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The Death of the Wrightian Protest Novel:

A Sociological Study of *Lawd Today*, *Native Son*, and *The Outsider*

Pankaj Patel

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in

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ABSTRACT

The Death of the Wrightian Protest Novel:
A Sociological Study of Lawd Today,
Native Son, and The Outsider

Pankaj Patel

In Lawd Today, Native Son, and The Outsider, Richard Wright's world view changed from personalism, to communism, to existentialism respectively, determining the significant-form of each novel. Each stage of this development was enacted in contradistinction to the ideology of Negro nationalism. The opposition between the hero and the world (hegemony), determining the tenor of the protest, reached its sharpest point in The Outsider, Wright's most misunderstood work. An analysis of the structures of these three novels, based on Lucien Goldmann's sociology of literature, demonstrates a clear progression in the consciousness of freedom for the African-American, from degradation, through struggle, to power. The Outsider is thus the culmination of Wright's novelistic art; it repudiates the protest novel as an inadequate vehicle for the literary aspirations of the African-American writer.

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" . . . never had he felt a sense of wholeness."

--Native Son

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to reevaluate Richard Wright's The Outsider (1953), for critics have been divided on the subject of the novel's literary merit and its status in Wright's canon. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., for example, praised the novel as "an impressive book . . . which, though it is a very imperfect work, is yet (after Black Boy) his finest achievement . . . "[1] Irving Howe, on the contrary, dismissed it as "a very poor novel . . . full of existentialist jargon applied but not really absorbed to the Negro theme."[2] The persistence of such extreme judgments cannot be blamed on the formal ambiguities or the artistic

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[1]Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright," in Five Black Writers, ed. Donald B. Gibson (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 21. Kingsley Widmer, likewise, calls attention to The Outsider's conscious existentialism, suggesting that "on most artistic and intellectual grounds" it achieves more than "the 'naturalistic' and 'race problem' Native Son (1940) and The Long Dream (1958)." See Kingsley Widmer, "The Existential Darkness: Richard Wright's The Outsider," in Five Black Writers, p. 50.

[2]Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in Five Black Writers, p. 266. Robert Bone, going further, saw in the novel's artistic failure "a key to the deterioration of Wright's later style." See Robert Bone, Richard Wright, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, 1969), p. 488.

imperfection of the novel alone; it is in part the result of a failure of method. Or to put it another way, it reflects the collapse of a purely intrinsic approach in comprehending the crucial contradiction lying at the heart of The Outsider--the contradiction between assimilation and Negro nationalism, for nationalism is a socio-political force. Or take protest: protest is both emotion and idea--that is to say, it is a structure of consciousness. Any definition or theory of the Negro protest novel that fails to encompass both the object of the protest and the subjective state of consciousness from which the protest proceeded must result in a distortion of critical judgment. What is required then is a theory and practice that views the work and the social group that engendered it as a totality of consciousness.[3] A neo-Hegelian sociology of literature begins with such a premise.[4] It was appropriated for this thesis; while the perceived contradiction between assimilation and Negro nationalism, needless to say, formed my initial hypothesis.

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[3]"The epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life." See Georg Lukacs, The Theory of the Novel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 60.

[4]In Raymond Williams' words, it might be said that the relation between literature and sociology "is not a relation between, on the one hand, various individual works and on the other hand various empirical facts. The real relation is within a totality of consciousness: a relation that is assumed and then revealed rather than apprehended and then expounded." See Raymond Williams, Introduction to Lucien Goldmann, Racine (London: Writers and Readers Cooperative, 1981), p. xv.

The question of establishing a representative sample of creative work upon which to test my hypothesis had already been resolved on the basis of the perceived unity among the first three of Wright's five novels. Unlike The Long Dream (1958), which had a Southern setting, as did the stories in Uncle Tom's Children (1938), or Savage Holiday (1954), which had a white hero who was incompletely realized,[5] Lawd Today (1937), Native Son (1940), and The Outsider were not only set in the urban North, they also dramatized the action through the will of a Negro hero. So they were selected. The problem now lay with the terms of my hypothesis, since assimilation and nationalism were, broadly speaking, sociological rather than literary terms. To forestall the danger of reductionism, I turned to the concept of world view, which had already been used with success by Lucien Goldmann in literary studies.[6]

Goldmann's use of the concept of world view might best be comprehended within the context of the Lukacsian theory of the novel. This is what the general statements in the

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[5]What's more, Savage Holiday, has been called an artistic failure by Edward Margolies, in his The Art of Richard Wright (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 148. Wright's agent, Paul Reynolds, agreed "that the novel was inferior and would do nothing positive to Wright's reputation." See Dan McCall, The Example of Richard Wright (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), pp. 147-148. Bone: "Savage Holiday was written for the pulp market . . . The Long Dream is a desperate attempt to rejuvenate his art by returning to his Mississippi youth." See his Richard Wright, p. 488.

N.B.: Hero = central character of a realist novel.

[6]See Alan Swingewood, The Novel and Revolution (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 25.

left-hand column of the list below illustrate. The statements a, b, c, d in the right-hand column have been deduced as the predictable consequences of the theory adumbrated in A, B, C, and D.; they are more than procedural points--they underscore the critical approach upon which this thesis will be founded.

A. A significant novel is "a totality of thought and experience, since structurally it embodies the crucial values and events of its time."[7]	a. For example, Native Son will be examined in the light of the premise stated in A., i. e., as a "totality."
B. It [a significant novel] also embodies the world view (vision du monde) of the author, which invests the novel not only with an internal coherence but also with an external validity.	b. Similarly, my three selected novels will be seen as embodying the world view of Wright.
C. This concept of world view, defined as "the whole complex of ideas, aspiration, and feelings," is embodied within the "collective consciousness" of a social group to which the writer belongs.[8]	c. Wright's world view will be seen as a reflection of his participation in a social group; in his case, his racial group, or more precisely, his race.[9]

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[7]Points A and B are from Lukacs; C and D, from Goldmann. Quoted by Diana Laurenson and Alan Swingewood in The Sociology of Literature (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1971), pp. 64-65.

[8]"The collective consciousness is neither a primary reality, nor an autonomous reality; it is elaborated implicitly in the over-all behaviour of individuals participating in the economic, social, political life, etc." See Lucien Goldmann, Toward a Sociology of the Novel (London: Tavistock Publications, 1975), p. 9.

[9]This is not to say that Wright did not belong to other groups, e. g., family, the John Reed Club, the Post Office, etc. It is to say that his major reference group was his racial group, which he could never leave, as he could the other groups. The class of his reference group was non-bourgeois.

D. This group is in opposition to members of other social groups, which in most cases assumes "the existence of a social class."	d. To put this consequence bluntly: Wright's race, in the specific American context, will be perceived as being in opposition to the white race.[10]

My deviation from Goldmann's theory on points C. and D., led logically, I saw, to the coloration of "collective consciousness" with the factor of race. But I still had to clarify to my own mind in what way I was going to incorporate the concept of world view in my method. My revised hypothesis now saw the crucial contradiction in Wright's work as that between world view and ideology. World view I associated with the possible consciousness of the Negro writer's race, and ideology with the actual consciousness of his race.[11] Wright, for example, could

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[10]As reflected by Diana Laurenson's comment: "Any attempt to link American writing with the concept of world view attached to a social class in the Goldmann sense is difficult: the class identifications of the writers are confused with immigrant loyalties." See The Sociology of Literature, p. 164. The class identifications of Negro writers, we might say, were confused with race loyalty. Wright himself in the 1950's "was willing to admit openly that a racial structure of life and history itself exists beyond the patterns of class history." See Russell Carl Brignano, Richard Wright: An Indroduction to the Man and His Works (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 110.

[11]"A social group is ordinarily limited to its actual consciousness, and this will include many kinds of misunderstanding and illusion: elements of false consciousness which will often, of course, be used and reflected in ordinary literature. But there is also a maximum of possible consciousness: that view of the world raised to its highest and most coherent level, limited only by the fact that to go further would mean that the group would have to surpass itself, to change into or be replaced by a new social group." See Raymond Williams, Introduction to Racine, p. xvi.

embody in his work both the possible and the actual consciousness of his race, i. e., both world view and ideology. These two concepts, being structures of consciousness, not only resided in his mind, they also corresponded to the structures of consciousness of his race (the "collective" racial consciousness).[12] Since a literary work, a novel for example, aspired toward autonomy, the structures within it did not correspond mechanically to social reality; rather, they were mediated by the active consciousness of the writer, by the writer's creative labor. What I had done here, in order to move away from a strictly reflective theory of literature, was to abstract the idea of assimilation to possible, and the idea of Negro nationalism to actual consciousness.[13] I could say then that the Negro protest novel represented an attempt on the part of the

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[12]The group to which a writer belongs, says Goldmann, constitutes "a process of structuration that elaborates in the consciousness of its members' affective, intellectual, and practical tendencies towards a coherent response to the problems presented by their relations with nature and their inter-human relations. With few exceptions these tendencies fall far short of effective coherence . . . " [my italics] See Towards a Sociology of the Novel, p. 160. Although Goldmann does not say so, we can say that ideology is born when the group falls short of effective coherence. World view by contradistinction is born when these tendencies towards coherence coalesce in the work of a creative individual, such as a writer.

[13]Of course, the Negro writer, in as much as he speaks English, is already assimilated (socialized) to the extent that he has internalized the basic values of the hegemony through primary education, etc. The question is not whether he is "in"; the question is how far he can be in, without losing his identity; on what terms he can be in; and how this can be possible on the basis of honor and justice, i. e., freedom.

writer to transcend the actual consciousness of his race (e. g., his Negroness) to a higher level of a possible consciousness in which state freedom can be realized.[14] This possible consciousness, embodied in world view, functioned on the level of practice (social and literary) as a strategy of protest.

It remained, finally, to describe the configuration of the social forces within which totality the work and the writer were placed. Acknowledging that class affiliations are fluid in America, and that they are often confused with immigrant or race loyalties, as Diana Laurenson has observed,[15] I arrived at the concept of hegemony (which is basically a redefinition of the determination implicit in the base/superstructure model)[16] in the following way. Just as individuals may be said to possess an individual consciousness, so do groups who share a common past possess

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[14]Significant writers embody the possible consciousness of the group to which they belong: It is in this sense that one can say that Native Son would have been written even if Wright had not been born. Or as Hegel would have said, human beings being part of the absolute idea, art is one way in which the absolute idea comprehends itself. See Peter Singer, Hegel (Oxford: O. U. P.,), p. 81. Native Son, we might say, is one way the Negro race comprehends the absolute, i. e., itself.

[15]See footnote #10.

[16]It is not my intention to expound Marxian cultural theory here. Briefly, all cultural creation is part of the superstructure, which in most cases is determined by the economic base of society. Marx's theory of base and superstructure can be found outlined in his A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. See Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), ed. Lewis S. Feuer, pp. 43-44.

a group consciousness. Furthermore, since society itself is comprised of many diverse groups, the total aggregate of minds in it may be said to possess a "societal" or civil consciousness. The name given to the way this so-called societal consciousness is organized and organizes itself is "hegemony," which can be defined as a situation existing in society where the values of the dominant class or group are accepted as valid by subordinate classes or groups. In some periods of history, of crisis, one or another of these subordinate social groups may reject the validity of hegemonic values; in such periods the ruling class exercizes coercion to suppress the disaffected groups. When this happens a situation of "domination" is said to exist; as existed, for instance, in the thirties in America, when various radical movements challenged the hegemony.[17] In a broad sense, we can say that a situation of hegemony has existed in America since its founding by colonists and immigrants in the eighteenth century, at which time the values, ideals, and pursuits embodied in the American Dream were enshrined in the text of the U. S. Constitution drafted by the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1787. The Negroes in the main were excluded from the hegemonic Weltansauung symbolized in the American Dream. It is here,

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[17]Hegemony is thus "identified with the institutions of 'civil society' (the family, church, education) and not those of the state of 'political society' (army, government bureaucracy) through which governments may be forced to exercise 'direct domination.'" See The Novel and Revolution, p. 32.

I believe, that the chief source of the problematic status of the hero in the Negro protest novel lies; he is both inside and outside the hegemony, as it were.[18]

In the light of the foregoing definitions we can restate our hypothesis as follows: In Lawd Today, Native Son, and The Outsider, Wright's world view changed from personalism, to communism, to existentialism respectively, determining the significant-form of each novel. Each stage of this development was enacted in contradistinction to the ideology of Negro nationalism. The opposition between the hero and the world (hegemony), determining the tenor of the protest, reached its sharpest point in The Outsider, Wright's most misunderstood work.

An analysis of the structures of these three novels, using Goldmann's method,[19] will attempt to uncover the significant-structure, which can account for the unity of the work.[20] To elaborate: substituting Matter with content we might say with Hegel that

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[18]The novel, says Georg Lukacs, is "characterized essentially by a radical antagonism between the hero and the world." And this hero is problematic because his search is for values which constantly elude him in a social world "emptied of authenticity, a world degraded and dominated not by human but by exchange values." See The Sociology of Literature, p. 72.

[19]See Appendix A.

[20]Structures = structures of consciousness (mental structures), not linguistic or semiotic structures.

> [i]t [Matter] seeks its Unity; and therefore exhibits itself as self-destructive, as verging toward its opposite. If it could attain this, it would be Matter no longer, it would have perished. It strives after the realization of its Idea; for in Unity it exists ideally.[21]

The urge to unity, operating as an esthetic principle, strives after the realization of its idea, towards the organization of textual content in the most meaningful manner possible. The structures of a novel (i. e., the structural elements of the significant-structure constituting the novel's total unity) can be best isolated by grasping their function in accomplishing this unifying task. This organization of content, needless to say, is a conscious creative act on the part of the writer, just as the cognition of this textual order is an evaluative critical act on the part of the reader, evaluative insofar as the reader seeks to apprehend the thematic meaning of the work, the literariness of which has already been presumed.

Violence, for example, can be isolated as a structure contributing to the unity of The Outsider on the level of content not only on the basis of textual evidence (there are five murders in the novel), but also on the basis of the conditional violence in the actual consciousness of ghetto Negroes. Love, on the other hand, can be eliminated as a structure in The Outsider because it is subsumed within the structure of violence (sadism) in that work. Likewise, fear

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[21]From Hegel's Introduction to the Philosophy of History, in The Age of Ideology, ed. Henry D. Aiken (New York: New American Library, 1956), p. 88.

and flight as structures in Native Son can be subsumed under the structures of violence and alienation respectively, while fate can be inserted into the structure of struggle, as in the following statement: The Negro's fate is to struggle.

But there is another reason why fate cannot be adduced as a functional structure in Native Son. This has to do with the world view of communism, which militates against the fatalistic acceptance of oppressive social conditions. World view, as has been stated in point B. in the list above, gives a novel its "internal coherence." Thus while unity works on the level of content, coherence is an aspect of form. In other words, the world view of a writer determines to a large extent the significant-form of a particular novel. And the questions that arise in this context pertain to genre: What is distinct about the Negro protest novel? How can its form be differentiated from the form of the radical novel? These and other pertinent questions will be dealt with in our last chapter, where the paradigm of the Wrightian protest novel will be formulated. Our hope is that this paradigm will help us understand why Wright's significant protest finished, that is, reached its logical end, in The Outsider.

A brief note about the use of the term "Negro" in this thesis will be in order here. I am aware that the term "Black" is preferred to the term Negro at the present time;

however, the term Negro was used quite commonly in the thirties and forties by Wright himself in his work. My own use of the term Negro is to avoid confusion, because I use the special term "Black Negro" in Chapter II. In any case, the only term that can be used with any credibility after The Outsider, as perhaps Wright himself would have suggested, is the term "African-American."

I. Personalism: The White Lord and the Negro Lord[1]

Richard Wright has been called the "first Negro novelist to deal with ghetto life in the Northern cities."[2] This fact ought to be remembered, since our three selected novels, Lawd Today, Native Son, and The Outsider, have the city in common: they are all set in and around the Negro ghettoes of Chicago and New York.

Chicago, for Wright, was a place where, he tells us, he could "grow differently . . . drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps . . . bloom."[3] And so it was for most southern

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[1]" . . . there are two worlds, the white world and the black world . . . for all I know, a white God and a black God. . . . " See Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," in Black Voices (New York and Toronto: New American Library, 1968), p. 542.

[2]Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 141.

[3]Richard Wright, Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth (New York: Harper, 1945), p. 228. Pleasantly surprised at the freer codes of transracial social intercourse in the city, Wright marveled at the natural, casual quality of his relationship with white waitresses at the North Side cafe where he worked as a dishwasher. And then it was some of the white friends he had made at the post office where he worked as a substitute postal clerk in the summer of 1929 who invited him to attend one of the meetings of the Chicago John Reed Club in 1933. The John Reed Clubs, closely controlled by the Communist party, had

Negroes, who made the northward migration during the boom times that began in 1924,[4] a promised land, of freedom and equality; while the hope of a better future borne in the souls of these descendants of slaves was expressed in their common folk-expression that they would rather be a lamppost in Chicago than the president of Dixie.[5].

The system of color-caste segregation so prevalent in the South was absent there. Upward social mobility, the opportunity for Negroes to rise to the standard of living enjoyed by the white bourgeoisie, was a prospect within reach. Even the promise of representation was confirmed with the election in 1928 of the first Negro congressman from the North, Oscar DePriest.[6] The undying dream of man for self-fulfillment, the realization of his essence, was coming true. And so the Negro proletariat dreamed of becoming bourgeois, and so the Negro bourgeoisie dreamed of becoming white. Illusion replaced reality for a brief,

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been organized at a national conference held in Chicago 29-30 May 1932 to promote proletarian culture. See Keneth Kinnamon, The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), pp. 13-14, 50-51.

