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WRITERS IN PARIS AFTER WORLD WAR II.

The City University of New York, Ph.D., 1975
History, modern

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ALIENATION AND EXPATRIATION:
AFRO-AMERICAN WRITERS IN PARIS AFTER WORLD WAR II
by

NINA KRESSNER COBB

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
Faculty in History in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doc-
tor of Philosophy, The City University of
New York.

1975

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

9 January 1975
date

April 8, 1975
date

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.
Chairman of Examining Committee

John H. H. H.
Executive Officer

Irving Haeberle
Michael Wesz

Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Because a dissertation is often the first serious piece of research and writing of a young scholar, its author may require encouragement and sympathetic advice. In this respect, my adviser, Arthur Schlesinger, jr., was most helpful. His criticism, always perceptive, was also gentle and constructive. I should also like to thank Michael Wreszin for a provocative course that first led me to this study, for his unflagging enthusiasm when I was seized by doubts, and finally for his valuable criticism. Irving Howe was also a source of encouragement at the beginning of this project and provided a sensitive perspective on the subject.

All scholarship is dependent on the work and cooperation of other scholars and this study is no exception. Without the outstanding research of Michel Fabre, this dissertation could not have been written. He generously shared his expertise with me, permitting me to read his own thesis before it was published and allowing me access, with the permission of Mrs. Ellen Wright, to the Wright correspondence that he and Edward Margolies collected over many years. Above all, Michel Fabre and his wife Geneviève graciously opened their home to me while I was in Paris, thus alleviating some of the loneliness that is inevitable when one is alone in a foreign country. I

should also like to thank Edward Margolies for his help and valuable advice.

A Ford Foundation grant in Ethnic Studies made much of this research possible. I am most grateful to Chester Himes for talking with me at length and for his hospitality. I would also like to thank Samuel Tabbat for listening patiently, for his help and for his insight into intellectual and psychological questions. I am particularly indebted to Myrna Engelmeyer who was most generous with her time and her wisdom. I would also like to thank Nancy Frieden, Gaye Tuchman, and Sheila Kaplan. My greatest debt is to my husband Peter, a constant source of critical assistance and reassurance.

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CHAPTER I

In a symposium on America and the intellectual in 1952, the Partisan Review proclaimed that "most writers no longer accept alienation as the writer's fate in America."¹ This conclusion was an elaboration of an earlier statement made by Philip Rahv, a founder and long-time editor of the journal. World War II had ended "both the theory and practice of expatriation" according to Rahv.

For in a Europe shaken loose from its old foundations and chaotically moving toward a new and unknown future, there is plainly no room for Americans seeking to recapture the past or to discover a secure basis for the creative life.²

Rahv read this obituary notice over a practice that had begun in earnest for Americans after the Civil War. In earlier years Americans had gone to Europe on patriotic missions, intent on returning with new skills to enrich their native land. George Ticknor, George Bancroft, and Edward Everett had attended German universities in order to bring back new methods of scholarship in the early nineteenth century. The same was true of American artists who went to Italy. But in the second half of the nineteenth century,

¹"Our Country and Our Culture," XIX (May-June 1952), p. 282. Norman Mailer was the only one to dissent from this position.

²The Discovery of Europe (New York, 1947), p. xix.

when a burgeoning industrialism spawned the crassness and philistinism of the Gilded Age, Europe beckoned the American, as Washington Irving had predicted, with

the charms of storied and poetical associations . . .
the masterpieces of art, the refinements of highly
cultivated society, the quaint peculiarities of ancient
and local custom . . . [and] the accumulated treasures
of age. . . .¹

After the Civil War, American expatriates were drawn primarily to England in search of their historical identity, though a few artists and writers went to Italy to recapture the glories of classical civilization. America's origins were inextricably linked to European civilization and Americans were still troubled by the meaning of their national identity. Perhaps no one was as obsessed with this dilemma as Henry James, novelist and expatriate. In The Passionate Pilgrim, James wrote of the problem that Europe posed. He described the

ambiguity of his attempt to re-attach himself to the old soil--an ambiguity the source of which is nothing less than doubt of his true historical identity. Now a doubt of that sort is at once creative and inhibitive. If it lifts the individual out of his national mold, thus weakening his capacity for simple adaptation, it on the other hand intensifies and refines his powers of memory and appreciation, his consciousness of origins, of the intermixture of past and present and of the values gained as well as those irretrievably lost in the process of construction of a new civilization.²

¹Washington Irving, Sketch Book, quoted in Rahv, The Discovery Of Europe, p. xiv.

²Rahv, pp. xiv, xv.

Although Paris had long been considered the world's cultural capital, it was not until after still another war that it became a magnet for American expatriates. In the 1920s the creative freedom associated with Paris attracted American artists and men of letters. This shift of interest from London and Rome to Paris seemed to be in part a response to internal conditions within the United States at the time. The "Lost Generation" left America to escape Prohibition, the excesses of puritanism, and the conformity of the era of normalcy. England was equated with puritanism and Paris with bohemianism. Americans headed for Paris "to think, drink, write, publish, discover America, and follow the dollar."¹ According to a recent scholarly work, their sojourn was an expression of cultural criticism.²

By the end of the decade most American expatriates returned home. The Depression jolted America out of complacency. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal made the American man of letters feel more welcome in America. The philistinism that Henry James had so deplored in 1879 seemed to have been replaced by a greater respect for the arts and the intellect. The passage of time had blunted the criticism America had no history or traditions.

¹Joseph Barry, "Americans in Paris--The More they Change . . ." New York Times Magazine, August 15, 1948, p. 18.

²Warren Susman, "Pilgrimage to Paris: The Backgrounds of American Expatriation, 1920-1934," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1957), *passim*.

In the eyes of many intellectuals, World War II had reversed Europe's traditional domination in the world of art and literature. This perception was symbolically rooted in the fall of France in 1940, betokening an end of an era.¹ And as a haven for a community of international political refugees, America acquired new intellectual and artistic vigor.² After World War II, New York became the capital of the avant garde. Europe came to be seen as a seedbed of ideological excess, strengthening America's tendency to associate the continent with the sins of the past. Nazism and Fascism were the excrescences of a decaying society. Even Communism, once the repository for the left-wing intellectual's hope for the future, had been much discredited by the Moscow Trials and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. With the onset of the Cold War, American intellectuals rallied to defend the United States. Expatriation was unthinkable. Sources as diverse as Time and the Partisan Review proclaimed the reconciliation between America and her artists and intellectuals.³

But if the post-war era brought about a rapprochement

¹Harold Rosenberg, "On the fall of Paris," Partisan Review, VII (November-December 1940), p. 448.

²See Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn (ed.) The Intellectual Migration; Europe and America 1930-1960 (Cambridge, Mass., 1969).

³"America and the Intellectual: The Reconciliation," Time, June 11, 1956, pp. 65-70.

between the United States and its white men of letters, many black writers felt themselves still on the outside. The aftermath of World War II was as profoundly disillusioning for black authors as the "war to make the world safe for democracy" had been for white artists and intellectuals. In fact, nine Negro authors expatriated themselves after World War II. While William Demby, Willard Motley, and Julian Mayfield went to Rome, Mexico, and Ghana respectively, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, James Baldwin, William Gardner Smith, Richard Gibson, and Frank Yerby went to France.

In this dissertation, we are concerned with the three major writers who went to Paris after World War II, Wright, Himes and Baldwin. Wright's Native Son (1940) was the first novel by an Afro-American to become a best-seller and a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. And it shattered America's complacency about the dark stranger living in her midst. Wright left America for Paris in 1947, the first black author to do so. His example proved to be very influential.

James Baldwin, a twenty-four year old fledgling novelist, followed Wright to Paris in 1948. At first a protégé of Wright's, Baldwin broke away from Wright's school of protest literature, distinguishing himself in a less militant literary style and as a master of the art of the essay. After the publication of Go Tell It On The Mountain (1953), Baldwin was recognized as the most important young

Negro writer to emerge in the 1950s.¹ Sometime later Baldwin took up Wright's mantle of spokesman for Afro-Americans despite a much-publicized reluctance to assume such a role.

In 1953 Chester Himes, at the age of forty-five, set out for Paris. An author of Wright's generation, Himes first gained recognition as a significant new writer of protest literature after the publication of his first novel, If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945). Although his subsequent literary efforts were less enthusiastically received, Himes became one of the most prolific Negro novelists. Only recently has he begun to receive critical attention as one of the most important black novelists.

Most studies of American expatriation have been anecdotal rather than systematic. In the only thorough, methodologically sound study of the subject, "Pilgrimage to Paris: The Backgrounds of American Expatriation, 1920-1934," Warren Susman noted that the United States, a nation of exiles, was one of the two countries in which expatriation had become a "common and widespread phenomenon."² While this assertion is both interesting and provocative, it is totally unsubstantiated. Indeed, the statement is virtually unverifiable. A quantitative approach using statistics in

¹Ralph Ellison's much acclaimed Invisible Man was published in 1952, but Ellison was of an older generation than Baldwin.

²Ibid., p. 12.

the United States census on Americans living abroad or immigration data would yield little in the way of useful information. The expatriate, like the refugee and the exile, is an immigrant, but what distinguishes him from other immigrants is his motive, which cannot be discerned from statistics. An expatriate is an individual whose alienation from his native land is so intense that he is compelled to express it in the extreme act of self-imposed exile. Thus, a study of expatriation almost inevitably becomes a study of expatriates whose motives are accessible because of the prominence of the individual.

Susman has defined the expatriate as "any individual who has chosen to live abroad for any considerable amount of time."¹ Such a definition enabled him to study trends of expatriation, but is inadequate for distinguishing the cultural expatriate from the businessman living abroad, the invalid who must seek a different climate for his health, or the rich playboy. Susman's definition is limited, however, because it can be applied only ex post facto and is dependent on a period of time having elapsed. It does not treat the issue of motivation.

One of the major problems in any study of expatriation is definitional. According to common usage, the noun "expatriate" refers to a national of one country living in

¹Ibid., p. 50.

another country for some length of time.¹ Consulting the dictionary, we find that "exile" and "expatriate" are synonymous and that "exile" is also a synonym for "refugee."² Furthermore, "expatriation" is defined as the act of emigration; thus, the expatriate is an immigrant. Common sense tells us that an expatriate is an immigrant only in a statistical sense and our historical sense tells us that there is a fine line of distinction between the expatriate and the exile that should not be blurred.

Generally, the exile has been banished or driven from his native land for political reasons while the expatriate has voluntarily chosen to live abroad. This distinction, however, is not a hard-and-fast rule, for many exiles have chosen to leave their native land rather than endure political persecution. Furthermore, the expatriate's decision to live abroad was usually made in response to external conditions, but it is not always easy to distinguish between internal and external compulsion. In the context of this study, it becomes even more difficult to maintain this distinction between the expatriate and the exile because of the

¹Recently newspapers have been referring to Americans living abroad for some time as expatriates. Perhaps Mary McCarthy was correct when she wrote "An exile can be of any nationality, but an expatriate is generally English or American." "A guide to Exiles, Expatriates, and Internal Emigrés," New York Review of Books 17 no. 4 (March 4, 1972), p. 4.

²Oxford English Dictionary.

similarity between political persecution and racism.

Perhaps then the most essential difference between the exile and the expatriate lies in their disparate attitudes toward the country to which they flee. The exile hopes only to endure his temporary sojourn outside his native land, reconciling himself neither to his condition nor to the land of his exile. The expatriate, on the other hand, expects to embrace his new homeland, generally intending to live there permanently. Whether Wright, Himes, and Baldwin are exiles or expatriates, Paris represented a counter-image to the United States to them.

This study explores an important phase of the alienation of the American intellectual. But Wright, Himes, and Baldwin are not simply American men of letters; they are also Afro-Americans. Thus, we must examine whether the source of their alienation from the United States is racial or artistic, social or cultural, or both. An analysis of their image of Paris will amplify our view of their alienation at the same time that it clarifies whether they should properly be considered exiles or expatriates.

In a sense this study is also an examination of the myth of Paris in American, specifically Afro-American, culture. We are interested in these writers' image of Paris and the role that it played in their decision to leave the United States. Unlike white expatriates, the Negro's

relationship to Paris--like his relationship to the United States--is fraught with ambiguity. Because Wright, Himes, and Baldwin sought freedom in a white environment, can we infer that they had not totally condemned the white world? What did the choice of Paris reveal about their sense of identity and their alienation when they left the United States? Did they associate Paris with bohemianism and freedom of expression or with *liberté, égalité, fraternité*; in short, freedom from racism?

By its very nature, a discussion of expatriation must take into account cross-cultural influences. This is especially significant in the case of influential writers. To what degree did Wright, Himes, and Baldwin participate in and assimilate with their new environment? Were they affected by the intellectual, political, and social climate in Paris and did this influence their writing? Finally, how did their experiences in Paris affect their identity as writers and as men?

CHAPTER II

At the age of thirty-eight, Richard Wright, a sharecropper's son who had become America's most renowned Negro novelist, renounced the United States to live in Paris. In an ironic way, Wright's success was a fulfillment of the American dream. When Robert Park, eminent sociologist of the Chicago School, once asked Wright, "How in hell did you happen?," he was displaying the shock of a member of a profession that searched for environmental causes and broad generalizations.¹ In "Richard Wright's Blues," Ralph Ellison argued eloquently against the racism implicit in such a question. Ellison noted that critics of Black Boy had complained that the autobiography failed to "explain" Wright. To Ellison such a criticism underlined the fact that

the prevailing mood of American criticism has so thoroughly excluded the Negro that it fails to recognize some of the most basic tenets of Western democratic thought when encountering them in a black skin. They forget that human life possesses an innate dignity and mankind an innate sense of nobility; that all men possess the tendency to dream and the compulsion to make their dreams reality. . . .

Perhaps all this . . . has been forgotten because the critics recognize neither Negro humanity nor the full extent to which the Southern community renders the fulfillment of human destiny impossible.²

¹Speech given by Richard Wright at the American Church in Paris on November 8, 1960 on the position of the Negro Intellectual in the United States. Richard Wright MSS in the possession of Michel Fabre and Ellen Wright, Paris, France.

²Shadow and Act (New York, 1972), pp. 80-1.

It would do Wright an injustice, however, to ignore Park's question. We would underestimate Wright's powerful will, his stubborn tenacity against seemingly impossible odds, and his independent spirit, while slighting Wright's own preoccupation with the enigma of his emergence from such obscure and precarious beginnings. "What was it," he had written in Black Boy, "that made me conscious of possibilities. From where in this southern darkness had I caught a sense of freedom?"¹ Any attempt to understand Richard Wright, author and expatriate, must begin with a discussion of his early life.

Wright was born on September 4, 1908 in Natchez, Mississippi--the heart of Vardaman and Bilbo territory. To escape the hardships of sharecropping, the Wright family

¹Indeed, this was the question that Wright sought to answer in his autobiography, Black Boy (New York, Perennial Classic edition, 1966), p. 282. Using Black Boy as a source has both its advantages and disadvantages to the historian who should be wary of it as an accurate portrayal of Wright's childhood. As a retrospective document, and one written for publication, there will necessarily be both conscious and unconscious distortion. One problem is that Wright deliberately tried to make his life more typical of the lower-class Southern black and muted his middle-class background. Moreover certain aspects of his childhood are emphasized and exaggerated to make a point; the well-known episode of Wright's alcoholism at the age of six is an example. (See Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright [New York, 1973], p. 13.) Although Wright's recollections were perceived in the light of later experience this retrospective account of childhood filtered through his subsequent experience makes Black Boy more useful here. In isolating and emphasizing aspects of his personality, Wright is really giving us his perception of himself at a time very close to his expatriation.

moved to Memphis, Tennessee in 1914. They found life in the city even more difficult. Wright described his father as "a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but who failed in the city; a black peasant whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city. . . ." ¹ His mother Ella had come from a middle-class background, but when she married Nathan Wright, she lost the status she had held in the Negro community. ²

Wright's relationship with his father was neither close nor warm. His father was the lawgiver in the family, a forbidding presence. Yet Nathan Wright did provide the family with a modicum of stability until he deserted them shortly after they arrived in Memphis. Thereafter, Wright associated his father with the terrible pangs of hunger he suffered as a child.

Ella Wright was forced to seek employment as a cook in white peoples' kitchens. When Wright was eight, he and his brother were placed in an orphanage: his mother had fallen ill and was unable to support them. Despite the fact that Wright's stay at the orphanage was brief, he later wrote that it left an indelible mark on his personality. The experience taught him to distrust everyone and everything and he began to see himself as "a distinct personality

¹Black Boy, p. 43.

²Wright's mother, her sister, and her brother were all school teachers.

striving against others."¹

Many circumstances throughout Wright's childhood served to reinforce these feelings. After running away from the orphanage, Wright, along with his mother and his brother, had to depend on a series of relatives for room and board. Wright resented his position as an "uninvited dependent" and his relations with his extended family were fraught with hostility and violence.² This situation was probably responsible for the harsh and controversial statement about the quality of American Negro life in Black Boy:

I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair.

(Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I know that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man.)³

The number of moves that Wright was subjected to as a child must have increased his wariness and defensiveness.⁴

¹Black Boy, p. 38.

²Ibid., p. 114.

³Ibid., p. 45.

⁴Keneth Kinnamon has pointed out that Wright had moved nineteen times in as many years. The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study In Literature and Society (Urbana, Illinois, 1972), p. 24.

In Black Boy, Wright recalled that by the age of eight, he had already learned to leave places without regret. In the essay significantly entitled "American Hunger," Wright declared, "In all my life . . . I had not a single satisfying sustained relationship with another human being."¹ This lack of emotional sustenance led to intense feelings of isolation that Wright felt all his life.

Economic necessity always took precedence over Wright's education. His mother could not afford to clothe him properly so his schooling was delayed until he was eight years old. The family was forced to move so frequently that by the time that the boy was twelve, he had not completed one full year of school.² Despite his late start and the constant interruption of his education, he graduated from the eighth grade as valedictorian of the Smith-Robinson Grammar School in Jackson, Mississippi in 1925.

The family's poverty and their adherence to Seventh Day Adventism only added to Wright's sense of isolation as he was growing up. In Jackson where the Wrights lived with Richard's maternal grandmother from 1919 to 1925, neighborhood children helped allay their family's poverty by working

¹Originally a chapter of Wright's autobiography, "American Hunger," was omitted and published later in Mademoiselle. Wright had originally chosen this as the title for his autobiography. The theme of undernourishment--literal, emotional and cultural--pervades Black Boy. The quote above appears in Mademoiselle, XXI (September, 1945), p. 164.

²Black Boy, p. 112.

on Saturday. But Saturday was the Sabbath for Seventh Day Adventists and Wright was forbidden such employment. The children used their spending money to buy themselves lunches while attending school. Wright's desire for companionship was so keen that he used to forego lunch at home to go with his classmates on their noon-time jaunts to the local store. Wright would stand and watch them eat, saying that he never got hungry so early. By the time that Wright was finally allowed to go to a Methodist Sunday school rather than the Seventh Day Adventist school that he had been attending, he felt that he had been excluded from the way of life of his fellow students too long to ever feel part of it.¹

Wright's accidental discovery of the world of fiction at the age of eight transformed his environment and increased his alienation from his family and the Negro community-at-large. A boarder in his grandmother's house read him the tale of Bluebeard. It was this story that

made the world around me be, throb, live. As she spoke, reality changed, the look of things altered, and the world became peopled with magical presences. My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different, somehow. . . . The sensations the story aroused in me were never to leave me.²

His grandmother forbade him to finish Bluebeard because it was the Devil's work. When Wright was in eighth grade, he

¹Ibid., pp. 166-67.

²Ibid., p. 47.

wrote a short story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," that was published in a local newspaper. He was chastised for his efforts not only because the story was not true, but also because there was a curseword in the title.

The young boy had hoped that his story would win him the acceptance of his schoolmates; but instead it merely increased their suspicions of him. As he grew older and his reading became more serious, Wright was aware of the vast gulf it created between him and the world around him. In "American Hunger," he declared:

I knew that my words [about reading] sounded wild and foolish in my environment, where reading was almost unknown, where the highest item of value was a dime or a dollar, an apartment or a job; where if one aspired at all, it was to be a doctor or a lawyer, a shopkeeper or a politician. The most valued pleasure of the people I knew was a car; the most cherished experience a bottle of whiskey, the most sought-after prize, somebody else's wife. I had no sense of being inferior or superior to the people about me; I merely felt that they had no chance to learn to live differently . . . yet they felt in my neutrality a deeper rejection of them than if I had cursed them.¹

For Wright, living in an environment that failed to support or nourish him, books represented "cultural transfusions." They helped keep him alive in a "negatively vital way."² But they were also emotional transfusions. The violence of Bluebeard provided him with a safe vehicle for

¹"American Hunger," p. 300.

²Black Boy, p. 282.

emotional release. Speaking of that story's impact, he wrote

I vowed that as soon as I was old enough I would buy all the novels there were and read them to feed that thirst for violence that was in me, for intrigue, for plotting, for secrecy, for bloody murders. . . . They could not have known that Ella's whispered story of deception and murder had been the first experience that had elicited from me a total emotional response.¹

It was no accident that all of Wright's own fiction was marked by the violence or the threat of violence and that he maintained an interest in police stories and pulp fiction throughout his life.

Wright's thirst for violence was fed by his first contact with Southern white brutality. The incident occurred when he was eight years old, living in Elaine, Arkansas, with his Aunt Maggie, Uncle Hoskins and his mother. Hoskins, the owner of a profitable saloon in the black belt, was lynched by whites who coveted his business. Wright could not understand why the family chose to flee rather than fight back. His mother's slap quelled his questions, but not his legitimate anger and desire to retaliate. When he was ten, a story he heard about a black widow's cunning revenge of her husband's death at the hands of whites filled him with admiration. He resolved to emulate her should he ever face an angry white mob.²

¹Ibid., p. 48.

²He immortalized the episode in the short story "Bright and Morning Star" (1938)

The example of black resistance had a vital impact on Wright. He wrote that the widow's "deception gave form and meaning to the confused and defensive feelings" that had been slumbering in him. His fantasies of vengeance were "a moral bulwark that enabled" him to retain his emotional integrity.

These fantasies were no longer a reflection of my reaction to the white people, they were part of my living, of my emotional life; they were a culture, a creed, a religion. . . . Tension would set in at the mere mention of whites and a vast complex of emotions, involving the whole of my personality, would be aroused. It was as though I was continuously reacting to the threat of some natural force whose hostile behavior could not be predicted.¹

From an examination of Black Boy, it is evident that Wright believed he had escaped the devastating effects of his environment by developing a fertile imagination.

Because I had no power to make things happen outside of me in the objective world, I made things happen within. Because my environment was bare and bleak, I endowed it with unlimited potentialities, redeemed it for the sake of my own hungry and cloudy yearning.²

In the dedication to Native Son, Wright credited his mother with teaching him "to revere the fanciful and the imaginative."³ When he was eleven or twelve, his mother, who had

¹Black Boy, p. 84.

²Ibid., pp. 82-83.

³Wright did not reveal how Ella Wright instilled him with such an appreciation. She had taught him to read before he entered school. However, the only reference to his mother's own imagination pertained to a cruel punishment she devised after Richard had hanged a cat. See Black Boy, p. 19.

tried to be the buffer between her young child and her family's fanaticism, was stricken by a paralytic stroke. Her illness, which lasted ten years, was a pivotal experience for her son, coloring his view of reality and affecting his personality.

A somberness of spirit that I was never to lose settled over me during the slow years of my mother's unrelieved suffering, a somberness that was to make me stand apart and look upon excessive joy with suspicion, that was to make me self-conscious, that was to make me keep forever on the move, as though to escape a nameless fate seeking to overtake me.¹

The insight that he gained into suffering made him sympathetic to men in rebellion and helped him formulate his own conception of life. For Wright, "the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering."² His mother's pain became symbolic of "all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread, the meaningless pain and the endless suffering."³ After Wright left the South, he was concerned that he might lose the immediacy of these feelings. During his first year in Paris, he wrote in his diary, "In the morning I shall

¹Black Boy, pp. 111-112.

²*Ibid.*, p. 112. It seems unlikely that Wright's mother's paralysis was actually the genesis for all that Wright has claimed; but it probably did reinforce these tendencies.

³*Ibid.*, p. 111.

stay in bed late, I hope, and think and dream some so that my own DEEP RESTLESS AND HURT SELF CAN COME ONCE MORE TO THE FORE."¹ In his fiction, he returned again and again to the emotions of fear, dread, and pain.²

Finally, Southern race relations completed Wright's alienation. Despite his mother's harsh lessons in "the ethics of Jim Crow," Wright never learned to accommodate himself completely to this hateful system.³ He speculated that his noncompliance might have stemmed from the fact that his grandmother was white in appearance--a fact that made it difficult for him to understand the difference between the races--or perhaps he had entered the complex world of black-

¹Diary September 17, 1947 quoted in Fabre, p. 333. (All capitalized in the original.)

²This notion was perhaps implicit in Ellison's essay, "Richard Wright's Blues." Although Ellison did not make this specific observation in relation to Wright, his definition of the blues was an apt description of Wright's almost obsessive concern for the pain of his past. Ellison viewed the blues as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it. . . ." Shadow And Act, p. 78.

³See "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, an Autobiographical Sketch," originally published in a WPA Writers' Anthology, American Stuff (New York, 1937), pp. 39-52, later included in the 1940 edition of Uncle Tom's Children. See also Black Boy, passim.

white relations too late to be able to adjust easily.¹

Describing his first job experience, Wright wrote:

I was tense each moment, trying to anticipate their wishes and avoid a curse, and I did not suspect that the tension I had begun to feel that morning would lift itself into the passion of my life. Perhaps I had waited too long to start working for white people; perhaps I should have begun earlier . . . as most other black boys had done--and perhaps by now the tension would have become an habitual condition, contained and controlled by reflex.²

Forgetting to say "sir" or to smile were symptoms of the larger fact that Wright had not learned his "place" in the South.

Southern white culture required subservience from Negroes. But as inferior creatures, they were not expected to adhere to the precepts of white morality; they were supposed to be cunning. Wright was troubled by this apparent contradiction. His strong religious upbringing and his own sense of integrity made it difficult for him to accept this double standard as a guide for his own actions. He had observed other blacks ". . . pretending to conform to the laws of the whites, grinning, bowing, they let their fingers stick to what they could touch. And the whites

¹It seems unlikely that he would have accepted his fate had he been exposed to the realities of race earlier, for he was a strongly independent and self-reliant boy with a deep sense of his own self-worth. In Black Boy, he wrote, "It had never occurred to me that I was in any way an inferior being. And no word that I had ever heard fall from the lips of southern white men had ever made me really doubt the worth of my own humanity," p. 283. He had a rebellious nature and despised submissiveness.

²Ibid., pp. 164-65.

seemed to like it." He was puzzled by the fact that he "who stole nothing, who wanted to look them straight in the face, who wanted to talk and act like a man, inspired fear in them." Finally, he concluded that "Southern whites would rather have Negroes who stole, work for them than Negroes who knew, however dimly, the worth of their own humanity."¹

As a Negro, Wright felt that white society had placed him outside the ethics of Western civilization. Perceived as an outsider and with many examples of white duplicity to guide him, he became convinced that he would indeed be foolish to adhere to Christian morality in an immoral world. Working in a movie theater in Jackson, Wright was able to take advantage of the double standard by stealing enough money to escape to Memphis in 1925.

Memphis was just the first stop in Wright's search for freedom--a quest that would take him to Paris in 1947. But as a youngster in Jackson, Mississippi, Wright's freedom was a source of immense discomfort to him, making him feel lonely and afraid. He felt that he had been "emotionally cast out of the world, had been made to live outside the normal processes of life, had been conditioned in feeling against something daily, had become accustomed to living on the side of those who watched and waited."² These feelings

¹Black Boy, p. 219.

²*Ibid.*, p. 223. (*Italics in the original.*)

remained with him all his life. He would write about such a man in his first novel written in Paris, The Outsider (1953).

Wright's two-year stay in Memphis was a very significant phase in his development. It was here that he finally learned to conform to Jim Crow mores and to disguise and control his volatile emotions. It was also in Memphis that he began his serious reading. He started with Harper's Magazine, Atlantic Monthly and the American Mercury.¹ But it was not until Wright read a violent denunciation of H.L. Mencken in a white newspaper that his literary development really began. Borrowing a library card of a white Catholic who was ostracized because of his religion from the optical factory in which they both worked, Wright went to the public library with a note that he himself had written saying: "Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H.L. Mencken?"²

Through Mencken, Wright discovered that words could be used as a weapon. He imagined Mencken "as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weaknesses of people, mocking God, authority."³ Literature had been Wright's window on the world, giving him far broader vistas than his own milieu provided. It

¹Ibid., p. 247.

³Ibid., pp. 271-72.

²Ibid., p. 270.

allowed him a certain degree of emotional fulfillment--albeit vicarious--that he could not attain in his own life. Literature transformed Wright's inner world and became his means of salvation.

Perceiving that he could now use literature as an outlet for his aggressiveness Wright was able to overcome his sense of powerlessness to alter the external world. Whereas he had previously used his imagination to change his inner landscape, he could now use that imagination as a weapon. He was no longer impotent in a hostile environment.

Naturalism was the literary genre that had the greatest appeal for Wright.

It would have been impossible for me to have told anyone what I derived from these novels, for it was nothing less than a sense of life itself. All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel.¹

Wright implied that his proclivity for naturalism grew out of his oppression: "A man will seek to express his relation to the stars; but when a man's consciousness has been riveted upon obtaining a loaf of bread, that loaf of bread is as important as the stars."² But his attraction to this school was connected with his view that literature could be used to transform external reality--that mastery of the

¹Ibid., p. 274. In *Black Boy*, he mentions Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt by Theodore Dreiser.

²Ibid., pp. 254-55.

details of the objective world was, in a sense, real mastery of that world. Or, at the very least, technical control was a precondition and a prelude to true control. Perhaps even more significant was the fact that he used the stance of the observer as a defense mechanism to help him gain control over his own emotions. As he wrote in "American Hunger,"

the more my emotions claimed my attention, the sharper--as though in ultimate self-defense--became my desire to measure accurately the reality of the objective world so that I might more than meet its demands.¹

Thus, mastery of the objective world was also a way to achieve self-control.

While Wright was living in Memphis, he dreamed of going North where he believed life could be lived with greater dignity. He was convinced that he would become a victim of violence--either his own or others'--if he remained in the South. Later Wright confessed that in leaving the South in 1927, he was "running more away from something than toward something," that his flight was a "shunning of external and internal dangers."² The theme of flight was central to Wright's fiction and characteristic of his life.³ In fact,

¹ p. 301.

² Black Boy, pp. 282-83.

³ In Wright's fiction, flight appears in the short stories "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down By The Riverside," "Long Black Song," "The Man Who Was Almost A Man," "The Man Who Lived Underground," "The Man Who Saw a Flood," and "The Man Who Went to Chicago." Savage Holiday is the only one of Wright's novels that does not involve a hero in actual flight.

Ralph Ellison described Wright as a man in a state of almost manic restlessness.¹

Through a variety of jobs that he held in Chicago-- insurance collector, post office clerk, runner for the local Democratic and Republican clubs, counselor at the South Side Boys' Club, hospital attendant, staff member on WPA theatre and writers' projects, as well as a number of menial jobs like porter and dishwasher--Wright came to know the aspirations and the anguish in the lives of Negro slum dwellers.² Much of his experience provided the raw data for his later work.³

In Chicago, Wright was introduced to the tools to help him understand both his old and new world. Mary Wirth, wife of the well-known sociologist Louis Wirth, was the caseworker assigned to the Wright family by the Emergency Relief Agency. Recognizing the boy's ability and his burning

¹"Richard Wright's Blues," p. 80.

²See Richard Wright, "The Man Who Went To Chicago," Eight Men (New York, 1970), pp. 171-204 and The God That Failed (New York, 1964), pp. 103-46. Both of these essays were originally written for Black Boy but were left out at editorial suggestion. They were first published as "Early Days in Chicago," in Edwin Seaver (ed.), Cross-section (New York, 1945) and "I Tried To Be A Communist," Atlantic Monthly (August-September, 1944).

³The post office was the background for his novel Lawd Today (1937) and for The Outsider. At the South Side Boys' Club, he encountered many of the desperate young men who were to populate Native Son. See "How Bigger Was Born," in Native Son (New York, Perennial Classic edition, 1966), pp. xxvi, xxvii and The God That Failed, p. 121.

curiosity, she took him to the University of Chicago to introduce him to her husband. Wirth gave him a sociology bibliography.¹ From the "scientific findings" of men like Robert Park, Louis Wirth, and Robert Redfield, Wright grew to understand the forces that molded both the urban and rural Negro. The insights that he gained were crucial to his development as a writer.

I did not know what my story was, and it was not until I stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me.

For Wright, "sincere art and honest science were not far apart . . . each could enrich the other."²

Undoubtedly, the most influential experience in Wright's Chicago years was his affiliation with the Communist party. Given Wright's poverty, his knowledge of injustice, his alienation, and the puritanical strain in both Communism and Seventh Day Adventism, it was not surprising that he was attracted to the Communist party. But Wright was also drawn to the party as a writer. His introduction to the party came through the John Reed Club which he joined in

¹Horance R. Cayton, Long Old Road (New York, 1970), pp. 247-48.

²Richard Wright, "Introduction," Black Metropolis (New York, 1962), I, xvii-xviii.

1932 or 1933.¹ The party's activism, its sense of purpose, and the comradeship that it offered were important for Wright. He was also impressed by what he had heard of the policies of the Soviet Union toward the different nationalities within her borders.² The respect with which he believed the various cultures were treated contrasted sharply with America's contempt for its Negro minority. Marxist ideology gave Wright's eclectic autodidacticism a coherent perspective while his membership in the John Reed Club of Chicago and later the Communist party ended his keenly felt sense of intellectual and emotional isolation.³

The club was my first contact with the modern world. I had lived so utterly isolated a life that the club filled a need that could not be imagined by the white members.

¹Kinnamon has given the date as 1933 while Constance Webb has written that Wright joined the John Reed Club at the end of 1932. See Kinnamon, p. 50 and Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography (New York, 1968), p. 122. In the introduction to Black Power (1954) Wright wrote that he was a member of the Communist party from 1932-1944. The John Reed Club had been founded in New York in 1929 and was established nationally in May, 1932. Local clubs were established to foster and define proletarian culture, to create and to publish art and literature of a proletarian character and to develop worker-writers and worker-artists. The clubs were also engaged in agit-prop activities. At the time that Wright joined the John Reed Club, it was publishing Left Front which he was eager to write for.

²Wright was referring to Joseph Stalin's Marxism and the National Question, 1913.

³In The God That Failed, Wright described the importance of the party to him in the following terms: "I was meeting men and women whom I should know for decades to come, who were to form the first sustained relationships in my life," p. 105.

I hungered to share the dominant assumptions of my time and to act upon them, I did not want to feel, like an animal in the jungle, that the world was alien and hostile. . . . So far I had managed to keep humanly alive through transfusions from book. . . . But it seemed to me that here at last in the realm of revolutionary expression was where Negro experience could find a home.¹

Wright's descriptions of his searing personal experiences were structured by Marxist ideology and by the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and psychology that he had learned from the Chicago School. Personal life, informed by the intellect, became the hallmark of his early writing. Wright was but one of many thousands of Negroes who had fled the Southern rural environment for the concrete jungles of Chicago.² The severe dislocation involved in such a transition fascinated him for the rest of his life. It became a major theme in almost all of his writings, unifying his fiction and non-fiction.

Wright's first major publication, Uncle Tom's

¹Quoted from the Constance Webb MSS of Black Boy, pp. 57ff, 64 in Edward Margolies, "A Critical Analysis of the Works of Richard Wright," (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1964), p. 51.

²Allan H. Spear estimates that 50,000 Negroes left the South for Chicago between 1916-1920. Black Chicago: The Making Of A Negro Ghetto 1890-1920 (Chicago, 1969), p. 141. Drake and Cayton's figures show that the Negro population in Chicago increased by almost 124,000 in the years 1920-1930, the decade in which Wright came to Chicago. However, these figures are not broken down to indicate what proportion of the increase was due to migration. Black Metropolis, I, p. 8.

Children (1938), written while he was a member of the Communist party, depicted the life of the rural black.¹ At the same time that he was writing these stories, he was also working on his urban novel Lawd Today. The protagonist Jake Jackson had recently left the rural South for Chicago and was working in a post office. Wright portrayed the frustration, tedium, meaninglessness and brutality in a typical day in the life of such an uprooted man. Jackson and his friends were victims--almost slaves--of the capitalist system in which they lived but, in large part, their bondage was a result of their acceptance of the crass materialism and the commercial values of their society. Thus, although Jackson lived in a more modern society than the one inhabited by the

¹As originally published, Uncle Tom's Children contained the short stories "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down by the Riverside," "Long Black Song," and "Fire and Cloud." ("Bright and Morning Star" was added to the 1940 edition.) The first three stories were all examples of individual efforts at salvation that failed. Only in the last story, "Fire and Cloud," was victory achieved. The organizational structure was meant to impart the message that the Negro could only achieve freedom through organization. It is interesting to note that the first story that appeared in this collection, "Big Boy Leaves Home," was based on an incident in the life of a black communist agitator whom Wright had met in Chicago. Wright had wanted to write the story of the man's life, which he had perceived as "a bundle of the weakness and virtues of a man struggling blindly between two societies, of a man living on the margin of a culture." The Communist party prevented him from continuing his study so he narrowed his scope to this episode. The God That Failed, p. 115.

characters in Uncle Tom's Children, his prospects were bleaker because he believed that he had found the promised land. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Native Son, had also come to Chicago from Mississippi. Frustrated, angry, and repulsed by his family's religious submissiveness, Bigger was a boy who had lost his moorings in an hostile urban environment. Even The Outsider treated this theme in the long philosophical statements made by the main character.

Wright's first non-fiction book, 12 Million Black Voices (1941), was a folk history of the American Negro. But Wright's major concern in this book was to describe the differences between rural and urban cultures and mentalities and the dislocations involved in adjusting from the former to the latter. Wright spoke of the Negro plight in the following way:

Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city; we were barely born as a folk when we headed for the tall and sprawling centers of steel and stone. We who were landless on the land; we who had barely managed to live in family groups; we who needed the ritual and guidance of established institutions to hold our atomized lives together . . . we who had our personalities blasted by two hundred years of slavery had been turned loose to shift for themselves.¹

The book was heavily influenced by Marxist categories, although Wright personified the forces of production by

¹Richard Wright, 12 Million Black Voices (New York, 1969), p. 93.

using the more folksy phrases "The Bosses of the Land" and "The Bosses of the Buildings." In an introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton's Black Metropolis (1945), Wright turned to social psychology to explain the peculiar situation of the doubly dispossessed urban Negro. In his move to the urban North, the black man had been stripped of his folkways; the machine had altered his relationship to his family, the earth, his fellow man, and even to himself. Yet he gained none of the rewards that he had sought in leaving his rural, traditional environment.

In going to the urban centers of the North, the Negro sought the promise of justice and equality in the American dream. In Wright's view,

the American Negro, child of the culture that crushes him, wants to be free in a way that white men are free; for him to wish otherwise would be unnatural, unthinkable. Negroes, with but minor exceptions, still believe in the hope of economic rewards; they believe in justice,¹ liberty, and the integrity of the individual.

However, the upheaval that Negroes experienced in moving from a traditional to an urban society and the anomie that resulted, coupled with America's denial of their desired goals and their very humanity, left them frustrated, restless, resentful, and brutalized. In short, they were the "seedbeds

¹"Introduction," Black Metropolis, I, p. xxv.

of revolution."¹

Despite all that Wright gained from the party, as a writer committed to craft and as a black man committed to racial justice, he often disagreed with party policy. He was disheartened by the party's new position on the Negro question during the Popular Front era. When Wright had joined the party, it was following a policy established at the Sixth World Congress in 1928. The Negro population in the United States was to be considered an "oppressed nation" under the heel of an imperialist power. The American Communist party was instructed to foster nationalism leading to self-determination and national liberation for the Negro population. Under this policy, the party took the lead in

¹Ibid., xxiv. In his autobiographical short story, "The Man Who Went To Chicago," pp. 191-92, Wright had written that revolutionaries were created from people who no longer responded to the rewards offered by their society. "If I were a member of the class that rules, I would post men in all the neighborhoods of the nation, not to spy upon or club rebellious workers, not to break strikes or disrupt unions, but to ferret out those who no longer respond to the system under which they live. I would make it known that the real danger does not stem from those who seek to grab their share of wealth through force, or those who try to defend their property through violence, for both of these groups, by their affirmative acts, support the values of the system under which they live. The millions that I would fear are those who do not dream of the prizes that the nation holds forth, for it is in them, though they may not know it, that a revolution has taken place and is biding its time to translate itself into a new and strange way of life."

the defense of the Scottsboro boys. However, in 1934, this stance was shelved because it was considered too divisive.¹ At the national John Reed Club congress held in the summer of 1934, Wright was the only delegate to oppose that organization's dissolution. The John Reed Clubs also fell victim to the Popular Front phase of party policy in which a concerted effort was made to enlist a broader spectrum of support in an anti-fascist fraternity. They were replaced by the League of American Writers in 1935. The party was more concerned with attracting writers of "standing"--whether they be left or liberal--to this new organization than in fostering new talent.²

In the essay "I Tried To Be A Communist" (1944), Wright declared that he had dissociated himself from the party after the dissolution of the John Reed Clubs. Yet, in 1940, he had accepted the position of vice president of the League of American Writers. Wright claimed that he had

¹Until 1928, party policy on the Negro question was formulated in economic class terms. The Negro question was not a subject for debate until the Fourth World Congress in 1922, when a special commission was established to study the problem. See Wilson Record, The Negro and the Communist Party (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1951), pp. 54-119.

²The God That Failed, pp. 122-23; Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left (New York, 1969), pp. 298-300; Lewis Coser and Irving Howe, The American Communist Party (Boston, 1957), p. 314.

wanted to resign his membership in the party, but had been told that the only way to leave the party was through a purge. Thus, he chose inactivity and silence rather than a humiliating expulsion. But Wright was hardly silent or inactive in the years between the demise of the John Reed Clubs and his public defection from the party in 1944. In 1937, Wright left Chicago to become the Harlem editor for the Daily Worker.¹ Kinnamon has shown that Wright's name appeared more frequently on statements supporting party positions after the publication of Native Son in 1940 than it had previously.² Wright endorsed the nomination of the party's candidates Earl Browder and James W. Ford for the 1940 presidential election. Wright's last piece to appear in a party publication was printed on February 13, 1942 and his name no longer appeared in support of party causes thereafter.³ Thus, it seems that Wright's serious disenchantment with the party did not take place until 1942.

