

# I

## Journey toward Black Art: Jean Toomer's *Cane*

When I began teaching at Yale in 1968, my ambition was to be a successful critic of British Victorian literature. Having studied at UCLA and the University of Edinburgh, I had produced a dissertation entitled "The Idea in Aestheticism." Commencing with a reading of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the dissertation argued that nineteenth-century aestheticism ("art for art's sake") was a form of social activism. At a moment when the Vietnam War was in full swing and when America's "flower children" had taken to the streets—often wearing Pre-Raphaelite hairstyles and fashions—in antiwar and anti-establishment protest, the "idea" in the writings of the aesthetes and decadents of nineteenth-century England seemed amenable to interpretation as protest against the vulgar jingoism and ugly industrialization of the Victorian era.

My method of analysis was New Criticism. My education as a scholar of literature had been marked by such criticism, and in 1968 I sincerely believed that "close reading" was an objective mode for wrestling inherent truths from protean works of art. Such truths I deemed unadulterated; they were *artistic*, unbuttressed by historical, sociological, ideological, psychological, or biographical supports. Guided by this New Critical perspective, I was holding forth one evening in New Haven on the virtues of a modern play which was in performance by the Yale Repertory Company. A group of young black men and women

broke my concentration when they entered the auditorium. But they seemed to tune in immediately to what I was saying. Their stares were intense and unyielding. When I concluded my talk, the group approached and their leader said: "Brother, did anyone ever tell you how much you look like Malcolm X?" I hardly knew what to say.

The group, as it turned out, was composed of graduate students in Yale's Drama School. They were trying to secure a black drama workshop within the school, and they had also organized themselves to protest some inanely racist play scheduled for production by the repertory company. They were all engaged in creative and political activities in the black New Haven community. They were black nationalists in politics and cultural orientation, whose motto was: "The ultimate solution is Black Revolution!" Saluting my "way with words," they enlisted me in their struggle.

As my hair exploded beyond normal limits, so, too, did my intellectual horizons. Granted permission to teach a black American literature course during 1969-70, I also had the good fortune to secure a contract from McGraw-Hill for an anthology of black American literature. My response to my reading and study of black literature and culture was analogous to Frederick Douglass's response when his master unwittingly informed him of the virtues of literacy:

I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. . . . Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read.

I set out to learn how to read black American literature.

While my habits of New Critical explication offered an available avenue, I realized from conversations with my Drama School friends that no merely *formal* approach devoid of social, historical, and biographical considerations would suffice for the job of reading black literature. In fact, the elegant black novelist, poet, and critic Arna Bontemps—who joined the Yale English department faculty

in 1969—explained to me that his own generation understood that the very orientation of New Criticism consciously excluded expressive traditions grounded in folklore, history, and psychobiography. The utterances of a new generation of black writers that included Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Addison Gayle, Jr., were declarations of war against such exclusion. Clearly, a crisis of allegiance was at hand for me.

The hundreds of black American expressive works that I eagerly, profitably, and enjoyably devoured during 1969-70 were far too compelling to permit me simply to withdraw. I knew that I had to harmonize with the Black Aesthetic temper of a new era. And that meant I would have to adopt an avowedly sociohistorical, biographical, and consciously ideological approach to criticism, reading black texts as works produced by "interested" black men and women. Further, it meant that I would, per force, have to ascribe comprehensible social purpose to all works of expressive culture. *Art*, thus, came to be defined as precisely *not* for art's sake.

Along with other Black Aestheticians, I came to regard art as both a product and a producer in an unceasing struggle for black liberation. To be "art," the product had to be expressivity or performance designed to free minds and bodies of a subjugated people.

Which is to say, we of the Black Aesthetic temper rewrote "art" to mirror the role we had set for ourselves. Deeming ourselves members of a Black Power or Black Liberation cadre, we believed we could be articulate spokespeople to and for the masses. Our aim was to emulate the expressive cultural work of, say, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Frances Harper, W. E. B. DuBois, or Langston Hughes before us. We read a definite and deliberate social purpose in the efforts of our predecessors, men and women like Sojourner Truth who had so ably moved mass black audiences. We also credited our precursors with a rather more elusive quality called "soul." "Soul" was the most ubiquitous term of the Black Aesthetic era. "Blackness" and "soul" came to compete, in fact, as signs for an ineffable "something" that made black American creativity *Not-Art*.

This brief account indicates that there was a sometimes con-

fusing array of claims and strategies surrounding the Black Aesthetic. The critical framework that it sanctioned, however, was a pure product of an era in which competing claims abounded: Civil Rights vs. Black Power, Black Capitalism vs. Black Utopianism, Black Studies vs. a "Black University," "Negro" vs. "Black," American Reform vs. Black Revolution. In harmony with the competing ideologies and ambivalent orientations of its era, the Black Aesthetic represented a politically interested demand for "engaged" literature. It was also a clarion call for a firmly socio-historical criticism.

I embraced this aesthetic and all of its claims with belief, joy, and trust. Having grown up in a racist, stultifying Louisville, Kentucky—which, on any given day, could make 1987 Cumming, Georgia, look like Club Med—I had been discriminated against and called "Nigger" enough to think that what America needed was a good Black Revolution. And with the abundant energy and endless enthusiasm of youth, I wanted to speed the day of the revolt. My chosen vocation and recently shifted allegiances, I felt, eminently qualified me as a Black Aesthete. The rub was that I could not seem to "get it right."

I was never able to speak exactly or write simply enough to gain the attention of the multiplied thousands of black people—lay people, artists, and critics alike—who so fervently responded to, say, Addison Gayle or Stephen Henderson. There were, at least, two reasons for my shortcomings.

First, I did not know a fraction as much about Afro-American expressivity as Gayle or Henderson. Second, I had not even begun seriously to assess and address the theoretical and practical contradictions implicit in the high value I placed on my "Yale status." My orientation toward Victorian studies was, of course, an emblem of my axiology. For what I relished about the aesthetes and decadents, and the spokesmen who were sources and influences for them, was their "disinterestedness." They refused to be strident ideologues. And their resolute insistence on the saving grace of the contemplative life made them models of quiet revolt. If this sounds like the code of a bourgeois intellectual, then I have successfully described my "Yale status."

Confronted with a conflict between my emotional commitment

to a stridently ideological aesthetic and my intellectual affinity for a disinterested reading of life, I was always writing with two audiences peering over my shoulder—Addison Gayle and Matthew Arnold. The response that "Journey toward Black Art: Jean Toomer's *Cane*" first received mirrors my conflict. Both *PMLA* and the Broadside Critics Series politely rejected the work. *PMLA* said the essay offered "nothing new" on the subject. Broadside said it was too academic.

What was my ambition in writing the essay? I wanted, first, to praise *Cane* as an exception to what was commonly labeled the exotic fare of the Harlem Renaissance. Second, I wanted to put Toomer's work forward as an example of the way in which "our" black literature transcended American minstrel limitations. The book's stream-of-consciousness narration and laconic imagery made it "modern" by white standards.

But outside my confused chauvinism (e.g., proving *Cane* great by white standards), there was the question of actual, practical critical procedures. How could I best show Toomer's work to advantage? The answer, implicit in the analysis that follows, was New Criticism. There was also the question of *Cane's* status vis-à-vis the criterion of "soul." Was the book black or soulful enough to merit analysis? It was de rigueur for me to believe that *Cane* had a discoverable black, and liberating, *telos*.

