Chapter VII

In Search of New Directions: *Two Trains Running*

The 1960s was the most turbulent decade in African-American history. The sit-in movements, the freedom speeches, marches, demonstrations, and the voter registration drives suggested that a new destiny for blacks was in the making. Slowly, then more rapidly, the optimism gave way to pessimism and even cynicism. Justice and equality were not to be extended to blacks, though the Civil Rights Bill and the Voting Rights Bill became laws in 1964 and 1966 respectively. Both before and after the bills were passed, there was violent white opposition, followed by black retaliation. In 1963 John F. Kennedy, whom many blacks had come to regard as their friend, was assassinated. Then there was the murder of numerous civil rights workers as well as of innocent blacks. Finally, in 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. was shot down. To many blacks, this violent act symbolized the rejection by white America of their vigorous but peaceful pursuit of equality. In more than a hundred cities, rioting, burning, and looting ensued--a grave and desperate response by blacks to the wanton murder of their leaders.

Set in 1969 Pittsburgh, *Two Trains Running* (1990) addresses the tumultuous 1960s. In Frank Rich's words, the play "is Mr. Wilson's account of the 1960s, unfurling at that moment when

racial conflict and the Vietnam War were bringing the nation to the brink of self-immolation" (388). In his interview with Pettengill, Wilson says that the title of the play came from a blues song, "Two Trains Running": "Two trains running, neither one going my way. One running by night, one run by day" (207-8). There are two ideas in the play, ideas that have confronted black America since the Emancipation: the idea of cultural assimilation and the idea of cultural separatism. Symbolically, these two ideas are the two trains. For blacks, neither of these trains is working. They have to build a new railroad in order to get to where they want to go--because the trains are not going their way. However, the play does not address the so-called red-letter events of the nineteen sixties. Nor does it seek to depict the political violence that destroyed both whites and blacks. Such omissions of historical facts point to Wilson's intentional avoidance of the official versions of American history. What *Two Trains Running* does is that it keeps open the problem of writing American history. W.E.B. Du Bois's prophetic announcement, "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (1), resonates throughout the play, reminding the audience that the solution to this problem would be to get blacks to cross the color line.

The characters in *Two Trains Running* are, despite all the upheavals of the 1960s, living their usual lives. These events, while they may have in some way affected these blacks, do not loom large because the characters are average people who are simply concerned with living. Wilson seeks not to convert blacks to the belief in any revolution but to cultivate in them a kind of self-perception that can overturn the existing social order without much bloodshed.

The action of the play takes place in a restaurant scheduled for demolition along with nearly a dozen surrounding city blocks. Outside, the world moves convulsively toward the future. But within the walls of the restaurant the regulars spend hours philosophizing, telling stories, debating politics, and competing to prove each other wrong. It seems that the restaurant is the only refuge left for these blacks as an extended family. Through their conversations these blacks establish a kinship, a community within the safe confines of the restaurant, away from all the violence that occurs outside. They seem to be more interested in their little things than in distant leaders sowing lofty dreams of change. They are distrustful of the sound and the fury surrounding the civil rights movement, especially the old men, who have quite often witnessed such movements in life.

Memphis, the restaurant owner, recalls to have seen various movements and demonstrations, none of which have brought about any reforms: "All them niggers wanna do is have a rally. Soon as they finish with one rally they start planning for the next. They forget about what goes in between" (*Two Trains* 63). Their attempts to gain justice and equality are each time predoomed. They are fighting fate as determined by white men, the authority that enforces rules written for the black "Other." Their struggle goes back past the nineteen sixties; it spreads over centuries of suffering. But while their sufferings are mostly caused by whites, blacks themselves, as Memphis thinks, are no less responsible for their present plight. They sometimes fail to understand, even after years of harsh experience, the deceits of whites and easily fall prey to their ruses:

> They had that boy, Begaboo. The police walked up and shot him in the head and them same niggers went down there to see the mayor. Raised all kind of hell. . . . After that it was business as usual. The only thing anybody remember is the funeral. The mayor sat down there and waited it out. Didn't even bother to transfer the cop to another precinct. . . . Then he had enough nerve to come up here and ask these niggers

