

THE ART OF POLITICS AND THE POLITICS OF TRAGEDY

(A study on the influences of Stalinism upon literary form and critical interpretations of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Albert Camus' *L'Etranger*)

by

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Abstract

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Advisor: Professor Vincent Crapanzano

Richard Wright and Albert Camus revived tragic form in their most popular works, *Native Son* (1940) and *L'Etranger* (1942) at a time when the spirit of a new age was coming to a close. In the Enlightenment tradition of Voltaire who used his “pen” as his “sword”, each author responded to the important political questions of their day, concerning the betrayals of the goals of the Russian Revolution, by reviving the humanism of ancient Greek Tragedy. Just as Sophocles' Oedipus and Shakespeare's King Lear stirred their intended audiences, Wright's *Bigger Thomas* and Camus' *Mersault* appealed to men and women who once believed that they could stir the consciousness of a generation. The re-emergence of tragedy and the birth of French Existentialism in the early forties reflects a changed social condition—a society moving away from the idea of social revolution. Yet, as Raymond Williams correctly observes, tragic forms are not a negative example to social manifestations, but a positive commentary on the potential for social revolution.

Although my main objective is for this dissertation to be a contribution to a renewed interest in Marxist literary criticism, trying to shed its Stalinist baggage

in contemporary academic circles,¹ I will also bring in an unlikely critical bed partner, namely that of personal criticism, developed by Nancy K. Miller, in her well-known work, *Getting Personal*. In doing so, I will rely on my own lived experiences as well as those of Wright's and Camus' to help demonstrate my thesis. The Marxian equation, "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life," suggests that the work of art has the potential to effect change at the material level of man's existence. Wright and Camus related their activities from the viewpoint of a real man or woman, yet, created characters, as did Shakespeare that overreached the idiosyncrasies of the individual, to achieve tragic proportions with one foot set firmly on the ground. Ultimately, they preserve the dialectic, at a time when many other writers were beating back a hasty retreat from what they believed was a hopelessly idealistic and unviable alternative—the possibility to transform the world from the bottom up.

¹ See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Cambridge, 1990) and *Marxist Literary Theory*, eds., Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Blackwell, 1996).

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Introduction:

Art and Politics

The new art will revive all the old forms, which arose in the course of the development of the creative spirit. The disintegration and decline of these forms are not absolute, that is that they do not mean that these forms are absolutely incompatible with the spirit of the new age.

–Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*

Richard Wright and Albert Camus revived tragic form in their most popular works, *Native Son* (1940) and *L'Etranger* (1942) at a time when the spirit of a new age was coming to a close. In the Enlightenment tradition of Voltaire who used his “pen” as his “sword,” each author responded to the important political questions of their day, concerning the betrayals of the goals and ideals of the Russian Revolution, by reviving the humanism of ancient Greek Tragedy. Each portrayed a protagonist with a consciousness that represented more than the idiosyncratic individual, but the shared thoughts and feelings of a generation of revolutionaries who had ceased to believe in the possibility of imminent revolution, but nevertheless did not disregard the potential for revolution to occur. With the aims of an Oedipus Rex, but an inward rather than external journey and fall, Wright’s *Bigger Thomas* and Camus’ *Mersault* appealed to a generation of men and women who had once believed that they could stir the consciousness of a generation of idealists born in an age of revolution. Yet, on account of what I will argue is an effect of an intellectual reaction to Stalinism, both Wright’ and Camus’ works, *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*, have never been compared in a

dissertation thesis or discussed in terms of their respective text's repetition of tragic form.

It is of some interest that these two famous authors in the field of Western Literature, who lived and wrote at approximately the same time, have not been the subject of a dissertation topic or published article. I will argue that it is because of an intellectual backlash that Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Albert Camus' *L'Etranger*, published in 1940 and 1942, remain on opposite sides of any literary interpretive fence. After much research, it is my current understanding that the lack of comparative analysis of the two texts stems from an academic blind spot occurring on account of an intellectual retreat in the face of the horrors of Stalinism. In short, due to false categorization within the Western literary cannon, *Native Son* is often lumped into the category of the protest novel, while *L'Etranger* is more often than not interpreted as an existential novel. In this sense, my dissertation hopes to be a contribution to the renewed interest in Marxist literary criticism that is currently trying to shed its Stalinist baggage in contemporary academic circles.²

Moreover, I will demonstrate that in the absence of a genuine Marxist analysis, which I will argue may offer a more comprehensive understanding of the two works than what is currently offered in academic circles, a false categorization has resulted in an even more important oversight—the missed revival of tragic form in the early forties. Although there are numerous critics who comment on the persistence of tragic forms well into the twentieth century there is hardly a

² See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Cambridge, 1990) and *Marxist Literary Theory*, eds., Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Blackwell, 1996).

mention of this reoccurrence in the period of the Popular Front. It is my main endeavor to demonstrate, through close reading and interpretation of the two works at hand, that this form not only reoccurs, but also that that reoccurrence is relevant to those of us who wish to achieve a greater understanding of the connection between art and politics in the field of literary interpretation.

I will borrow upon two critical interpretive strategies to demonstrate my thesis. Primarily, I will use a Marxist method within the tradition of Leon Trotsky, Vladimir Lenin, and Georg Lukacs. Yet, I will also bring in an unlikely critical bed partner, namely that of personal criticism developed by Nancy K. Miller, in her well-known work, *Getting Personal*.

Most of this dissertation relies upon objective rather than personal experience as a critical method to gain legitimacy for its authorial voice. For the most part this is to be expected given that my critique is framed in a Marxist ideology concerning the dynamic relationship between art and society. Nevertheless, even though I am more influenced by a Marxist critical approach, I do not wish to throw out useful tools of analysis based on ideological differences such as those between Feminism and Marxism.

Who is to say that personal experience, which has certainly influenced the writing of Wright and Camus' novels, does not also offer us a useful method of criticism? Interestingly such "wisdom" contradicts the facts that some of the most stunning critiques have been written in autobiographical form: The autobiographies of Frederick Douglas, Harriet Jacobs, Malcolm X, and John Adams, for example, all offer critiques of American society. There is of course

more wiggle room for an autobiographer to be critical than for a critic to be autobiographical.

Nancy K Miller explains how this tendency to avoid personal experience is prevalent amongst contemporary feminist who ironically espouse the notion that the personal is political. She bemoans the fact that even though feminist theory has always been built around the personal and even now at a time when feminists have started to etch out a tradition of “personal criticism,” they are still wont to use the personal as a legitimate critical tool in academic settings. In her landmark text “Getting Personal”, Miller explains how these feminist have avoided “getting personal:”

Feminist theory has always built out from the personal: the witnessing ‘I’ of subjective experience. The notion of the ‘authority of experience’ founded a central current in feminist theory in the 1970s....But despite that foundational construction, most academic women in the 1970s did not articulate that as a ‘new personalism’ in their writings. In literary studies, the works of pioneering feminist literary scholars—like Kate Millett, Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter, Annette Kolodny, and Judith Fetterley—were clearly fueled by a profound understanding of the consequences of taking the personal of thought and gender as a category of analysis. But as academic feminists—and I’m talking here of white mainstream feminism—they on the whole wrote like everyone else who belongs to the third sex of ‘PhD’s. Carolyn Heilbrun has added to the categories of male and female readers.... This self-conscious depersonalization was increased in the mid-eighties with a certain level of institutionalization, by which I mean the construction and recognition of feminist theory as a body of knowledge, as well as by the ‘theory’ frenzy that affected most academic writing—at least at the level of the signifier. At the same time, however, the experiments in autobiographical or personal criticism that I have been describing were also going on and constituted a contrapuntal effect, breaking into the monolithic and monologizing authorized discourse.³

³ Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal* (New York, 1991), p. 14.

Miller's version of feminism, as personal criticism, may offer us a useful model to review the "monolithic and monologizing authorized discourses" that have monopolized much academic criticism of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Albert Camus' *L'Etranger*.

I am specifically referring to those "monologizing" interpretive strategies that began to dominate the academy at the end of the last wave of world-wide social upheavals of the sixties and early seventies—New Criticism, New Historicism, Structuralism, Post Structuralism, and Deconstruction. Each had one thing in common—they have ceased to view any sort of truly dynamic relationship between the text and the world. On the other hand, Miller's personal criticism, however limited, at least attempts to regain that dynamic relation between the text and the world of lived experience. Below, I shall argue that it was the retreat of intellectuals away from activism and into the academy, as those movements retreated, that led to an abandonment by critics of two of the basic tenants of Marxism that were further developed by Trotsky, Lenin and Lukacs: the dialectic and the universal subject.

At the heart of this retreat was the initial abandonment by the "New Left" of the class politics of the old left. This retreat left critics ill equipped to explain and stave off the subsequent reaction and conservatism that set in during the Reagan and Bush years. The dominance of a politics of identity and multi-culturalism was in some sense a bunkering down by intellectuals to protect the gains made by women, Gays, Blacks, Latinos and other minorities, while giving up in fact any

effort to transform the status quo of the canon. The critical theories which sought to explain that fragmentation of the movements, once class had been displaced as the central form of exploitation and oppression, moved ever more towards abstraction, to the absurd point of a theoretical obsession on form, devoid of any content or meaning. Baudrillard's simulacrum represents the zenith of that move towards abstraction, where reality is utterly unknowable. These theorists have made a virtue of necessity, and in doing so have ironically retreated to staring at Plato's shadows on the wall, without even the possibility of a single one of us breaking free to see truth. In the end, the politics of identity, that has all but consumed academic discourse, has retreated towards the realm of the individual and given up on any notion of a universal subject. Yet, at the same time, the economic and political system of capitalism has continued to advance and increase its strangle hold on our intellectual freedoms.

It is no wonder, then, that few in the academy would observe any effort to stave off that move away from the universal subject by reviving the universal in the form of tragedy. Most often both Wright's and Camus' protagonist are seen as reflecting anti-Marxist, individualist philosophies. Both *Native Son* and *L'Etranger* are read as a retreat away from idealism and a devolvement into the self-centered realm of the individual, rather than being seen as works whose respective protagonists reflect a universal, human consciousness. In spite of Wright's literary and political contribution to the field of Western literature, he remains marginalized. Why? I will argue that the seeds were laid much earlier before the movements of the sixties and seventies became fragmented around the

issues of identity rather than class.⁴ This dissertation will argue, however, that both Wright and Camus have moved beyond an individualistic philosophy, reviving instead the more universal meanings inspired by the great tragediennes of Fifth Century Athens and the outgrowth of individual passions into a more developed understanding of the universal and human nature as exemplified in Shakespeare's tragedies. Trotsky makes some relevant point on this question of individuality and the tragic hero in the following passage:

Bourgeois society broke up human relationships into atoms, and gave them unprecedented flexibility and mobility. Primitive unity of consciousness which was the foundation of a monumental religious art disappeared, and with it went primitive economic relationships. As a result of the reformation, religion became individualistic. The religious symbols of art having had their cord cut from the heavens fell on their heads and sought support in the uncertain mysticism of individual consciousness.

In the tragedies of Shakespeare, which would be entirely unthinkable without the reformation, the fate of the ancients and the passions of the mediaeval Christians are crowded out by individual human passions, such as love, jealousy, revengeful greediness, and spiritual dissension. But in every one of Shakespeare's dramas, the individual passion is carried to such a high degree of tension that it outgrows the individual, becomes super-personal, and is transformed into a fate of a certain kind. The jealousy of Othello, the ambition of Macbeth, the greed of Shylock, the love of Romeo and Juliet, the arrogance of Coriolanus, the spiritual wavering of Hamlet, are all of this kind. Tragedy in Shakespeare is individualistic, and in this sense has not the general significance of Oedipus Rex, which expresses the consciousness of the whole people. Nonetheless, compared with Aeschylus, Shakespeare represents a great step forward and not backward. Shakespeare's art is more human. At any rate, we shall no longer accept a tragedy in which God gives orders and man submits. Moreover, there will be no one to write such tragedy.⁵

My choice of Wright and Camus as vehicles to demonstrate this argument is not random, for two reasons. First of all, each poses a highly conscious protagonist whose tragic fall is reflective of larger social issues beyond a mere

⁴ See Alex Callinicos, *Against Post Modernism*. (St. Martin's Press: 1991), and Sharon Smith's "Identity Politics," *International Socialist Review*. (Fall: 1994).

⁵ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, (RedWords: 1991). p. 242.

reflection of individual human passion. Secondly, the very “wall” that was put up between the world and the text, led critics to view these two similar authors, and their works, on opposing sides of the interpretive fence. In other words, the works themselves have fallen victim to their own literary classification, the protest novel and the existentialist novel, respectively, a label both author’s would reject. Too often Wright’s text has been “ghettoized” and interpreted mainly as a treatise on race relations, while Camus’ has been neutralized and interpreted mainly as a treatise on existentialism. Each has been viewed as a retreat from socialist politics and idealism. And because critics’ treatment of aesthetics over the years has tended towards abstraction, it is Camus who is more often viewed as the greater literary novelist and Wright’s aesthetic is at best ignored, and more often criticized.

This dynamic is spelled out time and time again in other works by other authors, but is particularly apparent in works such as those by Wright and Camus because they wrote their works at the exact time that the Communist Party was abandoning its international revolutionary perspective to make alliances with capitalist countries in the Popular Front period to fight the spread of fascism during World War II. It is because each of these works were published at the very beginning of this ultimate betrayal of the working class which led the Russian Revolution in 1917, that I will argue is the reason that we see the possibility of the repetition of tragic form. A less idealistic age would never have been able to render any tragedy. Nevertheless, on account of the critical wreckage left in the

wake of Stalinism, intellectuals have been wont to notice this surprising revival of tragic form at the end of the last revolutionary social upheaval.

Chapter 1

From the Personal to the Political: The Pitfalls of Literary Classification

“I had to step outside my culture, had to defamiliarize the concept by translating it into a new mode of discourse, before I could see its potential in critical theory.”

--Henry Louis Gates, “The Signifying Monkey”

How does one step outside of the institutional framework where one has learned how to read great literary works, such as those by Wright and Camus, and read them in a new way? There is a history of autobiographical criticism, particularly by minorities, that has attempted to do just that. These efforts have shown that it is often useful to reflect on how we developed our initial ideas on any given subject in order to see if there may have been other ways to gain insight. To this end, allow me to attempt to start anew and trace my own personal steps that lead to the thesis of this dissertation.

Upon reflection, I now can see that classification is a dangerous thing. Far too often, it lulls us academics into a false sense of security; we begin to feel as if we understand a thing just because we have a label for it. At least that’s how I often feel when I stand in front of my Introduction to Literature class at Columbia College at the beginning of every semester. For example, when I teach *L’Etranger*, I often begin by telling my students that Albert Camus is an existentialist and as they take feverish notes while I prattle on about the origins

and different trends within the larger philosophical and literary tradition we all feel as if we are getting somewhere.

Typically, I begin with the death of Hegel and the emergence of the post-Hegelians. I explain how Marx took things in a different direction than did Feurbach, and Nietzsche. I go on to teach about Nietzsche and how things have never been quite the same since he killed God. I go on to discuss Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism and explain how not all existentialists are atheist. I then speak about Sartre's brand of existentialism and his famous debate with Camus around the question of existentialism, politics, and revolt.⁶

Finally, I take up Camus' brand of existentialism, "the absurd," and point out moments within *L'Etranger*, that exemplify the particular existential trends that most influenced his writings. In other words, I teach Camus the way I was taught Camus, as an existentialist. In the end, all of us, my students and I, feel satisfied: We now have a "handle" on this writer. But do we? In labeling Camus within a tradition and/or movement, does that say we now understand him and the movement?

All this comfortableness came to an end the day I stumbled upon a text that challenged everything I thought I knew about literary classification. The book was *Native Son* by Richard Wright. Here was a detective novel, structured as a tragedy, narrated by an existentialist and Marxist, and written to be the archetype for every form of Black protest fiction thereafter. None of my prior studies in literature and genre prepared me for *Native Son*. I first reached for the critics to

⁶ See most recent publication by Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The story of a friendship and the quarrel that ended It*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004).

explain this unusual work. For the most part, they attributed the use of multiple genres to inexperience and “weaknesses” in the text.⁷ Critics also disagree on exactly which genres are operating. Joyce Ann Joyce was the only critic I could find that took up *Native Son* as a tragedy, but she fails to give any context in her analysis. Most critics see *Native Son* influenced more by Social Realism than Tragedy.⁸ And in spite of the novel’s canonical stature, it has never been compared to its strikingly similar literary counter part: Albert Camus’ existential novel, *L’Etranger*, written, published, and described with the same structure and plot, in the same year as *Native Son*.

This elision stood out more than any other did. I wondered how a work so incredibly similar to *L’Etranger*, would fail to be mentioned in any course or by any professor in all my years of study in French and Comparative Literature in the United States and France. Thinking this must be some sort of lapse in my academic background, and my intellectual curiosity now sparked, I began a search. After extensive searches of dissertation and other academic abstracts, I could not find any academic who had devoted much attention to a comparison of these authors’ major works.

After much study, I have come to believe that this elision is not due to the act of classification per se. I am not making here an argument against generalization and classification in favor of some more individualistic, idiosyncratic exercise.

⁷ In particular see Clifton Fadimon’s attack on *Native Son* which appeared in *The New Yorker*, March 2, 1940. Also read Joyce Ann Joyce, “The Unity of Book 3,” where she defends Wright against critics: Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Robert Bone, Edward Margolies, Russell Brignano, James Baldwin, Dan McCall, Katherine Fishburn, and Margaret Alexander. *Richard Wright’s Art of Tragedy*. P. 100.

⁸ In particular see Barbara Foley, “The Politics of Poetics: Ideology and Narrative Form in An *American Tragedy* and *Native Son*,” in *Richard Wright, Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds., Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. (Amistad, New York: 1993).

Rather, after much study, I am prepared to argue that the lack of comparison between the two authors and their works under discussion have more to do with a general misunderstanding of the historical moment in which they rose to prominence, the era of Stalinism.⁹

According to Karl Marx, the universal subject is the working class, the agent of social transformation.¹⁰ Without such an agent, the responsibility of transforming society falls on the individual. Stalinism replaced the working class with the state as the subject of change. This dissertation argues that Stalinism is *the* social, political and economic factor that led to a rejection of Marxism as a legitimate criticism in the academy, and that this is the reason why these two works have never been compared as tragedies.

This dissertation is an effort to demonstrate that once we are made conscious of the critical legacy of Stalinism, fresh insights come to the fore, as for example the discovery at hand that Wright and Camus have written modern tragedies in novel form more on par with Athenian and Baroque Tragedy. This then is the first attempt that I know of to compare Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Albert Camus' *L'Etranger*, as modern tragedies and consider the ramifications of that discovery.

There have been, of course, some efforts to describe this reoccurrence, but devoid of an historical materialist analysis, the critics often lapse into an analysis of form for the sheer sake of it, without ever considering the relevance of its reoccurrence. They fail, in other words to explain its social significance. So, for

⁹ See Tony Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia*, (London 1974), especially pp. 166-68, and pp. 275-77.

¹⁰ See Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, (Moscow 1957).

example, although Joyce Ann Joyce's *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy* compares the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, in *Native Son*, to a tragic figure, she never shows how this is a pattern in other works of the period, and fails to explain its significance.¹¹

This is not to ignore the many critics who study and write about modern tragedy, such as Arthur Miller. In his work, "Tragedy and the Common Man" his thesis, in fact, is that tragedy is a perfect vehicle to express the modern condition of the working poor, and not just a vehicle to dramatize the downfall of the noblesse d'oblige. Yet, even Arthur Miller, misses the re-occurrence of tragedy in the early forties. Instead, he reaches back to the social realist novels of the thirties in his critiques. But the proletarian novels of the thirties have more in common with Zola's Naturalism than they do with tragedy. The emphasis in both cases is on the environment; but tragedy, emphasizes the subject and his or her struggle to overcome conditions they have unwittingly created. In other words, Tragedy is dependant upon a notion of the universal subject.

The difference between Naturalism and modern tragedy stems from different paths taken out of the same source: the liberal enlightenment. Naturalism ultimately rejects the path towards human liberation that the liberal enlightenment gave promise. On the other hand, modern tragedy attempts to maintain this course towards human liberation by maintaining a firm grip on the development of humanism born much earlier in Fifth Century Athens with the birth of Tragedy. In short it is, as the Marxist theorist Raymond Williams suggests "essentially a

¹¹ Joyce Ann Joyce, *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy*. (Iowa City, Iowa Press: 1991).

matter of attitudes towards revolution.” The following passage by Williams in *Modern Tragedy* deserves to be quoted at length in order to highlight naturalism’s ultimate reaction to the liberation ideology that gave birth to it:

The literature of naturalism is the most obvious example. It seems now the true child of the liberal enlightenment, in which the traditional ideas of a fate, an absolute order, a design beyond human powers, were replaced by a confidence in reason and in the possibility of a continually expanding capacity for explanation and control. In politics, this produced a new social consciousness of human destiny; in philosophy, analysis of the ideologies of religion and social custom, together with schemes of rational explanation; in literature a new emphasis on the exact observation of rational explanation of the contemporary social world. But the literature of naturalism, finally, is a bastard of the enlightenment. Characteristically, it detached the techniques of observation and description from the purposes which these were intended to serve. What became naturalism, and what distinguished it from the more important movement of realism, was a mechanical description of men as the creatures of their environment, which literature recorded as if man and thing were of the same as nature. The tragedy of naturalism is the tragedy of passive suffering, and the suffering is passive because man can only endure and can never really change his world. The endurance is given no moral or religious valuation; it is wholly mechanical, because both man and his world, in what is now understood as rational explanation, are the products of an impersonal and material process which though it changes through time has no ends. The impulse to describe and so to change a human condition has narrowed to the simple impulse to describe a condition in which there can be no intervention by God or man, the human act of will being tiny and insignificant within the vast material process, universal or social, which at once determines and is indifferent to human destiny.

This naturalism, as once the most common theory and the most ordinary practice of our literature, began in liberalism but ends, ironically, as a grotesque version of the system originally challenged by liberalism....A living design became a mechanical fate, and the latter is even further from man than the former; more decisively alienated from any image of himself.

But then this development has real causes. It is essentially, a deliberate arrest of the process of the enlightenment, at the point of critical involvement. As such it corresponds to the deliberate arrest and subsequent decadence of liberalism, at the point where its universal principles required transformation of its social programme, and where men could either go on or must go back....The universal principles of human liberation have become an embarrassment to men who, benefiting themselves from change of this kind, see before them an infinitely, expanding demand, of other classes and other peoples, which threatens to submerge and destroy their new won identity. A few men hold to their principles, and make their commitment, to a general social revolution. But the majority compromise, evade, or seek delay, and the most destructive form of this breakdown—for simple reaction is easily recognized—is the characteristic substitution of evolution for revolution, as a social model....Any attempt to assert a

general human priority, over the process as a whole, is then of course seen as childish: the mere fantasy of revolution. The extent to which almost all our politics has been reshaped to this mechanical materialism hardly needs emphasis. But what has to be said is that this movement of mind, claiming its origins in reason, was theoretically and factually a mystification of social activity, an as such discredited reason itself.¹²

Williams' use of Marxism as a theoretical tool is within the same vein as Leon Trotsky's, outlined in *Literature and Revolution*. Both attempt to mediate between politics and aesthetics through sociology of social forms." Williams, as Terry Eagleton describes, as editor in *Marxist Literary Criticism*, "Like Trotsky, did not simply reject Bourgeois culture, but argued for an expanded concept of culture."¹³ Such a Marxist critique does not mechanically reject all aspects of bourgeois culture as mere cause of a primary economic base, but sees culture as a means to understand the ongoing struggle towards social liberation. Without such a method, it is difficult to appreciate the repetition of tragic forms in modern texts, because it is through the prism of a Marxist understanding of culture that we look for the universal subject. Although we are seeing a mini-revival of this Marxist trend within today's academy, since the forties, it has been marginalized because of Stalinism. Competing interpretations such as structuralism, post-structuralism, new criticism, and new historicism differ from a genuine Marxist interpretation, within the tradition of Rosa Luxembour, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, by rejecting the notion of a universal subject.

According to Aristotle's definition of tragedy detailed in the *Poetics*, the form requires the fall of an above ordinary individual due to an external flaw (*harmatia*)

¹² Raymond Williams, "Tragedy and Revolution," *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 68-70.

¹³ Terry Eagleton, *Marxist Literary Theory*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 242.

where the action is played out in a 24 hour period and whom the audience identifies and experiences a reaction born from fear (catharsis).

Marxism offers us a tool to understand the dynamic relationship between form and content that exists within tragedy, and is often missed by modern critics. For example, a New Critic, would reject importance of authorial and other worldly influence upon the text. A post-structuralist, like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, would deny any coherence or unity in the text because there is no constant outside the text or language, to render meaning. Based on a Saussurienne notion of linguistics, all meaning is derived through language and the ways that words work together. Saussure's contributions are key, however, they stay within the parameters of linguistic theory. In no way are they meant to include a philosophy about the meaning of life, as later Postmodern interpreters suggest. Read for example a passage from his lectures on the relationship between the signified and the signifier:

So the whole language system can be envisaged as sound differences combined with differences between ideas. There are no positive ideas given, and there are no determinate acoustic signs that are independent of ideas. Thanks to the fact that the differences are mutually dependent, we shall get something looking like positive terms through the matching of a certain difference of ideas with a certain difference in signs. We shall then be able to speak of the opposition of terms and so not claim that there are only differences (because of this positive element in the combination). In the end, the principle it comes down to is the fundamental principle of the arbitrariness of the sign. It is only through the differences between signs that it will be possible to give them a function, a value. If the sign were not arbitrary, one would not be able to say that in the language there are only differences.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Ferdinand Saussure's *Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics*(1910-1911)/ publ. Pergamon Press, 1993.

He interest is upon how language derives meaning through its relation to other words, and not how language is the basis for understanding all about the world we live in.

Nevertheless, interpreters of Sausseure have used his theory to suggest that everything is language and the world is unknowable outside of the realm of representation. In short, Sophocles' *Oedipus*, and the world he lives in, is unknowable even within the world of the text because language leaves any text radically open to contradictory interpretations.