My critical posture, as represented by "Journey toward Black Art," suggests, of course, that I was between two equally questionable intellectual positions. While an awareness of what might be called the *cultural situatedness* of *Cane* is surely necessary for any comprehensive critical analysis of Toomer's work, this awareness can be achieved only by meditation, study, and a great deal of reading. It cannot simply be ascribed as an affective function of ideological enthusiasm. Again, while attentive or close reading is needed to apprehend the force of *Cane*, such reading cannot assume, in advance of the evidence, that its result will be a holistic, organic, *literary* masterpiece. Such an assumption is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The paradox of my situation lay in the fact that I was intent on producing a black art and criticism. My "objective" standards and procedures were, however, discoverably white. "Journey

toward Black Art" is, thus, a reflexive enterprise, using a claimed "progress" of both Toomer and his narrator as an emblem of the possibility of transcending the limitations of a black past (a "false" or "failed" Harlem Renaissance). The essay also reads *Cane* as an augury of the emergence of an authentic black art wrung from a fabric of painful contradictions.

In some ways I suspect the essay is more characteristic of the Black Aesthetic in general than even its senior mentors could have recognized when it appeared in my book *Singers of Daybreak* (1974). The essay is governed by a well-intentioned, culturally nationalist, and, I would argue, much-needed black American political perspective. But it is also moved by traditional New Critical means of analysis. It offers a view of the Black Aesthetic critical situation similar to that of Langston Hughes's Leontyne in the poet's twelve moods for jazz:

In the pot behind the  
Paper doors what's cooking?  
What's smelling, Leontyne?  
Lieder, lovely Lieder  
And a leaf of collard green,  
Lovely Lieder Leontyne.

Traditional "art" songs and odiferous Afro-American critical intentions marked both the Black Aesthetic and the "Journey toward Black Art" that was produced behind its paper doors.



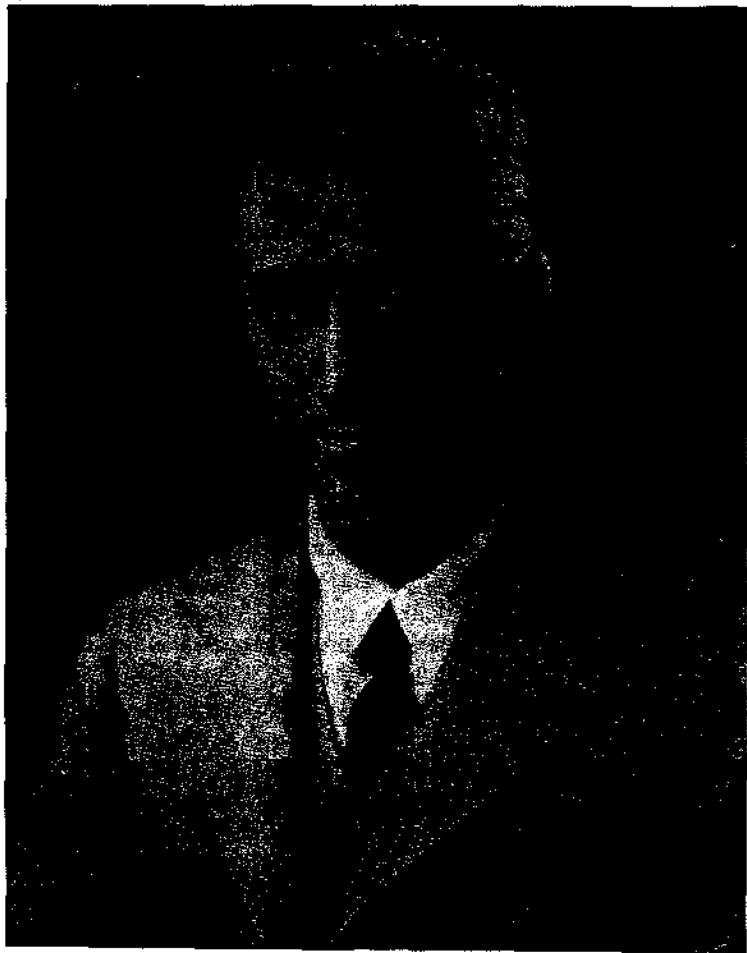
William Stanley Braithwaite's "The Negro in American Literature" concludes with the rhapsodic assertion that "*Cane* is a book of gold and bronze, of dusk and flame, of ecstasy and pain, and Jean Toomer is a bright morning star of a new day of the race in literature."<sup>1</sup> Written in 1924, Braithwaite's statement reflects the energy and excess, the vibrancy and hope of a generation of young black authors who set out in the 1920s to express their "individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."<sup>2</sup> They were wooed by white patrons; they had their work modified beyond recognition by theatrical producers, and they were told time and again precisely what type of black American writing the

public would accept. Some, like Wallace Thurman, could not endure the strain.<sup>3</sup> Claude McKay absented himself from Harlem throughout most of the twenties,<sup>4</sup> and Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen gained a degree of notoriety.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, it was *Cane* (1923), a book written by a very light complexioned mulatto, that both portrayed—without fear or shame—a dark-skinned self that transcended the concerns of a single period and also heralded much of value that has followed its publication. Arna Bontemps writes:

Only two small printings were issued, and these vanished quickly. However, among the most affected was practically an entire generation of young Negro writers then just beginning to emerge; their reaction to Toomer's *Cane* marked an awakening that soon thereafter began to be called a Negro Renaissance.<sup>6</sup>

The 1920s presented a problem for the writer who wished to give a full and honest representation of black American life; for him the traditional images, drawn from the authors of the Plantation Tradition and the works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, were passé. The contemporary images, captured in Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), were not designed to elucidate a complex human existence, for they were reflections of that search for the bizarre and the exotic that was destined to flourish in an age of raccoon coats, bathtub gin, and "wine-flushed, bold-eyed" whites who caught the A-train to Harlem and spent an evening slumming, or seeking some élan vital for a decadent but prosperous age. That only two small printings of *Cane* appeared during the 1920s is not striking; the miracle is that it was published at all. Toomer did not choose the approbation that a scintillating (if untrue) portrayal of the black man could bring in the twenties, nor did he speak sotto voce about the amazing progress the black man had made in American society and his imminent acceptance by a fond white world. *Cane* is a symbolically complex work that employs lyrical intensity and stream-of-consciousness narration to portray the journey of an artistic soul toward creative fulfillment; it is unsparing in its criticism of the inimical aspects of the black American heritage and resonant in its praise of the spiritual beauty to be discovered

there. An examination of the journey toward genuine, liberating black art presented in *Cane* reveals Toomer as a writer of genius and the book itself as a protest novel, a portrait of the artist, and a thorough delineation of the black situation. These aspects of the work explain its signal place among the achievements of the



Jean Toomer

Harlem Renaissance, and they help to clarify the reaction of a white reading public—a public nurtured on the minstrel tradition, the tracts of the New Negro, and the sensational antics of Carl Van Vechten's blacks—which allowed it to go out of print without a fair hearing.

The first section of *Cane* opens with evocative description and a lyrical question. The subject is Karintha, whose:

skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,  
O cant you see it, O cant you see it,  
Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon  
. . . When the sun goes down.<sup>7</sup>

The repetition and the simile bringing together the human and the nonhuman leave a memorable impression. The reader is directly asked to respond, as were the hearers of such spirituals as "I've Got a Home in Dat Rock" and "Rich man Dives he lived so well / Don't you see?" From the outset, the atmosphere is one of participation, as the reader is invited to contemplate a woman who carries "beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down."

"Karintha," however, offers more than rhapsodic description and contemplation. It is a concise, suggestive sketch of the maturation of a southern woman: from sensuous childhood through promiscuous adolescence to wanton adulthood. The quatrain that serves as the epigraph is repeated twice and acts as a sharp counterpoint to Karintha's life, which is anything but beautiful: "She stoned the cows, and beat her dog, and fought the other children . . ." In a sense, "Karintha" is a prose "The Four Stages of Cruelty," and its exquisite style forces some of its more telling revelations into a type of Hogarthian background, where they are lost to the casual observer.

There are elements of the humorous black preacher tale in the narrator's comment that "even the preacher, who caught her at mischief, told himself that she was as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower," and grim paradox appears after Karintha has given birth to her illegitimate child near the smoldering sawdust pile of the mill:

Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in water. Someone made a song:

Smoke is on the hills. Rise up.  
Smoke is on the hills, O rise  
And take my soul to Jesus.

