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## Specificities: Cultures of American Identity

### Self Reflection(s): Subjectivity and Racial Subordination in the Contemporary African-American Writer

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*ABSTRACT: Shelby Steele's The Content of our Character, and John Wideman's Philadelphia Fire are contrasted for what they reveal about the two authors' confrontation with self-expression and self-definition in a society that denies African-American individuality. I argue that Steele's and Wideman's distinctive solutions to personal expression as demonstrated in these works constitute the discursive boundaries, the poles between which black male subjectivity oscillates in this racist society. To explicate these particular positions, I draw on psychoanalytic concepts of narcissism, masculinity, and subjectivity. Thomas Mann's Death in Venice is invoked to articulate, albeit in a different society and context, the subjective crisis of the intellectual, the linkage between one's inner world and outer society, and the relation between personal identity and national self-understanding. While Steele opts for an isolated, transcendent individualism, Wideman embraces a conception of self inextricably connected to and constrained by the wider African-American community. I argue that each 'solution' produces its own form of self-estrangement, revealing the psychic cost and intractability of racial division in America.*

The ego ideal opens up an important avenue for the understanding of group psychology. In addition to its individual side, this ideal has a social side; it is also the common ideal of a family, a class or a nation. It binds not only a person's narcissistic libido, but also a considerable amount of his homosexual libido, which is in this way turned back into the ego. The want of satisfaction which arises from the non-fulfilment of this ideal liberates homosexual libido, and this is transformed into a sense of guilt (social anxiety). (Freud, 1914, pp. 101–2)

The new type of hero favoured by Aschenbach, and recurring many times in his works, had early been analysed by a shrewd critic: the conception of an intellectual and virginal manliness, which clenches its teeth and

stands in modest defiance of the swords and spears that pierce its side.  
(Mann, 1911, p. 11)

Strangely fruitful intercourse this, between one body and another mind!  
(p. 46)

Within a week of one another in the autumn of 1990, two books were published and widely reviewed. One, *The Content of our Character*, written by Shelby Steele, is a collection of nine essays in which the author offers 'a new vision of race in America'. The book, Steele's first, won him a Pulitzer Prize and was nominated for the National Book Award. In these well-crafted essays, Steele insists on the atavism of racial categories, and is convinced that blacks today wrongfully hold on to an ideology of victimization while white responses to blacks are constricted by feelings of guilt. The other book, *Philadelphia Fire*, is written by John Wideman. Already an accomplished author and recipient of the PEN/Faulkner Prize for his writing, Wideman has written eight other works of fiction as well as a memoir, *Brothers and Keepers*. While *Philadelphia Fire* proved to be less celebrated than Steele's book, it explores similarly important themes. It is a work of fiction revolving around the actual bombing of the MOVE headquarters in Philadelphia in 1985. Six adults and five children were killed — all black — and 262 people were left homeless. The bombing had been ordered by the Mayor of the city — himself an African-American. Wideman uses this incident to consider the intractability of the American racial problem and the profound hold it has on all blacks, even those who imagine themselves able to transcend it.

The two books share more than this common concern with race in contemporary America. Both authors are professors of English: Steele at the State University of California at San Jose, Wideman at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Both are in their late forties or early fifties, and both are African-American. By their own accounts, each has been profoundly affected by being a member of a subordinated racial group and both use their craft to express their understanding of its deep personal impact. While Steele is an essayist and Wideman a novelist, both self-consciously move back and forth in their writing between an exploration of how the reality of racial difference in America has shaped their own lives, and how that experience is a vehicle to comprehend the larger American racial order. Perhaps the strongest parallel between the books is that they both interpret America by moving between self-exploration on one side, and social commentary on the other.

Written by African-American men confronting American racial realities, each book offers its readers the author's personal solution to this conundrum: how does one express oneself personally in a society that systematically denies black individuality? As individual artists, both Wideman and Steele are committed to a belief in self-expression and to the significance and communicability of their own subjective experiences. But the American social reality of racial difference has meant that their racial identity must take centre stage in their own self-definition. Both books reveal their individual responses to the collective vise of racial categorization.

A central and remarkable feature of American racism is the society's inability to experience black individuality: to appreciate the subjective experience of black persons as distinct from their racial standing. Central to racial difference in America and a major contributor to its perpetuation, I argue, is the experience of white individuality, or subjectivity, and its negation in the black collectivity.<sup>1</sup> The fully developed, complex, multi-layered personality, it would seem, is the exclusive property of whites and corresponds to a cultural incapacity to see the face beneath the veil, i.e., to experience unselfconsciously black individuality. This, I argue, is one of the hallmarks — a critical linchpin — of this racist society.<sup>2</sup> And it is this struggle to assert the full complement of individual responses to blacks that has largely defined the challenge to the black writer. As Abdul JanMohamed has written about Richard Wright, writing for a black author is a struggle against the presumption of 'social death' (Patterson, 1982), an active effort to form one's own subjectivity and to challenge the culture's presumptions (see JanMohammed, 1987).

