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Figurations of Passage through "Of the Coming of John"

> Whoever is able to wrest from the riotous swell of the Wagnerian orchestra such treasure may harvest from its altered sound the solace that it obstinately denies, for all of its rapture and phantasmagoria. By voicing the anguish of the helpless, to the helpless it could signal succor, however frail and distorted, and promise once again what the primordial protest of music promised: Life Without Fear.[1]
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> Theodor Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*

Among the trove of questions for thought opened by the work "Of the Coming of John" is that of openings and closings, of beginnings and endings. Where does the work of "Of the Coming of John" open and close, what beginnings and endings does it stage? Where does the work of *The Souls of Black Folk* open and close and what beginnings and endings does it stage? What is the status of the *fictional work* of "Of the Coming of John," the one work of imaginative mimesis in *The Souls of Black Folk*, within the philosophical, historiographical and sociological work of the thirteen other chapters? Focusing our attention, we can further ask: how does this text within a text, (originally conceived as the final chapter of the book[2]) open or close itself to the rest of *The Souls of Black Folk* and to its own intertexts? How does it work, in other words, as a work within a work? And expanding our attention we still further ask, what do the workings of "Of

the Coming of John" (the first published work of fiction by Du Bois) within *The Souls of Black Folk* imply for the workings of the latter in the Du Boisian *oeuvre* as a whole? A reading attentive to the difference of the time that "Of the Coming of John" opens in the readings of *The Souls of Black Folk* promises to pose for thought the question of a Du Boisian theory of the language of fiction and of the work of art sedimented within his practice of art-making and that of the workings of this theory within the general Du Boisian project of thought and action. Implicated in this proposed desedimentation of a Du Boisian aesthetics from "Of the Coming of John" is attention to its styles and postures, its writerly positionings and lyrical and musical voicings. The present intervention will begin to deliberate the question of a Du Boisian poetics as it analyzes specific textual moments in "Of the Coming of John": it will linger on the openings and closings of the story, particularly its epigraphs and its culmination by the Sea, while wandering down detours that inevitably surge and wind, like the meanderings and branchings of the Ganges and the Altamaha, or like the Deep River of the spirituals.

Figures of "Of the Coming of John"

"Of the Coming of John" has received sustained critical attention since the seventies and continued engagement in more recent scholarship. Earlier commentary on the work, pressured by political and theoretical allegiances, presented readings that debated the status of the education of the protagonist John Jones and his identifications with European high art, above all the music of Wagner. For Houston A. Baker, for example, in his chapter on Du Bois in his widely-read *Long Black Song,* the character of John from "Of the Coming of John" was aligned with Baker's reading of Du Bois as the African American Arnoldian aesthete, partaking of the posture of late nineteenth century *decadence*. John's ultimate demise was read as that of the "tragic black man

of culture who is not accepted by whites and who is too elevated to communicate with his own people,"[3] while Byerman noted that "John's thorough training in Western Civilization (he goes to his death humming Wagner's "Song of the Bride") requires the erasure of black culture from his identity."[4] John's aspirations for cultural advancement not only do not, in this thinking, lead to his integration in cultured white society but also result in a disavowal of and alienation from a true political engagement with the black masses. A diametrically opposed view emerged from Russell Berman's frequently-cited essay "Du Bois and Wagner: Race, Nation, and Culture between the United States and Germany," which interpreted Du Bois's mobilization of European culture in "Of the Coming of John" as a "model of black activism" that serves as a "cipher of egalitarianism"[5] inasmuch as its citation of Wagner's *Lohengrin* translates the latter's themes into that of the untransgressable color line. European culture is precisely that which preserved the possibility for a liberatory politics for Berman, rather than a tragic distance from the politics of the masses, (although political activism is not at all represented in "Of the Coming of John" as it is indeed in later novels by a Du Bois much more inclined to the political). European culture and its perennial grand themes were seen to echo through Du Bois's literary endeavor, resulting in a fortification of the politics of emancipation with which *Souls*, Berman stressed, is preeminently concerned. On the other hand, while Baker's reading of the Du Bois of *The Souls of Black Folk* distanced him from the politics of black emancipation, it was far from a simple rejection of his presumed elitism. Indeed, in interventions such as "Du Bois broadened the Arnoldian definition of culture, which was narrowly white and Western, to include the best that had been thought and known in the world of Black American folk,"(106)[6] Baker marked one mode of the philosophical contribution of *The Souls of Black Folk* that "Of the Coming of John" reflects negatively. Comparing the perspectives of Baker, Byerman and Berman, it seems that Du

Bois occupies a tragic position: the crossfire between differently motivated interpretations of his relation to European culture. In all of these readings, however, a presumption is made of the concept of "culture" as a fixed body of reference that, it is implied, Du Bois must have related to as something external or internalized, which then had to be aligned with an experience understood to be more proper or "authentic" to his subject position as an African American.

More recent commentary has offered diverse new perspectives but has highlighted yet further dilemmas of interpretation of this resilient text. The ambiguity of the ending of "Of the Coming of John" has provoked two divergent threads of interpretation. Ronald Judy proposes a pessimistic interpretation in his conjugation of the tragic ending of John Jones, who, in the final moments of the story, seems to passively accept the inevitability of the lynching that awaits him, as a type of renunciation: "What is particularly pertinent about the story of John Jones is how double-consciousness appears to entail an unhappiness that renounces the intelligibility of human reality."[7] Robert Gooding Williams, more recently, gives a Schopenhauerian twist to this construal of John's death: "in his final moments black John perfectly captures what Schopenhauer termed resignation" (123); his nuanced close reading determines that "John's demise is, in fact, an unambiguous triumph of that past over the future John desires" (128) and decides that "Du Bois is reluctant to conclude *Souls* with an unqualified expression of hope (129), even including John among figures in *The Souls of Black Folk* that are "still-born" (128). He reads the distance of narrative voice in the ending of the story as evidence that "Du Bois's narrative technique works to reinforce his representation of black John as a spirit of resignation lost to the world" (293). Other readings, however, enter the ambiguity of the ending of "Of the Coming of John" and leave with a different perspective. Kevin Miles, for example, notes that "The 'failure' Du Bois depicts in the character of the black John in this short story is a depiction

of an enterprise that has succeeded because it exceeds the economy in which it is a failure"[8] and that "he may be seen as having failed to the extent that he attempts to have his voice heard outside the domain of the church, but he has not failed in having his voice heard as the echoes of his thinking take up residence in the next generation his sister represents" (210). My reading, in the following sections, of the beginnings and endings of "Of the Coming of John," of its overtures and cadences and of their resonances for an appreciation of the aesthetics of *The Souls of Black Folk,* will pick up these questions of reference and intention yet again, leaning on other perceived intertexts, which serve to reposition the discourse around "Of the Coming of John."

