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Zen and the Art of Richard Wright

Time exists for us because we measure it vicariously by observing the movement of things. Consequently, however, we arbitrarily designate point As and point Bs along a seemingly linear construct. And herein lies the problem: we tend to merge these pairs of points and make out of them destinations—that follow one after the other in endless procession—instead of admiring the transitions and transformations these junctions actually represent. Through words Richard Wright would ultimately find freedom, but when we look at his mind’s—and subsequently his craft’s—journey through the metamorphoses of understanding the magic, power, and catharsis of literary expression, we can see a very logical progression that redirects his journey inward with nary a destination in sight.

Through a succession of experiences involving the assimilation and employment of words—or lack thereof, as in the beginning of Black Boy (American Hunger)—Wright shows us this transformation in stark detail albeit with the benefit of hindsight. By focusing on seemingly separate instances throughout his autobiography, the reader can holistically discern a ‘quasi-Sidharthean’ quest for enlightenment. For Wright this takes varying forms and degrees of freedom from an alternation of oppressive environments contained in an early twentieth-century South, an urbanized North of the Twenties and Thirties, and self as positioned not only against environment, but also against his own understanding of self—a oneness only hinted at in Existentialism and exemplified in Zen Buddhism. This transition, and thus his autobiography, would end not in American Hunger but in the thousands of haiku poems he would pen in the last eighteen months of his life under the auspices of self-imposed exile in France.

Black Boy (American Hunger) starts out in the most telling of places: the poverty of utterly stifling surroundings. Four-year-old Richard’s journey begins in the home, a home that confronts him with the reality of a sick grandmother whose comfort—among other things—is far more important than Richard’s right to be a child. “... My mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still, warning me that I must make no noise. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient” (BB 3). Wright defines for the reader his conflict by presenting us with a young self “dreaming of running and playing and shouting”—in short,

those things a child would embrace as forms of freedom. He sets this in sharp contrast against “Granny’s old, white, wrinkled, grim face framed by a halo of tumbling black hair ...” (BB 3) Wright manages to outline, in this description of his grandmother, the various aspects of oppression he encounters throughout the text. With the word ‘old,’ he makes out of Granny an antiquity, a product of another time—having been born a slave. Later in a conversation Richard has with his mother, Granny’s ‘white face’ hints at the dark truth of being a black woman born and raised on a plantation. He initiates this conversation in his head, reflecting: “Now, there was my grandmother ...Was she white? Just how white was she? What did the whites think of her whiteness?” (BB 47) Her ‘whiteness’ would come to be synonymous with a danger akin to that which he would experience in relation to racist whites. Moreover, by showing us “wrinkles,” he shows us the weathered nature of a long life of submission to whites and to religion. How could her countenance *not* be ‘grim’—all those she has seen suffer in her past are served up as proof of the inevitable future for those she has yet to meet.

Furthermore, giving her a ‘halo of tumbling black hair’ foreshadows a religion he would not only forsake, but also therein find a *safer* rebellion. The ‘tumbling of black hair’ reminds the reader of the inescapable observation that she is, in fact, a black woman, in addition to being a fallen one in the sense that she has accepted her fate as God’s provenance—looking to a better hereafter in lieu of the impossibility of creating a better here-now. Wright goes on to reinforce this idea by setting her hair ‘lying upon a huge feather pillow’—feathers plucked from a multitude of dead birds symbolizing the plethora of dead dreams Granny represents, but also the comfort she seeks within them. At the same time, however, the narrator takes the reader by Richard’s small hand to a window where we spy a solitary flying bird—symbolic of not only freedom, but also Richard’s aloneness. In reaction, he loudly rejoices only to become a nuisance for his mother to stifle.

To Wright’s reflecting mind, the perceived threat of force against felicity is an attempt to destroy his dreams. Fortunately this only suffices to encourage a hunger Wright references throughout the rest of the book. Oppression presents itself in the many guises of fear, and Wright lets us know this by embodying it within the character of his grandmother. More succinctly stated, Wright pits imposed fear against anger and impatience, which is the ‘self vs. environment’ conflict he sought to understand in his life and through his works. If Granny’s home were the perfect setting for his *safer* rebellion, then it would in turn be within self that he would find the *safest* place to rebel—freeing himself from the constraints of his environment.