If Wright's disenchantment with the party was neither as

¹Wright held this position for one year until he received a Guggenheim which allowed him to devote more time to his own writing. However, during the period that he was at the Daily Worker, he was also on the editorial board of New Challenge and worked on the Harlem sections of New York Panorama and New York City Guide for the Federal Writers' Project.

²Kinnamon, p. 153. It seems reasonable to assume that Wright's name was solicited more frequently after he became a celebrity, but he need not have signed.

³Ibid., pp. 154-55.

severe nor as early as he claimed in "I Tried To Be A Communist," his discomfort under party discipline should not not be underestimated. Indeed, a careful reading of Native Son, which he started in 1938, reveals the source of Wright's heresy. Native Son was written in the naturalist tradition, heavily influenced by Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy. Naturalism's stress on the influence of environmental conditioning was not inconsistent with Marxist economic determinism. Yet Native Son exhibited a conflict between two different theories of human motivation: environmental determinism and free will.

In the title of the novel, Wright expressed his belief that his protagonist, Bigger Thomas, was the product of his environment--racism, poverty, and oppression. The first two sections of the novel detailed the bleak conditions of Bigger's life, with the clear implication that his attitudes, emotions, actions and eventual fate were already predetermined. However, in Book III, Wright shifted his attention to Bigger's acceptance of his imminent death.

Because of the essentially inarticulate and unreflective nature of his protagonist, Wright had to rely on the device of a narrator or on objective correlatives to explain many of Bigger Thomas' moods and actions in the first two sections of Native Son. But in the third section, Bigger became far more introspective and was able to speak for himself. In prison, Bigger attained a level of self-

awareness that permitted him to come to grips with the meaning of his existence and ultimately to accept his death. The realization that allowed him to accept his fate was an expression of individual responsibility: "But what I killed for I am."¹ Bigger had to reject his lawyer's sociological analysis of his actions. He had to face his death alone and the only explanation of his life that he found meaningful was a personal one.²

Wright explained his point of departure for Native Son in the essay "How Bigger Was Born." (1940). The novel grew out of a fascination with what he came to call the Bigger Thomas syndrome. Bigger Thomas was the oppressed man in revolt against a system that denied his humanity. Wright was interested in depicting the conditions that led to Bigger's anger, frustration, fears, hatred, and, ultimately, to his violence. If we can rely on Wright's own explanation

¹Native Son (New York, Perennial Classic Edition, 1966), pp. 391-92.

²I am indebted to Donald Gibson's essay, "Wright's Invisible Native Son," American Quarterly, XXI (Winter, 1969), pp. 728-38, for this insight.

Native Son was written as a sociological case-study.¹ It seems that Wright had intended to follow the prescriptions of Marxism in his novel.² The explicit Marxist analysis

¹There is reason to doubt this particular explanation. Wright himself was aware of the heresy contained within the pages of his novel. As he told the reader in "How Bigger Was Born," he feared that the Communist party might think that he was a "smuggler of reaction," an "ideological confusionist," or an "individualistic and dangerous element" (p. xxii). Thus, it seems that one of the purposes of this essay was to disarm the critics--whether they be the ACP or the black bourgeoisie. However, in a letter from Wright to Gertrude Stein (no date) he stated that he was prompted to write the pamphlet because a well-known literary critic in New York hypothesized that though Wright wrote well, he did not really know why he wrote, that it was an outpouring unrelated to mental activity.

²The question of Wright's own design is controversial. Critics like Robert Bone and Edward Margolies have argued that Wright had not consciously contrived to undermine Marxism in the novel. According to Bone, Wright had failed to integrate communism into the artistic fabric of the novel. Because Wright was forced to depend on the more or less artificial device of the lawyer Boris Max's explanations, Native Son suffered a major structural flaw, making it possible to misconstrue the Marxist intent of the novel. Robert Bone, The Negro Novel In America (New Haven, 1966), pp. 150-51. Margolies has argued that Wright was ideologically and philosophically confused; while he believed that he was arguing for revolution in communist rhetoric, Wright actually presented a more convincing portrayal of Bigger as a nationalist revolutionary and a metaphysical rebel. Edward Margolies, Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth Century Negro American Authors (New York, 1969), pp. 73-86. Donald Gibson has asserted, in an interesting and well-argued essay, that Native Son was not written as a propaganda piece. This interpretation arose because most people viewed Max as Wright's spokesman. Gibson, however, believed that Max was only one side of a dialogue whose limitations were apparent. Max never really understood Bigger, nor could he help him with the problem that he faced as a lone individual about to die. Although Gibson's article is quite persuasive in arguing against James Baldwin's perception of Bigger as a stereotype and for his individuality, he is not persuasive on the question of Wright's intent in terms of Marxism.

of Bigger Thomas' situation and the fact that the only characters who had any rapport with Bigger and attempted to understand him were communists lends credence to this position. Yet, perhaps because of Wright's sympathy for his hero and because his own life had taught him to distrust socio-economic determinism, Bigger Thomas transcended sociological limitations.¹

Wright's own perspective of the black experience in America made him sensitive to some inadequacies of Marxist ideology. This was implicit in Native Son but in the introduction to Black Metropolis, Wright was quite explicit. He did not believe that the Negro problem in America could be explained by the "class-war frame of reference."² Racism was rooted more deeply in American culture. From these statements, it is clear that by 1945 Wright had rejected the theory that culture was simply a reflection of economic arrangements within society. He thought that the Right and

¹We have already mentioned Wright's expression of sympathy for the rebel on page 34 above. It is not unusual for an author's feelings for his subject to get the best of his intentions. Fyodor Dostoyevsky set out to argue against nihilism in The Brothers Karamazov, but his fascination for evil--as he saw it--was so great that his art transcended his didacticism. Aloysha in The Brothers Karamazov and Prince Mishkin in The Idiot, who personified good, were far less compelling characters than Ivan Karamazov.

²Wright, Introduction, Black Metropolis, I, p. xxix.

the Left were both guilty of trying to convert the Negro problem into something that they could control, "thereby denying the humanity of the Negro, excluding the unique and historic positions of the Negro in America."¹

But if Wright was uncomfortable with Marxist determinism, the American Communist party was even more at a loss about how to respond to Native Son. They waited over a month before reacting to the book. Although the party objected to the portrayal of communists as somewhat insensitive and of Negroes of unheroic proportions, they did not want to repudiate an author who had been nurtured by them and represented a victory for their policies.² Wright was privately censured for his deviations by high party functionaries,³ but Earl Browder finally decided that "there was nothing wrong with the book" and it received high praise from the communist critic Samuel Sillen in New Masses.⁴

¹Ibid. Wright's critique of the Communist party is the same as the one that James Baldwin leveled against Wright's Native Son in "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) and in "Many Thousands Gone," (1951). See chapter 9, below, pp. 256-59.

²Cayton, Long Old Road, p. 248.

³Edward Margolies, "A Critical Analysis of the Works of Richard Wright," p. 64n. Michel Fabre informs me that Benjamin Davis was one of the officials involved here.

⁴Cayton, Ibid., p. 249. See "The Response to 'Native Son'" New Masses, 35 (April 23, 1940), pp. 25-27; "The Meaning of Bigger Thomas," New Masses, 35 (April 30, 1940), pp. 26-28; "Native Son: Pros And Con," New Masses, 35 (May 21, 1940), pp. 23-26.

Wright had been aware that Native Son would displease the party. But he wrote, "I felt that a right more immediately deeper than that of politics or race was at stake; that is, a human right, the right of a man to think and feel honestly."¹ Wright had already submitted to the party's wishes that he keep Lawd Today from publication.

His spirit rebelled against such coercion. He had fled the South in order to be able to talk freely and escape the pressures of fear. He had believed that the Communist party beckoned its members with the following invitation: "If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find that you are not alone."² But he discovered that true freedom of speech was actively discouraged. Wright's inability to submit to Jim Crow practices in the South and his conflict with the Communist party stemmed from his deep individualism and his personal integrity. As he explained in Black Boy, his whole life had shaped him to live by his own thoughts and feelings.³ He reiterated this position in a letter to a Uruguayan artist, Antonio Frasconi, in 1944:

¹"How Bigger Was Born," p. xxii.

²The God That Failed, p. 106.

³Ibid., p. 276.

I really believe that it would be far wiser for you to willingly and honestly hire yourself out to the business firms of your native country as an advertising copywriter than to try to reduce your artistic expression to another kind of advertising under the mistaken impression that you are helping mankind by so doing. . . . Must we artists have bosses, Left or Right?¹

Despite Wright's disagreements with important aspects of party policy and the fact that he was temperamentally unsuited to the discipline required by the Communist party, he clearly left the party with great reluctance. Throughout his life, Wright had objectified his own experience and emotions. His mother's protracted illness came to represent mankind's meaningless suffering. As a young man emotionally and intellectually uprooted, he looked to the disciplines of sociology and anthropology to understand the processes that produced such displacement. Anthropology, sociology, naturalism, and Marxism all served to provide an objective structure and a verification of Wright's own experiences. Marxism had been almost an article of faith for Wright, as it had been for so many other communists.

Through his affiliation with the John Reed Club and the Communist party, Wright placed his struggle for freedom from oppression in a larger context. He had found a home and a real sense of community among people who also

¹"Richard Wright and Antonio Frasconi, an Exchange of Letters. Wright to Frasconi." Twice A Year, No. 12-13, 1945, pp. 260-61.

identified with a cause greater than themselves and who were committed to political action, ending his sense of emotional and intellectual isolation. After leaving the party, he wrote that he thought of the stories that he had written "in which I had assigned a role of honor and glory to the Communist Party, and I was glad that they were written down in black and white. . . ." Now, more wary of total solutions, he knew that he would

never be able to write that way again, should never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, should never again express such passionate hope, should never again make so total a commitment of faith.¹

¹Wright, The God That Failed, p. 146.

CHAPTER III

After the success of Native Son in 1940, Wright had hoped to go to Paris. But, as he wrote Gertrude Stein in 1945,

When my turn came to go to France . . . Hitler came and took the country. . . . Maybe next year we will come to France and I hope that Paris will be as so many have said it used to be. . . . For a reason I don't know I've always felt that France would mean something to me and that I'd live there.¹

France meant many things to Wright. In "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1937), he recalled that as an adolescent growing up in Memphis in the post-war years he had begun to associate France with liberal racial attitudes:

I found out that many subjects were taboo from the white man's point of view. Among the topics they did not like to discuss with Negroes were the following: American white women; the Ku Klux Klan; France, and how Negro soldiers fared while there; French women . . . or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of the Negro.²

Like many other Afro-Americans Wright had heard about the

¹Richard Wright to Gertrude Stein, May 27, 1945, Gertrude Stein Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University. Their acquaintance started when Wright reviewed Stein's Wars I Have Seen in PM (March 11, 1945). Carl Van Vechten, author of Nigger Heaven and a patron of Negro art, forwarded the review to Stein who in turn read Black Boy and sent Wright a very enthusiastic letter.

²Uncle Tom's Children (New York, Signet Books, 1963), p. 16.

egalitarian treatment that Negroes had received in France.¹ His early impression was corroborated by reports from black authors like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen who had traveled to France in the twenties.²

If Wright's image of France as a land of equality was common among blacks, his impression of the broader humanistic spirit of French civilization was gleaned from the literature with which he was preoccupied. He thought of France as an hospitable environment for iconoclasts, the home of the avant garde.³ The presence of Gertrude Stein was an added attraction to Wright, for he felt a sense of kinship with the old woman whom Hemingway had called "the mother of us all."

¹In 12 Million Black Voices Wright spoke of American officers' attempts to segregate blacks in France during World War I. (See p. 88.) Rayford Logan spoke of the American Negroes' special affection for France because of their World War I experience there. See "The American Negro's View of Africa," Africa From The Point Of View of American Negro Scholars (Présence Africaine, 1958), p. 223. French egalitarian treatment of Negro soldiers was a cause for concern on the part of the American army. General James Erwin issued an order for Negroes to stop fraternizing with French women. A document was circulated in August, 1918 warning the French against socializing with Negroes. John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans (New York, 3 ed., 1969), p. 468.

²From an unpublished paper by Michel Fabre delivered at the Richard Wright Conference at the University of Iowa, July, 1971.

³Fabre notes that Wright's library contained works by Rabelais, Voltaire, Dumas, Balzac, Flaubert, Anatole France, Theophile Gautier, Pierre Loti, Romain Rolland, Jules Romains, Louis Aragon, Gide, Proust, and Malraux.

Wright considered her novelette Melanctha the first serious treatment of Negro life in the United States. Wright claimed that, Melanctha had evoked the speech of his grandmother, "a deep Negro dialect colored by the Bible."¹ Writing of Gertrude Stein's style he said, "Yec, she's got something, but I'd say that one could live and write like that only if one lived in Paris or in some out of the way spot where one could claim one's soul."² Thus, Paris seems to have conjured up an image of tranquility to Wright, a place where he too could claim his soul.³

¹He discussed this in "Introduction," Black Metropolis, p. xxxi; "Gertrude Stein's Story Is Drenched In Hitler's Horrors," PM Magazine, March 11, 1945, p. 1t, the review of Wars I Have Seen.

²Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, p. 587n.

³By 1945, Wright felt that the pace of life in New York was inimical to such a quest. After a summer in Quebec, Wright wrote of the contrast of the way of life in New York and Quebec. "Quebec is slow and ripe and organic and serene; there is no hurrying and no straining to attain the impossible or unique or the different. But when one returns to New York, one is struck by the hurried, the green, the vague and the frantic. Everything is romantic, abstract. In Quebec, man has found a way of living with the earth; in New York we live against the earth." Letter from Richard Wright to Gertrude Stein, October 29, 1945, Gertrude Stein Library. When he returned from Canada Wright tried to buy a house in Vermont. The transaction got very complicated and Wright suspected racial motives. See Webb, pp. 239-41. As Wright explained in 1950, he was tired of asphalt. "I Choose Exile," (unpublished), Richard Wright MSS.

Wright applied for a passport to go to France in January, 1946, but his application was rejected on the grounds that post-war conditions in Europe were too hazardous for American citizens. However, he learned that the State Department was granting passports for business and cultural purposes and he became the French correspondent for Dorothy Norman's periodical Twice A Year. He also asked Gertrude Stein to set up some lectures for him in France to be sure to meet the requirements.¹ On April 25, 1946, Wright received an official invitation to France from the French government.² Still, Wright's difficulties with the State Department were not over. They lost two copies of the invitation that Wright had mailed to Washington and Wright felt compelled to present his third copy in person. Only then did Wright and his family receive their passports.³

When Wright, his wife Ellen, and their infant Julia left for France as official guests of the French government on May 1, 1946, they were embarking on a long overdue voyage.

¹Richard Wright to Gertrude Stein, March 15, 1946, Gertrude Stein Collection. According to Webb, Wright suspected that his difficulty was due to his critical stance on the position of the American Negro in the United States. See p. 244.

²Claude Levi-Strauss, then cultural attaché in New York, to Richard Wright in Richard Wright MSS.

³For the complicated details involved in Wright's difficulty over his passport, See Webb, pp. 242-45 and Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, pp. 298-300.

In Paris, Wright was a celebrity: he received many flattering letters from members of the French intelligentsia expressing the desire to meet him, was feted at numerous receptions in his honor, and was awarded the honorary title of citizen of Paris.¹ Wright was deeply moved by his warm welcome from the French literary community, but he was even more impressed by the respect accorded a writer by the French population at large. Wright believed that materialism had corrupted America's values. In France, he found that people were more concerned about what one thought rather than how much one earned.² He echoed the sentiments of Gertrude Stein who had written

But really what they [the French] do is to respect arts and letters, if you are a writer, you have privileges . . . even in a garage an academician and a woman of letters takes precedence even of millionaires or politicians, they do, it is quite incredible but they do, the police treat artists and writers respectfully too. . . .³

¹Wright received letters from André Gide, Albert Camus, Léopold Senghor, and Claude-Edmonde Magny among others hoping to meet him. In the Richard Wright Mss. The publishers Gallimard and Albin Michel (publisher of the French edition of Uncle Tom's Children and Native Son) as well as the PEN Club and the Société des Gens de Lettres held receptions in Wright's honor while the Office of Cultural Services of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave him a luncheon.

²Michel Gordey, "L'Amérique n'est pas le nouveau monde," Les Lettres Françaises, 10 janvier 1947, p. 9.

³Paris, France (London, 1940), p. 21.

Wright's enormous success in Paris cannot be explained solely by his literary achievements. In many ways, Wright's arrival in Paris was propitiously timed, coinciding with a wave of interest in the United States as a result of her emergence as a super power after World War II. Many writers including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus visited the United States in 1945 and 1946 as journalists.¹ In addition, American literature was enjoying a vogue in France. In part, the post-war fascination with American novels was a continuation of the attention that Faulkner, Hemingway, Caldwell, Steinbeck, and Dos Passos had received in the thirties. The banning of American novels under the Nazi occupation had intensified this interest. Sartre wrote that it had become a symbol of resistance to read an American novel.² He also hypothesized that Frenchmen

¹Wright himself commented on the influx of French tourists to the United States in a letter to Gertrude Stein of March 28, 1946. Gertrude Stein Collection.

²Sartre, "American Novelists in French Eyes," Atlantic Monthly, 178 (August, 1946), p. 114. Many French journals devoted entire issues to American literature as early as 1943: Fontaine (August, 1943); Confluences (1943); L'Arbalète, 9 (Autumn, 1944); Esprit (November, 1946); Les Temps Modernes (August-September, 1946); Cahiers des Langues Modernes (1946); and Renaissances (1946). For a thorough study of the French reception to American literature, see Thelma Smith and Ward L. Menir, Transatlantic Migration: The Contemporary American Novel in France (North Carolina, 1955). See also Simone de Beauvoir, "An American Renaissance in France," New York Times Book Review, June 27, 1947, pp. 7, 29; Harry Levin, "Some European Views of Contemporary American Literature," American Quarterly, I, 1 (Fall, 1949), pp. 264-79; "France-Amerique: The Transatlantic Refraction," in Refractions (New York, 1966), pp. 212-20.

had grown weary of French analytical novels and found the "direct, brutal" American genre more satisfying.¹

There was a ready market for novels written by Negroes in France. J'irai cracher sur vos Tombes (1946)--a novel published under a pseudonym, but purported to be the work of an American Negro--enjoyed great success until it was revealed that Boris Vian, a Frenchman, had written it.² French fascination with the Negro had its roots in the early twentieth century,³ but after World War II, it took on a political significance.

¹Sartre, p. 116. Sartre wrote that the "hard-boiled" school of American literature was particularly popular. Simone de Beauvoir cautioned that the vogue of American literature might be dangerous because the distinction between Faulkner and Hammett tended to blur. However, on the whole, she felt American literature would have a liberating effect: the "art of narration" was particularly well-suited to portray "the vicissitudes of action." Beauvoir, p. 29. Pierre Brodin wrote that France was in the mood for "strong, shocking, violent literature" in the 1940's. "The Influence of American Contemporary Writers Upon French Literature," The American Society Legion of Honor Magazine (Autumn, 1956), p. 214.

²It is interesting to note that Vian had translated Wright's short story "Bright and Morning Star" for Les Temps Modernes (hereafter cited as TM).

³Maurice Vlaminck, André Derain, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso became interested in African sculpture as an art form in the first decade of the twentieth century. African art influenced the styles of Picasso, Matisse, and Amadeo Modigliani. See Robert Goldwater, Primitivism In Modern Painting (New York, 1938), pp. 74-76, 117-28. Erik Satie and Darius Milhaud were influenced by Negro music. See William Gaunt, The March of the Moderns (London, 1949) and Eugene Jolas, Le Negre qui chante (Paris, 1928). The 1920's were known as the decade of the Negro entertainer in Paris. See Al Laney, Paris Herald (New York, 1968).

The resurgent French interest in the American Negro was part of a growing anti-Americanism that accompanied the expansion of American influence. America's growing cultural influence in France aroused fears of Americanization. No doubt, France's humiliation in World War II and her subsequent decline as a world power contributed to such xenophobic reactions.¹ Therefore, America's race problems were a source of some satisfaction to wounded French pride.

The Negro problem in the United States was also powerful ammunition for the French Left in its battle against America's political influence in France. The existentialists centered around Sartre's influential journal, Les Temps Modernes, were a case in point. Though not communist and despite the apparent irreconcilable differences between Marxism and existentialism, Les Temps Modernes believed that Marxism had established the conditions for the humanization of society, that the proletariat would emancipate

¹For a study of French nationalism after World War II in reaction to America's growing role in Europe, see John T. Marcus, Neutrality and Nationalism in France (New York, 1958).

mankind through its own emancipation.¹ Sartre's journal was the first publication to carry Wright's work in France.² The journal was largely responsible for establishing Wright's reputation. Sylvia Beach, owner of the famed American bookstore Shakespeare and Company, wrote Wright, "I hope Sartre has been sending Les Temps Modernes with 'Black Boy' which has interested French readers tremendously. They are waiting

¹David Caute, Communism and the French Intellectuals 1914-1960 (New York, 1964), p. 175. The basic conflict between Marxism and existentialism lies in their different conceptions of the nature of man. Existentialism posits the absolute and radical freedom of the individual in the dictum "existence precedes essence"; whereas economic determinism is the basic doctrine of dialectical materialism. In an important essay, "Materialism and Revolution," written in 1946, Sartre argued that the two philosophical systems were incompatible and rejected dialectical materialism as a revolutionary myth because it denied the possibility for freedom, the very ideal that led him to espouse Marxism. See "Materialism and Revolution," Literary and Philosophical Essays (New York, 1962), pp. 198-256. Sartre had great difficulty reconciling his sense of the proper political commitment with the basic philosophical premises of existentialism--a task that was further complicated by political events in the Soviet Union. He wavered before finally committing himself irrevocably to Marxism. See Wilfred Desan, The Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre (New York, 1966); Michel-Antoine Burnier, Choice of Action: The French Existentialists on the Political Front Line (New York, 1968); and Caute. In Critique de la Raison Dialectique (1960), Sartre achieved his goal of reconciling Marxism with existentialism, but only by subsuming existentialism under Marxism: "Existentialism . . . was only an ideology, a parasitic system, existing in the margin of knowledge, whereas Marxism was a philosophy, the most advanced and comprehensive mode of explanation of which the present generation was capable." Caute, p. 257.

²The first piece by Wright to appear in TM was "Fire and Cloud" in October and November, 1945. "Debut à Chicago" appeared in August-September, 1946; "Black Boy" in January, February, April-June, 1947; "Black American Literature" in August, 1948; "I Tried To Be A Communist" in July 1949 and "The Man Who Lived Underground" in July, 1951 and June, 1952.

impatiently for 'Native Son' now. . . . And I think it is a very good thing for 'Black Boy' to appear in Sartre's review. Everybody reads it."¹ Indeed, Les Temps Modernes was the first influential opinion-maker in France to see the importance of racism and colonialism and to denounce them consistently wherever they were found.²

Among the Communists, resentments toward America had been festering since 1945. Still, the Communist press had displayed a favorable attitude toward America until 1947. The historian David Caute cites the publication of "America is not the new world" (January 1947) in Les Lettres Francaises, "the geiger-counter of and for communist intellectuals," as a turning point in party policy toward the United States.³ Significantly, this article was the interview in which Richard Wright had compared the position of the artist in France with the artist in America.⁴

¹May 26, 1947, Richard Wright MSS.

²The first article condemning colonialism was published in December, 1946. (Burnier, p. 31) Sartre had portrayed the iniquities of American racism in "La Putain Respecteuse" (1946), a play based on the Scottsboro case. Beauvoir stated that she became "extremely preoccupied with racial problems in the United States after the war. . . ." and attributed her concern to Sartre. See Michel Fabre, "Impressions of Richard Wright: An Interview with Simone de Beauvoir," Studies in Black Literature, I (Autumn 1970), p. 3.

³Caute, p. 173.

⁴See p. 49 above.

Wright's impressions of French racial attitudes are especially interesting in light of the French Left's campaign to expose American racial problems in an attempt to discredit her moral leadership in the post-war era. In a letter written shortly after he had arrived in Paris, Wright told his editor Ed Aswell that he found such an absence of race hatred that it seemed "unreal."¹ But somewhat later in a letter to the black poet Owen Dodson, Wright wrote that while he found no opposition on the part of the French to seeing the Negro honestly, an exotic stereotype of the Negro was widespread in France. French people, he wrote, thought of the Negroes as a "race of people with something queer in them that makes them write jazz music."² But Wright concluded that despite this stereotype, France was not plagued by racism. As a result, he believed that France could provide an answer to the problem of freedom in the modern world. "My hopes for France," he wrote, "may well be wrong. But if such a call, an appeal, a definition, is not made from here, than I really don't know where it is

¹May 15, 1946, Richard Wright MSS.

²Richard Wright to Owen Dodson, June 9, 1946, New Letters 38, #2 (Winter 1971), pp. 25-26.

coming in the near future."¹

He was skeptical that any solution would be forthcoming from any group in the United States.

What any group in our country needs to know before it can do anything is a knowledge of how much discontent and suffering exists at all levels in the societies of the world. . . . Before anyone, Right or Left, can even take the attitude that something must be done, he must sense how the problem is reflected in the hearts of men. . . . The French have a phrase for it: The Human Condition!²

He was no more optimistic about the Soviet Union. In fact, the only significant difference that Wright found between the USSR and the United States was that Russia applied American methods of industrialization with an unbridled ruthlessness that the United States could not employ because of her traditions of individual freedom. Both countries, he said, had their cultural purges; but they were official in the Soviet Union and unofficial in the United States. Nonetheless, the result was the same: "suppression of the individual, the devaluation of the personality, and preachments against what they call 'subjectivity.' . . ."³

Like many other disillusioned leftists, Wright came

¹Richard Wright to John Scanton, June 15, 1946, in an unpublished paper by Michel Fabre given at the Richard Wright conference at the University of Iowa, July, 1971.

²Ibid.

³Wright, "Two Letters to Dorothy Norman," Art and Action, A Book of Literature, the Arts, and Civil Liberties (10th Anniversary, Twice A Year, 1938-1948), New York, 1948, p. 70. Letter dated March 9, 1948.

to see communism in the same light as fascism, though he had long believed that both ideologies answered similar psychological needs.¹ He thought that the ideologies of both the Right and the Left had become subsumed to their commitment to material progress.

The Right and Left, in different ways, have decided that man is a kind of animal whose needs can be met by making more and more articles for him to consume. If . . . that is what will prevail . . . a world will be built in which everybody will get enough to eat and full stomachs will be equated with contentment and freedom. . . .²

In Wright's opinion, such a conception of man threatened the definition of humanity that had evolved 2,000 years ago.³

¹In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright wrote that Bigger Thomas was a potential communist or fascist. His emotional state was not compatible with support of the status quo. Furthermore, the Bigger Thomas syndrome was not restricted to blacks, "he was white too, and there were literally millions of him, everywhere," He was a product of the dispossession caused by urbanization, industrialization, and rationalization. Both ideologies fulfilled "a wild and intense longing . . . to belong, to be identified, to feel that they were alive as other people were, to be caught up forgetfully and exultingly in the swing of events. . . ." Native Son, p. xiv. At a time when Marxists were interpreting fascism as a petty-bourgeois movement, Wright understood the power of its appeal to the dispossessed. In the introduction to Black Metropolis, he wrote that "History will no doubt dub the Hitlerites as the most devastating critics of our disorganized industrial order, not even excepting the Bolsheviks of 1917." He warned that the slums of Chicago could become the "Vienna of American fascism." I, pp. xxiv, xx. (New York, 1962)

²"Two Letters to Dorothy Norman, p. 73.

³Wright's own ethnocentrism was strongly evident in this remark. Clearly, he was referring to a Western definition of humanity, heavily influenced by Christianity.

Wright regarded the humanistic tradition of France, unmarred by racism, as an alternative to communism. He looked to French humanism to counter-balance the increasing materialism in the Western world. He wanted to know how "such a literate nation" would meet the problems that industrialization and modernization posed to human freedom, suspecting that the vitality of French humanism would bring about a propitious solution.

I keenly feel that France must have her say about the way men should live in the world and I feel that she realizes more strongly than any other nation in the Western world the dramatic import of what may be lost in spirit if such or such political or social decisions are taken.¹

Clearly Wright wanted France to exercise moral leadership in the post-war world. He believed that this could be achieved if

France is equated not to England, America, or Russia, but to one and one-half billion or so people in the world who are not yet industrialized, and when the French genius of giving voice to the hopes of mankind is realized in relation to the vast pools of industrial misery which exists within the gigantic industrial prisons of England and America, the future of France appears brighter in proportion to the degree that she senses, realizes and can articulate and harness the suffering of those trapped both in industrialized and non-industrialized nations.²

Wright believed that French suffering during and after World

¹Wright, "A Paris les GIs noirs ont appris à connaître et à aimer la liberté," Samedi Soir, May 25, 1946, p. 2.

²"France Must March," (unpublished), cited in unpublished paper by Michel Fabre given at the University of Iowa in July, 1971.

War II strengthened her humanistic concerns and insights.

"Above all," he wrote, "I know that France is alive and suffering. Is not suffering acutely a way of being alive?"¹

The emphasis that Wright placed on suffering was no doubt a consequence of his mother's illness--its symbolic importance to him and the role that he thought it played in his own life.²

From an abstract point of view, Wright believed that the privations of the post-war years in France were morally beneficial; but on a more human level, he was appalled by the living conditions that the French had to endure. These hardships led him to write that there were no good countries left. Yet the sharpest impression that he did receive during his eight-month sojourn was that the humanist sentiment that he valued so highly had deeply penetrated the fabric of French life. American anti-intellectualism, materialism and racism had all served to deny him the kind of deference that he had received in France. Wright had been enormously impressed with French culture; his eight-month visit to Paris served to reinforce that image.³

On January 18, 1947, Wright returned to New York with

¹"A Paris, les GIs noirs . . . "

²See Chapter 2 above, pp. 20-21.

³Wright to Dodson; Gordey.

his family. France had been "a refuge--a wonderful vacation," but he felt that he belonged in America. In the style of the late Gertrude Stein, he said, "The French are in France and the Americans are in America." In a different tone, he concluded, "My work is here. My main job is in this country. . . . No, I was fashioned in this peculiar kind of hell."¹

The Wrights moved into their new house on Charles Street in Greenwich Village. Racial tensions were high in New York and Wright was greeted with racial epithets in his neighborhood. Few restaurants would serve him and he still had to go to Harlem for a haircut. In the spring of 1947, gangs of white youths threw blacks out of restaurants and molested inter-racial couples. Wright was served coffee with salt in it on one occasion when he was with a white female companion.² But it was not until his five-year-old daughter was subjected to racial discrimination in a New York department store that Wright began to think of returning to France.³

¹"Why Richard Wright Came Back from France," P M Magazine, February 16, 1947, p. 6. Gertrude Stein died late in 1946.

²Webb, pp. 255-57; Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, pp. 310-12.

³Constance Webb had taken Julia to Central Park. When the young girl needed a toilet, she took her to Bergdorf Goodman's, where they were refused admittance. See Webb, pp. 258-59.

By the end of July, only six months after the Wrights returned to New York, they left again for France, determined to make it their home. For Wright, such a move was nothing new; he left New York to go to Paris as he had left Mississippi for Memphis, Memphis for Chicago, and Chicago for New York in search for freedom. Wright's bitterness toward the United States was reflected in a diary entry that he wrote aboard the SS United States:

There is something about the very atmosphere of America that serves to corrupt human feelings. The few French on board do not act like the French of France. Already they have soaked up more than they should have of our racial poison. Oh, what can one do about one's native land when that land spreads death to the world? . . . I hate to see the face of a white American in foreign countries, for, nine times out of ten, I know what that face is doing is spreading racial propaganda.¹

* * *

Wright's impressions of Paris during his first few months as an expatriate were mixed. On his arrival, he was again struck by the beauty of the city.

Coming again into Paris! The sun was just setting and the pale light shone upon the old buildings and revealed their age. How earthy a people are the French! How squat the buildings sit upon the ground! It was like a dream to be riding one's own car into the beautiful Paris streets.²

But within a few days, he became annoyed at some of the inconveniences of French life that were often by-products of

¹July 31, 1947, Richard Wright MSS.

²Diary, August 8, 1947, Richard Wright MSS.

the age of the buildings that he so admired. Even his car, a new 1947 Oldsmobile, that had been a source of pride, was a cause for exasperation in Paris.¹

Wright found it difficult to accommodate himself to French ways.²

It is so hard to get a fixed routine set in Paris these days. . . . Went to the ice house. It was closed until five o'clock. Now, I ask you, is that not the reason that France is so damned poor today?³

As a visitor, he had applauded the lack of materialism in French attitudes and French life; but in the early days of his exile, Wright was exasperated by French habits: "There must be somewhere a blending of the tolerant way of life of the French and the love of comfort of the Americans."⁴ The

¹Diary, August 18, 1947, Richard Wright MSS; Chester Himes writes of Wright's difficulties with his automobile in The Quality Of Hurt (New York, 1972), p. 191. So does William Gardner Smith in "Black Boy In France," Ebony 8 (July, 1953), p. 33.

²Himes claimed that even six years after leaving the United States Wright had still not adjusted to the lack of creature comforts in French life. He described Wright's apartment as one that was "sumptuously furnished . . . with many expensive improvements," pp. 142, 197-98. Van Vechten accused Wright of going bourgeois in Paris--but it is quite likely that he got that impression from Himes with whom he was quite close. Interview with Carl Van Vechten, Columbia Oral History Project, Columbia University, New York City, p. 267.

³Diary, September 3, 1947, Richard Wright MSS.

⁴Ibid.

intensity of Wright's reaction may have revealed more about himself than about France.¹

I left word with the ice man to say yes or no about the ice. Imagine a man refusing money! But he did. I love the French mentality sometimes, but not always. Not when practical matters are concerned. I see that most French stores are closed not only for two hours during lunch, but for longer periods. No wonder the French do not have suits to wear, the women are shoddy. I love leisure but not the kind of leisure that leaves a nation of beggars and cheats. Leisure that comes before security is pathetic. . . .²

The few disappointments that Wright experienced in Parisian life were more than offset by the tranquility he gained from reduced racial tension.³ Shortly before Wright left New York, he remarked that he could scarcely go two blocks from his house in New York "without being made to feel a Negro."⁴ But after a few weeks in Paris, he exulted in the fact that he had to remind himself that he was a Negro.⁵ In

¹In a letter to Margrit de Sablonnière, June 8, 1960, Wright remarked that indolence was the greatest curse of mankind. In his travels to non-Western nations, Wright voiced his sharpest criticisms about the peoples' traditional work-habits and attitudes, his rebukes sounding much like this. See Chapter 4, below, pp. 97. Wright's own faith in hard work was inculcated by his puritanical background and reinforced by his own hard-won success.

²Diary, September 3, 1947, Richard Wright MSS.

³"How calm I've felt here in Paris! No more of that tension which grips so hard it almost makes you dizzy, I walk down a street and I feel my legs swinging free. I'm so much more at home this time in Paris." Diary, August 18, 1947, Richard Wright MSS.

⁴Kinnamon, The Emergence of Richard Wright, p. 17.

⁵Diary, August 24, 1947, Richard Wright MSS.

an unpublished article written three years after he left New York, Wright remarked that he had shed his racial conditioning a half hour after he arrived in France. He attributed this to his belief that Frenchmen were simply more civilized than Americans, recalling a remark made by André Gide in 1946: "the more uncivilized the white man, the more he fears and hates those who differ from him."¹

In his first few weeks in Paris, Wright was exhilarated by a discussion about the nature of freedom with two French friends. Thinking such heady, philosophical conversations were common in France, Wright exclaimed: "How good it is to discuss life in this way! Is not this what life is for to find out what it means. How agreeable it is to live in Paris!"² By late 1947, Wright was no longer so optimistic about the possibilities for liberty in France. He expressed his dismay at the ever-polarizing political scene in France in an unpublished article, "A Personal Report from France." To a man who had recently cast off the ideological strait-jacket of the Communist party, the situation was particularly threatening.

If I appeared in Combat, the Communists would not like it; if I appeared in Samedi Soir, the Combat people

¹"I Choose Exile," Richard Wright MSS.

²Diary, August 18, 1947, Richard Wright MSS.

would not like it. If you decide to publish nowhere, people ask you why. It is almost impossible to write for any periodical without being branded or tagged with a political label. Men are called names, but rarely are they called men.¹

Because Wright had come to believe that any definition of freedom necessarily limited man's potential, he was disturbed by the ideological "blueprints" of the Left and the Right. "The groups and parties in France had a program for everything except the welfare of the man in the street," he wrote. "Each new definition of man reduces man here. Each new view of life leaves life more denuded. Each new political program takes away some of the dear bought values of living."² He was horrified to find that French creative writers were caught up in "machine-made dreams" too. They sacrificed everything to ideological consistency. No one wrote what he felt. Instead, they wrote "abstractly, violently, intellectually."³

One of Wright's "fondest ideas" about France was that her people had made an identification between their suffering during World War II and the suffering of the rest of humanity⁴--much as Wright had done with the suffering of his mother. Upon closer examination, he discovered

¹"A Personal Report From France," Richard Wright MSS.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Diary, August 27, 1947, Richard Wright MSS.

that this was a misconception. Furthermore, the intense ideological competition in post-war France led to a "calcification of intellect" rather than to a solution of the problems of modernization.¹

Although the entire French intellectual community did not conform to Wright's idealized preconceptions, one segment did provide him an ideological haven. Wright believed that Jean-Paul Sartre was the only Frenchman who had "voluntarily made this identification of the French experience with the rest of mankind."² In his diary on September 7, 1947, Wright noted,

Sartre is quite of my opinion regarding the possibility of human action today, that it is up to the individual to do what he can to uphold the concept of what it means to be human. The great danger, I told him, in the world today, is that this feeling and conception of what is a human being might well be lost. He agreed. I feel very close to Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.³

Wright and Sartre were both part of the non-Communist Left and feared the growing influence of the United States in world affairs. Each man believed in the necessity of collective action to eradicate the evils of capitalism, but

¹Michel Fabre suggests that this article was written with the United States rather than France in mind. This hypothesis may provide an explanation for the contradiction in Wright's opinion of French intellectuals here and in "I Choose Exile," but does not take into account the fact that Wright's description of the ambiance in France was quite apt.

²Diary, August 27, 1947, Richard Wright MSS.

³Ibid.

insisted on the integrity of the individual and the primacy of conscience over ideology. Sartre, like Wright, saw the black man as a victim of an oppressive capitalist system. Furthermore, they shared the conviction that literature was a weapon and that the proper role of the writer was one of engagement. Out of this shared perspective, the two men joined together in several political or quasi-political ventures.

Late in 1947, Wright, Sartre, Camus, Gide, Emmanuel Mounier, Théodore Monod, Michel Leiris, le père Maydiéu, Paul Rivet, Paul Hazoumé, and Léopold Senghor founded the influential journal Présence Africaine.¹ Présence Africaine was the major voice for "nègritude," a doctrine of cultural nationalism that was formulated in the 1930's in Paris by Senghor of Senegal, Aimé Césaire of Martinique, and Léon Damas of French Guiana.² Heavily influenced by Marxism and surrealism, nègritude insisted on the unique poetic

¹Michel Leiris, Théodore Monod, and Paul Rivet were ethnologists. Emmanuel Mounier was the editor of L'Esprit, a left-wing Catholic periodical.

²For a comprehensive study of negritude and its predecessors, see Lilyan Kestiloot, Les écrivains noirs de la langue française (Brussels, 1963). See also Thomas Melone, De la nègritude dans la littérature négro-américaine (Paris, 1962); Irving L. Markowitz, Léopold Sedar Senghor and the Politics of Negritude (New York, 1969); Jean-Paul Sartre, "L'Orphée noir," Présence Africaine, vol. 6, Octobre, 1948; and, of course, Présence Africaine.

attributes of the black race.¹

Wright's sense of kinship with Sartre helped ease some of the difficulties of his exile. The example of Sartre was an important factor in reconciling him to France.

One of the most remarkably gifted men I've met in Paris is Jean-Paul Sartre. . . . Sartre feels that it is his right rather than his duty to defend, on purely humanistic grounds, the interest of workers, to castigate anti-Semites, racism, and imperialism.²

Wright's disappointment with the French intelligentsia in 1947 had dissipated by 1950 when he wrote, "Albert Camus, Jean Cocteau, Simone de Beauvoir and a host of other French writers share the same humanistic passion to defend the dignity of man . . . a passion which they feel compelled to weave into their artistic productions."³ If Wright could no longer regard the whole French nation as his spiritual home, his identification with Sartre enabled him to regain a sense of community with a small segment of the French intelligentsia.

¹As a rejection of positivism, negritude reveals its kinship to surrealism. "la conception rationaliste, les explications mécanico-materialistes n'expliquent rien." In Senghor, "Ce que l'homme noir apporte," *Liberté I, Negritude et Humanisme* (Paris, 1964), p. 23. "L'émotion est nègre, comme la raison hellène" was an often quoted phrase expressing the same sentiment. (Ibid., p. 24) This doctrine loses much of its flavor in translation: no wonder it appealed more to French-speaking blacks than those in the English-speaking world.

²"I Choose Exile," Richard Wright MSS.

³Ibid.

Sartre also provided Wright with a *modus vivendi* for political action. In the midst of the violently partisan political atmosphere in France, Sartre--who was groping for a "'third way' out, a way which admits the inevitability of industrialism but wants to keep individual freedom intact"--was a source of inspiration to Wright, providing him with new grounds for hope.¹ He became involved in French politics, siding with the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (RDR), founded in 1948 by journalists and militants of the non-communist Left, Georges Altman, Jean Rous, Gérard Rosenthal, and David Rousset. Sartre, Camus, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty joined its ranks shortly thereafter. The RDR, which called itself a "gathering" rather than a party, took a position to the left of the Socialist party but to the right of the Communist party.²

As an American citizen, Wright was restricted from full engagement in French politics, but he supported the RDR by speaking at a rally on December 13, 1948 on "International-

¹Wright, "Two Letters to Dorothy Norman," p. 71.

