

1974

The Descent into the Underworld and Modern Black Fiction

Michael G. Cooke

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cooke, Michael G.. "The Descent into the Underworld and Modern Black Fiction." *The Iowa Review* 5.4 (1974): 72-90. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1772>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

The Descent into the Underworld and Modern Black Fiction

Michael G. Cooke

There is “nothing so old,” the great West Indian poet, Derek Walcott, has written, “that it [can] not be invented.” But even as we recognize this as a crucial intuition, we acknowledge an age-old superstition about priority, and may well wonder if the latter-day poet has not entered into special pleading to stop his new “invention” from seeming just another *déjà vu*. This is a pitfall of modern black literature that Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) aggressively avoids when he asserts that black writers open up and illuminate a distinct “room” of their own, thus achieving simple independence and originality. The trouble is that the black writer may then seem to speak to, as well as about, only that narrow “room” (though Baraka puts it into a “big house”). Either way black literature stands to suffer neglect: as a more or less negligible instance of something familiar, or as a more or less negligible phenomenon for being merely unfamiliar.

But there is implicit in Baraka’s architectural image a revelation of new dimensions, and a new economy of relations, in the “house” of literature; and by the same token Walcott is teaching us a new form of the old adage, to wit, that the more it is the same thing, the more it changes. The new room or the new poem exists in an altered, or an altering, environment, and serves to remind us that every occurrence at once reaffirms and conjures with its category, setting new limits for it, and revealing tacit limitations in earlier examples.

Among the ways in which modern black literature must seem at once reminiscent and pioneering is its development in fiction of the theme of the descent into the underworld. For the psycho-cultural meaning of blackness, its implicit perils and resources, attaches in a distinctive manner to this theme. The primary force of Baraka’s *The System of Dante’s Hell* derives from the terrible, punishing ordinariness of the situation for black people and from the fact that there appears no hope of purgation, let alone salvation. No group or class as such has ever said that *to belong is to be in hell*. In like manner the virtual elimination of the figure of the guide and the role of the underground counselor speaks to a singular loss, in modern black experience, of established structures of authority, and hence of answerable visions of the future.

Perhaps this will seem no singular feature of black experience, but instead a plain contemporary phenomenon. In the gross, however, it may be observed that whatever principles and values may have been jettisoned from white society, in all cases where contact has been made (and no literature is available to us otherwise), white people economically or politically captain the ship and enjoy the perennial structures of power. Not surprisingly this organization is apparent in Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King*. Dahfu, the black king of the Wariri,

becomes Henderson's guide and counselor in the virtual underworld of the lion, Atti's den, but Dahfu himself thereby violates and risks the animosity and vengeance of the upholders of his own ancestral standards. If we recall the connection between Atti and Até, a figure of fatality in Greek mythology, the underworld ambience of the entire episode seems unmistakable. Atti belongs to Dahfu; she is a given of his existence, but only an episode in Henderson's. This is the picture from a white writer's standpoint. The black writer's position may be illustrated by Ralph Ellison, who sends his nameless protagonist (to have no name is by itself an emblem of the lack of ancestral generosity and assurance) to his underworld only when all sources of plausible authority have been exhausted and lost. That is when he fully comes to terms with his blackness. In both cases a special isolation and disorientation would seem to be associated with the underworld in modern black literature.

To represent the development of the theme, I will take up six authors here: Jean Toomer, Imamu Baraka, Ralph Ellison, Camara Laye, Amos Tutuola, and Wilson Harris. The list includes American, African, and West Indian writers, and thus affords a breadth sufficient to make a basis for plausible generalizations concerning the modernization and accommodation of the theme. It is, perhaps conspicuous that the list excludes Richard Wright, but in the face of an evocative and ubiquitous myth, it has seemed wise to bound the topic with some care. As Joseph Campbell makes plain in his study of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, nearly everything above or under the sun, and every enclosure above or under the ground, may qualify as an underworld locus (he cites, e.g., temple interiors; the belly of a whale; the heavenly land beyond, above, or below the conventional world). But one should distinguish between central and partial uses of the underworld. The underworld occurs in Wright's *Native Son*, but in an allusive and unsystematic way. The cloacal escape hatch in "The Man Who Lived Underground" and even the storefront church in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* have underworld associations, but not in a sustained or substantial degree. The examples I have chosen to deal with have in common an explicit application of the descent into the underworld to the action of the text; so that the theme becomes a principle of construction and interpretation, and not an opportunity for critical relentlessness or ingenuity.

The System of Dante's Hell is the most formal representation of the descent into the underworld in modern black literature. It invokes Dante, and draws on his terminology, without in the least pretending to model itself on him; its circles are made linear, as ditches, and though Baraka himself suggests gradation, or degradation, in placing the heretics last, for the worst shall be the last, all are essentially simultaneous. Each section is an angle, a perspective on one single frame of experience. And no reader will fail to see that the descent into Bottom, in "The Heretics," belies its nomenclature by containing, in however tainted a form, the only morsel of human relief and imaginable grace that the text affords. D. H. Lawrence enjoins us to heed the novel, not the author, and *The System of Dante's Hell* certainly seems to say that heresy is everywhere. "Treachery to Kindred," immediately preceding "The Heretics" in Circle 9, in-

volves treachery to self, and vice versa. The material admits of analysis by episode or character or scene or reflection or "association complexes," but these are interpenetrating, and indivisible, notwithstanding the illusion of sequence created by the page.

The text never quite makes an explicit identification of the treachery of others to the self, but this, the pervasive evil of *The System*, is dramatized in "The Eighth Ditch (Is Drama" (sic). Here again we need to remember that hell is all, or all is hell, for Baraka. The Ur-treachery occurs with creation and birth. One is given a life that cannot be lived, a gift of words that limn negation, a sense of substance and space that camouflage "these shadows" and vacancy. When he identifies himself with Dante, the speaker proves a Dante with a difference. For the first time he has a guide, but it is only "the other guy" who himself stands in need of a guide, since "he pointed, like Odysseus . . . like Virgil, the weary shade," and we know that a weary Virgil (only his voice is weary in the *Commedia*) can hardly lead further and Odysseus not at all. It is not surprising that the "other guy" points out nothing but more hell:

He pointed, like Odysseus would. Like Virgil, the weary shade, at some circle. For Dante, me, the young wild virgin of the universe to look. To see what terror. What illusion. What sudden shame, the world is made.