Many critics have said that Wright never got over the episode of his mother's beating him nearly to death—for fighting whites boys--and I am sure that it left a lasting impression upon him. I would contend, however, that by the time he wrote *Black Boy*, he was either more fully aware of his mother's motivation, or at least further removed than when he wrote the account in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow." (BB 83)(Early Works 226) Admittedly, however, he must have felt some kind of confusion when comparing her treatment of him to his altercation with the whites who pick him up in a car, offering him liquor. They let him know after beating him, how lucky he is that it is them and not some other whites who may not have been so easy on him. (BB 181) (Early Works 231) "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of," as Pascal once said. You might even say that a mother's *raison d'être* is to see her children into adulthood by any means necessary. On the other hand, if discipline is to be measured against the severity of an infraction (especially one of life-threatening magnitude), then it is easy to see the appropriateness of her actions at least from her point of view. No matter how reprehensible or vulgar the reader interprets Richard's transgressions and trespasses to be, they are by no means 'life-threatening'. Therefore, it is against those closest to him where he found a place to safely rebel—to test the waters of dissention, as it were.

"Because I had no power to make things happen outside me in the objective world, I made things happen within." (BB 72) If Richard lived in a stifling environment that lent itself to a 'safer' rebellion, he found quite the opposite outside of the home. Though he would continue to experience oppression throughout his lifetime, the various things he witnessed in the early twentieth-century South would run counter to and concurrent with a life seeking freedom—not the least of which were the lynchings and their blatant expression of hatred. In a sense, he takes this 'safe rebellion' with him into the world; in that, his mind becomes a place for him to first act out his thoughts, and then render them literarily. One positive he manages to take from living in the Jim Crow South, is that he becomes able to take his conflicts inward to explore them in meaningful ways. After a black woman takes revenge on those who have lynched her husband, Wright not only questions the fallibility of 'truth', he imagines in vivid detail how he will emulate this woman's actions if presented with a 'white mob.' (BB 73) He concludes that these things 'live in his mind' because he is ultimately powerless in the face of racism.

With *The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre* at the age of 15, Richard discovers not only an inner voice but also consternation from all angles except Malcolm Rogers—the editor of the *Southern Register* who published the piece. This is a turning point for him. He becomes aware that he is "beginning to dream the dreams ..." (BB 169) Coupled with this inner awareness rests the lucid vision of his environment reaffirmed to him by the lynching of a friend Ned's brother Bob; someone he knows. (BB 171)

The impact of the lynching becomes very central for Wright. In addition to the danger it represents, it also becomes a focal point epitomizing hate toward blacks in the South. While some may argue that it is Uncle Hoskins disappearance that most affects him, I am more inclined to say that the lynching of Ned's brother Bob had a far greater impact on him. (BB 53, 171) First of all, Uncle Hoskins' little incident in his horse-drawn wagon with Richard makes it hard for me to believe Richard was 'waiting to go on a wagon ride' with his uncle who fails to make it home that night. In fact, Wright says, "His words meant nothing and I would not re-enter the buggy." Uncle Hoskins had violated a trust and honesty that words were beginning to represent for Richard. Secondly, Bob most resembles the lynching victim in "Between the World and Me." It is "a whore's lipstick" cementing these two instances of hate together for me.

Wright explored this dichotomous relationship between inner and outer worlds as a product of the oppression in and out of his home. "... Flash of insight which revealed to me the true nature of my relations with my family, an insight that altered the entire course of my life." (BB 173) Before this epiphanous moment, Wright's inner world included his home and family. Now he could plainly see that both places—in the home and out of the home—were not only products of the same environment, they were also grossly similar in content. His family and home life could lead to a metaphorical death in his loss of freedom, while at any moment, whites around him could end his life literally. He puts these ideas to the test when he writes and delivers his own graduation speech rather than read one prepared for him—effectively freeing himself from the option to be 'bought' and refusing to be the Uncle Tom the Principal represents to him. As long as he maintains a healthy balance between these two worlds he will be safe, but even this becomes—in his mind—a path to the "southern way of life." He decides to search for his manhood by finding the means to get to Memphis, striking out on his own.

Wright would arrive in Memphis with only 4 years of formal education under his belt. Quickly finding a room with Mrs. Moss and her seventeen-year old daughter Bess, Wright tells Bess right off "... a man ought to pay his own way." (BB 211) He takes a dishwasher job for a short period then decides to try to find employment at an optical company (having had some experience at another optical business in Jackson), and this is the place that opens doors for him. At eight dollars per week, he is able to afford to buy magazines and used books. Arriving at work early each day to read the *Commercial Appeal* free, he sees an editorial chastising H.L. Mencken. (BB 244) Wright figures there must be a reason that Mencken has incited such disdain, though all he knows of the man is that he is the editor of the *American Mercury*. This would prove to be the impetus for one of Wright's biggest transformations as an intellectual and aspiring writer.

