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WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON:* THE BURDEN IT BEARS

By 1940 when *Native Son* appeared, Richard Wright had grown disenchanted with the Communist Party.[1] But he remained affiliated with it through 1944. Michael Fabre suggests that Wright had joined the Party in the first place "perhaps more as a way of getting out of the cultural ghetto than out of a sense of courage."[2] However that may be, when *Native Son* was published Wright was immediately declared by most critics to be the most important Black American novelist. The reviews were spirited indeed; whether positive or negative, they were always passionate. Time did little to abate the passion. The most ambitious claim for the novel, for instance, was set forth by Irving Howe in 1963:

> The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.[3]

Howe's accolades were so phrased, and laid such claims to the novel's sociological meaning in such absolute terms:

> Now I think it would be well not to judge in the abstract, or with much haste, the violence that gathers in the Negro's heart as a response to the violence he encounters in society. It would be well to see this violence as part of an historical experience that is open to moral scrutiny but ought to be shielded from presumptuous moralizing. Bigger Thomas may be enslaved to a hunger for violence, but anyone reading *Native Son* with mere courtesy must observe the way in which Wright, also struggles to transcend it. That he did not succeed seems obvious; one may doubt that any Negro writer can.

that black writers, especially Ralph Ellison, have felt compelled to

answer.[4] A great part of Howe's essay concerned itself with a discussion of Ellison's and James Baldwin's responses to *Native Son*. Essentially, Howe defended what Ellison and Baldwin had seen as weaknesses (neither had been totally negative) and implied that he, Howe, more than Baldwin and Ellison, knew the meaning of black life. *Native Son* and Richard Wright had obviously taught him. Much of the criticism of *Native Son* since Howe's, Baldwin's and Ellison's statements has concerned itself with their argument — taking sides, as it were. Eldridge Cleaver is perhaps the most prominent writer who has joined the debate. What this debate has done, obviously, is to so engage the energies and talents of critics that *Native Son* has received little serious critical analysis. Scholars and critics have seemed content to state that *Native Son* brought the Afro-American novel to its maturity; and, convinced that Wright has influenced every succeeding black novelist, have sought, fairly vigorously, to discover traces of him in all their writing. It is certainly time to look, again, at the novel itself. Such passion as that expressed by Howe, Ellison, Baldwin and Cleaver is a clear indication of the novel's power;[5] no one reads it with detachment.

The first book of *Native Son* covers one day in the life of Bigger Thomas, from the time he awakens in the crowded, rat infested apartment which he shares with his mother, sister and younger brother, to the time he crawls back into bed before the following dawn. Part of the novel's power is that so much occurs in so short a period of time. Everything happens fast — before the reader is capable of disengaging himself. In *Native Son*, the reader participates as Bigger kills a rat, threatens to kill one of his gang, defiantly slashes the cloth of a billiard table even though the owner watches with a gun in his hand, and finally, smothers Mary Dalton, stuffs her corpse into a trunk which he carries down the stairs of a house he does not know, shoves it in a lighted furnace — chopping the head from the shoulders to achieve a perfect fit, and turns on the exhaust to remove the possibility of the smell of burning flesh. Book One is called "Fear," and fear is what attends Bigger in all of these acts. Forever frightened, he nonetheless lives dangerously. This entire day is spent in vacillation between his being paralyzed by his fear (as when he drives Mary and Jan to "Negro town") and his exaggerated acts to deny it. Fear is the controlling emotion of his life.

Had Wright ended his novel at the end of Book One (the short-story being the form that it would probably have taken), much of the

criticism directed against it would be irrelevant. Up to this point, he presents a character, in Bigger, who, alienated from all those around him is a viable study in the reaction to alienation. Bigger in Book One is a sullen, depressed, hostile individual. That he is not bright enough to articulate his frustrations (nor to think his way out of them) is obvious. He is a coward who cannot come to terms with his cowardice either intellectually or psychologically; but he senses that cowardice is a bad thing. He acts, in desperation, to disprove that cowardice.

Such would run the analysis of Bigger's character had Wright ended *Native Son* at Book One. Society, too, would have come in for its share of the blame for Bigger's plight: Whites, for their collective guilt in allowing Blacks to live under conditions that render shelter and food the dominant concerns of their lives and Blacks for their demonstrated selfishness and lack of concern for each other's well-being. Mrs. Thomas, for instance, lives in such fear of being dropped from the relief roll that she cannot see that Bigger is not capable of holding a job:

> "You know, Bigger, . . . if you don't take that job the relief'll cut us off. We won't have any food."[6]

She becomes a shrew who browbeats her son:

> "Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you, . . ." (p. 7)

Fear of starvation and eviction do not make for gentle mothers but rather for manipulating mothers. Mrs. Thomas is capable of cajoling:

> "If you get that job," his mother said in a low, kind of tone of voice, busy slicing a loaf of bread, "I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs." (p. 10)

She threatens:

> "Suppose you wake up some morning and find your sister dead? What would you think then?" she asked. "Suppose those rats cut our veins at night when we sleep. Naw! Nothing like that even bothers you! All you care about is your own pleasure! Even when the relief offers you a job you won't take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you! Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!"
>
> "You done told me a thousand times," he said, not looking around.
>
> "Well, I'm telling you agin! And mark my word, some of these days you going to wish you had made something out of yourself, instead of just a tramp. But it'll be too late then."

