# Underground Topography of the Political Unconscious in Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison

Richard Wright ve Ralph Ellison'da Politik Bilinçdışının Yeraltı Topografyası

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**Abstract**
Coming from different socio-economic backgrounds but sharing the experience of being black intellectuals in the US before the Civil Rights movement, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison met in New York in 1937. Although they eventually grew distant, their friendship generated some of the most important political writings of African-American literature. They were interested in the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx for possible solutions to the "Negro question." They argued for a Freudo-Marxist synthesis as a remedy for the broken black psyche under white supremacist pressure. With its dimension on American racism, the synthesis they proposed offers a distinct and important contribution to the dominantly European canon of the theory. This article investigates the political psychoanalysis of Wright and Ellison as represented in their ideationally interlinked novels, Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (2021). It analyses how their novelistic writing emerges as a dynamic space to elaborate upon a political psychoanalysis through their own race-based version of a theoretical synthesis. Moreover, the study also offers a new approach to new material, as Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* remained unpublished until it was recently rediscovered and printed for the first time in 2021.
**Keywords:** Political psychoanalysis, Freudo-Marxism, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, *The Man Who Lived Underground*, *Invisible Man*

**Öz**
Farklı sosyoekonomik kökenlerden gelen, fakat Sivil Haklar hareketi öncesi ABD'de siyah entelektüel olma deneyimini paylaşan Richard Wright ve Ralph Ellison 1937'de New York'ta tanıştı. Zamanla araları açılmış olsa da dostlukları Afro-Amerikan edebiyatın bazı çok önemli metinlerine ön ayak oldu. İki yazar da "Zenci meselesi"ne olası çözümler için Sigmund Freud ve Karl Marx'ın fikirleriyle ilgileniyorlardı. Freudo-Marksist bir sentezin beyaz üstünlükçü baskı altında hasar gören siyah ruhuna çare olma potansiyelini savunuyorlardı. Yazarların önerdikleri Freudo-Marksist sentez Amerikan ırkçılığına dair boyutuyla teorinin baskın Avrupa kanonuna da farklı bir katkı sunmaktadır. Bu makale düşünsel anlamda birbiriyle ilişkili olan Ralph Ellison'ın *Invisible Man* (Görünmez Adam, 1952) ve Richard Wright'ın *The Man Who Lived Underground* (Yeraltında Yaşayan Adam, 2021) romanlarındaki politik psikanaliz temsillerini incelemektedir. Yazarların bahsi geçen romanlar üzerinden nasıl kendilerine özgü ırk temelli bir teorik sentez sunduklarını tartışmaktadır. Ayrıca, Richard Wright'ın *The Man Who Lived Underground* romanı daha önceden basılmadığı ve yakın zamanda yeniden keşfedilerek ilk defa 2021'de yayımlandığı için çalışma yeni malzemelerle yeni bir yaklaşım da sunmaktadır.
**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Politik psikanaliz, Freudo-Marksizm, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, *The Man Who Lived Underground*, *Invisible Man*

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## Introduction

This article examines the political role psychoanalysis plays in the works of Richard Wright (1908-1960) and Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) both of whom utilise psychoanalysis as a key component in their left-aligned anti-racist politics as well as their literature. It focuses on two novels, Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (2021) with a particular emphasis on their "underground" depictions in order to present the distinctive Freudo-Marxism that emerges from the writers' dialogic relationship as it becomes manifest in these two comparable texts. The article argues that the political psychoanalysis as maintained by Wright and Ellison establishes a unique Freudo-Marxism that emphasises the significance of blackness in the formation of the individual as a political subject within the mid-twentieth century US American context. Not only their active engagement with psychoanalysis and communism on issues concerning race and class is a significant aspect of their literary intellectual position, but also their positionality as intellectuals both within the broader black movement and outside it as they shift out of its institutional structures renders their stance distinctive. Accordingly, their writing, fiction and non-fiction, contribute to the debates on the agency and the subjectivity of the individual in Freudo-Marxist thought.

Inspired by a real-life criminal incident about a (white) man who took to hiding in the city's underground sewer system and committed petty crimes, Richard Wright published a short story titled "The Man Who Lived Underground" (Gounard, 1978, p. 381). This story, which first came out in 1944, later turned into a novel with the same title. However, the novel was rejected by the publisher, and it was not until recently that it was rediscovered in the archives and finally published in full as a novel.[1] The story of a black man who is accused of a crime he has not committed and who has been persecuted until he withdraws into the sewer system is of course reminiscent of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which similarly tells the story of a black man who is forced into hiding in the underground tunnels of the city. Given the friendship between Wright and Ellison, it is possible to trace the links between Wright's short story (and the novel) and Ellison's text (Dietze, 1982).[2]

In 1936, Ralph Ellison moved to New York in order to work and save the funds to continue his music education at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. While initially fraught with

[1] Richard Wright's daughter Julia Wright came across the full manuscript of the novel "more than a decade ago" at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, where his father's manuscripts are held. She brought it to the attention of the Library of America and the text was published unabridged, along with his essay "Memories of my Grandmother," in 2021. The ongoing police brutality in the USA (marked by the shooting of George Floyd in 2020 and its aftermath) seems to have created an urgent and "eerie" sense of timeliness for Julia Wright to eventually pursue the novel's publication, see "Unearthing 'The Man Who Lived Underground'," *The Harvard Gazette*. Although there are plenty of discussions on the short story version of the text, given its very recent publication, there has not been many scholarly studies focusing specifically on the novel, yet. This article is among the first few that explore the full novel analytically, alongside those of Robin E. Preiss and Douglas A. Jones, Jr.

