



"What Had Made Him and What He Meant:" The Politics of Wholeness in "How 'Bigger' Was Born"

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Although it was included in some early editions of *Native Son*, Richard Wright's essay on the genesis of his novel was until recently the virtually exclusive property of specialists who hunted it up there or found it in an anthology of Afro-American writing. With the proliferation of such anthologies (and of the courses that use them) came a wider availability for the essay, and now that Harper and Row have printed it as an introduction to the Perennial edition of *Native Son*, its currency may begin to approach that of the novel.¹ Presumably the essay will be used in the classroom, as it has been used in professional publications in the past, as a source of evidence for various theses about the novel, or to put it more charitably, to "illuminate" *Native Son*. This paper is written out of the conviction that "How 'Bigger' Was Born" merits examination as an important biographical and critical statement in its own right, and that such an examination is necessary to its use in understanding both the novel and the development of Wright's career.

The literary impact of the essay results largely from its dramatization of the creative process as an act of total engagement of the whole person with social reality. Wright attempts to grapple with the social and historical roots of Bigger Thomas as a character and simultaneously with those of his own experience as a person and a writer. This biographical focus, along with the primary reference to one character in one novel, has seemed to obscure the significance of the essay for literary history and criticism. Critics have consistently assumed that it falls into already existing historical categories. His reference to people as organisms, for instance, and to himself as "a scientist in a laboratory" (xxi) are only the most obvious examples of qualities that have made Wright's place in the traditions of American realism and naturalism a cliché in critical discussion of his work. But that observation is rarely brought into direct relationship with the crucial impact of Marxism in Wright's life, an impact which is still another cliché.

The critical literature hardly goes beyond that cliché except to apply simplistically the characteristically dogmatic and frequently time-serving formulas of Wright's contemporaries and to attribute his alleged weaknesses to what Dan McCall has called his "cultural victimization"² by the Communist Party. A more sophisticated and sympathetic approach to Wright's own account of his experience as a writer should make a beginning toward a more sensitive awareness of the influence of socialism (which is not identical with the latest pamphlet sanctioned by the Communist Party, U.S.A.) upon Wright's work, and also toward a definition of Wright's departures from the assumptions and direction of the familiar traditions of naturalism. I shall suggest, furthermore, that those departures are reflected in precisely the intensely personal quality that is central to the aesthetic satisfaction of reading "How 'Bigger' Was Born."

Since Wright is not attempting to formulate an abstract theoretical construct, the application of particular labels (socialism, dialectical materialism, etc.) is especially difficult and dangerous, mainly because he hardly ever uses them himself. His discussion of the impact of "the labor movement and its ideology" (xiv), for example, is only two paragraphs long, and only one sentence attacks explicitly the capitalist order: "I sensed, too, that the Southern scheme of oppression was but an appendage of a far vaster and in many respects more ruthless and impersonal commodity-profit machine" (xv). Although he does not depend upon such unequivocally political language, however, other passages suggest that the significance imbedded in that rhetoric is nevertheless its thoroughly, albeit unselfconsciously, materialistic approach to reality, and especially to the sources of identity. A few paragraphs later he writes of his conviction "that the environment provides the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped or tranquil, the mode and manner of behavior will be affected toward deadlocking tensions or orderly fulfillment and satisfaction" (xvi).

There would seem to be little here to divide Wright from the conventions of naturalism, but it becomes clear from the essay as a whole that he works from a special notion of "environment." Later in the essay, he defines these instrumentalities as the institutions characteristic of a given society; thus Bigger's "fear and ecstasy were naked, exposed, unprotected by religion or a framework of government or a scheme of society whose final faiths would gain his love or trust" (xxv). His focus on the social instrumentalities for the expression of individual identity is reflected also in his analysis of Bigger's typology. The black person who says, "God, I wish I had a flag and a country of my own" (xiii-xiv) is expressing the need to feel himself as playing "a responsible role in the vital processes of a nation's life" and "to feel the clean, deep, organic satisfaction of doing a job in common with others" (xiv). Implicit in these passages and underlying the structure of the essay is the conviction that identity is experienced socially in the material world, and this conviction generates the definitive qualities of Wright's perspective and therefore of this thematic and formal approach to his work.