> "Stop prophesying about me," he said.
> "I prophesy much as I please! And if you don't like it you can get out. We can get along without you. We can live in one room just like we living now, even with you gone," she said.
> "Aw, for Chrissakes!" he said, his voice filled with nervous irritation.
> "You'll regret how you living some day," she went on. "If you don't stop running with that gang of yours and do right you'll end up where you never thought you would. You think I don't know what you boys is doing, but I do. And the gallows is at the end of the road you traveling, boy. Just remember that." (p. 8)

She is an exhibitionist martyr:

> "Lord, I get so tired of this I don't know what to do," her voice floated plaintively from behind the curtain. "All I ever do is try to make a home for you children and you don't care."
> "Aw, Ma," Vera protested. "Don't say that."
> "Vera, sometimes I just want to lay down and quit."
> "Ma, please don't say that."
> "I can't last many more years, living like this."
> "I reckon I'll be dead then. I reckon God'll call me home." (pp. 8-9)

Vera and Buddy, Bigger's sister and brother, are in their own ways as demanding and damning of him as is his mother. Vera, with her ready assurance to Mrs. Thomas that *she* will soon be able to work, that *she* will certainly get up to set the table, that *she* will go to sewing class and make "something" of her life, takes herself as seriously as she does precisely because by so doing she confronts Bigger with the fact that he will not allow himself to be taken seriously, and is, therefore, guilty of making nothing of his life. Condemnation by comparison is the game she plays. The anxieties and frustrations of the family's indigent life make her a near-hysterical wreck. All of her promises to save them from economic ruin when *she* is older are issued as much to shame her brothers into immediate action as they are out of love for the mother. Her super-conscious femininity is easily connected to what she sees as her older brother's lack of masculinity. This femininity-masculinity obsession (fraught with Bigger's sense of guilt) strains their relationship with feelings that border onto the sexual.

But it is Buddy's response to Bigger which is perhaps the most painful for him to endure. It is simple, straightforward "big brother worship" and nothing is worse than worship that is not warranted.

The weight of this responsibility on Bigger (who, obviously afraid that he cannot successfully shoulder it, rejects it) is the key to the relationship between himself and his family.

That Bigger cannot articulate his fear of responsibility but reacts to it rather subconsciously is the key to his relationship with his gang, with Doc of the poolroom, and later with the Daltons and Jan Erlone. Feeling guilty because of his inability to take responsibility for his family's welfare and sensing that fear of responsibility to be connected in some way to his manhood, Bigger withdraws from his family. He hates their presence as they conjure up unpleasant feelings in him.

> He went down the steps into the vestibule and stood looking out into the street through the plate glass of the front door. Now and then a street car rattled past over steel tracks. He was sick of his life at home. Day in and day out there was nothing but shouts and bickering. But what could he do? Each time he asked himself that question his mind hit a blank wall and he stopped thinking. (p. 11)

Thus isolated from his family, Bigger must cover these shortcomings in himself when with his gang. No one of them must suspect his cowardice. Over-compensating, he dares to do the most. It is Bigger who suggests that the gang rob Blum's store, who holds a knife to his friend Gus's throat and makes him lick it, and who, under the aim of Doc's gun, destroys his billiard table.

Bigger Thomas dares the most; but he is always scared. This is how his life is spent — taunt — from guilty, silent, nothingness to exhilarating, spine-tingling, ecstatic danger. Death in nothingness and life in danger:

> These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger — like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force. (pp. 24-25)

Ironically, the daring young Miss Dalton, who dangles Communism in her capitalist father's face like Bigger dangles the dead rat in Vera's: ("Bigger, do you belong to a union?", and her whiteness in Bigger's face: "You got a girl, Bigger?") is sealing her doom when she meets and flirts with Bigger. She has no way of knowing, of course, that she and Bigger are kindred spirits. She, as far at the top of the economic ladder as Bigger is at the bottom, can find no meaning in her life except through periods of "dangerous living." Like Bigger, she

seems incapable of anything but momentary flirtations with things she fears. She believes in the Communist cause, she insists, but she has rejected neither the comfort of her father's home nor her right to his money. One senses that she is as afraid of Communism as her father is. Her father shows his fear by running away from it; she defies her fears by challenging them — pretending they do not exist.

Mary and Bigger (once they are introduced to each other) spend the rest of her life through the end of Book One "challenging" fears. She, afraid of Communists, chooses one for her lover and sneaks to an assignation with him. She is afraid of black people, obviously, yet she insists on eating at a black restaurant. Mary Dalton is the most dangerous person that Bigger could know. Or, he is the most dangerous person that she could know. White woman that she is, Bigger (given his personality) will obviously be afraid of her and she (given her personality) will obviously fear him; and given both their propensities to react to what they fear through aggression, they will naturally seek to control each other. This means that the entrance of Mary Dalton into the novel signals Bigger Thomas' death as well as her own.

But to continue the story: When Bigger is invited to drink with Jan and Mary, he is afraid but accepts. Similarly, when he is invited (ordered) into the black restaurant to eat with them, he agrees to do so even though he is frozen with fear. Later, he is afraid to take the drunk Miss Dalton into the house; but he carries her upstairs to her room. Finally, he is scared by the fact of her death; but he executes her body's disposal as if he had plotted and practiced it a thousand times.

Except for a few instances of carelessness with details, Book One of *Native Son* is solidly, powerfully written and aesthetically acceptable. Irving Howe's suggestion that the characters are not characters but cartoons, his charges of melodrama and crudeness do not, indeed, apply to the novel thus far. A careful reader can glimpse, however, the faint beginnings of trouble for the novelist. One source of trouble is the character of Bigger himself. Wright goes to great lengths to present Bigger as an individual whose responses to life are more emotional than intellectual. He is a man of instincts, not of reason. Such a character must translate his feelings through his actions. Obviously not satisfied with Bigger's ability to communicate, Wright does it for him as the omnipotent author. And the omnipotent author gives us thoughts (supposedly Bigger's) that the author has already spent time convincing us that Bigger is incapable of thinking. This

mixture of Bigger as instinct and intellect is frustrating to observe. Here, for instance, is a Bigger whose mind is on top of his family situation:

> Vera went behind the curtain and Bigger heard her trying to comfort his mother. He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough. (p. 9)

And here is a Bigger not capable of fully comprehending that relationship except through feeling:

> He was sick of his life at home. Day in and day out there was nothing but shouts and bickering. But what could he do? Each time he asked himself that question his mind hit a blank wall and he stopped thinking.

