

Walking Around the Fences: Troy Maxson and the Ideology of “Going Down Swinging”

In act one, scene one of August Wilson’s *Fences*, Troy Maxson, a retired Negro League slugger who works as a garbage collector in 1957 Pittsburgh, makes a complaint to his friend Jim Bono and his wife Rose. They have told him that he “just come along too early” to play in the integrated major leagues:

TROY: There ought not never have been no time called too early! Now you take that fellow. . . what’s that fellow they had playing right field for the Yankees back then? You know who I’m talking about Bono. Used to play right field for the Yankees?

ROSE: Selkirk?

TROY: Selkirk! That’s it! Man batting .269, understand? .269. What kind of sense that make? I was hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs! Man batting .269 and playing right field for the Yankees! (9)

Troy’s criticism has probably not registered that strongly with *Fences*’ audiences, since by the time the play debuted, George “Twinkletoes” Selkirk, who played right field in the Bronx from 1934 to 1942, had been long forgotten by all but the most devoted historians and fans. They likely take more notice moments later, though, when Troy turns his diatribe to a more beloved player:

ROSE: They got a lot of colored baseball players now. Jackie Robinson was the first. Folks had to wait for Jackie Robinson.

TROY: I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn’t even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn’t nobody. (9-10)

The play’s critics, however, appear to have taken even this provocative attack at close to face value. After all, it fits nicely into the standard take on *Fences*, in which Troy’s tragedy represents that of a lost generation of great black baseball players, mute inglorious Babe Ruths denied fame and glory by the institutional racism of their time. Almost unanimously, critics have joined Troy in being “angry that he, a great player who hit .432 with thirty-seven home runs, never played for the majors while white Selkirk . . . played right field for the Yankees” (Birdwell 89), despite Selkirk’s “paltry” hitting (Koprince 352). While Troy’s criticism of Robinson causes some to recoil—noting that Troy seems partly motivated by “jealousy” (Saunders 49) toward “Robinson, and other baseball players who now have opportunities he was denied” (Bogumil 39)—they still yield to his overall claim, citing contemporary Negro Leaguers who also disparaged Robinson and concluding that Robinson achieved his historical position as much because he was a “model citizen” (Koprince 351) as because of any baseball ability, making him “the right man for the job in spite of not being the most gifted player the Negro Leagues had to offer” (Saunders 47). Most take for granted that had Troy been given a chance in the major leagues, he would have not only played better than a journeyman like Selkirk but “could have . . . surpassed even the likes of Jackie Robinson or Babe Ruth” (Shannon 97).

It is not hard to see why critics so frequently agree with Troy in this way, given his sympathetic historical position and his justified anger in response to Bono and Rose’s rationalization. Nonetheless, though, Troy’s baseball judgments are demonstrably wrong: indeed, throughout the play, Troy gets about almost everything he says

regarding the sport wrong, a problem nowhere more profound than with respect to the maligned Selkirk. This does not merely suggest that Troy may not have been one of the greatest players who ever lived: as I argue in this essay, it implies that the entire social, racial, and political world view Troy derives from baseball is misguided, especially regarding the very thing many critics most celebrate, his insistence on “going down swinging.” By not realizing Troy’s professional failings, critics have been unable to see how they are intertwined with his personal ones, causing them to misunderstand the nature of *Fences*’ tragedy.

To fully comprehend why Troy’s fixation on “going down swinging” is so harmful, though, we have to do a few unusual things. We need to survey some changes in the study of baseball over the past three decades, compile a hypothetical scouting report on Troy Maxson, and investigate why the Brooklyn Dodgers recruited Jackie Robinson in 1946. We must begin, though, by going further back, to the year in which George Selkirk hit .269.

The Canadian God of Walks

George Selkirk, a former professional wrestler who broke into the major leagues at twenty-six after spending the better part of a decade in the minors (Levy 166-67, 194),¹ did hit exactly .269 in one season, 1940, a total of two points lower than the average American Leaguer that year.² Considering that Selkirk played right field—a relatively undemanding defensive position where teams consequently require premier hitters—and that he played for the four-time defending-champion Yankees, this might appear a poor result, one that may have contributed to the team’s shocking third-place finish that season. To judge Selkirk entirely by that year would be unfair, however, as by 1940 Selkirk was thirty-two, declining, and in his last full season.³ Just a year earlier, in 1939, he had been an All-Star, and he had also made the squad in 1936; in those seasons, he hit .306 and .308, respectively. But Troy may still have a point: were it not for segregation, perhaps fading white stars—like Selkirk in 1940, in his view—would have been more swiftly benched and replaced by talented nonwhite players. Even in 1957, he complains, “The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team. . . . They got colored on the team and don’t use them. Same as not having them” (34).

