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THE HAMMER AND THE NAIL

Richard Wright's modern condition.

By Louis Menand

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Richard Wright was thirty-one when "Native Son" was published, in 1940. He was born in a sharecropper's cabin in Mississippi and grew up in extreme poverty: his father abandoned the family when Wright was five, and his mother was incapacitated by a stroke before he was ten. In 1927, he fled to Chicago, and eventually he found a job in the Post Office there, which enabled him (as he later said) to go to bed on a full stomach every night for the first time in his life. He became active in literary circles, and in 1933 he was elected executive secretary of the Chicago branch of the John Reed Club, a writers' organization associated with the Communist Party. In 1935, he finished a short novel called "Cesspool," about a day in the life of a black postal worker. No one would publish it. He had better luck with a collection of short stories, "Uncle Tom's Children," which appeared in 1938. The reviews were admiring, but they did not please Wright. "I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about," he complained, and he vowed that his next book would be too hard for tears.

Richard Wright, Venice, 1950. Photograph by Archivio Cameraphoto Epoche / Getty

"Native Son" was that book, and it is not a novel for sentimentalists. It involves the asphyxiation, decapitation, and cremation of a white woman by a poor young black man from the south side of Chicago. The man, Bigger Thomas, feels so invigorated by what he has done that he tries to extort money from the woman's wealthy parents. When that scheme fails, he murders his black girlfriend, and even after he has finally been captured and sentenced to death he refuses to repent. Nobody in America had ever before told a story like this, and had it published. In three weeks, the book sold two hundred and fifteen thousand copies.

It will give an idea of the world into which "Native Son" made its uncouth appearance to recall that at almost the same moment that Wright's novel was entering the best-seller lists—the spring of 1940—Hattie McDaniel was being given an Academy Award for her performance as Mammy in "Gone with the Wind." McDaniel was the first

black person ever voted an Oscar, and she gave Hollywood (as all Oscar winners ideally do) an occasion for self-congratulation. "Only in America, the Land of the Free, could such a thing have happened," the columnist Louella Parsons explained. "The Academy is apparently growing up and so is Hollywood. We are beginning to realize that art has no boundaries and that creed, race, or color must not interfere where credit is due." She did not go on to note that when McDaniel and her escort arrived at the Coconut Grove for the awards ceremony they found that they had been seated at a special table at the rear of the room, near the kitchen.

"The day 'Native Son' appeared, American culture was changed forever," Irving Howe once wrote, and the remark has been quoted many times. What Howe meant was that after "Native Son" it was no longer possible to pretend, as Louella Parsons had pretended, that the history of racial oppression was a legacy from which we could emerge without suffering an enduring penalty. White Americans had attempted to dehumanize black Americans, and everyone carried the scars; it would take more than calling America "the Land of the Free" and really meaning it to make the country whole. If this is what, more than fifty years ago, Wright intended to say in "Native Son," he isn't wrong yet.

"Native Son" also stands at the beginning of a period in which novels (and, more recently, movies) by black Americans have treated the subject of race with a lack of gentility almost unimaginable before 1940. In this respect, too, Wright's novel casts a long shadow. But if we consider "Native Son" primarily in the company of works by other black writers, we'll miss what Wright was up to, and why he is such a remarkable figure.

Wright's intentions have been difficult to grasp, because many of his books were mangled or chopped up by various editors, and their publication was strewn over five decades. "Lawd Today!" (the retitled "Cesspool") was not published until 1963, three years after Wright's death, and then it appeared in a bowdlerized edition. One of the stories in "Uncle Tom's Children" was rejected by its publisher and did not appear in the first edition of the book; it was added to a second edition, published after "Native Son" became a best-seller. "Native Son" itself was partly expurgated, and a significant episode was dropped, at the request of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Half of Wright's autobiography, "Black Boy" (published in 1945), was cut, also in order to please the Book-of-the-Month Club, and remained unpublished in book form until 1977, when it appeared under Wright's original title for the entire work, "American Hunger." And the long novel "The Outsider" was heavily edited, and some pages were dropped without Wright's approval, when it was first published, in 1953.