While JanMohamed argues that writing, at least for Wright, stands as an affirmation of black subjectivity — a kind of transcendence — it might also be said that Wright, having chosen to write, could hardly have written anything different. The presumption of racial difference largely imposes the discursive frame within which the black writer labours. No less a part of the cultural matrix that represents blacks as non-individuated, black writers find themselves discovering individuality — in their own voice, in their characters, in their challenges to stylistic convention as they too work to overcome this 'culture of social death' (JanMohammed, 1987).

Both Wideman and Steele aspire, just as DuBois suggested in a very different era, 'to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self' (DuBois, 1961). Each book constitutes a distinctive effort to assert the author's individuality. Each author hopes to subordinate the reality of racial difference to his own personal voice. But beyond these similarities of purpose, these books represent dramatically different responses to what might be called the crisis of black individuality. In short, the books' common themes of race and individuality seem to unravel, revealing different artistic responses to this culture of racial difference. Embracing two different representations of race, the two books taken together may be seen to define the discursive boundaries, the poles between which black male subjectivity oscillates.

In this article, I will examine Wideman and Steele's conflicting representations of black identity and society. I will do this by drawing on concepts of narcissism, masculinity and subjectivity from contemporary psychoanalytic theory and from my experience as a psychoanalytic clinician. But rather than rely on formal theoretical categories, I will relate Wideman and Steele's renderings to the literary vision of Thomas Mann who, in *Death in Venice*, portrays the psychic fragmentation of the modern artist. I will argue that Mann's insights about the artist's relation to his society, and the psychological costs it entailed, provide a frame by which to explore the dilemmas of the contemporary black intellectual in America.

*The Content of Our Character* expresses Steele's own struggle to put racial particularity behind him, to deny the centrality of his race as defining his

character. Steele (1990) acclaims instead his own individuality, insisting that black identity serves only to camouflage personal feelings of inferiority or inadequacy. In describing his own motivation to write the book, he describes the pain of experiencing the split between his public 'racial face' and his private 'uncensored thoughts and feelings that occur to us spontaneously'. He writes:

I made a sort of bargain with the prevailing black identity — I subscribed in a general way to its point of view so that I could be free to get on with my life. Many other blacks I knew made this same bargain, got on with their lives and fellow-travelled with black power. I don't believe this subscription was insincere, but it was convenient since it opened the individual space out of which we could make our lives.

Describing his more recent experience, he writes, 'I was tired of my own public/private racial split, the absence of my own being from what I said to people about race'. The essays became Steele's effort to shed his false self, the public one, in which he presented himself as a spokesperson for his race. In its place, Steele hoped to find a better and truer self, one which knew no distinction between private and public. In this way, Steele sought to rid himself of DuBois' double consciousness.

I have had both to remember and forget that I am black. The forgetting was to see the human universals within the memory of the racial specifics ... Now I know that if there was a secret to the writing of this book, it was simply to start from the painfully obvious premise that all races are composed of human beings.

The split, for Steele, was experienced profoundly: he was either a human being privately or an African-American publicly. He seeks to resolve the division by attempting to replace it, through his writings, with an integrated, true self speaking in a single, authentic voice.

From this language of desire — the wish to be a single, integrated whole person in a world fractured by racial difference — Steele offers a psychology of the self and draws out its sociological implications for American race relations. Racial identity today, Steele insists, reflects a failure of nerve to face oneself, to achieve on the basis of one's own talent. 'The most dangerous threat to the black identity', Steele writes, 'is not the racism of white society (this actually confirms the black identity), but the black who insists on his or her own individuality'. 'I think black Americans are today more oppressed by doubt than by racism', he suggests, 'and the second phase of our struggle for freedom must be a confrontation with that doubt'.

Steele offers a well-formulated psychology of the self, largely grounded in existential concepts and reflecting his own self-understanding, in which he counterpoises a self characterized by healthy self-esteem, energy, and initiative against an anti-self, 'an internal antagonist and saboteur that embraces the world's negative view of us, that believes our wounds are justified by our own unworthiness, and that entrenches itself as a lifelong voice of doubt'. In continual conflict, the self and the anti-self struggle for dominance. Blacks, Steele argues, have typically engaged in various forms of defensive manoeuvres —

denial, distortion, re-enactments — protecting the self from full exposure to the possibilities, and dangers, of individual accomplishment. Racial identity, an ideology of victimization, hiding among the collectivity, each are properties of the anti-self and, Steele argues, dominate the experience of contemporary blacks. Steele describes American blacks as engaged in a full-blown intra-psychic battle, not unlike his own struggle between his public and private self. Determined to be shorn of his own self-doubts, he offers further a social programme in which blacks renounce their interest in preferential treatment and willingly and actively compete, individual *qua* individual, for the resources and rewards the society has to offer. Commenting on the publication of his own book, Steele said, 'one of the things ... that gives me deepest satisfaction is that there's no affirmative action in the publishing business ... So I know that achievement was based on my merit, my skill and hard work'.

