Shaping Words to Fit the Soul

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In Frederick Douglass’s autobiographies, the figurative circle of the author’s southern ritual grounds remains intact to the last, and the famous passage introducing the motif is retained verbatim in all the different versions of Douglass’s life. As such, the passage also evokes the literal circle of the ring shout, perhaps the most significant of slave culture rituals, which one antebellum eyewitness described thus:

[T]he true “shout” takes place on Sundays or on “praise” nights through the week, and either in the praise-house or in some cabin in which a regular religious meeting has been held.

Language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the while we long to move the stars to pity.
—Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary

CHAPTER 2

Shaping Words to Fit the Soul

Afro-Modernism and the Breakdown of Communication in Jean Toomer’s Cane

In Frederick Douglass’s autobiographies, the figurative circle of the author’s southern ritual grounds remains intact to the last, and the famous passage introducing the motif is retained verbatim in all the different versions of Douglass’s life. As such, the passage also evokes the literal circle of the ring shout, perhaps the most significant of slave culture rituals, which one antebellum eyewitness described thus:

[T]he true “shout” takes place on Sundays or on “praise” nights through the week, and either in the praise-house or in some cabin in which a regular religious meeting has been held.
[A]ll stand up in the middle of the floor, and when the “sperichil” is struck, begin first walking and by-and-by shuffling round, one after the other, in a ring. The foot is hardly taken from the floor, and the progression is mostly due to a jerking, hitching motion, which agitates the entire shouter, and soon brings out streams of perspiration. Sometimes they dance silently, sometimes as they shuffle they sing the chorus of the spiritual, and sometimes the song itself is also sung by the dancers. But most frequently a band, composed of some of the best singers and of tired shouters, stand at the side of the room to “base” the others, singing the body of the song and clapping their hands together or on the knees. Song and dance alike are extremely energetic, and often, when the shout lasts into the middle of the night, the monotonous thud, thud, thud of the feet prevents sleep within half a mile of the praise-house. (qtd. in Allen, Ware, and Garrison xiii–xiv)

Scholars agree that the ring shout derives directly from African rituals (Floyd 19–40; Raboteau 68–74). Mostly, but not exclusively, a worship ritual, variants of the ring shout have been prevalent in all black diasporic cultures. Whether religious or secular, the ring shout in the New World is, according to DoVeanna Fulton, an “oral and dance ritual that functions as a vehicle to collapse time and space dimensions so that participants experience and are sustained by history”—an expression, in other words, of an historical conscience (Speaking 119). The performance of circle rituals by the slaves, maintains historian Sterling Stuckey, “was so consistent and profound that one could argue that it was what gave form and meaning to black religion and art” (11). Yet like any ritual, the ring shout as practiced in the black diaspora indicates displacement even as it sustains a continuous identity across time and space. The ring shout in the American South evinces the brutal effects of dislocation in the Middle Passage and of the implementation of the peculiar institution: the distinctive “thud thud thud” of the dancers’ shuffling movements was produced by feet whose soles may very well have been scarred from frostbite, as Frederick Douglass’s were. Although the ring shout retained its basic African elements, it also transformed itself under the pressures of enslavement, most notably as a result of the Christianization of the slaves and the frequent injunctions against dancing (Floyd 35–36; Raboteau 74–75; Rosenbaum 18–25, 56–58).

This dialectic between retention and displacement is also at the center of the figurative ring that circumscribes Jean Toomer’s Cane. What Douglass had located within the circle, the Toomer of the early 1920s often referred to as “the spiritual truth” of the South’s rural black folk,
and, equipped with the latest tools of the literary avant-garde, he set out to capture that spirit in what would remain his only published novel (qtd. in Kerman and Eldridge 95). The 1923 book is, as Paul Anderson notes, “at once ancestralist and ultramodernist” (73): on the one hand, Cane’s ‘ancestralism’ is very much concerned with what’s inside the circle, with what Ralph Ellison would come to call “the ‘Blackness of Blackness’” (Invisible 9). On the other hand, the novel’s ‘ultramodernism’ renders this circle visible only as fragments. Where the figurative ring remains intact in Douglass’s protomodernism, the segments of the triptych that is Cane are interlinked by three arcs—the pieces of a broken circle. The ritual of call and response, so central to the ring shout, appears irrevocably disrupted.

The transition from Douglass’s circle to Toomer’s arcs thus also exemplifies the rise of modernism in western art. In the Pound era, writes Hugh Kenner, the arts were “all simultaneously released from the mimetic” (Pound 245). “The long tradition of mimesis,” he elaborates, “uses words to imitate actions and speeches; but confronted by a world of matter and motion, from which actions and speeches have departed, mimesis can only imitate (1) old poems, or (2) the movements of the mind transposing and reconstituting what is seen” (Homemade 78). Auerbach grumbled from his exile in Istanbul that with the rise of modernism, “in all nooks and crannies of the earth crises of adaptation developed; they increased and massed together; they led to shocks that we have still not overcome” (511). Where Douglass remained confident that text, his text at least, was still capable of representing a “vital substance,” the crisis of mimesis that resulted in the modernist movement of the early twentieth century was a reflection of the white westerner’s sense that things were indeed falling apart, that the center could no longer hold.

