

**Imagism & Toomer:
Burning Poetry to its Bones**

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In the August 15th, 1913, issue of *The New Freewoman*, Rebecca West proposes that “poetry should be burned to the bone by austere fires and washed white with rains of affliction: the poet should love nakedness and the thought of the skeleton under the flesh” (86). Earlier that year in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, Hilda Doolittle, recently dubbed “H.D.” by Ezra Pound, published the first poems to be labeled “imagiste.” The imagist movement was explicitly a poetic reform, but its rhetoric and goals echo feminist ideas heralded by the little magazines that published their imagist work. The imagists wanted to free poetry of its excess sentimentality and to strip the poem of its “soft living” and “veiled things,” while the feminists advocated a similar freedom for women (West 86). A decade after West’s article, Jean Toomer, influenced by the imagists, transformed this metaphorical image of burning the poem down to its bones in his poetic depictions of the literal burning of the flesh of African-Americans in lynchings. His gorgeous, yet violent and grotesque images of lynchings maintain the aesthetics of imagism but complicate its politics by racializing the gendered female body of the poem.

Although he racializes the feminized body of the imagists, Toomer’s larger political goal is to transcend race by introducing the new American body, one that erases racial categories. His lyrics, in the context of *Cane*, operate as a “swan song... a song of an end” for the South, but when these lyrics appear in little magazines like *Broom*, they function as modernist images that are released from limits of space and time (Turner, xxii). *Broom*’s intellectual, international, and

liberal audience served as the appropriate venue for Toomer's literature and his ideas concerning this new American body. This paper will briefly analyze the complex gender politics of imagism before exploring the way Toomer complicates the aesthetics through literalizing several imagist ideas in his work as a whole. Toomer not only applies the imagist ideal of stripping the poem to its bones in his lynching imagery, but he also literalizes the metaphor of shocking images through an electric current in some of his poems.

Little magazines like *Poetry* and *The New Freewoman*, both of which are associated with feminism, make the gender politics of imagism explicit through feminist writings. Little magazines published not only imagist poems, but also manifestos and reviews that outlined the politics of imagism. In one article in *Poetry*, Pound highlights the importance of creating images that are ““intellectual and emotional complex[es] in an instant of time”” (Loeffelholz 22). Pound's ideas imply imagism to be only a poetic reform, whereas articles like West's “Imagisme” that were published in little magazines evince the complex gender politics of the movement. In West's discourse, she suggests that specific imagist techniques, such as ridding the poem of flowery images, mirror the feminism ideals of stripping women of their supposedly inherent feminine softness. Imagism allows the body of the poem itself to be feminized and identified as a woman—critic Cyrena Pondrom states that there are often “unstated comparison[s]” within imagist rhetoric that link the subject of the poem to a real woman (92). Rebecca West exemplifies this idea by saying that the body of the poem has gone from “the beautiful stark bride of Blake” to “the idle hussy hung with ornament kept by Lord Tennyson” (86). By describing the poem as a “bride” and a “hussy,” West feminizes the poem and suggests that each of these male authors presents two differing images of women. Maintaining this metaphor, she proposes that the “*imagistes* want to discover the most puissant way of whirling

the scattered star dust of words into a new star of passion” (86). West empowers the woman through her analogy of a passionate star, which suggests a new metaphor: the poem is no longer a woman who is manipulated by the poet, but is now a passionate woman playing the starring role. Stardom, however, does not always lead to complete fulfillment—playing the lead role often results in fame and objectification, at which point the woman receives all of the attention. The gender politics here prove to be ambiguous; the woman has more power, but that power yields more scrutiny.

Specific imagist poems such as H.D.’s “Priapus,” one of the first three poems published under the “imagiste” name, also exemplify these gender politics. H.D.’s imagist techniques in “Priapus” are embodied in its “clarity, sharpness, precision, objectivity, and use of a presentational...style” (Pondrom 93). H.D. strips the poem of its excess sentimentality, which reflects a goal of both the imagist style and the feminist mindset. “Priapus” is a prayer to the son of Dionysus and Aphrodite—the name of the poem means “the offspring of revelry and love” (93). Pondrom suggests that “the poem presents a moment in the orchard at harvest time, a moment fraught with intense and conflicting emotions” (93). The speaker begins the poem with the words, “I saw the first pear / As it fell,” which represents the moment in time when the fruit stops growing and begins to decay. This poem focuses on the meaning and beauty of the moment, which parallels H.D.’s own imagist ideal of finding meaning in each specific word. The aesthetic appeal of H.D.’s poetry lies not only in her imagist style, but also in the “ambiguity and radiance of observed experience; the mind returns to them again and again, reinterpreting as the feelings they elicit change with each added detail from the poem” (96). This “ambiguity and radiance” can be seen through H.D.’s complication of gender in her description of the “pear”: the fruit’s uterine shape feminizes the pear, but the “god of the garden” is male (93). Although these