In short, Sophocles' *Oedipus*, and the world he lives in, is unknowable even within the world of the text because language leaves any text radically open to contradictory interpretations.¹⁶

Even literary traditions that consider context, such as New Historicism, see the text as a mere mirror reflection of historical events. A new historicist approach does consider the relationship between historical events and the text, but views that relationship as linear: the text is a mere reflection of the times and values of the society: The text neither distorts, confronts, nor subverts the from which it society it originates. For example, a new historicist would understand the historical environment of 5th Century Athens that gave birth to *Oedipus*, but would not understand that relationship between text and world as dynamic.

What all of these views have in common is a notion of history as incidental, as something that just happens. For the New Critics, history is irrelevant, for the

¹⁵ See especially, J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: 1978), p. 288, and *Of Grammatology*. (Baltimore: 1976) pp. 158 and 143.

¹⁶ See especially, J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: 1978), p. 288, and *Of Grammatology*. (Baltimore: 1976) pp. 158 and 143.

post-structuralist it is unknowable, and for the New Historicist, it is relativist. None of the above critics believe that it is propelled by any unifying force; they dismiss a universal subject out of hand.

But if history is incidental then the text becomes the only fixed point to begin an analysis, an “absolute,” as it were. This is to suggest that art has no radical potential to transform society or even consciousness.¹⁷ What we end up with is a fixation on culture, as cause, rather than as an effect. In other words, contemporary critics describe the protagonist and his own individual plight, which may or may not reflect values and issues in the world at large, but they see those actions as having little bearing on the world at large except on the degree to which the action stirs the emotions of the audience. Oedipus then becomes the stock example on how to write a tragedy, but nowhere do we find in the above critics an explanation on why and when the tragedy occurs. The New Critics and Post-Structuralist answer how and what happens; a Marxist interpretation explains *why* it happens. This is important because if you don’t know why a literary form appears you may fail to note repetition of tragic forms particularly in a modern context and a different genre.

A Marxist interpretation allows one to see connections and parallels that are missed when one denies the social significance of the universal subject. Without such an agent, history is seen as a series of incidents without any connections.

For Karl Marx “the history of all hitherto societies was a history of class struggle.” Devoid of any motor propelling history forward, everything is seen as

¹⁷ See especially Georg Lukacs’ “The Ideology of Modernism” (1957) and T. W. Adorno’s “Commitment” (1962) in *Marxist Literary Theory*, eds., Eagleton and Milne.

relative. Literature, art, and culture, viewed in this relativist soup, become mere accidents of history, historical bloopers, with no cause and effect. The rejection of this notion of a unified subject stems from erroneous interpretations of the first and only successful workers revolution. The horrors of Stalinism lead the “New Left” to a reject, not just of the primacy of a class analysis, but a rejection of the potential for the subject to transform his world.

Socialist Worker’s Party leader Tony Binn cites the matter succinctly in a 1986 agitation pamphlet:

As socialists, we cannot avoid the question of Russia. Every time we argue for a socialist revolution here at home, we have the example of Russia thrown back in our faces: the ‘socialist’ slave camps of the Gulag Archipelago, the ‘socialist’ tanks that invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, the ‘socialist’ helicopter gun ships in Afghanistan, the ‘socialist’ imprisonment of free trade unionists in Eastern Europe.

There is an urgent need to confront these questions. Does a serious Marxist analysis of Russia really reveal it to be socialist? Does it reveal it to be, as some people on the left argue, a superior form of society that is on the road to socialism? If so then we may as well forget about Marxism. It would lose all credibility as the theory of the liberation of the masses of ordinary people.

But this is not our view. A proper understanding both of Russia today and of Marx’s analysis of capitalism reveal Russia to be state capitalist, not socialist. Russia is not a superior social formation to those of the West but an imperialist capitalist power just as they are. It cannot be made socialist by just a few reforms here and there, but, as in the West, it will require a full-scale workers’ revolution against the ruling class and the entire social fabric that preserves their rule.¹⁸

Even though the Soviet Union has collapsed since the time of this pamphlet’s publication, the question of whether or not Russia was Socialist is still significant when considering the relevance of Marxist ideas to literary interpretation.¹⁹ Take

¹⁸ The introduction to a shortened version of an article first published in *International Socialism*.

¹⁹ See John Molyneux, *Marxism and the Party*, “The Revolutionary Party Today.” (Chicago, Haymarket: 2003), pp. 162-169).

for example, Raymond Williams's article, "Tragedy and Revolution," Williams, although not a Leninist, uses a historical materialist understanding of the universal subject to critique academics' separation of Tragedy from the idea of social revolution. Tragedy is not pessimistic, according to Williams, if you understand the "social and political forces that give rise to it." Williams is not, of course, the only Marxist critic out there.

Williams's popularity, however, is a continuing sign of a genuine revival of Marxist ideas and criticism within the academy.²⁰ Although, these ideas are still quite marginal, the resurgence follows a growing openness to Marxist ideas in U.S. society since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

We see, of course, competing traditions within this resurgence, yet most Marxist critics within the academy still have one common thing in common: They are all influenced by Althusser's rejection of agency. In *Lenin and Philosophy*, Althusser abandons Marx's theory, and Lenin's application, of the working class as a universal subject, for Capitalism's institutional framework, seen as tied together by competing ideologies. Althusser's elimination of agency will pave the theoretical way for postmodernisms' fragmented, unknowable, "identities." We have all ceased to become Leninists.

Yet, wasn't it Lenin's most important contribution at the very essence of Marxism? Lenin helped to demonstrate that the working class could create social revolution. He gave example to Marx's famous axiom "philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point, however, is to change it." He took the theory of

²⁰ See especially, Terry Eagleton's *Marxist Literary Theory* (1996)

Marx's concretized Hegelian universal spirit, and made it a historic reality through the creation of an organization, a Party, that understood its potential to lead the working class to overthrow of the social order. Nevertheless, Lenin has gone the way of Stalin, and with them, Leon Trotsky, whose great critical work, *Literature and Revolution*, is hardly ever found today on literature syllabi. Nevertheless, the theoretical tradition of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky reveals Marxism to be useful, critical tools to help all of us understand works written during the era of Stalinism.

Due to the popularity of Wright and Camus, and the success of *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*, each makes an excellent comparative model to explore the Stalinist distortions seen most vividly through analysis of their works written at the tail end of the last great upheavals in International working class struggle.

The re-emergence of tragedy and the birth of French Existentialism in the early forties reflects a changed social condition—a society moving away from the idea of social revolution. Tragic forms, as Williams correctly observes, are not here a negative example or reaction to social manifestations, but a positive commentary on the potential for social revolution. In conclusion, the challenge of literary classification, is a challenge for academics to consider a revision of our current understanding of an historical period that most believe ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Chapter 2

Actions Speak Louder than Words: Tragic Plots and Revolutionary Potential

Probably the most common critical error in assessing the value of a Marxist critique is the prevailing assumption that Marxists are only interested in the text in so much as it reflects historical reality. For example in the *Compact Bedford*,²¹ the editor delineates a Marxist critique from other forms of literary interpretation such as Feminism, New Criticism, and Structuralism, as far as the Marxist, according to Bedford, places his or her emphasis upon content rather than form. Such a criticism not only flies in the face of well known Marxian analyses of form, such as Lukacs *Theory of the Novel* and Macherey's *Literary Production*, but it also sets up a false dichotomy between form and content. Such a view also fails to explain the persistence and/or reoccurrence of particular forms at completely different stages of human development. For example, in the case of *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*, each work relies on Aristotelian model of tragedy to lend meaning to their respective works. To comprehend the significance of this reoccurrence and why such a reoccurrence belies any effort to neatly separate form and content it is useful to compare first the plot structure of *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*. Such a comparison will show that a Marxist analysis need not separate form from content, but is rather useful in exposing the dynamic relation between the two.

²¹ See section on literary traditions in the Michael Meyer's *The Compact Bedford: Introduction to Reading, Thinking, and Writing*. (Bedford/St. Martin: 2003).

If you ignore for a moment the cultural differences of *Native Son* and *L'Etranger* any reader will note the similarity in their plot structure. Both texts create a protagonist born of ordinary circumstance who is lead through a series of events to commit, accidentally, a senseless murder half way through the novel. The crime occasions the protagonists' ultimate sentence to death row. On the last page of each novel, respectively, the condemned man awaits his execution with a new found awareness of his situation in the world that lends him a certain contentment unattainable prior to his sentencing.

In *Native Son*, our protagonist is a poor Black man from Chicago's South-side named Bigger Thomas. Bigger lands a job as a live-in handyman working for a wealthy real-estate developer named Mr. Dalton. The same day that he is hired, Mr. Dalton's Daughter, Mary, compels Bigger to chauffeur her and her boyfriend, Jan, to one of Bigger's haunts in the poorer side of town. After a night of necking and drinking in the back seat, Bigger drops off her boyfriend and then proceeds to carry an inebriated Mary up the stairs and into her bedroom. At that precise moment Mary's mother, the blind Mrs. Dalton, enters Mary's room and Bigger, a Black man now terrified of being discovered in a white woman's bedroom, accidentally smothers Mary to death with a pillow, to keep her from alerting her mother that he is in her bedroom. In a gruesome effort to hide his deed, Bigger chops Mary up with an axe and places her body in the basement's furnace. The next day, when a detective stumbles on Mary's charred remains, Bigger flees, only to be caught and taken off to jail, after an intensive man hunt through Chicago's South-side. At the end of a lengthy court battle Bigger is found guilty

of first degree murder and sentenced to die in the electric chair. The final scene depicts Bigger grimacing through the bars as his lawyer, Max, dejectedly walks away.

In *L'Etranger*, our protagonist is a working class white man from French occupied Algiers, named Mersault. On the day following the burial of his mother, he accompanies his girlfriend, his friend Raymond, and Raymond's girlfriend to the beach. Raymond, who is of nefarious character and often on the wrong side of the law, leads Mersault into an altercation with a group of Arabs. At the exact half way point of the novel, Mersault returns that same day to the spot of the altercation. With the sun blinding his eye sight he accidentally fires the gun given to him by Raymond at an Arab on the beach. This crime leads to a court battle which he ultimately loses, and like Bigger, Mersault is also sentenced to death row. And again, in another plot parallel, Mersault, sneers like Bigger does, in the final scene as he looks out from his jail cell.

Interestingly, both Bigger and Mersault are ultimately condemned to die for a breach of custom rather than their respective acts of murder. Bigger is convicted in the eyes of the jury for his supposed rape of a white woman, although he never raped anyone; and Mersault is similarly found guilty in the eyes of the jury for not showing any grief over the death of his mother, although his lack of demonstrative emotion did not reflect his true feelings towards his mother. In short both are sentenced to death not because of their individual characters but because their actions supposedly breach a societal more. It is in this turn of

events that each novel goes beyond any naturalist or realist framework into the dimension of tragedy.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle states:

For tragedy is an imitation not of men but of a life, an action, and they have moral quality in accordance with their characters but are happy or unhappy in accordance with their actions; hence they are not active in order to imitate their characters [as one would find for example in a realist novel], but they include the characters along with the actions for the sake of the latter. Thus the structure of events, the plot, is the goal of the tragedy, and the goal is the greatest thing of all.²²

In spite of the fact that Aristotle could not have imagined a “worse” character playing the role of protagonist, as we find in today’s modern tragedies (until the 19 Century non-aristocrats were only featured in comedy), nor could he have foreseen the development of the novel, his definition of plot in tragedy neatly ties in to the two plots we have outlined above. Each plot exposes how an action taken on the part of the protagonist leads to his ultimate demise, and this action, as different from an ordinary adventure or detective novel, has moral import. So for example, both Bigger and Mersault are condemned to die for their actions which transgress, however unconsciously, a societal taboo. These actions lead to the “goal” of their respective tragedies, which is the realization on the part of the protagonist of his mistake. But again, their respective mistake is not having committed a crime, but rather his not having seen how his actions have determined his life, rather than the other way around. In this definition of tragedy, the plot at least lies in direct conflict with an absolutist philosophy. The individual character is produced as a result of his actions, rather than having some

²² Aristotle, *Poetics*, Trans., by Gerald F. Else. (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor:1970), 27.

pre-conceived notion of subjectivity, the subject is produced after he acts. This is where Raymond Williams understand tragedy as having revolutionary potential (see Williams below). It pre-supposes that the individual is not locked into a pre-determined self, but is free to create that self through action. The entire plot revolves around this “unified” action. In other words, in fiction at least, men do have the ability to transform their world, irrespective of fate or divine right.

Another interesting point that Aristotle makes about tragic plots, and which pertains to this discussion, is how the plot reflects the writer’s views on what is possible:

From what has been said it is also clear that the poet’s job is not to report what has happened but what is likely to happen: that is, what is capable of happening according to the rule of probability or necessity. Thus, the difference between the historian and the poet is not in their utterances being in verse or prose; the difference lies in the fact that the historian speaks of what has happened, the poet of the kind of thing that *can* happen. Hence, also poetry is more philosophical and serious business than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars. “Universal” in this case is what kind of person is likely to do or say certain things, according to probability or necessity; that is what poetry aims at, although it gives its persons particular names afterward; while the ‘particular’ is what Alcibiades did or what happened to him.²³

Finally as we conclude our analysis of plot in both novels there is a question left unresolved which will remain unresolved if we stick to a mere formalist analyses, for what can novels which shy away from the particular tell us by themselves about the what the author has deemed possible. Without a larger perspective, our reading is myopic. We must step outside of the text and look to the historical developments at the time in order to prove the main argument in this dissertation:

²³ *Poetics*, p. 33

Both plots are tragic harbingers of the retreat of the revolutionary potential which had existed up to the writing of these two texts. Far from some “crude” Marxian analysis, that sees the text as only a mirror of historical events, we maintain that these writers were not merely “reporting” on historical events of their time. They were not writing about what had already happened, but showing, rather than telling, what probably would happen to humanity if the moral lessons of these texts went unheeded. In other words, their respective plots have universal consequences.

Chapter 3

A Close Reading: The Tragedy of Resistance

“In our society any man who does not weep at his mother’s funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death.” –Albert Camus

Thus far, we have discussed the distortions of Stalinism as it related to Wright and Camus being mischaracterized by various critics, academics and interpreters. Within that context, we have also considered how the plots of their most celebrated novels take a tragic form to announce the retreat of the revolutionary potential of the epoch. Now, I would like to offer a close reading of each of the novels under discussion in order to show how these same distortions repeat themselves when we offer a textual interpretation of *Native Son* and *L’Etranger*. We will see in our comparison of the opening scenes below how both use a similar style and tone, to produce an effect which introduces their respective protagonists as neither totally of naturalist or existential in origin, but instead more akin to characters acting in a tragedy.

Native Son:

Brrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinnng!

An alarm clock clanged in the dark and silent room. A bed spring creaked. A woman’s voice sang out impatiently:

“Bigger, shut that thing off!”

A surly grunt sounded above the tinny ring of metal. Naked feet swished dryly across the planks in the wooden floor and the clang ceased abruptly.

“Turn on the light, Bigger.”

“Awright,” came a sleepy mumble.

Light flooded the room and revealed a black boy standing in a narrow space between two iron beds, rubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands. From a bed to his right, the woman spoke again:

“Buddy, get up from there! I got a big washing on my hands today and I want you-all out of here.”

Another black boy rolled from bed and stood up. The woman also rose and stood in her nightgown.

“Turn your heads so I can get dressed,” she said.

The two boys averted their eyes and gazed into a far corner of the room. The woman rushed out of her nightgown and put on a pair of step-ins. She turned to the bed from which she had risen and called:

“Vera! Get up from there!”

“What time is it, Ma? Asked a muffled, adolescent voice from beneath a quilt.

“Get up from there, I say!”

“O.K., Ma.”

A brown-skinned girl in a cotton gown got up and stretched her arms above her head and yawned. Sleepily, she sat on a chair and fumbled with her stockings. The two boys kept their faces averted while their mother and sister put on enough clothes to keep them from feeling ashamed; and the mother and sister did the same while the boys dressed. Abruptly, they all paused, holding their clothes in their hands, their attention caught by a light tapping in the thinly plastered walls of the room. They forgot their conspiracy against shame and their eyes strayed apprehensively over the floor.

“There he is again, Bigger!” the woman screamed, and the tiny, one-room apartment galvanized into violent action. A chair toppled as the woman, half-dressed and in her stocking feet, scrambled breathlessly upon the bed. Her two sons, barefoot, stood tense and motionless, their eyes searching anxiously under the bed and chairs. The girl ran into a corner, half-stooped and gathered the hem of her slip into both hands and held it tightly over her knees.

“Oh! Oh!” she wailed.

“There he goes!”²⁴

L’Etranger:

Aujourd’hui, maman est morte. Où peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J’ai reçu un télégramme de l’asile : <<Mère décède. Enterrement demain. Sentiments insinues. >> Cela ne veut rien dire. C’était peut-être hier.

²⁴ Richard Wright, *Native Son*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), pp. 3- 5.

L'asile de vieillards est à Marengo, à quatre-vingts kilomètres d'Alger. Je prendrai l'autobus à deux heures et j'arriverai dans l'après-midi. Ainsi, je pourrai veiller et je rentrerai demain soir. J'ai demandé deux jours de congé à mon patron et il ne pouvait pas me les refuser avec une excuse pareille : «Ce n'est pas de ma faute. » Il n'a pas répondu. J'ai pensé alors que je n'aurais pas dû lui dire cela. En somme, je n'avais pas à m'excuser. C'était plutôt à lui de me présenter ses condoléances. Mais il le fera sans doute après-demain, quand il me verra en deuil. Pour le moment, c'est un peu comme si maman n'était pas morte. Après l'enterrement, au contraire, ce sera une affaire classée et tout revêtu une allure plus officielle.

J'ai pris l'autobus à deux heures. Il faisait très chaud. J'ai mangé au restaurant, chez Céleste, comme d'habitude. Ils avaient tous beaucoup de peine pour moi et Céleste m'a dit : «On n'a qu'une mère. » Quand je suis parti, ils m'ont accompagné à la porte. J'étais un peu étourdi parce qu'il a fallu que je monte chez Emmanuel pour lui emprunter une cravate noire et un brassard. Il a perdu son oncle, il y a quelques mois.

J'ai couru pour ne pas manquer le départ. Cette hâte, cette course, c'est à cause de tout cela sans doute, ajoute aux cahots, à l'odeur d'essence, à la réverbération de la route et du ciel, que je me suis réveillé, j'étais tassé contre un militaire qui m'a souri et qui m'a demandé si je venais de loin. J'ai dit «oui» pour n'avoir plus à parler.

L'asile est à deux kilomètres du village. J'ai fait le chemin à pied. J'ai voulu voir maman tout de suite. Mais le concierge m'a dit qu'il fallait que je rencontre le directeur. Comme il était occupé, j'ai attendu un peu. Pendant tout ce temps, le concierge a parlé et ensuite, j'ai vu le directeur : il m'a reçu dans son bureau.²⁵

From the outset each narrative uses a trenchant, Hemingway-like, style that would leave a reader alone to draw his own conclusions, if not for an eerily, flat, almost banal tone exuding from the respective narrators. If nothing else the narrative begs us, as readers, to get to the source of how such banality occurs in such a varied and dynamic world as each narrative opening describes.

Although both narratives will take on some of the most profound philosophical questions of the day, they begin with the immediacy of lived experience, leaving the more general ideas to be developed in later chapters. With brevity of style

²⁵ Albert Camus, *L'Étranger*, ed., Germaine Bree, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), 21-22

like the declarative “Brrrrrrriiiiiing” of Bigger’s alarm clock or the simple announcement to the reader by the first person narrative of the protagonist Mersault that “«Aujourd’hui, Maman est morte”, the narrator rejects indirect language to make a proclamation in the opening line followed by lengthy dialogue. The direct address opening hopes to awaken the readers’ emotions. These short declarative phrases attempt to move the reader into an emotional state compelling him or her to experience rather than merely observe the action. Unlike the description that follows—influenced by the more realist descriptions that dominate openings like *Le Pere Goriot*, although demanding through the use of dialogue more of the reader than the role of Balzac’s observer—these opening lines are the first event in a chain of events leading to the protagonist’s crime and subsequent punishment. Like tragedy, the first action in each novel, sets off the sequence of events that will ultimately prove meaningful and logical in the final analysis when the protagonist has the benefit of experience and the advantage of time to reflect his circumstances.

Each respective narrative opening description that follows the declarative opening lines is rich in detail: Bigger’s sister is not just a “girl” but “A brown-skinned girl in a cotton gown,” who “[s]leepily, sits on a chair and fumbles with her “stockings.” Their clothes are not just clothes but their only form of privacy, barely enough to keep them from “feeling ashamed;” It is not just a family but also a “conspiracy against shame.” And as readers, we are also, “caught by a light tapping in the thinly plastered walls of the room,” which signals the entrance of the rat into the scene and Bigger’s development, from his “surly, “grunt” like self,

to a fast moving hero who will beat the rat to death to save his frightened family. Yet the rat is not just any rat: It is a “huge black rat” that rears up on his legs and shows his “long yellow fangs, piping shrilly belly quivering. Bigger takes a shoe and pounds the rat’s head, “crushing it, cursing hysterically.” And like the conquering hero, he takes his dead rat as a trophy and dangles it in front of his petrified sister. His mother ends the scene with a cheering foretelling prompted by his antics: “the gallows is at the end of the road you traveling, boy. Just remember that.” The rat sets the scene: It represents Bigger’s nemesis: He will end up on death row not for cutting off the head of a young girl, but for desiring a white woman. It is his desires, his wants, and his teasing rebellious nature that make him human. His shabby environment, which the rat is the most symbolic of, and the curators of that blinding poverty, want to crush that humanity.

In *L’Etranger*, we are given minute descriptions of time. We are told the distance from Marengo to d’Alger is “a quarter-vingts kilometers d’Alger.” The exact time Mersault will « prendrai l’autobus a deuz heures » and he tells us « j’arriverai dans l’apres-midi. » The scene tells us where he eats at Celeste’s as well as details about the weather: it is « tres chaud. We know that he wants not any tie but a “cravat noir et un brasard.”

We also read much detail on his route to d’Algers: « Cette hâte, cette course, c’est a cause de tout cela sans doute, ajoute aux cahots, a l’odeur d’essence, a la réverbération de la route et du ciel. » And finally we see the <<le directeur>> who is not jus any man but a “petit” man with a legion of honor pin on his lapel. And similarly to the opening in *Native Son* we as readers are also carried through

the opening narrative though the dialogue and movements of the narrator which are first merely routine, Mersault, is also sluggish until the moment that he expresses his desire to see his mother, but is interrupted by the concierge who insists that he first visit with the director.

C'est un petit vieux, avec la Légion d'honneur. Il m'a regardé de ses yeux clairs. Puis il m'a serré la main qu'il a gardée si longtemps que je ne savais trop comment la retirer. Il a consulté un dossier et m'a dit : « Mme Meursault est entrée ici il y a trois ans. Vous étiez son seul soutien » J'ai cru qu'il me reprochait quelque chose et j'ai commencé à lui expliquer. Mais il m'a interrompu.

Like the rat, the director represents Mersault's nemesis. His implications that Mersault did not care for his mother will be the standard judgment and reason he is sentenced to death in the final scene. He represents not poverty as Bigger's nemesis does in the image of a rat, but officialdom. Mersault's humanity is never felt so keenly as in this scene with the director. He is condemned, prior to his ultimate death sentence, by the clear eyed, insensitive director, and before being allowed to see his mother. He will die for not "acting" properly.

In short both scenes rely on description and a preponderance of action to move the protagonist and the reader to the key defining moment which represents a microcosmic reflection of the text's larger plot: the conflict between the individual and his materialistic, routinized, oppressive society. Yet what takes each narrative beyond the borders of realist, naturalist, or existentialist text is the embittered tone which is juxtaposed to the rich imagery and action packed language of the respective texts. In other words, it is only in the incomparability/irreconcilability of the banal tone to the diverse setting that

moves the reader from spectator to one who feels the action. This tone reflects a sense of loss, and what has been lost is none other than the protagonist's ability to connect with this rich varied experience so attentively described in the opening. Similarly to the cathartic experience in tragedy, as readers we will be moved to both "fear" and "pity" the protagonist as he struggles in a world that the narrator has already determined, through tone, to be lost. This pessimistic tone sets the stage in the novels as much as fate sets the drama in traditional tragedy. No matter how far and wide the protagonist may wander, he cannot escape his tragic end, because he is human. From the first lines the trenchant style defines the protagonist as he is sent hurtling towards his respective murder scene where he will make a mistake in judgment that throws them into the court of public opinion which condemns him to death.

This tone comes from the existential imagination of Wright and Camus who like other young intellectuals and writers of the day, Jean Paul Sartre for example, sought to create in their fiction a protagonist who would become conscious of the absurdity of his existence. To be able to discern meaning through his action is the most vital reworking of the existential consciousness as it struggles to be heard through the realist and naturalist style reflecting the variance and drudgery of modernity. This conflict is as much a conflict over language as it is over ideas. For existentialism is not a style, but a system of ideas, a philosophy. In fiction it can only come to light through language that must by necessity contain all of the style, form and tradition of an earlier time. Leon Trotsky said: "The human imagination is economical" in his work *Literature and Revolution* which critiqued

Futurism and social realism as falsehoods. In the absence of a sustained, revolution that would have thrown out the dominant ideologies of the former society, a writer of any era is forced to use the linguistic tools at hand, not make up new ones. It is then the voice of the narrator, his tone, which competes with a language now out of sorts with his new found condition, thus the need for tragic form. Tragedy is always a re-working of not just of fears and frustrations, it is not melodrama, but a reworking of an ideological crisis. Tradition surrounds each tragic protagonist, but his role is always to break the rule, in order to expose the very limits of language and society. In short, existentialism owes a great debt to tragedy which I will discuss below, but first allow me to show how in spite of these similarities both author's have ended up on opposing sides of the interpretive fence.

