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"the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream."²⁸

The lesson of *Palace of the Peacock* is that, at the end, one no longer sees himself as an isolated point on the periphery of existence, but as part of the One in the center. It is the center that consummates the enantiomorphic union of opposites²⁹ through the middle passage—that most fundamental element of inward experience, the most legitimate fulfillment of the meaning of the individual's life.³⁰ Only the subjective consciousness of the Faustian man is isolated. When, however, in Carroll's song and in the tested experience of the cliff ascent, subjective consciousness relates to its center (the anima, divine eros), it becomes integrated into wholeness and finds in the midst of suffering and nothingness a meaning beyond all futile pursuits. As the narrator states in his moving peroration: "Each of us now held at last in his arms what he had been for ever seeking and what he had eternally possessed" (152).

University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona

²⁸ *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot*, quoted in Patterson 175.

²⁹ Jung calls this union of opposites equilibration. In fact, Jung borrows this concept of opposites from Heraclitus, who had earlier described it as *enantiodromia*. Jung explains the concept of enantiodromia this way:

In the philosophy of Heraclitus this concept is used to designate the play of opposites in the course of events, namely, the view which maintains that everything that exists goes over into its opposite. From the living comes death, and from the old, youth; from waking, sleep; and from sleep, waking; the stream of creation and decay never stands still. Construction and destruction, destruction and construction—this is the norm which rules in every circle of natural life from the smallest to the greatest. Just as the cosmos itself emerged from the primal fire, so must it return once more to the same—a double process. (See de Laszlo, *The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung*.)

³⁰ See de Laszlo, *The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung* 77-80.

MAKING THE BONES LIVE AGAIN: A LOOK AT THE "BONES PEOPLE" IN AUGUST WILSON'S *JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE* AND HENRY DUMASS' "ARK OF BONES"

BY DANA A. WILLIAMS

During the years that encompassed one of the greatest literary movements in African-American letters, the Harlem Renaissance, African-American authors, at a rate before unimagined, embraced their culture and explored its dynamics, its uniqueness, its usefulness, and its beauty. As time progressed and the debate about "race" literature ensued, African-American authors like Ralph Ellison began to argue that they should not and would not restrict themselves exclusively to racial issues for subjects of their texts. By 1960, with the Black Arts Movement in full swing, African-American authors again began to focus on the attributes of black life and black culture. Not only authors, but other people too, proclaimed the beauty of blackness, and, subsequently, literary texts were immersed in elements of African-American culture. The willingness of these authors to employ African-American folklore in their literature revealed their acceptance and privileging of an African-American reality over a reality defined by others. With virtually all of their works heavily influenced by the dogma of the Black Arts Movement and by various elements of African and African-American culture and folklore, both Henry Dumas and August Wilson can be characterized as cultural aestheticians who invoke distinctly African-American folkloric traditions into their literature to enhance their mythmaking processes.

In "August Wilson's Folk Traditions," African-American folklorist Trudier Harris insightfully recognizes Wilson's use of African-American folk traditions in his dramas and likens him to Dumas and Toni Morrison in their

roles as folklorists and mythmakers. She writes: "Like Dumas and Morrison, [Wilson] is as much a mythmaker as he is a reflector of the cultural strands of the lore he uses."¹ Each author employs traditional forms of lore, but these forms gain their ultimate cultural significance as the author reshapes and manipulates them to suit his/her aesthetic will. It is as if s/he says to his/her reader, *You already know the story; now watch what I do with it.* Such is the case with Dumas and Wilson as they take a familiar biblical story about bones and reshape it by invoking African-American folk traditions in the text.

Both Dumas's "Ark of Bones," collected in his *Ark of Bones and Other Stories* and, more recently, in his collection of short stories, *Goodbye Sweetwater*, and Wilson's metanarrative of the "bones people" in his drama *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* are mythic revisions of the biblical story of "The Valley of Dry Bones" found in Ezekiel 37. Verses one through ten of the King James version read:

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones. And caused me to pass by them round about: and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and lo, they were very dry. And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord. . . . as I prophesied, there was a noise and behold a shaking, and the bones came together . . . and the flesh came upon them. . . . and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.

