FYS 16: 1st Essay (Sept. 19, 2010)

War of Words

Douglass in his Narrative describes physical resistance, such as his fight with Mr. Covey and his escape north, as crucial to his passage to freedom and manhood, “Richard’s” first lesson in “Ethics” concerns the lack of that option in the Jim Crow south.

Using specific passages in the Narrative for comparison, discuss how and why Wright describes the use of words as weapons.

A related question, which you may or may not find helpful to continue on to: In writing “Ethics,” how is Wright both freer and less free than Douglass in writing his Narrative?

Post-mortem on the assignment:

Challenge: The assignment involved a difficult question about a short text (“Ethics,” 10 pp.), which we had analyzed only briefly, in relationship to a longer text, (Narrative), which we had worked through in detail. The fact that the question centered on a metaphor (words as weapons) made it particularly tricky, especially since Wright uses that figure explicitly only once (“armed with a library card,” p. 98). However, the metaphor is implicit everywhere in the hostile environment of the Jim Crow South. The question caused more frustration than I would have anticipated, but writers also showed resourcefulness; e.g., several writers asked for clarification about the prompt before finishing the rough draft. In general, writers made effective use of the process of draft writing drafts, conferences, and revisions, and one or two had also talked with associates at the Writing Center.

Outcome:

Prose: The level of prose on the level of sentences and paragraphs ranged from decent to wonderful. Particular writers had better and worse moments, but no one got stuck on a good idea that s/he could not get down on paper. Economy caused the most problems, as for example in re-explaining already familiar issues at length when a line would do. The two essays reproduced below show techniques for getting to the point efficiently.

Argument: The greatest difficulty came in finding a persuasive and original argument and supporting it with specific textual evidence. This may be more a problem of reading than writing. By and large, the final drafts showed progress in this direction in
comparison to the rough drafts. The shortfalls of various presentations go in various
directions: an intriguing argument, but not much evidence; a great take on RW, but
little effective contrast to FD; or ingenious parallels of vignettes from RW and FD, but
with the contention that both authors are just showing the same problems.

The following responses from writers may suggest the options:

Argument #1 (complete essay):

Armed\(^1\) with a Library Card

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said that, “in the truest sense, freedom cannot be bestowed;
it must be achieved.” Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* and Richard Wright’s “The Ethics of
Living Jim Crow” are two autobiographical works that depict an individual’s attainment of
freedom, but through opposite methods. While Douglass manages to escape slavery by means of
force and even violence, Wright learns as a child that he cannot. Richard then attempts using
words to obtain freedom, but discovers expectations and taboos that come with spoken words.
Therefore, Wright must resort to written words, which he compares to weapons that replace
violence and which fail Douglass in his first attempt to freedom. While Douglass achieves
freedom through violence and action, Wright must use words to achieve it, and when spoken
words are controlled by whites, only written ones remain.\(^2\)

When he first deals with whites as an adult, Wright tries to use spoken words to attain
freedom, but learns that these are controlled by whites.\(^3\) Wright suggests that certain words are
expected of blacks: at his job interview, Richard is careful to “[answer] all his questions with
sharp yessirs and nosirs” (90). The diction of “sharp” recalls Wright’s earlier description of the
“hard, sharp outlines of white houses” that become a “symbol of fear” (90) in his mind, implying
an attempt to comply with white expectations. Similarly, a white man demands that Richard
“‘talk like it then.’ ‘Oh, yes, sir!’ I said with as much heartiness as I could muster” (97). This
man’s order that Richard “talk” as if he agrees with him shows that whites desire spoken
confirmation of their superiority from blacks. However, spoken words are also sometimes
prohibited: Wright asserts that “many subjects were taboo from the white man’s point of view”
(98). Wright gives a long list of forbidden topics—only “sex and religion” is allowed. This
drawn-out, systematic list implies thoughtless memorization; his “education” in words is, in fact,
the lack of one because he has been instructed in what he *cannot* say. His dilemma in the

\(^1\) In the first word, the writer cites the one place in “Ethics” where RW explicitly uses the weapon
metaphor for words.

\(^2\) Introduction gives a summary of the thesis.

\(^3\) Clear transition; topic sentence for paragraph, which will present evidence from six (6) different
vignettes smoothly and succinctly.
elevator shows this delicate balance of knowing when it is appropriate to speak or not, as does
his mental dilemma at the optical factory: either he calls one man a liar or disrespects the other.
The consequences of saying the wrong words are obvious: “The words were hardly out of my
mouth before I felt something hard and cold smash me” (95). “Hard” evokes once again the
qualities of that symbol of fear, and even more literally, the bottles that the boys threw at
Richard. Spoken words are thus useless to Wright in his personal attempt at freedom.

