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Symbolic Wrights: The Poetics of Being Underground

INCIPIT

And there in that great iron city, that impersonal, mechanical city, amid the steam, the smoke, the snowy winds, the blistering suns; there in that self-conscious city, that city so deadly dramatic and stimulating, we caught whispers of the meanings that life could have, and we were pushed and hounded by facts much too big for us. Migrants like us were driven and pursued, in the manner of characters in a Greek play, down the path of defeat; but luck must have been with us, for we somehow survived; and, for those of us who did not come through, we are trying to do the bidding of Hamlet who admonished Horatio:

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
 Absent thee from felicity awhile,
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
 To tell my story. [*Hamlet* Act 5 Sc. 2]

From Wright's Introduction to *Black Metropolis*, 1945

It is fitting that Wright himself should provide the incipit for the work of this paper, for the epigraph above, drawn from his introduction to Horace Cayton and St Clair Drake's *Black Metropolis* (1945), is deeply concerned with a similar metaphoric of chaos and cosmos, apertures and closings, heights and depths, and beginnings and endings that occupy me here. Wright was one of the greatest interlocutors on the modern implications of such dialectical oppositions, especially as they occur in the arena of political discourse and novelistic representation. As in his best known work of fiction, *Native Son* (1940), Wright's narratives gave birth to a broad new way of conceptualizing modern black life in America; indeed, *Native Son*'s greatest explicit claim is that Bigger Thomas, the novel's tragic protagonist, is himself the scion of modern America and its split human condition. Thus as a metaphor, Bigger represents not black America alone, but America itself, replete with its ambivalences, paradoxes, ironies, and cataclysms. Bigger is America's natural and native son.

Yet even as much of our criticism has focused primarily on the ideological problems Wright raises in his fiction, and especially in *Native Son*, there remains a need for further

criticism focusing upon the workings of Wright's poetics in *The Man Who Lived Underground*. In the wealth of literature on Wright, the main features of his poetics certainly have not gone unnoticed by critics,¹ yet most writers have focused upon *Native Son*, of course, with a second majority looking at his later fiction, especially *The Outsider* (1953).

¹See, for instance, Joyce Ann Joyce, *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005), and Eugene E. Miller, *Voice of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990). Joyce sees an "ideological relationship" (13) between the naturalism and existentialism that generally serve as interpretive lenses for much of Wright's fiction, and tragedy, which she feels "extends the limits of existentialism" (14). Seeing Wright, and rightly, I think, as preeminently concerned with the human and human expression, Joyce argues that Wright's art of tragedy "not only finds meaning in human existence but also celebrates it" (14). Yet Joyce concerns herself with the Western traditions of tragedy in ways that diverge sharply from my intent; while she purports to read Wright primarily through Aristotelian notions of tragedy, feeling that this is the most advantageous approach to Wright's work, I examine the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology (that is, ways and categories of perceiving and knowing as aspects of consciousness or being) that undergird Wright's art of metaphor. JanMohamed's study addresses the "ways in which 'subjectivities' are bound and hence formed by the threat of death" (4) and, indeed, as he draws upon the notion of "social death" promulgated by Orlando Patterson (in *Slavery and Social Death* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982]), he somewhat problematically uses the terms "slave and black interchangeably to refer to the black man or woman living in the South between 1900 and the 1950s as well as to Wright's characters" (5). Wright was, as many critics have noted, preoccupied with the depiction of death, yet JanMohamed argues that many of Wright's critics, including Paul Gilroy, "overlook the agency of death in Wright's work" (11). For JanMohamed, the "willing acceptance of death' functions as the most viable form of liberation in the fiction of Wright" (22).