Whereas the naturalist tradition characteristically seeks to render a vision of the human condition that is universal in time and place, cutting through history and across social distinctions, Wright announces his intention to focus on Bigger's experience as a function of his caste and class under specific historical circumstances. He makes it clear that the meaning of Bigger's life is rooted in his exclusion from "the vital processes" of social existence. He recognizes the universal reference in Bigger when he writes of "that part of him which is so much a part of *all* Negroes and *all* whites," but he emphasizes that Bigger "was also a Negro nationalist in a vague sense because he was not allowed to live as an American" (xxiv). And it is "his nationalist complex through which I could grasp more of the total meaning of his life than I could in any other way" (xxiv). So Wright locates the sources of Bigger's divided self in his response to the specific material conditions of his life as a black person. Bigger is divided because he is forced into a "deep sense of exclusion" by a white world: "this intolerable sense of feeling and understanding so much, and yet living on a plane of social reality where the look of a world which one did not make or own struck one

with a blinding objectivity and tangibility" (xvii).

Bigger has been divided from his human aspirations by the operation of that combination of psychological prejudice and economic disadvantage that we have come to call institutionalized racism. So "the look of a world that one did not make or own" implies the existence of others that did make it and do own it, who do participate in the "vital processes" and symbols of solidarity. Thus Lenin strikes a responsive chord in Wright when he shows Gorky "*Their* Big Ben" and "*their* Westminster Abbey" and "*their* library." Wright responds, "That's Bigger. That's the Bigger Thomas reaction" (xvii). For if there is a "they" who "own" the world, the "one" who does not comes to represent all who do not, becomes an "us". There emerges here an awareness that the obstacles to the achievement of wholeness are inherent not in an abstract human condition but in concrete social structures controlled by specific people, who are therefore responsible. Thus the key terms in the familiar opposition between the world and the self are radically transformed into the oppression of those who do not own the world by those who do.

Each of Wright's descriptions of Bigger's prototypes at the beginning of the essay is informed by this political awareness, expressed in a sensitivity to the uses of power and of the form and symbol of power: wealth. The basic pattern is set by Bigger 1, who uses violence to get control of toys, and then uses the toys to extract humility, a reassurance of his own superiority. It becomes clear later that this superiority is for Wright a substitute for a "scheme of society" to protect him from his "primal fear."³ The political content of the pattern becomes explicit in Bigger 2; whereas the symbol for the children was toys, for the adult Bigger it is money. Bigger 2 refuses to pay rent or his debts; he does not initiate violence but simply refuses to acquiesce to the reality "that the white folks had everything and he had nothing" (ix). It is this identification of a collective enemy that makes his refusal political, and it is predictable that he ends up in prison, a political prisoner in the sense that is fashionable on the contemporary Left.

Bigger 3 also refuses to pay, but is a little more aggressive, forcing his way into the movies, and it is appropriate that he escapes prison only by being killed by the protector of white authority, "a white cop" (x). Bigger 4 also rejects the legitimacy of the cash nexus in a situation where others have all the cash when he refuses to dig "ditches for fifty cents a day." But he goes even further and violates "all the taboos," and makes fun of "the antics of white folks" into the bargain. Like the black doctor in *Invisible Man*, he seems not merely bad but absolutely senseless to white society, and he is thus sent "to the asylum for the insane." But just as Bigger 2 is aware of the economic power of the white world, Bigger 4 is conscious of his behavior as a response to the political fact that "The white folks won't let us do nothing" (x). Bigger 5, finally, symbolically sums up the whole pattern when he rides "the Jim Crow streetcars without paying and sat wherever he pleased" (x), rejecting both the power of money and the powers of custom and law, and making it entirely clear that he is prepared for violence in order to continue in this way. Wright is vague about his fate, but if the others are imprisoned, committed or shot, then from what we know (e.g., from *Black Boy* and *Uncle Tom's Children*) about the South of Wright's childhood and youth, lynching is a good guess for Bigger 5.