The holy song that accompanies an unholy event is no less incongruous than the pilgrimages and the fierce, materialistic rituals in which men engage to gain access to Karintha. For the heroine is not an enshrined beauty but a victim of the South, where "homes . . . are most often built on the two room plan. In one, you cook and eat, in the other you sleep, and there love goes on." Karintha has been exposed to an adult world too soon, and the narrator drives home the irony that results when biblical dictates are juxtaposed with a bleak reality: "Karintha had seen or heard, perhaps she had felt her parents loving. One could but imitate one's parents, for to follow them was the way of God." While some men "do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon," the narrator is aware that Karintha has been subjected to conditions that Christianity is powerless to meliorate. Her life has been corrupted, and the mystery is that her beauty remains.

The type of duality instanced by Karintha's sordid life and striking appearance recurs in part 1 and lends psychological point to the section.<sup>8</sup> The essential theme of "Karintha" is the debasement of innocence. Men are attracted to the heroine but fail to appreciate what is of value—the spirituality inherent in her dusky beauty. They are awed by the pure yet wish to destroy it; evil becomes their good, and they think only in terms of progressive time and capitalistic abundance—"The young fellows counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them" and ran stills to make her money. These conditions result, in part, from a southern Manichaeism; for the land whose heritage appears in "Karintha" stated its superiority and condoned an inhumane slavery, spoke of its aristocracy and traded in human flesh, lauded its natural resources and wantonly destroyed them to acquire wealth. Good and evil waged an equal contest in a South that contained its own natural harmonies but considered blacks as

chattels personal, having no rights that a white man need respect. In such an instance, love could only be an anomaly, and the narrator of part 1 seems fully aware of this. When black women are considered property (the materialism surrounding Karintha and Fern) and white women goddesses (the recrimination that accompanies Becky's sacrilegious acts), deep relationships are impossible; the evil of the encompassing universe and the natural compulsion of man to corrupt the beautiful inform the frustrating encounters of part 1.

The two poems—"Reapers" and "November Cotton Flower"—that follow "Karintha" offer a further treatment of the significant themes found in the story. The expectations raised by the title of the first poem are almost totally defeated by its text. There are sharpened blades, black men, black horses, and an inexorable energy; but wearying customs, indifference, and death are also present. "I see them place the hones / In their hip-pockets as a thing that's done," the speaker says, and goes on to depict the macabre death of a field rat that, "startled, squealing bleeds." This event does not halt the movement of the cutters, however: "I see the blade, / Blood-stained, continue cutting . . ." An abundant harvest is not the result of the poem's action, and the black reapers, with scythes in hand, take on the appearance of medieval icons of death—an appropriate image for those who help to corrupt the life of Karintha. "November Cotton Flower" with its images of scarcity, drought, dead birds, and boll weevils continues the portrayal of a grim environment. Against this background, however, stands a beauty like Karintha's. The heroine of the first sketch was compared to a November cotton flower, and here the appearance of the "innocently lovely" flower brings about the speculation of the superstitious. "Beauty so sudden for that time of year," one suspects, is destined to attract its exploiters.

While exploring the nature of Karintha's existence, the author has been constructing the setting that is to appear throughout part 1. The first story's effect is heightened by the presence of the religious, the suggestive, and the feminine, and certain aspects of the landscape linger in the reader's mind: a sawmill, pine trees, red dust, a pyramidal sawdust pile, and rusty cotton stalks. The folk songs convey a feeling of cultural homogeneity; they are all

of a religious character, rising spontaneously and pervading the landscape. The finishing details of this setting—the Dixie Pike and the railroad—are added in “Becky,” which deals with a mode of interaction characteristic of primitive, homogeneous societies.

“Becky” is the story of a white woman who gives birth to two mulatto sons, thus violating one of the most rigid taboos of southern society. As a consequence, she is ostracized by the community. William Goede (following the lead of Robert Bone) describes her plight as follows:

Becky is, like Hester Prynne, made to pay for the collective sense of guilt of the community: after whites and Negroes exile her, they secretly build her a house which both sustains and finally buries her. The house, on the other hand, built between the road and the railroad, confines the girl until the day when the roof falls through and kills her.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Karintha, Becky is seldom portrayed in physical terms. The narrator has never seen her, and the community as a whole merely speculates on her actions and her changing appearance. She is primarily a psychological presence to whom the community pays an ironical homage: a spectral representation of the southern miscegenatory impulse that was so alive during the days of American slavery and was responsible for countless lynchings even in Toomer's own day. As early as the seventeenth century, southern legislatures were enacting laws to prevent sexual alliances between blacks and whites; hence, the community in “Becky” reacts in a manner sanctioned by law and custom.

“Becky” presents a further exploration of the duality theme encountered in “Karintha,” and here the psychological element seems to predominate. The heroine's exile first calls to mind repression; she is set apart and finally buried. A more accurate description of Becky, however, is that she is a shaman. Among certain Asian groups and American Indian tribes, a person who engages in unsanctioned behavior (homosexuality, for example) is thought to have received a divine summons; he becomes a public figure and devises and leads ritualistic ceremonies that project his abnormal behavior. The function of the shaman is twofold; he enables the community to act out, by proxy, its latent abnormalities, and he reinforces its capacity to resist such tendencies. He is tolerated

and revered because of his supernatural power, yet hated as a symbol of moral culpability and as a demanding priest who exacts a penitential toll. The most significant trait of the shaman, however, is that—despite his ascribed powers—he is unable to effect a genuine cure. Georges Devereux explains this paradox:

Aussi ne peut-on considérer que le chaman accomplit une “cure psychiatrique” au sens *strict* du terme; il procure seulement au malade ce que L'École de psychoanalyse de Chicago appelle une “expérience affective correctrice” qui l'aide à réorganiser son système de défense mais ne lui permet pas d'attendre à cette réelle prise de conscience de soi-même (*insight*) sans laquelle il n'y a pas de véritable guérison.<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising that analysts consider the shaman a disturbed individual; he is often characterized by hysteria and suicidal tendencies, and he remains in his role because he finds relief from his own disorders by granting a series of culturally sanctioned defenses to his followers.

Becky has engaged in a pattern of behavior that the surrounding community considers taboo, and she is relegated to a physical position outside the group but essentially public. Her house is built (by the townspeople) in a highly visible location, an “eye-shaped piece of sandy ground. . . . Islandized between the road and railroad track.” The citizens scorn her and consider her deranged (“poor-white crazy woman, said the black folks' mouths”), but at the same time they pray for her, bring her food, and keep her alive. Becky, in turn, continues her activities; she has another mulatto son and remains in the tottering house until it eventually crumbles beneath the weight of its chimney. In essence, we witness the same dichotomy presented in “Karintha”; the South professes racial purity and abhorrence of miscegenation, but the fundamental conditions of the region nourish a subconscious desire for interracial relationships and make a penitential ritual necessary. It seems significant, moreover, that Becky—who is a Catholic and in that respect also one of the South's traditional aversions—assumes a divine role for the community. Attraction toward and repulsion by the spiritually ordained are as much a part of the landscape in “Becky” as in “Karintha.”

The narrator is swayed by the attitudes of the townspeople, but he is by no means a devout shamanist. He duly records the fact that Becky's house was built on "sandy ground" (reflecting the destructive and aggressive feelings that are part of the shamanic experience), and he points out that Becky is a Catholic. Moreover, he sets up a contrapuntal rhythm between the natural pines that "whisper to Jesus" and the ambivalent charity of the community. The most devastating note in this orchestration is that Sunday is the day of Becky's destruction, and the vagrant preacher Barlo is unwilling to do more than toss a Bible on the debris that entraps her. In short, the narrator captures the irony inherent in the miscegenatory underconsciousness of the South. The town's experience with Becky provides a "corrective, affective experience" but not a substantive cure; as the story closes (on notes that remind one of the eerie conjure stories of black folklore), one suspects that the townspeople are no more insightful.