The Great War that broke out in 1914, which would radically transform both Ezra Pound’s New World and Erich Auerbach’s Old, fueling the emergence of high modernism, also had its impact on black America: it was in many ways American military involvement overseas and its socioeconomic ramifications at home that were among the catalysts for what came to be the Harlem Renaissance. But what for the white western writer, including Auerbach, was often an anxiety over the fate of mimesis, over cultural and aesthetic fragmentation, was for the African American writer an opportunity, too, to explore what a black American literature was to look like in the first place. And it was then, during this first major and sustained flowering of black American art, that the role, function, and value of the South and its various ritual grounds were being reassessed. For the African American artist, it was not so much that things were falling apart as that they were in flux. The Great Migration from South to
North, from country to city, from the field to the factory, not only offered to but demanded of the black artist an inquiry of where the center was, or had been, in the first place. The dialogue between modernism and blackness—in Alain Locke’s words, “a significant and satisfying new phase of group development, and with it a spiritual Coming of Age”—we know today as the Harlem Renaissance (51).

In literature, the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance is often dated to the year 1923, the year that saw the publication of a slender volume by the enigmatic Jean Toomer, titled *Cane*. Henry Louis Gates has lauded the book as “that blackest of black traces . . . imprinted on the New Negro Renaissance” (Figures 211). And yet, a vexing aspect of the novel is that *Cane*, perhaps more than any other work of the Harlem Renaissance, attests to the price for which literary modernity can be had: the fragmentation of the mimetic power of language. Toomer’s text encircles its southern ritual ground, but is never able to penetrate to its center and preserve and store its spirit in its own language.

In the concluding section of *Cane*, the author’s fictional alter ego Kabnis describes the act of artistic creation as “shapin words t fit m soul” (111). Initially, Toomer himself was confident that he had managed to shape words so as to make them fit the vivid and stimulating impressions that his first trip into the deep South, this “land of the gret [sic] passions,” had left on his soul (“The South” 233). Back in Washington shortly after his return from the small town of Sparta, Georgia, where he had substituted for two months as principal of a black school, he effused, brimming with confidence, “My seed was planted in the cane- and cotton-fields, and in the souls of black and white people in the small southern town. My seed was planted in myself down there. Roots have grown and strengthened. They have extended out. I spring up in Washington” (qtd. in D. Turner, *Cane* 148).

However, after Boni & Liveright published *Cane* in 1923, Toomer admitted that, as with Kabnis, the shaping of words had not been that easy at all. The book, he wrote, “was born in an agony of internal tightness, conflict, and chaos”; it “was somehow distilled from the most terrible strain I have ever known. . . . The feelings were in me, deep and mobile enough. But the creations of the forms were very difficult” (qtd. in D. Turner, *Cane* 156). He had also begun to doubt whether the shape of the words really did fit his soul. In a poem Toomer included in the cover letter of the manuscript he sent to Horace Liveright, he wrote of *Cane*, “And when I look for the power and the beauty / I thought I’d caught, they too seem to thin out / and and [sic] elude me. / Next time, perhaps . . .” (qtd. in D. Turner, *Cane* 154). But as it turned out, there would not be a next
time. With the publication date of *Cane* approaching, Toomer underwent a drastic reassessment of himself and his art. “The forming of a man is more important than the forming of a book,” he insisted, and began to withdraw into the mysticism of would-be *staretz* Georges Gurdjieff (qtd. in Kerman and Eldridge 110). Furthermore, he thought of himself now no longer as an African American, but as a member of a new ‘American’ race, a self-definition that confused and sometimes angered his friends as well as his publisher, as he steadfastly refused to promote *Cane* as the work of a black author (D. Lewis 70–74; Michaels 52–54, 62). Toomer was frustrated over what he felt was a misrepresentation of his new self and his book: “My writing, namely, the very thing that should have made me understood, was being so presented and interpreted that I was now much more misunderstood in this respect than at any other time of my life. . . . The label ‘Negro’ was of no more consequence than any other” (*Wayward* 133). For the rest of his life, Toomer would be devoted to explaining his newfound self and trying to clear up the misunderstanding.

He continued to write, but never again would he reach the power and the beauty that is in *Cane*. He would strain to explain himself and his work to America—and arguably to himself, too. Toomer’s literary career after *Cane* can be viewed as a breakdown of communication, a failure to communicate successfully what kind of text he was forming, and what kind of man he had formed. Much of what he wrote remained unpublished in his lifetime; his fiction was largely limp and didactic, his philosophical writings highly abstract and vapid (Kerman and Eldridge 378–79). However, this breakdown of communication was already foreshadowed in his greatest work. In *Cane*, Toomer said he attempted to “drive straight for my own spiritual reality, and for the spiritual truth of the South” (qtd. in Kerman and Eldridge 95). Yet the book depicts characters who are either unable to grasp fulfillment and tap a spiritual, mystic wholeness, or who are incapable of articulating comprehensibly their spiritual selves. A close textual analysis and examination of the recurring shifts between levels of narrative consciousness reveals that more than anything else, it is language itself that prevents the book’s characters from shaping words to fit their souls. Language distances not only the characters from each other but also, by extension, the narrative voice from its subject matter, the South. *Cane* consistently employs a narrative voice that observes “the spiritual truth of the South” from the vantage point of the outsider; sometimes the voice employs a first-person narrator, sometimes an omniscient one, but there is always a perceptible distance between the observer and the observed. The space between is filled with words, but this process inevitably leads to a breakdown of communication caused by language itself, the very medium
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of communication. Cane the book thus chronicles the attempts of the narrative voice in its various guises to capture the southern ritual grounds it visits and how it is ironically defeated by the very medium with which it seeks to survey the terrain, dramatizing instead the telling inarticulacy of Afro-modernism.