These five books have now been expertly restored to their original condition by Arnold Rampersad, the biographer of Langston Hughes, and published by the Library of America (in two volumes; $35 each). Rampersad has also provided succinct annotations, some helpful notes on the complicated history of Wright's texts, and a useful chronology of Wright's life. Wright produced more work after "The Outsider" than is included here: in the last seven years of his life he wrote two novels, a collection of stories, a play, several works of nonfiction, and some four thousand haiku. But Rampersad's selection has a meaningful shape: it puts the best-known works, "Native Son" and "Black Boy," at the center and provides them with, in effect, their prologue and epilogue. The result gives us the core of Wright's work not as it was once seen but as it was intended.

Putting the expurgated material back in gives all three of the novels a grittier surface; and in the case of "Native Son" it also adds a dimension to the story. In the familiar version of the novel, a puzzling line appears during a scene, late in the book, in which the State's Attorney tries to intimidate Bigger by letting him understand that he has information about other crimes and misdeeds Bigger has committed, including, he says, "that dirty trick you and your friend Jack pulled off in the Regal Theatre." The reference is opaque. Bigger and his friend do go to the Regal Theatre, a movie house, early in the novel, but no dirty trick is described. In the original version, though, after

Bigger and his friend enter the theatre they masturbate (the State's Attorney's comment is now revealed to include a pun), and are seen by a female patron and reported to the manager.

The Book-of-the-Month Club, Wright's editor informed him, objected to the scene, which, the editor thought Wright would agree, was "a bit on the raw side." Wright obliged the club's sense of propriety by removing the "dirty trick." But he hadn't intended Bigger's public masturbation to be simply a redundant example of his general sociopathy. In Wright's original version, after Bigger and Jack masturbate they watch a newsreel featuring the woman Bigger will accidentally kill that night, Mary Dalton. She is shown on vacation on a beach in Florida, and Bigger and Jack decide (as the newsreel encourages them to) that she looks as if she might be "a hot kind of girl." Wright cut this episode as well (he had Bigger watch a movie critical of political radicalism instead); and he also eliminated a few lines (apparently too steamy for the Book-of-the-Month Club) from Bigger's later encounter with the flesh-and-blood Mary which made it clear that Bigger is sexually aroused by her.

Restoring this material restores more than a couple of scenes. Bigger's sexuality has always been a puzzle. He hates Mary, and is afraid of her, but she is attractive and is negligent about sexual decorum, and the combination ought to provoke some sort of sexual reaction; yet in the familiar edition it does not. Now we can see that, originally, it was meant to. The restoration of Bigger's sexuality also helps to make sense of his later treatment of his girlfriend, Bessie. He repeats intentionally with Bessie what he has done, for the most part unpremeditatedly, to Mary: he takes her upstairs in an abandoned building, kills her by crushing her skull with a brick, and disposes of her body by throwing it down an airshaft. But before Bigger kills Bessie he rapes her, and if the scene is to carry its full power we have to have felt that when Bigger was with Mary in her bedroom he had rape in his heart.

Wright was a writer of warring impulses. His rage at the injustices of the world he knew made him impatient with the usual logic of literary expression. He was a gifted inventor of morally explosive situations, but once the situations in his stories actually explode he can never seem to let the pieces fall where they will. His novels suffer from an essentially anti-novelistic condition: they are hostage to a politics of outcomes. Wright tries to order events to fit his sense of justice—or, more accurately, his sense of the impossibility of justice—and when the moral is not unambiguous enough he inserts a speech. At the same time, Wright loved literature intimately, as you might love a person who has rescued you from misery or danger. Literature, he said, was the first place in which he had found his inner sense of the world reflected and ratified. Everything else, from the laws and mores of Southern apartheid to the religious fanaticism of his own family (he grew up mostly in the house of his maternal grandmother, a devout Seventh-Day Adventist, who believed that storytelling was a sin), he experienced as pure hostility.

After he moved to Chicago, he discovered in Marxism a second corroboration of his convictions, and he joined the Communist Party. But he believed that Marxist politics were compatible with a commitment to literature—and the belief led, in 1942, to his break, and subsequent feud, with the Party. He had an appreciation not only of those writers whose influence on his own work is most obvious—Dostoyevski and Dreiser and, later on, Camus and Sartre—but also of Gertrude Stein, Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Turgenev, and Proust. From the beginning of his literary career, in the John Reed Club, until the end, in self-exile in France, he participated in writers' organizations and congresses, where he spoke as a champion of artistic freedom; and he was a mentor for, among other young writers, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

It's true that Wright's convictions flatten out the "literary" qualities of his fiction, and lead him to sacrifice complexity for force. His novels tend to be prolix and didactic, and his style is often dogged. But force is a literary quality, too—and one that can make other limitations seem irrelevant. Wright's descriptions, for example, are almost all painted in primary colors straight out of the naturalist paintbox; but the flight of Bigger Thomas through the

snow in "Native Son"—a black man seeking invisibility in a world of whiteness—is one of the most effective sequences in American fiction.