Berman's discussion of *Lohengrin*'s thematization of the incommensurability of the mortal and immortal figured in the doomed love between Elsa and Lohengrin had brought this into contact with "Of the Coming of John" as an interpretation of segregation in Altamaha, of the apartheid of the post-reconstruction South, of the gap between the two equal but separate Johns. *Trennung*, or separation, the ontological divorce between the immortal and mortal spheres as figured in Wagner was interpreted in terms of the socio-historical content that forms the context for the plot of "Of the Coming of John." The difference between the Gods and humans that keeps Elsa and Lohengrin apart and that Wagner's tragedy protests is compared to the image of the Veil, recalled in the movement of the white women at the opera, who recoils her hand when accidentally touched by the black John (130). And yet this one movement, as well as every other figure of the color line in *Souls*, registers more than the experience of the history of segregation whose topography *Souls* does indeed chart and whose trajectory it does indeed chronicle. This does not have to mean that the theme of separation in *Lohengrin* has nothing to do with "Of the Coming of John," but the importance of its citation and repetition in the latter, I submit, is not reducible to a sociological content that, granted, *Souls* endeavors both to elucidate with scientific

rigor and to figure with literary expressivity. "Of the Coming of John" reads *Lohengrin*'s thematization of the incommensurability of the mortal, finite, with the immortal, infinite, *as such*, philosophically and does not apply it as a mere cultured adornment for its treatment of segregation. If, in "Of the Coming of John" the "timeless" themes figured in Wagner are not just, ironically or positively, "applied" to African American culture and if, consequently, it does not suffice to reinterpret Wagner in the light of this application,[9] it then seems, rather, incumbent to read "Of the Coming of John" as arriving at a field of philosophical inquiry that *Lohengrin* also inhabits, making exigent Du Bois's citation of it in this story; in seems incumbent to read it such that the experience of the (African American) subject John is figured to reflect an experience constitutive of the subject in general;[10] that across an intertextual field opened by Du Bois a problematic of the incommensurability of "realms" is echoed between *Lohengrin* and "Of the Coming of John"; that, finally, this echoing is just one point of a constellation in the story that charts and is this problematic. The necessity that brings the two texts together has a theoretical provenance immanent to their textual dynamics and does not stem from some accident of biography, a willful insertion, mere comparison or the application of a model to be followed. "Of the Coming of John" is a story about the incommensurability of ideals and history and the violence of the breach between them; about that between the talent and the task, opportunity and realization; about the doubling of souls, alienation from self, double consciousness; a story about the Veil and its doublings and the forces, the practices of distinction that raise it and the forces of difference, of identity that make the doubled souls on both sides of it.

"Of the Coming of John" cannot be readily or solely understood through a philological interpretation of its intertextual references alone, nor through chronicling its compression of the sociological, historical, ethnographical, and political content of the rest of the book *The Souls of*

Black Folk. A reading that would do justice to the specificity of its status as literary, that could participate in its movement and follow its textual dynamic would have to account as well for its language and form, would have to take into account and recount the status of its figurativity, have to figure out its figures. This work of figuring (out), this attention to Du Bois's language and its literary style, is a necessity already pointed to in past studies, such as those of Sundquist, when he claims that "it is only when *The Souls of Black Folk* is studied as a literary phenomenon, however, that its true meaning emerges" [11] and of Brodwin: "W.E.B. Du Bois stands out as the one acknowledged genius who poured his energies into almost every literary form available to him."[12] It is in this vein that the following contribution to figuring out "Of the Coming of John" is undertaken. It will focus, on a discussion of the problem of the figure as it moves through the story; on the intersection of texts that converge in this one story and the nature of their "inter-"; on the geographical and even cartographical figuring of "Of the Coming of John"; on the status of the work as a work among others in *The Souls of Black Folk*; and on the figuring of John that so centrally enacts the doubling at the heart of *Souls*, to ponder, once again, the endings of John by the Sea.[13]

Echoing Barrett Browning

"What bring they 'neath the midnight,
Beside the River-sea?
They bring the human heart wherein
No nightly calm can be;
That droppeth never with the wind,
Nor drieth with the dew;
O calm it, God; thy calm is broad

To cover spirits too.

The river floweth on.

MRS. BROWNING." (1)[14]

The citation and situating of Elizabeth Barret Browning's "River-sea" at the beginning of "Of the Coming of John" issues forth a source of resonances and referents that feed the figural course of Du Bois's story. The verse is taken from her "A Romance of the Ganges," a long poem written in her youth (1838) before her famously daring marriage with Robert Browning[15] and dramatic departure from England. The rigor of Du Bois's intention in the whole of *The Souls of Black Folk* and in the language of "Of the Coming of John" urge the reader to regard Du Bois's choice of this text as more than mere ornamentation, but one rather as complicated with the themes, language and plot of the text. "A Romance of the Ganges" was solicited for *Finden's tableaux: a series of picturesque scenes of national character, beauty and costume: from paintings by various artists after sketches by W. Perring*, an annual compilation of didactic or entertaining poems for a mainly woman readership. Its editor, Mary Russell Mitford, asked Barrett Browning to base her poem on an engraving of Indian girls placing lotus flowers to float in the Ganges.[16] While the publication was considered trivial, minor reading for an "unserious" audience, the structure and poetics of "Romance of the Ganges" reveal a complexity beyond any simple didactic, sentimental or "picturesque" piece, and the subtle tragedy it weaves around a forsaken woman is devoid of all artificial pathos. The place of "A Romances of the Ganges," like that of "Of the Coming of John," is near a river, and it relates the story of Luti, who has lost both her father to death and her lover to her friend Nuleeni. Seven maidens cast their boats of cocoa shells with lighted candles: if the candle stays lit, their partner's love, so the belief, will survive. Luti's candle dies and she remembers the death of her father at that same spot on the Ganges.

