



Towards a Black Realization of the Hegelian Ideal

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**"Towards a Black Realization of the Hegelian Ideal:
John Edgar Wideman's 'Homewood'"**

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Perhaps it seems incongruous and ironic to compare a late, twentieth-century, Afro-American novelist to a turn-of-the-nineteenth century, German philosopher with racist tendencies. Striking parallels, however, link John Wideman and Friedrich Hegel in their reaction to intolerable human conditions and in their models for a better society. As Raymond Plant shows us, the Hegel of 1798 to 1800 was in the throes of mental readjustment, his hopes for reform, harmony, and reconciliation on the personal and social levels dashed.¹ In parallel, the full, twenty-year span of Wideman's literary career is marked by his indignation over the systematic destruction of his home neighborhood by outside forces, economic and social, a destruction that he indicts for the waste of human resources and the loss of a viable community.²

Alongside this image of urban decay, a contrasting picture of Homewood lives on in Wideman's memory, a view that is partially substantiated. Official sources document better living conditions and greater social equality for Black Homewood residents in the 1920's and 1930's than for Pittsburgh as a whole. Yet it is less this visible aspect than the spiritual qualities the author chooses to accent: love, nurture, and caring for members of the next generation.³ Wideman's material is this humane Homewood, "the sunshine and the rain and the peoples' voices" that he wants to recapture.⁴ Like Hegel, he feels powerless to effect structural reforms to overcome the fragmentation of human existence; like Hegel, he ultimately proceeds to a philosophical redescription of experience through fiction.⁵ Therein he transfigures a world no longer fit for human habitation into one which could transcend its present conditions. His tools are memory, fantasy, and intensity of commitment. My premise is that Wideman's fictional Homewood is the modern American transposition of Hegel's ideal city of antiquity: happy, beautiful, and free in the wholeness of its past, but pitiful, ugly, and in bondage to the external forces that are disintegrating it today. By an effort of the imagination, Wideman sustains the relative utopia that was Homewood in the 1920's; he projects its fated demise onto the soap-bubble crystal ball that Grandmother Freeda catches between her fingers at the kitchen sink in *Sent for You Yesterday*.

Before the bubble can burst, the witness to Freeda's story advances three generations, from Freeda herself to her daughter, Lizabeth, then to her grandson, "Doot". Their telling, recalling, and retelling the episodes mark story and performance as ritual ceremony, symbolizing their unity. Thus it becomes apparent that the main thrust of Wideman's struggle to salvage the community operates on the level of language, of recapturing experience in multiple voices to effect group continuity and bonding.

For Wideman as for Hegel, language represents the ideal existence of consciousness. Dejected over modern man's incapacity to communicate with his fellows, Hegel despairs. Desperate, but determined, Wideman casts about for the linguistic interface between black and white systems, between thought and reality. The authentic rhythms of Black speech, the blurring of past and present, the

telepathic intensity of emotion, and the occasional romp in popular culture, all combine to make Wideman's family story a spiral construct, inexhaustible in its wealth of connotations, ever drawing the participants to the intimacy of its center. In the example studied, Freeda's prophetic soap-bubble is a new link in an old chain of stories, each entwined with another tale. "The Carterpillar Story", as this piece is entitled in *Damballah*, naturally leads into the history of Freeda's scar, itself a single step on a spiral staircase of memories that can be climbed or descended at will, defying ordinary temporal barriers. In sum, the family story is a complete legacy of interlocking anecdotes that span the generations. It constitutes a private, sacred myth, narrated in the different dialects of the community members past and present, a myth which espouses the secular dogmas peculiar to saints and heretics alike, perpetuating the sense of belonging.

Everything comes back to one tenet: family is community, and community is extended family, a social rather than topographical or political entity, "a shared sense of common life and destiny, reinforced by ongoing interaction and characterized by many shared beliefs and values."⁶ On the whole, the image of community Hegel and Wideman both project is of people working together to achieve common goals, socio-economic or spiritual, universally recognized or esoteric. Their aesthetic for community is dynamic, not static. It is group existentialism where self-realization is only possible as a function of the entire social body, in contrast to the antinomian and autonomian predisposition August J. Nigro finds in American ideology and culture as a whole.⁷

Nigro's global portrait is tragically accurate: modern society is destroying the notion of wholeness. It reposes upon ever-tinier entities as its basic, building blocks. As the nuclear family unit breaks down, only the couple remains, its own stability threatened. Wideman is far from unique in expressing alarm over the situation. In the sixties, a whole chorus of American social scientists heralded the widespread perception of community disintegration, personal and culturally speaking, as a contemporary phenomenon in United States life.⁸ Wideman should not be included among them, however; surely, he was cognizant that the phenomenon was not unprecedented. Indeed, the theme of the lost Golden Age goes back at least to the early Latin civilization, its vision shaped by its status as a colonized nation, not unlike the U.S. itself. More ancient still, the origins of this sense of loss might even be traced to the eighth-century B.C. Greek poet, Hesiod. Still, it is Hegel's lament for the lost ideal community that rings in my ear as I read Wideman. Like Hegel, Wideman seems to lay the final blame for the destruction of the ideal city upon modern man's pathetic loss of the ability to communicate effectively. And while I acknowledge that influence is difficult to prove, I note out that during the period John Wideman was studying philosophy at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, Hegel was the darling of European intellectual circles.