The first Bigger is fully conscious and therefore detestable. The second Bigger is a victim and deserves our sympathies. Which Bigger is the protagonist of *Native Son*? That a fully conscious, twenty-year-old Bigger should engage in such an activity as "playing white" is incredible:

> "Let's play 'white,'" Bigger said, referring to a game of play-acting in which he and his friends imitated the ways and manners of white folks.
>
> "I don't feel like it," Gus said.
>
> "General!" Bigger pronounced in a sonorous tone, looking at Gus expectantly.
>
> "Aw, hell! I don't want to play," Gus whined.
>
> "You'll be court-martialed," Bigger said, snapping out his words with military precision.

That the second Bigger plays such a game is pathetic.

Burton Rascoe quickly points to his problem of the two Biggers as one of the flaws of the novel:

> If a character is conceived as being inarticulate and dumb about the economic and social forces which have (in your mind) been responsible for his social and moral delinquency, it is an artistic error to portray that character, at times, as being fully

> conscious of the "conditions" which have mentally and emotionally crippled him. It is an elementary principle not only of art but of moral law, of legal principle, and of common sense, that, if you are aware of yourself and of the factors under which you live, you are, *yourself*, responsible for what you do and you must accept that responsibility.[7]

Mr. Rascoe's point regarding Wright's schizophrenia in the presentation of Bigger is well made. He overstates his case, however. One senses that Mr. Rascoe is too much the critic who responds much too defensively in his criticism and says, finally, that Blacks are *not* going to make me feel responsible for their plight. They did it themselves: the old game of blaming the victim — a game that does not need to be further discussed here.

The Rascoe statement does, however, get at the core of Wright's problem in continuing his novel beyond Book One. Wright's aim seems not to vindicate Bigger (despite Max's unbelievable courtroom performance) but to suggest that an oppressive system (white America) must assume a large responsibility not only for the social conditions under which the Blacks live, but more specifically, for Bigger's actions. But this gets muddled somewhere between the pages of *Native Son*. Somewhere along the way Wright seems to have lost sight of the *precise* end or ends that his novel would serve. Is it his position that Bigger, the inarticulate, intellectually stunted, deprived Black is abandoned by white America and forced into the position from which he can only die or commit murder? Or does he wish to drive home the idea of an intellectually powerful and sensitive Black's desperate or triumphant nose-thumbing at white America? The two positions are different and should be treated differently. The two remaining Books of the novel bear-and-fail-under the burden of Wright's indecision. That indecision, I feel, is fostered, in large measure, by Richard Wright's "troubles" with Afro-American culture.

What to do about Afro-American culture was a real problem for Wright. In "Blueprint for Negro Writers," he urged black writers to accept the nationalistic implications of their lives not in order to encourage them, but to transcend them. He accused nationalism of being limited as a position from which American Blacks could gain any control over their lives because it provided no vision for the future and further suggested that his particular Communist vision was the only vision from which any hope of such control could possibly come. In "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" Wright dis-

cusses the need for black writers to break completely with the folklore, religion, and songs of black Americans. In addition, he cites the works of Alexander Dumas and Alexander Pushkin as artists whose "Negroness" was the least important thing about them, and thus their success. He had charged earlier, in "Blueprint for Negro Writing," that black writers as a group had

> been confined to humble novels, poems and plays, decorous ambassadors who go a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. These were received as poodle dogs who have learned clever tricks![8]

Wright challenged black writers to discontinue such "begging" tactics; and he set himself up as at least one writer who would not use them. Likewise, he would break with the debilitating black folk culture. And, he would transcend Black Nationalism to achieve a Communist vision in his fiction.

Native Son, if one takes seriously all of Wright's declared intentions for himself, inherited the responsibility of (1) not begging whites; (2) discrediting the culture of Afro-Americans as not having a functional value in the modern world; (3) advancing Wright's particular Communism; (4) addressing itself to the black masses; and (5) maintaining plausibility as art. The protagonist who would bear the major responsibility for all this would be a young, rather unintelligent black man. So burdened, that the manuscript for *Native Son* ever left Wright's desk is a marvel. That it continues to engross readers is a testimony to Wright's sheer genius; because Bigger Thomas, under Wright's direction, does attempt to fulfill all of the above requirements.

Book Two of *Native Son* is called "Flight." Bigger, having gone to his mother's apartment to sleep after Mary Dalton's death, awakens to begrudgingly assure his mother that he has accepted the Dalton job, exchange hostile words with his sister as usual, and engage in "men's talk" with his approving brother, Buddy. Buddy and Mrs. Thomas sense Bigger's trouble. His mother's anxieties are soon quieted by his acting; and Buddy is given money to divert his attention. Later, when he joins his gang of friends, Bigger magnanimously grants them gifts of cigarettes and money before he returns to the Dalton home. When the Daltons become aware of Mary's disappearance, Bigger skillfully convinces them that he is not involved and that Jan Erlone

might be. His lies are readily accepted by the Daltons. The stunted Bigger of Book One is replaced by a most skillful operator, indeed.