The publication of these essays was an important watershed in Steele's life. From relative obscurity, Steele soon became a highly sought after commentator on the current racial scene. Not only widely interviewed about the book itself, Steele emerged as an articulate spokesperson for a conservative black perspective on public policy as it affected African-Americans. The book, too, climaxed a more gradual shift in Steele's own thinking and focus. Having built his career as an Afro-Americanist, the book proclaims his shift of allegiance from a focus on racial difference to a social psychology of the self.<sup>3</sup> In the end, Steele's strategy to overcome the importance of race constitutes only a denial of the meaningfulness of racial difference in America, not its transcendence. It is surely ironic that, in renouncing the significance of his being black, Steele finds himself thrust into the national spotlight as a spokesperson for his race. Despite his efforts to hide no longer behind the racial veil, Steele reaches the pinnacle of success as an author by revealing an American preoccupation with the crisis of race, both society's and his own.

John Wideman's self reflection has followed a dramatically different path from Steele's. Having graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and become the first Afro-American Rhodes Scholar in fifty years, Wideman decided to devote himself to creative writing.<sup>4</sup> Teaching first at the University of Pennsylvania, he expressed little interest in Afro-American literature. His first novels, while featuring black characters, are not about race but about an existential quest for meaning in a harsh and denying social world. In many respects, Wideman's early professional years expressed a personal optimism about the possibilities for racial transcendence; while not rejecting his racial identity, it was not central to his professional persona. But the racial politics and heightened attention to racial matters in the late 1960s and early 1970s came to implicate Wideman as well. First rejecting requests to teach courses on Afro-American literature, Wideman finally agreed. By 1972 he found himself chairing the Afro-American Studies Programme at Penn. In 1973, as he reports it, following the death of his grandmother, he seemed to have been ineluctably drawn back to more personal issues of family, background and race. He accepted a position at the University of Wyoming, 'to get away from that Ivy League competitiveness, the pressure to be somebody', so as to devote all of his attention to Afro-American literature and to his own writing. The all-embracing

themes of existential meaning and self-understanding were now examined through the prism of racial difference. In his memoir, *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman grappled with understanding his own accomplishments: his ability to express himself individually through his writing, and his ability to choose where to live. At the same time, his younger brother, Robby, was serving a life-term sentence for murder. Wideman explored this paradox and developed an understanding of a tangled link between his 'freedom' and his brother's bondage, incriminating his freedom to write with his brother's incarceration. Wideman's earlier illusion of individual autonomy gave way to a vision of an experience of inextricable connections and of the heaviness of race. 'You were the one clinging fast, taking the weight, and your dignity held me up', he writes, 'I was reaching for your strength' (1986, p. 27). The bifurcated though interconnected world of racial experience became uncovered for Wideman as he reflected on the difference between him and his brother.

Your world. The blackness that incriminated me. Easier to change the way I talked and walked, easier to be two people than to expose in either world the awkward mix of school and home I'd become. When in Rome. Different strokes for different folks. Nobody had pulled my coat and whispered the news about Third Worlds. Just two choices as far as I could tell: either/or. Rich or poor. White or black. Win or lose. I figured which side I wanted to be on when the Saints came marching in. Who the Saints, the rulers of the earth, were, was clear. My mind was split by oppositions, by mutually exclusive categories. Manichaeism, as Frantz Fanon would say. To succeed in the man's world you must become like the man and the man sure didn't claim no bunch of nigger relatives in Pittsburgh.<sup>5</sup> (pp. 27–28)

Cudjoe, the central character of *Philadelphia Fire*, is a black expatriate, who has left his wife and family behind in Philadelphia to lead his own, largely hedonistic life on the Greek Island of Mykonos. He reads of the bombing of the MOVE headquarters in his old neighbourhood and especially of Simba Muntu (Lion Man), a boy who survived the bombing but then disappeared. Cudjoe could not stop thinking of him, of 'the child who is brother, son, a lost limb haunting him ... He must find the child to be whole again'. The first part of the novel is the story of Cudjoe's return, his efforts to find Simba and to recover his past. It is also the story of Cudjoe's (and Wideman's) self-reproach: the realization that his original decision to leave was tantamount to betrayal.

How did they know his history', he wondered, 'that he'd married a white woman and fathered half-white kids? How did they know he'd failed his wife and failed those kids, that his betrayal was double, about blackness and about being a man? How could they know so clearly, with nothing more than their eyes, that they knew his secret, that he was someone, a half-black someone, a half-man someone, a half man who couldn't be depended upon? (p. 10)

Wideman, the author, and Cudjoe, his character, become interchangeable as the novel progresses. Cudjoe expresses Wideman's own search for reconciliation:

Wideman's desire to be one and connected to the whole is spoken through him. 'Why this Cudjoe, then?' Wideman wonders, 'This airy other floating into the shape of my story. Why am I him when I tell certain parts? Why am I hiding from myself? Is he mirror or black hole?'