[2] Ellison had read "The Man Who Lived Underground" in 1944 (Ellison, 1964, pp. 139-140) and he was probably inspired by it. However, although there are obvious similarities between the two works, there are no direct acknowledgments in regard to the connections between them. Rudolf F. Dietze notes that from Wells to Dostoyevsky, Ellison had many literary influences as he was determined to improve his craft (1982, pp. 32-33). While Wright's effect on Ellison's writing at this period in his life is undeniable, his desire to separate himself from Wright is also widely known (Ellison, 1964, pp. 139-140; Lawrence, 2000, pp. 359-352).

misadventures and despite the fact that it essentially ended his music career, this move was fortuitous for Ellison's intellectual education and emergence as a talented writer. He met Langston Hughes in New York who introduced him to Richard Wright. The young Ellison thus embarked upon his literary career imbued with politics, aesthetics, and a strong sense of self-awareness as a black intellectual. As Wright's friendship turned into a mentorship, Ellison grew more and more dedicated to improving his writing and creating a new aesthetic, a powerful voice for the black people before the Civil Rights movement. Although Wright and Ellison grew apart later, their friendship and dialogue were highly influential in Ellison's writing both through and against Wright's presence (Jackson, 2000).

Wright and Ellison shared interests in utilising psychoanalytical theory as a pathway to understanding the black psyche and its socioeconomic constituents and seeking out remedies for the mental health of the black people under racist pressure and segregation. Especially during and after the Second World War with the arrival of Jewish intellectuals from Europe, Freud's ideas (and those of other psychoanalysts) became a point of discussion within their anti-racist struggle. Ellison also met Frederic Wertham through Wright and the three men collaborated in the foundation of the first mental health clinic for black people, Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic (active in 1946-1958), in the heart of New York, at the basement of an Episcopal Church (Mendes, 2015). They were interested in the political possibilities of psychoanalysis not only against racism but also as a remedy for the broken black soul under the social injustices of the racially segregated American society. As Badia Sahar Ahad maintains, although they were "less convinced" of its "curative effects" under an "uneven U.S. democracy," Ellison and Wright were integral to the "discursive formation of American psychoanalysis" as a part of the social psychiatry trends prevalent at the time (2010, p. 83).

Moreover, Wright was a member of the Communist Party, and he was also actively involved with the various leftist and black social networks. It was through his introduction that Ellison was also able to get involved with such circles and gain access to valuable social, intellectual, and financial opportunities. In the 1930s and the 1940s, mainstream intellectual resources and channels were white-controlled and black writers had to carve out their own space for public engagement. The Communist Party and its organs were among the very few institutions where opportunities for black writers to showcase their works were present. They were, what Jerry Gafio Watts calls, "social marginality facilitators," the sole aim of which was "to increase, protect, and nurture the individual's artistic and intellectual space" (1994, p. 16) and to alleviate the social marginality of black writers and artists. Consequently, with the help of Wright, Ellison got a job with the Federal Writers' Project and wrote for communist and leftist journals such as *New Challenge*, *New Masses*, *Negro Quarterly* and the like. Even though both writers separated from their Communist Party alliances later on, their intellectual interests in Marx and Freud continued to manifest in their literary and critical writings. Throughout their career, they endeavoured to bring psychoanalysis and Marxism together for a comprehensive engagement with issues concerning the social, economic, and psychological implications of racism in the US.

**Charting Freudo-Marxism: Theorising a Political Psychoanalysis**

"It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (1859, no pag.), Karl Marx writes in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, firmly securing the foundations of a political philosophy based on materialism. In earlier Marxist thought the individual has been defined in relation to their role in the revolutionary praxis as an agent of social change. Yet, their

subjecthood as the manifestation of their psychological constitution has been neglected. The initial attempts at Freudo-Marxist syntheses thus focused on the compatibility of Marxism and psychoanalysis at this fundamental level (Lichtman, 1999; Sunat, 2021; Whitebook, 2004). In his *Sex-Pol* essays, for instance, Wilhelm Reich discusses the foundations of both theories to show their points of convergence and divergence as he demonstrates psychoanalysis to be "the germ from which a dialectical-materialist psychology can be developed" (1972, p. 59). He also underlines the materialism and dialectics within psychoanalytical theory (pp. 27-48).

With the trauma of two world wars and totalitarian destruction in the middle of the twentieth century, both psychoanalytical and Marxist theorists were compelled to rethink their fundamental ideas. Sigmund Freud developed his instinct theory further by elaborating upon the "death" instinct after World War I, while the shocking outcome of Enlightenment rationality in the form of the Nazi ideology and World War II drove the Marxists of the Frankfurt School to engage with psychoanalytical concepts along the lines of agency, subjecthood, and autonomy. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue for the Enlightenment's need for self-examination at the "intertwinement of rationality and social reality" and against its self-destructive nature (2002, p. xviii). Enlightenment has become akin to what it had criticised and sought to unravel. The inequality of the old order has been replaced by a repressive equality, the triumph of which was the "Hitler Youth" as "the unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual" (p. 9). As Joan Alway notes, the modern subject "has become a pseudo-individual, an automaton" (1995, p. 41).