I see the trope of death to be at the center of the novella's concerns, yet, surprisingly, neither of these critics focuses to any extent on *The Man Who Lived Underground*. Joyce, though her book is titled *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy*, does not focus on Wright's oeuvre at large, but solely upon *Native Son*. No mention is made of *Underground*, nor is any but passing mention made of Wright's other works of long fiction. JanMohamed, who moves with chronological acuity through Wright's major works (from *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) to *The Long Dream* (1958)), gives no critical attention whatsoever to the novella, though it would seem quite germane to the thrust of his book (he explains this omission briefly in a footnote, p. 303ff15). Miller's *Voice of a Native Son* remains focused on Wright's poetics (gleaned through an examination of Wright's published and unpublished manuscripts) throughout its pages. Drawing upon Wright's own words, Miller underscores the ways in which Wright sought to push art "beyond mere contemplation. In short its expression must become an objective act, having immediacy as its aim" (xviii). This sort of understanding of Wright's poetics is central to reading *The Man Who Lived Underground*, and accords with my analysis of the novella, since I view Wright as moving the reader toward a sense of moral outrage at the murder of his protagonist, an outrage that would ideally extend beyond the act of reading and compel the reader toward constructive social action. However, Miller views guilt as the unifying "symbol" of *Underground*, a reading I cannot support firstly because guilt itself cannot be a *symbol*, though it may be a major theme that is symbolized in various ways. Further, I see the novella proposing a number of critical and conceptual metaphors (existentialist guilt among them) that emerge from the symbolic opposition of chaos and cosmos, as I argue here. Though his method is quite different from mine, Houston Baker's reading of the novella in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), which insists upon a "tropology" of the "black (w)hole," and thus a metaphoric of consciousness, echoes my intention here.

New critical interest in Wright's poetry is fast emerging. However, the fundamental innovation that Wright's poetics represents in this novella, which is, of late, woefully understudied, its differential relation to similar poetics found throughout the African American canon, and its potential for subversive action and knowledge, have not yet received sufficient attention in the scholarship.² In drawing our attention to Wright's poetics, I do not mean to underscore simply the structural and formal elements at work in his mode of art, but the affective force of his tropes, and the symbolic exchange he establishes between the conceptual metaphors he creates and the world beyond his texts. Wright himself calls our attention to such matters of the text when he opines, in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), that the "image and emotion" of literature "possess a logic of their own" (1410). He insists that affect and imagery—including figures of language—are capable of granting form, meaning, and access to a new and better world.

The novella *The Man Who Lived Underground* paradoxically points the way to life in such a world through the complexity of its philosophical metaphors. In considering the novella, this paper examines a characteristic element of Wright's poetics and the central metaphor of this story: the habitation of the chthonian world. This trope has, of course, attracted the attention of many of Wright's critics, most of whom, however, see it as Wright's bleak and pessimistic judgment of the world's sorry state of affairs.³ My approach differs from this perspective. I see Wright's fundamental metaphor of psychic and bodily descent as emblematic of the ways in which archetypal tropes of death and life, guilt and freedom, time and space, memory and oblivion, and dreaming and waking facilitate the text's demand for a new and better world. Wright's novella underscores the value he places upon the exactness and complexity of the image in narrative, and the relation between metaphorical images and the words used to convey them. Thus, as he, in the words of Shakespeare, draws his breath in pain to tell the story of the underground man, the task he sets before the reader is that of discerning the affinities of metaphorical language and human life, even as they are condensed in the weathered patina of the tragic anti-hero. The tonal images and sedimented emotions of *The Man Who Lived Underground* form a tropological stream of discourse in which the novella not only probes its own status as a work of art, but

² Indeed, in the past decade, *The Man Who Lived Underground* seems to have fallen out of critical favor: in preparation for writing this essay, my review of current bibliographies on Wright revealed very few studies of the novella published during the first decade of this century. This is a serious oversight in Wright scholarship, one I attempt to ameliorate through this contribution. Certainly in light of Wright's centennial, which was celebrated in 2008, additional studies of this text will emerge.