The pain and poignancy of Cudjoe's search is intensified when Wideman reveals in the second part of the novel his own loss: his 16 year old son having been convicted of murder and currently serving a life sentence. 'Half his face obliged to go on about the business of living', Wideman writes, 'half as if asleep, dreaming over and over again the nightmare of his son's pain'. Cudjoe's search for Simba is Wideman's own desire to narrow the distance between himself and others; *Philadelphia Fire* reflects Wideman's persisting struggle to reclaim for himself his son, his background, his race, even his manhood. Wideman writes,

Cudjoe can't account for the force drawing him to the story nor why he indulges a fantasy of identification with the boy who escaped the massacre. He knows he must find him. He knows the ache of absence, the phantom presence of pain that tricks him into reaching down again and again to stroke the emptiness. He's stopped asking why. His identification with the boy persists like a discredited rumour. Like Hitler's escape from the bunker. Like the Second Coming. (p. 8)

Wideman's work shares with Steele's this painful discovery of a self divided, at war with itself and estranged from others. Together they illustrate how the reality of racial difference in America generates among certain black writers a compulsion to overcome it. Wideman and Steele, expressing almost identically the problem of double consciousness — experiencing the individual as dissociated from his race and seeking to reconcile the two — demonstrate the socially driven character of racial subjectivity, and the self-questioning and self-doubt that it produces. Whereas Steele responds by attempting to exorcise race from his subjective experience, Wideman undertakes an alternative strategy. For Wideman, the aspiration for individual autonomy, the fantasy of transcendence, is what needs to be driven out. *Philadelphia Fire* is about re-entry into the community, subordinating individual desire to the collectivity, achieving identity by surrendering the self to racial particularity.

In the end, however, Wideman's solution is no less ironic than Steele's. In moving toward a kind of African-American ethnocentrism by celebrating what about his being black has made him unique and his vision his alone, Wideman is establishing himself as a powerfully idiosyncratic voice in American literature. In ever more authoritatively expressing the black writer's alienation from the world in which he came and the desire for reunification with it, Wideman has become increasingly celebrated for his ability to capture the American world of racial difference. As long as he attempts to represent racial particularity through his writing — to be the voice of difference — he preserves his own estrangement and reinforces the reality of difference.

The crisis of subjectivity — what Wideman and Steele both powerfully express, albeit differently, for the black American writer — was a preoccupation, too, of the Nobel prize winning German novelist, Thomas Mann. Though written at the beginning of this century, and of a different society with a distinct



set of concerns, much of Mann's fiction is concerned with these related themes of the links of one's inner world to outer society, and the connection between one's personal identity and national self-understanding (see Goldman, 1988). Nowhere are these topics explored more powerfully than in his novella, *Death in Venice*, a story of an aging writer's fatal attraction to Tadzio, a beautiful adolescent boy. This novel has been widely understood as the story of the breaking through of repressed erotic desire in a man whose creative capacities were waning. Gustave von Aschenbach, the central character, however, expresses more than a man's reluctant discovery of his own homosexual impulses. *Death in Venice* is Mann's subtle and evocative exploration of narcissism, and of the necessity for self-love in the experience of the artist (see Shockower, 1969; McWilliams, 1967; Kohut, 1957; and Stewart, 1978).<sup>6</sup> More than that, it is Mann's vehicle to criticize contemporary bourgeois German civilization: its wholesale embrace of rationality, discipline, and achievement. The culture that has resulted, Mann argues, is one where the human being has increasingly become estranged from himself, impelled to abandon himself in the name of greater or higher truths. Aschenbach's desperate effort, late in his life, both to reclaim and restore himself is attempted through his love for Tadzio. The result was not the spiritual death, which Aschenbach was struggling to counteract, but instead his own physical death. These alternating poles of affiliation available to Aschenbach, powerfully described by Mann, have their analogue in the distinctive solutions to racial difference attempted by Steele and Wideman. On the one side, the denial of black individuality produces, in the work of Steele, an assertion of the manly Promethean individual, invulnerable to the injuries and slights that racism might inflict. Wideman, in contrast, responds by defending the beauty of the black world, embracing the particularism of black physicality. In the next pages I will characterize, as Aschenbach confronted them, the choices offered between the universal and the concrete, between the ideal and the material, and between the mind and the body, and describe Mann's portrayal of a civilization that insisted on the choice being made, and required of the artist a too-extreme self-renunciation. I will then turn to consider how parallel dilemmas confront the African-American writer seeking self-expression in a racially divided world hostile to it.

Mann describes Aschenbach as a man who had been consumed by these idealizing cultural concerns: the search for abstract principles, harmonies, and laws, all extruded from the experiencing self. The artist's writings reflect the classical German preoccupation with abstraction and formalism; 'the writer', as Mann describes it, 'of that impassioned discourse on the themes of Mind and Art'. Moreover, Aschenbach's had been a life-long effort to overcome the limitations of the physical, of the particular, of the personal; up to now, Mann describes, he had successfully driven himself to attain heights of creativity and understanding beyond, one would have thought, human capacity. He was, 'the poet-spokesman of all those who labour at the edge of exhaustion; of the overburdened ... who yet contrive by skillful husbanding and prodigious spasms of will to produce, at least for a while, the effect of greatness'. To promote his 'literary gift', Aschenbach describes, 'he had bridled and tempered his sens-

ibilities, knowing full well that feeling is prone to be content with easy gains and blithe half-perfection'.