Employing various modifications like cultural specificity and ancestral linkage to the above-quoted biblical narra-

¹ Trudier Harris, "August Wilson's Folk Traditions," *August Wilson: A Casebook*, ed. Mary Elkins (New York: Garland, 1994) 50.

tive, Dumas and Wilson, each in his respective text, invent from imitation, using the valley of dry bones story as a metaphor for the necessity of maintaining a link between one's past, one's present, and one's future. In Dumas's narrative, Headeye, in his quest for his spiritual self, must establish a link between the ancestor and himself; and in Wilson's drama, Herald Loomis, who is in search of his song, must allow the local conjurer to "bind" him to the past before he can establish his future. In both texts, the protagonists' decoding of the bones metaphor allows them to claim the victory and to find their respective songs.

Unlike Wilson's metanarrative about the bones people, Dumas's "Ark of Bones," as suggested by the title, foregrounds the valley of dry bones narrative. Shortly after the narrative opens, Fish-hound, Dumas's intradiegetic narrator, informs the reader that Headeye is in possession of what Fish-hound calls a mojo bone, but Headeye tells him that it is "a keybone to the culud man."² The only one like it in the world, this bone, according to Headeye, "belongs to the people of God" (5). When Headeye asks Fish-hound if he remembers when Ezekiel was in the valley of dry bones, Dumas, in the oral sermonic tradition of early African-American folklorists like James Weldon Johnson and Paul Laurence Dunbar, writes:

"And the hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit to the valley of dry bones. And he said unto me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' and I said unto him, 'Lord thou knowest.' And he said unto me, 'Go and bind them together. Prophesy that I shall come and put flesh upon them from generations and from generations.' And the Lord said unto me, 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of thy brothers, scattered to the islands. Behold, I shall bind up the bones and you shall prophesy the name.'" (6)

² Henry Dumas, "Ark of Bones," *Goodbye Sweetwater*, ed. Eugene B. Redmond (New York: Thunders' Mouth Press, 1988) 3-18. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Dumas modifies the biblical story of the valley of dry bones to suit his creative agenda and complements it with yet another revision of a biblical tale, that of Noah's Ark. As the narrative progresses and Headeye tells Fish-hound that the Ark is coming, Dumas, in his version of Noah's ark and focalized through Fish-hound, writes: "I see this big thing movin in the far off, movin slow, down river, naw, it was up river. Naw, it was just movin and standin still at the same time. The damnest thing I ever seed. It just about a damn boat, the biggest boat in the whole world" (10). Fish-hound continues: "I asked Headeye if it was Noah's Ark, and he tell me he didn't know either. Then I was scared" (11). By this point, the reader is immersed in "the wonderful world of Henry Dumas" and must accept the possibilities that this mythic world offers. As Harris notes of Wilson (and Morrison), Dumas also "encourages a willing suspension of disbelief about the nature of the lore he presents."³ Neither author establishes "the possibility of the existence of certain phenomena; [each] simply writes as if they are givens."⁴ For example, when Fish-hound claims that he "could hear the water come to talk a little" and that "[o]nly river people know how to talk to the river when it's mad" (Dumas 8), we are to accept Dumas's personification of the river and his creation of "river" people. His narration continues: "I comest to think about what he said, that valley of bones. I comest to get some kinda crazy notion myself. There was a lot of signs, but they weren't nothin too special. If your're sharp-eyed you always seein somethin along the Mississippi" (8). Like the reader, Fish-hound has been thrust into this folkloric world; and like Fish-hound, the sharp-eyed reader will suspend his/her disbelief and accept all possibilities.

One of the most radical variations of the biblical text which Dumas employs in his narrative is the force that

³ Harris 51.

⁴ Harris 51.

capacitates the dry bones. In Ezekiel, the bones are empowered by the breath of the four winds (see verse 9), but in "Ark of Bones," the bones can be empowered only by establishing a link between the past and the present. Signifying on the master text, Fish-hound narrates that he "heard a kind of moanin, like a lot of people" but figures that "it must be the *wind*" which was "whippin up a sermon" (Dumas 9; emphasis mine). As his terror heightens, he notices that "the moanin sound was real loud now, and if it wasn't for the *wind* and rain beatin and whippin [them] up the steps, [he'd] swear the sound was comin from someplace inside the ark" (11). Dumas implies that the sound is, indeed, coming from someplace inside the ark, and the reader is left to believe that it is the moaning of the bones. In his role as mythmaker, Dumas suggests that unlike the bones in Ezekiel, the bones of the African ancestor cannot be empowered by the blowing of the wind. These bones, residuals of the horrors of African Americans ranging from the Middle Passage to Jim Crow lynchings, can live again only through connections of the past with the present.

