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Cane: an American Mosaic

As books outlive their authors and newer editions of a text emerge, a surprising number of things change—for better or for worse. With each reprinting of a novel, publishers redesign the cover to better sell the book to a new generation of readers; plot summaries appear on dust jackets while reviews and awards are added to the back cover. In no other place, however, are the changes in each reprinting of a book more readily apparent than in the book's prefatory material: title pages are redone as publishers change; copyrights are updated, forewords and introductions are written, and—if the work is sufficiently old to lack these features in its original form—even modern inventions such as ISBN data and Library of Congress information must be inserted. Such is the case with *Cane*, whose current W.W. Norton edition bears no semblance in its prefatory material to that first published in 1923 by Boni & Livewright—the only version which Jean Toomer himself proofed page by page. Those original page proofs, as well as Toomer's handwritten comments and instructions to the publisher regarding them, today reside in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where they provide unique insight into both the way Toomer intended his work to be read and the painstaking care and attention he devoted to the manner in which the prefatory material was to be laid out. A comparison between the current “authoritative” edition of the text and the opening pages of the original version reveals a number of changes and rearrangements made to the prefatory material throughout the history of its publication, as might be expected for a work that has been reprinted several times over the past

eighty-seven years. Among these changes, however, one omission in particular stands out: the eventual elimination, in later editions of the text, of the acknowledgements page found in the prefatory material of the original. The omission of these acknowledgements is particularly significant in light of Toomer's own explicit instructions regarding their inclusion and placement in the original, which he makes clear in his notes to the publisher. The acknowledgements page, in both its text and its deliberate placement as the last page of prefatory material preceding the contents of *Cane*, frames the work as a heterogeneous collection of form, setting, and content—a mosaic which in turn provides a framework for reading *Cane* as an expression of America and its heterogeneity.

The page proofs of *Cane*, which Jean Toomer first received for review in March 1923, were arranged with the title page as the first (right-hand) page, followed by the copyright on page ii and the dedication on page iii. Two blank pages came next, which placed the acknowledgements on page vi—a left-hand page. The foreword by Waldo Frank began on the facing right-hand page and continued for four pages, concluding the prefatory material; then the text of *Cane* began, starting with the table of contents.

Toomer's notes to the publisher regarding these page proofs are brief and reveal only a handful of corrections, all but one of which correspond to minor changes in punctuation, capitalization, typeface, and layout. The exception, however, corresponds to the acknowledgements page, regarding which Toomer provides an unusually strong-worded and detailed set of directions to the publisher. Given the brevity and sparseness of his other comments, the surprising amount of attention he devotes to the placement of these acknowledgements provides a clue to their significance: "I do not like the idea of the acknowledgement page being directly opposite Waldo Frank's Foreword," Toomer writes in his

instructions to the publisher. “Change this by all means...let page vi be blank, and shift the acknowledgements to xiii. In this case, a blank page would have to follow, and the Contents would be xv” (from JWW MSS 1, Box 26, Folder 608). The rearrangement Toomer specifies highlights the importance of the acknowledgements in three ways: first, the acknowledgements shift from a left-hand page to a right-hand page, which denotes greater significance; second, they are set aside and given their own two-page spread after the foreword rather than sharing a spread with the beginning of the foreword; and third, the acknowledgements are repositioned as the last page of prefatory material immediately preceding the table of contents, which begin the text.

The placement of the acknowledgements page immediately preceding the table of contents is critical to its function as a framing device—specifically, one that frames *Cane*, upon readers’ entry into the work, as a collection. Readers thumbing through the prefatory material on their way to the text of *Cane* are first greeted by the text of the acknowledgements page:

Certain of these pieces have appeared in
Broom, Crisis, Double Dealer, Liberator,
Little Review, Modern Review, Nomad,
Prairie, and S4N.

To these magazines: thanks.

Having read those words, a subsequent turn of the page would reveal the table of contents, cleanly formatted with the title of each of the twenty-nine individual parts of *Cane* arranged along the left-hand column. In the acknowledgements, Toomer refers to the contents of *Cane* as “pieces,” rather than as chapters or sections; likewise, in his notes to the publisher, Toomer refers to them as “stories”—never as chapters or other related terms. The words “chapter” and “section” imply a linear relationship in an ordered plot, whereas “pieces” and “stories” suggest the qualities of an anthology or collection. Thus, the language of the acknowledgements, as well

as Toomer's insistence that they be placed immediately preceding the contents, illustrate their role in introducing the contents of *Cane* as a collection.

