

**The Insurmountable Malaise:  
Richard Wright's *The Long Dream* and the "Will to Being"**

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**Abstract**

Every epoch in human history has borne witness to the human struggle to decipher sense out of chaos. This has been an even intense struggle especially for those who have continued to live on the margins. The lives and actions of such people have been oriented not towards what Nietzsche calls the 'will to power', but towards what I propose as the 'will to being'. This engagement with the 'will to being' is necessitated by the absence of an answer to the conflict between human's rational demands and the world's irrationality which leads to the condition of an insurmountable malaise. In this article I have probed Richard Wright's *The Long Dream* which is permeated by the longing to surmount the existential malaise through the development of the 'will to being'. *The Long Dream* is particularly significant because of its inherent prowess to problematise the question of being and the will towards the actualisation of it.

**Keywords:** Richard Wright, *The Long Dream*, Insurmountable malaise, will to power, will to being, angst, bad faith, neurosis

Every epoch in the annals of human history is replete with instances of the human struggle to decipher sense out of chaos. This has been an even intense struggle especially for those who have continued to live on the margins. The lives and actions of such people have been oriented not towards what Nietzsche calls the 'will to power', but towards what I propose as the "will to being". The will to power turns out to be a possibility for those who do not experience the duel between their ideal and real selves. But for those who have been forced to experience the survival question and have to encounter their neurotic selves, "will to being" turns out to be of primary importance. This engagement with the 'will to being' is necessitated by the absence of an answer to the conflict between human's rational demands and the world's irrationality which leads to the condition of an insurmountable malaise. Albert Camus, the French philosopher, sums up the malaise as he suggests: "In a world suddenly divested of illusions and of light, man feels an alien, a stranger. His is an irremediable exile. since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land" (6). The root of the malaise, it follows, can be ascribed to the confrontation between this non-rational world and the desperate desire for clarity, which is one of man's deepest needs. Humans

have a fundamental longing for reason, especially for a world as a composite whole within which everything has its prescribed and demonstrable existence and values. The recognition of the irrationality, the utter meaninglessness of the world, and a nostalgia for reason end up in a confrontation, which in turn, constitutes the core of this malaise. The neurotic feeling of absurd can arise in many ways-- from the perception of the "inhumanity" or indifference of nature; from the realization of human's temporality or death which reveals the uselessness of human life; or from the shock occasioned by perceiving the ultimate pointlessness of life.

While dealing with the question of the malaise in his *Mortal Questions*, Thomas Nagel writes, "Most people on occasions feel life is absurd and some feel it vividly and continually" (11). The oppressed belong to the smaller group that experiences the feeling of absurdity quite often. It makes one feel as if one is standing over a void, denuded of support, helplessly gazing at the world gone chaotic. Though these experiences focus much on the dialectic of the absurd, these should not be mistaken as being anti-humanistic. The existential malaise does point towards the insurmountable condition of man as an 'irremediable exile', but not to make the chasm even wider. It does not force us into a mood of despondency and gloom. Instead, it orients itself towards the development of the 'will to being'. Camus, who mercilessly pointed to the existential malaise in his "The Myth of Sisyphus", elsewhere points towards the possibility of being. He says, "I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has meaning, and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one..." (Letters 22). What Camus is positing is that in the face of the existential malaise man assumes greater significance. Although he is divested of values and support to sustain him; nonetheless, he is treated as a possibility, the maker of his own values and fate. Sisyphus surmounted his fate in the face of irrationality with scorn, man can too, through engagement, overcome the condition of the malaise.

Similarly, Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* perceives the condition of nothingness as something replete with constructive values. His attitude to nothingness is summed up as an emptiness, separating a person from the world of things about him, from which the possibility of thinking or acting as one chooses arises. Karl Jaspers depicts this malaise through his concept of 'Boundary Situations' (*Philosophy* Vol. 2, Ch. 7) by enumerating the various stages as situationality, chance and fortune, suffering, human struggle and conflict, guilt and death. The boundary situation is the outcome of the conflict with insurmountable forces. It is a challenge to the idealist notion of a friendly universe. The tragic antinomy of life is described by him as 'shipwreck' which points to the polarity and perpetual 'tension' of human existence. Jaspers sums up the absurd as 'the tension between the apparent undecidability of our guiding beliefs and 'the reality of resolute self-comportment' which reveal the 'inherently dubious and brittle' nature and the 'antinomical structure' of our existence (*Philosophy* Vol. 2 109, 218).