According to his own estimate, Toomer came closest to capturing the power and the beauty of the South in “Fern” in the first section of Cane. He judged it to be one of “those pieces that come nearest to the old Negro, to the spirit saturate with folk-song” (qtd. in Kerman and Eldridge 98).

The plot of “Fern” is very basic and simple. The first-person narrator, evidently a newcomer to the small Georgia town of Sempter (the fictional counterpart to the Sparta Toomer visited), is captivated by the strange magic of Fern, her eyes, and her singing. Fern has had many men, but none of them could give her anything she needed or wanted. Seeing her sitting on her porch, the narrator asks her to join him for a walk. “I felt strange, as I always do in Georgia, particularly at dusk,” he continues; “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). They embrace in a cane field, but Fern extricates herself quickly and, shaking with torment and anguish, breaks out in song. Shortly thereafter, the narrator returns north, yet he is still haunted by the strange eyes of Fern. Like many of the other women in the first section of Cane, Fern—beautiful, sensuous, and strong, yet also misunderstood, vulnerable, and marginalized—is fashioned into a symbol of the folk culture of the (semi)rural black South (McKay 90–91).

The narrator’s failure to understand fully the magic of Fern is ultimately a breakdown of communication and a failure of language. The text shifts restlessly between different levels of narrative consciousness in its attempt to penetrate to Fern’s spiritual truth. These various levels of narrative consciousness can be roughly divided into four categories:

[I] First person (the narrative “I”)

[II] Second person (the “you” as reader—or the observer of the observer)

[III] Third person (“one,” “they,” or “everyone”)

[IV] The collective human mind (the omniscient observer of all observers)

The differentiation among these four levels is not always clear, because the language has a very lithe quality that flows almost effortlessly in and out of any given level. However, at the very least fifteen shifts of narrative
consciousness occur in the first eleven sentences alone. The sequence of shifts is indicated by Arabic numerals below:

Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples, in such a way that [1] wherever your glance may momentarily have rested, it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes. [2] The soft suggestion of down slightly darkened, like the shadow of a bird’s wing might, the creamy brown color of her upper lip. [3] Why, after noticing it, you sought her eyes, [4] I cannot tell you. [5] Her nose was aquiline, Semitic. [6] 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 [7] my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta. [8] They were strange eyes. In this, that they sought nothing—that is, nothing that was obvious and tangible [9] and that one could see, and [10] they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied. When a woman seeks, [11] you will have observed, [12] her eyes deny. Fern’s eyes desired nothing [13] that you could give her; [14] there was no reason why they should withhold. [15] Men saw her eyes and fooled themselves. (16)

In its relentless shifting between levels of narrative consciousness, the text appears to encircle Fern, but is nevertheless unable to penetrate to her essence. Separately as well as in concert, the four approaches, indicated by Roman numerals below, still fail to capture her spiritual self:

[IV:] Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples, in such a way that [II:] wherever your glance may momentarily have rested, it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes. [IV:] The soft suggestion of down slightly darkened, like the shadow of a bird’s wing might, the creamy brown color of her upper lip. [II:] Why, after noticing it, you sought her eyes, [I:] I cannot tell you. [IV:] Her nose was aquiline, Semitic. [II:] 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 [I:] my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta. [IV:] They were strange eyes. In this, that they sought nothing—that is, nothing that was obvious and tangible [III:] and that one could see, and [IV:] they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied. When a woman seeks, [II:] you will have observed, [IV:] her eyes deny. Fern’s eyes desired nothing [II:] that you could give her; [IV:] there was no reason why they should withhold. [III:] Men saw her eyes and fooled themselves.
Clearly, the narrating “I” of level I does not understand Fern. Level II provides no better inroad into the mystery and magic of Fern, for although we notice, hear, and observe, and even perhaps relate to the narrator’s feelings, we still cannot comprehend. Level III seemingly opens the pool of epistemological resources, yet we still merely see, but do not understand. And finally, level IV appears to be the most promising: here, the observer seems to have knowledge of the fundamental rules that govern human behavior, such as, “When a woman seeks... her eyes deny.” But even on level IV, the words that strive to bridge meaningfully the gap between the narrator-observer and Fern’s soul fall short and fail to let us see behind her eyes.

Having already encircled Fern with language on all four sides, the narrator begins to engage in speculation in the story’s second section: “Her eyes, if it were sunset, rested idly where the sun, molten and glorious, was pouring down between the fringe of pines. Or maybe they gazed at the gray cabin on the knoll from which an evening folk-song was coming.” This is followed by even more “[p]erhaps” and “[l]ike as not” (17). Then, the “I” implores the reader to aid him in his speculation: “Besides, picture if you can... Or, suppose... Your thoughts can help me, and I would like to know” (17, 18). For him, however, language remains the only tool with which he feels he can reach her: “Something I must do for her. There was myself. What could I do for her? Talk, of course. Push back the fringe of pines upon new horizons” (18). But here his privileging language fails him. Talk, language, may be able to “[p]ush back the fringe of pines upon new horizons,” but he can reach Fern only by removing the linguistic barrier, all the well-shaped words, from the space between his soul and the southern landscape, just as Fern does: “Like her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. Flowed into them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia’s South” (17). Fern—who speaks only once throughout the story—is at one with the spiritual truth of the South because she is capable of a direct experience, untainted by language, of the southern landscape. The one time Fern speaks, she asks the narrator as they walk to the cane field, “‘Doesn’t it make you mad?’ She meant the row of petty gossiping people” (19). She expresses her contempt here at being circumscribed by the language of others, an irony of which the narrator, who has been doing just that, is not aware.

