

The third section of Jean Toomer's Cane is a microcosm and aggregate of the first two sections. It is in the third section where the itinerant, disjointed musings of the first two sections are tied into a cohesive narrative. Kabnis, the title character of the eponymously named section, is a quasi-autobiographical amalgamation of Toomer's metropolitan upbringing and modern artistic sensibilities, and Toomer's heritage and the Negro spiritual poetry of the earlier sections of Cane. Kabnis' speech patterns in particular are a strange marriage of northern sensibilities and southern history. The progressive devolution of Kabnis' speech from scholarly English into black southern dialect highlights the inadequacy of the former mode of speech in allowing Kabnis to connect viscerally with a primitive heritage from which he, as a black northerner, was both geographical and culturally disassociated; through this juxtaposition of black southern dialect and scholarly English, Toomer shows how an emotional appropriation of primal dialects is requisite for an intellectual understanding of one's "roots".

Kabnis' opening lines demonstrate frustration with the limits of conventional English, especially in contrast with the ubiquity and eloquence of natural language. This frustration plants the seed for Kabnis' linguistic evolution into southern dialect. "These cracks [between the boards in the cabin room]," the narrator begins, "are the lips the night winds use for whispering. Night winds in Georgia are vagrant poets, whispering. Kabnis, against his will, lets his book slip down and listens to them" (83). Here, Toomer presents a binarism of language: the language of formalized schooling versus the natural language acquired through experience, outside of this formalized system. The former is the sphere that Kabnis, at least preliminarily, is more likely to inhabit as a northern professor trained in the humanities; the latter is the sphere that resonates with Kabnis' heritage. To decipher the language of the universities, it takes effort and constant

focus, pulling upon learned skills. Kabnis “tries” to read, but is ultimately wooed by the voices of the ghosts of Georgia’s vagrant poets. The “whispering lips” of emotional appeals usurp his intellectual discipline. His enchantment with the south is not learned or forced, but involuntary and reflexive. This enchantment is also communal. While books must be published and written by specific individuals, an omnipotent, communal force authors this Georgian poetry—the environment itself—the Georgian night winds. Intermediaries, translators, and pages of books rendered unnecessary: Kabnis can simply listen to the wind in order to tap into the Negro spirituals of his ancestors.

This binarism of language is present outside of the literature, in Jean Toomer’s personal journals. On the last page of a mostly-empty spiral-bound notebook titled, “Terms of My Language,” Toomer scribbles, “This red clay in the city of n.y.” Red clay is often associated with the state of Georgia. The notebook is not dated, but the thematic linkages between the substance of the notebook and Cane, particularly the “red clay” detail, suggest the appropriateness of using one text to inform an understanding of the other. On the very first page of the notebook, Toomer draws an image he titles, “My language tree.” In this image, he draws a tree with branches, labeling each part with a specific categorization of language. The organization of the branches seems to indicate a hierarchy of language. Rephrased, Toomer’s writing foundation, his rhythm and writing structure, are connected to various other modes of language—terms from the sciences, terms from other writers, his own language, American slang, and idiomatic English—but do not directly stem from one another. While all forms of language share the same roots, they are distinct branches on Toomer’s “language tree”. This graphic representation of separateness despite a shared root runs in parallel with Kabnis’ internal struggle

between the separate linguistic worlds of the north's books and the south's poetic whispers, despite the underlying historic root that unites the two.

The marriage of word and image in Toomer's notebook is made all the more poignant because the imagery in "Kabnis" also juxtaposes images of nature with images of poetry and words. Toomer's choice to juxtapose natural imagery with the word "poetry" fundamentally decenters the meaning of language and literature; it follows that Kabnis' decision to listen to the "winds' poetry" instead of reading bookish language manifests from a frustration with the conventions of English and a desire to decenter these conventions. Firstly, Toomer's juxtaposition emphasizes orality. The poems of the Georgian winds were not scribbled, but whispered. Such emphasis on orality resonates with the culture of life in the South, where access to education was historically more limited, and where slaves transmitted messages through songs and music more often than written words. Secondly, Toomer's linguistic juxtaposition validates this emphasis on orality by cynically using the word "poetry" that carries with it the baggage of many centuries of white male participants in the western canon. Thirdly, juxtaposing natural imagery with the word "poetry" prognosticates the evolution of Kabnis' own language, and his internal struggle with his southern history and his northern upbringing. Kabnis' southern history ultimately wins this battle. While this poetry is certainly native to the Georgian winds and the lineage of southern blacks before Kabnis that breathed those same winds, this poetry is also "vagrant". The poetry that the Georgian winds whisper is not geographically limited, but accessible to northerners and southerners alike. The poetry is ambulant and pervasive as the wind itself. In this beginning section of the novel, the seeds of Kabnis' appropriation of southern dialect are planted as he shows his frustration with his own scholarly, northern language. Only

when he appropriates southern modes of speaking does he begin to gain a fuller understanding of the mechanisms of racism and oppression in the American south.