However, Troy’s indictment of Selkirk rests on a common but crucial misunderstanding of the value of batting average. Due to its one-dimensional nature, batting average has always been an unreliable catch-all number for comparing player performance, but its inadequacies have become increasingly apparent in recent years. Over the past few decades, baseball researchers deploying more advanced statistical tools (“sabermetrics”) have demonstrated that batting average—still the most popularly cited statistic—is a far inferior measure of a player’s offensive contributions than his on-base percentage (Lewis 57). Although the two numbers are similar—both decimals representing how frequently a player produces positively in his offensive opportunities—they often generate markedly different results, mostly because batting average, for arbitrary reasons dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, does not credit a player for drawing a walk.⁴ This limits its value, because over the sport’s development, the ability to draw a walk has emerged as a vital hitting skill.⁵ by all logic, on-base percentage ought to have supplanted batting average as the fan’s go-to number long ago.

George Selkirk may never have been among the American League leaders in batting average, nor did he post eye-popping numbers in other traditional categories such as home runs or RBIs.⁶ Throughout his career, though, his on-base percentage

was consistently extraordinary, placing him among baseball's unheralded elite hitters. The 1939 Yankees, one of the greatest teams of all time, were led in the most important offensive category not by future Hall of Famers Joe DiMaggio, Bill Dickey, or Joe Gordon, but by Selkirk, whose .452 figure ranked second in baseball only to Red Sox legend Jimmie Foxx that year. That Selkirk so excelled in this category, despite his good but unexceptional batting average, was due to his ability to draw walks, as he received 103 bases-on-balls in only 537 plate appearances.⁷ While some of his hitting skills had left him by 1940, his batting discipline had not, as among all American League players with at least 400 plate appearances that season, the aging, soon-to-retire Selkirk topped every one in the frequency with which he walked, leading to an excellent .406 on-base percentage.⁸ Far from being the incompetent Troy suggests, even in his final years Selkirk was a still very good player.

“Going Down Swinging” Versus “Going Down Looking”

With respect to *Fences*' larger issues, though, Selkirk's on-base percentage might appear to be little more than an interesting footnote: after all, Troy's evaluation of him would not have been unusual during an era in which all anyone talked about was batting average and home runs.⁹ However, Troy's choice to deride one of the great walk-drawers of his time—especially over more obvious targets, such as Pittsburgh's own inept outfielder Vince DiMaggio—speaks to a significant philosophical difference with Selkirk, one that may be best articulated in terms of Troy's subscription to the ideology of “going down swinging.”¹⁰

To say that someone has “gone down swinging” is usually intended as a compliment, suggesting that while he has failed, he has at least given his best shot—unlike those who have “gone down looking,” who are viewed as having declined to make any attempt at all. In other words, whether one succeeds is less important than whether one has made a public display of effort in doing so. This mindset reaches beyond baseball, but how it functions may best be examined through examples from the sport. For instance, when star hitters Carlos Beltrán, then of the New York Mets, and Ryan Howard of the Philadelphia Phillies made the respective final outs for their teams in the 2006 and 2010 National League Championship Series by striking out looking, fans excoriated them: by not swinging, they hadn't appeared to “go down fighting” or even to “try” at all, putting into question the players' desire to win, their ability to master pressure situations, and implicitly their masculinity (cf. Rhoden D1, Donnellon). Indeed, many appeared more upset that their stars hadn't swung than that their teams had been eliminated.

Of course, this ideology is as absurd as it is common. A batter gets no bonus for having swung at a third strike rather than having let it pass. While a player might be justly criticized for failing to swing at a pitch in the middle of the strike zone, swinging at pitches on its edges (as were the pitches to Beltran and Howard) is usually counterproductive. Ted Williams, perhaps the greatest hitter of all time, notes in his *The Science of Hitting* that:

A good hitter can hit a pitch that's [directly] over the plate three times better than a great hitter with a ball in a tough spot. . . . [M]ore often than not, you hit a bad pitch in a tough spot and nothing happens. Nothing. And when you start fishing for the pitch that's an inch off the plate, the pitcher—if he's smart—will put the next one *two* inches off. Then *three*. And before you know it you're making fifty outs a year on pitches you never should have swung at. (25)

Granted, if one does not swing, one has no chance to get a hit—but if one does swing, the pitch cannot be called a ball, and the player cannot draw a walk. For a

pitch on the edges of the strike zone—where, given the inherent margin of error and subjectivity of umpires' calls, it might be ruled either a ball or a strike—the batter's swinging and either putting a weakly hit ball in play or missing it entirely may well lead to a worse result than letting the pitch pass. The aforementioned Ryan Howard exemplified this all too well a year after his season-ending 2010 strikeout when he made the Phillies' final out in the 2011 playoffs by flailing at another tough pitch, subsequently not only hitting an easily fieldable ground ball but tearing his Achilles tendon while dashing out of the batter's box. "Going down looking," then, is not a failure to "give it your best shot," as many claim, because letting the pitch go may well *be* the hitter's "best shot."