She makes the unknowing Nuleeni promise to always remind her husband and children of his infidelity before throwing herself into the Ganges, and says: "Nuleeni! look not sad--- / Light up the waters rather! / I weep no faithless lover where / I wept a loving father" (86-89).[17] Nuleeni weeps as the river flows on. Each verse ends with "The river floweth on," yet in the last verse this has come to mean the river of her tears. The ballads of Barrett Browing are to be understood as a rehabilitation of what was previously viewed as a naïve, popular form by neoclassicist aesthetics, following the democratizing, romantic tradition inaugurated with Wordworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. "Romance" or in other poems "romaunt" is her translation of the word for "ballad" from romance languages. Feminist critics (beginning with Virginia Woolf) have defended Barrett Browning's work from charges of maudlin sentimentality: long dismissed as inferior and confused, her ballads and other poems have been reinterpreted since the eighties as proto-feminist critiques of Victorian constructions of femininity[18]. Du Bois's citation of Barrett Browning alongside the other, exclusively male[19] writers in the epigraphs suggests a more sophisticated appreciation of her work at a time when her work had yet to be rediscovered. Luti, as many other characters of Barrett Browning, is a strong-willed and driven if ultimately tragic woman, and while similar women characters do not appear in *The Souls of Black Folk*, they do in later fiction by Du Bois.[20] Furthermore, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is the only author cited twice in the epigraphs in *The Souls of Black Folk*, [21] suggesting especial attention on the part of Du Bois for this author.

The lines cited are from the second verse of the 213-line ballad. They serve to foreshadow the death / suicide at the end of the poem, since the "calm" that God can provide the troubled human heart must cover "spirits" too, that we will come to know to be as Luti's as well as her father's. The obvious parallel between "Of the Coming of John" and "Romance of the

Ganges" is the theme of a death by the "River-sea," but there are further thematic resonances that some micrologically close reading helps reveal. There are three orthographic differences between the original verse in *Finden's Tableaux* and the version Du Bois cites as the epigraph: 1) "River-sea" reads "river-sea" in line 10 of the original; 2) "the human heart" reads "that human heart" in line 11 of the original; and 3) "thy calm is broad" reads "*thy* calm is broad" in line 15 of the original. The first change is, I believe, intentional and therefore the most significant and will be addressed in the final section of this essay. But the others are also important because they do subtly shift the emphasis, be they errors of transcription or changes by the typographers. It is furthermore likely Du Bois was reading the original version while choosing it for "Of the Coming of John" and we assume it was this version he had in mind and that must have influenced his choice. The demonstrative in the original "that human heart" specifies *that* human heart that is perturbed by violent emotions (that is to say, Luti's and all forsaken lovers') instead of the human heart *as such,* which would *always* be beset with unfulfilled passions, while the emphasis on "*thy* calm" suggests that *earthly* calm is *not* broad enough to cover the spirit. *Those* souls that are beset by such turbulence, in other words, will only find peace in the divine. The suggestion is further heightened by the slippage between the "breadth" of God's calm and the breadth of the Ganges, which pushes the image of the River-*sea* toward the symbolic range of the infinite or death (the river of life that flows into the infinite sea of the beyond). Thus while the choice of "Romance of the Ganges" for the epigraph is to be understood on the one hand to link the deaths that Luti and John Jones suffer at the edge of the River-sea, it also suggest a modulation of the meaning of dying by the River-sea, a passage which is *also* a liberation (for Luti from the anguish of her human heart and for John from the "storm" that bursts around him in the last lines of "Of the Coming of John") and the culmination of a transcendence denied in

life. To amplify still more the echoes of Barrett Browning's thinking of death in *The Souls of Black Folk* it is worth looking at the other epigraph by Barrett Browning, which is for the chapter "Of the Sons of Master and Man." The poem cited is "A Vision of Poets," a 1000-line elegy that ends with the lines "Knowledge by suffering entereth, And Life is perfected by Death" (Barrett Browning 247-260). The choice of Barrett Browning for the two chapters highlights the thematic resonances between these within *The Souls of Black Folk* and between the ending of the elegy and the theme of transcendence by death in "Of the Coming of John."

But there is yet another Barrett Brownian text that echoes through "Of the Coming of John" without ever being mentioned by name. While the verse from "Romance of the Ganges" neatly parallels John's relation to death by the River-sea, one of her more famous and controversial pieces, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," (Barrett Browning 317-320), also culminates in a lynching by the sea. It is difficult to conceive that W.E.B. Du Bois was not aware of this poem, written for the Garrisonian abolitionist journal *Liberty Bell* in 1848. The structural and substantial similarities between the poem and "Of the Coming of John" are evident, and the numerous resonances between "A Romance of the Ganges" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (two women lose their lovers, avenge themselves with a curse, death by murder or suicide by the water) further amplify the latter through the former in Du Bois's text. Can we imagine Du Bois developing "Of the Coming of John" with Barrett Browning's abolitionist poem in mind?[22] Or even as a response to this text, rare in nineteenth century Europe as a text written by a white author from the perspective of a black woman?[23] "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" is a dramatic monologue published in 1848 that challenged Northern abolitionists with its frank depiction of the suffering of a slave in the North, probably in Massachusetts.[24] It was controversial enough that its publication was delayed a year. The