³ See, for instance, Robert Bone's early study, *Richard Wright* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1969), which is exemplary in this regard. Bone argues that *Underground* is one of three enduring texts by Wright (the others are *Native Son* [1940] and *Black Boy* [1945]) that will lead the reader to a discovery of "the central thrust of Wright's imagination" (14). Yet Bone's perspective on the pessimism in Wright's work is clear. As he concludes, "Wright's subterranean world is a symbol of the Negro's social marginality. Thrust from the upperworld by the racial exclusiveness of whites, he is forced to lead an underground existence. Wright was groping for a spatial metaphor that would render the Negro's ambiguous relationship to Western culture. In *Native Son*, seeking to express the same reality, he hit upon the metaphor of No Man's Land. It conjures up a bleak and sterile landscape in which a hapless soldier crouches, in constant danger of annihilation by enemy or friend" (26). In Bone's reading, the Negro, and by extension the reader, is left without sanctuary or reprieve.

also demonstrates the ways in which Wright's theory and practice of metaphor touch on and contribute to broader philosophical issues of the historicity of black being, the liminality of black existence, and the crises of social belonging.⁴

⁴ It would be good to take a moment to expand upon this concept of the "historicity of black being." For Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1929), "Being-in-the-world" is a concept that is central to understanding human existence (83), for it signifies not only being in relation to other worldly entities (entities that may be living or inanimate, but that are not human), but, more pointedly, it indicates the quality of concern that is constitutive of human being, which he calls "Dasein."

Dasein is a term that may be translated, in the vernacular, as "existence," but it is usually and best left untranslated. Heidegger sees Dasein, which is a combination of two German words, "Da," meaning "there," and "sein," meaning "being," not as equivalent to a holistic subject or self, but as a self constituted temporally and existing in space without being limited to any specific time or place. For Heidegger, Dasein, is characterized not only by its historicity, but also by its care and concern, which are crucial ways of Being-in-the-world:

Dasein's facticity is such that its Being-in-the-world has always dispersed [*zerstreut*] itself or even split itself up into definite ways of Being-in. The multiplicity of these is indicated by the following examples: having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining All these ways of Being-in have *concern* as their kind of Being—a kind of Being which we have yet to characterize in detail. Leaving undone, neglecting, renouncing, taking a rest—these too are ways of concern; but these are all *deficient* modes, in which the possibilities of concern are kept to a "bare minimum." (83, italics in original)

In other words, the central aspect of Dasein lies in its "possibilities," a Heideggerian notion that correlates wonderfully with Ellison's concept of and insistence upon human possibilities, as I touch upon in this work. Another crucial characteristic of Dasein, then, is its "care," or "concern," which Heidegger uses as an "ontological term for *existential*" (83). Care, he writes "is always concern and solicitude if only privately" (238-39). This is, of course, a central theme critically at play in *The Man Who Lived Underground*, a theme that is not always credited in the literature on this work, but to which I turn my attention near the end of this essay.

Throughout this essay, I will use terms such as "being" and "existence" rather than the less familiar "Dasein," though I hope my meaning will nonetheless be clear. I will also refrain from capitalizing the term "Being" in my own usage, though when needed I will reproduce it as it is used by Heidegger and others. I will use instead the lowercase "being" to indicate at once an embrace of ideas of existence, life, care, and concern, and a refusal of metaphysical concepts of absolute presence or determinate subjectivity. Heidegger used Dasein as a rejection of Aristotelian categories of being (which included the notions of "substance," and "essence," which Heidegger sought to counter), and universalist "Being" or absolutist notions of "Being" that came about in the work of both Kant and Hegel. Heidegger, like Nietzsche, sought to refute these absolutist notions, and he did so later in his oeuvre by placing Being "under erasure"—the *sous rature* adopted by Derrida—showing both the unreliability of the term and its indispensability.

