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LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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THREE WAYS TO PICTURE HELL: AN AESTHETIC APPROACH TO RICHARD WRIGHT'S NATIVE SON, RALPH ELLISON'S INVISIBLE MAN, AND LEROI JONES'S THE SYSTEM OF DANTE'S HELL

Angela Charlene Bosfield

A Thesis

in

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ABSTRACT

Three Ways To Picture Hell: An aesthetic approach to Richard Wright's Native Son, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, and LeRoi Jones's The System of Dante's Hell.

Angela Charlene Bosfield

This thesis examines three novels as individual visions of the hellishness of the Black experience. The distinctive quality of each novel is shown to lie in the manner in which the particular author executes his vision.

Naturalism is the literary philosophy adopted in Native Son to expose the damaging effects of economic hardship and racial segregation in the Thirties. Powerful symbols and naturalistic sociological data are employed to produce the feelings of estrangement and entrapment experienced by the young Negro ghetto-dweller.

In Invisible Man, Ellison utilizes the freedom of the Picaresque Tradition and the self-consciousness of the multivalent novel to illustrate the internal and external chaos of Negro American life. The suggestion here is that the human identity itself is threatened by modern society, and that the Negro's problem of maintaining an integrated self is shared by all men.

For Jones, in The System of Dante's Hell, hell is the tortured psyche redeeming itself by self-exposure from the false position of

white-assimilation to that of Blackness. Conventional in his use of Dante's Hell as a literary model and contemporary in his disregard for traditional grammar and syntax, Jones experiments with the fluid form of the lyrical novel to project the self-impressions of his guilt-ridden persona.

Together they indicate the hellish nature of Black experience in a variety of literary modes, each one reflecting the aesthetic influences of the time.

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May God bless them all.

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INTRODUCTION

Interviewer: Would you say the search for identity is primarily an American theme?

Ellison: It is the American theme.

Ralph Ellison

Form is not a matter of prefabrication...it is created by its meaning, the content of the book, by its theme.

Anais Nin

As indicated by the above quotations, this study concentrates on the relationship of form to meaning in the Black American novel. The three novels chosen for analysis, Richard Wright's Native Son,[1] Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man,[2] and LeRoi Jones's The System of Dante's Hell,[3] are the products of their respective social and literary periods in terms of form, although they share as their subject matter, the idea of the Black circumstance as hellish. The definition of hell being incorporated here is not the traditional one of Hell as a place under the earth where the damned receive everlasting punishment,[4] but rather

[1] Native Son (New York: Harper and Row, 1940).

[2] Invisible Man (1952; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1972).

[3] The System of Dante's Hell (1965; rpt. New York: Grove, 1975).

[4] Dictionary of Christian Ethics (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 47.

as a place of turmoil and a state of supreme misery or discomfort,[5] emphasizing both the physical and psychological landscape of the Black condition.

In Native Son, set in the 1930s, Wright offers the reader a strategic position from which to view the physical characteristics of the modern urban ghetto, and establishes that locale as the typical setting for the literary enactment of Black life. The author establishes that it is the Black man's social and economic disadvantage which gives rise to Black ghetto conditions, while his treatment of urban reality provides the means by which the reader evaluates the effects of that environment on the Black personality. His novel seeks to demonstrate that it is these ghetto conditions which do violence to the sensibilities of ghetto youths, encouraging them into self-destructive crimes, and condemning them to a state of pathological alienation. By dramatizing his theme of the hellishness of personal entrapment in a sordid environment, Wright projects himself as a spokesman for oppressed men everywhere.[6]

In Invisible Man, Ellison stresses the frustrations of Black people in their attempt to cope with the vast social changes which transformed them from slaves to independent industrial workers in less than a century, resulting in the fragmentation of a once integrated identity. Each of his hero's encounters entails some form of unexpected exposure which illustrates that past traditions and experiences no longer serve

[5] Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary (London: W.R. Chambers, 1972), p. 605.

[6] "How Bigger was Born," Native Son, p. xvii.

as meaningful instruments with which to interpret the present. Because the future unfolds at such a pace the hero's life eventually progresses far beyond a point where former beliefs and behaviour can be deemed relevant. That Ellison's hero comes to accept his invisibility as a viable identity is a sign that he has found some meaning in life's chaos and has re-created his own reality from it. The profound and subjective treatment of the outer and inner disorder of Black experience enlarges the novel into a universal statement on the modern human condition.

In The System of Dante's Hell, Jones focuses on the urban Black youth who is faced with the dilemma of succeeding in white society at the expense of rejecting Black culture. Through the intensely subjective treatment of his persona, Jones traces the emotional and psychological origins of his character's seemingly neurotic attitude towards self, class, and sex, and in so doing offers the reader a dramatic example of the way in which young people become estranged from society, upset in sexuality and ultimately unable to apply aggression constructively.[7] Since the proposed solution to the hero's problem of fragmentation is the return to Blackness, the novel ends with the type of Black nationalistic consciousness which Wright had mentioned vaguely in Native Son as the possible answer to Bigger's dilemma, and with which Ellison had endowed his character Ras. Thus, Jones's hero, who by 1960 is able to pilot the aeroplanes which were once a symbol of unreachable white opportunity to Bigger, now turns his back on white society, lamenting his previous desire for assimilation.

[7]Erik Erikson Identity: Youth and Crisis (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), p. 309.

Within the twenty-five-year span between Native Son and The System, the difference between Wright's mid-depression Chicago, Ellison's Harlem and Jones's Newark, is minimal indeed, in terms of crime, casual violence, garbage, and decay. It is on the level of the Black man's inner life that great change is recorded. The authors reveal an increasing tendency to move deeply inward in order to create their own visions of reality. The worlds which they create fictionally depict the fate of those who live unrelated to others or to their true selves, for, whether it is in the inarticulate Bigger Thomas, the invisible rabble rouser, or the fictionalized artistic self, each hero of these respective novels must find some meaning in life amidst the hellishness of his circumstance, and struggle to assert his newly-found sense of self, in the face of inimical forces which, he senses, seek to extinguish his unique individuality.

Before 1940, the Black novelist had entertained a vision of reality which was unique to Black Americans and which could not be applied to the rest of the nation. Two antithetical concerns of some of the first Negro writers,[8] for example, were physical violence against the oppressor in the form of slave revolts and violence against one's own identity by 'passing' into white society. Though their desire for freedom was expressed in works which relied heavily on the methods and materials of Abolitionist Propaganda,[9] they had touched upon a longing so centrally

[8] William Wells Brown (Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States [1853]) was the first Negro novelist; Frederick Douglass (The Heroic Slave [1853]) was the most widely known Negro Abolitionist; Martin Delaney (Blake: or The Huts of America [1857]) was the father of Black Nationalism. Ronald Takaki, Violence in the Black Imagination: Essays and Documents (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), pp. 11-12.

[9] High Gloster, Negro Voices in American Fiction (1948; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), p. 25.

available and sufficiently vital as to influence Wright's Native Son almost a century later.

The Post-Reconstruction writers, such as Charles Chestnutt (1858-1932), Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906), and W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963), who followed these Negro literary pioneers, engaged themselves in polemical fiction in a vain attempt to oppose the image of the Negro portrayed in the novels of the Plantation School of Thomas Nelson Page and the racist cult of Thomas Dixon.[10] These members of the Talented Tenth (the term coined by Booker T. Washington to describe the best-educated Negroes) found themselves, as James Emmanuel comments, "suspended by literary inexperience between the Romantic and Realistic traditions and surrounded by unworthy models in the form of melodramatic popular fiction."[11] Characterization was a particular problem because the authors tended to create counter-stereotypes, or reinforce existing ones, or else they ignored the racial issue completely, by writing sentimental moralistic work for the uplift of their readers.[12] On the whole, the mood of such fiction tended to be hopeful even in the midst of legally sanctioned prejudice and discrimination, since, as members of the rising Negro middle class, the authors regarded assimilation into white society as a realistic possibility.[13]

[10] Gloster, p. 7.

[11] Emmanuel and Theodore L. Gross, Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 3.

[12] Richard Long and Eugenia Collier, Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1972), p. 114, (Vol. 1).

[13] James Weldon Johnson's novel The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912) did capture a sense of the Negro soul denied and contrasted the hard materialistic attitude of whites with the humane artistic spirit of Negroes.

Unlike their predecessors, the writers of the Twenties had experienced World War I and the Great Migration,[14] and were less entranced by the thought of assimilation into white society. These two very significant events greatly altered the Negro's attitude towards himself and his country. The war exposed the Negro soldier to international affairs, offering him the opportunity to compare the fair treatment which he received upon his arrival in Europe with the restrictions imposed on him soon after by the Generals in the American Army.[15] This exposure resulted in a generally heightened consciousness leading to such bloody episodes as the St. Louis race riot of 1917 and the Red Summer of 1919, which saw Negroes resist the usual attempts to injure them.[16] The apprehension of Black Men that their participation in the European conflict would not result in democratic rights, and their realization that there was, however, power in numbers, led to an almost immediate increase in racial consciousness.

The term "New Negro" was coined by Negro intellectuals to signify this new awareness of group identity, and represented a shift in the attitudes of both Negro middle and lower classes. The poorer classes centered their sense of pride around Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa

[14]"Large numbers of blacks had streamed into the northern cities in the first years of the new century, forced out by poverty of southern agriculture and the mean brutality of southern racial bigotry." Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (1971: rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press Paperbacks, 1973), p. 14.

[15]Huggins, p. 54.

[16]Lerone Bennett, Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America 1619-1962 (Chicago: Johnson, 1962), pp. 293-294.

Movement"[17]; the rising Negro middle class upheld the term "New Negro" as a way to convey to white society that they were worthy of acceptance and assimilation, while many of the Negro literary intelligentsia saw it as a revelation of the Negro's "joie de vivre,"[18] reflecting, to a certain extent, the exhilaration of the Jazz Age. It was the noisy cabaret, not the crowded slums, which gained fictional attention and by glorifying the Negro temperament as exciting and exotic, The Harlem School of writers, following the example of a white author, Carl Van Vechten, established a new and attractive approach to the unsophisticated ghetto-dweller.

With the success of his novel Nigger Heaven (1926), Van Vechten discovered an audience for the Negro writer signalling an eagerness for works exalting the exotic, the sensual and the primitive.[19] This led to the situation whereby "the Negro was to write about what he knew best, himself; but the trick was to do it so that the white man would recognize it as authentic."[20] Not wishing to express themselves in this manner (which might have assured commercial success),[21] some writers found it extremely difficult to publish works.

[17] From 1917, when he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Harlem, until his forced exile ten years later, Garvey was able to capture the imaginations and loyalties of countless Negroes in the United States, Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa. "It was as if black common men the world over had been waiting for a Messiah." Huggins, p. 24.

[18] A notable exception to the Negro fiction of this period was Jean Toomer's Cane (1923). Experimental in structure and innovative in style, Toomer's novel was self-consciously 'avant garde'.

[19] Amirijit Singh, The Harlem Renaissance: Twelve Black Writers 1923-1933 (Penn State Univ. Press, 1976), p. 25.

[20] Huggins, p. 18.

[21] Singh, p. 25.

With the Great Depression of the 1930s came a new approach to the altered American reality, the harshness of life too omnipresent to escape literary depiction. Portraying an inarticulate and frustrated ghetto youth as his hero, Wright shattered any remaining illusions on the part of both Negro and white readers concerning the nature of ghetto reality. With the publication of what James Baldwin has termed "the most powerful and celebrated statement of what it means to be a Negro in America,"[22] Wright revealed that an attentive, if not 'converted', white audience existed for the Negro writer who wanted to expose certain unpleasant truths about American race relations. Moreover, the modern Negro writer now had, in Wright, a model of the Black literary artist which he could either follow or reject. Ellison reveals in his essay "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure"[23] the influence exerted by Wright over his formative attempts at fictional technique.

In the post-war years, the growing dissatisfaction with impersonal government, complex society and the resultant diminished self was expressed by Ellison in a novel which revealed a disillusioned traveller journeying into his past to find some meaning in life. Ellison seeks to give a contemporary perception of reality by reconciling the individual to the chaos of modern life. The image of the isolated Black man is extended to embrace the sufferings of all men, thus transforming a novel of social protest by a Black man about the Black circumstance into one which speaks to a wider audience about the human experience.

[22] Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," Notes of a Native Son (1949; rpt. London: Transworld, 1970), p. 23.

[23] Ellison, "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview," Shadow and Act (New York: Vintage, 1972), pp. 14-16.

A decade later, social dissatisfaction was expressed publicly in the form of protests and sit-ins, and in literary works which continued to explore the problems of the urban individual. In terms of the Black experience, the year 1960 was a most significant one, being historically recorded by C. Vann Woodward as the "year of the massive awakening of Negro Americans, in general,"[24] the year when the mass of Negroes became aroused by the possibilities now opened to them by the 1954 Court Decision to desegregate public facilities. The steady rise in the pitch of protest and demonstration resulted in the growing awareness that progress was an illusion and that "Black people were in worse economic shape, lived in worse slums, and attended more highly segregated schools than in 1954."[25] As indicated by Jones's novel, this revolt was not just against white oppression, but a rebellion of Black youth against the older generation of "Uncle Toms" and other generally inhibited Negroes. In search of a more positive self-image, they embraced their Blackness as a cultural symbol of their essential selves.

In this study, one chapter is devoted to each novel in which the structural, stylistic, and narrative qualities are examined. Reference is made when necessary to changing social and cultural trends in America from the Thirties to the Sixties, but more emphasis lies with the formal literary characteristics of the novels as these have been variously shaped by three artists in the depiction of the hellishness of the Black condition.

[24] Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow.

[25] Robert Allan, Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 78.

CHAPTER I

Native Son: A Vision of Entrapment

The environment supplies the instrumentals through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped or tranquil, the mode and manner of behaviour will be affected toward deadlocking tensions or orderly fulfillment and satisfaction.

Richard Wright

You were indignant. And sometimes the difference between individual and organized indignation is the difference between criminal and political action.

Ralph Ellison

If, as Arnold Rose suggests, the relationship between social conditions and personality deformity is difficult for the ordinary man to grasp, especially "the subtle influences of the denial of outlets for ambitions, social disparagements, cultural isolation and the early conditioning of the Negro child's mind by the caste situation,"[1] then a writer who chooses to explore this subject may deem it necessary to present the situation as explicitly as he can within the bounds of literature.

[1] Rose, The Negro in America, the condensed version of Gunnar Myrdal's An American Dilemma (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 35.

The world created by Wright for Bigger Thomas is oppressive, claustrophobic, and shadowy, envisioning America as a trap in which the underprivileged are enticed and captured by capitalist promises of opportunity, and made to live in sub-human conditions while forced to witness the successful advancement of others. Wright's two-fold intention in Native Son[2] is to depict the Negro[3] condition in such a way as to evoke a response of horror mingled with sympathy,[4] and to insist on the reader's recognition of white society's guilt. The novel combines the harsh facts and determinism associated with Naturalism, with the awesome power of vivid symbolism.

The novel concentrates on a short period in the life of Bigger Thomas, a young man who was born in the South, moved to Chicago with his family after his father's death in a race riot, and has spent time in an urban reform school. This information is not given sequentially in the novel as a means of introduction to the character, but must be accumulated by the reader as he comes across it at various points in the novel. The narrative begins on the day that the hero is supposed to accept a chauffeuring job with a rich white family, but before he arrives at the

[2] Native Son (New York: Harper and Row, 1940).

[3] "Negro" instead of "Black" is employed in this chapter and the Ellison chapter because until the 1960s "Negro" was the most commonly accepted term among Negroes.

[4] In "How Bigger was Born" (the introductory essay in the novel) Wright explains that his first published work, Uncle Tom's Children, was a book which "even banker's daughters could read and weep over and feel good about." He therefore swore "that his next book would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears." Native Son, p. xxvii.

Dalton residence, he must kill a large rat which threatens his family; decide whether or not to rob a white man's store, and maintain a tough attitude as a gang member in spite of his choking fear. Before the day is over, he smothers and burns his bosses' daughter, Mary, steals her money and devises a plan so as to place the blame on Jan, her Communist boyfriend.

On the next day (the beginning of Part Two), Bigger is interrogated by a detective, coerces his girlfriend Bessie into agreeing to collect ransom money from the Daltons, and insists on remaining at the scene of the crime in order to enjoy his employers' dilemma. It is not until the third day that the local reporters come to interview him and accidentally discover Mary Dalton's charred remains, finally causing Bigger to flee. He takes refuge in an abandoned tenement, where he eventually murders Bessie. After another day of hiding and running, Bigger is captured and is imprisoned.