²Burnier, pp. 54-57. Jean Rous and Georges Altman were editors of Franc-Tireur. David Rousset was an ex-Trotskyite who wrote for Les Temps Modernes. Maurice Merleau-Ponty was on the board of Les Temps Modernes. He was a phenomenologist philosopher and psychologist who was extremely influential in establishing the journal's political position until 1950.

ism and the Human Spirit."¹ He participated in a forum held in the pages of Franc-Tireur for several days before the rally itself. His article, entitled "L'Humanité est plus grande que l'Amérique ou la Russie," denounced both the United States and the Soviet Union for repressing human liberty.² However, Wright refused to attend RDR's International Day Against War and Dictatorship on April 30, 1949 because he feared that it might become an anti-communist event.³ He shared this stand with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.⁴ Wright was suspicious of the American delegates to the conference--Sidney Hook, Karl Compton, and James T. Farrell--and opposed the American delegation's support of NATO and

¹Wright attended in the company of Rousset, Sartre, Andre Bréton, Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Carlo Lévi, Claude Bourdet and Gérard Rosenthal.

²Franc-Tireur, December 1, 1948, p. 4.

³Despite Wright's hostility to communism, he had opposed anti-communism as a tactic. After he wrote "I Tried To Be A Communist," he decided to refrain from further denunciations of communism because he felt that the real threat to freedom came from the rise of fascism in the United States. See Wright, "Comrade Strong, Don't You Remember?" New York Herald Tribune (European Edition), April 4, 1949, p. 4. In a letter to Dorothy Norman written in 1948, Wright distinguished between anti-communism in France where communism was a real possibility and American anti-communism which seemed too "vague, highly emotional, and somewhat hysterical" to him. Two Letters, p. 69, letter dated February 28, 1948. Wright broke his silence in 1949 with the publication of the letter to Anna Louise Strong cited above. Miss Strong had been expelled from the USSR as a spy. In her own defense, she accused others of treason and continued to defend party cruelty as exceptional behavior. Wright was disturbed by this new rally of character assassination.

⁴Burnier, p. 63.

the Marshall Plan.¹

Although Wright was opposed to NATO, he was enough of a pragmatist to concern himself with its operation. He asked Sartre and Beauvoir to support his drive for equality between black and white soldiers among the American troops in France, but Sartre refused because such a stand implied recognition of the troops.² Sartre's involvement with philosophical implications rather than people's lives irritated Wright.³ Still, the two men joined together once again when Wright established the Franco-American Fellowship in the fall of 1950.

The FAF was founded to combat the spread of racism which Wright believed was on the rise in France as a result of NATO and the Marshall Plan.⁴ The organization's goals

¹"Wright on U.S." Labor Action, May 30, 1948, pp. 1-3. Given Wright's recognition of Europe's serious need for economic aid, his opposition to the Marshall Plan would have been curious had it not been for his fear of an expansion of American influence.

²Fabre, "An Interview with Simone de Beauvoir," p. 4.

³Fabre, "Richard Wright (1908-1960) Essai de biographie critique." Thèse pour le doctorat-es Lettres, Université de Paris, Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 1970, p. 602fn. This was based on an interview that Fabre conducted with Dorothy Norman. It is interesting that James Baldwin felt that this was the one of the serious areas of conflict between Wright and the existentialists. See "Alas, Poor Richard," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1963), p. 148.

⁴Wright, "Les Noirs Américains et la France," L'Observateur, 56, 3 mai 1951, and the translation, "American Negroes in France," Crisis, LVIII (June-July 1951), pp. 381-83.

were set forth in a document entitled "What Is the Franco-American Fellowship?" On the whole, they were broadly humanitarian and the general tone of the document was strongly international. The group aimed at eradicating ignorance and prejudice while attempting to preserve freedom from the encroachment of industrialization. It also served as a forum for cultural programs. In December, the group was officially launched with Wright serving as president, a position he held until the FAF attained its legal status as a cultural group on November 7, 1951. In December of that year, the organization collapsed for lack of members.¹

The Franco-American Fellowship was the last collaboration between Wright and Sartre. Their relationship could best be described as a meeting of two minds at a time when their political and philosophical interests coincided. But politically, the two men were moving in opposite directions: Wright away from communism toward subjectivism and Sartre away from a very individualistic philosophy toward a full commitment to communism. Sartre gave up his policy of neutrality in the Cold War and took a vehemently pro-communist stand in "Les Communistes et la paix," an article appearing in Les Temps Modernes in July, 1952.

For Sartre, Wright had served to articulate the

¹See Chapter 5 below, p.126.

problems of racism in the United States. He had singled Wright out as a model of the committed writer in the essay "What Is Literature?" (1947). But Wright did not influence Sartre's ideas about black identity. Sartre's famous essay "L'Orphée Noir" (1948) owed more to the concept of negritude, a doctrine for which Wright had little sympathy.¹

Despite their joint ventures and common interests, neither Sartre nor Wright contributed substantially to each other's mode of thought. In contrast to Sartre, by 1950, Wright had decided the capitalist world was the lesser of two evils. He believed that possibilities for change still existed in the United States whereas the Soviet Union was a counter-revolutionary force.² Wright's disagreements with Sartre are most vividly revealed in The Outsider--a novel that is generally considered to be Wright's

¹See discussion of Black Power, Chapter 5 below, p. 99. Wright's affiliation with Présence Africaine did not last long.

²"Entrevista con Richard Wright," Revista Branca, 1950 (translated by M. Fabre) Richard Wright MSS.

existential novel.¹ Not only is the novel Wright's most virulent attack on the Communist party, but it also refutes the most basic assumption of Sartrean existentialism, the notion that existence precedes essence.²

In fact, Wright had begun thinking about this novel before moving to France, but seven fallow years lay between Black Boy, Wright's last major work, and The Outsider. During this period Wright often felt that his work was blocked. The long gestation period required for this novel may have been due to a variety of difficult adjustments in Wright's life. Exile proved to be a more difficult transition than he had imagined, especially coming so soon after his break with the Communist party. But an even more important

¹Richard Lehan, "Existentialism in Recent American Fiction: The Demonic Quest," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, I (Summer, 1959), p. 181. See also remarks by Saunders Redding and Arna Bontemps in "Reflections on Richard Wright: A Symposium on an Exiled Native Son," in Anger, and Beyond, pp. 205-7; Nick Aaron Ford, "The Ordeal of Richard Wright," in The Black American Writer, ed. Donald Gibson (New York, 1970), pp. 32-33; Charles I. Glicksberg, "Existentialism in 'The Outsider,'" Four Quarters, VII (January, 1958), pp. 17-26; Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright," Graduate Comment, VII (July, 1964), pp. 74, 83; Kingsley Widmer, "The Existential Darkness: Richard Wright's The Outsider," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, I (Fall, 1960), pp. 13-21; and Webb, p. 310.

²Constance Webb has argued that the novel was devoid of political intent, despite the synonymity between communism and fascism that was built into the plot. See p. 307.

reason for Wright's trouble with The Outsider was undoubtedly the very nature of the enterprise that the book represented; it was an attempt to resolve his identity outside the confines of ideology or race as well as a statement of his political and intellectual position.

As the title suggests, one of the main themes of the novel was the alienation of modern man. The protagonist, Cross Damon,¹ was an outsider on several levels--the most superficial of them being the fact that he was Negro.

Negroes, as they enter our culture, are going to inherit the problems we have, but with a difference. They are outsiders and they are going to know that they have these problems. They are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both inside and outside of our culture at the same time. Every emotional and cultural convulsion that ever shook the heart and soul of Western man will shake them.²

Cross Damon was not an uneducated, inarticulate black like Bigger Thomas; he was an intellectual, a former philosophy student at the University of Chicago. The fact that he was an intellectual separated Damon from his environment as much as the content of his ideas removed him from the rules of society.³

¹The name Cross Damon shows the author's symbolic intent. Cross, the Christ figure suffers for modern man, but his demonic urges lead to the undoing of humanity.

²The Outsider (New York, 1965, Perennial Library edition), p. 129.

³Among the authors that District Attorney Ely Houston found in Damon's library were Nietzsche, Hegel, Jaspers, Heidegger, Husserl, Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky. Ibid., p. 421.

Weren't there somewhere in this world rebels with whom one could feel at home, men who were outsiders not because they had been born black and poor, but because they had thought their way through the many veils of illusions?¹

Wright articulated the situation of modern man through the ideas that Damon espoused. Driven to an atheistic premise by the forces of science and industrialization, Cross concluded that "In modern industrial society we try to steer our hearts by improvised, pragmatic rules which are in the end, no rules at all."² He believed that most men were unable to accept the reality of the world that science revealed and continued to live in the twentieth century by the "totems and taboos" of the world of myth.³ But, in reality, Western men had outlived the faith of their fathers and could not really adhere to the old moral precepts that were predicated on the existence of God. In Damon's view, the crisis of the twentieth century lay in the fact that man's consciousness was split. Modern man lived in bad faith, "daily stifling" his "sense of terror in the face of life . . . pretending that life was tending toward a goal of redemption. . . ."⁴ Civilization

¹The Outsider, p. 28.

²Ibid., p. 358.

³Ibid., p. 357.

⁴Ibid., p. 187.

was nothing more than man's attempt to hide from his true nature. All efforts at order were part of man's struggle to quiet his fears of himself.

The logic of Damon's beliefs led to the conclusion that "Everything was permitted"; but, in reality, as the book opened, Damon was trapped as tightly as Bigger Thomas had been.¹ Caught between his wife and three children, on the one hand, and his young mistress who claimed to be pregnant, on the other, Damon felt that his situation was hopeless. A fortuitous elevated-train accident in which a body was identified as his gave him an opportunity to escape his shoddy existence. Freed from the entanglements that he had unwittingly made for himself, he leaped at this chance to shape his life in accordance with his philosophy.

Others took their lives for granted; he, he would have to mold his with a conscious aim. Why not? Was he not free to do so? That all men were free was the fondest and deepest conviction of his life. And his acting upon this wild plan would be but an expression of his perfect freedom.²

Thus, Wright set the stage for an examination of one of the basic tenets of Sartrean existentialism: existence precedes essence. This dictum, the core of Sartre's early philosophy, posited the absolute freedom of the individual. Man defined

¹There are marked similarities between the first part of The Outsider and the situation of Jake Jackson in Lawd Today. (Both men worked in the post office and both men had wives who reported their bad conduct to a supervisor.)

²The Outsider, p. 87.

himself through his actions or inaction. He was nothing more than the sum of his choices.

Having shed the responsibilities of friends and family and the restraints of religion, conventional morality, and his past, Damon entered uncharted territory. He knew that he

had to discover good and evil through his own actions, which were more exacting than the edicts of any God because it was he alone who had to bear the brunt of their consequences with a sense of absoluteness made intolerable by knowing that this life of his was all he had and would ever have. For there was no grace of mercy if he failed.¹

In New York, Damon got involved with others who assumed the posture of little gods. He was fascinated by the communists, but he observed them in a cynical, detached fashion. The essence of the Communist party, as Damon saw it, was open lawlessness; its humanitarian rhetoric was nothing more than a cloak, disguising a brutal power struggle. Power was more than a political concept when it was employed by the communists; it was psychological, "wielded directly upon the lives and bodies of others" through the use of fear.²

Although Damon recognized his kinship with the communists, he knew that there were some essential differences between himself and them. In deciding on his course of action, Damon was motivated by an "emotional

¹Ibid., p. 123.

²Ibid., p. 199.

compulsion, religious in its intensity, to feel and weigh the worth of himself," while the communists "had resolved their tangled emotions in the rigid disciplines of Communist politics, thereby rejecting from their hearts the pathos of living, purging their consciousness of that perilous subjective tension that spells the humanity of man."¹ Their concept of man denied the central core of man's humanity and he came to detest these little gods who tried to mold man to their own image.

Damon resolved to oppose them. This decision led to a series of cold-blooded murders and ultimately to Damon's own destruction. Having murdered because he was offended by his victims' disdain for human life, he realized that he had become contaminated by their lawlessness. He had adopted their attitudes as well as their methods. Damon's crime, as Wright defined it, was that he had

cynically scorned, wantonly violated every commitment that civilized men owe . . . to those with whom they live. That, in essence, was his crime. The rest of his brutal thrashing about were the mere offshoots of that one central, cardinal fact.²

Like the communists and fascists in the novel, Damon had become a "little God who trafficked in human life."³ His experiment in freedom had been a failure. At the end of the

¹Ibid., p. 180. (*Italics added*). Still it is not clear how joining the Communists would bring this about. What is clear is the debt that Wright owes to Dostoyevsky rather than Sartre in this novel.

²Ibid., p. 374.

³Ibid., p. 427.

novel, Damon warned others "not to come down this road."¹

On the surface, it would seem that Damon's destruction was the logical consequence of his ideas. But Wright posited a more basic reason. In The Outsider, Wright wrote that he was addressing himself to the most significant question of the twentieth century: "The problem for twentieth-century man is psychological."² Wright was concerned with the scope of human freedom in a psychologically determined universe.

Damon was an outsider because he was a Negro and an intellectual, but his alienation stemmed primarily from his relationship with his mother. He had lost his father at an early age and his mother was the dominant influence in his life. Like Wright's own mother, Damon's was intensely religious and her teachings evoked feelings of fear and guilt in her son.

Though she had loved him, she had tainted his budding feelings with a fierce devotion born of her fear of a life that had baffled and wounded her. His first coherent memories had condensed themselves into an image of a young woman whose hysterically loving presence had made his imagination conscious of an invisible God . . . hovering oppressively in space above him. His adolescent fantasies had symbolically telescoped this God into an awful face shaped in the form of a huge and crushing NO. . . .³

Wright wrote that "dread had been" Damon's "mother's first fateful gift to him."⁴ Once he realized this, he spent the

¹Ibid., p. 439.

³Ibid., pp. 17-18.

²Ibid., p. 363.

⁴Ibid., p. 17.

rest of his life trying to keep this heritage from crushing his own life.¹ Damon became a man divided: emotions of guilt and dread against intellect. Thus, he gravitated to the stance of the observer, detached from his family, his friends, and himself.

In running away from his life in Chicago, Damon was free from everything but himself. He realized that "It was not easy to break with one's life. It was not difficult to see that one was always much, much more than what one thought one was."² Thus, in reality, Damon's break with the past did not really liberate him. Wright tried to show this through Damon's first desires and actions after he had assumed his new identity. Not only did he wish to see his family once more before he left, a desire that would have cost him his freedom; he was also compelled to commit murder in order to preserve his new identity. Thus, his first murder was not a free act, but one dictated by the necessity of the situation.

It seems quite clear that Wright had concluded that the realm of human freedom was limited by psychological determinism. He was not content to leave the conclusion

¹Constance Webb states that Wright told her that he experienced this in regard to his mother. See Richard Wright, p. 407, fn. 10.

²The Outsider, p. 87.

that Damon had not attained perfect freedom implicit in the action of the novel. He turned to the device of an omniscient narrator to tell us that while logic guided Damon's sense of direction, his emotional needs were dictating the kinds of direction he chose.

More definitely than ever her [his mother's] fateful gift was shaping and toning his hours even now on this fleeing train, was subtly sculpturing the contours of his destiny, staining all the future that he was to embrace. . . .¹

Wright's thesis of psychological determinism in this novel was very much at odds with Sartrean existentialism. The Outsider refuted the most basic tenet of Sartre's philosophy. For Sartre, the concept of freedom was in no way contingent on material, social, historical, or psychological preconditions. However, Damon's nihilistic ideas distracted critics from the implications of the novel as a

¹Ibid., p. 119.

whole.¹

To the extent that The Outsider reflected existential ideas, they came from Wright's own experiences and his earlier reading of Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky. Wright had already planned and begun The Outsider before he went to Paris. The frame of reference for Damon's nihilism was not Sartre but Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky whom Wright had read in the thirties. Dostoyevsky's influence on Wright had been profound: in 1955, Wright acknowledged that Dostoyevsky had taught him about the psychological state of modern man.

That influence can be seen clearly in The Outsider, a novel of crime and punishment. Cross Damon was a combination of Ivan Karamazov and Raskolnikov. His intellectual position resembled Ivan's but his motive for rebellion was

¹The Outsider has been called the first American existential novel, profoundly influenced by Sartre. In large part, this widespread misunderstanding reflected one of the major failings of the book. As a novel of ideas, The Outsider was too ambitious, addressing itself to the problem of freedom versus psychological determinism, the consequences of nihilistic thought, and the human condition of modern man. Wright chose to work out his answers on three different levels: plot structure; the ideas espoused by Damon and his alter-ego Ely Houston, the district attorney; and through the psychology of the main character. However, he added confusion to complexity by failing to integrate them. The psychological dimension of the novel was not fully developed. Instead of "subtly sculpturing the contours" of his major character within the integral framework of the novel, Wright relied too much on the omniscient narrator to inform the reader of the basis of Damon's alienation. Nor was it clear how Damon's actions or ideas were related to his psychological make-up. As a result, Wright's intent was lost and the psychological argument against existentialism has often been overlooked.

the same as Raskolnikov's. Like Karamazov, Damon was a metaphysical rebel. Starting from the hypothesis that God was dead, both men concluded that everything was permitted. Raskolnikov had murdered to prove whether he was a man or a louse and Damon's rebellion stemmed from his need to test himself.

In Damon's attempt to create his own codes of good and evil, he had embarked on the project of Nietzsche's prophet Zarathustra:

Can you give yourself your own will and your own good and hang your own will over yourself as a law? Can you be your own judge and avenger of your own law? Terrible it is to be alone with the judge and the avenger of one's own law.¹

But one of the major differences between Damon, on the one hand, and Zarathustra and Raskolnikov, on the other, lay in the fact that Damon had no notion of the superman. He chose not to adhere to conventional morality because he was outside, not above, society. As an outsider, his perception of reality was more acute than that of other men. Wright viewed Damon as a test-case of modern morality.

But whether The Outsider was influenced by Sartre or by Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche is an academic question--albeit an interesting one. What is more important is Wright's attempt to find a less parochial identification as a human being and as a writer in this novel. Looking back

¹Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, The Portable Nietzsche (New York, 1961), p. 175.

over his first five years in exile, Wright declared, "The break from the United States was more than a geographical change. It was a break with my former attitudes as a Negro and as a Communist."¹ In The Outsider, Wright had rejected the economically determined view of man of Native Son and the authority of the Communist party. The Outsider was not a race novel and Wright did not dwell on this aspect of the protagonist's alienation.² In this novel, he used the situation of the Negro in the United States as a metaphor for the dilemma of twentieth-century man. This idea was not new to Wright. It was implicit in Native Son; explicit in "How Bigger Was Born" and followed logically from Wright's famous statement "the Negro is America's metaphor"³--if

¹William Gardner Smith, "Black Boy in Paris," Ebony, VIII (July 1953), p. 40.

²The following quotations from The Outsider show clearly that Wright de-emphasized race in this novel. "Anxiety now drove a sharp sense of distance between him and his environment. . . . There was no racial tone to his reactions; he was just a man, any man. . . ." Ibid., p. 86. "Cross's opportunistic rejection of his former life had been spurred by his shame at what a paltry man he had made of himself. . . . His consciousness of the color of his skin had played no role in it." Ibid., p. 142. For a discussion of this question, See Arthur P. Davis, "'The Outsider' As A Novel Of Race," Midwest Journal, 7 (Winter 1956), pp. 320-26.

³"The Literature of the Negro in the United States," White Man Listen! (New York, Anchor Edition, 1964), p. 72. This essay is the text of a lecture often given by Wright in the U.S. in 1945.

America is understood to be a metaphor for industrialized society. But in the past, Wright had been making a commentary about the American Negro and now he was addressing himself to the human condition. With the alienation of modern man as his theme, Wright hoped to make a new literary reputation for himself so that the public would not associate him primarily as the author of Native Son and Black Boy.¹ Wright's efforts in fiction and non-fiction were bent toward this aim in Paris. Savage Holiday (1954), Wright's second novel written in exile, did not have a single Negro character.

In The Outsider, Freudian determinism replaced Marxist determinism. Wright concluded that man was a psychological animal and Savage Holiday, a crude Freudian exegesis, gave evidence that this was the direction of his thinking. In fact, far from being the potboiler that critics imagined, Savage Holiday was planned as the first of a series about the conflict between the individual and society.² The second novel had the working title "Strange

¹Richard Wright to Paul Reynolds, July 27, 1955, pp. 2,3, Richard Wright MSS.

²Wright to Reynolds, July 27, 1955, Richard Wright MSS. Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, pp. 427-31. In an unpublished article entitled "Personalism" written in 1935, Wright stated that literature should be traditionally American and should have as its main burden and theme the posing of the problem of the individual in relation to society. Richard Wright Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

Daughter" and was concerned with sexual taboos of a puritanical culture. The main character, a white girl, can only achieve sexual satisfaction through humiliation. As a result of a sado-masochistic relationship with a Nigerian, she finds fulfillment--only to be murdered in accordance with the regulations of his religion, when he discovers that she is pregnant. The third novel, "When the World was Red," was to deal with the conquest of Mexico, exploring Montezuma's ambivalent feelings of fascination and repugnance for his conquerors.

In a very real sense, The Outsider was also a continuation of Wright's autobiography. The points of contact between Damon and Wright were numerous. We have already mentioned their similarity in regard to their relationship with their mother and their religious backgrounds which produced feelings of guilt and dread. The fact that both men were Negroes and intellectuals seems almost too obvious to mention. But most significant was the emotional affinity between the two men: Wright had always thought of himself as an outsider. In exile, these feelings grew stronger.

Wright had been drawn to Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche because their struggle against authority represented one of the earliest and most persistent preoccupations of his life. As he wrote in Black Boy,

Was I really as bad as my uncles and aunts and Granny repeatedly said? . . . Was I right when I resisted punishment? It seemed inconceivable to me

that one should surrender to what seemed wrong
 how could one live in a world in which one's mind and
 perceptions meant nothing and authority and tradition
 meant everything?¹

In reality, Wright's treatise on nihilistic rebellion in
The Outsider was part of an internal dialogue.

In Native Son, Wright had explored the viability of
 individual rebellion. Bigger Thomas had found meaning in
 his murders and through them his life had gained significance.
 Wright affirmed Bigger's rebellion through the protagonist's
 statement "What I killed for I am." In The Outsider, Wright
 rejected this nihilistic form of revolt. Damon's belief
 in freedom was rooted in his conviction that human life was
 inviolable and in his belief in the freedom of all men.
 He had opposed the communists because they had denied the
 freedom and sanctity of human life. But in murdering them,
 he became one of their kind and his quest for freedom became
 meaningless. Placing himself outside of societal conventions
 in order to achieve freedom, Damon had destroyed the principle
 upon which that freedom was based. As he was dying, Damon
 told the district attorney, "The search can't be done
 alone. . . . Alone a man is nothing."²

The Outsider reveals Wright's continued preoccupation
 with his origins. He had always thought of himself as an

¹pp. 181-82.

²Ibid., p. 439.

outsider. That was how he had explained his spectacular emergence from such inauspicious beginnings. Through anthropology, sociology, and Marxism and in Native Son, "How Bigger Was Born," and Black Boy, Wright explored the socio-economic factors that led to his alienation. In The Outsider, he turned to psychology. Yet, interestingly at the very time that Wright's thinking became increasingly subjective, he rejected the individualistic rebellion of Native Son. The Outsider expresses Wright's basic ambivalence toward his own freedom and the emotional price that he had paid for it. The novel may also be indicative of his disillusionment with France.

Although Wright sought refuge from racism in Paris, he did not intend to give up his life-long struggle against the forces of oppression. France was a strategic site from which to conduct his battle against racism in the United States. The example of French humanism was a weapon that Wright could use to embarrass the United States about her racial policy. But French humanism was more than just a weapon for Wright: he placed his hopes for his future and the future of the world on France, characteristically fusing his personal and political aspirations. France was both a cause and a spiritual home to Wright. But after his rift with Sartre, he was politically isolated. Wright had not found a spiritual community in France. His anguish over

The Outsider suggests Wright's difficulty in coming to terms with his isolation.

CHAPTER IV

By 1953 Wright had turned his hopes and the focus of his attention to the non-Western world. In part, this shift was related to his growing realization that France was "alien soil." But it was also connected to an increasing despair over the possibilities for social change in the United States. In 1951, Wright had submitted an article entitled "I Choose Exile" to Ebony. The article was a paean to his adopted homeland.¹ Wright claimed that he found more freedom in one square block in Paris than he had known in the entire United States. Although Wright was referring to the difference between French and American racial attitudes when he made this statement, he also defined freedom as the right to hold a different opinion from one's neighbors, the right to express distrust of collective public wisdom, and the right to refuse to spy on one's neighbors. He called himself "a democrat who had grown skeptical of the people." But his elitism was a reaction against McCarthyism in the

¹It is difficult to know to what degree Wright's statements about France were influenced by his prospective audience. This problem is especially acute in light of the fact that Wright chose not to publish his critical views on France in "A Personal Report from France." See Chapter 3 above, p. 64. Wright was keenly aware of the propaganda value of such statements.

United States--a point he made perfectly clear when he called his principles "un-American" not "anti-American."¹

Ebony rejected the article and refused to release it to Wright to circulate elsewhere. Although Wright had never been fond of the black bourgeoisie which Ebony epitomized, he was both surprised and furious at this new evidence of cowardice.² In a letter to his agent, he denounced the Johnson publication as more reactionary than its white counterparts.³ He then submitted his article to Atlantic Monthly which had published "I Tried To Be A Communist." Rejection here led him to the conclusion that liberal opinion could not be counted on in America. In Wright's view, the Cold War had reached such proportions that he could not even praise America's French ally for her more liberal racial attitudes. "What has happened to the Negro problem in America is that it is solved, and the way they solved it is by forbidding anybody to mention it."⁴

Wright's belief that the Cold War and McCarthyism

¹"I Choose Exile," Richard Wright MSS.

²For examples of Wright's hostility toward the black bourgeoisie, see "How Bigger Was Born," *passim*. and Twelve Million Black Voices, *passim*.

³Richard Wright to Paul Reynolds, January 23, 1953, Richard Wright MSS.

⁴Richard Wright to Paul Reynolds, January 30, 1953, Richard Wright MSS.

had led to an increasingly conservative stance on the part of American liberals and his assessment of the reactionary nature of the black middle classes appear to have contributed to his growing pessimism about the possibility for significant change in the United States. Given Wright's hostility to communism, his disillusionment with France, and his view that America was calcified in a right-wing reaction, the Third World became the repository of his hopes. But Wright's interest in the Third World represented a shift in locale rather than a shift in subject matter. When writing about the Negro situation in the United States, Wright had always been concerned with vast social changes and the psychological dislocations that they brought in their wake. These were the kind of processes that caught his imagination and he found similar situations again in the Third World which he described as "societies in ferment."

Wright's interest in the Third World was stimulated by his contact with George Padmore, a leader of the Pan-African movement, and the international black elite in Paris, though, of course, the kinship between America's oppressed black minority and colored colonial peoples had been a tenet of Marxist theory that was emphasized when Wright joined the Communist party. Wright met Padmore in London in 1947 as he was returning to the United States from France. Like Wright, Padmore had been a communist, but had left the party in 1934 after the USSR reversed its policies

on the Negro question and colonialism.¹ The two men formed a close friendship and Wright was very much influenced by Padmore's Pan-Africanism. In an interview in 1948, Wright remarked that his interests had turned to Africa and Asia.² Despite Wright's brief involvement in Présence Africaine, this statement seems like an exaggeration. Wright was still primarily concerned with Western values and the West. He did not embark on his sojourns to the non-Western world until 1953.

Wright wrote that his trip to Africa was prompted by the visit of Mrs. Padmore on Easter Sunday in 1953.³ She suggested that Wright see the Gold Coast which was then converting to self-rule. Wright had thought of going to Africa in 1947, but nothing had come of the idea: his adjustment to exile had proved more difficult than he had imagined. Then in 1949, he went to Argentina to film Native Son, a project that took a year.⁴ When he got back, he

¹Padmore, a West Indian by birth, was the most important black man in the Comintern. He was one of the leading figures at the Fifth Pan-African Congress held in 1945 in Manchester, England. Before his death in 1959, he had been Special Adviser on African Affairs to Kwame Nkrumah.

²Wright, "Boîte aux lettres," L'Ordre, January 1, 1948, Richard Wright MSS.

³Black Power, p. 3.

⁴Wright had several offers to turn Native Son into a movie. The most striking came from Harold Hecht who wanted to change Bigger Thomas to a Caucasian. Wright finally decided to work with Pierre Chenal, a French director. Wright starred in the movie; it received terrible reviews.

settled down to finish The Outsider. In December of 1952, when Wright was still embroiled in his dispute with Ebony, he brought up the subject of a trip to the Gold Coast with his agent, Paul Reynolds. Reynolds was quite enthusiastic about the idea: he had been worried about the effects of exile on Wright's creative energies and hoped that such a trip would stimulate him.

Wright had been acquainted with Kwame Nkrumah in the United States, but because it was a politically sensitive time, Wright needed the intercession of the Padmores to gain admission to the Gold Coast. Nkrumah approved Wright's request to visit the Gold Coast in a journalistic capacity and expressed pleasure in welcoming him, though he could not help financially with the trip.¹ One month later, Wright left for Africa aboard the Accra.

Of the our travel books that Wright wrote, Black Power was the most complex;² for his exploration of Africa was also a voyage of self-discovery.

One does not react to Africa as Africa is. . . .
One reacts to Africa as one is, as one lives; one's reactions to Africa is one's life, one's ultimate sense of things. Africa is a vast, dingy mirror and what modern man sees in that mirror he hates and wants to

¹Kwame Nkrumah to Richard Wright, April 16, 1953, Richard Wright MSS. Nkrumah had gone to Lincoln University and had become acquainted with Wright at that time.

²The others are The Color Curtain (1956), Pagan Spain (1957) and White Man, Listen! (1957).

destroy. He thinks, when looking into that mirror, that he is looking at black people who are inferior, but, really, he is looking at himself. . . .¹

Wright described Black Power as a very personal book in which he probed his own relationship to Africa. He had considered several titles for the book--"What Is Africa To Me," "O, My People," or "Stranger in a Strange Land."² Taken together, these titles show his ambivalence toward Africa.

Of the titles Wright was mulling over before he thought of "Black Power," "Stranger in a Strange Land" most aptly described Wright's feeling of discomfort in Africa.³ Much of what he saw he did not understand. "I'm of African descent and I'm in the midst of Africans, yet I cannot tell what they are thinking and feeling," he wrote.⁴ His first impression of Africa was somewhat unsettling. "The kaleidoscope of sea, jungle, nudity, mud huts, and crowded market places induced in me a conflict deeper than I was aware of: a protest against what I saw seized me."⁵

¹Black Power, p. 158.

²Richard Wright to Paul Reynolds, Oct. 4, 1953, Richard Wright MSS. "What Is Africa To Me" is the title of a Countee Cullen poem. It is not clear whether the second title is intended to be ironic.

³"The title: Black Power means political and state power. I did not have in mind any racial meaning." Richard Wright to Margrit de Sablonnière, June 9, 1955, Richard Wright MSS.

⁴Black Power, p. 137.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 37.

Although Wright felt quite alien from the culture of the Gold Coast, he sympathized with the oppression, suffering, and hopes of the people.

In general, Wright's attitude toward Africa contained a combination of hostility, sympathy, repugnance, and condescension. His hostility was aroused when he was asked what part of Africa his family came from. Feeling defensive, perhaps, because he did not know, he replied that the Africans who had sold their brethren as slaves had not kept any records. Wright tried to ward off feelings of condescension by trying to understand the underlying assumptions of African beliefs. He warned Westerners against seeing the African as irrational, but he himself was not entirely successful in this for Africa revealed the great extent to which he was a product of Western culture.

One did not leave the past behind; one took it with one; one made the past the present. I could not get beyond that, for it was alien to me; it was intriguing but beyond the bounds of my feelings. I could understand it, but I couldn't experience it . . . faced with the absolute otherness and inaccessibility of this new world, I was prey to a vague sense of mild panic.¹

Wright described himself as an uneasy member of the Western world, but little of his discomfort surfaced in this book. Indeed, Wright was a ruthless westernizer, a rationalist who could not understand African religion. Unlike some black nationalists in the United States today,

¹Ibid., p. 175 .

Wright would salvage nothing of native customs and traditions if they stood in the way of modernization. In Wright's eyes, these aspects of African culture were impediments which had to be destroyed in order for Africa to become free of white domination. Wright advised Nkrumah to be hard: African life would have to be "militarized in order to be able to leap into the twentieth century."¹

Most important of all, a military form of African society will atomize the fetish-ridden past, abolish the mystical and nonsensical family relations that freeze the African in his static degradation; it will render the continued existence of those parasitic chiefs who have too long bled and misled a naive people.²

Oddly enough, Wright did not seem to see any irony in recommending that Africa become more like the West in order to rid itself of Western influence. Nor did he see any apparent contradiction between his criticisms of the Soviet Union and his advice to Nkrumah. In a section of Black Power addressed to Nkrumah, he wrote:

There will be those who will try to frighten you by telling you that the organization you are forging looks like Communism, Fascism, Nazism; but, Kwame, the form of organization that you need will be dictated by the needs, emotional and material, of your people. The content determines the form. Never again must the outside world decide what is good for you.³

Although Wright had never actually been a nationalist,

¹Ibid., pp. 345, 347-49.

²Ibid., p. 348.

³Ibid., p. 349.

he was not insensitive to Africa's appeal to many American Negroes. But he was skeptical of the popular notion that his kinship with Africans gave him special insight into Africa and its customs. Wright rejected anthropological notions about the survival of African traits in the American Negro and was unsympathetic to the idea that Negroes had a special gift for "music, dancing, rhythm, and movement. . . ."¹

While Wright did not believe that life could be explained in racial terms, he was puzzled by the similarity he observed between the dancing of African women and the dancing in store-front churches and Holy Roller Tabernacles in the Deep South. Wright resolved this conundrum by concluding that "African survivals" were cultural rather than racial. So-called African survivals were nothing more than "the retention of basic and primal attitudes toward

¹Ibid., p. 5. The idea of African survivals in the American Negro was presented by anthropologist Melville Herskovitz in The Myth of the Negro Past (New York, 1941). Wright's disagreement with this viewpoint was one of the causes of his split with Présence Africaine. (Perhaps his skepticism arose from the fact that he himself could neither dance nor carry a tune.) Speaking in 1960 about black French writers, he stated that he thought they were profoundly influenced by religious sentiment. He did not formulate problems in the same way that they did. "American blacks fight to make the Constitution a reality." Interview in L'Express, 18 août 1960, no. 479, pp. 22-23.

For a discussion of the different approaches of English-speaking and French-speaking Negroes, see Ezekiel Mphahlele, "The Cult of Negritude," Encounter, vol. 16, no. 3, (Mar. 1961), pp. 50-52.

life."¹ Wright believed that an African, like other peoples, would take on the characteristics of another culture to the degree that he had been allowed to assimilate:

But, to the degree that he fails to adjust, to absorb the new environment (and this will be mainly for racial and economic reasons!), he, to that degree, and of necessity, will retain much of his primal outlook upon life, his basically poetic apprehension of existence.²

Thus, Wright thought that the social scientist should concern himself with the causes for the persistence of primal attitudes.

In Black Power, Wright's approach was consistent with this advice. Thus, much of the analysis could be categorized as social psychology, focussing on the psychological effects of religion, colonialism, and nationalism. Wright dealt briefly with the psychology of the oppressed, but not as prominently as in his later books. Wright claimed that he followed a Marxist analysis in Black Power. However, this was true only to the limited degree that his explanation of Western colonialism was predicated on economic motives. According to Wright, the greatest crime that took place under the aegis of imperialism was not economic exploitation, but the creation of a servile personality structure in the native population. As a result, he believed

¹Black Power, p. 266.

²Ibid.

that the most important task facing Nkrumah was the creation of confidence at the core of the African personality rather than the establishment of a strong economy--although certainly both were necessary.¹

In this book, Wright described nationalism as "politics plus!"² Nkrumah filled the void that the British missionaries left when they smashed tribal culture. He "tapped the abandoned emotional reservoir" that Christianity had no use for.³ His genius lay in fusing politics with tribalism, combining tribal rituals such as the oath with twentieth-century politics. Nkrumah took the millions of detribalized Africans, people living in two worlds--part of neither, believing in neither--and gave them a politics that bordered on religion. Politics plus "involved a total and basic response to reality; it smacked of the dreamlike, of the stuff of which art and myths were made. . . ." ⁴ It was not the cold, unemotional religion that the missionaries had given the African; nor was it communism which Wright

¹"African culture has not developed the personalities of the people to a degree that their egos are stout, hard, sharply defined; there is too much cloudiness in the African's mentality, a kind of sodden vagueness that makes for a lack of confidence, an absence of focus that renders that mentality incapable of grasping the workaday world." Ibid., p. 343.

²Ibid., p. 56.

³Ibid., pp. 59-61.

⁴Ibid., pp. 91-92. Ellipses in the original.

said was "above all, ideological." What he had seen was "the quintessence of passion." There was a "smattering of Marxism and the thirst for self-redemption." Thus, Wright dubbed Nkrumah an "agent provocateur to the emotions of millions."¹

Wright's political stance in Black Power was somewhat ambivalent. He explained that his use of Marxism did not commit him to policies or programs commonly associated with communism. Indeed, he was explicitly anti-Soviet.² Yet, he did advocate the same techniques of modernization that he had condemned in the USSR because they had crushed freedom. Despite the fact that Wright claimed he had written this book in order to warn the West that it would lose Africa to communism if it remained blind to the causes of revolution on that continent, Black Power was almost as anti-Western as it was anti-Soviet. In reality, Wright had addressed himself to the African elite, imploring them to modernize as quickly as possible. Ironically, many Africans were offended by Wright's portrayal of African life: they found him condescending and scornful.

¹Ibid., pp.91-92. It should be noted that in this context Wright is quite sanguine about a quasi-religious movement of this kind; nor does he seem to be concerned about the similarity between his description of Nkrumah here and his description of Hitler in the "Introduction" to Black Metropolis.

²See "Apropos Prepossessions," Black Power, pp. xi-xv.

Pagan Spain, while neither an exploration into a nation in the throes of modernization nor a study of a former colonial area, has a central place in Wright's thought about these subjects. Wright's visit to Spain in August 1954 should not be attributed to any change in his political sympathies but to his restlessness and curiosity. For many years, Wright had resisted the advice of friends, including Gertrude Stein just a few days before her death, to visit Spain. Although he believed that he was quite familiar with totalitarian regimes--having been born in "an absolutist racist regime in Mississippi,"¹ having worked twelve years under the dictatorship of the Communist party and having spent a year in Peronist Argentina--he had been hurt and haunted by the fate of Spain.¹ Wright deftly wove sections of a handbook on the goals and ideals of the Franco regime throughout the book to show the type of control that the regime hoped to exercise over the thoughts and actions of the people.

Wright's book on Spain was his examination into the meaning of Western civilization. His view that Spain lay outside of Western civilization showed quite definitely that for him the West was not defined geographically but culturally. Wright's belief that religion permeated every

¹Pagan Spain (New York, 1957), pp. 1-2.

aspect of life in Spain, in short, that the secular sphere had not emerged independent, was his basis for differentiating Spain from Western civilization. Clearly, Wright's view of Western civilization was teleological, a development culminating in the emergence of a secular, rational civilization.

To the extent that Pagan Spain was more than a travelogue, it was a discussion of the sociology of religion. Wright hypothesized that Catholicism, by shaping the Spanish personality, was the key factor responsible for the course of Spanish development. In an analysis similar to Max Weber's in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Wright explained that there was a causal relationship between Protestantism and the dynamic societies of Western capitalist countries, on the one hand, and between Catholicism and a more traditional society, on the other.

In Wright's determination, the major difference between the two religions was the essentially spiritual nature of Protestantism and the sensual nature of Catholicism: Protestantism emphasized individual conscience while Catholicism relied on external factors such as symbols and music.

To Catholics, the hierarchy of Christianity was external, unspeakably beautiful, powerful, and yet miraculously accessible through the intercession of others. . . .

To Protestants this whole process had been psychologically internalized. . . . Protestants had to conjure up out of their imagination, their longings, their fears, . . . Protestants had to make severe demands on themselves; Catholics submitted to what had already been arranged.¹

Wright's attitude toward religion in general was by no means consistent. In discussing the Gold Coast, Wright approved the use of religious fervor in politics. Yet his condemnation of the Communist party was partially based on his perception that it was analogous to the church.² It seems that Wright's hostility to religion or quasi-religious movements was determined by the degree to which he believed that they stifled individualism and, concomitantly in his view, human progress. Wright's attitude becomes clearer when we examine his fiction. In the short stories, "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star," his heroes were religious and their religious energy had been channeled to strike out against an oppressive society. But Bigger Thomas and Cross Damon, the protagonists in Native Son and The Outsider respectively, had to rebel to attain any measure of freedom from a repressively religious mother who preached submission and self-denial.

Clearly, Wright's attitudes were strongly influenced by his own experience. The religion practiced in his

¹Pagan Spain, pp. 226-27.

²The God That Failed, p. 140..

grandmother's house was harsh and punitive, denying self-actualization. As he had rebelled against such strictures in his youth, so he rejected religious zeal that suppressed freedom when he was an adult. But almost as clearly, Wright was not able to extricate himself from the influence of his religious background. He was not only a puritan himself in many of his attitudes and in his outlook on work, but he also placed a very positive value on the Protestant ethic. Protestantism, as he elaborated in White Man, Listen! (1957), created a psychological strength that led to emotional independence and a stance of detachment; while Catholicism tended to encourage an attitude of "sensual slavery to sights, sounds and colors."¹ The similarity between Wright's description of the internalization of Protestantism cited above and his description of his own intellectual development in Black Boy are too striking to be ignored.² Indeed, Wright's tendency to regard his own survival techniques as a paradigm to be followed by whole peoples became more pronounced later.

Returning from Spain for the Christmas holidays in 1954, Wright read for the first time of the Bandung Conference to be held in Indonesia that spring. Twenty-

¹(New York, Anchor, 1964), p. 55.

²See Chapter 2, above, p. 19.

nine independent African and Asian nations were planning to meet to discuss the problems of racialism and colonialism. Wright assessed the conference as a gathering of the despised, dispossessed, and rejected of the earth: the victims of Western racism. Furthermore, almost all the nations attending the conference were deeply religious. He felt that these circumstances made him an ideal reporter for the event. As an American Negro, he understood the effects of racial slights; as a former member of the Communist party, he knew the politics and psychology of rebellion; and as a one-time Seventh Day Adventist, he had insight into religion.

