Early Twentieth-Century Fiction
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Prof. Andrew Goldstone (andrew.goldstone@rutgers.edu)
Office hours: Monday 2 p.m., or by appointment

March 29, 2021. Toomer (1).

review: nothing there

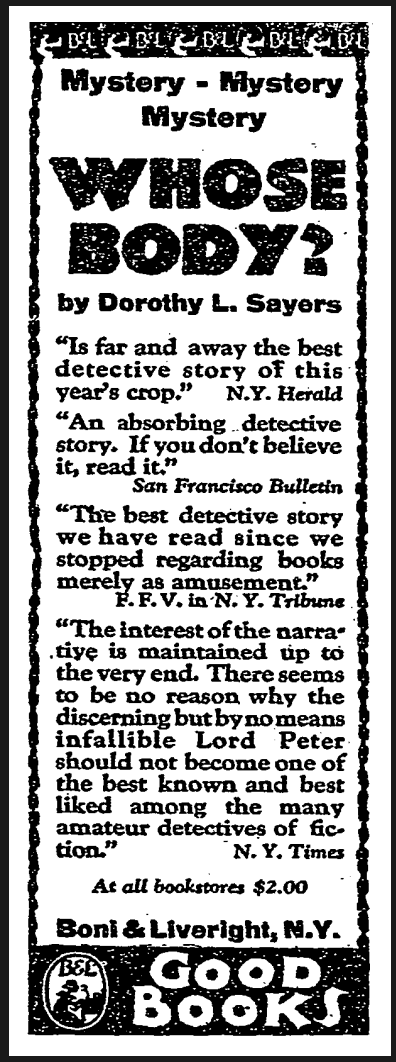
- the hollowness of the self
  - Sam, like everyone else
  - integrity and selfishness indistinguishable
- the hollowness of the falcon
  - the (ludicrous) fake
  - what is worth?
- what is literary worth, for the genre?
  - the coin of experience
  - “it is not a fragrant world”
  - redemption? no, thanks

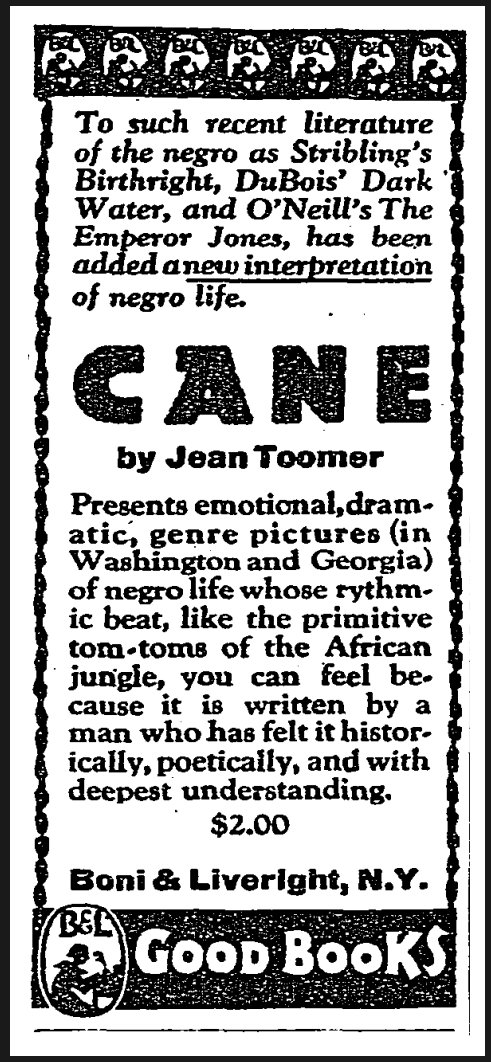
parallel histories

1893 James, “The Middle Years”
1916 Joyce, *Portrait*
1923 Sayers, *Whose Body?*
1925 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*
1929–30 Hammett, *Maltese Falcon*
1930 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*
1944 Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder”

parallel histories

1893 James, “The Middle Years”
1903 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
1916 Joyce, *Portrait*
1923 Toomer, *Cane*
1923 Sayers, *Whose Body?*
1925 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*
1925 Locke, ed., *The New Negro*
1926 Hughes, *The Weary Blues*
1929–30 Hammett, *Maltese Falcon*
1930 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*
1937 Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
1944 Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder”