Nonetheless, one thought-provoking discrepancy stands between Wideman and Hegel. Where the German philosopher relegates the ideal city to an irretrievable past, the Afro-American novelist lets the reader believe Homewood could rise, Phoenix-like, from its ashes. The burden for achieving this renaissance lies on the last members of the dying community. They must settle the black-white cultural conflict which threatens to efface the final vestiges of their identity as a community. The hero must choose between two role interpretations. He can capitulate to the onslaughts of the dominant society in its attempt to inculcate its doctrine of self-reliance and independence, thereby evolving into a self-centered individual, responsible for himself alone. Or he can submit to the initiation process

by which minority, ethnic groups assimilate their members, and confer group identity upon them. In the balance hangs the future of both the hero and his society. Wideman's protagonists -Eddie Lawson, Cecil Braithwaite, Thomas Wilkerson, Brother Small and Brother Tate, Tommy/Bobby, and "Doot" himself all agonize before resolving a soul-searching Hegelian dialectic regarding their identity. The "white" or "black" self-image that they ultimately embrace as their own establishes their credentials as "pioneers", pillars of the community, or as hapless members of a "lost generation", too weak to assume their duties towards the community. Making the "wrong" identification associates the character with community deterioration; making the "right" association rekindles hope thanks to a tacit commitment to continue the struggle and achieve ultimate salvation for all.⁹

Wideman first advocated this personal commitment to the community in *Sent for You Yesterday* in 1983; he did not elucidate the "pioneer" theory until a 1985 interview with the American Prose Library. The whole of his opus, however, from the chiaro-scuro, portrait-of-the-artist novel, *A Glance Away* in 1967 to the guilt-charged, non-fictional essay, *Brothers and Keepers* in 1984, is predicated upon the concept that an ideal black community existed in Homewood; that it was essentially composed of the members of Wideman's own extended family group; that their community identity and strength came from an unbroken line of clan leaders who guaranteed the sense of shared values and group destiny; that upon the demise of the last of these tribal chiefs, no capable successor stepped forward to fill the role of maintaining the network of interpersonal bonds. It was this network that served to transmit the family messages that prevented its members from falling into white, individualistic, behavior patterns.¹⁰

No capable and willing successor, that is, until the narrator's persona, "Doot", and the real-life author himself. For Wideman seems to accept that he is the natural heir to his pioneer ancestors and characters, both in fiction and reality. His is the responsibility to reestablish the broken lines of communication within the inner circle, starting with the bonding of the minimal community of two, the couple, and gradually encompassing those intimately associated with it, "interfacing" otherwise incompatible hearts and minds without undue regard for natural blood lines. The answer to the calling is firm yet reserved. Self-consciously, the author's persona called "Doot" in *Sent for You Yesterday*, tries to dance to the music of bygone days, searching to pick up the thread dropped by the old Homewood residents. Equally discrete yet fervent, the man interviewed in real life stresses the fecundity of his generation as opposed to the sterility of the "lost generation"; between the lines, he suggests he has picked up the torch from his fallen predecessors, Mother Sybella Owens, John and Freeda French, Mother Bess, and Brother Tate.

The function performed by the implied and real author combined is restoring the total communication characteristic of Homewood's golden era, thanks to the gift for story-telling. Like the African griot who preserves and propagates the myths of his tribal history, Wideman deals in private, family myths that serve as shibboleth and rallying cry, talisman and initiation, resistance and solidarity for the Happy Few. On the one hand, he is dealing in what Miguel de Unamuno terms *intra-historia*, the minutiae that lie behind official History and constitute its real truth¹¹; on the other hand, he is reaffirming his own kinship with the oldtimers and the continuity of the oral tradition.

Respecting that continuity requires more than just narrating the family

anecdotes, for each family story must appeal to all aspects of Afro-American culture, from its verbal rituals to its music, from its body language to its dance. Participation in the community culture is the first step to reopening blocked channels of communication; psychological reinsertion in the second, together with the acceptance of community values and identification with its goals. For John Wideman, his task as writer is to create the illusion of the society of the past and all the intangibles that accompanied the message and guaranteed its comprehension. He has added fiction to the channels of communication associated with the family story: music, gesture, extrasensory perception, empathy for suffering.¹² Discourse is couched in a total atmosphere of receptivity that acts as catalyst to the syntax and diction, enhancing the communicative value of symbol and seme with non-standard associations Wideman might be tempted to term "surfiction".¹³ By shifting the mode of his story-telling from the spoken, or sung, or danced, or mimed, or felt to the printed word, the artist may have altered its form, but he has painstakingly conserved its meaning. Thanks to his insistence upon preserving the fantastic alongside the credible, the illusion alongside the real, he gets inside time, negating the necessity for categories like linear, mythical, existential or perceptive time. An allusion to T.S. Elliot's "Burnt Norton" set as the frontispiece to *Sent for You Yesterday* hints at a private pledge to Wideman's old mentor; at the same time, the words spell out an informal contract with the Homewood community of his memory, promising to make the past itself, like "past lives, live in us, through us".¹⁴

Wideman's lyricism originates in an imaginary world caught between memory and creation, which, like all pieces of art, exists independently of the real community that inspired it. Thus he summons up the Homewood of superior beings whose dauntless efforts resulted in the "ideal city" of times gone by, and rebuilds the "new community" of hearts and minds, part social reality like those inspired by Pablo Neruda and Aimé Césaire, part imaginary like those that have ever inspired great literature.