Through their reading of Odysseus's journey as an allegory of the dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer incorporate Freud's theories of the instincts and the psychic apparatus into their Marxist critique of Enlightenment as self-examination. They argue that Odysseus and his men are labourers who have renounced their subjecthood –both master and slave– in their resistance against the sirens. For the sake of efficiency and practicality, they are alienated from their sense of individuality and thus they have regressed (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002, pp. 27-28). Their reading equates the labour-subject relationship to one of repression as represented by the psychic negotiation between the id and the ego. Between self-preservation and self-destruction, the temptation of the sirens is sublimated. For Adorno and Horkheimer, Odysseus's narrative becomes the narrative of the failure of Enlightenment (Sherratt, 1999, p. 39).

While Adorno and Horkheimer chose one of the most canonical texts of western literature for their Freudo-Marxist critique, at the margins of the European theoretical canon other distinctive attempts at incorporating psychoanalysis and Marxism were undertaken. As literary intellectuals, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison depict their own versions of and alternative engagements with Freudo-Marxism across the Atlantic. The alienated black subjecthood in the heart of the US as depicted by Wright and Ellison establish and contribute to a distinct kind of intellectual liminality that is both within and the other at the same time. The writers' presentations of Freudo-Marxism reveal a thorough knowledge of and an active engagement with the theories, while still maintaining a distinct critical stance in regard to their possibilities and limitations. The writers elaborate upon the implications of both psychoanalytical and Marxist theories, challenge their canonical presumptions, and propose their own versions. Their writings are platforms for contemplation, elaboration, and critique whereby theories of Marx and Freud, of revolution and subjecthood, of the political and the personal are reconsidered in the liberating space of narrative. Furthermore, both writers

complement their novelistic writing with their non-fiction texts, contributing to the development of the broader theoretical framework through their distinct positionalities.

Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of Enlightenment charts a map for the discussion of this article, as the inherent dichotomies in racial, Marxist, and psychoanalytical discourses are all products of Enlightenment thinking. While Marx's economic philosophy and historical materialism requires reason and scientific methodology to understand the world and to change it (Nielsen, 1988), Freud's psychoanalytical theory is driven by medical science and reason in the affirmation of rationality against irrationality (Altman, 2000). Marx and Freud are a part of Enlightenment's discursive continuum that promoted reason as the basis for what was deemed maturity and civilisation. This basis was the ideological fault line that was exploited to establish the hegemony of the Europeans over the indigenous populations in the colonised lands and to dehumanise black people and justify slavery in the US. Read in relation to this discursive continuum, Freudo-Marxism in the works of Wright and Ellison stand out as a dialogic ideal proposed through and against Enlightenment thinking.

**Writers in Dialogue**

Born to emancipated grandparents and raised in the deep racism and poverty of the American South, Richard Wright grew up with a strong sense of resistance to the injustices of his circumstances (Wallach, 2010). However, it was not until he migrated to Chicago that he was introduced to organised political thought. Once he became a member of the Communist Party, he sought to express the voices of the oppressed black people. Yet, his desire for a life of the written word later led to his disillusionment with its internal politics. In "I tried to be a communist," he writes,

> It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. (1944, no pag.)

The dehumanising experience of slavery, the constant threat to life following emancipation, and the stark poverty that oppressed black lives motivated Wright to pursue questions of agency, autonomy, and collective action. Naturalism with its harsh but powerful form provided Wright with the platform to explore the experiences of the dispossessed.

Sigmund Freud's theories inform the psychic world of Wright's naturalism. "Yes; these days everybody was talking about 'complexes' and the 'unconscious'; and a man called Freud" (Wright, 1965, p. 61): with the shock of a freak accident resulting in the death of a little boy, *Savage Holiday*'s (white) protagonist is overwhelmed with guilt and panic. Through his noir story of suppressed sexuality and violence, Wright portrays an elemental version of the repressed and the unconscious. In "Psychiatry Comes to Harlem," he argues that psychologically, repressed need goes underground, gropes for an unguarded outlet in the dark and, once finding it, sneaks out, experimentally tasting the new freedom, then at last gushing forth in a wild torrent, frantic lest a new taboo deprive it of the right to exist" (1946, p. 49). Wright advocated psychological support for the black people whose poverty and disenfranchisement under a brutalising racism destroyed any sense of selfhood. With his friend, the German psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, he founded the Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic for the poor, the black, and the marginalised. As Gabriel N. Mendes shows, the clinic held "a distinctly radical confrontation of the psychic costs of anti-black oppression" (2015, p. 9) and became "an underground extension of democracy" (Ellison, 1995b, p. 320). Wright

portrays his opinions as such in his novel *The Man Who Lived Underground*, in which he depicts the effects of white supremacist violence on the black psyche. As the protagonist Fred Daniels escapes his unjust prosecution and hides in the sewer system, the duality between the city and the underworld reflects the topography of the un/conscious psyche.