narrator of the monologue is the fugitive who has gone to the place of the New World arrival of the colonists to await her death and there recounts her story. She curses first a cosmos where she must suffer for her color, then recounts the joy of love with another slave, the horror of his murder and of her rape by her master, her escape, and her filicide of her "white" child from her master. She performs a philosophical monologue addressed to the "pilgrim-souls" as the group of white men approach to murder her. The poem ends as she awaits reconciliation in the beyond with her dead child and cries: "In the name of the white child waiting for me / In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree, / White men, I leave you all curse-free In my broken heart's disdain!" (250-3)[25] The runaway slave, while previously having cursed the pilgrims and "Washington's race" for creating the conditions for her tragic ending, chooses to not curse the white mob that will murder her, an ending, like that of John Jones, which is not represented in the text. The posture of "disdain" of the runaway slave at the end of the poem prefigures John's almost insouciant mood as he also awaits the "angry men" who will seal his fate, humming lines from Wagner's "Song of the Bride." The lines "And feel your souls around me hum / In undertone to the ocean's roar" (17-18) from "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," are reminiscent of the whistling of the world in John's ears that close "Of the Coming of John." These doublings of references to the Barrett Brownian texts in "Of the Coming of John" themselves double the doubling within "Of the Coming of John"[26] and the doubling in *The Souls of Black Folk*. The images and events in these two poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning that echo each other and through "Of the Coming of John" also echo through the other musical texts referenced in it: the spiritual "You May Bury Me in de Eas'" and Wagner's *Lohengrin*. Their figural movement and its importance for the generic status of "Of the Coming of John" will be addressed in the next section.

Spiritual Rivers of Life

The second epigraph is a line of musical notation from the spiritual "You May Bury Me in de Eas'." The full text of the lyrics reads:

You may bury me in de Eas', you may bury me in de Wes'
But I'll hear de trumpet soun' in dat mornin', my lord.
How I long to go for to hear de trumpet soun' in dat mornin'

Father Gabriel in dat day
He'll take wings and fly away.
For to hear de trumpet soun'
In dat mornin'
You may bury him, etc.

Good ole Christians in dat day,
Dey'll take wings and fly away etc.

Good ole preacher in dat day
Dey'll take wings, etc.

In dat dreadful judgmen' day
I'll take wings, etc.[27]

Like the poetical epigraph, the musical epigraph[28] at the beginning points forward to the ending of "Of the Coming of John." The bars cited in the epigraph correspond to the first verse of the spiritual, and the thematic correspondence to the ending of "Of the Coming of John" mirrors that of the Barrett Browning texts. But like the caching of "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" within the citation of "A Romance of the Ganges" one must put pressure on the citation of "You may bury me in the eas'" to desediment the references. My reading will begin by way of a detour through the figures of violence and transcendence in the text of "Of the Coming of John."

There is an odd image in the text whose appearance and reappearance invite reflection on its function and necessity. It is first evoked in the first paragraph with its geography of the Georgia town of Johnstown, where the story is set, that positions the black university on a hill to the west of town: "When at evening the winds come swelling from the east, and the great pall of the city's smoke hangs wearily above the valley, then the *red west glows* like a dreamland down Carlisle Street, and, at the tolling of the supper-bell, throws the passing forms of students in dark silhouette against the sky" (1). It reappears at the moment of sublime rapture at the performance of Wagner in New York: "A deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise with that clear music out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled. If he could only live up in the free air where birds sang and *setting suns had no touch of blood!*" (14). And it last appears at the moment of the black John's killing of the white John: "He said not a word, but, seizing a fallen limb, struck him with all the pent-up hatred of his great black arm; and the body lay white and still beneath the pines, all bathed in *sunshine and in blood*" (45 emphases added).

I propose to read these figures of the sun and blood (and their metonyms: red, heaven, glow, etc.) as ciphers for John's striving for the ideal; in the case of the former, the goals of enlightenment and education, with the "transcendent" understood as a passage-beyond within

this world, toward knowledge as such and progress; in the case of the latter, with the violence that emerges at every point of possible transcendence, at every moment of deliverance, from the mud of Altamaha, which comes to symbolize the dull weight of its inertia of history, and from the imprisoning pillars of the institutions of white supremacy; that at every point of an insertion of hope for an other to the separations and desperations of the Veil, of the color line, enters the scene with a force of its own and the force it spawns and doubles. So, for example in the concert scene, at the pinnacle of his ecstatic participation with the music, the Veil and its violence descend on John's shoulder like an iron wall as the hand of "the usher tapping him lightly on the shoulder and saying politely, 'Will you step this way, please, sir?'" (16). Or after the return to Altamaha when the dream of education and of bringing progress to Altamaha and its mud culminates in the "red, angry face of the Judge" (45) who shuts down his school. And finally in the violence of the white John toward Jenny and the counter-violence of the black John (49-50).

After John has defended Jenny (who thereafter disappears from the narrative) and killed the white John, he returns to house and mother. "Mammy, I'm going away,—I 'm going to be free" (50). "Then, without another word, he went out into the narrow lane, up by the straight pines, to the same winding path, and seated himself on the great black stump, looking at the blood where the body had lain" (53). If Schelling's claim for pagan tragedy stands, that in freely chosen death the paradoxical unity of freedom and necessity is preserved,[29] we may therein see the motive in the willfulness of John's confrontation with the mob, as well as in that of the filicide of the infant in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." John's death is in this sense as much a suicide as a murder.[30] Whether this death is accomplished at the hands of the lynch mob or with his own is a matter of indifference to the logic of the story: it is a death that has been chosen. The final scene of violence, the inevitable lynching of the protagonist, is excised from

the narration because its representation is superfluous, just as is that of the death of the runaway slave in Barrett Browning's dramatic monologue.