Those who adhere to the ideology of "going down swinging" however, refuse to acknowledge this. They also grant far too little rhetorical respect to "drawing a walk," even though a walk is clearly more valuable than a strikeout of any kind. The walk appears to them an undeserved reward, gained by good fortune and evasion rather than by honest effort. For instance, when a federal judge declared a mistrial in the initial perjury case of alleged steroid-user Roger Clemens, headline writers exploited the obvious pun by writing that Clemens had "walked" (Keidel). This wordplay was not intended to credit Clemens—indeed, most showed nothing but contempt for him—but to suggest that the pitching legend had not deserved the positive outcome he'd received. Had he "gone down swinging" with an impassioned, heartfelt denial of the charges instead of relying on strategic stonewalling and legal maneuvering, he might have garnered more respect.

A Hypothetical Scouting Report on Troy Maxson

No matter why this perverse preference for "going down swinging" continues to pervade popular rhetoric—lingering effects of the Protestant ethic's emphasis on performing industry, perhaps, or the characteristically American desire to express individual agency over the accidents of fate—Troy Maxson clearly believes in it. Toward the end of *Fences*, he tells Rose, "You can't afford a call strike. If you going down, you going down swinging" (69). Indeed, Troy's final act is to embody this principle literally: as Rose tells us during the play's 1965 denouement, Troy's death comes just after he takes one final swing of his bat in the backyard (95-96), presumably consummating the challenge to Death ("the fastball on the outside corner") he had made at the close of the previous scene (89). Before analyzing the implications of this attitude for Troy's larger world view, let's examine how it informs his approach to baseball and—in the context of his other comments on the game—reveals his likely limitations as a player.

Critical assumptions about Troy's hitting ability appear based primarily on Troy's and Bono's accounts of the former's playing days. While rarely challenged by critics, these stories are frequently untrustworthy or even clearly false. For instance, Bono claims, "Ain't but two men ever played baseball as good as you. That's Babe Ruth and Josh Gibson. Them's the only two men ever hit more home runs than you" (9), a claim implicitly assented to by critics who claim that Troy is "patterned after Gibson" (Koprince 351) and that watching Troy on stage is like "watching an aging Josh Gibson" (Saunders 50). Ruth, of course, hit 714 home runs during his major league years, while Gibson is thought to have slugged over 800 in his Negro League career. These astronomical totals could have been accrued only as Ruth and Gibson accrued them, via a decade or more of consistent forty- and fifty-homer seasons. Troy's career, on the other hand—and this has gone oddly unremarked in criticism on the play—could not have lasted more than a few years. After all, Troy's

thirty-four year-old son Lyons was born in 1923, when Troy (fifty-three at the time of the play) was nineteen; Troy's fifteen-year imprisonment, where he learned to play baseball, likely could not have begun earlier than that, meaning that he was let out of prison no younger than age thirty-four, thus setting the beginning of his Negro League career around 1938. For his career's end, we need look no further than Troy's frustrated description of his married life with Rose as "st[anding] on first base for eighteen years," after he had "found you and Cory and a halfway decent job," the latter presumably meaning the full-time garbage work that supplanted his baseball career. Combined with his claim that he "decided seventeen years ago that boy [Cory] wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports" (39), it seems Troy quit baseball shortly after Cory was born—that is, probably just after the 1940 season. (No wonder he fixates so intently on Selkirk's play that year, as it was the last season he could have fantasized about being recruited to the country's most celebrated team and heroically rescuing it from a subpar campaign.) This sets the length of his Negro League run at three seasons, and regardless of how impressive those seasons were, they would not have been nearly long enough to hit the five-hundred-odd home runs necessary to make Bono's ranking of Troy with Ruth and Gibson remotely credible.¹¹