Once Fish-hound and Headeye enter the ark, an old man informs Fish-hound that he is "in the house of generations [and that] [e]very African who lives in America has a part of his soul in this ark" (15). Revealing that only the living man who is aware and in touch with his Africanness and with his culture can empower the bones to live again, Headeye, in a ritualistic mode, repeats after the guru: "Aba, I consecrate my bones. / Take my soul up and plant it again. / Your will shall be my hand. / When I strike you strike. / My eyes shall see only thee. / I shall set my brother free. / Aba, this bone is thy seal" (16). With Fish-hound as his witness that he has established a link between the past and the present, Headeye burns the shield that has been anointed with oil, places it on an altar until it burns into ashes, and, finally, rakes the ashes inside the original bone. Abruptly and without

much explanation, Dumas withdraws from his mystical metadiegesis and shifts to a less mystical one. After Headeye has raked the ashes inside the bone, Fish-hound narrates: "Then he zig walks over to me, opens up that fence and goes up the steps. I have to follow, and he ain't say nothin to me. He ain't have to then" (17). Dumas opts for an "open-ended" closing that characterizes not only the African oral tradition but an "August Wilson" ending as well. Both authors refuse to decode their narratives or the conceit of their tales for the reader. Instead, the reader must become a participant in the narrative and recognize for him/herself the significance of the ancestor to the present and the necessity of its presence for a prosperous future.

Like "Ark of Bones," *Joe Turner* explores the significance of the past to the present. In the poetic lines that preface the play, Wilson writes:

From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. *Isolated and cut off from memory*, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned. . . . Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of *separation and dispersement* which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to *reconnect*, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy.⁵

One of the ways in which the drama's protagonist, Harold Loomis, reassembles his life and finds his song is through his (re)connection with the past and with the ancestor. Wilson first exposes his audience to his character's African ancestry by having Bynum, a conjurer whose primary calling in life is to "bind" people, render his story about the "shiny man." Later, the characters participate in the African folk dance, the juba, which, according to Wilson's stage notes, is "reminiscent of the Ring Shouts

⁵ August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (New York: Penguin, 1988) n. pag. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

of the African slaves" (Wilson 52). Immediately following the juba dance, Loomis tells of his vision of the "bones people." Like Dumas, Wilson (re)writes the biblical tradition of Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. As Harris notes, Wilson's recreation of the biblical text is a primary part of his "rewriting of the savior motif in religious practices."⁶ Just as God's words and his command to the winds are inadequate to put flesh on the bones and make them live again in Dumas's narrative, the traditional Christian savior is inadequate as a medium for Loomis's salvation in *Joe Turner*. Both characters must establish connections to the ancestor to find their respective songs.

As the final scene in act one opens, the residents of Seth Holly's boarding house have just finished eating dinner and soon after begin to juba. In the middle of the dance, Loomis enters and demands that they stop dancing and singing about the Holy Ghost, which has failed him. He then begins to speak in tongues and stops after he sees a vision. Bynum, arguably the only character who is fully in touch with the ancestor, attempts to "bind" Loomis to the past by ushering him into a call-and-response cathartic ceremony that is highly reminiscent of the griot and the naysayer in the African oral tradition. Wilson writes:

BYNUM. What you done seen, Harold Loomis?

LOOMIS. I done seen bones rise up out the water. Rise up and walk across the water. Bones walking on top of the water. . . . I come to this place . . . to this water that was bigger than the whole world. And I looked out . . . and I seen these bones rise up out the water. Rise up and begin to walk on top of it.

BYNUM. Wasn't nothing but bones and they walking on top of the water.

LOOMIS. Walking without sinking down. Walking on top of the water. (53)

⁶ Harris 54.

As Harris notes, "[t]hat the bones people walk on water without sinking certainly evokes Jesus, but the phenomenon more immediately evokes for Wilson's characters African-American history and the enormity of the loss of lives and human potential during the middle passage."⁷

With more extensive modifications of the Ezekiel story than Dumas, Wilson fully personifies the dry bones and empowers them not only to live again, but to walk on water without sinking as well. As Loomis tells Bynum, who seems to know the story already, "A whole heap of them. They come up out of the water and start marching" (Wilson 53). Loomis continues and Wilson expands his myth as he writes:

LOOMIS. They just walking across the water . . . and then . . . they sunk down . . . When they sink down they made a big splash and this here wave come up . . .

BYNUM. A big wave, Herald Loomis. A big wave washed over the land.

LOOMIS. It washed them out of the water and up on the land. Only . . . only . . .

BYNUM. Only they ain't got bones no more.