> to vote for him and they like to broke their neck running to the polls. (*Two Trains* 63)

The compulsion to live by the white institutions of modern America is but a variation on slavery. Blacks have, no doubt, gotten legal freedom. But that is only a half-won battle. American economic system still does not reward them for their contributions. To employ the metaphor of the numbers game, which continues throughout the play, the fix is always in against the black men. The legal clauses entitle them to a minimum recompense for the loss of their property; even lottery winnings are cut in half. The life of Hambone, who resembles the mentally disturbed Gabriel in *Fences*, better exemplifies the economic exploitation of blacks. Nine and a half years earlier, the owner of Lutz's Market promised him a ham for painting his fence. Once the fence was painted, however, Lutz was only willing to give Hambone a chicken. He said that Hambone did not do a good job; so he did not owe him a ham. As long as such manipulations exist, hopes for prosperity and harmony cannot be realized; different races cannot live together peacefully in a society where the patterns of relations are, at best, confused. The murders of Martin Luther and Malcolm X are cases in point. Their murders betray the rejection by dominant whites of their pursuit of equality, and underscore the senseless violence

perpetrated against blacks at a time when America had been emerging as a great nation.

The blacks in *Two Trains Running* are, however, considerably different from those in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and even in *Fences*. They are, as Rich says, "the furthest removed from both Africa and the Old South and are now aware of the choices they need to make as African Americans in the North" (389). They have a clear understanding about the means of achieving what they have been deprived of. For them, the issue of mere survival is not a major concern; rather their efforts are directed toward living life with dignity and pride. They seek to celebrate their presence in the world and look about themselves to discover their true confidence and abilities. These blacks are, as Wilde says, "not innocent: they have already tried to make their lives work as the world dictates and lost. Their need to reclaim what has been taken from them, either in actual or symbolic terms . . . becomes the truest form of revolution and affirmation" (74). Memphis wants the fair-market value for his restaurant, which he must sell because of the urban renewal campaign. He has placed over thirty years of hard work into his restaurant, losing his wife in the process, and he demands recompense. When the court offers him $20,000

for his property, he makes it plain that he will not settle for less than $25,000.

For nine and a half years, Hambone has stood outside Lutz's market demanding his ham, rejecting Lutz's insistence that he just take a chicken. He is not "willing to accept whatever the white man throw[s] at him" (*Two Trains* 50). He dies restive and leaves behind him the meaning of his death--do not give up your hope because the possibility always exists that you might one day get your "ham." He voices the traditional African belief in the majesty of the eternal human spirit. To him, it means an endless fight for dignity, freedom, and justice. He is the character who, when he dies, changes things. His death without a ham strengthens everyone in the community to preserve their dignity and signals a tentative deliverance from the misfortune that has befallen each of them. It inspires them to identify themselves with his quest. Sterling turns into a man of action. He realizes that what appears to be madness in Hambone is actually his resolve to hold on to life in the face of defeat: "I started to go over there and get his ham for him. But then he wouldn't have nothing to do in the morning. I didn't want to take that from him. He have more cause to get up out the bed in the morning than I do. I consider him lucky" (*Two Trains* 56). Memphis sees himself in him: "Man been around here ten years

talking the same thing" (*Two Trains* 54). Memphis has been around for ten years, too. Hambone has chosen to stand up for his material rights. Memphis has more in common with Hambone than he would like to believe. Like Hambone, Memphis has been denied what was his by right. Memphis's lines, "My clause say they got to give me what I want for it. It's my building. If they wanna buy it they got to meet my price" (*Two Trains* 58), express the ethos of Hambone's "He gonna give me my ham. I want my ham" (*Two Trains* 54). In the white idiom hambone is merely an insane black, but then there is also nothing benevolent about white Lutz. Hambone's philosophy of human dignity is superior to the hypocrisy of his oppressor. "Hambone," says Wilson, "shows us that a new black man was created in the 1960's who would not accept a chicken" (qtd. in Saunders 10). His rejection is, in fact, a conscious affirmation of human identity in the face of dehumanizing circumstances.