Freed of having to work that afternoon, Bigger leaves the Dalton home to visit his girlfriend Bessie. At Bessie's apartment his imagination is charged by Bessie's mention of the Leopold and Loeb case. There, adding extortion to murder, he plans to write the Daltons a note demanding ten thousand dollars for the return of Mary. The note will further implicate Jan Erlone and the Communist Party in its signature. He blackmails a reluctant Bessie into agreeing to help him carry out the plans for receiving the money. He returns to the Dalton home, effectively evades implicating himself in his responses to many questions by the Daltons and their detective, and then leaves the house to purchase pencil, paper and envelope for the kidnap note which he writes from Bessie's apartment.

All goes well for Bigger until, being questioned in the basement of the Dalton house, the furnace begins to smoke. Insisting that the ashes be removed immediately, the detective and the reporters move to assist the hesitating Bigger. They discover Mary's bones. In their excitement they ignore Bigger, who flees. Reaching Bessie's apartment, he concludes that she should not accompany him. He senses that she will be a bother to him in his flight, but he cannot risk leaving her behind. Hiding in an abandoned building, he rapes her, bashes her to death with a brick and shows no emotion as he drops her down an elevator shaft. Alone, Bigger gives his pursuers quite a chase before he is finally caught.

"Flight" is the perfect title for this second Book of *Native Son;* for, in a technical sense, this is the Book in which Bigger flees not only from the authorities, but from Richard Wright, his creator. He is more effective in eluding his creator than the authorities, however, inasmuch as he is finally captured by the lawmen, while Wright never regains his control. Wright has introduced Bigger as an inarticulate, rather dull character. In a word, he is what modern educationists would term educable — but barely. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born" Wright himself makes the point:

> I knew that I could not write of Bigger convincingly if I did not depict him as he *was*: that is, resentful toward whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed and unaccountably elated at times, and unable even, because of his own lack of inner organization which American oppression has fostered in him, to unite with the members of his own race.[9] (Wright's italics.)

This lack of "inner organization" was to be Wright's bane in Book Two. It proves an ingenious device to align the reader's sympathies with Bigger in Book One. In fact, that Bigger vacillates between the stupor of dullness and hysterical, irrational defiance is the only way a black reader can accept his actions in Book One.

In 1940, any but a mentally dull black man would know better than to carry a virtually unknown drunken white woman upstairs to her bedroom while her parents sleep in the same house. Any but such a black man would know better; and, knowing the consequences if caught, none would attempt it save one whose emotional instability was such that he sought out the dangerous and deadly for *no other reason* — no revolutionary reason, no reason of personal or racial vindication — no other reason than that the act itself gave pleasure.

Book Two of *Native Son* presents a Bigger who is, although still not verbal, a rather perceptive thinker. In Book One he suited Wright's purpose by being a black mind stunted by white oppression. Here, in Book Two, however, he has another role to play. He must reason his way out of the fix he is in. He certainly does not demonstrate any lack of "inner organization" here. His cramped life has not prevented the development of a highly developed consciousness.

Consider his thoughts as he plays innocent for Mrs. Dalton as she questions him about her missing daughter:

> "She took you to her room?"
>
> He did not want her to think that he had been alone in the room with Mary. Quickly, he recast the story in his mind.
>
> "Yessum."
>
> "I see. . . ."
>
> "Anything wrong, mam?"
>
> "Oh, no! I-I-I . . . No; there's nothing wrong."
>
> She stood in the doorway and he looked at her light-grey blind eyes, eyes almost as white as her face and hair and dress. He knew that she was really worried and wanted to ask him more questions. But he knew that she would not want to hear him tell of how drunk her daughter had been. After all, he was black and she was white. He was poor and she was rich. She would be ashamed to let him think that something was so wrong in her family that she would ask him, a black servant, about it. He felt confident. (p. 109)

And consider his observations of Bessie:

> Her voice had come in a whisper, a whisper he had heard many times when she wanted something badly. It brought to him a full

> sense of her life, what he had been thinking and feeling when he had placed his hand upon her shoulder. The same deep realization he had had that morning at home at the breakfast table while watching Vera and Buddy and his mother came back to him; only it was Bessie he was looking at now and seeing how blind she was. He felt the narrow orbit of her life; from her room to the kitchen of the white folks was the farthest she ever moved. She worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off; and when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led. It was her hankering for sensation that he liked about her. (p. 118)

Bigger perceives too much; too much, that is, to convince us that he is the Bigger of Book One. Obviously, it is Wright the interpreter who puts thoughts into Bigger's head. But while this may solve Wright's problem, it increases the reader's — and the novel's. For it is Bigger's vision that is essential. The way Bigger sees — perceives — himself is the axis on which the novel turns. How Bigger feels after Mary Dalton's murder is the thing that will make us judge him a victim or a victimizer — not what Wright feels, as in this instance: when Bigger and Bessie go out for a drink after he has killed Mary Dalton:

> He knew that he should have asked her to dance, but the excitement that has hold of him would not let him. He was feeling different tonight from every other night; he did not need to dance and sing and clown over the floor in order to blot out a day and night of doing nothing. He was full of excitement. (p. 120)

Clearly what we have here is Wright's philosophy of the culture's ineffectiveness. Dancing and singing are "clownish" meaningless acts to replace nothingness. The implication does not escape the reader. These other black people are dancing and singing only to blot out a day of horrible existence. Bigger has *done* something; he has chopped up Mary Dalton and put her in a furnace. He doesn't need to dance and sing.