In Part Three, the reader is confronted with the varying interpretations of Bigger's predicament and the possible remedies for his spiritual sickness. Max, his Communist lawyer, presents a Marxist-based theory of economic determinism; the Negro preacher offers Bigger security in life after death; and Buckley, the court prosecutor, advocates the extermination of vermin like Bigger. Out of these contending views comes Bigger's anti-social decision to free himself from all personal guilt by accepting himself as a murderer, thus revealing, what in Wright's mind is the moral horror of Negro life in America.[5]

[5]Wright is quoted as saying that this is his intended message by John Houseman in "Native Son on Stage" Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives ed. David Ray and Robert Farnsworth (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1973), p. 91.

Since it is Wright's point that Bigger is forced into a life of murder by determining social and racial conditions, the life of the protagonist is presented as a form of animal survival in which he must use brute force against the natural power of society. Such an approach is revealing of early Naturalism, but when accompanied, as it is here, by an exploration of the hero's emotional landscape, it entails both an exposure of the degrading conditions which distort and destroy Black personality, and an assessment of this inner damage.[6]

I

Written in the form of three parts, titled "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate," the structure of the narrative suggests the pure determinism of the early Naturalism with each section fulfilling its intended purpose of preparing the reader for the novel's conclusion. Fear is the motivating force leading to the novel's main action, flight is the manner in which the hero attempts to survive, and fate is the predetermined death sentence and subsequently alienating absence of moral guilt.

As indicated by Wright's comment that "all my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel,"[7] it is quite clear

[6] In American Literary Naturalism Charles Child Walcott writes of the two stages in the development of naturalistic theory: "The first stage assumed perfect determinism, reduced will to a fiction and thought to a chemical reaction; it found its most nearly perfect formal expressions in clinical studies of disease and degeneration and in tragedies of environment when the hapless protagonist was destroyed by the social and economic pressures of his milieu...The second stage is descriptively naturalistic; it describes the mind and the experience of...(the hero) in a way that makes what happens to him appear typical and probable." Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream (Minneapolis): Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 256-7.

[7] Wright in Black Boy (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), p. 274.

that he saw himself as working within the naturalistic tradition, one which now seems to be most clearly marked by its inherent paradoxes:

> There is always a tension between hope and despair, between rebellion and apathy, between defying nature and submitting to it, between celebrating man's impulses and trying to educate them, between embracing the universal and regarding its dark abysses with terror.[8]

This ambivalence is evoked in Native Son, where Bigger is shown to have coped with his predicament to the best of his ability, but not in a manner that is socially positive. Although he rebels in order to assert himself, the means chosen lead to his death just at the point that he is coming to show interest in others and in himself. A further tension between determinism and free will, is generated by the reader's awareness of the opposition between what Wright says about man's fate and what his act of self-expression affirms about man's hope.

This tension serves to heighten the reader's social consciousness as it depicts a twenty-year-old youth supposedly robbed of his right to make decisions for himself, and submitted to the will of society until he rebels violently. The reader is made to feel shock, pity, and guilt: shock at the unmitigated depiction of brutality; pity for the protagonist; and guilt because of his own implication with society, shown here to be a destructive force. This also accounts for possible feelings of claustrophobia evoked by the narrative, for even when Wright is not overtly didactic, his material is presented in such a way, as to force the reader to face the relentless depiction of brutal facts. Thus, in the interest of social and racial protest, Wright adopts a form which incorporates Marxist economic determinism, the naturalistic determinism of a writer such as Theodore Dreiser, and the psychological exploration

[8] Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, p. 18.

of Bigger's inner landscape to the point that he can emerge from his fated circumstance with some measure of self-consciousness and self-acceptance.

From the beginning of the novel, the reader is made familiar with the details of American race relations. The oppressive presence of white society is evinced by the posters of white faces in Negro neighbourhoods, white opportunity is portrayed by the aeroplanes flown only by whites; and white supremacy is indicated by Bigger's almost hysterical fear of violating racial conventions by robbing a white man's store. The only cultural education acquired by Bigger and his friends about white society derives from newspapers, magazines and movies, which expose them to second-hand impressions, or fictionalized accounts. Bigger's subsequent frustration at finding himself socially alienated and his inability to accomodate himself to the fact, is the result of this estrangement.

This first section also delineates the general features of Bigger's character, establishing a relationship between his temperament and social isolation. As an inarticulate Negro, bound by constraining conditions, he is caught between a Negro culture of poverty and entrapment, and an impressive white culture, which refuses to include him but constantly makes itself evident around him. He struggles to control his emotions and in so doing isolates himself from both his friends and his family:

> 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 fulness 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.[9] (pp. 13-14).

[9] Native Son pp. 13-14. All further references to this text appear in the text.

Although twenty years old, he is still susceptible to extreme emotions and acts of rebellion. His intense desire to feel equal to the other boys in the poolroom (as indicated by his antagonistic feelings towards them), coupled with the compulsion to possess a knife and a gun, emphasize his extreme insecurity.

The key to Wright's deterministic treatment of his hero lies in this first book, for it is here that the reader is confronted with the limited nature of the choices made available to Bigger. Economically, his options are to "take the job at Daltons and be miserable or refuse it and starve" (p. 16); while racially, he either can act out the stereotype of the Negro servant and keep his distance or agree to act in the manner required of him by Jan and Mary, and expose himself to danger. In Wright's mind, this is the environment out of which murder can and does emerge as an "objective and concrete expression of feelings which ... are both resentful and estranged" (p. 361). Bigger represents those Negro American men who have been deprived of a moral intelligence, or active social sense of ethical thought, and whom American society denies the opportunity to acquire such qualities.[10]

That Bigger's fate is pre-determined is made quite clear, from the way in which certain aspects of this first section anticipate Mary's murder. Using conversations and day-dreams to prepare the reader for the seemingly inevitable act, Wright creates an overwhelming sense of entrapment. In the first pages of the novel Bigger's mother predicts that "the gallows is at the end of the road you are travelling" (p. 13),

[10] Saunders Redding, "The Alien Land of Richard Wright" in Soon, One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes 1940-1962, ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 55.

Bigger himself ominously admits to Gus that "sometimes I feel like something awful's going to happen to me" (p. 23), and Bigger's response to the movie "The Gay Woman" touches on most of the details of the novel itself concerning Mary's secret lover, her interest in the South Side and the large sums of money to which she has access. In this way, Mrs. Thomas intimates the nature of the novel's ending, Bigger predicts his own fate, and the movie provides the stereotypes which will control Bigger's assessment of reality to the point where he becomes fearful when Mary and Jan act contrary to his expectations.

During the second section, Wright concentrates on Bigger's unsuccessful physical flight from the police, and his partially successful mental flight from the reality of his predicament. The terror of being caught cannot overwhelm the temporary elation derived from his newly-discovered sense of freedom:

> The thought of what he had done, the sinful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. (p. 107)

This is the dramatic paradox of the situation: Bigger's action is socially negative and destructive, and yet personally felt as a positive and creative act of self-assertion.

In the overheard conversation between two Negroes, Bigger listens to two alternative reactions to his crime. One condemns him for breaking the law, while the other protests that "We's <u>all</u> murderers t' them ... We's all black an' we jus' as waal <u>ack</u> black" (p. 235), and it is left up to the reader to consider self-destructive self-assertion as an alternative to the passive endurance of degrading circumstances. Whereas the first section of the novel introduces the reader to the mental and

physical aspects of Negro-white relations, section two explores Bigger's action in the light of the concepts of freedom and determinism, self-assertion and entrapment.

Having established the particular condition which leads to Mary's death and its effect on Bigger's attitude, Wright, in section three, seeks to present varying truths about the Negro condition in general, through the reactions which Bigger engenders from a number of representatives of society. Analysis now replaces subjective depiction to some degree, in order that a more objective rendering of the Negro condition may occur. A number of differing images of Negro life are proffered to the reader so that he may be a true judge.

In the eighteen-page courtroom speech of Max the lawyer, Bigger is depicted as a mere member of "a separate nation" (p. 264). Through Max, Wright presents the sociological and political facts behind the previously described emotional qualities of Bigger's life. Apart from emphasizing the truth behind the fiction, Wright is also commenting on the nature of the Communist Party policy, for this speech, being obviously propagandistic and by no means a viable defence, reflects the Party philosophy, concentrating on the social and political realities of the Negro at the expense of the psychological and emotional. Max is able to describe the cause of Bigger's anger, fear and frustration but he cannot begin to fathom the depth and intensity of the emotions involved.

Dalton's self-inflicted blindness to the conditions in his tenement slums, on the other hand, is an emotional and intellectual shield which prevents him from developing the sort of interest in lower-class sufferings which Max exhibits. The cold detachment of his philanthropical attempts is not far from Buckley's realization of some of Bigger's feelings

of inferiority and his subsequent description of him as a "black lizard" (p. 373).[11] It is Jan's understanding of Bigger's situation and his honest and sincere expression of concern that cause a white man to become human to Bigger (p. 269). Bigger's greeting to Jan via Max, suggests that his life might have been different if he had been recognized and accepted sooner.

Since all the action of Books One and Two is telescoped into three days, the concentration produces a heightened and fearful tension. Situations like Bigger's inner conflict over the thought of murdering Bessie and his "silent agony" (p. 223) prevent the reader from dismissing the hero as the beast described in the newspapers (and which his sexual aggression with Bessie might confirm), while increasing the already stifling emotional pressure. By the time Bigger is forced off the tank, both he and the reader are exhausted emotionally. In Book Three, however, there is a noticeable slackening of pace and and a diminishing of tension.

The author's change of pace is related to his shift from a strictly dramatic to a more didactic treatment of his subject matter. The strong narrative power generated in the first two sections emphasizes the need for an emotional understanding of Negro life, while the third section of the novel concentrates on intellectual comprehension. Together they demonstrate how environmental conditions lead to personality distortion and explain that the Negro's often self-destructive defiance stems from

[11]This usage of reptilian imagery is a reflection of attitudes encountered in newspapers at the time that the novel was being written. Margaret Alexander Walker, "Richard Wright," Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives ed., Ray and Farnsworth, p. 59.

the limited choice between self-hatred (if he incorporates the example of white society) and partial self-esteem (if he sets his own standards). The ensuing discussion of the novel's point of view, style and symbolism examines the manner in which this vision of Negro reality is created and presented.

II

Since Bigger is inarticulate, Wright has to adopt a shifting point of view so that the reader can share Bigger's feelings while viewing him as others see him. It is important to Wright's purpose that he establish an intolerable closeness to his hero either by plunging the reader into the narrow confines of Bigger's existence, or by locking the reader into the circle of the youth's fluctuating moods. When necessary, distance is obtained by the use of newspaper accounts of Bigger's crime and the critical opinions of other characters. In this way, the reader possesses the social, psychological, and emotional contexts behind the crime.

At one point in Section One, for example, Wright shifts his attention from Bigger as an individual to speak of "Bigger and his kind" (p. 109) in order to make a general statement about Negro attitudes for the benefit of his readers:

> To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people, they were a sort of natural force, like a stormy sky overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark. (p. 109)

Such objectivity again occurs in Max's speech in the last section of the novel where the same point is reiterated: "When situations like this arise instead of feeling like they are facing other men, they feel that they are facing mountains, floods, seas" (p. 358). This is an example

of the novel's didacticism with Wright seeking to ensure that his point is not missed.

The author also employs a number of methods of involving the reader in the hero's thought processes, three of which are to be found on one page. There is the matter-of-fact depiction of what Bigger is saying, doing and feeling,[12] ("he went out of the back door; a few fine flakes of snow were floating down. It had grown colder. The car was still parked in the driveway. Yes, he would leave it there." [p. 92]); the third-person presentation of Bigger's thoughts, written in italics to indicate that it is an intense interior monologue, ("Jan and Mary were sitting in the car, kissing. They said, Goodnight Bigger ... and he said, Goodnight. And he touched his hand to his cap" [p. 92]); and finally, the more direct rendering of Bigger's thoughts, again in italics, but this time using the first-person pronoun, "I'll tell 'em I left her with Jan in the car after I took the trunk down in the basement. In the morning I'll take the trunk to the station like she told me" [p. 92]). With each shift the reader is drawn closer to the hero's fast-shrinking world.

A basic component of Wright's purpose is to provide the reader with an understanding of Bigger's motives and intentions in a manner that is not merely sociological interpretation. It is imperative that the psychology of a ghetto youth be grasped, especially if the reader is to feel the pity and guilt that the author intends him to feel. Wright is faced with the problems of a character of limited intellect being required to undertake some sort of detailed self-analysis. In the

[12] Native Son, p. xxxi.

introductory essay "How Bigger was Born," Wright attempts to explain his solution to this problem:

> I don't say Bigger knew this in the terms in which I'm speaking of it; I don't say that any such thought ever entered his head. His emotional and intellectual life was never that articulate. But he knew it emotionally and intuitively for his emotions and his desires were developed and he caught it, as most of us do, from the mental and emotional climate of our time. (p. xxv)

From the information given, however, it is often difficult to determine which passages represent the struggles for self-knowledge that are in keeping with Bigger's limited consciousness and which are statements of Wright's own informed awareness of Bigger's psychological state. The statement: "He knew Gus, as he knew himself, and he knew that one of them might fail through fear" (p. 110), for example, seems to represent a conscious thought, particularly when connected with the seemingly self-directed question: "How could he think of robbing Blum's that way?" (p. 110) but it is, nevertheless, an unlikely possibility that Bigger could be so conscious that his own 'acting tough' was the result of inner fear.

In a discussion of Wright's novel, Ellison suggests that it was Wright's attempt to "translate Bigger's complicated feelings and universal ideas [which forced] ... into Bigger's consciousness concepts and ideas which his intellect could not formulate";[13] and from Wright's own comments on his awareness of the unreality of the jail scene in section three, he reveals that he was willing to tolerate unreality in order to achieve a desired effect:

[13] Ellison, Shadow and Act (1952; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1975), p. 89.

> I knew it was unlikely that so many people would ever be allowed to come in a murderer's cell. But I wanted those people in that cell to elicit a certain response from Bigger. And so the scene stood. I felt that what I wanted that scene to say to the reader was more important than its surface reality or plausibility. (p. xxxi)

Deviating from the naturalistic tradition of recording natural facts of the case without exaggeration or extenuation,[14] Wright uses his protagonist's consciousness as a medium for exploring and commenting upon the moral horror of Negro life. After presenting the facts as attested by Max's speech on economic determinism and the Negro's victimization, Bigger is made to relate the extent of his spiritual sickness caused by alienation.

The courtroom speech, a device often used by naturalistic writers,[15] here provides details concerning high rents, segregation, housing discrimination and intentional overcrowding, so that the reader never loses sight of the type of environment which fostered this native son, and engendered his hatred for whites. By having Mr. Dalton testify, Wright ensures that a definite connection is made between the social conditions controlled by wealthy landlords and Bigger's state of mind. Dalton's attitude and Max's statistics summarize the sociological facts behind the emotional actuality of the first two books.

These facts are important to naturalistic fiction in order that the reader be immersed in realistic details which act as evidence in the author's case against society. Court cases and newspaper articles are

[14] Joseph Warren Beach, commenting on Dreiser's realism. The Twentieth Century Novel (New York: Century, 1932), p. 325.

[15] Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (1971; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 239.

of particular value in providing an air of authenticity to what would seem a mere attempt at verisimilitude. Wright, therefore, relies on real newspaper accounts from the Chicago Tribune to form the basis of his fictional newspaper excerpts.[16] The effect for which Wright is aiming is that of a truthful assessment of the actions and motives of an inarticulate and frustrated Negro ghetto youth.

III

Realistic physical and psychological details are presented in such a manner as to fix Bigger firmly in a world which the reader can accept as real. Bigger's uncertainty over the behaviour expected of him on his first visit to the Dalton's captures a sense of the vast distance existing between the worlds of poverty and riches, on one hand, and the Negro and white races, on the other, for, added to Bigger's feelings of social inferiority are those of racial inferiority:

> Would they expect him to come in the front way or back? It was queer that he had not thought of that ... suppose a policeman saw him wandering in a white neighbourhood like this? It would be thought that he was trying to rob or rape somebody. He grew angry. Why had he come to take this goddam job? He could have stayed with his own people and escaped feeling this fear and hate ... (p. 46)

The many self-posed questions surrounding the very short statement "He grew angry" suggest that Bigger's response to these questions can only be emotional as he seems to possess no answers.