It is interesting to note that Wright applied to the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which he believed had the indirect backing of the State Department (and actually was financed in part by the C.I.A.), for financial support to make this trip. He obtained it, but not without making sure that it would not restrict his freedom of speech. Officially, Wright covered the conference as a free-lance writer.¹

Like Black Power and Pagan Spain, The Color Curtain was a frankly subjective work. Wright described his trip to the Orient as a search for the emotional landscapes of Asia. He was not as interested in politics per se as he

¹Richard Wright to Paul Reynolds, Feb. 4, 1955, Richard Wright MSS.

was in the psychological bases for politics. In Asia, he found that both religion and race, "two of the most powerful and irrational forces in human nature," were key factors in shaping the people's psyches.¹

Religion was no longer a delicate relationship of a people to the world in which they lived, a relationship wrought through centuries and embodied in ritual and ceremony, but a proof of one's humanity, something to defend and cling to (even if one did not believe in it!) passionately, for the sake of one's pride, to redress the balance in the scales of self-esteem.²

While religious diversity divided the nations represented at Bandung, race unified them. Black, brown, or yellow, they all were colored in the eyes of the West. Their unity had been forged over centuries at the hands of a common oppressor.

"race" was no longer a simple designation, nonscientific, of a people and their physiological differences, but an instrument of subjection, a badge of shame, a burning and concrete fact that was instantly proved by the color of one's skin. . . .³

Thus, in Asia, Wright hypothesized that race and religion had combined into

a racial and religious system of identification manifesting itself in an emotional nationalism which was now leaping state boundaries and melting and merging. . . .⁴

¹The Color Curtain (New York, 1956), p. 140.

²Ibid., p. 74.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 40. This passage was italicized in the original.

He feared that this shared racial consciousness might evolve into a virulent racism.

Although much of The Color Curtain consisted of excerpts from speeches and interviews,¹ the major concern was for the political future of these new independent nations. Wright believed that the political significance of Bandung was enormous despite the ridicule that the conference often got in Western newspapers. He cautioned the West against viewing these national movements within the context of Left or Right or as an episode in the Cold War. Race and religion, the two major forces and issues in Asia, were beyond these categories. The conference itself had not been sounded in terms of ideology and Wright reported that Chou En-lai was clever enough to fit his speech and conversations into the framework of the conference, "turning the other cheek when receiving ideological slaps."²

Wright called Bandung "THE LAST CALL OF WESTERNIZED ASIANS TO THE MORAL CONSCIENCE OF THE WEST!"³ The Asian elite was more Western than the West. Yet, their attitudes toward the West were highly ambivalent. They were taught Western law, ethics, and finance, and encouraged to develop a taste

¹The questions for the interview were provided by the American sociologist, Otto Klineberg.

²Ibid., p. 157.

³Ibid., p. 202. Capitalized in the original.

for Western goods. They made their revolutions in terms of Western values. Although they needed Western technical knowledge, they feared the aid of the West because it might result in a return of Western domination. Thus, much of the language at the conference was frankly anti-Western, manifesting Asian bitterness over centuries of humiliation.

Indeed, the West would have to exercise extreme caution to avoid throwing these nations into the arms of the communist camp. The Asian masses were psychologically predisposed to collectivism and hierarchy, Wright felt. "The Asian seemed to have a 'picture' of life and wanted to find out where and how he fitted into that 'picture.' He sought no separate, unique or individual destiny."¹ These attitudes made it more likely that the masses would be attracted to communism rather than to Western individualism. Chou En-lai was skillfully waiting in the wings to help these nations with "his drastic theories and practices of endless secular sacrifices."² Wright was no more sanguine about the results of a Russian victory, characterizing Stalinism as a "TRAGIC METHOD, WITH ITS SECULAR RELIGIOSITY OF HORROR AND BLOOD."³

Thus, it seems that Wright's argument that the West still had a chance to win over the nations of Asia was

¹Ibid., p. 74.

³Ibid., p. 221.

²Ibid., p. 220.

based more on hope than logic. Still the apostle of Western values and modernization, Wright predicted that men who are given a choice between the bonds of their traditions and new horizons will choose the latter. Modernization was inevitable in the Orient. The only questions that were still open were when and by what means. He advised the West to do all in its power to bring about a rationalized Asia. The secular base already existed in the Asian elite. Otherwise, the tenuous rational strands in these societies would be subsumed by racial and religious passions.

White Man, Listen!, published in 1957, was actually a collection of speeches that Wright had given in Europe 1950-1956.¹ Many of the themes of his earlier non-fiction books were elaborated and re-developed here. Social psychology seems to have triumphed over Marxism as a mode of analysis in these essays. Not only did Wright devote an entire essay to the psychology of the oppressed, but he now ascribed imperialism to psychological motives of the "perverted Western mind."

¹"The Literature of the Negro in the United States" was the earliest essay. A copy of a very similar speech appears in the Webb Collection in the Schomburg Collection, New York. It is entitled "Speech for a white audience" and was written shortly after World War II. The essay also appeared in Les Temps Modernes in August, 1948. "The Psychological Reaction of Oppressed People" was written some time after Wright attended the Bandung Conference in 1955. It seems likely that "The Miracle of Nationalism in the African Gold Coast" was also prepared at this time. "Tradition and Industrialization" was the latest essay, delivered at the Congr s des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs in September, 1956.

The fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century neurotic European, sick of his thwarted instincts, restless, filled with self-disgust, was looking not only for spices and gold when he set out; he was looking for an Arcadia . . . that would permit free play for his repressed instincts. Stripped of tradition, these misfits . . . were the most advanced individuals of their time.

Living in a waking dream, generations of emotionally impoverished colonial European whites wallowed in the quick gratification of greed, reveled in the cheap superiority of racial domination, slaked their sensual thirst in illicit sexuality, draining off the damned-up libido that European morality had condemned. . . . Asia and Africa thus became a neurotic habit that Europeans could forego only at the cost of a powerful psychic wound, for the emotionally crippled Europe had, through the centuries, grown used to leaning upon this black crutch.¹

As a Negro raised in a white society, Wright described himself as a man with double vision, viewing both worlds from a third point of view.² Yet Wright's pro-Western bias was most blatant in the later essays. He baldly expressed his disdain for the cultures indigenous to Asia and Africa when he wrote that Europeans should not be too proud of their conquests in these areas; such victories were not indications of white racial superiority, but of the inferiority of native culture and mental habits.³

If this rather unusual argument against white supre-

¹"The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People," White Man, Listen!, pp. 3,4.

²The perception of the Negro's unique angle of vision was articulated in W.E.B. DuBois' classic The Souls of Black Folk (1903).

³"The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People," p. 2.

macists was not calculated to please black nationalists, his speech entitled "Tradition and Industrialization" that was given at Le Congrès des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs sponsored by Présence Africaine in Paris in September 1956 could hardly have resulted in huzzahs from the audience. Considering the setting, his words were strange indeed.

the teeming religions gripping the minds and consciousness of Asians and Africans offend me. I can conceive of no identification with such mystical visions of life that freeze millions in static degradation, no matter how emotionally satisfying such degradation seems to those who wallow in it.¹

Wright called any white man who argued in favor of preserving native customs a racist for he believed that such a stance was tantamount to advocating white dominion over these peoples. Despite the fact that Wright believed that colonialism had fostered a psychology of the oppressed which he deplored in the native populations, he assessed the overall effects of imperialism positively. By smashing the ties of custom, religion, and tradition, European colonialism had liberated Asia and Africa.

Though Wright was an advocate of Western values, he opposed the West's political goals with respect to the Third World. He did not think that the Western system of government should be imposed on the developing nations. He thought that the democratic theories of John Locke and John Stuart

¹Ibid., pp. 48-49.

Mill were inappropriate for the tasks facing these countries. To African and Asian leaders, Wright recommended the same method of accelerating the long, drawn-out process of modernization that he had recommended to Nkrumah in Black Power--dictatorship. Only in this way could the nations of Asia and Africa hope to preserve their independence from the West and the USSR that Wright so desired.

Wright hoped that the West would understand the necessity for such political developments in the Third World. He tried to convince Western leaders not to fear that these nations were courting communism if they established dictatorships to attain their goals. Nationalist leaders like Nkrumah, Sukarno, and Nasser, he felt, should have carte blanche in their efforts at modernization; otherwise the West would risk alienating these nations even further. It had already lost a large part of the Third World to communism through selfishness and racism. His greatest fear was that the racism of the West would blind its leaders to its true interests.

Never have so few hated and feared so many. What I dread is the Western white man, confronted with an implacably militant Communism on the one hand, and with a billion and a half colored people gripped by surging tides of nationalist fanaticism on the other, will feel that only a vengeful unleashing of atom and hydrogen bombs can make him feel secure.¹

¹Ibid., pp. 42-43. It should be noted that Wright's despair with the West may in part be attributed to his growing discomfort with French colonialism. Having once believed that France was the black man's last hope in the West, Wright found the tenacity of French colonialism in the 1950's very disturbing. We shall discuss this in some detail in Chapter 5.

Indeed, Black Power, The Color Curtain, and White Man, Listen! were written partially as warnings to the West to mend its ways or risk losing these areas to communist influence. However, Wright's increasingly shrill tone suggests that he was becoming ever more despairing. These works revealed Wright's emotional and intellectual restlessness. He constantly sought new landscapes. It was, of course, significant that Wright first went to Africa. Although he was skeptical of finding his roots in Africa, he was nonetheless curious about his relationship to his ancestral homeland. Wright was shocked by Africa and his experiences seemed to have heightened his interest in the meaning of Western civilization.

In his later trips, Wright probed for the factors that distinguished Western societies from the rest of the world. The basic organizing concepts that unified his journalistic efforts echoed his earlier fascination with the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and secularization in the United States. The underlying themes, attitudes, and prescriptions of these accounts of non-Western societies revealed the influence of Wright's experience as a Negro in America. Race, religion, and the psychology of the oppressed were leitmotifs that reflected Wright's particular background which had always been his subject matter, whether in fiction or in non-fiction.

The analytical role that industrialization and secularization played in Wright's thinking was not as sur-

prising as the prescriptive role that he assigned to them.

Wright explained that his pro-Western outlook was based on his belief in the separation of Church and state, individualism, and empiricism. In what could be interpreted as his credo, he wrote:

I feel that man--just sheer brute man, just as he is--has a meaning and value over and above all sanctions or mandates from mystical powers, either on high or from below. I am convinced that the humble fragile dignity of man, buttressed by a tough-souled pragmatism, implemented by methods of trial and error, can sufficiently sustain and nourish human life, can endow it with ample and durable meaning. . . . I hold human freedom as a supreme right and good for all men, my conception of freedom being the right of all men to exercise their natural and acquired powers as long as the exercise of those powers does not hinder others from doing the same.¹

He gave voice to the liberal's faith in the free circulation of ideas as a way of finding truth. Furthermore, he approved of the autonomy of both art, "independent of the spheres of political or priestly power or sanction," and science, existing "without any a priori or metaphysical assumptions," that prevailed in Western civilization.²

The militance of Wright's pro-Western attitude would be difficult to account for without reference to his autobiography. Clearly, Wright believed that he would have remained a helpless victim of the cruel environment of his youth had he not applied reason to question the whys and

¹Ibid., pp. 50-51.

²Ibid.

wherefores of the society in which he lived. The rural, religious environment that he rejected spelled poverty and degradation to the southern Negro. Wright attained freedom by breaking the bond of tradition, refusing to accept his place as a nigger in a Jim Crow society. No doubt, Wright's own experience taught him the disrespect for customs and traditions that were so evident in these accounts. In White Man, Listen!, Wright declared that race, religion, and tradition hamper man's mastery of his environment.¹ He himself had achieved freedom through mastery of the world around him rather than submit to the irrational forces of religion and racism. A recent article entitled "The Expatriate as Native Son" hypothesized that only in the "savage and 'pagan' lands and in the privileged role of neutral observer did Richard Wright finally come home."² Or, in other words, Wright acknowledged his folk identity by examining these primitive societies. But such an argument overlooks completely Wright's virulent denunciation of and antagonism toward the tradition-bound, religious, rural nations that he visited. Wright would have purged all vestiges of traditional society by prescribing secularization and industrialization as the immediate solution for the Third World in its struggle for

¹"Tradition and Industrialization," p. 64.

²Harold T. McCarthy, American Literature, 44, no. 1 (March 1972), p. 98.

independence from Western domination.

Wright pinned his hopes for the triumph of those Western values that he regarded so highly on the Westernized elite in the developing nations to whom he had dedicated this book. This group of men were the freest men in the world because they were not burdened by the weight of the past. Their Western education had cast them adrift from their own culture. Inculcated with Western values, but then denied the privileges and equal treatment that these values should have accorded to all men, they also gained a critical perspective toward the society that excluded them. They represented the only bastions of Western thought beyond the confines of the West, the only hope that rationality would prevail over the forces of racism and religion in these areas of the world.

Wright had spoken of this elite in his earlier treatment of the Gold Coast and the Bandung conference, but they assume a more significant place in his thinking in the later essays. Of course, they are but another instance of Wright's interest in the marginal man--an interest that can be traced back at least as far as Native Son. In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright described Bigger as "hovering unwanted between two worlds--between powerful America and his own stunted place in life--and I took upon myself the task of trying to make the reader feel this No Man's

Land."¹ But here for the first time, Wright attributes a wholly positive purpose to them. Wright's trips to the Third World made him realize that he was far more Western than even he had known; yet at the same time, he grew ever more despairing of and alienated from the West. A glance at the dedication to White Man, Listen!--to ". . . the Westernized and Tragic Elite of Asia, Africa, and the West Indies--the lonely outsiders who exist precariously on the clifflike margins of many cultures. . . ."--reveals the reason. Wright not only sympathized with the Westernized elite, he identified his plight with theirs.

¹p. xxiv.

CHAPTER V

Wright never came to regard Paris as his real home. His many trips were indicative of his growing restlessness. Further evidence of this comes from Wright's writing while in exile. The Outsider contains only a few references to Paris; Savage Holiday, none. Of Wright's three short stories written after he left the United States, two--"Big Black Good Man" and "Man, God Ain't Like That"--have European settings. However, only the second one is set in Paris.¹

In fact, Wright had great difficulty bringing his new environment to life in fiction. In 1954, Wright's agent, Paul Reynolds, suggested that he use a Parisian setting in his next novel, but Wright rejected the idea on the grounds that it would make for a "bleak" book.² Two years later, after Wright put aside his proposals for a new series of novels on the advice of both Reynolds and Aswell, his editor,

¹See The Outsider, p. 206. Wright's comments about Paris are limited to the city's beauty and to its importance for an artist. The third short story written during this period is Man of All Work (1959). "Big Black Good Man" (1957) is set in Copenhagen; "Man, God Ain't Like That" (1959) is also set in Africa and none of the main characters is French. White racism is a pervasive theme in all the stories.

²Reynolds to Wright, May 24, 1954; Wright to Reynolds, May 30, 1954, Richard Wright MSS.

he returned to his agent's idea.¹ For his next novel, to be published as The Long Dream, Wright decided to dramatize the fact that the psychic damage inflicted by racism remained long after the conditions that caused it had disappeared.² He planned to take his main character, Fishbelly, from Mississippi to Paris. But writing to Aswell on April 11, 1957, he complained that he could not get Fishbelly to France.³

Both Saunders Redding and Arna Bontemps suggested that Wright failed to incorporate his new environment into his fiction because he was not at ease in the greater cosmopolitanism of Paris. He remained essentially an American, a Southerner, and a "small town boy . . . all of his days."⁴ To the degree that Wright's most formative experiences were in his past when he left for France at the age of thirty-eight, Bontemps and Redding were correct. His character and emotional make-up had been forged in the crucible of American racism. Wright himself acknowledged this in 1950 when he wrote:

Any writer who has not, at the age of twenty, stored away the fundamental basis of his so-called subject

¹See Chapter 3, pp. 86-87 below.

²Richard Wright to Margrit de Sablonnière, August 8, 1956, Richard Wright MSS.

³Richard Wright MSS.

⁴"Reflections on Richard Wright: A Symposium on an Exiled Native Son," pp. 207, 209.

matter will never do so. I took my subject matter with me in the baggage of my memory and I'm distressingly confident that race relations will not alter to a degree that render invalid these memories. . . .¹

Wright's subject matter grew out of his most deeply felt experiences. Until his last few years, Wright's life in France did not impinge acutely on his consciousness.

In Wright's last four years in Paris, his dream of freedom turned into a nightmare. He had escaped America's tension-ridden racial climate but believed that he had become a victim of the Cold War struggle for hegemony over the Third World.² In Island of Hallucination, sequel to The Long Dream, Wright finally turned his experiences in Paris into fiction. Writing to Reynolds on February 16, 1959, Wright commented that every episode in the novel was true, though he had distorted the characters of the people involved.³ In the book, Wright described Paris as the nerve-center of the Cold War struggle, full of intrigue and international espionage. Furthermore, the black community was one of the

¹"I Choose Exile," Richard Wright MSS.

²Richard Wright to Timothy Seldes, November 19, 1958, Richard Wright MSS.

³Richard Wright MSS.

principal targets and also a locus of this clandestine activity.¹

Wright believed that his situation was threatened by an American conspiracy to force him back to the United States or, at the very least, to discredit him because "people hate the idea of an independent Negro living in a foreign country."² Such a view was an outgrowth of Wright's own conception of himself and of his role as spokesman for black people. It is clear from Black Boy that Wright attributed his singular success to his alienation from all existing systems of authority.³ Because he had not derived sustenance from these institutions, he was independent of them. He believed that he had transformed his painful loneliness from a disability into an asset. His independence was his source of strength.

¹Unfortunately, this novel is both unpublished and inaccessible. I asked Mrs. Wright for permission to read the manuscript to no avail. Five short episodes appear in Soon, One Morning (ed. Herbert Hill), (New York, 1963). Discussions of the novel appear in both Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, and Webb, who were granted access to the manuscript.

²Richard Wright to Paul Reynolds, February 23, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

³Answering his own question "Why did Bigger revolt?" in the essay "How Bigger Was Born," Wright replied that Bigger, symbol of the Negro who refused to submit to the code of conduct in a racist society, was estranged from his folk culture and religion. p. xiii.

Wright viewed his own work as a break from the dominant trend of Negro literature that preceded him. In "Blueprint for Negro Literature" written in 1937, he had characterized Negro literature as

humble novels, poems, and plays, decorous ambassadors who go a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human. . . . These were received as poodle dogs who have learned clever tricks.¹

In portraying the frustration and the hatred of the American Negro, Wright believed that he was opposing the desires of black and white Americans. He refused to allow himself to be intimidated, vowing: "I must write this novel [Native Son], not only for others to read, but to free myself from this sense of shame and fear."² Uncle Tom's Children had been a strategic mistake because it allowed bankers' daughters to cry. He had decided that his next book would be so hard that it would not permit the consolation of tears.

Wright regarded himself as a man who had to speak the truth no matter whom it displeased and despite the consequences. Certainly his quarrel with the Communist party about artistic freedom and his daring to publish Native Son testified to his strong spirit of independence. In 1950,

¹Amistad 2 (New York, 1971), pp. 4, 5.

²*Ibid.*, p. xxii (italics in the original).

Wright stated that he craved freedom more than other people and it was for this reason that he had left the United States.¹ He had come to regard himself as a rare example of courage and integrity: in the last year of his life, feeling isolated and beleaguered, he wrote that he was the "only uncontrolled Negro alive."² Wright's spirit of independence and his own awareness of it which had stood him in good stead in the early years of his lonely struggle was heightened and possibly exaggerated in exile and may have ultimately warped his judgment.

Wright suspected that the American government was aided in its efforts to drive him back to the United States and ruin his reputation by a network of spies in the Afro-American community in Paris. Although Wright had written of agents provocateurs operating in American black belts in 1956, it was not until his speech at the American Church in Paris on November 8, 1960, that he spoke at length of the intense rivalry among black men that fostered such back-biting.³

¹"I Choose Exile," Richard Wright MSS.

²Wright to Reynolds, February 23, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

³A review of a book by Warren Russell Howe, written March 9, 1956. Richard Wright MSS. Speech on the position of the Negro Artist and Intellectual in American Society, Richard Wright MSS.

It has frequently been suggested that Wright was hostile to black society as he knew it in America and certainly he was antagonistic to America's black bourgeoisie. Wright's initial disappointment with the Afro-American community in Paris stemmed from his attempt to organize the Franco-American Fellowship in 1950. He attributed the organization's failure to his impression that Negroes in Paris had not shed their racial conditioning and still acted as if they were living in American black belts.¹ To what extent Wright's disillusionment with the black community was justified is difficult to gauge. Nonetheless, his opinion of his brethren did contribute to his self-image

¹Wright to Reynolds, March 2, 1959, Richard Wright MSS.

Although James Baldwin can by no means be considered an impartial witness, his testimony sheds a different light on the failure of the Franco-American Fellowship. He had been involved in the early organizational stages of the group despite the fact that he had not been terribly enthusiastic about it. Primarily Baldwin believed that the venture was unrealistic because there was neither sufficient information about the black community in Paris nor sufficient interest on the part of blacks to work for American firms in Paris. Furthermore, Baldwin implied that the group failed because of Wright himself. See "Alas, Poor Richard," *NKMN* (New York, 1970), pp. 166-67. Despite Baldwin's "hopelessly sardonic" tone in discussing this topic and his general hostility toward Wright, his evaluation is corroborated by a statement by Samuel Allen, Negro poet and member of the FAF. Allen wrote that Wright's efforts to secure "an inner Marshall Plan for Negroes inside the Marshall Plan for Europeans . . . was not the experience they had sought in putting 3,000 miles between them and their native shores, and so the undertaking foundered." See Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest*, pp. 601, 602. Fabre, however, believes that Allen's testimony contradicts Baldwin's.

as an isolated and independent man.

In Wright's speech at the American Church, he also spoke of the fierce competition among black literary men which aided the American effort to discredit him. Wright realized that a certain degree of rivalry existed among all artists, but he doubted that it reached the proportions that he saw among black artists because white society would only permit one Negro author prominence at a time.¹ According to Wright, the black artist was motivated by envy and opportunism: fear, deception, and distrust far outweighed feelings of friendship toward colleagues. The Negro artist and intellectual's dependency on white society was not only economic, but also psychological, with its roots in white philanthropy. He believed that most Negroes reflected either the attitude of the church or of the subsidized Negro leadership; in either case, they were molded by white charitable institutions.² Shame over this condition was

¹In a letter written to Margrit de Sablonnière on March 28, 1960, Wright remarked that what went on between Negroes was far worse than between Negroes and whites. Richard Wright MSS.

²Wright's opinions of the Negro intellectual were shared by the eminent sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. Frazier wrote that with the few exceptions of literary men, Negro intellectuals were dependent on white philanthropy and white society. "The Failure of the Negro Intellectual," On Race Relations (Chicago, 1968), p. 272. Frazier also shared Wright's negative attitude toward the black middle class. See his Black Bourgeoisie (Glencoe, 1957).

one of the causes of their bitter antagonism.¹

Wright believed that this context clarified his celebrated controversy with the young black author James Baldwin. Despite the fact that Wright had been instrumental in getting Baldwin a Saxton Fellowship in 1946 and had helped Baldwin find an inexpensive hotel when he arrived in Paris in 1948, Baldwin briefly criticized Native Son in one of his first articles, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) and did a more thorough job in "Many Thousands Gone" (1951). According to Wright, Baldwin's attitudes toward race relations produced a certain degree of tension in the authors' relationship.² This latent hostility finally broke out into an open dispute.

As Wright described the incident, he and Chester Himes were at the Café des Deux Magots on the Boulevard St. Germain when Baldwin approached them in the company of a white woman. Baldwin asked for Wright's opinion of an

¹"The Position of the Negro Artist and Intellectual in American Society," Richard Wright MSS.

²In Wright's speech at the American Church, he said that Chester Himes shared his attitude toward Baldwin. "To us, the works of Baldwin seemed to carry a certain burden of apology for being a Negro and we always felt that between his sensitive sentences there were the echoes of a kind of womanly weeping. Now Chester Himes and I are of a different stamp."

article of his about the problem of Negro identity.¹ When Wright responded that he could not understand Baldwin's difficulty in coming to grips with the meaning of Negro identity, the young author flew into a rage, threatening to destroy Wright. In his speech, Wright told his audience that he himself had always accepted his Negroness while Baldwin always seemed to be questioning "that hard fact."² However, the major significance of this incident to Wright revolved around the presence of a white woman, proving his point that each Negro had his own white sponsor.

Baldwin's version of his quarrel with Wright in "Alas, Poor Richard," is so dissimilar that it suggests the possibility that he had a different encounter in mind. According to Baldwin, the dispute took place after the publication of "Everybody's Protest Novel" in Zero in the spring of 1949. The two men met at the Brasserie Lipp on the Boulevard St. Germain and Wright accused Baldwin of betrayal for attacking the idea of protest literature. Baldwin quite rightly pointed out that his critique of Native Son was only a minor

¹From this reference, it is not clear which article Wright had in mind because several of Baldwin's essays dealt with this topic. However, it does seem that "Everybody's Protest Novel" was not the essay in question since it does not speak to the problem of Negro identity. See Chapters eight and nine for a discussion of Baldwin's essays on Negro identity.

²"The Position of the Negro Artist and Intellectual in American Society."

aspect of the entire essay. Baldwin claimed that he had hardly criticized Native Son, but had mentioned it because it was the most important novel written about Negro life in America. Much to Baldwin's misfortune, Wright interpreted the essay as an effort to destroy Wright's reputation. To a large extent, however, Wright's perception of the controversy was justified, even according to Baldwin's own testimony.

He saw clearly enough, far more clearly than I had dared to allow myself to see, what I had done: I had used his work as a kind of springboard into my own. His work was a road-block in my road, the sphinx really, whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself . . . this was the greatest tribute I could have paid him. . . . For, finally, Richard was hurt because I had not given him credit for any human feelings or failings. And indeed I had not, he had never really been a human being for me, he had been an idol. And idols are created in order to be destroyed.¹

Clearly, the discrepancies between the two accounts cannot be explained on the basis that each man presented his position in the most favorable light. The possibility that there were two separate incidents involved is not supported by either Wright or Baldwin. In fact, Wright stated that the tension that existed between Baldwin and Himes and himself had never been mentioned or directly written about before this quarrel which, because of Himes' presence, could

¹"Alas, Poor Richard," p. 157.

not have taken place before 1953.¹ Baldwin wrote of no second quarrel, though he did mention that there were a number of attempts to patch things up.

Chester Himes' version of the Wright-Baldwin controversy only complicates matters further. Though Himes wrote that he was indeed a witness to the sordid affair, thereby corroborating Wright's date of the incident, the argument as Himes related it, bears a closer resemblance to Baldwin's rendition.² Yet it seems odd that a quarrel about Baldwin's ingratitude should have transpired at least

¹"The Position of the Negro Artist and Intellectual in American Society." This assertion seems somewhat dubious given a letter from Himes to Wright of June 1, 1953. "By the way, have you seen any reviews of 'our boy' Baldwin's book, *Go Shit On The Mountain*, or whatever the title is." Richard Wright MSS.

²According to Himes, Baldwin had called Wright to ask for a loan. The three men planned to meet at the Café des Deux Magots, but before Wright and Himes set out, Wright told Himes that he had been influential in getting Baldwin an award to write his first novel. Baldwin had repaid him by attacking him in print. At the cafe, Wright was "playing the fat cat and forcing Baldwin into the role of the quivering mouse." Himes remarked that it "wasn't particularly funny, but then Dick wasn't a funny man." At the cafe, Wright accused Baldwin of ingratitude. Baldwin's response was that Wright had written his story, leaving him nothing to say. Soon, they were surrounded by a large group of white people including Mrs. Putnam, the white woman who accompanied Baldwin to the cafe in Wright's story. Himes felt that Baldwin had the crowd's sympathy because he looked so insecure. The last remark that Himes related was Baldwin's: "The sons must slay their fathers." The Quality of Hurt, pp. 200-201.

four years after the publication of Baldwin's first essay criticizing Native Son and two years after the second one.¹

Although Wright believed that Baldwin's rivalry with him was part of an attempt sponsored by whites to find a less critical Negro spokesman, he was far more perturbed by a bizarre incident that took place in the expatriate community in Paris.² Ollie Harrington, a cartoonist for the Pittsburgh Courier who originated the "Bootsie" series, had loaned his apartment to a young black author, Richard Gibson, in 1956. Gibson refused to return the apartment and claimed ownership of all of Harrington's personal effects. Harrington was afraid to call in the police and he let the matter rest.³ However on October 21, 1957, a letter to the editor appeared in Life Magazine under Harrington's signature. The letter was critical of French colonial policy in Algeria, endangering Harrington's stay in France. Harrington had

¹The only incident that Baldwin mentions in which he, Himes, and Wright were together was a very amiable one. See "Alas, Poor Richard," p. 158. However, we do not mean to imply that this was therefore the only occasion that the three men spent together.

²Michel Fabre noted that "Some people claim that Time and Life, following the publication of Invisible Man made every effort to have Ellison win the National Book Award . . . with the aim of detracting from Wright's reputation and establishing Ellison as the black novelist of the day. . . . Ellison refused to play along with the scheme. Baldwin . . . was more willing to play the role of Wright's 'successor.'" The Unfinished Quest, p. 613n.

³"The Position of the Negro Artist . . ."; Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, pp. 461-62; interview with William Gardner Smith, January, 1971, Paris.

not written the letter and engaged a criminal lawyer for an investigation. Eventually, Harrington was cleared and it was discovered that Gibson, whom many black expatriates suspected to be a CIA agent, had written the letter.¹

Wright feared that this incident was part of a campaign to silence Negroes who were critical of the American racial situation. But the campaign had entered a more threatening phase for it seemed that it now aimed at compelling those Negroes whose exile symbolized their condemnation of America to return home. In 1958, Wright wrote that he was afraid that his passport would be taken away from him, leaving him "semistateless."²

For fear of jeopardizing his status in France, Wright had not spoken out against French colonial policies, despite his strong pro-nationalist sympathies.³ In the few

¹Interview with Chester Himes, February, 1971 in Spain; interview with William Gardner Smith, January, 1971 in France; For more details of the investigation, see Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 462.

²Richard Wright to Margrit de Sablonnière, February 2, 1958, Richard Wright MSS.

³In an article written by Ben Burns, "They're Not Uncle Tom's Children" (discussed at greater length on pp. below, the author mentioned Wright's fears of discussing French foreign policy in 1953 when the two men spoke in Paris. The Reporter, March 8, 1956, pp. 21-25. Despite the fact that Wright called the article "slanderous," this part of it seems credible because it coincides with Wright's views of colonialism and because it occurred before Wright had publicly voiced such opinions.

instances where Wright commented publicly on the French colonial situation, his attitude was markedly ambivalent, shifting from a positive to a negative and then back to a positive point of view. When he wrote "I Choose Exile" in 1950, Wright appeared to have been seduced by France's mission civilisatrice. But three years later, writing Black Power, he warned the young colonial to be wary of the pull of French culture, all the more insidious because the black man was eagerly received everywhere in France.¹ In part, the difference in Wright's attitude can be explained by his different intentions in the two pieces: "I Choose Exile" was written to justify his expatriation by extolling the virtues of France while Black Power was an examination of the problems of and the necessity for liberation. However, it also seems that the change in Wright's attitude reflected his disillusionment with France as well. In fact, in Black Power, Wright evaluated the black man's situation in France as essentially the same as that of the black man in the United States or in England, but with more subtle variations.² Furthermore, as a result of Wright's disenchantment with France, he began to identify more strongly with the Third World.

¹p. 235.

²Ibid.

Wright was very upset by the 1956 Anglo-French venture in Suez and became increasingly afraid that the white world would unite against the Third World out of fear of the black man.¹ But despite his fears and the increased militancy of his nationalist sympathies, he was surprisingly pro-French in his only public statement about the Algerian war in 1959. Because the French considered the Algerians to be French, Wright regarded the French colonial situation in a very different light from American racism. "Frenchmen tells the Muslims at the point of their submachine guns: 'You are French.' We American Negroes might wish to be forced in a similar way to consider ourselves as Americans."² Although the interview was for a Swedish publication, it seems likely that Wright's statement was influenced by his fear of deportation.

Wright had perceived that his exile and his critical stance on America's racial situation were a threat to America's foreign policy aims, but he did not begin to interpret the critical articles and reviews written about him from the United States as part of a concerted effort to discredit him until he was viciously attacked in The

¹Richard Wright to Margrit de Sablonnière, August 15 and 28, 1956, November 21, 1956, Richard Wright MSS.

²Folket I BILD, 25 AR 1959, translated by Michel Fabre, Richard Wright MSS.

Reporter in March, 1956.¹ Ben Burns, formerly an editor at Ebony, opened his article, "They're Not Uncle Tom's Children," with an anecdote about the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson's visit to Chicago. Cartier-Bresson was interested in shots of the South Side, Chicago's ghetto. Burns, acting as the photographer's guide, was intent on showing the Frenchman the progress that had been made, but Cartier-Bresson was only interested in slum scenes. Burns wrote that he knew that the photographer was correct from a pictorial point of view, but was angry, nonetheless, that Cartier-Bresson accepted the stereotypical vision of Negro life in America.

Burns had a dual purpose in including this story: he hoped to undermine the myth that Europeans were free of racial stereotypes and he was drawing a parallel between Cartier-Bresson's visit and Wright's return to Chicago in 1949.²

¹In "I Choose Exile," written in 1950, Wright recalled that on his first trip to Paris in 1946, he was told by an American official that any discussion of the American racial situation would be like throwing bricks at a window.

²Wright wrote an article for Ebony based on his return to Chicago. "The Shame of Chicago" was highly critical of the lack of progress in the years of his absence. The article was accompanied by a dissenting editorial opinion entitled "Return of the Native Son." See Ebony, VII (December, 1951), pp. 24-32. In "They're Not Uncle Tom's Children," Burns related the controversy that Wright's article aroused among the editors of Ebony, claiming that he was responsible for the article's publication and the disclaimer.

Burns then revealed his animus toward Negro expatriates in Paris in general and Wright in particular. He accused Wright of "poisoning European thinking about racial problems in America." "Down deep inside of him there manifestly burns a relentless, insatiable loathing for white people and America that erupts whenever he sits down at a typewriter."¹ Then he added that "Wright enjoys a good audience on the Left Bank for his hate school of literature."²

Wright wrote Reynolds that he thought the article was slanderous. He felt that he was betrayed by an old friend.³ But even more important was the fact that Wright lost all faith in the only segment of the American political spectrum that he had relied on after his break with communism--the American liberal community. Earlier, after Atlantic Monthly had rejected "I Choose Exile," Wright had concluded that American xenophobia had reached such a pitch that it was no longer acceptable to praise the culture of an ally. However, that had occurred during the heyday of McCarthyism when timidity was the order of the day. The Burns' article struck a similar xenophobic note, but without the same background of fear, it must have seemed far more

¹Burns, p. 21.

²Ibid., p. 22.

³Richard Wright to Paul Reynolds, April 15, 1956, Richard Wright MSS.

ominous. Referring to The Reporter, he wrote Reynolds, "I had long thought the magazine was liberal; maybe I no longer understand what liberalism means."¹ Wright's reaction to "They're Not Uncle Tom's Children" seems to have marked a turning point in his attitude toward the United States and to the Western world. From then on, he became more hostile and suspicious of the West and more militantly pro-nationalist.

Burns' article aroused Wright's suspicions of a concerted effort to discredit him. But it was not until the Gibson affair that Wright began to fear deportation. By 1958, Wright viewed the Burns' article and the Gibson affair as part of a two-pronged effort to lessen the effectiveness of his critique of America's racial situation. He believed that Ebony was acting in conjunction with the American State Department.² The conspiracy was far-flung: he suspected his agent in France of trying to sabotage the publication of his new novel, The Long Dream, by telling prospective French publishers that the novel had received terrible reviews in the United States and that Americans thought that Wright should return home.³

On November 17, 1958, an article about black expatriates in Paris, "Amid Alien Corn," appeared in Time

¹Ibid.

²Richard Wright to Paul Reynolds, November 7, 1958, Richard Wright MSS.

³Ibid.

magazine. Wright regarded this article as a calculated attack against him.¹ He insisted that he had not had an interview with Time and that all the quotations attributed to him were fabricated.² He was particularly concerned that he might lose his passport for having been quoted thus in the article: "The Negro problem in America has not changed in 300 years."³ Time claimed that Wright had been interviewed by a French photographer, Giselle Freund, who had been sent to take his picture.⁴ However, Wright had a signed statement from Mlle Freund denying this.⁵ Time had explained that they were "inspired by another article appearing in a British periodical." Wright himself believed that the British article "was planted by an American to start an international fuss about American Negroes living in France."⁶

¹Wright to Reynolds, November 14, 1958, Richard Wright MSS.

²Wright to Reynolds, November 12, 14, 1958. Richard Wright MSS. In an interview in February, 1971, both Chester Himes and his wife Leslie (who was working for Time in Paris at the time) stated that Wright was interviewed by Time.

³Time, p. 28. This statement was very similar to one made by Wright in the interview with Michel Gordey.

⁴Wright to Reynolds, November 23, 1958, Richard Wright MSS.

⁵Giselle Freund to Richard Wright, November 22, 1958, cited also in letter of Wright to Reynolds, November 23, 1958, Richard Wright MSS.

⁶Wright to Reynolds, November 19, 1958, Richard Wright MSS.

The question of the interview aside, an examination of the content of the article does not seem to justify Wright's assessment of its purpose. The tone of the Time article is quite sympathetic to black expatriates in Paris. Unlike many articles written about expatriates, this one does not portray them spending all their time in cafés, tearing down the United States.¹ Rather it presents them as serious men with a serious grievance. In the opening two paragraphs of the article, black expatriates are contrasted favorably to white exiles "who stayed in France as long as their money--or their parents' money held out. . . ."² Furthermore, unlike their white compatriots, the black expatriates had become part of the larger French community. The article concludes with a description of the contrasting opportunities that await the white and black artist or intellectual in the United States.

"Amid Alien Corn" briefly discusses the exile of seven Americans Negro artists in Paris: Chester Himes, Richard Wright, William Gardner Smith, and Richard Gibson--writers and Harold Cousins, Beauford Delaunay, and Ollie Harrington--artists. The section on Wright accounts for

¹See Joseph Wechsberg, "The Self-Exiled," New Yorker, May 7, 1949 (XXV), pp. 76-89; William Barrett, "New Innocents Abroad," in The Scene Before You, ed. Chandler Brossard; New York, 1955, pp. 285-306.

²p. 28.

eight and one-half lines out of a 112-line article. Of all the writers included, Wright's coverage is the briefest. However, it is also true that the article is less flattering to Wright than to the others.

Richard (Native Son) Wright, the dean of Negro writers abroad, says bluntly: "I like to live in France because it is a free country. Then there are my daughters. They are receiving an excellent education in France." What of the danger of getting out of touch with U.S. life? Snaps Wright: "The Negro problem in America has not changed in 300 years."¹

Given the more favorable tone that Time employed in its treatment of his fellow expatriates, he was justified in perceiving a more hostile attitude toward him in the article. However, it seems that his suspicions that the article was part of an effort to create an unfavorable climate of opinion toward black expatriates in Paris and thus force them to leave was unfounded.²

At the time, Wright was under considerable strain. For the first time in many years he was beset by economic difficulties. He was discouraged by negative reviews that The Long Dream had received in the United States and was

¹Ibid.

²Wright was particularly suspicious because the article did not mention any white expatriates in Paris. Wright to Reynolds, November 19, 1958, Richard Wright MSS. Michel Fabre believes that this article was part of a campaign to sully Wright's reputation. The Unfinished Quest, p. 472.

having trouble getting it published in France. On the same day that he first read these reviews, he learned that his mother was seriously ill. One day later, he was informed of the death of his friend and editor, Ed Aswell.¹ Nonetheless, Wright's reaction to the Time article suggests the possibility that his image of himself as an intransigent, fiercely independent Negro which had been a source of strength throughout his many struggles had begun to warp his judgment.

By early 1959, Wright concluded that the Cold War had created an impossible atmosphere for the artist to work in. He was afraid that his new book "Island of Hallucination" would not be well received in America and began to question his usefulness as a writer. He believed that Negro subjects no longer had an audience and a writer without an audience was no longer a writer. He attributed his "bad press" to the fact that he lived in France.² In his letter of March 2, 1959, he considered two possible courses of action: the first was to stop writing about the Negro; the second was to move to England where his knowledge of the language would enable him to find another means of employment.

¹Ibid., p. 470.

²Wright to Reynolds, February 16, March 2, 22, 1959; Richard Wright MSS.

Less than two weeks later, Wright decided to move to England. He wrote that he had several new ideas for writing so it seems clear that his choice was not predicated on a decision to terminate his career as a writer. His oldest daughter Julia had enrolled at Cambridge University and his wife and daughter Rachel had moved to England. Wright decided that he wanted to keep his family together and that, he said, was the basis for his move. He wrote that he still loved France and didn't want any publicity over his move. He feared that the press would infer reasons that were not his. But at the same time, his comment that England was the only sane nation left indicates a more negative attitude than Wright cared to have broadcast.¹

In large part, Wright's decision to leave France was based on fear. He had long been worried by the unstable political situation in France.² Afraid that his expulsion from France was imminent, he thought it would be best to leave voluntarily, when he could go in peace.³

¹Wright to Reynolds, March 15, 1959, Richard Wright MSS.

²On August 28, 1957, Wright wrote Margrit de Sablonnière that he feared a Fascist dictatorship in France. In a letter of September 14, 1959 to Margrit, he was concerned about the possibility of Civil War. Richard Wright MSS. On January 3, 1959 Wright wrote Reynolds that he feared a disaster with the Red Army.

³Wright to Reynolds, March 15, 1959, Richard Wright MSS.

Finally, Wright was still concerned that he would not be able to continue his career as a writer.

As early as 1952, Wright had toyed with the idea of moving to England because he found Paris too distracting for writing.¹ In 1957, he asked John Strachey to approach the British Home Office about the possibility.² Receiving no reply from Reginald Butler of the Home Office, Strachey raised the question in the House of Commons on November 30, 1958.³ On January 29, 1959, Butler wrote Strachey that Wright would be permitted to enter England providing he could prove his solvency. On February 27, Strachey informed Wright that his permission to stay one year would be renewed for four years and then indefinitely.⁴

Wright had to delay his departure to complete some work and to recover from a serious bout of amoebic dysentery. He was finally able to travel in September, 1959 and left for England to visit his family and his friend, Padmore. He was greatly distressed because his passport was held up at customs. In response to the customs' official's question

¹Wright to Reynolds, December 26, 1952, Richard Wright MSS.

²Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 491. (This date may not be accurate.)

³Hansard, 595, #18, November 20, 1958, pp. 1353-54.

⁴Strachey to Wright, Richard Wright MSS.

about the purpose of his trip to England, he replied that he did not intend to take up residence there on this trip. He returned to France after a short visit only to go back to England within a few days for Padmore's funeral.

Wright thought that this might be an appropriate time to settle his plans with the immigration authorities. However, they confronted him with his statement that he had not intended to emigrate to England. The fact that he had been referring specifically to his intentions on that particular trip were omitted from the records. The combination of Wright's difficulties with English officials and his suspicious cast of mind at this point in his life convinced him that he was persona non grata in England.

I had elected to live in England, but I was made to feel that I was not wanted. But there are larger and more important issues involved in this: Britain is a part of the white Western world. . . . Can the white West afford this kind of behavior? . . . If Britain was calculatingly seeking to spread and deepen the notion of black nationalism, then I declare that the attitudes I encountered were designed to accomplish just that. Of course, I do not credit that much Machiavellian intelligence to British actions; I suspect that those actions are short-sighted and stupid. . . .¹

As a result, he abandoned his plans to live in England.

In the last year of Wright's life, he was beset by illness, failures, and more sinister suspicions. Amoebic

¹Wright to Strachey, no date, Richard Wright MSS.

dysentery, which had delayed his move to England, recurred early in 1960 and Wright was placed on heavy doses of drugs.¹ He was still having trouble with the French publication of The Long Dream. Editions Mondiales had bought it but later dropped it because, Wright wrote, of American pressures.² A stage production of the novel had just failed in New York and Wright attributed its failure to his exile. Cleveland Amory had mentioned Wright's expatriation in his review. Wright asked his agent who the man was and who backed him.³ By March, Wright began to place a more sinister interpretation on the play's poor reception:

The real matter with The Long Dream play is this; I've been informed from reliable sources here that it came under governmental taboo. You see, America as leader of the free world does not wish cruel pictures of how Negroes live shown to Africans or Asians. This is the way we fight communism!⁴

He wrote that the situation in France was fierce. He felt that he had not escaped conflict in his exile, but rather that he was in the thick of it.⁵ Wright had long believed that his pro-nationalist sentiments and his critical assessment of America's racial situation were threaten-

¹Wright to Sablonnière, February 26, 1960, Richard Wright, MSS.

²Wright to Reynolds, February 23, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

³Ibid.

⁴Wright to Reynolds, March 2, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

⁵Ibid.

ing to America's Cold War aims. But, by the end of March, 1960, he felt that

the American State Department and Pentagon are hard on my neck, for my work, though anti-communist, falls like a black shadow over what they are trying to do in Asia and Africa.¹

He was convinced that they were trying to drive him back to the United States and he feared that once there he would be shut up or physically destroyed.² Eight days later in a letter ostensibly intended to re-assure his Dutch translator and confidante Margrit de Sablonnière, Wright wrote:

You must not worry about my being in any danger. I'm sure that I'm in no more danger now than when I was born. . . . I'm not exactly unknown here and I have personal friends in de Gaulle's cabinet itself. Of course, I don't want anything to happen to me, but if it does, my friends will know exactly where it comes from. . . . So far as the Americans are concerned, I'm worst [sic] than a Communist, for my work falls like a shadow across their policy in Asia and Africa. That's the problem; they've asked me time and again to work for them, but I'd die first. The number of Negroes in the world who are free to say what they want are far too few for me to work for anybody's government.³

Wright was concerned about an unfriendly letter that he had received from Sartre in February. He was perhaps even more disturbed to learn that it was a forgery, reminiscent of

¹Wright to Sablonnière, March 22, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

²Ibid.

³Wright to Sablonnière, March 30, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

the Gibson affair.¹ He also suspected that Cayton and Drake did not want him to write a new introduction for an edition of Black Metropolis.²

Wright's world became more and more menacing to him. His doctor, Vladimir Schwartzmann, a specialist and "one of the top men in France," had suggested that Wright accompany him to a conference in Leiden. Wright was suspicious of the invitation.³ He was supposed to reserve a room for the doctor and his son in Holland through Margrit, but somehow had only reserved one for himself. Wright felt that his error must have been intentional, indicative of an "unconscious aversion."⁴ In the middle of May, he announced his intention of changing doctors.⁵ At the same time that Wright was worried about his doctor, he suspected Chester Himes was betraying him in a new novel.⁶

¹Wright to Sablonnière, March 28, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

²Ibid. In this letter, Wright mentioned the bitter antagonism among Negroes.

³Wright to Sablonnière, April 16, 1960. Richard Wright MSS.

⁴Wright to Sablonnière, April 26, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

⁵Wright to Sablonnière, May 16, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

⁶"Chester Himes is writing detective stories in which he attacks me, my friends, etc. Gosh, it is strange. And I always thought he was such a good friend. He's got all his information from undercover agents of the American C.I.D." (sic) Wright to Sablonnière, April 16, 1960. Richard Wright MSS. Wright was referring to Himes' novel Une Affaire de Viol. See chapter 7 below, p. 206 n.

Although Wright's health was improving by June, his economic situation had not taken a similar turn for the better and he described himself as a poor man in a letter to Margrit.¹ He had sent the manuscripts of his haiku poems, the fruits of his illness, to Reynolds and was nervously awaiting a reply.²

Despite the dangerous consequences that Wright feared would result from voicing his political opinions, he took up the offensive against the racism of the West in a series of interviews on television and radio and in the newspapers after the French publication of The Long Dream.³ In a letter to Margrit written on June 9, he wrote that he had denounced the United States on all fronts.⁴ Referring to one of his radio broadcasts, he told Margrit that he had attacked Americans "for trying to control the output of Negro litera-

¹Wright to Sablonnière, June 9, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

²Wright started to write these poems in August, 1959. He composed over 4000 of them. He sent 800 to his agent on June 18, 1960 and wrote Margrit de Sablonnière that he was "sitting and chewing his nails" anticipating a reply. July 3, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

³Anne Marie de Vilaine, "Richard Wright: 'La ré-éducation des Blancs est plus urgents que celle des Noirs,'" L'Express, April 24, 1960, p. 14; "Avec Richard Wright," France-Observateur, June 9, 1960, pp. 19-20; B.P. "Rencontre avec Richard Wright," Le Figaro Littéraire, May 16, 1960.

⁴Richard Wright MSS.

in the USA, for trying to render it harmless. . . ." He reiterated his belief that "for a Negro today to cite the bare facts of his life is to make an anti-American document."

that testimony, whether we aim it or not, is calculated to render the Asians and Africans hesitant about feeling that the American white man is a better friend to colored people than the Russians or Chinese.¹

It seems clear that Wright received a great deal of satisfaction from his offensive. In a letter that he wrote shortly before his death, he declared, "I've been attacking here in Paris, both in writing, public speeches and on the radio (I have two more interviews to come!)." ² The attack that gave him the greatest satisfaction was the one that he delivered on the position of the Negro artist and intellectual in American society on November 8 at the American Church. In this talk, Wright finally laid bare, in what he considered to be his boldest exposition of the subject, the methods that America used to control the Negro intellectual.

Wright's fears of the white world mounted in the last few months of his life, forcing him back to a position of strict neutrality vis à vis the Cold War. He had agreed to appear on a Canadian Broadcasting Company program about The God That Failed, but reconsidered his participation in light of his foreboding that the "white world--communist and

¹Wright to Sablonnière, June 23, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

²Wright to Sablonnière, November 23, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

non-communist might have a detente to be able to concentrate their efforts against the colored world."¹ Wright's attitude toward communism had not changed, but his attitude toward anti-communism had.

I find myself constantly under attack--both me and my books--by the white West. I lift my hand to fight Communism and I find that the hand of the Western world is sticking knives into my back. That is a crazy position, I don't want it. The Western world must make up its mind as to whether it hates colored people more than it hates Communists. . . .²

Wright's skepticism about the motives of the anti-Communist left was fed by his bitterness. He had refused a request from Richard Crossman of the British Labour party and editor of The God That Failed to speak about communism. He was struck by the incongruity of this invitation after the difficulty he experienced applying for residency in England.

I've told Crossman that I cannot do it, that if I'm good enough to stand on his shoulders and speak about Communism, that I'm good enough to live in England. I told him the Western world was insane if they felt that they could treat black men as slaves and then turn around and ask those men to fight their battles for them. I told him that the white man must make up his mind if he hated colored people as much or more than he hated Communists. . . .³

At about the same time, he also turned down an offer to speak on Tolstoy in India from the Congress of Cultural Freedom, saying that he was "too busy fighting issues here

¹Wright to Oliver Swan, October 24, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

²Ibid.

³Wright to Sablonnière, November 8, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

in the Western world to go into Asia and try to sell their brand of pretense."¹ As early as 1955, Wright had been aware of that organization's connection with the American government, but he had been willing to accept their support provided that he was at liberty to express himself freely.²

How Wright interpreted the Congress of Cultural Freedom's "brand of pretense" at the time that he rejected its offer is by no means clear. However, three weeks later, after Margrit informed him of an interview with Beb Vuyk, a journalist he had met in Indonesia, appearing in Vrij Nederland that made him sound like a pro-communist, Wright wrote:

the tactic of the Americans today is to attack those who disagree with them from the Left, an anti-Communist Left which they have bought and which they control. I'm sure that if you look into the background of Beb Vuyk you'll find that she is backed by the Congress of Cultural Freedom. . . . This attack is important for it means that this is the beginning of an attack against Pan-Africanism. A reading of The Color Curtain and White Man, Listen! ought to set out my views clearly in all these matters, but I'M CONVINCED THAT THIS ATTACK WAS ORDERED BY PEOPLE IDENTIFIED WITH AMERICAN IDEAS AND AMERICAN AIMS.³

He concluded that "the Americans now do all their important work through the non-Communist Left, which . . . they have

¹Wright to Sablonnière, November 8, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

²Wright to Reynolds, February 4, 1955, Richard Wright MSS.

³Wright to Sablonnière, November 23, 1960, Richard Wright MSS. Capitalization in the original.

bought."¹

In the last few months of his life, Wright had mobilized his resources and was back on the offensive. Whether the threats that he perceived were as serious as he imagined is open to question. Clearly, however, from the time that Wright discovered that literature could be a weapon, he felt most comfortable in a position of the aggressor. He was anticipating a full-scale attack against him and seemed to feel eager to take it on. However, a bout with the flu triggered his intestinal troubles and on November 26, Wright entered the Eugène Gibez Clinic. On November, 1960, his protesting voice which could not be silenced was finally stilled. His heart gave out.²

¹Wright to Sablonnière, November 24, 1960, Richard Wright MSS.

²Wright's abrupt death gave rise to much speculation (fed by the biographical novel, The Man Who Cried I Am by John Williams) about possible foul play by the CIA. Frantz Fanon's death that same year, after receiving medical care from the CIA at the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, added fuel to the fire. These rumors have not been substantiated. See Fabre, The Unfinished Quest, p. 522.

CHAPTER VI

Chester Bomar Himes was born in Jefferson City, Missouri on July 29, 1909. The Himes family had considerable prestige within the Negro community. Joseph Himes, Chester's father, was a professor of blacksmithing and wheelwrighting and head of the Mechanical Department at the Lincoln Institute, an agricultural and mechanical college.¹ Himes' mother Estelle (née Bomar), granddaughter of a planter and his slave, was highly conscious of the status attached to her almost white skin and took great pride in her ancestry.

My mother claimed that my grandfather's father was a direct descendant from an English noble family and was very proud of it. Much of her nagging and scolding and punishing and pushing us stemmed from her desire for us to live up to our "heritage."²

¹The Quality of Hurt (New York, 1972), p. 4. The Lincoln Institute was the first Negro land grant college in the country. It is now Lincoln University.

²Ibid., p. 5. Estelle Himes wrote a novel about her family which her son incorporated into the early drafts of The Third Generation (1954), his autobiographical novel (alternately called "The Black Sheep" and "The Cord" in rough draft). In her novel she wrote that her maternal grandfather was an Irishman; her maternal grandmother, the daughter of an African princess and an English nobleman while her paternal grandmother was an octoroon and her paternal grandfather was an Englishman. "The Cord," Chester Himes MSS., James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University, Box VIII.

Himes' childhood was disrupted by frequent moves. When he was four, the family left Jefferson City, going first, briefly to Cleveland for six months, and then to Mississippi, where his father had secured a position at Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College.¹ When Himes was eight or nine years old, his parents separated temporarily. Mrs. Himes took Chester and his older brother, Joseph, to Georgia where she had obtained a teaching job.² After a year, the family was reunited in Mississippi. In 1920, when Chester was almost eleven, Professor Himes was dismissed from Alcorn and the family moved to Pine Bluffs, Arkansas where Himes was employed at Pine Bluffs Normal College until 1924 or 1925.³

¹In the Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1913-1914, J.S. Himes is listed as a blacksmithing instructor in the Mechanical Department. (Natchez, Mississippi, n.d.)

²The Quality of Hurt, pp. 5-8. Chester's brother Joseph Himes, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina, did not mention living in Cleveland or Georgia--the two junctures that Mrs. Himes and the children lived apart from Joseph Himes, Sr. (letter from Joseph S. Himes, March 24, 1974)

³According to Chester Himes, his father lost his position at Alcorn A. and M. because Mrs. Himes had refused to submit to Jim Crow harassment. The Himes family owned one of the few cars in Jefferson County and Mrs. Himes used to take her sons on drives through the countryside. Rather than yield the road to white mule teams, his mother carried a pistol that she would pull "whenever a cracker mule driver reached for his rabbit gun. . . ." (The Quality of Hurt, p. 8) In The Third Generation, Himes' autobiographical novel about his family, this is but one of several similar incidents that lost Professor Taylor a series of jobs in Georgia, Missouri, and Mississippi.

During this period of instability, Chester became very dependent on his mother--a situation that was probably exacerbated by the fact that Mrs. Himes taught her children at home rather than trust their education to the black school system in Mississippi. In Himes' autobiography, The Quality Of Hurt (1972), he confessed to a "strange fierce love" for his mother. His emotional attachment to her was one of the major themes of his autobiographical novel, The Third Generation (1954). Although one must always be cautious when using a novel as a source, Charles Taylor, the protagonist of The Third Generation, is only a faintly disguised Chester Himes.¹ In this novel, originally entitled "The Cord," Himes described his relationship with his mother.

The intensity of their emotion for each other was overpowering. Charles loved his mother heartbreakingly, and yet he hated her. And her love for him was agonizing. She oftentimes beat him unmercilessly seeking to control his will. . . . They tore at each other's heartstrings, hurting each other terribly. Between² them raged this love and hatred which never cooled.

When Chester was about thirteen, this clash of wills

¹Apparently Himes had said that The Third Generation was his "most dishonest book." In a lengthy interview with novelist John A. Williams, Himes explained that he was referring to the fact that he had omitted his mother's manuscript from the final version of the novel because he was afraid that the miscegenation would offend publishers and his book would be rejected. "My Man Himes: An Interview with Chester Himes," Amistad I (ed. Charles F. Harris and John A. Williams, New York, 1970), p. 74.

²New York, Signet Edition (1956), p. 22.

led to tragedy. Chester and his brother Joseph, both enrolled at Pine Bluffs Normal College, were chosen to perform a chemistry experiment in a school show. Chester had misbehaved and his mother forbade his participation in the experiment. During the demonstration, the highly volatile chemicals exploded in young Joe's face, blinding him. The impact on Chester was devastating. In his autobiography, he wrote,

That one moment in my life hurt me as much as all the others put together. . . . I loved my brother. I had never been separated from him and¹ that moment was shocking, shattering, and terrifying.

Himes' treatment of this incident in both his autobiography and The Third Generation reveal a sense of guilt for the tragedy. In The Quality Of Hurt, he recalled "I do not remember why we chose that particular feat; it had little to do with our chemistry. It was probably my choice; I was always the showoff, the adventurer."² The Third Generation was built around the theme of guilt and retribution. Himes portrayed Charles as a youth with conventional religious beliefs. His mother warned him that God would punish him for his cursing and he fully expected this prophecy to be fulfilled. Instead, his brother Will was stricken.³

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 11.

²Ibid.

³The recreation of the accident in The Third Generation closely resembles the description in The Quality Of Hurt, but the detail is richer in the novel.

The accident

left him [Charles] with a sense of shock that never wore off. He might have been able to adjust to his brother's loss of sight. But he never learned to rationalize the error of God's judgment--the profound and startling knowledge that virtue didn't pay.¹

At the novel's conclusion, Charles fell in with a group of pimps and prostitutes. His father was killed trying to protect his wife as she attempted to wrest Charles from their midst.² After this brutal murder, Charles

found himself thinking about Will's accident. That was the beginning, he thought; that was where it started. He thought about it for a long time . . . about his mother saying God was going to punish him for acting ugly. . . . Now he knew: God didn't make a mistake, after all.³

Yet it also seems that Himes blamed his mother for his brother's accident. In The Quality Of Hurt, he mentioned that while in prison several years later, he would be reminded of the tragedy whenever he read the harsh signs that plastered the walls: "Spitting on the floor is forbidden. . . .

¹The Third Generation, pp. 131-32. The repetition of this theme in Himes' novel Une Affaire de Viol, written in 1956, indicates a significance that might otherwise have gone unnoticed because of its implausibility here. See below, p. 204 n.

²A different denouement is found in "The Cord." Mrs. Taylor, rather than Mr. Taylor, is the one to die; however, her death is peaceful. She suffers a stroke in her garden and dies thinking that all her sons are successful.

³The Third Generation, p. 316.

Talking at night is forbidden. . . . Taking food from the dining room is forbidden. . . . Whistling is forbidden."¹

Himes made this point more explicitly when he wrote, "I had this understanding with my father that he would never discipline me, resulting as it had in my brother's blindness."²

After the accident, a self-destructive tendency emerged in Himes' personality. In his autobiography, he wrote,

I played football, baseball, soccer, basketball, any game that you can name, with suicidal intensity. The other boys on the playground either ganged up on me or refused to play with me. . . . I cut classes and roamed alone through the strange big city, spending hours in the railroad station watching the trains come and go. I was unpopular with my teachers, disliked by the students; I was lonely, shy, and unsufferably belligerent.³

In The Third Generation, Charles also sought relief from his conscience in sports "played with a deep subconscious desire to kill himself."⁴ This and the theme of guilt and punishment in the novel support the hypothesis that Himes' self-destructiveness was related to a desire for punishment. However, the young boy's love-hate relationship with his

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 11.

²Ibid., p. 43.

³Ibid., pp. 13-14.

⁴p. 146.

mother as well as particular incidents¹ in the novel suggest that Himes' anti-social behavior was also a cry for attention and a rebellion against his mother.

In 1924 or 1925, the Himes family left Pine Bluffs in the hope that better medical care in St. Louis might save Joe's eyes. Professor Himes had difficulty finding employment and eventually took a job waiting on tables at a beer hall. Two years later, after all hope for Joe's eyesight was extinguished, the family moved to Cleveland where prospects for employment seemed brighter.

The situation in Cleveland was no better than it had been in St. Louis. Mr. Himes took on carpentry and small construction jobs. Chester enrolled in high school where he was one of three black students and Joe attended a school for the blind. For a time, the family lived with members of Mr. Himes' family, but Mrs. Himes did not get along with her in-laws. Indeed, Himes claimed that this was the cause of the ill-feelings that later led to his parents' divorce.²

¹After his brother's accident, young Charles began to steal. When his parents were at the hospital visiting his brother, he drank an entire bottle of liquor and became very ill. "They'd just returned from the hospital. Now she was faced with a terrible choice. Both sons needed her desperately. Which ever one she tried to save, the other one would surely be lost." (The Third Generation, p. 132)

²It seems more likely that the ill-will already existed.

Mrs. Himes hated her husband's family and they suspected that she harbored these feelings because, like her husband, they were darker than she was.¹ In his autobiography, Himes has acknowledged that they may have been correct, but revealed very little about his mother's attitude toward dark-skinned Negroes despite the effect that such an attitude must have had on him. As Himes wrote in that book, he was sepia-colored, a combination of his mother and father.

In January, 1926, Himes graduated from high school on a fluke--a failing grade of 56 in Latin was recorded as an 86. Despite the family's straitened circumstances, Himes planned to go to college to become a doctor. Such a course of action was the only acceptable one in the Himes family. Although his mother and her siblings were the children of slaves--the second generation--they had each received a

¹The Quality Of Hurt, pp. 15-16. Elsewhere in the book, Himes stated that, in general, light-skinned Negroes despised darker ones. See p. 29. In a rough draft of The Third Generation, Himes wrote of the rigid social hierarchy based on racial composition in his mother's home town. Some light-skinned Negroes were rumored not to allow darker ones to enter through the front door. For a discussion of this, see John Dollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town (New York, 3 ed., 1957).

college education.¹ More was expected from the third generation which was said to be "the generation."² Indeed, education was so highly prized in the Himes' household that all three children went to college.³

After graduating from high school, Himes took a job at the Wade Park Manor to help defray his educational expenses. While there, he fell down an elevator shaft,

¹In "The Cord," one finds the sentence "Charles had been born and raised in the tradition of academic pre-eminence." (p. 337). In various versions of this rough draft, one finds that his mother's sister Maggie taught at Atlanta University and married a minister, her sister Phyllis and brother Tom graduated from Atlanta University, her brother Charlie graduated from Knoxville College (a Presbyterian school founded by the Freedman's Bureau) and her sister Hattie taught at a boarding school and married "the head of a department of a full fledged college." Although the family name in the novel is "Roberts" one finds references to the Bomar girls occasionally. The Roberts family was Presbyterian as was the Bomar family and the author has written that the Roberts girls were raised in the church--which was the source of their breeding and manners. There are also references to Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina among these manuscripts. Scotia was the first Presbyterian school for Negro girls. Jesse Belmont Barber, Climbing Jacob's Ladder (New York, 1952), p. 43. Checking the catalogues of Scotia Seminary, I found a Phyllis Bomar listed on the faculty while Hattie Bomar was in the senior class in the year 1886-1887. Later Hattie Bomar joined the faculty in the Literature Department. Seventeenth Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Scotia Seminary. Concord North Carolina 1886-7. Thirty-Third Annual Catalogue . . . 1902-3.

²In the same manuscript, one finds Mrs. Taylor's sentiment that it took three generations to wear a tie properly.

³Himes' eldest brother Edward, who left home when Chester was just six, went to Atlanta University. His brother Joseph graduated from Oberlin College and got his Ph.D. in sociology at Ohio State University.

injuring himself seriously. The Ohio State Industrial Commission awarded him total disability payments while the hotel continued to pay his salary.

This settlement became another source of conflict between his parents. His father had recommended that he sign a waiver to all further claims against the hotel and accept the disability payments from the state of Ohio and the supplementary payments from the hotel. His mother, believing her son's youth and color were being taken advantage of, thought they ought to sue the hotel for damages.

Himes' mother was "a fighter . . . a tiny woman who hated all manner of condescension from white people and hated all black people who accepted it. That much, Himes wrote, he inherited from her.¹ Despite his identification with his mother, in his autobiography he claimed that he didn't share her view of his father as an Uncle Tom. Yet earlier in that book, he had described his father as a man

born and raised in the tradition of the Southern Uncle Tom; that tradition derived from an inherited slave mentality which accepts the premise that white people know best, that blacks should accept what whites offer and be thankful. . . .²

He further revealed his ambivalence toward his father when he wrote "my father I respected. And while I loved my mother

¹The implication seems to be that if he did not inherit her skin, at least he had her spirit. The Quality Of Hurt, p. 22.

²Ibid.

I obeyed my father. On his advice I signed away my rights."¹

When Himes finally left for Ohio State University in September, 1926, he was glad to leave an environment that had become increasingly intolerable. Because of his injury, he was exempt from ROTC with its uniform that would have marked him as a lower classman. With his liability payments, he was able to enter college with the accoutrements of a typical, though affluent, collegian of the 1920's, complete with coonskin coat and Model T Ford.² From Himes' emphasis of these details in his autobiography, it seems that he embarked on his college career with the expectation of participating fully in college life.

College, however, presented Himes with a new set of problems. Dormitories, restaurants, and movie theaters in Columbus barred Negroes. In the 1920's, the campus was no freer of racism than other parts of society. Of the 6000 students at the university, Himes said only 500 were black.³ For the first time in his life, Himes was living in an almost all white environment that excluded Negroes. He has described the situation in his autobiography.

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 25.

³"Notes 'College life,'" "The Cord," Chester Himes MSS. Box VIII. The figure "500" seems rather high.

The white students didn't know exactly what to make of me. I dressed and behaved like the "Yes We Are Collegiate" students . . . and yet I was black, a member of the inferior race. I rarely spoke to white people, and never unless I was addressed first by them, and yet I would find them always looking at me. I ignored them. I didn't hate white people then; I simply didn't need them, didn't want to know them, and always felt that they couldn't reject me any more than I could reject them.¹

He joined Alpha Phi Alpha,¹ a black fraternity on campus, but did not find it congenial.

I resented the . . . pretensions, and discriminations within the black student body. I suppose I shouldn't have; I was one of the chosen. . . . But even then I despised the in-group class distinctions based on color and the degree of white blood in one's veins . . . I liked dark black people, I was accepted by them as just another person. . . . Among them I felt as black as the next person and as good as anyone. The "light-bright-and-damn near-white" clique got on my ass.²

Depressed by the white environment, Himes lost interest in his studies, cut classes and started to frequent music halls, movies, and prostitutes in the black ghetto in Columbus. By Christmas holidays, Himes hoped to be expelled from Ohio State for failing grades and spent most of his vacation with whores in the black slums of Cleveland.

I was tired of Ohio State University and its policy of discrimination and segregation, fed up with the condescension which I could never bear, and disgusted with

¹It is not altogether clear whether Himes was actually a member of Alpha Phi Alpha. In one of the earlier drafts of The Third Generation, Charles had not been chosen as a pledge. I have written to the fraternity, but have not gotten any response.

²The Quality Of Hurt, p. 29.

myself for my whoremongering and my inability to play games . . . and my schizophrenic impulses to be inconspicuous and conspicuous at the same time.¹

His activities provoked bitter quarrels between his parents and Himes was once again glad to leave for college after the holidays.

Emotionally exhausted by his parents' constant bickering, he became even more disgusted by the social pretensions at the university.² In a fit of pique at black snobbery, Himes took some fraternity brothers and their dates to a brothel and speakeasy after a dance.³ When they discovered where they were, they were horrified. The next day, Himes was asked to withdraw from the university.

In The Third Generation, Charles's failure in college was a rebellion against the restrictions that he suffered as a Negro.

If he couldn't take part in everything, he wouldn't take part in anything. He'd always been like that; if he couldn't have it all, there was nothing in it for him.⁴

Himes had also expressed this sentiment in an earlier novel, If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945). Its repetition implies that it was the author's response as well as the reaction of

¹Ibid., p. 28.

²It seems reasonable to think that Himes' annoyance was related to his parents' fighting.

³In one of the drafts of The Third Generation, Charles took a prostitute to a fraternity dance to retaliate for the fact that he had not been accepted as a member.

⁴p. 238.

his heroes. Indeed, much of Himes' rebellion seems to be related to rejection or fear of rejection. His rejection of whites before they could reject him was much like the incident after the fraternity dance. In both instances he gave people a concrete reason to reject him. Thus, he wrote in his autobiography:

I seldom thought of being oppressed because I was black, perhaps never. I had done enough other things in my life for which to be penalized. I felt good about the fact that white people didn't have to hate me just because I was black; I had given them plenty of other reasons.¹

Himes came home to a "gloomy and unbearable atmosphere."² By summer, he returned to the nightlife of the Cleveland ghetto where he spent long hours at a gambling club. The club was frequented by respectable Negroes, men in "service"--hotel employees, domestic servants, and porters--and Himes wrote that his friendship with Bunch Boy, the owner of the club, provided a steadying influence.

In the fall of 1927, Himes' world fell apart: his brother Joseph went away to college and Bunch Boy moved to to take over a policy house in the heart of the ghetto. Himes fell in with a sneak thief named Benny. Together they stole cigarette lighters and cufflinks from expensive men's stores in Cleveland. Their next venture was more

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 301.

²Ibid, p. 28.

ambitious--robbing the Ohio State National Guard to sell guns to Negroes working in the steel mills in Warren, Ohio.¹ They were apprehended by the police in Warren before they were able to bring their plans to fruition. Himes received a suspended sentence.

Mrs. Himes blamed her son's evil ways on her husband's permissiveness. Many of their quarrels now centered around Chester. She sought control over the liability payments to curb her son. When that effort failed, she tried to place him in a juvenile correctional institution, but Mr. Himes refused the needed permission. His mother started divorce proceedings in what Himes implies was a measure to increase her authority over him.²

¹Himes himself states that this occurred in 1928. However, the records of Oberlin College show that Joseph Himes, Jr. entered Oberlin College in 1927. (Robert L. Jackson, Registrar of Oberlin College, to Nina Cobb, May 24, 1974). According to Himes' chronology, he committed his first few crimes the same year that his brother went away to college. Although the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction has no record of ~~the above crime~~, ~~their~~ records do reveal that Himes was first arrested on November 28, 1927 for forgery in Columbus, Ohio. (W. J. Whealon, Coordinator Halfway House and Community Services Development Program, and Haralson Gordon, Assistant Coordinator to John Brickman, Executive Director of the Board of Corrections of the City of New York, May 2, 1974). The omission of the gun robbery from Himes' record can be explained by the fact that it was his first offense and he did not serve any sentence. I am grateful to John Brickman for sharing his expertise in these matters with me.

²The Quality Of Hurt, p. 43.

In The Third Generation, the parents' different racial make-up and their attitudes associated with their different skin-tones destroyed the Taylor household. Mrs. Taylor, a very light-skinned Negro, shared the attitudes of the white caste that excluded her.

She had been reared in the tradition that Negroes with straight hair and light complexions were superior to black-complexioned Negroes with kinky hair. This conviction was supported by the fact that light-complexioned skin and straight hair did give Negroes a certain prestige within their race.¹

She had married Professor Taylor, despite his black skin, because of her great faith--typical of Negroes one generation out of slavery--in education.²

"Between them the battle of color raged continuously."³ Even the children became a focal point of their quarrels. Mrs. Taylor wanted to raise her sons to think that they were white and tried to cultivate their white features, pinching their noses and nurturing Charles' straight hair. Mr. Taylor, on the other hand, wanted to prepare the children for the reality of being black. Mrs. Taylor was portrayed as a strict disciplinarian while Mr. Taylor was far more indulgent. Their different approaches to child-raising assumed racial

¹The Third Generation, p. 11.

²Ibid., p. 17.

³Ibid., p. 33.

significance. Mrs. Taylor reproached her husband for his leniency in class and racial terms:

You're nothing but a shanty nigger and never will be anything else. And you would love nothing better than to have my children turn out to be as low and common as yourself.¹

Joseph Himes, now a sociologist at the University of North Carolina, writes that

THE THIRD GENERATION is a novel, a protest novel. In constructing the story, Chester perceived that our family and the situation would make an admirable vehicle for his protest. The family he wrote about, however, is the Taylors, not the Himes. Around our family and the situation he constructed characters, relationships, motives, actions and the rest to do the job of protest that he had in mind. Incidentally, some of the personality characteristics, feelings and motives, relationships, experiences and the rest happened to be biographically factual. Many others were fabricated to meet the novelist's need.

It was an exquisitely "nice" device to have Mrs. Taylor act out the contempt for blacks that is the essence of American racism.²

Yet the little that Chester Himes revealed about his mother's racial attitudes in The Quality Of Hurt tends to confirm that

¹Ibid., p. 37.

²Letter from Joseph S. Himes, March 24, 1974.

color was one of the sources of conflict in the Himes' household.¹ He wrote that his mother "looked and felt that she should have been white."² He implied that this identification with the white race was one of the sources of her defiance in the face of Jim Crow and of her strength. Her sense of pride in her white ancestry coupled with her desire that her children prove themselves worthy of their white blood and her concern that her children's noses retain their Caucasian shape indicate a certain similarity in the racial attitudes of Mrs. Taylor and Mrs. Himes.

On November 28, 1927, Himes was arrested for forgery in Columbus, Ohio. He implied that this series of crimes--

¹Much of the disparity between the two books can be attributed to the fact that Himes condensed his family background and his first nineteen years from 316 pages in the novel to forty-five pages in The Quality Of Hurt. It is also possible that Himes was far more circumspect about these details in his autobiography. He may have felt freer to recreate the reality of his family situation in a work of fiction that would not be interpreted as literal truth. Furthermore, Himes wrote The Third Generation while he was in despair about his career as a novelist; whereas he wrote his autobiography during a time when black militancy was strong in the United States, a fact that was not unconnected to the revival of Himes' reputation as a prominent black writer. While we cannot know to what extent the incidents that Himes related in The Third Generation were the products of his imagination, the recurrence of the color conflict among Negroes as a theme in his novels lends additional support to the hypothesis that this novel is more faithful to Himes' perception of his parents' difficulties than The Quality Of Hurt.

²The Quality Of Hurt, p. 22.

a stolen car and a number of forged checks--was related to the strife between his parents and his brother's departure for college.

My brother was packing to leave for Oberlin College. I realized that it was September. I would not be going to school ever again.

A week later Benny and I stole a car and drove down to Columbus. . . .

The first term was in its second week at Ohio State University. . . .¹

Himes was placed on probation for an unspecified term on January 23, 1928.²

His parents had gotten their divorce and he was placed in his father's custody. Himes described his father as a broken man and wrote that he used to do "anything to keep away from that room that stank of my father's fear and defeat."³ On November 25 or 28, 1928, Himes robbed a wealthy white couple of \$5500 in cash and jewelry.⁴ In The Quality

¹Ibid., p. 43.

²W. J. Whealon and Haralson Gordon to John Brickman, May 2, 1974. The dates of arrest used here come from this source.

³The Quality Of Hurt, p. 47. "In many ways, the effect on this little black man born in a Georgia cabin, who'd tried so hard to become someone of consequence in this world, to live a respectable life, rear his children to be good, and teach his backward people, was the greatest tragedy of all." The Third Generation, p. 221.

⁴"Youth Is Given Long Pen Term," The Plain Dealer, December 26, 1928, "Prison Drama Flows From Convict's Pen," The Plain Dealer, July 9, 1935.

Of Hurt, he explained that he had wanted to go to Tijuana; he needed to get away.

I wanted to leave Cleveland and Ohio and all the United States of America and go somewhere I could escape the thought of my parents and my brother, somewhere black people weren't considered the shit of the earth.¹

But in an interview in the Plain Dealer that appeared in 1935, Himes said that he had become a criminal because he wanted to be a "big shot." In prison he had observed that this desire, fostered by American materialism, was at the root of most criminal careers.²

On December 1, 1928, Himes was arrested in Chicago, trying to pawn the jewelry. He pled guilty to the robbery on December 19. On December 26, Judge Walter McMahon, calling the robbery "one of the most desperate that ever came to my attention," sentenced Himes to twenty to twenty-five years.³ On December 27, 1928, Chester Himes entered the Ohio Penitentiary to serve his sentence.

Curiously, Himes did not discuss his prison experience at length in his autobiography. Although he was aware that

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 48.

²"Prison Drama Flows From Convict's Pen," The discrepancies between these two explanations may be the result of the passage of time, the difference in Himes' position in 1935 and the late 1960's when he was writing his autobiography, and the different audiences. It is, of course, possible that they both are true.

³"Youth Is Given Long Pen Term."

his imprisonment must have had an important influence on his life, he was unable to discern precisely how.

I knew that my long prison term had left its scars. I knew that many aspects of prison life had made deep impressions on my subconscious, but I cannot distinctly recall what they are or should have been.¹

In The Quality Of Hurt, Himes only discussed his impressions of his fellow inmates--which were none too flattering²--and his activities while in prison. Gambling was the principal pastime among the convicts and Himes' experience at Bunch Boy's stood him in good stead. He became head of a gambling syndicate, earning enough money to help support his family during the hard years of the Depression. Later as captain of the winning prison softball team, he won the favor of the guards on his ward. Both sets of circumstances made his term more pleasant than it would otherwise have been. Of the brutality in prison he wrote that nothing happened on the inside that he had not already encountered in the Cleveland ghetto--including the different forms of homosexuality. "The seven and a half years I actually served did not seem to hurt me at all. It was all anticlimax," he concluded.³

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 3.

²Himes' attitude toward most of his fellow inmates was little short of contemptuous: "Most of the black convicts in the Ohio Penitentiary were dull-witted, stupid, uneducated, practically illiterate, slightly above animals." (The Quality Of Hurt, p. 64)

³Ibid., p. 61.

This portrait of Himes as a hardened young man when he entered prison is very much at odds with the image presented in his prison novel, Cast The First Stone (1952). Although James Monroe, the protagonist, is white, he quite clearly is Chester Himes. Monroe is serving a twenty to twenty-five year sentence for armed robbery, having previously been arrested for forgery. He receives liability payments for a back injury. Having learned the ins and outs of gambling at Bunch Boy's, he is head of a gambling syndicate in prison. However, the inconsistencies in the biographical details about James Monroe are the most telling signs of the relationship between Himes and Monroe. When Monroe is first introduced, he is referred to as a doctor. Later the reader is informed that he had been incarcerated at the age of nineteen and had been a college student.¹

Cast The First Stone provides greater insight into Himes' experience in the state penitentiary than The Quality Of Hurt.² During the first few months of his sentence, Monroe is both shocked and frightened by the brutality and homosexuality in prison. He lives in terror that he will be sexually assaulted. Far from finding prison old hat,

¹Cast The First Stone (New York, Signet Edition, 1972), pp. 13, 52, 176.

²In The Quality Of Hurt, Himes wrote that he could not remember his life in prison and had to refer to what he had written previously when writing his autobiography.

Monroe survives by building a wall around himself, insulating himself from thoughts of the past or the future: he lives in the present tense.¹

Cast The First Stone is the most controlled of Himes' first three novels. The naturalistic mode of the novel emphasizes environment rather than emotion. There is much description of prison routine, prison clothes, and prison food.

Aluminum bowls were half-filled with soupy oatmeal. Milk, made by adding water to powdered milk, had been poured over it. But it had been standing for so long that the body of the milk had settled to the bottom in a white scum which covered the oatmeal. The water had come to the top. To one side of the cereal were aluminum plates, holding one link of fried sausage which had cold-welded to the aluminum by congealed grease.²

But the horror of it all is submerged in the monotony.

The tone of the novel reflects the image that Monroe wanted to present of himself in prison--an image that is closely akin to the one that Himes presents in his autobiography.

All those goddamned years trying to make out I wasn't ever scared. Those years of trying to be tough and trying to be smart and trying to prove I wasn't weak . . . and trying to know so damned much more than a nineteen-year-old boy has any business knowing . . . when all the while I was even afraid to admit to myself how utterly different was everything inside me when I let it be. . . .³

¹"Present Tense" was one of the working titles for the novel.

²Cast The First Stone, pp. 21-22.

³*Ibid.*, p. 205.

It is interesting that Monroe, like Himes, has trouble remembering certain aspects of his prison life. He could recall the physical aspects of his prison dormitory, but the essence of it--

. . . the living, pulsing, vulgar, vicious, treacherous, humorous, piteous, tawdry heart of it; the living men, the living actions, the living speech, the constant sense of power just above, the ever-present breath of sudden death. . . .¹

he had difficulty with. In an effort to survive, Monroe has to repress his natural range of feelings and the novel's tone is well-suited to convey that.

Neither Cast The First Stone nor The Quality Of Hurt shed much light on what--other than tedium and self-disgust--transformed Himes from a gambler to a writer in prison. However, in the 1935 interview with the Plain Dealer, Himes credited his decision to become a writer to the Easter 1930 fire that caused 320 deaths at the penitentiary. "From that time on, he knew his work would be people--why they did what they did. . . ." ²

Himes believed that his writing protected him from the violence rampant in prison because the black convicts respected and feared people who could write. But perhaps even more important was the sense of identity that he derived

¹Ibid., p. 56.

²"Prison Drama Flows From Convict's Pen."

from his writing. He told Carl Van Vechten in 1947, "It was what I wrote that made me what I was."¹ He reiterated this in his autobiography:

No matter what I did, or where I was, or how I lived, I had considered myself a writer ever since I'd published my first story in Esquire when I was still in prison in 1934. Foremost a writer. Above all else a writer. It was my salvation, and is. The world can deny me all other employment, and stone me as an ex-convict, as a nigger, as a disagreeable and unpleasant person. But as long as I write, whether it is published or not, I'm a writer, and no one can take that away. "A fighter fights, a writer writes."²

In prison, Himes wrote about criminals and prison life. His stories, like his prison novel Cast The First Stone, did not touch on race issues. Although several of his short stories had been published in black publications such as Atlanta World, the Afro-American, the Bronzeman, and Abbott's Monthly before "Crazy in the Stir" was accepted by Esquire, it is revealing that Himes did not consider himself a writer until he received recognition from a white publication.

As a result of a series of penal reforms instituted after the penitentiary fire, Himes' sentence was shortened. On April 1, 1936, he was released from prison. Paroled to the custody of his mother in Columbus, he quickly resumed his old ways. His mother had him placed in his father's custody in Cleveland. He met and married an old girlfriend,

¹February 18, 1947, Chester Himes MSS.

²The Quality Of Hurt, p. 117. This theme also appears in his highly autobiographical novel of 1954 The Primitive (New York, Signet Edition, 1972), pp. 24, 100.

Jean Johnson.

Marriage seems to have transformed Himes: he was imbued with a strong sense of male pride, refusing to allow his wife to work while he held a series of menial jobs. Himes' struggle for self-esteem, dignity, and manhood revealed the crippling cruelty of American racism to him.

Until then, there had been nothing racial about my hurt, unbelievable as that may seem.

Jean was an extremely beautiful brown-skinned girl, and I wanted to support her like any other man.¹

For a time, while Himes was on WPA, first as a research assistant in the Cleveland Public Library and then as a writer on the Ohio Writers' Project, he was shielded from racism's crushing blows. But when WPA ended, he was thrown into the humiliating position of seeking a job in Jim Crow defense industries in Ohio and then in Los Angeles where he and his wife moved around 1941. In his autobiography, Himes revealed that the "lying hypocrisy" of Los Angeles hurt him more, racially, than any other city he had known.²

Up to the age of thirty-one, I had been hurt emotionally, spiritually and physically as much as thirty-one years can bear: I had lived in the South, I had fallen down an elevator shaft, I had been kicked out of college, I had served seven and one half years in prison, I had survived the humiliating last five years of the Depression in Cleveland; and still I was entire, complete, functional; my mind was sharp . . . and I was not bitter. But under the

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 70.