Chapter 4

Severed at Birth: Les Etranges Sons

At the time of their premature deaths (within 10 months of each other)²⁶ both Richard Wright and Albert Camus had achieved international fame. Each also had the unusual distinction of writing novels that were lauded by laymen and critics alike.²⁷ Yet, in spite of the fact that both Wright and Camus were insiders within the upper echelons of French and American literary circles, their works ironically expressed their degree of estrangement from that upper class, because they were both considered to be the literary militants rather than theorists. Yet, such a biased view does not explain the theoretical critique of radical ideologies found in *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*. Written at the moment of Stalin's alignment with the allied powers in World War 2 in 1940,²⁸ each work attempts to raise consciousness of its respective reader, in spite of the huge cracks becoming exposed in the very ideologies that helped develop their own consciousness to begin with. In this section I shall summarize how the biographical parallels between Wright and Camus helps explain their roles as both "insiders" and "outsiders" within the literary circles of their day. I shall further demonstrate how their similar personal experiences lead to the production of their most well known works, which offer a unique contribution to salvage Marxism from Stalinism by

²⁶ Camus, January 1960; Wright, November 1960.

²⁷ By the time of their deaths both Wright and Camus were admired by most of the literati of their day including Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre.

²⁸ *Native Son* was published in 1940; *L'Etranger* was published in 1942,

utilizing the form of tragedy in their mutual effort to create anew the revolutionary potential of the masses. In short, their personal background left both of them ideally suited to reach back to Marx's humanism (a product of tragedy) in order to escape the bureaucratic literary constructs of French Existentialism and Stalinism, constructs that sought to straightjacket each other's purpose to ignite their audiences.

For both Richard Wright and Albert Camus the desire for "setting out from real, active men," was born in the poverty stricken homes of their childhoods. The desire to relate the "ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process" grew as they became men side by side the artistic geniuses of their day. Each found themselves amongst the leading intellectuals of their day, and proceeded to write two works that to this day remain popular and appealing to contemporary readers. And yet, in spite of occasional references to Camus by some critics who analyze Wright's existential influences, they have never been compared in the same academic breadth. In this section I will explain how this artificial separation stems from critics failure to see Wright and Camus as proponents of Marxism and the theories elucidated above--a literary blind spot that has lead to a false tokenization and categorization of Wright and Camus.

Both Wright and Camus spend their childhoods at the bottom social wrung of society in the midst of great civil and political repression—Camus, in French occupied Algiers and Wright, in America's Jim Crow South; Each experienced poverty in similar ways, and subsequently wrote novels engrained with these early

childhood experience. In other words, it is out of their impoverished environment that both Wright and Camus hone their creative potential.

After an interview published in *Tomorrow* in May 1945, Charles J. Rolo had this to say about Richard Wright's past and the treatment of his aesthetic:

Richard Wright was born on a plantation near Natchez and grew up in the slums of Memphis and the small-town slums of Arkansas and Mississippi. When Richard was five, his father deserted his mother. A few years later his mother was crippled by paralysis. His childhood was a nightmare of abject poverty, hunger and fear—poverty that sent him begging for pennies in the saloons, where grown-ups would get him drunk and give him nickels to repeat obscenities; hunger that was forever 'nudging at my ribs, twisting my empty guts until they ached'; fear of beatings at home, of hostile black children, of ghosts and of harsh religion of his grandmother, and later dread of the white world, which murdered his uncle and lynched a boyhood acquaintance, in which the slightest slip of word, or expression meant 'ugly' trouble.'

Germaine Bree sees the seeds of *L'Étranger's* theme of critical detachment in his critique of a passage from Camus' first published work:

He was a stranger, too, in the unlovely décor of poverty. 'I remember a child who lived in a poor section... There were only two floors and the staircase was not lighted. Even now, many years later, he could find his way home to the house in the dark... His very body is impregnated by that house. His legs remember the exact height of the steps. His hand, its instinctive, never-dominated horror of the banisters... because of the roaches.' Camus was never to forget the closed, silent 'world of poverty' of his childhood. Asking nothing, expecting nothing, it had its own dignity. Its inhabitants, stoic rather than resigned, silently and perhaps unconsciously despised the glib rationalizations and easy consolations in which the more fortunate middle class sometimes indulges. The mother, the grandmother, the stark poverty around him would have constituted the child's entire world had it not been for the 'other side of the coin,' the luxurious beauty of the land of Africa.²⁹

²⁹ Germaine Bree, *Camus*, (New York, 1964), p. 16.

Camus describes for us this beauty in his text, *L'Envers et L'endroit*. He writes:

There is solitude in poverty, but a solitude that gives each thing its real price. At a certain degree of wealth, the sky itself and a night filled with stars seem natural riches. But, at the bottom of the ladder, the sky regains all its meaning: a grace without price: Summer nights, mysteries amid the crackling of the stars. Behind the child stretched a stinking corridor and his broken little chair gave slightly under him. But his eyes raised, he drank from the purity of night.³⁰

Camus describes what he owes to his childhood in the following passage on poverty in Paris:

Born poor in a working-class section of the town, I never knew what destitution was before I saw our cold suburbs [of Paris]... The warmth that reigned over my childhood freed me from resentment. I lived amid privation but also in a sort of delectation and felt infinite forces within me. The only problem was to discover where I should apply them.³¹

Richard Wright's privation was even starker:

Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly. The hunger I had known before this had been no grim, hostile stranger; it had been a normal hunger that had made me beg constantly for bread, and when I ate a crust or two I was satisfied. But this new hunger baffled me, scared me, and made me angry and insistent. Whenever I begged for food now my mother would pour me a cup of tea which would still clamor in my stomach for a moment or two; but later I would feel hunger nudging my ribs, twisting my empty guts until they ached.³²

³⁰ *L'Envers et L'endroit* (Algiers: Charlot, 1937), p.27.

³¹ *L'Envers et L'endroit* (Gallimard, preface to 1958 printing), p. 17.

³² Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York, 1998), pp. 14-15.

Rolo sees this “underprivileged black boy...by instinct a rebel, with a burning sense of the dignity of man.”³³ Wright would agree: “The artist is a revolutionary figure,” according to Richard Wright:

“The serious artist grapples with his environment, passes judgment on it. He helps to deepen people’s perceptions, quicken their thought processes. He makes them conscious of the possibility of historical change—and in that way facilitates change. That’s a big task, a self-sufficient one.”³⁴

Both Wright and Camus forge their craft as writers from the memories of the degradation and horror of “twisting...empty guts,” and “roaches” running through dark hallways.

Yet, in spite of these biographical parallels, critics tend to focus on differences rather than similarities in their biographies. Take for example the following summation of Hakutani’s points on Wright and Camus:

Hakutani skillfully shows how Wright's novel could not be entirely subsumed under the philosophy of existentialism, both because of the persistence of Wright's naturalistic approach to storytelling and because of his character's striving toward meaning, as opposed to Mersault's vision of the absurd. The fact is that, as a Western, European man, Mersault has already been through the individualism that Wright's character is trying to achieve; and has found it wanting.

Hakutani rightly sees *Bigger* reflecting much of the values born from Wright’s personal experiences in the Deep South and later Chicago; nevertheless he is somewhat blinded by the influences of Wright’s biography upon his master work.

³³ See Charles J. Rolo, “This Too, Is America,” in Kenneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre (ed.), *Conversations with Richard Wright* (University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p.68.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67

It is wrong to create some natural polarity between Wright as a poor, impoverished Black man and Camus as the affluent, educated European. Both as we see grew up hungry and alienated, yet committed: Early on Wright expresses this need to go beyond the “individualism” that Mersault “has [also] found wanting:”

My purpose was to capture a physical state or movement that carried a strong subjective impression, an accomplishment which seemed supremely worth struggling for. If I could fasten the mind of the reader upon the words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response, I felt that I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative. I strove to master words, to make them disappear, to make them important by making them new, to make them melt into a rising spiral of emotional stimuli, each greater than the other, each feeding and reinforcing the other, and all ending in an emotional climax that would drench the reader with a sense of a new world.³⁵

Wright and Camus saw their purpose, and created protagonists that reflected this purpose—Bigger and Mersault not excluded--to raise the consciousness of the reader. Each wanted to make the individual aware of his relation to others. Always, the protagonist is thrust into the realm of other social beings engaged in activity that interestingly pulls him to his downfall, all because he fails to recognize himself in relation to others.

Germaine Bree sees Camus’ originality in a way reminiscent of Wright’s words above:

If we can distinguish Albert Camus from among his contemporaries it is perhaps because, in this realm, he started from nothing and had nothing to question or reject, except precisely that

³⁵ Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York, 1998), p. 280.

very nihilism that might have led him to passively to accept Illness and death. His notebooks in these early years reveal his intense concern with ethical values, his need to establish a passionately loved life on intellectual foundations that seemed valid to him. Camus was never to abandon this search. It was the strongest driving force behind his work, and it made a writer of him.³⁶

The common intellectual and ethical thread that runs through Wright and Camus writings are not coincidental. Both Ellison and Sartre, and many more of the literati of the day, wanted what these two had: a creative intellect born from working class experience: Such experience gave each work a sense of purpose and with it the ability to connect to a mass audience in a way that Baldwin, Ellison, Dreiser, Sartre, Genet, or Stein could not. Both saw political theory as a means to elucidate lived experience. For each the primary emphasis is upon the daily lives of human beings: for Wright those human beings lived in the “slums” of Chicago, for Camus they lived in the slums of Algiers and Paris. In response to Sartre’s philosophy concerning the claim that the author must be “engage”, the editor of “*Le Combat*,”³⁷ said “It is not struggle that makes artist of us, but art that obliges us to be combatants.” Or as the narrator of Camus’ *La Peste* says: “It is not rebellion itself which is noble but the demands it makes upon us.”³⁸

Ronald Aronson sums up this key difference between Camus and Sartre in the first chapter of his most recent work on Camus and Sartre. He explains how in 1944 in the midst of the insurrection against the Germans, Camus as editor of the

³⁶ Bree, *Camus*, pp. 26-27.

³⁷ Newspaper for a clandestine resistance cell Camus joined in 1943. “Combat” had been founded in 1942 as an intelligence and sabotage organization to carry news of the war. Camus became editor in 1943.

³⁸ from *The Plague*, 1947

underground resistance newspaper, *Combat*, “offered Sartre the opportunity of a lifetime,” in asking him to write a descriptive report of the Liberation period.

Aronson writes:

With the resulting articles the thirty-nine-year-old philosopher and writer who had not known how to engage himself directly in the world could now participate—by going into the streets and observing events, and then by describing them to a mass audience.

Sartre wrote two articles that described “the intoxication and joy” as the public happily “plunged back to collective life.” Sartre subsequently ended up with a by-line and his name appeared at the top of *Combat* in big, bold letters.

According to Aronson’s research, however, particularly his readings of Simone De Beauvoir’s unpublished writings, it was she and not he who wrote the articles, because, as she said, ‘he was too busy.’ Aronson insists that “this is no small point,” because “These articles appeared to show Sartre coming down to earth in a new and decisive way, at a defining historical moment, and they have long been regarded as the best eyewitness account of those days.” In yet another comparison of Camus’ and Sartre’s level of engagement, Aronson cites an anecdote in which Camus finds Sartre asleep at the Comedie-Francaise during the insurrection and says ‘You have turned your theater seat in the direction of history!’ Aronson proves that this remark “would be central in their later falling out.” Aronson sums up their relationship in a few words: “Camus was the captain of the boat that Sartre, it seems kept missing.”³⁹

³⁹ Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, pp. 24-25.

By this very function “the artist is the witness of freedom, and this is a justification for which he sometimes must pay heavily.”⁴⁰ Each sees the world as Marxists; they see a world where reality determines consciousness. Each is equally suspicious of over arching ideological systems of thought that hinder the expression of lived experience. Although both were member of the Communist Party, Wright in the CPUSA between the years 1935 and 1945, and Camus in the Communist Party from the fall of 1935 until the summer or fall of 1937, each became highly critical of the CP, and in fact ended up being expelled over the same issue as the Party shifted right-ward into the what is known as the Popular Front period where Communists sought to make alliances with allied party’s in a united front against fascism. Aronson describes Camus expulsion:

He was expelled for refusing to follow the shift in the Party line that, under the colonial interpretation of the Popular Front, would soft-pedal previous PCF support for Arab nationalism....Camus believed that the party’s commitment to Algerian Arabs should have precedence over such strategic concerns.⁴¹

Wright’s views are similar. Prior to his criticisms of the Communists and in defense of the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany, Wright explains: “what the pact really meant was that peaceful relations between Germany and the Soviet Union struck a blow against the imperialist war intrigues of Chamberlain and the continent.” Angelo Herndon explains Wright’s position: He believes it is a war between two thieves who have fallen out and want to settle their imperialist quarrel with the blood of the common people.” Wright’s starting

⁴⁰ *Actuelles I*, p.264.

⁴¹ Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, p. 25.

point in his critique of allied intervention is the condition of African Americans.

He writes

That the Negro has no stake in this war is borne out by the fact that England and France oppress more Negroes and colonial peoples than all the Empires of the world combined. This war is not to free or protect the interest of small states, but to protect the vast colonial holdings of the imperialist powers.⁴²

At the time of the writing of *Native Son* the Soviet Union's shift in policy to support allied powers during the Popular Front period leads Wright to make criticisms of the CP, similar to those by Camus above for its emphasis on strategic questions over the colonial question. In an article titled *Negro Author Criticizes Reds as Intolerant* (1944), Wright states that

Publicly [the] Communists will deny that there is any substantial change in their militancy but privately they offer any handy excuse. The militancy on the Negro question has passed into the hands of right-wing Negroes. That was not true eight years ago. Most of the battles then were led by Communists.

In an answer to what caused the Chicago rift between him and the Communists, Wright states:

It was an accumulation of many things—not so much a leaving as an ejection over a difference of opinion. I had my way of expressing my conception of Negro experience in my writing. I thought it would be of value to them. There was an irreconcilable gap in our attitudes....I do not regard the Communists today as effective instruments for social change....the Communists have a terrible lot to learn from people....What it amounts to is that they are narrow-minded, bigoted, intolerant and

⁴² *Conversations with Richard Wright*, ed. By Kenneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre, (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1993), pp. 25-26.

frightened of new ideas which don't fit into their own, whether these ideas or right or wrong.⁴³

Both *Native Son* and *L'Etranger* privilege the common man and his resistance to current ideologies. Their purpose is beyond the realist's, because they create heroes whose consciousness of these ideological contradictions ultimately subverts their essential character. In the end reconciliation fails, but the purpose was to expose the *effort* of reconciliation. The reconciliation between social consciousness and current bourgeois ideology fails in their works, while succeeding in a realist text because the goals are dissimilar. In the protest novel they seek to do more than expose the contradictions in Bourgeois society. Instead, they propose a more revolutionary role to art.

In turn they make the Marxist ideology of their day accessible to working class experience, as well as taking that experience into the intellectual circles of their time. On a question about audience in *Native Son*, Wright explains: "I would address my words to two groups: I would tell Communists how common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them."⁴⁴ Camus is also conscious of his role as a messenger of sorts from the front lines relating to his contemporaries the lived experience of oppression that pulsates through his ideological narratives. Aronson writes about Camus' sense of engagement: "*The Stranger* became the

⁴³ Richard Wright, "Negro Author Criticizes Reds as Intolerant," From *New York Herald Tribune*, 28 July 1944, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper, 1977), p. 66.

publishing event of an Occupation that sought, above all, to promote the illusion of normal life as one of the fruits of collaboration with the Germans.”⁴⁵

For both the theory of “engagement” was a Marxian concept that insisted upon positively subversive narratives. In “Poetry of the Future” from *the Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx wrote,

Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living.

It is important to understand that in spite of their respective criticisms of the Communist Party--and particularly in the case of Camus, the Hegelian-Marxian dialectic--both Wright’s and Camus’ protagonists in their respective novels are not a celebration of the individual over oppressive ideologies, whether from the CP or Bourgeois societies. Instead their notion of the individual does not stem from bourgeois notions of the individual and private property, but from an individual as a social type whose fall is reflective of a loss of entire class, not a private loss of an individual desire. It is through their unique use of a tragic structure that they attempt to recoup the individual within a humanist perspective given the limitations of the Communist Party’s alliances with Bourgeois governments during the Popular Front period.

⁴⁵ Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, p. 27.

In short, what sets both *Native Son* and *L'Etranger* apart from many other works of their day, is their use of tragic form to structure their novelistic settings and plots. Most critics correctly see the Marxist, existentialist and naturalist influences upon these two works, but few see, and none recognize, the significance of their work as tragedies. Yet, it is the tragic mistake each makes in committing a murder half way through the novel (see above) that propels the protagonist downwards towards his fall and final moment of recognition as an “absurd” hero. Each stumbles into consciousness by mistake. Only after committing a senseless murder of a relative stranger half way through the story line, does the possibility for awareness occur. Interestingly, it is only on the last page of each that we know for sure of the protagonist’s awareness of himself as a social class.

Native Son and *L'Etranger* end with identical final shots, of Bigger and Mersault looking through the bars of death row with an ironic sneer gazing out at us all. As Max says his final “Goodbye...! He still held on to the bars. Then he smiled a faint, wry, bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut.”⁴⁶ With the Chaplain gone, Mersault gives his final thoughts:

Je m’ouvrais pour le premier fois à la tender indifférence du monde. De l’éprouver si pareil a moi, si fraternel enfin, j’ai senti que j’avais été heureux, at. que je l’étais encore. Pour que tout soit consomme, pour que je me sente moins seule, il me restait à souhaiter qu’il y ait beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon exécution et qu’ils m’accueillent avec des cris de haine.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (First Perennial, 1998), p. 430.

⁴⁷ Albert Camus, *L'Etranger* (New York, 1955), p. 138.

In the end *Bigger* and *Mersault* are both absurd and tragic. Camus describes the “tragic irony” of the “absurdist” philosophy.

The absurd man will not commit suicide: he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusions, and without resignation either. He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him. He experiences the ‘divine irresponsibility’ of the condemned man.⁴⁸

Although Camus’s absurdist philosophy was a further development from Nietzsche’s “God is dead” formula. It is actually part of a much older tradition going back to Greek Tragedy. Robert Brustein describes this phenomena in the following way:

The drama of the Western world, like the dram of the Greeks, describes a trajectory which arches from belief to uncertainty to unbelief, always developing in the direction of greater skepticism towards temporal and spiritual laws. A growing sense of futility and despair infects both Hellenistic culture and the culture of late Renaissance Europe, which is reflected in certain Naturalistic philosophies, calling everything in doubt.”⁴⁹

The random, accidental events that catapult the hero to enlightenment are what separate Wright’s and Camus’ novels from other naturalist novels of the day. It is the inadvertent crime, an external influence that puts the hero on the path of recognition. Unlike, for example, Truman Capote’s archetypal *In Cold Blood*, whose protagonist may be a “natural born killer;” or Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov of *Crime and Punishment*, whose strivings to be conscious drive him to the crime,

⁴⁸ Jean Paul Sartre, from analysis of *Mersault*, in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (1943).

⁴⁹ Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt* (Boston, 1964), p. 5.

Bigger and Mersault stumble upon their crimes as Oedipus does, as upon “a beggar in the road.” Bigger only meant to keep Mary quiet, Mersault had the sun in his eyes, Consciousness develops from an unintentional act by an individual that is not without social significance.

For Camus and Wright the absurd was not a negative, trivial state, but a genuine state of existence. To embrace the absurd is to embrace a realistic view of life, and abandon spiritual laws and logic and universal logic. This radical philosophy imbues life with meaning: the meaning of human experience. The “absurdist” goal is remain in control of destiny while recognizing that meaning occurs through interaction with others. Sartre’s theme of “engagement” is derived from this “absurdist” view of the world which insists on responsibility as a code of conduct in the absence of universal logic. Both *Native Son* and *L’Etranger* follow the principle of “engagement:” each author knows what he wants to write about.

For both Wright and Camus their topic of human experience was forged into their young creative souls through sheer pain and suffering. Wright’s first published essay: “Hell’s Voodoo Half Acre” was about his experiences in the Segregationist South. Camus first began writing a collection of essays known as the Algerian Essays, and soon thereafter he joined the reporting staff of *Alger-Republicain*. Wright and Camus, begin their writing careers as journalists. Their first novels, *Native Son* and *L’Etranger*, also represent the looming social questions of their day—Jim Crow and Black liberation for Wright, French Colonialism and German occupation for Camus. Many mistakenly argue that

L'Etranger is not pre-occupied with social and political questions. Perhaps the American title, "The Stranger," or the British "Outsider" leads one to see Mersault as "outside" or at odds with the society around him. In *Introducing Camus*, Mairwitz is more on point:

Mersault, the novel's hero, a 'stranger' to the system of Christian morality insofar as he cannot comprehend it, is certainly not an 'outsider,' neither consciously choosing to remain outside society nor being rejected by it. On the contrary, Mersault is the perfect model of a young lower-middle-class pied noir, with an ordinary desk job, and with the ordinary insiders' simple taste for watching a banal film, having a drink at a local bar, going to the beach, lying in the sun. He is very much inside the French Algerian colonial scene, living the most ordinary of lives, not at all a social reject or in any way a rebel.

After the act of murder has been accomplished each protagonist is set on a path that will allow him to ultimately reach a higher state of consciousness and begin to feel truly free. By each novel's conclusion the protagonist sits on death row awaiting execution laughing at the absurdity of his condition. Nevertheless, Hakutani, who has done the most well known and influential comparisons of Wright and Camus's novels, sees more dissimilarity than similarity around the question of crime in comparison of *L'Etranger* to a later work of Wright's. As one reviewer writes:

Hakutani concentrates more on the distinctions between Meursault and Cross Damon as radically different characters on matters of ideology and action. Wright's hero is not only an embodiment of a 'half-baked philosophy' but a "genuine product of the African American experience (163). The twins of naturalism--heredity and environment--are more evident in *The Stranger* than in *The Outsider*. For Camus, crime is not the center but a consequence; for Wright, crime occasions the creation of a new self and a new life for the hero.

Hakutani misses the point here. Perhaps blinded by Wright's realism in his descriptions of Bigger's transformation he ignores a key change in Camus' Mersault. The crime creates the opportunity for Mersault to feel. At the novel's conclusion Mersault is indeed a changed man not only does he finally begin to think of his mother, he begins to understand her:

Pour la premier fois depuis longtemps, j'ai pense a maman. Il m'a semble que je comprenais pourquoi a la fin d'une vie elle avait pris in "finance," pourquoi elle avait joue a recommencer. Si près de la mort, maman devait s'y sentir libère et prête à tout revivre.⁵⁰

Similarly, Bigger expresses his feelings before a terrified Max: "What I killed for must've been good!" Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. "It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something....I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em...."⁵¹ In both texts the crime occasions awareness, and awareness leads to the tragedy. The tragedy however stems from a societal rather individual aspect of human experience.

Nevertheless, many read this scene as an example of Wright's repudiation of the Communist Party. Kenneth Kinnanon makes an excellent observation concerning this misunderstanding in his essay "How Native Son Was Born." He writes:

Although Wright had already encountered problems with Party functionaries and was to denounce his former comrades bitterly in

⁵⁰ *L'Etranger*, p. 138.

⁵¹ *Native Son*, p. 429.

The Outsider (1953), he could hardly have been more empathetic in declaring the importance of that deepened understanding of the Bigger type made possible by Marxist thought: ‘The extension of my sense of the personality of Bigger was the pivot of my life; it altered the complexion of my existence...It was as though I had put on a pair of spectacles whose power was that of an x-ray enabling me to see deeper into the lives of men.’ Critics who read *Native Son* as a black nationalist repudiation of Marxism—Bigger’s instinctive black triumph over Boris Max’s arid white theorizing—would do well to ponder these words. Wright’s effort in the novel is to reconcile his sense of black life with the intellectual clarity and the possibility of social action provided by the Communists...: ‘I would address my words to two groups: I would tell the Communists how common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them.’⁵²

To understand how the tragic figure can express a social rather than individual part of human experience, and why this development is significant a summary of how Wright and Camus utilize tragedy rather than the more conventional bildungsroman to create structure in their respective novels will follow. Each relies upon an Aristotelian definition of tragedy, although they do it in the form of a novel rather than a play.⁵³ According to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy described in *The Poetics* and based on analysis of Sophocles’ “Oedipus”:

Tragedy, then, is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude; by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts; enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics.⁵⁴

⁵² Kenneth Kinnamon, “How *Native Son* Was Born” in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), p.112.

⁵³ Aristotle’s *Poetics* is written almost 2,000 years prior to the earliest novels that appear in the early 17th. It would take nearly 300 years before critics saw the potential to tragedy to reappear in novel form. See Arthur Miller’s “Tragedy and the Common Man.”

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics* (Ann Arbor, 1970), p. 25.

According to Aristotle the action takes place for the most part within a single day. It involves a character who is exceptional and whose fall leads to some form of awakening on the part of the protagonist. The protagonist's fall is not the result of some inner flaw (this is what separates it from traditional novels) but from a mistake in judgment. The reader observing his or her rise and fall experiences a Cathartic reaction. Given the working class roots of the characters, we are of course dealing with Miller's concept of tragedy where we have an inverted use of Aristotelian concepts.⁵⁵ In "Tragedy and the Common Man," Miller argues that a working class protagonist is an even more fit example of a tragic hero than the nobles of Aristotle's day. Joyce Anne Joyce best underscores the connection between tragedy, existentialism and naturalism in her ground breaking work *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy*.

In her introduction she critiques critics who would under mind Wright's creative aesthetic by casting him within a naturalist or existentialist literary straightjacket:

To view Bigger Thomas's characterization and the impetus behind Wright's creativity from the constructs of naturalism and existentialism falls short of capturing not only the beauty that Longinus refers to as the sublime, but also the subtle intricacies of Wright's technique responsible for the power of *Native Son*. The key to moving beyond the narrow doors of naturalism and existentialism in interpreting *Native Son* is buried in Wright's inexhaustible commitment to knowledge and in our ability to penetrate the established, prejudicial critical walls that immure Bigger as primarily an environmental victim.

⁵⁵ See Arthur Miller's, "Tragedy and the Common Man."

