

How Richard Wright Was Born

by Hiroshi Kanzaki

Introduction

The Negro novel, like Negro life in America, is at once alike and different from the novels of white Americans. While it follows, usually after a short lag, the main historical development of the American novel, it has in addition a life of its own, which springs from the soil of a distinctive minority culture. It is no accident that approximately 85 per cent of the novels written by American Negroes deal principally or exclusively with Negro characters in a Negro setting. This racial emphasis is simply a literary echo of cultural reality. Whether this reality is desirable or not is another matter. When and if the Negro minority becomes fully integrated into American life, tendencies toward cultural autonomy will presumably disappear.

Like any other artist, the Negro novelist must achieve universality through a sensitive interpretation of his own culture. The American Negro, however, has not one but two cultures to interpret. He bears a double burden, corresponding to the double environment in which he lives. He must be conversant with Western culture as a whole, and especially with the traditions of English literature of which he is a part, and at the same time be prepared to affirm a Negro quality in his experience, exploiting his Negro heritage as a legitimate contribution to the larger culture. Nor is my espousal of cultural dualism an attempt to segregate the Negro world to be liberating rather than confining. As Ralph Ellison has remarked:

Negro life is a by-product of Western civilization, and in it, if only one possesses the humanity and humility to see, are to be discovered

all those impulses, tendencies, life, and cultural forms to be found elsewhere in Western society.⁽¹⁾

The phenomenon of cultural dualism is by no means unique to the American Negro. The writers of the Irish Renaissance come immediately to mind, as do Jewish authors who, while writing in English, are nonetheless concerned with their relationship to Jewish life. Outside of certain narrow circles, however, only the sketchiest analytical tools have been developed for dealing with the cultural history of an ethnic minority. Thus I am going to approach the history of the Negro in America.

Chapter 1.

Before Native Son

Negro writing in America has a long history. It begins with *A Narrative of Uncommon Sufferings*, by Britton Hamon, published in 1760, and with Jupiter Hammon, a writer of both prose and poetry, whose first work appeared later in the same year. He was soon followed by Phillis Wheatley, a Massachusetts slave, who was given special privileges by the rather unusual Wheatley family and encouraged to write poetry, for which she had a talent rare for that period. Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in 1773. In 1829, another book of poem appeared, *The Hope of Liberty*, by George Moses Horton, who was freed late in life, as Phillis Wheatley had been.

In the North during this early period, a number of free Negroes were active as writers and journalists in the anti-slavery cause. Their articles and stories frequently appeared in the abolitionist newspaper *Freedom's Journal*, the first Negro newspaper in the United States, which began publishing in 1818. In 1853, James Whitfield, among these whose work often appeared in *Freedom's Journal*, published his *America and Other Poems*.

The first novels written by an American Negro were *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853) and *My Southern Home* (1830), by William Wells Brown, who also wrote other novels and a play *The Escape* (1858). Brown, who was active in the abolitionist movement, was a serious writer, and after the Civil War he produced several ambitious historical and narrative works which achieved a rather large circulation at the time. He was the first American Negro who devoted his life to literature and the first to earn his living as a writer.

In the novels written by Negro authors after 1890, there occurs a significant change in subject matter, one that Robert Bone describes as a shift in theme from attacks upon slavery to attacks upon caste. In these novels the principal characters are usually light enough in color to pass, handsome, worthy, and cultivated, yet suffering from the stigma of membership in what American society regards as an inferior caste. Thus was born a tradition that stretches from J. McHenry Jones's *Hearts of Gold* (1896) to the novels Walter White, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen in the 1930's. One of the most interesting writers of the past who did not belong to the sociological or protest school of Negro writing was Charles Waddell Chesnutt, who, at the turn of the century, revealed a fine literary talent. Chesnutt was a writer of originality, aware of style and literary tradition, and had a profound insight into Southern life. Chesnutt's writing was far beyond the literary fashion and taste of his time. In such imaginative and original novels as *House Behind the Cedars*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, and *The Colonel's Dream*, as well as in the short stories he contributed to *The Atlantic Monthly* and other publications, Chesnutt eschewed the puerile romanticism of Thomas Nelson Page, Thomas Dixon, and other popular writers of his day.

During the 1920's when the novels of Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Walter White were fascinating white and Negro

readers alike, another group of Negro writers, known as the "Harlem School," was creating the so-called "Negro Renaissance" and deriding the pretensions, subject matter, and genteel style of the older group.

In 1925, *The New-Negro*, a volume of writings by Negro authors edited by Alain Locke, appeared. Langston Hughes, in describing the "New Negro" movement, wrote:

"We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."

There were many young and talented writers who participated in the "New Negro" movement of the 1920's and early 1930's. Among these were Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Waters Turpin, Eric Walrond, and Wallance Thurman.

Claude McKay's books—such as *Home to Harlem*, a national best seller in 1928, and *Banjo* (1929)—were an expression of the spirit and temper of this group, whose subject matter was often the Negro lumpen world and the life of the colored working class. This material shocked and offended the sensibilities of the more conservative Negro intellectuals such as Du Bois, who in a review for *The Crisis* magazine in 1928 stated that McKay's *Home to Harlem* "for the most part nauseated me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath." In his third volume of fiction, *Gingertown* (1932), McKay told more stories of Harlem's "low life."