[4]The economic opportunities that arose after the boom that began in 1924 provided full employment for Negroes; for example, in the Chicago stockyards. See Kinnamon, p. 12. The motives of the great Negro migration to the North were twofold: 1) to escape racial discrimination in the South; and 2) to find economic opportunity in northern cities. See Philip M. Hauser, "Demographic Factors in the Integration of the Negro," in The Negro American, eds. Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 74.

[5]Quoted by Kinnamon, p. 11.

[6]See Kinnamon, p. 13.

wide-eyed spell of ecstatic awe and personal liberation, for the dream soon turned into ice.

Even before the Great Depression broke in 1929, the difference between de jure equality and de facto equality struck home like a cruel lesson in the operational principles of the double-standard.[7] De jure residential segregation was deplored in principle by the northern bourgeoisie, but de facto segregation prevailed in housing.[8] Group rejection of Negroes by the white majority resulted in a general ghettoization, with its concomitant social isolation from the socio-economic mainstream of American life.[9] And despite the real economic opportunity, upward

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[7]In many sectors of (northern) public life, according to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City (1945), de jure equality of the races had been attained, and in some sectors--public transportation, retail buying, access to sports events and theaters--a substantial degree of de facto equality prevailed. Noted by Kinnamon, p. 13. Wright wrote the introduction to Black Metropolis, a two-volume study of urban Negro life in Chicago.

[8]"For the most part flats could be found only in the Black Belt on the South Side (of Chicago), a ghetto whose inevitable expansion under the pressure of the migration was contested by bombs and by less violent but more effective restrictive covenants." See Kinnamon, p. 13.

[9]G. Franklin Edwards, "Community and Class Realities: The Ordeal of Change," in The Negro American, p. 280. Most sociologists in the thirties saw race relations in the North in terms not of caste but of ethnic groups. In general specific communities, according to St. Clair Drake, were viewed as "areas in which ethnic groups were involved in continuous competition and conflict, resulting in a hierarchy persisting through time, with now one, and again another, ethnic group at the bottom as previous newcomers moved 'up.'" The Negroes who had come to northern cities during World War I were "the latest arrivals in this fluid and highly competitive situation." See St. Clair Drake,

social mobility for the Negroes was limited on account of their high visibility.[10] Since visibility is determined by race, race for many Negroes became the source of evil, limiting their growth and advancement, and thwarting their desire to be accepted as true Americans. The assimilation of hegemonistic values not only created an unconscious desire to be white, it also gave birth to self-hatred.[11] "Hated by whites," said Wright, "and being an organic part of the culture that hated him, the black man grew in time to hate in himself what others hated in him."[12]

In other words, the hegemony forced the Negro to identify himself as a Negro first and an American second.[13] While on the psychical plane, coupled with verbal and non-verbal derogation of so-called "negroidness," it gave rise to a low self-esteem among Negroes in general.[14] Wright himself seemed to be aware of this victimization at the time

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"The Social and Economic Status of the Negro in the United States," in The Negro American, p. 3.

[10]St. Clair Drake, in The Negro American, p. 3.

[11]Assimilation had its roots in what Langston Hughes called "the urge to whitenenss within the race." See The Negro Novel in America, p. 4.

[12]Wright, "Early Days in Chicago," Negro Digest (1950), pp. 52-68; quoted by Bone in The Negro Novel in America, p. 4.

[13]Wright himself had early in his youth developed a consciousness of two races, "with a sharp consciousness that would never die." See Russell Carl Brignano, Richard Wright: An Indroduction to the Man and His Works (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 8.

[14]G. Franklin Edwards, p. 282.

he wrote Lawd Today.[15] But he also must have known that this negative esthetic appraisal was hegemonistic propaganda of the slave era, "which still existed as a form of cultural lag which had lost even the excuse of the functional utility it once had in rationalizing an integral part of the Western economic system--Negro slavery."[16]

ii

Jake Jackson, the central character, of Lawd Today, spends a lot of time every morning in front of the bathroom mirror fixing his hair--"His hair had to be combed, combed flat so that not a ripple, not a crinkle, not a crease must show."[17] Wright in fact describes the big job as a battle with the "woolly black flare" that had to be bullied into "a

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[15]A normal social life was replaced by devious and subversive activities. The Negro had to develop "a delicate, sensitive controlling mechanism" that shut his mind and emotions "from all that the white race said was taboo." See Brignano, p. 10. Though published posthumously in 1963, Lawd Today is "Wright's first novel, begun probably in 1934 or 1935 and finished in 1937. Since the setting of Lawd Today is Chicago early in 1937, indicated by topical references, the composition of the book obviously extended into that year." See Kinnamon, p. 75.

[16]"These negative esthetic appraisals are part of a larger stereotype-complex which equates Africa with primitiveness and savagery and considers Negro ancestry a 'taint.'" See St. Clair Drake in The Negro American, p. 33.

[17]Richard Wright, Lawd Today (London: Anthony Blond, 1965), p. 27.

billiard ball smoothness."[18] The hair straightener Jake uses is called LAY 'EM LOW, and the ironic message is not lost on the reader, for this is a chemical weapon of the hegemony, manufactured for the chief purpose of making blacks conform to the white ideal of coiffure--straight hair.[19] The self-deprecation expressed in the imitation of white hair grooming is obvious. But no matter how many hours of "pressure" to dry the water and hair grease, no matter how hard a Negro tries to be white, eventually he cannot escape the fact of his Negroness; Jake's hair would in the end "flounce back into a thousand triumphant kinks."[20]

Hair, thus, functions as one clear symbol of the derogation of Negroness in Lawd Today, through which Wright shows the effect of white hegemonic values on the psychology of the ghetto Negroes in America. But this contradiction between the unalterable fact of Negroness and the derogation of its value by the hegemony was lost on many readers. The

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[18]Lawd Today, p. 27.

[19]Cf. the reminiscence of Horace Cayton: "Dick [Wright] talked to me . . . about a story he was working on . . . about a Negro woman who was just light enough to pass, but she had a bleaching cream, which was supposed to lighten her. This bleaching cream had arsenic in it, so that while she was committing sociological suicide, she was also committing biological suicide. And this is no exaggeration, because Dick actually bought up any number of bleaching creams and had chemical analyses made of them." In "Reflections on Richard Wright: A Symposium on an Exiled Native Son," Five Black Writers (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 68.

[20]Lawd Today, pp. 28, 29.

Negro critic Nick Aaron Ford, for example, was shocked by the novel's unflattering portrayal of Negroes,[21] while bourgeois Negro critics no doubt saw the novel as a literary instance of the writer's self-hatred. Nevertheless, since Jake--like many lower-class urban Negroes at that time--still believed implicitly in the promises of the American Dream,[22] we might say that in Lawd Today Wright was primarily concerned with depicting the internalization of this derogation of Negroness, with its concomitant psychology of victimization and identity problems.

On another level, however, Lawd Today is an attempt to present the totality of Negro experience in the ghetto.[23] Therefore there are almost no white characters in the book, who would represent a threat to the central character's being.[24] The last part of the book is even set in a Negro night club, a big room jammed with dancers. A three-piece jazz band--a cornet, a drum, and piano plays blues (St. Louis Blues) and ragtime (Tiger Rag). The place is a microcosm of the underbelly of Negro ghetto society.

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[21]Kinnamon, p. 81.

[22]Margolies goes so far as to say, "Indeed, Jake himself has faith in the system." See Edward Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 91.

[23]"Wright's emphasis is upon Negro people and Negro life amid the cold forces of Northern urban surroundings." See Brignano, p. 23.

[24]Brignano, p. 23.

> There were gamblers, pimps, petty thieves, dope peddlers, smallfry politicians, grafters, racketeers of various shades, athletes, high school and college students in search of "life," and hordes of sex-eager youngsters. The women were white, ivory, yellow, light brown, medium brown, solid brown, dark brown, near black, and black. They wore red, yellow, brown, blue, purple, and black gowns with V shapes reaching down almost to their waists. Their bosoms were high and bulging, and they danced with an obvious exaggeration of motion.[25]

These are not exactly favorable images of urban Negroes; but this was the world Wright himself came to when he migrated from the South to the North in 1927. A lamppost may have been freer in Chicago than a Negro in the South, but Wright was soon to perceive bitterly that "the only difference between the North and the South is, them guys down there'll kill you, and those up here will let you starve to death."[26]

For Negroes at that time, both in the South and in the North, two avenues of dealing with the hegemony wielded by the white majority were available: assimilation, or nationalism.[27] Those opposed to assimilation saw the

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[25]Lawd Today, pp. 194-95.

[26]Lawd Today, p. 156.

[27]This choice represented a deep division among the Negroes. "The early novelists were loyal members of the middle class who desired only equal rights within the status quo. The younger writers of the 1920's were the second generation of educated Negroes; they were the wayward sons of the rising middle class. In psychological terms, they were rebelling against their fathers and their fathers' way of life." See The Negro Novel in America, p. 56.

In the Wrightian protest novel, as we shall see, the choice (contradiction) is between accommodation and rebellion. Fathers crop up in The Long Dream; in our three selected novels, however, there are no fathers to kill (in the Freudian sense).

process of social integration with whites as a degradation of purely Negro values and mores. Rejecting white hegemonic values thus, they formed the core of the Negro nationalist movement with the slogan "separate but equal"; and one of the extreme leaders of this movement, Marcus Garvey, advocated a return to Africa, the ancestral and spiritual homeland of the Negro people.[28] The Communist Party, which Wright joined in 1934,[29] supported the Negro nationalist line calling for a separate nation for the Negroes in the "Black Belt" of the South.

Up until the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in 1928, the American Communist Party's line had been pro-integrationist and against the U. N. I. A. (Garveyites):

> The Workers' Party will oppose among Negroes all movements looking to the surrender of the Negroes' rights in this country, such as the "Back to Africa" movement, which is only an evasion of the real struggle and an excuse to surrender the Negroes' rights in their native land, America. The U. S. is the home of the American Negro, and the Workers' Party champions his full, free and equal partnership with his white brothers in the future society.[30]

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[28]See Alphonso Pinkney, Black Americans (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), pp. 211-213.

[29]"Although one cannot be precise, the most reasonable conclusion is that Wright received his party card in the spring of 1934." See Kinnamon, p. 62.

[30]Quoted by Theodore Draper, American Communism and Soviet Russia (New York: Viking Press, 1960), p. 328. See also, pp. 327, 334-335, 350-355. The Party reverted to this position in 1957.

Then, under the direction of Stalin, whose analysis was that Negroes in America constituted a national minority with some of the characteristics of a nation, the American Party changed its line. Henceforth, the line on the Negro Question was based on the conception of a single world movement, including Africa, South and Central America, the Caribbean, and the United States, with the North American Negroes, since they lived in a highly industrialized society, "in the vanguard of the African struggle against oppression." Thus the right of self-determination of the Negroes was acknowledged, and the Black Belt Doctrine formulated, which, "in its attempt to keep the class question separate from the color question, proposed a separate 'Negro republic' in the South."[31] This was the line of the Party on the race issue in 1933.

Because of the Party's recognition of the principle of self-determination for Negroes, many flocked to the Party, among them many previous members of the dismantled U. N. I. A., disillusioned Garveyites who saw their dream of "Black Zionism" fading after Garvey's arrest and deportation from the U. S. in 1927.[32] But as the Party had little support in the rural South where the proletariat was still weak, more Negroes joined the Party in the industrialized North than in the "heartland of the Negro nation" in the Black Belt,

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[31]See John Diggins, The American Left in the Twentieth Century (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), p. 126.

[32]Alphonso Pinkney, p. 212.

where, in any case, partly due to migration and partly due to the pauperization of vast numbers of Negro sharecroppers and small land holders during the Depression, the proportion of mobilizable Negro agricultural laborers had diminished from 78 per cent in 1910 to 43 per cent in 1940.[33] Moreover, white Communist organizers found it harder to integrate Negroes into a multiracial movement in the segregationist South. It was easier for both whites and Negroes to associate together politically in the North, where between 1920 and 1940 the Negro population in the central metropolitan areas of such states as California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania had increased by 83 per cent. Thus the N. A. A. C. P. included whites under its umbrella, and the Communist Party admitted Negroes into its ranks.

It is important to understand the Party's rational line on the Negro Question, because this line was one of the major sources of Wright's ideology of Negro nationalism; that is why we have described it in this place.[34] This

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[33]Philip M. Hauser, in The Negro American, pp. 746, 82. For the problem the Party had in organizing Negroes, see Walter B. Rideout, The Radical Novel in America (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 194.

[34]The other source of Wright's nationalism was the "white terror" he experienced in the South. "The hostility of the whites had become so deeply implanted in my mind and feelings that it had lost direct connection with the daily environment. . . . Tension would set in at the mere mention of whites. . . . It was as though I was continuously reacting to the threat of some natural force whose hostile behavior could not be predicted. I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become as

ideology was to stay with Wright even after he left the Party, until the end of his writing life in fact, during which years he saw the publication of his important non-fiction books concerning the dilemma of the newly emerging nations of Africa and Asia: Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos (1954), The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference (1956), and White Man, Listen! (1957). Then Negro nationalism fused with his positive (possible) Negro consciousness, as is found in the doctrine of Pan-Africanism; but in Lawd Today, it was still part of his negative (actual) Negro consciousness, the psychic consequence of derogation of Negroness mentioned earlier.[35]

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Lawd Today is divided into three parts: "Commonplace," "Squirrel Cage," and "Rat's Alley." Each of these titles expresses an aspect the Negro's social reality. The action of the novel occurs on one day, February 12, Lincoln's birthday, but Jake still has to work on this statutory holiday. More important, nothing has changed since the

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conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings." See Black Boy, pp. 48, 65.

[35]"Of the racial and ethnic groups in America only Negroes have been subjected to caste-deprivations; and the ethnic-class system has operated to their disadvantage as compared to European immigrants." See St. Clair Drake in The Negro American, p. 4.

Emancipation Act; the lot of the Negroes is as bad as ever. The birthday of the great president is hence just another day, "commonplace." The second image relates to the conditions of the workplace and the pressure on the worker to perform, to "run," just as a squirrel turns the wheel of its cage and there is no way to go but forward. Rest is denied for the worker; he has to run, the machine confining him requires it. And if he chooses to stop for a bit, as Jake does, then he is subjected to disciplinary action by his foreman and the postal inspector, with whom he has a violent argument in the second part of the novel. The third image is related to crime, seen not as the result of the violation of law but as the ultimate consequence of "spiritual poverty," or degradation.[36] The club he goes to after work is where debased Negroes, the vermin of society, are driven to socialize together like rats in an alley not by a sense of solidarity against their oppressed condition, but in the quest of a good time, to escape the problems of the present in food, drink, music, and bought sex.

The novel opens with a dream--Jake is in bed, dreaming of steps, which lead up to some higher standard of life, the promise of the American Dream. Somewhat as it was for the Biblical Jacob, the ladder is the ladder to heaven, although the voice calling him up at the top is not the voice of God,

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[36]"Jake is not only disagreeable; his sense of oppression stems principally from what [James T.] Farrell has called 'spiritual poverty' rather than from overt racial and social causes." See Margolies, p. 91.

but the voice of his boss: "And that sonofabitch up there sounds just like my boss, too!"[37], thinks Jake. The equation of God with his white boss is of course an aspect of the omnipresence and omnipotence of the hegemony, and Jake's resentment that it should be so, even in his subconscious dreams, is one cause of his violent outburst against his wife Lil, who is a worshipper of this "God." When Lil inadvertently slams a door, waking him up, Jake reaches with his hand and finds a magazine devoted to Christian healing in his bed. "He saw the picture of a haloed, bearded man draped in white folds; the man's hand resting upon the blond curls of a blue-eyed girl. . . . What makes Lil keep all this trash in bed?"[38], and he hurls the book across the room. Ironically, his wife is also "always having dreams"[39]; but her dreams are of spiritual salvation, whereas Jake's dreams are about money, which functions as a means of realizing the dream of freedom. Later that same morning, when he goes to play a game of numbers, Jake remarks, "Yeah, maybe if I'd played all the numbers I could get on my dream, I would've won something."[40] This is more than wishful thinking or mere fatalism, for "[he] had implicit faith in his dreams."[41] "Some folks say dreams is

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[37]Lawd Today, p. 9.

[38]Lawd Today, p. 11.

[39]Lawd Today, p. 41.

[40]Lawd Today, p. 53.

[41]Lawd Today, p. 48.

warnings," Jake says, "and if you watch 'em you can tell what's going to happen."[42] The irony here is that Jake does not know "what's going to happen" because he is no longer in control of his destiny; the right to self-determination is denied to the Negro by the forces of the hegemony.[43]

What follows is an enumeration of the novel's structures with an analytical description of supporting evidence from the novel's content. As remarked in our "Introduction," these structures correlate with the structures of the collective consciousness of the group to which the writer (Wright) belonged. Their isolation proceeded from a process of elimination, using the principle of esthetic unity to establish their function in the text.

A. Violence. This structure emerges from feelings of frustration and self-destruction. "The Negroes' feelings of frustration," writes Carl Russell Brignano,

> the anxieties over their dead-end work, the knowledge that they are 'niggers' in a white society that shuts them out--all produce in the

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[42]Lawd Today, p. 159.

[43]" . . . if Jake is a hapless victim of a ruthless monetary system, he is even more a slave to the values of the civilization that exploits him. . . . He regards America as the freest, happiest nation on earth and views as Reds people who criticize his native land." Jake is not only "enthralled by some of the shoddiest values of American civilization, Jake is as much in bondage to subjective impulses, instincts and feelings which he only dimly understands." See Margolies, p. 95. These values are of course the values of the hegemony.