Mann implicates even conceptions of masculinity as they intertwine in a civilization intent on silencing the subject: 'The new type of hero favoured by Aschenbach', Mann writes, 'and recurring many times in his works, had early been analysed by a shrewd critic: 'The conception of an intellectual and virginal manliness, which clenches its teeth and stands in modest defiance of the swords and spears that pierce its side'. *Death in Venice* articulates Mann's conviction that a civilization dedicated to 'virginal manliness' generates its own pathology. It is a culture, Mann insists, that fails to gratify the self, that demands instead self-denial and self-sacrifice. Aschenbach sees in Tadzio his own stunted beauty, 'the virginal purity and austerity ... the tender young god' that became sacrificed to the demands of a harsh and austere society. In gazing upon the boy, Aschenbach attempts to incorporate him; he becomes the object of Aschenbach's desire to reclaim his own body, up to now laid as sacrifice to the gods of German civilization and experienced as estranged from his mind. And how mightily Aschenbach attempted to reconcile these eroticized fantasies of reclamation with a life dedicated to self-denial.

In the end, Aschenbach was unable to leave Venice and Tadzio, and the thought of returning 'to reason, to self-mastery, an ordered existence, to the old life of effort ... made him wince with a revulsion like physical nausea'. Even knowing of disease spreading through the city, Aschenbach could not renounce the fantasy of Tadzio; he could no longer resist the celebration of the body.

Freud helps us understand Aschenbach's homosexual attraction and the psychic fragmentation that he was experiencing. In his essay, 'On Narcissism: an Introduction', written in 1914, three years after *Death in Venice* was published, Freud introduced the concept of the 'ego-ideal', a forerunner to his later-developed idea of the super-ego. He argued that the infant originally experiences two forms of love: the love of his mother and self-love. The latter he describes as primary narcissism, a necessary component for healthy development. In time, self-love, or self-gratification, Freud argues, conflicts with 'cultural and ethical ideas', requiring a substantial degree of repression. The continuing need for self-love, now in conflict with a social world that prevents its immediate gratification, produces a compromise formation, an ego-ideal. 'What he projects before him as his ideal', Freud writes, 'is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal'. Conscience, ethics, morality are masked expressions — ego-ideals — of feelings of self-perfection projected onto idealized social and cultural objects.

Aschenbach's life-long dedication to German ideals and to its austere expectations of self-renunciation was loosening its hold on the writer. Now older, his wife dead, and without a son in which to invest his narcissism, Aschenbach was increasingly aware of cracks in his repression armour that had enabled him to remain self-denying for so long. Finally and reluctantly, his attraction for Tadzio became fully apparent to him. Tadzio, of course, was no less an idealization than those values to which he had subordinated himself over the course of his life, but the gratification that he gained immediately from his gaze overwhelmed his capacity to repress it.

Towards the end of the novella, Aschenbach reports a deeply troubling dream that 'left the whole cultural structure of a lifetime trampled on, ravaged, and destroyed'. The dream was about his confrontation with 'the stranger god', that stranger who was a 'sworn enemy to dignity and self-control'. While Aschenbach was determined in the dream not to succumb, he soon found himself embracing the stranger god, the god who was in search of Tadzio. 'Yet it was he [Aschenbach] who was flinging himself upon the animals, who bit and tore smoking goblets of flesh — while on the trampled moss there now began the rites in honour of the god, an orgy of promiscuous embraces — and in his very soul he tasted the bestial degradation of his fall'.

Aschenbach experienced his humiliation as complete. He had tasted the flesh and now no longer struggled against his degradation. But contentment and self-fulfilment were still not his. As Mann describes, having embraced the stranger god, Aschenbach only became more conscious of his own imperfections. He hated himself for his agedness in the face of ideal youth, and for his ugliness when compared to the boy's perfect beauty. And still more profoundly, Aschenbach came to detest his own artistic ideals to which he could not live up. He says of himself, with self-deprecation,

for you know that we poets cannot walk the way of beauty without Eros as our companion and guide. We may be heroic after our fashion, disciplined warriors of our craft, yet are we all the women, for we exult in passion, and love is still our desire — our craving and our stance. And from this you will perceive that we poets can neither be wise nor worthy citizens. (pp. 70–71)

Aschenbach's refusal to strive heroically for 'virginal manliness' convinced him of his own degradation: we are all the women. And Aschenbach realizes that the alternatives available — engagement rather than detachment, feeling over thought, body over mind, women not men — in the end, do not produce happiness and self-reclamation. He dies the death of the defeated. But Mann's point is not simply that. Rather, Mann offers a cultural critique: Aschenbach could not integrate what Venice came to represent for him in a civilization that insists on wholesale repression of feeling, of self, of physicality, and of femininity. For Mann, Aschenbach's tragedy is not having been drawn to Tadzio but experiencing physical attraction as so antithetical to his self-understanding that he could not choose to leave Venice, even when remaining ensured his own death.

