THE DRAMATIZATION OF *NATIVE SON*: HOW "BIGGER" WAS REBORN

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In June of 1940, playwright Paul Green accepted a contract to dramatize Richard Wright's recently published bestseller, *Native Son*. During the summer, the two men worked together, outlining and developing what became the first draft of the play. The following spring the completed drama was produced on Broadway by John Houseman and Orson Welles. Naturally, there were a number of revisions between the first draft and the final version, but the story behind these revisions has remained somewhat a mystery. In a letter to one of Wright's biographers, Green outlined the details of the collaboration as he remembered them, though he cautioned that "I am sure that I don't remember too accurately many details of this association. I guess, however, that in the main things were as I report them here" (Paul Green to Constance Webb, 9 May 1967).[1] Green's disclaimer, however, has been largely ignored by literary critics and historians, who have failed to check his statements against the facts.

Fortunately, the events are fairly well documented. Green kept a good diary for most of his adult life, and the special collections of the University of North Carolina libraries contain hundreds of letters, telegrams, and papers relating to his life and work. A little digging proves Green's assessment fair: In the main, things were as he reported them, although some minor details were confused. (Green says, for example, that he asked Wright to share credit for the dramatization because "he had been so helpful." In fact, the joint authorship and division of royalties had been worked out in contracts signed at the beginning of the collaboration.) But as one searches for a clearer picture of how the novel became the play, it becomes apparent that Green was not the only person whose memory failed him.

In 1972, John Houseman published *Run-Through*, the second volume of his colorful and engaging autobiography. Prior to publication, a portion titled "*Native Son* on Stage" was excerpted for the special Richard Wright edition of *New Letters*, which was itself published in book form as *Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives*. Houseman originally had wished to dramatize *Native Son* himself and was disappointed that Wright chose Green instead. Throughout his account, Houseman complains bitterly of what he calls Green's "deliberate betrayal" of Wright's work, and portrays himself as the champion of Wright. He describes Green as a sort of

enlightened redneck, with a "perceptive and sensitive but essentially Southern, rural attitude toward the race problem in America" (*Run-Through*, 462). According to Houseman, Green was blind to the message of Wright's novel and forced his own naïve social theories onto the play. Rather than risk a public disagreement with Green, who was sympathetic to the Negro cause, Wright allegedly appealed to Houseman, who argued for strict adherence to the novel. Still, Houseman claims, Green refused to budge. Houseman says he then met secretly with Wright and together they began "transfusing the blood of the novel back into the body of the play" (*Run-Through*, 469), excising all deviations from the novel and completely rewriting the ending. It was his version, not Green's, that Houseman claims was performed to critical and popular acclaim the following spring (*Run-Through*, 472).

Exaggeration and half-truth, supported by a misleading chronology, form the backbone of Houseman's one-sided account. His claims are particularly insidious in that he mixes fact and fiction in such a way as to mislead even the informed reader. For example, Houseman claims to have secured the production rights on his own, then decided (much later) to "give" Orson Welles the job of directing it (*Run-Through*, 462-69). Houseman did, in fact, initiate the negotiations with Wright and his agent, Paul Reynolds, but it is evident from the correspondence between Wright, Green, Reynolds, and Houseman that Welles's immense publicity value was a critical factor in securing the production rights and that Welles was included early in the contract negotiations (Frank J. Sheil to Paul Green, 12 July 1940).

Likewise, Houseman and Wright did work together, mostly in early February 1941, during the two weeks before the play went into rehearsal. And, although they revised the final scene, most of their work involved cutting and fine-tuning Green's script. Houseman's chronology, however, implies that major revisions continued from late November 1940 through March 1941, and that Green attempted to enjoin the performance, an implication that is simply untrue (*Run-Through,* 468-72). In fact, Houseman himself had made veiled threats about delaying rehearsals until the script met with his approval (John Houseman to Paul Green, 24 December 1940).

Houseman's account would be of little concern if it were simply another unread book on the shelf. But as the only principal player to have published an account of the dramatization, his version has been enshrined as sacred truth and quoted *ad infinitum* in critical anthologies and biographies of Wright and Welles. It is unfortunate that writers who discount Houseman's credibility on some points readily accept his word on the *Native Son* dramatization. Two recent biographers of Welles, in discussing the disputed writing credit for *Citizen Kane*, convincingly demonstrate that Houseman's account is

distorted and exaggerated. Yet they both unquestioningly reproduce Houseman's story of "giving" Welles the directorship of *Native Son*.[2]

An even more disturbing form of Houseman's account appears in Michel Fabre's award-winning biography *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, one of the few critical works to discuss the *Native Son* dramatization at length. In a footnote to an otherwise evenhanded discussion of the play, Fabre quotes at length a letter from Houseman to Green in which Houseman offers his reactions to some of Green's proposed changes. Fabre dates the letter 23 October 1940, thus lending credibility to Houseman's claim that he and Wright began rewriting the script in late November. In fact, Fabre's "quote" is a paraphrase of a letter that Houseman wrote on 24 December 1940, which undercuts his claim to authorship. The incorrect date may simply be a careless mistake. But, like many others, Fabre appears to have taken Houseman at his word, and he may have adjusted the date of the letter to fit Houseman's chronology. Either scenario is possible, for this section of Fabre's book is plagued by a wide variety of errors, ranging from inaccurate bibliographic citations to misspelled names and false information.[3]

Because the authors' reminiscences and the secondary sources based on those reminiscences cannot be trusted, the only way to piece together a reliable account of the dramatization is to return to the manuscripts and correspondence actually written during the dramatization. In the following pages, I have attempted to reconstruct the events surrounding the dramatization of *Native Son* from the publication of the novel to the closing of the play and beyond. Wherever possible, I have provided specific documentation of the sources used to determine the sequence of events. I have indicated those places where I have relied on inference and deduction. My aim is not so much to draw conclusions about the play's artistic merits as it is to provide a reliable starting point for future studies of the play.

SPRING 1940

When Richard Wright's *Native Son* appeared on the literary scene on 1 March 1940, it became an instant critical and financial success. Reviewer Malcolm Cowley compared it with *The Grapes of Wrath*, which had taken the country by storm the previous year. Others saw *Native Son* as the literary heir to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. Wright's novel sold over two hundred thousand copies in its first three weeks and quickly jumped to the top of the best-seller lists.[4] With few exceptions, critics praised the novel's uncompromising realism, and it was the first work by a black author to be offered as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. As praise for the novel accumulated, so too did offers to adapt it to the stage.

Wright's agents in New York forwarded these offers to him in Mexico, where he was taking a long-awaited vacation. Most of the offers were unremarkable, but one from Paul Green immediately caught his attention. Rather than simply express admiration for the novel, Green also voiced concerns about what he perceived to be potential problems in adapting the novel to the stage, and suggested that the two writers work together during the dramatization. Green's plan fit nicely with Wright's own ideas about adapting the novel, as he explained in his response to Green:

> Some one [sic] who knows Negro life should do it, create the dramatic structure, etc. Then I'd like to be able to go over the script with them in relation to characterization, emphasis, and dialogue, etc. But the main job of casting the book into stage drama would be theirs (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 22 May 1940).

Wright had other reasons for wanting Green to do the dramatization. Green had developed an impressive reputation in the early 1920s as the author of many plays for the Negro theatre. His first full-length drama, *In Abraham's Bosom*, told the tragic story of one man's fight to overcome racial oppression and his own weaknesses as he struggled to build a school for Negroes. The play won the Pulitzer Prize in 1927. Wright had read Green's 1936 one-act play *Hymn to the Rising Sun* and was deeply impressed by its powerful depiction of racial brutality in a Southern prison camp. Wright fought for a production of the play during his tenure as publicity director of the Chicago unit of the Federal Negro Theatre, a New Deal program designed to relieve unemployment and promote American drama. "Indeed, I had to fight both Negroes and whites to get them to see that the play was authentic" (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 22 May 1940). Eventually, the play went into production, only to be banned as immoral by city officials, and Wright was forced to resign his position (Fabre, 131-33; Webb, 112-13).[5]

The experience left Wright feeling that Green was the kind of writer who could effectively manage a controversial character such as Bigger Thomas:

> Bigger Thomas, if put on the stage, will be a kind of character that many Negroes and whites will not like. But I think that a great deal of the danger can be avoided by making Bigger a character through whom the social forces of Negro and white life flow. Because of the many threads of Negro and white life you caught in your one-act play, and because of the kind of insight you displayed for the Negro character

> in that play, I think you can handle a boy like Bigger (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 22 May 1940).

Wright arranged to stop at Green's home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, on his return to New York from Mexico. There they could get to know each other and discuss the play in more detail.