At this point, Toomer has set forth the dominant tone, setting, characters, and point of view of the first section. Women are in the forefront, and in both "Karintha" and "Becky" they assume symbolic roles that help to illustrate the dualities of a southern heritage. The beauty of Karintha and the beneficent aspects of Becky's existence are positive counterpoints to the aggressiveness, materialism, and moral obtuseness of the community as a whole. The omnipresent folk songs and the refrain in the second story ("The pines whisper to Jesus") bespeak a commitment to spirituality and beauty, while the animosity of the townspeople in "Becky" and the ineffectiveness of Christianity in "Karintha" display the grimmer side of a lyrically described landscape whose details pervade the whole of *Cane*. The point of view is largely that of a sensitive narrator, whom Arna Bontemps describes:

Drugged by beauty "perfect as dusk when the sun goes down," lifted and swayed by folk song, arrested by eyes that "desired nothing that *you* could give," silenced by "corn leaves swaying, rusty with talk," he recognized that "the Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa." A native richness is here, he concluded, and the poet embraced it with the passion of love.<sup>11</sup>

The narrator speaks in a tone that combines awe and reverence

with effective irony and subtle criticism. There are always deeper levels of meaning beneath his highly descriptive surface, and this is not surprising when one considers Toomer's statement that in the South "one finds soil in the sense that the Russians know it—the soil every art and literature that is to live must be embedded in."<sup>12</sup>

The emblematic nature of the soil is reflected in the tone and technique of the narrator and particularly in the book's title. Throughout part 1 there is an evocation of a land of sugarcane whose ecstasy and pain are rooted in a communal soil. But the title conveys more than this. Justifications of slavery on scriptural grounds frequently traced the black man's ancestry to the race of Cain, the slayer of Abel, in the book of Genesis. Toomer is concerned not only with the southern soil but also with the sons of Cain who populate it. In a colloquial sense, "to raise Cain" is to create disorder and cacophony, and in a strictly denotative sense, a cane is an instrument of support. Toomer's narrator is attempting to create an ordered framework that will contain the black American's complex existence, offer supportive values, and act as a guide for the perceptive soul's journey from amorphous experience to a finished work of art.

The third story of part 1, "Carma," is called by the narrator "the crudest melodrama," and so it is—on one level. When Carma's husband, Bane (surely an ironical name to set against *karma*), discovers that she has been unfaithful, he slashes the man who has told him, and is sentenced to the chain gang. This is melodramatic to be sure, but only (to quote the narrator) "as I have told it." Beneath the sensational surface is a tragedy of black American life. Bane, like Jimboy in Langston Hughes's *Not without Laughter*, is forced by economic pressures to seek work away from home; thus, his wife is left alone in an environment where (again, according to the narrator) promiscuity is a norm.<sup>13</sup> But Carma is also a woman who flaunts her sensuality, and can hardly be said to possess a strong sense of responsibility.

As in the previous stories, there are positive and redeeming elements in "Carma." The heroine herself is "strong as any man," and, given her name, this at least implies that her spirituality—that which is best and most ineffable in her—is capable of enduring the

inimical aspects of her surroundings. This is particularly important when one considers that "Carma" introduces a legendary African background to the first section: "Torches flare . . . juju men, gree-gree, witch-doctors . . . torches go out. . . . The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa" (pp. 17-18). The passage that introduces this reflection reads: "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" (p. 17). The folk song is linked to the African past, and a feeling of cultural continuity is established. The atavistic remains of a ceremonial past have the fragrance of earth and the spirituality of song and dance to recommend them, and at the center of this drama is Carma. She is strong (as Karintha is beautiful) despite southern conditions, and she endures in the face of an insensitive Bane, who is enraged because he cannot master his destiny.

"Carma" is also the first story in which the narrator clearly identifies himself as a conscious recounter ("whose tale as I have told it"), and the poems that follow read like invocations to the heritage that he is exploring. "Song of the Son" states his desire to sing the "souls of slavery," and "Georgia Dusk," which makes further use of the legendary background encountered in "Carma," evokes the spirits of the "unknown bards" of the past. It is not surprising, then, that the story of Fern should follow.

Fern is a woman whom men used until they realized there was nothing they could do for her that would modify her nature or bring them peace. She is an abandoned Karintha, and in a sense a more beautiful and alluring Esther (heroine of the next story), staring at the world with haunting eyes. The narrator seeks out this beautiful exile who is free in her sexuality and unmoved by the all-pervasive cash nexus of her environment. However, when he asks himself the question posed by former suitors—"What could I do for her?"—his answer is that of the artist: "Talk, of course. Push back the fringe of pines upon new horizons" (p. 29). The others answered in solely materialistic terms, coming away from their relationships with Fern oblivious to her fundamental character and vowing to do greater penitence: "candy every week . . . a magnificent something with no name on it . . . a house . . .

rescue her from some unworthy fellow who had tricked her into marrying him" (pp. 25-26). The narrator, on the other hand, aspires to project a vision that will release Fern from her stifling existence; she thus becomes for him an inspiration, an artistic ideal. She is a merger of black American physical attractiveness and the unifying myth so important in black American history and in the creation of the spirituals.

"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 [the narrator's] feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta," and Fern's full name is Fernie May Rosen. The narrator is thus making use of the seminal comparison between the history of the Israelites and that of black America, which frequently appears in the religious lore of black American culture. In effect, the slaves appropriated the myth of the Egyptian captivity and considered themselves favored by God and destined in time to be liberated by His powers; this provided unity for a people who found themselves uprooted and defined by whites—historians and others—as descendants of wild savages on the "dark continent" of Africa.<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that she dislikes the petty people of the South and apparently needs to express an underlying spirituality, Fern seems to act as a symbolic representation of the black man's adoption of this myth. When the narrator has brought about a hysterical release in her, however, he fails to comprehend what he has evoked. The story ends with an injunction to the reader to seek out Fern when he travels south. The narrator feels that his ideal holds significance, but claims that his aspirations toward it are unfulfilled. There appears to be some disingenuousness in this claim; for the teller of Fern's story has thoroughly explored the ironies inherent in the merger of white religion and black servitude. The religion of the Israelites is out of place in the life of Fern. While she captures—in her mysterious song like that of a Jewish cantor—the beauty of its spirit (and, in this sense, stands outside the narrow-minded community), she is imprisoned by the mores it occasions. Like Becky and Karintha, Fern is a victim, and the narrator skillfully captures her essence. The apparent disingenuousness at the story's conclusion is in reality modesty; for

the art the narrator implies is humble actually holds great significance (in its subtle didactic elements) for the culture he is attempting to delineate.

"Esther" is a story of alienation and introduces an element of inquietude that grows into the concluding terror of the book's first section. Apocalyptic images abound as the heroine dreams of King Barlo (a figure who first appeared in "Becky") overcoming her pale frigidity with a flaming passion that will result in a "black, singed, woolly, tobacco-juice baby—ugly as sin" (p. 41). Edward Waldron points out that

beneath this superficial level . . . lie at least two more intense and, for Toomer, more personal interpretations. One deals with the relationship of a light-skinned American Negro to the black community in which he (she) must try to function, and the other has to do with a common theme of the Harlem Renaissance, the relationship between the American Negro and Africa.<sup>15</sup>

But one can make excessive claims for King Barlo. While it is true that he falls into a religious trance and sketches, in symbolic oratory, the fate of Africans at the hands of slave traders, it is also true that he is a vagrant preacher, a figure whom Toomer sketches fully (and with less than enthusiasm) in Layman of "Kabnis." And though Barlo is the prophet of a new dawn for the black American, he is also a businessman<sup>16</sup> who makes money during the war, and a lecherous frequenter of the demimonde. It thus seems an overstatement to make a one-to-one correlation between Barlo and Africa, or Afro-America. It is necessary to bear in mind that Esther Crane is not only a "tragic mulatto" repressed by Protestant religion and her father's business ethic ("Esther sells lard and snuff and flour to vague black faces that drift in her store to ask for them"), she is a fantasizer as well. Esther's view of Barlo is the one presented to the reader through most of the story; hence, when she retreats fully from reality at the conclusion, the reader's judgments should be qualified accordingly.