images are gender ambiguous, they nonetheless have a powerful voice: “We grasp the mood...by reflexive inspection of feeling.... The poem is economical because each image is itself speech, not ornament” (96). H.D. suggests an equivalence between poem and pear; the poem is her own offspring and the fruit of her labor. As part of H.D., this poem becomes feminine and can be read as an extension of herself. Although H.D.’s poetry follows the rules of Pound in its imagist rhyme, rhythm, and exact words, this poem’s “concentration, free-verse forms, and objectivity” and implied comparison to a woman allow the gender politics of imagism to become more evident (Loeffelholz 22).

Jean Toomer draws upon several of these same imagist techniques in *Cane*, a book of poems and short stories. Discussing how Toomer follows imagist ideals, critic Werner Sollors notes that Toomer’s images, particularly those in “Blood-Burning Moon,” follow Pound’s idea for an image to represent “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (26). Sollors also concludes that “Toomer’s images certainly are not ornaments; they *are* the speech” (26). Sollors suggests that these images, though often ambiguous, “treat the ‘thing’ directly, [and] use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation” (26). Toomer presents the bare bones of poetry; instead of using superfluous description, Toomer’s violent images and racial ambiguity not only highlight the cruelty of lynching but also present his idea of racial interdependence and the blurring of racial categories.

Toomer’s writing proves hard to define, reflecting his own enigmatic personality and feelings toward racial issues. His main contribution to the modernist movement, *Cane*, published in 1923, reveals in its ambiguous form Toomer’s own disdain of being pigeonholed into a category: “some have identified it as a novel” but “no matter what name is given to the book’s form...Toomer did not conceive *Cane* as a novel” (Turner xxi). Even though *Cane*’s

of black flesh after flame.

In this poem, Toomer takes the gendered body from the earlier imagists and racializes it, albeit ambiguously, to describe a female victim of a lynching. Although imagist aesthetics have always been political, Toomer highlights racial politics to evince new ideas toward race. Here the image of burning the poetry to the bone described by West becomes literal: “along with the...syntax, all expectations of beauty disintegrate before our very eyes as what might have been visions of loveliness decompose into a grotesque living corpse and a monstrous charred body” (Kutzinkski 171). Even though the images are violent, they are still strangely attractive. This poem’s blazon form traditionally describes the body or beautiful parts of nature from top to bottom. Toomer describes this victim from top to bottom in a lynching blazon that shocks the audience by its strange enjoyment of such a horrifying image. In addition to using this stylistic form, Toomer also writes objectively, which reflects another imagist technique. Instead of depicting this woman with an overly sentimental, subjective diction, Toomer writes in the same concentrated and objective form of the earlier imagists. Making sure that each word serves a distinct purpose, Toomer strips the poem down to its bones, while the victim of the lynching unsettlingly undergoes the same experience.

The grotesque effect of Toomer’s images lies not only in his succinct descriptions, but also in the harsh historical reality they represent. Kutzinski suggests that *Cane*’s poetry only appears pleasing on the surface: “*Cane*’s aesthetic purity is...deceptive... The text’s purportedly sensual lyricism...has to it an eerie, nightmarish quality that unsettles its readers...more than it communicates an abiding sense of ‘spiritual fusion’ and ‘harmony’” (Kutzinski 166). The book’s poetry cannot simply be read as aesthetically pleasing because a “nightmarish quality” unnerves the audience, mainly from the fact that the “‘weird chill’ of history is ever present in his

text” (168). The brutality of the history behind the lynchings provides a reason for Toomer’s frustration with the fixed racial categories of black and white.

In the 1920s, many Americans were fascinated with lynchings. Not only in the South but in most parts of the country, lynchings were advertised in the newspapers as forms of entertainment (Rice 5). Many people did not consider lynching evil, but thought of them as celebrations and parties; by the 1920s “lynchings had evolved from clandestine operations carried out in the dead of night into widely publicized festivals held in the light of day and carefully choreographed, recorded, and marketed throughout the nation” (2). African-Americans, however, have always seen the evil of lynchings, and critic Trudier Harris notes that African-Americans of all generations tend “to confront and to work through the historical trauma of lynching in order to address contemporary racial concerns” (2). Toomer was not alone in his depictions of lynchings, since “poetry and description and analysis were [often] deployed as weapons in the war to end [lynchings]” (1). The style of Toomer’s depictions, however, differs from many other writings of lynchings of the time because of his use of earlier imagist techniques that create aesthetically appealing yet grotesque pictures of lynchings.