Each of these prototypes, then, is characterized by the use of violence and money in a conscious pattern of individual resistance to a collective enemy, "white folks," and pays a predictably high price for that resistance and for the sense of identity that it confers. In this regard, however, Bigger is not presented as typical in the usual sense. "I lived the first seventeen years of my life in the South," Wright tells us, "without so much as hearing of or seeing one act of rebellion from *any* Negro, save the Bigger Thomases" (xiii). But Wright's sense of him as a general type is nevertheless clear in the wide spectrum of behavior which he sees as "variations in the Bigger Thomas pattern" (xii). They include the retreat into religion and alcohol and music, a "thousand ruses and strategems of struggle to win their rights," the pursuit of education and the enjoyment of "the fruits of it in the style of their bourgeois oppressors" (xiii), right on up to leadership in the community. Hardly anyone is excluded from Bigger's constituency; he is the representative man.

Wright gives other examples to show that his rebelliousness is simply an exceptional expression of a shared impulse. First there is the black person who has moments of intense desire not "to live this way," but unlike Bigger's his anger passes and he "goes back to his job" (xiii). Then there is the wish for "a flag and a country of my own," but that mood also "would soon vanish." For these people Bigger's anger gets submerged "in the tense grind of struggling for bread" (xiv), but while they may not share his need for overt rebellion, they certainly share the political awareness out of which it arises. There is expressed here and in those who "praise what Japan is doing in China" and even "say that maybe Hitler and Mussolini are all right; that maybe Stalin is all right" (xiv) a conscious rejection of what Marcuse has called a one-dimensional world, a world where the conditions of the status quo are taken as given and inevitable. These typical Negroes live with a perpetual awareness of the potentiality in themselves of different conditions, a second dimension where they cease to experience the duality implicit in their exclusion from the dominant culture and live as whole persons. But this potentiality remains abstract, a subjective fantasy overwhelmed by the "blinding objectivity and tangibility" of the world that oppresses them. The importance of the drama of Fascism and Stalinism is that it seems to embody a concrete realization of that other dimension.

Similarly, Bigger himself is recognized by his own people as an expression of their desire for wholeness. "We longed to believe and act as he did" (ix), Wright tells us; and when Bigger defies the white man, the other "Negroes experienced an intense flash of pride" (xi). If Bigger were simply a freak, however admirable for anyone who shared his frustration, he would scarcely provide any occasion for optimism; he would have no prophetic value. So Wright is at pains to show us that besides the typical desire for wholeness that he shares with all the oppressed, his exceptional qualities are not random aberrations, but a "socially conditioned distortion," to use Lukács' phrase,⁴ of the norm. He becomes a rebel because he is "estranged from the religion and folk culture of his race," and because he is "trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization ..." (xiii). Far from being accidental, "his emergence as a distinct type was inevitable" (xiii). And only the prediction of the spread of the conditions that produced Bigger is necessary to see in him "the outline of action and feeling which we would encounter on a vast scale in the days to come" (xxi).

Wright attributes to black people, then, a psychological and intellectual equivalent to class consciousness. His materialism, the awareness of identity as experienced through material conditions and social structures, and his awareness of collective experience, the conviction that the oppressed struggle consciously for identity against the conditions and structures that divide them, converge in a sense of history and society that does not merely explain Bigger, but legitimizes him as a potentially progressive historical force. "The conditions of life under which Negroes are forced to live in America" (xxi) are "what had made him" (xxvii) and the degree to which he represents "the embryonic prefigurations of how a large part of the body politic would react under stress" (xxi) is "what he meant" (xxvii), making him a "prophetic symbol" (xiv).

The biographical importance of the essay begins to merge with its significance for literary history and criticism in this sense of history, which finds value in Bigger's life and therefore in Wright's own. The identification between the author and his character is apparent in more than the logical construct that they share the same background, that if Bigger is typical of black people then he must represent forces at work in Wright's life. "The extension of my sense of the personality of Bigger," he writes, "was the pivot of my life" (xiv). And the same ideology that helped him to see Bigger clearly also revealed "a struggle in which I was involved" (xv). Bigger also becomes central in his developing artistic vision and method. Listening to white writers, he would "translate what they said *in terms of Bigger's life*" (italics supplied) until their techniques "became *my ways of apprehending*" (xvi) the life of black people. Listening to Bigger's adulation of Garvey's symbols of nationalist solidarity, "I knew the truth of those simple words from the facts of my own life" (xix). His understanding of Bigger helped him get in touch with his own alienation and formulate his response to it: "made me feel more than ever resolved toward the task of creating with words a scheme of images and symbols whose direction could enlist the sympathies, loyalties, and yearnings of the millions of Bigger Thomases in every land and race" (xix). And although he hopes to approach Bigger "like a scientist in a laboratory," he must first accomplish "this much knowledge of myself and the world" (xxi) in order to render "his way of life and mine" (xxiv).