²Ibid., p. 73.

mental corrosion of race prejudice in Los Angeles I had become bitter and saturated with hate. And finding myself unable to support my black¹ wife, whom I loved desperately, I had become afraid.

Himes' first novel, If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945), was inspired by race-torn Los Angeles. In this novel, Himes portrayed the Negro's frustration and rage at the conflict between democratic ideals and racial realities. Robert Jones, the protagonist, was a leaderman at an aircraft company. Despite his position of responsibility, Jones received little cooperation from his white co-workers because he was Negro. If He Hollers Let Him Go portrayed a man frightened by the violence of his own emotions. Jones' fear came from his recognition that to give vent to his rage and frustration would destroy everything that he had struggled for: a good job and his upper-class, light-skinned, accommodationist girlfriend. Yet at the same time, to accept constant racial abuse was equally destructive, depriving him ultimately of his sense of manhood.

From the time of Himes' marriage, he had been painfully aware of how difficult it was for a Negro to attain a sense of manhood in the United States. Although Himes' situation in Los Angeles differed from Jones' in many details, the author has called the novel an emotional autobiography.²

¹Ibid., pp. 75-76.

²Interview with Chester Himes, February, 1971, Moraira, Spain.

Jones' struggle for manhood was Himes' struggle:

I didn't want to be the biggest Negro who ever lived, neither Toussaint L'Ouverture nor Walter White. . . . If you couldn't swing down Hollywood Boulevard and know that you belonged . . . if you couldn't eat a thirty-dollar dinner at a hotel without choking on the insults, being a great big "Mister" nigger didn't mean a thing.

I'd settle for a leaderman job at Atlas Shipyard-- if I could be a man, defined by Webster as a male human being. That's all I'd ever wanted--just to be accepted as a man-- . . . without any other identifying characteristics but weight, height, and gender.¹

The critical reaction to If He Hollers Let Him Go was mixed. Inevitably, it was compared to Native Son and suffered in the comparison. In The New York Times, Joseph Warren Beach wrote, "This book has not the power and sweep, the subtlety and depth of Native Son. But in its lesser way, it is an impressive performance." The New Yorker dismissed the book as nothing new. This charge was repeated in the Saturday Review of Literature, but the novel's raw power was praised. Isaac Rosenfeld's review in the New Republic was similar to the one in the Saturday Review of Literature. Rosenfeld described Himes' style very aptly, calling it "a compact thing, known to the trade as 'hard-hitting,' acceptable because it is free of the major irritants

¹If He Hollers Let Him Go (New York, Signet Edition, 1971), pp. 143-44.

of journalese, but lacking in real literary distinction."¹

The theme of the struggle for manhood appeared again in Himes' second novel, Lonely Crusade (1947). Despite the novel's complexity, it is quite evident from many of Himes' statements and writings that this was the subject. In one of the first drafts of the novel, Himes wrote "To discover manhood is a crusade which all must make alone."² Writing about the novel in Commentary, he stated "My purpose in writing Lonely Crusade was to create a novel out of the theme of one man, a Negro, searching for manhood. The search of this man, Lee Gordon, for manhood is the lonely crusade."³ In a speech that Himes gave after the book's publication, he stated his conception of the central problems posed by the novel: first, can an American Negro realize his full manhood? second, can marriage be successful if a husband can't support his wife? third, can a Negro husband provide security for his wife?⁴

¹Beach, "The Dilemma of the Black Man in a White World," New York Times Book Review, December 7, 1945, p. 7; New Yorker, November 3, 1945, (21), p. 102; William S. Lynch, "Born Black," Saturday Review of Literature, Isaac Rosenfeld, "With The Best Intentions," New Republic, December 31, 1945, pp. 909-10.

²Chester Himes MSS, Box I.

³"Author's Protest," Commentary 5 (May, 1948), p. 474.

⁴Notes on Lonely Crusade from lecture delivered to North Carolina College (no date), Chester Himes MSS.

It seems quite obvious that Lonely Crusade had an autobiographical dimension. The problems that Lee Gordon faced were problems that Himes experienced in Los Angeles. Like Ruth Gordon, Jean Himes held a more prestigious job than her husband. In his autobiography, Himes wrote

It hurt me for my wife to have a better job than I did and be respected and included by her white co-workers besides rubbing elbows with many well-to-do blacks of the Los Angeles middle class who wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole.¹

Yet he explicitly denied that he had anything in common with Lee Gordon.² This disclaimer seems disingenuous given the similarity between Himes' and Gordon's personal problems and concerns and the continuity of the theme of the struggle for manhood in Himes's writings. If this is not enough to disprove his disclaimer, in 1962, he wrote John A. Williams, the black novelist, that he was indeed Lee Gordon.³

Himes was living in New York when Lonely Crusade was published. Like If He Hollers Let Him Go, Lonely Crusade got mixed reviews. Horace Cayton called the book great and Negro critic and novelist Arna Bontemps wrote that "Himes' talent, apparent to many, has produced an even more provocative book this time."⁴ Although the book did receive

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 75.

²Ibid., p. 93.

³October 31, 1962, p. 6. Chester Himes MSS.

⁴New York Herald Tribune, September 7, 1947.

many favorable reviews, several notices were vitriolic.

Ebony compared Himes to Hitler and Bilbo, and denounced the book as "virulent, malicious . . . full of rancor and venom."

Its author was "infected with a psychosis."¹ Commentary likened the novel to the graffiti in the men's room, both being "part of the same debased culture."² Writing in his autobiography of the critical reaction to Lonely Crusade, Himes could only remember that the book was universally hated. In reality, the reviews were a good deal more varied, but the book was virtually ignored, selling only 3,600 copies.³

In a lecture given under Horace Cayton's auspices in Chicago shortly after Lonely Crusade had been reviewed, Himes spoke of the difficulties confronting the Negro novelist in America. In terms reminiscent of Wright, Himes said that the task of the Negro novelist was to explore how the fear experienced by all Negroes in a white society affects and distorts the Negro personality.⁴

¹"Time to Count Our Blessings," Ebony, November 1947, p. 44. Himes refers to this editorial in The Primitive.

²Milton Klonsky, "The Writing on the Wall," 5 (February, 1948), p. 190.

³Telephone call to Eleanor Carlucci, Sales Department, Alfred Knopf.

⁴One of the titles Himes thought of using for Lonely Crusade was "An Anatomy of Fear." (Note, March 9, 1947, Chester Himes MSS.)

If this plumbing for truth reveals within the Negro personality, homicidal mania, lust for white women, a pathetic sense of inferiority, paradoxical anti-Semitism, arrogance, uncle-tomism, hate, fear and self-hate, this then is the effect of oppression on the human personality.¹

Himes believed that the person who revealed these unpleasant realities as he had in Lonely Crusade would be reviled rather than the conditions that produced them.

Although Himes understood the reasons for many of the rabid reviews, he was nevertheless deeply hurt. In the first novel he wrote in exile, The Primitive (1955), which was also autobiographical, one finds

No matter how much he drank, nor whatever he did to deaden his thoughts, there was this part of his mind that never relaxed, never became numb. It was always tense, hypersensitive, probing. . . . It had started with the publication of his second book, five years before. . . . Some goddamned reason for all the hate, the animosity, the gratuitous ill will. . . .²

In his autobiography, he wrote

Of all the hurts which I had suffered before-- my brother's accident, my own accident, being kicked out of college, my parents' divorce, my term in prison, and my racial hell on the West Coast--and which I have suffered since, the rejection of Lonely Crusade hurt me most.³

¹"Dilemma of the Negro Novelist in the United States," in Beyond the Angry Black, ed. John A. Williams, (New York, 1971), p. 79.

²p. 22. Italicized in the original.

³The Quality Of Hurt, pp. 101-02. However, on p. 11 of The Quality Of Hurt, Himes had written that his brother's accident hurt him more than all the other hurts of his life combined. (See p.157, above.)

In an interview with Himes conducted by this writer some twenty-four years later, he was still visibly affected as he talked about this aspect of his life.

Himes declared that the reviews of Lonely Crusade made him decide to leave the United States at his first opportunity.¹ However, this is by no means certain. In a letter to Van Vechten written before Lonely Crusade was published, Himes said that he hoped to follow Richard Wright within the year.² From the context of the letter, it seems that Himes had nothing more than a visit in mind. When Himes finally did leave for Paris in 1953, he wrote both Wright and Van Vechten that he planned a stay of about six months or a year.³ What is clear is that the reaction of Lonely Crusade increased the sense of frustration and bitterness he had already expressed in If He Hollers Let Him Go.

I knew with the white folks sitting on my brain, controlling my **every** thought, action, and emotion, making life one crisis after another . . . I couldn't make it. I knew that unless I found my niche . . . unless I stopped hating white folks and learned to take them as they came, I couldn't live in America, much less expect to accomplish anything in it.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 103.

²May 12, 1946, Chester Himes MSS.

³Chester Himes to Richard Wright, no date, Wright MSS, Chester Himes to Carl Van Vechten, February 19, 1953, Chester Himes MSS.

⁴p. 141.

For the next few years after Lonely Crusade was published, he was unable to write. He took a number of menial jobs--snow shoveller, janitor's helper, and dishwasher--while his wife held a position as a recreational director for the Federal Housing Authority in New York City. Once again, his wife's superior post put a strain on their marriage. Himes wrote that their marriage was saved by his wife's losing her job which placed him in the position of man and husband once again.¹ He got employment as a caretaker and bellhop at various resorts in New York and New Jersey. In 1950, he and his wife moved to Bridgeport where Himes was arrested and sent to jail for reckless driving. The experience unnerved Himes and the couple returned to New York rather precipitously.

In the same year, Himes's novel about his prison experiences was rejected and he had come to believe that he was a failure as a writer. Himes and his wife were forced by their jobs to live separately and by 1951, their marriage had disintegrated under the strain of poverty and enforced separation. While working at a hotel in Sullivan County that summer, Himes learned that The Third Generation, which he had been working on since at least 1949, had been accepted for publication. In his autobiography, he wrote "the first

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 105.

thing I desired now that I had money was to sleep with a white woman."¹ He returned to New York City and resumed an acquaintanceship with a woman he had met in Chicago who had worked for the Rosenwald Fund. Their relationship, which lasted for eighteen months, was the subject of his fifth novel, The Primitive (1955). The affair was a tumultuous one, with a violent denouement in which Himes came dangerously close to killing her.

On April 3, 1953, when Himes was almost forty-four, he left New York on the Ile de France. Equipped with "American toilet articles and medicine, Kleenex, drip-dry nylon shirts, pajamas and underwear, an American can-opener and an alcohol stove," Himes wrote that he "had had it" with the United States.² While it is impossible to say whether Himes actually intended to expatriate at the time, in retrospect he certainly believed that he had already decided to leave forever six years earlier. His brother Joseph Himes suggests that Himes' intention to leave for six months or a year in 1953 and his later perception of his departure may not be contradictory.

Did he go for six to twelve months or forever? Is it not possible that both intentions are true? When he left in 1953 he may have intended to stay six to twelve months only if things worked out badly, forever, if they worked out well: when he left in 1953 he may

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 135.

²Ibid., p. 142.

have intended the short stay, but looking back twenty years later he may have perceived that from the beginning, at the subconscious level, he never intended to return to the United States to live.¹

Himes' retrospective explanation of his own departure from the United States gives the impression of contingency and confusion rather than design. After almost two decades abroad, Himes felt compelled to justify his expatriation to his black brothers through an autobiography. In the very first sentence of The Quality Of Hurt, Himes revealed the difficulty of providing an explanation for such a complex phenomenon: "I suppose there were many reasons for my coming to Europe, but I don't remember them clearly."² He had gotten an advance for his prison novel, Cast the First Stone, and an advance on the sale of the reprint rights of The Third Generation. This not only provided the means but the added psychological prerequisite, confidence, to make the trip.³ After his father's death in 1953, he realized that he no longer had any reason to stay in the United States. His mother had died in 1945 and his wife had left him. Indeed, the only thing that he had left, he wrote, was his success

¹Letter from Joseph Himes, March 24, 1974.

²The Quality Of Hurt, p. 3.

³On this subject Himes writes: "I don't know what effect money has on other people, but it has always given me a confidence that nothing else has . . . even now I still derive more confidence from money than from all Europe has to offer me." The Quality Of Hurt, p. 142.

with white women. But his experience with his white mistress seemed to preclude that as well. He was both "shocked and frightened" by the violence of his own emotions and realized that the ultimate result of America's sex and racism syndrome was murder.¹ But no doubt he must have also been frightened because he realized that he was at the end of his tether. Contingency, fear and despair contributed their share to Himes' departure from the United States.

Finally, Himes declared that he left the United States because of American racism.

Race prejudice, of course. I know that was one even though I don't remember it. I am black and I was born and raised and lived in America, and the fact that race prejudice was one of my reasons for leaving it is inescapable.²

If this reference to racism seems too pat, too de rigueur, it is because of Himes' attempt to separate the racial from the personal. Thus, he had written that up to the age of thirty-one, he had never been hurt by racism, as if what he had suffered he had brought on himself. But such a separation, given Himes' own family, is too artificial and only leads to confusion. Perhaps instead of seeking specific reasons for Himes' ex post facto expatriation in his autobiography, one should view the autobiography as an explanation

¹Ibid., p. 4.

²Ibid., p. 3.

in a broader sense. Himes has presented the reader with his life--which he has characterized in the title "The Quality Of Hurt"--as the ultimate explanation of his exile.

CHAPTER VII

A key factor both in Himes' desire to go to Paris and in his rapid disenchantment once there appears to have been Richard Wright. It was not long after Wright and his family left for Paris as special guests of the French government that Himes had written Van Vechten about his hope to follow. Before Himes went to France himself, he had been in communication with Wright who told him "how pleasant and stimulating life was in Paris; then of how cheaply one could live."¹

Himes had known and liked Wright in New York. In Paris, however, he discovered other aspects of Wright's personality. Although admiring Wright greatly and sympathizing with the struggle for dignity that had taken him to Paris, Himes found Wright's egotism irritating. The day after his arrival in Paris, Wright appeared at his hotel, anxious to get the copies of The Outsider that Himes had brought from New York. The books were in a huge trunk which he had left with customs and the two men went off to get it. After much confusion, they finally brought the trunk back to Himes' hotel. No sooner did they arrive at the hotel

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 141.

than, as Himes remembers it, Wright dragged Himes off to a bookstore to display his book prominently. In his autobiography, Himes describes Wright as the "king" of the Café Monaco, greeting everyone "with boisterous condescension."¹ In an article that he sent to Ebony in 1954, he wrote at greater length about the cafe life that was dominated by Wright.

The American colony in the Quartier Latin is dominated by the bustling, confident personality of the "new" Richard Wright, who holds court for his neophytes in a little café, the Monaco, just back from the Odéon on St. Germain, and down Monsieur le Prince, a block from where he lives with his wife and two very lovely daughters. The Monaco is a hang-out for the English-speaking student-artist types, Americans mostly, some British, a few Scandinavians . . . a few African colonials. It's a gossipy little bistro, and if one wants to know the lowdown on any compatriot in the Quartier one has only to sit there for an hour or so and keep out of the line of fire. Wright stops by once or twice a day and talks loudly of world politics, the American Dilemma, the nature of communism and the pitfalls of creative writing. Most listen, and perhaps a few agree. . . . William Gardner Smith who maintains his individuality by avoiding the Monaco is holding his own court, smaller and less wide-eyed, but perhaps² better informed than Wright's in the Café Tournon.

Himes was also embarrassed by what he considered to be Wright's prurient interests and was disturbed by his treatment of Baldwin.³

¹Ibid., p. 179.

²March 1, 1954 (unpublished), Chester Himes MSS. William Gardner Smith wrote Last of the Conquerors and Stone-Face.

³According to Himes, Wright had a habit of speaking of his interest in prostitution and in bizarre sexual fetishes loudly in English, assuming that he would not be understood. See The Quality Of Hurt, pp. 196, 209. For a discussion of Himes' view of Wright's treatment of Baldwin, see p. 131 n above.

Although this behavior may have contributed to Himes' rift with Wright, Himes was more distressed by Wright's rudeness to Willa Thompson,¹ a white, upper class American woman whom he had met on the Ile de France. Despite Himes' claim that he had left the United States to get away from American white women, he was immediately drawn to her. The tragedy of her life and her "complete innocence" attracted him.

She did not have to tell me, as she did later, that her aunt had taught her that the greatest sin one could commit was to hurt another person without cause. The innocence emanated from her. I had never known an innocent woman before.

In my own way I was as innocent as she was. The difference was that she was a good woman, and I have never been a good man.²

They formed a deep attachment for each other on the boat and after Ms. Thompson took care of some of the details of her divorce from her husband in Belgium, she returned to be with Himes in Paris.

Himes felt that Wright resented his relationship with Ms. Thompson because she was a Boston Brahmin. He believed that Wright felt uncomfortable in the presence of someone of her social standing and treated her disrespectfully as

¹In his autobiography, Himes uses the pseudonym "Alva Trent Van Olden Barneveltdt." Thompson was her real maiden name.

²The Quality Of Hurt, p. 161-62. Elizabeth Hancock Brissaud, one of the main characters in Une Affaire de Viol, a novel that Himes wrote in late 1956, bears a striking resemblance to Ms. Thompson. See pp. 204, 7, above.

a result. Wright greeted her with "an air of coarse jocularly that made it obvious that he regarded her as a tramp." Instead of inviting her up to his apartment after her arrival in Paris, he suggested that they go to the Monaco, where, as Himes put it, "all American tramps hung out,"¹

It also appears that Himes had counted on Wright to initiate him into Parisian life. Writing to Van Vechten on June 12, 1953, Himes declared

I don't know exactly what I expected to get from Paris, but whatever it was I didn't get it. I don't think that is due entirely to the city. It seems now, looking back, that Dick Wright might have been blocking me off from meeting people or getting to know the city; he spent a good deal of time with me but it was all quite pointless.²

In an interview with this writer, Himes explained that Wright did not want any other black writer to become famous, thus, he policed Himes' activities.³

Himes was also disappointed by the black community in Paris. Not a single "soul brother" showed up to greet him at the Café Monaco after his arrival in Paris. Although Himes commented that this was

an eccentricity which I was later to learn was the natural reaction of the envious and jealous American

¹Ibid., pp. 217-20.

²Chester Himes MSS.

³Interview with Chester Himes, February 1971, Moraira, Spain. This seems somewhat unfair to Wright, given the help he gave young writers.

blacks who lived in Paris--or anywhere else in Europe for that matter. They did not want any arriving brother to get the idea they thought he was important.¹

It is clear that he was insulted by this slight. Not receiving the welcome that he had anticipated, he rejected the black community.

In his autobiography, he wrote:

I hadn't made it with my soul brothers. Dick was the only one with whom I spent some time. But then I never liked American blacks simply because we belonged to the same race. . . . I felt that I didn't have to like blacks in order to identify; I was one. I didn't have to prove anything by talking about my hard times . . . my dues were paid. I wanted to get away and lead a different life. At times my soul brothers embarrassed me, bragging about their scars, their poor upbringing, and their unhappy childhood to get sympathy and some white pussy and money, too, if they could. It was a new variety of Uncle-Toming, a modern version. Anyway I was glad to . . . get away from Paris.²

Furthermore, Himes had great difficulty with the French language and people. In the article that he had written for Ebony in 1954, Himes said that he had found little race prejudice in France, but a great deal of anti-Americanism.³ Curiously, he was irritated by the anti-Americanism.⁴ In his autobiography, he described a conver-

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 179.

²Ibid., p. 224.

³See p.201, below, for a fuller discussion of Himes' views of racism in France.

⁴Interview with Chester Himes, February 1971, Moraira, Spain.

sation he had had with a French woman who complained of the destructiveness of the American army, averring that the Americans were worse than the Nazis. Himes grew tired of her "bullshit" and left the restaurant.¹

In his first few weeks in Paris, Himes spent his days at the Café Monaco and his nights at the Café Tournon which was frequented by Smith. Yet in Paris perhaps even more than in the United States, Himes seemed to feel that he was a loner no matter what his surroundings. At "an assemblage of Jewish intellectuals from all over Europe" that he attended in the company of Ellen Wright, Himes recalled, "I didn't fit in, I wasn't an intellectual and I didn't have a title."² At a cocktail party given by the French publishing house Correa for Henry Miller, Himes was virtually ignored. In truth, Himes gave himself very little time to get established in Paris before he and Ms. Thompson left for his translator's house on the Bay of Arcachon.

From the south of France, Himes moved to Majorca where he wrote The Primitive (1955). In his autobiography, Himes stated that this novel was, in part, a response to the fury that he felt from

the hypocritical respectability of white people
feigning outrage and indignation at sight of me and

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 183.

²Ibid., p. 211.

Alva [Willia] together, while all the time smirking and leering and revealing sick envy of our perpetual orgy that took place in their minds.¹

He described The Primitive as "one of the most profane, sacrilegious, uninhibited books on record."² Instead of writing the novel to gain approval, Himes claims that he was inspired by the desire to "give them something to hate" him for.³ As a result, The Primitive was the first book that Himes enjoyed; his earlier books were written out of compulsion. Writing The Primitive, he was able to do what he wanted to do with a story for the first time, "without being influenced by the imagined reactions of editors, publishers, critics, readers, or anyone."⁴

Himes told Van Vechten that The Primitive was one of the most pornographic books ever written.⁵ Although the book has been cut, it seems unlikely that Himes was being literal. As he explained in his autobiography, "To describe a black man . . . alongside . . . a white woman, no matter how seriously intended, is unavoidably pornographic in American society. Given the American background, the bare colors create a pornography of the mind."⁶ Nonetheless, The

¹Ibid., p. 285.

²Himes to Van Vechten, May 25, 1955, Chester Himes MSS.

³The Quality Of Hurt, p. 301.

⁴Ibid., p. 302.

⁵Himes to Van Vechten, April 15, 1954, Chester Himes MSS.

⁶The Quality Of Hurt, p. 285.

Primitive is a profoundly pessimistic book that revolves around the relationship between Jesse Robinson, a black writer, and Kriss Cummings, a white woman. Although Kriss is a successful executive at an educational foundation in New York, her personal life has been far from satisfactory. As a result of two abortions at the age of sixteen, she is sterile. The man she married turned out to be a homosexual and she is now divorced. When the novel opens, Kriss awakens to find herself alone, "an indication of her failure as a woman," despite many affairs.¹

Superficially, Jesse and Kriss have little in common. Kriss lives in a beautiful apartment in the exclusive Gramercy Park area of Manhattan and Jesse lives amidst a group of homosexuals in a boarding house in Harlem. But like Kriss, Jesse sees his life as a failure. He has published two novels, but his second one received terrible reviews. After his third manuscript is rejected, his editor suggests that he write a Negro success novel because the "public is tired of the plight of the poor downtrodden Negro."² Much to the surprise of his editor, who thought that Jesse could use his own life as a model, Jesse replies that he doesn't have that much imagination and leaves the office. Like Kriss, he lives alone. He has left the wife

¹The Primitive, p. 4

²Ibid., p. 94.

whom he loves because the strains of racism and failure have corroded their relationship. A series of dreams seem to indicate that Jesse is losing his sense of identity; he carts his unpublished manuscripts around with him to remind himself that he is a writer, no matter what he may do for a living.

Kriss and Jesse come together out of their fear of loneliness and their need for sex. But Himes posits an ironic inevitability in their need for each other: they are both victims of a white supremacist society--Kriss, a victim of the white man's strange sexual needs; Jess, a victim of racism.¹ "Ruined" in the eyes of society, Kriss can only feel secure that she is valued in the arms of a black man; while the sexual taboos that white society has placed on its women make it only "natural" for the black man to desire her. They seek to obliterate their self-hatred in a sea of alcohol and try to avenge their suffering by lacerating each other.

In a drunken stupor, Jesse kills Kriss. Because of his sense of integrity, his refusal to compromise, Jesse was a primitive. In killing his female, he has finally become a full-fledged member of the human race.

'End product of the impact of Americanism on one Jesse Robinson--black man. Your answer, son. You've been

¹Ibid., p. 158.

searching for it. Black man kills white woman. All the proof you need now. Absolute incontrovertible behaviorism of a male human being. Most human of all behavior. Human beings only species of animal life where males are known to kill their females. . . . Jesse Robinson joins the human race.¹

After a year and a half of hardship in the south of France, London, and Majorca, Himes returned to Paris with Ms. Thompson. Unlike Wright, Himes "found Paris profoundly hostile to American Negroes."² In 1956, he wrote a synopsis (later published as Une Affaire de Viol in 1963) for a novel that dealt with French racism. The racism that Himes was responding to in The Primitive became the subject of Une Affaire de Viol. Une Affaire de Viol was written "in order to emphasize the preconceptions and humiliations that Black Americans were subjected to in Paris during the Algerian War."³

In the later novel, four American blacks are accused of the rape and murder of an American white woman, Mrs. Elizabeth Hancock Brissaud, in a Paris hotel room. In If He Hollers Let Him Go, Himes had placed Bob Jones in such a situation to dramatize the horrors of American racism. For Jones and other Afro-American males, to be accused of the rape of a white woman is the quintessential nightmare:

¹The Primitive, p. 158.

²Chester Himes to Van Vechten, December 16, 1954, Chester Himes MSS.

³Michel Fabre, "A Case of Rape," Black World, March, 1972, p. 43.

I was scared . . . of America, of American justice. The jury and the judge. The people themselves. Of the inexorability of one conclusion--that I was guilty. In that one brief flash I could see myself trying to prove my innocence and nobody believing it. A white woman yelling, "Rape," and a Negro locked in a room. The whole structure of American thought was against me. American tradition had convicted me one hundred years before.¹

The position of Scott Hamilton, Cesar Gee, Sheldon Russel, and Theodore Elkins in Une Affaire de Viol is ironic: they had left the United States to escape this nightmare; but in Paris their worst fears have been transformed into reality.

The evidence against them is circumstantial. Mrs. Hancock, Hamilton's former lover, had been seen fighting with the four men in a hotel room and later died of a heart attack from the combined effects of a near-fatal dose of an aphrodisiac and over-exertion from repeated sexual acts. Because it is assumed that Mrs. Hancock could not have consented to sexual relations with her black companions, rape is the only answer that fits the circumstances.

In reality, the night before her fatal visit to Scott Hamilton's room, Mrs. Hancock had been with her former husband, a sadist with strange sexual tastes, and had consumed Spanish fly. In the hotel room with Hamilton and his friends, she accidentally swallows more of the aphrodisiac and becomes violent. However, she does not have sexual relations with any of the black men; she had already taken

¹If He Hollers Let Him Go, p. 175.

part in an orgy the night before with her husband. The author comments that it would be too much to expect the members of the French jury to believe that this was the actual course of events.

In this novel, Himes reveals his belief that Parisians, like Americans, identify blacks with sexuality.¹ "The mother of the proprietor (of the hotel) had been able to stare carefully at Mrs. Hancock just as she did . . . with all white women who accompanied black men to their rooms."² The jury and the public at large scoff at the defense attorney's argument that no connection has been proved between the medical evidence of Mrs. Hancock's sexual activity and the four black men. When the medical experts make the same point, it is greeted by cynical laughter. A guilty verdict receives full public approval in the French press. In fact, the only skeptical response to the outcome of the trial that appears in the novel comes from black newspapers in America. The white American press cites the case as a lesson to American blacks who believe that they can find a

¹In an interview with this writer, Himes said that in the '50's clubs existed in Paris for Frenchmen to take their wives to dance with blacks. It was all quite safe, just an "indulgence," to titillate both wives and husbands. Interview with Chester Himes, February, 1971, Moraira, Spain.

²Une Affaire de Viol (Paris, 1963), p. 8. (The translations from this book are my own.)

utopia in Europe.

In each instance, the responses are merely a reflex. Indeed, one of the major points that Himes make in Une Affaire de Viol is that racial attitudes and responses within an interracial context are so conditioned that they can never be anything other than reflex. Scott Hamilton's attraction for Mrs. Hancock, whom he had met on the Liberté in 1953 is in part racial. She is a white woman from an upper class background. But he is also drawn to her because she is as much a victim of white hypocrisy as he is.¹

The circumstances that bring Mrs. Hancock together with Scott Hamilton and his friends on this fatal day are also racially motivated and the events that transpire are no less so. Mrs. Hancock and Hamilton had jointly written a novel which was to be published under her name. The publisher had discovered Hamilton's part in it and cancelled the contract. She suspected Hamilton of informing the publisher and Hamilton brought her to his room to meet his friends so that they could assure her that he had no part in the disclosure.

If he took her to his room in order to meet his three friends there, it was only with the intention

¹The author says that Scott Hamilton and Elizabeth Hancock were also joined together by their faith in the tenets of Christian morality and their suffering on account of it as well as their subsequent disillusionment with the idea of God and goodness. Une Affaire de Viol, p. 125.

of reaffirming her confidence in Negroes. At the time, he didn't know why this seemed so important to him, but it was a little as if he had wanted to defend the dignity and integrity of his race.¹

Mrs. Hancock had been directing her attention to Hamilton and Russel who were both light-skinned. Believing that she favors them because they are lighter than himself and Cesar Gee, Elkins hands her some sherry with cantharidine, an aphrodisiac. "It was thus out of pure spite--natural, spontaneous, non-premeditated and uniquely inspired by a racial reflex that Ted Elkins handed this bottle to Mrs. Hancock. . . ."² Elkins planned to throw her into Cesar Gee's arms to see how she would react to seducing a man who she must think looked like a monkey.

In the ensuing disaster, panic prevents the four men from calling a doctor just as fear keeps them from telling the jury what had actually taken place in Hamilton's room.

. . . they were so conditioned by their culture, so conditioned above all by the prejudices of the white race which always attributes the crime of a Negro, of just one individual to his entire race, that they could not even conceive that a white jury was capable of believing in their innocence.³

¹Une Affaire de Viol, p. 151.

²Ibid., p. 154.

³Ibid., p. 160.

In effect, Une Affaire de Viol is both an open challenge to and a refutation of Wright's assertion that one could shed one's racial conditioning on French soil.¹

In many respects, Une Affaire de Viol is like The Primitive. Each novel deals with the relationship between a black man and a white woman. Like Kriss and Jesse, Scott and Elizabeth are victims of a hypocritical Christian morality. In both novels, the woman is killed. But Une Affaire de Viol is strikingly different from The Primitive and Himes' other descriptions of relationships between black

¹One of the characters in the novel, Roger Garrison, bears a very close resemblance to Wright. Garrison, an American Negro who was conducting an independent investigation of the case, had been born in Alabama; was self-educated, a former member of the American Communist party, the author of five books including a celebrated autobiography; and had gone to France after he split with the party. In France, he had become a political symbol used by the French to illustrate their freedom from racial bias and to divert attention away from French colonialism. Garrison, like Wright, felt uncomfortable in the presence of an upper class white woman with a superior education (Mrs. Hancock). Garrison was the one man who, by virtue of his position in France and his experience in the United States, could have saved Hamilton and his friends. However, Garrison--who had always interpreted blacks' actions, motives, and thoughts in terms of racial conditioning when he was in the United States--no longer thought in such terms in France. Thus, his investigation was conducted along irrelevant lines.

Richard Wright accused Himes of using information from the "American C.I.D." to attack him in one of his detective stories. It is not clear if Wright had Une Affaire de Viol in mind, but it does seem more likely than any of Himes' actual detective series. See page 148 n above for Wright's exact words. In "A Case of Rape," Fabre denies that Garrison is intended to represent Wright.

men and white women. In The Quality Of Hurt, Himes explains that "the very essence of any relationship between a black man and a white woman in the United States is sex. . . ." ¹
Une Affaire de Viol is set in Europe and unlike The Primitive, it is a story about love.

It is not Europe but Elizabeth Hancock herself that makes the difference. When he first met her, she suggested a Dostoyevsky character to him: he had never known a woman so gentle, so kind, so good. Elizabeth had been taught that the greatest sin a person could commit was to hurt another person without cause. She had lived her life in accordance with this principle and had suffered on account of it. Elizabeth found peace with Scott and he wanted to heal her wounds. He had long believed that he had been born to play such a role, but had never been given the opportunity. "From the beginning to the end, Scott's love for Lisbeth was only a dream." ²

In the novel, Himes describes Paris as a "tired, blasé, and cynical city" that treats dreamers badly because it destroys not only dreams but the very capacity for dreaming. Scott and Elizabeth return to Paris after a long absence and their love is transformed into a nightmare.

¹The Quality Of Hurt, p. 285.

²Une Affaire de Viol, p. 132.

In effect, in Paris, nothing meant anything anymore; everything was changed or distorted; or else each thing was given its true form or taken on its real significance, which was equally destroyed. Love had become sexuality; aspirations, ambition. . . . One would barter a dream of happiness against a night of love.¹

Une Affaire de Viol is a novel about Scott Hamilton's disillusionment with Paris; it is also the post-mortem of a love affair.

Michel Fabre has pointed out that Une Affaire de Viol is a turning point in Himes' fiction. Written after The Primitive and the first draft of Pinktoes (a satire on the interracial relations of the NAACP/Urban League crowd) but before Himes' celebrated detective story series,

the book partakes of both Himes' "earlier" style--more bitter, more violent, and more explicit in its denunciation . . . --and of his "later" style more humorous than satirical, often surrealistic, dealing in caricature and laughter as an answer to absurdity.²

But if Une Affaire de Viol is a literary turning point--and indeed this seems difficult to evaluate because the work is not fully developed--The Primitive marks a psychological turning point in Himes' literary career. Only after writing this novel was Himes able to break with the autobiographical in his fiction. Pinktoes, Himes' first humorous novel, was also his first non-autobiographical book. Although Une

¹Ibid., p. 87.

²"A Case of Rape," p. 45.

Affaire de Viol returned to the autobiographical mode, it was also a harbinger of things to come. Indeed, in many respects, Himes' detective stories were a synthesis of the broad social satire of Pinktoes and the suspense of Une Affaire de Viol.

In an interview, Himes declared that The Primitive, "being autobiographical (I did not kill the white woman however gladly I might have) . . . acted as a catharsis, purging me of all the mental and emotional inhibitions that restricted my writing." He revealed that he had written the novel without any hope of earning money and little hope of its being published.¹ Himes said much the same thing about his attitude toward If He Hollers Let Him Go in a letter to Van Vechten written in 1947. He told Van Vechten that one of the principal stumbling blocks in his career as a writer had been his desire for respectability and thus a need to reject much of his past. This had, he continued,

brought a lot of confusion to my mind added to which was a great deal of pressure of a thousand kinds being exerted by friends and relatives and loved ones who were half ashamed of what I wrote . . . until I was caught in a bag which I didn't begin to break out of until I wrote If He Hollers.²

Significantly, in a synopsis of Lonely Crusade, Himes had written, "nothing took the place of acceptance;

¹New York Times Book Review, June 4, 1967.

²February 18, 1947; Chester Himes MSS.

nothing could assuage rejection."¹ In the United States, Himes had hoped that his books would give him entree to a black elite that was accepted by white America. By living abroad, Himes was rejecting this goal and accepting his status as an outsider. Thus, in exile, psychologically, Himes was no longer writing for the same audience. This seems to have freed him to express certain aspects of himself that he had feared exposing in the United States.

Furthermore, as long as Himes was living in America, his rage--even as it found expression in the author's protagonists--had to be controlled. Thus, in If He Hollers Let Him Go, Bob Jones dreams of murdering a white man, even plans to murder him, but never actually commits the crime. It is not until The Primitive, the first book that Himes wrote in exile, that a white person is murdered. If He Hollers was a first but incomplete step toward self-expression that would lead to catharsis.

After Himes wrote Une Affaire de Viol, he turned to detective stories, writing eight in a period of twelve years. Himes calls this series, that includes For Love of Imabelle (1957), The Real Cool Killers (1958), The Crazy Kill (1959), The Big Gold Dream (1960), All Shot Up (1960), The Heat's On (1961), Cotton Comes to Harlem (1964), and

¹Chester Himes MSS.

Blind Man With a Pistol (1969), his "Domestic Harlem" series. These novels were first published in French by Gallimard in its "Série Noire."¹ For Love of Imabelle, which appeared in France as La Reine des Pommes, won the Grand Prix de la Littérature Policière in 1957, and helped to re-establish Himes' reputation in the United States.² Because of the similarity of these eight novels, we shall treat them jointly in this chapter.

Although Himes' most compelling reason for writing detective stories was his need to make money, the books also

¹The "Série Noire" is a mystery series. Himes wrote these novels in English and they were translated into French. With the exception of Blind Man With a Pistol, the novels were published in France first. Therefore, the publication dates in the text above refer to the French editions even though I have given the English titles. The French titles of the books are respectively La Reine des Pommes, Il pleut des coups durs, Couché dans le pain, Tout pour plaire, Imbroglia Negro, Ne nous énervons pas, and Retour en Afrique.

²After Himes left the United States, he was virtually ignored. The Crisis seems to have been the only journal to review The Primitive (November, 1956, pp. 571-72). In 1959, Anthony Boucher reviewed Real Cool Killers, calling the book "not uncomic, fascinating." He referred to the stir that La Reine des Pommes created in France: "The French, whose literary tastes can occasionally mystify us, have gone mad over the work of Chester Himes . . . called by Jean Cocteau 'a prodigious masterpiece'; and Jean Giono has said (so help me!) 'I give all the Hemingway, Dos Passos, Steinbeck for this Chester Himes.'" (New York Times Book Review, September 6, 1959, p. 13.) But Himes was like the proverbial prophet in his own country. Three weeks after Boucher's review appeared, it was deemed necessary to inform the reader of Himes' background. The next review of Himes' work does not appear until 1965.

represent a return to his less respectable past. The novels were in no way autobiographical, but they did come out of Himes' knowledge of the criminal world. Himes declared that he "began writing these stories because" he "realized that" he "was a black American and there's no way of escaping some forty odd years of experience." The books were written out of "pure homesickness,"¹ Himes asserted; but little sign of it creeps into his detailed, vivid descriptions of Harlem.

Looking eastward from the towers of Riverside Church, perched among the university buildings on the high banks of the Hudson River, in a valley far below, waves of gray rooftops distort the perspective like the surface of a sea. Below the surface, in the murky waters of fetid tenements, a city of black people who are convulsed in desperate² living . . .

That is Harlem.

The books contain much description of the sights, sounds, smells, and food of Harlem, but Himes did not allow any nostalgia to romanticize the past.

Even at past two in the morning, "The Valley," that flat lowland of Harlem east of Seventh Avenue, was like the frying pan of hell. Heat was coming out of the pavement, bubbling from the asphalt, and the atmospheric pressure was pushing it back to earth like the lid on a pan.

Colored people were cooking in their overcrowded, over priced tenements; cooking in the streets, in the after-hours joints, in the brothels; seasoned with vice, disease and crime.

An effluvium of hot stinks arose from the frying pan and hung in the hot motionless air, no higher than the rooftops--the smell of sizzling barbecue, fried hair, exhaust fumes, rotting garbage, cheap perfumes, unwashed bodies, decayed buildings, dog-rat-and-cat offal, whiskey, vomit, and all the dried-up odors of

¹John A. Williams, "My Man Himes," pp. 49-50.

²For Love Of Imabelle, New York, 1971, p. 111.

poverty.¹

In fact, Himes has been criticized for a portrayal of Harlem that denigrates and demeans its citizens.² Himes has answered this charge and defended his portrait of Harlem on the basis that the best a writer can do is deal with subjects that are personal and describe what it was like for him. He disavowed the role of spokesman for any segment of the black community: he was only interested in creating a "Harlem of the mind," a purely personal vision.³

Himes' Harlem population is divided into two distinct categories: the squares and the con-artists, a world of predators and their prey. The novels introduce us to a rogues' gallery of characters: pimps, madams, prostitutes, pushers, addicts, faith-healers dispensing "heavenly dust," fortune-tellers, gamblers, numbers runners and bankers, conmen with a variety of rackets like "the Blow" and "the lost gold mine," and transvestites dressed as nuns selling tickers to heaven. Himes gives them names like Sugartit, Ready Belcher, Snake Hips, Black Beauty, and Sassafras, to

¹The Heat's On, New York, 1966, pp. 30-31.

²Ernest Kaiser, "The Literature of Harlem," Harlem: A Community in Transition, ed. John Henrik Clarke, New York, 1964, p. 35.

³Michael Mok, "Chester Himes: An Expatriate American Takes His Themes from the Black Experience as I have Undergone It," Publishers Weekly, April 3, 1973, p. 20.

mention only a few. Harlem emerges as a metaphor of the social, economic, and political relationships that exist between the white world and the black.

Himes' Harlem is a world of paradox, populated by unwed young mothers, suckling their infants, living on a prayer; fat black racketeers coasting past in big bright-colored convertibles with their solid gold babes, carrying huge sums of money on their person; hard-working men, holding up the buildings with their shoulders, talking in loud voices up there where the white bosses couldn't hear them; teenage gangsters grouping for a gang-fight, smoking marijuana weed to get up their courage.¹

In Himes' opinion, what unites these people, rich and poor, is the fact that they all must hustle to earn a living within fairly circumscribed conditions.²

Two black cops, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, are the heroes of the series.³ The two men are barely distinguishable from each other--except for an ugly facial scar from an acid burn that Coffin Ed received in the line of duty. Their "monickers" seem to be derived from the saying in For Love of Imabelle "that Coffin Ed's pistol would kill a rock and that Grave Digger's would bury it."⁴

¹The Crazy Kill (New York, 1966), pp. 66-67.

²Tristan Renaud, "Chester Himes 'Homeless,'" Les Lettres Françaises, #1020, 12 mars 1964, p. 5.

³Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson are based on two cops Himes knew in Los Angeles.

⁴For Love Of Imabelle, p. 59.

Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are charged with the difficult task of preserving the peace in the jungle of Himes' imagination. In such an environment their task is formidable--necessitating the brutality and violence that their names imply. Because of that, "Folks in Harlem believed that Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson would shoot a man for not standing straight in a line."¹ Coffin Ed and Grave Digger are crude in their pursuit of a criminal, occasionally pistol-whipping people or roughing them up in order to get information. But Himes makes it clear that for the most part their violence--unlike much of the violence in Harlem and the violence committed by the white cops--is not gratuitous. "They had to be rough to work in Harlem. Colored folks didn't respect colored cops. But they respected big shiny pistols and sudden death."²

Operating in a world of corruption and exploitation, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger have their own ethics of professional responsibilities that are often at odds with the establishment that they serve.