Physical descriptions of Bigger also achieve Wright's aim of assaulting the reader's senses with the inescapable reality of the hero's presence. When, for example, Bigger leaps from his bedroom window into

[16] Native Son, p. xxviii.

the snow, the reader is hurtled out also:

> Then he leaped, headlong, sensing his body twisting in the very air, as he hurtled. His eyes were shut and his hands were clenched as his body turned sailing through the snow. He was in the air a moment, then he hit softly, but the shock of it went through him, up his back to his head and he lay buried in a cold pile of snow, dazed. Snow was in his mouth, eyes, ears, snow was seeping down his back. His hands were wet and cold. Then he felt all of the muscles of his body contract violently, caught in a spasm of reflex action, and at the same time he felt his groin laved with warm water – it was his urine. (p. 207)

The varied rhythm in this short passage is intended not only to capture the jerky movements of a panic-stricken man, but also to maintain the sensation of spatial movement: "Sailing through the snow" creates the effect of sustained movement, while "leaped headlong" produces a more violent and abrupt feeling. To ensure that the reader remains conscious of Bigger's body throughout the period in which he is regaining full consciousness, mention is made of each exposed area of Bigger's, which has been noticeably affected by the snow (mouth, eyes, ears, back and hands), conjuring up an image of a half-buried figure, frozen with cold and fear.

These realistic details of Bigger's sensations and moods are enhanced greatly by Wright's use of the dramatic present, which endows his work with the concrete immediacy and emotional power of a play. Bigger's life is told "in close-up, slow motion, giving the feel of the grain in the passing of time" (p. xxxii).

The murder scene in which Bigger is trying to get Mary into her room and then tries to silence her, gives a strong and direct impression of life. Their physical closeness is emphasized, along with Bigger's fear and excitement, Mary's drunkenness, and the silence:

> He felt her hair brush his lips. His skin glowed warm and his muscles flexed, he looked at her face in the dim light, his senses drunk with the odor of her hair and skin ... He turned her around and began to mount the steps, one by one. He heard a slight creaking and stopped. He looked, straining his eyes in the gloom. (p. 82)

The room is charged with tension as Bigger becomes sexually aroused and then riveted with "hysterical terror" (p. 84) when he sees blind Mrs. Dalton at the door. Silence pervades as both Bigger and Mary struggle to survive, "his muscles flexed taut as steel as he pressed the pillow, feeling the bed give slowly, evenly, but silently" (p. 85). Phrases like "fists clenched in fear" and "fingernails biting into his wrists" provide evidence of the intensity and extremity of the emotions being silently experienced in this room.

In the poignant scene when Mrs. Thomas goes down on her knees in front of the Daltons suggesting her supplication to them as secular gods, Wright explores another area of Negro emotion. The reader is made aware of the manner in which many Negro people have abased themselves and with this image of the pleading woman firmly fixed on his mind, it is easier to understand why Bigger and even Buddy, his brother, would wish to smash the temple of these secular gods, rather than worship in supplication at their feet. Mrs. Thomas, on her knees, becomes more than just a weeping mother begging for her guilty son's life, she is also a symbol of the Negro man pleading for the chance to live in America as a dignified citizen.

Her complaint joins with Bessie's expressions of woe in Book One, developing the already graphically presented picture of Negro misery. The endless and exhausting monotony of her existence is captured in essence by her tone and style of expression:

> The Lord knows I did all I could for you and your sister and brother. I scrubbed and washed and ironed from morning till night, day in and day out, as long as I had strength in my old body. (p. 277)

Wright's effective use of conjunctions between the verbs "scrubbed," "washed" and "ironed," and the phrases "morning till night, day in and day out" create the effect of unfulfilling repetition, which somehow keeps her poised on the brink of disaster without ever disturbing her balance. This obviously is the "heavy and delicate burden whose weight she did not want to assume by disturbing it one whit" (p. 103) to which Bigger refers after he has murdered Mary and sees his family through different eyes. Because of Bigger's crime, she now is able to express her affection for him in a new tone of love: "Honey, you poor old ma can't do nothing now" (p. 277) which is in direct contrast to the previously harsh imperatives urging him to assert his manhood.

In another emotion-charged scene, Wright portrays the nightmare and shadowy world of Bigger's inner landscape, that emotionally torn No Man's Land. The confusion into which Bigger is thrown as a result of Jan and Mary's unexpected behaviour serves to illustrate that white sympathy and pity can be as psychologically intolerable as overt prejudice to a young unprepared Negro man:

> He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something to be hated, the badge of which he knew was attached to black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, and transparent, he felt that this white man having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. (p. 68)

In an attempt to underscore the hellishness of certain situations, Wright departs from realistic documentation to resort to gothic and melodramatic effects. The scene in which Mary is decapitated is set,

according to Dan McCall, in the outdated but "familiar Hawthorne furniture; the blood, the dark basements, the guilt attendant on primitive horrors and murders,"[17] Likewise Bigger's escape across the rooftops accompanied by screeching sirens and flashing lights is heightened beyond the ordinary or the realistic, as Margaret Walker confirms in a quoted conversation between herself and Wright about this particular incident. In reply to her comment, "Oh, that must be dramatic to the point of melodrama," Wright had said, "Yes, I think it will shock pepole and I love to shock people."[18] This is Wright resorting to sensationalism.

The novel throbs with an awesome emotional power derived from Wright's presentation of Bigger and the reader's horrified reaction to the character's inescapable fate. Forced to witness Bigger striking Bessie with a brick until "he seemed to be striking a sodden mass that gave softly but stoutly to each landing blow" (p. 222), the reader is prevented from maintaining a comfortable emotional distance from the world being described, because Wright's imagery is seldom, if ever, subdued in the novel. The harsh facts and brutal imaginings are presented without modulation.

Wright's conception of the Negro reality is based on his impression of the essence of Negro existence, an impression which was not derived

[17] McCall, The Example of Richard Wright (New York: Harcourt, Brace World, 1969), p. 70.

[18] Walker, "Richard Wright" in Richard Wright, ed. Ray and Farnsworth, p. 61.

from intellectual knowledge but from brutalizing personal experience.[19] Since it is the emotional aspect of Negro life that is of particular importance to Wright, the nature of the conflict between Bigger and white society is illustrated most effectively, not by the accumulation of sociological data, but in the form of powerful symbols and metaphors woven through the novel, enabling the reader to envisage accurately those thoughts and emotions which the hero cannot articulate for himself.

IV

In Native Son, symbolism serves to concentrate the author's artistic effect, for, while factually presenting certain situations, he strives to describe the texture of experience under these circumstances. Physical and psychological details are often rendered metaphorically, turning a sordid story into a hellish spectacle of an inarticulate hero whose inner emotions have been magnified memorably through powerful symbols. The images of Bigger as both a rat and a Christ figure illuminate the novel's theme of black entrapment and victimization as a result of social aggression. In addition, the use of colours and the climatic elements are developed into meaningful patterns that create a detailed impression of the more hellish aspects of Negro life, based on the conviction that "Mr. Charlie controls everything."[20] That Bigger's physical

[19] Wright, in Black Boy, writes about two noteworthy incidents which occurred before he was five years old: his being beaten unconscious by his mother for accidentally having set fire to the house (p. 13) and his being forced to win the right to the streets of Memphis by confronting a gang of bullies. (p. 25) He also had come very near to being lynched at the optical company where he worked. (p. 210)

[20] Charles Silberman, Crisis in Black and White (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 158.

and social hell is the source of his mental and emotional hell is made manifest in Wright's symbolism.

A number of direct comparisons occur intermittently in all three books to remind the reader of the similarity between Bigger's state and that of a ghetto rat. In Book Two, Bigger is reduced to the level of an animal in search of a hiding place, after the police instigate a city-wide hunt with five thousand policemen and three thousand volunteers; and when no safe place can be found, he is described as looking "wistfully at that gaping hole through which the rat had darted to safety" (p. 235). Apart from this, the first scene of the novel in which Bigger is attempting to kill the rat, is connected to the courtroom scene in Book Three, by means of the dialogue introduced in both:

> "Hit 'im, Bigger!" Buddy shouted.
> "Kill 'im!" the women screamed...
> Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat's
> head crushing it, cursing hysterically.
> "You sonofabitch!"...
> "Gee, but he's a big bastard!" (pp. 9-10)

This reaction of the Thomas family on encountering the rat, is re-echoed during Bigger's trial:

> "That sonofabitch!"
> "Gee, isn't he black!"
> "Kill 'im!"
> A hard blow came to his temple and he
> slumped to the floor. (p. 281)

Much like the rat's "long thin song of defiance" (p. 9), Bigger desperately responds to this treatment in his statement of self-assertion at the end of the novel, defying the society which has made him resort to violence as his only means of real survival.

An effective extension of this image of the Negro as a black rat, is that of the white man as a white cat. The Daltons' cat represents the seeming omniscience and omnipresence of white power being present

"as two green burning pools - pools of accusation and guilt" (p. 90), when Mary's body is being put into the furnace; and, again, when Britten questions Bigger in front of the reporters. Since the cat had fled from Bigger in terror the night before, it is somewhat unrealistic, and obviously symbolic, that it should act toward him now with what seems to be affection: "the big white cat bounded down the steps and leaped with one movement upon Bigger's shoulder and sat perched there. Bigger was still, feeling the cat had given him away" (p. 190). Thus, the white cat appears to pronounce judgement upon Bigger, as the white judge will do in section three: the white cat succeeds in catching the black rat.

In dehumanizing Bigger to the level of a black rat, and white society to the position of a white cat, Wright implies that his hero has become viciously sub-human as a result of his treatment by society. He is reduced to the state of having to defend himself at any cost, indiscriminately lashing out at his family, friends, and enemies. His life seems to be spent with his back in a corner, aggression his only response. In spite of the recognition of common humanity which occurs between Jan and Bigger, Wright's hero ultimately remains trapped by the legal system, the system which conditioned his criminality sits in judgement of his crime.

What Wright reveals in Native Son is the tragic implications of racial differences and mutual fears; no understanding between them can develop, for when they touch "too closely at the unfavourable and too lightly at the favourable levels,"[21] fatal misunderstandings occur. The

[21] Alain Locke, "The New Negro" in Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1968), p. 517.

full implication of this conflict is revealed by Bigger's crime, but it is also given expression in the contradictory symbols of the two crosses and Bigger's confused reaction:

> But why should they burn a cross? As he gazed at it he remembered the sweaty face of the black preacher in his cell that morning talking intensely and solemnly of Jesus, of there being a cross for him, a cross for everyone, and of how the lowly Jesus had carried the cross, paving the way, showing how to die, how to love and live the life eternal. But he had never seen a cross burning like that one upon the roof. Were white people wanting him to love Jesus too? (p. 312)

The burning cross is the symbol of the fanatical gods of Ku Klux Klan, the gods of hatred, prejudice and persecution; and because of the power of its presence in his daily life, Bigger decides to reject all notions of worshipping a god-head, since he cannot distinguish between the two types of abnegation demanded by them both.

If to white society there is something Lucifer-like in Bigger's seemingly senseless rebellion, to Bigger and others like him, violence or some form of anti-social behaviour is a means of self-assertion. They seek freedom from oppression choosing the way of Barabbas rather than that of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Wright also endows Bigger, in his role as a social victim, with the quality of martyrdom.

When Bigger finally is forced from the tank and is dragged down into the street, the cries of the crowd are reminiscent of biblical crowds demanding Christ's death; before Bigger passes out in the snow, "two men stretched his arms out as though about to crucify him" (p. 253); and when he is visited in his cell by his family and his friends who are ashamed at what he has done, he is described as experiencing:

> ... a strange but strong feeling, springing from the very depths of his life. Had he not taken fully upon himself the crime of being black? Had he not done the thing which they dreaded above all others? Then they ought not to

> stand there and pity him, cry over him, but look at him and go home contented, feeling that their shame was washed away. (p. 275)

Before giving up his life, he had taken a life as the rules of the world dictated, being forced into this hell of reversed values by a society which deems it sinful to be a Negro. He now feels that his family and friends should acknowledge and rejoice over the self-sacrifice which his attack on white society entails. Finally, his asking of Gus to take his mother (Mrs. Thomas) home is reminiscent of Christ's similar request to John, his young and beloved disciple, since in Bigger's reversed world a victimized friend would be equivalent to a beloved disciple in the 'ordinary' world. In a sense, then, Bigger is a Negro Christ-figure.

Wright's use of climatic conditions also provides the reader with a sense of the omnipresence and omnipotence of whiteness. Both Bigger and the reader are reminded of the presence of white power by the snow which begins settling everywhere as soon as the crime is committed. The first flakes are coming down when he leaves the house and by the next morning when the ground is all white, he is whipped by an icy wind. After writing the kidnap note, the weather worsens, "the air was thick with snow, the wind blew hard. It was a blizzard" (p. 171); and by the time he returns to the Dalton home and delivers the note the snow is falling: "as though it had fallen from the beginning of time and would always fall till the end of the world" (p. 174). The white world is thrown into a wrathful turmoil as a result of the crime, and the streets in and out of Chicago become blocked with snow.

In keeping with the concept of white society as a cold blanketing force and Negro reality as hell, fire is the element chosen by Wright to describe Bigger's emotions of anger and hatred. The white man's

presence is felt in the center of Bigger's being like a choking ball of fire:

> "Everytime I think of 'em, I feel 'em" Bigger said.
> "Yeah, and in your chest and throat, too," Gus said.
> "It's like fire."
> "And sometimes you can't hardly breathe..."
> "That's when I feel like something awful's going to happen to me..." Bigger paused and narrowed his eyes.
> "Naw, it ain't like something going to happen to me. It's...it's like I was going to do something I can't help ..." (p. 24)

Mary is consumed eventually in this fire of hatred and fear, but instead of Bigger raping her, as described in the novel's original draft,[22] she is smothered, beheaded, and stuffed into a furnace, the ultimate symbol of Bigger's consuming destructiveness.

V

In Native Son, Wright re-created nightmarish conditions for his character to experience and for his readers to witness, even though he was aware that there was more to Negro life than these hellish, racial struggles. He knew that Negroes possessed a culture based on religious tradition and a vital Negro folklore[23] along with certain nationalistic aspirations manifested in Negro institutions,[24] but he wanted to create a character who remained alien to these cultural resources. What Wright

[22] Benjamin Appel in "Personal Impressions," Richard Wright, ed. Ray and Farnsworth, p. 76.

[23] Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Amistad 2: Writings on Black History and Culture ed. John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 6. A shorter version of this essay appeared in New Challenge, 1937.

[24] Wright, "Blueprint," Amistad 2, p. 8.

has done is to isolate his hero and the reader from the benefits of Negro culture in order to depict "the cultural barrenness of Negro life,"[25] with its "meaningless pain and suffering,"[26] "where each member of the household lived locked in his own dark world."[27]

Wright's concern for the racially and economically oppressed was typical of many writers of the Thirties, when the plight of the masses was forced upon the consciousness of the country as a whole. The drastic effect of the Great Depression on the lives of individuals made it seem that men truly lived in a closed world that could be presented plausibly as the product of a particular social system. Like John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath (1939), for example, Native Son was both a part of the exposure-literature of the period and a product of the broader literary tradition of social protest. Written during the late 1930s, the novel also envisages man as being caught in the "psychological trap of being emotionally committed to the living of a life of freedom which is denied them."[28]

As a member of the Communist Party, during the composition of the novel, Wright was also one of many artists who were influenced by Marxist economic determinism, and conforming to a structured ideology. Having been encouraged to break their ties with bourgeois thought, these radical

[25] Black Boy, p. 45.

[26] Black Boy, p. 111.

[27] Black Boy, p. 238.

[28] Wright, Introduction to Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City by Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945), p. xxvi.

artists conceived of creating "the literary and artistic movement of the working class...forging to a new art that shall be a weapon in the battle of a new and superior world."[29]

Although by 1940 Wright was finding it difficult to conform to the Party's literary policy, he still retained their disciplined approach of relating the unique qualities in his culture to a broader concept of history. By fusing the racial and social components of the Negro's hellish existence; Wright was able to express for the first time the sorrow, rage and murderous bitterness that devours the lives of many Negroes. In Native Son, Wright created a lasting symbol of one type of Negro American living in the squalor of the urban slum, for whom tragically the act of desperate self-assertion means criminal action.

[29] Daniel Aaron and Robert Bendiner, The Strenuous Decade: A Social and Intellectual Record of the Nineteen-Thirties (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 306.

CHAPTER II

Invisible Man: A Vision of Chaos

To live in Harlem is sometimes to hear the siren song of success often to be denied by heaven and disdained by hell, yet always to hope anew each morning, whatever yeaterday's despair.

Frank Hercules

"A slice of life," said the naturalist school. The great mistake of this school is cutting its slice always in the same direction; in the direction of time lengthwise. Why not breadthwise? As for me, I prefer not to cut at all. Understand me. I should like to get everything into this novel.