When Malcolm Cowley writes of *Native Son* that Wright

> makes Bigger Thomas a human rather than a racial symbol — shows that he wrote an even better novel than he had planned.[10]

he touches on, as the saying goes, a raw nerve and takes the lid off a whole can of ironies. The first and most obvious is that Cowley obviously has some feelings that a character must be either a human or a racial symbol and that never the twain shall meet. All of which

urges one to posit the question of what, precisely, is a human symbol? A symbol of all humanity, yes. But one still feels the need to ask, when this symbol is a character, does all this clamoring for humanity mean that a character must have no clearly delineated feelings of identity with the race? Or, put differently, is it a fixed and irrefutable law that all racial identity be relinquished before one can be granted membership in the human race? A second irony is that, contrary to Malcolm Cowley's belief that Wright makes Bigger a human symbol as opposed to a racial symbol, both Wright and the novel itself work most diligently to make Bigger nothing if not the symbol of the race (which is why the lawyer Max pleads not for Bigger Thomas at his trial but for twelve million Blacks); and, this is the final irony: Richard Wright, a Black, seems dangerously close to Malcolm Cowley in his insistence that before Bigger could be human, he had to disassociate himself from the deadening and damning influences of his race and culture.

So far, we have seen Bigger rid himself of the need to dance and sing. Convinced of the debilitating qualities of black folk culture, Wright could not have his black character hampered by them. Bigger's first responsibility would have to be that he free himself of these hindrances. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born" Wright says that Bigger had been estranged from the religion and folk culture of his race "through some quirk of circumstance." A close reading of the novel reveals that the "quirk" was Richard Wright. He insisted, and rightly so, that black characters should not "go a-begging," pleading that they have a life "comparable to other people." Folk culture and religion hampered such rebellion.

Never does Wright or Bigger pose the possibility that one's folk culture can give some support, some basis, if you will, for the vision or the strength necessary to meaningful modern existence. Book Two wipes out the cultural "hindrances" for Bigger with alarming speed. Here is Bigger's response to his family's life:

> He felt in the quiet presence of his mother, brother, and sister a force, inarticulate and unconscious, making for living without thinking, making for peace and happiness, making for hope that blinded. He felt that they wanted and yearned to see life in a certain way; they needed a certain picture of the world; there was one way of living they preferred above all others; and they were blind to what did not fit. They did not want to see what others were doing if that doing did not feed their own desires. (p. 91)

This is pretty deep water for Bigger and Wright to be swimming in. One might point out to both of them that Mrs. Thomas and her two other children's yearning to see life in a certain way is borne out of the life they presently live. It is not unduly farfetched to consider that their present oppressive condition could foster in them a passionate desire to build a world where no such conditions could prevail. Slaves can have a firsthand knowledge of the evils of slavery and can become great champions of freedom for all. But not Bigger. Having killed Mary Dalton, he is alive (for the first time, we are told); and he is contemplating the stuff necessary for a positive life. He concludes not only that his folks do not have life, but that they do not *want* to have it; and that they unaware that they do not want it. Religion and puritan ethics (black style) have fostered all this blindness Wright feels. Bigger's people are content to accept anything, to demand nothing in this life. They look forward to another world.

> I got a home in dat rock
> Don't you see?
> I got a home in dat rock,
> Don't you see?

The spirituals are presented as being a begging man's garb, having in them nothing that inspires one to rebel. Clearly this is too narrow a reading of a group of songs that contain, in addition to the much cited yearning for another world, subtle and overt praise and threat of war.

> If I had my way, Lord
> If I had my way, Lord
> I'd tear dis building down.

Fast on the heels of Bigger's denouncement of his family comes his denouncement of black ghetto life in general, implying his revolutionary superiority to it:

> There were rare moments when a feeling and longing for solidarity with other black people would take hold of him. He would dream of making a stand against that white force, but that dream would fade when he looked at the other black people near him. Even though black like them, he felt there was too much difference between him and them to allow for a common binding and a common life. . . . never could they sink their differences in hope. (p. 97)

With these words, Wright loses Bigger forever, and undercuts his own hopes for literature by Afro-Americans. Bigger cannot hope to find

revolutionary support — solidarity from fellow Blacks. What good, one might ask, is a revolution if the people for whom it is waged, do not want it? Indeed, they *cannot* want it Bigger is saying. And, more importantly (because it is of a practical nature), with whom can Bigger identify now that he is so "aware and so alienated" from all other Blacks? Wright's aim was not to keep him isolated. The answer is obvious. With the white folks, of course — with the Communist Party specifically. And the Party (as Wright perceived it) would plead, not for Bigger, but for the stultified Afro-Americans — all twelve million — who, if we accept Bigger's and Wright's insights, are not capable of knowing, much less articulating their own aspirations for a full life. The "knee-pants of servility," the "bowing and curtsying to prove humanity" — "the begging" — that Wright detested in other black writers are not so far removed from *Native Son* as he would have it.

When Bigger achieves his "awareness" he makes no attempt to persuade other Blacks to his vision. The reader will remember that Bigger does not articulate his new sense of the world to those Blacks who visit him in jail. This fact reminds us that in none of the fiction by Wright is there a black character who articulates Wright's Communist vision to the masses in an effort to persuade them. In "Fire and Cloud" Reverend Taylor's speeches to his congregation do not quite fit the bill. He speaks to an audience whose one concern is whether he will lead them on the march against city hall. In "Bright and Morning Star" Wright *tells* the reader that Johnny-Boy and Sug have converted their mother to a Communist vision but we do not witness the process. In *Lawd Today* a black Communist submits to a verbal tongue-lashing in a black barbershop and disappears. Bigger will represent the black masses to Jan and Max in Book Three, but he cannot communicate with those masses. Recall that, in the beginning of the novel, he displays no small sign of interest in the movie *Trader Horn:*

> He looked at *Trader Horn* unfold and saw pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing. Those were smart people. . . . (p. 29)

The African scene, however wrongly portrayed, presents other Blacks and might be expected to hold Bigger's attention for the simple reason that they and he share a common hue. But not so; Bigger's mind slips away from the African scene to contemplate white folks, "laugh-

ing, talking, drinking, and dancing." And it is not a damnable thing for Whites to dance. They own the world. They are smart people.