Thus, it is ultimately language itself that separates the narrator from Fern, man from woman, human beings from nature, knowledge from understanding, one soul from the other, and the modernist text from the South. Ironically, it is language that is responsible for the breakdown of communication. It is significant that in the only passage in which the
first-person narrator is able to communicate meaningfully with Fern, his message is transmitted in nonverbal fashion:

"Let's take a walk," I at last ventured. The suggestion, coming after so long an isolation, was novel enough, I guess, to surprise. But it wasn't that. Something told me that men before me had said just that as a prelude to offering their bodies. I tried to tell her with my eyes. I think she understood. The thing from her that made my throat catch, vanished. Its passing left her visible in a way I'd thought, but never seen. (18–19)

Here, he finally connects with her by 'telling' her with his eyes and breaking through the barrier of language—he comes to see her in a new light. Nonverbal communication opens new vistas of recognition, but the narrator, using words as his means of communication, obfuscates as much as he reveals. We are not told (and perhaps we cannot be told) in precisely what new way Fern is now visible to him, except that her new visibility is the result of an imaginative leap. In the climactic moment of his interaction with Fern, he loses again whatever precarious connection to her spirit he might have had:

From force of habit, I suppose, I held Fern in my arms—that is, without at first noticing it. Then my mind came back to her. Her eyes, unusually weird and open, held me. Held God. He flowed in as I've seen the countryside flow in. Seen men. I must have done something—what, I don't know; in the confusion of my emotion. She sprang up. Rushed some distance from me. Fell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying. Her body was tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her. It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Jesus Christ. And then she sang, brokenly. A Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice. A child's voice, uncertain, or an old man's. Dusk hid her; I could hear only her song. (19)

In this crucial moment, “[t]he narrator leaves blank the place where he touches Fern, leaves ‘unreadable’ his relation to her, making it uncertain whether his relation is one of liberatory breakthrough or patriarchal reen-closure,” Laura Doyle argues (98). His relation to Fern is partly 'unreadable' because her spiritual essence is, if occasionally visible, then decidedly 'unwritable.' Nellie McKay sees this “[a]s a metaphor for the relationship between the poet and the folk culture, the narrative point[ing] to the problems that those like Jean Toomer, removed in time and place from it,
face in accurately trying to record and interpret it” (111). The educated observer-narrator relies on well-shaped words to tap the soul of the southern folk, but the only possible way for Fern to communicate her spiritual essence is through nonverbal means, through trying to ‘tell’ with her eyes and with her song.

This, then, calls for a reconsideration of how close “Fern” actually comes “to the old Negro, to the spirit saturate with folk-song.” Toomer’s own assessment anticipates Stephen Henderson’s condition of “saturation,” a condition in which “personally and communally recognized meanings . . . are more felt than named” (43). As a critical concept, saturation is “chiefly the communication of ‘Blackness’ and fidelity to the observed or intuited truth of the Black Experience in the United States” (10). Henderson’s theory links saturation as “a sign, like the mathematical symbol for infinity, or the term ‘Soul,’” with the concreteness of poetic structure, that is, the inner mechanics of a poem, so that black poetics demarcate a “Soul-Field” of “the complex galaxy of personal, social, institutional, historical, religious, and mythical meanings that affect everything we say or do as Black people sharing a common heritage” (68, 41, 28–30). As Kimberly Benston points out, though, in the attempt to link saturation with structure, saturation “becomes suspended in the space of its own tautology, allowing only the choice between a hypertrophied (sated) and an empty (satired) blackness: the blacker you are . . . the blacker you are” (Benston 15; Baker, Blues 81–83). Fern, the southern earth mother, embodies this Hendersonian “Soul-Field,” but she, too, simply is; her essence defies linguistic description. This tautology at the core of saturation as well as of “Fern” recalls Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura: aura is a “halo of breath” (“Hauchkreis”) and is predicated in “the Here and Now of the work of art—its unique presence at the place where it is located” (“Kleine” 376; “Kunstwerk” 139). The aura’s “Here and Now” is also characterized by a “vulnerable” core of its “genuineness,” and this genuineness in turn contains “the essence of everything that can be handed down from its origin, from its material duration to its historical testimony” (“Kunstwerk” 140). Just as Benjamin pits nebulous aura against the material conditions of technological reproducibility, so does the Hendersonian Soul-Field pit saturation against poetic structure. Both issue the same demands that Fern does: the mystery of (black) art must be accepted a priori and can only be experienced directly, because its auratic “halo of breath” ultimately defies linguistic representation and empirical analysis.