The most important expression of Wright's identification with Bigger is in his response to the anticipated reactions of readers. "I'd be reacting as Bigger himself reacted;" he tells us: "I'd be acting out of *fear* if I let what whites would say constrict and paralyze me." And in the following sentence he shows that the writing of the novel functioned for him much as violence serves Bigger: "As I contemplated Bigger and what he meant, I said to myself: 'I must write this novel, not only for others to read, but to free *myself* of this sense of shame and fear ... the writing of it turned into a way of living for me'" (xxii). And he restates the same theme later in connection with the actual work of constructing the novel: "That is writing as I feel it, a kind of significant living" (xxx).

The identification is made explicit in the "two events" that "made me sit down and actually start work on the typewriter" (xxvi). His work in the South Side Boys' Club gives him an intense experience of the conflict between his needs and the demands of a hostile world. "I felt I was doing a kind of dressed-up police work, and I

hated it," and he empathizes with the black youths to whose demand for life "the police blotters of Chicago are testimony." In this way he allows himself "vicariously, to feel as Bigger felt—not much just a little, just a *little*—but still, there it was." The language of the often quoted passage which follows on the reception of *Uncle Tom's Children* shows the parallel between Wright's motives and Bigger's. "Go to it boys! " he had said at the Club; "Show that full-blooded life is harder and hotter than they suspect." Now he discovers that *Uncle Tom's Children* was "a book which even banker's daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears" (xxvii).

It is evident that Wright experienced the writing of *Native Son*, then, as a mode of self-expression and a demand for social recognition parallel to Bigger's violence, a breaking out of his isolation and an attempt to force recognition of his own existence. Indeed, a similar motive is apparent for "How 'Bigger' Was Born" itself when Wright tells us "that his dignity as a living being is challenged by something within him that is not understood" (viii). In this need for confirmation of his identity in a world that denies it, Wright reveals his writing as his own "variation in the Bigger Thomas pattern." But at another level, the variation comes still closer to identity with Bigger, because both are engaged in an attack on things as they are. The only difference is that Wright is conscious of his role as an agent of historical change. But the self actualizing meaning of Bigger's life is the same for Wright as its meaning for Bigger. The only difference is that Wright can articulate that meaning because he connects it with collective experience within the framework of an understanding of history as a dynamic process. The intense personal excitement that informs the essay is a function of this identification with Bigger as black, as oppressed, and as rebel.

That identification is also the source and symbol of the identity between his role as artist and his needs as a social person. The classic writers of realism and naturalism could not achieve such identity because they saw specific interactions between characters and their social environment as metaphors for archetypal conflicts that could be resolved only by flight from social reality or by reference to a moral order transcending that reality. Human aspirations in this literature remain beyond "orderly fulfillment and satisfaction" in the material world. Dreiser, for example, detaches himself from both Hurstwood and Carrie and sees them as simply opposite poles of the same universal, timeless process; similarly, he speaks from outside of Cowperwood's experience and resigns himself to a cosmic equilibrium in social affairs analogous to that which he finds in the biological realm. Other American writers may seem less explicitly detached, but Huckleberry Finn, like Leatherstocking before him, can experience freedom only by lighting out for the territory. And Silas Lapham can achieve a sense of moral worth only by a renunciation of self-realization in the social and material world, a renunciation of the status and wealth that are the only forms of recognition offered by that world. The irony in the title of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* reflects the dichotomy between selfhood and the physical world that goes back in the Western tradition all the way to Zeno at least. Wright makes a departure from that tradition when by bringing the insights of "the labor movement and its ideology" to bear upon his own life he sees the possibility of resolving that duality.