Citing Katherine Fishburn's Richard Wright's *Hero: The faces of a Rebel-Victim* (1977), Joyce makes an interesting general point about the continuation of tragedy in modern literature:

The ideological relationship of naturalism and existentialism to tragedy is the clue which directs the way to interpreting *Bigger* as a tragic hero and *Native Son* as a tragedy. Explaining the interrelationship between naturalism and existentialism in *Bigger*'s characterization, Fishburn writes: 'Bigger's success derives from an act of pure violence, another intersection of naturalism and existentialism in *Native Son*. Violence rages in many forms through most naturalistic literature; sheer animal survival is the key activity...Existentialism also explores man's capacities for violence...Metaphysical rebellion begins with protest against man's situation. It leads to the deification of man; God's order is replaced by man's through violence and crime.' A philosophical concept describing an individual's violent refusal to accept the strictures and limitations of the environment, existentialism moves beyond naturalism. And tragedy extends the limits of existentialism.⁵⁶

Joyce uses Richard B. Sewall's *A Vision of Tragedy* to elaborate on the true nature of tragedy. Sewall explains that tragedy's primary concern is not to establish some absolute moral truth or sociological meaning of the hero's action:

To bring the protagonist swiftly to the point of ultimate test, the artist imagines a deed which violently challenges the accepted social/legal ways. Hence the fact that that tragic heroes are often criminals in the eyes of society, and hence the frequency of the legal trial as a symbolic situation in tragedy from Aeschylus to Dostoevsky and Kafka.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Joyce, 13, 14

⁵⁷ Sewall, 61-62

Although Joyce addresses *Native Son* and not *L'Etranger*, her critique sheds light on both texts: In each the act of murder propels them into the later symbolic scenes of the trials which compels Bigger and Mersault, respectively, to come to terms with the meaning of existence. Unfortunately, because Joyce never attempts to ask why critics continue to see Wright as only a naturalist and/or existentialist she never fully explains the significance of this odd shift towards classical forms within these radical, protest novels. In other words she swings wildly in the other direction: in looking for Wright's more creative side, she counter poses it to his political side. This is a mistake, for it is his political influences that are the source for his use of tragedy in the first place, as we shall see. This same error occurs when critics take up Camus. Either they discuss his politics and role as a protest novelist, or his aesthetic as an existentialist writer. Raymond Williams observes this general oversight in his essay "Tragedy and Revolution." He writes:

Since the time of the French Revolution, the idea of tragedy can be seen as in different ways a response to a culture in conscious change and movement. The action of tragedy and the action of history has been consciously connected, and in the connection have been seen in new ways. The reaction against this, from the mid-nineteenth century, has been equally evident: the movement of spirit has been separated from the movement of civilization. Yet even this negative reaction seems, in its context, a response to the same kind of crisis. The academic tradition, on the whole, has followed the negative reaction, but it is difficult to hear its ordinary propositions and feel that they are only about a set of academic facts. They sound, insistently, like propositions about contemporary life, even when they are most negative and most consciously asocial. The other nineteenth-century tradition, in which tragedy and history were consciously connected, seems then deeply relevant. In experience and in theory we have to look again at this relation.

We must ask whether tragedy, in our own time, is a response to social disorder. If it is so, we shall not always expect the response to be direct. The disorder will appear in very many forms, and to articulate these will be very complex and difficult. A more immediate difficulty is the ordinary separation of social thinking and tragic thinking. The most influential kinds of explicitly social thinking have often rejected tragedy as in itself defeatist. Against what they have in common as the idea of tragedy, they have stressed man's powers to change his condition and to end a major part of the suffering which the tragic ideology seems to ratify. The idea of tragedy, that is to say, has been explicitly opposed to the idea of revolution: there has been much confidence on the one side as on the other. And then to describe tragedy as a response to social disorder, and to value it as such, is to break, apparently, from both major traditions.⁵⁸

Williams hits the nail on the head. The "immediate difficulty" in assessing whether tragedy is a response to social disorder in our own time, is that the very claim rests outside the universal view, articulated by both revolutionaries and the more "influential...defeatist" academics, that sees a separation between "social thinking and tragic thinking." Yes, indeed, much of this dissertation relies on Williams claim to be right, that to separate the two. I am proposing that the lack of comparison between Wright and Camus as well as the failure to see tragic repetition in their works, originates from current new-critical academics and "Marxists" of the dominant Stalinist tradition, which both separate the idea of social change from the "idea of tragedy." In regards to the former, literature in general has ceased to have any revolutionary potential (see "Post Modernism's Rejection of Modernism" Ch. 5). The latter view has reduced the role of art to mere vehicle for revolutionary propaganda. Lindsey German, re-iterates this

⁵⁸ Raymond Williams, "Tragedy and Revolution," *Modern Tragedy* (1966), quoted from Marxist Literary Theory, eds., Eagleton and Milne. pp. 242-243.

same problem in the foreword to Leon Trotsky's major work *Literature and Revolution*:"

Art and revolution, on the face of it, to have little in common. But the subject raises a range of issues: Is 'high art' superior to 'popular culture'? Can revolutionary artists contribute anything to struggle? Is there such a thing as working class culture? What is the connection between art and society?"

Two polarized views often emerge when discussing these questions: some people argue that art has nothing to do with society and can therefore be judged purely on its own terms; others that unless art offers an overt message it is meaningless. So some deny any useful art can be produced without social commitment, while others try to abstract art from society, stressing 'art for art's sake'.

These questions are not new. They are live when Leon Trotsky wrote his book *Literature and revolution* in the early 1920s. His aim was to avoid both pitfalls, to try to find a synthesis between basically propagandist and the purely aesthetic approaches to art.⁵⁹

This dissertation is a further attempt to look again as Williams does to "this relation between tragedy and history." I am arguing that the lack of recognition by critics of tragic repetition in *Native Son* and *L'Etranger* occur from their general misunderstanding of tragedy. Both Williams and German, offer our readings of the two texts, an anti-Stalinist and nontraditional view that gives the work a dialectical relationship to the social order. Their and mine is an effort to understand the dialect between each writer's respective politics and his creativity, which as I have argued above is forged from their personal experiences. Few critics have attempted to understand "the art of politics" in Wright or Camus' major works. Either they lean more towards the politics or art, i.e., what was the political philosophy behind the work, or they de-politicize art, and see any effort

⁵⁹ Lindsey German, Foreword to Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* (London, 1991), p.9.

to politicize it as a form of totalitarianism.⁶⁰ Yet, the tragic forms I say are present in Camus' 1938 and Wright's 1940 texts, which are political manifestos of different degrees, do not offer an aestheticism of politics (fascism) or a politicization of art (communism). Instead they attempt to usher in a humanism to dissolve the separation between art and politics. *Native Son* and *L'Etranger* have one most striking thing in common: in rejecting naturalist protest fiction as adequate conveyers of human experience, they reach towards tragedy. It is for the remainder of this dissertation to explain why Wright and Camus saw such a return to traditional form as historically necessary.

Both Wright and Camus saw a revolutionary role to art. Each sought to bridge the gap between art and politics by writing a humanist portrayal of working class consciousness based on lived experience in an effort to rebuff Stalinist and traditional academic preconceptions of the role of art in modern society.

Critics commit a major oversight in missing the significance of both Wright and Camus' early years upon their creative works. A key point of comparison between the two is the way in which each regards their craft as a writer within the political arena that helps to launch their careers. For both Wright and Camus the relationship between their creative and political side was often a difficult point to reconcile. Wright's career was launched by the Communist Party, and he has no problem declaring if not for his work within the Communist Party he would never have written the two works that propelled him to fame, *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*. Yet Wright's search for the authentic "negro voice" often put him at

⁶⁰ See Walter Benjamin's ending in the "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), p.242.

odds with Party discipline. He was often described by Party functionaries as a dilettante. Yet, paradoxically it was his interest to render a radical role to art by touching the most basic of human experience. He wanted to stir the reader to act politics which created the drama's to allow these authentic voices to unfold.

Richard Wright says:

My color is not my country. I am a human being before being an American; I am a human being before being a negro; and if I deal with racial problems, it is because those problems were created without my consent and permission. I am opposed to any racial definition of man. I write about racial problems precisely to bring an end to racial definitions. And I do not wish anybody in the world in which we live to look at it from a racial perspective, whether he is white, black, or yellow.⁶¹

Intellectually, Wright is more of a Trotskyite than a Stalinist. His critique pinpoints the theoretical problems disorienting communist party cadre under the shifting directives of Stalin (see Ch. 3). In *Native Son*, Bigger fails because he cannot “see” his allies. Mary is innocent, and a potential ally, a genuine class trader she wants social change and understands that you can’t just talk about human experience, you have to live it. So they (Jan and Mary) proceed to go with Bigger to his side of the tracks. They both resist making an abstraction out of Bigger. Unlike Max, who essayist Laura Tanner rightly sees approach “Bigger not as an individual but as a symbol,” Mary and Jan approach Bigger as a subject.⁶² However socially awkward they may be in Bigger’s eyes, they truly do

⁶¹ Richard Wright, *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson, 1993), back cover.

⁶² Laura E. Tanner, “Uncovering the Magical Disguise of Language : The Narrative Presence in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*” in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah edited *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York, 1993), p. 142.

want to hang out with him, get to know him, and struggle together against racial injustice. Mary desires to go beyond her father's narrow understanding and questionable social role surrounding Bigger's plight. Yet, Bigger can't get past his pride. He is humiliated at the thought of bringing them into his neighborhood, food joint. And finally Bigger can't get passed his fear and thus becomes overwhelmed by it as the white, ghostly character, the blind Mrs. Dalton, moves towards him. His crime evolves not so much from being Black, but being "Bigger." Each action is carved out of "some abstract principle of Bigger's conduct." If it fails to meet the reality test, such as the overcrowded final cell scene, it nevertheless remains as long as it "elicits a certain emotional response from Bigger." In short, as Wright succinctly states, "I tried to write so that, in the same instant of time, the objective and subjective aspects of Bigger's life would be caught in a focus of prose."⁶³

Wright's "focus of prose" is tragedy. The tragedy envelopes the objective and subjective aspects of Bigger's life giving them a universal quality, born from personal experience and experienced cathartically. As Wright writes in "How 'Bigger' Was Born" The birth of 'Bigger' goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger...If I had known only one Bigger I would not have written *Native Son*.⁶⁴ Wright strove to create a novel that had the immediacy of a play in the reader's mind:

⁶³ Richard Wright, « How 'Bigger' Was Born » accompanying *Native Son* (New York, 1998), pp. 434-435.

⁶⁴ "How Bigger Was Born," p.457

As I wrote I followed, almost unconsciously, many principles of the novel which my reading of the novels of other writers had made me feel were necessary for the building of a well-constructed book. For the most part the novel is rendered in the present; I wanted the reader to feel that Bigger's story was happening now, like a play upon the stage or a movie unfolding upon the screen... Action follows action as in a prize fight... I had long had the feeling that this was the best way to 'enclose' the reader's mind in a new world, to blot out all reality except that which I was giving him. In the writing of scene after scene I was guided by truth... That is, to objectify in words some insight derived from my living in the form of action, scene, and dialogue.⁶⁵

Ultimately Wright's goal is to meld the social with the aesthetic to evoke violent emotion from the audience. It is for this reason that as he states "I kept out of the story as much as possible, for I wanted the reader to feel there was nothing between him and Bigger; that the story was a special premiere given in his own private theater."⁶⁶ Wright's efforts are to bridge the gap between art and politics through the use of Tragedy and lived experience.

Camus suffers from a similar "problem." He too is searching for an authentic voice, devoid of the dogmatism that he finds in Sartre's brand of Marxism. His text is filled with much angrier, militant, anarchist-like protagonists than are found in the novels of Sartre. Once these characters seem to find a way, exemplified in Camus' last work *L'Homme Revolte*, he is criticized by Sartre who said "Camus n'est rien qu'une abstraction de revolte: son moralite de l'absurd a devenu le moralisme bourgeois." Sartre believed that *L'Homme Revolte* "Trahur l'absurd de L'Etranger." Yet, paradoxically, it is this feud over the political questions in Camus' final work which propels Camus to the heights of literary

⁶⁵ « How Bigger Was Born, » p.458

⁶⁶ « How Bigger Was Born » p. 459.

and political fame. And ironically, the revolutionary students of Paris 1968 did not reach for, nor identify with Sartre's novels and characters, who posed himself as more radical; rather they reached for the more "idealiste revolutionnaire," Camus, whose protagonists always in a constant state of revolt they more easily identified with.⁶⁷

What makes these two militants and fiction writers in essence comparable is their efforts to use their fiction as a means to salvage humanism within Marxism after it had been so trammled upon by Stalin. Both Camus and Wright were looking for a way to avoid throwing away the Marxist baby with the Stalinist bath water. The extent to which they fail is not so much a mark of a personal failure, but a societal one. In this sense their texts, document the societal failure to maintain the gains of the revolutionary spirit born in 1917, born to fruition in the 1930s. And in this sense also, each work foreshadows the rise of the New Left, however militant and angry, it had lost to a great extent its revolutionary, working class potential.

For each writer Existentialism, and with it its debt to Romanticism's idealism, provided only part of the way to navigate through the landmines left by Stalinism. Sartre said "Existentialism est un Humanisme," but Wright and Camus were interested in more than developing a philosophy. They borrowed upon existentialism when the politics of revolutionary Marxism and the hopes of 1917 were now being masqueraded by the horror of Stalinism, as a foundation to create a more political art work. In the name of Socialism millions were slaughtered.

⁶⁷ See Débat in *Les Temps Modernes*. (1951).

Every single revolutionary who survived the Revolution was rounded up and shot or sent off to die in Siberia. Stalin, a “socialist” had just made a pact with Hitler, a fascist. To their credit, Wright and Camus, tried to navigate through this apocalyptic horror by trying to show the potential for consciousness to still matter, and not just any form of consciousness, but one that had glimmered for a brief moment in the hearts and minds of the children of 1917, through the literary tradition of Existentialism.

Like Sartre they were looking for a third way to preserve the gains of Marxism while abandoning Stalinism; but unlike Sartre they utilized a literary rather than political program. They instead sought a cultural arena to find abstracts on lived experience in order to document the tragic toll upon the human imagination of the decline and fall of revolutionary consciousness. To this effort they reached beyond a philosophical frame work to something that encompassed both reason and passion, ideology and experience, art and society: Tragedy provided such a vehicle. Less as a return than a re-using, their repetition of Greek values attempts to breakdown the modern categories of philosophy, politics and art. They seek to become critics of the social by becoming artists of the day. In creating *Native Son* and *L'Etrange* they answer Raymond Williams’ question with an affirmative. Yes: “We must ask whether tragedy, in our own time, is a response to social disorder. If it is so, we shall not always expect the response to be direct. The disorder will appear in very many forms, and to articulate these will be very complex and difficult.” Indeed, so complex and difficult, that we’ll have to reassess everything we thought we knew on a subject.

Their two works stand as a final warning, a warning that went unheeded, and yet pierced the imagination of intellectuals and workers alike. They were a

product of their times, the voice of their generation, and the tribunes of hope for the next generation. Their lived experiences produced a kind of pragmatism in their writings which permitted them to use words as weapons, to engage man's imagination to cause him to act or die.

The failure of academics to compare Wright and Camus' aesthetics, is not some minor oversight, but rather a product/symptom of a miss-reading of an entire period. By not fully understanding the legacy of Stalinism upon Western intellectual thought gross mischaracterizations have resulted by those with the best interest to render writers like Wright and Camus their due. Such a misunderstanding of history has left these two kindred souls at arms length from each other, and in the end done an even greater disservice to our students who are given a false sense of security with our self-imposed categorizations, instead of feeling the anxieties that both Wright and Camus strove so hard to create within our imaginations to stir us all to act.

Whatever differences one may draw between the two, the fact remains that they influenced protest literature thereafter. They were uncompromisingly committed to the idea that art could move one to act. In this sense they are both Marxist, in the purist sense. In spite of the disparate collection of Marxist theories of aesthetics, they all have one thing in common. Each theory insists on art's emancipatory potential. Author and Philosopher, Pauline Johnson, explains in her work *Marxist Aesthetics* that "despite the very real differences between their specific contents, the main stream of Marxist theories of aesthetics give an enlightening capacity to art: they all attempt to determine the basis of the

emancipatory impact of the work of art.”⁶⁸ In its revolutionary capacity, art, as ideological construct has the potential to disrupt the material world.

This common theme refers back to Marx and Engel’s primary theoretical contribution: Both were not unique in the understanding that social classes exist, but as Terry Eagleton argues, “What they considered innovative about their theory was the claim that the rise and fall of social classes is bound up with the rise and fall of historical modes of production.”⁶⁹ Man’s ideas and consciousness is, as Marx writes, “at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life.” In *The German Ideology*, Marx introduces the seeds of a theory of aesthetics when arguing against the philosophers of his time:

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. That is to say, not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but of setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process.⁷⁰

The Marxian equation, “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life,” insists as a matter of fact that the work of art has the potential to effect change at the material level of man’s existence, for it is not the individual with all of his pre-conceived ideas that transforms society, but the individuals themselves as they relate to one another in the real world as

⁶⁸ Pauline Johnson, *Marxist Aesthetic: The Foundations within Everyday Life for an Enlightened Consciousness* (London: Rutledge, 1984), p. 1.

⁶⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Marxist Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996). P.3.

⁷⁰ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York, 1988), p. 47.

determined by the level of advancement of the forces of production. For Wright and Camus to try to relate “their” activities from the viewpoint of a real man or woman in the real world is to reconstitute ideology from the bottom up.

In conclusion, we see that contrary to much critical interpretations, Richard Wright and Albert Camus are both “insiders” and “outsider”, theorists and activists, because they begin from their own lived experiences, and yet simultaneously reach for the universal. Just as Shakespeare’s characters express passions that overreach the idiosyncrasies of the individual, they also create characters that reach tragic proportions, but with one foot set firmly on the ground. In short, they preserve the dialectic, at a time when many other writers were beating back a hasty retreat from what they believed was a hopelessly idealistic and unviable alternative—the possibility to transform the world from the bottom up.

Chapter 5

Wright's Literary "Ghetto"

Richard Wright's *Native Son* remains to this day what Ralph Ellison described as "every body's protest novel." Wherever Wright tried to break out of the "naturalist" mold and invent more universal protagonists,⁷¹ his critics scoffed. As Wright's leading biographer, Michel Fabre describes, "Reviewers even seemed to regret that Wright attempted to deal with ideas." He cites, Orville Prescott, author of the *New York Times* review of *The Outsider* as an example: "instead of a realistic sociological document he ha[d] written a philosophical novel, its ideas dramatized by improbable coincidences and symbolic characters."⁷² Fabre responds: "It is clear, then, that Wright is regarded not as a novelist of ideas or as a symbolist, but as an emotionally powerful creator who writes from his guts and churns up reality in a melodramatic but effective way because he is authentic, close to nature, true to life." For Fabre this is significant because critic's annoyance reveal that there are elements in Wright that make it impossible to pin point him as a "hardboiled naturalist." Fabre finds that Wright's naturalism is similar to Dreiser, in particular, in his creation of a universal out of his personal experience--growing up poor and oppressed--but different in that Wright as a Marxist replaces Dreiser's pessimism with a brand of Humanist Existentialism.

⁷¹ See Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953) and *Savage Holiday* (1954).

⁷² Michel Fabre, "Beyond Naturalism?" *Modern Critical Views: Richard Wright* (New York, 1987), p. 37.

Yet, even Wright's leading biographer fails to consider another aesthetic operating. For Fabre, Wright's uniqueness stems from his pull towards the "irrational." Fabre concludes his essay, "Beyond Naturalism?" pointing out the limitations of critics, and unintentionally, his own readings on Wright:

To that end, American naturalism, both as philosophy and as a literary technique in the line of Dreiser and James Farrell, provided him [Wright] only with a starting point; then either, as we suggested, a larger definition of naturalism must be given—if it is to encompass the many facets of Wright's writing—or it must be recognized that he often overstepped his boundaries. Wright's attraction to the fanciful, the mysterious, and the irrational always proved too strong for him to remain attached to his self-declared rationalism and deliberate objectivity. His heavy reliance upon visceral and violent emotions may account for this inability. Far from being a limitation, it turns out to be one of the major resources of his narrative power, in the same way that his obstinate refusal to submit to authority and his insatiable curiosity concerning everything human certainly led him to ask some of the most relevant questions of our time.⁷³

Fabre takes us further than other critics towards an understanding of what gets lost in too narrow an interpretation of Wright. Wright's narrative does indeed spill over the confines of naturalism in a most irrational violent way; Yet, if we reduce Wright's aesthetic, at least when outside of a naturalist one, to the influence of voo doo, we do Wright a disfavor, much the same as Margaret Walker did in the writing of one of Wright's worst biographies: *Daemonic Genius*. Although, Fabre leads the critics charge against Walker's misconception of Wright, he falls into a similar trap. Perhaps stemming from the same problem that leads most critics who attempt to describe what about Wright lies outside a

⁷³ "Beyond Naturalism," p. 56.

naturalist aesthetic, even Fabre in the end sees Wright's narrative uniqueness outside the realm of ideas. In the case of Fabre, and many others, I am arguing that this stems from a misunderstanding of Wright's Marxism. For Fabre, it is an ideological primary for Wright that counters naturalism's pessimism.

Nevertheless, Fabre sees Wright's Marxism chiefly as a positive ideal: the fact that Wright came of age, in a literary sense, under the aegis of the Communist Party and during the depression largely accounts for "the special tenor of his naturalism."⁷⁴ Wright's "realistic/naturalistic fiction" is thus defined through Wright's experience, as "an eye opener." These writers felt it their mission to abandon the ivory tower and get into the trenches with the oppressed and working class. And while it is true that Wright finds a cause in racial oppression and a vehicle in rebellious writings organized among other writers of the thirties in the C.P.'s John Reed Club, Wright's search for an authenticity within the ideological framework of Marxism takes him outside naturalism's pessimism.

Wright's two most well-known works, *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son* depicts respectively the hopes and dreams of a generation for genuine working class solidarity across color lines, but, *Native Son* takes us one step further to expose the nightmare vision of a world that may be incapable of creating such an ideal. In this sense Wright's narrative is even more deeply pessimistic and optimistic than any other naturalist. It is the extremes of both that only the form of tragedy can contain. What Fabre fails to notice is that Wright's "heavy reliance upon visceral and violent emotions" are also the characteristics of a tragic

⁷⁴ Michel Fabre, p.43.

protagonist, like King Oedipus or Lear. Yet, none of the critics speak of tragedy: instead, they see Wright's protest outside the idea of tragedy, because they separate tragedy from the idea of social revolution. When Raymond Williams tells us that "Tragedy is not pessimistic if you understand the social and political forces that give rise to it," he is describing tragedy as "a response to social disorder." However, as Williams notes, "to value it as such, is to break, apparently, from both major traditions." Both traditions: academic and revolutionary do not value the critique of social conditions that tragedy offers us. at least not in our own time.

Perhaps, because Richard Wright never again realized the fame brought to him by his early works that dealt explicitly with American racism, he is more remembered and discussed as a naturalist. He is, indeed, trapped in a literary "ghetto." Almost without exception he is taught in courses on African American Literature. It is rare, to see his works taught in literature courses on Existentialism, Tragedy, or even history of the novel.⁷⁵

Michel Fabre is among many critics more recently who have made an effort to understand Wright's more literary side. In an essay in Henry Louis Gates collection of old and new critical perspectives on Richard Wright, Barbara Foley takes this narrow perspective head on in her essay, "The Politics of Poetics: Ideology and Narrative Form in *An American Tragedy* and *Native Son*." In it, she critiques what she refers to as "the requirements of politics," which "we are continually told, coexist only uneasily with those of aesthetics; when novelists

⁷⁵ see *Critical Perspectives*, 188-89

begin to ‘preach,’ their narratives descend to ‘propaganda’ and lose their imaginative power and integrity.” According to Foley “if we wish to pursue the full logic of the current challenge to the canon, we need to rethink our criteria for assessing literary form and adjudicating literary ‘greatness’ at the same time that we revise our literary histories and course syllabi.”

This is of course true for many Black authors, who are first seen for their Blackness before being viewed as an artist in their own right. For example, one reviewer writes that Langston Hughes is “credited with launching a renaissance in black writing in America,” yet mentions nothing about his poetic abilities in general. African American authors seldom make it out of Black studies to be taught as poets in their own right, as a poet on par with an Ezra Pound or a Walt Whitman. James Baldwin, rarely makes it out of Black Studies, unless *Giovanni’s Room* is on the syllabus and then he enters yet another marginalized area of the academy: Gay Studies. Tony Morrison’s work shares a similar fate: Her works are often marginalized within courses on African American Literature and/or Women’s Studies.

It is therefore not surprising, to find Wright in a Black Studies course, rather than any course on existentialism and the novel. In this chapter, I will argue that the seeds for Wright’s “ghettoization” began years before the student struggles of the late sixties and seventies produced the academic departments and centers that we know as Black Studies and Women Studies. Long before the dominance of identity politics and “post modernism” took hold in the university, Wright was

engaged in a debate with much of the intelligentsia of the day whose outcome would help sew the seeds for the marginalization of Black writers in the academy.

The fact that Richard Wright's work has been successfully marginalized within the field of Black Studies and never considered a tragedy or an existentialist novel is at odds to what he felt about himself as a writer and thinker. For although Wright was but a child (8 years old) at the time of the Russian Revolution, and lived on another continent and world in Natchez, Mississippi, he and a generation of Black and white men and women, would be inspired and influenced by the rise of working class politics—a politics that rejected the middle class cultural Black Nationalism that dominates Black Studies Departments today.⁷⁶ To understand how Wright would write *Native Son* as a tragedy, and not simply as a protest novel which left it open to “ghettoization,” it is important to understand Wright's political background in the Communist Party

In many ways Richard Wright's *Native Son* represents one of the earliest casualties of the retreat of the working class and the betrayals of the Communist Party under the direction of Stalin. The criticism of Wright began with the publication of *Native Son*. Although Ralph Ellison applauded it in the *New Masses*, “In Wright we have the first philosophical novel by an American negro,” James Baldwin felt that it was damaging because it displayed Blacks in a

⁷⁶ This is not an argument against Black Studies, etc. These departments were only won through hard earned struggle such as that of the SEEK College Students in 1969 at City College, who took over buildings to win their demands of Black enrollment and Black and Latino studies within the curriculum. Unfortunately, the result has been a complete marginalization of Black and Latino authors. Rather than integration into the core curriculum, the fact of separate departments has left administrators off the hook. Today any student majoring in American Literature can not graduate without having read Steinbeck or Whitman, but many graduate without ever having read Richard Wright or Langston Hughes.

stereotypical fashion.⁷⁷ Nobody wanted to appear sour faced about the first best-selling black writer in American literary history, although privately many offered their critiques, and the controversy would never die. Langston Hughes wrote in an article titled “It’s About Time (1946):”

It’s about time some writer wrote a good novel about good negroes who do not come to a bad end... With all of the millions of colored people in America who never murder anybody, or rape or get raped or want to rape, who never lust after white bodies, or cringe before white stupidity... With all the millions of normal human, lovable colored folks in the United States, its about time some Negro writer put some of them into a book.⁷⁸

Still others have said that the final chapter, where Max explains the politics of the Communist Party to be over done, too much “telling” rather than “showing” as one critic put it. This, “misunderstanding” of *Native Son*, stems from a misunderstanding of Wright’s role in the Communist Party.