Not superfluous however is the intentionality of its time and its place: John confronts his end facing the Atlantic on the Georgia coast, he faces the sea and beyond that, as any globe reveals, the Africa that Crummel left and also faced at the end of his story (the preceding chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* "Of Alexander Crummel").[31] John looks at Crummel looking at him over the Atlantic. John has chosen his location, the location of the *leaving* of John, after his coming: he will fly away home–you may bury him east or west but this soul will take wings and fly away–to Africa, the metaphorical cartography of the text suggests.[32] And it is the intention behind this act that turns the inexpressible, unfigurable meaninglessness of every violent death into a figure of its unfigurability that preserves for reading a trace, a mark that registers in form the unspeakability of the empirical–event, if it is one–that itself remains unwritten as well, the sediment of an unrepresented unrepresentability.

But the uncharted cartography of "Of the Coming of John" includes here another buried reference, not to the beyond of the sea of passages, Africa, but to another Altamaha, the river Altamaha, that like the Ganges flows from inland to mouth into a great sea. This is the site of the town Altamaha. We have returned, at and in the end, to Barret Browning's "River-sea," the proper point–geographical, metaphorical, figural and metaphysical–of an intersection, a meeting, a merging–and an ending. It is a point of fluid indifference, the site of a permanent desituating, whose situatedness consists in the washing away of any locus, any permanence, and whose fluidity flows over the end to the flow. In the spirituals the river enters often as a metaphor of life.[33] And the flow of life meets, for John, its end at the point where it meets the sea. As the text of "Of the Coming of John" reads, at the intersection of the deep river of life (which, like the

Ganges, we must imagine whispering) and the no-longer-silent great brown sea of death and passages, the "storm burst round him" (53). But the storm is itself a figure for the trumpet, as Du Bois reminds us in the "Of the Sorrow Songs." There he quotes the spiritual "Steal Away," where the storm is brought into contact with the sound of the trumpet: "My Lord calls me, / He calls me by the thunder / The trumpet sounds it in my soul" (541). The storm around John then is both empirical and figural: an empirical storm (that itself figures the call of God's trumpet calling John home) and the figure for the empirical violence of the lynch mob. As little as the reader may ignore the reference to Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" behind the citation of "A Romance of the Ganges" can she abdicate reading "Steal Away" and "Deep River" with the citation of "You May Bury Me." If at every point of possible transcendence violence erupts to disturb its completion, so too at every point of violence is a type of transcendence figured–the impossibility of blood without suns complements the impossibility of suns without blood. We hear the sound of the trumpets that has to echo through the citation of "Steal Away," through the epigraph, through the figure of the storm, through the undecidability of its status as referential to the figural trumpet or the empirical mob, resounding in his ear, with the whistling world, at the culmination of his river's flow, to call him, perhaps, to the passage through to the "campground" of "Deep River," to where the trumpet sound calls him "dat morning." Coincident with the reference back to the spirituals in the moment of death is also a reference back to Wagner: "With and effort he roused himself, bent forward, and looked steadily down the pathway, softly humming the "Song of the Bride,"- "Freudig[34] gefuhrt, ziehet dahin" (54). But it is not that Du Bois must insert a reference here to *Lohengrin* as carrier of transcendence: the storm already has blown the trumpet call of the spirituals, that John hears echoed, doubled with the memory of the concert, the scene of parting, the ultimate separation

between spheres and the mark of the yearning pain of the failed consummation of Elsa and Lohengrin's love and the incommensurability of mortal and immortal.[35] This doubling of reference mirrors the doubling of reference in the epigraphs.

Personification and The S/sea

The penultimate paragraph of "Of the Coming of John" ends with the words: "…his closed eyes toward the *S*ea" (54, my emphasis). For the first time since the epigraphs, where Du Bois had intentionally capitalized Barrett Browning's "River-sea," as I argued above, one reads the capitalization of the noun that is a figure so prevalent in the rest of *The Souls of Black Folk*, the signature of the figure of personification or prosopopeia that itself was the signature of Du Bois the essayist in *The Souls of Black Folk* and its related texts.

In Du Bois's essayistic prose in *The Souls of Black Folk*, prosopopeia serves to lend a tone of *gravitas* to the sociohistorical exposition of the trajectory of the souls of black folk, their pasts, present and futures that the work puts into motion. I read Du Bois's mobilization of the figure of prosopopeia as a writerly strategy to underscore its work of inscription, the writing of a new history, of the African (American), hitherto relegated to a mythical half-existence outside of history (Hegel) in Western discourse. Such concepts as the Veil, Fate, Debt and most ominously, Race are figured as almost persons, almost *protagonists* in Du Bois's figuring of a yet unwritten history. Prosopopeia is the dominant mode of allegory, according the Angus Fletcher's classic work *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode,* and Du Bois's use of the figure infuses his concepts with what Fletcher terms "daemonic agency": "Whatever area the abstract ideas come from, these agents give a sort of life to intellectual conceptions; they may not actually create a personality before our eyes, but they do create a semblance of personality"[36] (26-35). The

semblance of personality in the concepts (Veil, Race, Fate, Debt) presented in the historiographical work of *The Souls of Black Folk* lends a narrative flavor to the text, a *sense* of literariness, that augments the sublime seriousness Du Bois ascribes to the (newly written) history of the souls of black folk in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Perhaps one even hears echoes of a Hegelian dialectical and historical idealism here, the personifications likened to historical forces made to be the "heroes" of the narrative through the channeling of the demonic agents of (African American) history into personae. But, as if conscious of its own dangerously totalizing implications, "Of the Coming of John" interrupts a master narrative in-the-making in *The Souls of Black Folk*, inserting a break or difference into the new inscription of the African American into history with a fictional work that ironically denies itself the literary tones of the figure of prosopopeia, thus making itself anew in the spirit of the "historial" (Chandler 2008, 366).