André Gide

One hardly could find two Negro authors with more different social backgrounds than Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright: one born in the extremely racist and closed society of the American South; the other born in a non-slave state which, though segregated, was one where relationships between races were more fluid and thus more human.[1] Unlike Wright's restricting and oppressive family, Ellison's parents encouraged him to aspire to personal freedom, having come to Oklahoma in order to find a broader freedom for themselves.[2] They encouraged him to develop an understanding of Negro existence which acknowledged both the obviously negative aspects of Negro life and culture, and its more positive and

[1] Ralph Ellison, "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview," Shadow and Act (1964 rpt. New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 5.

[2] Ellison, p. 5.

admirable elements. This duality is discussed by Ellison in an interview with Robert Penn Warren:

> I've never pretended for a minute that the injustice and limitations of Negro life do not exist. On the other hand, I think it important to recognize that Negroes have achieved a very rich humanity despite these restrictive conditions. I wish to be free not to be less Negro American but so that I can make the term mean something even richer.[3]

Since Invisible Man[4] combines the delineation of the Negro's historical and political development with the depiction of his emotional and psychological growth, the novel's panoramic view of Negro life is in sharp contrast to the narrow focal range of Native Son. Whereas Wright acknowledges only claustrophobic feelings and violent moods of an oppressed people, Ellison also celebrates the existence of possibility and creative freedom which not even a tightly-closed society should be able to suppress completely.

Invisible Man, the author's only published novel, is a journal of the Negro's existence in America from his complicity in his own abasement in the South to his ghettoization in the North, chronicling the events in, and their effects on, Negro life as it has been recorded or remembered. The novel opens with the first-person narrator trying to rationalize his present predicament of being forced underground into his "hole"; the body of the novel contains the memories of his adolescence and young adulthood which eventually cause him to recognize himself as a representative human being; and the Epilogue reveals the change in consciousness which has taken place since the Prologue. The novel's subject

[3] Robert Penn Warren, Who Speaks for the Negro? (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 346.

[4] Invisible Man (1952, rpt. New York: Vintage, 1972).

therefore, is one of the historical and psychological change as mirrored in the life of one Negro individual yet signifying the history of a people, with the action shifting from a purely racial plane to a poignantly human one.

The Prologue, in which the hero is in his "hole," symbolizes a state of contemplation in which each individual must submerge himself at some time in his own life. It is out of this period of relative passivity that the hero's literary act emerges as a forerunner to his intended political acts. The time spent in social and personal analysis creates a seeming halt in the progression of time enabling the hero to retrace his steps to the naive formative years when he was unaware of his own invisibility, and blind to the manner in which others forced a limited visibility upon him.

The first half of the novel depicts the hero's past while providing a compendium of modern Negro American history, and since in 1952 when the novel was published, the Civil Rights Act[5] had not yet been passed, the American social and political system appears as a well-organized network of white deception, frustrating the Negro's attempts to fully share in the American Dream. The hero's journey from South to North takes place in this first half in order to emphasize the variety of shocks which the hero has to receive before realizing the reality underlying the surface of American institutions. The innocent hero is warned by his grandfather, the vet, Bledsoe, and young Emerson, that appearances are not what they seem but it takes practically the whole novel before he fully accepts the nature of his predicament.

Since the author-narrator has relinquished his innocent and naive

[5] Signed on July 2, 1964 abolishing legal discrimination.

approach to life, he recounts the story of his life in a fashion that manifests the hero's ignorance and the reader's enlightened position. In the first recorded episode, that of the battle royal, the hero's admirable sincerity is contrasted with his inability to perceive the truth. Having been warned by his grandfather that sincerity is a liability in American society and that treachery is a necessary means of self-preservation, the hero persists in his highmindedness. Out of the shame and humiliation that he endures comes a more worthwhile monetary reward than the useless coins painfully extracted from the electrified rug, as he is presented with a scholarship to the state college for Negroes.

It is in college that he will be exposed to the insidious nature of philanthropy and will become entangled in the web of deception and illusion which is spun around the Northern philanthropist, Norton, the blind visionary, Barbee (keeping alive the Founder's dream of Negro progress), and the Negro 'accommodating' principal, Bledsoe, who dons a mask of docility in order to enjoy power secretly. The hero's expulsion from the college occurs because he takes his duty to the white trustee too seriously and in so doing undermines the precariously-maintained racial facade established by the college.

At the home of Trueblood, who is seen by the aspiring middle-class Negroes as a shameful confirmation of Negro inferiority and barbarism, the hero is shown, but is unable to see the manner in which white society seeks to perpetuate its prejudiced myths. It is the white southerners who, with money and with avid interest, support a Negro tenant-farmer whom they had allowed to live in extreme poverty before his incestuous 'accident' took place, because he has committed what to society in general is a tabooed act. It is to the white man's racial advantage to keep

Trueblood on the college grounds as a reminder to the Negro community of their morally degraded origins as established and then justified by the American slave system.

Like the hero of the novel, the veterans at the Golden Day[6] were once believers in the American Dream and even had gone so far as to defend the nation during wartime. As such they also represent all Negro fighting men from the Civil War up to World War II, who, having taken their beliefs in the American Constitution a little too seriously, become disillusioned to the point of emotional instability or insanity when their talents are ignored in the post-bellum days. In spite of their supposed madness, they attempt to educate the hero to the treatment being given to Negro intellectuals, but he remains blinded by illusion. His subsequent journey northwards is undertaken reluctantly, and is brightened only by the thoughts of his possible return. He actually has to be forced to leave the South, unlike the runaway slaves and the participants in the Great Migration who sensed that possibility lay elsewhere.

[6] It is possible that Ellison here is making reference to Lewis Mumford's book The Golden Day, which pointed to a new attitude towards American Literature. It was deemed necessary "to have a fresh sense of confidence in our own creativity, past, present and potential; and this meant that we must accept some better criterion for our performance than its approximation to standard European models" (p. viii). This invigoration of hope and faith took place between 1912 and 1920 and corresponds to the Negro Awakening of the Twenties in terms of the vet's changed attitude to white men and to the Negro's place in white society.

It is also significant that the Golden Day episode in Invisible Man occurs just prior to the hero's introduction to Emerson and Northern industrial conditions paralleling America's emergence as an industrial nation around the time of the Golden Day depicted by Mumford.

Mumford, The Golden Day: A Study in American Literature and Culture (1926; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

Not having learnt his lesson in the South, he must continue his race education in the North; it takes a white man, named Emerson, to get him finally to perceive the actual. Once aware of the American system of deception, he begins to play along, using his wits to obtain a job at the Liberty Paint Factory. Unfortunately, he is not prepared for the questionable procedure of industrial relations and the 'back-stabbing' behaviour of the urban Negro as illustrated by Brockway's treachery (even though Bledsoe acted similarly), because somehow he expects Brockway to recognize his innocence. It is not until an operation similar to a lobotomy takes place, and his masculinity is threatened by castration that he is shocked into the realization of the more dangerous and permanently destructive effects of racial relations in the North as compared to the South. The Northerners' indifference to the implications of their actions seems to penetrate the psychological barriers which had served the Negro so well while he lived in the South.

After the operation, the hero is now ready to be absorbed into the Negro community, and Ellison describes a series of encounters in which the positive features of Negro culture are introduced. In Mary, he meets the strong Negro woman who instills hope in the young; in Clifton, he sees and admires the energy and beauty of the educated but similarly illusioned young Negro; in Ras, he confronts the extremism of Black nationalism with its harsh truths and often self-destructive violence; in Brother Tarp, he sees the dignity which has emerged despite the Negro's ignoble past; and finally in Rinehart, he contends with the self-effacing strategy of intentional multi-role-playing which replaces the Southern technique of assumed docility with one involving the total and final dissolution of the 'whole' self.

The hero's contact with white society is now mainly through the Brotherhood, as it is they who witness his spontaneous speech at the eviction, and who engage his services for the betterment of the Party under the guise of aiding the Negro people of Harlem. Brother Jack makes him into a public figure and then destroys his political career, while the other members of the Brotherhood reveal their basically race-conscious and subtly prejudiced attitudes. Sybil is the typical white woman of American race mythology who reduces the Negro's identity to a purely sexual level. She and the other members of the political group so frustrate the Negro ghetto-dwellers with their stereotypical attitudes towards them, that they become a rioting mob. It is at this point that the hero retreats to his "hole."

In order to depict the hero's exploration of his own personal past, the plot illustrates fictionally the nature of the Negro's historical experience. The selected events of the hero's personal past have immediate reference to the Negro Americans' historical evolution resulting in a convergence of the historical events through which his Negro ancestors have had to pass so that their past truly becomes his past. At the same time, he is being portrayed as an aspiring middle-class Negro, seeking to identify with white America, and resembling in his ambitious dreams upper-class Negroes who try to escape from race and caste. The hero's appraisal of reality and manner of conduct at different stages of his development is contrasted continually with that of other Negro men at different periods in time.

In the South, he is confronted by the divisions among Negroes (encouraged by the social system), the existence of sexual frustrations and taboos, the Negro's financial dependency upon white society, and the

earnestness with which Negroes vie for white approval and monetary rewards even though it involves their own moral degradation. In the North, he finds these tactics compounded by the Negro's further deception by political organizations such as the Brotherhood, which offers the illusion of equality and leads to the violent bitterness of the riot. Thus, the hero encounters the industrial, economic and political problems which have plagued the Negro from the time of his arrival in the North.

Just as the evicted couple's personal effects are "artifacts and momentoes from every stage of the American Negro past,"[7] so the hero's personal history parallels the historical events experienced by his race. It is a telescopic rendering of historical change, indicating the manner in which each ensuing generation has to cope with seemingly new difficulties but which, in reality, often reflect a basic pattern of social and racial chaos in both the rural South and the urban North. Thus, the plot structure of the novel acts as a tool with which to penetrate simultaneously, several layers of American and Negro experience.

In this panoramic sweep of the Negro's history from slavery to urbanization, and psychological growth from share-cropper to rioting slum-dweller, Ellison creates a many-faceted image of Negro American life. Since it is his intention to present the richness and diversity of this life, comedy and tragedy, fiction and fact have to be intertwined and fused to permit the overflow of language in a succession of events. A proper vehicle is required to depict the journey of the self through geographically and psychologically differing landscapes so that the painful but rewarding development of consciousness can take place.

[7] David Littlejohn, Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes (New York: Grossman, 1966), p. 114.

I

Because of this "extreme fluidity and openness which [seems] too vital and alive to be caught for more than the briefest instant in the tight well-made Jamesian novel,"[8] Ellison adopts a form which is unrestricted enough to contain his experience, choosing what Alan Friedman speaks of as "the complex picaresque"[9] which combines the characteristics of the picaresque novel with that of the "multivalent... [with its] self-conscious awareness of itself as artifact, [and its] counterpointing of conflicting ethical stances."[10] The traditional picaresque novel possesses "fairly consistent, though generalized patterns,"[12] in terms of plot and character depiction. Invisible Man conforms to such patterns; but since it is impossible to induce any ideal picaresque narrator, style or ending[12] those are the areas in which the novel becomes openly multivalent.

As a reflection of the breakdown of static social relations and their replacement of more fluid forms, the picaresque journey allows the characters to escape from the narrow confines of Naturalism, with its "final and unrelieved despair,"[13] into a world which can be both serious

[8] Ellison, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," Shadow and Act, p. 103.

[9] Friedman, "The Modern Multivalent Novel," The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 130.

[10] Friedman, p. 137.

[11] Stuart Miller, The Picaresque Novel (Cleveland: The Case Western Reserve Univ., 1967), p. 78.

[12] Miller, p. 98.

[13] Ellison, "Brave Words," Shadow, p. 105.

and humorous. With its episodic variety, it mirrors unexpected occurrences so as to reveal a chaotic lack of order in the world of both hero and reader,[14] for, unlike the naturalistic plot, there are no limitations of probability. Instead of the still-camera, Ellison aims for a representation of the American quest for identity and the Negro's historical search for freedom, as a motion picture.

The novel's structure consists of a succession of events which propel the hero from adolescence to manhood, from South to North, from total blindness to, at least, partial vision of self. Continuously assaulted by life's chaos (the battle royal, expulsion from college and injury at the factory), he suffers great psychic hardship which suggests life's many uncertainties.

The fragmented effect of the narrative is gained from the frequency with which the hero meets new friends and abandons old ones, for, like most picaresque novels which tend to be peripatetic,[15] it depicts the hero as a traveller experiencing casual relationships. Brockway, Privo, Crenshaw, the cartman and Emerson are all characters encountered only once, and when the occasion of a second meeting arises, as with Norton in the subway, the vet on the bus, Tod in the street and Ras during the riot, it creates what Miller describes as a "dance pattern" whereby one

[14] Nearly ten years after the novel was put aside when Ellison came to read it again he comments that "it stands on its own if only as one of those pieces of writing which consists mainly of one damned thing after another sheerly, if I'm right then it is still in tune with our times..." Ellison in his note to "Out of the Hospital, Under the Bar," an unpublished extract from the original draft of Invisible Man in Soon, One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 243.

[15] George Northup, Selections from the Picaresque Novel (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1935), p. iv.

character quickly slips from the other and then reappears.[16] Often, it is merely the philosophies of such characters as the hero's grandfather, Ras and the vet which are recalled, but even they serve to underscore life's variety. Especially, when disguised as Rinehart, is there a frequent occurrence of random events, so that life appears to have become exceedingly illogical and disconnected.

The novel contains a series of reversals which create a boomeranging effect, causing the hero to travel "around in a circle meeting ... [his] old selves coming and going."[17] Each event is self-contained, beginning with bewilderment and ending with a violent accident which catapaults the hero into a parallel and progressive situation indicative of an historical Negro situation. This movement forward by contradictions and the novel's concentric planes of meaning together suggest that the form of the novel corresponds to the dialectical evolution of culture.[18]

Since one of the characteristics of the multivalent novel is endlessness as an end in itself,[19] the fact that Invisible Man ends with two questions (one about the hero and society and the other about the reader and society) indicates Ellison's preference for an endless novel, not wishing to terminate the reader's emotional and moral engagement in the experience of the novel. The hero's journey from innocence to experience, from ignorance to enlightenment, points to a new beginning projected beyond the narrative which is to take place. With no final conclusion, such

[16] Miller, p. 14.

[17] Invisible Man, p. 385. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[18] Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), p. 172.

[19] Alan Friedman, The Turn of the Novel (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 30.

a novel offers, Friedman states:

> to take the self by its truer ending, either an ever-widening disorder a finally open "order" which embraces all the opposed directions or whatever ethical compass it has brought along for the trip. Like the modern cosmos...it is ever expanding, and it is racing away fastest at its outermost reaches.[20]

The hero does not attempt to keep this open ending from the reader, as he makes it quite clear in the Prologue that the narrative has no decisive ending. The hero's interruption of himself "but that's getting too far ahead of the story almost to the end, although the end is the beginning and lies far ahead" (p. 5) which is reiterated towards the end of the novel, reminds the reader that this is fiction, where beginnings and endings can be arbitrary. That life is chaotic and as deceptive as fiction, is supported by the novel's narrative point of view, style and symbolism.

II

Since it is one of the characteristics of the picaresque that the naive hero "be conscious either during his adventure or later as a mature author of the reflections upon society which his tale points up,"[21] Ellison has no difficulty in adapting his hero to the requirements of the multivalent novel, concerning the narrative point of view. Like Pip in Dicken's Great Expectations, the author-narrator looks back on an earlier version of himself in order to discern the essence of his personality in his youth with himself as author-narrator; but this contrasting of past-self with present-self enables the reader also to contrast the self which

[20] Friedman, The Turn, p. 188.

[21] Miller, p. 71.

the author-narrator thinks he really is, with the self that the reader finds him to be. Because of this double consciousness operating on two levels, the narrative allows for many satiric and ironic comments; yet this distancing never prevents the reader from gaining a sense of how it feels to be in such a world and how that world makes a man internally disordered.

Using the traditional first-person form, the hero invites the reader to accompany him as he reviews his former struggles for survival, thereby reminding the reader of his own daily struggles for stability and security; of the shifting roles he often has to play within social situations; and the forms of trickery, flattery and deception to which he often has to resort. The reader's uncertainty is shown to differ from that of the hero in degree, not in kind. With each event coming as a surprise to both hero and reader, it suggests the manner in which a letter, a visitor, or a telephone call, may cause disorientation.

In his situation as an outsider who, nevertheless, tries to survive inside the bounds of society, the hero occupies an ideal position to perform the role of a social critic. His impressions of life though sometimes sordid and vicious, are impressively entertaining and positive, suggesting on the whole the sort of incontestable ambivalence illustrated by the partially-veiled face of the statue at his college, where he is "unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted or lowered more firmly in place" (p. 28).