Although I have found no evidence that passages from Wideman's novels serve, like the poems of Neruda and Césaire, as spirit-raising anthems of cultural self-affirmation, it may be true that the creative power of his community metaphor is summoning Homewood up from its ashes by encouraging others to fight for it.¹⁵ Earlier this year, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania sponsored an exhibition focussing on the successive waves of residents in this section of Pittsburgh, from the industrial aristocrats like Andrew Carnegie, H.J. Heinz, and George Westinghouse to the German, Swiss, Irish, and Italian immigrants and, lastly, to the black population. The published version of this nostalgic, but factual, review concludes on an upbeat note with claims that "Homewood Avenue is on the road to recovery, with new townhouses and new businesses on the way", and that despite the lingering problems the area has faced over the past forty years, that "optimism and successful revitalizing efforts attest that community-making is alive and well in Homewood-Brushton".¹⁶ Beneath the Chamber of Commerce "hype" lie a few encouraging signs that Wideman's message has indeed been apprehended and the rallying of forces begun. The constructive projects may never materialize, but the heightened awareness of the urgency of the situation and the consensus that Homewood is worth saving are welcome omens.

- 1 - Raymond Plant, *Hegel, An Introduction*, second edition, London: Basil Blackwell, 1972, 1983, p. 76.
- 2 - *Pittsburgh*, September, 1983, p. 69.
- 3 - *Ibid.* See also John A. Herbst, et al, *Homewood-Brushton: A Century of Community-Making in Pittsburgh*, Pittsburgh, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1987, p. 37.
- 4 - Jim Gallagher, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Monday, November 21, 1983, p. 8.
- 5 - Plant, *ibid.*
- 6 - William A. Schultze, *Urban and Community Politics*, North Scituate, Massachusetts, Duxbury Press, 1974, p. 38.
- 7 - *The Diagonal Line: Separation and Reparation in American Literature*, Selinsgrove, Pa., Susquehanna University Press, 1984, p. 29.
- 8 - Schultze, *loc. cit.*
- 9 - In my analysis of Wideman's works, I am indebted to Elizabeth A. Schultz's studies, "The Heirs of Ralph Ellison, Patterns of Individualism in the Contemporary Afro-American Novel", *College Language Association Journal* XXII (December, 1978), pp. 102-122, and "The Insistence Upon Community in the Contemporary Afro-American Novel", *College English*, October, 1979, pp. 170-184.
- 10 - This is one of the premises of my unpublished doctoral thesis, "La Communauté et la Communication dans l'Univers Fictif de John Edgar Wideman" written under the direction of Professor Michel Fabre of the Sorbonne and defended in 1987. The interview cited is available on cassette under the title, "An Interview with John Edgar Wideman", published and distributed by the American Audio Prose Library, Columbia, Mo., copyright May, 1985. *A Glance Away* was first published in New York by Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc.; *Sent for You Yesterday*, New York, Avon Books, 1983; and *Brothers and Keepers*, New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- 11 - Cited by Philip G. Williams in "A Comparative Approach to Afro-American and Neo-African Novels: Ellison and Achebe", *Studies in Black Literature*, volume 7, Winter, 1976, pp. 15-18.
- 12 - See my article, "Beyond Discourse: The Unspoken Versus Words in the Fiction of John Edgar Wideman", *Callaloo* 8 (Fall, 1985), pp. 525-534.
- 13 - I am alluding to Wideman's article by this title which appeared in *Southern Review* 21 (Summer, 1985), pp. 633-640.
- 14 - From the preface to *Sent for You Yesterday*, *op. cit.*
- 15 - This activist function of the metaphor harmonizes with the theories elaborated by Paul Ricoeur in *La métaphore vive*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

A thought-provoking, doctoral thesis (unpublished) on the impact Neruda and Césaire had on mass conceptualization of their nation-communities in-the-making, putting Ricoeur's theory to practical application, gave me much food for thought in my own studies of John Wideman. The author of the thesis in question is Canadian literary scholar and gynecologist, Jan Marta; her thesis, "La métaphore et la transformation sociale chez Gaston Miron, Aimé Césaire et Pablo Néruda", thèse de 3e cycle, Lettres Modernes, Université de Nice, 1981, was directed by Professor Michel Launay.

16 - *Homewood-Brushton: A Century of Community-Making in Pittsburgh*, loc. cit.