The poetic texture of the final sentence declares the coincidence of creation and a state of hell. For the speaker sees the shame into which the world is fallen, but also the shame of the fact that the creation has taken place. Only Peaches, paradoxically in "The Heretics," has the instincts or the energy to try to bully or guide him out of this shame, but *his* instincts and energy, perhaps more faithful to the intrinsic ordination of things (Peaches after all promises but sensual savvy and peace), are equal only to making good his escape from the improbabilities of hope.

This escape may resemble an ultimate state in the text, but again the uniformity of *The System* at bottom, the pervasiveness of "heresy" must be regarded as the primary fact. It is not possible, given all we have seen and learned, for the speaker to do otherwise than escape from the temptation of hope. Baraka describes heresy as a matter of "running in terror, from one's deepest responses and insights, . . . the denial of feeling . . ." and classifies it as "basest evil." Undeniably this sums up the speaker's relation to Peaches. But it is not an exclusive phenomenon. *The System* begins with a thorough "denial of feeling," and a degree of "terror" that forbids running and results instead in paralysis.

The very first circle of *The System* introduces us to a world with less of life than the sixth, and the ninth at least abounds in action, and boasts Peaches. The book, moving as Baraka says from "association complexes" (a variant of stream-of-consciousness) to "fast narrative," also moves from inertness to activity. The initial sense it gives is of increase, rather than decrease, of engagement and value, but in fact the "association complexes" serve as an irresistible gravitational field and controlling (not to say suppressing) environment for the "fast narratives."

From the outset *The System of Dante's Hell* offers a curiously curt, cold, faceless set of images so far disembodied of human valences as to lose even the consolation of grammar. "Faces seep together" here, and summer itself "seemed cold." It is a universe in which life is betrayed into a grim, bleak unfeelingness and deprivation. It depends on images, but "the image is cold, without space, a dead talking of earth."

"Hell," Baraka says in the postscript to the text, "is definable only in . . . terms" of his being "a social animal." He can "get no place else," so that without society the very notion of hell "didn't exist." But ultimately his hell subsists by being recognized. It is a conscious state of cold annihilation, into which no amount of fast narration can infuse enough friction to ignite a spark or seed of life. Thus hell ends up existing "in the head," and the reader, despite the numerous autobiographical notes in the text, may begin to see not the autobiography but the anesthesia of an attitudinal despair anchored in a wraith-like flow of memories.

Can one, we may well ask, have a sense of death, who shows so little sense of life? But the point is of course that Baraka apprehends black life as death, and the descent into the underworld as the descent into the status of the self, as black. What in Coleridge is a singular dreadful state of death-in-life becomes a standard condition: the "lust of the world" is "fashioned into snow," and so is at once negated and preserved. "Nothing remains," Baraka then writes, ". . . except . . . the pure image. Nothing remains." And if we take this as a form of rampant self-pity, a piece of slack and shapeless generalization, it may be that we have grown as habituated to its truth as its victims, who by virtue of *The System* may enjoy the cold comfort of consciousness.

And yet it must seem that *The System*, for all its power, lacks a certain dimensionality and falls into a certain flatness, since it immediately establishes, by tone and image, a deathliness in black life and thereupon proceeds to put that deathliness into its narrow underworld motion. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* presents itself by contrast as a richly formed complex on the subject of *American* life, indeed of modern life, with a black protagonist. The very absence of an article in the book's title, as opposed to H. G. Wells' simpler portrayal of a science fiction detective story world, carries us at once into a universal frame; we are dealing with the condition of man, and not with "a" man merely, or even "the" man whose story unfolds before us.

It is striking, however, that *Invisible Man* yields the same conception of a hell built into black life as does *The System*. Perhaps if Ellison had not written Baraka would not have carried out his theme so thoroughly, without remission or qualification. For Ellison's view of blackness as hell, while not engrossing all activities and aspects of life to the exclusion of other possibilities, certainly pervades his novel. The theme of the underworld is all but explicitly presented in the introductory episodes. The incident in the Golden Day (itself ironically named to suggest an eschatological perfection) carries the strongest hints of an underworld condition, especially where the vet dismisses the narrator and Mr. Norton with the brusque injunction: "Now the two of you descend the stairs

into chaos and get the hell out of here." The fact that the narrator has conducted Norton to the Golden Day, and the insistence that Norton is obscurely pursuing his "destiny," only reinforce the underworld association, with the narrator as an ironically helpless and inadvertent guide. The fear the frequenters of the Golden Day have that Norton will die among them, or is dead ("DEAD! . . . He *caint* die!"), also carries overtones of the return from the dead. But Norton, even if his destiny is embodied in the black student, may leave the Golden Day, the ghetto, and the school itself, virtually at will. The narrator and the black community experience all of this not as some ultimate destiny, but as very life, and we need to recognize that the school, if it is a source of upward mobility for the narrator, allows him to move up out of hell.

There are even earlier indications of underworld dimensions to black experience. In the novel's opening pages the undated episode from the narrator's past where, "under the spell of the reefer" he "discovered a new analytical way of listening to music," to Louis' music, to jazz, is almost formally organized in terms of familiar underworld categories. "I not only entered the music," the narrator reveals, supposedly in an "analytical" vein,

but descended, like Dante, into its depths. And *beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it, . . . and beneath that lay a still lower level . . . , and below that I found a lower level . . .*

As if this were not patent enough, the ceremony he comes upon resounds with underworld allusions, to "*The whale's belly*," for example, and to the death of the father and the possibility of the sparagmos we associate with Adonis and Osiris: "Them boys woulda tore him to pieces with they homemade knives."