Given how exaggerated are Bono's claims about Troy's home runs, we ought to be skeptical about other claims the pair make regarding the latter's skills. For one thing, Troy's plate approach does not sound like that of a great hitter. Although we receive no direct depiction of Troy playing baseball, Troy uses such extensive baseball metaphors throughout the play—hitting a home run for beating death (10), striking out for any kind of failure (58, 69), bunting for settling down with Rose (69), and attempting to steal a base for his affair with Alberta (70)—that we can at least partly reconstruct one. Unsurprisingly, given Troy's "going down swinging" mentality, he makes no mention of walks; moreover, he seems to lack any recognition that some pitches are out of the strike zone and unhittable. During the extended metaphor in which Troy uses the batter's three allotted strikes to limit the number of times he will allow Cory to challenge him, Troy warns his son, "That's strike two. You stay away from around me, boy. Don't you strike out. You living with a full count" (72). Of course, central to the tension of a "full count" are not only the two strikes against the hitter, but the three balls against the pitcher—that is, not just the possibility of the batter's striking out but also the chance he will be walked. Yet Troy does not speak of what a "ball" or "walk" might represent in this situation: he seems concerned only with swinging the bat. This attitude would not have served him well in the major leagues, as no great hitter since Ruth's era has been anything less than excellent at drawing walks.¹² As Williams puts it, the key to being a great hitter is not swinging aggressively but waiting "to get a good ball to hit" (20), and given that Troy seems willing to hack away even at pitches on the strike zone's edges—boasting at one point, "Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner. And you know what I'll do to that! . . . You get one of them fastballs, about waist high, over the outside corner of the plate where you can get the meat of the bat on it . . . and good god! You can kiss it goodbye" (10)—it is hard to imagine him consistently hitting well. Troy no doubt hit some outside fastballs over the fences (few who have seen either James Earl Jones or Denzel Washington handle the bat in *Fences*' two Broadway productions will likely question Troy's strength), but these were probably the exceptions in a parade of swinging strikeouts produced by Troy's compulsive "born with two strikes" approach (69).¹³

As a result, it's unlikely that Troy was really hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs in 1940; like the story he tells about making furniture payments to the Devil (19-21), it's probably a yarn. Furthermore, even if Troy weren't exaggerating his statistics, his approach would likely not have transferred well to the major leagues: major league pitching may not have been greatly superior to that of the Negro

Leagues, but its wealthier teams could spend more money on scouting, surely discovering in the process Troy's penchant for fishing for curveballs at the shins, lunging across the plate at outside fastballs, and going down swinging. This would allow their pitchers to pitch to him accordingly and exploit his weaknesses. These flaws in his approach would have certainly prevented him from surpassing Babe Ruth, and probably would have kept him inferior to Selkirk. In all likelihood, Troy would have ended up like the 1970s' slugger Dave Kingman, a gifted home-run hitter whose high strikeout and low walk totals all but negated the value of his power stroke, or worse, for those who are familiar with Michael Lewis's *Moneyball*, like the young Billy Beane, an Adonis-like high-school prospect who impressed scouts with power-hitting displays but never developed the plate approach to make it in the majors (Lewis 50-51). Perhaps apotheosizing Troy seems a convenient tactic for critics to use in positioning themselves as opponents of racism, but uncritically valorizing every boastful Negro Leaguer as a hidden legend devalues the achievements of true greats—such as Jackie Robinson.

How Jackie Robinson Protected the Plate

Even knowing that Troy was not as good as he claims may not initially appear to affect the standard interpretation of the play's larger critique of racism. However, by recognizing the problems within Troy's commitment to "going down swinging," we may be better able to evaluate his application of this philosophy off the field. Most critics, again, praise rather than criticize Troy for this belief, seeing the swinging strikeout as the black ballplayer's symbolic act of resistance against an unjust world; as one writes, "[Troy] knows he cannot always keep that fastball from streaking past his swinging bat, but until it does he will play hard and survive as long as he can" (Pereira 43). Nevertheless, realizing the negative impact of this ideology on Troy's behavior will help us see that the true tragedy of his life is not simply that of a good athlete abused by the system, but something far subtler.

So far, I have quoted Troy's baseball comments synchronically and out of context, but this has been somewhat misleading, because Troy's world view appears to shift over the course of his life. This is best seen in the pivotal confrontation in which Troy admits to Rose that he has had an affair with Alberta:

TROY: Rose, I done tried all my life to live decent . . . to live a clean . . . hard . . . useful life. I tried to be a good husband to you. In every way I knew how. Maybe I come into the world backwards, I don't know. But . . . you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate. You got to guard it closely . . . always looking for the curve-ball on the inside corner. You can't afford to let none get past you. You can't afford a call strike. If you going down . . . you going down swinging. Everything lined up against you. What you gonna do. I fooled them Rose. I bunted. When I found you and Cory and a halfway decent job . . . I was safe. Couldn't nothing touch me. I wasn't gonna strike out no more. I wasn't going back to the penitentiary. I wasn't gonna lay in the streets with a bottle of wine. I was safe. I had me a family. A job. I wasn't gonna get that last strike. I was on first looking for one of them boys to knock me in. To get me home.