One of the major figures of the Negro Renaissance was the highly talented poet Countee Cullen who wrote a novel, *One Way to Heaven* (1932), which is quite different from the work of Claude McKay and the other writers of the Harlem School in that it is primarily concerned with respectable churchgoing folks and presents a satiric portrayal of Negroes with social pretensions and their equally absurd white acquaintances.

The most important writer of the Negro Renaissance was Jean Toomer, a poet and shortstory writer whose major work,

Cane, was published in 1923. *Cane* is written in an unusual style, a mixture of prose and poetry, sensuous, and with a strange mysterious atmosphere, rich with fantasy and subtle suggestions.

Today very little is known of Jean Toomer. He has published almost nothing since 1923. Some of his short stories appeared in the second and third editions of *The American Caravan* and a poem, "Blue Meridian," appeared in *New American Caravan* of 1936, but virtually nothing else of importance has been published. It has long been rumored that Toomer, a light-skinned Negro, had "crossed the color line." In discussing this possibility, Arna Bontemps has written:

"Jean Toomer stepped out of American letters; despite the richness of his thought and his gift of expression, he ceased to be a writer ... While he may have escaped its strictures and inconveniences in his personal life, he did not get away from the racial problem in any real sense. His dilemmas and frustrations as a writer are equally the dilemmas and frustrations of the Negro writers who have since attracted attention. The fact that most of them have not been provided with his invisible cloak makes little difference. He is their representative man. He stands their prototype."⁽²⁾

This comment by Arna Bontemps calls attention to the special problems Negro authors face in finding an audience and getting published. In the past Negro writers failed to use what Henry James called the "angle of vision," because of their need to secure an audience of white readers, the only audience in fact that existed. Thus they attempted to exploit those elements in Negro life that would interest white readers. In the 1920's, Langston Hughes has said the Negro was in vogue. During this period there was little difference between such white writers as Julia Peterkin and Roark Bradford, who dealt with Negro themes, and Negro writers themselves. Both stressed exoticism, sensuality, Negro humor and dialect material.

Chapter 2.

After *Native Son*

Today the Negro artist, as he enters into the main stream of contemporary literature, feels a new strength and refuses to be limited to racial protest or to the conventional Negro themes of the past. Self-pity and dreary rage are clearly no longer enough. As the Negro writer moves beyond anger, he develops a new concern for the writer's craft for literary discipline and control, and seeks an involvement in the larger world of art and ideology.

Two decades ago the transition had barely begun. The publication in 1940 of Richard Wright's *Native Son* represented a significant moment in the history of the Negro novel in America. Wright drew upon an earlier tradition of naturalism in American writing, and within it created a dramatic novel of protest, with political overtones, which reached a vast audience at home and abroad, and later, as a play and motion picture, exerted a compelling influence on a generation of Negro writers.

A major characteristic of the naturalistic novels of Theodore Dreiser is the rendering of characters that are determined and controlled by economic and social forces. Environment is everything, and man is to be understood as a social creature created by a milieu which is all-prevalent.

The writers of the radical novels of the thirties, continuing in this tradition but now involved in a political movement that proclaimed "art as a class weapon in the class war," were not simply concerned with the effects of environment upon individuals, as an earlier generation of American novelists had been, but consciously launches an attack upon the capitalist system, which, it was alleged, was directly responsible for the brutal exploitation and misery of the workers.

Essentially, the framework for *Native Son*, one of the impor-

tant novels in contemporary American literature, is to be found in its implicit assumption that the social order is directly responsible for the degradation of the Negro, that American society produces conditions that distort and destroy individual human beings who are part of an oppressed group. The character in the book who functions as Wright's spokesman states of Negroes that "taken collectively, they are not simply twelve million people; they constitute a separate nation, shunted, stripped and held captive within this nation, devoid of political, social, economic and property rights."

Although *Native Son* is basically a novel of protest, Richard Wright went beyond the attack on environment and injustice to a powerful symbolic rendering of the narrative material that is frequently a comment on the action itself.

After the appearance of Wright's *Native Son* and the poignant autobiographical *Black Boy* in 1945, and the publication of such novels as Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) and *The Street*, by Ann Petry (1946), the fake exoticism of Negro writing vanished, as did the idealized folksiness of tales about quaint and simple colored people.

In classic naturalistic fashion, Negro authors after Wright—such as Himes, Ann Petry, William Gardner Smith, and others—turned their attention to the corrosive effects of the urban slum and, with varying degrees of success, joined the tradition of social protest with the Negro's demands for racial equality and justice. Thus, during the 1940's, Negro authors were writing "problem novels."

In 1952, *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison, won the National Book Award. This novel is indeed a magnificent contribution to American letters. It contains brilliantly and powerfully written episodes in which race is used symbolically. In *Invisible Man* Ellison evokes a world which perhaps only an American Negro can fully apprehend, a lunatic, febrile world where love and

hate, pity and cruelty, are brutally intermingled. Ellison's work utterly transcends the traditional preoccupations of the Negro writer; ultimately he is concerned not with race but with man.

Invisible Man was one of the most significant American novels of the past two decades, and certainly is the most important novel yet written by an American Negro. For Ralph Ellison, race and the Negro's experience are part of his creative imagination, and in using this material he makes universal what is racial and regional.