> men an outer pose encouraged, expected, and accepted by whites. It is one perceptively comprehended by one of the Negroes: "We just as well take it easy and have some fun, 'cause the white folks got us hog-tied."[44]

Self-destruction, as violence directed against the physical self, is described in Jake's "killing" of his wife's fetus. Lil, viewed as woman, procreator of the race, accuses Jake of what amounts to infanticide: "It's all you fault," she cries, "and you got to pay for it!"[45] If one views abortion as murder, then the larger self-destruction of the race can be inferred on a biological level. Family violence comes to a head in the last pages of the novel, where Jake commits full scale assault and battery against his wife. She, however, gets to deliver the last blow, cutting him with the jagged edge of a shattered windowpane of glass on the head, and he collapses with blood oozing out of his scalp, in a drunken stupor.

Social violence, on the other hand, defined as the violence engendered by the brutal conditions of ghetto-life, is symbolized by the figure of the hustler. The hustler is a criminal type who is envied and respected. He knows how to deal with women. He knows that the only way to keep a woman is to beat her and show her "who's boss." One of Jake's buddies Slim tells a story of how he "managed" a counter girl, by tricking her into accepting the sexist

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[44]Brignano, p. 26.

[45]Lawd Today, p. 19.

domination of the male over the female. In other words, a man who can hustle a woman and get her to keep him, is a real man, a hero. The Negro heroes to be admired are men like Joe Louis, who win significant status and money through engagement in violent sports like boxing. David Bakish has suggested that the name Jake Jackson may have been a modificaton of the name Jack Johnson, "a Negro who fought against a deadening life and succeeded in becoming the first black heavyweight boxing champion of the world (1908)."[46] Survival, not self-realization, is the name of the game. This is why Robert Bone has called the heroes of Wright's fiction picaros,[47] men who live by their wits, rogues, and would-be outlaws, if not black cowboys.

Jake, too, accepts this stereotype of the Negro. He lies to the Board of Review at the Post Office to keep his job and survive.[48] In the words of Edward Margolies, Jake

> has apparently adapted himself to the deviousness and deceit of which he has been made such a victim. In his own way Jake is a petty corrupter and cheat--conspiring with an abortionist to deceive his wife that a baby would be detrimental to her health, paying bribes to keep his job, scheming through calculated lies to obtain illegal

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[46]David Bakish, Richard Wright (New York: Ungar, 1973), p. 13.

[47]"The picaresque tradition . . . is readily adapted to the needs of the black writer. . . . To survive he [the picaresque hero] becomes a hustler, a confidence man, an outlaw, a criminal." See Robert Bone, Richard Wright (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, 1969), p. 480.

[48]Lawd Today, p. 116.

> loans. Thus, wedded to Jake's naive ignorance is a furtive duplicity--which allows him to survive.[49]

In this way, although physical violence is depicted in the novel--the wife-beating, the fight at the nightclub--violence as a structure is against the human soul, against the establishment of a true self-identity free of the accepted stereotypes for the Negro. Violence may thus be seen in its more subtle, degrading, and virulent form, as that committed by the forces of the hegemony symbolized in the very dream which Jake believes in; for the Dream, instead of liberating him, has denied him his sense of self-worth and destroyed his spirit.

B. Alienation. "The dream in a sense," states Margolies,

> relates not only to the futility of Jake's strivings--it is all he can do, apparently, to remain in the same places--but announces the theme of the book--the senselessness, the purposeless, the absurdity of his life. . . . Nonetheless, all of Jake's energies are directed towards denying the reality of his situation. In his way, of course, much of the time Jake is denying to himself that he is a Negro--since he knows in a profound sense that the goals he wants to achieve are denied him because he is a Negro.[50]

Racial segregation in the Post Office separates him from his fellow white workers, while economic competition divides him from his fellow Negro workers. Negroes in positions of

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[49]Margolies, p. 98.

[50]Margolies, pp. 95-96.

power, like Howard who sits on the Board of Review, looks down upon Jake, a mere mail sorter. Even foreign immigrants, like the West Indian Negro workers, are resented by Jake in the post office canteen.[51] Class and intra-race conflict undermine the spirit of community. Jake has his buddies Al, Bob, and Slim from work, who lend him money when he is broke and who save him when he fights in Rosa's bar. But Jake is robbed not by white men but by a member of his own race. In other words,

> [w]hat Wright does here is describe the slow dissolution of southern folk elements in the character of Jake and his friends as they face a new impersonal fragmentation of their lives in the city. Jake and his buddies had migrated from the South to Chicago--to find better jobs, to look for freedom. . . .[52]

Finally, Jake's alienation from the values of the family are most graphically expressed in the story about his wife Lil, who is forced to have an abortion at the hands of a quack. No children, no family. This is a conscious, or perhaps malicious, choice on Jake's part, because he lies to his wife, telling her that she would die if she had a child, because "her hips was too little"[53] for a safe delivery. Like his buddy Slim who is sick with tuberculosis, Lil is also sick. The sickness is both a cause and effect of alienation, a sick society created by America in the Negro

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[51]Lawd Today, p. 147.

[52]Margolies, p. 96.

[53]Lawd Today, p. 153.

ghetto, where basic human values are warped and humanity unrealizable.

C. Degradation. Proceeding from the derogation of Negroness, viewed as an aspect of the psychic malaise of ghetto life, the images of Negro beauty are degraded: When Jake and his friends pass a beauty parlor, Jake sees a woman step out on to the sidewalk. "The contrast between the overdose of white powder and the natural color of her skin was so sharp that she looked like two people instead of one; it was as if her ghost were walking in front of her."[54] Jake's wife, ironically, is not a ghost; with smooth and kinkless hair, the color of Lil's skin cannot have been black. The shade of her complexion is not given; but when in the bathtub Jakes begins to fantasize, his sexual fantasies are fixed on the ghostly, unnamed woman, whose skin is brown.[55] A light skin color may have been one of the reasons why Jake married Lil in the first place, since the skin color of mulattoes reflected more exactly one of the hegemonic ideals of female beauty--white skin color.

Just as there is no escape from white standards of beauty, there is also no escape from the degrading conditions of work in the Post Office. Alcohol abuse is just one symptom of this degradation. Jake drinks in the morning, afternoon, and evening. One of the three times he

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[54]Lawd Today, p. 110.

[55]Lawd Today, p. 40.

is called before the Board of Review is for drinking on the job, a serious offence; the second time is for debt-dodging.[56] The squirrel-cage metaphor surfaces here again. "Jeeesus, all that running for nothing. . . . Yeah, there's a trick in this."[57] Jake, like a squirrel, is forced to keep running, to keep working for the means of his subsistence, and to pay for his wife's medical problems. For nine years he has had no advancement or promotion at work. Even in their government jobs,

> the men feel they can advance only so far. As Jake watches the young white college boys working around him in the post office, he senses keenly the real barriers: "Them white boys always in a hurry to get somewhere. And soon's they get out of school they's going to be big shots. But a nigger just stays a nigger."[58]

Lil is trapped too, in her sickness, and though she knows Jake does not love her anymore (if the word love may be used in this degraded context), she has to stay with him because he can support her. "I knows you don't want me, but you going to support me!"[59] Since the values of the hegemony are in part use-values symbolized by money, money functions as one of the principal images of degradation in the novel. Money is a symbol of manhood. Money can buy the fancy clothes which Jake wears. Jake has ten suits hanging

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[56]Lawd Today, p. 125.

[57]Lawd Today, p. 9.

[58]Brignano, p. 25.

[59]Lawd Today, p. 19.

in his closet, and has spent his meager income lavishly on accesories like his "light grey top coat with huge buttons of liquid pearl," his "black hat with a tiny red feather peeping timidly in the back," and his "mahogany-handled cane."[60] Money gives Jake the wherewithal to buy his buddies a round of drinks; not to do so would be cowardly, cheap, and unmanly. It also crops up in his bragging about sexual conquests. Women go for men who have a steady job. Even Blanche, the prostitute at Rosa's bar, is looking for a so-called sugar daddy who can keep her. Money is a way to make friends and influence people, as represented in the fable told by the barber Doc Higgins, where it is compared to butter.[61] Money is a way out of the squirrel-cage: If he had only saved some money, thinks Jake, "during these long years I would drop Lil and this lousy job flat."[62] This thought, however, is tempered with irony, for we know that the values of the dream have so permeated his soul that all he can do is hope (with a touch of sour grapes): "When you boil it all low you'll see that everybody gets an even break in the end."[63] When Jake says this, his voice trails off uncertainly, and it is at this point that money is equated with freedom. The struggle Jake wages against degradation caused by spiritual poverty is his own fault. "It's all my

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[60]Lawd Today, pp. 30, 40.

[61]Lawd Today, p. 63.

[62]Lawd Today, p. 122.

[63]Lawd Today, p. 37.

own fault," he thinks regretfully before he goes before the Board of Review.[64] Hence, the causes of this degradation are viewed in personal terms. The only social struggle for the freedom conferred by money in the ghetto is the war waged by hustlers of various shades, by quack doctors, con-artists, religious societies, and others, who feed on the fears and superstitions of the Negroes; and even here, this struggle is in the main anti-social.

Money, thus, is a means toward the realization of identity: the lack of it causes self-pity and self-hate. Jake has bills: "the furniture bill and the rent bill and the gas bill and the light bill and the bill at the Boston store and the insurance bill and the milk bill. His eyes grew misty with tears, tears of hatred for Lil and tears of pity for himself."[65] Then, again: "Sometimes when I think about it I almost hate myself."--"Yeah, sometimes I wish I was anything but a nigger."--"We don't stick together."[66] Self-hate, symtomatic of pervasive self-deprecation, appears in the expression used against Jake and Doc Higgins by the only Communist in the novel, Duke: "Aw, you niggers full of crap!"[67] That's right, the niggers are full of "crap," all of their own making; no one is to blame but themselves. But this is precisely the point where the irony turns

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[64]Lawd Today, p. 121.

[65]Lawd Today, p. 23.

[66]Lawd Today, p. 166.

[67]Lawd Today, p. 61.

problematic, for these Negroes are not bourgeois but working class and lumpen proletarians. Why Wright should denigrate the lower classes when he was a member of the Communist Party at this time, which had an express theory about proletarian literature, is puzzling. It is true that the subtle, ironical exposure in Lawd Today of the degradation and dehumanization caused by the internalization of the use-values of the hegemony is artistically successful from a Marxist perspective, as Brignano has pointed out.[68]. But there is no glorification of the oppressed in Lawd Today, and no solutions are offered, which is to say that the novel is not a proletarian novel.[69] Its execution runs contrary even to Wright's own "Blueprint for Negro Literature," in which place he spells out his views about the responsibility of the Negro writer: "to furnish moral sanctions for action, to give a meaning to blighted lives, and to supply motives for mass movements of millions of people."[70] How then can we account for the significant-form (coherence) of the novel? By Wright's world view of personalism.[71]

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[68]Brignano, p. 76.

[69]" . . . to call it a proletarian novel would be a distortion." See Brignano, p. 71.

[70]Quoted by Dan McCall, The Example of Richard Wright (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), p. 53.

[71]Basically an American philosophy, personalism is a modern form of idealism that argues that the nature of ultimate reality is personality. Freedom is the quintessence of personality (but there is also a unity of consciousness which is purposive, rational, and value-seeking--a private being who is socially communicable). For a summary of its basic beliefs, see Peter A. Angeles,

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The term personalism, which Wright himself used in a speech he gave in 1936, is closely related by F. C. Campbell to social humanism, as opposed to hierachical communism (Stalinism), which seeks to collectivize individuals and submerge their consciousness into the mass.[72] For Wright, says Campbell, the Party's analysis

> left out the subjective, dehumanizing effects of such oppression on the Negro masses' psychological reality. What Wright sought to do as a Marxist was to expose this reality through his prose fiction in order to show that mere antiracist slogans could not comprehend nor dissipate the great hatred and fear which many blacks had for all whites, resulting not only from the melodramatic acts of terror but from the daily, petty, often unconscious humiliations which the average white person inflicted on the average black.[73]

Dictionary of Philosophy (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981). See also Wright, "Personalism." Richard Wright Collection. Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature and History. New York Public Library.

[72]F. C. Campbell, "Prophet of the Storm: Richard Wright and the Radical Tradition," Phylon, 38 (1977), 11. Personalism (at least Mounier's version of it--and there are many versions, including a Hegelian version) agrees with the economic theory of Marxism; it is also pro-socialist: "The attainment of socialism must be, as it was originally formulated, a work of the workers themselves, of movements of peasants and workers organized with the more enlightened portions of the bourgeoisie." See Emmanuel Mounier, Personalism (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, No date), pp. 103-106.

[73]F. C. Campbell, 16.

These "unconscious humiliations" are those inflicted by the forces of the hegemony, and although Jake has "an impulse to whirl and sweep his arm in a wide swift act and brush away everything," there is

> nothing he could solve by doing that; he would only get into more trouble. And the feeling that he could do nothing doubled back upon him, fanning the ashes of other dead feelings of not being able to do anything, and he was consumed in a fever of bitterness.[74]

It does not matter in the end that Wright offers no solutions or panaceas in Lawd Today; he was determined not to leave out "the subjective, dehumanizing effects of such oppression on the Negro masses' psychological reality" [Campbell]. Communism as a world view seeks to transform the hegemony by overthrowing the domination by revolutionary means, usually by armed struggle. In Lawd Today there is no attempt made to overthrow anything by Jake, who is not politically conscious. He feels sorry for himself; he admits it's his own fault "'cause we ain't going nowhere."[75]

Jake yearns to change his condition but he knows he is socially impotent:

> Lawd, if I had my way I'd tear this building down! If only there was something he could do to pay the white folks back for all they had ever done! Even if he lost his own life in doing it! But what

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[74]Lawd Today, p. 143.

[75]Lawd Today, p. 119.

> could he do? He felt the loneliness of his black skin. . . .[76]

Jake addresses the Lord in the above quote, but it is this same Lord who is the source of his degradation. "The white man's Gawd in this land,"[77] says Jake, and in the dream which opens the book, God sounds like his white boss. Here lies the central irony of the book upon which the meaning turns. Who or what is this Lord of Lawd Today? Is He a white Lord symbolizing the power of the hegemony? Campbell implies that for a personalist "men and women can only arrive at their true, individual nature--that is, their innate psychological and physical powers--through co-operative relationships with other human beings."[78] Jake admits that urban Negroes "don't stick together." But what about the co-operation mentioned by Campbell? In the barber shop Doc Higgins and Jake are talking:

> "Ain't that what old Booker Washington said? Cooperate and get along?" [Jake asks Doc]
> "That's right." [says Doc]
> "That's what Duke ought to think about instead of running around here talking about overthrowing the government."[79]

Co-operate and get along? With oppressors of Negroes? Of course not. Duke is a Communist, and the above passage of

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[76]Lawd Today, pp 143-144.

[77]Lawd Today, p. 133.

[78]F. C. Campbell, 10.

[79]Lawd Today, p. 67.

dialogue is meant to be read ironically: The point is not to co-operate with the Lord. But what if the Lord were Negro, representing, let us say, an alternative hegemony established by the racial forces of the Negro nationalist movement? Jake and his buddies are talking:

> "You know, I wish there was a man somewhere who knowed how to lead and who could lead. . . There'll be a man like that some day. . . "
> " . . . and things start to change then."
> "You know, honest, for something like that I wouldn't mind maybe fighting and dying."[80]

But many pages later comes the line: "But it'd take a strong guy to make all these folks come under one command."[81] The meaning of this line is ambiguous, for so was Hitler a strong "guy" who made all the German "folks" come under one command. But Hitler was a dictator, and all dictators seek by totalitarian means to collectivize the individual by submerging him in the mass. This submersion of the individual in the mass, however, is precisely what is anathema to a personalist. Likewise, the strongest "guy" (dictator) in the cosmos--the Lord--also submerges the souls of all people into an other-worldly "mass," as it were. Questions of benevolence aside, to accept a white Lord or a Negro Lord would amount to the same thing. In this way, Lawd Today transcends the ideology of Negro nationalism prescribed by the Party. And this is also why the novel is

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[80]Lawd Today, p. 182.

[81]Lawd Today, p. 183.

not propagandist. The world view of personalism gave Wright a strategic angle with which to attack the "Lord Today," i. e., the hegemony. It is through personalism that the structures of the novel coalesce to give it its artistic coherence.

Jake, who has to work split shifts, says at one point: "Yeah, that's the big trouble with working part of the day and part of the night. When you's off there ain't no place to go."[82] This is precisely Wright's point: there is no place to go for the Negro in America. "'What the hell?' thinks Jake, a wave of self-pity sweeping through him. 'What in the world can a man do? I'm just like a slave.' . . . He owed so many debts he did not know which debt to pay first."[83] But Jake Jackson, like many other Negroes in the cities of the North, has already paid his "debt," his dues to America.

Brignano states that Wright "implies in both novels [Lawd Today and Native Son] that framing the superstructure of society dominated by the white world is capitalism, which is a force that smothers and denudes the individual personality" [my italics]. Lawd Today is thus "an attempt by Wright to draft in an artistic mode and a literary genre those messages which are all too clearly spelled out later in Native Son."[84] What is true for Lawd Today, however, is

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[82]Lawd Today, p. 71.

[83]Lawd Today, p. 22.

[84]Brignano, p. 23.

not true for Native Son, for the latter novel evidences a shift in theory from idealism to dialectical materialism, a change in world view, that is, to that of communism, as we shall see in the next chapter.

II. Communism: The American Negro and the Black Negro[1]

Early in the first part of Native Son, Bigger Thomas encounters a poster on the street. It pictures State Attorney Buckley, his finger pointed at the man-in-the-street, and above his head in tall red letters are the words: IF YOU BREAK THE LAW, YOU CAN'T WIN.[2] The long arm of the law thus stretches even into the degraded ghetto of the Negro in Chicago--the "promised land" for Negroes fleeing Southern hate. And then near the end of the novel, in part three, "Fate," Buckley comes to life and tells Bigger, who is now in prison: "You're dealing with the law now!"[3] Bigger's existence is proscribed by the "law"; the law has made him a criminal in the eyes of white society. This is what Wright explains in "How Bigger Was Born," as he

[1]"He was an American, because he was a native son; but he was also a Negro nationalist in a vague sense because he was not allowed to live as an American. Such was his way of life and mine; neither Bigger nor I resided fully in either camp." See "How Bigger Was Born," in Black Voices, p. 554. N.B.: (Metaphorically) the American Negro, favors accomodation, the Black Negro, does not; The American Negro is an American first, Negro second, the Black Negro is the other way around.