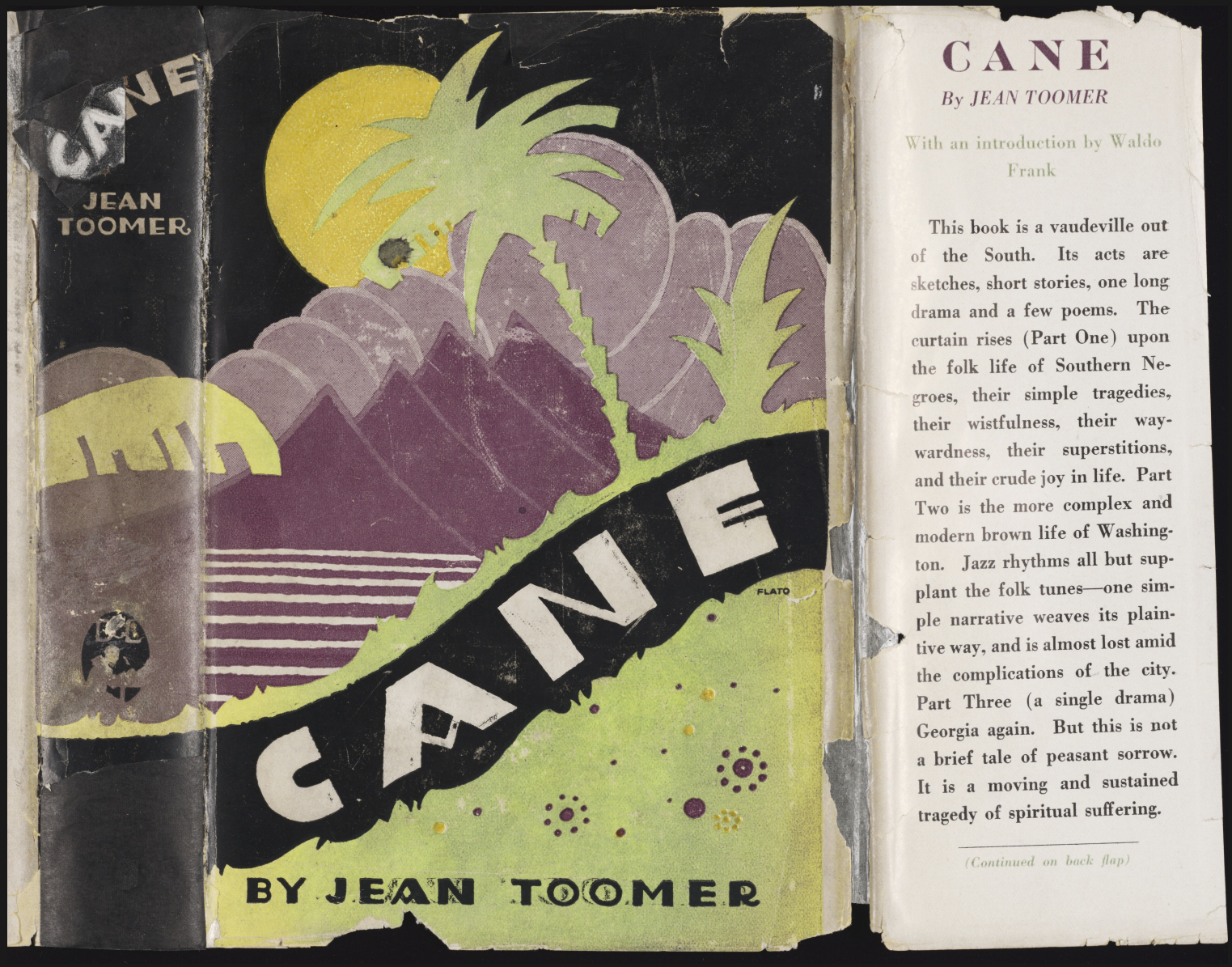


Left: *NYT Book Review*, June 10, 1923: 28. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
Right: Ibid., September 16, 1923: 24. ProQuest.