By this time, offers had also been made to produce the play. Eventually, the production rights were secured by John Houseman and Orson Welles of the Mercury Theatre in New York. Welles was just completing work on *Citizen Kane* and was considered one of the most creative directors working at the time. Houseman had a long-standing relationship with the Negro theatre and, in 1935, had been selected, with Rose McClendon, as co-director of the New York unit of the Federal Negro Theatre (*Run-Through*, 175). In conjunction with Welles, the Harlem company had produced a series of highly acclaimed productions, including the famous "voodoo" *Macbeth*. Houseman had hoped to write the *Native Son* dramatization himself, and was disappointed when Wright chose Green (*Run-Through*, 462). Still, he recognized the artistic and financial value that a play such as *Native Son* would have, and he eagerly joined Wright and Green in Chapel Hill for their planning session.

The three men met on 21 June 1940 and set to work outlining the novel for dramatic study. By all accounts, the meeting was a huge success, and Wright and Houseman left for New York late the next afternoon (Paul Green, Diary, 21-22 June 1940). A few days later, Green received a letter from Paul Reynolds, Wright's agent in New York, that reiterated Wright's enthusiasm about the meeting and his desire to formalize their collaboration:

> Mr. Wright made it very clear in his talk with me that he wanted you to dramatize the book with him and no one else and that that was of paramount importance in his mind (Paul R. Reynolds Jr. to Paul Green, 25 June 1940).

Once Wright and Green had a contractual agreement, then Welles and Houseman could be legally committed as well. Houseman, who managed most of the business affairs of the Mercury Theatre, informed Welles of these plans on 25 June (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 26 June 1940). By mid-July, the contracts were signed.

SUMMER 1940

Paul Green first read *Native Son* at the suggestion of a friend, who thought that Green should do the dramatization. Green wrote that he found it "horrifying, brutal, and extraordinarily vivid. Reminiscent a bit of 'Crime and Punishment.' Doubt I could do anything with it" (Diary, 29 April 1940).

Green's uncertainty was due, in part, to his recognition of the difficulty in translating such a complex and violent work onto the stage. In his prefatory essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright explains that he had carefully and deliberately crafted his novel to make it "so hard and deep that [the reading public] would have to face it without the consolation of tears" (xxvii). To "enclose the reader's mind," he had used a limited point of view, "restrict[ing] the novel to what Bigger saw and felt, to the limits of his feeling and thoughts, even when I was conveying *more* than that to the reader" (xxxii, Wright's italics). Green surely recognized that the highly subjective viewpoint of Wright's novel would be lost on the stage, where the audience would be physically detached from the action and would form their opinions based on what they saw, not on what Bigger saw.

This difficulty points to a larger, more fundamental problem: Although Wright's novel is highly dramatic, much of its energy is focused on exploding racial myths and stereotypes. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright says he never worried about the plot because he had "spent years learning about Bigger, what had made him, what he meant; so, when the time came for writing, *what had made him and what he meant* constituted my plot" (xxvii, Wright's italics). In other words, the character's actions are less important than the motivations behind those actions and the consequences which result from them.

The scope of the problems facing Green is perhaps best illustrated with an example. In the opening scene of the novel, we see Bigger quarreling with his mother, who wants him to take on more responsibility for the family. The narrator then goes on to explain that:

> 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 (13-14).[6]

Without the narrative explanation, we see only a lazy, inconsiderate, disrespectful young punk causing his family unnecessary mental anguish. The dramatist faced a serious problem. If the audience felt no sympathy for Bigger in the relatively restrained opening scene,

how would they feel about him as a rapist and murderer? How could he elicit understanding for a character whose actions were so violent and seemingly devoid of "conscience"?

Although Wright said he could offer "no explanation [for Bigger's violence] based upon a hard and fast rule of conduct," he did feel that "in many respects his emergence as a distinct type was inevitable" ("How 'Bigger' Was Born," xiii). Bigger was the product of "a highly geared world whose nature was conflict and action, a world whose limited area and vision imperiously urged men to satisfy their organisms, a world that existed on a plane of animal sensation alone" (xix). In a world that denied him the means to create, Bigger could find self-definition only through acts of destruction.

But Wright also recognized that putting Bigger on the stage would force some changes; in fact, his statement that Green could increase audience understanding "by making Bigger a character through whom the social forces of Negro and white life flow" implies that he wanted some changes (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 22 May 1940). Green acknowledged the power of environment to shape one's character, but he rejected the notion that Bigger was reduced to the level of an animal. He envisioned the play as a classical tragedy, in which Bigger Thomas was not merely the victim of circumstance, but an active participant in his own downfall. In addition, he believed that by the end of the play "Bigger Thomas should come to the realization that he was at least partly responsible for the character he was and therefore had some responsibility for the fate that fell upon him" (Paul Green to John Houseman, 30 June 1973).

Green felt that such a realization was fundamental to all human beings, that human nature included an awareness of one's own free will, and that "in the original book-ending Wright's material was failing this truth." Therefore, as part of his agreement to do the dramatization, Green required that "Bigger Thomas grow through his stretch of endurance and not just suffer" (Paul Green to John Houseman, 30 June 1973).[7] The exact date and details of this agreement are not documented, but there is little reason to doubt its existence. During the dramatization, Green was in constant contact with Wright and made no substantive changes without his approval.

Wright arrived in Chapel Hill around 9 July, and the two men went to work almost immediately. Green had arranged with the University of North Carolina to have office space on campus, where they could work comfortably during the hot summer months.[8] Working from the outline that they had pieced together earlier, they would talk through each scene, toying with new possibilities as they arose. When they had worked out the ideas, they would rough out the dialogue, often using passages from the novel. Finally, they would dictate the entire scene and make revisions from the typescript (Campbell, 22-23).[9]

According to Ouida Campbell, who served as secretary during the collaboration, the characterization of Bigger was the greatest problem for Wright and Green. Bigger's intense hatred was the driving force of Wright's novel, but it made him an unsympathetic presence on-stage (Campbell, 22). In order to gain the audience's sympathy for Bigger, Green felt it necessary to soften his character and reduce the amount of on-stage violence. In changing such potentially horrifying scenes as the dismembering and burning of Mary Dalton's body and the bludgeoning to death of Bessie, Green saw the opportunity to make Bigger less monstrous and more desperate.

For the murder of Mary Dalton, Wright and Green decided to cast the scene as Bigger's nightmare remembrance. Doing so would serve several purposes: It would lessen the shock to the audience by removing the murder (and a sexually charged interracial scene) one step from reality; it would effectively demonstrate Bigger's psychological torment; and it was more interesting from a dramatic standpoint. Wright had given the scene a drunken, dreamlike quality in the novel, placing the "shadowy form of a white bed" in a room draped in "hazy blue light" (83-86). Mrs. Dalton is repeatedly described as a ghostlike "white blur floating in the shadows of the room" (85). When he sees her, Bigger is seized with a hysterical terror, "as though he were falling from a great height in a dream" (84). And after Mrs. Dalton leaves the room, Bigger is described as feeling "that he had been in the grip of a weird spell and was now free" (86).

Despite his own progressive views, Green was sensitive to the public's sense of "decency," and he attempted to convey the sexual tension of the murder scene with a minimum of sexual contact.[10] Wright agreed. His experience in Chicago had taught him that, although some controversy might help a play, too much might kill it altogether. In the novel, Bigger becomes sexually aroused by the touch and scent of Mary's body (80-83). Her own arousal is less pronounced, but she offers no resistance as he kisses her and fondles her breasts (84). In the play, it is Mary who is the aggressor, stroking Bigger's hair and touching his cheek, drunkenly contemplating their mutual lostness as he struggles to free himself (MS1, I.iv.4-5).[11] But Bigger is unable to let go, both for fear that Mary will fall and because he is strangely fascinated by the things that she is saying. Mary passes out in his arms, crying for her mother, and "for a moment Bigger does not move." Finally, in a strange mixture of attraction and repulsion, he kisses the unconscious girl, crying out "I lost too--like you--dunno where to go--nothing but darkness to take me home" as he "jerks his face away" (MS1, I.iv.5). Bigger then carries Mary to her bed, where he kneels for a moment in prayerlike supplication to Mary--first "Miss Mary" but then "Mary--mother of Jesus hanging on the wall," a reference to the religious painting on the wall of his

mother's tiny apartment (MS1, I.iv.6). As Bigger rises to leave, he hears Mrs. Dalton approaching and calling to Mary. To prevent Mary from crying out again, Bigger covers her face with a pillow. By the time Mrs. Dalton leaves the room, Mary has suffocated.

The rest of the scene deviates only slightly from the novel. Naturally, the play version relies more on spoken passages to express Bigger's fear and panic as he realizes that Mary is dead. And the play does not include the gruesome dismembering and burning of her body. The roar of the furnace is sufficient to indicate Bigger's intentions as he awakens, terrified, from his dream.