Esther's final state is described as follows: "She draws away, frozen. Like a somnambulist she wheels around and walks stiffly to the stairs. Down them. . . . She steps out. There is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared" (p. 48). The

heroine is enclosed in her own mind; the sentient objects of the world mean nothing to this repressed sleepwalker. Given the complexity of Barlo's character, it is impossible to feel that such an observer could capture it accurately. Just as we refuse to accept the middle-aged and sentimental reflections of Marlowe as the final analysis of Kurtz in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and exercise a qualifying restraint before the words of Camus's narrator in *The Fall*, so we must recognize the full nature of Esther's character if we are to grasp her story and the role of King Barlo in it. Barlo does contain within himself the unifying myth of black American culture, and he delivers it to the community in the manner of the most accomplished black folk preachers. In this character, however, he paradoxically contributes to Esther's stifled sensibility, which continually projects visions of sin. As a feat hero (the best cotton picker) and a skillful craftsman of words (his moving performance on the public street), he contains positive aspects, but the impression that remains—when one has noted his terrified and hypocritical response in "Becky" and his conspicuous materialism and insensitive treatment of Esther—is not as favorable as some critics would tempt us to believe.<sup>17</sup>

The feelings of alienation and foreshadowing generated by "Esther" are heightened by the poems that follow. "Conversion" tells of a degraded "African Guardian of Souls" who has drunkenly embraced white religiosity, and seems intended further to illuminate the character of Barlo. "Portrait in Georgia" is a subtle, lyrical protest poem in which a woman is described in terms of the instruments and actions of a lynching. The second poem's vision prefigures the horror of the last story in part 1, "Blood-Burning Moon."

"Blood-Burning Moon" stands well in the company of such Harlem Renaissance works as Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" and Walter White's *The Fire in the Flint*. It is a work that protests, in unequivocal terms, the senseless, brutal, and sadistic violence perpetrated against the black man by white America. The narrator realized in "Carma" that violence was a part of southern existence, and the shattering demise of Becky, Barlo's religious trance, and Fern's frantic outpouring speak volumes about the terror of such a life. But in "Blood-Burning Moon" the narrator

traces southern violence to its source. Tom Burwell—strong, dangerous, black lover of Louisa and second to Barlo in physical prowess—is only one of the black Americans whom the Stone family “practically owns.” Louisa—black and alluring—works for the family, and Bob Stone (who during the days of slavery would have been called “the young massa”) is having an affair with her. Tom reacts to hints and rumors of this affair in the manner of Bane; he turns violently on the gossipers and refuses to acknowledge what he feels to be true. Wage slavery, illicit alliances across the color line, intraracial violence—the narrator indeed captures the soul of America’s “peculiar institution,” and the results are inevitable. In a confrontation between Stone and Burwell, the black man’s strength triumphs, and the white mob arrives (in “high-powered cars with glaring search-lights” that remind one of the “ghost train” in “Becky”) to begin its gruesome work. The lynching of Tom, which drives Louisa insane, more than justifies the story’s title. The moon, controller of tides and destinies, and a female symbol, brings blood and fire to the black American.

Part 1 is a combination of awe-inspiring physical beauty, human hypocrisy, restrictive religious codes, and psychological trauma. In “Fern” the narrator says: “That the sexes were made to mate is the practice of the South” (p. 26). But sexual consummation in the first section often results in dissatisfaction or in a type of perverse motherhood. Men come away from Fern frustrated; Karintha covertly gives birth to her illegitimate child in a pine forest; Esther dreams of the immaculate conception of a tobacco-stained baby; and Becky’s sons are illegitimate mulattoes, who first bring violence to the community and then depart from it with curses. The women of part 1 are symbolic figures, but the lyrical terms in which they are described can be misleading. With the exception of their misdirected sexuality, they are little different from the entrapped and stifled women of the city seen in part 2. In short, something greater than the pressure of urban life accounts for the black man’s frustrated ambitions, violent outbursts, and tragic deaths at the hands of white America. The black American’s failure to fully comprehend the beautiful in his own heritage—the Georgia landscape, folk songs, and women of deep loveliness—is part of it. But the narrator places even greater emphasis

on the black man’s ironical acceptance of the “strange cassava” and “weak palabra” of a white religion. Throughout part 1, he directs pointed thrusts—in the best tradition of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, and William Wells Brown<sup>18</sup>—at Christianity. Although he appreciates the rich beauty of black folk songs that employ Protestant religious imagery (“Georgia Dusk”), he also sees that the religion as it is practiced in the South is often hypocritical and stifling. The narrator, as instanced by “Nullo,” the refrain in “Becky,” and a number of fine descriptive passages throughout the first section, seems to feel a deeper spirituality in the landscape. Moreover, there seems more significance in the beauty of Karintha or in the eyes of Fern (into which flow “the countryside and something that I call God”) than in all the cramped philanthropy, shouted hosannas, vagrant preachers, and religious taboos of Georgia. The narrator, in other words, clearly realizes that the psychological mimicry that led to the adoption of a white religion often directed black Americans away from their own spiritual beauties and resulted in destruction.<sup>19</sup>

But the importance of white America’s role cannot be minimized. King Barlo views the prime movers behind the black situation as “little white-ant biddies” who tied the feet of the African, uprooted him from his traditional culture, and made him prey to alien gods. The essential Manichaeism of a South that thrived on slavery, segregation, the chattel principle, and violence is consummately displayed in the first section of *Cane*, and Barlo realizes that a new day must come before the black man will be free. The brutality directed against the black American has slowed the approach of such a dawn, but the narrator of part 1 has discovered positive elements in the black southern heritage that may lead to a new day: a sense of song and soil, and the spirit of a people who have their severe limitations but cannot be denied.

Part 2 of *Cane* is set in the city and constitutes a male cycle. The creative soul that was characterized by a type of “negative capability” in part 1 becomes an active agency of dreams and knowledge, and the narrator recedes to a more objective plane, where he can view even himself somewhat impartially. “Avey” has a first-person point of view, but the remainder of the stories come from

the hand of an omniscient narrator who seems aware that as a creator he needs "consummate skill to walk upon the waters where huge bubbles burst" (p. 108). The urban environment demands more careful analysis, and thus the lyrical impulse is diminished in the second section—there are only half as many connecting poems here as in part 1.