Probably inspired by and in some ways emulating Wright's "the man who lived underground," Ralph Ellison portrays a black protagonist finding himself a life underneath the city in his *Invisible Man*. At the end of his narrative the protagonist says, "I'm an invisible man and it placed me in a hole -or showed me the hole I was in, if you will" (Ellison, 1995a, p. 432). As the novel presents, he is not forced into this "hole" just as a black subject under the gaze of the white supremacist. He is also invisible to the black gaze that invests his subjecthood with roles and meanings that befits tightly defined parameters and denies him agency otherwise. His invisibility, therefore, provides him with an ontological freedom, a liberation through non-being. His subterranean excursion suggests multiple readings, one of which naturally follows the psychic torment experienced by black people in the segregated American society. The ghosts of the collective unconscious haunt black subjecthood both in contrast to whiteness and relationally within blackness. Very much like the labyrinths of Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*, the underground world of Ellison's *Invisible Man* offers an experiment in regression and psychic exploration. Ellison's unnamed narrator survives the experience with a new sense of duty, as "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (Ellison, 1995a, p. 439).

Unlike Wright, Ellison had a strong familial support and a good formal education despite the hardships of poverty and racism. He had a cursory reading of both Marx and Freud as early as his college years and their theories "had given Ellison new conceptual language" for a critical perspective (Jackson, 2007, p. 133). However, once he moved to New York and met Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, he was introduced to organised black communism. Wright in particular was fundamental in the initial development of his politics and literature. Ellison came to believe that communism was the answer to racism (Jackson, 2007, p. 186). His friendship with Wright introduced him to the political, psychological, and aesthetic possibilities of "negro writing." In "Remembering Richard Wright," he writes that he was "very curious as to how one could put Marx and Freud together" and although such a synthesis was a problem for "Communist intellectuals," he "could discuss such matters" with Wright (Ellison, 1987, p. 192). In his essays, he positions his literary engagement in terms of "the great social clashes of history" and "the painful experience of the individual" (Ellison, 1995b, p. 189), emphasising his interest in the integration of Marxist and Freudian ideas to discuss "the Negro question." Moreover, he got to engage with psychoanalysis further with the arrival of Jewish intellectuals from Europe and he was involved with the Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic alongside Wright and Wertham. Accordingly, with its depictions of unionised black workers and "negro revolts," alongside the utilisation of the incest taboo and the unconscious, Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a critical testimony to his Freudo-Marxist approach as an African-American intellectual.

## Texts in Dialogue

Having done a full day's work at the Wootens' house, the protagonist of Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Fred Daniels heads home to his pregnant wife Rachel. On the way, he is stopped by the police, and after a brief questioning, he is taken into custody. He is accused of murder and robbery. Despite his refusal of guilt and attempts at defending himself with an alibi and character references from the respectable members of the community, he is

unable to convince the police. He is beaten and tortured and made to sign a false confession. Dizzy with how fast his life has taken a turn for the disastrous and probably a concussion, Fred is confused and lost, but keeps it together until he can see his pregnant wife again. The evening that the police take him to his home, his wife is rushed into the hospital for delivery. In an impulsive moment behind a mental fog, Fred jumps out of the window and runs off into the darkness. As he is pursued by the police, he sees the manhole covers providing an opening and slips down one of them.

Between his arrest after work and his disappearing into the underground, the narrative presents the gradual unravelling of Fred's psyche under pressure. As the foundations that hold his life together, i.e., his job, his family, his belief, and his reputation, are rapidly reduced to null, he is lost to himself and to the world as he knows it. The whirlwind of events contrasted by the slow-motion fog settling on his mind is a powerful introductory depiction to the protagonist's story. With this dramatic beginning, *The Man Who Lived Underground* becomes a story about being lost and being found to oneself, a psychic journey with serious ramifications.

Employing a different narrative structure, Ralph Ellison presents the story of *Invisible Man* in reverse, as the novel opens with the unnamed narrator having already established himself an underground life. The "Prologue," in which he explains his "invisibility" to an implied audience, is the end of his story and he enigmatically says, "the end is in the beginning" (Ellison, 1995a, p. 5), hinting at both the structure and the subject matter of the work. However, Ellison's novel also opens up with a highly dramatic scene in which the "invisible man," in the process of announcing his invisibility, randomly beats up a white man on the street. As is seen later in the novel, this act of violence is a response to as well as a reversal of the brutality experienced by the narrator in particular and the black people in general.

Similar to Wright, Ellison initially published a section of his novel, i.e., "The Battle Royal" scene, in a journal (*Horizon*) to great acclaim.[3] "The Battle Royal" scene is one of the most powerful moments of the text in terms of both the narrative storyline and the dramatic stylistics of Ellison. It is the first time that the posed appearances of race slip and the reality (literally) hits the young narrator hard and fast. Being an academically successful, exemplary student, the narrator is offered the chance to give his graduation speech in front of a group of wealthy, influential men with the hope that he might be granted a scholarship to go to college. Yet, he is also expected to "entertain" these men with some other black boys. They are first sexually humiliated, then forced to fight one another blindfolded on a ring, and finally made to pick up coins on an electrocuted carpet. The sweat and blood that chokes the narrator as he proceeds to give his speech, which parallels the state Fred was in at police custody, sets the tone of chaos and violence in the novel early on. In the end, the narrator does receive his scholarship alongside a fancy briefcase.