In the scenes with Bessie, Bigger's girlfriend, Wright and Green made similar modifications to paint Bigger in a more favorable light. Wright had drawn Bessie as a pathetic figure, hiding from the reality of her pitiful existence in an alcoholic haze, enduring Bigger's abuse because he keeps her from being alone. She tries to break away after he admits that he killed Mary, but he threatens to kill her if she doesn't help him escape. Hiding in the cold and darkness of an abandoned building, Bigger seems to show a compassionate side as he draws her near. Instead, he rapes her. And as she drifts off into a troubled sleep, Bigger concludes that Bessie's life is endangering his own. Then, in what may be the most brutal and horrifying scene of the novel, Bigger takes a brick and pounds her head into a bloody pulp:

> He lifted the brick again and again, until in falling it struck a sodden mass that gave softly but stoutly to each landing blow. Soon he seemed to be striking a wet wad of cotton, of some damp substance whose only life was the jarring of the brick's impact (222).

When he is certain that she is dead, he drops her body down an air shaft. The death of Mary Dalton had been accidental, the burning of her body an act of panic. But here were no mitigating circumstances. This was cold-blooded, premeditated murder.

In the play, Wright and Green portrayed Bessie as less pathetic and more tragic. She is supportive and steadfast; even as she and Bigger hide in the abandoned building, she fusses over him, urging him to eat something and to keep warm. Bigger, too, is less abusive, though he still treats Bessie with indifference. In the play, there is no rape, only soul searching as Bigger imagines himself a kind of black god whose crime has empowered both himself and black people everywhere (MS1, II.iii). And, most significant, Bigger does not kill Bessie. She is accidentally shot to death by the police as they close in on Bigger.

The first draft of the play also included a second scene in the bedroom of Mary Dalton, where the police have reconstructed the

crime in an attempt to force a confession from Bigger. Although this scene did nothing to advance the plot, it provided the dramatic equivalent to the novel's sensational newspaper accounts, which Wright had used to convey the societal prejudices and assumptions that convicted Bigger long before he set foot in a courtroom. Furthermore, it illustrated the coercive tactics used by the police to obtain information from "uncooperative" Negro boys. Wright had described this stereotypical situation in "How 'Bigger' Was Born":

> A crime wave is sweeping a city and citizens are clamoring for police action. Squad cars cruise the Black Belt and grab the first Negro boy who seems to be unattached and homeless. He is held for perhaps a week without charge or bail, without the privilege of communicating with anyone, including his own relatives. After a few days this boy "confesses" anything that he is asked to confess, any crime that handily happens to be unsolved and on the calendar. Why does he confess? After the boy has been grilled night and day, hanged up by his thumbs, dangled by his feet out of twenty-story windows, and beaten (in places that leave no scars--cops have found a way to do that), he signs the papers before him, papers which are usually accompanied by a verbal promise to the boy that he will not go to the electric chair. Of course, he ends up by being executed or sentenced for life (xxviii).

Wright shows this type of coercion in the novel when Buckley, the state's attorney, forces Bigger to sign a lengthy confession (281-88), and when the police take Bigger to the Dalton house and urge him, under the watchful eyes of the news media, to "show us just what happened that night" (310-12).

The play, too, followed the routine outlined by Wright. Before Bigger is subjected to the re-enactment, he is interrogated by Buckley and Britten, a private investigator. When their leading questions fail to trap Bigger, and Britten's physical abuse fails to frighten him, Buckley casually lifts the window curtains and looks outside:

> BUCKLEY Bigger, there's a crowd of people gathered in the streets. You want to talk, or don't you want to talk? (*His voice is hard and metallic*)
> BIGGER. They can't hurt me.
> BUCKLEY. If we turned you loose out there--you'd find out.
> BIGGER. They can't hurt me.
> BRITTEN. My God, he is nuts (MS1, II.iv.8).

This, too, failing, they proceed with the re-enactment.

Buckley's ghoulish re-creation of the crime, complete with a wax figure of the dead girl, was based in part on the courtroom re-enactment in the novel, in which Buckley has a group of workmen transport the furnace from the Dalton basement and reassemble it in the courtroom:

> Buckley [then] had a white girl, the size of Mary, crawl inside of the furnace "to prove beyond doubt that it could and did hold and burn the ravished body of innocent Mary Dalton; and to show that the poor girl's head could not go in and the sadistic Negro cut it off." Using an iron shovel from the Dalton basement, Buckley showed how the bones had been raked out; explained how Bigger had "craftily crept up the stairs during the excitement and taken flight" (352).

In the play, Buckley carefully reconstructs the murder scene based on information recorded in Bigger's cell as he talked in his sleep. A movie camera is provided to capture Bigger's confession, or, as Buckley notes, "if he doesn't talk we'll have a picture of his actions. We'll show that to the Court" (MS1, II.iv.4). Buckley narrates for Bigger the events of the murder, complete with visual and sound effects. Bigger resists at first, but is slowly drawn in by the sound of his own voice and the sight of the "sleeping" girl:

> BIGGER. (*As if impelled by a force beyond his control, Bigger moves slowly towards the figure. Whispering, as if timidly waking a sleeping child*) Miss Mary, Miss Mary-- (*A note of joy dawns in his voice*) It's you--It was a dream. That is right, and you ain't dead. You are just sleeping, sleeping. (*His face caught in a breaking light*) Thank God! Thank God! (MS1, II.4.11-12)

But Bigger's illusion (and possibly his mind) is shattered as he reaches out and touches the cold hand of the figure on the bed.

> BIGGER. Your little hand is cold, cold. (*Leaning over her--horrified*) You is dead! That ain't you. (*Holding his manacled hands in front of his face*) Hide it from me--hide-- (*Shrieking*) And I killed her--and I killed her--and she's burned up in that furnace--and gone forever--take me away-- (MS1, II.iv.12).

Buckley has his confession, and the play moves on to the courtroom scene.

As stated above, the re-enactment scene was both sensational and, in terms of the plot, repetitious. But sensationalism and repeti-

tion were part of the point of this scene. In the novel, Wright had illustrated the public's lurid fascination with Bigger's case at the coroner's inquest, where the raped and mutilated body of Bessie was exhibited not to convict Bigger of those crimes, but as "evidence" in the Mary Dalton case (305-07). In the trial scene of the novel, Wright demonstrated the prosecution's overkill with a seemingly endless parade of witnesses: Fifteen newspapermen, five handwriting experts, six doctors, four colored waitresses who knew Bigger, two of his former teachers, his best friends, sixteen policemen, five psychiatrists, Jan Erlone, and the entire Dalton family--sixty people in all--are called to the stand in order to convict a young man who has entered a guilty plea (350-52). The re-enactment scene of the play, sensational and repetitious though it was, managed to convey at least a sense of the impossible odds facing someone like Bigger.

The "first working draft," twelve scenes in two acts, was finished on 12 August, and Wright returned to New York. In addition to the scenes discussed above, the new script contained several other noteworthy changes. The left-wing defense attorney, Boris Max, and Mary Dalton's communist boyfriend, Jan Erlone, had been blended into one character. Bigger had gained a thoughtful, introspective side and an awareness of his own humanity, though he had delusions of grandeur that hinted at a sort of schizophrenia. In the final scene in the death cell, Jan's probing questions begin to penetrate Bigger's hard, protective shell, and Bigger concludes that he hadn't wanted to kill Mary: He killed her because that is what the white people say black people are supposed to do:

> BIGGER. Seem like I heard voices, saw things. Yeh, heard voices--talking to me telling me all the things they say about us in this world all the terrible things they say we do--seem like something made me act, made me behave just the way they say we black folks behave--and I was two people, two folks inside me like somebody else walking inside my shoes, some other arms inside my arms, made me go to the bed, made me take that pillow--yeh, like I was dreaming or something--and doing things in a dream I didn't want to do (MS1, II.vi.5-6).

Jan's faith in humanity is thus restored, and he remarks that "no man is really bad if left alone--he wants the good, he wants to go up, wants to mean something" (MS1, II.vi.6). But Bigger is confused by Jan's remarks and tries to place his own life within their context:

> BIGGER. Now it come clear! I see it. [A]ll the peoples and all the killings and the hangings and the burnings, inside

> me, kept pushing me on--up and on to do something big--something great--to keep my head up . and all the bad I done--it was right (MS1, II.vi.7).

Killing Mary was his only chance "to do something big," and he is glad that he did it. Jan/Max is left to implicitly posit "the truth," as Bigger slips into insanity, that the Bigger Thomases of the world can be changed only if the world itself changes.

They had hurried to finish the first draft while Wright was still in Chapel Hill, and Green, apparently dissatisfied with the final scene, marked the manuscript "Ending to be changed."

FALL 1940

The "first rough working draft," as the authors called it, was completed in a little more than one month. But it would be many more months before the play was ready for production. During the fall of 1940, Green devoted much of his energy to revising and improving the play. He made several trips to New York, where he and Wright continued to work on the script, first in Green's hotel room, and later in an office at Harper's. Some of the hotel guests, it seems, had complained about a black man riding the elevator up to the guest rooms (Diary, 29 September 1940; Paul Green to Constance Webb, 9 May 1967).

When the first draft was completed, Wright and Green had assembled a two-page list of "correction notes" as a starting point for revisions. The notes offered a scene-by-scene analysis of the play, providing both such specific stage directions as "Mrs. Dalton should greet Erlone" (I.iii) and such general items as "characterize Vera more" (I.i). Still, both men realized that potential changes to the final scene would be the most significant--and the most troublesome.