In 1953, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was published, followed in 1956 by *Giovanni's Room* and in 1962 by *Another Country*. In these novels, as well as in Baldwin's two collections of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name*, he manifests a unique sensibility and intelligence.

In the work of both Ellison and Baldwin, the Negro's color, his identity, or, rather, his "invisibility," are used poetically and symbolically to communicate the dilemma of all men who are denied dignity and purpose in the contemporary world. Their work demonstrates a new literary sensibility that distinguishes their writing from the work of most Negro authors of the past.

Wright's *Native Son* (1940) came years after the naturalism of Dreiser, and Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947) came years after Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*. But now Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin have created their own literary forms; they are not derivative of the writers of a generation ago; they are, in fact, of the avant-garde and they are influencing the younger writers now beginning their careers. It is in this development that we can perceive the crucially altered role of the Negro writer in contemporary American literature.

Chapter 3.

How Richard Was Born: Part 1.

In *Black Boy* Richard Wright described a boyhood filled with hatred and deprivation and fear. Born on a Plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, September 4, 1908, he was educated through the grammar grades in public schools and a Seventh Day Adventist School, dragged from Natchez to Jackson to Elaine, Arkansas, to Memphis, exposed constantly to the religious fanaticism of his mother's family, to the indifference of his father. He lived under Jim Crow law, with perpetual awareness that at any moment the whites might strike. He witnessed what happened to Negroes who did not stay in their place. In almost every way he epitomized the problem of the Negro in the Deep South. For him the problem was compounded because he was intelligent, sensitive, aspiring, and unable to make himself into what Southerners would accept as a "good nigger".

At fifteen he began working at odd jobs in Memphis. At seven, having read some of H. L. Mencken, he decided to go north and become a writer. *Black Boy* ends with his flight from the South. The remainder of the story is told in various magazine articles and in the autobiographical elements of *The Outsider*.

Wright went from Memphis to Chicago, to the Black Belt that at the same time offered a kind of freedom to Negroes, especially to those fresh from the South, and the problems of ghetto living. At seventeen he had lived enough experience to last an average novelist a lifetime. Chicago added new experience, and heightened the effect of the old. Poorly educated, untrained for a trade, he worked at odd jobs and studied as he could, until the Depression cut off the odd jobs.

During those years, while searching for intellectual activity, he found the John Reed Club, in the Loop area of Chicago, spon-

sored by the Communist party for stimulation of artistic expression and, of course, extension of Communist propaganda. He became a member of the Communist party and eventually an officer in the club.

It was natural that Wright, a sensitive Southern Negro in Chicago, would gravitate to the John Reed Club. His whole life experience had prepared him for it. Its members were young, thoughtful, and diverse enough in racial origin that a Negro would not stand out. Their own hard experience had made them more aware than any other group he had known. They were victims of depression, of what seemed to be the collapse of the capitalistic system, a "lost generation" in a more genuine sense than any other in American history. Their views were extreme. They often distorted fact to make it fit their argument. At the same time, they wanted a better America, a more creative America. In their intense discussions of politics and art, Wright found impetus to shape into fiction his own hard-bought experience.

He began to write and to see his poems and stories published in *The Daily Worker* and *New Masses*. At last he was making a place for himself.

It was natural perhaps that many of his early works would reflect the Communist party line. He had been tempered for exploitation. However, because they were written by Richard Wright, they also reflect a vigor, an individuality all his own.

Uncle Tom's Children (1938), a collection of stories, brought recognition and a Guggenheim Fellowship. The following year he received the Spingarn Medal, awarded by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for his contribution to understanding of the Negro Problem.

It was the publication of *Native Son* (1940) that brought Richard Wright to the attention of the world and established him as a writer of the first rank in America. Reviewers recognized in this novel a record of the thirties—of the social and economic

injustice, the confusion, the search for idealism, the despair—as in the *Grapes of Wrath*. They recognized that at last the tragedy of the American Negro had been effectively dramatized, and by a Negro. It could do a great deal for further emancipation.

Chapter 4.

How Richard Was Born: part 2.

(Role of the Communist party)

During the 1930's the Communist party was active politically in virtually every sphere of American life. In its heyday, it conducted successful propaganda work both among writers as a professional group and among Negroes as such. In an effort to win writers to its cause, it worked through such front organizations as the American Writers' Congress, the League of American Writers, the early John Reed Clubs, and countless local groups of similar character. It offered a forum for "progressive" writers in such journals as *New Masses*, and through its vast periphery was able to supply young unknowns with a captive audience. Many young writers, both white and colored, succumbed to the flattering publicity which the party was willing to bestow—for a political price.

The party also made great strides in its "Negro work" during the Depression years. It began rather ineffectually with the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, Langston Hughes, President. Far more spectacular was its share in the defense of the Scottsboro boys, undertaken by a front organization known as the International Labor Defense. By fighting the case of nine Negro youths from Alabama accused of raping two white girls of dubious morality, the party was able to pose successfully as the champion of the Negro people. In the national elections of 1932 and 1936 it ran a Negro, James Fard, as its showpiece candidate for vice-president. In accordance with its new popular-front policy

of the midthirties, it helped to initiate, and eventually took over, the National Negro Congress, perhaps the most promising attempt to organize Negroes since the formation of the NAACP. As a result of these activities, the Communist party achieved a certain influence among Negro intellectuals which should not be belittled or underestimated.