The writings of Wideman and Steele, when taken together, reveal that Aschenbach's struggle is no less discernible in contemporary America, nor is Mann's commentary about narcissistic yearnings any less applicable in this self-denying and racist society. Wideman's and Steele's accommodations to the American racial order represent the two poles of Aschenbach's impasse. One embraces material physicality, and one embraces the repressive strictures of the rationalism that Mann presents Aschenbach as compelled to reject. Both strategies reveal the psychic cost of the splitting, and the intractability of racial division in America.

*The Content of our Character* expresses Steele's heroic efforts to promote his 'literary gift', to use his creativity and intellect in the service of individual achievement and of transcendence of racial categorization. Steele naïvely imagines that he has at last found the route to narcissistic gratification, an escape from the anguish of a divided self, and he exhorts all blacks to follow. He promotes a modern conception of the individual, liberated from history, tradition, from all forms of social and familial enmeshment. Steele's hero is the man of boundless energy, free, vital, Promethean. Prometheus — the mythological creator of mankind, invulnerable and immortal — is Steele's ego-ideal. He is the man of unbridled strength, alone able to survive against any adversity. His ideal is the man that has escaped the shackles of particularity and primordality. In aspiring himself to realize this vision, Steele turns his pen against blacks for not sharing in it with him. In an odd though not incomprehensible twist, Steele attacks blacks for their unwillingness to face life as free, unencumbered public citizens. Steele has come to believe that black ideology, or 'race-holding', has until now constricted his own achievement, and by now criticizing the black community, he hopes to exorcise these voices of doubt and anxiety from himself. It is 'they' who have interfered with his own accomplishments. Blacks, Steele insists, 'focus on racism and ... neglect the individual initiative that would deliver them from poverty — the only thing that finally delivers anyone from poverty'.

Against this backdrop of a community mired in its own self-pity, Steele promotes instead a peculiarly austere conception of the self. He endorses, in the words of Mann, a manliness 'which clenches its teeth and stands in mordant defiance of the swords and spears that pierce its sides'. Steele describes a 'virginal manliness' that has successfully overcome its connection to others, even its links to its own past. Steele's hero is the man who has struggled mightily against his anti-self, against 'inertia, passivity, and faithlessness'. This is what Steele presumes: 'When a white fails, he alone fails. His doubt is strictly personal, which gives him more control over the failure. He can discover his mistakes, learn the reasons he made them, and try again. But the black, labouring under the myth of inferiority, will have this impersonal, culturally determined doubt with which to contend'. Steele's ego-ideal is now defined in exclusively racial terms. Imagining white failure to be experienced entirely differently from his own, he yearns for their strength. He aspires to become the other.

Here is Steele's new form of essentialism, revealing his own subordination to the reality of American racial difference.<sup>7</sup> Whites express their strength and autonomy in suffering the blows of failure 'like men', Steele imagines, while blacks are ensnared in an ideology of victimization that shields them, like women, from both the satisfaction of virile success and the pain of defeat. Steele seeks a way out of what he calls this 'unconscious circumvention of possibility' and strives after Mann's heroic ideal of the 'miracle of regained detachment'.

It is a particularly masculinized vision of the hero. Against the backdrop of 'hav(ing) suffered as much as any group in human history' and being part of 'the most despised race in the human community of nations', Steele instructs blacks to transcend the impact of this reality: to ignore the swords and spears

by acting toward the world as whites do, not to indulge in the pain and suffering of racial subordination. The challenge, he insists, is for blacks to overcome the internal voice of the anti-self and thrust the self forward. It is an intra-psychic struggle between male propulsion and female submission: whites propel themselves, blacks acquiesce. And yet, as Julius Lester has argued, Steele's resort to essentialist thinking leads to his inability to comprehend the intersubjective character of racial subordination. 'Steele make(s) the serious mistake of thinking that racism is a statement about the victims, that is, about blacks', Lester (1991) writes. 'If whites did not regard themselves as superior, blacks could not be seen as inferior', Lester continues, 'black nationalism, black anger, black self-pity, black victimhood and sentimentality are a backlash, a reaction to and against white power's insistence on itself. It is the historically and culturally conditioned white insistence on black difference, a conviction probably as secure today as it has always been, that denies personhood to blacks. Personally standing erect against the swords and spears of racial difference, as Steele recommends, may produce a certain narcissistic gratification, as it had for Aschenbach for much of his life in his quest for the universal. But just as Mann casts Aschenbach as one who could not anticipate the personal toll that a divided self would take, so Steele's solution to black subordination in America can hardly be a sufficient response to a culture seemingly incapable of transcending racial difference.

Wideman represents the contemporary alternative to Steele's radical individualism.<sup>8</sup> He embraces the materiality of the black community and responds, like Aschenbach, to physical desire. In describing his longing to return, to bridge the gap between himself and his past, Wideman foreswears his former conceit that he, as an individual, might transcend the primordial world from which he came. He turns to the African-American oral tradition as his inspiration; he takes it as his challenge to preserve its distinctiveness. He describes 'a creeping, exhausting sense that a link was being severed, a connection lost', a fear that the 'melting pot would have its way. Slowly, surely the monoculture would claim us. Black Kens and Barbies would be free at last', and he devotes himself now to preserving the tie with the past, to expressing it according to its distinctive cadence and sounds. Wideman's writing is now eroticized: he embraces the body of black culture, he enters the black speech community and sees himself entangled within it. 'Never had the pride of the word been so sweet to him'. Aschenbach thought as he wrote with Tadzio in his gaze, 'never had he known so well that Eros is in the word'. Wideman writes again but, this time, he experiences reunion with a past and a culture that he largely foreswore, as he sought to become a writer speaking in his own voice.