[2]Richard Wright, Native Son (New York: Modern Library, 1942), p. 12.

[3]Native Son, p. 281.

tells us about the five Bigger Thomases he has met, whose main characteristics were rebellion, not submission, pride not humility.[4] The Bigger Thomas of Native Son has already been to a reform school--an adjunct of the penal system: "[he] had been accused of stealing auto tires and had been sent to the reform school."[5] What's more, he is also seen planning to rob a white man's store with his buddies. This plan means more than just the violation of a taboo defined by the law of the state; it also entails

> trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them; in short, it would be a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over them; a challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to. Yes; if they could rob Blum's, it would be a real hold-up, in more senses than one. In comparison, all of their other jobs had been play.[6]

Bigger's response to the law is indeed a "hold-up" [Wright] in more senses than one. When Bigger sees a plane writing in the sky above the ghetto, he tells his buddies "if I took a plane up I'd take a couple of bombs along and drop 'em as sure as hell. . . . "[7] Next, they start to "play white" and Bigger addresses Gus as a general and threatens him with a court martial if he doesn't play,

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[4]"The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell." See "How Bigger Was Born," p. 542.

[5]Native Son, p. 47.

[6]Native Son, p. 13.

[7]Native Son, p. 16.

ordering him mockingly to "attack with tanks, gas, planes, and infantry."[8] "For the most part," writes McCall, "we see it [Bigger's mind] as a strategic, military mind; he feels power and knows how to use it."[9] For this reason the forces of the law who are out to get him after the murder of Mary Dalton are delineated in military terms; in fact, the police organize what can best be described as a military operation, as reported in the newspaper Bigger reads after fleeing the Dalton home:

> Today and last night eight thousand armed men combed cellars, old buildings and more that one thousand Negro homes in the Black Belt in a vain effort to apprehend Bigger Thomas, 20-year-old Negro rapist and killer of Mary Dalton, whose bones were found last Sunday night in a furnace.[10]

On the rooftop before his capture, it seems to Bigger "that an army was thundering up the stairs."[11]

Bigger Thomas, in other words, is opposed by the forces of the law, and in the end, despite his "military mind," he knows that he is no match for them:

> That the image of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton which he had seen but two hours ago should be seen again so soon made him feel that this whole vague white world which could do things this quickly was more

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[8]Native Son, p. 17.

[9]McCall, p. 89.

[10]Native Son, p. 238.

[11]Native Son, p. 240.

> than a match for him, that soon it would track him down and have it out with him.[12]

He knows it is over as soon as the newspaper run the headline "AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME"; for, adds McCall,

> [Bigger] has blown the fuse in the white mind. Immediately the police are able to gather three thousand volunteers. "The Negro rapist and murderer" the papers call him before he gets a chance. Massive reprisals come immediately and hundreds of black employees are fired from their jobs, Negro men are beaten on the streets, and all the ghetto hot spots are raided and closed down.[13]

Thus from the outset of the novel to Bigger's capture and subsequent sentencing to death, the law casts its pall over the action, hovering like a Gothic nightmare over a tale of horror. "Why should I want to do anything?" Bigger says to lawyer Boris Max in his cell. "I ain't got a chance. I don't know nothing. I'm just black and they make the laws."[14] These "laws," of course, are a part of the domination, and unlike in Lawd Today where there are no direct confrontations with the forces of the domination--with the police, for instance--and the struggle is against the values of the hegemony, in Native Son the attack is more "armed"; Wright's rage is more explosive.[15] The novel,

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[12]Native Son, p. 208.

[13]McCall, p. 88.

[14]Native Son, p. 328.

[15]"Bigger's rebellion is not against American morality but, instead, against laws and rules . . . " See Addison Gayle Jr., The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in

writes Irving Howe, "is a work of assault rather than withdrawal. . . . "[16] Howe is right; Native Son is a work of assault because of its attack on the domination.[17] Perhaps this is why some bourgeois critics found the work propagandist.[18]

The Communist Party, for its part, found the novel quite acceptable. General-secretary Earl Browder saw "nothing wrong with it."[19] And although Benjamin Davis, a prominent Negro Communist, remarked that the novel fell short as a Communist novel on the racial theme because, "the author overwrites Bigger into a symbol of the whole Negro people,"[20] in general, explains Kinnamon, Wright, as a fervent party member, "maintained a thoroughly Communist point of view in Native Son."[21] The communism in the book is spelled out in lawyer Max's arguments at the trial:

America (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1976), p. 218.

[16]Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in Five Black Writers, ed. Donald B. Gibson, (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 258.

[17]This is to say that the attack in the main is on the domination. Bigger precipitates a state of crisis in the hegemony, a race crisis as it were, by breaking the law, by violating a taboo, by defying the state with its unseen forces of domination, which are henceforth overtly ranged against him.

[18]"With the appearance of Jan Erlone, the young Party worker who is also Mary Dalton's boyfriend, the novel becomes blatantly propagandistic." See Brignano, p. 78.

[19]Kinnamon, p. 148.

[20]Kinnamon, p. 149.

[21]Kinnamon, p. 125.

> What is happening here today is not injustice, but oppression, an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life. And it is this new form of life that has grown up here in our midst that puzzles us, that expresses itself, like a weed growing from under a stone, in terms we call crime.[22]

This "new form of life" may be christened the so-called New Negro of the Negro Renaissance, who has supplanted the bankrupt image of the Old Negro represented in the American literary imagination by Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom.[23] And the "oppression" Max is talking about is of course the socio-political oppression caused by the domination. The courtroom arguments of Max are "patently leftist"[24]; and he offers Bigger "the vision of a more constructive kind of rebellion--or revolution. He tries to supplant Bigger's racial consciousness with class consciousness. Here lies the novel's most serious conceptual and artistic weakness."[25] This last remark of Kinnamon's is important, since it represents the major criticism against Native Son; so, let us look at it more closely.

"In How Bigger Was Born," continues Kinnamon,

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[22]Native Son, p. 361.

[23]"The term 'New Negro' was coined by Alain Locke during the 1920's, to express the new spirit of dignity and manhood which animated the postwar generation of Negro youth. The New Negro was distinguished by his refusal to accept subordinate status; he had decisively rejected the slavemindedness which taught the Old Negro to know his place." See The Negro Novel in America, p. 33. Bigger Thomas, thus, is "bigger" than Uncle Tom (Thomas).

[24]Kinnamon, p. 125.

[25]Kinnamon, pp. 141-142.

> he [Wright] speaks of the 'concrete picture'--his sense of his racial experience--and the 'abstract linkages'--his Communist theory. The two never completely merge in the novel, just as the understanding between Bigger and Max is never total.[26]

For Kinnamon, and indeed many other reviewers, it is Wright's failure "to resolve fully his intellectual (Max) and his emotional (Bigger) understanding of black life that prevents Native Son from being the minor masterpiece it could have been."[27] For Brignano, "Wright's emphasis on socio-political-economic explanations of Bigger's predicament causes an undesirable shift in focus from the fascinating personal story of Bigger's psychological life."[28] And Margolies sums up this valid criticism with the following comment:

> There is an inconsistency of tone in the novel--particularly in Book III, 'Fate,' where the reader feels that Wright, although intellectually committed to Max's views, is more emotionally akin to Bigger's. Somehow Bigger's impassioned hatred comes across more vividly than Max's eloquent reasoning.[29]

Margolies adds that "an inconsistency of ideologies, an irresolution of philosophical attitudes" prevent "Bigger and the other characters from developing properly, which

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[26]Kinnamon, p. 142.

[27]Kinnamon, p. 143.

[28]Brignano, p. 82.

[29]Margolies, p. 113.

adulterate the structure of the novel. . . . "[30] But how exactly may we understand this "inconsistency" in our terms? How define this "irresolution of philosophical attitudes"?

On the one hand, we have, as it were, the mind (Max); on the other hand the heart (Bigger). Max the lawyer may be a petit-bourgeois intellectual and Bigger the lumpen proletarian in Marxist terms; but though Wright agrees with Max's statement that taken collectively "they [Negroes] are not simply twelve million people; in realty they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive within this nation, devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights,"[31] his heart is really with Bigger's statement that "they [whites] hate black folks more than they hate the unions."[32] What we have here, at the core of the novel, is the crucial contradiction between the world view of communism and the ideology of Negro nationalism, expressed in Max's statement about the Negroes constituting a "separate nation." The "inconsistency" Margolies talks about is then really a conflict between world view and ideology. In Lawd Today, as we have seen, Wright's nationalist ideology was subsumed by his world view of personalism; in Native Son, world view and ideology are in opposition in the form of the novel, and this is why Native Son is thematically more complex, the texture of its prose

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[30]Margolies, p. 114.

[31]Native Son, p. 365.

[32]Kinnamon, p. 142.

more rich, and its impact more powerful than the first novel. "Lodged in the heart of this moment," Max declares in the law court, "is the question of power which time will unfold!"[33] Precisely. Native Son, we might say, is largely redeemed from being a tract by its ingenious and skillful attack against the power of the domination.

ii

Native Son is divided into three books: "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate," and though these titles sum up the content of the books, they do not give us the structures of the novel. Rather, they provide a guide to the narrative framework or story and to the states of being of the central character on an existential level. Any man, Negro or white, convicted of a crime would in theory have to accept his fate--punishment--at the hands of the law. In this respect Bigger's situation is not unique. What is particular about Bigger's case, however, is that he is a Negro. And though Wright discovered while writing the novel that "Bigger Thomas was white, too,"[34] Bigger is by no means a "white Negro" in Norman Mailer's phrase. Nor is he unconscious of the color of his skin. Bigger is "white" insofar as his objective situation parallels that of his white working

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[33]Native Son, p. 370.

[34]"How Bigger Was Born," p. 545.

class comrade; most of the time, however, he is very conscious of his black skin and "there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. Did not white people despise a black skin?"[35] The "extraordinary quality of the book" remains its "niggerness."[36] It is in relation to this particularity that the structures of the novel must be sought.

There are three basic structures in Native Son:

A. Violence. The lawyer Max describes Bigger's case not in terms of injustice, but oppression:

> It is not to tell you only of suffering that I stand here today, even though there are frequent lynchings and floggings of Negroes throughout the country. If you react only to that part of what I say, then you, too, are caught as much as he [Bigger] in the mire of blind emotion, and this vicious game will roll on, like a bloody river to a bloodier sea.[37]

America was built on "war" and "conquest," and "another civil war in these states," Max warns, "is not impossible."[38] The reasons, apparently, for this violence are hate and fear: hatred on the part of whites against

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[35]Native Son, p. 63.

[36]McCall, p. 78.

[37]Native Son, p. 359.

[38]Native Son, p. 370.

Negroes and workers, and fear on the part of those people of wealth

> who urge the use and show of force, quick death, swift revenge, to protect a little spot of private security against the resentful millions from whom they have filched it, the resentful millions in whose militant hearts the dream and hope of security still lives.[39]

Bigger reacts to oppressive hate with a rage that results in murder; but he is afraid, too, because of his ignorance of the social causes of his fear, due in part to "the restrictions which have been placed upon Negro education."[40] In the ghettoes, the oppression of landlords constitutes a form of violence that brutalizes its inhabitants. But this is conveniently forgotten by the judiciary of the domination, because the landlords are all white. The essence of Bigger's life, writes Margolies, is violence and power.[41] "But what I killed for, I am!" cries Bigger, and in killing he feels "he has destroyed symbolically all the oppressive forces that have made his life a misery," and enjoys "a sense of potency, of power and freedom that he has never before experienced."[42]

For State Attorney Buckley, however, this symbolic destruction is a threat, for as he says, he represents "the

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[39]Native Son, p. 371.

[40]Native Son, p. 364.

[41]Margolies, p. 112.

[42]Margolies, p. 110.

forces which allow the arts and sciences to flourish in freedom and peace, thereby enriching the lives of us all."[43] "Us all," meaning "us all whites," not the Negroes, because the Negroes at large have been excluded from the arts and sciences and any attempt at self-realization on their part is considered a crime. Bigger's very existence, in fact, "is a crime against the state!"[44] And though "crimes of even greater brutality and horror have been committed in this city," and though gangsters "have killed and have gone free to kill again," nothing has brought forth "an indignation to equal this."[45] The American fascination with the image of the gangster as a type of urban rebel is tied to Bigger's delinquency. Bigger has also acquired a gun (which he plans to use in the hold-up of Blum's store). "Inside his shirt he felt the cold metal of the gun resting against his naked skin."[46] The gun, needless to say, is one of the most (if not the most) concrete symbols of violence in modern American literature.[47] For Bigger the gun is also a symbol of power. "And he felt the equal of Doc, too; had he not slashed his table and dared him to use his gun?"[48]

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[43]Native Son, p. 373.

[44]Native Son, p. 368.

[45]Native Son, p. 357.

[46]Native Son, p. 40.

[47]"The symbol of the twentieth century, wrote Wright, is the man on the corner with a machine gun . . . " See Addison Gayle Jr., The Way of the New World, p. xxiii.

[48]Native Son, p. 38.

"He felt the gun nestling close to his skin. That gun could always make folks stand away and think twice before bothering him."[49] The "folks" are the people who command the forces of the domination, represented by the "cops," who are his real enemies. The private investigator Britten

> was his enemy. He knew that the hard light in Britten's eyes held him guilty because he was black. He hated Britten so hard and hot, while standing there with sleepy eyes and parted lips, that he would gladly have grabbed the iron shovel from the corner and split his skull in two.[50]

"Bigger sees both of these men [Britten and Buckley] as official representatives of the dominant white society," says Kinnamon, "instinctively recognizing their hostility. The reader, too, sees them solely in this role."[51] Upon the gun as symbol of violence and power hinges Bigger's sense of self-worth; "a certain sense of power, a power born of a latent capacity to live," is experienced by him, while the murder of Mary Dalton makes him feel "the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score."[52] "He is so conditioned by the racial situation," adds Kinnamon, "that he cannot respond to individual whites as separate persons, but only as abstract

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[49]Native Son, p. 121.

[50]Native Son, p. 151.

[51]Kinnamon, p. 133.

[52]Native Son, p. 153.

embodiments of white power--'that white looming mountain of hate.'"[53]

B. Alienation. "It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood on."[54] Urbanization has led to the "dislocation" of Bigger from his community, from religion, and from the larger white world. Bigger's relationship with his family is one of "iron reserve."

> He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and 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 . . . he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain.[55]

Due to the brutalization of life in the ghetto, Bigger is unable to form stable, human relationships with his friends, Gus, G. H., and Jack, or with his girlfriend Bessie Mears. Bigger not only beats up Gus because of a minor altercation, but he kills Bessie because "he could not take her with him and he could not leave her behind."[56] After his arrest, when a Negro preacher tries to pray for him, Bigger flings away the wooden cross the preacher has hung around his neck in a symbolic gesture repudiating Jesus Christ, whose

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[53]Kinnamon, p. 131.

[54]Native Son, pp. 63-64.

[55]Native Son, p. 9.

[56]Native Son, p. 218.

message has been debased by the Ku Klux Klan. "He had the cross of salvation round his throat and they [the KKK] were burning one to tell him that they hated him!"[57]

Bigger's alienation from the larger white world is described in an episode where he goes to the movies, one about "white men and white women lolling on beaches, swimming, and dancing in night clubs," and the other, Trader Horn, about "black men and black women dancing against a wild background of barbaric jungle."[58] The contrast is deliberate; whites are rich and leisured, Negroes poor and savage. The two worlds are mutually exclusive. Bigger's exclusion from the world of opportunity and upward social mobility is expressed in his regretful statement, "I'd like to be invited to a place like that just to find out what it feels like."[59]

C. Struggle. This structure is concerned with Bigger's fight for survival in the degrading conditions of ghetto poverty. The struggle for survival is undertaken on a very basic level, that of meeting the necessities of life such as food, clothing, and shelter. Bigger's family lives in one small room that is cold in the winter. His mother fears that if Bigger does not take the job the welfare department has found for him, "the relief'll cut us off. We won't have

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[57]Native Son, p. 314.

[58]Native Son, p. 27.

[59]Native Son, p. 29.

any food."[60]. If Bigger takes the job, his mother says, "I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs."[61] Tied to this socially caused poverty, the lack of opportunity, of education, of the basic amenities of life, is the struggle for identity and self-realization. Men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread, Max tells the jury; Bigger murdered because

> it was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him. He accepted it because it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight.[62]

The struggle for identity is the struggle for manhood and a struggle against a mother's sense of shame. She curses him bitterly: "Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you," and then derogates his sense of manhood: "We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you," she says.[63] She foretells his death: "And the gallows is at the end of the road you traveling, boy."[64] And then as he eats his breakfast he feels that "they [his family] were thinking of the job he was to get that evening

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[60]Native Son, p. 11.

[61]Native Son, p. 12.

[62]Native Son, pp. 364-5.

[63]Native Son, p. 7.

[64]Native Son, p. 9.

and it made him angry; he felt that they had tricked him into a cheap surrender."[65] This is the struggle against the surrender of pride, pride that buttresses the ego or sense of self-confidence, the loss of which leads ultimately to the struggle to save one's sanity, one's mind. This is really to lose touch with oneself, for Bigger has not only lost touch with the religion and folk culture of his race, he also momentarily loses touch with his sense of self-possession. "I knew what I was doing, all right. But I couldn't help it. That's what I mean. It was like another man stepped inside of my skin and started acting for me. . . . "[66] The struggle for self-possession is the struggle for dignity; dignity cannot be achieved without self-realization, which, in turn, cannot be achieved unless one is in possession of one's self; thus, one comes full circle again, to the struggle for self-possession. In other words, to touch other people humanly is to know full well that "in that touch, response of recognition, there would be union, identity; there would be a supporting oneness, a wholeness which had been denied him all his life."[67]

Wright endows Bigger with a double vision:

> He looked out upon the world and the people about him with a double vision: one vision pictured death, an image of him, alone, sitting strapped in the electric chair and waiting for the hot current

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[65]Native Son, p. 11.