Wright consequently realizes that written words are his only means of freedom through
self-expression, in contrast with Douglass, who finds written words ineffective. When Douglass
is planning his first escape, he says he “wrote several protections, one for each of us” (62);
however, when they are betrayed, he “managed…to get my pass out, and, without being
discovered, throw it in the fire” (64). These written “protections” are destroyed, implying that
Frederick finds them not only ineffectual but detrimental as proof of his plan. Frederick also
finds his literacy frustrating, stating that he “[felt] that learning to read had been a curse rather
than a blessing” (43) because it torments him to ponder his unattainable freedom. Wright,
meanwhile, learns the power of the written word. He describes a change in his Jim Crow
education: “It was no longer brutally cruel, but subtly cruel” (98). This transition from
“brutally,” which connotes action and recalls the beatings and castrations he has witnessed, to
“subtly,” which Wright uses to describe himself. In his scheme to borrow books from the library,
Wright conveys the power of the written word: “Armed with a library card, I obtained books in
the following manner: I would write a note to the librarian, saying: ‘Please let this nigger boy
have the following books.’ I would then sign it with the white man’s name” (98). The diction of
“armed” clearly implies some kind of potent weaponry, to be used in battle. The seemingly dull
facility of the library becomes almost a fortress that Richard is able to penetrate, and his
language in this section is strategic and methodical, evoking battle plans; his use of “when” and
“if” conveys situations he encounters for which he has a set scheme. Wright uses the written
word (forging notes) to defy the unjust policies of his time and, even further, to increase his own
intelligence and literacy. Ultimately, in the act of writing the autobiographical “Ethics,” Wright
uses the written word to express his freedom directly. While Douglass discovers that written
words do not aid him in his freedom, Wright finds power and value in them.

Ultimately, in the written words lie the key to freedom itself. Douglass may define his
violent resistance as a “turningpoint,” but he does not deny that literacy and education did serve
him in his experiences. After all, he has written an autobiographical tale that transmits his
experiences, expresses his thoughts, and asserts his freedom, just as Wright has. Wright merely
recognizes its significance more acutely because he has no other choice. Both authors use the

4 Clear transition, which draws FD into the analysis.

5 Writer uses RW’s transition (“brutally cruel … subtly cruel”) to set up the climax of the argument, about
the library.

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written word, which is vehemently denied to the slaves, as a powerful tool in their personal
declaration of freedom: one they have, by whatever means, not received, but achieved.⁶

Argument #2 (complete essay):

War of Words⁷

(RW = Ethics, Richard Wright; FD = Narrative, Frederick Douglass)

Weapons can be used but cannot be truly possessed: they can be turned right back
against those who wield them. So are words. In Ethics, Richard Wright turns the dominant
white language back against itself.⁸ In this essay, I will discuss what role language plays and
how language in Ethics differs in its meaning, both within the story and on Ethics as a whole,
from that in Frederick Douglass' Narrative.

Language both in Narrative and in Ethics is the way white people maintain their
hegemony: the Word⁹ is the way they set the hierarchy (“Sir”, “Mr”, “Nigger”) and form a
discourse in favor of themselves (“taboo from the white man’s point of view ... slavery; social
equality...”, RW p.98f). Therefore, they try to keep the protagonists away from learning how to
read and write language: “If you teach that nigger [Douglass] how to read, there would be no
keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave (FD, p.33a)”; “Whut yuh tryin’ t’ do,
nigger, git smart? ... Nigger, you think you’re white, don’t you?(RW, p.91)”; “It was assumed
that after a Negro had imbibed what scanty schooling the state furnished he had no further
need for books.(RW p.98d)”.

(I) The Word Within the Story of Ethics and Narrative

Yet the protagonist of Ethics knows how to wield language in a subversive way: in
Section 9 the protagonist, “armed with a library card” and “a note with the white man’s
name(RW p.98c)”, manages to get into the library, namely the forbidden citadel of knowledge,
where he can develop higher literacy. Similarly, Douglass uses the Word during his attempted

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⁶ The conclusion makes some needed qualifications (e.g., FD uses the written word as well), and
gracefully loops back to the opening quotation in the introduction.

⁷ This essay has some rough edges in expression, but it packs in a great deal of well-chosen evidence and
it builds to a remarkable conclusion.

⁸ The thesis statement could be somewhat clearer. The reader has to deduce that RW turns language back
on the white audience in a way that FD does not.

⁹ Capitalizing “Word” needs more explanation. Does Word indicate a philosophical concept, such as
Platonic logos, or the Word of God?
escape as a “protection(FD p.62), which “certifies that [the master has] given the bearer, [his] servant, full liberty to go to Baltimore.” Language in both cases supersedes the protagonists’ apparent identity as a “Negro” and allows them a privilege that white people would not want them to have.