No other single mark separates with such exactitude the language of "Of the Coming of John" from the other chapters in *Souls* than that of the S/sea: "Of the Coming of John" had established its status as "literary" in contradistinction to the rest of *Souls* through the exclusion of this privileged figure of his non-fictional essayistic writing. Prosopopeia's absence in "Of the Coming of John" is the genre-defining border that the story's figural register draws: it departs from a rhetorical mode appropriate to the essays, in which the capitalization of nouns underscores the conceptualization of the grand themes and dynamics that shape the African American trajectory that *The Souls of Black Folk* charts. Prosopopeia's return here, at the end of the story, harks back to the "River-sea" cited in Barrett Browning at its very beginning as the only other such capitalization in the text: these two marks localize the ports of departure and return of the excursion into fiction that *The Souls of Black Folk* embarks on in "Of the Coming of John." As the distinguishing characteristic its reappearance here is a signpost of the return of

Souls of Black Folk to the language of the non- fictional essay, at the end of "Of the Coming of John" and before the subsequent chapter "Of the Sorrow Songs." The location of this displacement of the figure through "Of the Coming of John" is not arbitrary; indeed it is the site of its most rigorous logic, because it mirrors the encounter of the river with the sea. It is at this moment of John's final passage when the submerged figure of prosopopeia, the trademark of Du Bois the essayist, the signature figure of the essays of *The Souls of Black Folk*, re-emerges to reclaim its status and effaces the figure of the sea, by in effect putting on once again its prosopopeic mask. This Sea is not the same sea, cited eight times before in the story (2,11,14,18,24,47,48,53). *This* Sea is the stitch that sutures the fictional figure of the sea in the fictional story "Of the Coming of John with the conceptualization implicit in prosopopeia. With this single "S," then, the entire figural movement in "Of the Coming of John" and the whole of *Souls of Black Folk* is itself transfigured as much as John himself is transfigured at the moment of his death, as much as Crummel is, facing his Africa across the sea of passages. The "trans" of the transfiguration is the passage of both the figural and the empirical, of the figure of the personification of the Sea and of the empirical person John, facing each other as the storm "bursts around him," which is two storms: the empirical one of thunder and lightning, nature's storm, and the metaphorical storm of the violence of the lynch mob, the storm of history, the sociohistorical violence that claims him and whose persistence disallows any transcendent finality to this end in this world. It is in this transfiguration of the S/sea that the passage, the transport of the figure and John's passage, are inscribed together in the ending of "Of the Coming of John" as repetition of the River-sea of the beginning, a culmination in the origin that opens out rather than closing in an absolute finality. Thus, after the world has stopped to whistle

in John's ears and in his uncalmed heart, after Luti's loss, after the silencing of the uncursing lips of the runaway slave, after the burial east or west, the Altamaha floweth on.[37]

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[1] "Wer es aber vermöchte, den übertäubenden Wogen des Wagnerschen Orchesters solches Metall zu entreissen, dem vermöchte sein veränderter Klang zu dem Trost zu verhelfen, den es trotz Rausch und Phantasmagorie beharrlich verweigert. Indem es die Angst des hilflosen Menschen ausspricht, könnte es den Hilflosen, wie immer schwach und verstellt, Hilfe bedeuten, und aufs neue versprechen, was der uralte Einspruch der Musik versprach: Ohne Angst Leben." Adorno, Theodor. *Versuch über Wagner.* Munich: Knaur, 1964, 166. Original translation. The book is translated by Rodney Livingstone as *In Search of Wagner*. London: Verso, 1991.

[2] Cited in Charles Nero's "Queering The Souls of Black Folk." *Public Culture* 17.2 (2005): 255-76: "Originally, the story was to be the final chapter of *Souls*; however, at the suggestion of his publishers, Du Bois added a chapter about Negro spirituals at the end of the book" (256). The source provided is: A. S. McClurg and Company to W. E. B. Du Bois, Chicago, January 21, 1903, in *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois, 1803 (1877–1963) 1965* (Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1981), reel 2, frame 433.

[3] Baker, Houston A. *Long Black Song; Essays In Black American Literature And Culture.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972, 102.

[4] Byerman, Keith Eldon. *Seizing The Word : History, Art, And Self In The Work Of W.E.B. Du Bois.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994, 33.

[5] Berman, Russell A. "Du Bois and Wagner: Race, Nation, and Culture between the United States and Germany." *The German Quarterly* 70.2 (1997): 123-135, 128.

[6] Robert Gooding Williams offers a corrective to Baker's position: "I would say that Du Bois wants not to broaden Arnold's definition of culture so much as to show that the black American folk or folk-spirit, satisfies that definition." Williams, Robert Gooding. *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008, 300.

[7] Judy, Ronald. "The New Black Aesthetic and W. E. B. Du Bois, or Hephaestus, limping." *The Massachusetts Review* 35.2 (1994): 249, 255.

[8] Miles, Kevin Thomas. "Haunting Music in The Souls of Black Folk." *boundary 2* 27.3 (2000): 199-214, 208.

[9] This is not to say such a reading of Wagner in the light of Du Bois would in itself be unworthy: indeed, Berman's pursuit of the claim that "Du Bois's appropriation of the Wagnerian material.points to a very plausible resolution of issues central to the critical understanding of the opera" (128) produces convincing results.

[10] On the significance of the Du Boisian project for an understanding of "ultratranscendental" structures of subjectivity, with specific reference to the "distinctive generality" of the autobiographical example, see Nahum Chandler: "The Figure of the X: An Elaboration of the Du Boisian Autobiographical Example." Lavie, Smadar, and Ted Swedenburg. *Displacement, Diaspora, And Geographies Of Identity.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. 235-272.

[11] Sundquist, Eric J. *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993, 458.

[12] Brodwin, Stanley. "The Veil Transcended: Form and Meaning in W.E.B. Du Bois' The Souls of Black Folk." *Journal of Black Studies* 2.3 (1972): 303-321, 304.

[13] My readings of "Of the Coming of John"s work of re-figuring Wagner, Barrett Browning and the spirituals positions itself in sympathetic proximity to Nahum Chandler's concept of desedimentation, and understands itself as another and further occasion of this desedimentation: "Another movement of traces would solicit an inhabitation of the impress that remains of the rhythm or step of certain figural movements within a discursive field, not so much by removing them from the soil of their embeddedness or ground and bringing them back to life, but by a kind of labor of desedimentation that would mobilize—that is, disturb—the lability of the shifts and fault lines that configure the ground that surrounds them. … Such a practice, that is, might turn up new soil on old ground." Chandler, Nahum. "Of Exorbitance: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought." *Criticism* 50.3 (2008): 345-410, 353.