Overall critics have made too much about his eventual departure from the party described in his autobiographical piece “the God the Failed.”⁷⁹ It was on the best sellers list for weeks.⁸⁰ To this day critics still believe he joined the Party only to strengthen his position in the Communist inspired John Reed Club. Nothing could be further from the truth. Wright stayed in the Party even after the infamous Stalin-Hitler pact, when most writers and intellectuals left.

Richard Wright joined the Communist Party because it reflected his views on racism in American society; And far from having a negative impact upon his

⁷⁷ See Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” (*Partisan Review*: June, 1949).

⁷⁸ Langston Hughes, *New York Age*, 22 May 1946

⁷⁹ See James Baldwin’s “Alas, Poor Richard.” (*Partisan Review*:

⁸⁰ See Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 1999)

writing it in fact inspired him to write about one of the great tragedies of the 20th century—a tragedy that is only understood if one has a full grasp of the influence of Stalinism, as distinct from Leninism, upon class struggle in the wake of the Russian Revolution. At the time of its publication *Native Son* won Wright international acclaim (It was a Book of the Month Club) , and allowed Wright to become the first Black writer to ever be supported by his writings alone because the work takes up the fundamental schism within the Party which would lead to the mass exodus of intellectuals from the Party, prior to the age of McCarthyism. Viewed through the prism of disillusionment and despair, many have seen *Native Son* as a further example of Wright's distance from the Party. Some critics make little distinction between the explicit anti-communist rhetoric in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the subtle criticisms of the Communist Party in *Native Son*. This is a misreading of Wright's novel and a misunderstanding of the historic forces at work that would turn not just Richard Wright but a generation away from the Party and eventually away from the politics of revolutionary socialism.

Chapter 6

Historical Background: Black Liberation and the American Communist Party

Richard Wright had the good fortune to be born in a time when there was a living example of human liberation in the true Marxian sense: The Communist Party USA was connected to an international movement that evolved out of the Russian Revolution. For American Blacks the Russian Revolution was a powerful symbol of liberation. In 1944, Richard Wright recalled, “Of all the developments in the Soviet Union, the way scores of backward peoples had been led to unity on a national scale was what had enthralled me....” Annie Ziron, author of “Richard Wright’s “Words as Weapons” sheds light on the relationship between Blacks and the Communist Party in the following quote: “Black Communists identified with the Russian Jews who the revolution had liberated from hundreds of years of Tsarist oppression.” In the same article she quotes Lovett Fort-Whittman who wrote after returning from an eight month trip to Russia in 1925 that

There was no country in the world more harassed with racial problems than Russia before the revolution...It might be said that the Jew was the Negro of Russia...the solution of the Negro problem in America is possible only after the revolutionizing of the American social order.⁸¹

⁸¹ Annie Ziron’s “Richard Wright’s Words as Weapons.” *International Socialist Review*, Haymarket Press, Chicago: Summer, 2003.

The Communist Party had an analysis of slavery and racism that differs from much of today's accepted definitions, and it was from their theoretical understanding of this oppression that they worked out a practical application to end it—an application that Richard Wright firmly believed in. Rather than viewing slavery as a product of racism and racism as the continuation of backward ideas from the first emergence of class society, the Communists believed that racism was an ideological product of the slave trade that was used to justify that institution as it prevailed, in spite of the democratic ideals of the newly formed U.S. Government. For example, the most advanced medical studies devoted much “scientific” study to prove that Blacks were biologically inferior to whites. After the Civil War was won, and the Reconstruction period drew to a close, racist ideas were perpetuated, not in mere ignorance, but as a deliberate effort by rich landowners and industrialists to keep Blacks and white workers from organizing together for better working conditions. Ex-slave, author and lecturer, Frederick Douglass said it best when describing the reason for the apartheid-like conditions that prevailed in the south after slavery was defeated. He said “they [the bosses] divided both to conquer each.” In other words Douglass understood that there was nothing inherent about racism, but that racist ideas were consciously manufactured first by the slave holders and later by industrialists to keep Blacks and whites apart at a time when they had much to gain by organizing together.⁸² In other words, racism wasn't just a system of

⁸² *The American Negro Congress* was founded in Chicago in October, 1925. The Workers (Communist) Party of America intended the Congress to be a vehicle for uniting all of the organizations of Black workers and farmers then existing. The Congress was largely unsuccessful. It remained in existence until 1930. It gave way to the foundation for the *League of*

ideas that could be educated away, but had a material basis in society. Ziron aptly describes the effects of racism on the working class movement:

Since slavery, racism has been the greatest obstacle of the working class movement in the United States, the division that employers and politicians have used to break unions, keep wages low, and deflect class anger onto scapegoats. By far, it is through the use of African Americans as scapegoats that employers have gained, time and time again, their offensive.

Because of this analysis of racism as the main division of the working class, revolutionaries schooled in the politics of Marx and Lenin believed that racism was not something that could be dealt with after the revolution because in fact there would be no revolution without taking on the greatest obstacle to working class unity, an essential ingredient for a successful revolution. Unlike previously held attitudes by other socialist organizations in the early part of the 20th century, the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) did not believe as Socialist Eugene Debs did that “We have nothing special to offer the negro.”⁸³ Instead, and in spite of commonly held beliefs that the CP cared nothing for Blacks, Mark Naison, in his book *The Communist Party in Harlem*, shows how the CPUSA became the first socialist organization in United States history to commit itself to fighting racism, and to the recruitment and training of Black cadre. Naison gives countless examples of how Communists in Harlem rejected a “pure class approach” and instead put the fight against racism as a central component in its efforts to create a revolutionary current in the United States.

Struggle for Negro Rights, a mass organization through which the CPUSA unsuccessfully attempted to extend its influence among Black workers.

⁸³ Eugene Debs, cited in Herbert Aptheker, *Negro Slave Revolts in The United States, 1526-1860* (New York: International, 1939), pp. 17-18.

Richard Wright was among millions of Socialists world wide who became active members of a Party offering the possibility of genuine Black liberation through revolutionary working class struggle. Unbeknownst to much of this dedicated multitude was the fact that the Communist International was driven by one who had and would continue to betray the beliefs and tenets of the workers who created the revolution in the first place. Such a contradiction manifests in many ways. In the case in point, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the disappointment spawns a tragedy.

In *Native Son*, Max, Bigger's Communist Party attorney, represents the disconnection between Max's intellectual understanding of oppression and Bigger's lived experience. In the last scene Max gazes in horror at Bigger's revelation that "what he killed for" must have been "good." Mary Dalton, who Bigger murders accidentally half way through the text, and her boyfriend Jan, make many failed efforts to connect with Bigger. The other revolutionary who Bigger fails to connect with is Jan, Mary Dalton's communist counterpart. The Party's ultimate rejection of the "negro" in its rightward shift to support the Second World War, would leave to the ultimate abandonment of that goal and hence one of the great tragedies of the 20th century, a world wide crisis that Richard Wright turns into literature in *Native Son*.

The 1917 Russian Revolution was the high water for a generation of working class people around the world. It put class politics front and center on an international stage. All of the leading intellectuals of the day were influenced by these ideas. Wright, although poor and Black and living in the Deep South, could

not have helped but be influenced by the class politics of his day.⁸⁴ By the time that his young mind began in earnest to learn about the world around him, it was not the ‘pick yourself up by your boot strap’ politics of Booker T. Washington, nor the “Back to Africa,” Black nationalist politics, of Marcus Garvey, nor the writings of the more sympathetic Zora Neal Hurston for that matter, which dominated his young mind. It was the politics of revolutionary Marxism, spread by the Communist International, which dominated Wright’s intellectual development.

Wright first honed his intellectual and creative abilities, off of the works of the highly critical H.L. Mencken, long noted as a critic of the white South. His introduction to Mencken is worth quoting at length to gain an understanding of how enmeshed politics and writing were to him even as a very young man:

That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the sink, I opened a Book of Prefaces and began to read. I was jarred by the style, the clear, clean sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man 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. What was this? I stood up trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of the words....Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? No. It frightened me. I read on and

⁸⁴ Although growing up in the Jim Crow South, Wright did not evolve as a Black nationalist. Because of the prevalence of Marxist ideas he was more inclined to believe that white working class people did not benefit from racism, and that Black and white unity was possible. Frederick Douglas, who said when asked why the south was segregated said “they divided both, to conquer each,” offered an opposing view to that of Booker T Washington who blamed the individual rather than society for obstacles to Black liberation.

what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it.⁸⁵

He was particularly interested in “Mencken’s iconoclasm and use of ‘words as weapons.’”⁸⁶ These writings inspired him to pursue further readings, including works by Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, among others.

Wright’s primary interest to use his “words as weapons” shows the influence of Marxist ideas upon his young mind. He believed along with millions of other Marxists at the time in the subjective factor. It is a central tenant of Marxism that Capitalism does not just create misery of untold millions, but it also produces the potential for the working class to change their condition. The system produces, its own “grave diggers” within the working class who hold their hands on the leavers of production. Marx believed that social change from below was possible, if not inevitable, because as he writes in his agitation pamphlet the Communist Manifesto,

The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself. But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians.⁸⁷

Marx’s most famous quote: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point, however is to change it,” was made manifest by the workers councils,

⁸⁵ *Black Boy*, p. 293

⁸⁶ Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, “Chronology”

⁸⁷ *Manifesto*, p. 68

known as Soviets, and lead by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky leaders of the Bolshevik Party, a time, incidentally, when Stalin was but a low level bureaucrat. 1919-1928.

Many critics of the Communist Party USA draw on its beginnings to show how little the CP cared about Blacks. In August 1919, when the Socialist Party in the United States split into two factions, the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party, there was not a single Black delegate at the convention, and one convention didn't mention Blacks at all. On the issue of "the negro question" the CP stated: "The Negro problem is a political and economic problem. The racial oppression of the Negro is simply the expression of his economic bondage and oppression, each intensifying the other..." So, although the CP and the International Workers of the World (IWW) recognized the need to organize black workers into trade unions, they nevertheless, as Philip Foner points out, failed to realize that,

the confidence of the Black workingman, who still had to fight his way into industry against the resistance of organized white labor, could not be won without carrying on a fight simultaneously for the specific demands of Black labor and against racism.⁸⁸

In fact one of its founding members and leader of the American Trotskyism movement later wrote that the CP had

[n]othing to start with on the Negro question but an inadequate theory, a false or indifferent attitude... [seeing racism as] an economic problem, party of the struggle between workers and the capitalists; nothing could be done about the special problems of discrimination and inequality this side of socialism... a formula for

⁸⁸ Philip Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War* (London: Holmes & Meier, 1981), p. 113.

inaction on the Negro front, and incidentally a convenient shield for the dominant racial prejudices of the white radicals themselves.⁸⁹

In short what Cannon among others were arguing was a very mechanical, non-Leninist view of historical development: the idea that history moves in stages. And because racism was central to capitalist development, it would take a workers revolution to effectively address racism. This view point soon changed as a result of historical factors that lead the CP into some of the most important anti-racist work of the twentieth century: First, there was the objective growth of the Black working class. During World War 1, mass numbers of Blacks migrated from sharecropping life of the rural South and moved into the Northern cities to join the ranks of the industrial proletariat. The surge of working class militancy in the “red summer” of 1919 posed the need for building unity between Blacks and whites in the labor movement. In the Great Steel Strike of 1919, employers broke the strike by bringing 30-40,000 Black strikebreakers up from the South.

Secondly, Black communists made valiant efforts to convince the Party to take racism seriously. The CP had recruited a handful of Black members, such as Cyril V. Briggs, out of the African Blood Brotherhood, a revolutionary nationalist group that rejected the Garveyist argument for Black exodus to Africa and looked instead to the Bolshevik revolution as a model for Black liberation. Briggs waged a campaign for leadership in the Party to force the CP to relate to black workers.

⁸⁹ James P. Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, pp. 92-93.

As James Cannon describes, the other significant pressure on the American communists came from the Bolsheviks themselves.⁹⁰

Even before the First World War, and the Russian Revolution, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were distinguished from all other tendencies in the international socialist movement by their concern with the problems of oppressed nations and national minorities, and the affirmative support of their struggles for freedom, independence and the right of self determination...

After November 1917, this new doctrine—with special emphasis on the Negroes—began to be transmitted to the American communist movement with the authority of the Russian revolution behind it. The Russians in the Comintern started on the American communists with harsh insistent demands that they shake off their unspoken prejudices, pay attention to the special problems and grievances of the American Negroes, go to work among them, and champion their cause in the white community.

It took time for the Americans, raised in a different tradition, to assimilate the new Leninist doctrine. But the Russians followed up years after year, piling up the arguments and increasing the pressure...slowly and painfully [the American Communists] began to change their attitude; to assimilate the new theory of the Negro question as a special question of doubly exploited second class citizens, requiring a program of special demands as part of the overall program and to start doing something about it.⁹¹

It is thus wrong to perceive that the CP ignored the race question throughout the 1920s and only when Stalin took full control of the reins in Russia in 1928 did the party begin to take racism seriously. In their classic work *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omni and Wyant make this point the foundation of an argument about the historical inadequacy of Marxism to account for questions of race. “Prior to 1928, the Communist Party in the United States attributed no

⁹⁰ The CP was the first U.S. socialist organization to recognize that the specially-oppressed condition of Blacks required that socialists champion the fight against their legal, political, economic and social oppression. James Cannon, the first national chairman of the Workers Party (as the CP was called) who later founded the Trotskyism opposition to Stalinism in the U.S., argued that the intervention of the Communist International was decisive in shifting the CP on this question.

⁹¹ Philip Foner and James S. Allen, Eds., *American Communism and Black Americans* (Temple, 1987), p.9.

special role or status to blacks...within the general class struggle.” Yet, in truth throughout the 1920s, the CP made political and practical attempts to transform the party’s avoidance of “the negro question” in socialist organizations and trade unions: In 1920, at the Second Congress, John Reed made the CP’s “first programmatic statement” on Black liberation. Reed condemned lynching and race riots and supported the right of Blacks to armed self defense against racist attacks:

The Communists must not, however, stand aloof from the Negro movement for social and political equality...Communists must avail themselves of this movement in order to prove the emptiness of bourgeois equality and the necessity for a social revolution not only to liberate all laborers from slavery but also as being the only effective means of liberating oppressed Negro people.⁹²

By 1922 the CPUSA convention platform argued that Blacks faced the most “ruthless” oppression of any social group in America. The CP issued a strong commitment to fight racist discrimination in the trade unions. In 1925, on the advice of the Comintern, the CP established a Parity Commission, which issued “the most comprehensive statement of the party position on the Negro question, during that period.” The Resolution stated that the aim of the Party was to create a working class movement that could lead the fight against racism. The Commission resolved to take up “not merely with words of sympathy, but with concrete organizational methods,” the fight against lynching and establish

⁹² John Reed, American Journalist who wrote *The Ten Days that Shook the World*, was a supporter of the Third Period and Communist Labor Party also as a leader of the Socialist Left Wing worked for the Bureau of International Propaganda which was attached to Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. His job was to translate into English all decrees and decisions of the various Russian Soviets and prepare them for distribution.

Permanent interracial committees against lynching, against terrorization of the Negro and the white workers, against the Ku Klux Klan, against the use of one race of workers against the other in strikes...for the full admission of Negro workers into the unions with equality of membership with whites....

At the age of 22, the same year that Wright becomes interested in views of Communist orators and organizers, especially those in the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, Wright publishes his first short story “Superstition” in *Abbott’s Monthly Magazine*. Although the magazine fails before Wright is paid is the way is already being paved for Wright to make a career as a writer and a Marxist.

For much of the leading intelligentsia that Wright will eventually be a part of, writing and Marxist politics went hand in hand. But one thing that separated him out from the Black and white intellectuals of his day was his humble upbringing, years of starvation, and countless hours spent doing menial labor. He more than any of the others was what Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, would refer to as an “organic intellectual.” Richard Wright was not taught by any school other than the school of hard knocks, and although much of his experience was surrounded by poor working class, “Black folks,” he also had much opportunity to see the sufferings of poor working class whites.

It is arguable that Richard Wright’s working class background not only prepared him in a unique way to make an important contribution to the intellectual and literary current of revolutionary Marxism, but also forged the kind of writer that the John Reed Club,⁹³ would embrace. Although Wright rightly

⁹³ See “John Reed Clubs” “Radical Representations” named after American Journalist whose eyewitness account of the Russian Revolution, *The Ten Days that Shook the World*, inspired

gives credit for the John Reed Club for inspiring his two major works of fiction *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son* and giving him a platform to get his books out to a mainstream audience, he in turn gave back to that club by creating literature that helped popularized the ideals of the literary club.

Uncle Tom's Children and *Native Son*, represented not just the ideals of revolutionary Marxism, they made those ideals accessible to everyone. Through the moving scenes in the short stories, including "Fire and Cloud" which moves the audience to tears as one lynching after another spills from his pen, Wright captures in fiction not only the possibility for Black and white unity, as a viable solution to the horror of the Jim Crow South, but also the possibility of Black liberation. Wright's latest biographer, Hazel Rowley, describes his induction into the Club perfectly:

Wright's poems were angry like H.L. Mencken, he was 'using words...as one would a club.' But these poems had an optimism about the future that was quite new for him. The last stanza of 'I Have seen Black Hands' exploded in revolutionary fervor.
 I am black and I have seen black hands
 Raised in fists of revolt, side by side with the white fists of white workers,
 And some day—and it is only this which sustains me—
 Some day there shall be millions and millions of them,
 On some red day in a burst of fists on a new horizon!⁹⁴

On the other hand *Native Son* depicts the tragic loss of those ideals from a generation who believed that a better world was possible, in the final scene that

millions to preserve the ideals. of the revolution. At its height it attracted the leading writers of the day. In 1933, Richard Wright joins the Chicago Branch of the John Reed Club.

⁹⁴ Rowley, Hazel. *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*. New York: Henry Holt, 2001.

captures the raging Bigger Thomas and the sympathetic old lefty Max, who tries to save Bigger with an argument framed in a class analysis before a community hungry for the blood of the man they believed raped the white woman.

To understand the degree of tragic commentary in *Native Son*, it is useful to understand the degree of Communist Party involvement in Black America. Only then can one appreciate the tremendous loss felt by those who had joined the Party and then left after the C.P. shifted its perspective away from the rank and file organizing of the Third Period to the alliance made with other imperialist powers during Russia's Popular Front Period.

Much of the contradictions that play out in *Native Son* stem from the contradictions in the Party line. In what is known as the CP's Third Period a new perspective was adopted for fighting racism that rejected an integrationist model. The VIth Congress of the Comintern, held in Moscow from July 17th-September 1, 1928, declared that the CP would henceforth stand for "the right of Negroes to national self determination in the Southern states where the Negroes form a majority of the population." The theory that underscored the massive organizing efforts of Black workers was known as the in the Black Belt theory. But the call for "self-determination in the Black Belt" meant that the CP would no longer regard Blacks as an oppressed section of the working class, but a national minority, "a nation within a nation," with a distinct national culture and identity.

Much of this distinction is played out in the scene when Mary and Jan insist that Bigger take them to his side of town. Bigger is mortified by what his friends may think of him with white people, and it is in his mortification where we see

the enormous gulf that existed between Blacks and whites represented. The southern “Black Belt” was where Black sharecroppers constituted a majority of the population and labored in a “semi-slave” economy. For the C.P. the national liberation struggles of Blacks was an essential first stage on the road to socialist revolution. The CP proclaimed its new intention to unite and lead the “double historical mission of the Black proletariat.” Blacks were expected to lead their own revolution in the absence of their white working brethren.

While, a majority of the CPUSA delegates to the VIth Congress opposed the “Black Belt” theory as “it had little bearing on the actual conditions or aspirations of Blacks,” the CPUSA bureaucracy along with the theory’s chief American proponent, Harry Haywood, eventually carried and won the argument.

The Daily Worker explained the new perspective:

National self-determination means the right to establish [the Negro masses] own Negro state if they choose to do so...At the same time it is the duty of the Negro comrades to emphasize the solidarity of the Negro and white workers and to make clear to the Negro masses that only a victorious proletarian revolution can fully and definitively solve the national question in the Solid South....⁹⁵

Such an argument today is known as ‘third worldism.’ In essence it suggests that the workers in capitalist nations benefit from the oppression of other workers around the globe, whether they are Black share croppers or child laborers in India. Such a view looks at the Civil War as only a half hearted attempt to complete the aims and goals of the American Revolution. For example, in *American Negro*

⁹⁵ On the Sixth Congress of the Comintern (July 13, 1928).

Problems, John Pepper explained that the Southern economy that relied so heavily on Black sharecroppers and Jim Crow segregation, constituted a “semi-feudal” system, “virtually a colony within the body of the United States of America.”

Lee Sustar, writer for the *Socialist Worker* and *International Socialist Review*, disagrees with the Black Belt theory and rightly sees it as an American version of Stalin’s theory that national liberation struggles had to go through “two distinct stages”—first a bourgeois nationalist stage, and only after that, the struggle for socialism.”⁹⁶ Pepper’s article, in opposition to Sustar’s position, states that

[w]hile their interests were ultimately identical with those of white workers, the black masses could not fully ally themselves with the whole proletariat in the struggle for socialism until they had achieved a position of autonomy and equality comparable to that enjoyed by the different national minorities constituting the population of the USSR.

These two opposing view points lay at the heart of Bigger’s dilemma. Both Mary and Jan attempt to transcend the “Black Belt Theory” in treating Bigger as an equal, but Wright, heavily schooled in Stalin’s perspectives on anti-racist work, produces a Bigger Thomas who resembles a character incapable of forming any common bond with white folks. And yet, Wright, who at the time of writing *Native Son* was having his own disagreements in the Party, namely around the question of the role of intellectuals and artists in the Party, poses the difference between Bigger and Mary and Jan as a problem to resolve rather than an

⁹⁶ See Lee Sustar’s writings in *The Socialist Worker* (Chicago: Newspaper of the International Socialist Organization), and *The International Socialist Review* (Chicago: Haymarket Books).

inevitability. Wright, who had grown up in the Jim Crow South could not have helped but see that the problem with this approach is that, rather than working to overcome the divisions imposed by Jim Crow—divisions that work to benefit the landowners and the capitalists, the theory concedes that those divisions will inevitably shape the way the struggle should be organized. It locates the time for unity in some impossible future, *after* Blacks have achieved equality, rather than recognizing that building unity is a necessary pre-condition for Black liberation. In many ways *Native Son* is a study on the possibility of establishing these pre-conditions for unity and the difficulties involved in doing so.

Still many proponents of the Black Belt theory defended it in the basis of Lenin's argument in 1917 that American Blacks should be considered an oppressed nation. But as Ziron rightly point out,

the Black Belt theory marked a major theoretical departure from Lenin's approach to national liberation struggles. Lenin's argument that socialists should unconditionally support the right of national minorities to self determination was a means of confronting and breaking down the chauvinism of the working classes in the oppressor nation. Lenin specifically argued in 'Theses on the National Question' that communists must avoid submerging themselves uncritically into national liberation struggles, or lending those struggles a 'communist color.' The communists must 'uphold the independence of the proletarian movement even if it is in the most embryonic form.'

Sustar lends some clarification when he states:

in the early 1930s, it was the Communist Party—and not Black workers and farmers—who called for self determination of the Black Belt. Even the Garvey movement was not calling for self

determination, but exodus to Africa. As Shawki⁹⁷ writes, there is a ‘sharp distinction between upholding the right to succession and actually advocating it [Lenin’s] support for self determination was...a means to advance the struggle for socialism, not an end in itself.’ The Black Belt theory contradicted population trends as well. In the early 1930s, the majority of Blacks lived in the south. With the onset of the Depression, rural Blacks continued the Great Migration into northern cities that had begun with WW1. By 1940, half the Black population had become urbanized. In his Narrative, Southern Black Communist Hosea Hudson recalls that he and his comrades spent hours puzzling over the correct application of the Black Belt theory:

We used to discuss at length about the places like Birmingham....Well, we had a lot of discussion, and I can tell you the truth, I don’t know how we come to, what conclusion we reached....Out in the rural area, you know, the rural area of the Black belt, where the Negro farmers was in the majority, we felt that there, many places that the Negro would be able to get, enjoy the land, the land would be, the rights of the land, before socialism. But then they, we know that they going to have a big struggle in the big industrial towns like Bessemer, Alabama, Birmingham, Gasden Alabama. All these places were in the Black Belt. It’s a question of what was to do there. It just wasn’t the farming area.

Yet in spite of these contradictions for sharecroppers like Hosea Hudson and writers like Richard Wright, the Communist Party was the only party in the US committed to fighting racism in the here and now. As Hosea Hudson wrote:

Really, what it meant, the right of self determination in the Black Belt, meant confiscating the land from the big landlords. It also meant confiscating the industrials from the big industrials, which were going to be a pulling of an eye tooth, but that was the correct slogan at that time, see?