Although the apparent impossibility of surmounting the malaise gives in to the inherent possibility of the 'will to being', the incapacity to act in the face of oppressive realities render it unendurable. This stems from the understanding that everyday life is lived, for a considerable part, in 'bad faith', sunk in the 'they', and under the sway of the 'other'. This points to the presupposition that

an authentic existence, from which everyday life is a fall, is necessarily an individualized' existence in which one recalls oneself from 'bad faith' and the comforting embrace of the 'they'. Despite the neurotic descent into the realm of bad faith as a conscious effort to avoid ratiocinating, one is never completely free from experiencing the inexplicably disturbing angst. Angst is hardly a pleasant feeling, and most people who experience it even for the first time, generally endeavour to avoid it by 'fleeing' into the comforting embrace of the 'they'; and, thus enter the realm of 'bad faith'. Though not a pleasant feeling, Angst, nonetheless, plays a vital role in waking an individual to reflect on the possibility of one's authentic existence.

Although angst is an unwelcome, disturbing experience which people want to be rid of, it is nevertheless, described as an immensely positive feeling. Heidegger calls it an 'unshakeable joy'; (*Being* 310) Sartre finds angst 'positively exhilarating' (*Nausea* 26). The real worth of angst is revealed when a person, instead of passing it off as a funny turn and returning into the tranquilizing ways of the 'they', faces its messages and accepts the truth about one's existence which it intimates. Kierkegaard in his *The Concept of Dread* depicts dread as "... an alien power which lays hold of an individual and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has a will to do so; for one fears what one desires" (39). He further calls dread "a sweet feeling of apprehension", a "vague presentiment", the "reality of freedom as possibility", and a "sympathetic antipathy" and "antipathetic sympathy" (*Dread* 38). Sartre, in his "Existentialism is a Humanism" presents his concept of anguish (angst) rather succinctly as he points to the origin of angst: "When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind---in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility" (292). Sartre also provides an answer to the experience of the vertigo as he says, "I am afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over" (*Being* 29). For Sartre "man is always separated by a nothingness from his essence, and this sense of groundlessness creeps in the form of angst when a person contemplates choice. The simple explanation may be to say that man is stripped of all values and supports in the condition of the absurd, hence he is rendered as a 'vacant position', 'a potentiality to be'. This invests a person with infinite freedom and requires him to choose his own values. This is precisely where a person experiences angst, for angst is, as Kierkegaard says, "dizziness of freedom". Vertigo requires the absence of a supporting ground, and the absurd points to this groundlessness. Angst is the experience of groundlessness, the absence of anything holding one in place and anchoring one's actions.

Informed by these insights into the insurmountable nature of the existential malaise, I probe Richard Wright's *The Long Dream* which is an obvious take from his experiences on the edge. Wright's nightmarish peregrination in the face of life's uncertainties doubled the intensity of his experiences of the malaise threatening his very being. While presenting his worldview through his dissenting protagonists, Wright was actually identifying the black experience with that of the oppressed worldwide. All his life, he was preoccupied with the idea of a transformative society based on mutual acknowledgement of inclusive human growth. His oeuvre is permeated by the longing to surmount the existential malaise threatening the very ontology of humans, through the development

of the 'will to being'. *The Long Dream* is particularly significant because of its inherent prowess to problematise the question of being and the will towards the actualisation of it.

*The Long Dream* is a study of both social and self-alienation; it is the moving tale of a young boy struggling with the existential malaise and the need to evolve the 'will to being'. Despite its inherent richness in encompassing the human struggle for transcendence, the novel received considerable criticism from almost all quarters. A major reason for this (mis)understanding of the novel could be the inability of most critics to treat it as a separate and unique entity in Wright's oeuvre. The deliberate attempts to analyse the novel in conjunction with the much critically acclaimed *Native Son* and *The Outsider* has resulted in reading the nuances of the struggle for the 'will to being'. Robert Bone calls it "a still more disastrous performance than *The Outsider*" (*Negro Novel* 142). Saunders Redding attacks the book by saying that "its effect is flattened by too much iteration." He insists that Wright does not know where to stop and that he fails to convince the readers that this "lamentable tragic manhood... is the only kind of manhood possible for a negro in the South" (*The Way* 4). Granville Hicks is also caustic in his approach to the novel as he criticizes Wright for being "alienated from reality" (13).