ROSE: You should have stayed in my bed, Troy.

TROY: Then when I saw that gal . . . she firmed up my backbone. And I got to thinking that if I tried . . . I just might be able to steal second. Do you understand after eighteen years I wanted to steal second.

ROSE: You should have held me tight. You should have grabbed me and held on.

TROY: I stood on first base for eighteen years and I thought . . . well, goddamn it . . . go on for it!

ROSE: We're not talking about baseball! We're talking about you going off to lay in bed with another woman . . . and then bring it home to me. That's what we're talking about. We ain't talking about no baseball. (69-70)

I am struck most in this passage by Troy's description of his life as governed by a paranoid fear of striking out. However, while his constant readiness to swing is designed to fend off strikeouts, he also implies that his life prior to Rose had been an endless string of strikeouts. This is something of a paradox: how could a man who has lived his life so as to stave off strikeouts still end up striking out all the time?

We may better understand why by examining a player whose hitting style was as different from Troy's as possible, Jackie Robinson. Perhaps one reason many veteran Negro Leaguers found the young Robinson unimpressive was because he did not subscribe to the ideology of "going down swinging."¹⁴ His game had its flashy elements, to be sure, especially in the field, but Robinson was as selective with his swing as any second baseman of his time, which was likely among the main reasons the Dodgers signed him.¹⁵ When a Dodgers scout observed Robinson playing in the Negro Leagues, he wrote that Robinson "protected the strike zone better than any rookie he had yet seen" (Rampersad 123), and indeed, besides drawing as many as 106 walks in a major league season, Robinson also never struck out more than forty times.¹⁶ How did Robinson avoid the called strikeouts Troy fears while taking so many pitches? While we don't have full pitch-by-pitch data, the reason is probably the one Williams credited for his own low strikeout totals: by not swinging at difficult pitches early in an at-bat, he often got ahead in the count and forced pitchers to throw him more hittable pitches later, for fear of giving up an easy walk (27). Troy, on the other hand, likely swung at and missed early pitches for fear of letting a hittable pitch go by, causing him to fall behind and enabling pitchers to throw pitches on the edge of the strike zone, the more likely to induce swinging strikeouts. In other words, by remaining patient and frequently choosing inaction over action, Robinson not only avoided strikeouts but got better pitches to hit.

Furthermore, Robinson's in-game discipline appears to have been as inextricable from his overall approach to life as Troy's desire to go down swinging is from his own attitude toward the world. During the first years of Robinson's career with the Dodgers, he often faced situations engendered by the era's overt racism—plane reservations deferred without explanation, accommodations refused, spring training games abruptly canceled—that he found intolerable, but that he knew he could not surmount even if he'd stood up for himself (Rampersad 135-57). Despite his great personal pride and self-assurance about being in the right, he bore the humiliations instead of fighting them, taking the pitches instead of swinging. Instead of leading to strikeouts and failure, Robinson's passiveness allowed him to succeed. For instance, during one of Robinson's first major-league games, Philadelphia Phillies manager Ben Chapman directed his players to distract Robinson with racial insults, but instead of picking a fight, Robinson did nothing, and seeing this response, the press praised him as a "gentleman" and turned on Chapman, who was forced to publicly apologize (Rampersad 172-76).

This attitude, though, is as alien to Troy—at least as a young man—as is Robinson's selective plate approach. An American individualist to his core, when he is faced with brutally unfair conditions he refuses to believe there is nothing he can do to better them, even when all his options are likely to make things worse. As a teenager, when Troy runs away from an abusive father and finds himself penniless in Mobile (51-53), he begins robbing people in the street, eventually killing a wealthier man during a knife-point mugging, for which he is sent to jail for fifteen years (54-55). While Troy's motivations in committing this act are not totally unsympathetic, the decision was so likely to further degrade his condition (in addition to harming his victims) that, surely, he would have been better off trying to bear his poverty. Swinging at all available opportunities so as to avoid being called out produces the most devastating strikeout, a youth spent in prison. After getting out of jail, Troy

does achieve some success during his few seasons playing baseball, but the Negro Leagues' seasonal work and uncertain finances could not provide a path to long-term personal satisfaction for a man in his mid-thirties.