categories

My racial composition and my position in the world are realities which I alone may determine…. I do not expect to be told what I should consider myself to be…. As a B and L author, I make the distinction between my fundamental position and the position which your publicity department may wish to establish for me in order that *Cane* reach as large a public as possible. In this connection I have told you…to make use of whatever racial factors you wish. Feature Negro if you wish, but do not expect me to feature it in advertisements for you. For myself, I have sufficiently featured Negro in *Cane*. Whatever statements I give will inevitably come from a synthetic human and art point of view; not from a racial one…. All of this may seem over-subtle and over-refined to you, but I assure you that it isn't.

Toomer to Horace Liveright, September 5, 1923. Beinecke library; *Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919–1924*, ed. Mark Whalan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 171–72.



Cane (New York: Liveright, 1923): dust jacket. Beinecke Library.

The gifted Negro has been too often thwarted from becoming a poet because his world was forever forcing him to recollect that he was a Negro. The artist must lose such lesser identities in the great well of life.

Waldo Frank, foreword to *Cane* (New York: Liveright, 1923), viii. HathiTrust.

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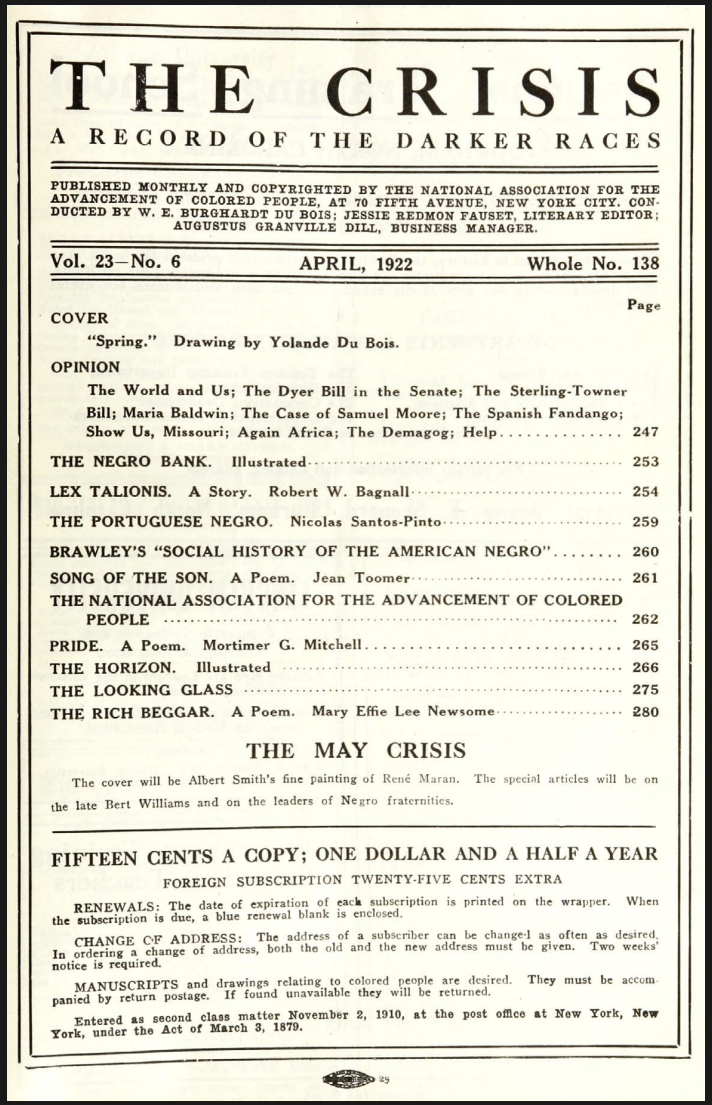

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Vol. 23—No. 6 APRIL, 1922 Whole No. 138

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"Spring." Drawing by Yolande Du Bois.