At that time, blacks were not able to get books from the library, so Wright not only gets a white man to loan him his library card, but also forges a note. “Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H.L. Mencken?” Wright tells us that he used this word intentionally to mislead the white woman he hands the note to. She brings him *Prejudices* and *A Book of Prefaces*. In *Prefaces* he is shocked and astounded at Mencken’s use of “words as weapons.” (BB 248) In addition to this revelation, Wright finds a reading list to pursue including the likes of: Conrad, Sinclair Lewis, Dostoevsky, Crane, Zola, Dreiser, and Nietzsche. In the books he hungered for, he was “finding new ways of looking and seeing.” (BB 249)

In these new perceptions were moods and feelings that became increasingly hard for him to conceal. “... the book would not die; it lingered, coloring everything I saw, heard, did.” (BB 249) Out of necessity, he hides the books he reading by wrapping them in newspaper, but these new ways of ‘seeing and feeling’ show on his face and in his manner. “... some of the white men discerned that I had begun to brood.” (BB 251) His reading awakens in him ideas of freedom, of black solidarity, and the truest sense of understanding white America. He “... no longer *felt* that the world about [him] was hostile, killing; [He] *knew* it. (BB 251)

Wright concludes in *Southern Night*: “This was the terror from which I fled.” (BB 255)

To flee in terror only to land in the lap of ‘horror and glory’ would become a huge blow to Wright’s idealized sense of Northern freedom. “My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies.” (BB 261) Wright’s first writings in this daunting place would come in the form of poetry published in small leftist publications as he tried to use Communism to understand self vs. environment—individual and community. Though he used concrete imagery in spots, most of his earliest poetry caters to the abstract agenda of Party politics. Of special note however, is “Between the World and Me.” In his Communist-influenced poems, he tends to preach a position, in “Between the World and Me” he visits the world of lynching with concrete images that not only put the reader there, but also allowed Wright to absorb environment while witnessing it.

That Wright emulated styles has never been in dispute and it is in this modus that he came to use concrete imagery as a direct result of his reading naturalist writers such as Crane, Zola, and Dreiser. He, in essence, learned to paint pictures with words by using the impressionist style he borrowed from Crane. On Page 7 of *Black Boy*, Wright tells us, “Each event spoke with a cryptic tongue,” and then goes on to show us a catalogued sequence of the senses in words. “... seeing long straight rows ... cool kiss of sensuality when dew ... crying strings of wild geese ... sweet juice trickle from sugar cane ... smelt clay dust potted with fresh rain.”(BB 7-9) Incorporating all five senses—sight, touch, sound, taste, and smell),

Wright defines the extent of human experience by its interaction with environment. Wright covers all bases. Even though these are each more than the 17-syllable traditional form of haiku, they represent what would become exactly that in his expression.

On Page 45 Wright employs the same technique and starts by telling us, “The days and hours began to speak now with a clearer tongue. Each experience had a sharp meaning of its own”—linking this to the passage on Page 7 and introducing meaning as independent of his interpretations. He shares a transformation here not only by stating this last, but also by making far fewer actual references to “I” and resorting to *implying* his participation. The transformation is not nearly complete but it is marked and he was aware of this when he wrote *Black Boy* while living in New York.

Though the traditional form of haiku generally precludes subjectivity--direct references to self, whether stated or implied—it is when Wright uses them that we can catch glimpses of the things he was beginning to see. In fact, this is most evident in the opening piece—“I am nobody:/A red sinking autumn sun/Took my name away.” His new vision exists through and because of all other perspectives; he has labored to understand. Therefore, though he breaks with form, he is in a way, using that form to describe states of mind—while at the same time putting us on notice that an old ‘self’ is finally dead, inviting us to read on. It is in reading on that we find that—for him--essence presupposes labels and abstract meaning.

In Haiku 131 Wright refers indicatively to a ‘dirt road’, perhaps he means a road less travelled, or one that he paves--leaving behind him an easier thoroughfare for those choosing to follow. The road ‘winding through windy trees’ depicts a road doing the travelling and the trees eliciting the wind. By finishing with the line “That I must travel,” Wright brings together the outer and the inner to illustrate the inseparable nature of ‘self and environment.’ He is telling us that these two things do not compete; they do not cooperate—they are interwoven and so perfectly inseparable that they preclude our abstract understanding of them as separate entities. “Both exist through and because of each other.” (Hakutani, Haiku 166)

If we define human experience as a dichotomous relationship between self and environment, then it is this essence that the haiku tries to capture: inclusion and exclusion are, by nature, one and the same thing. Within this context, Wright stipulates his entire autobiography in the 18-syllable description of his grandmother in *Black Boy*’s opening paragraph. Moreover, it would be another 14 years after the first printing of *Black Boy*, before Sinclair Beiles would introduce him to the haiku form. (Hakutani, Haiku 165) Wright incorporated this seamlessly with his extant understanding of the inescapable dichotomy he unearthed while exploring ‘self and environment’ in his and others’ writings. What is more, he *intuitively*

employed this form by understanding—at a very deep level—that free will and environment cannot be mutually exclusive. The ‘inner world’ as contrasted *against* the ‘outer world’ would become a moot point for him in *This Other World*.

Works Cited

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