More important, however, than the party's organizational tactics was the theoretical formulation on which they were based. The American Negro problem, so runs the Communist rationale, is an aspect of a broader pattern of imperialism, and its solution should follow Lenin's Pronouncements on "the national question". The American Negro is not merely an ethnic minority but a separate and distinct nation, like any other oppressed colonial people. The American Negro "nation" should therefore be granted the right of "self-determination," on the model of the national minorities in the Soviet Union. From this underlying conception flowed the party's slogan calling for the formation of a Negro Soviet Republic, embracing a hypothetical black belt in Southern United States. Only at the latest party convention was this position finally abandoned.

Taken literally, the proposal for a separate Negro nation within continental United States is adventurist enough. Most American readers will wonder how a Negro intellectual of, for example, Richard Wright's stature could have entertained it seriously, even for a moment. Yet merely to raise the question is to underestimate Negro nationalism, an error never committed by the Communist party. As a metaphor, or as a myth, the idea of a separate Negro nation expresses a separatist impulse deeply embedded in Negro psychology.

Whatever one's evaluation of the party's position, it exerted a profound influence on the Negro writers of the 1930's who accepted it in full or in part. whatever it was put forward, it gave additional impetus to the nationalist content of Negro

literature. The Communist party did not invent Negro nationalism, but it did its best to encourage it for political reasons. Wilson Record describes the party line on Negro art as follows:

“It was with the struggle of this Negro nation to achieve its manhood that the Negro artists and intellectuals were to be concerned. Its trials, its tribulations, its sufferings,—these were to be the major themes of novels, of music, of other creative forms. To select other themes was tantamount to the betrayal of the race.”⁽³⁾

By thus enjoying the Negro author to explore his own tradition, the party inadvertently advanced the legitimate development of Negro art. It is not the first time in its history that the American Communist party has done the right thing for the wrong reasons.

Chapter 5.

Uncle Tom's Children

As a successful and influential author, Wright focuses attention upon the warping and stunting effect of racial discrimination and economic oppression upon the downtrodden and underprivileged classes of the United States, and blames brutal and prejudiced whites as well as complacent and cowardly blacks for much Negro crime and delinquency. His special forte in depicting the circumscribed life of the Negro was early shown in his revolutionary verse and in *The Ethics of Livign Iim Crow; An Autobiographical Sketch*. In the latter piece, which is divided into nine thumbnail parts, Wright relates how he learned through First-hand experience to conform to the standards of conduct prescribed by the Southern white man for the Negro. Among the lessons that he received were that a Negro should never fight a white person, should always stay in his place, should unfailingly and “sir” to a “yes” or a “no” addressed to white adults, should not expect equal protection under the law, should never undertake to defend Negro women imposed upon by white men, should unresistingly indulge

the exploitation of Negro women by white men, should be oblivious to the physical charms of white women, should anticipate severe punishment if discovered consorting with white women, and should avoid the following topics in discussions with white people :

American white women; the Ku Klux Klan; France, and how Negro soldiers fared while there; French women; Jack Johnson; the entire northern part of the United States; the Civil War; Abraham Lincoln; U. S. Grant; General Sherman; Catholics; the Pope; Jews; the Republican Party; slavery; social equality; Communism; Socialism; the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution; or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of the Negro.⁽⁴⁾

The occurrences described in *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow; An Autobiographical Sketch* take place in the Mid-South; the first eight incidents deal chiefly with experiences of the author in Jackson, Mississippi, while the ninth and last sets forth his activities as an optical shop employee in Memphis, Tennessee, where his Jim-Crow education "was no longer brutally cruel, but subtly cruel."

Reverting to agricultural and small-town scenes, Wright continues his indictment of the South in *Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas* (1938), whose pre-liminary note announces the passing of the traditional Uncle Tom and the emergence of the militant new Negro :

The post Civil War household word among Negroes—"He's an Uncle Tom!"—which denoted reluctant toleration for the cringing type who knew his place before white folk, has been supplanted by a new word from another generation which says:—"Uncle Tom is dead!"⁽⁵⁾

"Big Boy Leaves Home," the first these novellas and one of the most authentic pictures of a boy's gang in American fiction, deal with the tragedy resulting from the prankish decision of four Negro boys to go swimming in a pond where Negro bathers are not allowed. once in the water, the naked youngsters become

frightened at the approach of a white woman who walks near their clothes under a tree. When the youths rush to regain their garments, the terrified woman screams for her escort, who appears with a gun and kills two of the youngsters before meeting his own death at the hands of Big Boy, the leader of the gang. Through the aid of Negro citizens Big Boy escapes to Chicago in an express truck, but his remaining companion is caught by irate white citizens and lynched. "Big Boy Leaves Home" shows that crime inevitably springs from the denial of adequate recreational facilities, and the series of murders in the story may be traced to the meaningful comment of one of the boys: "The white folks got plenty swimming pools we ain got none."⁽⁶⁾ The narrative also sets forth the fear and hatred engendered by the Southern way of life, for Big Boy justifies the murder of the woman's escort on the ground that "yuh never can tell erbout white folks"⁽⁷⁾ and dreams of the possible glory of killing a dozen or even a score of white men before meetin his own death. After its release in *The Negro Caravan* (1936) "Big Boy Leaves Home" was hailed by Alain Locke as "the strongest note yet struck by one of our writers in the staccato protest realism of the rising school of proletarian fiction."⁽⁸⁾