The ending already had proved to be difficult. Of the novel, Wright said, "At last I found out how to end the book; I ended it just as I had begun it, showing Bigger living dangerously, taking his life into his hands, accepting what life had made him" ("How 'Bigger' Was Born" xxxiii).

But one might argue that, whether or not Bigger accepted what life had made him, his life had been taken out of his hands when the court sentenced him to death. Green was determined that the play should end with Bigger accepting not "what life had made him," but "that he too as a human being had participated in his own fate," and this meant giving Bigger some kind of choice.

In their notes, Wright and Green had outlined several new options: "Possibility of Mrs. Dalton appearing in final scene, perhaps through her husband's power having secured a reprieve for Bigger. A question of Bigger's possible suicide" (Correction Notes for First Working Draft).

Wright had mentioned a failed reprieve in the novel (381-84), but only as a means of conveying the hopelessness of Bigger's position. Green saw a successful reprieve as the means by which they could once again make Bigger the master of his own fate. But, having done so, would Bigger's suicide provide a meaningful--or plausible--conclusion to the play?

There are countless examples of heroic/tragic suicide throughout literary history, from Antigone and Brutus to Othello and Anna Karenina, with reasons for their deaths as varied as the examples. There was no question that Bigger's suicide could provide a powerful and meaningful ending to the play, but was it something that he actually might do? To answer this question, Green returned to Wright's novel for clues about Bigger's psyche.

As mentioned above, the opening scene of the novel shows Bigger "acting tough" to disguise his tremendous fear. The narrator then explains that "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" (14).

In the novel, the killing comes first. Mary's death terrifies Bigger, but it makes him feel alive. He doesn't know why; he knows only what he feels. Similarly, Bigger views Bessie's murder as necessary self-preservation: "He would have to kill her. It was his life against hers" (222). Later, after he is captured, Bigger realizes the futility of his struggle and that he can never be a part of the world around him:

> The feelings of his body reasoned that if there could be no merging with the men and women about him, there should be a merging with some other part of the natural world in which he lived. Out of the mood of renunciation there sprang up in him again the will to kill. But this time it was not directed outward toward people, but inward, upon himself. Why not kill that wayward yearning within him that had led him to this end? He had reached out and killed and had not solved anything, so why not reach inward and kill that which had duped him? (255)

Green was convinced that suicide was a definite possibility with Bigger. Wright, too, was receptive to the idea, as he indicated in a letter to Green: "The more I've thought of your idea of ending the play with Bigger killing himself, I like it. . If you'd like my working with you to complete the ms., just say so (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 3 October 1940). Green continued to work on the script, but for the most part, he worked alone.[12]

During the fall, Wright and Green kept Houseman informed of their progress. At the end of November, Green visited New York, where he met with Houseman and continued typing and revising the

first draft script (Diary, 25 November 1940). At this time, it seems, he also gave copies of the unfinished script to both Houseman and Wright. Wright wrote to Green the next week saying, "I've been ill with a cold and have not had time to read the ms" (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 2 December 1940). Houseman, too, was prevented from replying immediately, as he was in rehearsal with another play. But by Christmas, he had read it "a number of times": "Generally speaking, I liked it when you read it to me that day in New York long ago, and I like it now just about the same. Indeed, I do not see that it has changed to any considerable degree since that day" (John Houseman to Paul Green, 24 December 1940).[13]

Although he had been passed over for the job of dramatizing the novel, Houseman undoubtedly still had his own ideas about how the play should be presented. In a detailed letter to Green, Houseman explained that he felt that the murder scene would be stronger if it occurred "in a scene of reality and not a scene weakened by the gauzes and hazes of a theatrical dream world." He disliked the idea of combining Jan and Max, mainly because he felt that Jan lacked "the weight necessary for the courtroom scenes and the last act together." More significantly, he felt that the reprieve and suicide were implausible and seemed to prove "something entirely different from Wright's conclusion in the novel." He believed that the play should end with Bigger's version of "the truth" (that his life had no meaning before he killed; that he killed because he wasn't allowed to live), and that the audience should be left to sort out the truth for themselves. Houseman ended his letter by rather pointedly remarking that

> years of bitter experience have forced me to a determination not to place a play in production until the script is as near complete and perfect as I believe possible. I would like to produce *NATIVE SON* as soon as I am through with my present work, which should be by the end of January. However that means that the script would have to be completed some weeks before that. Wright, I believe, is also upset by the delays and feels that he has lost a great deal of time and does not want the matter to drag on much further. I know how terribly busy you are yourself. What do you think we should do about it? (John Houseman to Paul Green, 24 December 1940)

Wright was indeed upset by the delays. He had expressed his concern a few weeks earlier in his brief but desperate note to Green:

> I [had] a long talk with Houseman. His attitude seems to be this: He is absolutely opposed to any consideration of

> rehearsals until after the play is finished. I'm almost positive that he'll not back down from this position. What do you suggest? (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 2 December 1940)

At the time of these letters, several scenes were still under revision, but Houseman's thinly veiled threat to hold up the production until the script met with his approval was something neither Wright nor Green had anticipated. They expected Houseman to produce the play as they had written it, not according to his own set of guidelines.

Houseman's letter highlights a serious misunderstanding in the *Native Son* collaboration. The contracts had outlined such details as the division of royalties and time limitations on the collaboration, but it did not provide specific job descriptions for the people involved. Each man understood his primary function, but secondary responsibilities were unclear. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright said, "in the writing of scene after scene I was guided by but one criterion: to tell the truth as I saw it and felt it" (xxx).

Any of the men involved with the *Native Son* production might have said that: Wright, Green, Houseman, or Welles. Each man had his own idea of what that truth was, and each man believed that he had ultimate authority for what appeared on stage.

WINTER 1941

Green was understandably disturbed by Houseman's threat to delay rehearsals. But, because he too was not yet satisfied with the draft version of the play, he decided to continue with his revisions in hopes that the finished product would be something upon which they could all agree. He divided the new script into a three-act format, roughly corresponding to the "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate" sections of the novel. In an effort to trim the play to a reasonable length, he cut the scene at Ernie's Kitchen Shack, where Jan and Mary force Bigger to eat with them. To appease Houseman, he removed the dream sequence from the murder scene, though most of the dialogue and stage directions remained the same. (This did not involve a lot of cutting since the dream portions formed a frame around the murder scene.) The police re-enactment scene was also removed, though in its place Green created a new scene of psychological drama.

The new scene was set in the anteroom of the state prison a week after Bigger's capture, where the resurrected lawyer, Max, tries to understand Bigger and prepare some grounds for his defense. Much of the scene is transcribed from the similar scene in the novel, where Jan and Max ask Bigger about his childhood, his dreams, his ambitions in life, his hatred of Mary, his abandoned faith, and his future (320-32). Bigger's answers point invariably and inevitably to death: "We are whipped," he says, "our throats is cut before we are born" (MS2, III.i.5).

The scene also included elements of Green's first draft. Bigger's "seem like somebody else inside me" speech was borrowed from the death scene, and his vision of himself walking high and free among the clouds was taken from the scene with Bessie (now "Clara").[14] But, whereas in the earlier draft Bigger's words had pointed to insanity (he shouted them defiantly as the police closed in), now they were tragic, spoken "half to himself" as he contemplated something he would never have:

> I wanted to be free, to walk wild and free with steps a mile long--over the fields, over the river and straddling the mountains--something in me--Yeh, cry out my words over the roof tops, over the valleys, put my name on the hot wires of the world-- (MS2, III.i.8).

As Bigger's family arrives, the scene shifts to a sort of religious revival when his mother and the black preacher, the Reverend Hammond, "set their God on Bigger's lost but unyielding soul" (Diary, 1 January-1 March 1941). Here, too, Green patterned the scene after passages in the novel (262-69), though he wrote most of the dialogue in standard English, not the heavy dialect that Wright had used. Green also added the spiritual "Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit." The preacher begins the song but then is joined by members of the family. The song builds in intensity and volume until, "The group crowds up closer around Bigger. He springs to his feet, his face working in a convulsion of anger and grief."

> BIGGER. Let me alone! Let me alone! (MS2, III.i.17)

The scene ends as the guard clears the room and Bigger tears the cross from his neck, throwing it to the floor.

Green also reworked the final scene, hoping to produce something close enough to the novel to please Houseman, but with some sort of moral responsibility for the individual. Drawing from his previous efforts, Green pieced together a final scene in which Bigger comes to understand that what he did was wrong, though his desire to leave his mark in the world is natural to all men. In this sense, the play began to acquire the tragic dimensions that Green first envisioned: The protagonist is placed between two overwhelming yet irreconcilable forces, thus creating a situation that ultimately ensures his demise. Wright, too, had described this phenomenon:

> [H]e was trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life.