(II) The Word in Narrative as the Divine Light, Words in Ethics as the Secular Weapon

However, language bears different meanings to the protagonist of Ethics and Douglass in the Narrative, while it plays the same role to achieve their goals. Notice the sharp contrast in their tones concerning their knowledge of language: Richard “learned to lie, to steal, to dissemble [the language]”, whereas Douglass describes it as a means of “protection.”

For Douglass, literacy is the way to the Truth of God, to his “Word”: it is “a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things” and makes him “[understand] the pathway from slavery to freedom.(FD p.33)”. As he cultivates his literacy, he becomes convinced in the power of the Word leading him to freedom and exposing the injustice of slavery: “The moral which I gained ... was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder.(FD p.42c)” Therefore, language is the key to “learn how to read the will of God. (FD p.60a)”

Meanwhile, language in Ethics is not a divine guide to freedom as in Narrative. For Wright, language is a weapon, which was used to oppress him and is to be reclaimed. As a writer, he stands outside the quotation marks, in which the white-dominant language suffocates him. Therefore, his illustration of 'Jim Crow education' lies beyond the story itself: it is noteworthy that he little uses judgmental words as Douglass does (“dehumanizing character of slavery (FD p.24)”, “cruel and hateful (FD p.49)”). Rather, he shows forth the absurdity of Jim Crow education by a variety of styles: sarcasm, irony, sudden change of voice, etc. For example, he refers to a white man in a sarcastic way(“to assure Pease that I had never called him simply Pease.(RW p.92)”), freely mentions the list of taboos such as “slavery, social equality, Communism(Ethics,p.98)”, and suggests white men’s vulgarity by putting their words in a dialect as they wield their physical force. He also suggests the structure of violence by juxtaposing active/passive voices in the section 7 and 8. The subject of oppression is concealed(“was caught, ..was castrated, ...were called, ...were given to understand(RW p.97c)” and the responsibility is attributed to the oppressed(“[Richard] walked, .. ashamed to face [the victim]”), while in fact “[he] couldn’t help it.(RW, p.97c)”

Wright turns Ethics as a whole into a subversive weapon: ¹⁰Contradicting its title, The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, it lays bare the underlying force of 'Jim Crow education' – brute physical force. It is be not the Divine Word in Douglass’ sense that leads African Americans to

¹⁰This final paragraph doesn’t sum up the argument but takes it to another level: The veiled threat of revolutionary violence heard from the elevator man in fact brings the use of violence (un-learned with R’s beating from his mother) back into the argument.
emancipation; as Wright’s friend once said, “Ef it wuzn’t fer them polices ‘n’ them ol’ lynch-mobs, there wouldn’t be nothin’ but uproar down here!” (p.99c) In conclusion, Ethics seems to have a more revolutionary implication than Narrative: if language as a weapon is already reclaimed by Wright and yet Jim Crow education continues “in a subtly cruel” (RWp.98c) way, we would need another weapon to fight them back, namely physical force.

**Argument #3 (suggested by various writers):**

**Addressing the White Audience**

Some writers addressed the impression that Wright is both more elusive than Douglass (where is this story heading?) and implicitly more confrontational toward his notionally white audience. In terms of the “words as weapons” metaphor, Wright makes his white audience a target in a way that Douglass tactfully does not.

This idea has much potential, and we barely touched on it in class discussion. A good formulation:

Wright talks about the white community collectively; he employs “they” and “them” which functions as a generalization about all white people. Immediately, these pronouns express his feelings not just about the white people that attack him, but he sees their actions as actions committed by the entire community. His decision to group the actions of one or some white people to the entire community “became a symbol... Through the years they grew into an overreaching symbol of fear” (90). In context, Wright explains how the images of “green trees, the trimmed hedges, [and] the cropped lawns” are reminders of white people which is what “they” is literally referring to. But, implicitly, Wright is referring to the white community again as a symbol of fear; a community that Wright does not want to encounter, but does want to address.

One can develop this perception in various directions: Douglass draws what would be for his northern audience a reassuring distinction between the vicious slaveholders and the virtuous white abolitionists who helped him. The southern whites become the “they” and Douglass implicitly joins his white audience as an “us“: because we all hate slavery; because we’re all educated; and because we’re all Christians (and you’ll show your Christianity by opposing slavery). In naming and denouncing specific slaveholders, Douglass keeps the white characters from merging into a “they,” and he carefully assesses their individual qualities. Wright, by contrast, does not use names other than Pease and Morrie and does not describe helpful white people other than the Roman Catholic man who helped him get books out of the library (p. 98). The danger he faces is not from a particular master or overseer, but from any white person or gang anywhere who decides to put him in his place (“them ol’ lynch mobs,” p. 99). Douglass’s northern audience knows that they are not running slave plantations; Wright’s audience cannot so easily distance themselves from the white houses and green lawns, which they may not have recognized as part of the race problem in the USA.