[66]Native Son, p. 326.

[67]Native Son, p. 336.

> to leap through his body; and the other vision pictured life, an image of himself standing amid throngs of men, lost in the welter of their lives with the hope of emerging again, different, unafraid.[68]

This double vision is analogous to that described by DuBois many years before.[69] The Black Negro is "alone," excluded, as it were; while the American Negro "lives with hope." How the rays of these two visions touch and refract must be considered one of the great illuminations of the novel.

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Toward the end of Native Son, before his trial, Bigger has a vision:

> Another impulse rose in him, born of desperate need, and his mind clothed it in an image of a strong blinding sun sending hot rays down and he was standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, and the sun's rays melted away the many differences, the colors,

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[68]Native Son, p. 338.

[69]W. E. B. DuBois, reflecting on the existential condition of the Negro in America in 1903, had seen him as a person born with a veil. "One ever feel his twoness," DuBois wrote, "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Quoted by Addison Gayle Jr. in his "Introduction" to The Black Esthetic, (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1972), p. xxi. For a historical perspective on this dualism, see John Hope Franklin, "The Two Worlds of Race," in The Negro American, pp. 47-68.

> the clothes, and drew what was common and good upward toward the sun. . . . "[70]

This vision is powerful enough for Bigger to want to live, to want to live "in order to find out, to see if it was true."[71] And in the closing pages of the novel Bigger does find the courage to admit to Max that he believes in himself. "I ain't got nothing else. . . . " he says. In this manner, the animal (rat) in him is changed to the human. Ironically, it is when he kills that he feels most free; killing mitigates his awareness of the meaninglessness of life, as the following lines from the novel illustrate:

New life: "He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him."[72] Meaning: "The hidden meaning of his life--a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide--had spilled out."[73] Rebirth: "Like a man reborn, he wanted to test and taste each thing now to see how it went; like a man risen up well from a long illness, he felt deep and wayward whims."[74] Destiny: "He felt that he had his destiny in his grasp. He was more alive than he could ever remember having been; his

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[70]Native Son, p. 336.

[71]Native Son, p. 392.

[72]Native Son. p. 98.

[73]Native Son, p. 99.

[74]Native Son, p. 104.

mind and attention were pointed, focused toward a goal."[75] Freedom· "The mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands. But they would never think that he had done it; not a meek black boy like him."[76] Wholeness:

> In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes . . . never had he felt a sense of wholeness.[77]

In other words, it is when he struggles against "bondage" that he feels most free, for the world is a prison:[78] the Cook County jail where Bigger is incarcerated pending his execution is connected metaphorically to the ghetto as a prison for Negroes, and ultimately to America as a prison for the lower classes.

Bigger Thomas struggles against violent state power represented by the police, vigilante groups, and the racist mob who is out to get him. He is tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death by electrocution. Like a black rat, he

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[75]Native Son, p. 139.

[76]Native Son, p. 177.

[77]Native Son, p. 223.

[78]"Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. . . . We black and they white. . . . It's just like living in jail" [my italics]. Native Son, p. 18.

is "trapped."[79] Alienation in the sense of "belonging to another," that is, the state of being possessed, is tied to this metaphor of the ghetto-prison, circumscribed on all sides by the white forces of the domination, from which prison flight, or escape, becomes a form of self-defense.[80] The gangster-movie-like capture of Bigger on the rooftops of Chicago is intended to show the Negro as an animal--a black ape[81]--escaped from a cage. The sign that Bigger is depicted as a trapped animal and not as a human is further proof that the Negro "gangster" is not treated with the same respect that a white gangster would be accorded under similar circumstances. A white gangster is still human, a Negro gangster is not. The Negro criminal is on a lower rung of the penal ladder than is the white criminal. Bigger escapes from his alienated "criminal" self to grapple with social reality; this is why, in a sense, the atmosphere of the novel is so claustrophobic.[82] The world is a living

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[79] "He was trapped." Native Son, p. 228.

[80]This category, among other categories of alienation, is listed in Mary Horton, "The Literature of Alienation" in The Sociology of Literature: Applied Studies, ed. Diana Laurenson (Keele, Straffordshire: University of Keele, 1978), pp. 197-217.

[81]When Bigger is led out of the Eleventh Street Police Station after the coroner's inquest (en route to the scene of the crime--the Dalton house), he catches a few distinct words that a crowd gathered outside is shouting at him. One of these lines is " . . . burn that black ape. . . . " Native Son, p. 310.

[82]"They was crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me no room. Lots of times I tried to forget 'em, but I couldn't. They wouldn't let me. . . . " Native Son, p. 389.

nightmare where there is no place to hide. Social freedom and private freedom are in the end one and the same thing. Only the unfree are victimized. Negro men are the most unfree, therefore the Negroes are the most victimized. Negro women are even more victimized than Negro men. The insight embedded in these theme-clusters stems from Bigger, the Black Negro.

For a Negro, trapped in this deterministic cosmos defined for him by the white man, there is no escape unless the domination is overthrown. Or as the Party would have said: Individual rebellion is doomed to failure unless it has the democratic, legitimized support of the masses. A hundred enraged Bigger Thomases acting in spontaneous unison would constitute a race riot; a thousand Bigger Thomases acting in an organized fashion under the leadership of an articulate party would have constituted a revolutionary movement. The contradiction can only be solved through a belief in human solidarity, which only communism is capable of conferring on man. Liberation can be achieved only through the alignment with "the side that feels life most, the side with the most humanity and the most men."[83] So much for the Party line.

"The central fact to be understood here," says Max,

> is not who wronged this boy, but what kind of a vision of the world did he have before his eyes, and where did he get such a vision as to make him, without premeditation, snatch the life of another

[83]Native Son, p. 392.

> person so quickly and instinctively that even though there was an element of accident in it, he was willing after the crime to say: "Yes; I did it. I had to."[84]

Metaphorically speaking now, Bigger has to kill the American Negro in order to realize his true identity as a Negro national; he "had to" kill in order to become a Black Negro. This is one side of the equation. Max again: "Another civil war in these states is not impossible."[85] A civil war with the whites against the Negroes? Or the American Negroes with the whites on one side versus the Black Negroes by themselves on the other? And if such a hypothetical war were started, who would win then? Answer: "Well, the side that feels life most, the side with the most humanity and the most men. . . . That's why . . . y-you've got to b-believe in yourself, Bigger. . . . "[86] But which "self"? His American Negro self or his Black Negro self, both of whom may be led, after all, by the Party?[87] "Bigger acts violently in order to exist," says Margolies, "and it is perhaps this fact, rather than his continued undying hatred of whites, that so terrifies Max at the close of the

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[84]Native Son, p. 365.

[85]Native Son, p. 370.

[86]Native Son, p. 392.

[87]Cf. The motif of "blindness" in the novel. Everyone is blind, as it were, because they see only the American Negro in Bigger. They cannot see his true self, which is invisible, hidden from them. A moot point, which I will not defend; but blindness in this context could be related to the lack of self-knowledge (ignorance) on society's part.

novel."[88] Max's horror stems from the fact that he does not know who Bigger has killed when Bigger cries out that murder for him was an act of creation. On the physical plane Bigger of course has killed Mary Dalton accidentally and Bessie Mears with premeditation--this all is part of the lurid melodrama; but on the metaphorical plane, Bigger has killed the wrong Negro. And Max's deepest fear, in spite of his claim that every Negro in America may be "on trial out there today,"[89] is realized. Bigger Thomas has killed the American Negro in his soul in order to create himself, to exist as a man.[90] Which is to say that in Native Son, Wright's world view of communism, undermined as it is by the ideology of Negro nationalism, will not account for the significant form of the novel in the manner personalism did for Lawd Today. Native Son is open-ended; the conflict between world view and ideology remains unresolved; and the Communist Max's horror would soon become "Wright's dilemma two years after the publication of Native Son when Wright himself would leave the Party."[91]

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[88]Margolies, p. 116.

[89]Native Son, p. 341.

[90]It is true that Bigger asks Max to "Tell Jan hello," dropping the "Mister." But this does not mean Bigger has stopped hating some white men, as Siegel suggests. It only means that Bigger can finally relate to Jan as an equal. See Paul N. Siegel, Revolution and the 20th-Century Novel (New York: Monad Press, 1979), p. 104.

[91]Margolies, p. 117.

III. Existentialism:[1] Master and Slave

"There are three kinds of revolutionism in Native Son," says Margolies, "and none of them altogether engages the reader as representing Wright's point of view."[2] Communism is the first kind; Negro nationalism the second; and metaphysical revolution the third. Human rebellion, Margolies adds, with Camus' The Rebel in mind, ends in metaphysical revolution, "and it is in the role of the metaphysical revolutionary that Bigger looms most significantly for modern readers."[3] It is as if, to paraphrase Camus, a death sentence hangs over the Negro race; [Bigger] opposes the principle of justice which he finds in himself to the principle of justice which he sees

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[1]Existentialism is not obviously a system in the sense Hegelianism is; but its systematic unity of thought can be illustrated, as Fernando Molina has done. "Existentialism is the systematic, often technical, exploration of the category of the individual"; it is a "type of philosophy which endeavors to analyze the basic structures of human existence and to call individuals to an awareness of their existence in its essential freedom." See Fernando Molina, Existentialism as Philosophy (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 2, 4.

[2]Margolies, p. 114.

[3]Margolies, p. 116.

being applied in the world.[4] The significant-structure embedded at the core of Native Son bears this out in broad terms: struggle against alienation leads to violence.[5] However, to apply this last category of metaphysical revolution to The Outsider, as Margolies does, leads to some difficulty.[6] "Metaphysical rebellion," says Camus,

> is a claim, motivated by the concept of a complete unity, against the suffering of life and death and a protest against the human condition both for its incompleteness, thanks to death, and its wastefullness, thanks to evil.[7]

While the second part of the above statement [a protest against the human condition] can be applied to The Outsider, the motivation [by a concept of a complete unity] for Cross Damon's revolt cannot. Cross, the hero of The Outsider, is against the "concept of a complete unity" [Camus];[8] he is opposed to what may be called a condition of metaphysical slavery--the enslavement of the mind to abstractions in a

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[4]See Albert Camus, The Rebel (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 24.

[5]Alienation is used in its social and psychological sense; not in its metaphysical sense, as is found in Hegel. For an excellent summary of Hegel's Theory of Alienation, see T. Z. Lavine, From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), p. 250.

[6]If the world of The Outsider, as Margolies [p. 116-117] indicates, is a world "without God, without rules, without order, purpose, or meaning, each man becomes his own god and creates his own world in order to exist," then it is a world without metaphysics.

[7]See Camus, p. 24.

[8]That is, a "unity" defined by the white man, as we shall see.

world reified beyond meaning. His revolt, thus, is not so much against alien definitions of the Negro as it is against the being of the genus "man"; in this sense, the revolution in The Outsider may be called an ontological revolution (against metaphysics). And to understand why this change in revolutions occurred, we will have to turn briefly to the subject of Wright's rejection of communism. "Somewhere between the years of Native Son and The Outsider," writes Brignano, "--roughly between 1940 and 1953--Wright's vision of life was undergoing changes. His decision to live in France is a manifest outcome of this process."[9] The decisive event in Wright's intellectual life during this period was his renuciation of communism, and to explain The Outsider's anti-communism, we must understand why Wright left the Party.[10]

Wright was first introduced to the Chicago John Reed Club, an association of Communist writers and artists, by his friend Abraham Aaron in the summer of 1933[11], and he joined the Party in the spring of the next year. "It was not the economics of Communism," he wrote,

> nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the singularity of the experience of workers in other lands, by the

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[9]Brignano, p. 153.

[10]N.B.: Wright was not only an artist (novelist), he was also an intellectual.

[11]See Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright (New York: William Morrow, 1973), p. 96.

> possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role.[12]

His "Negro experience" did find a home for a time; but frictions between white and Negro Communists soon made him doubt the genuineness of the anti-racist platform of the Party. When he went to New York in 1935 to attend the first American Writers' Congress as a Negro delegate from the Chicago John Reed Club, Wright found that no hotel arrangements had been made for him by the Party, although all the white delegates had places to stay. Later, back in Chicago in 1936, when he witnessed a mini "Moscow trial" of a Negro Communist named Ross Poindexter, who was forced to confess to anti-Party crimes that he could not have committed let alone imagined, Wright felt disgusted.[13] It seemed to him a replay of the racial discrimination he had known so well in the South. It was not courage, he wrote in "I Tried to Be a Communist,"

> that made me oppose the party. I simply did not know any better. It was inconceivable to me, though bred in the lap of Southern hate, that a

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[12]Richard Wright, "I Tried to Be a Communist," in The God That Failed, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Bantam Books, 1952), p. 106.

[13]The charges against Ross were "ideological fanaticism," "class collaboration attitudes," and an inclination towards "black nationalism." Wright was alarmed that "his [Ross'] personality, his sense of himself, had been obliterated." See Wright, essay [untitled] in The God That Failed, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Harper and Bros, 1949), pp. 133, 143, 156.

> man could not have his say. I had spent a third of my life traveling from the place of my birth to the North just to talk freely, to escape the pressure of fear. And now I was facing fear again.[14]

Thus, it was the humiliating degradation of a sincere Negro Communist more than the dissolution of the radical John Reed Clubs to which Wright was vigorously opposed that made Wright decide to break with the Party.[15] In The Outsider, Bob Hunter, a Negro Communist organizer, is also abused by the Party; and hence the violence in the novel may be interpreted as Wright's literary revenge against what he may have felt was the racism of the leaders of the Party. But revenge is only one element of the structure of violence.

A. Violence. "To kill Hilton was a way of redeeming what Hilton had done to Bob,"[16] thinks Cross, expressing his rage at the Party's treatment of Bob Hunter. "What right had Hilton to say who could live and who could not live?

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[14]"I Tried to Be a Communist," p. 123; see also, p. 142.

[15]The John Reed Clubs were attacked by the Party for their "sectarianism"; their closure was prompted by the necessity of forming a broad United Front (with American socialists and New Deal liberals) against the rise of fascism in Europe and the threat of war. The dissolution of the clubs thus left those communist writers who opposed a unity with the bourgeois left on principle out in the cold. Wright must have been one of those who felt the Party had betrayed the working class by joining the enemy. See Walter B. Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States, pp. 243-245.

[16]The Outsider, p. 254.

Damn him. . . . "[17] Bob Hunter is willing to give his life to the Party, but the Party doesn't want his life;[18] it "disciplines" him by betraying him to the immigration authorities for his disobedience: he has refused to stop organizing railway workers. Deportation for Bob Hunter is tantamount to death, for he knows that if he goes back to his country, Trinidad, the British will snatch him off the boat and take him straight to jail for ten years. "Ten years in jail in the tropics is death--I mean death, man," cries Bob Hunter to Cross; "don't you understand?"[19] Cross understands only too well; he knows that the Communists have "killed" Bob Hunter, who happens to be a Negro, just as they have attempted to destroy the inner life of Eva Blount, who happens to be a white woman. The Party is not just racist or sexist, it is more insidious--it subjugates the inner life of human beings to its own ends. Cross knew that

> Gil [a Central Committee member and husband to Eva] did not take his inner life into account and he felt compelled to do the same with Gil. This damn thing's catching, he told himself. You have to descend to their level if you are to deal with them. There's no other way out. . . . But he really liked this; there was an absoluteness about it that appealed to him, excited him. To grapple with Gil would involve a total mobilization of all the resources of his personality, and the conflict would be religious in its intensity.[20]

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[17]The Outsider, p. 243.

[18]The Outsider, p. 194.

[19]The Outsider, p. 193.

[20]The Outsider, p. 156.

The Party seeks control over individuals' minds; the manner in which it does this is through "naked force," by which obedience is "exacted through fear"[21]; the violent struggle Cross wages with such "absoluteness" against this control is for the goal of self-mastery.

For this purpose, Cross has to employ the trick of grim prevarication:

> Cross felt that at the heart of all political movements the concept of the basic inequality of man was enthroned and practised, and the skill of politicians consisted in how cleverly they hid this elementary truth and gained votes by pretending the contrary. If, by pretending, he could find a hiding place, why, he would pretend that he believed in the Communist pretensions. Why not? They are deceivers and so am I.[22]

For this purpose Cross carries his gun: "He's worried about the gun, Cross thought. Otherwise, I've acted in a way to make him trust me, to make him feel that he is the boss; but my having the gun makes him feel that I might have a will of my own. . . . "[23] And for this purpose (self-mastery), Cross wields the intellectual weapon of cold logic to keep his "turbulent instincts" in check: "Logic was guiding his sense of direction."[24] In one sense, logic serves to rationalize his violence, to justify the murder of his four victims: Joe Thomas, Hearndon, Gil, and Hilton. Since "man

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[21]The Outsider, p. 163.

[22]The Outsider, p. 146.

[23]The Outsider, p. 174.

[24]The Outsider, p. 166.

is nothing in particular," homicide is nothing in particular as well, and Cross need feel no remorse for having killed "nothing."[25] When asked by Eva why he killed Gil [and the landlord Hearndon], Cross defines the motives for his crime purely in subjective terms: "I killed him because I didn't think he had a right to live."[26] Cross recognizes others as having no humanity; Hearndon is an insect, for example: "Yes, this other insect had to be crushed, blotted out of existence."[27] Cross negates the existence of his victims to consolidate his own identity; at one point he in fact thinks of killing Eva.[28] But he is aware of the void of nothingness separating them. She sees him as a victim of race oppression, independently of the way he sees himself. Communication is impossible because of the gap between his being-for-itself and her being-for-itself.[29] "What really obsessed him was his nonidentity, which negated his ability to relate himself to others. . . . "[30]

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[25]The Outsider, p. 121.