> But because the blacks were so *close* to the very civilization which sought to keep them out, because they could not *help* but react in some way to its incentives and prizes, and because the very tissue of their consciousness received its tone and timbre from the strivings of that dominant civilization his emergence as a distinct type was inevitable ("How 'Bigger' Was Born," xii-xiii, Wright's italics).

The bulk of the final scene is devoted to introspective dialogue between Bigger and Max, much of which is taken directly from the novel (385-92). Green, however, added a few lines here and there to indicate that Bigger had accepted responsibility for his actions, and that his actions were morally wrong:

> BIGGER. (*Now shouting again as he reaches out and holds [on] to Max's hand*) I didn't want to kill. But whatever it was made me do it must have been right or I wouldn't have done it. What I killed for must have been good, *and it was only the killing that was wrong*. I didn't really come alive until I felt things hard enough to kill for them. It's the truth, Mr. Max, and it makes me feel better to feel that way. Yeh, almost makes me feel right when I look at it that way (MS2, III.iii.9, emphasis added).

Green also added an extra piece to the end of the scene. As he says his farewell to Max, Bigger laments the fact that he will die having done "nothing really right yet, nothing really big," and asserts that "When a man's life ain't right, don't fit in, he ought to do something to make it right" (MS2, III.iii.10). As he is being led to the electric chair, Bigger sees his chance and snatches a pistol from an inattentive guard:

> BIGGER. (*Exultantly*) Yeh. The last minute I saw it--the chance to do something big, something right. For you, Mr. Max, I prove myself. See, I don't kill anybody. I could shoot you all down, but I don't. I don't hate you. Another man I got to kill. (*With a cry*) Goodbye, Mr. Max. (*He shoots himself through the breast. He staggers and then falls slowly down on the cot. Max bends over him, his voice breaking in grief*)
> MAX. Bigger! -- Son.
> BIGGER. (*Mumbling*) Goodbye. It's all right now, Mr. Max. Tell everybody it's all right (MS2, III.iii.11).

The scene fades out with Max and the guards standing helplessly over the cot. One is reminded of Wright's words, "Bigger living

dangerously, taking his life into his hands," though here he is clearly refusing to accept what life had made him.

Green finished the script in the middle of January 1941 and travelled to New York to confer with Wright. They met on or around 18 January and sent a copy of the revised script (MS2) to Houseman, who was in Philadelphia directing a Theatre Guild production of Philip Barry's *Liberty Jones*. A few days later, they joined him in Philadelphia, where they discussed the script in detail, indicating possible changes or cuts that might be made here and there.

Houseman may have expected Green to go ahead with these minor editorial changes or he may have hoped for more extensive revisions. Whatever the case, he sent this message to Green, via telegram, a week or so later: "Eagerly awaiting final scrip[t] *Native Son* so can go ahead preparing production. Do you think I could have it special delivery by tomorrow?" (John Houseman to Paul Green, 26 January 1941)

Green, somewhat confused by Houseman's request for a "final" script, wired his reply the next day: "Script you received in Philadelphia may for our present purposes be considered final but will get another marked edited copy to you at earliest convenience. Will be glad to come up any time you need me" (Paul Green to John Houseman, [27 January 1941]).[15] Green also contacted Wright about the mix-up, explaining that

> As soon as I arrived home I came down with the flu and have just got on my feet again. I did a little work in bed, and will send off to Housman [sic] tomorrow another script cut and refurbished as needs be. I hope you will keep me informed as to how things are developing (Paul Green to Richard Wright, 30 January 1941).

Meanwhile, Wright and Houseman had begun cutting and revising the earlier script for rehearsal, and the delays served Houseman well. In addition to the necessary minor changes, the scene in the anteroom was cut altogether. Moreover, Houseman still disliked Green's ending, and with Green temporarily out of the picture, he was able to convince Wright that the ending should be changed.

Throughout the collaboration, Wright had been remarkably flexible about changes to his story. His attitude may surprise today's readers, for whom Wright holds an established place in the pantheon of great American writers. But in 1941, the thirty-two-year-old Wright was himself somewhat overwhelmed by the success of his first novel. Suddenly, he found himself in the company of writers and artists whose work he deeply admired, among them Paul Green. At the time of the *Native Son* collaboration, Green was widely regarded as one of America's greatest playwrights. Wright respected his

opinions, trusted his judgment, and was receptive to his ideas, and so was reluctant to alter the script significantly.

Houseman was insistent, however, and Wright deferred to his greater theatrical experience. Together, they cut most of the introspective dialogue between Bigger and Max, focusing instead on Bigger's coming to terms with his fear and his impending execution. Some of Bigger's self-revealing statements remained, but, without Max's questions, they seemed inconsistent with his usual brooding reticence. And without the anteroom scene, where Max had gradually drawn Bigger out of his hard and fragile shell, such statements as "I was all right--then you come and start talking, digging into me--opening up my guts" seemed unrelated to the previous action of the play.[16]

Bigger tells Max that he didn't mean to kill; he killed because he was scared. But after he killed, he felt "high and powerful and free." Max tries to explain that that is not what he meant by "fighting against fear," but Bigger is absorbed in his own thoughts. He sends Max away, instructing him to "Tell Maw and the others I was all right wasn't crying none. See?" They shake hands and say goodbye as

> Bigger grasps the prison bars. He looks straight out holding on to the bars. Max turns away from him and walks down the corridor and off right. The lights start to fade. Bigger just stands holding on to the bars, looking straight out. The lights fade out completely. The curtain falls.

The scene was very brief and, with no doubt as to Bigger's fate, lacked dramatic intensity. Bigger's epiphany, his acceptance of his fate, is sudden and largely unexplained. Coming as it did immediately after the powerful courtroom scene, it seemed inadequate, almost anticlimactic.

In a letter to Green, Wright almost apologetically informed him of the changes:

> Houseman and I finished cutting the play. I don't know just how you will like the last scene, but we recast it in terms of the book. It is short, effective, I think, and forms a good conclusion to the play (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 12 February 1941).

Green had fully expected to be in New York to assist with the cutting. On Tuesday, 11 February, several days before he received Wright's note, Green had wired Houseman that he would be in New York "this weekend" and that he wanted to discuss the script. His plans, however, fell through. Several days later, Houseman wired back that rehearsals were scheduled to begin Monday, 17 February, but that

he need not come to New York for another week (John Houseman to Paul Green, 15 February 1941).

By this time, Green had received Wright's letter of 12 February indicating the changes to the final scene. But Green trusted Wright and Houseman and he considered their alterations tentative, so his response was remarkably restrained:

> Thanks for your note, and I am glad to know that you and Houseman are progressing right along with the play. . I now plan to be up that way this weekend, and hope to have a look at a swell cast (Paul Green to Richard Wright, 17 February 1941).

Perhaps he had forgotten Houseman's stated belief that a script should not be changed once it is in production. Or perhaps he thought Houseman meant "well into production." Whatever the case, he saw no cause for alarm. The remainder of his letter dealt with publishing details, and he urged Wright to "get some sort of script over to [Edward C. Aswell, Wright's agent at Harper's,] for his consideration right away."

Two days later, as his apprehension rose, Wright sent this message to Green: "Reynolds [Wright's literary agent] acting today on publication of play with Harper's. Anxious for you to see script" (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 19 February 1941). By the time Green got to New York, rehearsals had been underway for a week, and there was a new force to be reckoned with.

Orson Welles arrived in New York in the middle of February, riding the wave of controversy surrounding *Citizen Kane*.[17] The twenty-five-year-old director plunged into *Native Son* with his customary enthusiasm and dominated the production from the moment he arrived. He was willing to exploit the play's dramatic (or melodramatic) elements at the expense of its "message," and, despite Green's protestations, he supported Houseman's cuts to the script. Welles's position, however, was more pragmatic than ideological: He wanted to shorten the play so that it could be performed without intermission, as an unbroken series of scenes depicting the life of Bigger Thomas.

When Green saw a run-through of the play, he felt that it lacked the moral responsibility he had tried so hard to convey. Years later, he still vividly recalled his clash with Welles:

> Rehearsals began, and then I ran smack into Orson Welles' theory of tragedy--pathos rather than true tragedy.
> "I want this play to end," he said, "with Bigger Thomas behind the bars standing there with his arms reached out and up, his hands clinging to the bars--yes, yes, the crucified

> one, crucified by the Jim Crow world in which he lived." And so on (Paul Green to Constance Webb, 9 May 1967).

Green then turned to Wright, hoping to gain an ally in discussions with Welles and Houseman. But as much as Wright admired Green, he was overwhelmed by Welles. In a piece that he wrote for the *New York World-Telegram*, Wright joked that

> [Welles] is not a man, but a sort of creative engine! Indeed, I'd like to issue a warning to all governments now engaged in war: One Orson Welles on earth is enough. Two of them would no doubt bring civilization itself to an end. If there were ten thousand Orson Welleses, society would fly apart like an exploding bomb!

Wright now found himself in the awkward position of having to choose sides. During the last week of February, he agreed, somewhat halfheartedly, to assist Green in rewriting the final scene.