Ralph Ellison has held that Wright was the victim of the "much abused idea that novels are 'weapons'" and that people with "a commitment to social reality ... should abandon literature for politics."⁵ The importance of "How 'Bigger' Was Born" is that it renders a world of meaning where the concept of the novel as a weapon is not "abused", but used to abolish the fragmentation of consciousness implicit in the separation of art from society, its complexities, contradictions, and development. It is a measure of Wright's integrity as an artist, furthermore, that this world of meaning emerges directly from his structuring of his personal, social, and imaginative experience. In his introductory paragraphs he eschews handy formulas to explain the inexplicable, stating simply and candidly his own need for the recognition and understanding of his experience. Then he gives us the typology underlying his hero's character before mentioning any ideology. This accomplished, he moves into Bigger's historical significance before even beginning to deal with his own particular problems as artist, more than fourteen pages into the essay. The last half then moves forward through the interplay of personal experience, social meaning and artistic technique, so that that interplay itself renders an artistic significance as important as any conclusions that he may draw from it.

The first part of the essay modulates between images of the type and the conditions which produced it. His attempt to "indicate more precisely the nature of the environment that produced these men" quickly goes beyond the "two worlds" (xi) of Dixie into history, all the way back to its "imperialistic tug" that dragged black people to this continent. In this way the development of a divided world and a divided consciousness as a function of a specific historic experience is established at the very beginning. A brief catalogue of the categories of personality resulting from that experience then leads up to the first turning point in the essay, his perceptions of the causes of the emergence of Bigger as a special category. These are, first, estrangement from the normal compensations for a one dimensional reality available to black people, and secondly, a longing for the better life perceived as available to "the dominant civilization" (xiii). The examples, mentioned above, of this sense of another dimension conclude the first part of the essay.

The pivot upon which we turn into the second section is the point where Wright tells us that he began to focus on Bigger when he came "into possession of my own feelings" and made "contact with the labor movement and its ideology" (xiv). His new understanding of the conditions which produce Bigger allows him to introduce his broadest statement of the discovery of the forward motion implicit in those conditions, "the possibilities of *alliances* between the American Negro and other people possessing a kindred consciousness" (xv). There follows more play with "the concrete picture and the abstract linkages of relationships" (xv) which extend finally to white people as well as black. At this point in the essay the direction of the dialectic has been established, and Wright sums it up in three paragraphs of "how I culled information relating to Bigger from my reading" (xvii). The first example is the conversation between Lenin and Gorky cited above, preceding the paragraph that begins with the "deep sense of exclusion" that they share with Bigger and ends with Wright's sense of "revolutionary impulse." The next example then refers to the forms

of expression taken by that impulse on different levels of abstraction. He hears in the rhetoric of "We must be ready to make endless sacrifices if we are to be able to overthrow the Czar" a collectivization of Bigger's feeling when he tells a white man, "I'll kill you and go to hell and pay for it" (xvii). Both are the "tragic calculation of how much human life and suffering it would cost a man to live as a man in a world that denied him the right to live with dignity" (xvii).

These three paragraphs embody artistically the central theme of the first half of "How 'Bigger' Was Born": the roots of *Native Son* in social history. The structural direction is clear, moving from examples of alienation (Lenin, Bigger) to an abstract definition of that alienation and a statement of Wright's conviction of the consequent thrust toward wholeness; then there is a descent down the ladder of abstraction from a collective to an individual expression of that thrust. Wright also introduces explicitly in the structure of this passage the essential intellectual strategy that underlies the entire essay. Lukács observes that "The difference, both in historical content and psychology, between close-to-life spontaneity and the capacity of generalization ... runs right through history," and that it is the task of the novelist (as well as of the political leader) to make the connections between the two.⁶ It is evident that Wright sees himself in such a connecting role, mediating through his craft between on the one hand Bigger, whose experience he has shared, and on the other the understanding of history which he has derived from that experience through the constructs of Marxist ideology.