Ellison is clearly inviting us, with two such disparate incidents, as the novel is getting under way, to apprehend black life in terms of ineluctable connections with the underworld. Like Baraka, too, he makes the underworld more than a matter of what happens to be there, as it were for the reader to see. He brings it to consciousness, through the vet in the Golden Day, through the narrator in the exploration of the idiom of jazz, and most importantly (for these are trained minds and unusual characters) through the simple widow of the dead paterfamilias. She is moaning when the narrator comes upon her, but she is weeping with a new distress when he leaves, at her insistence: "*Leave me 'lone, boy, my head aches.*" For this one of her stalwart sons beats him up, but it puzzles him to get treated so:

"*What's the matter, man?*" I cried.

"*You made Ma cry!*"

"*But how?*" I said, dodging a blow.

"*Askin' her them questions, that's how. Git outa here and stay, and next time you got questions like that, ask yourself!*"

Finally, though all is hell, the consummation of hell is its rendering into consciousness of a life that cannot be lived, with principles that cannot be known, in an environment that cannot sustain. In other words, as Baraka says, "Hell in the head."

It is possible then to read *Invisible Man* as the tensional process that brings the narrator, through the stations of his ambition (very selfish at first, more altruistic later, but always mistaken), to the realization that his life, and black life, is hell. The novel affords an ostensible rising action, at least in terms of the narrator's psyche and expectations, up to the point where the "director of Men's House" addresses the narrator "with profound respect," and the narrator is aware that his "new name" is getting around. Here is the acme, and the end, of his "days of certainty." But even during the time of prospect unheeded threats of the underworld may be noted. The Founder "lay nine days in a death-like coma," and then it is "as though he had risen from the dead." This is the promise of a new life that makes death-in-life endurable, and somehow even desirable. The explosion in the paint factory (Brockway's fiefdom is an underworld in which the narrator pursues conventional goals) leaves the narrator sinking "to the center of a lake of heavy water," a sort of King Arthur who has, however, "lost irrevocably an important victory." And the narrator, just before he takes charge of the eviction scene and begins apparently to come into his own, has quite a contrary vision of himself tottering "on the edge of a great dark hole."

None of these intimations comes home to him, but in the rapid falling action of the final third of the text he begins to note new signs, begins to theorize, begins to develop such range and promptness of response as will enable him to understand and work from the underground that becomes peculiarly, and yet symbolically, his. The pivotal moment occurs with his facing Clifton's perception that "sometimes a man *has* to plunge outside history . . ." The image of plunging anticipates the manhole, and occurs elsewhere with a similar resonance, but here it involves an element of logical choice: given certain conditions, one must do one thing in order not to do another. Certainly when Clifton drops out of the Brotherhood the narrator reflects that it "was as though he had chosen . . . to fall outside of history."

To the extent that it presupposes choice this plunging remains false to the underworld experience of blacks. The narrator does not *have* to plunge, logically, he plunges naturally. That is the way of things. And we readily note that the narrator's mind slips from the idea of choice to the image of plunging, the primordial fear of being given over to gravity not just in body but in mind and soul. He himself is clinging to the Brotherhood: "For to break away would be to plunge . . . To plunge!" He has the sensation of it here, sympathetically. But almost at once it becomes inwardly, directly his own experience.

It is tempting to say that, with the underworld now open to him, he gravitates toward the subway. Certainly as he "wander[s] down" he is aware of his "mind plunging." A sense of his own precariousness sweeps over him, though he persists in the belief that the Brotherhood has saved him from it:

What did they ever think of us transitory ones? Ones such as I had been before I found Brotherhood—birds of passage who were too obscure for learned classification, too silent for the most sensitive recorders of sound . . . ?

Still short of recognizing his own underworld status, he sees that in “three [black] boys” walking down the subway platform “like dancers in some kind of funeral ceremony.” We need to remember that the funeral image, reinforcing the idea that some of the “transitory ones” have in the subway left the realm of life, is produced by his mind, as a means of coming to grips with their blackness. Throughout the passage, with simile and questions, he is groping toward a new level of apprehension. He begins to follow them, and spontaneously formulates the awareness that he will artificially deny, or displace into speculation for a while, the awareness that death informs black experience, which passes in a special underworld. Indeed, within the framework of speculation, he evinces an impulse to redeem, to recognize value in, that deathly underworld:

And suddenly I found myself thinking, Do they [the boys in the funeral ceremony] come to bury the others or to be entombed, to give life or to receive it? . . . The boys speak a jived-up transitional language full of country glamour, think transitional thoughts, though perhaps they dream the same old ancient dreams. They were men out of time But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can)—who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, . . . living outside the realm of history What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge? For they were outside, in the dark with Sambo, . . . taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod)

The boys are with Tod, and the plangent play on his name (*Tod*, death) consummates the definition of the underworld condition with a note of personal mourning.

The notes of identification between the narrator and the transitory, excluded, effectively chthonian ones break through his declarations of difference to inform us that he has joined them spiritually, though not yet avowedly. With an ironic allusion to another underworld he strives to resume his efforts at “mastery” of the social and political world: “I had found the thread of reality.” But his dreams give away his deepest position: “instead of Clifton being lost it was myself.” In addition, the falsity and hopelessness of his opposing the transitory ones and touting the Brotherhood stand out graphically where the Brotherhood celebrate Jack’s birthday “at the Chthonian.” As Satan might say, “which way I turn is Hell.”