The first portion of the new ending stayed fairly close to MS2. Green kept the question-and-answer format between Max and Bigger, though he cut some of the superfluous introductory dialogue (e.g. such exchanges as "How're you feeling, Bigger?" "I'm all right."). From the anteroom scene, Green salvaged what he considered two critical passages: the first, where Bigger explains why he hated Mary, and the second, where Max discovers that Bigger didn't kill Clara. And, Green again made it clear that Bigger accepted responsibility for his actions and that his actions were wrong:

> BIGGER. That day and night after I done killed her--when all of them was looking for me--hunting me--that day and night for the first time I felt like a man. (*Shouting*) I was a man!
> MAX. (*Loudly*) You don't believe that, Bigger.
> BIGGER. (*Lowering his head*) I'm all right now, Mr. Max--I'm all right. Don't be scared of me. I'm all right. You go on. I don't feel that way now. It didn't last.
> MAX. It never lasts, Bigger (MS3, x.10).

Green changed the last part of the scene--the suicide--which he had added to show Bigger accepting ultimate authority for his life. When Max, still holding out hope for a possible reprieve, whispers, "There's still a chance," Bigger responds that "Living or dead, they don't give me no chance" (MS3, x.10-11). But, when the governor refuses to stay the execution, Bigger curiously remarks, "Maybe that chance come. Still one chance, Mr. Max" (MS3, x.12). As the guards come to take him away, Bigger grabs one of their guns:

BIGGER. Yeh, at the last I do it--I see my way. . Now I hold your life in my hands! But I ain't going to kill you. I ain't. I give it back to you. (*Wildly*) Mr. Max! Mr. Max! (*Max slowly raises his head and turns his eyes upon Bigger.*) Tell 'em--tell 'em--for Bigger. I died--free--at the last--my own man.

(*His voice dies out, and a great shudder passes over his frame. He closes his eyes an instant, swaying with weakness. Then letting the pistol fall he starts moving toward the death house on the left. The guards relax their tension, their lips shut in an awed silence, as they watch him go. The death lament among the prisoners begins again as if of its own volition. The door to the death house opens and a flood of light pours into the scene. Bigger lifts his eyes, straightens his shoulders and moves toward its sunny radiance like a man walking in a deep current of water. The guards quietly follow him, their heads bent.*)

MAX. (*Staring after him, his big white face wet with tears*) Goodbye, Bigger.

PRIEST'S VOICE. (*Intoning from the shadows*) I am the resurrection and the life.

(*The death chant of the prisoners grows louder. The door to the death house closes.*)

THE END

(MS3, x.12-13)

The scene was finished on 1 March, Wright approved it, and Green returned to Chapel Hill. The next day, Green sent a copy of the scene to Welles, along with a letter explaining that

> the all-important thing, it seems to me, is to keep this play morally responsible to the world and to the individual as well as dramatic. I will be back in New York Friday morning of this week and will see you then (Paul Green to Orson Welles, 2 March 1941).

The next morning, perhaps realizing that his cause was hopeless, Green sent this telegram to Wright's agent, with copies to Wright, Welles, and Houseman:

> Since I am unable to be in New York at this time, and in order to help *Native Son* towards as complete presentation as possible, I wish Wright to take over the authority as author for the production of the final scene there, and likewise I will take the authority for the published script of the last scene,

> the rest of the play standing in joint responsibility as is. It is understood that he and I will continue our mutual aid on the show in any and every way possible (Paul Green to Paul R. Reynolds Jr., 3 March 1941).

The irony was that by now there was no "authority as author for the production" to be had: The play effectively belonged to Welles.[18] Wright admitted that he felt out of place in the theatre, and he attended only three or four rehearsals of *Native Son* (Birdoff, 81).[19] By "giving" away authority that had, in effect, been taken from him, Green had discovered a diplomatic way of washing his hands of the production, while at the same time assuring that he would have sole authority over the printed version.

When Green returned to New York on Friday, 7 March, it was primarily to finish the proofs for publication. But after watching the play in rehearsal, he found himself torn between wanting the play to be internally consistent and wanting it to be morally responsible. In a long letter to Welles, Green conceded that

> From the way you are building the show, I can see that our disagreement on the last scene no longer stands. In fact, I might say you have absorbed the dramatic form into an intensity of illustration. The entire play now strikes me as a sort of fierce close-up in which the biography of Bigger Thomas is the only thing that really counts. That being true, the spill-over into the last scene ought to carry--whether we are able to find a dramatic deed or not (Paul Green to Orson Welles, 10 March 1941).

In terms of the production, Green's re-evaluation of the play amounted to little more than a belated blessing. For the publisher, however, it was a nightmare. The same day that he wrote to Welles, Green sent a similar letter to Wright's agent:

> After considering the method--a kind of fierce close-up intensity--which Welles is using in producing the show, I came to the conclusion that the script had best adhere somewhat to that, since the matter of a well-rounded, well-constructed play was already through the window. So I limped the ending across the goal line as best I could. Wright and I agreed that if the critics and the public agreed too strongly that the play let down after the capture of Bigger, we could do something about revision in the acting version, which we hope [publisher Samuel] French will consider issuing later (Paul Green to Paul R. Reynolds Jr., 10 March 1941).

The problem for the publisher was that, in an effort to publish by the scheduled 17 March opening night, no page proofs were submitted. As soon as the corrected galley proofs of the first eight scenes were submitted, they were plated and ready to print. As a result, Green's last-minute changes to the early scenes were not included, though his agent at Harper's promised him that "the text will be just exactly the way you want it in any subsequent printing" (Edward C. Aswell to Paul Green, 12 March 1941). The final two scenes had not yet been plated, but the corrections that Green made to the galleys were "so extensive and involved so much resetting, that every schedule [Harper's] made had to be abandoned" (Edward C. Aswell to Paul Green, 13 March 1941).

About this time, Green also received a telegram from Wright, who had written a piece about the dramatization. Wright's anxiety about the article, evident in the text of the telegram, is underscored by the fact that he sent it on the same day that he married Ellen Poplar:

> Wrote article for *NY Times* on our collaboration discussing problem of hero in US drama. Gave your views and mine tried desperately to be objective and fair. Maybe they wont [sic] use it then will publish elsewhere (Richard Wright to Paul Green, 12 March 1941).

Green wired back the same day:

> I am sure your article for the *Times* is a good one, but wonder whether it is wise to make public at this time any past difference of opinion between the authors. Since the published ending is so nearly in line with the stage version except for a little cutting here and there don't you think we had better stand or fall together on the production? Later when the play is safely established for a run or not then it won't matter so much (Paul Green to Richard Wright, 12 March 1941).

Wright's article was never published, though he later repeated much of the text in a radio broadcast.[20]

When the play finally was published on 28 March, the final scene was a compromise between the version that Welles produced and Green's third revision. The script stayed fairly close to MS3 up to and including Bigger's "for the first time I felt like a man" speech. But, in the new version, Bigger makes no attempt to grab a weapon. On the contrary, he "stands with his face lifted and set in its tense concentration" (Bk, x.143).

BIGGER. (*In a fierce convulsive whisper*) There she comes--Yeh, I hear you. (*Far above in the night the murmuring throb of an airplane motor is audible. Bigger's voice bursts from him in a wild frenzied call*) Fly them planes, boys--fly 'em!--Riding through--riding through. I'll be with you! I'll---

FIRST GUARD. Come on, he's going nuts! (*He quickly unlocks the cell and they enter*)

BIGGER. (*Yelling, his head wagging in desperation*) Keep on driving!--To the end of the world--smack into the face of the sun! (*Gasping*) Fly 'em for me--for Bigger (Bk, x.144).

What the guards mistake for insanity is actually Bigger's declaration of freedom. His words hark back to an earlier scene, where Bigger and his friends had marveled at the sight of an airplane "writing on the sky":

JACK. (*Reading--afar off*) "Use Speed Gasoline"---

BIGGER. (*Exultantly*) Speed! That's what them white boys got!

GUS. (*Whispering*) Daredevils---

BIGGER. Go on, boys, fly them planes, fly 'em to the end of the world, fly 'em smack into the sun! I'm with you. (*He stares up, the sunlight on his face*)

GUS. (*Unable to let well enough alone, doffing his cap in a mock bow to Bigger*) Yessuh! If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you might could be with 'em (Bk, ii.33-34).

In death, Bigger sees his chance to be rid of all the "ifs" of the white man's world, and he is at peace. The guards lead him to the death house as Max says a tearful goodbye. From the shadows comes the voice of the priest intoning, "I am the resurrection and the life." And as "the death chant of the prisoners grows louder, [t]he door to the death house closes, cutting off the light" (Bk, x.148).

Although the published version of the play did not correspond exactly to the version produced on Broadway, it did convey the same sense of injustice and oppression. And, while Welles's cuts and narrowing of focus made for exciting drama, they oversimplified. Without the psychological exploration, Bigger's actions became the most important feature, and the consequences of his actions were viewed only in terms of the way they affected him: Bigger became a victim and the story became a melodrama.