Wright, who had absorbed much of this confusion about the theory into his own perspective, still understood that in practice the “Black Belt” injected a jolt of life

⁹⁷ See Ahmed Shawki, editor *International Socialist Review* (Chicago: Haymarket Books).

into the CP's anti-racist work. If not for this theory, party organizers would never have had the confidence and resources to take the CP's anti-racist work any further--far enough to reach out to a young Black writer from the Jim Crow South whom no one might have ever heard of. By the time Wright enters the Party, the CP had undertook to place issues of racism at the center of its program and all of its party activities. Recruitment and development of black cadre became the Party's priority. Their main focus in spite of the Black Belt Theory was to break down racial divisions in the labor movement. For Richard Wright and the hundreds of thousands of other Blacks heading north the timing could not have been better.

The Depression was wrecking havoc on the Black community at a time when traditional Black middle class organizations like the NAACP refused to represent the interests of the Black proletariat. In a few short years, the CP achieved mass influence among Black workers. In 1928, the CP only had 50 Black dues paying members. By 1930, Black membership numbered 1,000, reaching a peak membership of 5,005 in 1939. By 1934, there were 1,000 Communists in Alabama, 95% of them Black. The Birmingham chapter of the International Labor Defense League had 3,000 members. The Birmingham CP was several times larger than the Birmingham NAACP.

The CP fought for multiracial unity "from the mills of the Carolinas to the mines of Kentucky" and brought thousands of Blacks into the Labor movement. The number of blacks in unions went from 100,000 in the 1930s to under 500,000 in 1940. The CP also trained a large number of Black cadre for leadership

positions in the party. Prominent members such as Otto Hall, Harry Haywood and James Ford traveled to Russia and studied at the University of the Toilers of the East.

In *Native Son* the actions of Mary and Jan reflect the CP's anti-racist work within the Black community. At no other historic period in United States history do we see ruling class whites becoming "class traders" who throw themselves in with the lot of the poor Black masses. One of the CP's chief successes during this period was the organization of thousands of Blacks and whites into unemployed councils that fought for relief benefits and forced local officials to pass relief legislation. The Depression had wrecked Black living standards. James W. Ford, secretary of the Harlem Section of the CP, wrote that "The masses live on the brink of starvation. Disease and pestilence stalk the community. Police brutality drives the people to the point of desperation." Even *The New York Post* commented, "One half are not working, the other half are existing on crumbs from the table."

The CP's work went far beyond a social service agenda. They sought to sew the seeds of a liberation struggle with the goal of true equality between the races. On March 6, 1930, a CP-organized relief demonstration brought out 1,250,000 Black and white workers across the country. Foner writes,

In Shreveport Louisiana unemployed blacks and whites demanded 'work or food' and battled police who tried to arrest them...By fall of 1931 it was a common sight to see blacks appearing at the heads of unemployed demonstrations at numerous state capitals.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Philip Foner and James S. Allen, Eds., *American Communism and Black Americans* (Temple, 1987), p.3.

In 1935, the Party began to organize the employees of the Home Relief Bureaus and “built cells in every bureau in Harlem.” The Unemployed movement became one of the most important sources of Communist influence in Harlem. Claude McKay wrote in *Amsterdam News*, “it must be admitted that more than any other group, Communists should be credited with the effective organization of the unemployed and relief workers.”

Mary and Jan’s insistence that Bigger bring them to one of the restaurants in his neighborhood is yet another sign of the novel’s intent to reflect some of the inner workings of the CP’s effort to cast racist attitudes from their ranks. The Black Belt resolution compelled the CP to undertake a campaign to eliminate “white chauvinism” within the Party ranks.

The party must use all the means at its disposal to fight white chauvinism. Party schools, the party press, every public meeting must be used to counteract the opposition, even the indifference of white comrades to work among Negroes.

The CP staged a public trial to debate the expulsion of August Yokinem, a Finish Communist janitor of a Harlem dance hall, who had attempted to block a multiracial CP dance. James Allen commented on the significance of the case in *The Daily Worker*.

By this trial the Communist Party had done two things. First, it has made clear the anti-working class character of race prejudice. Second, it has shown that it will not tolerate any form of race prejudice within its own ranks and will fight tooth and nail to root out of the working class as a whole.

Wright who had grown up in the Jim Crow South was inspired by the CP's most significant advances in anti-racist work which struck at the heart of US racism, the Jim Crow South. Twenty years before the civil rights movement, the CP organized a sharecroppers union in Alabama that by the mid 1930's claimed 10,000 members, most of them Black. The communists and unionists met with vicious campaigns of terror and repression by local KKK, and the police force controlled by employers. These conditions continually forced the Communists to organize underground. In 1935, the Sharecroppers Union organized a strike in six counties demanding "a dollar a day for cotton choppers, a ten hour work day equal pay for women, youths and negroes, immediate relief for all strikers, no evictions and the right to organize, strike and picket." The CP's ultra left position on the New Deal (*The Southern Worker* wrote, "The New Deal has literally become the Big Landlord itself—the federal slave drive of the sharecroppers, tenants, and poor farmers.") resonated well with Black sharecroppers who suffered under government regulations that favored landowners.

One of the most important themes reflected in *Native Son* is the continued fear that whites expressed about Blacks' desire for the unattainable white woman. Richard Wright is criticized by many, including Black authors like James Baldwin, for his use of Black stereotypes. But Wright did not shy away from this issue and instead uses it as a central motif that ultimately leads to Bigger's being sent to death row. This form of legal lynching also has a historical reference. The CP founded the International Labor Defense in 1925 to develop political and legal campaigns to defend the victims of the criminal justice system. The ILD

newspaper *The Labor Defender* declared in its first issue, that the ILD, “in cooperation with other class struggle groups, was carrying on a persistent and militant struggle against lynching in the entire lynch law system.” The most famous ILD case was the national campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys. The Scottsboro campaign raised an everyday case of southern “lynch-mob justice” into a national symbol of the racism in the criminal justice system. On March 25th, 1931, nine unemployed black youths were arrested on the charge of raping two white women on a train. The boys were convicted and sentenced to death. The NAACP’s initial refusal to get involved in the case opened the path for the ILD to take the lead. The ILD built a mass movement to defend the Scottsboro nine that gained the attention and support of millions of people around the world. The campaign took years and involved huge demonstrations, and the artistic and cultural popularization of the cause.

Eventually the Scottsboro Boys won their freedom although it was six years before the first four were let out of jail, and almost twenty before the last defendant, Andrew Wright was set free. The ILD also campaigned to free Angelo Herndon a Black communist who was arrested in 1932 for leading a multiracial demonstration of the unemployed. Herndon was charged with violating the slave insurrection law of 1861 and sentenced to serve 18-20 years on a chain gang.

Throughout the 1930’s, the CP’s famous campaigns integrated themselves into the cultural consciousness of American workers. The Scottsboro Boys, the Angelo Herndon case, and the Harlem Tenant strikes, where CP activists fought evictions by replacing the evicted tenant’s furniture back in their house faster than

the landlord could throw it out—these events found tremendous appeal and resonance, particularly among Blacks. It is not hard to explain why a young, poor Black man like Richard Wright would have been drawn to the CP in the early 1930's. Wright later described his first encounter with the Chicago Communists:

I went home full of reflection, probing the sincerity of the strange white people I had met, wondering how they really regarded Negroes. I lay on my bed and read the magazines and was amazed to find that there did exist in this world an organized search for the truth of the lives of the oppressed and isolated....The revolutionary words leapt from the page and struck me with tremendous force.⁹⁹

It is significant to note that in the 1930's; the dominant model of Black liberation was an integrationist vision, a political advance over the Garveyist separations solution that had been popular in the 1920's. It was only when the class struggle began to retreat and the CP abandoned Black liberation that separatism once again became popular. As one journalist noted in the 1940's "Communism made its bid for the Negro with promises of abundant home relief but their promises failed and since they could not offer Russia or Siberia, Garveyism has taken the lead again." The CP story has an unhappy ending—the betrayal of thousands of working class militants during the Second world war, the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, and the McCarthy witch hunt of the 1950's. Nevertheless, the fact that the CP achieved such success *despite* itself, leaves us with an important glimpse of the possibilities. Wright's comment from more optimistic days still remains true. In 1937, he wrote that

⁹⁹ Richard Wright, "I Have Seen Black Hands" in *The Richard Wright Reader*, p. 246

Black writers may feel that only dupes believe in 'ism's, they may feel with some justification that another commitment means only another disillusionment. But anyone destitute of a theory about the meaning, structure and direction of modern society is a lost victim in a world he cannot understand or control.¹⁰⁰

In conclusion, we see that Wright's experience in the US Communist Party did not have a negative impact on his creative development, but in fact developed and honed his critical abilities. So much so, that he was able to create a body of literature that reflected a sophisticated, and in many cases, unique understanding of a period in history that offered an alternative to the horrors of Stalinism. His utilization of tragic form to reflect that missed opportunity, should be understood by interpreters has an occasion to broaden our understanding of Richard Wright and help academics to avoid false categorizations which as we see has lead to Wright's current "ghettoization" in academic circles.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 92

Chapter 7

Camus' Literary "Ghetto"

“There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully preserved,
of some autobiography.” --Paul Valery

Valery's pithy maxim above, on the subject of autobiography, tie in quite nicely to the following section of my dissertation. Not only do his remarks offer a useful critique of those who would label Camus' focus on the individual as Bourgeois, they also offer a useful critical model to help us understand socially significant events through the eyes of the individual. The best way to understand to what extent Camus has been misunderstood (and thereby ghettoized), is to examine his early and more autobiographical work, *A Happy Death*, that presages the philosophy of *L'Etranger*. In it we will find to what extent it is erroneous to sum up his philosophy as individualistic and bourgeois—a criticism leveled on him by Sartre and others for his critique of the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic. “Despite the obvious differences in plot structure and intention, we may see in *A Happy Death* a prefiguration of *The Stranger*.”¹⁰¹

To understand the composition of the novel, it is best to consider the final version first. *A Happy Death* is divided into two parts, each consisting of five

¹⁰¹ Roger Quillit, “Afterward” *A Happy Death*, p. 165.

chapters: 'Natural Death,' then 'Conscious Death.' But the first part consists of only 49 typed pages, scarcely more than a third of the entire 140.

The core of 'The Natural Death' is the murder of Roland Zagreus. Meursault, the hero, murders him in Chapter 1, steals his money, and then becomes sick when he gets home. The chapters that follow are flashbacks which explain to the reader how he ended up committing this murder: Meursault's ordinary life (Chapter 2), his relations with Marthe and his sexual jealousy (Ch. 3). His long conversation with Zagreus (Ch. 4), and finally the encounter with the barrel maker Cardona. And then there are the five chapters of "Conscious Death." It starts out with Meursault's stay in Prague, then he goes to Genoa and Algiers in Chapter 2, and then on to his life in the House above the World, Chapter 3. His departure from Chenoa, where he moves to a house overlooking the sea and finally his pleurisy and death. The first part is all about action while the second is all about his quest for happiness. The chief theme is how to die a happy man.

In many ways we can see *A Happy Death* as the voyage of a younger Camus who creates a character that reflects his own youthful idealism concerning happiness. In the beginning he is in love with the meaning of life and how to attain happiness. He initially seeks an answer to this question in the character of Zagreus:

What I'm sure of, he began, is that you can't be happy without money. That's all. I don't like superficiality and I don't like romanticism. I like to be conscious. And what I've noticed is that there is spiritual snobbism in certain 'superior beings' who think money isn't necessary for happiness. Which is stupid, which is false, and to a certain degree cowardly. You see, Meursault, for a man who is well born, being happy is never complicated. It's enough to take up the general fate, only not with the will for renunciation like so many

fake great men, but with the will for happiness. Only it takes time to be happy. A lot of time. Happiness, too, is a long patience. And in almost every case we use up our lives making money, when we should be using our money to gain time. That's the only problem that's ever interested me. Very specific. Very clear period....Oh I know perfectly well that most rich men have no sense of happiness. But that's not the question. To have money is to have time. That's my main point. Time can be bought....If you deserve it.¹⁰²

From this Meursault develops his own philosophy. He says: "Happiness implied a choice and within that choice a concerted will, a lucid desire. He could here Zagreus 'not the will to renounce, but the will to happiness.'"¹⁰³ But ultimately he rejects Zagreus' materialism and stakes out a moral position based on knowledge rather than money.

Just as there is a moment when the artist must stop, when the sculpture must be left as it is, the painting untouched—Just as a determination not to know serves the maker more than all the resources of the clairvoyance—so there must be a minimum of ignorance in order to perfect a life in happiness. Those who lack such a thing must set about acquiring it; unintelligence must be earned.¹⁰⁴

Such a view helps to shed light on the meaning in *L'Etranger*. Although the young Camus does not yet see the significance of death as a defining moment in the life of the existential character, death is an "accident of happiness," still he ultimately understands that happiness is not a state that one arrives at, but one that comes with the awareness that one must stop the routine and bustle of their lives and see the choices in front of them.¹⁰⁵

In the end we see the foreshadowing of *L'Etranger's* ending:

¹⁰² Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*, p. 43.

¹⁰³ Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*, p. 118.

¹⁰⁴ Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*, p. 121.

¹⁰⁵ Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*, p. 131

But before losing consciousness he had time to see the night turn pale behind the curtains and to hear, with the dawn and the world's awakening, a kind of tremendous chord of tenderness and hope which without doubt resolved his fear of death. Though at the same time it assured him that he would find a reason for dying in what had been his whole reason for living."¹⁰⁶

The *Happy Death* is a journey. He uses these characters to help him work out what it is to be happy, in a similar way that *L'Etranger*, works out his own existential position from the characters that do not reflect that theory, like the busy, nervous woman, in the café. But finally he arrives at a different understanding of happiness. In order to attain this thing called consciousness he has to step away from an intellectual understanding of happiness, from the pursuit, and that one must step away, as Meursault does at the end of *L'Etranger* when he is in the cell with everything stripped away. This dizzying crest of the present. This intuitive state that nonetheless is not mystical and not removed from reason. Happiness is about loving life and not the meaning of it. He arrives essentially at the key point that separates Camus from Sartre. The basis of his philosophy is ultimately his art. Yet for Sartre one often feels that the basis of his art is his philosophy. In the end the young Camus is interested in what will become his larger preoccupation, that split second that proceeds death, not death itself, but the eve of death. At the end of *L'Etranger*, when our character is the most conscious it is evening. There is no blinding light. Light in both texts is an inhumane, oppressive force. It blinds one to the truth. The young Camus chases the sun, but even in this inferior, immature work, he comes to understand that

¹⁰⁶ Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*, p. 144

reason without intuition, is like the Enlightenment without humanism, Marxism without humanity, in other words it is absurd. It is the rigidity of the robot woman in the café who represents intellectualism without humanism. In the following passage we see how much Patrice Meursault is the young Camus as well as the forerunner of the more sophisticated Meursault of *L'Etranger*:

The world always says the same thing. And in that patient truth which proceeds from star to star is established a freedom that releases us from ourselves and from others, as in that patient truth which proceeds from death to death. Patrice, Katherine, Rose, and Claire then grew aware of the happiness born of their abandonment to the world. If this night was in some sense the figure of their fate, they marveled that it should be at once so carnal and so secret that upon its countenance mingled both tears and the sun. And with pain and joy, their hearts learned to hear that double lesson which leads to a happy death.¹⁰⁷

If only I had read *A Happy Death* before I first taught Camus and *L'Etranger*. Perhaps I would not have fallen into the same trap that so many other academics do when they sanitize his work. This point is key because I have now arrived at a section, however, which has deep autobiographical references that help to shed light on my somewhat radical departure from all expected criticisms of my two texts under discussion: To do this I rely upon two unlikely bed partners: Marxists and feminists. As odd as it may seem the feminist theories on personal criticism have more in common with a Marxian analysis than appear on the surface. And if not for a course I took on autobiography with Professor Nancy Miller at CUNY's Graduate School of the City University of New York, I still would probably refrain from "getting personal." Many thanks, therefore, go to Nancy K. Miller,

¹⁰⁷ Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*, p. 102.

whose teachings and writings, particularly *Getting Personal*, taught me not to deny my own personal voice and experience when writing academic criticism. In other words Miller's class re-affirmed for me that there is an indissoluble link between the individual and the society he is born into. Or in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, Women are not born, they are made. And so, rather than write myself out of my dissertation, I now know how autobiography can be an effective rhetorical strategy to help gain a critical perspective on institutional politics, I will use the following personal narrative to explain how I believe that Camus ended up in a literary ghetto. A more "objective" critique will follow.

The last time I taught Camus' *L'Etranger*, I became conscious of something I had been perhaps been in denial about for quite some time: most of my students didn't like the book.¹⁰⁸ Upon further reflection, however, I noticed that each semester in my Introduction to Literature class at Columbia, and as far back as my days in New York City teaching Great Books at Queens College, there would, always be a couple of students who actually did love it. These were typically young, white, artistic, brainy types--typically male--who seemed to identify in some odd way with the character of Mersault.

Come to think of it, this minority of students in my classes on Camus responded to the text the same way I did the first time I read *L'Etranger*. Had I been losing countless students to appease but a few? Was my method of instruction elitist? Or was *L'Etranger* a book whose time had come and gone? Could contemporary students no longer identify with the character of Mersault? I

thought this last point unlikely given that it had such broad appeal to the students of 1968. And given the overwhelmingly retro obsession with 60s and 70s nostalgia with the young today, something seemed amiss. It must be the way I taught the darn book. So I thought it useful to reflect upon my initial fascination with the text, and how I was taught to understand it, by my instructors at Boston University, and an unofficial mentor I'd befriended at the time.

I remember the first time I'd read *L'Etranger* as if it were yesterday. It was in the Summer of 1986, and I was living in Boston when a downwardly mobile angst ridden middle class artiste named Laura Boudreau (she changed her last name from the less sophisticated "Revit") handed me the book when I told her I was working on a senior thesis on American Transcendentalism. To this day I still don't know if it was my admiration and awe for the seemingly much more sophisticated Laura (I had come out of a working class family, and had managed to claw my way into Boston University), or if I was experiencing a genuine intellectual shift, but after I read that book my academic career abruptly veered in a new direction. I immediately scrambled to read every thing I could on existentialism.¹⁰⁹ By the time I got back to school I didn't just like existentialism, but considered myself an existentialist rather than a transcendentalist.

I remember the first day back walking into my advisor's office. His name was Norman Pettit. I had been following him from course to course, mostly in

¹⁰⁹ That Summer I read: Andre Gide's, *L'Immoraliste*; Franz Kafka's, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, *Collected Short Stories*, and *The Metamorphosis*, Thomas Man's, *Short Stories*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brother's Karamazov*, and *Notes From Underground*; and Nietzsche's *Twilight of he God's*, and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

American Literature, and saw him as my main mentor. He was quirky soul. He wore only tweed, with a little bow tie, spoke impeccable English, and drove an old fashioned bike with up right handle bars and a straw basket--a strange sight along Boston's Commonwealth Avenue. His descendants had arrived on American shores in 1630. He had a bachelor's degree in English from Oxford, another bachelor's degree in History from Yale and a Ph D in English from Harvard. In his classes I learned how much a thorough understanding of history helps to develop an independent perspective on everything from politics to Literature. I learned that everyone misread Emily Dickinson that not only was she probably one of the most brilliant poets of our time, but the first existential poet in American Letters. I learned of a seldom taught transcendentalist named Jones Very, who had a mental breakdown while delivering the valedictorian speech at Harvard, but who nonetheless wrote the most beautiful transcendental poetry my professor had ever read. I also remember what he said to me when I told him I was no longer interested in studying Transcendentalism, that my recent studies in existentialism had challenged everything and that I thought I now knew all there was to know about truth and art. He said three words: Why study nothing? I left that day feeling as if I was some enlightened soul and Professor Norman Pettit was a dinosaur.

As I began my studies in to the French Existentialists in the form of directed study with the head of the French Language and Literature Department at Boston University the point that had the most impact on my young mind was the degree to which French existentialism, particularly that of Sartre and Camus represented

a sharp break from the absolutism of Platonic Philosophy, and how Camus truly blundered when he wrote *L'Homme Revolte* because he dared to present a unified subject that personified some kind of abstract, idealized rebel who dared to hold out some kind of hope. For Sartre, it was Mersault rather than Jeanson, who symbolized the true existentialist hero. My impressionable young mind had begun to place a value on meaninglessness. This academic experience was also backed up by my experiences in the world.

One moment from my unenlightened past stands out more than any other. It was the summer of 1986 and I was again hanging around with Laura “Boudreau.” We were both gazing into an art studio from the side walk along Boston’s famous Newbury Street. Inside was this art installation that flashed a random sequence of words and phrases in neon lights. After about a half hour of watching all these words such as “art” “power” “fishing” “death” “shoe string” flash across the screen, I turned to Laura and said “I wonder what it means.” To my dismay she turned to me angrily and said “why does it have to mean anything, that’s the problem with you, you’re always looking for answers,” and then she stormed off. I never saw her again.

If only Laura had turned to me and said Joan, it’s unfortunate but most of us don’t believe in meaning anymore. After the movements of the late sixties and early seventies receded, many of us retreated into the academy. We became further and further disillusioned to the point where we accepted false prophets¹¹⁰ who denied agency all together. And now after years of Conservative

¹¹⁰ Baudrillard, for example, also See Alex Callinicos’ *Against Post Modernism*. St Martin’s Press, 1990

Republicans in the White House most of us are utterly hopeless about the possibility for change. We have in other words made a virtue out of necessity. Art, which is a social production, and therefore impacted by politics, reflects this disillusioned consciousness in the form of works such as this installation piece we were just looking at. Artists and intellectuals alike see a world broken into thousands of little pieces, fragmented and beyond repair. I'm sorry, Joan, I just didn't know how to break it you any other way.

Unfortunately, Laura didn't know anymore than I about why we felt and believed the way we did. Both of us lacked a historical perspective and class analysis to help us piece it all together. So she went off to pour herself in a bottle of tequila, and I went off to live on New York's Lower East Side and study French language and literature at New York University's Graduate School. By the time I got to CUNY's Graduate School I had become quite adept at explaining why Althusser, and all the feminists, who immediately benefited from his lopping Marx's balls¹¹¹ off, were right and Lenin and Trotsky were wrong.¹¹² For me Camus' Mersault had now become the archetype for a shift in consciousness away from hope and towards despair. It was Sisyphus and not Jeanson who was happy, because Sisyphus understood that life had no meaning beyond the present. Jeanson was foolish enough to act for something he believed in, a higher cause. I saw him, in short, as the anti-thesis of Mersault, because he was foolish enough to act and try and break from the routine drudge of his oppressively ordinary life.

¹¹² See Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*. Monthly Review Press, 1971. While accurately explaining the social constructs of society's institutions he offers a devastating critique of Marx's notion of agency.

None of this is meant as a put down to the valuable instruction I received at Boston University's French Department, but merely an effort to show via example from my own autobiography how easy it is to run with an idea, before one truly has a grasp on the historical circumstances from which that idea originated. In the absence of an historical understanding of the period, I could only conceive of French existentialism, in the most simplistic of terms, as a nihilistic theory, and that Camus creation of a new hero, Jeanson, was a retreat back into to the fold of the same Bourgeois morality I believed the protagonist of *L'Etranger* so vehemently attacked. I did not understand, any more that Sartre and most of his contemporaries could understand, that Camus was not retreating, but attempting to salvage what had been trampled by the distortions of Stalinism. I could perceive with any clarity what Camus was trying to say when he wrote a defense of *L'Homme Revolte*:

We can no longer live without positive values. Bourgeois morality repels us by its hypocrisy and cruelties. We find equally repugnant the political cynicism that reigns in the revolutionary movement. As for the independent left, it is, in fact, fascinated by communist power and entangled in a Marxism of which it is ashamed.¹¹³

I bring all of this autobiographical information to the fore not as some therapeutic reprieve in the midst of a very long academic exercise (although it may have that effect), but to show that my readings and subsequent teachings of Camus have been thwarted by a political atmosphere that for most of my academic career I was completely unaware. I believe that Callinicos was correct, when he argued that the roots of postmodernism itself,

¹¹³ *Le Libertaire*, May, 1952.

are to be found in the combination of the disillusioned aftermath of 1968 throughout the Western world and the opportunities for an 'overconsumptionist' lifestyle offered upper white-collar strata by capitalism in the Reagan-Thatcher era.¹¹⁴

Because of this rightward retreat of intellectuals I have been taught to teach a sanitized version of Camus that has bored all but the most intellectually curious of my students. If I had had a broader historical and political understanding of the events as they unfolded between the writing of *L'Etranger* and *L'Homme Revolte* I may not have seen them as antipodes, but as step brothers in a hostile universe. I believe that Germaine Bree offers light on this subject, in the passage quoted at length below:

Between 1945 and 1951, when *L'Homme Revolte* was finished, the context if not the content of Camus' thought changed notably. In 1945, Camus was thinking in terms of the violence and cruelty of the Nazi domination; in 1946, with 'Ni victimes, ni bourreaux,' in terms of the cold war; but in 1950 it was the dangers of Marxist ideology that he denounced. His essay on revolt thus developed within a shifting political context, which, to some degree, seems to have oriented Camus' thought in a direction he had not foreseen in the initial 'Reflexions sur la violence.' In the course of this development, and because of his own involvement in the political turmoil that followed the liberation of France, Camus went far beyond an intellectual clarification of his own initial position and was led to attack two of the shibboleths of the political left: the doctrine, inherited from Hegel that there is a predetermined direction to history; and the all-or-nothing character of French political attitudes. His original apolitical study had turned into a highly inflammable subject.¹¹⁵

In this passage, Bree brings out one of the key points that this dissertation wishes to delineate: the idea that in an absence of an historical perspective, critical distortions, in regards to literary interpretations, arise. Far from

¹¹⁴ *Against Postmodernism*, p.7

¹¹⁵ Bree, *Camus*, p. 221.

abandoning the more radical critical perspective that many, including Sartre, see within the character of Mersault, *L'Homme Revolte*, is an attempt to reconcile the radical truths brought to the fore in *L'Etranger*, within a shifting political climate. Sartre said of *L'Homme Revolte*, that Camus embraced the ideal of humanity and rejected the individuals who made up that humanity. In other words, he had moved into a world of abstraction and idealism that French existentialism was supposed to reject. Moreover, while Camus does in fact, as Bree describes, “divide humanity with the rigorous simplicity of the last judgment, between ‘victims and executioners,’ the ‘just and the unjust’ ‘the truthful and the liars.’” *L'Homme Revolte* is an attempt at “reconciliation” and not an abandonment of the philosophy expounded in “Le Mythe de Sysyphe” which gave meaning to his novel *L'Etranger*. If anything, *L'Homme Revolte*, represents a difference between Camus and Sartre’s understanding of existentialism rather than a retreat from some shared principle of understanding. It is his effort towards reconciliation that critics so often miss, I will argue, that leads to false categorization and a sanitization of Camus’ work, *L'Etranger*.