"Seventh Street" and "Rhobert," the opening sketches of part 2, capture the positive and negative aspects of a new environment. The driving, cutting, inexorable energy seen in "Reapers" and "Cotton Song" has become "A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life" thrusting its way "into the white and white-washed wood of Washington" (p. 71). And the epigraph of the first sketch evokes a lower-echelon black urban environment—with its easy spending, bootleggers, silken shirts, and Cadillacs—not a dusky, natural beauty like Karantha's. The setting, however, is not a bizarre and exotic world; it is a life fathered by the incongruous combination of senseless violence ("the war") and puritan morality ("Prohibition"). Unlike the southern environment with its African ancestry, Seventh Street is a disharmony of nature—"a bastard"—and its rhythms reflect its cacophonous birth: thrusting, jazzy, crude-boned. These rhythms cannot be absorbed by the white world that surrounds them: "Stale soggy wood of Washington. Wedges rust in soggy wood . . . Split it! In two! Again! Shred it! . . . the sun. Wedges are brilliant in sun; ribbons of wet wood dry and blow away" (p. 71). The new life is an agency of the sun rather than the moon, and those who set it to work can neither contain nor arrest it. This situation becomes sardonically humorous when the narrator comments: "God would not dare to suck black red blood. A Nigger God! He would duck his head in shame and call for the Judgment Day." The omnipotent Father (frequently pictured by church primers as a blue-eyed white man) would be irrevocably altered by one drop of black blood. But there are black Americans who fear this new life. They wear their God-built houses like divers' helmets and refuse to subject themselves to its pressures. Rhobert—who might appropriately be called "robot"—is ruled by the white ethical code (the house) that has been imposed upon him.<sup>20</sup> After reading "Rhobert" and "Seventh Street," one is aware that one is in the presence of a narrator who

has learned to look intelligently beneath the surface of life. His irony is more subtle, and the near-Swiftian satire of the second sketch demonstrates his ability to make accurate, undisguised value judgments. Moreover, he has moved toward greater self-knowledge; if Rhobert is portrayed as a man engaged in a somewhat fruitless contest, so, too, is the first-person narrator of "Avey."

Goede has pointed out that "Avey," "Box Seat," and "Kabnis" represent portraits of the black American artist,<sup>21</sup> and "Avey's" narrator clearly identifies himself as a writer near the end of the story. Avey, whom Darwin Turner calls "an educated and northern Karantha,"<sup>22</sup> acts as a sensual ideal for the narrator and his boyhood peers; they long to mate with her and seek to give something she desires. Avey, however, is extraordinarily indifferent to them. She pursues an uneventful life and finally becomes a prostitute.

Despite the humor he directs at her indifference ("Hell! she was no better than a cow. I was certain that she was a cow when I felt an udder in a Wisconsin stock-judging class"), Avey becomes an artistic ideal for the narrator. Having seen her, he cannot forget her and longs to do something for her. Unlike the setting of "Fern," the backdrop for the narrator's quest in "Avey" is not in harmony with his designs. V Street in Washington's black community, an amusement park, the Potomac River, Harpers Ferry, and Soldier's Home—the sounds that rise from this landscape are not resonant folk songs: "The engines of this valley have a whistle, the echoes of which sound like iterated gasps and sobs. I always think of them as crude music from the soul of Avey" (p. 81).

At the outset of "Avey," the narrator comments:

I like to think now that there was a hidden purpose in the way we [he and his childhood friends] hacked them [boxes on V Street containing saplings] with our knives. I like to feel that something deep in me responded to the trees, the young trees that whinnied like colts impatient to be let free. (P. 76)

As the story progresses, the manner in which he hopes to bestow freedom becomes less violent, and in his last encounter with Avey, he (as in "Fern") conceives of talk as artistic expression, as an agency of liberation:

I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. I asked her to hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that day. I recited some of my own things to her. I sang, with a strange quiver in my voice, a promise-song. (P. 87)

But while the narrator evoked, at least, a hysterical response from Fern, he finds Avey asleep when he has finished talking. He realizes finally that Avey's is not the type of loveliness that characterizes a new day: "She did not have the gray crimson-splashed beauty of the dawn."

Bone ventures the idea that "Toomer's intellectualizing males are tragic because they value talking above feeling,"<sup>23</sup> but such a formulation implies that beautiful talk and profound feelings are mutually exclusive in *Cane*, which is not the case. The narrator derides himself for having "dallied dreaming" instead of making advances to Avey during a youthful holiday, and he realizes the absurdity of his situation when he finds her asleep. However, he also depicts himself as a man with his mind "set on freedom" and knows that art can play a role in achieving this end. Moreover, he is the character who evokes that sense of song and soil that received such positive valuations in part 1. He describes the setting for his final meeting with Avey as follows: "And when the wind is from the South, soil of my homeland falls like a fertile shower upon the lean streets of the city." And during the encounter, he reflects: "I wanted the Howard Glee Club to sing 'Deep River, Deep River,' from the road." The glee club's song is proposed as a substitute for the tinny, regimental music of the band, just as the narrator's dreams and visions are posed as liberating forces for the life of Avey. The feeling of frustration that concludes the story, therefore, results not totally from a flaw in the narrator's character but also from the intractability of his artistic materials. Avey, who is one of the more languorous and promiscuous members of the new urban black bourgeoisie, is hopelessly insensible to the artist's rendering of "a larger life," and one would scarcely expect her to respond to a beautiful heritage. She is, indeed, an "orphan-woman."

In the poems "Beehive" and "Storm Ending," the narrator first views the "black hive" as a place where he can rest indifferently,

taking his pleasures in the manner of Avey. He soon realizes, however, that "Earth is a waxen cell of the world comb" and longs to move outward toward greater fulfillment—"And curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower." The images of pleasure in "Beehive" are transmuted to ones of disharmony in "Storm Ending." Honey becomes rain, and flowers appear as ominous thunder from which the earth flees. Together, the poems seem to offer a further comment on "Avey." While Avey is alluring and a member of that class of blacks who (during Toomer's day) sought their alliances among college-bred men and women, she is unable (or unwilling) to respond to the beauties of her heritage. She cannot listen with interest to the narrator's evocations of the past or to his idealistic projections of a future black American creativity that will release men from their stifling existence. There is not only insensitivity in Avey's reaction but also a kind of tragedy, since it makes her an even greater victim of the urban anonymity and disharmony that confronted so many blacks after their migration from the South to the North at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hence, the transvaluation of images that occurs between "Beehive" and "Storm Ending" offers another instance of the duality theme; when one has penetrated the cardboard masks labeled "progress" and "the New Negro," one is likely to find the same obliviousness to life and to society's deeper meanings that appears repeatedly in part 1.

With the exception of "Bona and Paul," the stories and poems that follow "Storm Ending" in part 2 are restatements of concerns that have been treated earlier. The protagonists of "Theater" and "Box Seat" are both dreamers who envision passionate affairs with women bound by convention. Dorris in "Theater," like Muriel in "Box Seat," dances with energy, but neither could conceive of saying, in Imamu Baraka's words,

I want to be sung. I want  
all my bones and meat hummed  
against the thick floating  
winter sky. I want myself  
as dance. As what I am  
given love, or time, or space  
to feel myself.<sup>24</sup>

Dorris uses her dance, which is "of Canebreak loves and mangrove feastings," to solicit from John silk stockings and "kids, and a home, and everything," which she equates with love. And Muriel, after attracting Dan with her dance, is too repressed by societal dictates (represented by "Mrs. Pribby," a name second only to "Mrs. Grundy" in its devastating effects) to accept his love and his vision of life.

Of course, John and Dan have severe shortcomings. John's being, like the speaker's in "Prayer" and the woman's in "Calling Jesus," is fragmented. Dan suffers from a romantic megalomania that leads him to believe he is a type of the new messiah. But while one can imagine either engaging in the stilted, "bower of bliss" romance described in "Her Lips Are Copper Wire" or in the fruitless self-indulgence of "Harvest Song," both are characters who possess the ability to dream and project rejuvenating images drawn from the black American heritage. John feels himself become the "mass-heart" of the black urban folk (p. 92), and he envisions a Dorris—"Her face is tinted like the autumn alley. Of old flowers, or of a southern canefield, her perfume" (p. 99)—who could share his artistic dreams: "John reaches for a manuscript and reads" (p. 99). In "Box Seat," the narrator's injunction to the "gleaming limbs and asphalt torso" of the street might well have been directed to Dan Moore:

Shake your curled wool-blossoms, nigger. Open your liver lips to the lean, white spring. Stir the root-life of a withered people. Call them from their houses, and teach them to dream. (P. 104)

The dream is one of the most important elements in the second section; it can reunify the body and the soul separated by northern life ("Calling Jesus"), and it can stir the "root-life" of black Americans given to the mindless pleasures (the popular theater or Crimson Gardens) of the city and hemmed in by its rigid structures—moral codes, box seats, houses. The artist may be affected by the malaise of urban life, and as a consequence he may withdraw so far from it that his imaginative vision fragments the self (like John's in "Theater"), obscuring the physical beauty before him (Dorris's dance)—but he is the bringer of dreams.