In *Philadelphia Fire*, Cudjoe returns to find the boy, the naked, screaming, 'skin melting' boy emerging from the flames of the burned-out building. It is Tadzio walking serenely out of the Venetian sea, now transposed to another innocent boy, Simba, walking terrified out from the fire, amidst bullets, in war-torn America. Cudjoe's desire for Simba, his ego-ideal, was no less intense or desperate than Aschenbach's for Tadzio. And like Aschenbach, Cudjoe's yearnings meant that his entire life was subject to re-evaluation.

Cudjoe is a wiser man than he once was. He is now aware of the pain that a *fragmented self produces* and of his desperate efforts not to know that suffering. In returning to Philadelphia to find Simba, he undertakes the arduous effort of confronting himself and striving for a single, unified self. He even notices how his efforts at self-reconciliation transform in sexual desire. He encounters a woman on a park bench, 'who lets him see under her dress'. 'He stared at the dark hinge between her legs', Wideman writes. 'Though she seemed unconcerned by his presence, she wasn't ignoring him. She was stretching, yawning, welcoming, returning to him after centuries of sleep'. Cudjoe's was no longer the boundless sexual energy aspiring to male conquest. Instead, he imagined in her the possibility of communion, of a return, of finding *the wholeness for which he was searching*.

And still at the park, Cudjoe remembers the experience of the basketball game, for Wideman perhaps the quintessential experience of black difference. Cudjoe, remembering his basketball playing friend Darnell Thompson, describes him as 'big, black, graceful. Broad shoulders, narrow waist, short, bouncy, almost delicate steps'. And Cudjoe imagines himself back in the game:

Then the court's full again. Music blasting. Players grunting, panting, squeak of sneakers, cheers from the sidelines, thud of strong bodies every shade of black and brown and ivory colliding, tangling, flying. Cudjoe inserts himself into his film, a solitary figure, narrow shoulders framed by the emptiness of the court that is quiet again. A man caught up in reverie, shuttling at warp speed between times and places, a then and a now. Cudjoe is an actor embarrassed by the cliché shot, a director who can't resist filming it this way. (p. 31)

Wideman's capacity to describe the young, graceful black athlete playing the contemporary game of basketball is his commemoration to today's Afro-American culture. For Wideman, himself a basketball player while a student at the University of Pennsylvania, the game captures both a singular black physicality and a particular black fraternity. Wideman writes elsewhere, 'when *it's played the way it's spozed to be played*, basketball happens in the air, the pure air; flying, floating, elevated above the floor, levitating the way oppressed peoples of this earth imagine themselves in their dreams, as I do in my lifelong fantasies of escape and power, finally, at last, once and for all, free' (*Esquire*, 1990). He celebrates the athleticism of the black body and the male game. If Tadzio's pre-pubescent beauty describes for Mann the antithesis of the values of German classical ideals, the black basketball player playing his game represents for Wideman his rejection of an effete white intellection that celebrates the mind and rejects the physical. Here, Wideman, too, not only announces his attachment to black particularity but, in so doing, proclaims his own subordination to the reality of American racial difference.

In imagining himself physically able to play a game in the park as if no time had passed, Cudjoe attempts his self-reclamation. And through Cudjoe, Wideman describes the physical allure that has brought him back to the black community. As with Steele, there is here an assertive essentialism at play. The black athlete playing basketball is heroic, defining for himself qualities that are

uniquely Afro-American. And through him, Wideman explores the distinctiveness and the beauty of blacks, a community set apart from the white world. Wideman, in writing for the community, accepts the terms that it sets, and he reciprocates through his admiration.

But Cudjoe, like Wideman, is also a man resigned to his double consciousness. He describes his yearnings and cannot resist the attraction that they offer. But he knows too that the distance between him and what he desires can not be breached. Cudjoe knows that Simba will not be found, that the time spent away from Philadelphia cannot be erased, and that the age demarcating him from the young athlete cannot be traversed. Also Wideman himself knows the space that separates him from his son cannot be reclaimed; nonetheless, for Wideman and his character, 'the possibility of salvation, redemption, continuity' that reclamation offers means that the quest cannot be abandoned. The allure is too powerful.

*Philadelphia Fire*, then, is a mournful elegy to a world of difference that cannot be breached. Cudjoe, though ineluctably drawn back to family and race, knows, much like Aschenbach, that he will be defeated by forces larger than him. And Wideman, too, in this novel cannot resist the physical and its painful pleasures, but he holds no illusion that it will result in redemption. In *Philadelphia Fire*, he accepts his defeat at the hands of racial difference. For Wideman, it is Shakespeare's *The Tempest* that captures it best: Prospero's insistence, and the power to make it real, of Caliban's difference. Wideman writes, 'the saddest thing about this story is that Caliban must always love his island and Prospero must always come and steal it. Nature. Each one stuck with his nature. So it ends and never ends'.

