cultural revitalization based on a racially proud yet cosmopolitan sensibility, drawing confidence from "classical" African and African American folk culture and from a belief that important sectors of white America were prepared for an interracial and cultural pluralist future.[21]

Opposing the melting-pot paradigm of a cultural fusion he believed in a future pluralistic culture in which a transformed but still strong, distinctive, and authentic African American component would play an important role. In the "Foreword" to *The New Negro* Alain Locke, who was directly influenced by Van Wyck Brooks and Horace Kallen,[22] placed his book into the contexts of modernism and cultural pluralism:

> Yet the New Negro must be seen in the perspective of a New World, and especially of a New America ... America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity, trying to found an American literature, a national art, and national music implies a Negro-American culture seeking the same satisfactions and objections. Separate as it may be in color and substance the culture of the Negro is of a pattern integral with the times and with its cultural setting.[23]

Quite naturally Locke's views changed as is evident in his annual reviews of works by and about African Americans in *Opportunity* and *Phylon* between 1929 and 1952. One of these nuances concerns his perception of folk culture which he felt needed some elaboration through temperament and talent to make it generally accessible and permanent in art. Later, under the influence of the new guard of writers, he put more trust in its own strength and dynamics.

Jean Toomer, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke unanimously considered African American folk culture a valuable contribution to a new definition of American culture. With Locke Toomer shared a preoccupation with Black folk culture in the Southern homeland and the interplay with its northern extensions. For different reasons the author of *Cane* and W. E. B. Du Bois were more pessimistic than Alain Locke about the continuity of this culture in the United States. Whereas the author of *The Souls of Black Folk* held racism responsible for the denial of full participation in the redefinition of American culture, Toomer saw in the decline of Black folk culture as the result of objective socio-economic processes a double chance for creation and renewal, more than one phoenix rising from the ashes: 1) He could compose a swan song as an artistic monument to this culture. Both W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke who characterized Black culture as emergent would have seriously impaired their messages with a swan song. 2) Toomer understood the death of the culture preserved in the swan-song as first step towards a new culture whose first proponent he was because he had already liberated himself from his first cultural identification, and saw himself on the move towards something beyond, which he defined as first new American, "earth being" or "the blue man."[24]

Even more urgently than Du Bois's or Locke's, Toomer's strategy asked the mainstream, above all the modernist dedicated to revisions, to operate with the same degree of objectivity and radicality. As the Hutchinson quote indicated, some of the concepts of the modernist like Randolph Bourne's 'transnational America' did not invite Blacks to participate and merely added the steerage passengers to those from the Mayflower. Consequently, Toomer's over-exposure remained largely unappreciated and his vision unfulfilled in his lifetime. *Cane* actually became his own swan song as a published writer. In spite of these tragic effects Toomer reaffirmed his credo in the draft of an undated typescript probably written in 1932 referring to an exchange with James Weldon Johnson:

> In reply to me Mr. Johnson affirmed my individual position as an American, but said, in substance, that he doubted that the time was ripe for the projection of such a symbol for a general movement towards a fundamental Americanization of all American people. I, however, felt that the time was ripe.[25]

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[1] Jean Toomer, *Cane*, ed. Darwin T. Turner (New York: Norton, 1988) 142. All subsequent quotes in the text are taken from this edition. Also cf. p. 151: "But the fact is, that if anything comes up now, pure Negro, it will be a swansong."

[2] *CLA-Journal* 22.3 (1979): 194.

[3] *The Works of Israel Zangwill* (NY: American Jewish Book Co., 1921) 33.

[4] That the modernist critics ignored the fact that parts of *Huck Finn* can be read as a slave narrative only confirms the limitations of their perspective. Cf. e.g. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (NY: Oxford UP, 1993).

[5] *Jean Toomer, Artist. A Study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894-1936* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984) 127.

[6] (NY: Oxford UP, 1995) 65.

[7] *"Who Set You Flowin'?"* 66.

[8] *Jean Toomer, Artist* 127.

[9] "Introduction," *A Jean Toomer Reader. Selected Unpublished Writings*, ed. Frederick L. Rusch (NY: Oxford UP, 1993) xi.

[10] *Jean Toomer Reader* 15-16. A very similar approach to the concept of multidimensional identity is found in Luc Sante's *The Factory of Facts* (NY: Pantheon, 1998), a quite different approach in Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* (NY: Godine, 1982).

[11] *Jean Toomer, Artist* 150.

[12] (NY: Bantam, 1968) 5.

[13] *Jean Toomer, Artist* 190.

[14] Cf. George B. Hutchinson, "Jean Toomer and the 'New Negroes' of Washington," *American Literature* 63 (1991): 683-692 and Barbara Foley, "Jean Toomer's Washington and the Politics of Class: From 'Blue Veins' to Seventh Street Rebels," *Modern Fiction Studies* 42.2 (1996): 289-321.

[15] George Kent, "Patterns of the Harlem Renaissance," *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, ed. Arna Bontemps (NY: Dodd, Mead, 1972) 27.

[16] "To Move From Place to Place," *Jean Toomer Reader* 4.

[17] Angelyn Mitchell, ed., *Within the Circle. An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (Durham: Duke UP, 1994) 56.

[18] "Just Americans," *The Merrill Studies in Cane*, ed. Frank Durham (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1971) 16.

[19] *The Souls of Black Folk* (NY: Fawcett, 1961) 22.

[20] I am thinking of his enthusiasm about the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Also cf. Ronald A. T. Judy, "The New Black Aesthetic and W. E. B. Du Bois, or Hephaestus, Limping," *Massachusetts Review* 35.2 (1994): 249-282.

[21] *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995) 397. Also cf. Jeffrey C. Stewart, ed., *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke. A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture* (NY: Garland, 1983).

[22] Cf. Horace Kallen, "Alain Locke and Cultural Pluralism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 54 (1957): 119-127 and Werner Sollors, "Kallen, Bourne, and Du Bois," *Beyond Ethnicity. Consent and Descent in American Culture* (NY: Oxford UP, 1986) 181-191.

[23] (NY: Atheneum, 1977) xv-xvi. In a letter to Lola Ridge of December 1922 (*Jean Toomer Reader* 17), Toomer comes very close to Locke's position: "And I think my own contribution will curiously blend the rhythm of peasanty [sic] with the rhythm of machines. A syncopation, a slow jazz, a sharp intense motion, subtilized, fused to a terse lyricism."

[24] Cf. his poem "The Blue Meridian," *The Wayward and the Seeking. A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer*, ed. Darwin T. Turner (Washington, D. C.: Howard UP, 1980) 214-234, the essay "Race Problems and Modern Society," *Jean Toomer. Selected Essays and Literary Criticism*, ed. Robert B. Jones (Knoxville: U of Tenn. P, 1996) 60-76, and Chapter III "The Negro, The Blue Man, and The New Race," *Jean Toomer Reader* 79-114. Also cf. Frederick L. Rusch, "The Blue Man: Jean Toomer's Solution to His Problems of Identity," *Obsidian* 6 (1980): 38-54.

[25] "Fighting the Vice," *Jean Toomer Reader* 104-105. Also cf. "Not Typically American (1935)," *Jean Toomer Reader* 95-101.