“If I...could become the face of the South,” Kabnis pleads, “how my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul” (83). Kabnis recognizes the correlation between the physicality of his “lips” singing the songs of old and an understanding of the heart and soul of the American south. At this point in the narrative, however, Kabnis’ is still sorting out, in parallel, the relationship between Georgian dialect and conventional English, and the extent of the violence and torment present in Southern daily life. Kabnis is terrified by stories of lynching and violent racism. The ghost of Toomer’s “language tree,” here, has a sad, historical tone; black southern dialect is not a natural connection to one’s roots, but a liability that leads to one’s death in the trees. The more Kabnis hears and the more terrified he becomes, the more prevalent the imagery of Georgian wind poets, and phantom singing; “the whole countryside [transforms into] a soft chorus” (98). The constant association of natural phenomena with Negro spirituals and songs is important because it connects a collective people, black southerners, very tangibly to the land they inhabit. The people and the land become inseparable. Such associations also allude to the power of the expansive and the mass rather than the individual, enhancing the notion of collective history. Kabnis is not tapping into one individual’s song, but a song of all the black people that inhabited the Georgian countryside. The countryside itself is a collector of the history of the south. Thus, Kabnis, just by virtue of residing in Georgia, is able to share in this history without having personally known the people that inhabited the countryside years ago.

While Kabnis’ increasing bond with southern songs continues to inspire his adoption of southern slang, his disillusionment with the literary tradition also contributes to his adoption of southern slang by showing the limits of conventional language and knowledge. Kabnis’ hysteria

over southern violence is a clear indication of his geographically distorted perception of the southern social climate. His unfamiliarity with the south causes him to pull upon stereotypes because of his estrangement from its realities. Halsey remarks, “These aint th days of hounds an Uncle Tom’s Cabin, feller” (94). This allusion to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s work is a comment on the inadequacy of literature and the legacy of the “New England tradition” (95) to explain life in the south. Furthermore, Halsey’s remark was directed toward Kabnis’, who, as a professor, is a supposed inheritor of this New England tradition. As the men talk and Halsey encourages Toomer to have a drink, he tells Kabnis, “Th boys what made this stuff have got th art down like I heard you say youd like t be with words” (95). This connection between alcohol and language is notable for several reasons. Firstly, directly after the alcohol-fueled altercation with Hanby in this scene, Kabnis is finally swayed to permanently adopt southern dialect instead of merely listening to phantom southern poetry. Secondly, just as bootleggers distill alcohol in secret locations, Kabnis, too, attempts to distill—extract the quintessence of—southern life by paying deep attention to southern song. The more is he is surrounded by the soft phantom songs of his heritage and blaring evidence of the shortcomings of the New England literary tradition, the more Kabnis is wooed to abandon his university English and adopt the dialect of his Southern heritage.

Kabnis’ frustration with his inability to express himself eventually transforms into pure frustration with the social mechanisms of the south. Kabnis’ linguistic evolution from “professorly” English to the colloquialisms of his primal tongue, accompanies this last stage in his intellectual evolution. A month after his arrival in Sempter, Kabnis begins to speak as if he were born in Georgia. The presence of southern song is still strong, but its significance changes. Instead of harking a shared black past, it harks a shared future. “Cane and cotton-fields, pine

forests, cypress swamps, sawmills and factories are fecund at her touch...Night winds are the breathing of the unborn child whose calm throbbing in the belly of a Negress sets them somnolently singing” (105). The inclusion of imagery pertaining to both the wilds of the south and the factories of the north makes clear that the songs of “southern Negresses” are pertinent to every member of the black diaspora, especially the “children,” such as Kabnis, that might seem geographically and culturally estranged. It is now clear that Kabnis, along with other kin of the black southern heritage, is no longer merely listening to the songs of old, estranged, but is now actively “breathing” in the history of the south. He exclaims, “Th form that’s burned int my soul is some twisted an awful thing...An it lives on words. Not beautiful words. God almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words” (111). By the end of the novella, Kabnis’ “tortured” language now matches his an accurate comprehension of the torture of black life in the south, riddled with racism and violence.

In “Kabnis,” Toomer takes the reader on a top-down journey through his “language tree”. We enter the novel through the epiphenomenal “top branches” of his diction. As we delve deeper, we reach the middle branch of “special words from particular writers and people”—the rung reserved for Kabnis’ polished English. Once we reach the novel’s end and Kabnis’ linguistic devolution is complete, we reach the branch closest to the roots of the language tree—idiomatic English (black southern English in this case specifically). Once Kabnis falls to the bottom branch of the tree and adopts primal methods of speech, he is able to fully understand the realities of southern violence, and his personal connection with these racist, violent southern roots. With an emotional attachment to southern dialect, he escapes years of northern intellectual conditioning. The reader follows the branches on Kabnis’ “language tree” retracing their veins to their “roots.”

Bibliography

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