"Listen, boy," Coffin Ed said. "Brody is a homicide man and solving murders is his business. He goes at it in a routine way like the law prescribes, and if some more people get killed while he's going about it, that's just too bad for the victims. But me and Digger are two

¹Ibid., p. 52.

²Ibid., p. 59.

country Harlem dicks who live in this village and don't like anybody to get killed.¹

They are more concerned with protection of life and limb than protection of property and they zealously try to protect the innocent victim or the sucker, the two often being synonymous. Curiously, they regard their white superiors' concern over police brutality as counter-productive--the very thing that will allow a dangerous criminal to go free.² In The Heat's On, Grave Digger is suspended from the police force for unintentionally killing a pusher by punching him in the stomach to recover evidence the pusher had swallowed. Digger's concern, like Coffin Ed's, is for the community.

All the crimes committed by addicts--robberies, murders, rapes. . . . All fucked-up lives. . . . All the nice kids sent down the drain on a habit. . . . Twenty-one days on heroin and you're hooked for life. . . .

And who gets it into the victim's blood? . . . The peddler! He sells the dirty crap. . . . He looks into their faces and puts the poison in their hands. He watches them go down from sugar to shit, sees them waste away. He puts them out to stealing, killing, starts young girls to hustling. . . . I'll take a simple violent murderer any day.³

Coffin Ed and Grave Digger belong to the breed of detective known as the "hard-boiled dick." They are cynical about many aspects of law enforcement. They allow drug dens

¹Real Cool Killers (London, 1964), p. 128.

²Another reason for this is that they regard this concern as merely window dressing, public relations.

³The Heat's On, pp. 70-71.

to operate so that their stool pigeons can be supplied, but they admonish the proprietor of one of these establishments to "put a little baking soda in that heroin. . . . We don't want these boys blind."¹ They do not crack down on prostitution or gambling either.

They took their tribute, like all other real cops, from the established underworld catering to the essential needs of the people--gamekeepers, madams, streetwalkers, numbers writers, numbers bankers. But they were rough on purse snatchers, muggers, burglars, con men and all strangers working any racket. And² they didn't like rough stuff from anybody but themselves.²

Their concern is for the dangerous rather than the illegal. Within the context of their environment, they are honest cops.

In a world inhabited by the exploited and the exploiter, violence is a widespread, everyday phenomenon.

People gathered in a circle to stare at the big cut black man dripping red blood on the brown tiled floor. . . .

Nobody thought it was unusual. It happened once or twice every night in that station. The only thing missing was that no one was dead.³

Indeed, violence is a reflexive response like the twitch of Coffin Ed's scar: stabbings, shootings, axings, beatings, throat slittings, and vicious fights occur with great regularity.

Half-nude people sat in open windows, crowded on the fire escapes, shuffled up and down the sidewalks,

¹The Crazy Kill, p. 75.

²For Love of Imabelle, p. 59.

³Ibid., p. 193.

prowled up and down the streets in dilapidated cars.

It was too hot to sleep. Everyone was too evil to love. And it was too noisy to relax. . . . The night was filled with the blare of countless radios, the frenetic blasting of spasm cats playing in the streets, hysterical laughter, automobile horns, strident curses, loud mouthed arguments, the scream of knife fights.

The bars were closed so they were drinking out of bottles. That was all there was left to do, drink strong whiskey and get hotter; and after that steal and fight.¹

Violence, however, is not new to Himes' fiction. His short stories--"The Night's For Crying" (1937), "All God's Chillun Got Pride" (1944), "All He Needs Is Feet" (1945), "One More Way To Die" (1946)--and his earlier novels are suffused with violence and murderous emotions. But in these earlier fictional efforts, the violence expresses Himes' rage and sense of outrage to the reader.

Writing to Van Vechten in 1956, shortly before he started the Harlem series, Himes stated.

From here the "Negro Problem" in America seems very strange and I don't think I will ever be able to write about it seriously. . . . It's just that it doesn't make sense any more on either side. There is a line in your letter which no doubt puts the finger on exactly what I mean: "Perhaps the Negro can no longer bear to see himself treated seriously in fiction or on stage! I believe that applies to all circumstances about American Negroes' lives." . . . Anyway I'm glad I don't think about it anymore.²

The tone of Himes' novels before he went to Paris is angry,

¹The Heat's On, pp. 30-31.

²April 26, 1956, Chester Himes MSS.

committed, intensely personal whereas his later novels are more detached and ironic.

The tone of detachment in the domestic Harlem series is achieved through two devices. The first is the use of humor. Himes' statement that humor is the only appropriate response to an absurd world reveals both the depths of his despair and his method of coping with it.¹ The second is the detective story genre itself. Both Ross Macdonald and Raymond Chandler, two master practitioners of the form, have explained that they used this medium to gain distance from highly explosive material.²

According to Himes himself, detective stories are "plain and simple violence in narrative form" and as such they are a "particularly American form." ("No one," Himes says, "understands violence or experiences it like the American civilians do.")³ Himes views his detective stories as more than a mystery; he thinks of them as a sociological statement about American life.⁴ It is interesting that Himes chose sociology, not only because his brother is a

¹Fabre, "Ecrire, une tentative pour révéler l'absurdité de la vie," Le Monde, 13 novembre 1970, pp. 20-21.

²Margolies, "The Thrillers of Chester Himes," Studies in Black Literature (June, 1970), p. 11n.

³John A. Williams, "My Man Himes," pp. 49-50.

⁴Interview with Chester Himes, February, 1971, Moraira, Spain.

sociologist, but also because it is yet another mode of detachment. But the stance of detachment that Himes the artist was able to impose on his work through technical skill is betrayed by the escalation of violence in the novels, as if it fulfills some kind of psychological need. One must not lose sight of the fact that the violence was created by Himes himself and that it was he who chose the genre of the detective story.

In the domestic Harlem series, Himes seems to enjoy the violence that he portrays. His descriptions often achieve a humorous effect. Occasionally, the humor is rather macabre as in the chase scene in All Shot Up. Coffin Ed and Grave Digger are in hot pursuit of a motorcyclist. Shooting at the tires of the motorcycle, Coffin Ed misses and hits the wheels of an open truck carrying sheet metal. The cyclist accelerates to pass the truck.

The three thin sheets of stainless steel, six feet in width, with red flags flying from both corners, formed a blade less than a quarter of an inch thick. This blade caught the rider above his woolen-lined jacket, on the exposed part of his neck, which was stretched and taut from his physical exertion, as the motorcycle went underneath. He was hitting at more than fifty-five miles an hour, and the blade severed his head from his body as though he had been guillotined.

His head rolled halfway up the sheets of metal while his body kept astride the seat and his hands gripped the handlebars. A stream of blood spurted from his severed jugular, but his body completed the maneuver which his head ordered and went past the truck as planned.¹

¹(London, 1969), p. 82.

Meanwhile, Sassafras, the cyclist's girlfriend, is awaiting her boyfriend's return with a "sucker" who needs help recapturing his stolen gold Cadillac.

Roman began looking worried again. "You're sure this joker can help us? I've got a notion we're up against some rough studs, and I don't want nobody messing around who's going to get rattled."

Sassafras ran a greasy bone comb through her short, tousled hair. "Don't worry 'bout him," she said. "He ain't going to lose his head."¹

In a recent interview, Himes stated that the book that he most enjoyed writing in the detective series was Blind Man With A Pistol because it is the first book in which a white man gets killed. (It is also the most violent.) However, Himes had forgotten that a white man is murdered in The Real Cool Killers, albeit accidentally. His death is a cause for celebration in Harlem. The pleasure that this event produces in Harlem suggests Himes' own enjoyment and prefigures the escalation of violence in Blind Man With A Pistol.

In many respects, Himes' detective stories represent his best writing. The confusion and the almost maudlin self-pity of some of the earlier novels is gone. In exile, he has been able to express himself, his past, and his emotions freely. Himes himself doubts that he would have been able to continue to write--let alone create any new forms or approaches to writing--had he stayed in the United States.

¹p. 84.

He believes that the murderous emotions that he has described so vividly in his novels would have prevented his writing entirely.¹ Thus, Himes attributes his new creative and emotional freedom to his exile.

But if this is true--and here it would be presumptuous to deny Himes' assertion--it seems unlikely from Himes' own writings about Paris and Europe for that matter that the differing racial climate was significant. Exile seems to have released Himes' inhibitions; his writing no longer had to bear the conflicting burdens of self-expression and acceptance from white America and the black elite. Thus, the confusion which had riddled much of his writing in the United States has disappeared. The domestic Harlem series are not a dispassionate sociological statement, but a severe indictment of American life--both black and white. The fact that Himes' writings have not mellowed is another indication that Himes found no racial paradise in Europe. If Himes was able to come to terms with himself--no small accomplishment--he never reconciled himself to the United States. This seems almost inevitable, given the flood of emotions that exile released.

¹Interview with Chester Himes, February, 1971, Moraira, Spain.

CHAPTER VIII

For James Baldwin, expatriation was the culmination of a struggle to survive the perils of ghetto life in the United States. Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924. His writings attest to the significance of this simple fact. In "Many Thousands Gone," (1951), he wrote, "We cannot escape our origins, however hard we try, those origins . . . contain the key . . . to all that we later become."¹ Indeed, Baldwin's origins marked a crucial difference between him and Richard Wright and Chester Himes. A generation younger than they, Baldwin had not shared in the migration pattern common to blacks of their age: the move from the South to the industrial Midwest and finally to Harlem in search of better opportunities. As Baldwin acknowledged in his ambivalent tribute to Richard Wright, "I have not, in my own flesh, traveled, and paid the price of such a journey, from the Deep South to Chicago to New York . . . and the world which produced Richard Wright has vanished and will never be seen again."²

¹In Notes Of A Native Son (New York, Bantom Modern Classic edition, 1968), p. 20. See also "The Discovery Of What It Means To Be An American," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1963), p. 22. Hereafter Notes Of A Native Son and Nobody Knows My Name shall be NNS and NKMN respectively.

²"Alas, Poor Richard," NKMN, p. 158.

Harlem was the last best hope for most Negroes.

James Weldon Johnson had written

Harlem is indeed the great mecca for the sightseer, the pleasure-seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious, and the talented of the whole Negro world.¹

But to young James Baldwin, Harlem was a fearful place.

For the wages of sin were visible everywhere in every wine-stained and urine splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless, newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue, and in every bulletin: a cousin, mother of six, suddenly gone mad, the children parcelled out here and there; an indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow, agonizing death in a terrible small room, someone's bright son blown into eternity by his own hand; another turned robber and carried off to jail.²

Reflecting on his childhood in "Down at the Cross," Baldwin stated that at the age of fourteen ". . . whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue had become a personal menace. It had not before occurred to me that I could become one of them, but now, I realized that we had been produced by the same circumstances."³

James Baldwin was the illegitimate child of Emma Berdis Jones Baldwin and the step-son of David Baldwin, a

¹Quoted in Harlem, U.S.A., ed. John Henrik Clarke (New York, 1971), p. xiv.

²Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," The Fire Next Time (New York Dell edition, 1970), p. 33. This essay appeared in the New Yorker as "Letter From A Region Of My Mind" (1962).

³p. 28.

storefront preacher and laborer. Despite the fact that he was the eldest of nine children in a poor family, Baldwin's future looked promising. As a student at P.S. 24, Frederick Douglass Junior High School, and De Witt Clinton High School, he was recognized for his outstanding verbal ability and his intelligence.

In "Down at the Cross," written after he had assumed the role of Negro spokesman, Baldwin stressed the unexceptional nature of his childhood, much as Wright had done in Black Boy. But in his autobiographical novel, Go Tell It On The Mountain (1953), the hero John Grimes was singled out as an exceptional child by his elementary school principal.

That moment gave him, from that time, if not a weapon at least a shield; he apprehended totally, without belief or understanding, that he had in himself a power that other people lacked; that he could use this to save himself. . . . This was not, in John, a faith subject to destruction; it was his identity, and part, therefore, of that wickedness for which his father beat him and to which he clung in order to withstand his father.¹

His sense of his uniqueness was both his identity and a source of ego strength. Thus, although Baldwin was certain that many of his friends would wind up on the Avenue, he was determined to escape that fate.

more determined, really, than I then knew never to to make my peace with the ghetto but to die and go to

¹Go Tell It On The Mountain (New York, Signet Books, 1963), p. 19.

Hell before I would let any white manspit on me, before I could accept my "place" in this republic. I did not intend to allow the white people of this country to tell me who I was, and limit me that way, and polish me off that way.¹

Because he couldn't sing, dance, or box, the usual routes of social mobility--other than crime--that white society had left open for blacks were closed to him.²

Crime became real, for example--for the first time--not as a possibility but as the possibility. One would never defeat one's circumstances by working and saving one's pennies; one would never, by working, acquire that many pennies, and, besides, the social treatment accorded even the most successful Negroes proved that one needed, in order to be free, something more than a bank account. One needed a handle, a lever, a means of inspiring fear.³

Like many other boys in this situation, Baldwin knew that he had to find a "gimmick, any gimmick." And this Nietzschean situation in which anything was permitted terrified the young boy, hurling him into the church for safety.⁴

Converted by Mother Horn of the Mount Calvary Pentecostal Faith Church when he was fourteen, Baldwin became a storefront preacher like his stepfather. Ironically, it was the church that became Baldwin's gimmick. In Go Tell It On The Mountain, he described the function that the church

¹"Down at the Cross," p. 37.

²See Daniel Bell, "Crime as an American Way of Life: A Queer Ladder of Social Mobility," The End of Ideology (New York, 2nd ed. revised, 1962), pp. 127-50.

³"Down at the Cross," pp. 33-34.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 27, 38. Baldwin wrote that he thought that God and safety were synonymous.

could play for a Negro.

For John excelled in school . . . and it was said that he had a Great Future. He might become a Great Leader of His People. John was not much interested in his people and still less in leading them anywhere, but the phrase so often repeated rose in his mind like a brass gate, opening outward for him a world where people did not live in the darkness of his father's house. . . .¹

In addition to providing shelter and furnishing Baldwin with a gimmick, the church presented him with an opportunity to "best" his step-father at his own game. But this motivation was also one of the causes for Baldwin's ambivalence about his calling. Baldwin presented this dilemma vividly in Go Tell It On The Mountain: "Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. . . ."² But John had decided that "He would not be like his father or his father's father." Instead,

He lived for the day when his father would be dying and he, John, would curse him on his deathbed. And this was why, though he had been born in the faith and had been surrounded all his life by the saints and by their prayers and their rejoicing, and though the tabernacle in which they worshipped was more completely real to him than the several precarious homes in which he and his family had lived, John's heart was hardened against the Lord. His father was God's minister . . . and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father.³

¹p. 18.

²p. 11.

³Ibid., pp. 18-19. Baldwin's description of the church's impact on him is presented in a similar fashion in the essay "Down at the Cross." See p. 49.

Baldwin has characterized this phase as the "most dishonest" time of his life. The church was really an escape from freedom.

I relished the . . . relative immunity that my new status gave me, and I relished, above all, the sudden right to privacy. . . . There were hours and even whole days when I could not be interrupted--not even by my father. I had immobilized him. It took rather more time for me to realize that I had also immobilized myself, and had escaped from nothing whatever.¹

Thus, it is not surprising that Baldwin's apprenticeship to the Lord was a limited one, lasting only three years. He retired at the age of seventeen.

For Baldwin, the transition from preacher to writer was a natural one. He had begun to write at a very early age. His literary ambitions were encouraged by the presence of Countee Cullen at his junior high school. Baldwin was editor of the school magazine there and again at De Witt Clinton High School. In his last year as a young minister he told his step-father, in what he described later as their only real conversation, that he'd rather be a writer than a preacher.² But his years in the church left their mark on his writings: Go Tell It On The Mountain is steeped in the language of the Gospel and the fervor of religion. His essays are much like sermons, exhorting the nation to mend its ways or suffer in the holocaust.

¹"Down at the Cross," pp. 48-49.

²"Notes of a Native Son," NNS, p. 90.

One of Baldwin's major obstacles in becoming a writer was his skepticism that a black writer could succeed. At the age of fourteen, Baldwin had been so conditioned by white America that he was not able to take the idea of becoming a writer seriously. Native Son became a best seller when Baldwin was sixteen, one year before he left the church to become a writer. It seems likely that Wright's success may have strengthened Baldwin's decision to leave the pulpit:

He was black, he was young, he had come out of the Mississippi nightmare and the Chicago slums, and he was a writer. He proved it could be done--proved it to me, and gave me an arm against all those others who assured me it could not be done.¹

Wright thus became a spiritual father to replace the father Baldwin never really had. His achievement gave succor to the young boy while the contents of his books had a liberating effect on him.

In Uncle Tom's Children, in Native Son, and, above all, in Black Boy, I found expressed for the first time in my life, the sorrow, the rage, and the murderous bitterness which was eating up my life and the lives of those around me.²

Thus Wright was showing Baldwin a way to escape the ghetto. The ministry would have given Baldwin status and security within the Harlem community, and the precepts of

¹"Alas, Poor Richard," p. 160. Baldwin was not alone in seeing Wright's significance in this way. See also Himes, The Quality Of Hurt, p. 211.

²"Alas, Poor Richard," p, 153.

the church would have steeled the young man against the "wages of sin" of the street. But, as a writer, he could leave the ghetto entirely.

In 1942, James Baldwin, at the age of 18, moved into the white man's world: the defense plants of New Jersey. There, working among Southerners, Baldwin learned that to be a Negro in the United States meant "one was never looked at but was simply at the mercy of the reflexes the color of one's skin caused in other people."¹ Jim Crow conditions prevailed throughout the state: bars, bowling alley, and places to eat were segregated. Baldwin has described the impact these conditions had on him in very powerful terms in "Notes of a Native Son."

That year in New Jersey lives in my mind as though it were the year during which, having an unsuspected predilection for it, I first contracted some dread, chronic disease, the unfailing symptom of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and fire in the bowels. Once this disease is contracted, one can never really be carefree again, for the fever, without an instant's warning, can recur at any moment.²

¹"Notes of a Native Son," p. 77. For a more extended treatment of this subject, see Wright, "Introduction," Black Metropolis, pp. 32-33, and of course, Ralph Ellison's classic Invisible Man. For a good survey of the theme of invisibility in black literature, see Todd Lieber, "Ralph Ellison and the Metaphor of Invisibility in Black Literary Tradition," American Quarterly, XXIV, no. 1 (March, 1972), pp. 86-100.

²p. 79.

This fever was rage. And it was this rage, sometimes reaching murderous proportions, which forced Baldwin to the conclusion that the major threat to his safety was no longer mainly external. His last night in New Jersey, having been ejected from the "American Diner," Baldwin wrote that he lost control. Something inside of him snapped: it was "like a physical sensation, a click at the nape of my neck as though some interior string connecting my head to my body had been cut."¹ In a daze, Baldwin entered a fashionable restaurant and took the first empty seat that he saw. The waitress told him that no Negroes were served at that restaurant and he felt more murderous than before. Picking up a water-mug, Baldwin threw it at her. It missed, hitting the mirror behind the bar. At the sound of the glass shattering, Baldwin was brought back to the reality of the situation. Realizing his position, he ran. Once back in the safety of his own room, he relived the incident over and over.

I could not get over two facts, both equally difficult for the imagination to grasp, and one was that I could have been murdered. But the other was that I had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people₂ might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.

In the midst of a war to defeat Nazi racism, such

¹Ibid., p. 80.

²Ibid., p. 81.

discrimination was particularly galling. Racial tensions were high in the United States during World War II. Large numbers of Negroes had migrated from the South to defense industries in the North and the West.¹ Race riots broke out in Detroit, Los Angeles and Harlem. In "Down at the Cross," he explained that World War II represented a watershed in the Negro's relationship to America:

You must put yourself in the skin of a man who is wearing the uniform of his country, is a candidate for death in its defense, and who is called a "nigger" by his comrades-in-arms and his officers; who is almost always given the hardest, ugliest, most menial work to do; who knows that the white G.I. has informed the European that he is subhuman. . . ; who does not dance at the U.S.O. the night white soldiers dance there, and does not drink in the same bars white soldiers drink in; and who watches German prisoners of war being treated by Americans with more human dignity than he has ever received at their hands. And who, at the same time, as a human being, is far freer in a strange land than he has ever been at home. . . . You must consider what happened to the citizen, after he has endured, when he returns home: search, in his shoes, for a job, for a place to live; ride, in his skin, on segregated buses; see, with his eyes, the signs saying "White" and "Colored," . . . imagine yourself being told to "wait."²

In 1943, shortly after his step-father died, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village. He took odd jobs--working on PM and as a waiter--to support himself while writing his

¹Between 1940 and 1945, the Negro population of Los Angeles County doubled: from 75,000 to 150,000. From 1940 to 1943, 50,000 blacks migrated to Detroit. Franklin, From Slavery To Freedom, p. 597.

²pp. 76-77.

first novel which he had begun when he was eighteen. In 1944-45, Baldwin met Richard Wright and the older man recommended him for a Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship which Baldwin was awarded at the age of twenty-one. (Three years later, Wright would help him win a Rosenwald Fellowship.) Baldwin was determined to prove that Wright's faith in him had been justified, but when the gestation period for his first novel took far longer than Baldwin had anticipated, he was certain that he had disappointed Wright.¹

The post-war era as Baldwin knew it was "a time of the most terrifying personal anarchy."² Racial tensions did not ease. The Amsterdam News reported six lynchings during the week of August 3, 1946 alone.³ One of the more brutal assaults made a deep impression on Baldwin. Isaac Woodward, a young black veteran, had his eyes gouged out by a white police officer in Aiken, South Carolina.⁴ Baldwin described himself as a Trotskyite at the age of nineteen. But his flirtation with radical politics was brief; he quickly

¹Go Tell It On The Mountain was not published until Baldwin was twenty-eight.

²"The New Lost Generation," Esquire (July, 1961), p. 4.

³Brooklyn Edition, August 3, 1946, p. 8.

⁴Baldwin has related this incident along with a series of atrocities that made a deep impression on him. See "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South," NKMN, p. 88; Amsterdam News, August 3, 1946, p. 8.

lost faith in political solutions.¹

Baldwin described the social and intellectual climate in Greenwich Village after World War II in "The New Lost Generation." All around him, people were seeking personal rather than collective solutions. It was the era of the orgone box. Psychic and sexual health were the paths to freedom. In this essay, Baldwin's attitude toward this new Weltanschauung is edged with sarcasm despite the fact that his own writings suggest that the basis of the Negro problem in the United States is largely psychological and sexual. It was a "time of experimentation; with sex, with marijuana, and with minor infringements of the law. . . ." Murder and suicide, Baldwin wrote, had to be restrained at almost any party.²

While Baldwin was living in Greenwich Village, his best friend, a Negro, was pushed to suicide because of his relationship with a white girl. Such a senseless death, caused by the racial mores of society that prohibited open show of affection between men and women of different races, frightened Baldwin. In the essay, "The New Lost Generation," Baldwin tells us that the story of his expatriation began with this episode in 1946.

¹No Name In The Street (New York, 1972), pp. 29-30 and James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, A Dialogue (New York, 1973), p. 77.

²"The New Lost Generation," p. 114.

Thus, Baldwin had discovered that life outside the ghetto was as precarious as it had been in Harlem.

in the beginning I thought that the white world was very different from the world I was moving out of and I turned out to be entirely wrong. It seemed different. It seemed safer, at least the white people seemed safer. It seemed cleaner, it seemed more polite, and, of course, it seemed much richer from the material point of view. But I didn't meet anyone in that world who didn't suffer from the very same affliction that all the people I had fled from suffered from and that was that they didn't know who they were. They wanted to be something that they were not.¹

In Harlem, the threat of violence had been external. In the white world, it was internal, growing out of frustration, humiliation and rage. "There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood--one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it."²

Essentially, he believed, America offered the choice between the roles of the "good nigger" and the "bad nigger." William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs' discussion of the "bad nigger" syndrome is very similar to Baldwin's:

black boys are admonished not to be a "bad nigger." No description need be offered; every black child knows what is meant. They are angry and hostile. They strike fear into everyone with their uncompromising rejection of restraint and inhibitions. . . . Because of his experience in this country, every black man harbors

¹"Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," NKMN, pp. 122-23.

²"Notes of a Native Son," p. 79.

a potential bad nigger within him. . . . The more one approaches the American ideal of respectability, the more this hostility must be repressed.¹

Baldwin knew that the only way that a Negro could survive in the United States was to play the role of the good nigger. But experience had taught him what that meant.

If one was good, his goodness was proved by his loyalty to the white man. A baffling sort of goodness, particularly as one's father, who certainly wanted one to be "good," was more than likely to come home cursing--cursing the white man.²

Having rejected the bad nigger syndrome out of prudence, Baldwin could not accept the good nigger role because he feared it would drive him mad.³

Madness was no abstraction to Baldwin. His step-father had become acutely paranoid at the end of his life, refusing to eat because he was afraid of being poisoned. In Baldwin's opinion, paranoia was, in fact, almost a natural condition for the American Negro. In "Down at the Cross," he wrote,

¹Black Rage, (New York, 1969), pp. 54-55. Baldwin believed that black child-rearing practices which were forced on Negro mothers in order to prepare their children for a hostile world laid the basis for feelings of guilt and paranoia. See "Down at the Cross," pp. 40-41.

²"East River, Downtown," NKMN, pp. 72-73

³Baldwin refers to his fear of madness frequently. In one of his earliest short stories, "Previous Condition," the hero, a young Negro actor is afraid that he will go mad because of the difficulties he faces as a Negro. Commentary (October, 1948), p. 339.

every American Negro . . . risks having the gates of paranoia close on him. In a society that is entirely hostile, and, by its nature, seems determined to cut you down-- . . . it begins to be almost impossible to distinguish a real from a threatened injury.¹

His step-son believed that David Baldwin was paranoid because he had accepted the white man's image of himself: "he had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him."² Thus, Baldwin concluded that the Negro was destroyed only by believing that he really is "what the white world calls a 'nigger.'"

The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro's heart; and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality. Thus, he like the white enemy with whom he will be locked one day in mortal struggle, has no means of asserting his identity.³

This was the most insidious effect of the stereotype: it was a "cage," a "prison," that limited the black man's freedom by defining him. This had been David Baldwin's fate, a fate the young Baldwin struggled mightily to escape.

¹pp. 93-94.

²"My Dungeon Shook," The Fire Next Time, pp. 13-14.

³"Many Thousands Gone," pp. 29-30. Erik Erikson confirms this point. "Therapeutic efforts as well as attempts at social reform verify the sad truth that in any system based on suppression, exclusion, and exploitation, the suppressed, excluded and exploited unconsciously believe in the evil image which they are made to represent by those who are dominant." "The Identity And The Life Cycle," p. 31, Psychological Issues, I, 1 (1959).

But in the United States, Baldwin could not discard the nigger role: it was too useful. Because he knew what Americans saw when they looked at him, Baldwin could play "endless and sinister variations on the roles which they had assigned" him.¹ But Baldwin also knew that such a game exacted a fearful toll on personality.

This is an awful sword and shield to carry through the world, and the discovery that, in the game I was playing, I did myself a violence of which the world at its most ferocious, would scarcely have been capable, was what had driven me out of New York.²

Baldwin believed that the fact that the Afro-American had been cut off from his African heritage made it more difficult for him to reject the stereotyped definition imposed on him by white society. In "Stranger in the Village" (1953) and in "Many Thousands Gone" (1951), Baldwin stated that shame of slavery had prevented the Negro from developing a new culture that he could take pride in. Furthermore, American culture restricted the usefulness that a symbolic relationship with Africa could play by teaching American Negroes that "Africa had never contributed 'anything' to civilization."³ Educated to admire European culture, the Negro could share no pride in these achievements. Finally,

¹"Equal in Paris" (1955), NNS, p. 122.

²Ibid., p. 123.

³"East River, Downtown" (1961), p. 72.

Negroes accepted American symbols of beauty and her panoply of heroes, all of which were white. Baldwin thus defined his dilemma: "Obviously I wasn't white--it wasn't so much a question of wanting to be white--but I didn't quite know anymore what being black meant."¹

The result of Negro acceptance of white American values, Baldwin revealed, was self hatred. The heritage that America gave to the Negro was the cry of the slave to his Maker: "'Wash me . . . and I shall be white, whiter than snow. For black is the color of evil. . . .'"² In Childhood And Society, Erik Erikson noted that the idea of a "washable layer" is quite common in connection with race.³ The problem for Baldwin was that "there was not, no matter where one turned, any acceptable image of oneself, no proof of one's existence" in America.⁴ Even the English language and its imagery connected the black man with bestiality and evil, he noted in "Equal in Paris."

Baldwin's struggle to escape Harlem--"Harlem which I had so hated and so loved, the escape from which had soon

¹James Baldwin, "Black Man in America," WFMT Perspectives, X (December, 1961), p. 30. "You go to white movies and, like everybody else, you fall in love with Joan Crawford, and you root for the Good Guys who are killing off the Indians. It comes as a great psychological collision when you realize all of these things are really metaphors for your oppression." *ibid.*

²"Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), NNS, p. 16. *Italics in the original.*

³(New York, 1963), pp. 243-44.

⁴"East River, Downtown," p. 73

become the greatest direction of my life"--had been an attempt to avoid the circumscribed, perilous existence of ghetto life.¹ But outside the ghetto, white control was exercised more subtly but every bit as thoroughly by prescribing roles to regulate external behavior and by defining the Negro through the stereotype to shape his psyche. Baldwin's forays into the white world served to convince him that the terror of ghetto-life was not restricted to specific geographical regions within urban centers, but was a prevalent condition for blacks in the United States. For Baldwin, expatriation was a logical solution.

¹"Equal in Paris," p. 127.

CHAPTER IX

On November 11, 1948, James Baldwin flew to Paris on a one-way ticket with only forty dollars in his pocket.¹ Unlike Richard Wright or Chester Himes, Baldwin arrived in Paris an unknown. Only twenty-four, he had not yet written anything to bring him to national or international attention. His published works up to this point, mainly about "the Negro problem," were limited to articles and book reviews that appeared in liberal periodicals like The New Leader, The Nation, Partisan Review, and Commentary.

In a recent interview and in No Name In The Street (1972), Baldwin states that he did not go to Paris in 1948; he simply fled America.²

My journey, or my flight, had not been to Paris, but simply away from America. . . . I ended up in Paris almost literally₃ by closing my eyes and putting my finger on a map.

Yet while Baldwin was still in the United States, he had written Richard Wright

¹Fern Marja Eckman, The Furious Passage of James Baldwin (New York, 1966), p. 113.

²"Conversation: Ida Lewis and James Baldwin," Essence, October, 1970, p. 22. No Name In The Street, p. 39.

³No Name In The Street, p. 39.

I hope you are having a good time in France. It's a very wonderful thing to have happened and the only other person I would have liked it to happen to is myself.¹

Perhaps Baldwin was merely carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment. But in his essay "Alas, Poor Richard," written after Wright's death, Baldwin's reminiscences about Wright's departure for Paris struck a familiar chord.

It seemed to me that he was sailing into the most splendid of futures, for he was going of all places! to France . . . a country which would not penalize her [his daughter] on account of her color.²

Baldwin now describes himself as having had no illusions about Frenchmen or Paris.

I have never, thank God--and certainly not once I found myself living there--been even remotely romantic about Paris. . . . So I was not as demoralized . . . as I would certainly have been if I had ever made the error of considering Paris the most civilized of cities and the French as the least primitive of peoples. I knew too much about the French Revolution for that. I had read too much Balzac for that.³

But in two essays and an interview in 1961, Baldwin still referred to Paris as a "refuge from the American madness."⁴ True, he was not as unequivocal in his praise of Paris as Wright had been, but then the Paris that Baldwin lived in was not the same city that Wright knew.

¹James Baldwin to Richard Wright, no date. Richard Wright MSS.

²"Alas, Poor Richard," pp. 155-56.

³No Name In The Street, p. 39.

⁴"The New Lost Generation," p. 114; "Black Man in America," p. 34; "Alas, Poor Richard," p. 149.

Because of financial considerations, Baldwin lived among the bourgeois and among les misérables. Although there were a considerable number of American Negroes in Paris, they did not form a coherent community and Baldwin did not seek them out. Baldwin attributed this isolation from each other to the ghetto existence that they had been forced to lead in the United States: "It is altogether inevitable that past humiliations should become associated not only with one's traditional oppressors but also with one's traditional kinfolk."¹

In Baldwin's first year in Paris, he says that he "floated, so to speak, on a sea of acquaintances," knowing few people well. Here again, Baldwin's financial position was significant: too proud to accept the position of "free-loader," he avoided people who had more money than he. "Other people were eliminated by virtue of the fact that they enjoyed their poverty, shrilly insisting that this wretched round of hotel rooms, bad food, humiliating concierges, and unpaid bills was the Great Adventure."² Baldwin, however, was too realistic to be seduced by such romanticism.

¹"Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown" (1950) NNS, pp. 99-100.

²"Equal in Paris" (1955), p. 120.

Those images created by Marcel Carné, for example, prove themselves treacherous precisely because they are so exact. The sordid French hotel room, so admirably detailed by the camera, speaking, in its quaintness, and distance, so beautifully of romance undergoes a sea-change, becomes a room positively hostile to romance, once it is oneself, and not Jean Gabin, who lives there.¹

Perhaps it reminded him too much of the conditions that he was trying to escape.

Examining American G.I.s' motives for studying in Paris in the essay "A Question of Identity" (1954), Baldwin concluded that "it was nothing more than the legend of Paris, not infrequently at its most vulgar and superficial level" that brought them there. Paris represented

the city where everyone loses his head, and his morals, lives through at least one histoire d'amour; ceases, quite, to arrive anywhere on time, and thumbs his nose at the Puritans--the city, in brief, where all become drunk on the fine old air of freedom.²

In "Autobiographical Notes" Baldwin tells us that he was not attracted to this bohemian image of Paris.

Despite all his disclaimers, Baldwin was also seduced by a myth of Paris. In "Encounter on the Seine," published in June, 1950, Baldwin reveals, without elaborating, that he held "exaggerated hopes of the French" at the beginning of his exile.³ In the essay "Equal in Paris" (1955), we

¹"A Question Of Identity," NNS, p. 107.

²Ibid., p. 108.

³p. 100.

find Baldwin's image of Paris. Here, Baldwin states that he had considered the French to be "an ancient, intelligent and cultured race." He had anticipated pleasant reverberations from France's ancient institutions. But he learned that far from providing "safety," "order," and "common sense," these institutions were merely antiquated, cruel, and impersonal.¹

The incident that led to these conclusions occurred a year after Baldwin had arrived in Paris when he was arrested for stealing a sheet from a hotel. In the commissariat, Baldwin discovered that the police did not see him as a "despised black man," but as a member of a more privileged group, as an American.² And it was Baldwin's American heritage that was responsible for the difference between his reaction to his incarceration and the reaction of those who were brought up under French rule.

It seemed to me that all the sentences meted out that day were excessive; though, again, it seemed that all the people who were sentenced that day had made, or clearly were going to make, crime their career. This seemed to be the opinion of the judge, who scarcely looked at the prisoners or listened to them; it seemed to be the opinion of the prisoners, who scarcely bothered to speak in their own behalf; it seemed to be the opinion of the lawyers . . . who were defending them.³

¹"Equal in Paris," pp. 118-19.

²Ibid., p. 123. This event occurred December 19, 1949.

³Ibid., p. 131.

The French and the Algerians who were arrested on charges as petty as Baldwin's did not fulminate against their situation. They simply accepted it as a matter of course. Baldwin, on the other hand, was unable to accept his "imprisonment as a fact, even as a temporary fact."¹ The difference in their attitudes reflected the different social structures in the two societies.

The great impulse of the courtroom seemed to be to put these people where they could not be seen--and not because they were offended at the crimes . . . but because they did not wish to know that their society could be counted on to produce . . . a whole body of people for whom crime was the only possible career. Any society inevitably produces its criminals, but a society at once rigid and unstable can do nothing whatever to alleviate the poverty of its lowest members, cannot present to the hypothetical young man at the crucial moment that so-well advertised right path.²

Baldwin discovered that discrimination was based on a different principle in France from the United States: in France, the variable was class rather than race.³ The

¹Ibid., p. 128.

²Ibid., pp. 131-32

³Wright's view differed sharply from Baldwin's on just this point. Wright believed that the most striking difference between American and French culture revolved around attitudes toward poverty rather than race: in France, the most respected people lived in poverty, he wrote, whereas it was considered a sin to be poor in the United States. However, Wright was thinking of scientists, priests, soldiers, and savants--clearly a different level of poverty than the one that Baldwin had in mind. Wright, "I Choose Exile," Richard Wright MSS.

equality that Baldwin found in his second year in Paris was the equality of poverty. There was no discrimination among the poor, whether they be white, black or Arab. Perhaps this experience and the disparity in the milieux that Wright and Baldwin inhabited accounts for some of the disagreement in the two men's views of Paris.

The meaning of Europe for an American Negro was one of the things about which Richard Wright and I disagreed most vehemently. He was fond of referring to Paris as the "city of refuge"--which it certainly was, God knows, for the likes of us. But it was not a refuge, for the French, still less for anyone belonging to France; and it would not have been a city of refuge for us if we had not been armed with American passports.¹

The discovery that the French were no more humane than the Americans was the cause of Baldwin's first disappointment with Paris.

I was chilled by their merriment, even though it was meant to warm me. It could only remind me of the laughter I had often heard at home. . . . This laughter is the laughter of those who consider themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched, from whom the pain of the living is not real. I had heard it so often in my native land that I had resolved to find a place where I would never hear it any more. In some deep, black, stony, and liberating way, my life, in my own eyes, began during that first year in Paris, when it was borne in on me that this laughter is universal.²

¹"Alas, Poor Richard," p. 149. Baldwin often uses Paris and Europe interchangeably. Although we shall remain faithful to Baldwin's references, we shall assume that he is speaking of Paris when he refers to Europe.

²"Equal In Paris," p. 134.

Though he still admired the culture and mentality of the French, he was disappointed by the limits of "the role of intelligence in human affairs." The French personality which, from a distance, had seemed "so large and free . . . was also inflexible and . . . full of strange, high dusty rooms which could not be inhabited." Baldwin concluded that the ancient glories of France had exacted a toll on French personalities. In the twentieth century, the French showed signs of fatigue and paranoia. From this time forth Baldwin no longer held a romantic attitude toward the French.¹

Despite Baldwin's disillusionment with Paris, he remained there another eight years. In a way he was right when he said that he was not as demoralized as he might have been had he had false expectations of Paris, but this was more because Baldwin's image of Paris was not so central to his expatriation; instead, as he suggested in his essay about the myth of Paris, it was "a question of identity." As he wrote in the "Introduction" to Nobody Knows My Name (1961), "In America, the color of my skin stood between myself and me; in Europe, that barrier was down. . . . The question of who I was had at last become a personal question

¹Ibid., pp. 118-19. It seems more likely that these signs of fatigue and paranoia may more properly be attributed to the cumulative effects of World War I and World War II as well as colonial problems.

and the answer was to be found in me."¹

In France the social climate discouraged outward manifestations of racial bigotry, Baldwin noted in "Encounter on the Seine."² This did not mean that racial prejudice did not exist, but that a laissez-faire attitude prevailed.

He [the Parisian], with his impenetrable politesse, and with techniques unspeakably more direct, keeps the traveler at an unmistakable arm's length. . . . Neither does the Parisian exhibit the faintest personal interest, or curiosity, concerning the life, or habits, of any stranger. So long as he keeps within the law, which, after all, most people have sufficient ingenuity to do, he may stand on his head, for all the Parisian cares.³

In fact, Baldwin found the Frenchman's attitude toward the Negro somewhat galling. "The French . . . consider that all Negroes arrive from America, trumpet-laden and twinkle-eyed, bearing scars so unutterably painful that all the glories of the French Republic may not suffice to heal them."⁴ In a review that Baldwin wrote for the Reporter in November, 1951, he stated:

In the first place, racial prejudice in Europe is not news. Such an idea can only spring from an arbitrary juxtaposition of the situation of the Negro

¹p. 11.

²p. 100.

³"A Question Of Identity," pp. 108-09.

⁴"Encounter On The Seine," p. 101.

in Europe and the Negro in America.¹

In Baldwin's opinion, racism was as endemic to European as in American culture. Racism was predicated on the idea of white supremacy, an idea that was European in origin. Nonetheless, the black man's life was much more palatable in Europe. Baldwin hypothesized that this was a result of the fact that "the significance of the Negro in the European imagination has very little to do with the displacement the Negro causes in the American mind."² Because the black man did not really inhabit Europe, but lived in her colonies, he was largely a creature of the imagination in Europe; whereas the American was forced to face the subject that caused him so much guilt and fear. In Europe, the black man was the Noble Savage; in the United States, he was merely savage.³

Baldwin elaborated on these ideas in "Stranger in

¹"The Negro at Home and Abroad," Reporter, 5 (November 27, 1951), p. 36. This is a review of Roi Ottley's No Green Pastures. Mr. Ottley's major thesis, as the title indicates, is that the Negro cannot escape race problems by going to Europe.

²Ibid.

³In the eighteenth century, the Noble Savage referred to the Indian. Winthrop Jordan says the Negro was not thought of as embodying all the features of the noble savage by Europeans even at the time that all savages of the world were being promoted to nobility. But Baldwin is probably talking about the twentieth century fascination for things African in Germany and France. Jordan, White Over Black (Baltimore, 1969), p. 27.

the Village" which appeared in October, 1955. Once again, he noted that the idea of white supremacy originated in Europe, but it was the Americans who "made themselves notorious by the shrillness and the brutality with which they have insisted on this idea."¹ Baldwin's explanation for the divergent history of this concept is remarkably close to the one offered by Winthrop Jordan in Black Over White.² Because the black man lived in more remote areas of the world, he remained "comfortably abstract" to the European. The European's sense of identity was in no way threatened. But in the American wilderness, this was not the case; black and white lived in close proximity. Furthermore, the transplanted Europeans faced a "moral chaos as absolute as the physical chaos it was their destiny to conquer."³ In these settlers' eyes, the black man was the personification of the baser desires and attributes that the white man was discovering in his own heart, now that he was released from

¹"Stranger in the Village," NNS, p. 146.