The apparent indifference to artistry in Wright's work has seemed to some people a thing to be admired, a guarantee of literary honesty. It's the way a black man living in America should write, they feel. This interpretation is one of the ways Wright's race has been made the key to understanding him; and it's a position that, in various guises and more subtly argued, has turned up often in the long critical debate over Wright's work—a debate that has engaged, over the years, Baldwin, Ellison, Howe, and Eldridge Cleaver.

It is not a position that Wright would have accepted. His models were the great modern writers (nearly all of them white), and he wanted to serve art in the same spirit they had. He was frank about the models he relied on in making "Native Son": "Association with white writers was the life preserver of my hope to depict Negro life in fiction," he wrote in the essay "How Bigger Was Born," "for my race possessed no fictional works dealing with such problems, had no background in such sharp and critical testing of experience, no novels that went with a deep and fearless will down to the dark roots of life." He made it clear that his greatest satisfaction in writing "Native Son" came not from entering a protest against racism and injustice but from proving to himself (he didn't care, he said, what others thought) that he was indeed a maker of literature in the tradition of Poe, Hawthorne, and James. In "the oppression of the Negro," he said, he had found a subject worthy of those writers' genius: "If Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him."

What Wright took to be his good fortune was also his dilemma. Poe was, in a sense, the luckier writer. The moral outlines of Wright's principal subject matter were so vivid when he wrote his books that efforts to complicate them would have seemed irresponsible and efforts to heighten them melodramatic. Some of the stories about black victims of Southern racism in "Uncle Tom's Children" have memorable touches of atmosphere and drama, and some are morality plays, but in all of them the action is determined entirely by the unmitigated viciousness of the white characters. When the subject is violent confrontation in a racially divided community—as it is in those stories and in "Native Son"—a "literary" imagination can seem superfluous. In the last section of "Native Son," for example, Wright has Bigger read a long article about his case in a Chicago newspaper, in which he finds himself described in these terms:

> Though the Negro killer's body does not seem compactly built, he gives the impression of possessing abnormal physical strength. He is about five feet, nine inches tall and his skin is exceedingly black. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast.
>
> His arms are long, hanging in a dangling fashion to his knees. . . . His shoulders are huge and muscular, and he keeps them hunched, as if about to spring upon you at any moment. He looks at the world with a strange, sullen, fixed-from-under stare, as though defying all efforts of compassion.
>
> All in all, he seems a beast utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization. In speech and manner he lacks the charm of the average, harmless, genial, grinning southern darky so beloved by the American people.

The passage may strike readers today as a case of moral overloading—a caricature of attitudes whose virulence we already acknowledge. In fact, as a student of Wright's work, Keneth Kinnamon, points out in the introduction to a recent collection of "New Essays on Native Son," Wright was using the language of articles in the Chicago *Tribune* about Robert Nixon, a black man who was executed in 1939 for the murder of a white woman.

For the Wright who wanted to expose an evil that other writers had ignored, the starkness of his material made his job simpler; for Wright the novelist, the same starkness made it harder. In "A Passage to India," E. M. Forster took a

situation very like the one Wright used in "Native Son"—impermissible sexual contact between a white woman and a man of color—and built around it a textured, essentially tragic novel about the limits of human goodness. Forster's sensibility was very different from Wright's, of course, but he could work his material in the way he did in part because his "racists" were people who imagined themselves to be enlightened, and this allowed him to tell his story in a highly developed ironic voice. The kind of racism that figures in most of "Native Son," though, is not tragic, and it is not an occasion for irony. It is simply criminal.

Wright seems to have recognized this difficulty partway through "Native Son," and to have responded by giving his work a sociological turn. In "Lawd Today!" (about a black man who is not only a victim of bigotry but a bigot himself), in "Uncle Tom's Children," and in the first two parts of "Native Son" he had tried to describe the conditions of life in a racist society; in the last part of "Native Son" he undertook to explain them. He therefore introduced into his novel a character who has never, I think, won a single admirer: Mr. Max, the Communist lawyer who volunteers to represent Bigger at his trial. Max's bombastic and seemingly interminable speech before the court (twenty-three pages in the new edition), in which he proposes a theory of modern life meant to explain Bigger's conduct, is almost universally regarded as a mistake.