Missing from Bigger is also the sense of his own beauty — and therefore the dignity that Jake Jackson feels in *Lawd Today* — a novel written before *Native Son* but which was published posthumously. Jake enjoys the Calumet Street gathering of black folks. The black girl who dances there receives his approval: "DO IT A LONG OLD TIME!" he shouts. The dancers at Paris Grill, however, are the object of Bigger's contempt. Only white people, dressed in white and black clothes, owning millions, could engage Bigger's attention. When Jake Jackson engages in Messianic utterings for his people,

> "A guy who wouldn't steal. . . ."
> ". . . and lie. . . ."
> ". . . and grab your woman when your back is turned."
> ". . . and who would know how to speak out all these things so folks'd understand 'em. . . ."
> ". . . and who wouldn't be scared!"
> "There'll be a man like that some day. . . ." [11]

he is demonstrating an acute awareness of his people's plight. He senses the need for a leader. Jake will be willing to follow that Man, he says. Bigger is convinced that his people "cannot sink their differences in hope." Nor, indeed, can he recognize that they know enough to hope.

Stylistically, Wright repeats in *Native Son* mistakes made earlier in his short stories. In his understandable hurry to make Afro-Americans free, he too hurriedly converts black preachers and black religious mothers to Communism ("Fire and Cloud" and "Down by the Riverside") and here he also totally separates Bigger from his black heritage. Consequently, Bigger moves and reacts, not in a familiar tradition, but in Wright's abstractions. Hence the schizophrenia of the writing. The reader bounces between Bigger's flat, thin, monosyllabic sentences and Wright's driving, uneven, weighty transcriptions of Bigger's mind. Bigger's vision is blocked from our view by the ever-present Wright. "Get away; let me see him for myself" one is tempted to say. But Wright could not do this; for then Bigger would have been on his own responding to his daily encounters out of lessons learned from a myriad of past experiences, not the least among which teachers would be his Afro-American heritage. In which instance, Bigger would be forced to find *some* positive aspects in that

heritage, some humanity. Given his convictions of the barrenness of all black culture, however, Wright had little choice but to control Bigger as he did.

The plot of Book Three of *Native Son* is soon told. Caught, Bigger is jailed. Characteristically, the newspapers hold nothing back in their editorials on the killer-ape who is a threat to civilized white folks. Wright uses much of the newspaper treatment of the Thomas Nixon case in Chicago as the basis for this sensational reporting of the news.[12] Jan Erlone brings Max to Bigger's cell. It is the Communist Max who pleads Bigger's case. The story line moves through the inquest, Bigger's confession, the trial and sentencing. Essentially, it is Max's defense of Bigger that dominates this final Book. It is called "Fate."

"Flight" presents a Bigger on the move through the ghetto. "Fate" brings the ghetto and suburbia to Bigger in his jail cell. Wright takes artistic liberties of some magnitude to achieve this effect; for among his visitors are none other than the parents of the murdered Mary Dalton and the State's Attorney. In fact, Reverend Hammon (the black preacher), Jan Erlone, Max, Attorney Buckley, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, Vera, Buddy, Mrs. Thomas, Gus, G.H. and Jack are in Bigger's cell at the same time. Bigger receives his callers tensely.

> Bigger's body was still with dread and indecision. He felt his mother's arms tight about him and he looked over her shoulder and saw Vera and Buddy come slowly inside and stand, looking about timidly. Beyond them he saw Gus and G.H. and Jack, their mouths open in awe and fear. Vera's lips were trembling and Buddy's hands were clenched. Buckley, the preacher, Jan, Max, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton stood along the wall, behind him, looking on silently. Bigger wanted to whirl and blot them from sight. (p. 251)

The technical mistakes pile up. We begin this passage seeing through Bigger's eyes: but at the end we see what Richard Wright sees, for Bigger would have no way of showing us with his eyes "Buckley, the preacher, Jan, Max, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton . . . along the wall, behind him looking on silently."

But Wright was not unaware of the unreality of the crowded jail; he makes confession of his awareness in "How 'Bigger' Was Born":

> The degree of morality in my writing depended upon the degree of felt life and truth I could put down upon the printed page. For example, there is a scene in *Native Son* where Bigger stands in

> a cell with a Negro preacher, Jan, Max, the State's Attorney, Mr. Dalton. . . . While writing that scene, I knew that it was unlikely that so many people would ever be allowed to come into a murderer's cell. But I wanted these people in that cell to elicit a certain emotional response from Bigger. And so the scene stood. I felt that what I wanted that scene to say to the reader was *more important than its surface reality or plausibility.*[13]

What, then, is the important emotional response that Bigger makes? Essentially none. He is no more rigid than at other times, he does not weep; nor does he laugh. Contrary to Wright's insistence that he was concerned with *Bigger's* emotional response, it is the response of his *visitors* to Bigger's murder that he concentrates on. Bigger sits (or stands from time to time), godlike, and in his stoniness justifies the superiority of his actions and responses to life (or Wright does it for him) over those of the people who come before him. Not characters, but cardboard stereotypes, Wright compares them, one by one, to his protagonist and judges them to be inferior. The black preacher's religion gets little tolerance:

> He had killed within himself the preacher's haunting picture of life even before he had killed Mary; that had been his first murder. And now the preacher made it walk before his eyes like a ghost in the night, creating within him a sense of exclusion that was as cold as a block of ice. Why should this thing rise now to plague him after he had pressed a pillow of fear and hate over its face to smother it to death? To those who wanted to kill him, he was not human, not included in that picture of Creation; and that was why he had killed it. To live, he had created a new world for himself, and for that he was to die. (p. 242)

His friends' response of awe and fear are condemned by Bigger's thoughts:

> . . . while knowing that Jack and G.H. and Gus were standing awkwardly in the doorway staring at him in curious disbelief — while conscious of all this, Bigger felt a wild and outlandish conviction surge in him: *They ought to be glad!* It was a strange but strong feeling, springing from the very depths of his life. Had he not taken fully upon himself the crime of being black? Had he not done the thing which they dreaded above all others? Then they ought not stand here and pity him, cry over him; but look at him and go home, contented, feeling that their shame was washed away. (p. 252)

And although he is not convinced by his mother's response to life and death, Bigger is gentle in his condemnation of her.