It is in the hero's treatment of his own limited consciousness that much of the novel's irony arises, and often it is his reaction to the statements of others that reveals his 'innocence' or ignorance. His encounter with the vet offers many examples in this area, as on the occasion

when the hero is pushed about two inches from Mr. Norton's face, and begins to scream while being reassured that "he's only a man. Remember that. He's only a man" (p. 66); but the hero feels "that Mr. Norton was much more than that, that he was a rich man and in my charge" (p.66). Throughout the novel the hero acts as the satirist underscoring the ridiculous naiveté of his past, and, as a knowing narrator working through the medium of a much more simple protagonist, he is both the instrument of irony and the ironist.

There is a definite change in the author-narrator's attitude as first encountered in the Prologue, and then in the Epilogue, a change which seems to have been brought about by the writing of his memoirs. In the Prologue, for example, he claims that it is his right to be irresponsible because "irresponsibility is part of my invisibility...to whom can I be responsible, and why should I, when you refuse to see me" (p. 11). By the Epilogue, however, he has changed his mind, and now claims that even his hibernation is a crime because "there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (p. 439).

Apart from the possibility of his maturation during the course of compiling his life history, it is also highly likely, and perhaps nearer to the truth, that the hero's shifting point of view comes from his being in "a literary form which has time and social change as its province... [reflecting the] restlessness of the spirit [which] is the American condition."[22] Thus, when the hero admits in the Epilogue that he finds it difficult to be honest, the reader fears that he has been betrayed by a

[22] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Shadow, p. 57.

narrator with whom he had sympathized; but even this in the end is a valid comment on the instability or elusiveness of Truth. His refusal to commit himself is an honest approach to reality as it exists for him "because it was the clash between his assumptions, his allusions about reality, and its actual shape, which made for his agony."[23]

As a fictional projection of Ellison's imagination, the hero struggles with the difficulty of the Black writer to superimpose his image of self over the many stereotypical ones already in existence. In his quest for truth he finds that self-assertion is his only life-line and that as both artist and naive hero, such a journey leads to the steady exposure of deception in society and literature; an exposure which is incorporated in the very form of the novel.

Added to the picaresque sense of a fiction within a fiction, is the novel's obsession with "its own identity as a work of art and its relationship to those who experience it."[24] By drawing attention to its total existence as artifice, the novel reveals what Robert Alter refers to as the overreaching paradox of the self-conscious novel:

> Art itself is a mode of deception, a manifest fabrication passing itself off as Truth, and what the writer does technically in this novel is to turn the trickery of fictional art inside out in order to bring us closer through a literary form to the elusive truth behind deceptive moral appearances.[25]

[23] Ellison, in "An Interview with Ralph Ellison," Ellison and Allan Geller, The Black American Writer, Vol. 1: Fiction, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Maryland: Penguin, 1969), p. 159.

[24] Friedman, "The Modern," Theory of the Novel, ed. Halperin, p. 30.

[25] Alter, Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-conscious Genre (Berkley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), pp. 76-77.

That the world is a place of elaborate fictions constructed by each individual, is given fictional reality by the author-narrator's attempt to re-organize his past along the lines of his newly-acquired impression of reality. From as early in the novel as the presentation of his college experience, the hero reveals his problem with the reliability of self-representation; but it is Emerson who articulates the masking which is involved:

> Do you believe it is possible for us, the two of us, to throw off the mask of custom and manners that insulate man from man and converse in naked honesty and frankness? ...such frankness just isn't possible because all our motives are impure. (p. 141)

Because of the hero's double consciousness (before and after his maturation) all of the events of the past seem coloured by his newly-acquired perspective, thus preventing him from presenting his past objectively.

III

The description of the college begins with the pastoral beauty of its setting. Everything has a place and develops naturally with no seeming interference from man and hence no artificiality:

> It was a beautiful college. The vines and the roads gracefully winding, lined with hedges and wild roses that dazzled the eyes in the summer sun. Honeysuckle and purple wisteria hung heavy from the trees and white magnolias mixed with their scents in the bee-humming air. I've recalled it often, here in my hole. (p. 27)

Then, by using bathos to shatter the reader's illusions, he adds a touch of satire to his description:

> ...the bridge of rustic logs, made for trysting, but virginal, and untested by lovers; on up the road, past the buildings with the southern verandas half-a-city block long, to the sudden forking, barren of buildings, birds or grass, where the road turned off to the insane asylum. (p. 27)

At this point in the novel, he is confident of his ability to order

reality and so he is able to display fully his narrative control.

The hero displays his poetic abilities by creating a satirically nostalgic dream world in a few lines of exaggerated lyrical apostrophe, and then destroys his fragile creation by introducing ugly but realistic details:

> Oh, long green stretch of campus, Oh, quiet songs at dusk, Oh, noon that kissed the steeple and flooded the perfumed nights, Oh bugle that called in the morning ...what was real, what solid, what more than a pleasant time-killing dream? For how could it have been real if I am now invisible? If real, why is it that I can recall in all that island of greeness no fountain but one broken, corroded and dry? (pp. 28-29)

The past which was both artificial and superficial is made even more so by his poetic excesses, and yet it once had provided him with the only sense of identity that he possessed. Like Don Quixote's incongruous description of Dulcinea, his portrait of the campus "hints that he himself exists in a flesh-and-blood world [against which the campus], distilled as it is from familiar poetic hyperboles, must begin to seem purely a verbal concoction."[26]

During the riot, the author-narrator's surrealistic style implies that reality is too vast and confusing to be contained coherently by a single finite mind; the sense of omniscience is lost, plunging the reader into the "real," chaotic hell of Harlen:

> I leaped aside, into the street, and there was a sudden and brilliant suspension of time, like the interval between the last axe stroke and the falling of a tall tree, in which there had been a loud noise followed by a loud silence. Then I was aware of figures crouching in doorways and along the curb; then time burst and I was down in the street, conscious and unable to rise. (p. 404)

As Ellison explains, the depicted Harlem is not one of the "highly

[26] Alter, p. 27.

formalized sections of society," and it is quite possible that this phantasmagoric scene might appear to the inhabitants of the hero's nightmare as "mundane reality."[27]

The danger of the riot mingled with the holiday spirit of the rioters, caused the hero's nightmare to become quite an amusing dream:

> ...darling figures in blonde wigs the tails of their stolen dress coats flying. Behind them in hot pursuit came a gang armed with dummy rifles taken from an Army and Navy store, I laughed with the others thinking: A holy holiday for Clifton. (p. 411)

This mingling of reality and illusion reflects what Anna Balakian refers to as the "inconscient," "subscient" or "irrational" state of mind "culminating in a new logic based on the linking together and acceptance of contradictory entities."[28] The hero is liberated from logical thought in his effort to grasp and express disorder as "flagrant contradictions that exist between the dream and waking life, the 'unreal' and the 'real,' and the unconscious and the subconscious."[29] Since this results in a process of liberating the immagination and...expanding the definition of reality,[30] the author-narrator succeeds in controlling the reader's conception of reality, while projecting it as a reflection of a change in his (the author-narrator's) consciousness.

When it is not the author-narrator's personal style which creates a jagged rhythm it is the interpolated tale, political speech, sermon

[27] Ellison and Geller, p. 155.

[28] Balakian, Literary Origins of Surrealism: A New Mysticism in French Poetry (New York: King's Crown Press, 1947), p. 2.

[29] David Gascoyne, A Short Survey of Surrealism (London: Frank Cass, 1970), p. x.

[30] C.W.E. Bigsby, Dada and Surrealism (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 78.

or some form of word-play which renders the same effect. The semi-nonsensical rhyming of the cartman, "I'll verse you but I won't curse you. My name is Peter Wheatstraw. I'm the Devil's son-in-law" (p. 134), makes no attempt to hide its existence as purely verbal game-playing; its presence in the narrative injects a further element of verbal variety to a world of racial and political conflict. Such spieling as "I'maseventhsonofaseventhsonbawnwithacauloverbotheyesandblackcatboneshighjohntheconquerorandgreasygreens" (p. 134) also touches on the cultural importance of rhetorical skills for the Negro man, as well as adding to the novel's variegated verbal effects.

It is the novel's depiction of the actualities of Negro life which holds the hero's world together as a reflection of the "real" world; but even in the most straightforward description, the reader is subjected to sudden reversals of language and action:

> Trees were round the length of the long block beyond me, rising tall in dripping wetness above a series of cluttered backyards. And it occurred to me that cleared of its ramshackle fences and planted with flowers and grass...it might form a pleasant park. Just then a paper bag sailed from the window to my left and burst like a silent grenade scattering garbage into the trees and pancaking to earth with a soggy exhausted plop! (p. 285)

"The silent grenade of scattering garbage" suggests the hyperbole and general unorthodoxy of the hero's stylistic techniques, while the "soggy exhausted plop" refers as much to the bursting of the hero's day-dream as it does to the bag of garbage.

IV

As with Native Son, this novel's symbolic setting projects the essential elements of its artistic vision. The hero's "hole" is the place to which he physically descends in order to go beneath the surface

reality to arrive at a more truthful assessment of society and self. By descending from the old identities and illusions which shackled him to visions of reality that were never truly his own, he finally becomes aware of the metaphorical hole of darkness into which his past life had fated him. Like the traditional epic heroes who descended into the underworld at the crucial midpoint of their journeys,[31] the hero finds his "hole" to be both the end of his "running game," and the beginning of his recognition of his own invisibility and his attempt to control his destiny by means of recording this invisibility in literature.

Ellison's characterization reveals that the central metaphor of invisibility is explicable from two angles, for, on one hand, it possesses the sense of isolation which occurs as the result of the actions or attitudes of someone else, while, on the other hand, it reflects a condition of self-induced, or self-maintained alienation which may begin as a reaction and develop into a conscious act. The ambiguities and subleties of these two states of mind are expressed in the novel by images of namelessness, blindness, and invisibility.

Every new encounter brings the prospect of a new identity. Sheets of paper with an identity written on them are the symbolic means used by Ellison to illustrate this situation of role-definition: the hero's scholarship introduces him to college life as a reward for conforming to Southern rules of racial decorum; Bledsoe's letter defines him as someone to be kept 'running'; and Jack names and sets him running "with one and the same stroke of the pen" (p. 429). In this chaotic world, new guises are demanded of the hero at the beginning of each episode.

[31] Alter, Partial Magic, p. 23.

Along with defined roles, the hero is forced to answer to different names, which are drawn from Negro culture and are particularly appropriate to the varying occasions. In the Prologue, he is hibernating and so his name is "Jack the Bear" (p. 5); in the battle royal, he merits the name "Sambo" (p. 21); at the college his accommodating ways causes Bledsoe to call him "nigger" (p. 107); and having been beguiled by the college Administration, he catches himself humming "O well they picked poor Robin clean" (p. 147), again relevant because of the slow and humiliating punishment that he was made to endure. The suitability of the names to the situation suggests that each one only touches upon an isolated but most obvious aspect of the hero's 'real' self at a particular time, at the expense of his 'essential' self.

Elsewhere characters are given apt name-coinages which suggest that, like fictionally 'flat' characters, the person is defined totally by the characteristic associated with his name. Just as the name Wrestrum is indicative of the offensive manner in which the man conducts himself, and Tod brings to mind the British expression "on one's tod," meaning to be alone, and the German word "todd," meaning death (the fate of the character), so the names Bledsoe and Rinehart reveal the central fact of their inner reality. The character Emerson evokes Ralph Waldo Emerson[32] so that he may be linked with self-reliance. The ambiguity surrounding the concept of self-reliance, when interpreted by different races, parallels that of the name Ras which in the West Indies means both Prince (as in Ras Tafari the figure worshipped by Rastafarians) and "ass" when spelt "rass."

[32] The author's name, which is Ralph Waldo Ellison, also comes to mind.

Without one particular name with which to make the center of all his associations with the world,[33] the hero is a truly invisible man emitting no messages about himself except that he is as yet undefined.[34] In terms of self-induced invisibility, it is understandable that external definitions are imposed on him because of the absence of self-assertion; and yet what the novel depicts quite clearly is the social habit of forcing the individual to fit into a narrow personal or political image of reality.

By first setting the hero in the high-class location chosen for the battle royal ("the main ballroom of the leading hotel...where all of the town's big shots were...in their tuxedoes" [p. 14]), then in the middle-class environment of the college, the working-class setting of a factory, the underground locale of the Brotherhood, and finally the Harlem social scene, Ellison asserts his central truth: that ambiguity is universal and that society is blinded by its own desire for security. Throughout the novel, Ellison shows that beneath the apparent stability of America's respectable classes, lies a chaos of conflicting passions. Norton's incestuous involvement, the sexual fantasies of Sybil and the men at the battle royal, and Bledsoe's craving for power, all reveal the

[33] In Shadow and Act, Ellison states that names are to be "charged with all our emotions, our hopes, hates, loves, aspirations. They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past." "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" Shadow, p. 148.

[34] In Light of August, William Faulkner speaks of the significance of a name when he discusses the effect that the name "Joe Christmas" has on strangers: "It seemed to him that none of them had looked especially at the stranger until they heard his name. But as soon as they heard it, it was as though there was something in the sound of it that was trying to tell them what to expect, that he carried with him his own inescapable warning like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle." (New York: Random House, 1932), p. 29.

invisible behind the visible. The novel proceeds through the study exposure of the sexual, social and political contradictions existing in almost every aspect of American life.[35]

Ellison's treatment of invisibility as the problem of the individual includes a figure of the Negro as someone who often does not recognize his own worth because those who see his skin-colour ignore his individuality and render him invisible. In an interview with Robert Penn Warren, Ellison explains the danger of self-negation:

> The danger lies in overemphasizing the extent to which Negroes are alienated, and in overstressing the extent to which the racial predicament imposes an agony upon the individual. For the Negro youth this emphasis can become an excuse and a blinder, leading to an avoidance of the individual assertion. It can encourage him to ignore his personal talent in favour of reducing himself to a generalized definition of alienation and agony.[36]

It is the hero's early acceptance of external definitions of himself that reinforce his invisibility and prevents change. His inability to recognize this fact is a sign of his own partial blindness. Much of the disorder of the hero life is shown to result from his complicity in his own abasement, reducing himself to a cipher[37] in a way that the Negro's "entire history of repression and brutalization has failed to do."[38] The novel, however, transcends its racial subject matter and depicts the

[35] It was the social fluidity of frontier Oklahoma between World War I and the Great Depression which developed in Ellison the impression of life as a "strange mixture of the naive and the sophisticated, the benign and the malignant, which makes the American past so puzzling and its present so confusing." Life was indeed a picture that seemed slightly out of focus, hindering judgement and encouraging individual guesses at its hidden meanings, an effect which Ellison associated with the controlled and benign madness of the frontiers-man. Ellison, Shadow, pp. xifi-xv.

[36] Ellison, in Who Speaks? Warren, p. 328.

[37] Ellison, in Who Speaks? Warren, p. 328.

[38] Ellison, in Who Speaks? Warren, p. 321.

universal struggle of the individual with society, fusing the racial and the human fate. That the problem of role-enforcement extends beyond white society and into Negro society, is illustrated when the hero stumbles upon the existence of the Harlem underground, where clothing and deportment also may render one invisible:

> It was as though by dressing and walking in a certain way, I had enlisted in a fraternity in which I was recognized at a glance - not by features, but by clothes, by uniform, by gait. (p. 367)

As in the world of business and politics, his individuality is lost, his inner reality is camouflaged so easily when he puts on a hat and a pair of sunglasses, that not even Brother Maceo recognizes him when they meet in a bar.

Persons whom the hero meets compel him to adopt the role they desire him to play, and when he either refuses to act accordingly, or is unable to do so, they reject him violently. Thus, the hapless hero comes to represent modern man denied an authentic identity by those who seek to label him along racial, economic, political, sexual or social lines. In their refusal to envisage a 'whole' person, they reduce him to an invisible man upon whom they impose their self-satisfying roles. This is the hellish aspect of American life: the reduction of self to a "disembodied voice" (p. 439) and the resultant inner chaos.

V

By drawing upon the panoramic sweep of Negro American life and shaping it as a phantasmogoric depiction of Negro existence, Ellison does succeed in presenting the American Negro in the image of modern man, capturing "the sensitively-focused process of opposites, of good and evil, of instinct and intellect, of passion and spirituality which literary art

has projected as the image of man."[39] He turns his naive hero into a philosophical prober, whose confrontation with society also engages him in an inner struggle of mental anguish. His protests go beyond the level of minority afflictions to speak out against life's chaotic disorder, and man's need to try to balance life's irreconciliable tensions, in the hope of achieving an uneasy equilibrium, and a fragile harmony.