In 1940, Troy realizes that the pitch he's been flailing at—an invitation to the majors—is too far out of the strike zone to hit. Finally, he stops swinging. Although he does not use the metaphor of drawing a walk to figure this decision, he does use a similarly humble baseball image that leads to the same result, the bunt single, to describe settling down with Rose.¹⁷ Instead of achieving stardom, he gets a wife, a legitimate son, a job, and a house. Having arrived at first base, he waits for his next opportunity to advance, hoping to circle the bases gradually instead of chasing every pitch. At last, he has acknowledged that achievement and responsibility do not require him to swing for the fences all the time; he succeeds, too, who sometimes stands and waits.

Caught Stealing

Troy never fully comes to terms with this decision, however. Even in 1957, Rose must ask him in exasperation, "Troy, why don't you admit you was too old to play in the major leagues? For once . . . why don't you admit that?" (39). As the dialogue I quote throughout shows, strands of his old rhetoric remain, combining complicatedly and sometimes incoherently with the new approach. He wishes to be responsible, but doesn't quite know whether responsibility entails "going down swinging" at every opportunity or staying on his feet—especially as opportunities for further advancement seem never to come.

After seventeen years, Troy's "going down swinging" impulse reemerges when he tries to "steal second" by having an affair with Alberta. As in the knifepoint robbery, Troy in this case seems to have strayed from Rose merely for the sake of doing something rather than nothing. The steal is an even more apt metaphor than Troy realizes, because just as the flash and excitement of the stolen base often overshadows how the slightly increased probability of scoring it offers is usually outweighed by the disastrous penalty for getting caught—not only being removed from the bases, but taking away an out from the baserunner's team (Lewis 129)—Troy's affair creates much greater potential for disaster than gain.¹⁸ More importantly, as Rose's rejoinder to Troy when he tries to justify his affair in base-stealing terms—"We ain't talking about no baseball!"—suggests, applying the metaphor of a successful stolen base to Troy's affair makes little sense: whatever "getting home" means to Troy, it's hard to see how his relationship with Alberta would constitute advancing toward home compared with his life with Rose. Troy's abrogation of his well-earned discipline loses him not only the fruits of his adult life's work but damages those about whom he cares most, fragmenting his family (68-70) and causing Alberta to die giving birth to their illegitimate child (76). This makes all the more tragically ironic the promotion to sanitation truck driver Troy receives shortly before Alberta's death (44): the pitch he'd been waiting for finally came, but only after he'd gotten himself tagged out.

Wilson's Sporting Goods

There is an even sadder irony to this resolution. Even were Troy less insistent on "going down swinging," he still would never have received what he really

wanted, the opportunity to play in the major leagues. No doubt, abandoning this ideology sooner would have served him well both on and off the base paths, but doing so would not have made the game any more willing to be integrated. Troy's "bunt" epiphany, then, is more bittersweet than has been recognized. Although it brings him to Rose, it shows him with the same stroke that he would never make it to the major leagues and that he needed to stop swinging. Troy Maxson's tragedy isn't that he was a great player who never got a chance—it's that the one realization that could have made him a great player is the same realization that showed him he had to walk away from baseball. That this dilemma is rendered all but meaningless several years after his retirement adds insult to injury. No wonder Troy strives so hard to keep Cory from getting involved in sports: he can't accept that the choice he had to make has lost its meaning.

I wonder how cognizant Wilson was of how tortuously the play's baseball rhetoric winds through its protagonist. As others have noted, Wilson appears to use some strands of baseball history quite shrewdly in undercutting Troy's reliability, particularly when he has Troy denigrate Hank Aaron (34) only weeks before the latter was awarded the 1957 National League Most Valuable Player award and cemented his place in the American consciousness by bludgeoning the Yankees on national TV and radio broadcasts during the Milwaukee Braves' successful World Series run (Wolfe 62). Yet in other cases, Troy's rhetoric is allowed to run freer than it should have been. For instance, when Troy comments to Cory that the Pirates' up-and-coming Puerto Rican outfielder (and future Hall of Famer) Roberto Clemente had not played regularly during the 1957 season, he characteristically attributes this to managerial racism (33). If Wilson had wanted to key the audience to Troy's limited world view—or even realistically imagine the response of an avid Pittsburgh baseball fan like Cory—he would have had Cory mention the real cause of Clemente's benching: a nagging back injury that had not only kept Clemente in the hospital for weeks but had also affected his hitting so severely that he probably ought to have played even less than he did (Biederman 20).¹⁹ Wilson deprives Cory's response of this barb, however.