In the 1960s, blacks became fully aware that they could, as Baker Jr. says, "never 'reintegrate' into a dominantly white society with a 'socially responsible' status" (*Blues* 154). And therefore they began to search for an integration of their own personality, in a society where segregation and integration were the two faces of the same white politics. In pursuit of their goals, they directed their move toward "a black subject

position" (Awkward 13) and entered a world that demanded a radical shift from the traditional conception of self. Memphis, who is demanding $25,000 for the demolition of his restaurant, is confident that he can beat the white man at his own game as long as he knows the rules. He has hired a white attorney, who knows the white man's rule, in order to realize the amount from the city council before it pulls down his building. He believes that as a businessman he can overcome white prejudice and outwit the white men by achieving his primary aim--to make money. Years of white men's company has oriented him toward their philosophy of individual success in the competitive capitalistic system. He emulates white business practices by preying on whites themselves, and flaunts the fruit of his success, a Cadillac. The complexities of American society have made him a trickster. The imperious fiats of whites have always relegated him to an underclass. The only means of negotiating a passage beyond this underclass is playing tricks. He has learnt that "the only way to recover what has been lost or stolen is by following the dominant culture's tactics: robbery, burning buildings for insurance, carrying guns to assert power" (Wilde 388). He can now exercise his choice and has almost found an answer to the question that Levee had asked during the 1920s: "How can I live this life in a society that refuses to allow me

to contribute to its welfare--how can I live this life and remain a whole and complete person?" (Wilson, "Interview with Kim Powers" 373).

Memphis's tricks finally help him win the fight: he gets the twenty-five thousand dollars for his restaurant. At Aunt Ester's (the 322-year-old conjure woman) advice, he resolves to return to Jackson to confront Stovall, the first white man to cheat him and chase him off his land. If he survives his confrontation with Stovall, he will return to the Hill and use his twenty-five thousand dollars to build "a big restaurant right down there on Center Avenue" that will employ "two or three cooks and seven or eight waitresses" (*Two Trains* 72). While he was leaving Jackson some forty years ago, he was determined that one day he would buy a V-8 Ford, and it took him only thirteen years to get the Ford. Six years later, he traded that in for a Cadillac. Though he does not believe in politics, he believes that God blesses the child who has got his own ability and minds his own business. He protects his property as best as he can. His success is certainly the result of his realization that productive arrangements of life can also be made through individual effort and self-dependence.

Wolf, an amicable trickster, profits from running numbers for Old Man Albert. He offers new lives for the price of a

ticket. Playing the numbers is a way to try to get enough money to get ahead. Getting ahead happens also through a lucky number: "It's the same thing as putting money in the bank. This way you might take out more than you put in. . . . The numbers give you an opportunity. If it wasn't for the numbers all these niggers would be poor" (*Two Trains* 43). Wolf has a clear sense of ethics and a strong sense of self-preservation.

West, the undertaker, is another black whose hard work and confidence bring him financial rewards. His field of business relates to his philosophical credo that gradual economic advantage leads to gradual social equality. He believes in being patient and realistic in realizing one's dreams. He claims that in order to be content in life one should carry "a little cup" so that it seems like something when it fills up. He is a modern high priest presiding over the ceremonies of grief and valediction. He is a self-made person with his "practical view of death . . . perhaps the community's keenest social observer and certainly its wealthiest entrepreneur" (Rich 389). He is the preacher of new dawn for black Americans and is also a businessman who makes money. His entry into the bourgeois economy is perhaps a crucial move in a repertoire of black survival in America.

Prophet Samuel is dead but his attainments include a cache of jewelry, a white Cadillac, a harem, and a huge folk. When he was alive "The police didn't bother him no more. Wouldn't even give him a parking ticket" (*Two Trains* 48). Unlike Reverend Gates in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, he held a good deal of social respect. This shift in status marks a new order of black life in the 1960s America.