> Slowly, he stood up and lifted his hands and tried to touch his mother's face and tell her yes; and as he did so something screamed deep down in him that it was a lie. But his mother believed; it was her last hope; it was what had kept her going through the long years. . . . His hands finally touched her face and he said with a sigh . . .
>
> "I'll pray, Ma." (p. 255)

Reminiscent of Jesus, this black man of twenty, who has created himself through an act of murder, now comforts his mother at his death. Actually, the novel might well have ended here. Bigger, at this point, has pleaded his case much more effectively than Max will do later. But to end the novel here will cheat Wright of the time to introduce his Marxist-Communist vision. So far, he has certainly dealt a heavy blow to nationalistic tendencies in black life. Bigger must now be given his new vision.

Symbolically, Bigger is brought low by his old vision. "He rolled on the floor and sobbed, wondering what it was that had hold of him. Why he was here." (p. 264). His conversion is slow; but it comes. And Wright makes certain that the reader knows what Bigger is converted to. Consider the following passage:

> He lay on the cold floor sobbing; but really he was standing up strongly with contrite heart, holding his life in his hands, staring at it with a wondering question. He lay on the cold floor sobbing; but really he was pushing forward with his puny strength against a world too big and too strong for him. He lay on the cold floor sobbing; but really he was groping forward with fierce zeal into a welter of circumstances which he felt contained a water of mercy for the thirst of his heart and brain.
>
> He wept because he had once again trusted his feelings and they had betrayed him. Why should he have felt the need to try to make his feelings known? And why did not he hear resounding echoes of his feelings in the hearts of others? There were times when he did hear echoes, but always they were couched in tones which, living as a Negro, he could not answer or accept without losing face with the world which had first evoked in him the song of manhood. He feared and hated the preacher because the preacher had told him to bow down and ask for a mercy he knew he needed; but his pride would never let him do that, not this side of the grave, not while the sun shone. And Jan? and Max? They were telling him to believe in himself. Once before he had accepted completely what his life had made him feel, even unto murder. He had emptied the vessel which life had filled for him and found the emptying meaningless. Yet the vessel was full again,

> waiting to be poured out. But no! Not blindly this time! He felt that he could not move again unless he swung out from the base of his own feelings; he felt that he would have to have light in order to act now. (p. 264)

Bigger Thomas rises from the floor a full-fledged Communist — Richard Wright style — a style in which he does as much disservice to Communism as he has done to the black heritage in Books One and Two.

The trial itself adds nothing to the novel that Wright has not already said. It is as if Bigger is forgotten by his creator as he makes the courtroom a platform upon which capitalist America and Communism will engage in debate. When Bigger's verdict is announced, no reader is surprised. Absent from the trial is the tension found in Books One and Two. In fact, when Bigger is caught, the tension ends — and as tension is what gives the novel power, Book Three stands powerless, pseudo-philosophical, and dull. Try as he might, Wright cannot compellingly render Max's and the State's Attorney's speeches. With Bigger in the background, the trial lags. In fairness to Wright, one must admit the difficulty of his position. It is a *tour de force* to inject suspense into a trial when the outcome is known from the beginning. Even Bigger knows what his future holds:

> "Here," Max said. "Straighten your tie."
> Bigger tugged listlessly at the knot.
> "Now, maybe you'll have to say something just once, see. . . ."
> "You mean in the courtroom? . . ."
> "Yes, but I'll. . . ."
> Bigger's eyes widened with fear.
> "Naw."
> "Now, listen, son. . . ."
> "But I don't want to say nothing."
> "I'm trying to save your life. . . ."
> Bigger's nerves gave way and he spoke hysterically:
> "They going to kill me! You know they going to kill me. . . ."
> (p. 311)

Wright tries to compensate for the defeatist nature of the trial by dousing it with passion — in both Max's and the State's Attorney's speeches; but despite its being "full of sound and fury" it signifies, to the detriment of *Native Son,* nothing about the life of Bigger Thomas, its protagonist.

Actually, the problem with the trial is that it relates less to Bigger Thomas' specific crime than to a larger social issue of the condition of

twelve million black Americans. Wright was correct, of course, to have such concerns. But in this novel, readers have watched a specific black man commit two specific murders. What about him? Won't Max even pretend an interest in saving him? And this raises another question: Does Wright believe that Bigger is guilty of these crimes? Does he think that Bigger is innocent? If Wright brought Bigger all the way from his cramped flat through two murders in order to grant Max an opportunity to speak for twelve million black people (black people to whom Bigger bears no relationship), he has undercut his protagonist and tricked his readers. And, seemingly, this is precisely what he has done — for, once Bigger is jailed, Wright abandons him and concentrates on his Communist vision.

Max and Jan Erlone give Bigger "hope" through their Communism. Their vision of the world gives him a light by which to move. Because it does not demand that he beg, their vision is acceptable to him. The marriage seems a good one. At the final hour, however, one senses a strain between them. Bigger falters in his faith in Max.