Was Wilson as willing as Troy to chalk up any perceived slights to racism, no matter how implausible? How well did he understand that his creation was mostly bluster? For all of Troy's obvious faults, Wilson's interviews still trumpet him as a paragon of black masculinity, emphasizing mostly that Troy is "very responsible" (Bryer and Hartig 72), "noble and heroic" (172), and basically "right" in his attitude toward Cory and sports (32). Furthermore, Wilson praises the very ideology of "going down swinging" that his narrative seems designed to critique: "I think what impressed me most about Troy was his willingness to engage life. . . . And he died with his boots on. When he struck out at the plate, he said: 'Death is nothing but a fast ball on the outside corner.' Well he only swung, and he missed. But he was in the batter's box when he died" (105). What Wilson thought Troy was swinging at, and what he could have possibly gained had he hit it, is unclear. Yet at the same time, as scholars examining *Fences*' numerous drafts have noted, the play's development seems to have moved unceasingly toward undermining Troy's character, deemphasizing his broader political consciousness while emphasizing his flaws (Fishman 176-77), and changing the play's timeline to shorten Troy's implied career (Herrington 65).²⁰ Perhaps, if only unconsciously, Wilson understood the great smallness of the man he wished to celebrate. If so, his attitude toward Troy might well resemble Troy's toward himself: too proud of his abilities and too incensed by the limitations of his environment to admit what he quietly realizes about the ineffectiveness of his overreaching swings, no less empty for all their might.

Notes

1. Principally, this was due to the Yankees' understandable satisfaction with their incumbent right fielder, Babe Ruth.

2. All baseball statistics cited in this essay may be found on the websites Baseball-Reference.com or Fangraphs.com. For convenience, all references to the history and methodology of baseball statistics, particularly sabermetrics, are made to Lewis's *Moneyball*, a popular nonfiction account that nonspecialists should find not only comprehensible but narratively entertaining, although it is not necessarily written with scholarly rigor and has become a bit dated over the past decade. Anyone wishing to delve into more substantial primary sources on this subject is encouraged to read the work of Bill James; Pete Palmer; the team at *Baseball Prospectus*; Tom M. Tango, Mitchel G. Lichtman, and Andrew E. Dolphin, *The Book: Playing the Percentages in Baseball* (Dulles: Potomac, 2007); and the regular blog posts at the websites listed above.

3. After two more years of part-time playing, Selkirk used his enlistment for World War II as a graceful method of retirement, transitioning to scouting and managerial jobs ("George Selkirk").

4. When formulating the first set of baseball statistics in 1859, sportswriter Henry Chadwick decided that the walk was merely the pitcher's failure to get the ball across the plate, even though walk-drawing has now clearly emerged as an independent skill (Lewis 70-71). I should add a few more points to technically distinguish batting average from on-base percentage: times reached safely on an official fielding error or fielder's choice are subtracted from the numerator of both, while their denominators do not include sacrifice bunts. Obstructions, dropped third strikes, and catcher's interferences are not counted toward either. The hit-by-pitch is also counted in on-base percentage but not batting average, although this rarely affects on-base percentage significantly.

5. In fact, the ability to draw walks may vary widely even for otherwise similar players. For instance, in 2010, the Tampa Bay Rays' second baseman Ben Zobrist hit .238, while his Seattle Mariners counterpart José Lopez hit .239, but Zobrist also drew 92 walks, while Lopez accumulated merely twenty-three, giving Zobrist a solid .346 on-base percentage while Lopez posted an extremely poor .270. (Their other numbers were remarkably similar, too: twenty-eight doubles and ten home runs in 655 plate appearances for Zobrist, twenty-nine and ten in 622 for Lopez.)

6. In 1939, his best year, Selkirk totaled twenty-one home runs and 101 RBIs—very good numbers, to be sure, but not stand-out figures among baseball's top sluggers that year.

7. For comparison, in 1939, a rookie named Ted Williams—who would lead the league in on-base percentage during the next twelve seasons when he met minimum playing-time qualifications—drew 107 walks, but needed 677 plate appearances to accumulate them.

8. To be precise, Selkirk walked in 17.9% of plate appearances. For reference, his .406 on-base percentage would have been third among qualified batters in either league in 2014. Placing his total performance that season into context, the sabermetrically inclined baseball sites Baseball-Reference.com and Fangraphs.com respectively calculate Selkirk's play that season as worth 2.9 and 3.8 Wins Above Replacement (or WAR; that is, worth that much more for his team's record above that of a hypothetical AAA call-up), both solid contributions that—had Selkirk not sat out nearly forty games that season due to injuries and manager Joe McCarthy's desire to give his reserve outfielders regular playing time (Levy 257-68)—would come out near to All-Star levels.