[26]The Outsider, p. 349.

[27]The Outsider, p. 199.

[28]The Outsider, p. 286.

[29]Sartre takes over Hegel's distinction between "existence which is in-itself, and which is unself-conscious existence and, on the other hand, existence for-itself, in which one exists as self-conscious personality." These are the two "regions of being" in consciousness, for Sartre. "There is the being of myself as consciousness and the being of that which is other than myself, separate from myself, the objects of which I am conscious." See Lavine, pp. 246, 352-353.

[30]The Outsider, p. 128.

B. Alienation. Cross' alienation stems from his sense of dread, and the cause of this dread lies in the condition that "his sense of life had been so heightened that desire boiled in him to a degree that made him afraid. Afraid of what? Nothing precisely, exactly . . . And this constituted his sense of dread."[31] Cross suffers little anxiety, his mind is lucid though darkened with desire; his dread, however, makes him despair, and rather than take the leap of faith, Cross tries pathetically to save himself from the abyss through Eva's love--imagined in religious terms. He wanted "her love to help him to redeem himself in his own eyes for his crimes."[32] Eva's suicide, after he tells her his true name after having assumed three false ones (Charles Webb, Addison Jordan, and Lionel Lane), results in his own death, for he finally manages to overcome his existential despair by ridding himself of his alienation "which negated his ability to relate himself to others."[33] Cross talks of himself as being akin to the devil, the devil [Satan] being of course the archetypal outsider fallen from the state of grace (heaven).[34] Bob Hunter's common-law wife Sarah indeed calls Cross the devil: "You are a devil! . . . You like to

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[31]The Outsider, p. 21.

[32]The Outsider, p. 252.

[33]The Outsider, p. 127.

[34]The Outsider, pp. 362-363.

see suffering," she bursts out bitterly[35]; while New York District Attorney Houston, who serves as Cross' "inquisitor,"[36] ontological-twin, "a hunchback, an outsider, a man whose physical deformity had forced him to live in but not of the normal rounds of ritualized life," knows, as does Cross, "the demonic feelings of men who played god because he himself was of the demonic clan, having hidden his kinship with the rebellious by publicly upholding the laws and promises that men live by . . . "[37] Cross deserts his family in Chicago and refuses to recognize his mother and his four small sons, Cross, Junior, Peter, and Robert, when they are brought before him by Houston in an effort to break his will.[38] Cross sees himself as a man "without a name, a past, a future; no promises or pledges bound him to those about him"; it is nihilism which has led him to this self-perception. His crisis is caused by his fundamental problem--"the relationship of himself to himself."[39] He is condemned to be free, for there resided in his heart

> a sharp sense of freedom that had somehow escaped being dulled by intimidating conditions. Cross had never really been tamed. . . . For Cross had had no party, no myths, no tradition, no race, no

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[35]The Outsider, p. 363.

[36]This is Kingley Widmer's term. See his essay "The Existential Darkness: Richard Wright's The Outsider," in Five Black Voices, p. 54.

[37]The Outsider, p. 224.

[38]The Outsider, pp. 339-41.

[39]The Outsider, p. 13.

> soil, no culture, and no ideas--except perhaps the idea that ideas themselves were, at best, dubious.[40]

In other words, his refusal to be defined by ideas--essences, has lead to a consciousness of his own "inhumanness"; he realizes that he has "to become human before he could mingle again with people."[41]

C. Power. The will-to-power is the desire "to be in command of oneself,"[42] and this will to be in command means not to have any masters on the social level. Self-mastery is achieved through negation: the refusal to obey or submit to another man's will, to refuse to be used. Cross will not let himself be used by the Party functionary Hilton, who "was an outsider and was free. But I'm an outsider too, Cross thought musingly. I'll let him use me for what I want to be used for. . . . "[43] Recognizing that it was "not just the exercise of bureaucratic control, but personal power to be wielded directly upon the lives and bodies of others"[44] that motivates the Communists, Cross says to Hilton, before killing him,

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[40]The Outsider, p. 329.

[41]The Outsider, p. 124.

[42]The Outsider, p. 128.

[43]The Outsider, p. 66.

[44]The Outsider, p. 175.

> I might forgive you if you had been going to kill me. But, no; you were going to make me a slave. I would never have been able to draw a free breath as long as I lived if you had had your own way. I'd have suffered, night and day. You would have dominated my consciousness.[45]

Wright tells us that Cross

> had killed Jack Hilton for many reasons: to redeem Bob's betrayal, for the sake of Sarah's indignation, for Eva's deceived heart; but mainly it had been to rid himself of that sense of outrage that Hilton's attitude had evoked in him. Hilton's assumption that he could have made a slave of him.[46]

Men like Hilton "tried to conquer you in terms of total power," and for this reason "you too had to use total power"[47]; the Party does more than enslave, it tries to make you conform to its will. The Nazis "tried to win the loyalty of their subjects by conferring upon them ornate titles, noneconomic rewards of various sorts, and by devising schemes of sport and joy."[48] The Communists' methods were analogous to the methods used by the Nazis; "[t]he heart of communism could not be taught; it had to be learned by living, by participating in its rituals."[49] The present danger lies in the apprehension that

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[45]The Outsider, p. 263.

[46]The Outsider, p. 267.

[47]The Outsider, p. 215.

[48]The Outsider, p. 170.

[49]The Outsider, p. 175.

> once a thorough system of sensual power as a way of life had gotten hold of a man's heart so that it ordered and defined all of his relations, it was bound to codify and arrange all of his life's activities into one organic unity.[50]

The above passage reflects Wright's central thematic preoccupation at the time he wrote The Outsider; so this will be the best place to examine what he meant by the "organic unity" and why he considered it dangerous.

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After the murder of the neo-Fascist Hearndon and the Communist Gil, Cross reads the headline in the paper: DOUBLE TOTALITARIAN MURDER, and he wonders what protection ordinary men have against the fascists and the Communists of the world, since they were both more intelligent than the journalist who had written the report about the murders was. "Did that mean that the future was in the hands of the totalitarians?" Cross asks himself. "And that the shape of that future was in the hands of the totalitarians? And that the shape of the future would be determined by which of these monsters was triumphant. . . ?"[51] Cross wonders if they knew that "the war against individuality and for the

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[50]The Outsider, p. 175.

[51]The Outsider, p. 284.

subjugation of freedom was bound to be won by their side?"[52] What is being expressed here, beyond the explicit assertion of the primacy of the rights of the individual over the rights of the totalitarian state, is a rejection of Hegel, with his belief that individual freedom was social freedom. When it is remembered that the notion of organic unity was also Hegel's, it becomes clear that Wright's anti-communism entailed the repudiation of Marx's Hegelian roots as well.[53] But how precisely does Wright's mouthpiece, Cross Damon, understand the notion of organic unity?

Consider this passage:

> Cross began to see that this systematization of the sensuality of power prevailed, though in a different form, in the so-called capitalist bourgeois world; it was everywhere, in religion as well as in government, and in all art that was worthy of the name. And bourgeois rulers, along with the men of the church, had forged through time and tradition methods for concealing these systems of power under thick layers of legal, institutionalized, ritualized, ideological, and religious trappings. But at the very heart of the system were the knowing and conscious men who wielded power, saying little or nothing of the nature of the black art they practised, the nameless religion by which they lived . . . This vision made reality more meaningful, made what his eyes saw take on coherence and depth [my italics].[54]

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[52]The Outsider, p. 284.

[53]Different philosophic systems, for example, "should be seen not as at war with one another but as 'elements of an organic unity.'" Carried into the realm of Hegel's moral philosophy, the "Nation-State" becomes a "great organic totality." See Lavine, pp. 215, 241. No wonder that Hegel was used (or misused), and is still used, by the totalitarians to justify their ends.

[54]The Outsider, p. 177.

What vision is this which makes "reality more meaningful"? And what reality is Cross talking about? The reality of his existential being-for-itself? Or the reality of being-in-itself? Or is he talking about being-for-others, in Sartre's sense of the term?[55] What is the notion of being-for-others other than a modification of Hegel's theory of the "looking-glass self"?[56] Let us leave these questions aside for the moment and consider what Cross means by his vision of the "systematization of the sensuality of power." Cross talks about the "so-called capitalist bourgeois world" and "ideological and religious trappings," terms which sound vaguely familiar since they are also found in Marx's sociological theory of the base and superstructure.[57] We have been using the terms hegemony and domination throughout this study to refer to the social structures which determine and are determined by human consciousness. Wright's world

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[55]In Part III of Sartre's Being and Nothingness: the world of other conscious beings is a world of being-for-others. See Lavine, p. 376.

[56]This theory embodies the idea that man becomes conscious of himself only as he finds himself reflected in the consciousness of the other. See Lavine, p. 376.

"Each self-consciousness (person) needs the other to establish his own awareness of himself. What precisely is it that each requires from the other? Hegel suggests that it is acknowledgment or recognition." Furthermore, if the "worth of a person is systematically denied--then that person's sense of identity can be utterly destroyed. (The result of this lack of acknowledgment, according to [R. D.] Laing, is schizophrenia)". See Peter Singer, Hegel (Oxford: O. U. P., 1983), p. 59.

Cross, then, may be called the most schizoid of Wright's fictional heroes.

[57]See this thesis' "Introduction," footnote #16.

view here is in opposition to both these social structures, which form the totality constituting his "world."[58] Existentialism, by insisting on the primacy of the conscious being, is, in the words of T. Z. Lavine, "the defender of the human spirit against the oppressive features of mass society, science, philosophy, politics, and organized religion."[59] Now we understand why Wright fears organic unity. For Hegel the notion of organic unity as expounded in his doctrine of organicism

> claims that an organism, as a developing unity of hierarchical and interdependent parts serving the life of the whole, is the model for understanding the human personality, societies and their institutions, philosophy and history.[60]

Hegel's philosophy, like that of Marx, is systematic, and hence viewed with suspicion by self-conscious existentialists as being in bad faith.[61]

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[58]Denoting the writer's "world" (Lebenswelt), as when we talk, for instance, of Balzac's world, Dickens' world and so on.

[59]Lavine, p. 329.

[60]Lavine, p. 217.

[61]"Bad faith wasn't unknown to Cross; not only had he long been guilty of it in his personal relations, but he was convinced that bad faith of some degree was an indigenous part of living." The Outsider, p. 165. Bad faith is self-deception: "to seek escape . . . from freedom and responsibility . . . " See Lavine, p. 361.

It must be stated here that Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity begins with a demolition of Hegel's Idea--the identity of subject and object, the unity of thought and being. See Fernando Molina, p. 7. Our procedure must thus seem incongruous, for it seeks to analyze a thing that resists a Hegelian analysis on principle, so far as the world view in question is existentialism. Wright, however,

Returning now to the "reality" of Cross' vision, we might best start by reviewing Frantz Fanon's discussion of the Negro and Hegel.[62] This approach will have the advantage of addressing the problem of Cross Damon's Negroness. Wright insists that color-consciousness played no role in it [the action], that Cross alone was responsible for it.[63]

> Militating against racial consciousness in him were the general circumstances of his upbringing which had shielded him from the more barbaric forms of white racism; also the insistent claims of his own inner life had made him too concerned with himself to cast his lot wholeheartedly with Negroes in terms of racial struggle. Practically he was with them, but emotionally he was not of them.[64]

But if this were true, asks Margolies, then why would Wright take the trouble to relate "all these instances of

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as will become apparent, is opposed to a "white" organic totality here; thus our approach is not invalidated.

[62]"The Negro and Hegel" is section B of Chapter Seven in Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp. 216-222. This work was originally published a year before The Outsider in the French Peau Noire, Masques Blancs (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1952). Wright's biographer Constance Webb tells us that Wright had read [Dominique] O. Mannoni's Le Psychologie de Colonialisme [from George Padmore's library] before June 4, 1953 [Wright left for the Gold Coast (Ghana) the same year]. See Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1968), p. 326. Fanon also includes references to Mannoni in Peau Noire, Masques Blancs. It is probable then that Wright knew about or had read the master/slave chapter in Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind around the time of the novel's composition. Fanon's letter to Wright is included in Appendix B.

[63]The Outsider, p. 127.

[64]The Outsider, p. 127.

racism?"[65] For example, the ill-treatment meted out to Bob Hunter, and Sarah's angry outbursts?[66] Brignano goes so far as to quote another critic, Morris Beja, who believes that "the overwhelming cause" for Cross' alienation "is, as a matter of fact, his color."[67] Beja is right up to a point; Cross' burden (cross), however, is more than his color, it is his Negroness, since the analogy between physical deformity and psychological deformity is expressly made by Houston on the train from Chicago to New York.[68] "This damned hump," Houston tells Cross,

> has given me more psychological knowledge than all the books I read at the university. My deformity made me free; it put me outside and made me feel as an outsider. It wasn't pleasant; hell, no. At first I felt inferior. But now I have to struggle

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[65]Margolies, p. 134.

[66]"But it's a white man's Party, ain't it?" Sarah says, attacking Bob for being cowed by the Party. She will never kneel before a white priest. "Now, we're in the revolution and the same goddamm white man come along. But he's in the Party now." See The Outsider, p. 168.

[67]Brignano, p. 157.

[68]I am not implying that to be a Negro is to be physically deformed in some way; all I am saying is that the Negro's Negroness has often been a barrier to his social and economic advancement in America, for reasons which Wright has stated elsewhere, e. g., in White Man, Listen! (Garden City, New York: Double Day Anchor Books, 1964), pp. 48-49. Nor am I equating deformity with neurosis; deformity is a spiritual deformity (schizophrenia), if you like. Paradoxically, it is this deformity which turns outsiders into Nietzchean "gods" (overmen). Cross, who knows that "Negroes can be Fascists too," also knows that "the real slaves of the twentieth century are . . . those who are congenitally afraid" and that the "only real enemies of this system are not the rats themselves, but those outsiders who are conscious of the rats who are being controlled." See The Outsider, pp. 315, 316, 336.

> with myself to keep from feeling superior to the people I meet. . . . "[69]

It must be understood, then, that Cross' race is important to an understanding of his dilemma, which is how to be human and Negro.

Now Fanon, taking the cue from Hegel, writes in Black Skin, White Masks[70] that

> [m]an is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed.[71]

Cross' feeling of alienation stems from his dread in which state the world appears as a strange, hideously frightening place. Furthermore, as we have already noted above, this dread has so heightened his sense of life that desire has boiled in him to a degree that has made him afraid. Afraid of what? Of being-in-itself. But then there is born "in one a wild, hot wish to project out upon that alien world the world the one is seeking. This wish is a hunger for power, to be in command of oneself" [my italics].[72] What is this nascent wish to project? The wish to be recognized as

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[69]The Outsider, p. 119.

[70]This work has been cited in footnote #62.

[71]Fanon, pp. 216-217.

[72]The Outsider, p. 128.

a being-for-itself. "In order to win the certainty of oneself," writes Fanon, "the incorporation of the concept of recognition is essential. . . . Each consciousness of self is in quest of absoluteness."[73] Now what happens if this hunger for power is equated with one's wish to be recognized and this wish is opposed? Self-consciousness undergoes the experience of desire, says Fanon, paraphrasing Hegel; it accepts the risk of its life, and consequently it threatens the other in his physical being.[74] As soon as I desire, I am asking to be considered and willing to struggle unto death by risking my life for my freedom. Cross wages this struggle for his freedom, for recognition, for self-mastery, and that is why the Negro Bob Hunter's cringing, slavish attitude before the Party fills Cross with contempt. "Cross knew that Bob would never win. Bob was too scared to act alone; he had to have a master. The Party had sunk its hold deep in Bob's heart and, if Bob left the Party, he would have to find another. . . . "[75] And that is also why, in a sense, Cross kills those who deny him recognition, who seek to enslave him.[76]

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[73]Fanon, p. 217.

[74]Fanon, p. 218.

[75]The Outsider, p. 169.

[76]" . . . he needed those people and could become human only with them. Dimly he realized that his dilemma, though personal, bore the mark of the general." See The Outsider, p. 124.

Cross has killed, established his power and mastery, but then Wright informs us that Cross realizes that "he had been defeated by that which he had sought to destroy. . . . He had become what he had tried to destroy, had taken on the guise of the monster he had slain."[77] What does this realization mean? Cross, the slave, has killed the master; but by this very act of negation has made himself into the master, and now, paradoxically, there is no one to recognize him as such, since the opponent he has subdued is dead. And for the first time he feels guilty,

> not a guilt for his having murdered; it was because he now saw that he held over the life of Eva a godlike power and knowledge that even Gil or the Party had not held. He had killed Gil and Herndon because they had wanted to play god to others and their brutal strivings had struck him as being so utterly obscene that he had torn their lives from them in a moment of supreme conviction that he and he alone was right and that they were eternally wrong.[78]

Cross holds a godlike power over Eva because he now dominates her; love for Cross, as Sartre would have said in this case, becomes a form a sadism;[79] Cross sees Eva as a victim, a slave, and possesses her body.[80] "She was a

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[77]The Outsider, p. 203.

[78]The Outsider, p. 208.

[79]The relationship of love is hopeless according to Sartre, leading to three outcomes: One can become a slave, a masochistic object for the lover; one can become the master of a loved one--sadism; or one can ignore the other and vice versa. See Lavine, p. 380.

[80]Margolies (p. 132) mistakes Cross' love for Eva as a weakness in the novel: "How someone who has so successfully

victim like him; the difference was that he was a willing victim and she was an involuntary one . . . She protested and he said yes. And a world yawned between his yes and her no . . . "[81] Eva, in other words, is a willing slave and the world between his affirmation of mastery and her negation of her self-mastery represents, in Sartre's terms, the impossibility of true love.[82] Cross loves her because he is her master; she has given him the recognition he yearns for. But does he want to be recognized as a Negro?