Fabre points out that Wright came to read Heidegger well after the publication of *Native Son* and soon after *The Man Who Lived Underground* appeared in print. Indeed, in 1944, he asked Dorothy Norman, the prominent photographer, editor, author, and activist, "to instruct him on existentialism and the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger, whom she had read. She invited Paul Tillich and Hannah Arendt over so that they could discuss the topic with him" (*Unfinished Quest* 299). From this perspective, a use of Heidegger in examining Wright is not only appropriate, but reveals Wright's

Of course, the use of the metaphorical takes place throughout the tradition of African American poetry and prose alike. In this essay, I consider it as unfolding not in the *pursuit* of being (as has often been argued by such noted scholars as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *Figures in Black* (1987) and in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988); that is, that African Americans have used inventive metaphorical strategies to “write themselves into existence” and to “prove” their humanity, and thereby establish or enter into historicity), but in the socio-political *revelation* of black being, or black being-in-the-world, to adapt the Heideggerian sense of this phrase to my purpose, such that the always already being of African Americans is granted, even the always already of their so-called racial difference. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, for example, DuBois metaphorically uses bars of music to preface each of his essays as a representation of black being, even though they constitute an instantiation of silence. Human expression is transfigured into silence in DuBois’ text, yet this silence signifies both literally (as “visible music”) and metaphorically, by way of absent lyrics. The bars of music function as graphemes that call us to a recognition of language, to an engagement with language. And thus, drawing upon Heidegger a bit further here, being, not simply as particularity but also as existential thought in relation with the present as well as future worlds, inhabits this language.

In using bars of music to represent the Spirituals and, thus, the thought of the slave regarding her present and future conditions, DuBois does not pursue or bestow being through his prose. Rather, he reveals its always already existence by thinking and sharing the poetics of the slaves with his reader. Ethical work is done through this gesture in *Souls*, for how can one grasp the truth of being writ large if one denies the existence of black being there within the veil? Socio-political work is done as well: DuBois demonstrates how the slave and post-slave populations project their being toward the world through the art of metaphor.

Here, then, we must see the Spirituals not simply as ecstatic religious expression, but as an ek-staticinstance of allegorical thinking.⁵ Allegorical thought, a species of metaphorical thinking, is also hermeneutical engagement, a thinking and an interpretation that have to do with a sustained engagement with worldly concerns, existential concerns. In this way, the Spirituals have much to do with an afterlife, yes; but they also have much to do with a critical concern for the world in which the slaves lived, and the world they themselves envisioned and created.

It must be said that Richard Wright had little understanding of the poetics of the Spirituals in the way I read them here.⁶ For Wright, the Spirituals provided fertile ground

own prescience regarding the ideas that eventually coalesced in mid-twentieth-century versions of existentialism.

⁵ My use of the term “ek-static” draws upon readings in both Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre adapts Heidegger’s concept of “ek-static temporality” to refer to the quality (rather than the quantity) of “lived” time. The emphasis here would be upon the situational and existential conditions faced by the slave. Also of concern would be the care for others exhibited in the Spirituals, as well as action described and prescribed in their lyrics.

⁶ Wright’s idea that the blues were an urban form of the Spirituals—expressed in an introduction to *Southern Exposure* (a three-album recording of folk songs by Josh White)—certainly accords with the perspective on this point that most musicologists who study the subject embrace. It is striking that

for the exposition of a pre-modern culture that must be overcome and surpassed. He saw little of the modern possibilities—intellectual as well as political—that DuBois saw in the Spirituals. Instead, Wright proffers them in *The Man Who Lived Underground* as evidence of a collective people's guilt. This point will require some explanation.