In many ways, that same ghettoization that I’ve explored with Richard Wright has occurred with Camus as well. One would rarely find *L'Etranger* in a course on Cultural Studies, Marxism in Literature, development of the Novel or Tragedy even though it does deal with questions of struggle, race and class relations, colonialism, political consciousness, aesthetic form and genre. You wouldn’t see it taught in a course on Romanticism, although Existentialism in literature owes a huge debt to Romanticism (see below). In addition, you wouldn’t see it taught in a

course on tragedy although Mersault like Bigger represents Arthur Miller's tragedy and the common man. Instead, he is most often and conversely to Wright, taught in courses on Existentialism, in spite of the fact that Camus vehemently rejected such classification. Upon publication of *L'Homme Revolte*, Camus said, "I have little liking for the too famous existential philosophy and, to speak frankly, I think its conclusions are false."¹¹⁶ Most have regarded Camus apparent cynicism as representing a pessimistic philosophical worldview. Rather, I would argue that both Wright and Camus are involved, in a highly optimistic enterprise: a project to "lead art back into social praxis."¹¹⁷ Both Camus and Wright considered the importance of art, not so much in its capacity to highlight philosophical truths, as for example one may describe of Sartre's novel *La Nausee*, but its importance was considered only in so much as a vehicle to transcribe the lived experiences of individuals who may or may not have ascribed to profound philosophical impulses. So for example, Mersault is interesting not so much in his capacity to reflect moral truths, but in his capacity to confront these truths through his day-to-day lived experience. According to Germaine Bree:

For Camus, however, political problems were of interest only as far as they touched one of his major preoccupations, that is, the daily life of human beings, their freedom and the human justice meted out to them on earth. He consistently refused to refer to the abstract universe of systematic ideologies and always based his arguments on the individual universe of everyday living in relation to the general principles of freedom and justice.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ *Actuelles I*, p. 111.

¹¹⁷ Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. xiv.

¹¹⁸ Bree, *Camus*, p. 9.

If Bree is correct in describing the rebel in *L'Homme Revolte* as an unhappy Sisyphus, he is not attempting to offer some new, philosophical ideal to the fore—one that counters the Sartrean version of existentialism—but rather, he is intent in carving out his Promethean hero as the Rebel as one who would have to confront, as the individuals of his day had to, the dogmatism of the French Left, both in and out of the Communist Party, that he so much abhorred, by reintroducing the individual, however heroic, who must square off to this rising tide of totalitarianism. Moreover, although, according to Camus, and seemingly the inverse of Camus' rebel, Meursault is a man “sans aucune attitude heroique accepte de mourir pour la verite,” he is an individual who embodies Camus' philosophy that human revolt must be ceaselessly reaffirmed. Meursault is not a rebel in the traditional sense, but he is a rebel in his detachment from the ordinary things in life that all other characters in the book are so fixated. In this instance, Bree is actually wrong to suggest in the introduction to *L'Etranger* that, “Meursault is not a man who looks on himself as different from other men, like the Romantic heroes of Byron or Chateaubriand or Victor Hugo.”¹¹⁹ Although he may not view himself as superior, by the novel's conclusion he is conscious of the physical and emotional distance between himself and his world. By the novel's conclusion Meursault cries out, <<il me restait a souhaiter qu'il y ait beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon execution et qu'ils m'accueillent avec des cris de haine. >>¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Albert Camus, *L'Etranger*, ed. by Germaine Bree and Carlos Lynes, JR. Appleton-Century Crofts (1955) p. 8

¹²⁰ *L'Etranger*, p. 138

Moreover, from the opening line the reader is forced to consider Mersault as “different from other men.” How else are we to read the following opening lines to the novel:

Aujourd’hui, maman n’est morte. Où peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J’ai reçu un télégramme de l’asile : <<Mère decedee. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués. >> Cela ne veut rien dire. C’était peut être hier.¹²¹

The contradiction between the impassive tone and the weighty content alerts the reader immediately to the protagonist’s difference. In fact, Camus condemns Mersault to death for this indifference, which most assuredly makes him different from the other characters. In the end, Mersault becomes almost a Christ figure, and in that sense not so different from Prometheus who claims, “The hero now tells them that he knows the city and that he alone knows it.”¹²² In each work, they overreach their own fate, but with one crucial difference, Mersault must follow the tragic characters trajectory—he must move from an unenlightened position to an enlightened one: Mersault must come to understand the truth of Sisyphus in order to be happy. The rebel moves from a position of enlightenment (Prometheus) to one who is even more enlightened (Caesar); he is therefore not a tragic figure. I will argue below that this stems from the same historical shift that Bree refers to above. By 1945, the potential for revolution that Raymond Williams sees in the tragic form is now dashed, and with that lost hope, we cease to see tragic form in the novel.

Published in 1942, many see *L’Etranger* as a reflection of the sheer gloom that existed in occupied Paris during the war. However, a more fitting explanation

¹²¹ *L’Etranger*, p. 21

¹²² *L’Homme Revolte*, p.301.

lies in the introduction of an edition edited by Germaine Bree and Carlos Lynes, Jr. For these editors “It was not from war and occupation that the tale drew its poignant theme, but from the author’s personal experience of life.”¹²³

The post-Althusserian world where most of us are taught about the pessimism of Mersault was foreign to Camus. Born in the Algerian village of Mondovi, near Constantine, on November 7, 1913, Camus like Wright came from an impoverished background, his father was an agricultural worker who died in 1914, and his Spanish mother worked hard in humble occupation to support her family. However as, Bree explains, “The poverty of his childhood and young manhood left no bitterness or envy in Camus’ heart; it seems rather to have given him affectionate understanding of the world’s hard-working ‘little people.’”¹²⁴

Unlike Wright, Camus received a University education and traveled extensively throughout Europe in spite of material considerations. Camus also of course did not feel the constraints of growing up Black in an apartheid-like state. Nevertheless, growing up poor in Algiers he was surrounded by the Arab community and had many Arab friends who lived and suffered daily under the crushing fist of French colonialisation. Therefore, although he was not a direct target of oppression, he understood intimately the devastating effects of occupation. Of course, Camus was directly affected by the Nazi Occupation of Paris, and saw first hand the inadequacies of the enormous Communist Parties in pushing back the advance of Fascism under the directives of Stalinism. These early and later days influenced Camus’ political and literary development to an

¹²³ *L’Etranger*, p. 3

¹²⁴ *L’Etranger*, p. 4

extent that many critics still do not fully understand. For example even Germaine Bree, reveals his blind spots in his edited version of *L'Etranger*.

Unlike Sartre, who has attempted to treat these problems with the rigor and method of a systematic philosopher, Camus is first of all an artist, a man with keen sensibility and an instinctive sense of form. His concern with moral, social and political issues is genuine, but these issues have been forced on him by the times. In a happier age, he might have felt free to devote himself entirely to his art and to the fullness of living.¹²⁵

If Camus had devoted himself “entirely to his art,” there would have been no Camus. Sure there may be a man named Camus who may have delivered finely wrought novels, but certainly not the works that continue to stir our imaginations. What an odd thing Bree wishes for. Interestingly, when Bree separates out so cleanly the political from the aesthetic in Camus’ resume, he does the same injustice that so many have done to Richard Wright and countless other writers of the day (see above).

Why are politics seen as a distraction from more pure literary enterprises? Why are politics seen as having a negative impact on the imagination?¹²⁶ Where are these novels and novelists that are not impacted by the “moral, social, and political issues” of “their times.” Can any one imagine asking Virginia Woolf or even William Shakespeare, for that matter to be less impacted by the issues of their day so that they could “devote themselves more fully to their art” And when, for that matter does the artist stop devoting himself to his art? Is an artist

¹²⁵ see Bree p. 16

¹²⁶ There’s a fair amount of recent literature which argues against the idea that party affiliation adversely affected writers: See Carey Nelson and Alan Wald in Barbara Foley *Radical Representations*.

only engaged in art when he is at the palette or the typewriter? Finally, what is this antagonistic relationship between form and content that Bree expounds upon?

What kind of neo-Platonist, divinely inspired writers is Bree referring to? Where is this pure world of aesthetics beyond the realm of us mere mortals? Of course, Bree is writing this in 1955, but his criticisms influenced other critics who come after him; they are also symptomatic of a general problem in literary criticism that continues to this day--a problem stemming from a rejection of a modernist (more revolutionary) view of the text because of the distortions of Stalinism. The New Left's abandonment of the old left (Lenin, Trotsky) lead to an ultimate rejection of Marxist ideas in literary criticism. To understand this distortion, let us now turn to a brief history of the period to help shed more light on how misreading *L'Etranger* tends to occur from misunderstandings stemming from the intellectual reaction to Stalinism.

Chapter 8

Historical Background: Existentialism, Fascism, and the French Communist Party

In the same way that *Native Son* utilizes the form of tragedy to explore the potential for revolution, *L'Etranger* also utilizes this form to explore a similar possibility. Yet, because the historical circumstances that surround the making of *Native Son* are vastly different from those that would fuel the creation of *L'Etranger*, many read Camus' work as anti-Communist and more of an exploration of the liberation of the individual. Yet, although anti-Communist, *L'Etranger* is not anti-Marxist. Meursault's final moments are not simply a celebration of his own individual intellectual emancipation, but a study of Meursault's understanding of his connectedness to others. In other words, the protagonist transforms from an extremely alienated individual to one who is at peace in a world with others. One who understands, for example, how his mother could have chosen a fiancé in her dying years. He understands the social nature of his being and in that awareness lies the potential for a social, rather than individualist Bourgeois, liberation. To understand this potential for social liberation, which permeates the text, it is necessary to draw upon the history of the French Communist Party at a time when fascism was advancing across Europe.

Unlike the Communist Party in the United States, which had much more autonomy than the European Communist Party, the French Communist Party was not in direct conflict with the fascists, as were the American Communists against

the Klan. In fact, the advance of Fascism occurred because of a tragic historical mistake under the directives of Stalin. Instead of seeing Fascism and Hitler as the main enemy, he instead believed that the workers in the German Social Democratic Party were the main obstacle in the fight for Communist revolution.

Stalin was a newcomer to the Comintern. In the days when the Comintern seemed a living organism and engaged the constant and anxious attention of Lenin, Trotsky, and Zinoviev, he (Stalin) remained apparently indifferent to it. He turned to it only in 1924 when it...had become a bureaucratic machine capable of impending or furthering Soviet policy or his own political designs.

In 1924 Lenin died, and Trotsky went on without him to form the Left Opposition within the Comintern, based on the principle of keeping October alive, he provided genuine leadership for revolutionary movements internationally.

Trotsky declared:

The International Left Opposition stands on the ground of the first four congresses of the Comintern...All essential principles (in relation to imperialism and the bourgeois state; to democracy and reformism; problems of insurrection the dictatorship of the proletariat; on relations with the peasantry and the oppressed nations; soviets; work in trade unions; parliamentarianism; the policy of the united front) remain even today the highest expression of proletarian strategy in the epoch of the general crisis of capitalism.¹²⁷

The struggle over the Comintern between Stalin and Trotsky ended with Trotsky's defeat and expulsion. By 1925, after the Fifth Congress, Stalin had

¹²⁷ Leon Trotsky, *Writings*, 1920-1925, pp. 10-47.

secured leadership in the CPSU and began to direct the communist parties of the world in ways that served the foreign policy interests of Stalin's dominant Center faction. "Turning the Comintern into a tool of Russian foreign policy was part of the strangling of workers' power inside the USSR."

In the Third Period (1928-1934) any opposition to Stalin was crushed. Trotsky and his followers became increasingly marginalized. During the 1920s, Stalin and his Center faction crushed the Left Opposition under Trotsky. When the task had been accomplished, Stalin turned against Bukharin and the Right, which had favored policies that gave concessions to the class of wealthy peasants. By 1928, Trotsky was in exile, Bukharin and his supporters were vanquished, and Stalin had established bureaucratic state capitalism in Russia with the ideology of "socialism in one country." As Hallas writes, "It suits the interest of the bureaucratic rulers of the USSR; to maintain the fiction [that the soviet union is a genuine socialist society] Their claim to the inheritance of workers' revolution of 1917 is used to validate their rule over workers."¹²⁸

In 1928, Stalin launched the Five Year Plan--a massive program of rapid industrialization--that used the power of the state to develop Russia's backward economy and enable the Soviet Union to compete in the world market. As Stalin said at the time, "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must close this gap in ten years. Either we shall do it, or they will crush us."¹²⁹ ¹³⁰ Stalin accomplished the state capitalist development of the economy by

¹²⁸ Duncan Hallas, *Communism and Stalinism. International Socialist* (1st Series). No. 87 March-April, 1976, pp. 25-29.

¹²⁹ Stalin, *On the Sixth Congress of the Comintern*, "New Economic Policy." (July 13, 1928).

collectivizing the peasant, and imprisoning millions in slave labor camps. He enforced this program with a brutal reign of terror, political police and the obliteration of anyone with authentic ties to the Bolshevik revolution. The Comintern and the mass communist parties around the world became a tool for Moscow, a subsidiary agency for the defense of this process of industrialization and of the bureaucracy, which directed it.

In 1928, Stalin launched the Third Period in the Comintern, a policy that claimed that the capitalist system was on the verge of imminent crisis, and the world was entering a period of revolutionary upheaval. Stalin insisted that the biggest threat to the world working class in this time of crisis were the social democrats who presided over mass reformist parties across Europe. The ultra-left policy of the Third Period had devastating world consequences. Most tragically, it meant that the German Communist Party under Stalin's directives failed to build a united movement against Hitler, and focused instead on denouncing the social democrats as "social fascists." Stalin's motivation behind the perspective was two fold. First, his immediate goal was to use the ultra-left rhetoric to purge "Right" faction Bukharin supporters from the world the Communist Parties. The policy had a second desirable effect. Stalin's chief concern was the appeasement of the European powers to allow him the space to carry out the Five Year Plan. Thus the ultra-left perspective meant in practice that the CP abstained from building a genuinely revolutionary current in countries like France, Germany, and England. "Any external upheaval, any upset in international relations, anything

which might have adverse effects on foreign trade of the USSR was out. The ferocious leftism of the Third Period had paradoxically the desired effect.”

It is no accident that *L'Etranger* was written during the period that is known as the Popular Front, 1935-1939, when the bureaucratization of the Party reached its zenith. In 1935, Stalin abandoned the Third Period perspective of immanent revolutionary crisis. Stalin's decision was motivated both by foreign policy concerns and his domestic agenda. Domestically, labor productivity was not as high as Stalin had hoped. One section of the bureaucracy favored granting some incentives to workers to remedy the situation. Stalin launched a pure against “dissident” elements in the bureaucracy that began three years of show trials and executions. Trotsky called the 1935 Congress, the “Comintern Liquidation Congress”. The show trials and the vicious anti-Trotsky campaign completed Stalin's goal to obliterate anyone with an authentic connection to the October Revolution. “For Stalin to consolidate his power internationally, it was essential that the Comintern parties be immunized against criticism from the revolutionary left.”¹³¹

During the same period in Germany, Hitler was completing a massive rearmament drive and clearly intended the Soviet Union to be one of his first targets. In a matter of days, the Comintern abandoned the Third Period policy that had instructed communists to ignore the fascist threat, and launched the Popular Front against fascism. The Popular Front called for communists to submerge their class politics in order to appeal to the “progressive” section of the

¹³¹ Trotsky, *Writings*, 1935-36, p.31.

bourgeoisie. Behind this policy of class collaboration lay Stalin's hope that he could make a military alliance with France and England to protect the USSR from the Hitler threat. Thus at the VII Congress, Stalin ordered the suppression of any position that would upset his would-be allies, including communist support for anti-imperialist struggles in the French and British empires. Anyone who resisted the new line was denounced as a "Trotsky-fascist" and an "agent of Hitler". The show trials, the anti-Trotsky campaigns, and the new line of the People's Front were inseparably connected. The numerous social democrats, liberal intellectuals and assorted "progressives" who supported the people's front, also—with few exceptions—defended the Moscow trials and the Trotsky hysteria." Stalin's policy of collaboration with the "progressive" bourgeoisie had the effect of shackling the CP's ability to lead working class struggle across Europe.¹³² In Spain 1936, an alliance with the bourgeoisie caused workers to forfeit revolutionary power and as a result suffer Franco's fascist rule for three decades.

It is useful to compare how far the Comintern had fallen from its early days as a genuine revolutionary International. Back in 1920, at the Second Congress, the Comintern had declared,

Every party which wished to join the Communist International is obliged to expose not only avowed social-patriotism, but also the insincerity and hypocrisy of social pacifism; to bring home to the workers systematically that without the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, no international court of arbitration, no agreement to limit arguments, no 'democratic'

¹³² Trotsky, *Writings*, 1935-36, p. 31.

reorganization of the League of Nations will be able to prevent new imperialist wars.¹³³

In the name of defending the socialist tradition, the Popular Front proceeded to violate the internationalist, an anti imperialist principles of the Bolshevik revolution.

In spite of this critical legacy, the nineties ushered in an anti-Stalinist, anti-structuralist, and Marxist revival within academic circles. Terry Eagleton's anthology, *Marxist Literary Criticism*, revives the Frankfurt School, re-introduces Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, and ends with Tony Cliff and Alex Callinicos' critique of postmodernism.

To sum up, if it wasn't for the distortions of Stalinism "class" wouldn't be seen as the bogeyman. Nevertheless, because class politics were all but abandoned by the eighties, politics, in particular, class politics, are seen as a distraction. As Bree said, too bad Camus couldn't "devote himself entirely to his art and the fullness of living." It is because politics are seen as a distraction for these writers of the 30s and 40s that authors, including Camus, are sanitized to the point that we scarcely recognize them or their characters as representing viable human beings. Camus's existentialism is taught not as humanism, as Sartre insisted it should be, but more often as an abstract philosophy that tried to explain, and ultimately mirrored the extreme nihilism of the day. His characters are effectively sanitized and all the lifeblood is drawn out of him. No wonder my students hated Mersault.

¹³³ Trotsky, *Writings*, 1920.

Similarly to Wright, Camus was also heavily criticized from the Left as well as the Right. The Communist Party deemed Wright a dilettante while Camus was described by his Communist friend, Jean Paul Sartre, as a traitor to the cause of existential freedom. Although Sartre's philosophy on human freedom expounded in his great existential work *Being and Nothingness* introduces an historical picture of human experience severely at odds with Marxism, Sartre remained in the Communist Party and became less critical of Stalin's "positivistic materialism." Not only did Sartre and Camus have big debates on the question of the use of violence to further political aims, Sartre publicly condemned Camus for creating a character that represented both hope and agency with his last novel *L'Homme Revolte*.

For Sartre the latter represented a complete betrayal of the ideals of the absurd articulated in *L'Etranger*. For Sartre the "committed" individual referred not to a specific person but to his humanity, the Rebel betrays Sartre's vision of the pre-existence of the value of freedom, by positing a universal subject that exists a priori. Sartre's philosophy draws heavily on Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's existentialism. At the core of his philosophy is the belief of freedom as the central category of existence.

Human freedom proceeds essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of 'human reality'. Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently: there is no difference between the being of man and his being free.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York, 1966), p. 30.

Again both of Sartre's critiques of Camus need to be placed in context. In light of the horrors of Stalinism it is no wonder that Camus rejected violence as a means to an end. He was not a Pacifist per se, but merely reacting to some of the greatest atrocities committed under the rationalization of some fake socialist society. As for his antagonist "The Rebel," yes it is true that the rebel's world is not meaningless and absurd, as is Mersault's, but filled with hope that the individual can transform his condition. Yet such a character represents not the abandonment of existentialist ideals but the hope that existentialism need not have been a philosophy of pessimism it has now so commonly been referred to as. Leon Trotsky makes an insightful comment on the role of individuality in his critique of "Literary 'Fellow-Travelers' in *Literature and Revolution*, that sheds some light on what I would argue is a miss-reading of Camus' *L'Homme Revolte*.

Trotsky writes:

They [Bourgeois critics] tell us that a writer begins where individuality begins and that therefore the source of his creativeness is his unique soul and not his class. It is true without individuality there can be no writer. But if the poet's individuality and only his individuality is disclosed in his work, then to what purpose is the interpretation of art?

In keeping with this notion of individuality as representative of a type, or a social being, Camus, preserves the political significance of the existentialist's notion of freedom. Rather than some abstract notion of freedom, which Sartre's critique of *L'Homme Revolte* implies, Camus preserves his notion of the individual within a humanist/Marxist framework. In other words the individual of *L'Homme Revolte*, rather than betray, holds in common with Mersault of

L'Étranger, the ideal that in the individual's resistance, however particular that resistant behavior may be, is, in fact, an acknowledgement that he, as a type, represents a much larger social conflict. Trotsky's remarks are again relevant here:

But truth is that even if individuality is unique, it does not mean that it cannot be analyzed. Individuality is a welding together of tribal, national, class, temporary and institutional elements and, in fact, it is in the uniqueness of this welding together, ... that individuality is expressed. So it can be seen that what serves as a bridge from soul to soul is not the unique but the common. Only through the common is the unique known; the common is determined in man by the deepest and most persistent conditions which make up his 'soul,' by the social conditions of education, of existence, of work, and of associations. The social conditions in historic society are, first of all the conditions of class affiliation.¹³⁵

The extent to which you will not see Camus taught in a course on protest novels and politics is a testament to the degree to which his own ideals have been sanitized and white washed into to some narrow anti-humanist, abstract notion of existentialism. Rather than betray the ideals of existentialism, as Sartre would suggest, Camus remained loyal to his Marxist roots, and saw class and the common man's conflict with bourgeois structures, as a pre-condition for the very existence of an existentialist philosophy. Camus in fact rejected the label of existentialist: he said that *L'Étranger* was not an existentialist novel. And not because he rejected the philosophy's ideals, but rather because he rejected all fixed ideological systems for their inability to connect with genuine, working class people, the people he himself had come from and whose experience he

¹³⁵ Leon Trotsky, "Literary 'Fellow-Travelers'" *Literature and Revolution*, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1957) pp. 59-60.

valued above all others. Camus is first and foremost a militant. As Germaine Bree describes:

Camus was thus astonishingly free of the intellectual attitudes, which most Frenchmen inherit, from their long historical past and the milieu into which they are born. For Albert Camus this “innocence” was, in a sense, both a problem and a strength. It explains in part his tendency to consider each question from scratch, and it also explains, perhaps, why the intricacy and greatness of the problems of our historical experience weighed heavily on the work of a man who, by the time he was in his late twenties, unexpectedly found himself cast in the role of moral mentor to his generation.¹³⁶

It is for this reason that the French students of 1968 returned to Camus rather than Sartre as a role model for their historic struggle.

A central tenant in Marxist theory is the notion that cultural institutions, including politics, art and literature, are not entirely separate from the economic mode of production that prevails at any given time. So for example during the Middle Ages, when an agrarian mode of production dominated under a monarchy who saw his power bestowed upon him through divine intervention you get much art devoted to the lives of kings and Saints. The illiterate masses are only viewed at this time as comic relief and play no serious roles in art or literature.

With the advent of a capitalist mode of production and the rise of the bourgeois class the canvases and text are filled with images of this class, entirely replacing the saints and kings of an earlier stage in societal development. By the 19th century you begin to see the first working class manifestations and with them the first serious images and descriptions of working class people. They are, as Miller describes, “fit for tragedy.” To put it simply art is a social production.

¹³⁶ Germaine Bree, *Camus*, p. 7.

This is not to say, as so many critics do, however, that Marxists only view art as a means to expound upon some social or political issue. For example, in the back of one of the required texts for Composition II in Columbia College's English Department are summaries of different critical and theoretical traditions, including Feminism, Formalism, New Criticism, New Historicism, Structuralism, and Marxism. In the case of the latter it explains how Marxists literary criticism is interested in content rather than form, and sees the value of the text only in so much as it elucidates history and politics.¹³⁷ I had to laugh the first time I read it, because of the way the editor makes this completely inaccurate statement in such a matter of fact way. As if he were saying oranges are orange. Or history belongs to the conquerors. His uncritical statement is indicative of a pervasive bias of most mainstream critics concerning Marxist literary criticism. In spite of the fact that all one has to do is run a Google or Amazon search to see how many texts there are by Marxist critics devoted to the question of form, the commonly held view lingers on that Marxist offer a reductive, crude analysis of aesthetics because their primary interest is society.¹³⁸ This is of course a contradiction in terms because it assumes an aesthetic staved off from the content of history. It is naïve at best. Why should either be prioritized?

One text that has had probably had the most influence on the question of form and politics is Georg Lukacs, *the Theory of the Novel*. In this profound work on human and philosophical development, Lukacs discusses the intimate relationship between form and human relations:

¹³⁷ See *Compact Bedford*

¹³⁸ In particular, see Georg Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel*. (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1996).

In Tragedy crime is either nothing at all or a symbol—it is either a mere element of the action, demanded and determined by technical laws, or it is the breaking down of forms on this side of the essence, it is the entrance through which the soul comes into its own. Of madness the epic knows nothing, unless it be the generally incomprehensible language of a super world that possesses no other means of expression. In non-problematic tragedy, madness can be the symbolic expression of an end, equivalent to physical death of a soul consumed by the essential fire of selfhood. For crime and madness are objectivations of transcendental homelessness—the homelessness of an action in the human order of social relations, the homelessness of a soul in the ideal order of a supra-personal system of values. Every form is the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence; every form restores the absurd to its proper place as a vehicle, the necessary condition of meaning. When the peak of absurdity, the futility of genuine and profound human aspirations, or the possibility of the ultimate nothingness of man has to be absorbed into literary as a basic vehicular fact, and when what is in itself absurd has to be explained and analyzed and, consequently recognized as being irreducibly there, then, although some streams within such a form may flow into a sea of fulfillment, the absence of any manifest aim, the determining lack of direction of life as a whole, must be the basic a priori constituent, the fundamental structural element of the characters and events within it.¹³⁹

Here Lukacs eloquently lays out his own aesthetic theory to explain the relationship between human relations and the “literary”. Far from a crude reductive analysis, Lukacs paints a dynamic vision of form’s purpose as it pertains to human development. The “literary” functions as a vehicle to reconcile the “irreducibility” of the “absurdity” of existence. Epic differs from tragedy because its immature world does not yet know the “madness” Which comes from a loss of essence. The individual has not yet experienced the “ultimate nothingness” that evolves from a state of “transcendental nothingness.” It is the search for meaning within the given order of human relations that creates the need for literature because there is something irreducible in “man’s” search for

¹³⁹ Georg Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 61-62.

meaning. Within the very form of its plot and characters literature is compelled to respond to this “a priori constituent” of human existence.