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purged himself of 'feelings' as Cross can suddenly fall in love is of course another matter. One is left sadly to conclude that even Wright did not understand his main protagonist." Wright's understanding of his hero's sexual desire, however, is deeper than appears on the surface.

Cf. Sartre: Sadism is "the failure of desire; in fact as soon as I seek to take the Other's body, which through my incarnation I have induced to incarnate itself, I break the reciprocity of incarnation, I surpass my body toward its own possibilities, and I orient myself in the direction of sadism. . . . Sadism is the failure of desire, and desire is the failure of sadism. One can get out of the circle only by means of satiation and so-called 'physical possession.' In this a new synthesis of sadism and desire is given. . . . But if pleasure enables us to get out of the circle, this is because it kills both the desire and the sadistic passion without satisfying them." See Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness (New York: Philosophic Library, 1956), pp. 404-405.

[81]The Outsider, p. 186.

[82]Cross voices this understanding in the following passage: "He knew her hurt, but could she ever know his? Was there really no direct bridge between the subjective worlds of people? Was the possibility of communication only a kind of pretense, an arrangement assumed to exist but which really did not? Was the core of the subjective life of each person sealed off absolutely from that of another?" See The Outsider, p. 288.

Here we come to one of the most painful parts of the novel,[83] for Wright tells us that Eva

> was wanting to love him for his being black, and he wanted her love to help him to redeem himself in his own eyes for his crimes! Could he allow her to love him for his color when being a Negro was the least important thing in his life? He closed his eyes and rested his head on her shoulder. Yet he wanted that sensitive heart of hers to be his monitor, to check him from sinking into brutality, from succumbing to cruelty, and she wanted to love him because she thought he was an innocent victim!"[84]

This is a very important passage if we are to arrive at an understanding of Cross' relationship with Eva. On the one hand, we have, quite correctly, the enslavement in love on the part of Eva; by becoming her master, Cross has sunk into brutality, into the cruelty inherent in such master/slave relationships, which he wants to check, to arrest. On the other hand, we have the knowledge that Eva loved him because he was a Negro. We will have to explore this last point further, because it has a direct bearing on Wright's assessment of the relations between white women and Negroes. Eva with her "sensitive heart" is the only artist

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[83]All the more so, perhaps, because this is the first time in his fiction that Wright deals at length with the subject of interracial love. As if for balance, Wright has already brought on stage a white prostitute, Jenny, in Book One: Cross sleeps with her; but he also dumps her. Why? Because she is a whore and a southern whore at that? Perhaps Jenny, a poor white, represents white degradation, just as Eva represents white nobility. "Eva was <u>too</u> good. . . . " [Wright's italics]. See <u>The Outsider</u>, p. 288.

[84]<u>The Outsider</u>, p. 252.

in the The Outsider[85]; she believes "that colored people were caught up in life, healthy, untouched and unspoiled by the cynical world of political deceptions."[86] In other words, Negroes are more than noble savages, they are men of instinct, primitives.[87] Cross, on the contrary, as the above passage indicates, wanted her to love him as a deracinated man, because color is unimportant to him. Eva thus represents white culture and civilization; in contrast, Cross represents her idea [America's idea] of his primitivism.[88]

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[85]Her studio walls are covered with canvases of abstract art; more paintings lie stacked in corners. See The Outsider, p. 180. In her diary of her honeymoon to Paris, the capital of "art" as it were, she expresses her fears that membership in the Party is death to artists. The Outsider, p. 182. N.B.: The other members of her and her husband's circle are by contrast intellectuals, not artists.

[86]The Outsider, p. 208.

[87]Men of instinct are Nietzchean (Dionysian) overmen. The subtext here refers to the stereotype of the New Negro we encountered in our analysis of Native Son in the last chapter--the New Negro overman, seeking through his will power to transform his life by finding his true identity, through a revolution in culture, a "transvaluation of all [white] values." The cult of primitivism was in its heyday in the twenties, when the Negro displaced the American Indian as natural man--mainly, one suspects, because the Negro's apparently unrepressed sexuality could be used as an ideological weapon against Puritanism and the New England School of genteel literature. That Cross responds vaguely to Eva's idea of his primitivism is given in Cross' suggestion to her about their going away together (to Canada, i. e., to nature): "We'll be where the big, blue sky stretches over our heads, with the wind blowing through the high pine trees. . . They tell me that the lakes in the Gatineau are blue and deep and clear. . . . " See The Outsider, p. 284; also p. 251.

[88]From this perspective, the literary ancestors of Cross Damon go back to the romanticization of the Negro in

Frantz Fanon tells us that the white woman, by loving a Negro, proves that the Negro is worthy of white love: " . . . this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged . . . Her love takes me [the Negro] onto the noble road that leads to total realization. . . . I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness" and "grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine."[89] Which is to say, "I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white."[90] Wright tells us that there was

> no racial tone to his [Cross'] reactions; he was just a man, any man who had had an opportunity to flee and had seized upon it. In a way, he was a criminal, not so much because of what he was doing, but because of what he was feeling. It was for much more than merely criminal reasons that he was fleeing to escape his identity, his old hateful consciousness. There was a kind of innocence that made him want to shape for himself the kind of life he felt he wanted, but he knew that that innocence was deeply forbidden. In a debate with himself that went on without words, he asked himself if one had the right to such an attitude. Well, he would see . . . "[91]

What is happening to Cross here? Is he fleeing his old hateful consciousness (Negroness) because he wishes to be white? Let us see.

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the Jazz Age [see the previous note]; the New Negro is reborn here, as it were, as a Negro god. The creed of Negritude likewise serves or served to romanticize the Negro.

[89]From Chapter Three, "The Man of Color and the White Woman," in Frantz Fanon, op. cit., p. 63.

[90]Fanon, p. 63.

[91]The Outsider, p. 78.

It seems clear to Cross at one point that "the crux of the Party's attitude [toward him] was his relationship with Eva."[92] There is more than the question of sexual jealousy involved in the Party's attitude; it is a question of recognition, which question is not lost on the cynical Houston, who knows the game. "No; you didn't kill to get her," he tells Cross; "you didn't have to. You'd want to lead her, remake her, save her, and at bottom you'd be wanting, in doing this, to save yourself. . . . And she was ripe to respond on the same basis; she wanted to help you. . . . "[93] But her tragedy is that she cannot help him on the basis of reciprocity; or, to put it another way, Eva can recognize Cross only as Negro, whereas his wish is to be desperately recognized as white (read, civilized, human as opposed to primitive, subhuman). And when this primary, "white" recognition is withheld from him by Eva, after she realizes that he has lied to her about his name, his identity, his crimes, Cross himself loses his reason for being. Then the "ludicrous nature of his protest" comes to him and he smiles "wryly at his own self-deception."[94] Thus Cross' wish to be white, his ironical protest that he is more than Negro, indeed his abnegation of his Negroness, is rendered in the end absurd. It has been absurd all along. His homicidal crimes in New York proceeded from the desire

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[92]The Outsider, p. 296.

[93]The Outsider, p. 368.

[94]The Outsider, p. 376.

for self-mastery and a contempt for totalitarian domination; his death proceeds from the rejection of his humanity, his putative "whiteness" by the white world. "Men would not give meaning to what he had done! Society would not even look at it, recognize it! That was not fair, wasn't right, just . . . "[95] Cross' attempt to create an alternate world for himself by dissolving his Negroness has led to his turning into a monster. Eventually, even his sounding-board, the perspicacious Houston, turns away from him, denying him the acknowledgment he seeks; pardons him his crime of trying to be white, to be a man.[96] But Cross, paradoxically, has by then become so "white," so deracinated, that he is already "dead." The bullet in his back at the park ends his physical life; in essentialist (eidetic) terms, however, he has killed himself, committed moral suicide.

Fanon's use of Hegelian theory then provides a useful way of looking at the Negroness of Cross, given the historical fact of American slavery. It also, since Wright has imbued in him human qualities, sheds light on Cross' quest for identity and freedom. Cross' last words can be interpreted as a plea to Negroes to be human in their own

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[95]The Outsider, p. 376.

[96]" . . . and his prop was gone. . . . The thing he had been fighting had turned its face from him as though he was no longer worthy of having an opponent and this rejection was a judgment so inhuman that he could not bear to think of it." See The Outsider, p. 376.

terms, not the terms of others.[97] His crime, "in essence" lies in the knowledge that he has "cynically scorned, wantonly violated every commitment that civilized men owe, in terms of common honesty and sacred honor, to those with whom they live."[98] But society commits such crimes every day against the underprivileged; rather, it only covers its crimes under the guise of legality. Cross, on one level, has only too well followed the footsteps of one American character type, the egotistic individual, who is heroic precisely because he, without being caught, violates every commitment that civilized men owe to those [Negroes, women] they live with. Wright's protest here is against both the hegemony and the domination. At another level, Cross possesses double vision; he is both inside and outside the hegemony.[99] He is "white" to the extent that he is inside; he is Negro to the extent that he is outside. Neither of these situations can lead to freedom. Cross wishes to be white, to be as much inside as possible, even if it means the denial of his Negroness. But his insider status, ironically, leads to even greater crimes: it is when he tries to be civilized in the white sense that he is the most inhuman. He fulfills what some whites have been saying,

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[97]" . . . Man is all we've got. . . . " See The Outsider, p. 383.

[98]The Outsider, p. 327.

[99]These are the terms Houston uses in his discussion with Cross about the Negro problem. See The Outsider, p. 82.

prophesizing about the Negro all along, that he is not civilized.

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The Outsider has been called a novel of ideas,[100] and since a novel of ideas must have a thesis, let us state the thesis first, before we go on to spell out its message and process its theme. In a paraphrase of Margolies', The Outsider's thesis may be stated thus: Because true freedom is but another expression of the will-to-power, it is impossible to realize without impinging on the freedom or humanity of others.[101] The significant-structure comes close: Power is the violent mastery of alienation. What does this mean, precisely? What is the message? Since man is divided against himself in a reified society, the only way to change this state of affairs is through the assumption of power? No. The message is the opposite of this; it can put into a slogan: Denounce white power! Announce your humanity! Any attempt for the Negro to assume power in America is futile; so, forget it. Turn elsewhere; [and by implication] look back, or look up, to Africa.

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[100]The Outsider is "a novel in which 'ideas' dominate plot, character, even prose style. Indeed, the plot exists, as we have seen, as a kind of working out of Cross' philosophy of life." See Margolies, p. 137.

[101]Margolies, p. 122.

Forget America; free the world first; America will only be free when the third world is free--and so on to the Bandung Conference and Ghana.[102]

The grand theme of the novel follows thus: Cross, a Negro, tries to be white, and in the process realizes that he cannot be white, that a Negro cannot wish to be white. His criminal status stems from this wish; the Negro in him protests, protests against the values of the hegemony. Again, the white world will only accept him if he aspires to whiteness, "passes" as white. But to be white he has to be the master, for he can of course never be white while he is a "slave." Mastery the domination will not tolerate. The political parties of the white man are there to prevent it; they seek to subject his will to their domination. A "struggle unto death" ensues; Cross loses--he was "simply too damned human,"[103] i. e., too Negro; but he has been there, got as white as a Negro possibly can. Man is nothing in particular.[104] Precisely: white man is "nothing in particular."[105] What appears to be an outrageous, perhaps even a preposterous, conclusion is not so outrageous if we

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[102]The first Afro-Asian summit conference (of the newly emerging nations of Africa and Asia) was held in Bandung, Indonesia, to discuss colonialism and racism. Wright traveled there in 1955; his trip to Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) was in 1953.

[103]The Outsider, p. 40.

[104]This is Cross' line; see The Outsider, pp. 121, 366.

[105]"Man is a promise that he must never break. . . . " The Outsider, p. 383; i. e., the Negro must never break the promise to himself to be a Negro [man].

return to the Hegelian master/slave metaphor we have been using thus far.

We have left the master and the slave locked in a desperate struggle without a clear-cut winner. How can we get out of this impasse? Is there no exit? Is freedom an impossibility in The Outsider?[106] Let us turn again to Hegel, his logic, for an answer. "Logic," Wright tells us, "was guiding his [Cross'] sense of direction."[107] Let us just suppose that this logic was Hegel's dialectical logic. What we have then is the thesis-antithesis opposition in the master and slave, which condition, as we expect, has to at some point resolve itself to a synthesis, a new equilibrium. To quote again from Lavine:

> First, the master is dependent on the slave's recognition of him as master . . . Second, the slave has as his mirror another self who is an independent person, while the master . . . has as his mirror only a dependent slave-self to relate to . . . [108]

However, the third and most important point is that though the master forces the slave to labor for him, the slave

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[106]Cf. Margolies, p. 137: "In The Outsider Wright is saying that freedom is an impossibility; that man will ever be a prey to his compulsions; that in seeking his freedom man becomes an enslaver of others. But along with the pessimism there exists a germ of hope. In rejecting Communism years before Wright had very nearly despaired of mass social action as a means of discovering freedom. Nonetheless his interests and activities in nationalist movements are evidence that Wright had not given up altogether."

[107]The Outsider, p. 166.

[108]Lavine, p. 222.

eventually comes to recognize himself in the products of his own labor and thereby frees himself from the master's power. It is through his creative labor that the slave attains self-consciousness and independence; and this, analogously we might say, is exactly what has happened to Negro literature at the present time. The writers governed by the Black Esthetic[109] have freed themselves by concentrating on their own creative labor, by telling the master [the white literary establishment] to get lost, thereby transcending dialectically the limits of the Negro literature of protest.[110] From this perspective, The Outsider may be

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[109]The Black Esthetic can best be described by its goals; its task is to work toward "redefining the definitions, creating new myths, symbols, and images, articulating new values, and recording the progress of a great people from social and political awareness to consciousness of their historical importance as a people and as a nation within a nation. . . . " See Addison Gayle, Jr., The Way of the New World (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1976), p. xx.

Cf. Hegel: The basic drive of self-consciousness "can be expressed positively as the attempt to have only oneself for an object and thereby to achieve autonomy or self-sufficiency. It can also be expressed negatively as the attempt to negate the external world and thus become independent of it." See Ivan Soll, An Introduction to Hegel's Metaphysics (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 28.

[110]"He [the black writer] has given up the futile practice of speaking to whites, and has begun to speak to his brothers." See The Way of the New World, p. xxi.

Similarly, the white writer [and critic], recognizing this literary manumission, also turns away. Eldridge Cleaver's writing, for example, "remains in some profound sense not subject to correction or emendation or, most certainly, approval or rejection by those of us who are not black." See Richard Gilman, "White Standards and Negro Writing," in The Black American Writer, Volume I: Fiction, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 40.

considered a seminal work in the history of Negro literature. It represented tne real turning point, a genuine critical prolepsis, realized by the remarkable penetration of Richard Wright.

IV. The Death of the Wrightian Protest Novel

Is The Outsider, then, a rejection of existentialism? Brignano thinks so;[1] and so does Widmer. But Widmer is more cautious: "Wright's ambiguous negation of the existential quest (existential anti-existentialism) reveals . . . a peculiarly American vantage point."[2] This vantage point for Wright was determined by his Negroness; and while it is true that Wright did lose interest in existentialism after he finished The Outsider (Savage Holiday, his next novel, for example, evidences an interest in Freudianism),[3] the important point is that Wright's existentialism was "black." It was a manifestation of the alienation and tragic despair carried by the Negro in the innermost recesses of his collective consciousness since the brutal uprooting of his

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[1]See Brignano, p. 163.

[2]See Widmer, p. 54.

[3]Wright was "so much an American with very deep roots in Southern Negro life that the effort of the Sartre crowd to take Dick over was bound to fail. Although he was definitely influenced by them over a period of two or three years it was not lasting, it really didn't take." Arna Bontemps in "Reflections on Richard Wright: A Symposium on an Exiled Native Son," in Five Black Writers, p. 67.

soul from Africa.[4] Thus the problem of how the Negro can be free in America is explored in The Outsider in black existential terms. On the other hand, in Native Son and Lawd Today, this problem is explored in social terms and in personal terms respectively; and the structures of these novels may be schematized as follows:

	Lawd Today	Native Son	The Outsider
A.	Violence	Violence	Violence
B.	Alienation	Alienation	Alienation
C.	Degradation	Struggle	Power

That violence and alienation were part of the Negro experience during Wright's lifetime does not merit commentary. The C structures, however, do; it is through them that the unity of the works may be found.[5] To begin with, we can state in summary fashion that Lawd Today is about the degradation of Negro life in the ghetto (self-hate

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[4]Cf. Margolies (p. 6): Wright's existentialism "was not an intellectually 'learned' process (although he had been reading Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard in the thirties) but rather the lived experiences of his growing years." Further see Darrell Rhea Shreve, Jr., "The Fact of Blackness: Black Existentialism in Richard Wright's Major Fiction" (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1976).

[5]Violence and alienation, as reflections of the social conditions of the race in the works, correspond on the level of content; hence are less significant. A non-artistic work such as a sociological study of the urban ghetto life, for example, would be just as valuable from the point of view of comprehension (understanding). Goldmann makes a point of distinction between comprehension and explanation, which may serve us here. See his Towards a Sociology of the Novel, p. 162.

the motive)[6]; that Native Son is about the Negro's struggle against oppression (the white man's law); that The Outsider is about power (the immediate motive being the lack of recognition of the Negro qua Negro). The enumeration of themes is not so important, however, as is the remarkable pattern of the C structures, which takes on the progression of the consciousness of freedom for the Negro in America.[7] Wright's world views, seen as crystallizations of the possible consciousness of his race, changed synchronously with the shift in the C structures, from personalism, to communism, to existentialism. But world view in Native Son is undermined by the actual consciousness synthesized in the ideology of nationalism. Lawd Today is different. It does not fit the paradigm established by Native Son. Why this is so lies in Lawd Today's irony.[8] Personalism is in

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[6]See Appendix C for the Wright's views on self-hatred and on the problem of recognition.