The value of the acknowledgements page, however, lies in its framing of *Cane* not merely as a collection but as, specifically, a remarkably heterogeneous one—for if the language and placement of the acknowledgements serve to introduce the work as a collection, then the list of magazines included serves to frame the work as one composed of a highly diverse set of different individual pieces. Of the magazines listed by Toomer on the acknowledgements page, only *Crisis*—the official magazine of the NAACP—remains in print today. Nevertheless, the remarkable heterogeneity of the other magazines listed by Toomer would have been recognizable to contemporary readers: for example, *Broom* was edited and published by American expatriates in Italy; *Double Dealer* was printed in the South; and *Little Review* was published in Chicago and New York. The acknowledgements page thus serves in a way to draw readers' attention to the heterogeneity of form and setting in *Cane*, introducing the work as a collection spanning geographic location, culture, and race. *Cane* begins in a Georgia cotton field, moves to a Washington theater and a Chicago gymnasium, then returns to a schoolhouse and a basement in the South—mirroring its own geographically heterogeneous publication history. The work alternates between poetry, as in “Song of the Son,” prose, such as “Bona and Paul,” and drama, as in “Kabnis”—again reflecting its roots in the variety of forms expressed within literary magazines. The fact that Toomer refers to each of these as “pieces,” combined with their remarkable diversity of form and setting, suggests that *Cane* is meant to be read not as a novel but as a collection of individual stories, portraits, and vignettes, a heterogeneous collection spanning both poetry and prose—in many ways resembling and introduced by the literary magazines first cited on the acknowledgements page.

Most importantly, this understanding of *Cane* as a heterogeneous collection provides a framework for reading its heterogeneity as an expression of America itself. The acknowledgements introduce the heterogeneity of literary form and physical setting present throughout the work, but these merely serve to accentuate the greatest and most important heterogeneity in *Cane*: that of its contents. *Cane* is a mosaic, of which the individual stories and poems are the colored tiles. And just as a mosaic requires a collection of many differently-colored tiles to convey an image, so too does *Cane* require a collection of stories, differently colored and shaded, to capture its image—the image of America. A collage whose individual images are the same shade, or a mosaic whose individual tiles are homogenous in their hue, is unable to reproduce the tonal range and contrast necessary to encode a visible image. In the same way, the collective heterogeneity of the individual pieces of *Cane* is crucial to its ability to express an image of America. A story about a black man, for example, is not necessarily American, as such a story is not specific to a particular place and could easily take place wherever there are black men. Likewise, a story about a white woman is not in itself an American story. But a story about “the white woman who had two Negro sons”—the story of Becky, a “Catholic poor-white crazy woman, said the black folks’ mouths”—is a story that is unmistakably American, in the sense that it instantly narrows the setting to America (7). A story of a love triangle resulting in spilled blood is as old as Shakespeare, yet when the story involves a black man who slits the throat of his white rival before being burned alive by an angry white mob, as in “Blood-Burning Moon,” it instantly becomes an American story—one which could never be true anyplace else (30-37). A song in a cane field is not specifically American, but a song that rises from both a cane field in Georgia and a theater in Washington, D.C., becomes in some way uniquely American. *Cane* suggests that America, like a mosaic, cannot be defined by

or reconstructed from any one of its individual tiles, just as each of these stories are not explicitly American until combined; the texture of the mosaic lies in the contrast arising from the arrangement of many heterogeneously colored pieces—the pieces of *Cane*.

Finally, the significance of understanding *Cane* as a collection hints at the importance of those who undertake the role of collector. Since the acknowledgements page frames *Cane* as a self-collection of separately published pieces as much as a collection of diverse form and content, Toomer's role as collector is implicit. That role is reflected in several of his characters, including the first-person narrator who visits the South in the piece titled "Fern," as well as the character Lewis in the final section titled "Kabnis." Portrayed as an educated black Northerner collecting images of life in the South, Lewis is "Always askin questions... Pokin round and notin somethin" (91). The similarity to Toomer's role as an intellectual Northerner collecting stories from the South is clearly evident, and editors have noted that "Lewis resembles the self-portrait Toomer sometimes created in his fiction and drama" (91). At the end of "Kabnis," however, Lewis finds the result of his work too overwhelming to bear: "Their pain is too intense. He cannot bear it" (112). The placement of "Kabnis" as the last piece in *Cane*, coupled with the similarities between Lewis and Toomer, suggest perhaps that Toomer also found himself overwhelmed by his work upon reaching its completion. Read in this way, *Cane* becomes something greater than the sum of its individual parts: a collection more powerful than even its author could suspect.