The speech is surely a mistake, but the error is not merely a formal one—putting a long sociological or philosophical disquisition into the mouth of a character. Ivan Karamazov goes on at considerable length about the Grand Inquisitor, after all, and few people object. The problem with Max's oration isn't that it's sociology; it's that it's boring. And it's boring because Wright didn't really believe it himself.

Max's thesis is that twentieth-century industrialism has created a "mass man," a creature who is bombarded with images of consumerist bliss by movies and advertisements but has been given no means for genuine fulfillment. The consequence is an inner condition of fear and rage which everyone shares, and for which black men like Bigger are made the scapegoats. This fits in neatly enough with much of the story for it to sound like Wright's last word. But it's not: Max's courtroom performance is followed by one final scene, in which Bigger talks with Max in his jail cell. They carry on a rather broken conversation, at the end of which Bigger cries out:

> "I didn't want to kill! . . . But what I killed for, I *am!* It must've been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder. . . ."
>
> Max lifted his hand to touch Bigger, but did not.
>
> "No; no; no. . . . Bigger, not that. . . ." Max pleaded despairingly.
>
> "What I killed for must've been good!" Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. "It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something. . . . I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em. . . . It's the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, 'cause I'm going to die. I know what I'm saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way. . . ."
>
> Max's eyes were full of terror. Several times his body moved nervously, as though he were about to go to Bigger; but he stood still.
>
> "I'm all right, Mr. Max. Just go and tell Ma I was all right and not to worry none, see? Tell her I was all right and wasn't crying none. . . ."
>
> Max's eyes were wet. Slowly, he extended his hand. Bigger shook it.
>
> "Good-bye, Bigger," he said quietly.
>
> "Good-bye, Mr. Max."

That Bigger should have the book's last word and that what he has to say should terrify, and apparently baffle, Max has seemed to some critics to be Wright's way of saying that not even the most sympathetic white person can hope to have a true understanding of a black person's experience—that the articulation of black experience requires a black voice. "Max's inability to respond and the fact that Bigger's words are left to stand alone without the mediation of authorial commentary serve as the signs that in this novel dedicated to the dramatization of a black man's consciousness the subject has finally found his own unqualified incontrovertible voice" is how one of those critics, John M. Reilly, puts it in his contribution to "New Essays on Native Son." This academic excitement over a black character's saying something "unmediated" ought to be followed by a little attention to what it is that the character is actually saying. For what Bigger says (and Max understands him perfectly well) has nothing to do with negritude. It is that he has discovered murder to be a form of self-realization—that it has been revealed to him that all the brave ideals of civilized life, including those of Communist ideology, are sentimental delusions, and the fundamental expression of the instinct of being is killing. Two years before Wright formally broke with the Communist Party, in other words, he had already turned in Marx for Nietzsche.

Now that Wright's books can be read in the sequence in which they were written, we can see more clearly the dominance that this belief came to hold in Wright's thinking. It didn't replace his interest in the subject of race; it subsumed it. Wright intended "Black Boy," for example, to have two parts—the first about his life in the South, and the second about his experiences with the Communist Party. But the Book-of-the-Month Club refused to publish the second part. Wright was convinced that the Communists were behind the refusal (and it is hard to find another reason for it), but he agreed to the cut, and "Black Boy" became an indictment of Southern racism (and a best-seller). Wright managed to publish segments of the suppressed half of the book in various places during his lifetime—the most widely read excerpt is probably the one that appeared in Richard Crossman's postwar anthology "The God That Failed." When the autobiography is read as it was intended to be read, though, it is no longer a book about Jim Crow. It is a book about oppression in general, seen through three examples: the racism of Southern whites, the religious intolerance of Southern blacks, and the totalitarianism of the Communist Party.