²In the preface to this book, Jordan states: "I might also say that at a later date when I first read some remarks by James Baldwin my first reaction was that he had plagiarized my unfinished and unavailable manuscript," p. ix.

³Ibid., p. 146. For Jordan's statement of this same thesis, see Jordan, pp. 40, 94, 98, 110.

the strictures of the society he had left.¹ Only by maintaining the beliefs inculcated in Europe--prime among them being the concept of white supremacy--was the white man able to stave off the chaos he feared from his own desires.² Thus, by drawing a sharp distinction between himself and the Negro, the white man was able to salvage his own identity.

As a result of the different historical development of the United States and Europe, Baldwin found racism in France to be less threatening than in America. The psychological need to see the black man as a different species had been sharply intensified by the moral complexities of the situation on the new continent. The democratic ideology was the raison d'être for the struggle and cruelty on the

¹"It seems almost as if the Negro had become a counter image for the European, a vivid reminder of the dangers facing transplanted Europeans, the living embodiment of what they must never allow to become. 'Disorders, rapines, and inhumanity' were precisely those qualities which seemed to emerge all too readily when Europeans failed to discipline themselves in America. Application of a distinctly different law to barbarous Negroes in itself afforded reassurance that Englishmen in America had not lapsed into barbarism and had not lost their grip on the old standards." Jordan, p. 110.

²Baldwin is referring to puritanism as the belief inculcated by Europe. Baldwin believed that puritanism's taboos on the pleasures of the flesh were responsible for the difference in the racism found in France and other parts of Europe. François Bondy, "James Baldwin: An Interview," Transition, III, 12 (January-February 1964), p. 18.

American continent; but the democratic ethos could not be extended to include black men. Thus, an even more virulent form of white supremacy was adopted to reconcile the conflict between democratic values and the position of blacks in this so-called democratic society.

* * *

The young man who left for Paris in 1948 was seeking an existential freedom, freedom to define himself. "You have to dig deep into yourself in order to re-create yourself. You have to impose, in fact . . . you have to decide who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with its idea of you."¹ Freedom, in Baldwin's terms, meant eschewing all categorization, all stereotypes. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," (written shortly after his expatriation), his attitude toward the possibility of attaining this kind of liberty within the United States was pessimistic and his tone bitter.

the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria; they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality.

within this situation, there can be no desire on the part of the oppressed for a new society²-what they want is acceptance within this society.

In "Many Thousands Gone" (1951) Baldwin examined the

¹"Black Man in America," p. 30.

²(1949) NNS, pp. 15-16.

white man's image of the nigger.

There was no one more forbearing than Aunt Jemima, no one stronger or more pious or more loyal or more wise; there was, at the same time, no one weaker or more faithless or more vicious and certainly no one more immoral. Uncle Tom, trustworthy and sexless, needed only to drop the title "Uncle" to become violent, crafty, and sullen, a menace to any white woman who passed by.¹

Because the attributes of the stereotype were so contradictory --"loyal," "pious," "witless," "faithless," "immoral," "cunning,"--Baldwin's search for an identity disassociated from the nigger stereotype would be extremely difficult. As Baldwin saw it, "One had the choice, either of 'acting just like a nigger' or of not acting just like a nigger--and only those who have tried it know how impossible it is to tell the difference." ²

For Baldwin, this self-knowledge was a prerequisite for good art.

One writes out of one thing only--one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. . . . The difficulty then, for me, of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation.³

But this was not his only motivation for uncovering his identity. Rather there was a symbiotic relationship between

¹p. 21.

²"East River, Downtown," p. 72.

³"Autobiographical Notes," NNS, pp. 4-5.

his art and his search for identity: the latter was necessary for the former, but literature was also a vehicle for self-discovery.¹ Thus, it should not be surprising that an analysis of Baldwin's definition of art reflects the same ideas that he has given voice to regarding his search for identity.

Baldwin believed that the task of the writer was to reveal the complexity, ambiguity, and unpredictability of the human being.² Literature was not sociology, nor was it social protest. In one of his earliest published pieces, Baldwin articulated his criticism of the realist school and, by contrast, his own vision of literature emerged. He listed this school's failings: a concern for people not as human beings but as symbols; an inability to depict the "unpredictability and the occasional and amazing splendor of the human being"; lack of insight into the mainsprings of human needs, desperations, and desires." Thus, "the concern with squalor remains merely squalid and acts to brutalize the reader rather than to purge him."³

¹"I have not written about being a Negro at such length because I expect that to be my only subject, but only because it was the gate I had to unlock before I could write about anything else." Ibid., p. 5.

²"Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 11.

³"Maxim Gorky as Artist," Nation, CLXIV (April 12, 1947), pp. 427-28.

Baldwin's critique of Gorky and the realist school was the precursor to the expanded argument presented in the essay that first brought him prominence, "Everybody's Protest Novel." "The failure of the protest novel," for Baldwin, "lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended."¹ "Everybody's Protest Novel" is a denunciation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and, tangentially, of Richard Wright's Native Son.² He felt that these two books--one written by a white woman in 1857 and the other by a black man in 1940--shared a stereotyped depiction of human beings.

Baldwin's concept of art was highly individualistic, intimately related to the question of his own identity. His argument against stereotypes in literature reflected his own struggle to free himself from the categorizations imposed on him in the United States.³ The stereotype, both in

¹"Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 17. (Italics added.)

²It is interesting that Baldwin chose these two books to criticize. Uncle Tom's Cabin was the first novel that Baldwin read. We have already seen the impact that Native Son had on him in his own writing. It appears as if he were trying to rid himself of their influence.

³Baldwin's animus against stereotypes in Native Son goes so far that the main character in "Previous Condition" rejects the offer to portray Bigger Thomas in Native Son because he believes that it is type-casting.

literature and in reality, limited the freedom of the human being. His description in this essay of how stereotypes work and their effect on individuals is brilliant.

It is the peculiar triumph of society--and its loss--that it is able to convince those people to whom it has given inferior status of the reality of this decree; it has the force and the weapons to translate its dictum into fact, so that the allegedly inferior are actually made so, insofar as the societal realities are concerned. . . . we find ourselves bound, first, without, then within, by the nature of our categorization.¹

In Baldwin's reading of Native Son, Bigger Thomas' tragedy did not lie in the fact that he was "cold or black or hungry,"

not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being subhuman and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth.²

Bigger's life was controlled by his hatred and his fear. Thus, the murder that Richard Wright had portrayed as Bigger's creative act was not a free, self-defining act. Not only was Bigger's action pre-ordained by his role in society, but, indeed, it confirmed the fantasy that most white Americans held of the Negro. Baldwin elaborated this point in the essay "Many Thousands Gone."

There exists among the intolerably degraded the perverse and powerful desire to force into the arena of the actual

¹"Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 15.

²Ibid., p. 17.

those fantastic crimes of which they have been accused, achieving their own vengeance and their own destruction through making the nightmare real.¹

Baldwin's analysis of Bigger Thomas bears a striking resemblance to his description of his father. Baldwin's rejection of the Bigger Thomas stereotype was motivated not only by his hatred of his father, but also by the lesson he had learned from his father's life. That lesson taught him that hatred toward others and, above all, self-hatred were terribly self-destructive. Thus, while Baldwin felt that every American Negro had "his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull," he believed that it was essential that each Negro make his own "precarious adjustment to the 'nigger' who surrounds him and the 'nigger' in himself."² This was the wisdom that David Baldwin had bequeathed his son.

In discussing his famous critique of Native Son shortly after Wright's death, Baldwin provided a psychological interpretation of his attitude in 1949. He claimed that the sons must destroy the fathers. This statement had two obvious meanings. He was explicitly using the phrase in the sense made immortal by Turgenev in Fathers and Sons. A conflict of generations is inevitable because the younger generation must destroy the principles and traditions of the older in

¹p. 29.

²"Many Thousands Gone," pp. 30, 33.

order to create something new. However, one can easily extrapolate another meaning from Baldwin's own writings. He has told us that Richard Wright became his second father. Hating his first father and wishing to destroy him, Baldwin may well have transferred this desire to his spiritual father. Thus, his critique of protest literature was a natural outgrowth of his own struggle to attain his identity, free from the constraints of a societally-imposed definition and in opposition to his father.

Baldwin had to reject protest literature as well as the role of the Negro writer.¹ Wright had established the

¹Of course, Baldwin's critique of protest literature was grounded in literary terms as well. ". . . the avowed aim of the American protest novel is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed. They are forgiven, on the strength of these good intentions, whatever violence they do to language. . . . It is, indeed, considered the sign of a frivolity so intense as to approach decadence to suggest that these books are both badly written and highly improbable." "Everybody's Protest Novel," pp. 13-14. In terms of Native Son, Baldwin criticizes Wright for having failed to show any relationship between Bigger Thomas and his people. The novel reflects the isolation of the Negro within his own group but it in no way illuminates this situation. Furthermore, Native Son leads the reader to believe that there is no tradition in Negro life. Bigger Thomas cannot function as the reflection of a social illness because he has no society to reflect in within the novel. See "Many Thousands Gone," pp. 27-28. Baldwin also criticizes protest literature on moral grounds. He believes that such literature leads to a feeling of complacency. The fact that Native Son could be published and read so widely made Americans feel that theirs was truly a democratic society. "Americans, unhappily, have the most remarkable ability to alchemize all bitter truths into an innocuous but piquant confection and to transform their moral contradictions, or public discussion of such contradictions, into a proud decoration, such as are given on the field of battle." "Many Thousands Gone," p. 24. Richard Wright himself recognized this sad fact. See "How Bigger Was Born," p. xxvii.

viability of this form of fiction for the black author through the critical and financial success of Native Son and Black Boy. But as a result, the Negro author was placed in the category of Negro Writer, whose subject was the "Negro Problem." To Baldwin this was another form of hateful stereotyping. He would not submit to stereotyped roles in life, because just as in literature, they distort human potential.

Thus, one can understand his explanation for his expatriation, written in 1959: "I wanted to prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro: or even, merely a Negro writer."¹ But in avoiding categorization as a human being and as an artist, Baldwin placed himself in the position of rejecting his negritude as a major component of his identity, as if it were nothing more than an accident of birth. He wanted to be "an honest man and a good writer."² (And he believed that the former was necessary for the latter.) As his primary objectives were personal and artistic, Paris did not present any conflicts for him as a place of exile.

In fact, Baldwin found that Paris gave the artist the perspective from which to find his connections. In part, this was a consequence of distance from the forces that shaped him, allowing him the opportunity for quiet reflection.

¹"The Discovery of What It Means To Be An American," p. 17.

²"Autobiographical Notes," p. 6.

But it was also a result of the different status the artist had in European society and in Paris in particular. Intellectual activity in Europe was part of an honorable and respected tradition; whereas, in the United States, it was suspect. "The American writer, in Europe, is released, first of all, from the necessity of apologizing for himself."¹

Baldwin located the source of these different attitudes in the different social structures in the United States and Europe. His analysis was essentially Tocquevillean. Because America's society was less static than Europe's, status was much more problematic in America.

Where everyone has status, it is perfectly possible, after all, that no one has. It seems inevitable, in any case, that a man may become uneasy as to just what his status is.

But Europeans have lived with the idea of status for a long time. A man can be as proud of being a good waiter as of being a good actor, and in neither case feel threatened. And this means that the actor and the waiter can have a freer and more genuinely friendly relationship. . . . The waiter does not feel, with obscure resentment, that the actor has "made it," and the actor is not tormented by the fear that he may find himself, tomorrow, once again a waiter.²

This new social esteem gave Baldwin a tremendous sense of freedom. The artist no longer had to pretend that he was a "regular guy." And it was not until he had freed himself from this pretense "that he realizes how crippling this habit has been."³ Furthermore, Baldwin found that the

¹"The Discovery of What It Means To Be An American," p. 19.

²Ibid., p. 20.

³Ibid., p. 19.

writer was much less socially confined: "he can reach out to everyone . . . he is accessible to everyone and open to everything."¹ This kind of exposure was healthy for the writer, Baldwin thought, because it destroyed many of his preconceptions, forcing him to reexamine his own point of view.

However, Baldwin did not limit his recommendation of Europe's benefits merely to the "lack of social paranoia" that he found there. Europe also provided the artist with intellectual sustenance that he could not derive from the United States because the European vision of reality was influenced by a sense of limits. Thus, Baldwin believed that American artists had to go to Europe to learn about tragedy and the darker forces of human life.²

He elaborated on Americans' peculiar inability to comprehend limits in "Stranger in the Village" and "A Question of Identity." Americans did not understand that "society is never anything less than a perfect labyrinth of limitations."³ Furthermore, they seemed to be incapable of believing in the reality of time. America was a nation with no sense of history--not because its past was so short or insubstantial, but rather because Americans, turning their

¹Ibid., p. 20.

²Ibid., p. 23.

³"A Question of Identity," p. 114.

"faces so resolutely away from it, have never demanded from it what it has to give."¹ As a result, the kind of scrutiny that the writer should perform on himself and society--"to go beneath the surface, to tape the source"--was more difficult to achieve within the American context than in Europe.²

The United States willfully ignored its history in an attempt to recover European innocence. This seemingly anomolous statement--anomolous in the tradition of American letters which has regarded Europe as the corrupt continent--becomes clearer when we understand that Europe represented a continent without Negroes. In Baldwin's view, this willful ignorance was dangerous because "the past is all that makes the present coherent."³ Baldwin asserted that people who are willfully blind to reality bring on their own destruction. He extended an essentially psychoanalytic notion from the individual to the nation. Nations were like people; the person who could not tell himself the truth about the past was trapped in it. In "Stranger in the Village," he concluded that the person who attempted to remain in a state of innocence once innocence had passed became a monster.

¹Ibid., p. 115.

²"Autobiographical Notes," p. 3.

³Ibid., p. 4.

This theme was extremely significant for Baldwin for it appeared again in "Preservation of Innocence" (1949) and Giovanni's Room (1956). In these works Baldwin treated the problems caused by homosexuality as an outgrowth of America's inability to see the world in terms other than good and evil, black and white. In "Preservation of Innocence," Baldwin first suggested that the American fear of homosexuality was a result of a moral code that allowed no ambiguities.¹ As a result, American males could not admit the possibility of homosexual desires. This led to an inevitable crippling of self-awareness. Life, however, as Baldwin defined it in this essay, was the "process of decisions and alternatives, the conscious awareness and acceptance of limitations."² Furthermore, Baldwin believed that experience and history indicated that "it is not possible to banish or to falsify any human need without ourselves undergoing falsification and loss."³ Thus, in their effort to preserve their innocence, American males could not become men, but remained in the state of childhood, which was, after all, the state

¹An interesting parallel can be drawn with American society's refusal to recognize gradations among mulattos. All mulattos were designated Negroes. This was not true in the English colonies in the Caribbean where hierarchical divisions were acknowledged among those of mixed blood. Jordan, pp. 167-75.

²"The Preservation of Innocence," Zero 2 (Summer 1949), p. 17.

³Ibid.

of innocence. As a result, the debasement of the homosexual corresponded to "the debasement of the relationship between the sexes."¹

In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at a man's estate, that mindless monster, the tough guy, has been created and perfected; whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals and whose attitudes towards women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust.²

"The Preservation of Innocence" was unique among Baldwin's essays. Although the theme--the preservation of innocence--was one that Baldwin returned to again and again, he always discussed it in terms of America's race relations. This was the only time that Baldwin used this vantage point in an essay to discuss homosexuality. Baldwin elaborated on the theme of "The Preservation of Innocence" in Giovanni's Room. Innocence of course refers to the Biblical concept of the Garden of Eden. Knowledge is the forbidden fruit. In this novel, it is the recognition of the hero David's homosexuality that is denied. It is no accident that in most of his essays Baldwin dealt with the theme of the preservation

¹Ibid., p. 16.

²Ibid., pp. 18-19. For a more extended treatment of this theme in American literature, see Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death In The American Novel (New York, 1960) and "Come Back to the Raft Agin, Huck Honey!" An End to Innocence (Boston, 1966, but written originally in 1948, only one year before "Preservation of Innocence.")

of innocence in terms of white attitudes toward Negroes while he treated the subject in terms of homosexuality in this novel.¹ Baldwin was intimately involved with both questions in defining his own identity and he saw the two issues, race relations and sexuality, as connected ones.²

Founded on the Puritan ethic, American society could not cope with the reality of blackness or sexuality. Thus, the white man projected his own sexual desires onto the black man and woman. It was not he, the white man, who was base, sensual, bestial. The black man threatened white womanhood; the black woman lured the white man. Because he could not admit his attraction for the image he had created, an image of unrestrained sensuality,³ the white man could

¹In Another Country, Baldwin will treat both subjects.

²Baldwin believed that race relations made the Negro male's sexual identity problematic. American society had emasculated the Afro-American male by placing him in the position of an underling. His life, status, and economic well-being were controlled by whites. Furthermore, in granting the Negro woman the more stable economic position, American society turned the black family into a matriarchy. In what might today be considered a male chauvinist attitude, Baldwin noted that the Negro male's control over his black woman was further attenuated by the white man's power to take the Negro woman away from the black man whenever he so desired. Thus, in reality, the position of the black man is ambiguous in terms of traditional sex roles.

³The white man's image of the black man's sexuality is but another problem that the Negro man must deal with.

not accept the fact that white and black were related by blood. Thus, in American society, the white man could not face his sexuality, whether it be heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual. Nor could he admit his inhumanity to the Negro. It was the black man's "bestiality" that both excused the white man's treatment of him at the same time that it divested the white man of his own troubling sexuality. In the United States, in Baldwin's opinion, race and sex were intimately related and both were dealt with unrealistically, under a mantle of innocence. Thus, while Giovanni's Room is almost a parable,¹ we must not assume that homosexuality was merely a vehicle the author had chosen to work out his ideas.²

Perhaps because Baldwin's first novel was autobiographical, he created a white protagonist for Giovanni's Room in order that it not be taken as further chronicling of

¹Perhaps this is the reason that this book is so much weaker than Go Tell It On The Mountain.

²It would seem that this is an unnecessary precaution because so much is known of Baldwin's personal life. However, critics show a strange inability to comprehend this novel. Therman O'Daniel hypothesized that Baldwin had chosen to treat homosexuality in his second novel in order to make the statement that these "abnormal, unfortunate individuals are human beings too." Baldwin had chosen a homosexual protagonist because he believed that homosexuals are just as suitable as any other human beings for fictional treatment. "James Baldwin: An Interpretive Study," College Language Association Journal, VII (September, 1963), p. 42.

his life. But Baldwin's purpose was more substantive than that. The main character, David, represents the prototypical American.¹ Weary of the superficialities of American life, David had gone to Europe to find himself.² But the self that he discovered turned out to be the very thing he had fled from.

There is something fantastic in the spectacle I now present to myself of having run so far, so hard, across the ocean even, only to find myself brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard--the yard, in the meantime, having grown smaller and the bulldog bigger.³

David's flight had really begun the summer he had had a

¹Colin Mac Innes thought that Baldwin had made the characters in Giovanni's Room white because he "had lived in Paris and wanted to write a novel in this decor." "Dark Angel: The Writings of James Baldwin," in Donald Gibson, ed., Five Black Writers, p. 127. It seems clear that Baldwin created a cast of all white characters so that the issues involved would not be confused. David is referred to as "monsieur l'americain" by Giovanni, as "M'sieu. l'americain" by his landlady in Southern France, and as "le vrai americain" by Giovanni again. (See Giovanni's Room [New York, 1964], pp. 71, 88, 117.)

²Baldwin comments, parenthetically, that the phrase "to find oneself" is only found in the American language. Whether this is true or not, it shows to what extent Baldwin believed that an identity problem was an American dilemma. Giovanni's Room, p. 31. Baldwin had described the life style that David had led in the United States as a life of constant motion, "blunt, bluff, hearty and totally meaningless relationships," "wandering through the forests of desperate women," sustained on "joyless seas of alcohol." (p. 31) This is, it seems, Baldwin's vision of the general quality of American life.

³Giovanni's Room, p. 11.

sexual encounter with his friend, Joey, a "dark" boy.¹

I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me. I succeeded very well--by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion.²

And so a life of self-deception had begun.

David had gone to Europe and become involved with an American girl, Hella. Hella, having left Paris for Spain in order to decide whether to marry David, returned to find David involved in a homosexual relationship with Giovanni, an Italian waiter. David's relationship with Hella presented a sharp contrast to his relationship with Giovanni. In his sexual relationship with Hella, David did not have to face any responsibility.³ However, David represented salvation for Giovanni. He alone was responsible for saving Giovanni from the abyss. But even more taxing than the responsibility that David had to bear for Giovanni, this liaison made him face his true sexual identity. It was this aspect of himself that he never thought about or discussed, but "it remained, nevertheless, at the bottom of" his "mind, as still and as

¹It is not clear whether Joey is black or white. Still the fact that he is dark is significant. Eric, the homosexual, in Another Country, also had his first homosexual encounter with a Negro.

²Giovanni's Room, pp. 30-31.

³David's original idea was that "Hella would be fun to have fun with." He thought of his evenings spent with Hella as "nights of innocence" where "it was not necessary to take any but the most mechanical responsibility for them." (See Ibid., pp. 8-9.)

awful as a decomposing corpse."¹

Giovanni represented the European consciousness--filled with the knowledge of man's potential for good and evil. Giovanni had left Italy, which Baldwin described as a land of lush vegetation: he had left the Garden of Eden. In Paris, he accepted his bisexuality. Baldwin levelled an implied critique of America in the contrast between David and Giovanni; but he was not content to leave it implicit. He made the censure explicit through Giovanni's dialogue. Giovanni believed that Americans had turned themselves into another species, saying "I don't see why the world is so new for Americans. . . . After all, you are merely emigrants. And you did not leave Europe so very long ago."²

The Americans are funny. You have a funny sense of time--or perhaps you have no sense of time at all, I can't tell. Time always sounds like a parade chez vous--a triumphant parade, . . . As though, with enough time . . . and all that fearful energy and virtue you people have, everything will be settled, solved, put in its place. And when I say everything . . . I mean all the serious, dreadful things, like pain and death and love, in which you Americans do not believe.³

David could not accept his true sexual identity and threw Giovanni over when Hella returned. Giovanni knew that David was not really leaving him for a woman. He accused David with the following words:

¹Ibid., p. 24.

²Ibid., p. 47.

³Ibid., p. 48.

You do not love anyone! . . . You love your purity . . . you are just like a little virgin. . . . You want to be clean. You think you came here covered with soap--and you do not want to stink, not even for five minutes, in the meantime. . . . You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. You want to kill him in the name of all your lying little moralities. And you--you are immoral.¹

David, having finally achieved self-knowledge, but unable to live with it, could not be a man with Hella. His "boyish zestful affairs--which are . . . a kind of higher or, anyway, more pretentious masturbation" were terminated. Because he tried "to play it safe," he was condemned to a life of homosexual encounters without love. "You play it safe long enough . . . " Jacques told David, "and you'll end up trapped in your own dirty body forever and ever. . . . " "People do not die of love--but for the lack of it." The sexual relationship without love not homosexuality is condemned. Americans like David, who refuse to divest themselves of their false innocence, should never come to Europe; "it means that they can never be happy again. What's the good of an American who isn't happy? Happiness was all we had."²

Thus, in Baldwin's view, Europe offered the writer insight that he could not obtain in the United States. The European consciousness of history and society gave him

¹Ibid., pp. 186-87.

²Ibid., pp. 77, 79, 219.

A better understanding of the nature of the limits imposed on man. The European knowledge of good and evil presented him with a truer sense of the ambiguities in the world as well as a better comprehension of man's make-up. And finally, the confrontation with this new set of human possibilities allowed him greater freedom in coming to terms with his own identity. In America, the preservation of innocence was maintained by denying those impulses which were considered evil. Such self-deception resulted in loss of self and, often, unmitigated harm to others. In other words, it was the very opposite of innocence. In Europe, Baldwin discovered a new definition of innocence, contingent on one's recognition of one's desires and the ability to deal with them responsibly. Such a new moral environment in which good and evil were not seen in black and white terms liberated Baldwin to accept himself--his sexuality and his negritude.

* * *

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois framed the problem of the American Negro's identity in terms that became central to James Baldwin's self-conception. For in Paris, where the question of identity was "vivified in the European air," Baldwin discovered the importance of his Negro heritage and his American roots.¹

¹"A Question of Identity," p. 113.

In America, Baldwin told Studs Terkel in an interview, "all you are ever told . . . about being black is that it is a terrible, terrible thing to be."¹ There can be no doubt that James Baldwin believed that, in the United States at least, this was the truth. Baldwin had been filled with self-hate because he was Negro. In part, this was one of the reasons that he struggled so hard to disengage himself from the Negro stereotype. Neil Friedman has called the dilemma that Baldwin found himself in when he tried to disassociate himself from typical Negro characteristics a "nigger complex." Briefly analyzing Baldwin's use of personal pronouns in his essays, Friedman has shown that Baldwin had often used third person pronouns, "they," "them," and "he" to refer to the Negro in his early essays; whereas, in the later essays, he tended to employ the use of first person pronouns, thereby identifying himself as a Negro. Friedman has claimed that Baldwin's so-called "Olympian detachment" that was lauded by white critics was really a symptom of his non-identification with blacks. Essentially, Baldwin was himself reacting in the same fashion that he had observed as a general phenomenon: that is, "in terms of or against a stereotype promulgated by the dominant society, filtered through

¹"Black Man in America," p. 30.

family and peers, and finally internalized by the Negro himself."¹

As Baldwin told Terkel, "One of the great psychological hazards of being an American Negro is the sense of shame at one's heritage." Baldwin had denied his own cultural heritage. "I realized that I had acquired so many affectations, had told myself so many lies, that I really had buried myself beneath a whole fantastic image of myself. . . ."² In Switzerland, Baldwin discovered that one of the reasons that he was having so much difficulty with his novel, Go Tell It On The Mountain, was because he was ashamed of where he had come from and where he had been: "ashamed of life in the Negro Church, ashamed of" his "father, ashamed of the Blues, ashamed of Jazz. . . ."³ Baldwin said that he became reconciled to "being a 'nigger'" when he was in Switzerland, recuperating from a nervous breakdown.⁴

It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and cadence, who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have

¹Friedman, "James Baldwin and Psychotherapy," Psychotherapy III (November, 1966), p. 179.

²"Black Man in America," p. 29.

³Ibid.

⁴We cannot repress the doubt that this sudden, rather dramatic recognition of Baldwin's essential nature is somewhat apochryphal.

spoken when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America (in the same way that, for years, I would not touch watermelon).¹

Perhaps it was Baldwin's acceptance of his "negritude" that led to what he has called "the most crucial time" in his development: his recognition that he was a "bastard of the West."² The creations of Western civilization that Baldwin revered--Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, and Chatres--did not contain his history; he was an interloper.

this was not my heritage; at the same time, I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use-- I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe. I would have to appropriate these white centuries, I would have to make them mine--I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme--otherwise I would have no place in any scheme.³

In accepting his identity, Baldwin was affirming the existence of the social forces that produced him.⁴ Surely,

¹"The Discovery of What It Means To Be An American," p. 18.

²"Autobiographical Notes," p. 4.

³Ibid.

⁴The sense of identity that Baldwin came to recognize in himself is similar to the concept of identity that Erik Erikson has propounded. See "The Identity And The Life Cycle," Psychological Issues, vol. I, no. 1 (1959) and Childhood and Society (New York, 1963). For a shorter exposition of the main ideas, see Erik Erikson, "The Concept of Identity," in The Negro American edited by Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark, (Boston, 1966), especially pp. 230-231.

this is the real significance of Go Tell It On The Mountain, the story of an urban, secularized Negro, three generations out of slavery. Another aspect of Baldwin's identity that was revealed to him in Europe was that he was an American, as American as any Texas G.I. All the writers that he knew in Europe, whether they were white or black, were divorced from their origins and no more at home there than he. The fact that they were searching for their identities was of greater importance than the fact that some were the sons of slaves and some were the sons of free men. In fact, Baldwin came to the conclusion that in the Negro's need to establish himself in relationship to his past, the Negro is most American. For, "this depthless alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience."¹ Baldwin concluded that the Negro only deludes himself if he thinks he is capable of any other loyalty than his loyalty to the United States.²

Baldwin's search for identity drove him out of the American madness. His individualistic quest took him to Paris, the haven for artists and blacks. In that milieu, essentially untroubled by racial problems, Baldwin came to understand that the social components of his identity

¹"Encounter on the Seine, pp. 104, 109, 115; "Stranger in the Village," p. 149.

²"East River, Downtown," p. 71.

were as important as the particularistic ones. His sense of identification as an American Negro and a writer made his position in Paris untenable just as his lack of any such positive identity had made his exile in Paris attractive previously. As a black man, he could no longer be content to sit in cafes discussing the Algerian and the American Negro problems. As an American writer whose subject was America, he had to return to the United States to renew his acquaintance with his subject.

Baldwin's search for identity was a youthful one. Having established his identity as a writer, a Negro, and an American, Baldwin felt that he had to give up his youth, face his responsibilities, and return to America: "When the American writer realizes that he is living in Europe as an American, he realizes that it would be more honorable to return to America and do battle there."¹ Baldwin's new sense of identity as an American Negro--which he defined in almost cosmic terms--involved commitment and exile was merely a state of limbo. He went home in 1957 to do battle on two fronts: as a writer and as a Negro. As a Negro, Baldwin was ready to take on the role of spokesman. But the question that would remain open was whether Baldwin would be able to avoid the pitfalls of spokespersonship that he

¹"The Discovery of What It Means To Be An American," p. 21.

believed Richard Wright had fallen victim to.

Leaving aside the considerable question of what relationship precisely the artist bears to the revolutionary, the reality of man as a social being is not his only reality and that artist is strangled who is forced to deal with human beings solely in social terms; and who has, moreover, as Wright had, the necessity thrust on him of being the representative of some thirteen million people. It is a false responsibility. . . . The unlucky shepherd soon finds that, so far from being able to feed the hungry sheep, he has lost the wherewithal for his nourishment, having not been allowed--so fearful was his burden, so present his audience!--to recreate his own experience.¹

Baldwin, the individualist, the artist, had really gone beyond effecting a truce with the reality that he was born a Negro. Where once he had tried to disassociate himself from the attributes in the Negro stereotype, he now claimed that it was necessary to "accept the status which myth gives him, before he can hope to change the myth."² But now he would fight to change the definition.

¹"Many Thousands Gone," p. 25.

²"Stranger in the Village," p. 148.

CHAPTER X

In The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin remarked that a certain hope died for the American Negro after World War II. The growth of black expatriation from the United States at a time when it appeared on the wane among whites may seem to prove his point. This study was originally conceived as an exploration of the phenomenon of black expatriation after World War II. A study of expatriation--unlike a study of expatriates--attempts to arrive at generalizations about the nature of the society that produced such a phenomenon. The act of expatriation is viewed here not only as a profound expression of alienation, but also as an act of social and cultural criticism. Because the expatriate--unlike the exile--has voluntarily renounced his native land, an examination of black expatriation is a vantage point from which to view the anguish and disillusionment experienced by American blacks in the post-war era.

It seemed best to approach this subject through writers, not simply because their literature makes them more accessible, but also because the demand to strive for universality that their craft imposes makes them spokesmen even if they do not acknowledge the role. A basic assumption of this study is that the special consciousness

of the writer illuminates the inchoate yearnings and frustrations of his people just as expatriation reflects the condition that spawned it. A related assumption is that by studying expatriate authors whose writings can provide an articulate expression of their alienation, generalizations will emerge to provide insight into the nature of black expatriation after World War II.

The use of literary expatriates to gain a perspective on black expatriation adds new dimensions to the subject. A study of literary expatriates--particularly when they are as influential as Richard Wright and James Baldwin--raises the question of cross-cultural influences. Inevitably, the scope of the investigation expands: what began as a problem of social history might also involve a problem of intellectual history of the most traditional kind--the genealogy of ideas. Another context becomes relevant: the tradition of the alienation of the American artist.

We pursued the sources of these writers' alienation biographically. But we have also concentrated on their images of Paris on the assumption that they represented a counter-image to their vision of the United States which would suggest other aspects of their alienation or, at the very least, serve to corroborate the biographically-derived material.

Clearly, the circumstances surrounding Wright's second and final departure from the United States indicated

that American racism was the primary reason for his self-imposed exile. To the extent that such a distinction is valid, Wright left the United States as a black man searching for freedom rather than as a writer seeking freedom of expression. But his image of Paris revealed other components of his dissatisfaction with the United States.

Of the three writers we have examined, only Wright seems to have had a well-defined and fully articulated image of Paris at the time of his departure. In choosing Paris as his new home, he was influenced by the myth--corroborated by his own experience--that the French were not racist. In addition, Wright saw Paris as a haven for artists, a counter-image to the anti-intellectualism and the materialism he deplored in American life. In this respect, his escape to Paris was in the tradition of American literary expatriates after the Civil War and World War I who were offended by America's crudeness and philistinism. Beyond all this, Wright saw Paris as synonymous with the spirit of French humanism which, he believed could free mankind from the depersonalization of modernization. From his earliest days as a writer, he had been concerned with the dual problem posed by industrialization: he applauded its liberating effects while recognizing its threat to the human spirit.

James Baldwin left the United States to escape

the morass of American race relations that threatened his life and stifled his sense of identity. By prescribing his role in society racially and sexually, America denied him the freedom to define himself. Because Baldwin believed that self-knowledge was a prerequisite for art, he feared that his literary goals would ultimately be stultified. Refusing to be restrained by the racial designation that imprisoned him in the United States, Baldwin expatriated to France, repudiating not only America but also his negritude.

Baldwin renounced America on racial grounds, but he went to Paris as a young man in search of his identity and as a writer seeking his proper voice. In his quest for identity and his need to attach himself to the European roots of Western civilization, Baldwin too was well within the tradition established by white American literary expatriates. (In fact the resemblance to Henry James is so striking that one suspects Baldwin of a certain degree of literary affectation.) One sees this clearly in his later essays and in Giovanni's Room where his references to Paris, France, or Europe--the three are used interchangeably--almost all pertain to the emotional and intellectual sustenance they provide the artist.

Paris never assumed the symbolic importance for Baldwin it had for Wright: it remained a personal refuge and therefore, when Paris failed to live up to his "ideological" expectations, it didn't have the same impact

on Baldwin that it had on Wright. Nonetheless, Baldwin too had dreams of Paris. Baldwin's allusions to Paris in earlier essays reveal that he had more than purely literary illusions about the "City of Light." Like Wright he had anticipated a higher level of humanity and an absence of racism in Paris. Indeed, in 1961, Baldwin was still describing Paris as a refuge for American blacks. He had also imagined that the hoary age of French institutions would result in a greater degree of "safety," "order," and "common sense" and he expected intelligence to play a greater role in human affairs than it did in the United States. In short, Baldwin believed that Paris was more civilized than America.

When Chester Himes went to Paris in 1953, he had not decided to become an expatriate. He had long wanted to go to Paris, but did not have any clear idea of what he hoped to find there. Himes' confusion here is typical of the confusion that has characterized his life and much of his writing. It is based on his ambivalence toward the black and white blood that runs through his veins and toward the values and goals of white American and the black bourgeoisie--ambivalences which created a conflict between the desire for respectability and acceptance on the one hand and the need for rebellion and rejection on the other.

In prison, Himes resolved these tensions by defining himself as a writer. It is particularly significant in this

respect that race played no role in his prison stories and that Himes did not consider himself a writer until his stories were accepted by a white periodical. What is noteworthy of both Himes' sense of identity and his personal aspirations is the solitary nature of both and the lack of any racial identification.

With the poor critical reception of Lonely Crusade and the failure of his marriage, Himes' life was a shambles. He left the United States because he had no reason to stay and went to Paris largely because he had nowhere else to go. Still the fact remains that Himes chose Paris. Of the three men whose image of Paris we have studied, Himes' remains the most elusive. Although he might like to think of himself or have others regard him as a cynic, even Himes appears to have accepted the myth of Paris as a haven for blacks and writers. From his comments surrounding the writing of The Primitive, it seems that the racism in Paris took him by surprise. Although he was by no means certain what he was looking for, clearly he was disappointed with Paris.

Despite Himes' confusion, it seems possible to draw further conclusions about his motives for going to Paris. The figure of Richard Wright loomed large in Himes' associations with Paris. It seems likely that Himes hoped to be lionized as Wright had been. As Himes noted in his

autobiography, he himself was not unknown in Paris: the French translation of Lonely Crusade (1952) had been well received, a not insignificant detail. In going to Paris, it seems that Himes was seeking an escape from the sordid quality of life that he was subjected to in the United States. In Paris, he hoped to be treated with the dignity accorded a writer.

An examination of Wright's, Baldwin's, and Himes' images of Paris has been useful in bringing the sources of their discontent into sharper focus. Certainly to these three writers, Paris represented a counter-image to and an indictment of the United States, but their images of Paris are more significant as a projection of their needs and desires. Thus, expatriation was a more satisfactory solution for Himes and Baldwin who sought only a personal refuge, a place where they could live their lives free from the daily vexations of racism; in short, another country.

For Wright, Paris was more than a private sanctuary; it was a cause larger than himself with which he could identify. His need for commitment was symptomatic of his desire for a spiritual community. Wright had attained his freedom because he was an outsider; his success stemmed in part from his alienation from all existing systems of authority. But this was also a source of pain to him and he sought to overcome it in a sense of community.

France replaced the Communist party as Wright's spiritual home. The exile can be distinguished from the expatriate on the basis of his attitude toward the land that gives him succor. While the exile hopes only to endure a temporary sojourn in an alien land, the expatriate embraces his new homeland. Wright's adoption of France made him an expatriate rather than an exile. His image of Paris, his attitude toward France, his need for commitment, and his wide range of interests involved him in the intellectual and political life in Paris. In contrast, Himes and Baldwin who did not share Wright's vision of France as the agency of mankind's salvation did not participate in French cultural or political life.

French humanism proved to be as unsatisfactory in its own way as the Communist party had been. Bereft of an identification with a cause beyond himself and a sense of community, Wright came to accept his isolation. Previously, he had viewed his alienation as a mixed blessing at best; but in the late fifties, he convinced himself that his rootlessness was a virtue.

The awful part of it is that most folks on earth today are 'misplaced,' but there is nowhere for them to go. . . . You would be amazed at how many people no longer want to live where they are. It may mean that mankind is really more advanced than it suspects. I'm all for outgrowing the sentimental attachments of the place in which one is born. . . . It is a sign, I feel, of mankind's maturity.¹

¹Wright to de Sablonnière, February 2, 1958, Richard Wright MSS.

But it is clear that Wright's reconciliation to his essential solitude but not felicitous; his intensified feelings of alienation in France emphasized his sense of his own uniqueness and fed his suspicious nature.

Baldwin's journey to Paris was also a voyage of self-discovery, but with happier consequences. The object of his expatriation, his quest for identity, was the quest of a young man. In Paris, he realized the artificiality of distinguishing between his identity as a black man and as a writer and assumed the identity of Negro author and spokesman.

For Himes, exile was a voyage of liberation rather than one of self-discovery. In the United States, Himes' goals as a writer conflicted with his need to exorcise his rage in his writing. For Himes, writing was both a vehicle to gain acceptance from the white world and the black bourgeoisie and a vehicle for self-expression. Only once he freed himself from trying to please this audience could he vent his anger, like a "blind man with a pistol," fully and indiscriminantly--against both blacks and whites.

In a sense, the motives behind Wright's, Baldwin's and Himes' renunciation of the United States were as diverse as their lives and personalities. In an essay on Chester Himes' expatriate experience, Edward Margolies remarked

It is a commonplace that when a black American writer expatriates himself it is said that he does so because he wants to escape American racism. The black author when pressed, usually concurs. . . . But unless we define racism as something far more complex than is usually understood, it is a mistake to fall back on any easy assumptions.¹

Yet racism was obviously a factor in their alienation from America. Certainly racism left its mark on their psyches. What makes racism so complex is that its impact cannot readily be isolated. We have seen this most clearly in the life of Chester Himes. While racism was indeed the common denominator in Wright's, Himes's, and Baldwin's rejection of America, the complexity of human nature and the variety of human response render this explanation only part of a more intricate story.

Racism is even more inadequate as an explanation for the phenomenon of black expatriation after World War II, failing to account either for its limited appeal or for its emergence at that time. Expatriation was but one response to the post-war situation of the Afro-American; protest was another. Eighty years out of slavery, the Afro-American had come of age: expatriation and protest were both expressions of the black man's refusal to wait any longer for his freedom. But where the protest movement was an expression of hope and ethnic identity, expatriation was a

¹"Experiences of the Black Expatriate Writer: Chester Himes," CLA Journal XV, (June, 1972), 421.

very individualistic admission of despair.

For Baldwin, Wright, and Himes, the choice of Paris as a place of exile indicated, at best, a basic ambivalence about their identity as black men. Baldwin's vehement denial of any illusions about France or the French in No Name In The Street confirms this. Perhaps the Baldwin of 1972 has forgotten the degree to which he insisted on separating his racial identity from his identity as a writer in the early years of his exile. Wright was the only one who had not made this distinction, but even he was continually looking for a more universal identification once he was in Paris.

These three extreme individualists had rejected black culture and the black community. Alienated from their own culture and rejected by the dominant white society, they had no external sources of emotional support, none of the sustenance that a sense of community or a cultural identity could have provided. Furthermore, with fewer ties to American society--white or black--they had less reason to stay in the United States.

Wright, Baldwin, and Himes have all written that alienation from one's traditional kinfolk, to use Baldwin's language, is a legacy of racism. This aspect of racism provides a more powerful explanation for their expatriation and may well be the proper perspective in which to view the phenomenon of black expatriation after World War II.

Urbanization, which began for blacks in earnest in the second decade of the twentieth century and was accelerated by World War II, played an important role in eroding the traditional sources of strength and cohesion in the black community. Himes and Wright both participated in that migration from the South to the North, from a rural to an urban environment; Baldwin was a child of an urban ghetto.

Because expatriation was a response of a minority who were alienated from black culture, we must question the expatriates' depiction of Negro life in the United States. Influential as these portrayals of bleakness and self-hatred have been, they may be a distortion, a reflection of their authors' alienation from the sources of strength in black culture. Perhaps Baldwin was wrong in suggesting that hope died for the American Negro after World War II. Perhaps one can interpret the despair and disillusionment of these three writers as representing their personal, rather special, situation rather than as a state of mind common to the American Negro community as a whole. The limited appeal of expatriation may, in fact, testify to the reality of black hopes after World War II and to the resilience of black culture.

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