The process continues in the next passage where he sees in accounts of Nazism a working out of the implications of Bigger's response to leaders such as Marcus Garvey. "But more than anything," he tells us, "as a writer I was fascinated by the similarity of the emotional tensions of Bigger in America and Bigger in Nazi Germany and Bigger in old Russia" (xix, italics supplied). This passage also makes clear the limits of Wright's socialist faith, his recognition that the need for dignity, for making the dream of a whole life real in the material world, could lead to "either Communism or Fascism" (xx). What remains of the lessons of Marxism is the sense of history that sees in that need and the impulse toward revolt that grows out of it "the potentialities" that determine history, or in Lukács' phrase, "the objective course of events."⁷ And with that recognition he concludes the first half of the essay and turns to the specific experiences and problems of writing the novel.

The second half of the essay can be divided into two main sections. The first deals with the obstacles Wright experienced to actually beginning work and the considerations and events that helped him overcome them. The second section then finally goes into the specific problems of actually writing the novel. We have already seen that his conviction of Bigger's (and his own) role as historical agent gave him the strength to defy the anticipated gloats of white readers, overcoming his own fear and that of black readers as well. In his response to his "own white and black comrades in the Communist party" he demands "the right of a man to think and feel honestly." In "fulfilling what I felt to be the laws of my own growth" Wright demands that the Party fulfill in its means "the collectivist and proletarian ideal" (xxii) which he shared as its end.

Having dealt with his audience, Wright then returns to his character, recalling and clarifying in a few paragraphs the almost intimidating complexities that derive from the analysis that he made in the first half "How 'Bigger' Was Born." Then in the passages about the South Side Boys' Club and the response to *Uncle Tom's Children*, he again embodies in concrete personal experience the social sources of his artistic motivation. These anecdotes, in turn, set the scene for the final pivotal statement where he renders the fusion of his social vision and his artistic practice. He both refers back to the central thrust of the first half of its essay and looks forward to the technical concerns of the last half of this sentence: "so, when the time came for writing, *what had made him and what he meant* constituted my plot" (xxvii). The entire essay up to this point prepares us to understand this statement, and the language of the last section reinforces repeatedly his assumption of the social roots of his art.

Artistic terms and terms of social reference are repeatedly used interchangeably. Thus the "test-tube" (xxi) arranged for Bigger is a "social reality or dramatic situation," because "Life had made the plot over and over again" (xxviii). When he begins to get into that reality "American police methods of handling Negro boys" are described as a "stereotyped situation" (xxvii). And "a unified sense of background" is composed of "the forces and elements against which Bigger was striving" (xxxii). The assumptions implicit in this use of language throughout this culminating section of the essay reinforce the explicit sense of the artist as intermediary between Bigger and the world, the filament through which the meaning of the life of the oppressed passes and is made available to any audience who decides to listen. His gathering "in facts and facets" and holding them until "a new and thrilling relationship would spring up ..." (xxx) parallels his earlier account of the process of connecting various levels of abstraction in the ideological realm. This commitment to "where he came from and what he meant" also takes precedence over mere verisimilitude, and justifies his "stepping in and speaking outright on my own" (xxi), articulating, out of his capacity to generalize, the meaning of Bigger's spontaneous response to his experience.

From this thematic and structural analysis of "How 'Bigger' Was Born," then, we can abstract a vision of society, and of the artist's relationship to it, that can be summed up something like this: the consciousness of any individual is the product of the interaction between the essential human need for self-realization and the conditions of one's historical position, conditions determined by one's class and/or caste and by the time in which one lives. The writer's ability to articulate consciousness depends upon his sensitivity to individual experience, including his own, in the material and social world as typical of the collective experience of a historically defined group. Wright refers to this sensitivity in the beginning of his essay as "his emotions as a kind of dark and obscure designer of ... facts" (vii). It is with "his emotions," the sense of life intuited from his total experience, that he knows and feels "so much." The novel is the product of the struggle between that knowledge and "the blinding objectivity and tangibility" of the world, a struggle not to create a higher truth that transcends that world, but to discover and render the truth known and felt to be within it as "embryonic prefiguration" of the future.