The second novella, "Down by the Riverside," treats the heightened interracial tension of a Mississippi Valley flood disaster. Mann, a Negro farmer, uses a boat stolen by a relative to row his wife, who is in child labor, to a Red Cross hospital. Encountering the stranded owner of the boat and killing him in self-defence, Mann proceeds through turbulent waters to the nearest town, where, after a levee break, he heroically saves many lives, including those of the wife and children of the man he murdered. Identified by those he rescued and arrested by military police, Mann is later fatally wounded while making a hopeless attempt to escape. "Down by the Riverside" discloses various aspects of racial oppression during the 1927 Mississippi flood catastrophe.

Negroes, conscripted to pile sand and cement bags on the levee, are slain for trying to escape. Medical attention, given bluntly, is provided in unsatisfactory and segregated quarters; and martial law, administered harshly, is conducted with bias and intimidation.

"Long Black Song" mirrors the exploitation of unprotected Negro women by white men and the insecurity of the independent Negro landowner. Saran, left with her child on the farm while her husband Silas goes to town to sell cotton and purchase supplies, is seduced by a white travelling salesman. Returning home, Silas finds incontrovertible evidence of his wife's unfaithfulness and punishes her severely. Embittered by his persecution, Silas sardonically declares:

"The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothin in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N Then they take yo life!...Ahm gonna be hard like they is! So hep me, Gawd. Ah'm gonna be hard. When they come fer me Ah'm gonna be here! N when they git me outta here theys gonna know Ah'm gone! Ef Gawd lets me live Ahm gonna make em feel it!"⁽⁹⁾

When the salesman returns the next morning the abused husband murders him. The partner of the slain man escapes, however, and assembles a mob which, after losing two of its members before Silas' gunfire, ignites his barricaded house and watches it burn with the helpless victim inside. Remorseful after her seduction, Sarah is conscious of the senselessness of interracial strife:

"White men killed the black and black men killed the white. White men killed black men because they could, and black men killed white men to keep from being killed."⁽¹⁰⁾

"Fire and Cloud," the fourth novella of the volume, employs a theme not previously used in fiction by Negroes. Negroes and poor whites of a small Southern city are in the grip of starvation and unemployment; and wealthy citizens, though able to alleviate

the misery, are hoarding food and money. Because of the acute suffering, Dan Taylor, a Negro minister who has earlier served as a mediating agent between his race and the ruling whites, is seriously considering a Communist-endorsed downtown march of Negroes and poor whites as a protest against the unfair distribution of food and jobs. Encouraging him as to the advisability of this procedure are Hadly and Green, a white and a black Communist, respectively. Determined to prevent the march, authorities use every device, from review of past favors to threats of physical violence, to persuade Taylor to use his influence to call off the demonstration. Proving stubborn and recalcitrant, Taylor is abducted and mercilessly beaten, but bravely returns to lead a successful biracial march of the indigent and unemployed against their rich oppressors.

“Fire and Cloud” is the only narrative in the collection in which the political and economic philosophy of the author comes to the surface. Racial unity and co-operation with poor whites rather than Communist membership, however, are recommended as an approach to the solution of the problems of the town’s trampled and dispossessed; and the lesson which Taylor derives from the demonstration is that “Freedom belongs to the strong!” Competently portrayed is the minister’s prolonged struggle between the desire to co-operate with the Reds in an effort to relieve the hunger of the people and his equally strong wish to remain in the good graces of local officials and to cause no innocent bloodshed. Jimmy, the preacher’s son, is the new defiant Negro, ready to die rather than suffer brutality and terrorism; while Deacon Smith, distrustful of mass action and genuflective before municipal bigwigs, is a carryover of the traditional handkerchief-head type. The mayor represents the conciliator, and Bruden the autocrat in negotiations with colored people. Hadley, who propagandizes the city to gain relief, tells Taylor that Negro leaders frequently delay the advancement of their people by adopting a course of

action sponsored by the dominant white group:

"That's just it, Reverend. Don't be afraid of their turning you down becauae you're fighting for your people. If they knew you'd really fight, they'd dislike you; yes? But you can make them give something to all of your people, not just to you. Don't you see, Taylor, you're standing between your people and the while folks. You can make them give something to all of them. And the poor, hungry white folks will be with you."⁽¹¹⁾

Just before the march takes place, as the following remarks to Jimmy indicate, Taylor becomes convinced that the salvation of the Negro depends upon the organization of a strong popular front:

"We gotta git wid the people, son. Too long we done tried t do this thing our way n when we failed we wanted t run out n pay-off the white folks. Then they kill us up like flies. It's the people, son! Wes too much erlon this way! Wes los when wes erlone. Wes gotta-be wid our folks..."⁽¹²⁾

In brief, *Uncle Tom's Children* is a vivid, dramatic protest against Southern prejudice. The horror and tragedy suffered by Negroes in the narratives seem unnecessary in the light of the trivial incidents which cause them. Trespassing to swim on private property, using a stolen boat to transport a pregnant woman to a hospital, being helpless to repel the lust of a graphophone salesman, and planning a rather timid demonstration for food are sufficient to precipitate panic, loathing, murder, and mob violence. The responsibility for Southern turmoil is placed squarely at the doors of white demagogues who seek to maintain the illordered status quo and of knowtowing Negro leaders who cooperate with them in this policy.