The fundamental difference between the 1920s and the 1960s was cognizance. The evolution of consciousness in the blacks as a separate and dignified group of people "contributed to a heightened sense of power on the parts of Negro Americans" (Franklin 492). During the 1960s, many blacks moved decisively away from Christian humility and Gandhian forbearance that marked the strategy of Martin Luther. Their voices became more strident, their actions more aggressive. They substituted Black Power for Civil Rights as a survival strategy. The new phrase rang out with the sound of gunfire and the rumble of tanks. The last two years of the decade and the beginning of the 1970s found black men and women throughout America invoking Black Power that led to the Black Revolution. "Their arms had been raised," says Baker Jr., "in a gesture of unconditional refusal, and many had granted their allegiance to the black nationalist

doctrines so convincingly advocated by a man like Malcolm X" (*Afro-American* 116).

The play reinscribes the Black Nationalist ideology, with the young characters as its harbingers. Sterling and Risa attend the program associated with Malcolm X. Their spirit is elevated via worship of the civil rights leader, who sacrificed his life for a great cause--liberty and happiness for black people in America. By associating themselves with Malcolm X, they are sustaining their revolutionary consciousness. It is this consciousness that prompts Sterling to look for some change in life after coming out of the penitentiary. He is disillusioned by the racial inequities of the American system, and he virtually demands new forms in which to express his reality. He recognizes the revolutionary attitude displayed by Hambone and the magnitude of his disgust with the white oppression. He finds in Hambone's act a call for unified class action. In response to this call, he violently breaks into Lutz's store and takes the ham out that Lutz has been refusing to give to Hambone for nine and a half years:

> [STERLING *enters, carrying a large ham. He is bleeding from his face and hands. He grins and lays the ham on the counter*]

> STERLING: Say, Mr. West . . . that's for Hambone's casket. (*Two Trains* 72)

The white world was full of prejudice; it seldom gave blacks anything on its own, unless seized by force.

Risa is engaged in a radical protest against the objectification of women. Frustrated by men who deny her humanity by considering her body as a sex object, she scars her legs to deter their sexual advances. She wants others to look deeper into her character and has the determination and the steel to do what must be done to keep herself free. Holloway, the elder of the community who acts as an oral historian by preserving and interpreting the experiences of others, tells us, "She figure if she made her legs ugly that would force everybody to look at her and see what kind of personality she is" (*Two Trains* 50). Risa's revolt deconstructs the traditional concept that "the female body is imaged within representation only as the site of male desire" (Dolan 84). She defies traditional expectations and exists outside the cultural codes of feminity. Memphis with disdain proclaims:

> A man would be happy to have a woman like that except she done ruined herself. She ain't right with herself . . . how she gonna be right with you. Anybody take a razor and cut up on herself ain't right. . . .

> Something ain't right with a woman don't want no man. That ain't natural. If she say she like women that be another thing. It ain't natural but that be something else. But somebody that's all confused about herself and don't want nobody I can't figure out where to put her. (*Two Trains* 50)

This lays bare the "double jeopardy" the black woman suffers. The words of the black man ironically bring out the effectiveness of Risa's political strategy. No longer is she viewed simply as a sex object or a property of "some man to lay up with" (*Two Trains* 50). Wilson himself explains the cause of Risa's scarring of her legs: "For me the scarring of her legs was an attempt to define herself in her own terms rather than being defined by men . . . basically for me it was her standing up and refusing to accept those definitions and make her self definition" (qtd. in Shannon, "The Ground" 163). Risa accepts Sterling's love because Sterling values her as a positive force and considers her a living icon of personal and racial pride.