The breakdown of communication caused by the inability of language to capture and transmit “aura” is a recurring theme that appears in all segments of the book. Most of the middle section is set in Washington,
D.C.—at the time still very much a southern city—in the urban counterpart to the sleepy, semirural Sempter, Georgia. “Avey” is in many ways a companion piece to “Fern” in that it tells of a male narrator’s futile attempt to connect with a seemingly indifferent woman. The narrator here is much more assertive and aggressive, trying to impose his understanding of love onto her, but he too fails: “I talked. I knew damn well I could beat her at that. Her eyes were soft and misty, the curves of her lips were wistful, and her smile seemed indulgent of the irrelevance of my remarks. I gave up at last and let her love me, silently, in her own way” (46). But Avey’s way has no need for words—just like Fern, she speaks only once in the entire story—and it is a way that remains unacceptable and perhaps even inaccessible to him: “I wanted to talk. To explain what I meant to her. Avey was as silent as those great trees whose tops we looked down on” (46). They eventually go their separate ways, but after a number of years have gone by, he accidentally meets her in the street one day and asks her to accompany him to Soldier’s Home, a park “to which I always go when I want the simple beauty of another’s soul” (47). He explains how he feels about their relationship, what Avey should do to make something of herself, and “I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that would be born” (49). But Avey falls asleep during the monologue, and the narrator comes to realize that, just like his fellow soul-searcher does in “Fern,” nothing ever happens to Avey either, not even himself. It is again language that fails to capture and convey the spirit, and again language is the barrier between the narrator and Avey. The narrator leaves Avey as an “[o]rphan woman” at the end of the story, and so words have both literally and metaphorically orphaned her from the text into the simple but indescribable beauty of her soul (49).

Thus, there are no fulfilling relationships between men and women in Cane, as language always interpolates. For instance, when Tom in “Blood Burning Moon” tries to tell Louisa that he loves her, he discovers that feelings, emotions, ‘spiritual truth,’ cannot be conveyed in language, for “words is like th spots on dice: no matter how y fumbles em, there’s times when they jes wont come. I dunno why. Seems like the love I feels fo yo done stole m tongue” (32). The language of Toomer’s male narrator-observers fails to capture the female spirit. Language prevents all of these characters from either attaining or sharing spiritual reality and truth. Ironically, they are all frustrated by language itself in their effort to communicate the ineffable, to shape into words the inarticulable.

It is the last section of Cane where the breakdown of communication is dramatized most significantly, where the use of language carries the most compelling ramifications for the (male modernist) artist and his endeavor.
The title character of “Kabnis” is a transplanted northerner and would-be writer who teaches at a rural school for blacks in Georgia. Unable to sleep during a hot and humid night, he finds that his thoughts begin to wander:

Near me. Now. Whoever you are, my warm glowing sweetheart, do not think that the face that rests beside you is the real Kabnis. Ralph Kabnis is a dream. And dreams are faces with large eyes and weak chins and broad brows that get smashed by fists of square faces. The body of the world is bull-necked. A dream is a soft face that fits uncertainly upon it . . . God, if I could put that in words. Give what I know a bull-neck and a heaving body, all would go well with me, wouldn’t it, sweetheart? If I could feel that I came to the South to face it. 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. (83–84)

Kabnis is unsure of his identity, which he thinks of as an amorphous dream. If he had the right words, he could personalize his identity, give it a body and a shape; and if, like Fern, he could let the southern ritual grounds flow into his eyes, he would attain some spiritual truth. Kabnis fails to put the aura of the landscape in which he moves into words, and as a result, he will not attain the spiritual wholeness he longs for, and he will never be able to sing the songs of the South. Kabnis, who never sings and in fact does not like the spirituals and folk songs of the local black peasantry, chooses instead to repudiate what he sees after he has left his bed to get a breath of fresh air:

Kabnis is about to shake his fists heavenward. He looks up, and the night’s beauty strikes him dumb. He falls to his knees. Sharp stones cut through his thin pajamas. The shock sends a shiver over him. He quivers. Tears mist his eyes. He writhes. “God Almighty, dear God, dear Jesus, do not torture me with beauty. Take it away. Give me an ugly world. Ha, ugly. Stinking like unwashed niggers. 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. There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and . . . tortures me. Ugh. Hell. Get up, you damn fool. Look around. What’s beautiful there? Hog pens and chicken yards. Dirty red mud. Stinking outhouse. What’s beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you?” (85)

Again, the auratic beauty of the Georgia night is impossible to put into words, and so Kabnis uses language to detach himself emotionally from
the beauty. Unable to communicate beauty and unwilling to accept the insufficiency of words to tap spiritual truth, Kabnis verbally fashions the beautiful into the ugly.