The narrator emulates others; he becomes Clifton. He takes to himself the verb “to plunge,” and by the time we get to the race riot the underworld references are increasing and intensifying enough to seem either calculated, or integral to

Ellison's conception. An Acherontic river flows through the scene, "a black river ripping through a black land" early in the riot, and at its conclusion, when the narrator has "plunge[d] down, down" into the manhole, he seems "to move out upon black water." The text affords us too a candid gloss of his condition: "It's a kind of death without hanging, . . . a death alive." In addition to this, "Ras the Destroyer" on his "great black horse" has seemed a figure out of an anti-apocalypse, where salvation is ruled out, though summary judgment is executed, or threatened. And it is instructive that the white hoodlums who chase the narrator to the unforeseen manhole represent equally summary executioners. They ask one another, suggestively, if he is dead, that is, not just underground but in the underworld, and his response, to himself, after escaping two physical executions, is to confess that the answer is metaphorically, spiritually, immemorially, "yes." His "invisibility" is not only socio-psychological, but eschatological . . . he is a miserable social wraith:

. . . You stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. *That* is the real soul-sickness, the spear in the side, the drag by the neck through the mob-angry town, the Grand Inquisition, the embrace of the Maiden, the rip in the belly with the guts spilling out, the trips to the chamber with the deadly gas that ends in the oven so hygienically clean—only it's worse because you continue stupidly to live.

The definitive presence of the underworld in *Invisible Man*, establishing at once character and environment, may give some warrant for construing the final line of the novel as a message from the underworld: "Who knows but that, on the *lower* frequencies, I speak for you?" (italics added). If so, then the faintly ominous tone of this conclusion (as the post-manhole "Prologue" reveals, to fail to see him may bring on a terrible beating) is relieved and even redeemable. The denizen of the underworld, the "disembodied voice," is not cut off from his neighbor, or from the sense of humanity. However obscurely and tenuously, some new good may ensue. And surely an index of resurrection inheres in the combined image of blood and butterfly that virtually frames the novel, occurring in the grotesque battle royal and in the final dream of castration (the association of loss of light and castration in psychoanalytic theory need hardly be mentioned, nor the mythological association of castration with gods who must go to the underworld).

In the former scene, the narrator watches "a dark red spot of my own blood shaping itself into a butterfly, glistening and soaking into the soiled gray world of the canvas." In the latter scene, he lies "beside a river of black water," is cut, and sees "a glittering butterfly circle three times around my blood-red parts." The language suggests the same butterfly, interchangeably glistening or glittering, and probably the same underworld universe that is alternatively "soiled gray" or a black river. Certainly it is the same blood, with the same implications of violation, and loss of identity if not life. In this complex, the butterfly must be identified with *psyche*, with the soul, converting and transcending the dismal facts into

something on a *higher* frequency. Perhaps it takes something away from this hint of affirmation that the narrator is put down as a "mystic idealist," but we may recall that he has gone through hell to reach this position, and may be entitled to it.

There is no doubt a modern American component in the thoroughness with which blackness and the underworld become associated in Baraka and Ellison's work. Given the idea, already developed, that bringing the underworld quality of black experience to consciousness constitutes the quintessence of hell, Ellison may be regarded as prophetic in his vision; the great stimulus to this consciousness, as Eldridge Cleaver makes plain, came in 1954, "the year segregation was outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court." Prior to that, Cleaver asserts, "we lived in an atmosphere of novocain," but *Invisible Man* dates from 1952. Perhaps in fact Ellison's kind of consciousness entered into the legal and political decision of 1954, which in turn aggravated and enlarged that consciousness, until Baraka himself, then under thirty years of age, could produce *The System of Dante's Hell* with its unrelieved and universal portrayal of hell in 1963.

Earlier American literary works, and African and West Indian works of the last two decades, though they may evince the same idea, do not evince it with the same intensity or the same mood. In Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) the underworld implications of black experience in America are, so to speak, kept underground, and even to some extent denied, or renounced, or obliterated by a bright burst of hope. The underworld element in the work appears concentrated in the dominant, closing story, "Kabnis," and indeed is focused by, and on, the peculiarities of Kabnis' temper. The standards and customs of the Georgia town he sojourns in as a teacher hardly represent a pastoral ideal, but the wagonsmith and all-purpose repairman Halsey ("wonderfully himself") and his mysteriously innocent sister Carrie Kate show a viability and grace beyond the compulsions of place. It is a neurasthenia in Kabnis, verging on a comical paranoia where he flees from a supposed threat of white lynching, that makes the town effectively an underworld. He feels that he "might just as well be in his grave," that everything is "still as a grave"; his sense of "many dead things moving in silence" is an intuition of the actual world of people and objects without the illusion of corporeality, rendered in their true wraith-like state.

But a confirmation of Kabnis' intuition emerges when, driven from his teaching post and living place, he goes to live and work with Halsey. As substantial, sane, even serene as he is in himself, and as material and practical as is his occupation, Halsey proves to be the one who harbors Kabnis' proof, and that proof exists in Halsey's own basement, "The Hole," in which Father John, almost deprived of sense, passes his waning years as a Wordsworthian combination of patriarch and butt. The ambiguity of this circumstance is compounded by the fact that Halsey uses "The Hole" for parties "on those occasions when he spices up the life of the small town."

Far from settling the question whether "The Hole" secures certain free expressions of life or contains the character of death, the text widens its own dichotomy. Father John may be either "a mute John the Baptist of a new religion—or a

tongue-tied shadow of an old." But the underworld quality of his place is brought out by Kabnis, with his usual irritable pungency, calling the old man "Father of hell," and significantly also by the narrator, the old man being apostrophized as

Dead blind father of a muted folk who feel their way upward to a life that crushes or absorbs them.

Kabnis himself, while he continues to rail at the old man in terms of the underworld motif ("You're an old man, a dead fish man, an black at that"), seems finally to be railing at something he feels and dreads in himself. Opposition or defiance is his mode of action, and so it is both a momentary reaction to Carrie's attempt to save him and a deep revelation of himself when he declares: "I get my life down in this scum-hole. The old man an me—" He elects the underworld in order to escape it, the hopeless irony of his situation appearing where he tries to put himself above Halsey, metonymically reduced to a wagon wheel:

Great God Almighty, a soul like mine cant pin itself onto a wagon wheel
an satisfy itself in spinnin around.