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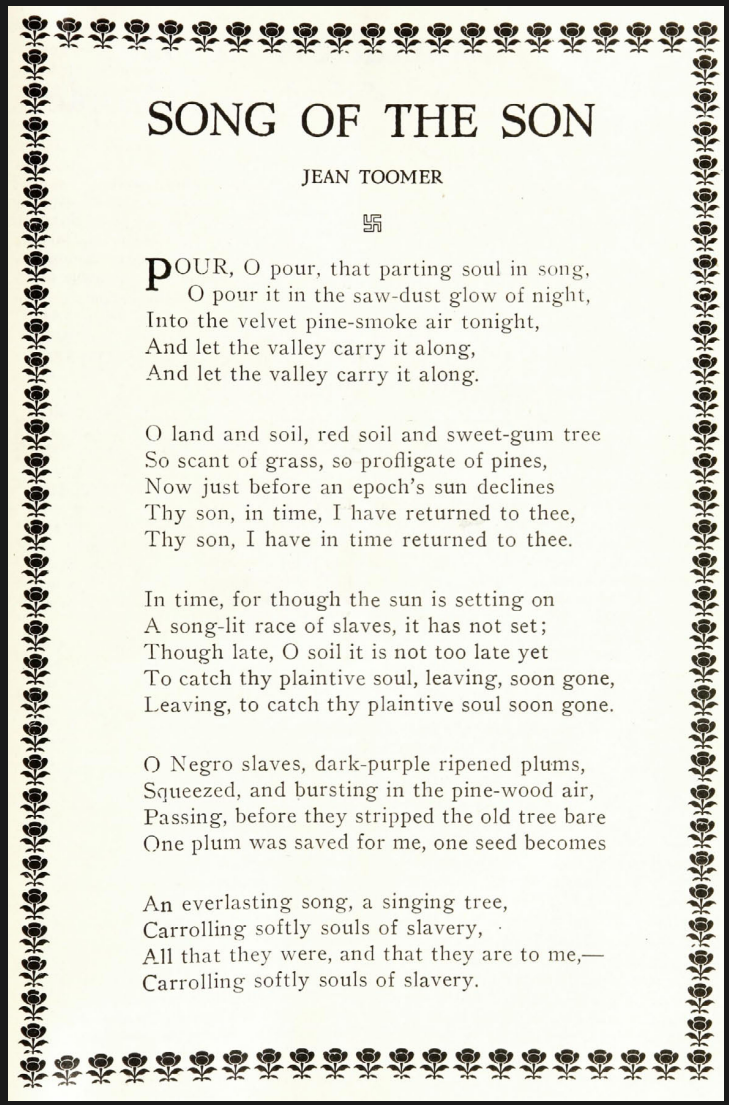

SONG OF THE SON

JEAN TOOMER

卐

POUR, O pour, that parting soul in song,
O pour it in the saw-dust glow of night,
Into the velvet pine-smoke air tonight,
And let the valley carry it along,
And let the valley carry it along.

O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree
So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,
Now just before an epoch's sun declines
Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

In time, for though the sun is setting on
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;
Though late, O soil it is not too late yet
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone.

O Negro slaves, dark-purple ripened plums,
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes

An everlasting song, a singing tree,
Carrolling softly souls of slavery,
All that they were, and that they are to me,—
Carrolling softly souls of slavery.

Crisis 23, no. 6 (April 1922): 243, 261. Modernist Journals Project.

Autumn 1922

THE LITTLE REVIEW

QUARTERLY JOURNAL
OF ART AND LETTERS

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ON SALE ALL FIRST CLASS BOOK STORES
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VOL. IX NO. 3