The whole of part 2 might justifiably be called a portrait of the

artist who has been removed from a primitive and participatory culture to suffer the alienation of modern life. One means of overcoming this estrangement is the dream, which calls forth positive images from the past; but when the artist's reveries become—for any reason—simply acts of self-indulgence (a word that might describe John's imaginings), he must move beyond the dream in a search for greater self-knowledge and a broader definition of the artist's role. The theme of "Bona and Paul," the concluding story of the second section, involves such a quest. When the story opens, Paul has become so introspective that his associates are baffled; even Bona, who is white (reviving the miscegenation theme of "Becky" and "Blood-Burning Moon"), though attracted to Paul, fails to comprehend him. Action is limited in the story: four students from a regimented physical education college in Chicago go on a date to Crimson Gardens. The primary focus of the largely stream-of-consciousness narration is the mind of Paul, which "follows the sun to a pine-matted hillock in Georgia" (p. 137). The passage following this description holds significance for "Bona and Paul" and for *Cane* as a whole:

He sees the slanting roofs of gray unpainted cabins tinted lavender. A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter. Her breasts are ample for the suckling of a song. She weans it, and sends it, curiously weaving, among lush melodies of cane and corn. Paul follows the sun into himself in Chicago. (P. 138)

The essence of the black southern heritage is in Paul's dream, but what is more important is that the dreamer incorporates the sun of this heritage into himself: "He is at Bona's window. With his own eyes he looks through a dark pane." Bona contains no light and Art, Paul's roommate, "is like the electric light which he snaps on." At Crimson Gardens the illumination is artificial. Paul, whom Bona designates "a poet—or a gym instructor," becomes a source of natural light, and he is neither a lyric poet like the speaker of "Reapers" nor a regimented victim of "mental concepts" like the drillers seen at the beginning of the story. He has transcended a narrowly personal stage of art and moves toward a stance as the knowing, philosophical creator.

His epiphany occurs at Crimson Gardens:

Suddenly he knew that people saw, not attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference. Their stares, giving him to himself, filled something long empty within him, and were like green blades sprouting in his consciousness. There was fullness, and strength and peace about it all. He saw himself, cloudy, but real. (P. 145)

Paul turns first to a brief exploration of the white world, which he finds lovely in its artificial light. He dances with Bona, and passion flares for an instant. The couple leaves the garden. But night is alien to Bona:

Perhaps for some reason, white skins are not supposed to live at night. Surely, enough nights would transform them fantastically, or kill them. And their red passion? Night pales that too, and made it moony. (P. 141)

When Paul is suddenly possessed by the night and the face of the black doorman (the man outside the garden), Bona realizes that she cannot contain, or comprehend, his desires. The fact that Bona has left when Paul returns does not mean the story's conclusion is pessimistic. Paul has come to greater self-knowledge, and he turns from Bona in an attempt to share it with another black man. The departure of Bona simply reinforces Paul's initial assessment:

From the South. What does that mean, precisely, except that you'll love or hate a nigger? That's a lot. What does it mean except that in Chicago you'll have the courage to neither love or hate. A priori. (P. 148)

It is Bona who is cold, imprisoned by the white mental restraints her companion has rejected. Paul is like a nascent black sun and has taken the first step toward sharing his vision with his people.

Part 2, therefore, moves beyond the dream to knowledge:

I'd like to know you whom I look at. Know, not love. Not that knowing is a greater pleasure; but that I have just found the joy of it. You came just a month too late. Even this afternoon I dreamed. (P. 148)

From the lyrical, awed, contemplative narrator of "Karintha," *Cane* has progressed to a self-conscious, philosophical creator who

contains "his own glow" and rejects the artificial garden of white life. "Kabnis," the concluding section of *Cane*, deals with the actions of such an artist vis-à-vis black southern life. It brings the action of the book full circle and completes the portrait of the artist.

The narrator of "Avey" seeks "the simple beauty of another's soul" and "the truth that people bury in their hearts" (pp. 85-86). The artist in "Kabnis," however, searches for knowledge of his own soul and an artistic design that will express it. From the simple observation of the physical beauty of women, the narrator has moved to a fuller exploration of the complexities that beset the black soul. Most of the symbolic figures in the drama are men, and the process of making undisguised value judgments, at work in "Rhobert," is fundamental to "Kabnis." The work is not only a return to the South but also an open protest (as opposed to the subtle, lyrical criticism dominant in part 1) against its stifling morality and brutal violence.

Though a number of recent critics have insisted that Ralph Kabnis is an unsympathetic character,<sup>25</sup> Bontemps correctly states that the protagonist "is a languishing idealist finally redeemed from cynicism and dissipation by the discovery of underlying strength in his people."<sup>26</sup> And Goede is tellingly accurate when he writes:

In Kabnis Jean Toomer has discovered an appropriate symbol of the Negro writers who hope to stir "the root-life of a withered people." Like [Ralph] Ellison's hero-writer [in *Invisible Man*], Toomer's hero-writer senses at least the first tentative step toward a commitment, through art, to racial experiences of the Negro.<sup>27</sup>

Ralph Kabnis is a Northerner who has come south to teach. He is fired by Hanby, the school superintendent (and an unctuous counterpart to Mrs. Pribby), and taken in by the wagonsmith, Halsey. Kabnis meets Layman, a southern preacher, and Lewis, a Northerner who has made a contract with himself—presumably to investigate the South for a month. The introspective Kabnis proves a hopeless failure as a manual worker and spends much of his time in the cellar of the wagon shop, which is reached by stairs located behind "a junk heap." "Besides being the home of a

very old man, . . . [the cellar] is used by Halsey on those occasions when he spices up the life of the small town." The old man is attended by Carrie K., Halsey's sister, and when first encountered he has been mumbling and fasting for two weeks. Halsey arranges a night of debauchery for himself, Kabnis, and Lewis, and the play concludes on the morning afterward, when the old man speaks. As in "Bona and Paul," however, action plays a minor role in "Kabnis"; description, dialogue, and reflection provide the points of focus. The message they render is that the old ethic of the southern black man—composed of Protestantism, vocational education, shopkeeping, and accommodation—will not suffice in a violent white society. Moreover, the new scientific approach to the complexities of black American life, represented by Lewis—whom Goede equates (I think correctly) with an intellectual "race man" such as W. E. B. DuBois—is unsatisfactory. Kabnis delivers the following thrust at the scientific attitude in general:

You know, Ralph, old man, it wouldn't surprise me at all to see a ghost. People dont think there are such things. They rationalize their fear, and call their cowardice science. Fine bunch, they are. (P. 165)

Negative images also surround all those activities of the black American's southern existence which the narrator and the author consider ineffective or inimical, for example, religion:

God is a profligate red-nosed man about town. Bastardy; me. A bastard son has got a right to curse his maker. (Kabnis, p. 161)

Above its [the church's] squat tower, a great spiral of buzzards reaches far into the heavens. An ironic comment upon the path that leads into the Christian land . . . (the author, p. 169)

This preacher-ridden race. Pray and shout. Theyre in the preacher's hands. Thats what it is. And the preacher's hands are in the white man's pockets. (Kabnis, p. 174)

Elsewhere in the story, God is seen as the creator of shopkeepers and moralizers; Layman is portrayed as a reticent vagabond too frightened to speak against the evils of lynching, and the singing

and shouting of a black church service are the backdrop for a chilling story of mob violence. Negative images also surround Halsey, a descendant of seven generations of shopkeepers and a man for whom time has stopped—"an old-fashioned mantelpiece supports a family clock (not running)" (p. 167). Finally, Lewis—who at different points in "Kabnis" appears as a Christ figure, a race man, and an alter ego for the protagonist—becomes "a dead chill" when confronted with the depths of the black southern experience:

Their pain is too intense. He cannot stand it. He bolts from the table. Leaps up the stairs. Plunges through the work-shop and out into the night. (P. 226)

The most favorable assessment of Lewis that can be made is that he seems much like the narrator in "Fern"—an observer awed by the beauty and pain of the South.