Physical and psychological brutalisation is key to *The Man Who Lived Underground* and *Invisible Man* and the journeys their characters have to embark upon in order to see the true face of their racial reality. It thrusts them out of their comfort zones, causes psychic destruction, and leads to self-awareness and reconstruction, even if it is a broken one. In both novels, the black protagonists must survive this dehumanising process and come through as a

[3] In his review of the novel after having read the section published earlier, Saul Bellow writes, "This episode, I thought, might well be the high point of an excellent novel. It has turned out to be not *the* high point but rather one of the many peaks of a book of the very first order, a superb book" (1974, p. 27).

new man, pointing to a death-rebirth cycle which is already implied in the idea of the underground. The depictions of the violence inflicted upon the protagonists in the texts does not just epitomise white supremacist brutality. These portrayals also function at the level of allegory through which how the "soul" of the black people is broken and how the cruel hegemony of the white men still reigns underneath its progressive façade are rendered visible in a jarring and intense representation.

It is in and through the dialogue between the individual cases of these depictions and their parallels in the broader black reality that Wright and Ellison propose their distinctive intellectual positions. The universal suffering of the oppressed, in their case based on race and poverty, is where the left-aligned politics of Marxism intervene, while the impact of racial brutalisation on the individual and the collective psyche opens debates for necessities beyond economic survival. Although primarily defined through physical parameters, race, and therefore, racism are constructs. As such, the prevalent racist hegemonic structures and discursive practices can and need to be dismantled. *The Man Who Lived Underground* and *Invisible Man*, as well as the other works of Wright and Ellison, are products of such an intellectual drive. Their Freudo-Marxism interpose the question of race into the discourses of psychoanalysis and Marxism in a way that has not been pursued in their European canonical foundations before.

## Underground Topographies

In literature, underground landscapes are generally part of a tripartite topographical structure whereby humanity's existence on earth at ground level is matched by a world underneath and one above. In this tripartite structure, underworld is archetypically where death resides and nature sleeps. However, most narratives of death and the underworld are complemented by the idea of a second coming, or a transference/transcendence to a different state of existence, i.e., rebirth. Carl G. Jung proposes five different manifestations of rebirth in his *Four Archetypes*. Among them, "Rebirth (Renovatio)" occurs in the lifetime of an individual and instigates a psychic transformation. Rebirth in this context refers to a healing process whereby "the personality which is renewed is not changed in its essential nature, but only its functions, or parts of the personality, are subjected to healing, strengthening, or improvement" (Jung, 2010, p. 48). Rebirth in such significations underlines a transformation of the self and a renewed sense of existence. The racial self-awareness and its psychic costs that Wright and Ellison emphasise in their works bear existential questions within such parameters of rebirth.

At the beginning of *The Man Who Lived Underground*, when Fred Daniels finds himself in the sewers, he is greeted by the rushing surges of water and quickly realises its dangers. It is a perilous journey that he has embarked upon, reminiscent of the mythical river of Styx: the river of death. He must engage with the underworld on its own terms if he is to achieve a rebirth. Water has the potential to take life, but it is also what gives life. It is the spring and the flood; it is the mother's womb and unfathomable death. In the novel, the duality of the symbolism of water in Fred's initiation to his new world is epitomised in the body of the dead baby that floats away in the underground water (Wright, 2021, p. 65).

In Fred's depiction, life and death is juxtaposed in a dynamic relationship that is established through the contrast between the underground and the aboveground, i.e., life as it is and life as it used to be, as he shuttles back and forth between the two worlds. His search for water to drink and tools to function in the underground, in a fashion that is reminiscent of survival narratives like "cast away" stories, is complemented by glimpses of life through the openings

to the world aboveground. For instance, he hears and sees the singing of a basement church choir, which briefly connects him to his past life as a believer. He wants to "observe the church service without being seen, without being a part of it" (Wright, 2021, p. 62). His remembrance of himself as once one of the faithful is contrasted by his desire to "awaken" them. His recently acquired "terrifying knowledge" of their "tormentors" and "oppressors" (2021, p. 63) has put a distance between him and them; him and his old life; him and his old self. He is dead to that life and that life is dead to him.

However, his desire to warn the members of the congregation is not necessarily suggestive of a loss of belief in God. His is a loss of faith in the black community's having a place within the greater social structure shaped by white oppression. Against what he had once believed, his arrest has proven that being a good person ("a good negro") who leads an ordinary life has no currency within an unjust and racist society. Death of the -what now seems a naïve- concept of belief is what Fred first needs to shed towards his rebirth. For him, openly facing the illusions of his life as a black person in the hegemonic white society is the first step towards a self-aware new subjectivity.