The “dispossessed and disinherited” (xx) contain that prefiguration because they begin from a common sense of exclusion which bifurcates identity; but they are forced to deal with that exclusion as individuals. Their modes of coping and resisting are Wright’s “variations” and “shadings” (xxx) of the Bigger model. That model is seen by the socialist as a “prophecy of our future” (xx) because it contains the determination to resist that, collectivized, can force a change. Thus Bobby Seale begins by trying to organize Bigger, the lumpenproletariat, the “brother on the block,”⁸ and if as John Reilly has suggested, Wright has transformed rage into art,⁹ it remains rage nonetheless. But it can become collective only when there is a shared sense of an alternative social model, alternative “instrumentalities” for the organism to express itself, which can be taken for the common goal. The resistance can then be successful in creating those alternatives when there is the shared sense of strategy and tactics that constitutes that elusive but necessary quality in any political movement, discipline.

Wright sees the “childish ideas” (xix) of nationalism as a facile and phony response to these needs. The trappings of flag, office, nationhood, provide the illusion of self-realization without the substance; and the charisma of “the leader” as a substitute for a collectively determined and understood strategy. National Socialism and Hitler are the obvious paradigms, and Fanon has analyzed these fascist temptations in *The Wretched of the Earth*.¹⁰ If Wright was unable to effectively dramatize the collectivist alternative, it was not because an understanding of that alternative is not a viable perspective from which to organize material into fictional form, but because he had never experienced that perspective concretely. He had before him a vast panoramic model of where Bigger came from, and Marxism provided the framework upon which to organize his perceptions and experience of that model. But the seeds of the future were deep within the womb of the present, and what Bigger might mean beyond the rebellion necessary to his dignity as a person, remained relatively abstract and elusive to the imagination of even the most creative realist. The only possible opportunity he might have had for such experience was the Communist Party, and the failure of the Party’s undemocratic centralism to realize its collectivist ideals in its own practice, its own style of work, is legendary. In a very real sense, Wright’s artistic “failure” (say, as a socialist realist) reflects the political failure of the Party. “Success” would inevitably have meant the revolutionary romanticism that plagued most proletarian fiction in the thirties.

The difference that this understanding of “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” makes in our perspective on *Native Son* is very subtle, at first glance even slight, but nevertheless profound. The traditional response to Bigger’s acts can be represented by Dan McCall’s judgment that his violence is “a helpless reflex, a gross futility, an insane outburst.”¹¹ Bigger’s conduct is legitimized only insofar as it is understood as an inevitable consequence of his experience. Such an approach attributes to Wright an identification of cause with value typical of the naturalistic, positivist tradition: an “evil” act ceases to be evil when we understand its causes. We forgive the individual who commits the act and dedicate ourselves (perhaps) to eliminating those causes. The individual himself ceases to be evil and becomes merely pitiable. Clyde Griffiths, in Dreiser’s *American Tragedy*, is perhaps the best example.

Bigger is of course somewhat less passive than Clyde, and it has been generally

understood that his murders constitute acts of personal creation, making possible the discovery of identity. An attempt has been made, furthermore, to socialize that value by the application of constructs from existentialism, a perspective which Wright himself embraced later in his career. The best known recent example is Edward Margolies' *The Art of Richard Wright*, which argues that Wright's major achievement is the creation of a "metaphysical revolutionary."¹² Camus is quoted to show that "The metaphysical revolutionary challenges the very conditions of being—the needless suffering, the absurd contrast between his inborn sense of justice and the amorality and injustice of the external world." Through his violence Bigger rejects that world and "becomes his own god and creates his own world in order to exist" (116). Such a formulation describes with considerable accuracy Bigger's subjective experience, and Margolies is still more exactly correct when he shows that "In an absurd, hostile world that denies his humanity and dichotomizes his personality, Bigger has made a choice that has integrated his being" (110).

Margolies' fundamental assumptions, however, the basic terms of that integration, are diametrically opposed to those developed in "How 'Bigger' Was Born." We are presented again with the old absolutes of the self and the world, defined once more as an "absurd contrast." And the resolution of the conflict is exiled once again to the realm of the "metaphysical." In this way the caste and class basis of Bigger's experience is obscured and he becomes "so much like us" (120). This approach, despite the accuracy of its results on one level, is in sharp contrast to Wright's own vision of identity as the result of the interaction between the self and the world, and of the world as the product of developments in material conditions and social institutions. In Marxist terms, Wright's vision is not absolute, but dialectical; not metaphysical, but materialist. But it is also a mistake to assume that "Max's Communism is of course what Wright presumes his novel is expressing". Wright is perfectly aware of the "irresolution of philosophical attitudes" (114) which Margolies perceives. "How 'Bigger' Was Born" makes it clear that the Negro nationalism, the communism, and the need for identity which both McCall and Margolies analyze so successfully are all present in the environment which helped condition Bigger and in Bigger himself. That he did not choose one of them for the sake of a consistent political perspective or a consistent aesthetic surface expresses his commitment to a critical realism rather than to proletarian romanticism or existentialist modernism.