Literally he is referring to Halsey's trade, but in rejecting that he is pinning himself spiritually to another wheel, Ixion's, with fateful consequences. At this point Kabnis anticipates Baraka's conception of the consummate hell, having utterly confused and betrayed himself into annihilating heresy. Toomer has Kabnis all but recognize this: "Mind me, the only sin is whats done against the soul."

And yet Toomer has a larger vision than Kabnis, both negatively and positively—he knows a dimension of sin that Kabnis, the irascible solipsist, cannot know, and the dimension of redemption that Kabnis, the irascible rationalist, cannot imagine. Nor does Halsey, or even Lewis, the even-minded, incisive, unflinching visitor-observer, with all his education and sensitivity, prove equal to expressing Toomer's vision. Rather it is Halsey's sister who is present, and who mediates the culmination of the work. Her role appears slender enough in physical terms, but it is delineated with precise and resonant strokes. Her gentle dutifulness, her unresentful suffering, her intuitive intensity and freedom tempered by a learned caution, a motherly and womanly depth of being: these features all emerge in her first brief appearance, bringing lunch for Halsey and the old man, having her electric meeting with Lewis, reporting on the old man's loss of appetite, and belatedly delivering the message she'd been sent with. The narrative accords her a certain loveliness in "her fresh energy of the morning," and her brother, in telling her to help the recalcitrant Kabnis get up to work after a hard night of partying in the cellar, may be calling not only on her tact and her strength, but on the power of her healing unselfishness and love.

Carrie is an antithesis, and a rebuke to Kabnis. He exploits his connection with the old man in their underworld to give vent to what he dare not bring to light. "The old man is a good listener," he says cynically. "He's deaf . . . An I can talk to him. Tell him anything." By contrast Carrie sustains and heeds the old man:

"He's deaf an blind, but . . . I've heard that the souls of old folks have a way of seein things." One can only think that Father John's utterance is a response to her faith and empathy. Kabnis expects a kind of intellectual originality, and, not finding it, regains his composure with a cynical remark. But the old man expresses an immemorial truth, not something to titillate a palate for novelty, but something to weigh and keep faith by: "Th sin whats fixed . . . upon th white folks . . . f tellin Jesus—lies." The sounds "Boom. Boom. BOOM!" that ensue come from upstairs, not from above, with a somewhat melodramatic effect. A more expressive and a more genuine comment on the old man's pronouncement comes from Carrie's act of reverence and prayer before Father John: "Jesus, come."

Thus *Cane* concludes with a hint or a hope of redemption, arising out of the very environment of its underworld. As between Carrie and Father John, the redemption is obviously religious. For the narrator it takes a more naturalistic form, as "the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest . . . Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down . . ." Where Ellison resorts to a neo-metamorphic mythology to achieve a sense of redemption, Toomer stays with the natural heavens to proffer a quasi-anthropomorphic rebirth. The earth may be fallen, even to the underworld that Kabnis insists upon and that Halsey and Carrie endorse, but as the "shadows of pines are dreams that the sun shakes from its eyes," so the shadowy underworld carries, through Carrie and Father John, intimations of a veritable light.

In the Nigerian Amos Tutuola's *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle* (1955) the departure from the harshness of the modern American temper in treating the underworld is even more pronounced than in *Cane*. Tutuola works with a kinetic and unpredictable repertory of folklore, fantasy, moral sentence, and picaresque and grotesque techniques, all oriented toward a *felt* audience (and deployed with a deadpan ebullience and lively insouciance concerning the stricter formalities of usage). *Simbi* is the story of a young lady, "the most beautiful in [her] village," only child of "a wealthy woman," with nothing to do "except to eat and after that to bathe and then to wear several kinds of the costliest garments." She is possessed of a "beautiful voice [that] could wake deads," and a mind of her own. Thus upon the loss of her two dearest friends, "kidnapped from the paths by an unknown man," she begins to brood and eventually resolves unalterably to go out and get to know "Poverty" and "Punishment."

This is a precis of just the first two pages of the story, a fairy tale of exquisite happiness swiftly pivoting, as a matter of moral choice and sympathy, into elegy and terror. But even in the thick of happiness the harshness of the underworld strikes the ear; Simbi's voice can wake the dead. Also, the kidnapping by an unknown man may suggest, by analogy, the story of Proserpine; indeed Simbi will find the kidnapper, Dogo, sells his victims onto "the Path of Death," and she herself becomes a sort of willful Proserpine. There is a further suggestion of Orpheus in the powers of Simbi's voice. In this light the main body of the story stands as a descent into the underworld, with a plaiting of traditional motifs, but also with a distinct modern twist: Tutuola makes Dogo a trafficker in slaves, and

slavery becomes the path of death, its victims virtual denizens of the underworld.

Simbi's mission, then, is at once to undo slavery and to harrow hell (this Christian dimension of the underworld seems little in evidence otherwise). She can do neither, and can barely make good her own escape with only one of her friends; the other, with a host of others encountered along the way, is consumed by the Satyr. Dogo, however, is thoroughly chastised and made to promise to give over his devilish trade; he presumably returns to "his town," which itself sounds like a version of the underworld, being "too far and too fearful for other people to go there, . . . to the end of the world, perhaps." In this respect the underworld practically ceases to exist, and the story reaches not a happy ending, but a happy prospect. That prospect is not entirely lacking in outline or specification. The ostensible moral of the tale is that girls should obey their mothers (Simbi ignores her mother's advice at the outset), but a deeper, fuller inculcation of traditional culture is diffused through the novel. Not only her mother, but an old man—obviously his age is meant to suggest authority and wisdom—gives Simbi clear counsel, and various soothsayers and gods out of the age-old culture instruct and assist her once she cannot be turned away from her ordeal. Without taking away from her own courage and resourcefulness, we must recognize that it is the resources and wisdom of her culture that really serve to bring her safely home. Even her friend Rali, without Simbi's privileges, has more native wit than Simbi herself, and with her good advice standing them in good stead at a crucial juncture in the last battle against the Satyr, it is appropriate that she should be the one to come back with Simbi and be spared.