[14] Numbers refer to paragraphs in the text "Of the Coming of John."

[15] While Du Bois cites "Mrs. Browning," the poet was much more well-known than her husband in her lifetime and familiar to an American readership.

[16] The image is a plate insert between pages 28 and 29 of *Finden's Tableaux*, before Barrett Browning's poem: Mitford, Mary Russell. *Finden's tableaux: a series of picturesque scenes of national character, beauty and costume: from paintings by various artists after sketches by W. Perring.* London: Charles Tilt, 1838. Mitford wrote Barrett Browning on February 1, 1838: "I want you to write me a poem in illustration of a very charming group of Hindoo girls floating their lamps upon the Ganges—launching them, I should say. You know that pretty superstition (if the girls lamp fails, her lover is inconstant)…I could not think of going to press without your assistance, and have chosen for you the very prettiest subject, and, I think, the prettiest plate of the whole twelve": *The Life of Mary Russell Mitford, Told by Herself in Letters to her Friends, Vol. 2.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1870, 197.

[17] Numbers reference line numbers in the poem (Barrett Browning 290-7).

[18] See Stone, Marjorie. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995, 100-101.

[19] Fiona MacLeod, author of the epigraph for "Of the Faith of the Fathers," is a pseudonym for the Scottish esoteric poet and biographer William Sharp. On MacLeod/Sharp with reference to Du Bois see Daniel Williams. *Ethnicity and Cultural Authority: From Arnold to Du Bois.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

[20] The parallels between "Of the Coming of John" and Du Bois's 1925 novel *Dark Princess* are striking. John Jones, like the novel's protagonist Matthew, is the cultured "diasporic race man" and "dandy" is Monica Miller puts it ("W.E.B. Du Bois and the Dandy as Diasporic Race Man." *Callaloo* 26.3 (2003): 738-765) while his counterpart and love interest Kautilya is another strong South Asian protagonist as is Luti. These repetitions resonate when one considers the subtitle of the novel: *Dark Princess: A Romance*.

[21] The other is the epigraph for "Of the Sons of Master and Man" discussed below.

[22] Wald suggests a different possible intertext for "Of the Coming of John" by punningly noting that the "twice-told tale" to which Du Bois refers may be a reference to Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil":"When he labels "Of the Coming of John" as a twice-told tale, he might even intend a veiled allusion to Hawthorne-as well as an allusion to the Veil." Priscilla Wald, *Constituting America: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995, 182.

[23] The only exception being, to my knowledge, *Ourika* by Claire de Dufort. It has also however been suggested that Barrett Browning perceived herself as of African descent via Jamaican

ancestors: see Ann Parry's "Sexual Exploitation and Freedom: Religion, Race, and Gender in Elizabeth Barret Browning's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'" *Studies in Barrett Browning and His Circle* 16 (1988): 114-127.

[24] For background information and a readings that stress the radicality of Barrett Browning's poem see Parry and Stone, Marjorie. "Elizabeth Barret Browning and the Garrisonians: 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, and Abolitionist Discourse in the *Liberty Bell*." Chapman, Alison. *Victorian Women Poets.* Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003, 33-55.

[25] Numbers refer to line numbers in the poem.

[26] On the doubling of characters in "Of the Coming of John" see Sundquist (456-9).

[27] Newman, Richard. *Go Down, Moses: A Celebration Of The African-American Spiritual.* New York: Clarkson Potter, 1998, 38.

[28] I will leave a deeper engagement with the lively critical discourse on the aesthetics of the musical epigraphs in *The Souls of Black Folk* for another occasion in order to focus on the parallel openings-out toward other texts that I read within both of the epigraphs. Here I merely call for attention select moments of this discourse. While Kevin Miles holds that "The music of Souls is most musical because it is alien; it becomes itself as music because it cannot be assimilated into the dominant discourse so often identified as the Western tradition" (206-7), A. Yemisi Jimoh describes the dual epigraphs as a juxtapositioning of a "privileged text and a marginal text" that are both "vying for a primacy as viable expressions of change" (9). Jimoh, A. Yemisi, *Spiritual, Blues and Jazz People in African American Fiction: Living in Paradox.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002. Kimberly Banks's comparative readings of short stories by Hughes and Toomer ("Home" and "Blood Burning Moon") alongside "Of the

Coming of John" highlight the role of music as a medium to address "one of the central questions of the short story…how the intellect responds to the irrationality of racial violence" (455), noting that "music provides the momentary imaginative realization of an ideal that is thwarted from social realization (455) and claiming of the return of Wagner at the ending of "Of the Coming of John" that "rather than representing paralysis or death, John's turn to classical music is a turn to a spiritual reserve of strength (459). Banks, Kimberly. ""Like a violin for the wind to play": Lyrical Approaches to Lynching by Hughes, Du Bois and Toomer." *African American Review* 38.3 (2004): 451-465. Cheryl Wall likens the musical epigraphs to "hieroglyphs" and Thomas Kemple compares them to a "*ritournelle*" or refrain (199) leaning on Deleuze and Guattari. Wall, Cheryl. "Resounding Souls: Du Bois and the African American Literary Tradition." *Public Culture* 17.2 (2005) and Kemple, Thomas. "Weber/Simmel/Du Bois : Musical Thirds of Classical Sociology." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 9 (2009): 187-207. Anne Carroll, in her consideration of *The Souls of Black Folk*'s possible mobilization of the Wagnerian concept of the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), holds that "In *Souls*, the bars of song and lines of poetry function as these kinds of elements; they visually and symbolically tie together the fourteen chapters of the book, making it more than just the sum of its parts. In other words, they become a graphic leitmotif." Carroll, Anne E. "Du Bois and Art Theory: The Souls of Black Folk as a "Total Work of Art"." *Public Culture* 17.2 (2005): 235–54, 243. One can read Alexander Weheliye's claim, however, in his intriguing study of the appropriations of musical technologies for Afro-modernist aesthetics, that the musical epigraphs of *The Souls of Black Folk* "implode the linguistic utterances that frame them and thus launch the structural moment of the mix," against the grain of Carroll's argument for the leitmotif. Weheliye, Alexander G. *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 96.