The basement church scene is one of the key instances that Wright's Freudo-Marxist synthesis stands out in the work. The individual's achievement of self-awareness and the momentum toward a new subjectivity is indeed central to the novel, but it is not enough. The existential renewal process needs to be followed by a drive towards collective transformation and the new self needs to take action for the welfare of others to fulfil his self-realisation. It is in this context that Fred's awakening is supplemented by a desire to awaken others. In his review of the initial short story, "The Man Who Lived Underground," Ronald Ridenour argues that

> Wright's didacticism involves the invisibility of not just the black man to the white man or of man to man but, significantly, of man to himself. Particularly does Wright, in this lengthy short story, transcend the now common theme of the lack of identity of Negroes to embrace that of the struggle to find meaning and worth for all mankind, that is, to discover truth for one's self and then to communicate this knowledge to one's fellow men. (1970, p. 55)

He thus asserts that the existential concerns prevalent in the short story point to Wright's gradual separation from the Communist Party. However, what he delineates as a contrast between "existential choice" and "existential commitment" (1970, p. 55), that is, the individual and the social are not as antagonistic as he posits. Despite his discontent with the party line, Wright does not stray far away from his left-aligned stance since Fred's depiction supports both individual and collective awakening. The character's solitary self-discovery and psychic transformation is not complete until he chooses to take action and reach out to others. Ridenour recognises this dynamic as the new level of complexity Wright achieves in his writing with "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1970, p. 55). Perhaps it is because he is working only with the short story edition of the text that he has a limited view of Wright's broader perspective. The complexity he underlines is in essence the manifestation of the novelist's Freudo-Marxism.

Unlike Fred's "escape" to the sewers, *Invisible Man*'s unnamed protagonist falls into the underground tunnels by mistake as he is escaping violence during the chaotic night of the "negro revolts." However, in addition to the similarities that bring about the necessity of escape in both cases, the latter is equally lost and confused, which is what leads him to fall (in multiple senses of the word) in the first place. As the white men -the narrator thinks they are "cops in

plain clothes" (Ellison, 1995a, p. 427)- close the cover of the manhole, the protagonist is forced into the darkness of the underground world.

This depiction combines being buried alive with the archetypal underworld of the dead for a multi-layered symbolisation and the rebirth narrative is constructed through the Manichean dualism of light and dark. In the darkness that the protagonist is forced to face literally and metaphorically, the light of rebirth comes in the form of the symbolic torch that he must build by burning the documents and the objects in his briefcase. The contents of his briefcase, which was gifted to him after the "Battle Royal" humiliation, represent the betrayals he has experienced in a world run by white men. The fire thus destroys the possessions of the old self and therefore the old self itself and cleanses him for what he will become, that is, the "invisible man." Like Fred, the casting away of illusions for the "invisible man" comes in the form of an "awakening." The character falls asleep and when he wakes up "in the blackness," he realises that he cannot return to any part of his "old life" (Ellison, 1995a, p. 431). Following his disillusionments and disappointments with the world aboveground, his journey towards a new self will have to be through finding a new light in the darkness, eventual result of which is "1,369 bulbs" lighting up his home in the underground (1995a, p. 10).

Through darkness and fire, through death and destruction, which is matched by the previous chaotic night, the psychic rebirth of the "invisible man" begins. He smells the "stench of death" in the air, but he hopes for "spring" (Ellison, 1995a, p. 438). From the chaos and darkness of death comes forth the spring and the light of life. As he says in the Epilogue, he must now leave the underground and recreate himself and his life anew in the knowledge of racial invisibility to both the white and the black gaze. In his newfound agency, he accepts his responsibility to take action and his first action is to tell his story. In storytelling, in the act of self-narration, a self-aware individual subject gives birth to himself against the racial constructs on both sides of the colour bar.

In terms of the formation of consciousness being determined by social existence, as Marx proposed, the case of the black people is a complicated one and the black self within a racist society requires an approach beyond the base of economics. In fact, the intersection of race and class is the main point of entry for Ellison to intervene with his Freudo-Marxism.[4] For the "invisible man," burning of the contents of his briefcase is an act of both psychic and collective liberation. It is an assertion of his individual agency against a racist society and its "baggage," as well as an acknowledgement of the fictionality of the middle-class American Dream. He burns his high school diploma, which is where the illusion of the Dream begins. The briefcase, the scholarship, and his diploma are all given to him as symbols of a promised life, which is essentially a fiction to keep the black man in line: "Keep This Nigger Boy Running" (Ellison, 1995a, p. 26). He burns the sambo doll that represents the image of the black slave inherently embedded in the racist American society. He also burns the piece of paper with his Brotherhood (Party) code name on it, rejecting the identity imposed on him by a movement that has failed its ideals. In addition to these pieces, there is also a pair of shackles that belonged to a former slave and a broken money bank that presents the black man grovelling for small change, alluding to the electrocuted coin competition in the "Battle Royal" scene. For Ellison,

[4] Ralph Ellison's friendship with Kenneth Burke is vital in the shaping of his Freudo-Marxism. As Barbara Foley notes, Burke's interests in the "amalgam of sociology, psychology, Marxism, and literary criticism" provided him with the kind of ideational fusion Ellison needed (2010, p. 92). See *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: at the roots of the racial divide* (2012) by Bryan Crable for more on their intellectual friendship.

in such a loaded context, a Freudo-Marxist approach is not just helpful to understand the black psyche under racist pressure. It is also exigent to adopt for true individual and collective transformation.