Chapter 6.

Native Son

On a literal level *Native Son* consists of three Books, dealing

with a murder, a flight and capture, and a trial. But the murder and the circumstances which surround it are in reality an extended metaphor, like the whale hunt in *Moby Dick*. The novel is not to be read merely as the story of a gruesome crime, though it is that. It is the hidden meaning of Bigger's life, as revealed by the murder, which is the real subject of *Native Son*. The novel is a modern epic, consisting of action on the grand scale. As such, it functions as a commentary on the more prosaic plane of daily living.

Book I is called "Fear." Its structure pulsates in mounting waves of violence, beginning with the opening rat scene, increasing during Bigger's fight with Gus, and culminating in murder. Each successive wave of violence is a means of reducing fear, for great fear automatically produces great violence in Bigger. He has been so conditioned that being found in a white girl's room is the ultimate fearinspiring situation. When the blind Mrs. Dalton appears as a white blur in the doorway of Mary's room, Bigger is seized with hysterical terror, and he murders. It is both an accident and not an accident, for the first characteristic of Bigger's life which the murder reveals is his uncontrollable fear of whites.

The second aspect of Bigger's normal life to receive thematic stress is his bitter sense of deprivation.

"We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence".⁽¹³⁾

Living on the margin of his culture, Bigger is constantly tormented by the glitter of the dominant civilization. "The Gay Woman," a movie which he watches while waiting to rob a neighborhood store, is emblematic of that world of cocktail parties, golf, and spinning roulette wheels from which he is forever excluded. To fill the intolerable void in his life he seeks "something

big"—the "job" at Blum's which never comes off, his real job as chauffeur and handyman for the Daltons. He finally breaks through the confines of his daily life by committing murder.

Book II, "Flight," opens with a recapitulation of Bigger's relations with family and gang, to show how they have changed as a result of the murder. Bigger has now achieved heroic stature: "He had murdered and created a new life for himself." This is the dominant irony of Book II—that Bigger finds fulfillment only by the most violent defiance of the legal and moral precepts of the society which oppresses him. As a criminal, Bigger achieves a sense of purpose, a feeling of elation which is a measure of the meaninglessness of his former existence.

After the fact of Bigger's rebirth is established, the narrative proceeds with a series of interrogations by Peggy, by the Daltons, and finally by the police. Bigger's conduct throughout is determined by the heightened perceptions which he enjoys as a result of the murder:

"The whole thing came to him in the form of a powerful and simple feeling; there was in everyone a great hunger to believe that made him blind, and if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted and never to caught as it".⁽¹⁴⁾

Bigger learns to exploit the blindness of others, "fooling the white folks" during his interrogation, and this is again something deep in his racial heritage, springing from a long tradition of telling whites whatever they want to hear.

At last comes discovery, flight, and capture. Once again the action of the novel serves as an oblique comment on Bigger's "normal" way of life:

"But it was familiar, this running away. All his life he had been knowing that sooner or later something like this would come to him".⁽¹⁵⁾

No such fear-ridden sequence as Bigger's flight and capture is possible without a proportionate act of violence. Beside's murder,

compounding horror upon grisly horror, serves to dispel any lingering doubt concerning Bigger's guilt. Learning from Dreiser's mistake, Wright takes no chances that his audience may be diverted from his main point by quibbling over the "accidental" nature of Mary Dalton's death. At the same time, the audience knows intuitively that it is Mary's murder, and not Bessie's, for which society will demand Bigger's life.

The successful fusion of narrative and metaphorical levels in *Native Son* is only a sample of Wright's craftsmanship. Not the least of his problems is to induce his readers to identify with Bigger in spite of his monstrous crimes. This he accomplishes by a tone which subtly controls and defines the reader's attitude toward Bigger. It is a tone of anguish and despair, established at the outset by Wright's epigraph from the Book of Job: "Even today is my complaint rebellious; my stroke is heavier than my groaning." Thus the stark horror of *Native Son* is balanced by the spiritual anguish which, in a sense, produced it. This note of anguish, which emphasizes Bigger's suffering, is so intense as to be almost physical in character. It is sustained by a style which can only be called visceral. The author writes from his guts, describing the emotional state of his characters in graphic psychosomatic terms. It is a characteristic device which has its source in Wright's aching memory of the deep South.

Notwithstanding Wright's professed naturalism, the symbolic texture of *Native Son* is exceptionally rich. The whole novel is contained in the first few pages when Bigger, in unconscious anticipation of his own fate, conners a huge black rat and kills him with a skillet. Much of Wright's meaning is conveyed by appropriate "objective correlatives" for Bigger's inner feelings and emotions. The icy gales and heavy snowfalls of Books I and II represent a hostile white environment:

"To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a

stormy sky looming overhead".⁽¹⁶⁾

Throughout Book II the red glow of the furnace appears as a projection of Bigger's guilt. A series of breathing and choking images anticipates the manner of the murder, linking it symbolically to Bigger's choked and stifled life. There is a constant play on blindness, focused around the figure of Mrs. Dalton but aimed ultimately at the reader, who is expected to grope his way to an understanding of Bigger's life.