Unlike Kabnis, Lewis, another of Toomer’s wandering observer-artists and himself a writer, is the only outsider in the book who manages to connect to the beauty and the power, the South’s spiritual truth.7 Both men encounter Father John, an old black man who has been relegated to a dark cellar and who mumbles incomprehensibly every now and then, and their reactions to him exemplify their differing notions as to how history and blackness, the pain and the beauty, are encountered and negotiated. Lewis tries not to explain verbally but to connect spiritually:

Lewis, seated now so that his eyes rest upon the old man, merges with his source and lets the pain and beauty of the South meet him there. White faces, pain-pollen, settle downward through a cane-sweet mist and touch the ovaries of yellow flowers. Cotton-bolls bloom, droop. Black roots twist in a parched red soil beneath a blazing sky. Magnolias, fragrant, a trifle futile, lovely, far off . . . His eyelids close. A force begins to heave and rise . . . (107)

Lewis also understands that the old man, as the “flesh and spirit of the past,” is the very embodiment of historical conscience (109). He accepts the past with all its beauty and pain, and this acceptance, an acknowledgment of historical conscience, unencumbered by language, endows him with a spiritual force. At the same time, Father John is also a personification of telling inarticulacy, a “mute John the Baptist of a new religion—or a tongue-tied shadow of an old,” who will not and cannot shape his “force” into easily decoded words (106). It is, significantly, the only instance in Cane where one individual meaningfully connects with another, and it is also a nonverbal event. Kabnis, on the other hand, rejects Father John, saying that “he aint my past” (108). Later, Kabnis angrily clarifies his position to Lewis in a long-winded invective that ironically serves only to foreground the insufficiency of words:

Y misapprehended me. Y understand what that means, dont y? All right then, y misapprehended me. I didnt say [I was born into a family of] preachers. I said orators. ORATORS. Born one and I’ll die one. You understand me, Lewis . . . I’ve been shapin words after a design that branded here. Know whats here? M soul. Ever heard o that? Th hell y have. Been shapin words t fit m soul. . . . I’ve been shapin words; ah, but sometimes theyre beautiful and golden an have a taste that makes them fine t roll over with y tongue. . . . Those words I was tellin y about, they
wont fit in th mold thats branded on m soul. Rhyme, y see? Poet, too. Bad rhyme, bad poet. . . . Th form thats burned int my soul is some twisted awful thing that crept in from a dream, a godam nightmare, an wont stay still unless I feed it. An it lives on words. Not beautiful words. God Almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words. . . . White folks feed it cause their looks are words. Niggers, black niggers feed it cause theyre evil an their looks are words. Yallar niggers feed it. This whole damn bloated purple country feeds it cause its goin down t hell in a holy avalanche of words. I want t feed th soul—I know what that is; th preachers dont—but I’ve got t feed it. I wish t God some lynchin white man ud stick his knife through it an pin it to a tree. (111)

Kabnis's tragedy is that the beautiful, golden, tasty words he has been shaping—perhaps the words of traditional romantic poetry—are incapable of expressing his spiritual reality as they stand between himself and his soul. But the contorted impressions on his soul do feed on language, they cry for expression, yet Kabnis cannot find the right shape for his words (Hutchinson, “Jean” 240). R. Baxter Miller points out that passages such as these “represent the artist's profound tension in dramatic fiction, his narrative encounter with himself” (“Blacks” 37). Ironically, Kabnis the artiste manqué approaches momentary greatness in his dramatic description of the tension within himself, and Cane as a whole dramatizes Toomer’s own negotiation of modernism's fundamental crux: how to shape words to fit one’s soul, how to overcome the breakdown of communication and give voice to a telling inarticulacy, how to extend Frederick Douglass’s project and transfer historical conscience into literary language.

The ending of “Kabnis” is therefore fittingly ambiguous: the protagonist ascends to the rays of the morning sun, the “[g]old glowing child” that “sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town” (117). But he leaves behind the cellar where Lewis, his foil, was able to connect, as the only one of Toomer’s artist-types, to the beauty and pain of the South’s historical conscience. In Lewis, Toomer presents us with a potentially positive outcome of the artist’s narrative encounter with himself, but significantly, Lewis exits the text before the end of Cane as he “finds himself completely cut out” (110). Once Lewis has tapped spiritual reality and acknowledged Father John as the embodiment of historical conscience, the narrative orphans him from the text “out into the night,” just like Avey and many other of Toomer’s female characters (111). Paradoxically, it also orphans him from language in that Lewis never actually writes anything (for all we know) and, expelled from the narrative, his text, too, remains unreadable.
Not even Lewis, it seems, can shape words to fit the soul in the way that Frederick Douglass’s pen fit in the gashes of his frostbitten feet. Apropos the American modernist enterprise, Hugh Kenner notes that “[t]he quest for the one true sentence leads to wordlessness”—which is precisely the destination Toomer maps for Lewis’s journey (Kenner, Homemade 155).

Once again, words separate the artist from his subject. Jean Toomer and his observer-artists all try to shape the words to fit the soul, yet in this painful process they come to foreground the fundamental artistic tension of writing the unwritable.

Cane thus dramatizes how literary language in and of itself seems incapable of rendering spiritual essence and auratic Soul-Field. The constant shifts between levels of narrative consciousness in “Fern” and other stories, as well as between various literary forms, poetic, dramatic, and narrative, do nothing to avert the breakdown of communication. The structure of the work is as fragmented and modernist as the language that the various narrator-observers employ to communicate spiritual truth. Each of the three sections of the book is prefaced by an arc; combined, the three arcs form a fractional circle. The circular progression of the book’s structure—incomplete and disrupted as it is—leads us back to the beginning, the very first word of the epigraph, “Oracular” (1, 39, 81). We, as well as the author himself, have not so much driven at but driven around the spiritual truth of the South. But the text does not aid us in capturing it. In Cane’s version of American modernism, language itself becomes a ritual, the “focus of ritual distraction from engulfments that will not submit to being ritualized,” as Kenner puts it (Homemade 152).