LOOMIS. They got flesh on them! Just like you and me! . . . They black. Just like you and me. Ain't no difference. (54)

Like the bones in Dumas's narrative, the bones in *Joe Turner* must go beyond the traditional savior for salvation. As Paul Carter Harrison notes, "Despite the trauma of slavery and consequent degradation of the body, the ancestors achieve spiritual ascendancy as they 'walk on water' and arrive in the New World with flesh on their bones. Inside the spiritual dynamism of the ancestors—perceived and made useful in the present as opposed to being arrested in the past—is the true song of redemption and liberation."⁸

⁷ Harris 54.

⁸ Paul Carter Harrison, "August Wilson's Blues Poetics," *August Wilson: Three Plays* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1991) 314.

Like Fish-hound, Loomis signifies on the master text by manipulating Ezekiel's command to the winds to blow breath into the bones so that they might live again. When Bynum asks Loomis why he is just lying there waiting, Loomis responds that he is waiting on the breath to get into *his* body, not the body of the bones. He tells Bynum: "The wind's blowing the breath into my body. I can feel it. I'm starting to breathe again. . . . I'm gonna stand up. I got to stand up. I can't lay here no more. All the breath coming into my body and I got to stand up" (55). Only he cannot stand up yet because the breath of God's winds is insufficient for Loomis's salvation. Like the bones of the ancestors which have used his living presence to reconnect and to empower themselves, Loomis must tap into their power source to empower his bones. Until he reconnects with the ancestor, his legs will continue to fail him and he will be without his song.

In the spirit of their African ancestry, both Wilson and Dumas acknowledge a variety of differences between African-American and *European-American* realities and traditions in their respective texts. Exploring African concepts of spirituality and of time, both authors privilege the African over the European. Missy Dehn Kubitschek argues that "*Joe Turner* sharply distinguishes between European and African-American uses of their spirituality. Always in service to commerce, European spiritualities are completely amoral."⁹ In accordance, Wilson creates Rutherford Selig, a character who is part of a family that commercializes its talent of finding people both before and after slavery. To the contrary, his African counterpart, Bynum Walker, freely shares his spiritual gift of "binding" people to help reconnect them with their past. Privileging the African over the Western, Wilson implies that Selig and his European gift of finding people are incapable of fully rendering Loomis his song, though he re-

⁹ Missy Dehn Kubitschek, "August Wilson's Gender Lesson," *May All Your Fences Have Gates*, ed. Alan Nadel (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1994) 190.

unites him with his wife. Only after he decodes his vision of the bones people, with the help of Bynum and his African spirituality, can Loomis stand on his feet and sing his song.

Both Wilson and Dumas adopt the African concept of time, opting to foreground circular time over linear time. In both texts, the past and the present eagerly merge, suggesting that time and life are cyclical rather than chronological. Each author, in a similar manner, insists that the bones from the past undeniably have a place in the present and that the people of the present must accommodate these elements of the past. In a similar vein, Gunilla Kester argues that spatial metaphors contribute to the understanding of Loomis's vision of the bones people.¹⁰ For Kester, spatial metaphors refers to the acknowledgment of the space between the metaphor itself and the object signified upon. Though Kester fails to uncover fully the relevance of her assertion, her reading helps reveal that in *Joe Turner* and in "Ark of Bones," the dimension of this metaphorical space is cyclical. As Kester notes, Loomis's image of the bones "changes the focus from the geographical space where history occurred, the ocean of the middle passage and the coastline of the new continent [the signified], to the black bodies that walk away from the space [the metaphor]."¹¹ Similarly, in "Ark of Bones," Headeye and Fish-hound's endeavor on the ark transforms the geographical space of the Mississippi river into the historical space of the Middle Passage and of the past. In short, both authors elect to accentuate African traditions, privileging the African concept of time and history over the European.

Careful examination of each of the completed dramas of August Wilson's ten-play cycle and of all of Henry Du-

mas's fiction and poetry would reveal their conscious efforts to depict positively black culture and folklife in their works. In the "bones people" metanarrative of *Joe Turner* and in the primary diegesis of "Ark of Bones," Wilson and Dumas take a familiar story, "Africanize" it, and give voice to the African American past, its culture, and its folk traditions. The willingness of these authors to foreground African-American folk traditions in their literature reveals their acceptance and privileging of an African-American reality over a reality defined by others and enhances their role as mythmaking cultural aestheticians.

Howard University
Washington, D.C.

¹⁰ Gunilla Theander Kester, "Approaches to Africa: The Poetics of Memory and the Body in Two August Wilson Plays," *August Wilson: A Casebook*, ed. Mary Elkins (New York: Garland, 1994.) 116.

¹¹ Kester 117.