Out of the hellish disorder of Negro life, a distinctly personal view also emerges, concentrating on the paradoxes of the Negro experience:

> :..striving not to escape, or to hold back but to work through; to transcend as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they dealt. The protest is there, not because I was helpless before my racial condition but because I put it there.[40]

Unlike Wright, Ellison chose to present Negro reality and "the truth about the human condition, here and now, with all the bright magic of a fairy tale."[41] Even the hero's concluding vision of himself as a castrated man which comments on the destructiveness of American society and its waste of natural resources, is presented as a dream.

The relevance of Ellison's perception of reality to his readers in the Fifties, lies in his presentation of American society as complex and chaotic, and of the self as alienated and unstable. With two world wars, a cold war and the growing significance of the atomic bomb casting a shadow on the decade, together with "the lazy self-satisfaction and venomous

[39] Ellison, Twentieth Century Fiction," Shadow, p. 26.

[40] Ellison, "The World and the Jug," Shadow, p. 137.

[41] Ellison, "Brave Words," Shadow, p. 105.

chicanery of the Eisenhower-McCarthy era,"[42] it was indeed a time of social disenchantment.

For the most part, artists of this period experimented with forms that were more expansive than the earlier novels of Naturalistic protest and Marxist determinism. They tended to depict either the picaresque adventures of a rogue-hero or the alienated stance of the hero who intentionally isolates himself spiritually, physically or both.[43] Man's search for a new sense of social and spiritual freedom was expressed in forms which tried to do likewise, as Hassan explains:

> As the fictional hero attempts to mediate the contradictions of culture and even to create a new consciousness, so does the form of the novel itself attempt the task on a deeper level. Realism and surrealism, comedy and tragedy, event and symbol tend to fuse in evasive forms, equal to the perplexities of the day.[44]

By relying on an aesthetic derived from the multivalent and the picaresque, Ellison does justice to Negro history, while moving beyond the American racial situation to depict it as a paradigm of the central American dilemma about personal alienation and social disorder.

[42] Harvey Swados, "The Writer in Contemporary American Society," Anger and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 65.

[43] Swados, p. 65.

[44] Hassan, Contemporary American Literature 1945-1972: An Introduction (New York: Fred Ungar, 1973), p. 26.

CHAPTER III

The System of Dante's Hell: A vision of expiation

Any distortion of self, either in degradation or idealization must be viewed as rejection of actual self and is therefore self-hating.

Theodore Rubin

We live in fragments
like speech. Like the fits
of wind, shivering against
the window.

Pieces of meaning, pierced
and strung together...

LeRoi Jones

In The System of Dante's Hell,[1] both form and language are used in a different manner than in the previously discussed novels. Here, as in Invisible Man,[2] a hero is involved in the exploration of his past, not however, an historically recorded past but rather one which is intensely subjective. Like Bigger's 'No Man's Land' this is an area of guilt and hatred, but whereas in Native Son,[3] these emotions were related directly to society and the white man, in The System, it is the hero himself who is the accused, being responsible for his degraded condition. The hellish condition of Jones's hero appears to be that of self-betrayal, his

[1] The System of Dante's Hell (New York: Grove, 1965).

[2] Invisible Man (1952; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1975).

[3] Native Son (New York: Harper and Row, 1940).

debasement less the result of social forces than of conscious choices. Though he is an urban ghetto youth, he has not been coerced into his present situation. In his relative freedom, he chose to follow the path of the Black middle-class, to enrol in a white institution such as the Air Force, and to estrange himself from his Black culture in the quest for the broader freedom of the artistic milieu of Greenwich Village.

As in the previously discussed novels, the reader is faced with an identity-in-torment. The hero's sexual, social and racial identity is dissected in the first-person narrator, exposing the cancer-like growth of self-hatred, shame and guilt. It is a private self-examination, with the broader social implication of enlightening the reader about his own inner corruption. Much of the direct social criticism occurs in the concluding section, "Sound Image," which was written during 1965, and presents a shift in attitude from that of the earlier, less explanatory pieces.

In The System, the reader is confronted with the circumstances and conditions resulting in the attitude that prompted Jones's eventual move to Harlem.[4] It records the gradual growth of Black consciousness in a man who felt himself being absorbed into white culture, and expresses his mental and spiritual alienation from, and slow rejection of this culture. In an interview with Theodore Hudson, Jones explains that his

[4] In 1965, Jones returned to Harlem unaccompanied by his white wife and two children because "the whole thing had become unbearable in a physical sense and I just cut out." Approximately a year later he changed his name to Imamu Ameer Baraka (Ameer later became Amiri). Theodore Hudson, From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1973), p. 20.

Owing to the lack of extensive biographical material concerning the author's background, and the semi-autobiographical nature of The System, less direct information is provided about Jones than about Wright and Ellison.

change:

> ...wasn't any sudden thing. It was a developing thing ...my work kept changing steadily...it wasn't any kind of abrupt rational decision. It was based on growing change -- like anything else...[5]

Since the body of the novel was written between 1960 and 1961 the sections other than "Sound Image" describe a hell concerned more with psychology than politics. "Hell in this book...is what vision I had of it around 1960-61 and that fix on my life, and my interpretation of my earlier life. Hell in the head."[6] Thus, here, as in Invisible Man, there is a double consciousness at work.

Much of the novel's ambivalence is created by the close affinity between the author and protagonist. As Jones's persona, the hero bears the author's name, and yet at the same time he is a fictional character. With no distancing of consciousness between the artist and his fictionalized self, it is impossible to distinguish the autobiographical details from Jones's imagined material, so that the reader is immersed totally in an impression of life which hovers between the two planes of reality and imagination.

The central theme of the novel is that of self-denial, that to emulate whiteness is to deny one's Blackness. The section which deals specifically with this psychology of racism is the final of the circles of hell, and signifies that, as a heretic, the hero is placed "in the deepest part of hell" (p. 7). Through the prostitute Peaches, the hero comes to learn that his world was "all lies...all fraud and sickness" (p. 148).

[5] Jones, in an interview with Hudson in From LeRoi, p. 20.

[6] The System, p. 153. All future references from the novel will be included in the text.

She introduces him to "a real world. [sic] of flesh, of smells, of soft black harmonies and color" (p. 148) to which he is pathetically alien and in which he cannot remain, but by seeing this world and losing it, he is able to "find sweet grace alone" (p. 150). Perhaps for the first time, the hero begins to think about who he is and what he desires from life, although the distance between this newly experienced Black world and his previous one is emphasized by the beating which he receives from three youths, one of whom refers to him as a "slick city nigger" (p. 151).

Along with his racial confusion, the hero must come to terms with the dilemma of his sexual identity. Once again it is Peaches who accuses him of being a homosexual, but this is the last of a number of references to the subject. In Circle Eight, the hero speaks about his homosexual encounters in Chicago:

> In Chicago I kept making the queer scene. Under the El with the preacher. and later retrogravure, his slick (this other, larger man, like my father) hair, murray's grease probably. (p. 58)

Much of the novel's air of guilt and shame stems from Jones's attitude to his homosexual tendencies during adolescence, and young adulthood. In Home, he relates these early actions to his artistic orientation:

> The artist is the concentrate...of the society's tendencies — the extremist. And the most extreme form of alienation acknowledged within white society is homosexuality. The long abiding characterization of the Western artist as usually queer does not seem out of place.[7]

Apart from the fear of impotence in heterosexual relations, Jones seems to use homosexuality as a source for his hero's identity confusion, since

[7] Home: Social Essays (New York: William Morrow, 1966), p. 219.

it threatens his masculinity.[8] Throughout the narrative, these homosexual-related memories are a constant source of torment to the hero.

The third area of dis-ease concerns the hero's middle-class orientation, which is based on his desire to emulate the white man. The attempted abduction with intent to rape which is described in the section dealing with "Treachery to Kindred," and the attitude of the young boy (46) in "The Eighth Ditch is Drama," both deal with the distortion of self which occurs when middle-class aspirations make one either gullible or cynical. In fact, throughout the novel disparaging comments are made about the self-centredness of the Black middle-class emphasizing the cultural change of consciousness which Jones was experiencing in the early Sixties. His contempt is unmitigated.

I

The System is modelled after Dante's Hell, and in Soon, One Morning, Jones discusses his indebtedness to that medieval classic:

> In the complete work I have tried to provide some parallels, i.e., emotional analogues, between my own life and Dante's Hell...I go into each bolgia (ditch) of each circle of the Hell and drag some corresponding horror in my own soul.[9]

At times it is difficult to trace the complete connection between the episodes recounted and the Dantean category (parts of the "Incontinent,"

[8] Theodore Rubin explains that homosexuality, the word and the symbol, threatens masculine gender identity, and identity generally, because it is felt as potential eradication of safe limits and borders within whose confines we can rest easy, sure of what we are supposed to feel and who we are supposed to be. Rubin, Compassion and Self-hate: An Alternative to Despair (New York: David McKay, 1975), p. 281.

[9] Jones, in Soon, One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes 1940-62, ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1965), p. 323.

for example), but in the main, the correspondence is achieved, often implicitly.

In The System, as in Dante's Hell, the condition being described is that "to which the soul reduces itself by a stubborn determination to evil, and in which it suffers the torment of its own perversions."[10] In both works, the image of hell is derived from each author's view of society and self; both looked outwards into the corruption of society and inwards into the corruption of the human heart, and saw the image of hell.[11] Since one aspect of the human condition concentrated upon in both The System and Hell is man's sinfulness, Dorothy Sayers's comment on the allegory in Dante's poem aids in an analysis of Jones's novel:

> ...The whole allegory may be interpreted politically in the widest sense of the word; as representing the way of salvation not only for the individual man, but for man-in-community. Civilizations as well as persons, need to know the Hell within them and purge their sins before entering into a state of Grace, Justice, and Charity, as so becoming the city of God on earth.[12]

That Jones sees the role of the Black artist as the modern chronicler of private and national ills, is illustrated by his statement in Raise: "Dante vanished, a black man in his place."[13] It is the sensitive Black man who, of all Americans, is most intimate with hellishness. Whether it is the Jones of 1960 or the Jones of 1965, disillusioned with self and

[10] Dorothy Sayers, trans., The Divine Comedy, by Dante (1949; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 68.

[11] Sayers, p. 49.

[12] Sayers, p. 69.

[13] Jones in Raise, Race Rays, Raze: Essays since 1965 (New York: Vintage, 1969), p. 49.

society, the similarities between the Twentieth Century and Dante's Fourteenth Century are relied upon, for, in both periods of time there were "wonderful enlargements of human knowledge...followed by widespread slaughter and destruction as racial and national hatreds burn with a hotter flame and threaten further strife."[14]

As in Dante's Hell, Jones's novel is subdivided into circles and bolgias, and the meaning of each section is quite self-contained, since most of the pieces were published separately prior to the novel's appearance.[15] The fact that Jones sought to establish a parallel with Dante's poem suggests his desire to provide his work with structural unity as well as preparing the reader for the nature of the consciousness to be encountered.

Although Jones makes no real distinction between the intensity of the sins being described in the novel, especially in the "association complexes", the fact that he maintains the exact order of Dante's hell suggests that he does agree with Dante's categorization. In keeping with Jones's growing sense of the importance of Black consciousness, those who seek to deny their own inner reality deserve the severest punishment and this explains why "the Heretics," although listed in its original place, is treated last. Aided by Jones's definition of heresy as treachery "against one's own sources" it is not difficult to grasp why the heretics are put in the deepest part of hell.

[14] Viscount Bryce, "Some Thoughts on Dante in His Relation to Our Time," Dante: Essays in commemmoration 1321-1921 (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1921), p. 21.

[15] The first seven circles in The Trembling Lamb; "Hypocrites" and "Thieves" in The Moderns; "The Eight Ditch" in the Floating Bear...; "The Christians" and "The Rape" in Soon, One Morning; "The Heretics" in New American Story. System, title page verso.

There are a number of textual details which maintain some affinity between his image of Black life and the scenes in Dante's Hell (no doubt to preserve the novel's unity). In Dante's vestibule the futile run perpetually after a whirling standard corresponding, in Jones's work, to the members of the aspiring Black middle-class, who waste their lives on false hopes and end up suffering from urban nihilism. In Dante's work, Heaven and Hell are states in which choice is permanently fixed and as such there has to be a state in which the refusal of choice is itself fixed, since the refusal to choose is in fact to choose indecision; it involves a cautious cowardice and a vague tolerance.[16] In Jones's hell, Dante's "scum, who'd never lived"[17] are identified with the "grey" Negroes who tolerate the social situation; the Black middle-class preacher, funeral director and shop keeper fall into this category:

> ...All dead, all walking slowly towards their lives.
> Already, each Sunday forever. The man was a minister.
> His wife was light skinned with freckles. Their church
> was tall brown brick and sophisticated. (p. 11)

Again in the "Ninth Ditch," Dante's victims "are continually smitten asunder by a Demon with a sword,"[18] and in the account of the fight which Jones relates a fat boy is badly chopped with a meat cleaver after the rest of the party is made to scatter ("his axe slid thru the place throwing people on their stomachs, it grazed my face sending my green hat up against the record player " [p. 99]). This gang-warfare is based on the attitude similar to those held by Dante's "Makers of Discord":

[16] Sayers, p. 89.

[17] Dante, Hell, ll. 64. Canto III p. 87.

[18] Sayers in introduction to Dante's Canto xxviii. Circle viii. Malbowges: Bowge ix: Sowers of Discord in Hell p. 246.

> ...fanatics of party, seeing the world in a false perspective and ready to rip up the whole fabric of society to gratify a sectional egotism.[19]

Added to these descriptive similarities are specific references to people in Dante's work: "Bertrand de Born" (p. 98), "Ciaphas" (p. 68), "Beast of Fucci" (p. 72), "Mohamet The sick tribes of Aegina" (p. 97). Thus, to some extent, both the novel's form and content are controlled by Dantean parallels.

Along with strengthening the novel's unity, these references remind the reader of the similarities between the nature of the hells being described by the two artists, both works being "the record of an intimate personal experience...passionate flesh and passionate intellect...fused together in...a furnace of the passionate spirit".[20] Jones's image of hell as the state of a corrupt childhood and adolescence, actually draws strength from the fact that Dante's hell envisages the corruption of the self at a later stage in its development. Hell is experienced much earlier for Twentieth Century man.

II

Through a self-conscious assault on his past self, Jones is involved in a process of regeneration and cleansing. The novel, therefore, takes on some of the characteristics of spiritual autobiography representing the self's attempt at describing its own development, for, as Roy Pascal has said:

> ...The writer takes on a particular standpoint, the standpoint of the moment at which he reviews his life, and

[19] Sayers in postscript to Dante's Canto xxviii. Circle viii: Malbowges: Bowge ix: Sowers of Discord p. 250.

[20] Sayers, p. 10.

> interprets his life from it. The standpoint may be his acknowledged achievement in any field, his present philosophy; in every case it is his present position which enables him to see life as something of a unity that may be reduced to order.[21]

Jones approaches his hero's life in a manner which makes "events become more important for him not in themselves, but for what he puts into them".[22] His life-story is presented in such a way that the reader may follow how the occurences or personalities from his past have kindled his imagination years later.

Throughout the novel Jones uses himself unremittingly and often cruelly as the subject of his prose, even though he is not writing literal autobiography; and yet by approaching himself through fiction rather than non-fiction, he not only shields himself with the protective device of fictional distance, he also is free to imaginatively transform reality. Jones explains this freedom in an interview with Hudson:

> ...Characters take on different elements that, maybe, I reflected on. Much of it is autobiography -- from situations I have been in, but most of it is projections of ideas, much later...They germinate in experience...Most of the time I move from real people I know, or I move from real experiences.[23]

Despite the literary and spiritual parallels with Dante, the autobiographical core renders the novel, ambiguous, for, on the one hand, it projects an image of the actual as opposed to the fictional, while on the other, it cannot be read as autobiography because it is classified by the

[21] Pascal, Design and Truth in Autobiography (London: Routledge, Regan Paul, 1960), p. 9

[22] Pascal, p. 133.