**The Im/possibility of Life After the Underground**

Although the underground journeys of the characters are promoted as self-discovery in *Invisible Man* and *The Man Who Lived Underground*, the novelists do not necessarily draw a picture of success in their journey, or more specifically, the success of the journey of self-discovery does not necessarily promise the expected outcome. The previous lives of the characters have shown that what they had known as real had been merely a façade. They had illusions about their lives in a seemingly progressive society which was in truth still being run by white supremacist hegemony. As they are forced to the underground, they shed what they consciously know, or thought they knew. Travelling through the underground as a metaphor for the unconscious in this sense is almost literal, whereby they were essentially "unconscious" of their racial reality. To put it more precisely, their death-rebirth cycle is a process for the realisation of their own false consciousness.

In Marxist thought, false consciousness refers to one's inability to see the true nature of their socio-economic circumstances due to certain ideological illusions. In the case of the black protagonists of Wright and Ellison, the reality of racism and racial inequality adds another layer to this deceptive perception. While the belief in the possibility of achieving the American Dream, that is believing that one can acquire the economic comforts of a middle-class life through honest hard work is in itself a product of false consciousness, the possibility of the blacks to also have a chance at "the pursuit of Happiness"[5] is often depicted as an outright untruth. As portrayed by Wright and Ellison, black life, at least before the Civil Rights movement, is built on the misleading ideals of a collective false consciousness. Accordingly, the underground journeys of the protagonists are promoted as being vital for the dismantling of such a prominent false consciousness so that change can be possible. However, the conclusions of the narratives do not quite suggest success.

In the case of the "invisible man," the blows that break apart his false consciousness come through a lifetime of humiliation and brutalisation, which comprises the majority of the novel. The longer he resists to see, the more extended his suffering is. It is not until he falls into the (blinding) pitch-black darkness of the underground that he truly sees the deceptive nature of his upbringing, his expectations, and the baggage he takes over from his predecessors. As for "the man who lived underground," his distance from the world as he knows it forces him to recognise another perspective and realise the nature of his illusions. Once he steps away from the manipulative social reality, he reaches a clarity regarding his personal circumstances and his place in the broader collective. His consequent existential crisis leads him to seek change.

At the beginning of the *Invisible Man*, the narrator explains his invisibility along the lines of perception rather than science fiction. He is invisible because "people simply refuse to see" him (Ellison, 1995a, p. 3). His emphasis on other people's refusal to see him highlights the real problem as being that of the perception of the looker. He is not *invisible* per se; he is invisible *to them*. This depiction reverses the prevailing discourse by underlining the so-called "negro

[5] From the *Declaration of Independence* (1776): "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (*U.S. National Archives*, no pag.).

problem" as being a "racism problem." The issues are not really about the ontology of blackness but are embedded in the post-slavery meanings and significations invested on the black people regardless of emancipation. The narrator says, "when they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me" (Ellison, 1995a, p. 3). Before his invisibility, which is a manifestation of the cracks in his false consciousness, the narrator is merely a "token negro" helping in the production of a deceptive sense of progress that validates the fundamental racism of the American society. Contrary to the initial wishful thinking of the narrator (the idealised college life and the promises of the Brotherhood), the white hegemony (of the Nortons) is even more affirmed through the black folks (the Bledsoes) and the so-called friendly progressive whites (Brother Jacks) who merely perpetuate the conditions that serve to reproduce the white hegemonic structure.

In a dialectical juxtaposition, the invisibility of the narrator is, in essence, instigated by his hypervisibility. His blackness is such a determining factor in how he is perceived that nothing else is seen beyond the colour of his skin, and thus, the meanings invested on it. The invisibility of "the invisible man" is deeply entangled with the "hypervisibility" of his racialised bodily existence. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon dissects the psychic costs of such racial hypervisibility in the European colonial context. He writes that the "consciousness of the body," physical visibility of which is inescapable, "is solely a negating activity" (2008, p. 83). A "negro" is "overdetermined from without," he is a slave of his "own appearance" (2008, p. 87). In a way that echoes Fanon's critique, Ellison presents the psychic breakdown of his protagonist under the pressure of the negation of his selfhood as a result of the consistently reinforced "invisibility through hypervisibility." The selfhood of the narrator (the black subject) is so overdetermined by the colour of his skin and its baggage (the collective past and the invested present) that everything else beyond it is impenetrable, and thus, he becomes "invisible."

This traumatic breakdown of the sense of self maintains the im/possibilities of life aboveground for the character. Nathan A. Scott Jr. defines the character's transformation along the lines of a liminality between detachment and reintegration. Adapting Arnold van Gennep's "liminars" theory, he argues that once the character completes his transition, he becomes a member of the broader "communitas," a social space, a community, in which "all the impulses and the affections that are normally bound by social structure are liberated" (2004, pp. 115-117). However, the character's portrayal does not quite present a successful reintegration into society as Scott Jr. proposes. He rids himself of all the different selves and decides to come out of his "hibernation" as a self-aware active agent: "I am nobody but myself" (Ellison, 1995a, p. 13). He narrates his story and mentions returning to the world above with a desire for action. However, when he is aboveground, his perception is erratic and somewhat unstable. In a way, the invisibility of the narrator manifests itself as a form of madness and his expression of his invisibility borders at ranting despite its transformational undercurrent. Despite his powerful rhetoric, his unreliability as a narrator sheds doubts over what his actions might be.