The obvious difference between Tutuola's universe and what we find in the modern American image of the black underworld lies in the fact that it is circumstantial for one, fundamental for the other. A major factor in this difference is no doubt the role of ancestral culture. For Tutuola, ancestral culture offers itself as something wise, creative, generous, protective, resourceful, stable, and comprehensive. For Baraka ancestral culture does not exist, and if it exists for Ellison it exists as a mirage, or a manhole cover inexplicably absent at the most inopportune time. Bledsoe stands as an epitome of this failure, and the white leaders—reactionary Southern or Northern liberal—stand as another. The narrator of *Invisible Man* carries in his brief case the essential poisonous products of such a culture, and it is necessary for him to realize that

to light my way out [of the manhole, the underworld] I would have to burn every paper in the brief case.

The same culture that provides a stay against the underworld in Tutuola's *Simbi* furnishes a version of it, from the viewpoint of Clarence, the white protagonist, in Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King*. But the action of the novel, following an obvious crisis of spirit, is such that his subjection to the underworld (the judgment chamber, the repetitive labyrinth of travel, the snake pit, the very room in which naked Clarence is shut away from the king are potent

underworld images) becomes his path to grace. In his much more complex and ironic style, Laye also presents African culture as a source of redemption (metaphysical or religious), and that even for the foreign white man.

Basically the method of the novel may be described as stream-of-subconsciousness, that is, a step beyond the calculated associations of Joyce, into an area where the reader cannot determine whether hallucination, a quasi-pathological demoralization and fantastic inventiveness, or a fierce and spiritually desperate and harrowing dream unto death is responsible for the curious forms of the action. A great sensuous vividness, compatible with any of these interpretations, marks the novel. But so does a profound epistemological quandary. Enigmatic objects and incidents are common, references to sleeping and dreaming abound, and there is clear evidence of Clarence's misconstructions of external events and of his gratuitous emotional states; the "mermaid"-sea cow episode would be a case in point. Clarence's own position is profoundly problematical, with his very sketchy past and his internal inconsistencies, such as his despising blacks and yet focusing all his aspirations, from material ambition to tender love to spiritual vision, on the blackest of the black, the king.

Clarence himself purblindly recognizes, the first time he sees the king, the kind of salvific force in blackness that the narrator ultimately establishes:

Perhaps the midnight of those limbs would help to lift love to its purest peak; yes, it kept love at an ideal remove, it prevented it from being changed into one knows not what, or only too well . . . into a hurtful bestiality. And these darknesses were absolute, blacker even in the king than in the blackest of his subjects.

He senses in the king an inner life partaking of "that very life which lies beyond death," and he wonders: "Can that be the sort of life I have come here to find?"

But the very casting of the question falsifies the issue by its drastic division between "hurtful bestiality" and that "remote, enigmatic" life. This reflects the false dichotomy between the southern capital of Aziana and the northern capital of Adramé. Adramé is architectural, Aziana natural; Adramé is densely populated, Aziana sparsely so, the former involving Clarence in masses of humanity, the latter in many single relationships; Adramé is a place of hopeless pursuit and movement, Aziana one of distraction or hopeless waiting. These distinctions stand out on the surface. But in terms of vital experience there is little to choose between the two capitals. In the south the odor of flowers and decay oppresses Clarence's senses; in the north it is the odor of grease. The same problems of perception occur in both capitals, in Adramé in relation to places and crowds, in Aziana to scenes and individuals. The same confusion as to states of dreaming and sleeping occurs in both, and the same strong suggestions of the underworld. It is not to be taken lightly that the beggar declares, "The South is everywhere." The point of the text is that Clarence must give over his dichotomous thinking, his penchant for facile analysis and classification. Thus "the inferno of the senses" does not stand utterly apart from the ethereal sublimity of the spirit; rather, in

Dantesque manner, that inferno leads complexly, self-denyingly toward that height. Very early in the text, as already observed, Clarence has the intuition that blackness, however lowly and sensual, may contain in itself the secret of, or the way to, ultimate spirituality. The Dioki episode in the snake pit, just before Clarence's second and definitive encounter with the king, brings him to confront this squarely, and so carries him beyond the helplessness of vanity and illusion to the helplessness of despair. To see that light was there throughout, with the darkness, to be had for a mere change of perspective, is to see that one may have seen before, and to apprehend that the life of darkness reveals both phenomenal fact and choice, and that one has chosen the opposite of what one has thought. What room, then, for another, saving choice, when the old one cannot be expunged, and when the new one may itself be a snare?

But Laye's vision is one of the gratuity of grace, and not one of Arminian pretension, let alone Calvinist rigor. The beggar's original attempt to express the essential nature of the king succeeds by inadvertency, by its very groping: "He is . . .," the beggar says, and again, "He is . . ." It is not necessary to refer to the epigraph and the idea of "Le Seigneur" to recognize the Lord in the novel; only one king *is*, and he is, as the beggar finally blurts out, "the king of kings." It is He who bestows his bright countenance on Clarence (the *Regard* of the original French title may best be rendered as "countenance," meaning both facial character and affirmative recognition, as of the object's right to exist). At this culminating moment in the text, Clarence apparently dies, but in the sense of countenance here given and actually contained in the text, he may truly exist for the first time. Certainly it is made clear, in the Dioki episode, that when Clarence no longer countenances sensuality and bestiality, it ceases to exist:

Oh! he did not succeed in turning away his eyes straight away. But when he had managed to eradicate from his sight and as it were wipe the old woman and her serpents from the face of the earth . . .

But we must recall, in order not to fall into Clarence's own fallacy of dichotomous thinking, that Dioki has knowledge of the king, has a measure of the truth (is a *soothsayer*) beyond Clarence's own. Her sensuality is grotesque, but her grotesque condition (grotto, underworld) is mystical, and Clarence imaginatively goes through it, uses its intuition and energy to go to the king. When Dioki insists, "I am not the king! . . . I am not the king!" she confesses a limitation in herself but also implies a dangerous idolatry in Clarence, a tendency to take a chthonian divinity for *the* divinity.