In Risa, says Shannon, "Wilson continues to demonstrate that the black woman's capacity to nurture is not limited to certain members of her family, nor is it confined to a domestic setting." Like Bertha Holly, who clearly regards her boardinghouse customers as her family, or like Ma Rainey, who

treats her nephew Sylvester as her child, Risa has singled out Hambone as the recipient of her compassion. "Risa's unexplained allegiance to Hambone," Shannon further says, "leaves room for much conjecture." ("The Ground" 161). Her strong commitment to him seems based upon some previous experience they apparently shared at another time and place. This strange bond is underscored by Risa's exceptionally protective instinct for Hambone. When necessary, she speaks for him, feeds him, and defends him. Her maternal concern for this mentally unstable man casts her as "the epitome of altruism" ("The Ground" 161). Knowing that her routine kind gestures toward Hambone stands to anger Memphis, she continues to give him coffee, a warm bowl of beans, or a wrap to shelter his body from the cold. When Hambone dies from multiple stab wounds, it is Risa who frowns upon the traditional welfare burial that awaits him, preferring --despite a $700 price tag--to "lay him out in a gold casket" (*Two Trains* 67). Risa's nurturing of Hambone may also be the result of the common physical and emotional scars that seem to forge a bond between them. Both Risa and Hambone are victims. Both of them live on the fringes of society, and seemingly out of their roughly similar circumstances, they gravitate toward each other for mutual support.

By 1969, the migration to the North had almost ended and blacks were as much northerners as any whites. Although Memphis does talk about his lost land in Jackson, most of the time he is busy struggling to make life better in Pittsburgh. His attention is focused on the present and the future, the past being merely a distant memory. So is the case with other characters. However, Wilson does not give up his theme of the past. Cultural memory, for blacks, is a means of achieving a proper place in the white world. To underscore this concept, Wilson incorporates Aunt Ester. The 322-year-old woman, as Wilson says, represents the entire length of black life in America with its rich cultural wealth--black tradition, philosophy, folk wisdom, hobbies, culture, and whatever blacks care to call their own. She is for reclaiming the past. Blacks cannot know who they are unless they recognize--irrespective of recent political history--that they have come from a long line of honorable people ("Interview with Richard Pettengill" 209-13). She is perhaps Wilson's most explicit figure functioning as a force of cultural cohesion and continuity.

Blacks seeking answer go to the red door at 1839 Wylie Street to consult Aunt Ester. Like the Sphinx in Sophocles drama, she provides her visitors not with answers but with riddles and parables, divinations that they themselves must

interpret. Specifically, "she offers them," says Wilde, "the choice of remaining passive or moving towards their fate--if they are ready to walk through fire to reach it. . . . Her presence, reaching to precolonial days, represents African American memory" ("Reclaiming" 388). Her power is so great that she transforms an ordinary minister into Prophet Samuel, founder of the wealthy, influential First African Congregational Kingdom. His transformation has accorded him the status of a spiritual guru above the white man's law. Holloway, who dreams of a return to the South he left in 1927, looks upon Aunt Ester as the oracle of African wisdom and bearer of the vernacular, for she speaks in a language native to the African-American community. He goes back beyond the slave past to the Middle Passage, and then returns to the present. To him, blacks need a sense of perspective that history can provide: "Niggers is the most hard working people in the world. Worked three hundred years for free. And didn't take no lunch hour. . . . If it wasn't for you, the white man would be poor" (*Two Trains* 66).

Wilson has reasons for revisiting the past. He says, "The message of America is 'Leave your Africanness outside the door'. My message is 'Claim what is yours'" (qtd. in Freedman 448). Reading the present in the light of the past allows one to move on with a distinct vision of the future. By reinscribing the

past and incorporating its legacy--custom, belief and pain--into their consciousness, blacks can reaffirm their belief in the need for a move toward better life. If blacks, says Wilson, seek today to find "the real person, the whole person," they must look to all their yesterdays. Then they can find their own "song," vigorous and enabling. Acknowledging the vestiges of the past within themselves, they can truly lay claim to what is their own ("Interview with Kim Powers" 372-75).

The blacks in *Two Trains Running* are standing at the most crucial moment of their lives. They are no longer willing to stay where they are; they demand back what they were deprived of. Their policy of "wait and see" has ended. Their present "struggle," in the words of Baraka, "moves to make certain that no man has the right to dictate the life of another man" (qtd. in Baker Jr., *Afro-American* 122). They, too, have boarded a train that runs counter to the whites'. However, they are yet to find a station where the two trains meet, recognizing a difference within sameness and a sameness within difference. The play, at best, captures a racially divided America; the bringing together of the two halves is a drama yet to unfold.