BROADWAY AND BEYOND

After being delayed for a week by technical problems, *Native Son* opened to a sell-out crowd on 24 March 1941.[21] According to Green's agent, who attended the opening night performance,

> The curtain rose about nine o'clock, and there were no intermissions. The play was over at eleven o'clock. There was not a dull or waiting moment in the whole proceedings. The audience was most enthusiastic and applauded vigorously after every scene, and at the end of the play there were at least fifteen curtain calls (Frank J. Sheil to Paul Green, 25 March 1941).

There was talk of "the Pulitzer," and Welles himself told the cast he was sure that the play would run for at least three years (Paul R. Reynolds Jr. to Paul Green, 2 April 1941).

Although the public responded enthusiastically, reviews of the play were mixed. Most critics seemed to follow the formula of *PM*'s Louis Kronenberger, who suggested that "The soundest way to review *Native Son*, I think, is to review it twice: first as a thing in itself, and then in comparison with the novel from which it was adapted."

As the brightest star in an otherwise lackluster season, *Native Son* received high marks from the New York critics for its strong acting and powerful staging. Welles was credited for his "imaginative and resourceful" directing (Watts, *New York Herald Tribune*), which gave the play "its finer quality as a theatre experience" (Mantle, *New York Daily News*). On 25 March, Sidney Whipple pronounced Welles "the greatest theatrical director of the modern stage," though four days later he also noted that Welles had excised from the text any

> phrases, passages or situations that might tend in the slightest degree to block the action of his play or soften its impact. . . The play is not, therefore, a study of social causes and results. It is a study of character and action, and Mr. Welles strives only for effects that will spell good theater without bothering his head about humanitarian theories (*New York World-Telegram*).

Canada Lee earned wide recognition for his powerful portrayal of Bigger Thomas. Richard Watts wrote of his performance: "[I]t is so honest, moving and generally impressive that it gives the play not only force but dignity and a wry sort of pity" (*New York Herald Tribune*). Even Hearst's *New York Journal American*, which printed an otherwise scathing review, praised Lee's "eloquent and vivid performance" (Anderson).[22]

The critics were much less kind, however, when comparing the play to Wright's novel. John Mason Brown questioned the wisdom of exposing Wright's novel to the limitations of the stage, and flatly stated that "'Native Son' at its best on the stage is as nothing compared to 'Native Son' at its crudest in book form" (*New York Post*). In addition, most reviewers lamented the loss of the novel's psychological dimension:

> Without sharing Bigger's thoughts and with only the chronicle of his actions before us, "Native Son" is bound to seem a mere skeleton, a noon-time shadow, of its former self (Brown, *New York Post*).
>
> The last scene, in his death cell, shows a change in Bigger but (unlike the book) scarcely explains it (Kronenberger, *PM*).
>
> There are often too many words. Bigger explains himself with uncharacteristic eloquence--the stage's unsatisfactory substitute, this, for the novel's analysis of character (Lockridge, *New York Sun*).
>
> Without the subjective background their defense of Bigger Thomas's ghastly crime in the court-scene sounds like generalized pleading. It lacks the stinging enlightenment of the last third of Mr. Wright's novel (Atkinson, *The New York Times*).

The critics' comments go to the heart of the Welles-Green controversy. For Welles, cutting the character analysis enabled him to present a focused, unambiguous, emotional tour de force. But to Green, discarding the novel's psychological dimension ultimately meant discarding its complexity. In a letter to a friend, Green described the play as "partly good, but not entirely" (Paul Green to Percival Wilde, 7 April 1941). His diary entries, too, show an uncharacteristic bitterness over the play: "*Native Son*, bastard and mutilated as it is, [is] doing well with the public. Can't get much pleasure out of seeing it succeed since one edge of its truth has been chiseled and blunted off" (Diary, 13 March-16 April 1941).

Yet there was no denying that the play was doing well with the public, and it continued to do well for the rest of the season. Attendance finally dropped off as the temperatures began to rise, and after ninety-seven performances, *Native Son* closed on 28 June 1941.[23]

The closing marked a number of other significant endings as well. Welles and Houseman never worked together again. They dis-

solved their Mercury Theatre, each to pursue separate careers in Hollywood--Welles with RKO and Houseman with David O. Selznick Productions. *Native Son* was one of the last plays Green wrote for Broadway and the only one he wrote in collaboration. The rest of his career was devoted primarily to "symphonic drama"--the historical, outdoor plays that he considered to be the future of American folk drama. Although Green and Wright never saw each other again, they remained on good terms and kept in touch from time to time.

Despite the success of *Native Son*, Wright never returned to Broadway. Instead, he turned his attention to the movies, which he said he preferred because "peoples' [sic] lives are like the movies" (Birdoff, 81). Wright received many offers to film *Native Son*, most seeking to change the story in some way, some bordering on the absurd. One even suggested recasting Bigger Thomas as a member of a white ethnic minority (Fabre, 336). In 1948, Wright finally accepted an offer from French producer Pierre Chenal, who agreed to follow the novel. Wright saw the project as his opportunity to translate onto film the same powerful message that he had conveyed in the novel. When Canada Lee was unable to do the film, Wright decided to play the part of Bigger Thomas himself.

Because of pressure from the United States government, which looked with disfavor on Wright's story of racial and political oppression and which exercised considerable influence in Europe at the time, most of the filming took place in Argentina. The bulk of the film was shot from October 1949 to June 1950, using a screenplay written by Wright and Chenal, which, interestingly enough, contained a series of flashbacks and dream sequences designed to heighten the dramatic suspense. The film premiered in November 1950 and was well-received in Argentina and Europe. But reactionary U.S. censors cut more than a quarter of the film, and what remained suffered under the inevitable comparisons to the novel and the play. Unscrupulous business partners, unrealistic budget projections, and a lukewarm U.S. reception of the film ensured a financial loss for Wright, who had paid $6,000 to buy back the rights from Green, Houseman, and Welles (Fabre, 336-51). In addition, Wright lost a great deal of time that might have been spent furthering his literary career (Warren). All in all, it is not unfair to say that he viewed the experience in much the same way that Green viewed the Broadway collaboration--as a project of great promise that yielded only frustration.

If the film was Wright's chance to retell the story of *Native Son*, Green's opportunity came years later. In the fall of 1965, Green was approached by producer Sidney Bernstein, who was planning a revival of the play. Green approved the proposal and suggested that the script be "rework[ed] here and there to take away certain outdated references and substitute more topical and up to the present

ones" (Paul Green to Sidney Bernstein, 25 November 1965). Consequently, the revised version was set in "the present" and included contemporary references--to Castro, rock 'n' roll, Black Power--intended to heighten the play's immediacy. But, with many of the original elements remaining (the coal furnace, the labor unions), the new references seemed anachronistic. Although the play was never produced (Bernstein died suddenly in the summer of 1966), portions of the revised script were published in the *North Carolina Anvil* (1967), and, later, in an anthology called *Black Drama* (1970).[24]

Once again, it seems, the ending proved troublesome to Green. The final scene of the 1967 revision combined elements of MS2 (most of the dialogue) and MS3 (the pistol-renunciation ending), whereas the 1970 version ended with a defeated Bigger Thomas accepting the responsibility--and the punishment--for his actions. When the revised dramatization was published in 1970, Wright's widow, who shared the copyright for the play with Green, issued a statement critical of the revision, which was written without her knowledge or approval (Brasmer, 71-72). But Green was to have still one more chance.

In 1978, the University of North Carolina completed the construction of a new, professionally equipped theatre to be named in Green's honor. Green was asked to select one of his plays to be performed at its dedication and he chose *Native Son*. For the dedication, however, Green decided to revise the play once more, and this time he was careful to consult Ellen Wright.

Green made a number of minor changes to the early scenes, though substantively they remained the same. He resurrected the anteroom scene (now set in "a hearing room of the City Courthouse") to show Bigger's alienation from his family and their religion, though he removed the spiritual singing. The final scene now vaguely resembled a trim version of the 1967 revision up to Bigger's "I ain't never wanted to hurt nobody" speech. From that point, the play began to reflect what Ellen Wright called

> Bigger's groping awareness of himself within a social context, that is, the dawning of his concern for himself as inextricably linked up with the fate of others, who, victims of the same inequalities, might wind up like him (Ellen Wright to Paul Green, 4 September 1978).[25]

Max's words of encouragement enable Bigger to see his death not just in terms of his own freedom, but as a means of setting others free as well. And with Max to play his Horatio, Bigger walks resolutely into the death chamber.

The play premiered 29 September 1978 with both Green and Mrs. Wright in the audience. In 1980, it was published in paperback

by Samuel French. In forty years, it seems, the play had come full circle, with Bigger once again the "martyr who was going to die that his race might be recognized as human beings" (Campbell, 22). The dozens of changes brought to bear in those intervening years attest to the story's power to stimulate discussion and challenge basic assumptions about racial and political freedom in the United States. And if the value of a literary work can be measured by its continued ability to fascinate, then *Native Son* has certainly stood the test of time. Sadly, the relevance of Wright's story today indicates that we cannot yet consign it to the category of "historical artifact."