[7]In the Hegelian spirit, namely: "The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom." From his Introduction to the Philosophy of History; see Peter Singer, Hegel, p. 11. Similarly (stretching the analogy to the limit): The history of the Negro novel is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom for the Negro in America. N. B.: Here we come close to understanding what Wright was about, to the one, unitary hypothesis that can explain all of Wright's work; namely, POWER (freedom) for the Negro can only be achieved through STRUGGLE (social and moral) against DEGRADATION (dehumanization).

[8]On irony in the radical novel (of the thirties), cf. Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States, p. 220: "Actually the chief ingredient of the proletarian writers' sensibility was a predilection for irony, that age-old defense developed by man to meet the disparity between what is and what ought to be. . . . irony, as always, was a method of attack too." Lawd Today, as we have seen in

contradiction as much with ideology as it is with a competing world view of atheistic social humanism masquerading as communism! Lawd Today is a transitional work[9]; and if it seems more satisfying artistically than Native Son, that is because it is more coherent (its world view subverts ideology), because "the greatest literary works are precisely those which realize a world-view at its most coherent and most adequate, its highest possible level."[10] From the point of view of esthetic unity, however, it is a failure. Why? Because personalism cannot be related adequately to the structure of degradation in the work.

A world view, we have indicated, gives a work its coherence; a significant structure gives it its unity. In Native Son, for example, communism accounts for its

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Chapter I, fails as a proletarian novel; but it comes closer than Native Son or The Outsider to being one, from the point of view of style.

[9]Wright's hesitation to publish it in the thirties was no doubt due to the non-straitforward treatment of communism in the book, a flaw Party functionaries would have denounced as counter-revolutionary. Wright's personalism at this time must of course have been conditioned by the sense of release and personal freedom he felt in the North after leaving the South; the former integrationist line of the Party may also have been a factor. In any case, what seems clear is that the communism in the novel is "raw"; Wright is still learning, testing the ground of dialectical materialism as it were; he is a socialist to be sure, but his socialism is of the bourgeois variety. Socialists and communists have in common their loathing of capitalism; they differ in the means of achieving their ends.

[10]See Raymond Williams, Introduction to Racine by Lucien Goldmann (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Coop, 1981), p. xvii. This idea is Williams' paraphrase of Goldmann.

coherence, and struggle for its unity; at the same time struggle (i. e., class-struggle) is an elemental structure of communism itself. Similarly in The Outsider, existentialism and power (the Nietzchean will-to) interpenetrate as correlates. In Lawd Today, on the other hand, personalism as an optimistic, positive creed deserves a structure, say, of sacrifice, a structure of the possible consciousness of the race, like struggle and power are in their respective totalities (works). Degradation is not a satisfactory objective correlative of personalism; it is its very antithesis, for the fight against the degradation of the human being to the status of an object, a thing, to the level where man's labor (his essence) becomes a commodity in the market economy, is one of the central missions of personalism [Mounier's version at least]. It is in the failure to realize such a connection, as we have pointed out, that the major structural fault of Lawd Today lies. Degradation is a reflection of the actual social condition of northern ghetto Negroes; personalism is a structure of their possible consciousness, insofar as personalism affirms one's personal freedom.[11] Lawd Today thus remains an

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[11]" . . . man is altogether and always free within himself whenever he wants to do so. Such freedom remains to the convict, even at the moment when he seems to be wholly subjected and humliated." Again: "To exist personally means also, and not seldom, knowing how to say no, to protest, to break away" [my italics]. See Emmanuel Mounier, Personalism, pp. 47, 59. Personalism accepts the basic tenets of Christianity as valid; it is also for the "unity of mankind." Christianity has been a powerful unifying force among Negroes [especially in the South].

artistic failure from the point of view of unity; it is coherent but not unified, whereas, Native Son is unified but not coherent, because world view cannot subsume ideology in Native Son. The Outsider is both unified and coherent, because its existentialism is black, enfolding ideology with its mantle of darkness. We can tabulate our findings as follows:

Novel	Coherence	Unity
Lawd Today	Yes	No
Native Son	No	Yes
The Outsider	Yes	Yes

A successful creative work, however, must possess both coherence and unity, a harmonization, or identity of significant-form with significant-structure: this is where the artistic weakness of the first two novels lies.

It remains now to deal with the question of the significance of Wright.

ii

The deficiencies of the radical novel of the thirties have been noted by Walter B. Rideout as,

> the infatuation with violence for its own sake, the melodramatic confrontations, the oversimplification, and therefore falsification, of characters, the recurrence of stereotyped motifs, the "wish-fulfillment" endings, the

> tendency generally to tamper with the logic of the novel's own structure of relationships.[12]

Yet at the same time Rideout asserts that the radical novel

> shares in the value of the whole, the value of protest against the still limited American democracy that is and of affirmation of the democracy that can be. . . . Whether wrong-headed or right, protest will always be essential in order to stir our civilization into self-awareness and thus prevent it from stiffening into an inhuman immobility.[13]

While sharing some of the deficiences of the radical novel, Lawd Today, Native Son, and The Outsider also follow the dominant tendency of realism established in American fiction since the twenties.[14] Native Son and The Outsider employ traditional realist techniques in their rendering of objective reality; while Lawd Today--that would-be proletarian novel--uses such familiar realist devices as

> the attempted reproduction of actual speech sounds or rhythms in the dialogue, careful analyses of the physical appearance of characters, and exactly detailed descriptions of settings or events. The influence of reportorial journalism is evident

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[12]Rideout, p. 286.

[13]Rideout, p. 289. Rideout, incidentally, sees Native Son as one of the best novels of the 1940s: "The end of [Native Son] comes close to being a tract, but it is saved by the emotional force of its terrible warning." See Rideout, p. 261.

[14]"Since the writers of the twenties had firmly established realism as the dominant tendency in American fiction, it is actually not surprising that a very large majority of proletarian novels use traditional realist forms and techniques. . . . but true naturalistic novels are infrequent among the dominant realist trend" [my italics]. See Rideout, pp. 208, 210.

> frequently in the desire to "get all the facts down"--and sometimes in the flatness with which they are got down. One characteristic device is the description, as Michael Gold had prophesied, of industrial or manual processes.[15]

The manual process of mail-sorting is described in exact detail in Lawd Today to the point of boredom; but though the narrative pace slows down in these passages, it picks up again in the use of stacatto Negro rhythms of speech in the dialogue.

Besides sharing the literary convention of realism with the radical novel, Lawd Today, Native Son, and The Outsider also share with it the urge to stir American civilization "into self-awareness and thus prevent it from stiffening into an inhuman immobility" [Rideout]. But this does not mean that they are addressed solely to whites. Although Wright said that "one of the most powerful things that could be done to help solve the race question" was to make "what Negroes experienced known to the American people,"[16] he never advocated that Negroes hand over their right to self-determination to the whites.[17] On the contrary, both Native Son and The Outsider evidence a recognition of power; while in the latter novel--almost an apotheosis of the protest novel itself, nothing is left of white civilization after

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[15]Rideout, p. 209.

[16]See Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography, p. 222.

[17]This is one charge leveled against Wright--basically that he was not nationalistic enough--by Addison Gayle Jr., in The Way of the New World, p. xxi.

Wright is done with it.[18] The message of The Outsider serves as an exhortation to Negroes to repudiate the inauthentic values of the hegemony; to embrace them would be equivalent to becoming a slave again. In this way, Wright not only foreshadows the cultural nationalism of contemporary Negro writers, he also reaches out to the world, to the global context of Africa and Asia, where colonial hegemonies had yet to be overcome. His advice to the tragic elites of the emerging independent nations may be summarized thus: Do as the outsider does, reject white civilization, though not industrialization and progress, but above all, try to establish an alternate hegemony, for there is no escape from dehumanization, from violence and alienation, within the existing model of the West. The international importance of The Outsider lies in this broader political meaning of Cross Damon's quest; hence its neglect by the Black estheticians is unfortunate.[19]

But to return to Rideout. Implicit in his comments are two kinds of protest, which, applied to the case of the Negro protest novel, can be outlined as follows. The first kind of protest, waged by bourgeois Negro writers, seeks redress for social wrongs and aims to reform the system

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[18]One might even go so far as to suggest, given the barbs in the novel against totalitarianism, that Wright sensed the impending danger to the freedom of the Negro inherent in the formation of the so-called military-industrial complex in America after the war.

[19]Addison Gayle, Jr., for example, ignores the novel completely in his The Way of the New World, subtitled "The Black Novel in America."

(i. e., the hegemony). The second kind of protest, by non-bourgeois writers, seeks not reform, but the overthrow of the capitalist hegemony by revolutionary means. We have already seen how the protest in Lawd Today was against the hegemony; in Native Son, in the main, against the domination; and in The Outsider, against both the hegemony and the domination. Thus, what we will now call the Wrightian protest novel, to differentiate it from the bourgeois Negro protest novel, clearly employs the second kind of protest, more so perhaps because Wright's class origins were non-bourgeois. But there is another point upon which the Wrightian protest novel differs from the "raceless" protest novel (i. e., the radical novel in Rideout's definition), in that in the latter there are two Americas--the rich and the poor; whereas, in the Wrightian protest novel there are four Americas--the rich and the poor, and the white and the Negro. This double-vision, or schism as Wright calls it,[20] is reflected in the problematic status of his fictional heroes, who are all the more problematic because they are opposed to the inauthentic values of the white bourgeois world. The class origins of

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[20]"Being a Negro living in a white Western, Christian society, I've never been allowed to blend, in a natural and healthy manner, with the culture and civilization of the West. This contradiction of being both Western and a man of color creates a psychological distance, so to speak, between me and my environment. . . . And my critical attitude and detachment are born of my position. I and my environment are one, but that oneness has in it, at its very core, an abiding schism." See Wright, "Tradition and Industrialization," in White Man, Listen! (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1964), pp. 48-49.

Jake Jackson, Bigger Thomas, and Cross Damon are non-bourgeois; and though it is true that Jake has bourgeois aspirations and Cross comes close to being a declassed intellectual, neither of them can be said to belong to the respectable Negro middle-class community. Bigger, for example, has even made the migration from the South to the North, as has Jake. But is Jake an anti-hero, i. e., a passive hero? I think not for three reasons.

First, the literary device of irony overturns for the reader Jake's blind acceptance of hegemonic values. Second, the novel stays within the bounds of the realist tradition; environmental determinism is a force but it is not overwhelming to the extent that it is in the naturalistic [Zolaesque] novel. Third, individualism is subverted by the world view of personalism.[21] Jake is seen as a person, a human being, not as an abstracted idea of a human being; he is alienated and violent but also warm in his friendships, humorous in his jokes, and melancholy in the lyricism with which he recalls the beauty of the southern countryside and

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[21]Personalism is against the political theory of individualism. "The self-reflective movement which constitues 'the individual' contributes to the maintenance of the human shape. But the person is only growing in so far as he is continually purifying himself from the individual within himself." See Mounier, p. 19. Likewise, we might say that Wright's Negroness was the self-reflective movement that constituted his individuality. But he could become a "person" (i. e., human) only to the extent that he purified himself of his individualizing Negroness. Thus personalism shows up its liberal, integrationist thrust, and ideology is overcome in Lawd Today. It may be noted that communism is also against individualism, which it sees as an excuse for selfishness, i. e., the exploitation of others for private gain.

the sense of wholeness he felt there, in his childhood, among his folk.[22] "Estrangement from nature," writes Lukacs, "the modern sentimental attitude to nature, is only a projection of man's experience of his self-made environment as a prison instead of a parental home."[23] This parental home was Africa, away from the prison of slavery; the nostalgia for nature is in reality a longing for community, an expression of, in Lukacs' sublime phrase, the "transcendental homelessness"[24] of the hero. For the "inner form" (significant-form in this thesis) of the [classic realist] novel can be understood

> as the process of the problematic individual's journeying towards himself, the road from dull captivity within a merely present reality--a reality that is heterogenous in itself and meaningless to the individual--towards clear self-recognition.[25]

But this sense of wholeness lost is also one of the basic characteristics of the bourgeois world, with its "medley of manufactured goods," according to Hegel, its division of labor, which separates men from a living contact

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[22]"In Lawd Today, 12 Million Black Voices, Black Boy, and The Long Dream, as well as Uncle Tom's Children, Wright's prose grows lyrical, sometimes floridly so, when he depicts Southern rural pleasures and scenes. Often, of course, he is merely heightening the contrast with the racial violence that occurs in these settings, but the rural attachment is real" [my italics]. See Kinnamon, p. 100.

[23]The Theory of the Novel, p. 64.

[24]The Theory of the Novel, p. 61.

[25]The Theory of the Novel, p. 80.

with nature and with other men.[26] Embodying the contradiction between the epic "poetry of the heart" and "the prose of external conditions antagonistic to it," the novel is an expression of the mundane bourgeois world reflecting the alienation and loss of wholeness implied in the movement from a land-based society to a money-based society.[27] The Great Migration was such a movement for the Negroes, and the fragmentation of the sense of community (in spite of the fact of barbarous racial oppression) implicit in their migration to the industrialized North formed the social preconditions for the historic rise of the Negro novel of realism in this century rather than in the last.[28] Wright, himself part of this massive historical transformation, straddled two epochs, assimilating to himself the entire history of the modern Negro novel, suggesting a coincidence of his canon with Goldmann's typology of the twentieth-century novel thus: 1) the growth of monopolies and colonial expansion (1880-1914) [Uncle Tom's Children; The Long Dream];[29] 2) crisis capitalism (1918-1939) [Lawd Today; Native Son]; and 3) consumer

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[26]Alan Swingewood, The Novel and Revolution, p. 6.

[27]The Novel and Revolution, p. 7.

[28]"The novel form emerges as a major literary genre in societies characterized by industrial capital, urbanism and a fluid-class system." See The Novel and Revolution, p. 3.

[29]This approximate fit can be made if one accepts a premise about a situation of "domestic colonialism" in America.

capitalism (1939 onwards) [The Outsider; Eight Men].[30] Viewing these periods as phases in the alienation of the Negro writer, we can comprehend the third phase as that of the greatest alienation, from the sense of wholeness he has lost, and which he tries to recapture in the novel, but which escapes him, because of the inherent contradiction within the novel form itself.

iii

In conclusion we might construct the paradigm of the Wrightian protest novel following the general criteria outlined below:

1) a preference for realism, which can be experimental in its literary technique.
2) a doubly problematic hero, (alienated on account of both his race and his class), who can be from any minority group, but who must be conscious of his or her race or ethnicity.
3) a radical attack on the hegemony, regardless of place or geography--North, South, West, etc.
4) a contradiction between word view and ideology, which remains unresolved.

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[30]See Towards a Sociology of the Novel, pp. 168-169; also see The Novel and Revolution, p. 28.

Native Son fulfills these criteria; Lawd Today does not--it remains a Negro protest novel since it dissolves the contradiction between world view and ideology (point 4 above). This unresolved contradiction, however, destroys the Wrightian protest novel's esthetic coherence, which can only be realized when world view transfuses the entire work. But coherence cannot be realized under the present circumstances; it can only be realized when the Negro writer creates an alternate hegemony for himself in America, and negates cultural dualism. This is the ultimate significance of The Outsider. But since the end of dualism is the discovery of wholeness, The Outsider proclaims the death of the Wrightian protest novel.

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Appendix A

On Goldmann's method:

> One sets out with the hypothesis that one may gather a number of facts into a structural unity, one tries to establish between these facts the maximum number of comprehensive and explanatory relations by trying also to include in them other facts that seem alien to the structure that one is uncovering; in this way, one ends up by eliminating some of the facts with which one set out, adding others, and modifying the initial hypothesis; one repeats this operation by successive approximations until one arrives (this, at least, is the ideal, which is reached to a greater or lesser degree according to the case) at a structural hypothesis that can account for a perfectly coherent set of facts.

See Toward a Sociology of the Novel, pp. 161-162.

Appendix B

Docteur Frantz Fanon

Hôpital Psychiatrique de Saint-Alban

(Lozère)

Saint Alban, 6 January 1953

Dear Sir,

I apologize for the freedom I take in writing to you. Alioune Diop, the editor of Presence Africane, was kind enough to give me your address. I am working on a study bearing on the human breadth of your works.

Of your work I have Native Son, Black Boy, Twelve Million Black Voices, Uncle Tom's Children which I have ordered (I do not know whether the book is available in France), two short stories published, one in Les Temps Modernes, the other in Presence Africaine.

Eager to circumscribe in the most complete way the breadth of your message, I'd greatly appreciate your letting me know the title of those works I might be ignorant of.

My name must be unknown to you. I have written an essay Black Skin, White Masks which has been published by Le Seuil, in which I intended to show the systematic misunderstanding between Whites and Blacks.

Hoping to hear from you, I am, very sincerely yours,

s/Frantz Fanon

[Printed in Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives, eds. David Ray and Robert M. Farnsworth (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), p. 150].

Appendix C

On self-hatred:

> "Hated by whites and being an organic part of the culture that hated him, the black man grew in turn to hate in himself that which others hated in him."

See Wright, "The Man Who Went to Chicago," in The Black Experience: An Anthology of American Literature for the 1970's, ed. Francis E. Kearns (New York: Viking Press, 1970), p. 455.

On the problem of recognition [from his reading of William James]:

> "No more fiendish punishment could be devised . . . than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke . . . and acted as if we were non-existent things a kind of rage would ere long well up in us, from which the cruelest body tortures would be a relief, for these would make us feel that, however bad our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth to be unworthy of affection at all."

See Wright, Introduction to Black Metropolis, by Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946), p. xxxii.