The idea that there are no "better" forms of human community but only different kinds of domination—that, in the metaphor of "Native Son" 's famous opening scene, Bigger must kill the rat that has invaded his apartment not because Biggers are better than rats but because if he does not the rat will kill Bigger—is what gives "The Outsider," the novel Wright published in 1953, its distinctly obsessional quality. The outsider is a black man, Cross Damon, who is presented with a chance to escape from an increasingly grim set of personal troubles when the subway train he is riding in crashes and one of the bodies is identified mistakenly as his. Cross has been, we learn, an avid reader of the existentialist philosophers, and he decides to assume a new identity and to see what it would be like to live in a world without moral meaning—to live "beyond good and evil." He quickly discovers that perfect moral freedom means the freedom to kill anyone whose existence he finds an inconvenience, and he murders four people and causes the suicide of a fifth before he is himself assassinated. (Wright was always drawn to composing lurid descriptions of physical violence. There are beatings and killings in nearly all his stories; and his first published work, written when he was a schoolboy, and now lost, was a short story called "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre.")

The influence of Camus's "L'Étranger" is easy to see, but Wright's book is even more explicitly a *roman à thèse*. Two of Cross's victims are Communists; a third is a Fascist. Cross kills them, it is explained, because he recognizes in Communists and Fascists the same capacity for murder and contempt for morality he has discovered in himself. The point (which Wright finds a number of occasions for Cross to spell out) is that Communism and Fascism are particularly naked and cynical examples of the will to power. They accommodate two elemental desires: the desire of the strong to be masters, and the desire of the weak to be slaves. Once, as Cross sees it, myths, religions, and the hard

shell of social custom prevented people from acting on those desires directly; in the twentieth century, though, all restraining cultural influences have been stripped away, and in their absence totalitarian systems have emerged. Communism and Fascism are, at bottom, identical expressions of the modern condition.

And is racism as well? Race is only a minor theme in "The Outsider," but there is no evidence in the book that Wright regards racism as a peculiar case, and "The Outsider" reads, without strain, as an extension of the idea he was developing at the end of "Native Son"—that racial oppression is just another example of the pleasure the hammer takes in hitting the nail.

It's not completely clear how we're meant to understand this analysis. Is the point supposed to be that twentieth-century society is unique? Or only that it is uniquely barefaced? If it's the latter—if the idea is that *all* societies are enactments of the impulses to dominate and to submit but some have disguised their brutality more effectively than others—we have reached a dead end: every effort to conceive of a better way of life simply reduces to some new hammer bashing away at some new nail. But if it's the former—if Wright's idea is that modern industrial society, with its contempt for life's traditional consolations, is a terrible mistake—then racism is really an example that contradicts his thesis. For the South in which slavery flourished was not an industrial economy; it was an agricultural one, with a social system about two steps up the ladder from feudalism. That civilization was destroyed in the Civil War, but the racism survived, in the form that Wright himself described so unsparingly in the first part of "Black Boy" and in the essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow": as part of a deeply ingrained pattern of custom and belief. To the extent that the forces of modernity are bent on wiping out tradition and superstition, institutionalized racism is (like Fascism) not their product, as Wright seems to be insisting, but a resistant cultural strain, an anachronism. The evil of modern society isn't that it creates racism but that it creates conditions in which people who don't suffer from injustice seem incapable of caring very much about people who do. Wright knew this from his own experience. There is a passage in the restored half of "Black Boy" which is as fine as anything he wrote about race in America, but which also has an exactness and a poignancy often missing from his fiction. Shortly after he arrived in Chicago, Wright went to work as a dishwasher in a café:

> One summer morning a white girl came late to work and rushed into the pantry where I was busy. She went into the women's room and changed her clothes; I heard the door open and a second later I was surprised to hear her voice:
>
> "Richard, quick! Tie my apron!"
>
> She was standing with her back to me and the strings of her apron dangled loose. There was a moment of indecision on my part, then I took the two loose strings and carried them around her body and brought them again to her back and tied them in a clumsy knot.
>
> "Thanks a million," she said grasping my hand for a split second, and was gone.
>
> I continued my work, filled with all the possible meanings that that tiny, simple, human event could have meant to any Negro in the South where I had spent most of my hungry days.
>
> I did not feel any admiration for the girls [who worked in the café], nor any hate. My attitude was one of abiding and friendly wonder. For the most part I was silent with them, though I knew that I had a firmer grasp of life than most of them. As I worked I listened to their talk and perceived its puzzled, wandering, superficial fumbling with the problems and facts of life. There were many things they wondered about that I could have explained to them, but I never dared. . . .
>
> (I know that not race alone, not color alone, but the daily values that give meaning to life stood between me and those white girls with whom I worked. Their constant outward-looking, their mania for radios, cars, and a thousand other trinkets made them dream and fix their eyes upon the trash of

> life, made it impossible for them to learn a language which could have taught them to speak of what was in their or others' hearts. The words of their souls were the syllables of popular songs. . . .)