Toomer himself envisioned a different circle in the book: “From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into Kabnis, emerges in Karintha etc. swings upward into Theatre and Box Seat, and ends (pauses) in Harvest Song. Whew!” (qtd. in D. Turner, Cane 152). However, if one views “Harvest Song” as the completion of the circle, the spirit of the South, its aura, still remains elusive in the end:

I am a reaper. (Eoho!) All my oats are cradled. But I am too fatigued to bind them. And I hunger. I crack a grain. It has no taste to it. My throat is dry . . .

O my brothers, I beat my palms, still soft, against the stubble of my harvesting. (You beat your soft palms, too.) My pain is sweet. Sweeter than the oats or wheat or corn. It will not bring me knowledge of my hunger. (71)
As Robert Jones points out, the poem “describes an artist’s inability to transform the raw materials of his labor into art. . . . Although the poet/reaper has successfully cradled the fruits of his labor, when he cracks a grain from the store of his oats, he cannot taste its inner essence” (“Jean” 261). Cracking the grain to still the hunger, shaping the word to fit the soul, cannot connect with the spirit. “The American harvest,” Darwin Turner observes, “is sterile” (“Jean” 193). Even in Toomer’s own tracing of the figurative ring, the circle remains broken. Where Douglass was still able to tap that which lies within the circle, even though he situated himself outside of it, now the tune has changed: Toomer’s narrator-observers have journeyed inside the circle, and still they cannot hear or see as those of the circle might see and hear. And in the rare instances when they can see and hear, as Lewis does, they cannot produce a text that represents this experience.

That language itself poses an insurmountable obstacle in representing the southern ritual grounds’ aura does not mean that Cane is without history, or without historical conscience. Barbara Foley’s research has unearthed how many of the novel’s locales and characters find their historical analogues in Sparta and vicinity. Foley makes a strong case for the novel’s title as also a veiled allusion to John Cain, one of the leaders of an 1863 slave uprising (“Jean” 755–56). And while Toomer had only a superficial grasp of the economics of Hancock County, he was very much aware of the politics, and the violence, of Jim Crow. The stories of racial violence that Layman shares with Kabnis allude to the brutal 1918 lynching of Mary Turner farther south in Valdosta, and especially to the notorious “Death Farm” in neighboring Jasper County: just a short time before Toomer’s arrival in Sparta, a series of grisly killings took place on the Monticello farm of John S. Williams. Williams, who was under federal investigation for debt peonage, ordered his foreman to murder the laborers, carrying out at least one of the killings himself, in order to cover up what amounted to conditions of chattel slavery on his farm. The bodies of the men, most of them chained together, were tied to bags of rocks and dumped in the Alvovy, Yellow, and South rivers. The case gained national notoriety, and Williams eventually became the only white southerner between Reconstruction and 1966 to serve prison time for the murder of an African American (Foley, “In” 187–93).

The mythical Father John, though, the very personification of historical conscience, does not really have an historical prototype. But this character is not just Toomer’s rejoinder to defenses of white supremacy that often cited the Old Testament myth of Cain but is also his retort to the accommodationist, Washingtonian politics of racial ‘uplift’ of
Sparta’s CME Ebenezer Church and the influence it wielded over the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute, where Toomer briefly taught (Foley, “Jean” 760–67; Scruggs 276–91). As Foley concludes, Cane’s refusal of these references to lynching and the politics of white supremacy “to be completely subordinated to Toomer’s mythifying imagination shows the irrepressibility of history” (“‘In’” 194). While the Soul-Field of Fern is indeed unwritable, historical conscience is not to be equated with aura. History is still writable, even if it has become oblique and rendered almost obscured by Cane’s preoccupation with the auratic. Nor does Afro-modernism’s historical conscience necessarily require concrete historicity: the character of Father John is, unlike Douglass’s feet, a fiction, a literary construct. If historical conscience defies the writing skills of the many artist-types who populate the novel, it certainly didn’t those of the Jean Toomer who put Father John in Cane.

Even so, Father John, the personification of historical conscience, has been driven underground, his message indecipherable to all but Lewis and Carrie, the young woman who feeds the basement’s denizen. The black coal in the bucket that Kabnis swings “carelessly” upstairs to Halsey’s workshop at the end of the novel is “dead,” Booker T. Washington’s ideology of racial uplift compromised by its alienation from historical conscience (117). Cane is therefore itself a breakdown of communication, and there is a pervasive sense of failure in the book. Its southern ritual grounds, Darwin Turner states, constitute “a landscape conceived and designed by a man who struggled for greatness but believed that he had experienced only failure; a man who wished to guide, to teach, to lead” (Introduction x). In trying to guide us and himself to the South’s spiritual truth and to the historical conscience of black America in the new American Century, Toomer found only words whose shape did not, and perhaps could not, fit the spirit of which he had caught a glimpse. Words, the novel discovers, are in and of themselves soulless—yet this same discovery ultimately transforms the geographical territory of the South into a figurative ritual ground manifesting the need to reimagine the human condition in a world that challenges the very humanity of not just its inhabitants, but its visitors, too. The banishment of the historical conscience into the cellars of the South is the price the novel pays so that it can become a modernist masterpiece that records the fragmentation of the human existence in the modern world.