The corrosive critical perspective to *The Long Dream* is the natural outcome of the novel's chronological thematic disparity. *The Long Dream* explores the theme of the conflict between social determinism and the individual urge for freedom. The tension which arises out of the conflict between desire and reality has pervaded the unreasonable world in search of his identity. Fishbelly, the novice-hero of *The Long Dream* is well aware of the existential malaise and despite his efforts to transcend his limits, he continues to struggle. *The Long Dream* traces the sources of isolation and self-deception in blacks by providing a thorough account of what it is like to grow up in the deep south as a Negro male. At the same time, it also depicts the universal struggle for meaningful existence in the face of absurdity. The chasm that divides intention from reality is depicted through Fish's dreams, the controlling trope in the book. This dialectic is also inherent in the book's title, the epigraphs, Tyree's comments, and in the section headings. The novel is an account of Fish's initiation into society, his subsequent disillusionment and ultimate rejection of the apparent benevolence of the world. The dialectical nature of existence as expressed in the conflict between desire and reality in *The Long Dream* is the same dialectic that Camus has identified as the absurd.

Since Fish is subjected to this conflict, he becomes like Wright's other heroes, an absurd hero, a man in quest of meaning and identity. This conflict and the resulting trials and tribulations form the narrative content of *The Long Dream*. The narrative pattern of the novel is circular as Fish arrives at the same point from where he has begun. His feeling of the absurdity, his experience of the angst and his alienation result from the awareness of his inability to bridge the gulf that lies between him and his fate. The novel both begins and ends with Fish's longing and struggle for the 'will to being'. In that sense Fish is also guilty of bad faith, a conspiracy of pretension. Fish comprehends life in fairly benevolent terms. For him life tends toward a redemptive goal in which he can have his dreams and desires realized. Being absolutely unaware of the irrational world order, he considers rationality as God and worships it. His idealization of the world receives a shock in his first experience of the

terrible meaninglessness of existence as he watches the man-hunt of Chris, a black bellhop, by the whites.

In fact, Fish's disillusionment with a seemingly rational world comes in three successive stages. At the end of his experience of the absurd, he finds the world standing before him naked, devoid of values. The first stage of Fish's disillusionment with the so-called benevolent world comes in the form of a hot debate with Sam, an older black boy. Sam angers Fish and his friends by saying that "A Nigger's a black who doesn't know who he is" (32). Sam also talks about the absurd condition saying, "when you know you a nigger, then you ain't no nigger no more,'... 'You start being a man! A nigger's something white folks make a black man believe he is—'. (32) meaninglessness of black existence that Sam reveals makes Fish nervous and guilty. Fish is so absorbed in his idea of the world as a rational, benevolent system of values that he cannot bear any criticism of it. When Sam tries further to disillusion him saying "you niggers ain't nowhere. You ain't in Africa, 'cause the white man took you out. And you ain't in America, 'cause if you was, you'd act like Americans--," (35), Fish is infuriated and fights with him. The incident, however, leaves a deep impression in his mind which makes him feel ashamed of his people, of his life and of his colour. Back home he glares at his reflection in the mirror, spits at it and hisses, "nigger"(37). This experience assists in the accretion of the subliminal self-hatred in Fish.

The second stage of Fish's disillusionment comes in the form of racial brutality. Chris Sims, the bellhop at a local hotel, is seduced and then shunned by a white prostitute. The whites, outraged by the 'violation' of their lily-white woman set out on a man-hunt to track down and destroy the black beast Chris. Once he is captured, they castrate him by divesting him of his bodily identity. Fish's initial response to this episode is one of shock, for he has never before been exposed to "this business of the white people" (67). Confronted with the precarious nature of existence, he is filled with a nagging sense of self-pity. While Chris is being chased and beaten to death across the town, Tyree, Fish's father is passing the lesson of pre-individualism to him. He admonishes to an already baffled Fish, "NEVER LOOK AT A WHITE WOMAN! YOU HEAR,"(64) and tries to make him aware of the reality saying that "'They outnumber us ten to one!... TEN TO ONE! YOU HEAR'"(65). Tyree is a self-professed "second-degree Uncle Tom" (Pipes, Dream 6), who has most readily accommodated to the social role designed for him. The blacks, because of their apprehension of disturbing the delicate equilibrium between the two races, complement each other's socialization and individuation process by inculcating in the minds of their own the necessity to maintain the status quo. In this way the black novices (adolescents) are indoctrinated into their social roles.