The laudable characters in the play are Kabnis and Carrie K. The protagonist is the knowing artist who confronts the desert places in himself, and Carrie K. is the young, chaste ideal of a new art. Both characters, however, have their limitations. Carrie is constrained by conventional ethics:

And then something happens. Her face blanches. Awkwardly she draws away. The sin-bogies of respectable southern colored folks clamor at her: "Look out! Be a good girl. A good girl. Look out!" (P. 205)

Kabnis is often self-indulgent, overly ceremonious, and terrified at the violence of the South. His is a Kurtzian vision, and his mulatto status (as with Paul and several of the other characters in *Cane*) comes to represent the gray world of alienation confronting modern man.

Carrie K. and Kabnis, however, are the individuals who function most effectively in the cellar, or "the hole," which represents the collective unconscious of black America. The hole is presided over by an enthroned figure whom Halsey and Carrie K. call "Father," but upon whom the awestruck Lewis bestows a religious title, "Father John." It is finally Kabnis who elicits from the black father his wisdom; the old man denounces "Th sin whats fixed

... upon th white folks . . . f tellin Jesus—lies. O th sin th white folks 'mitted when they made the Bible lie" (p. 237). Carrie K.'s reaction is one of tears and tolerance, but Kabnis—as well he might be—is incensed. For though the old man has condemned the hypocrisy of whites, his vocabulary is one of sin and the Bible. Kabnis, on the other hand, knows that

It was only a preacher's sin they [those of John's generation] knew in those old days, and that wasnt sin at all. Mind me, th only sin is whats done against th soul. Th whole world is a conspiracy t sin, especially in America, an against me. . . . I'm what sin is. (P. 236)

The protagonist is aware that a new vocabulary, one that will "fit m soul" and capture that "twisted awful thing that crept in [to my soul] from a dream, a godam nightmare" (p. 224), is needed; the black man must have a new vision of life crafted by the sensitive artist. Black art can function as a new and liberating religion.

The description that begins the fifth act of "Kabnis" reinforces this interpretation:

Night, soft belly of a pregnant Negress, throbs evenly against the torso of the South. Cane—and cotton-fields, pine forests, cypress swamps, sawmills, and factories are fecund at her touch. Night's womb-song sets them singing. Night winds are the breathing of the unborn child whose calm throbbing in the belly of a Negress sets them somnolently singing. (P. 209)

This imagery is followed by the ritualistic, confessional scenes in the hole, during which Kabnis wears a ceremonial robe; the next morning—in a setting characterized by glowing coals and women who have the beauty of African princesses—Kabnis prostrates himself before John's throne. The tone of the last two acts reflects solemnity, hope, and a new birth. Thus, when John lies expiring in the arms of Carrie K., the scene has the significance of an annunciation. He speaks the words "Jesus Come" in the presence of the woman whom Lewis viewed as a mother figure for Kabnis (p. 208) and who is described by the dramatist 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. 233). The concluding scene witnesses Kabnis, a

new-world creator, ascending from the cellar as the herald and agent of the dawn prophesied by Barlo in "Esther." In his hands are the dead coals of a past ritual, and the expectations generated by the opening of act 5 are fulfilled:

Outside, the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest. Shadows of pines are dreams the sun shakes from its eyes. The sun arises. 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. (P. 239)

The hopes of the narrator in "Song of the Son" and the aspirations of the dreaming souls in part 2 will be realized by the initiated Kabnis, who contains the inner glow of the protagonist in "Bona and Paul" and has made a successful pilgrimage through the black heritage to the "souls of slavery."

Kabnis beseeches that he not be tortured with beauty and goes on to say, "Dear Jesus, do not chain me to myself and set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk-songs, so close to me that I cannot reach them" (p. 161). The deeper meanings of the songs have touched him, and in an early soliloquy that combines the narrator's goals in parts 1 and 2, he says: "If I, the dream (not what is weak and afraid in me) could become the face of the South. How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul" (p. 158). He realizes, however, that there are also inimical aspects of the past and describes them in scathing, oftentimes bitter terms. What distinguishes him from others (like Layman and Halsey, who have seen the darker side of the South) is his self-awareness; he realizes that the paranoia, aggressiveness, ambivalence, and hypocrisy of the South find counterparts in his own personality. One expects, therefore, that a portion of his new art will be devoted to serious introspection. This self-knowledge and independence lead Kabnis to recognize the profound spirit involved in the creation of the song that serves as a refrain for the drama, but they also lead him to protest bitterly the limitations implied by its lyrics:

White-man's land.  
Niggers, sing.  
Burn, bear black children

Till poor rivers bring  
Rest, and sweet glory  
In Camp Ground.

Kabnis is the fully emergent artist—a singer of a displaced “soil-soaked beauty” and an agent of liberation for his people.

*Cane* led the way in a return to the black folk spirit, which Eugenia Collier has seen as one of the most vital developments of the Harlem Renaissance,<sup>28</sup> and it did so in a form and style that have scarcely been surpassed by subsequent American authors. Toomer knew—and did not attempt to sublimate—the pains and restrictions of a black southern heritage. This angst is astutely criticized in *Cane* and magnificently portrayed as the somber result of white America's exploitation and oppression, black America's too willing acceptance, and the inherent duality in the nature of man—the Manicheanism of the universe, emblemized by the southern past—which both marvels at and seeks to destroy beauty. Opposed to “the burden of southern history”—indeed, to the darker side of human history, with its inhibitions, omnipresent violence, and moral ineptitude—however, are the pristine loveliness and indomitable spirit of the folk, to be discovered and extolled by the sensitive observer. A folk culture containing its own resonant harmonies, communal values and assumptions, and fruitful proximity to the ancestral soil offers a starting point for the journey toward black art. The artist, however, cannot simply observe the surface beauties of this culture; he must comprehend the self-knowledge and nobility of spirit that made its creation possible in the midst of an inhuman servitude. Toomer repeatedly asserts this in *Cane*, and at times the book reads like a tragic allegory, posing good against evil, suffering against redemption, hope against despair. As the reader struggles to fit the details together, he becomes increasingly involved in the complexities of the black situation. He moves, in short, toward that freedom that always accompanies deeper self-knowledge and a genuine understanding of one's condition in the universe. In this sense, *Cane* is not only a journey toward liberating black American art but also what philosophy calls the *Ding-an-sich*—the thing in itself.



## II

# A Many-Colored Coat of Dreams: The Poetry of Countee Cullen

When James Emanuel, who was general editor of the Broadside Critics Series, politely (and with helpful comments) suggested that “Journey toward Black Art” was unsuitable for the series, he also invited me to write an extended essay on one of the other writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Because Addison Gayle had written on the work of Claude McKay for the series and because the corpus of Langston Hughes seemed far too formidable a task for a sixty-page essay, I settled on Countee Cullen. I knew that Cullen was a controversial writer. But I also knew that controversy surrounded him because he doggedly refused to be a “Negro poet.” Here, I thought, was just the test case for my critical loyalties, divided between *lieder* and *collard greens*.

For if Cullen could be redeemed by and for a Black Aesthetic, then that critical enterprise would reveal its *sui generis* powers of explanation. It would demonstrate, that is to say, its capacities not only of soulful ascription but also of carefully analytical description.

Since Cullen was black, a poet, and generally included in accounts of the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Aesthetic's capacity to separate the chaff of his white “pretensions” from the grain of his black “authenticity” would demonstrate the revolutionary critical mode's validity.