> He could not talk. Max reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder, and Bigger could tell by its touch that Max did not know, had no suspicion of what he wanted, of what he was trying to say. Max was upon another planet, far off in space. Was there any way to break down this wall of isolation? . . . He had lived outside the lives of men. Their modes of communication, their symbols and images. Yet Max had given him the faith that at the bottom all men lived as he lived and felt as he felt. And of all the men he had met, surely Max knew what he was trying to say. Had Max left him? . . . His lips quivered and his eyes grew misty. Yes; Max had left him. Max was not a friend. (p. 353)

But even if Max has left Bigger, he will fight to hold on to the new vision. It has aligned him with men. Bigger's last words are a timid salute to one of those men.

> "Mr. Max. . . ."
> "Yes, Bigger." He did not turn around.
> "I'm all right. For real, I am."
> "Good-bye, Bigger."
> "Good-bye, Mr. Max."
> Max walked down the corridor.
> "Mr. Max!"
> Max paused, but did not look.
> "Tell. . . . Tell Mister. . . . Tell Jan hello. . . ."
> "Good-bye!"
> "Good-bye!"

> He still held on to the bars. Then he smiled a faint, wry, bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut. (p. 359)

"Hello" to Jan is Wright's way of indicating Bigger's indomitable spirit. It is also Bigger's salvation from complete alienation — he is connected finally with another human being. But it is artificial — too little, too late. Wright has not convinced us.

"*Native Son* was composed in great anger," Sterling Brown states, "but except for excessive melodrama and the Marxist lawyer's harangue explaining what Wright's powerful dramatic scenes had left clear, the anger was disciplined by craft." It seems clear to me that Brown's assessment of the novel is generous. Brown also informs us that

> A large audience, prepared by Dreiser and Farrell and depression naturalists, acclaimed *Native Son*; the Book-of-the-Month and the Modern Library selected it (the first choice in both instances of a book by a Negro).[14]

The influence of Farrell and particularly Dreiser on *Native Son* are apparent. Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* is an important model for the novel. But Wright did not use Dreiser well; for Clyde Griffiths' case is never forgotten by Dreiser although he is concerned with larger social issues. Skillfully, Dreiser manages to get to those issues *through* Clyde. Wright, on the other hand, cannot achieve this. Clyde Griffiths' trial is a real trial; but then the circumstances in the two stories are quite different. Clyde planned Roberta's murder, but did he or did he not actually commit it? Dreiser's lawyers have a specific issue that will indirectly attack American society at large. Wright's Max puts the cart before the horse, as it were, and attempts, through attacking the larger issues, to save Bigger. It does not work.

Naturalism, too, seems to have presented itself as a model to Wright. This, too, seems to have been unfortunate. Naturalism would certainly attract the sensitive, alert Wright whose work in Chicago and New York had brought him into direct contact with the severe lives of so many ghetto Blacks. But Naturalism, for all its being an enticing school for the depiction of life in the raw, is defeatist. It allows for no uplifting, saving force. It is ironic that Wright, intent upon freeing Afro-Americans, should lean so heavily on this way of presenting life. The irony is heightened when one observes Wright's insistence on the negativeness of the blues, black religion, and folk

culture; for these represent, if nothing else, creations by a people determined to avoid hopelessness. In them can be found positive forces for liberation, not only in the next world, but this one.

> The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need. . . .

Irving Howe's statement was in many ways prophetic. *Native Son* does indeed need qualifying. Perhaps, Howe, too, has had the time to do some qualifying of his position. Time must have shown him by now that he overrated *Native Son.*

NOTES

[1] Richard Wright, "I Tried to Be a Communist" in *The God That Failed* (New York, 1949), pp. 144-46. Here Wright claims to have become disenchanted as early as 1937. "Blueprint for Negro Writing" was written in 1937.

[2] Michael Fabre, "Wright's Exile" in *New Letters,* Volume 38, No. 2 (Winter, 1971), p. 137.

[3] Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons" in *Richard Wright's Native Son: A Critical Handbook,* ed. Richard Abcarian (California, 1970), p. 63.

[4] See Ellison, "The World and the Jug" in *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1953).

[5] Even Wright himself got involved, rather passionately, in a debate over the novel. His "I Bite the Hand That Feeds Me" and "Rascoe-Baiting" are responses to reviews of *Native Son* by David L. Cohn (*Atlantic Monthly,* CLXV) (May, 1940), pp. 659-61 and Burton Rascoe (*American Mercury,* 1 May, 1940), pp. 113-16. David Cohn's opening lines get right to his opinion of the novel: "Richard Wright, a Mississippi-born Negro, has written a blinding and corrosive study in hate." Burton Rascoe was no less passionate: "Sanely considered, it is impossible for me to conceive of a novel's being worse, in the most important respects, than *Native Son.*"

[6] Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York, 1940), p. 11. Subsequent pagination will appear in the text.

[7] Burton Rascoe's review of *Native Son* in *American Mercury.* Reprinted *Richard Wright's Native Son: A Critical Handbook,* ed. Richard Abcarian (Belmont, 1970), p. 86.

[8] Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," p. 51.

[9] Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," *Native Son* (New York, 1966), p. xxi.

[10] Malcolm Cowley, "Richard Wright: The Case of Bigger Thomas," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Native Son,* Houston A. Baker, Jr., ed. (New Jersey, 1970), p. 112.

[11] Richard Wright, *Lawd Today* (New York, 1969), p. 187.

[12] See Margaret Walker Alexander, "Richard Wright," *New Letters*, Volume 38, Number 2 (December, 1971), pp. 193-94.

[13] Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," pp. xxx, xxxi.

[14] Sterling Brown, "The New Negro in Literature," *The New Negro Thirty Years Afterward* (Howard University, 1955), p. 65.