FERN

FACE flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples, in such a way that wherever your glance may momentarily have rested it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes. The soft suggestion of down slightly darkened, like the shadow of a bird's wing, the creamy brown color of her upper lip. Why, after noticing it, you sought her eyes, I cannot tell you. Her nose was aquiline Semitic. If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I followed the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta. They were strange eyes. In this, that they sought nothing, that is nothing that was obvious and tangible and that one could see; and they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied. When a woman seeks, you will have observed, her eyes deny. Fern's eyes desired nothing that you could give her; there was no reason why they should withold. Men saw her eyes and fooled themselves. Fern's eyes said to them that she was easy. When she was young a few men took her, but got no joy from it. And then, once done, they felt bound to her (quite unlike their hit and run with other girls), felt as though it would take them a lifetime to fulfill an obligation which they could find no name for. They became attached to her and hungered after finding the barest trace of what she might desire. As she grew up new men who came to town felt as almost everyone did whoever saw her, that they woud not be denied. Men were everlastingly bringing her their bodies. Something inside of her got tired of them I guess, for I am certain that for the life of her she could not tell why or how she began to turn them off. A man in fever is no trifling thing to send away. They began to leave her, baffled and ashamed, yet vowing to themselves that someday they would do some fine thing for her: send her candy every week and not let her know who it came from, watch out for her wedding-day and give her a magnificent something with no name

Little Review 9, no. 3 (Autumn 1922): 1, 25. Modernist Journals Project.

discussion: outside in

- Where is *Cane* narrated/spoken from? Use an example (or two); draw on group members' commonplace-book entries.

(The sun is hammered to a band of gold…) (“Carma,” 17; qtd. by A.S.)

I ask you, friend (it makes no difference if you sit in the Pullman or the Jim Crow as the train crosses her road), what thoughts would come to you—that is, after you'd finished with the thoughts that leap into men's minds at the sight of a pretty woman who will not deny them; what thoughts would come to you, had you seen her in a quick flash, keenly and intuitively, as she sat there on her porch when your train thundered by?…Something I would do for her. ("Fern," 29)

I ask you, friend (it makes no difference if you sit in the Pullman or the Jim Crow as the train crosses her road), what thoughts would come to you—that is, after you'd finished with the thoughts that leap into men's minds at the sight of a pretty woman who will not deny them; what thoughts would come to you, had you seen her in a quick flash, keenly and intuitively, as she sat there on her porch when your train thundered by?…Something I would do for her. ("Fern," 29)

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…. 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. (32)

liminal experience, terrifiying version

His black balanced, and pulled against, the white of Stone, when she thought of them….

Separately, there was no significance to either one. But for some reason, they jumbled when her eyes gazed vacantly at the rising moon. ("Blood-Burning Moon," 52)

Why not, just gal? (61)

1894 b. Nathan Pinchback Toomer in DC
1914–17 attends six colleges/universities
1919–23 magazine publications (*NY Call*, *Crisis*, *Liberator*, little magazines)
1920 changes name: Jean Toomer
1921 Substitute principal, Sparta, GA: Agricultural and Industrial Institute
1923 *Cane* published by Liveright
Small sales, critical success
1923– mystical/religious pursuits (Gurdjieff, Jungian, Quakers...)
1925 *Cane* excerpts in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* anthology (JT is not happy)
1967 d.

Passport, 1926. Beinecke.

The drama surrounding the publication of *Cane* is a unique and revealing instance of the problem that no person considered "Negro," according to the one-drop-rule of the U.S. regime of race, could get a hearing *except* under the sign of blackness.

George Hutchinson, "Identity in Motion: Placing *Cane*," in *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001), 52.

The school in Sparta, Georgia. Jean Toomer Papers, Beinecke library.

A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accents about, and of which, till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them.

Letter to the *Liberator* (Claude McKay and Max Eastman), August 19, 1922, *Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919–1924*, ed. Mark Whalan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 70–71.

black folk

Come, brother, come. Lets lift it;
Come now, hewit! roll away!
Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day
But lets not wait for it. ("Cotton Song," 15)

black folk

Come, brother, come. Lets lift it;
Come now, hewit! roll away!
Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day
But lets not wait for it. ("Cotton Song," 15)

"I saw a man arise, an he was big an black an powerful—"

Some one yells, "Preach it, preacher, preach it!"

"—but his head was caught up in th clouds. An while he was agazin at the heavens, heart filled up with th Lord, some little white-ant biddies came an tied his feet to chains." ("Esther," 38)

next

- *Cane*: “Seventh Street,” “Avey,” “Bona and Paul,” “Kabnis.”