The existentialist approach, then, while it seems to extend the value of Bigger's experience, is able to do so only by leaping away into the vast abstraction of "the human condition." The consequence is a failure to recognize Wright's vision of that value in the concrete, social world. The difference between the world of meaning created by "How 'Bigger' Was Born" and that in which Wright's critics have operated is clear from McCall's concluding reference to Fanon's "Concerning Violence," which analyzes the therapeutic value of violence for the oppressed in detail:

When Fanon speaks of violence, and the necessity for it, he addresses himself to a revolutionary social situation. "Violence" is impelled by consciousness. The hatred of "the native" is at the service of an idea and his destruction is a necessary prelude to a social creation. Violence ... is part of the large communal act: repossession of the African home.

But the violent blood baths of Bigger Thomas are at the mercy of the system which engendered them. He hacks his way to a dead end.¹³

But Fanon makes quite clear that the revolutionary impulse of “the native” exists before it is enlisted in the service of any idea, indeed, that it precedes “consciousness.” A major purpose of *The Wretched of the Earth* is to analyze how that impulse becomes collective, not to argue that it spontaneously serves a “large communal act.” Similarly, the central thrust of “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” is precisely that Wright sees America itself as on the brink of a “revolutionary social situation” and that Bigger’s individual “dead end” may signal a new, albeit ambiguous, collective beginning.

The strategies adopted for this essay may tend to obscure the very real ambivalence which Wright felt about his material, and to push aside somewhat too roughly his aspirations to the status of artist as universal spokesman which he later claimed in *The Outsider* and other works written after he achieved fame, affluence, and expatriation. They may also seem to turn Wright the imaginative writer into a consciously intellectualizing ideologue. But if the label dialectical materialism seems to be applied a little glibly here, it is as a corrective to a critical tradition that has patronized Bigger, or else turned away from him with a revulsion unwarranted for anyone not threatened by the active resistance of the “dispossessed and disinherited,” the wretched of the earth. I have also attempted to make clear the degree to which Wright’s experience as an artist at this stage of his career constitutes a departure, however temporary, from the direction of most of the other classics of contemporary Western literature. We see Wright attempting to return art to its place as an expression of real social forces, to end its isolation, detachment and schizophrenic despair, its wallowing in alienation or attempting to transcend alienation without facing squarely its social roots in oppression and exploitation. For the meaning of Bigger Thomas in Wright’s life, as a person and as an artist, is summed up in his own summary of Bigger’s birth as a character: “The most that I could say of Bigger was that he felt the *need* for a whole life and *acted* out of that need; that was all.”

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NOTES

1. Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), vii-xxxiv. Cited in text hereafter.
2. *The Example of Richard Wright* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1969), p. 56. The only exception I have seen to this tendency is Raman K. Singh, "Some Basic Ideas and Ideals in Richard Wright's Fiction," *CLA Journal*, 13 (1969), 78-84. Singh anticipates my study when he avers that Bigger Thomas "is the archetype of what Marx envisioned as the ideal revolutionary ...", rather than a pathetic victim or a universal existentialist hero.
3. Frantz Fanon has analyzed the oppressed person's use of violence against his own people in "Concerning Violence," *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), pp. 27-74.
4. Georg Lukács, *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 31. Many of the conceptual categories in the present essay are derived, *mutatis mutandis*, from Lukács' work.
5. *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 112, 114.
6. *The Historical Novel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 44-45.
7. *The Historical Novel*, p. 44.
8. Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 4.
9. "Afterword," *Native Son*, p. 397.
10. In "Spontaneity: Its Strengths and Weakness" and "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," *Wretched*, pp. 85-164.
11. *Example*, p. 102.
12. (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 116. Cited in text hereafter.
13. *Example*, p. 102.