At no point does the text afford us the luxury of absolute distinction and simple positions. Its very resemblance to allegory constitutes part of its elusiveness; the tendency to allegory in criticism feeds on deficiency in the encountered object, and here is no deficiency. Rather we must countenance the fact that Clarence is living at an extremity, if not *in extremis*, and without constricting the text into a record exclusively of either hallucination grounded in an overburdened physiology, or a fantasy of moral decay and personal vanity, or a religious vision

of the paltriness of the self and the inscrutable path to salvation, let it stand as a black man's elaboration of a white man's conception of Africa, with all the density and surprise of a system wherein epistemological difficulties, moral and social quandaries, and an involved and ambiguous religious vision intertwine.

As he far exceeds Laye in complexity and involution, the novels of the West Indian Wilson Harris may almost seem to become verbal forms of what they occupy themselves with in greater or lesser degree—the subject of the underworld. And in fact Harris is implying that the weight of the human “person” naturally and necessarily breaks through the commonsensical, “fashionable” surface of the “novel of persuasion,” with its crust of social custom and psychological convenience. His emphasis on “the person” and his sense of indeterminacy—a protean interchangeableness enters into the social, moral, spatial, temporal, emotional beings of his characters—give him some distinction even in a highly experimental era. The task he sets himself has nothing to do with charting, or even formally exploring, the underworld of being; that too much implies another place for us to live in secure detachment. Rather Harris' task is to come to a lucid acceptance of the flux of the underworld, and, as far as purpose goes, to approach “a profound and difficult vision of the person—a profound and difficult vision of essential unity within the most bitter forms of latent and active historical diversity.” To get at Harris' profound and difficult vision, focusing on the underworld, let us survey *Palace of the Peacock*. This is actually the first of his novels, but, as Kenneth Ramchand observes, it “contains all Harris's basic themes, and anticipates his later designs” in a “rounded poetic vision.”

Palace of the Peacock (1960) ends with an apocalyptic access to an ultimate, all-encompassing and all-resolving state for the person of the protagonist. In this respect it is very much like *The Radiance of the King*. It uses music instead of light as its dominant image, but the “peacock” certainly keeps light before our minds and the “palace” suggests a royalty very much in keeping with Laye's position. More significant differences also appear. It poses epistemological quandaries, with the strong possibility that dreaming controls its amplitudes and devises its details; almost the first words of the novel are, “I dreamt I awoke.” But Harris bases himself in the position of uncertainty, whereas Laye exploits it from without. Laye, though he makes so much of Clarence's journeying as in a quest to make contact with the king, leaves no doubt that waiting, the act of faith and hope, is fundamental to that contact; the king really comes to Clarence, who does not even ready himself with “good-will” (“charity” is the usual Christian term). But Harris maintains the active framework of a voyage, a quest, going not only through space and time but also through dimensions of space and time that seem to make the culminating scene a “geographical” as well as metaphysical state. The major difference, however, lies in the fact that the mystical absorption into timelessness is rendered by Laye's narrator as a privileged observer, by Harris' narrator as subject and participant. In effect, since there is finality, a conception of death in either case, Harris is generating a new conception of the finality of death.

Two stories, one simple and realistic and perfunctory, the other elaborate and

cryptic and symbolic, make up *Palace of the Peacock*. The simple “facts” are that the narrator, a poetic, sensitive, sickly younger brother, is visiting his more ambitious, burly, intense, but inhumane older brother, Donne, at the latter’s landholding in the midst of a largely undeveloped, “primitive” region of the Guyanese savannah. This after a separation of some years. A woman named Mariella seems to run the place for Donne, and is forthrightly ill-used by him, to the younger brother’s consternation. The latter idolizes Donne, in the ambiguous way of human idolatry; he at once fears and fears for him, with a displaced anxiety, and has since childhood had a dream, reeking of sibling rivalry on the surface, where Donne dies riding a horse (possibly a Jungian symbol of uncontrolled passion). The younger brother has an incurable disease of the left eye, but finds that that eye, as it were compensating for loss of sight, affords him meaningful and revelatory “visions” and “dreams.” The main body of *Palace of the Peacock* is a dream compounded of Donne’s story, domineering personality, his allusive name, Mariella and her helpless subjugation and resentment, and the narrator’s poetic in-sight into the kaleidoscopic seething under the apparent fixity of Donne’s world.

The “extractable story” of the dream is well summed up by Ramchand:

A boat’s crew [led by Donne, an early imperialist of the New World] beats its way up-river through the Guyanese jungles and rapids towards an Amerindian settlement called Mariella, only to find that the folk have fled. The crew discover an old Amerindian woman [in hiding] . . . , force her to act as their guide, and set off in pursuit of the folk. During the hazardous journey beyond Mariella, violence breaks out [and the crew begins to die off, from natural causes or by accident. Eventually] the boat is wrecked and the rest of the crew meet their deaths The crew is made up of the descendants and mixtures of peoples . . . belonging historically to different centuries and to successive waves of migrants to the Caribbean Moreover, [it] is a replica of a famous crew that had been drowned on a similar exploiting mission some time before, and they . . . shuttle between life and death at their author’s arbitrary demands It is not possible to make out whether the crew *exist* independently or are merely creatures of the dreamer’s free imagination.

(From the introduction to the Faber paper-covered edition)

The two stories link and move as one around the character of Donne, for whom the dream-story realizes not only the threat of death harboring in Mariella’s meek deportment, but his own inner fear of having no indisputable material life, of being somehow dead in an underworld of poverty and toil, like his parents: “They gave up the ghost before they had well started to live.” He enjoins his younger brother to “rule the land . . . while you still have a ghost of a chance,” and the condition of ghostliness seems more immediate and unavoidable than he knows. Later he will wonder if he has the “ghost of a chance” of changing his ways, and the same preeminence of ghost over chance appears. For now, all his

ruthless energy has made him the ruler of an effective underworld: "He had established himself in his brooding hanging house. Long before he had conquered and crushed the region he ruled, annihilating everyone and devouring himself in turn." Man, like the boat's crew, is in a condition of "living and dying together in a common grave."