Ralph Ellison, the Black-American novelist, in his *Shadow and Act*, has given a detailed description of the state pre-individualism. He posits that the pre-individualistic state is incorporated in the black adolescents by the matured blacks in order to impress the Negro child with the omniscience and omnipotence of the whites to the point that the whites appear as human as Jehovah, and as relentless as a Mississippi flood. Socially it is enforced through an elaborate scheme of taboos supported by a ruthless physical violence, which strikes not only the offender but the entire black community. To wander from the paths of behaviour laid down for the group is to become the agent

of communal disaster. This role-playing attitude is a highly deliberate mode of self-deception or bad faith. By readily giving in to the sway of the 'they', the blacks not only strip themselves of their individuality, but also consciously deprive themselves of the possibility of a meaningful existence.

Tyree is a glaring example of self-deception. He is using the Chris' castration episode as a shock tactic to induce the pre-individual state in Fish. Though the incident shocks Fish, he is not terrified. He is puzzled to witness the terrible meaninglessness of human existence, but he is even more puzzled by the terror evident on the face of his parents, on the face of everyone. His father asks him to "be a man...no matter what happens" (66). He can't understand what a role-model his father is setting before him. Is Tyree asking him to be a man like him? For he has just seen the 'real' Tyree beneath the feigned garb of a 'manly man'. Fish is full of shame for his parent's behaviour. He wonders Were these scared and trembling people his parents? He was more afraid of them than he was of the white people. Suddenly he saw his parents as he felt and thought as the white people saw them and felt toward them some of the contempt that the white people felt for them. (63) Suddenly, Fish is filled with hatred for his parents and the blacks who, he deduces, have colluded with the whites in unmanning them. He thinks that the blacks lead a worthless life which he despises. Since he can't cope with the despicable existence of the blacks, he feels alienated from his own race. He abhors their concept of accommodation and "what he saw evoked in him a sense of distance between him and his people that baffled and worried him" (67).

The third stage of disillusionment in Fish comes in a terrifying experience that leaves an everlasting trauma in his mind and renders him psychologically powerless. Towards the end of Part I (Chapters 13-16) during a lull in a mud-fight Fish and Tony are arrested on a petty trespassing charge. Infuriated with the seeming impertinence of Fish, the police threaten to castrate him with a pen-knife. Terrified, Fish faints—to the delight of his tormentors. This experience makes him aware of the precariousness upon which his existence hinges. The first section "Daydreams and Nightdreams" ends on a note of Fish's complete disillusionment with a seemingly rational world. The world's horrors and irrationality are revealed to him in these terrible experiences, which leave an indelible impression of his powerlessness in his mind. Daydream is lexically defined by the Oxford Advanced learners' Dictionary as "pleasant thoughts that make [one] forget about the present," which point to the web of illusion that Fish weaves around himself as a strategy to blot out thoughts of his unpleasant surrounding; precisely, it is 'bad faith'. The obverse of daydream is night dream, which serves as an outlet to the unfulfilled, anxiety-ridden desires of Fish. The title of the book's first section aptly suggests the dialectic of the absurd condition—the conflict between intention and reality which Fish experiences in those three stages. At the end of the section Fish is disillusioned and alienated. His alienation results from his gradual distancing from the world. Martin Buber, a philosopher, provides an illuminating explanation to this state in his *I and Thou* (1937). The person who regards the world as an 'it' lives in 'severance and alienation'. The proper relationship is that of 'I—Thou' (8). Fish's world is centred around his father who turns out to be not 'Thou' but 'it', impersonal, horrifying and loathsome. A couple of Fish's impressions of his father will serve better to explain this condition:

This was a father whom he had never known, a father whom he loathed and did not want to know. (125-126)

The trembling he hid behind false laughter, for the self-abrogation of his manhood. He knew in a confused way that no white man would ever need to threaten Tyree with castration Tyree was already castrated. (144)

Fish's alienation is largely due to this impersonality of his father and the world as such. Terrified, Fish recoils from the world that has gone mad. This sense of alienation lingers with him till the end of the book.