Part of the effect of these grotesque images is that they, along with other aesthetic devices of imagism, invite the audience to participate in the poem, much like the white mobs participated in the lynchings. When his writing was published in *Broom*, an experimental little magazine with an international flair, Toomer’s probable audience was liberal, intellectual, and predominantly white and read his poetry not only for pleasure and entertainment but also for intellectual stimulation. *Broom*’s white, intellectual audience strangely identifies with the white mobs that participate in lynchings for pure entertainment. Through this disturbing identification, Toomer suggests that his liberal audience does not differ as much as they might think from the

white mobs responsible for the lynchings. Commenting on the images in “Portrait in Georgia,” Kutzinski says that “these images are shocking not because they appeal to feelings either of guilt or of outrage but because they do not allow us to keep intact a reassuring distance between mind and body” (171). Even though the immediate reaction to reading this poem might not have been “of guilt or of outrage,” these images still affect the audience by inviting both our minds and bodies to participate in the poem. The implied relationship with the actual participants of lynchings makes the audience feel even more involved with what the victim experiences.

In “Portrait in Georgia,” Toomer plays with racial ambiguities in order to propound his racial politics. We cannot fully determine whether the woman is black or white in “Portrait”; the woman’s “slim body” is “white,” but Toomer compares it to “the ash of black flesh after flame” (lines 6,7). Toomer blends these colors together and suggests that the woman is both white and black; the woman’s racial ambiguity mirrors Toomer’s idea of racial interdependence and his notion of a new race. One critic notes that “the object of this poem is a woman whose braided hair is likened to a lyncher’s rope and whose slim white-skinned body is actually made of the ash of burned black flesh” (Griffin 24). In both “Portrait in Georgia” and “Blood-Burning Moon,” Toomer creates racial ambiguities by never actually clarifying whether or not the body is black or white; instead, “the races are bound together in a relationship of interdependence” (24). In “Blood-Burning Moon,” Griffin believes that “Toomer toys with traditional literary forms by inserting the volatile ingredient of race” (26). Toomer adopts the former imagist aesthetic but adds a racial, political rhetoric through his violent and shockingly appealing portrayals of lynchings.

Burning the poem down to its bone is not the only metaphor that Toomer literalizes within his poetry. “Her Lips Are Copper Wire” is “one of three poems in [*Cane*] that represent

Toomer's earlier imagist period" (North 169). Much like Toomer applies the idea of burning poetry down to its bone, he literalizes another imagist metaphor within this poem as well. In the before-mentioned article in *Poetry* magazine, Pound refers to the aesthetic importance of startling the audience: "A rhyme must have in it some slight element of surprise if it is to give pleasure; it need not be bizarre or curious, but it must be well used if used at all" (*Poetry*, 205). Richard Aldington, in another essay on imagism, said that true imagist poems include "'phrases which give me a sudden shock of illumination'" (North 171). Toomer takes these metaphors and literalizes them through the electrical imagery of this poem, and "in so doing he puts the doctrine of the image to work in an urban American setting" (171). He employs these metaphors to make them function within society and to reflect his importance of racial interdependency and the creation of a new race. The theme of electricity currents through the poem "Karintha" as well, in which the narrator refers to Karintha as "'a wild flash'" but also as "'a growing thing ripened too soon'" (173). "Her Lips Are Copper Wire" contains many "formal discontinuities [that] are meant to mimic the jaggedness of modern urban life" (North 169). Toomer strips the poem of punctuation and denies it strict syntactic rules, which both suggest Toomer's own belief in stripping society of certain restrictions.

Toomer's poetry, prose, and drama are all outlets for his imagistic expression as well as his unique political voice. He revolutionizes the imagist ideas of Rebecca West, Ezra Pound, and H.D. of stripping down poetry to its bones into an even more politicized rhetoric. Toomer expands the definition of imagism by adding racial politics to the gendered political work of imagists such as H.D. Even though some critics consider Toomer an imagist, his racially political voice echoes the claim of modernists to "make it new" (Pound). Imagist writing before Toomer did not satisfy him—he felt that his task "was to use the tools of modernism in such a

way as to draw from them something more socially responsible than he found in the imagists” (North 174). Like Toomer himself, his poetry and prose cannot be narrowly categorized; instead, he gleaned from imagism and modernism the aspects that he felt would lead to progress in the American future.

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