[23] Interview, July 29, 1970 in From LeRoi, p. 111.

author as a novel and includes much imagined material. Since this fusion is intentional, it is likely that the full force and significance of the novel is felt "only when the relation between the author outside the work to the representation of his life within the work is actively experienced."[24]

III

If The System is approached, in the main, as a lyrical novel, it becomes easier to fit together its Dantean structure, its autobiographical tendencies and the protagonist-author-relationship. As Ralph Freedman states, "lyrical novels are determined not by any pre-ordained form but by poetic manipulation of narrative types which writers have found ready made or have constructed within an existing tradition of the novel."[25] Having anchored the narrative on the structural framework of Dante's Hell, and having stated that it is semi-autobiographical, Jones is then free to create a lyrical novel or a novel disguised as a lyric, which according to Herman Hesse was "a borrowed label for the experimentation of poetic spirits to express their feeling of self and world."[26]

The hell suggested by Dantean parallels is reinforced, as Freedman notes, by paradoxically submerging the narrative in imagery and portraiture. The fluid structure of the hero's emotional and psychological life is blended so as to open up ranges of metaphoric suggestiveness that could not have been achieved by purely narrative means:

[24] William Matthews, Autobiography, Biography, and The Novel: Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar May 13, 1972, Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1973, p. 51.

[25] Freedman, The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Herman Hesse, André Gide, Virginia Woolf (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963).

[26] Hesse, quoted in The Lyrical Novel, p. vii.

> ...The lyrical novelist is faced with the task of reconciling succession in time and sequences of cause and effect with the instantaneous action of the lyric. Not only is time experienced spatially...but also the distance between self and world is telescoped; the engagements of men in the universe of action are re-experienced as instances of awareness.[27]

In its portrayal of the act of knowledge, the novel ceases to focus fully on the intercourse between men and world. By using a unique form to transcend "the causal and temporal movements of narrative within the framework of fiction... [Jones] uses the novel to approach the function of a poem."[28]

In his desire to create his fictionalized past as hell, Jones resorts to a form which permits him to combine narrative with a tapestry of images so as to reduce the world to a "lyrical point of view, the equivalent of the poet's 'I', the lyrical self... [which] is the poet's mask as well as the source of his consciousness."[29] The novel's images, style and point of view are entwined almost inextricably and will be examined in the light of this literary form.

By first setting down what appears to be the protagonist's memmories of his 'sins' as classified by Dante, rather than by a chronological account of his personal development, the author does not have to distinguish between levels of time and reality. Weaving together remembered scenes and current experiences, objects and people, Jones, as hero, proceeds to draw a fictionalized self-portrait. As a self-reflective hero:

[27] Freedman, p. vii.

[28] Freedman, p. 1.

[29] Freedman, p. 8.

> ... [He] mirrors the world as he sees it and so lends it a specific color of shpae, distorting it even displacing it...depicting experience and enacting it through a progression of images the hero renders himself a symbolic vision.[30]

The result is a picture of "poetic" reality in which the experienced effects of the American ghetto are shown to warp the spiritual growth of its impressionable young inhabitants.

The hero's approach to himself[31] is abusive, especially in the early part of the novel when he shifts from the past to the present tense while moving from description to self-admonishment:

> ...You've done everything you said you despised. A fat mind, lying to itself. Unmoving like some lump in fromt of a window...whatever clarity left, a green rot, a mind, a stifling at the base of the skull. No air gets in. (p. 13)

The reader continues to be involved with his "whatness, from within."[32] The novel imparts a deep sense of honest self-exposure by the hero, usually in the form of comments about an episode and his reaction. In "The Christians", for example, he describes the entry of a gang called the Dukes and adds, "SURE I WAS FRIGHTENED BUT MAN THERE WAS NOT A GODDAMNED THING TO DO" (p. 98). The most common form of description, however, is that of fragmentary impressions:

> ...Violence to my body. To my mind. Closed in. To begin at the limit. Work in to the core. Center. At which there is -- nothing. The surface of thought. Pure undulation at the mid-year, turned yellow as deserts, suns. (p. 71)

[30] Freedman, p. 9.

[31] Note: In this chapter the term "hero" refers to the author's self-in-art.

[32] Radar, p. 55.

In the "fast narratives" (p. 153) made up of "The Christians," "The Rape" and The Heretics," the hero's behaviour is a good indication of his temperament and beliefs, although his presentation of these dramatic situations is affected greatly by his present impression of them. After the indeterminate sense impressions in the first half of the book, the self-contained and dramatic narratives of the second half reveal the hero's state of mind just previous to the first flickers of Black consciousness:

> ...And slumped together in anonymous houses I thought of black man sitting on their beds this saturday of my listening quietly to their wives' soft talk. And felt the world grow together as I hadn't known it. (p. 147-8).

Occasionally the hero does present himself in a manner which approaches humour, especially in his depiction of his adolescent years. In the "Ninth Ditch" he treats himself with gentle irony:

> ...No. Nwk. was where the party was. Cookie's place. (They were hip mostly because they were foreign, for that matter myself too. No one knew who I was in the ward. A hero maybe. with foreign friends. Pretty cool. Some kind of athlete. [sic] So when I came to places like that (in time) I'd show up loose, rangy, very nice. Somedays wind swept thru my eyes and I'd stare off whistling. This was an ATTRIBUTE. (p. 95)

In a few lines he is able to capture the conceit and play-acting, the self-consciousness and insecurity of adolescence. Here he becomes any young boy who "plays cool" at parties, trying very hard to be liked while affecting disinterest. This is an image of the undefined self without depth, and amusing only in the sense that the acting exposes the sincerity of youth coping with itself and society.

For the most part, the hero's voice is that of a bitter and frustrated man who castigates himself and the environment, for tempting him to become alienated from his people and from himself, by sexual abuse,

social climbing and white cultural affiliations. He begins angrily, addressing the reader with open hostility: "This thing if you read it will jam your face in my shit. Now say something intelligent" (p. 15). In the main, however, the novel records a self-addressed aggression.

This retrospective use of his youth as the subject for later derision and contempt is made most clear in the Eighth Ditch, where the young hero is the passive partner in a homosexual scene with the older hero.[33]

> ...But you, my man, are still in the wilderness. Ignorant and weak. You can be taken. Its 1947 and there are at least 13 years before anything falls right for you. (p. 84)

The two characters 46 and 64 are the two main protagonists, and the reversal of the numbers in their names seems a comment on the complete change of attitude which has taken place in the hero's consciousness by the time this piece was written. Bearing in mind, however, Jones's opinion that homosexuality expresses alienation, this scene between the two phases of one developing consciousness, would suggest that the hero's sense of alienation is still very strong. Not until the last part of The System is there a feeling of cohesion developing in him. The novel's concluding sentence sets the tone of the new Jones: "The world is clearer to me now, and many of its features, more easily definable" (p. 154).

Jones adopts a blues-like attitude to the past, publicly exposing the painful events of his childhood, adolescence and young adulthood in

[33] The character 64 seems to represent Jones at twenty-six years of age (being born in October, 1934 and writing between 1960 and 1961) and 46, Jones at thirteen years (1947 being the date mentioned in the drama, the year in which Jones would have been thirteen and still a Boyscout).

order to master his shame and guilt at betraying his Blackness by "running in terror, from one's deepest response and insights,..the denial of feeling" (p. 7). He explores his private history so as to create a new self, for, as Larry Neal states, "History, like the blues, demands that we witness the painful events of our prior lives and that we either confront these painful events or be destroyed by them."[34]

Comments on the decay in the ghettoes and other sordid details about the environment occur intermittently, but little prolonged emphasis is made on the physical hellishness of the place. His brief description of the "white stripe up on center of the floor, taped to the bar, going up, over the counter" (p. 133), and the two men on either side who "were old friends, touching each other, and screaming with laughter at what they said" (p. 134) is one of the most revealing of his racial experiences. On the whole, Jones is more interested in his hero's personal and individual hell than in social protest and endows him with the self-awareness that Bigger lacked because of the constraints of Naturalism, and which the invisible man lacked as a naive person. Through his hero's free associations of ideas, fragments of memories and the flow of impressions and symbolic scenes, Jones's protagonist is allowed the possibility of a self-conscious explanation of the sources of his identity.

The hero is both a Bigger Thomas and an invisible man, a ghetto youth and an alienated intellectual, combining the street-gang attitude

[34] Larry Neal "From 'the Black Arts Movement,'" Five Black Writers, ed. Donald Gibson (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1970), p. 221.

and an exposure to literary tradition with a strong awareness of social and historical selfhood. The result is the tortured vision of a trapped "social animal" (p. 154) that finds itself at odds with its own society and with itself.

V

Much of the novel involves an experimentation with literary technique, and probably would be described by the current Jones (Baraka) as "uselessly literary".[35] The first half of the novel contains the "association complexes"[36] in which a world of images, ideas and experiences are triggered off by a name or an accident. A number of thoughts are included in one paragraph and the result is the intertwining of skeins of memories and ideas. In the following passage from "The Hypocrites" each sentence seems to be of equal importance, with subsidiary and main comments treated as equivalents:

> ...Boy, this cat is something. Is my dead sister. The car crashed her huge eyes. My father's buick. You rich running. Pigeon toes you got us into the Troops. (And those buildings, even the Delores, and the two crazy ones, football players and midgets) were crumbling. Were red, at the corner where my grandmother made "pageboys". Miss Still, was the lady she worked for. The other street, where Willie lived, continued to the lot and the women's detention home you could forget if you looked at the tile store or the abandoned ice-house full of ammonia. Mr. Bell fell thru the floor. (p. 66)

In his attempt to give a complete and accurate impression of the mind of his hero, Jones does not depict the character's flow of consciousness as a continual horizontal line. He deliberately seeks to give

[35] Hudson quoting in From LeRoi, p. 66.

[36] The term "association complex" will be used frequently in regards to the organization of the novel's form.

expression to the chaotic turmoil of the hero's thoughts at the expense of the reader's full comprehension of the subject matter. Often it is a matter of having to be satisfied with an imperfect understanding of the text and no inkling of the context.

In "The neutrals" where there is an extended image of stagnation and decay, to describe the feel of life under ghetto conditions, much of the comprehensiveness of the impression stems from traditional and unconventional techniques being blended together to achieve the desired effect. The colours included in the piece are those associated with fog and smoke: grey, brown and blue. The smells are those of rot and urine, and the scene is one of dogs, men and dead chickens. The dull heavy rhythm is achieved by the employment of assonance, "the brown night rolling down bricks" (p. 9), and alliteration "chipped stone stairs in the silence" (p. 9), while the continuous usage of present participation (rolling, setting, breaking, quivering) suggests the endlessness of the state:

> ...First the doors. The brown night rolling down bricks. Chipped stone stairs in the silence. Vegetables rotting in the neighbours' minds. Dogs wetting on the buildings in absolute content. Seeing the pitied. The minds of darkness. Not even sinister. Breaking out in tears along the sidewalks of the season. Grey leaves outside the junkshop. Sheridan Square blue men under thick quivering smoke. Trees, statues in a background of voices. Justice, Egalite. Horns break the fog with trucks full of dead chickens. Motors. Lotions. (p. 9)

The words "Justice" and "Egalite" are empty ones in this setting since revolution is the furthest thought from the minds of these people. "Motors. Lotions" is reversed echo of the word locomotion, suggesting the backward movement of these apathetic souls. The parallel between "Dogs wetting on buildings" and "Breaking out in tears along the sidewalks of the season" speaks of the futility of pity for people such as

these.

In "Seven "The Destruction of America," [sic] Jones creates a carefully planned pattern of line organization which rhythmically enhances the description:

> And Riders,
> coming toward us. The Gloom
> lifting. Trees
> blown back.
> Cold season,
> of steel, colors,
> cheap medicines.
> I am, as you are, caught. Here,
> is where we die.
> On this mountain,
> looking down. (p. 35)

The weight of the word "gloom" creates the impression that the word "lifting" is actually a lighter word because of the vowels "i" and "oo", and achieves a rising effect when the eye moves to the margin (as if both "gloom" and "lifting" were on the same line). Similarly, the words "blown back", placed at the beginning of the line, produce the feeling of being literarily blown back, and "looking down", situated as it were at the foot of the word "mountain," forces the eye to look down to find the rest of the sentence. The reader is made to participate in the novel by this type of manipulation of his senses and sensibility.

A description of the ghetto, however, in the harsh fragmentary fashion of the "association complexes" does more than catch the rhythm of a disjointed consciousness; it also suggests that the facts given are unpleasant truths and need to be digested singly:

> ..Newark St. (snakes writhe in the ditch
> binding our arms. Our minds...
> Its boundaries were Central Ave, to Sussex
> Ave. (1 block). This is the center I mean.
> Where it all, came on. The rest is suburb.
> The rest is outside this hole. Snakes die
> past this block. Flames subside. [sic]
> (p. 76)

In the representation of facts and feelings, Jones relies on a mixture of the comprehensible and esoteric so that the reader is surrounded by impressions of meaning.

As a result of these many and varied fragments included within the text, the novel possesses an air of disjointed authenticity. Many of the comments exhibit a natural concreteness in the midst of obscurity: "a Black Catholic girl had written my name on a trash can" (p. 28); "I stayed in the metal hall, rifling the mailboxes" (p. 37); "polish man (now I'd say 'polack')" (p. 56); "Kruegar (pronounced Kreegar)" (p. 94). Such seemingly unimportant observations establish a less aggressive relationship between the author and reader than suggested by the earlier command to "say something intelligent." The hero becomes less of the alienated artist here and more of an 'ordinary man' reminiscing.

This impression of realism is more apparent in the later narrative segments where the sense is less obscure. In the ditch titled the "Christians,"[37] for example, Jones presents a highly entertaining domestic scene opening with the hero at the upper window looking down at "9 Cliftons, slickheads in bunches waiting to beat punks up, cops whistling" (p. 93). His flow of thoughts is interrupted by his uncle "coming in the room, changing his collars, putting on checkered coat & 3 pens in breast pocket" (p. 93); and his usage of present participles to describe his uncle's actions captures the repititious nature of the

[37] According to Jones, "the Christians is taken from the eighth bolgia 9, The Makers of Discord. Dante made these the Mohammedans but alter this to my own purpose and cite these as christians." Jones, in Soon, One Morning, ed. Hill, p. 323.

procedure, and indicates that this is a regular occurrence. Following this he records his own attempts at getting ready, speaking of his "bell bottom 'hip' suit" (p. 93) which causes him to call to mind "the first time the suit was called 'hip' (some girl at the Y, a Duke chick, first called it that)" (p. 93). These are very natural thought processes, and they confirm the novel as a personal record.

Much of Jones's individuality as an artist rests in unique rhythmic effects which he is able to obtain with unconventional punctuation and disconnected sentences, creating (for example) the strides of a hurdler. The succession of fragments in the open bracket "(straight right leg... down." freezes the motion as the hero describes his body position before the action continues in the rest of the movements:

> ...The 180's I thought the most beautiful. After the first one, hard on the heel and springing up. Like music; a scale. Hit, 1-23. Up (straight right leg, down low just above the wood. Left turned at the angle, flat tucked. Head low to the knee, arms reaching for the right toe, pulling the left leg to snap it down. HIT (right foot). Snap left HIT (left) stride. The big one. 1-23. Up. Stretch. (p. 143)

Like a man with a movie projector, he halts the narrative's movement or slows it down whenever he chooses.

Jones's regular use of obscenity is another attempt to recreate the reality of his hero's world. Whereas David LLorens refers to Jones's use of it as "artistic obscenity",[38] Jones classifies it as reality, overruling all objections by accusing his accusers of trying to destroy the validity of a certain kind of experience. According to Jones, they seek to deny the expression of obscenity as honest, in their attempt to negate a whole world of feeling because of their ignorance of what the

[38] LLorens, "Ameer (LeRoi Jones) Baraka," Ebony, August, 1969, p. 80.

supposedly obscene words mean in Black culture or how they are used.[39]

At this point in Jones's artistic development, he is still interested in the "verb process; the doing, the coming into being, the at-the-time-of which is why we think that there is particular value in live music, contemplating the artifact as it arrives, listening to it emerge."[40] It is also his concern with the power of words that causes him to use present participles and active verbs as much as possible.[41] His writing generates a feeling of great energy as his observations highlight startling effects. In "The Rape", for example, he comments that "the party pushed noise into dark" (p. 109), so even verbs not in the present tense convey a forceful impression because of their subjects.

In his desire to capture the "now", Jones seeks to present the fragmentary impression of his life as a cohesive picture. The reader is plunged constantly into a particular moment in the hero's life, with no association with the past lying behind the moment. It is as if the reader, like the hero, is expected to be acquainted with what has gone before, able to understand when allusions are made to past events. Since the reader is ignorant of the hero's past, he must infer it from passing comments occurring in the narrative. The prose renders the impression of flowing thoughts because instead of narrating his own past, the hero merely makes allusion to it.

[39] Jones, "Philistinism and the Negro Writer," Anger and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States, ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 57.

[40] Home, p. 174.