A lesser artist would have directed Bigger's symbolic revolt against a brutal oppressor, but Wright understands that such an approach would only make his audience feel smug and superior. He chooses as Bigger's victim a girl who is "friendly to Negroes," but whose kindness under the circumstances is a bitter mockery. By this device, Wright means to suggest that Bigger's sickness is too deep to be reached by kindness, and at the same time to involve his audience in responsibility for Bigger's crime. The Daltons, who are people of good will, hire Bigger because they "want to give Negroes a chance." But they also own real estate on the South side, and have thus helped to make the black ghetto what it is. They are, in short, just as innocent and just as guilty as we.

Book I portrays the old Bigger; Book II, the new; Book III, the Bigger who might have been. The bare narrative is concerned with Bigger's fight for his life, but the dramatic tension of Book III is centered elsewhere. The important question is not whether Bigger will be spared, but whether he will be saved. Bigger's impending death in the electric chair is simply the crisis which forces a resolution of his inner conflict, thus revealing what is basic in his personality. After his talk with the lawyer, Max—the most intimate of his life—Bigger feels that he must make a decision:

"In order to walk to that chair he had to weave his feelings

into a hard shield of either hope or hate. To fall between them would mean living and dying in a fog of fear".⁽¹⁷⁾

on what terms will Bigger die; in hope or in hate? This is the tension of Book III.

Bigger's basic problem is to find someone or something he can trust. Kardiner and Liverey have written of the lower-class Negro family :

"The result of the continuous frustration in childhood is to create a personality devoid of confidence in human relations, of an eternal vigilance and distrust of others. This is a purely defensive maneuver, which purports to protect the individual against; the repeatedly traumatic effects of disappointment and frustration. He must operate on the assumption that the world is hostile."⁽¹⁸⁾

This lack of relatedness appears above all in Bigger's relationship with Bessie. As Max points out, "His relationship to this poor black girl reveals his relationship to the world." It is a mutually exploitative affair, devoid of devotion, loyalty, or trust—luxuries which are denied to Bigger and Bessie by the circumstances of their lives.

Bigger's lack of relatedness is presented symbolically at the end of Book II, just before his capture: Under it all some part of his mind was beginning to stand aside; he was going behind his curtain, his wall, looking out with sullen stares of contempt." This retreat, amounting almost to a catatonic trance, sets the stage for the dominant conflict in Book III. As Bigger slowly awakens from his trance, his fierce life-drive, set off perfectly by the death cell which he occupies, struggles toward some sort of relatedness with his fellows :

"If he reached out his hands, and if his hands were electric wires, and if his heart were a battery giving life and fire to those hands, and if he reached out with his hands and touched other people, if he did that, would there be a reply, a shock ? ⁽¹⁹⁾

The structure of Book III is essentially a series of attempts

by Bigger to realize this vision. He seeks desperately for a basis for hope but discards one alternative after another. He rejects his family "Go home, Ma"; his fellow prisoners "Are you the guy who pulled the Dalton?"; and religion. The old preacher tempts Bigger with the Christian explanation of suffering, but when the mob burns a fiery cross outside the jail, the cross of love turns to a cross of hate, Bigger finds it hardest to reject Jan and Max. These are the last symbols of relatedness to which he clings, and the main conflict of the novel occurs between them and Bigger's deepest experience as a Negro—his distrust of whites, his Negro nationalism.

Bigger's relations with Jan and Max cannot be understood apart from the context of Wright's experience in the Communist party. Most Negro Communists—and Wright was no exception—are Negro nationalists, for it is precisely the most embittered, antiwhite Negroes to whom the party offers the possibility of revenge. But the vast majority of American Communists, after all, are white. Paradoxically, the most white-hating Negro is thrust, by his membership in the party, into what is surely, whatever else it may be, one of the freest arenas of interracial contact in America. The result is an agonizing psychological conflict, as the Negro nationalist, newly won to Communism, struggles to relate to his white comrades. This is the conflict which is bothering Wright in Book III of *Native Son*, expressed on a somewhat primitive level through Bigger's relations with the white Communists, Jan and Max.

To Bigger, Communism is a matter not of ideology but of relatedness. Jan and Max are the flimsy base on which he tries to erect his shield of hope. Jan, through an act of understanding and forgiveness, evokes what is almost a religious response from Bigger, where the old colored preacher had failed: "The word had become flesh. For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him. The resolution of the novel,

however, comes in terms of Bigger's relationship with Max. Max serves as Bigger's father confessor as well as his lawyer, and Bigger comes closest to establishing a human contact with him.

After Max's speech fails, and after all avenues have been closed to Bigger, Max makes final visit to Bigger's cell. Bigger seeks to recapture their former intimacy, but Max is too concerned with comforting him in the face of death. Max then tries to communicate his vision of Communism to Bigger, but fails. As his shield of hope slips from his grasp, Bigger takes up the shield of hate which is his destiny. The impact comes through Max's reactions:

“Bigger saw Max back away from him with compressed lips..... Max lifted his hand to touch Bigger, but did not.....Max's eyes were full of terror.....He felt for the door, keeping his face averted.....He did not turn around.....Max paused, but did not look”,⁽²⁰⁾

What terrifies Max is that Bigger, re-possessed by hate, ends by accepting what life has made him: a killer. Bigger's real tragedy is not that he dies, but that he dies in hatred. A tragic figure, he struggles for love and trust against a hostile environment which defeats him in the end.