Kierkegaard, in his *The Concept of Dread* explains the angst-ridden state of an existent. For him dread is a state experienced only by humans ("the less spirit, the less dread") and it is inescapably allied with man's ability to determine himself (38). Since Fish does not adapt himself to the pre-individualistic state like the other blacks, he has an active spirit which experiences the individualizing message of angst. It is his spirit only that differentiates him from others. Though he has kept it a secret from himself and from others, Tyree detects and scolds him for persisting with his uncompromising spirit. He frowns at Fish, "I got to break your goddamn spirit, or you'll get killed, sure as hell!" (145). Fish's resoluteness to exist in the face of unsurmountable destructive forces helps him to resist the horrors of the white world. He once leaves an injured white man at the spot of an accident refusing to help him because he is called a "nigger" by him.

A powerless adolescent at odds with the insurmountable malaise, Fish cannot cling to his spirit for long. His experiences of the white brutality and the black psyche render him powerless both physically and psychologically. Then, there is his father, who is an even tempestuous deterministic force than the whites. Unable to retain his free will, Fish gradually recoils, losing the idea of being an active determining force in his own life. Subdued, he has no recourse, but to continually fight himself down. As a result of this he tries to resolve his ambiguity by identifying with the communal character. In doing so, he loses what is unique about him and in that sense loses his very self. He resorts to role playing; something he has already experienced. Earlier in the novel, after their parole in the trespassing case, while Fish and Tony walk back home, they automatically slump into a kind of "shuffling gait" whenever "They met a white man" (130). Tyree teaches Fish to 'act' so well that he virtually ends parroting him. At the cat house, Vera, the Madam's daughter tells him with surprise that he behaves very much like his father. Fish promptly replies (echoes Tyree) "'Aw I know how to handle these white folks'. He stepped into his father's shoes'" (153). He gradually submerges himself in the vast ocean of bad faith by suppressing his transcendental spirit. Constantly perturbed by the feeling of angst and the sense of powerlessness, he moves from will to acceptance as he grows up. As a transcendental spirit he has a chance to appropriate his real self in the face of the negative world forces, but as one who accommodates himself to a pre-determined role, he loses contact with his self. This state of self-estrangement is a quiet despair that drives Fish into an existential crisis. The loss of self, says Kierkegaard, is 'sickness unto death'; it is despair—despair at not being conscious of having a self, despair at not being willing to be ourselves. But it is a despair...which does not clamor

or scream. People go on living as if they were still in immediate contact with this alive center. (qtd. in Homey 158) here, through Tyree's murder, to his arrest on fake allegations of rape in Part III, Fish gradually sinks into a despairing state. He is conscious of his self-deception but fails (or does not desire!) to break free. At a later stage he reflects on his failure. There was some quality of character that the conditions under which he had lived had failed to give. Just beyond the tip of his grasp was the realization that he had somehow corroborated with those who had brought this disaster upon him. (356) It was not until Tyree's murder that Fish's existential crisis surfaces. Tyree was his illusion, and his death suddenly deprived him of illusions. His subdued angst resurfaces as he suddenly finds himself alone in a hostile world. His feeling of not yet being what he will be causes anguish in him. He despairs: "Papa...you left, something that's marked me! It's like it's in my blood!... My papa, my Papa's Papa, and my Papa's Papa's Papa, look what you done to me" (345-346).

In his famous hierarchy of needs Abraham Maslow has proposed that self-actualization can be achieved only when the first three levels— the psychological, the safety, and the social belonging—are fulfilled (373). The 'will to being' partakes of these basic needs of a human to help one experience that the being is 'there'. How detrimental the unfulfillment of this basic need could be is rightly suggested by Ralph Ellison in his *Invisible Man* where protagonist accounts for his invisibility by saying, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (1). The idea of non-recognition or misrecognition that is evident in Ellison's suggestions has been corroborated Charles Taylor who remarks that,

Equal recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it, according to a widespread modern view, as I indicated at the outset. The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized. (36)

When Fish is arrested on charges of rape (the real cause is that he is suspected of possessing evidence against Cantley, the ex-police-chief) and put in jail, he comes across for the first time in his life a set of choices. In confidence, he chooses himself. He remains unmoved even in the face of death. On his release, Fish decides to flee America in search of his self. His long dream has been that of becoming a person recognized by other human beings. At the end Fish, isolate, victim and an existentialist novice, is left with the responsibility of continuing his 'will to being'. The development of the 'will to being' in the face of an oppressive world order is not easy to achieve, but by revisiting the idea of transcendence Fish keeps himself alive for the possibility of prevailing over the insurmountable malaise.

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