[41] Jones writes, "If we describe a man by his life we are making him a verb, which is the only valid method since everything else is too arbitrary. The clearest description of now is the present participle, which if the activity described continues is always correct." Home, p. 175.

The names of friends occur in the narrative when they are mentally associated with some detail of the hero's past. Pooky, for example, is mentioned twice in the novel and each time the information is only relevant to the particular moment and a specific memory. As one of the people living nearby, he is introduced in the fourth circle "a union organizer...across the lot...an italian with twin sisters" (p. 31). Later on in the Eighth Circle he is mentioned because of his manner of speaking "Pooky wd say 'rigaleerio' because his nose was stuffed. Dried snot on its edges" (p. 73). This detail is brought to the hero's mind by a comment about the Ringaleerio (the correct spelling of the word), which had reminded him firstly, that "the whites say they sd [sic] different" (p. 73), then, that "our fays...took their mark from us" (p. 73), and finally, that Pooky, as an example of one of their "fays," had his own distinctive pronounciation. This is all the reader ever learns about Pooky because he exists only as a discrete and disconnected memory.

The textual details which indicate the hero's age, such as the reference to "kool-aid," chocolates and biscuits as the menu of the "Secret Seven" in the seventh ditch, to being a boy scout in the Eighth Ditch; being in college in "The Rape", and to the Air Force in "the Heretics", serve to indicate the chronological progression of time in the novel. The final incidents which reveal the hero at his worst ("The Rape" and "The Heretics") together with the dramatic portrayal of a homosexual encounter, all involve the hero in the three areas of self-hatred mentioned at the outset of this study.

In "The Rape", it is his middle-class attitudes which are associated with the cold and cruel egotism described by Dante:

> ...THE BEAUTIFUL MIDDLECLASS HAD FORMED AND I WAS TO BE A GREAT FIGURE, A GIANT AMONG THEM. THEY FOLLOWED WITH THEIR EYES, OR LISTENED TO SOFT MOUTHS SPILL MY STORY OUT TO GIVE THEIR WIVES. (p. 107)

As the middle-class hero he leads the others away from any identification with the Black drunken woman by accentuating their social differences: "What a desperate sick creature she, and what she wanted here in their paradise" (p. 109). It is his tone of voice which prompts the others to consider abducting her. As a true ghetto product she disgusts him:

> ...old wood and wine,
> what there is of a slum. Of dead minds, dead
> fingers flapping empty in inhuman cold.
> I winced (because I thot
> myself elegant. A fop, I'd because, and made
> a sign to Calvin that the woman smelled. (p. 112)

It is he who begins to touch her but it is the others who have to push her out of the car when she screams.

In "The Heretics" the hero returns to the subject of homosexuality. His search for love brings him to recall homosexual encounters in the city which only serve to remind him of the destructive and disillusioning effects of army experiences: "I had gotten so elegant (that was college/ a new order of foppery). But then the army came & I was dragged into a kind of stillness" (p. 124). He is weighed down with the need for these loves, "an actual longing for men that brooded in each finger of my memory" (p. 125), and burdened with guilt at the same time. Envisaging himself as "Dante...the yng [sic] wild virgin of the universe. To see what terror. What illusion. What sudden shame, the world is made" (p. 126), the hero prepares to witness and indulge in willful sin.

It is a vividly described hell of wasted lives that emerges from the hero's experience: "tough Black men...weak Black men. Filthy drunk

women whose perfume was cheap unnatural flowers" (p. 128). Aware of their estrangement from each other, and his alienation from them all, he becomes weary of the world and himself. As he describes the scene around him and his reaction to it, the reader is made aware of the inner emptiness and absence of identity from which the hero is suffering. Kept calm by the alcohol, his brain registers the horror around him, but he has been anaesthetized emotionally.

In his drunkenness, details are hazy and confused in their appearance: "The Cotton Club was in a kind of ditch. Or valley. Or three flights down. Or someplace removed from where we stood" (p. 133). The roaches, eggshells, the burnt shade speak of the reality of the situation while his drunken stupor and vain attempts to deter Peaches' amorous advances capture the complete hellishness of his situation; the incidents with the homosexual calling to him and his escape from the police reveal the nightmarish quality of his sexual confusion and the terrified response he makes to life in general.

VI

Within the "association complexes," Jones is able to achieve quite a degree of variety. In the "Flatterers," for example, the controlling metaphor is that of a baseball game, and several references are made to the sport. During the narrative which centres around a number of sexual encounters, the hero describes a baseball game in a rather disjointed manner, beginning with "A good season. Lost, the dust settling" (p. 41) and ending with "Good field/No hit!" (p. 45). These important pastimes for the young Jones (sex and baseball) are here presented under the heading of "The Flatterers," possibly because both

involve performance and degrees of self-indulgence and self-approbation.

In the "Seducers," the image is that of the game 'Simon Says.' Again, reference to this game occur intermittently:

> ...Say autumn. Say railroad. Say leaves. Go back. After crossing the street. The tracks. Dark stones. Your own space, wherever. It was afternoon when she died. Everyone lie...the sun had marked its time. Lillian. Say love. Say slept. Say place your fingers. (p. 37)

Death, love and childhood games fused into an image of seduction. The "going back" involved in the game leads him into memories of Lillian living "that distance across the trees" (p. 37) and the rhythms of the game reflect the movement of artistic consciousness in relating past to present.

In the "Eighth Ditch (is Drama, [sic]" Jones uses one symbol to suggest two meanings. The street is a metaphor of the positive and negative aspects of lower-class Black life which a young boy with middle-class aspirations will seek to escape:

> ...so buy expensive clothes and become middle-class that summer after college. But don't sneak away! You can't. I'll never know you, as some adventurer, but only as a chattel. Sheep. A "turkey" in our vernacular. (p. 80)

Here the street speaks disparagingly of the young boy's ambitions, suggesting that in his rejection of the street ways of the Black ghetto the youth not only denies himself access to the positive apsects of Black culture, but also gains its contempt.

The perspective then shifts and the street becomes the symbol of white oppression, a barren urban desert peopled with Black youths who are forced to live in degrading isolation:

> ...Those streets their mouths stank of wine, Black women with huge breasts lay naked in their beds. Filthy mounds of magazines, cakeboxes, children... It was Nassau St. mostly, and later the street where Skippy lived. (p. 81)

Jones uses this gross image of Black women, juxtaposed with his description of ghetto streets, to describe the very real horror of the ghetto. It is with this horror that the hero must be reconciled. By experiencing the degradation and exploitation, he can articulate the truth as no mere observer can and realize himself through it.

VII

In The System, the reader is confronted with a sensitive man filing through the details of the past in order to remind himself of his origins, to embrace his shame, and provide proof of his needs of social and spiritual change. He is a man "split open down the center, which is the early legacy of the Black man unfocused on blackness" (p. 153). The new Jones who emerges during the early part of the Sixties chooses to face the spectre of the past, and in his refusal to permit the old self-image to haunt him, has to exorcise himself by making it public, replacing the evil spirits of white culture with the good spirits of Blackness. This is expressed most clearly in "Sound Image":

> ...If we can bring back on ourselves. the absolute pain our people must have felt when they came onto this shore, we are more ourselves and can begin to put history back into our menu, and forget their propaganda of devils that they are not devils. (pp. 153-54)

The novel itself is an attempt by the author to put his private history in perspective, making known the absolute pain which he suffered while coming of age. His story arises from the fusion of style and theme: the tortured mind expressing itself in a tortured style.

The general effect of the novel is that of accumulation often lacking in clarity. It is quite obvious that Jones is not striving for the documentary statements of Native Son; his intention being instead to immerse the reader in the disorder of consciousness and encourage empathy rather than comprehension. Without a glossary or guide to assist in an understanding of Jones's vocabulary, the reader must react to everything on the basis of the intensity of the images. The result is the possession of a strong sense of being in contact with 'life" itself, unpleasant as it may be.

References to past and future sections of the novel (in the "Eighth Ditch", the neutrals are mentioned, in the "Personators" reference is made to "The Rape", and in "The Incontinent" both the neutrals and the heathen are cited), and the Dantean framework, solidify, to a certain extent, a work which contains an exceedingly wave-like fluidity. Having been written as a sort of memoir, the narrative flows towards the person speaking, and the reader is aware that a particular slant has been given to the selected material in order to fulfill the intended purpose of the narrator. With this fusion of the lyrical and semi-autobiographical points of view, the effect is one of freshness, intimacy and sensory immediacy.

In the lyrical novel, the "essentially underground, hip, urban and ayant-garde"[42] Jones, found a form of fiction the emphasis of which lay not in "the form of the narrative but in the manner in which it is

[42] Clyde Taylor, "Baraka as Poet," Modern Black Poets: A Collection of Critical Essays ed. Donald Gibson (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 133.

used."[43] Able to place himself as a mirror to reflect the significant scenes and figures through which his life could be expressed, the Jones of 1960-61 is struggling with all the facts of his identity. Like the invisible man, he must deal with his own sexual, social and racial problems; his alienation from Black culture is compounded by his homosexual experiences about which he is now guilt-ridden, by potentially criminal acts such as the attempted rape, and by his social snobbishness deriving from his enrolment in white-oriented institutions like the Air Force. The novel, which takes the reader into the lower depths of his psyche, is a record of his expiation. In the Dantean sense of redemption, a new awareness of self and the world does emerge from this underground journey of the mind, but is the salvation of Blackness that is at work here, and not the healing power of Jesus Christ.

The cryptic nature of Jones's language, his removal of grammatical and syntactical inhibitions, and his employment of ghetto obscenity all reflect, in many ways, the literary strategy of the Beat writers, who from the Fifties had been experimenting with 'spontaneous prose.' Their innovations prompted the re-examination and re-evaluation of the artistic process which was taking place in the Sixties,[44] especially the form of the novel which became, for Jones, subjective and lyrical, influenced by poetry, painting and music.[45]

Given the social and political upheaval of the decade in which Jones is writing, it would appear that literary innovation paralleled

[44] Albert La Valley, The New Consciousness: An Anthology of the New Literature (Cambridge: Winthrop, 1972), p. 2.

[45] Jones, The Moderns: An Anthology of New Writing in America (New York: Corinth, 1963), pp. x-xv.

youthful militance and racial rebellion. Black and white artists alike reflected this celebration of nonconformity; but for the Black writer the waves of Black militancy brought about "an outburst of literary creativity that crested in this decade."[46] Unlike that of the Harlem Renaissance, the outburst was nationwide, treating revolutionary subject matter and involving artists who were "proudly and aggressively disdainful of traditional or mainstream aesthetics and literary standards."[47]

In form and subject matter, Jones's fiction can be seen as the antithesis to Wright's Naturalistic depiction of a trapped individual. Lyrical and often elliptical, Jones's novel offers the reader a view of the inner workings of his psyche, and a new vision of Blackness. This Blackness which was Bigger's badge of shame, and the invisible man's source of confusion, is here hailed in the novel's concluding section, as a suit of armour, a mark of distinction and a priceless treasure.

[46] Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon, Black Writers of America (New York: The McMillan, 1972), p. 659.

[47] Barksdale, p. 659.

CONCLUSION

Is this the American nightmare: violence, castration, fragmentation?

Anais Nin

In the end, form is the way the mind acknowledges experience. It is a mode of awareness.

Ihab Hassan

In choosing to establish the Black man's experience of reality in America as hellish, I have suggested that this hellishness is the common historical resource upon which these three artists drew. Since artistic interpretation requires personal and individual expression, the result is three perspectives of Negro life: the violent and oppressing experiences of an inarticulate ghetto youth (Native Son[1]); the painful but rewarding assertion of self as recorded by an awakened Black consciousness (Invisible Man[2]); and the damned state of the alienated Black artist (The System of Dante's Hell[3]). Whichever the vision imparted, each is the expression of the author's own experience as understood and ordered through his knowledge of self, culture and society.

[1] Richard Wright, Native Son (New York: Harper and Row, 1940).

[2] Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (1952; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1972).

[3] LeRoi Jones, The System of Dante's Hell (New York: Grove, 1965).

In the chapter on Native Son, it was seen that out of Wright's claustrophobic and oppressive childhood in the South and the squalor of the urban ghetto of his adulthood came an image of the Negro as a potential criminal, in a fictional form which exposed the effects of American civilization on the personalities of Negroes. Endowed with powerful symbols and harsh facts, his novel spoke of the disabling effects of the Black Belt. The Negro American was to be seen as a yardstick by which to measure the failure of American social and political institutions, and as such, was to be rightfully and ironically titled "native son".

As a Negro artist Wright faced his own fear and shame in order to raise the consciousness of his people, and stir the consciences of white society, embodying the literary spirit of the Thirties. Writing in a decade when a sociological and political approach to American life was pronounced, he approached the Negro's racial dilemma through the broader tradition of social protest, and in so doing, aided in securing a place for the Negro artist among the ranks of American writers. By embracing violence as the predominant reality behind the illusion of the American Dream, Wright exposed the white man to his guilt, and freed the Negro from his self-destructive and self-denying impulses, encouraging him to confront the world, evaluate his experiences honestly, and publicize his conclusions without shame.

The source of the novel's strengths and weaknesses is tied to his reliance on Naturalism, which necessitates a main protagonist of limited consciousness. Although Wright's use of symbolism aids in the psychological exploration of the subconscious and raises the novel above the level of recorded physical data, his insistence upon society as the

sole determinant in Bigger's life ignores the question of personal responsibility and human complexity. As a form which presents a domineering society, Naturalism engenders the impression of entrapment for which Wright was aiming and, therefore, successfully projects his view of Negro life as restrictive, oppressive and violent.

Ellison, in turn, having been nurtured by an atmosphere which permitted him to entertain thoughts of himself as a "Renaissance Man", exhibits in his novel the creative strength and wonder that he found in Negro culture. Convinced that Wright's sociological approach produced a distorted image of Negro personality, Ellison chose to explore Negro life from his broader perspective, and consequently, employed a form which could contain the contradictions and ambivalences of a disordered and changing world. His experimentation with form and style led away from the fictional illusion of truthful documentation toward the acknowledgement of a wider range of human possibility.

Ellison's extended historical and political treatments of Negro American experience reveals him as champion of basic human values and his complex and detailed analysis of the problem of human identity through the metaphor of race demonstrated the universal nature of his vision. Just as Wright had created Bigger as a metaphor for the tragic consequences of American race relations, so Ellison creates a hero who, speaking for modern man, is aware of the need for a balance between individual freedom and social commitment so as to prevent either sterile isolation or the sacrifice of identity. Realizing the limitation of social determinism, Ellison concedes to the individual a greater freedom and a destiny shared with all men in spite of race or class. In his presentation of reality, he goes beyond Wright's vision of the

trapped Negro to suggest that restricting conditions do not negate the existence of individual potentiality and its realization.

Like the invisible man, Jones's hero was once a naive supporter of the American system, but now writes from outside the hypocrisy and pretensions of a corrupt society. The System being denounced is the ethos of the Black middle-class which the hero has chosen for himself, but which, being modelled on that of white society, causes him to abandon his Blackness. In his desire to escape from the ghetto, he previously had broken away from its inhabitants and had denied his inner reality.

In The System, there is a return to the unrelieved hellishness of the Black Ghetto youth's experience, but it is focused on the personal problems of social, sexual and racial identity, rather than the broader social effects of ghettoization and discrimination. It is the hero's inner harmony that is being destroyed, and although by the end of the novel he is decrying social conditioning, the body of the narrative suggests that he is suffering from his own weakness.

As in Ellison's novel the hero returns to the sin-ridden past in order to re-evaluate what had previously been considered a source of cultural shame. A once valued and enviable status in white society is shown to be corrupt and degrading, and a barrier to the development of consciousness. Out of what was described in Native Son as singularly destructive to the Black psyche now comes the means of the hero's cultural redemption.

Jones's lyrical approach to his early Black ghetto life is intended to provide access into a real world, and is not meant to portray filth,

pornography, or obscenity.[4] In keeping with his literary model his language was appropriate to his subject.[5]

In the treatment of individual effort at self-realization, each novelist has created his particular vision of the hellishness of Black life from his private perspective, and presented it within a form reflecting the distinctive literary mode appropriate to his point of view. Together they reveal the variety, depth, and complexity of literary interpretation afforded by Black life in America during the twenty-five year period of 1940 to 1965.

[4] Jones, Home: Social Essays (New York: William Morrow, 1966), p. 163.

[5] Sayers comments upon Dante's "Many provincial and dialect forms and such an abundance of colloquialisms as to be severly censured by eighteenth century pundits for his lowness, vulgarity and lack of proper dignity." Introduction to Dante's Hell, p. 62.

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