[29] In the tenth letter from "Uber Dogmatismus and Kriticismus": Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph. *Werke: Herausgegeben von Harmut Buchner, Wilhelm G. Jacobs, und Annemarie Pieper. Vol. I:3.* Stuttgart: Fromman Holzboog, 1982.

[30] Byerman also notes John's "calm, almost suicidal wait for the lynch mob" (33) but while he suggests a possible Lacanian reading of John as a scapegoat, his posture akin to the self-mutilation of the son confronted with the castration by the father "as the only autonomous gesture," (33) available, my reading arcs back to the "disdain" of the runaway slave, who refuses to curse her assailants and awaits reunion to "kiss and agree" with her "white" child. John also already has his eyes on another world.

[31] Zamir notes the similarity as well without further comment: Zamir, Shamoon. *Dark Voices: W.E.B. Du Bois and American thought, 1888-1903.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 189. I read the persons of John/Crummel, at their deaths on two facing coasts, as a figure of double consciousness itself in its geographical specificity: to belong to two *continents*, Africa and America, the one looking at the other.

[32] Sundquist already has noted the fact that "You May Bury Me in the East" invokes "a central legend of African tradition that survived in the slaves' folk belief that they might one day fly home to Africa" (523).

[33] Newman calls "Deep River" "the most universal of the spirituals," citing theologian Howard Thurman (30).

[34] As Berman first noted, "Freudig" (joyfully) differs from "Treulich," (loyally) the original word in the lyrics of the "Song of the Bride." While Berman attributed this act of signifying to a mistake, Sieglinde Lemke and Charles Nero both consider it intentional but with differing explanations of its importance. Lemke considers that "the substitution of 'joyously' for

'faithfully' makes sense only if we assume that the protagonist John said this line with a sarcastic or fatalistic tone," understanding "Freudig" as the perverse joy of the lynch mob and reading John's altered lyrics as "sublime condescension." Sieglinde Lemke. ""Of the Coming of John"" in *The Cambridge Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 37-47, 39-41. Nero aligns the change with his queer reading of the character of John: "What I am suggesting is that the substitution of "Joyfully" for "Faithfully/ Loyally" is consistent with Du Bois's depiction of John as the ideal of the Submissive Man. John approaches the act of submission much as a bride approaches her husband on the wedding day. The act is done with a faith or loyalty that leads ultimately to the higher state that Du Bois called "Joy." (264). I agree that the change is intentional – indeed, as I argue above, Du Bois also changed the epigraph by Barrett Browning intentionally – but my reading understands the joy John cites as an affirmation of the paradoxical moment freedom in the fulfillment of his tragedy, the transcendence in death and his liberation to fly away home.

[35] Cornel West has written: "The African American spirituals constitute the most sustained phenomenology of New World evil" ("Preface" in Newman 10). The spirituals, with their intense consciousness of an absurd existence in an irrational order, as in the lines "I'm a rolling thro' an unfriendly world" from the spiritual "I'm a Rolling" (Newman 36), with their stark portrayal of worldly sinfulness and extreme messianic view of the afterlife, and with their vision of retributive justice are ultimately concerned with the problem of evil as such and its origin. Read with "You May Bury Me in de Eas'," one may as well understand "Of the Coming of John" as a sort of theodicy of the (African-American) subject. Just as pagan tragedy focuses on the confrontation of the individual with the cosmic irreconcilability of worldly time and eternal meaning, the spirituals as well are concerned with the contradiction between (ideal) freedom and

(historical) necessity. John too must confront the same contradiction. See Christina Zwarg's "Du Bois on Trauma: Psychoanalysis and the Would-Be Black Savant." *Cultural Critique* 51 (2002): 1-39, (18ff) for a different discussion of the relation between Greek tragedy that highlights psychoanalytical themes in "Of the Coming of John."

[36] Fletcher, Angus. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1964, 26-35.

[37] My reading of John's death insinuates that "Of the Coming of John" is perfectly tragic, in the Aristotelian sense, and thus the sublimation of myth. Adorno's classic deconstruction of Wagner's mythopoesis is most suspicious of its regression to myth (already bourgeois) and its inability to arrive at the truly tragic, for all of the "rapture and phantasmagoria" it impressively throws up: "Essence is drawn into an omnisignificant immanence; the immanent is held in thrall by symbol. This stratum, where all is undifferentiated, is that of myth. Its sign is ambiguity; its twilight is a standing invitation to merge irreconcilables-the positivistic and the metaphysical-because it firmly rejects both the transcendental and the factual. Gods and men perform on the same stage. After Lohengrin, Wagner actually banned authentic historical conflicts from his work….The mythical musical drama is secular and magical at one and the same time. This is how it solves the riddle of phantasmagoria" (Adorno 115). The *leitmotiv*, for Adorno, is a cheap trick that fails to glue the content perilously dispersed through Wagner's wild, expansive attempts to create a total work of art, as much as he appreciates the musically technical potential unleashed in his furious working-through the musical material, such as Wagner's advances in chromaticism and instrumental color. Indeed, it is Wagner and late romantic music in general that make possible the revolutionary unleashing of dissonance and the "heroic" atonality of the Second Viennese School, so resonant with Out Jazz. I further insinuate that, read through

Adorno, “Of the Coming of John”’s aesthetics are at odds with Wagner’s, that they succeed where Wagner’s fail, that they brush up against atonality and that John’s intentional mistranslation at the culmination of the story aligns itself neatly with the sentiment Adorno expresses in the epigraph to this essay.