This feels much closer to the truth than the simplified Nietzscheism of "The Outsider." But, having rejected first the religious culture in which he was brought up, then the American political culture that permitted his oppression, then Communism, and, finally (as Cross's death symbolizes), the existential Marxism he encountered in postwar France, Wright seems, by 1953, to have found himself in a place beyond solutions. He was not driven there by an idiosyncratic logic, though; he was just following the path he had first chosen. Wright's experience, that of a Southern black man who became one of the best-known writers of his time, was unusual; his intellectual journey was not. The attraction to Communism in the nineteen-thirties, the bitter split with the Party in the nineteen-forties, the malaise resulting from "the failure of ideology" and from the emergence, after the war, of American triumphalism—it's a familiar narrative. Wright's role as a writer was to take one of the literary forms most closely associated with that narrative, the naturalist novel, and to add race to its list of subject matter. What Upton Sinclair did for industrialism in "The Jungle," what John Dos Passos did for materialism in "U.S.A.," what Sinclair Lewis did for conformism in "Main Street" and "Babbitt" Wright did for racism in "Native Son": he made it part of the naturalist novel's criticism of life under capitalism. And his strengths and weaknesses as a writer are, by and large, the strengths and weaknesses of the tradition in which he worked. He changed the way Americans thought about race, but he did not invent a new form to do it.

This helps to explain the Nietzschean element in "Native Son" and the nihilism of "The Outsider": they are the characteristic symptoms of the exhaustion of the naturalist style. The young Norman Mailer, for example, used Dos Passos and James T. Farrell as his literary models in writing "The Naked and the Dead," but added a dash of Nietzsche to the mixture, and then produced, in the early nineteen-fifties—like Wright, and with similar results—a cloudy parable of ideological dead-endism, "Barbary Shore."

Wright's most famous protégés, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, both eventually dissociated their work (Ellison more delicately than Baldwin) from his. They felt that Wright's books lacked a feeling for the richness of the culture of black Americans—that they were written as though black Americans were a people without resources. Someone reading "Native Son," Baldwin complained, would think that "in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse" by which black Americans could sustain themselves in a hostile world. But that is what Wright did think. He believed that racism in America had succeeded in stripping black Americans of a genuine culture. There were, in his view, only two ways in which black Americans could respond humanly to their condition: one was to adopt a theology of acceptance sustained by religious faith—a solution Wright had resisted violently as a boy—and the other was to become Biggers (or Crosses), and live outside the law until they were trapped and crushed. Otherwise, there was only the "cesspool" of daily life described in "Lawd Today!"—an endless cycle of demeaning drudgery and cheap thrills.

It's not hard to see why writers like Ellison and Baldwin resisted this vision of black experience, but it is a vision true to Wright's own particular history of deprivation. Ellison, by contrast, grew up in Oklahoma, a state that has no history of slavery, and he attended Tuskegee Institute, where he was introduced to, among other works, T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," a poem whose influence on his novel "Invisible Man" is palpable—as is the influence of jazz and of the Southern black vernacular. Ellison had a different culture, in other words, because he had a different experience.

What's most appealing about the idea that we should give primary importance to a writer's ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference when we're considering his or her work is that it promises to do away with the big, monolithic abstraction "culture"—the notion that culture is something that transcends the differences between people. The

danger, though, is that we will end up with a lot of little monolithic abstractions. Culture isn't something that comes with one's race or sex. It comes only through experience; there isn't any other way to acquire it. And in the end everyone's culture is different, because everyone's experience is different.

Some people are at home with the culture they encounter, as Ellison seems to have been. Some people borrow or adopt their culture, as Eliot did when he transformed himself into a British Anglo-Catholic. A few, extraordinary people have to steal it. Wright was living in Memphis when his serious immersion in literature began, but he could not get books from the public library. So he persuaded a sympathetic, though puzzled, white man to lend him his library card, and he forged a note for himself to present to the librarian: "Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H. L. Mencken?" He had discovered, on his own, a literary tradition in which no one had invited him to participate—from which, in fact, the world had conspired to exclude him. He saw in that tradition a way to express his own experience, his own sense of things, and, through heroic persistence, he made that experience a part of our culture. ♦