It is true that Richard Wright, in "Blueprint for Negro Writing," considered African American expression, including folklore, Spirituals, and the blues, to be a font of "racial wisdom" (1405), and he believed that Negro culture stemmed from the black church and African American folklore. Yet he also felt that, since the Civil War, the black church functioned as an inadequate and even deceptive "antidote for suffering and denial" (1404). While he allows that black religion constituted an important element of early black radicalism and nationalism, Wright argued that Negroes of his own day were still apt to look to the church as the source of "their only sense of the whole universe, [their] only relation to society and mind" and their "only guide to personal dignity" (1404). Such over-dependence upon black religion and black folklore for the development of the Negro's *weltanschauung* is as manifest in black nationalism as it is in black institutions such as "a Negro church, a Negro press, a Negro social world, a Negro sporting world, a Negro business world, a Negro school system; in short, a Negro way of life in America," Wright insists (1406). Though African Americans did not ask for these separate social institutions, Wright states, they are compelled to accept them as integral aspects of a way of life that has been forced upon them by the oppressive social and political systems of the southern United States, especially.

Wright reiterates that African American writers must, in turn, embrace black nationalism and its constituent elements—including religious expression—as organic to black existence in America, but they must do so only with an eye toward transcending them. He argues:

Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them. They must accept the concept of nationalism because, in order to transcend it, they must possess and understand it. And a national spirit in Negro writing means a nationalism carrying the highest possible pitch of social consciousness. It means a nationalism that knows its origins, its limitations; that is aware of the dangers of its position; that knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America; a nationalism whose reason for being lies in the simple fact of self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society. (1406)

Though the black folk were full of potential as a natural proletariat, black folk were also guilty in Wright's mind because they refused the power of choice that was endemic to modern freedom: they could choose to move beyond nationalism; they could choose a broader form of thought. Instead, in Wright's view, they had refused the self-consciousness and awareness that DuBois seems to accept as intrinsic to the black folk expression that founds black nationalism itself, at least in Wright's genealogy of the concept. Wright argued

though Wright calls the blues the "spirituals of the city" (qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 238), he does not draw upon the blues in the urban setting of *Underground*.

that black folk expression, especially in the Spirituals, was not a simple stage along the way to transcending an overly simplistic black nationalism, but that black folk expression in the Spirituals and other vernacular forms could, at the same time, be tapped as a source for the transcendence of the worldly limits of racism and oppression, a way of attaining, however tenuously, a state of psychic freedom and the realities of bodily freedom. DuBois, too, recognized the signal importance of folk expression in American culture, but refused to call for its sublimation,⁷ as did a number of his contemporaries, including James Weldon Johnson.⁸ DuBois, having completed his exposition of the Spirituals in the final chapter of *Souls*, links them directly to the cause of democracy and, arguably, as a cultural expression that could help obliterate the global color-line that is one of the central foci of his critique. This is why, perhaps, we note that sharp shift in tone near the conclusion of *The Souls of Black Folk*, when DuBois, after providing one of the earliest critical treatments of the Spirituals, which are indeed songs of freedom, in both the spiritual and moral senses of this term,⁹ abruptly and brashly interrogates whites' supposed sole possession of freedom, which they ensured by claiming a racially exclusive national identity. "Your country? How came it yours?" DuBois queries incisively, before launching a searing critique of American national history, in which African Americans and their cultural expressions played a central and definitive role. The conclusion of his strident exposition is the articulation of a radical vision of democracy.

Wright, of course, did not note DuBois' revisionist perspective on the Spirituals in "Blueprint." Yet his erstwhile protégé, Ralph Ellison, for whom *The Man Who Lived Underground* would be instructive as a model and as thematic inspiration, forcefully takes up DuBois' attention to the intersections of black folk culture and radical democracy when he raises a similar question regarding freedom in his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. There, his concern for freedom is expressed through metaphors of ideal democracy, but his approach, too, contrasts sharply with Wright's. The invisible man's quip, "I yam what I am", and his forging in the very crucible of black folk culture that is so important yet so seemingly dispensable to Wright, call us to a greater consideration of the historicity of black being and its continual efforts to make itself known even as it stretches forth toward an ideal world to come (266). Black being, as such, has had to contend with processes of objectification that arose in the early modern period, a period contemporary to the rise of Western imperialism

