
Karen Ford. *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Politics of Modernity*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005. 205p.

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Karen Ford's *Split-Gut Song* is a splendidly old-fashioned work of literary criticism. I do not use the term "old-fashioned" either pejoratively or patronisingly, but specifically: it is a close reading of Jean Toomer's *Cane* that places that remarkable work in the context of Toomer's too brief literary career. Ford's study, however, is not driven by contemporary theoretical concerns of identity formation, of postmodern interests in the instability of language, or of the social lines of race, class, and gender. Rather, she meticulously follows the track of her thesis, moving from image to image, incident to incident, and character to character, identifying the continuities and tensions of the work to argue for a structural and thematic unity. Though it is a book narrowed to Toomer's modernism alone, Ford's readings are matchless in their precision, lucidity, and persuasiveness, making this an indispensable book on *Cane*, particularly for anyone new to the work.

Briefly, Ford argues that *Cane's* initial interplay between poetry and prose expresses Toomer's modernist response to the pressures of modernity. That is, she identifies the distinctly African-American voice, with all of its history—agrarian life, community, song—and consequent culture of the embrace, with poetry and music. It is, in Ford's view, Toomer's modernism: an effort to recover cultural value from the African-American past to sustain meaningful, purposeful selfhood in the face of a violent modernity of racism, urban deracination, and sterility. This deracination is described in two kinds of failures to engender: a sexual failure and the failure to embrace a sustaining racial identity, "passing" as neither white nor black. Toomer's (male) poet figures in particular have their blackness, and hence their authenticity. These failures are linked to the greater failure—of expression, the ability to serve as an authentic, directing voice. As *Cane* proceeds, the structural expression of that failure is the gradual shift away from lyrical impressionism and the drying up of the number, cohesiveness, and weight of the poems between the prose portions. Most earlier critics have seen in these shifts either one of two things: either an evolution or an abandonment of the lyrical voice as it either accommodates itself to or is destroyed by the move from a rural agricultural to an urban industrial world.

By contrast, Ford argues that it is the poetry rather than the lyricised prose that serves as the repository of value, that the poetry expresses the essence of what is beautiful and sustainable in the black experience. "Lyric haunts the prose," making prose anxious as it considers its inadequacy for conveying the spiritual and

emotional in its “objective” mode (62). With emphatic precision, Ford dismisses prevailing critical views that read *Cane* as a “hybrid” of prose merged with poetry that expresses a merged or mixed racial identity. Citing evidence that Toomer was interested in “distinct genres,” Ford insists that Toomer is making a radical distinction between prose and poetry for thematic purposes: “the argument of *Cane* resides in the contrast of genres rather than in their combination, and what that contrast reveals is the precedence of poetry” (13).

Ford makes a good case for the aesthetic and moral prevalence of the poetry—which I have always found banal and derivative—but she makes a far more compelling case for the shift of focus from the poetry of the first section to the failed poet figures of the second and third sections. Just as poetry, Ford argues, cannot authentically recover sustainable moral and cultural values, so the figure of the mediating poet, like Kabnis—“thin-lipped” and “yellow” rather than full-lipped and black—is disenfranchised from the white world and disconnected from the black (80). This Hollow-man breach between language and experience, feeling and action, is especially painful given that, after *Cane*, Toomer’s own career devolved into “poetry” of the windiest sort. Toomer became, aesthetically and culturally, as impotent and irrelevant as Kabnis, the very figure he warned himself against. And as the poetry progressively fragments and fades, the “lyric strain” of the prose withers as well. Essentially, Ford warns us against our own attraction to that very lyricism that stuns us with its intense physicality in our first reading of *Cane*. For if that lyrical language calls to us, Ford insists, it is simply “nostalgic impulses” it awakens, impulses that prove the opposite of the desired unity with a restorative past. The lyricism is therefore falsified by the end, without authenticity. Thus Ford strongly counters the critical effort to read *Cane*’s conclusion, with its vision of the sunrise and the “golden child,” as evidence of an achieved redemption (142-143). In her reading, the final section “announce[s] the death of poetry” and hence the death of credible aspiration and recovery (139-140). As a student of *Cane*, I cannot be comfortable with this conclusion, but in the face of her argument’s rigor, neither I nor the critics she engages are well equipped to refute it. At most, we can speak up on behalf of the “lyric strain’s” moral substance. Toomer’s lyricism, in its merger of dirt-bound and spiritual desire, in which all the senses give substance to prayer, compels our sympathetic participation in human suffering. Whether or not it is a “nostalgic impulse,” it is a moral one.

We recall Samuel Johnson’s cruel compliment on *Paradise Lost*—that while we acknowledge its greatness, we do not wish it were longer—but my response to Ford’s book inverts this thought. Hers is unquestionably a fine and important work, newly essential to Toomer criticism, but I absolutely wished it were longer, that its scope

had been bolder and more ambitious. Depending on one's perspective, her book is either barren of or free from the premises of contemporary theory, providing an admirable example of the pleasures and benefits of close reading in the context of large argument. Yet while I was pleased that Ford does not reduce aesthetic effects to political expression, I found it odd that the pressures of gender and identity construction are not given fuller play, or much play at all. The book is not a long one, and her crisp, precise language easily keeps us engaged, so we would have been more than patient had there been space devoted to theoretical positioning.

In the same way, Ford's final chapter—on Toomer's post-*Cane* writings—seems rushed, not from stylistic problems of pacing, but because she sharpens our appetite for more than she provides. While she encourages us to infer that Toomer himself became his own failed "orator," Kabnis, that conclusion is far too interesting to let fall. Thus, though the shift from language that is "lyrical, subjective, and reflective of lived experience," to the windy, vacant, post-*Cane* language that Toomer called "symbolic, dramatic, and restorative" (149), is duly and generously reported, it is not as richly explained as we might expect of a critic of Ford's sensitivity. She touches on the malign influence of the self-styled spiritualist, George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, but does not really help us understand why Toomer surrendered his astonishing gifts so early, an act depriving us of what might have been some of the 20th century's greatest American literature.

Likewise, I would have preferred more space devoted to locating *Cane* in the context of Modernist works like *The Sea Garden*, *The Wasteland*, *Spring and All*, *The Bridge*, and *Absalom, Absalom*. Because Ford's book should enrich the bibliographies of both undergraduate and graduate courses in American Modernism, such a context would have given it greater power and reach. Such is not the book she apparently wanted to write, but it is the one she made me want to read. ✱