The interchangeability of life and death and the imitative economy of the underworld stand out clearly in connection with Cameron. Like Donne, Cameron "wanted space and freedom to use his own hands in order to make his own primitive home and kingdom on earth, hands that would rule everything, magical hands dispensing life and death . . . as a witch doctor would or a tribal god and judge." But it is clear that Cameron goes beyond Donne's desire to "rule the land." He wishes to rule mortality itself as an exempt and, conspicuously, non-redemptive god; he saves himself, others he will not save. This "rule" of Cameron's seems grossly realized by another member of the crew, Wishrop, who goes on a "cold and mad" shooting spree, beginning with his wife and her lover, *in flagrante*, and going on to his boon companions, and "lastly himself." The final phrase contains a crucial note for understanding the whole desire for absolute clarity and control besetting everyone but the poetic narrator. The desire to defeat mortality leads to the destruction of life, and of the self, for mortality must be defined as the implicit presence of death in life. One goes, and goes out with, the other. It is not surprising that Cameron is willing to treat the *other members of the crew* as "dead people" ("all-you rise bodily from the grave"), but not himself ("I ain't dead . . . I can prove it any day").

The novel does not deny that mortality may be dealt with: even in the absence of a plausible witch doctor or tribal god, it avoids the flat sense of hell which Baraka's *System* offers in its explicitly post-Christian universe. The seven days of the voyage from Mariella to the waterfall represent the interval of a new de-creation of fixities and certitudes, without bringing on a restoration of chaos. Rather they constitute the amnion of a new, interfluent comprehensive life. Thus the crew "saw the naked unequivocal flowing peril and beauty and soul of the pursuer and the pursued all together, and they knew they would perish if they dreamed to turn back."

But if this new sort of world is to have the cogency of dreaming, and not the vapid falsity of dreaminess, it needs to have effect and confirmation in human terms. This occurs within the poetic narrator who becomes increasingly the protagonist, and not just the medium of the action. In becoming "blind himself" Donne now takes on the function of an alter ego, and is subsumed into a system of illuminated uncertainty that he had wished despotically to fix and dominate.

The poetic imagination, with its capacity at once to achieve itself and to annihilate itself in exquisite conformity to any vagary and contradiction in what it perceives (the achievement of its object), becomes the key to existence in this world. Significantly the seventh day, the day of consummation, brings back the landscape and objects and figures of the simple factual story. The point is that the world begins where one finds himself, and ends where one finds himself, but moves without visibly moving through all space and time, which prove as

continuous and variously identical as one is oneself. The motivic word, muse, in *Palace of the Peacock* conveys at once a passive drift in the mind and its inspired capacity to know what is difficult and sublime. Thus the narrator can speak with confidence in the bewilderment of the underworld:

I had started to walk at last . . . after a long infancy and dreaming death . . . in the midst of mutilation and chaos that had no real power to overcome me.

What he comes to is virtually a Blakean vision, looking "though [the] eye" and not merely with it, "trusting" the world and finding that "everything," though at first offered as "half-finished sketches in the air," is "filled suddenly from within to become living and alive." Being is implicit, but not predictable in this state of things, and "the person," for whom the narrator stands as both spokesman and exemplar, must accommodate himself to a knowledge that is both sufficient and problematical.

The conventions of epistemology (and of the novel) are repudiated:

Idle now to dwell upon and recall anything one had ever responded to with the sense and sensibility [*pace* Jane Austen] that were our outward manner and vanity and conceit.

He acknowledges and escapes his "fear of strangeness and catastrophe" and, still within a basic acceptance of movement and duality, conveys the experience, not the meaning, of "the inner music and voice of the peacock":

I . . . sang as I had never heard myself sing before. I felt the faces before me begin to fade and part company from me and from themselves as if our need of one another was now fulfilled, and our distance from each other was the distance of a sacrament, the sacrament and embrace we knew in one muse and one undying soul. Each of us now held at last in his arms what he had been forever seeking and what he had eternally possessed.

Even so selective an array as this may give the impression that the modern black novelist is colonizing the underworld, imposing new mind-sets on the threefold culture of its original institution: the Dantesque, with its emphasis on due punishment and necessary purgation; the Homeric-Virgilian, with its emphasis on vital reconciliation and the guarantees of prophetic counsel; and the anthropo-mythological, with its emphasis on rebirth and redemption. But as a matter of fact (and perhaps also of principle) this is not the case. A resurgence of the underworld theme seems to mark modern fiction in general. It occurs conspicuously in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. We can recognize it in D. H. Lawrence, speaking in *Women in Love* of "the voluptuous resonance of darkness, the strong, dangerous underworld, mindless, inhuman," or again in "The Lost Girl," calling attention to "something [in a coalminer]

forever unknowable and inadmissible, something that belonged purely to the underground . . . knowledge humiliated, subjected, but ponderous and inevitable." It appears centrally also in Lawrence's *The Man Who Died*. From Dostoevski's *Notes from the Underground* to Faulkner's *Light in August* or Robert Penn Warren's *Meet Me in the Green Glen* or John Updike's *Rabbit Redux*, wherein an inner room suggests the underworld as sanctuary, it declares its presence and importance. Besides it occurs in the Proustian retreat, and in Jean Genet's prison scenes as a sort of horizontal underworld, with the vertical one growing archaic. Perhaps it has taken a new lease on life in Western culture as a whole. Surely we see it in the Freudian id, if not the Freudian womb.

But it seems undeniable, after scrutinizing the topography of modern black fiction from Jean Toomer to Camara Laye and Wilson Harris, that the black moderns have cultivated the underworld with particular candor and elaboration and perhaps intimacy. And not only cultivated but communicated it (on the lower frequencies, I speak for you), as though one driven to a cellar had found a dark treasure and transformed and redeemed the cellar by delivering it to the world.