However, critic Bowie Duncan has asserted that Toomer’s novel “speaks of a reality like itself, something to be experienced without absolute finality” (328). On another level, the book is not simply about the breakdown of communication or the shortcomings of language. In preventing us from
experiencing aura through words, *Cane* asks us to search for alternative channels of communication, and the most potent of these channels is the human imagination. *Cane* is a bold attempt to incite the imagination through language; it is a most powerful testimony to the realization that while it may no longer be possible for us to understand and communicate with our spiritual, inner selves and those of others, it is still very much possible to imagine. J. Martin Favor brings the paradox to a point when he argues that “[t]he South in *Cane* is as symbolic of death as it is a marker of wholly desirable black identity. But perhaps this is precisely Toomer’s point in writing a swan song for the folk; if nothing else, it points out the visceral necessity of imagining alternative categories and authenticities” (66–67).

And yet, the fact remains that *Cane* dramatizes the impossibility of transforming aura into text and calls attention to the inarticulacy, telling though it may be, of historical conscience. It exudes a sense of nostalgia often found in Afro-modernist texts, a nostalgia for the perceived possibility of an earlier world in which, says Sandra Adell, “understanding was at once aesthetic, political, social, and religious, for it took place through the authentic procedures that allowed the self to be one with myth. There was an immediacy in premodern symbolic meanings” where “[t]he self, the ‘I,’ was not isolated or distinguishable from the objective meaning of the world, the cosmos, and the social” (139). Toomer’s wandering narrator-observers clearly seek communion with the myths of the southern ritual grounds, but, unable to shape the words to fit their souls, they can only give voice to a quintessentially modernist yearning for ‘authenticity’ (Baker, *Modernism* 100–102; Duvall 11).

The one alternative channel of communication the novel offers up as capable of giving voice to the “truth” of the South is song. Throughout *Cane*, African American spirituals and folk songs are one of the few communicative modes that speak directly from and to the spirit, that transmit the aura of the southern ritual grounds, and the author himself referred to his book as “a swan song” (qtd. in D. Turner, *Cane* 156). Curiously, while the text itself abounds with references to song and singing wafting across the southern landscape, it doesn’t really incorporate actual music. It’s as though the language of Toomer’s modernism itself denies a satisfactory reconciliation between vernacular song and literary text. In “Fern,” for example, in the very text Toomer himself thought to be approaching the spiritual truth of the southern ritual grounds “saturate with folk-song,” only the *act* of singing is described; we never actually ‘hear’ (that is, read) Fern’s song. Significantly, the narrator cannot discern any words in her song other than Christ’s name, an inability to decode that echoes the
ostensibly unintelligible “jargon” of the songs young Frederick Douglass and his fellow slaves sang. Fern and the narrator operate on two different levels of communication: while he translates his perceptions into and communicates with language, she communicates directly from her spiritual self through song. The two communicative strands never meet, and so, when he finally leaves the South and Fern behind, he recognizes that “[n]othing ever really happened. Nothing ever came to Fern, not even I” (19). Language, the narrator’s story, and Cane’s “Fern” have separated them forever. Also, the four poems that frame the short story are not folk songs or spirituals themselves, but again only report the act of singing, as for example “Song of the Son,” which celebrates yet does not quote directly “[a]n everlasting song, a singing tree, / Caroling softly songs of slavery, / What they were, and what they are to me” (14). Telling as it is, the inarticulacy persists here, too.

Only once does Cane report an actual spiritual, “My Lord, What a Mourning,” namely at the end of act 2 in “Kabnis”:

A false dusk has come early. The countryside is ashen, chill. Cabins and roads and canebrakes whisper. The church choir, dipping into a long silence, sings:

My Lord, what a mourning,

My Lord, what a mourning,

My Lord, what a mourning,

When the stars begin to fall.

Softly luminous over the hills and valleys, the faint spray of a scattered star . . . (93)

The level of narrative consciousness here is that of level IV, and it seems as though the omniscient observer of all observers is the only one who notices the congregation’s song. Running after Kabnis, neither Halsey nor Layman appears to hear it, and act 3 opens with “[a] splotchy figure driv[ing] forward along the cane- and corn-stalk hemmed-in road. A scarecrow replica of Kabnis, awkwardly animate. Fantastically plastered with red Georgia mud”—the ironic foil of Fern, the southern earth-mother figure (93). Nor does the spiritual foreshadow the ending, for while we hear “the sinner mourn,” no “trumpet sound[s] to wake the nations underground,” as the original lyrics assure. Father John, that “mute John the Baptist of a new religion—or a tongue-tied shadow of an old” and the personification of historical conscience, only ever utters one intelligible word in his rare
ramblings, “sin” (106). Accordingly, the omniscient narrator interpolates
at this point to confirm that Father John’s true message, unlike his preach-
ing in the rice fields, cannot really be spoken. While the narrative voice
implores him at first to “speak,” it corrects itself immediately: “(Speak, 
Father!) Suppose your eyes could see, old man. (The years hold hands. O 
Sing!) Suppose your lips . . . ” (106; emphasis added). Even when Father 
John finally speaks to denounce “th sin th white folks ’mitted when they 
made th Bible lie,” Kabnis mocks him contemptuously (117). But Father 
John never does sing. The telling inarticulacy of Cane therefore suggests 
that Afro-modernism’s historical conscience could be retrieved from the 
cellars of the South and reinvigorated by song.