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BOOKS

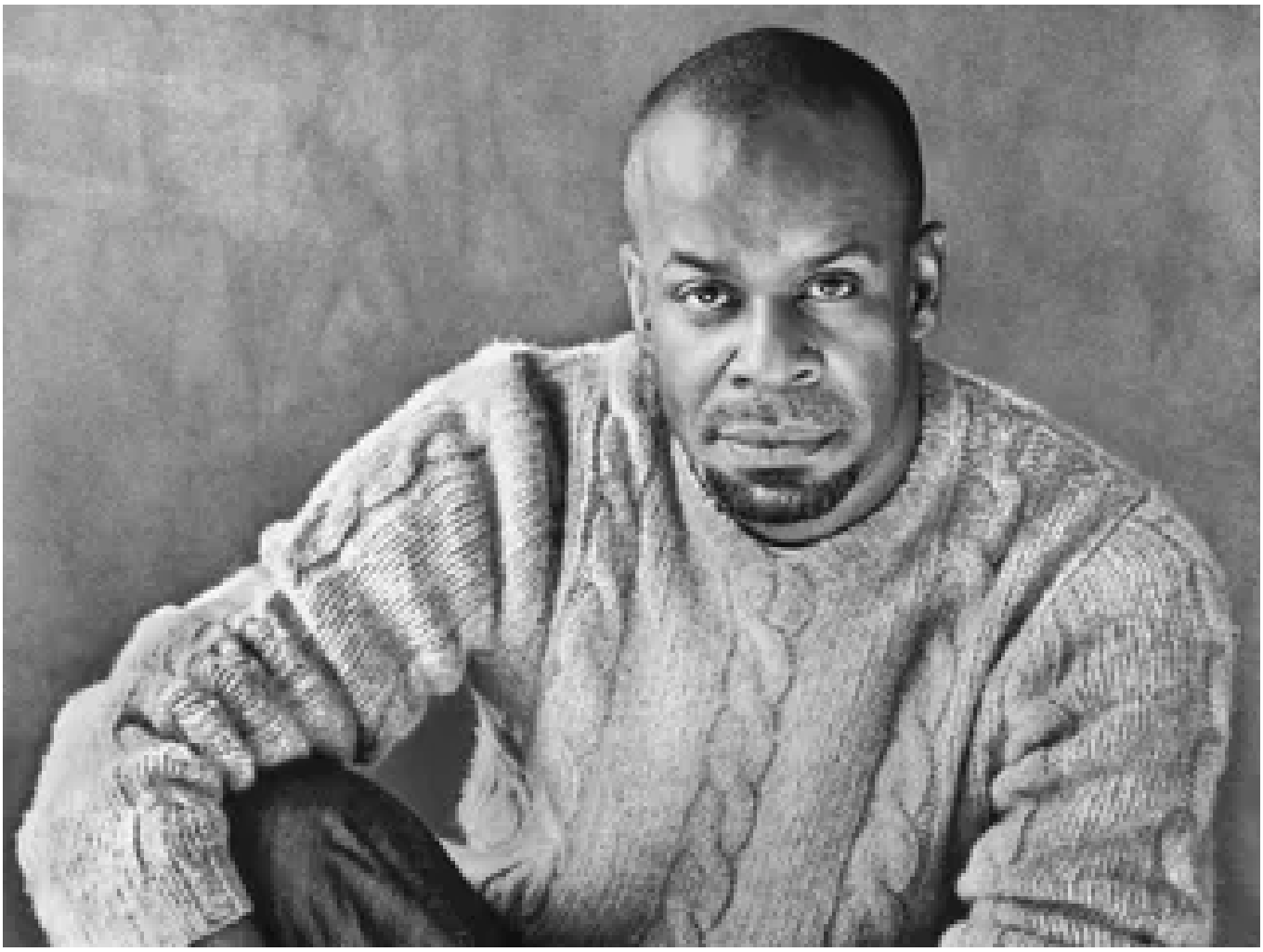
THE VISION OF THE INNOCENT

J. D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye."

By S. N. Behrman

DYING: AN INTRODUCTION

By Howard Moss



LIFE AND LETTERS

THE NOVELIST WHOSE INVENTIONS WENT TOO FAR

After the Afro-Cuban writer H. G. Carrillo died, his husband learned that almost everything the writer had shared about his life was made up—including his Cuban identity.

By D. T. Max

BOOKS

THE HAUNTING OF PRINCE HARRY

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