Wideman becomes the spokesman of racial difference. Through his writing, he preserves the world of African-American difference and celebrates it. But it is a sorrowful celebration: he acknowledges the ineluctability by which it has overtaken him, and the inability ever to escape it. Wideman's voice is like that of Mann: through his characters, he gives substance to the personal price of self-denial and renunciation, the human cost to individuals who yearn for gratification from a society incapable of providing it. Through his writings, Wideman, no less than Mann, represents an important voice of cultural criticism. He understands his own capitulation to essentialist thinking as the result of a world that has forced it upon him. For Wideman both celebrates African-American distinctiveness — the allure of the particular — and asserts nonetheless that it is the incapacity of the society to comprehend the whole society's insistence on racial difference that perpetuates it. 'Each one stuck with his nature. So it ends and never ends'. Wideman's pessimism is palpable. Like Mann, who creates in Aschenbach a character whose desire produces his own demise, Wideman's embrace of the physical comes with the self knowledge that it alone cannot restore a civilization hostile to its members.

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## Notes

1. This is a central theme of Prager (1982) see also Prager (1987).
2. DuBois (1961) powerfully described his experience of being perceived through the lenses of the racial category. He writes: 'Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, how does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent coloured man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word'.
3. Interestingly, Steele's (1974) Ph.D. thesis revolves around the themes of race and expressiveness.
4. The biographical details of Wideman's life are drawn from *Current Biography*, and Wideman's own (1988) statement.
5. Manichaeism, forced duality, is at the heart of Wideman's experience and captures perhaps the central tension in his contemporary writing and in his thinking. I will develop this theme later, though it is no more powerfully stated than in the passage cited. When commenting on his dilemma as a black writer in a written discourse that largely, though unintentionally denies the Afro-American experience, Wideman raises the question, 'does an Afro-American necessarily lose contact with an authentic self if he or she decides to tell a story in print, in a second acquired tongue? Are the only options silence or fatal compromise?', 'The Black Writer and the Magic of the Word'.
6. With the exception of Kohut, none of these treatments identifies the central dilemma in the novel to be one of narcissism. Even Kohut, who emerges later as the most important psychoanalytic theorist of narcissism, in this article identifies Aschenbach's narcissistic crisis to be only a psychic derivative of the failure of artistic sublimation late in his life. My treatment of the novel as being about narcissistic yearnings that organize Aschenbach's experience throughout his life is more in keeping with contemporary self psychology, a psychoanalytic perspective founded by Kohut that understands narcissism as central to each individual but whose manifestation may assume different expression at different stages of life. In this respect, my interpretation of *Death in Venice*, psychoanalytically informed by contemporary self psychology, is distinct from these earlier psychoanalytically orientated efforts.
7. Adolph Reid, in a (1991) review of *The Content of our Character* for *The Nation* powerfully captures Steele's resort to essentialist premises. Arguing that the title of the essays itself presumes a single character, Reid goes on to argue



that 'one cannot slide blithely back and forth between 'I' and 'we' obliterating all distinction between self and race, and at the same time complain that one's uniqueness as an individual has been suppressed.

8. An earlier rendering of this dualism in Afro-American criticism between African-Americans cast as symbolic expressions of America's failure and the real human price paid by African-Americans because of American racism can be found in James Baldwin's critique of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, where Baldwin chastised Wright for his portrayal of racism as 'a social, and not a personal or human problem', presenting the Negro 'problem' as 'somehow analogous to disease — cancer perhaps, or tuberculosis — which must be checked, even though it cannot be cured'. Bigger Thomas, the novel's protagonist, was not developed as a whole man, Baldwin argued, but rather as a social symbol of the price America pays for its failure to find a cure for the disease. The consequence, Baldwin insisted, was that Wright had 'the necessity thrust on him of being the representative of 13 million people. It is a false responsibility (since writers are not congressmen) and impossible, by its nature, of fulfilment'. 'The unlucky shepherd', Baldwin continues, 'soon finds out that, so far from being able to feed the hungry sheep he has lost the wherewithal for his own nourishment, having not been allowed — so fearful was his burden, so present his audience! — to recreate his own experience'. Alfred Kazin more recently quotes Baldwin for the alternative he offered: 'the relationship of oppressed to oppressor cannot be unlocked until we accept how much it contains of the force and anguish and terror of love' (*New York Times Book Review*, 29 December 1991). Here, in this earlier era, Wright's intellectual response to racism is contrasted with Baldwin's insistence on the more immediate, i.e., material, exploration of racism's meaning. It would be interesting to speculate on the significance of Steele's endorsement of individualism as the contemporary counterpart to Wright's indictment of society's racism. Has the obligation to portray racism's destructive social consequences been replaced in African-American literary discourse by an intellectual defence of the role of individual assertion despite the persistence of racism? Does this imply some progressive movement in racial discourse, even in the American racial reality?

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