Book III, and therefore the novel, suffers from a major structural flaw, flowing from the fact that Wright has failed to digest Communism artistically. The Communist party is simply not strong enough as a symbol of relatedness; Bigger's hatred, firmly anchored in his Negro nationalism, is hardly challenged. The contest is unequal, because there is nothing in Bigger's life that corresponds to “Communism.” As a result, the conflict between love and hate, between universal brotherhood and Negro nationalism, cannot be successfully internalized. Wright is forced to go outside of Bigger, to Jan and Max, both of whom are more the mouthpieces for a thesis than credible characters in their own right. Wright is sure of Bigger, but Jan and Max elude him. In noting his failure to realize Communism artistically, it

is not irrelevant to recall that for Wright himself, the party was no shield of hope.

Since Bigger is unable to bear the weight of political symbolism intended for him, Wright is forced to resort to rhetoric. The first two Books of *Native Son* contain two levels of meaning; the bare action, and a running account of Bigger's feelings at the time. Now a third level is introduced; an interpretation of the action, undertaken by the author through the medium of Max's speech. This speech, with its guilt-of-the-nation thesis, throws the novel badly out of focus. The reader is likely to come away thinking that Bigger committed a horrible crime to which he was driven by a still more horrible environment, which I, the reader, have helped to create. Fictionally, however, the novel makes a different point: Bigger is a human being whose environment has made him incapable of relating meaningfully to other human beings except through murder.

Not satisfied with interpreting his own level through Max, Wright tries again in his article *How Bigger Was Born*: "Bigger, an American product, a native son of this land, carries within him the potentialities of either fascism or communism". But Wright can only attempt in retrospect to impose a political symbolism on the novel which he fails to realize fictionally. He simply cannot fit the ideas of Bigger into those of the Communist party. A white Bigger could be a fascist; a colored Bigger with trade-union experience could be a Communist. But Bigger is a Negro without fellow workers and is therefore only Bigger, a memorable figure in contemporary literature whom Wright created in spite of his own political ideology.

Conclusion

Richard Wright has pursued the theme of the Negro's search for identity through subsequent years and books. He has since made clear his belief that the Communist party was a blind alley

for American Negroes. He has publicly repudiated Communism, but he has not tried to erase any of its influence from his early writing, and rightly so. Propaganda weakens but does not destroy. The Negro's problems are as vital as ever.

After twelve years as a card-carrying member, Richard Wright withdrew from the Communist party. In his essay published in the collection *The God That Failed* (1950) he recorded his disillusionment :

I remember the stories I had written, the stories in which I had assigned a role of honor and glory to the Communist party, and I was glad that they were down in black and white. For I knew in my heart that I would never be able to write that way again, should never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, should never again express such passionate hope, should never again make so total a commitment to faith.⁽²¹⁾

In *The Outsider* he made a vicious attack on the methods of the Communist party.

If a book must be considered in relation to literary tradition, *Native Son* belongs to Naturalism, a tradition new in America when Richard Wright was born. He adds nothing new to the theory of Naturalism. He follows established patterns: examination of life in its most sordid aspects and the belief that man is a product of his environment. His novel has most often been classed with Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is fully as critical of American society as either of these, with little of their understanding of human frailty. He may have been influenced by Jack London's *Martin Eden* or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. They attempt for the Socialist party what he attempts for the Communist party, with about equal success.

Technically, the novel employs devices of pulp melodrama: murder, the chase, capture, trial and conviction, all presented with sensationalism or stark horror. The reader is asked to feel sentimentally with Bigger Thomas. He is taken almost to the presence

of the electric chair itself, to comprehend emotionally the social lessons while contemplating the end of a man's life. These devices are deliberate. Wright himself said he wrote the story so "that it would be so hard and deep they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."

In spite of the melodrama and the propaganda, *Native Son* has a definite place in American Literature. It is a novel about Negro life written by a Negro who is also a first-rate writer. Only a Negro could have captured so effectively the language, the fear, the hate, and made them seen so closely allied to life experience. It is right that the book should have been written by a Negro though in itself it is a negation of its thesis, a proof that a Negro could achieve in the society it so bitterly condemns.

NOTE

- (1) "Richard Wright's Blues" p. 103
- (2) "The Negro Renaissance: Jean Toomer and the Harlem Writers of the 1920's" p. 31
- (3) "The Negro and the Communist Party" p. 110
- (4) "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" p. 9
- (5) "Uncle Tom's Children" title page
- (6) Ibid p. 17
- (7) Ibid p. 33
- (8) "Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us" p. 19
- (9) "Uncle Tom's Children" p. 105
- (10) Ibid p. 101
- (11) Ibid p. 121-122
- (12) Ibid p. 146
- (13) "Native Son" p. 17
- (14) Ibid p. 91
- (15) Ibid p. 187
- (16) Ibid p. 77
- (17) Ibid p. 315
- (18) "The Mark of Opression" p. 308
- (19) "Native Son" p. 307
- (20) Ibid p. 358-359
- (21) "The God That Failed" p. 164

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