List of Abbreviations

Bk *Native Son (The Biography of a Young American): A Play in Ten Scenes*, by Paul Green and Richard Wright. First edition of the play published by Harper on 28 March 1941.

MS1 "First Rough Working Draft," twelve scenes in two acts, completed 12 August 1940, by Paul Green and Richard Wright.

MS2 Revised version, eleven scenes in three acts, completed in mid-January 1941. The date "Feb 24/41," in Green's hand, appears at the top of the first page of the final scene (III.iii); the date, however, refers to longhand emendations made by Green to the final scene as he began work on MS3.

MS3 Third revision of final scene, designated "Scene 10." Written by Paul Green in consultation with Richard Wright, it was completed 1 March 1941 (see Paul Green to Orson Welles, 2 March 1941).

The draft manuscripts of *Native Son*, by Paul Green and Richard Wright, are located in the North Carolina Collection of the University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill. Excerpts are reprinted by arrangement with the Paul Green Foundation.

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Endnotes

[1]All references to correspondence, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the Paul Green papers in the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill.

[2]See Barbara Leaming, *Orson Welles: A Biography*, 203-4, 212; and Frank Brady, *Citizen Welles*, 235-39, 294.

[3]The article that Wright wrote for the *New York World-Telegram* is cited incorrectly (see my "works consulted" for correct information); Herman Mankiewicz, a business partner of Welles and Houseman, is referred to as "John Mankievicz"; Wright and Green are said to have met in Washington in January 1941, although they actually met in New York (and later Philadelphia); and Bynum Hall, where Wright and Green wrote the first working draft of the *Native Son* dramatization, is incorrectly identifed as a former slave quarters two miles outside Chapel Hill. Bynum Hall, which was built in 1904, is located near the center of the UNC campus and originally was a gymnasium. It was later converted to office space and today houses, among other things, the Affirmative Action Office (Schumann, 58). The number and kind of errors in this section of Fabre's book indicate that he did not verify his sources of information.

[4]On 25 March 1940, an advertisement in *The New York Times* boasted that *Native Son* was "Selling 2000 a day!" Sales were especially strong in the South, where the novel received excellent reviews in many of the larger newspapers, and in Chicago, where heavy advertising helped make it the city's number one best-seller ("Success Story," *The Publishers' Weekly*, 6 April 1940, 1387-88; "'Native Son' Sells Rapidly," *The Publishers' Weekly*, 16 March 1940, 1161).

[5]The exact reasons for banning the play are unclear. One high-ranking official is said to have characterized it as "too sexy" (Webb, 113). A more likely explanation is that the WPA found it difficult to justify spending taxpayers' money on a play that attacked the American "justice" system in such an offensive manner. At one point in the play, a young white prisoner, Bright Boy, is flogged for expressing sympathy for Runt, a black prisoner who has been confined to a sweat box for eleven days as punishment for masturbation. After the flogging, the tyrannical warden orders Bright Boy to sing "America" in honor of the Fourth of July. His song ends weakly as Runt's stiffened corpse is pulled from the box.

[6]All references to *Native Son* are taken from the 1987 edition of Wright's novel and are followed by page numbers in my text.

[7]In a letter to one of Wright's biographers, Green says that, during negotiations with Wright's agent, he agreed to undertake the dramatization provided that "I be allowed freedom in making the Communist matter in the book more comic than Wright had it, and further that I have freedom to introduce some new characters if needed, and still further that before Bigger Thomas died he should come to some sort of recognition that he too as a human being had participated in his own fate" (Paul Green to Constance Webb, 9 May 1967). Green's letter to Houseman, quoted in the text, was written after reading the one-sided account of the dramatization given by

Houseman in *Run-Through*, an account that Green characterized as "full of inaccuracies and gapped with omissions." In his letter, Green chided Houseman for, among other things, failing to mention this agreement in his book.

[8]According to Green, the University chancellor said he was pleased to have a nationally recognized author associated with the school; moreover, because the campus was not crowded during the summer, he did not expect the "color question" to be an issue. As Green tells it, they worked in peace until the last day of Wright's visit. The night before, Green's secretary, who lived in a small town several miles from campus, had given a party in Wright's honor. Some of the neighbors, apparently offended by the idea of blacks and whites mixing socially, complained to the University and actually organized a group of men to run Wright out of town. Green went to where the men were meeting and eventually defused the situation. Wright returned to New York without knowledge of the incident (Paul Green to Constance Webb, 9 May 1967). The account does not appear in Green's diary, but there are no entries at all from 22 June to 12 August 1940.

[9]In my discussion of the dramatization, I refer to some literary features as Green's and some as Wright's. This is done not to assign credit to one author or the other, but rather to highlight differences between the novel and the play. Firsthand accounts of the dramatization make it clear that many ideas were developed in joint discussions, particularly during the writing of the first draft.

[10]The next season, *Life* magazine was flooded with angry letters when it printed a picture of black actor Paul Robeson, as Othello, with his arm around white actress Uta Hagen, who played Desdemona (*Life*, 31 August 1942).

[11]Passages from the manuscripts are cited in this manner: Manuscript number, act, scene, page number. For a full description of the manuscripts and my abbreviations, see the list of abbreviations at the end of this article.

[12]Wright was involved with several projects during the fall, among them: an independent theatre group that would put "authentic Negro life on stage"; *Twelve Million Black Voices*, his folk history of American Negro life; and the national elections (Fabre, 218-19; Richard Wright to Paul Green, 3 October 1940).

[13]Houseman's phrase, "New York long ago," may have been a sarcastic reference to their meeting at Thanksgiving, implying "You haven't done much since." It is more likely, however, that Houseman was referring to one of their early meetings in September, since the script in question was a polished version of the "first rough working draft."

[14]At some point during the fall, Wright and Green decided that too many of the characters' names began with the letter "B," and

that this might prove confusing during rehearsals. Consequently, Bessie became Clara, Bertha Thomas became Hannah, and Boris Max became Paul (later Edward).

[15]Although Green's file copy of the telegram is undated, he specifically mentions it in his letter to Wright dated 30 January 1941.

[16]Excerpts from this version of *Native Son* are taken from Burns Mantle's *The Best Plays of 1940-41*, which provides a synopsis of the play as it was performed on Broadway.

[17]The 14 February opening of Welles's film had been suspended by the RKO Radio Pictures board of directors, pending a legal investigation designed to determine whether the film would expose them to a libel suit from publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, who said that the film was a personal attack on him (Brady, 285-86).

[18]Green later told of leaving the theatre on his way to Penn Station: "I noticed a sign painter working up on the outer wall. He had already painted 'Native Son' in big letters and under that the splashing names of Green and Wright as authors of the drama. I learned that a day or so later Orson saw this and let out a scream. He had our names erased and in still bigger splashing letters 'Orson Welles' NATIVE SON' was put up" (Paul Green to Constance Webb, 9 May 1967). Although the details cannot be verified, this anecdote effectively illustrates just how combative the artists had become, each trying to put his own special stamp on the play.

[19]In an article titled "Theatrical Folk Seem Odd to the Author of *Native Son*," Wright says, "Honestly, I don't think I'd ever become accustomed to the theater or grow to feel at home in it. To a man who has steeped his mind in prose, there is something just a little bit shameful and embarrassing about the theater, and no doubt to a theatrical personality a writer who is chasing words and trying to fasten them upon paper is engaged in a rather isolated and ridiculous pursuit" (*New York World-Telegram*, 22 March 1941).

[20]"*Native Son*: From Novel to Play," by Richard Wright, WNYC, New York, 8 April 1941.

[21]Houseman wired Green that they had postponed the opening in order to get the show "running fast and smooth" (John Hous[e]man to Paul Green, 15 March 1941). Welles insisted on rapid set changes between scenes, and according to stage manager Jean Rosenthal, a complete shift took only forty-five seconds ("*Native Son*--Backstage," 467-68).

[22]John Anderson's review of *Native Son* conspicuously failed to mention Orson Welles. Hearst, who was still attempting to block the release of *Citizen Kane*, had ordered that there be "no publicity, articles, or mention of any kind of *any* RKO film" in any of his papers (Brady, 278). Presumably, this gag order also included any mention of Welles.

[23]The show continued to play for some time afterward, with successful runs in most of the major northern cities. Green saw a performance in New York in December 1942, and still regretted the murder being presented as reality and not "as Bigger's nightmare remembrance--as Wright and I first conceived it" (Paul Green to Paul R. Reynolds Jr., 13 December 1942).

[24]"Paul Green and *Native Son*," *North Carolina Anvil*, 2 May 1967, 1+; Paul Green, "*Native Son*: A Revised Dramatization," *Black Drama: An Anthology*, William Brasmer and Dominick Consolo, eds., (Columbus: Merrill, 1970), 69-177.

[25]The new ending included revisions suggested by Mrs. Wright.