⁷ I am using "sublimation" in the psychoanalytic sense of this term, such that cathexes that might be seen as the motility behind black folk expression such as Spirituals and "dialect poetry" would be redirected towards other more "socially acceptable" avenues of affect and utterance. DuBois might characterize such cathexes as emanating from an instinct to live and thrive, requiring no such redirection; Wright might see them as coming from the death drive, demanding their own transcendence. Though he does not give pointed attention to *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Abdul JanMohamed explores at length the poetics of what he calls the "death-bound-subject" which, he argues, is central to the "teleological structure of [Wright's] work." See JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject*, 2. These points merit further discussion, especially given Wright's deep investment in psychiatry and Freudian psychoanalysis, but I do not have space to pursue them here.

⁸ See Johnson's Preface to the *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922); I discuss this preface and Johnson's perspective below.

⁹ "Moral" is used here to underscore the morality that was expounded as a central aspect of the concept of freedom in 18th and 19th century continental philosophy.

in the fifteenth century, and that extends through the modern civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century to our own day. Embodiedness, and the phenomenology of the black body, are issues in constant question in the work of each of these writers (especially in Ellison's *Invisible Man*), and thus they are frequently at the center of a poetics of being in African American culture and African American metaphorical constructions.

For metaphor, as Aristotle has taught us in the *Poetics*, sets before the eyes an image that relates the reality in which being is situated; it permits the grasping of the dissimilar within the similar, a transgression of categories of identity and a deviance from established sets of knowledge. Such oppositionality is false, of course, as the othering of the black body in particular takes place via the exigencies and dictates of white western capital and political power. Wright makes clear his awareness of this point in "Blueprint." Yet Wright, like DuBois before him and Ellison after him, employs metaphor in an effort to establish a rapport with the white western reader (though he does not readily admit this point) and to commune with the reader of African descent by way of a subject/object paradigm quite familiar to the American reader (with whiteness occupying a position of subjectivity and knowing, and blackness relegated to an antithetical position of objecthood and inscrutability). And while Wright, unlike writers such as DuBois, does not suggest to the reader a clear path of action as black being is revealed, he nonetheless offers her or him an ironic and subversive portrait of conscious black being and an alternative pathway to ideal humanism.

I suggest that the alternate pathway Wright offers is hewn subtly out of his antagonistic relationship to black folk culture and black folk expression. It is no simple thing that Wright's works remain compelling to the present generation of readers. I would argue that this is so because Wright's novels, essays, short stories, and novellas (to say nothing of his poetry) present to the reader a disturbing but crystal clear (if not at times purposely hyperbolic) portrait of the journey of black being in mid-twentieth century America. Whereas the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston (whose writing Wright disparaged) might have provided her reader inspiration for living, Wright shows his reader the clear path to death. In Wright's narratives, this pathway is littered with his protagonists' choices, which in most instances of Wright's fiction—the so-called later Wright in exile as well as the early Wright who wrote about the South from his perch in the urban North—disallow the freedom for which the protagonists dearly yearn. The wages of guilt, that is, the recompense for a refusal of consciousness, comprise the lesson one draws from Wright's fiction, but this is a lesson the reader must learn on his or her own. Wright does not tell us how we must act, that is, in what ways we should demonstrate our care and concern for others through ethical action, as do canonical figures throughout the African American literary tradition, including the eighteenth-century autobiographer Olaudah Equiano and the nineteenth-century poet and novelist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Yet we, as did the protest agents of the 1960s who embraced Wright's work unequivocally, know that we must. Wright's greatest gift to us is such knowledge.

The grounds for an agency-based knowledge such as that Wright limns are firmly situated in a poetics of underground life: one must immerse oneself in the consciousness of the underground in order to grasp the global consciousness that comes with freedom. In *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Wright's poetics takes shape through metaphors of chaos and cosmos, two oppositional, ontological tropes of understanding whose boundaries Wright