A similar but somewhat reversed play with vision is portrayed in *The Man Who Lived Underground*, whereby the protagonist sees what has been previously occluded by his false consciousness. Yet, Fred is overwhelmed with the new self-knowledge he achieves through his journey in the underground. He realises that he is "all people" and "they were he" (Wright, 2021, p. 196), stressing a sense of community. His individual psychic journey joins him with a collective. He is one of the many and he is not alone, and "all is one." This new realisation banishes "all fear and doubt and loss" and he sees that he is important and that he must "assert

himself" (2021, p. 107). This moment is significant in that it underlines a new realisation of his agency, pointing to a move away from passive suffering and towards active agency. He arrives at the same state with the protagonist of *Invisible Man* in that he decides "to devise means of action by and through which he could convince those who lived aboveground of the death-like quality of their lives" (2021, p. 107).

Fred goes back up, ready to intermingle with the life aboveground. He seeks to face his tormentors in order to complete his rebirth cycle. Similar to *Invisible Man*'s protagonist, he wishes to narrate his story and demands to be listened. However, in an allusion to "Plato's Cave," his driven words come across as ravings of a delirious mind. Here lies the irony of Wright's text. Fred is the man who left the cave and became aware of the lifelessness of the shadows against the reality of life, the one who has achieved a new language to express it all but is not understood by those who have not seen the truth themselves. Furthermore, the transformation of his selfhood culminates in a loss of identity that he will not get the chance to recreate. Patricia D. Watkins argues that in the loss of his identity (and in that he does not care), he "acquires a godlike identity" as he is freed from his life aboveground (1989, p. 775). Watkins, also analysing the short story rather than the novel, goes on to elaborate upon this godlike quality of the protagonist. However, it seems to be rather too positive a reading of Fred's behaviour aboveground. Not only most of the examples of this "divinity" can also be interpreted along the lines of the phases in his psychic breakdown, but also his consequent inability to communicate says something entirely different. Being godlike seems to be dangerously close to madness in the case of Fred Daniels.

Fred's self-discovery, although significant at an individual level, falls to deaf ears in a society that is not ready for it. Gounard points out how the reader learns Fred's name only by chance (he is "boy" to the patronising white) and how no one aboveground (especially the cops) recognises him. He writes, "the white characters are blinded by racial prejudice that prevents them from knowing Daniels as a man." However, while his condition is "symbolic of all black man," his insignificance is also "a result of human apathy" (1978, pp. 383-384). Essentially, the new possibilities for the transformed self are still impossibilities in a social context that has not achieved an equivalent transformation. This impossibility of possibility is Wright's Freudo-Marxist critical intervention into the "negro question." The "negro problem" cannot be fixed by fixing the negro who is still embroiled in the broken system imbued with racism and where black life does not matter. In the end, Fred does complete the death-rebirth cycle in full circle as he is shot dead by one of the cops.

Both *Invisible Man* and *The Man Who Lived Underground* utilise ideological false consciousness and the lack of self-awareness to underline the entanglements of the personal and the societal ramifications of racism in the American society. The writers do not just try to bring together ideas of Marx and Freud for a theoretical synthesis. They show that the "negro problem," or more appropriately, the problem of American racism is the embodiment of the exigency of such a synthesis, as racism is a psycho-socio-economic construct that necessitates an equally complex and integrated model for understanding and remedying it. The distinctive integration of race to Freudo-Marxism is the black American contribution of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison to what has previously been a primarily European theory.

## Conclusion

In the context of the writers' cosmology, the underground landscapes through which rebirth takes place is multi-layered. The death-rebirth archetype does not only maintain the journey

in the underground as an act of transformation with its relevance to the existential conceptualisations of selfhood, subjectivity, and agency. This archetypal representation is also entangled with the psychic world of the unconscious as presented in the typical topography established by psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud detailed out his tripartite topography of the mental apparatus in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, whereby he draws a dynamic relationship among the conscious, preconscious, and the unconscious (2010, pp. 542-543). He proposes this spatial structure as a systematic way to understand how the mind functions at different levels of consciousness.

Read in this light, the underground journeys of the characters also refer to the psychic processes of the formation and the maintenance of the self as a mediation between the conscious and the unconscious in the self's engagement with itself and the outside world. The relationship between the under- and the aboveground parallels the one between the conscious and the unconscious. From a Jungian perspective, the characters need to shed illusions and older selves and dig deep into their consciousness to reach a primordial sense of humanity in a brutally dehumanising society and rebuild from there upwards and outwards.

Moreover, a third topographical layer is added to the narrative through the collective conceptualisation of the un/conscious, in which the necessity for a political psychoanalysis is the most prominent. The individual experiences of the characters are representative of those of many others in the larger black community. Their journeys of self-discovery do not only reveal the brutality of racism and the systematic problems of the white hegemonic society. They also show the way for the greater transformation of the black collective. As depicted in the two novels, the black community needs such a journey of self-discovery as a whole to recognise illusions and shed former selves in the path towards a renewed sense of identity, one that is based on dignity.

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