9. In fact, although on-base percentage is easily calculable from the basic statistics that professional baseball has long recorded, it was not listed in the official major-league record books until 1984, a year not only decades after Troy's death but also by which time *Fences* was well into its revision stages. The impact of available statistics on how even experts discuss the game may be seen in how Ted Williams, baseball's greatest hitter in the period between Troy's retirement and the events of *Fences*, spends much of his classic primer *The Science of Hitting* talking about the value of walks, but still identifies players primarily by batting average (e.g., as ".250 hitters" or ".300 hitters").

10. Even against diluted competition during the World War II years, Vince DiMaggio led the league in strikeouts every season. As the famous quip about the DiMaggio brothers went, "Joe is the best hitter, Dom is the best fielder, and Vince is the best singer."

11. Bono might be addressing the single-season home run record, which Troy might conceivably have challenged in 1938 or 1939. But I doubt this because Ruth's and Gibson's single-season totals exceeded those of their peers less dramatically than their career marks. By 1957, Ruth's closest competition on the all-time major league home run list was Foxx, who trailed by nearly two hundred homers. However, Foxx had hit fifty-eight of those home runs during the 1932 season, very nearly topping Ruth's then-record of sixty from five years prior; similarly, players such as Hank Greenberg (fifty-eight in 1938), Hack Wilson (fifty-six in 1930), and Ralph Kiner (fifty-four in 1949) had made serious runs at Ruth's single-season record by 1957, which no one would manage to do for the career record until Willie Mays and Hank Aaron broke the 600-homer mark in 1969 and 1971, respectively. Negro League numbers are much hazier, but Gibson's teammate Buck Leonard frequently challenged him for the official home run lead during the latter's prime seasons, while no one is thought to have done so for the career record.

12. To be specific, the top thirty hitters since 1920 by Fangraphs' wRC+ statistic all drew walks in at least ten percent of their plate appearances.

13. As Williams notes, taking a two-strike approach requires "conceding to the pitcher," and can be effective only if one takes a controlled, low-power swing (51, 64-65), something it is difficult to imagine Troy doing.

14. The most important, probably, was their understandable envy of a youngster's being accepted into the white baseball world without having paid his dues as they had—accepted in part because he was, unlike most of them, a college-educated, teetotaling Army lieutenant.

15. Famously, Rickey's revolutionary spring training compound in Florida had a number of innovative devices designed to improve pitch selectivity (Snider 72-73). In fact, the only second baseman of Robinson's era markedly better than he at drawing walks was his otherwise limited Dodger predecessor, Eddie Stanky.

16. Robinson's .409 career on-base percentage tops that of all other second basemen to enter the major leagues since the end of World War II.

17. Sabermetricians dislike the "sacrifice bunt," since giving up an out to advance a runner usually does not significantly improve that runner's chances of scoring. However, they do note that bunting unexpectedly from time to time is often a good move, because defenses are often unprepared to defend the bunt (Lichtman).

18. To be precise, the sabermetric view does not totally dismiss stolen bases, but notes that they are not nearly as important as getting on base, hitting for power, and fielding; sabermetrics have also determined that stolen-base attempts provide positive value only when successful at least seventy percent of the time (Lewis 129). For instance, although Jackie Robinson was often among baseball's top base-stealers, his other abilities (reflected in his high on-base percentage, excellent fielding, considerable power relative to other second basemen, and so forth) would have placed him among the sport's best players even without his ability to steal; moreover, his quickness and skill minimized risk, as even in the later seasons of his career (the first in which caught-stealing records were officially kept), he was still successful in seventy-six percent of his attempts. The popular image of Robinson dramatically stealing home during Game 1 of the 1955 World Series provides a case study in the overvaluation of the stolen base, as its legend depends upon fans being unaware that a) the Dodgers actually *lost* the game; b) Robinson's second-inning triple (according to the Win Probability Added stat) was his most valuable play in the game; c) Yankee Billy Martin, a low-percentage career base stealer, had almost cost his team the game by being caught stealing home in the sixth inning; d) Robinson's eighth-inning RBI single to seal Game 5 had a bigger overall positive impact on the series for the Dodgers; and e) Robinson, largely ineffective otherwise in the series, didn't even play the clinching Game 7, benched for the younger Don Hoak.

19. Clemente managed only a .288 on-base percentage that year, with career lows in doubles and home runs.

20. In earlier drafts, Lyons is described as thirty-seven years old in 1957, meaning that Troy was sixteen when the former was born (Herrington 65). Although this change seems to have been made to suggest that Lyons still has time to mature, it also halves Troy's playing career. A six-year run in the Negro Leagues, from ages 31-36 (1935-1940), would make some of Troy's and Bono's claims, while still wildly implausible, slightly less ridiculous.

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