Critics who see a Marxist critic only interested in content miss the point that there are indeed Marxists interested in questions of form. In seeing Marxist literary analysis as some non-dynamic, crude and dogmatic instrument, rather than understanding the dialectical relationship that Marxist criticism helps us to understand between the text and the world, the misinformed critic casts aside a useful tool to analyze the aesthetic. While it's true that Marx did not ever create a fully worked out theory on aesthetics, he does give us enough to go on in the *German Ideology* to understand that these later critics do a great disservice to Marx. Such a view reduces Marxism to a study of economics. Frederick Engels addresses this error in a letter to Joseph Bloch. He writes:

According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase.

According to Marx and Engels, there is “an interaction of all these elements [political, legal, philosophical, religious, etc.]” in which the economic is “bound to assert itself.”¹⁴⁰ To reduce Marxism to a mere theory of economics is to miss his main premise concerning the dialectical nature of the real world with its real, living participants.

¹⁴⁰ Frederick Engels, “Engels to Joseph Bloch, 21-2 Sept. 1890,” in *Marxist Literary Theory*, eds., Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Cambridge, 1996), p. 39.

Perhaps one of the most dynamic applications of Marx's views on literary criticism and aesthetics is found in the critical work of French theorist Pierre Macherey, who explains in his book, *Pour une Theorie de la Production Litteraire* how Marx did not see the text as a normal mirror but as one contorted through the view point of the author, one whose angles allowed for glimpses of the real world unseen by any other cultural institution. He makes the interesting argument that if Marx only saw the value of the text in its ability to mirror reality he would have preferred Zola to Balzac, who did use the text to elaborate upon the condition of the impoverished Parisian masses. But in fact his favorite novel of all time was *Le Pere Goriot*, (a novel that focuses upon the Bourgeois classes) for the brilliant way it elucidates class relations in surprising and unexpected ways. In an essay titled "Literature as Ideological Production" written with Etienne Balibar, Macherey writes:

In *A Theory of Literary Production* with reference to Lenin's work on Tolstoy, Verne and Balzac, the attempt was made to use materialist principles to show the complex contradictions which produce the literary text: in each case, specifically, what can be identified as the ideological project of the author, the expression of one determinate class position, is only one of the terms of the contradiction of whose oppositions the text makes an imaginary synthesis despite the real oppositions which it cannot abolish. Hence the idea that the literary text is not so much the expression of ideology (its 'putting into words' [sa mise en mots]) as its staging mise en scene, its display, an operation which has an in built disadvantage since it cannot be done without showing its limits thereby revealing its inability to subsume a hostile ideology.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Pierre Macherey, in *Marxist Literary Theory*, pp. 284-85.

In opposition to critics who believe that a Marxist literary criticism offers us nothing towards a genuine aesthetic theory, Macherey borrows upon Lenin's application of the dialectic in "What's to Be Done" to explain how the text is not simply an expression of ideology because there are limits imposed by the "determinate class position" of the author. Consequently, unintended ideological contradictions operate in the "imaginary synthesis, Macherey sees as the text. Far from a linear relationship, both Lukacs (see above) and Macherey, describe the text as more than an ideological reflection. Each sees it having a productive power of its own to work out ideological contradictions. For Macherey the text offers a location for ideology to operate in the face of real contradictions it cannot "abolish;" for Lukacs the text offers an ideological "resolution" in the face of the absurd. Neither sees a purpose in viewing form and content as distinct entities; instead, each theorist seeks, as Trotsky does in *Literature and Revolution*, a synthesis between basically propagandist and the purely aesthetic approaches to art.

The problem stems from differing political perspectives: Its not politics per se that rubs these critics the wrong way. It's left wing politics that have fallen out of fashion, replaced by the dominance of "postmodern" ideas. Over the past twenty-five years, new theories about language and aesthetic have replaced Marxism as the dominant mode of criticism in the academy.¹⁴² In *The Decline of Modernism* author Peter Burger describes the advent of "postmodernism" in terms of a rejection of avant-gardism's goal to abolish the separation between art and

¹⁴² See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*. (Monthly Review: New York, 1971).

life. Yet he sees this “concept of postmodernism” as simultaneously too narrow and too broad: too broad because it relegates the modern to the past and too narrow because it relegates contemporary art to the domain of the material. “Instead of propagating a break with modernism under the banner of the post-modern, I count on its dialectical continuity.” He goes on to insist, “The dialectics of form and expression must be executed as something irreducibly particular, whereby the latter no longer means an individual situation but social experience refracted through the subject.”¹⁴³ In short, the modernist ideal is still operating in opposition to postmodernism’s separation between art and life. Alex Callinicos similarly concludes, but he sees it in a more political context:

The absence of successful socialist revolution is a contingent historical fact. Post modernity by contrast is merely a theoretical construct, of interest primarily as a symptom of the current mood of the Western intelligentsia. Post modernity and revolution are, however, connected. Not only does belief in a postmodern epoch generally go along with rejection of socialist revolution as either feasible or desirable, but it is the perceived failure of revolution, which has helped to gain widespread acceptance of this belief.¹⁴⁴

Although Callinicos is correct in his assertion that “post modernity” is more fiction than fact, such a claim does not make it any less problematic. Marxist criticism, well within one of the most grievous crisis since its first appearance in the mid-nineteenth century, has been all but supplanted by various forms of cultural theories that focus upon the politics of identity, whereby class is simply one part of the diversity that makes up our overall identities. Contemporary

¹⁴³ Peter Burger, *The Decline of Modernism* (Penn. State, 1992), pp. 408-409.

¹⁴⁴ Alex Callinicos, “The Jargon of Post modernity,” in *Marxist Literary Theory*, p. 409.

theorists tend to blame this shift from class to culture as part of an overall shift in capitalist stage of production (i.e., with the decline of the manufacturing base as well as the globalization of the economy Marx's proletariat 'grave digger' no longer exists).

But this theory is more a symptom of the confusion than a genuine critique of identity politics. The fact is that the obsession with culture--form--is a sign of a deep pessimism sunken in after the failure of social movements to change the mode of production. First, U.S. corporations still do most of their manufacturing at home. Second, whether you put on a blue shirt or a white one, most Americans still do not have any control over the profits of their labor. Finally, whether you are Black or white, man or woman, your class will have a greater effect on your success in life than any other social factor. This is not to deny special oppression, but to insist that no working class person benefits from ideological divisions like racism. Impacting the prevalence of these Marxist ideas has been the failure of social revolution in the Twentieth Century. This crisis fueled two separate Marxist critical traditions. David McLellan describes this schism in his survey of theorists in *Marxism After Marx*:

The re-emphasis of the Hegelian (and therefore anti-scientific in the crude sense) elements in Marx's thought was led by Lukacs and given a firm foundation by the publication of Marx's early works. The notions of humanism and alienation were given unwonted prominence by many Marxists after 1930 and a long controversy ensued as to whether the 'young' or the 'old' Marx was the real one. This division is exemplified in Western Marxism by the opposition between the Frankfurt School and the Structuralist Marxists.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ David McLellan, *Marxism After Marx* (Boston, 1979), p. 4.

The latter has the academic field. The former is attempting a revival.

Structuralist Marxism arose in France in the mid-1960s, although its roots go much further back to the birth of Russian Formalism of the twenties. A conservative, “art for art’s sake” movement; it sees aesthetics separate from the social order. Much of structuralism and post structuralism’s notion of the integrity of the work of art stem from the Formalist’s reliance on a more scientific, linguistic theory.

The legacy of Stalinism accounts for the dominance of “Structuralist Marxist” over the Frankfurt School. The key difference in the two is a question of emphasis. The former places more emphasis upon environment; the latter on the subject. According to David McLellan

Structuralist Marxism sought to harmonize Marxist thought with the apparently organized and passive nature of advanced industrial society in which both the working class and the bourgeois ego had lost their self-confident mission. Structuralism in general had its origin in the linguistic studies of Saussure and Jakobson who investigated the structure underlying language... For these thinkers [including Levi-Strauss, Lacan and Foucault], what was vital for our understanding of human society was not the conscious activities of the human subject, but the unconscious structure which these activities presupposed.¹⁴⁶

Not so coincidentally, the crucial difference between Stalin and Lenin’s version of the state rests with their opposing interpretations of the role of the subject.

Lenin believed in a government where the workers themselves, as living participants in the new socialist society, had power. Stalin, ruled a bureaucracy

¹⁴⁶ David McLellan, p. 298.

that relegated power away from the workers to the state. Trotsky describes Stalin's legacy in the following passage from *Revolution Betrayed*:

The basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption with the resulting struggle of each against all. When there are enough goods in the store the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there are little goods the purchasers are compelled to stand in line. When the lines are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order. Such is the starting point of the power of Soviet Bureaucracy.¹⁴⁷

Although workers in Russia technically owned everything, they ultimately controlled nothing. Lenin had warned on his deathbed to watch out for Stalin. He had argued to Trotsky that Stalin's rise could lead to the failure of the revolution. Trotsky did not take heed; the rest is history.

This semester I again introduced Camus as a prelude to *L'Étranger* to students in my Introduction to Literature: Prisoners and Capital Punishment course at Columbia College, only this time I attempted to counter some of the now predictable apathy with a fresh interpretation exploring Camus' work as a tragedy. To my delight the class lit up. Instead of some abstract discussion on existentialism as a philosophy expressed in *L'Étranger*, we thought about existentialism as it appeared as praxis. If Sartre is correct, and “existentialisme est un humanisme” whether as humanity/universal (Sartre) or particular/human (Camus), then the recurrence of tragedy in 1940 is the attempted “resolution” or “imaginary synthesis” of what it is to be a human in a world at the first stages of abandoning the hope for social revolution.

¹⁴⁷ Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (London, 1937), p, 110.

Tragedy is as Raymond William says “a critique of the social order.”

Contrary to those who would separate the idea of revolution from tragedy these by Camus and Wright embrace change at the very moment that the seeds are sown for the protagonist’s destruction. My students loved the discussion because they could finally see another side of Mersault—no longer just an apathetic, above average guy, he had become in their eyes a figure of resistance.

Chapter 9

Reflections on the Left's Retreat in the 40s

Thus far we have described the striking similarities between Wright and Camus' personal and literary biographies in an effort to show how each has suffered a great deal of mistreatment in the way in which they are categorized and understood and that this mistreatment is due in large part to distortions of the period they wrote as an effect of Stalinism. To put it simply: these two authors are more vulnerable to miss-readings because of the times they wrote and subject matter of their novels. Both authors are to this day in a sort of literary ghetto: Wright is mostly taught as an African American Protest novelist and Camus is taught as a writer of existential novels. Both Wright and Camus stood within an anti-Stalinist tradition that believed as Trotsky in the creative possibilities of the word:

But he believed not as most Western intellectuals have: not in some ironic contemplative symbolic way. The common distinction between word and deed Trotsky scorned as a sign of philistinism, worthy—he might have added—of liberal professors and literary dilettantes. He regarded his outpouring of brilliant composition as the natural privilege of a thinking man, but more urgently, as the necessary work of a Marxist leader who has pledged his life to socialism. The heritage of the Russian writers of the nineteenth century is stamped upon his books, for he took from them the assumption that to write is to engage in a serious political act, a gesture toward redemption or creation of man.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Irving Howe, *Steady Work* (New York, 1966), p. 119.

It is no accident that both *Native Son* and *L'Etranger* were written and published during the Popular Front Period. In this period the Communist Party International moved to the right politically under the directives of Stalin. Instead of looking for social transformation from below, from the working class, a greater emphasis was placed on forging alliances with liberal and social democratic parties. At this time the C.P. abandoned its anti-war position and made an alliance with Roosevelt and the United States, against Hitler, which led to mass confusion in the Party; thousands left. The new pro-war perspective meant that much of the local work by Communists, including social issues around housing and jobs, was scaled back or stopped all together. At the least, all of the work done by Communists took on an entirely different character. So for example the brilliant organizing amongst working class and poor blacks the Communists did in Harlem in the thirties was abandoned. Communists who did remain to do work among Blacks were re-directed to focus their energies on getting Democrats elected, a far cry from the tenant organizing and mass marches during what was known as the Third Period.¹⁴⁹

In France Communists continued to follow Russia's lead, but not without problems:

As long as the Russian Revolution linked its fate to the success of the revolution internationally, the pre-eminence of the Russian leaders aided the international, but as soon as this orientation was abandoned the International was ruined.

Two factors explain the continued passive submission of the foreign communist parties to Russian direction. The first was the

¹⁴⁹ Read Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem*

series of defeats inflicted on the international working-class movement. The Russians alone retained the prestige of success, and on the basis of nothing but setbacks no other party developed the confidence or the authority to challenge them. The second was a failure of the Bolsheviks to communicate, or, put the other way round, a failure of the foreign parties to learn. The communists of Germany, England, France etc. found themselves continually being criticized and corrected, first from the left and then from the right. In the process they seem to have absorbed not the Leninist method as a whole, on which corrections were based, but only the idea that Moscow was always right. Consequently they never developed the capacity for independent concrete analysis, which Lenin considered to be a function of the party to produce leaders.¹⁵⁰

Sartre, who maintained his connections to the Communist Party continued to launch criticisms of the Party. Sartre attacked Stalin's *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism* as a metaphysical and positivistic materialism, and stressed that "this possibility of rising above a situation in order to get a perspective on it...is precisely that which we call freedom. No materialism of any kind can ever explain it."¹⁵¹ Yet, in his 1952 article on *The Communists and the Peace*, provoked by the Korean War. It was this ultra-Bolshevik position that lead to his split with Merleau-Ponty, who emphasized the unity of the subject and object as opposed to their radical separation in Marx. Sartre's disagreement with Merleau-Ponty is a sign of the influence of Stalinism upon his critique.

Stalin...maintained that language was a creation of the whole people, and not of a class, that it developed gradually, and not by leaps, and that Marr was an idealist, in that language could never be separated from thought. More broadly, Stalin opened the way for discussions of the relative independence of ideas.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ John Molyneux, *Marxism and the Party* (Chicago, 2003), p. 92.

¹⁵¹ Jean Paul Sartre, "Materialism and Revolution", *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (New York, 1967, p. 235.

¹⁵² David McLellan, p. 136.

Marr, who based his theories of art on older models tied language to the “super structure” and to class. Intellectuals in the Party like Marr were ended by Stalin in 1950 with the declaration that language was not part of the superstructure and that languages did not have an essential class character.¹⁵³ The retreat of intellectuals from the Party had a profound effect on Wright and Camus. Although Wright was a card-carrying member of the Party, and Camus was not, the entire atmosphere of the period was changed.¹⁵⁴ Much of the optimism was gone. Fewer and fewer people believed in the potential for radical social change from below. The situation in Europe was especially bleaker. Hitler was advancing throughout Europe. Jews, Communists, Gypsies and Gays, were being rounded up in to ghettos and sent off to concentration camps this coupled with daily bombings, shortages and starvation, all were signs that the working class had not been able to save itself and that help would therefore have to come from on high.¹⁵⁵

The only force that could have prevented the Holocaust and spread of fascism was the German working class, but Stalin had misdirected the German Communists to reject the German Social Democratic Party (the largest working class in the world at the time) as Social Fascists. His strategy (of course, only after Hitler effectively ended the Hitler Stalin pact with the invasion of Poland) was to allow Hitler to take power and then defeat him.

As Remmele put it in the Reichstag:

¹⁵³ *The Essential Stalin*, ed. B. Franklin (New York, 1072), p. 367.

¹⁵⁴ Read Alan Wald, *New York Intellectuals and Exiles from a Future Time*

¹⁵⁵ Read *Trotsky's Fight Against Fascism*

Once they [the Nazis] are in power, then the united front of the proletariat will be established and it will make a clean sweep of everything... We are not afraid of the fascist gentlemen. They will shoot their bolt quicker than any other government.¹⁵⁶

Of course as Leon Trotsky had argued, this was a fatal mistake. No sooner had Hitler taken power than all working class parties were dismantled. Fascism, was indeed as Trotsky had argued, a razor in the hand of the class enemy.

The ruling class which at the end of World War I had suffered crushing defeat followed by the humiliation brought on by the treaty of Versailles, turned towards fascism as a solution to the economic and political crisis rather than risk revolution by the desperately, impoverished masses. The middle class, “the petty shop owners” who always provides the base for fascism, leaned towards the ruling classes once the working class was seen as incapable of manifesting its power.

This was a tragic mistake: Trotsky described the situation like this:

On the scales of election statistics, one thousand fascist votes weigh as much as one thousand communist votes, But on the scales of the revolutionary struggle, a thousand workers in one big factory represent a force a hundred times greater than a thousand petty officials, clerks, their wives and their mothers in-law. The great bulk of the fascists consists of human rubbish.¹⁵⁷

The Communist Party could have changed the situation, but under the directives of Stalin they missed their historic opportunity to stop the rise of Hitler and

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Braunthal, *History of the International*, volume 2 (London, 1967, p. 366.

¹⁵⁷ Leon Trotsky, *Fascism, Stalinism and the United Front* (London, 1989), p. 70.

instead attacked the Social Democratic Party, the one section of German society that could have stopped Hitler's advance.

To this day few understand how these historical events unfolded. Your average person believes that Hitler was some demonic genius who hood winked the masses.¹⁵⁸ Many academics believe that Hitler's rise was due to inherent anti-Semitism. Still others insist that Hitler's rise was inevitable, on account of the devastation after World War I. In short Hitler's rise is viewed as the opposite side of the great men makes history coin. If you are taught, as I was (until I hit college and met my first Marxist Professor, Professor Ringer, a Mellon Professor at Boston University, 1985) that great advancements in human civilizations occur on account of the actions of really great, always, white, men, such as Christopher Columbus, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson, then you are also forced to assume that catastrophic retreats in world history occur as a result of really bad, mostly white, men.

Yet, in all actuality, it is was the subjective conditions manifested in the defeatism of Western intellectuals that began to move away from the belief in revolution, which could have stopped the spread of fascism:

Western Marxism's shift to culture was born partly out of political impotence and disenchantment. Caught between Capitalism and Stalinism, groups like the Frankfurt School could compensate for their political homelessness by turning to cultural and philosophical questions. Politically marooned, they could draw upon their formidable cultural resources to confront a capitalism in which the role of culture was becoming more and more vital, and thus prove themselves once more politically relevant. In the same act, they could dissociate themselves from the savagely philistine Communist world, while immeasurably enriching the traditions of thought which that

¹⁵⁸ See *Hitler's Willing Executioners*

Communism had betrayed. In doing so, however, much Western Marxism ended up as a somewhat gentrified version of its militant revolutionary forebears, academicist, disillusioned and politically toothless. This, too, it passed on to its successors in cultural studies, for whom thinkers as Antonio Gramsci came to mean theories of subjectivity rather than workers revolution.¹⁵⁹

In short this liberal, Bourgeois, explanation of the world that dominates academic discourse to this day puts its emphasis upon the individual. It is through this individualized gaze that the history of the forties is transcribed in to the history books, and with it the history of Wright and Camus, and every other artist. Marx had a different theory. He said, “the history of all hitherto societies is a history of class struggle,”¹⁶⁰ a theory that both Wright and Camus espoused.

If we may leave aside for a second the academic question of the significance of authorial intentionality, then we can go on to reflect upon the significance of both authors believing in the historic role of the working class just at a time that this revolutionary theory of human liberation was on the decline. In other words one could argue in opposition to interpreters of Wright and Camus who believe that each had abandoned, or perhaps never even espoused in the case of Camus, class politics at the time of the writing of *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*, that they were using their texts to send a sort of wake up call to the masses, attempting to get them to act, or be consumed by the reactionary wave that ultimately did takeover and develop into what we now know as the Cold War. During this period the United States with its allies in France and England invaded whole countries to stop the “spread of communism.” In America, Communists

¹⁵⁹ Terry Eagleton, “The Rise and Fall of Theory,” *After Theory* (New York, 2003), p. 31.

¹⁶⁰ Karl Marx, see *Capital*, Volume 1

were scapegoats, hunted down, and rooted out of the unions, just as viciously as they had been during the first “Red Scare” between 1919 and 1920.¹⁶¹ In 1950, McCarthy remarked:

I have here in my hand a list of 205 that were known to the secretary of state as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department.¹⁶²

In Griffin Fariello’s amazing chilling oral history of the “Red Scare” he sums up McCarthy’s influence:

For the next five years, McCarthy’s shrill accusations, dominated public life, influenced foreign and domestic policy, and held two presidents hostage. He waged a guerilla war against the establishment, accusing the State Department, the Democratic Party, the U.S. Armory, even Truman and Eisenhower themselves—of treasonous pro-Communist behavior.¹⁶³

Although Europe had huge Communists Parties, they were still under the directives of Stalinism, and therefore worked more as a stopgap measure, than any real mechanism to help advance working class struggle.

Both *Native Son* and *L’Etranger*, unlike the protest novels/social realist texts of the thirties were focused upon the question of consciousness. If you look to the works of the writers from the thirties, including Richard Wright’s (Camus was born in 1929) the subject matter concerns ordinary individuals in

¹⁶¹ Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study of National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (New York, 1964), p. 281.

¹⁶² Joseph McCarthy, remarks reported in *The Wheeling Intelligencer*, February, 1950.

¹⁶³ Griffin Fariello, *Red Scare: Memories of an Inquisition* (New York, 1995), p. 28.

extraordinary times struggling, however successfully or unsuccessfully, against a common oppressor. The common theme behind all of these works from the thirties is that the working class can organize collectively, and that this collective organizing is somehow necessary to change things. The thirties, which witnessed the highest level of working class struggle in world history, made manifest Marx's most basic premise: "the History of all hitherto societies is a history of class struggle." By the time you get to the forties, and the retreat of working class struggle, this optimistic theme has dissipated. Nowhere do you read of the masses struggling together. The focus is almost exclusively back upon the individual. The literary text in other words mirrors the political retreat of the working class.

Yet, far too often critics do to Wright and Camus' text, what they accuse Marxist critics of all the time: seeing the text a mere mirror, a simple reflection of the times. A genuine Marxist critique understands the relationship between the world and the text in a much more dynamic form. Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey's views on the subject of the Marxian dialectic and how it pertains to literary analysis would be useful here:

It is important to 'locate' the production of literary effects historically as part of the ensemble of social practices. For this to be seen dialectically rather than mechanically, it is important to understand that the relationship of 'history' to 'literature' is not like the relationship or 'correspondence' of two 'branches', but concerns the developing forms of an eternal contradiction. Literature and history are not each set up externally to each other (not even as the history of literature versus social and political history), but are in an intricate and connected relationship, the historical conditions of existence of

anything like a literature. Very generally, this internal relationship is what constitutes the definition of literature as an ideological form.¹⁶⁴

So, in other words, the text doesn't just reflect the world it is produced in, it also impacts and alters that world. Wright and Camus understood this point intimately. They were the original writers of "la literature engage" that Jean Paul Sartre theorized about. They understood the power of words as weapons, and yet because they didn't spell it out in as straightforward a fashion as their precursors from the thirties, they are seen as writers who signal a death knell, rather than a warning shot, to working class struggle.

This seems odd given that their main focus in each respective novel is the question of consciousness. Why consciousness? Why should this be important at this particular historical conjuncture? What is the connection between consciousness and class struggle? Marx said that consciousness preceded class struggle: "It is not consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."¹⁶⁵

Surprisingly, Sartre's non-materialist and a historical notion of freedom comes from this equation: Instead of social being, "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible;" This "essence of human being is suspended in his freedom", much as consciousness is determined by Marx's "social being". Sartre's essentially political quest fermented in the belief that humans can rise above their situation, depends upon the correctness of this Marxian equation. For

¹⁶⁴ Balibar and Macherey, "Literature as Ideological Form" in *Marxist Literary Theory*, p. 278.

¹⁶⁵ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*

if essence does not proceed existence, but is instead a product of it, then human reality minus fate now becomes boiled down to a series of choices. Sartre's "freedom" is an inspired offspring of the social beings who achieved social consciousness in the wake of the Russian Revolution. The great potential for human liberation generated its own theory reduced to a simple belief that "there is no difference between the being of man and his being-free."¹⁶⁶

Questions about consciousness and how it relates to the idea of human liberation are made manifest in the works of Camus. Borrowing upon a Sartrean version of Marxism, Camus developed his aesthetic through the Sartre's notion of "freedom". His text brought to the fore many political questions evident right here in our own times. Yet, in spite of numerous signs of a shift to the left in working class consciousness since the conservative 80s, struggle has not broken out on a mass scale for a sustained period in thirty years.¹⁶⁷ It would be wrong, however, to characterize today's mindset as apathetic. Anyone who has stood on a street corner in any city in the United States and spoke of the burning social issues of the day: unemployment, health care, police brutality, Bush, etc, knows that people are extremely angry but in the absence of any sustained struggle and with the all out assault on working class living standards people lack the confidence to fight back.

These times are very different from those that Wright and Camus wrote *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*. Today, as we witness a second term of the Bush presidency many may wonder whether we have indeed come out of the

¹⁶⁶ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (New York, 1966), p. 30.

¹⁶⁷ see *International Socialist Review*, "Perspectives" (Chicago, 1992).

conservative period that took hold after the movements of the 60s and early 70s receded. In the early nineties it looked like things were beginning to break open. The end of South Africa's Apartheid, The fall of the Berlin Wall, The Rodney King Rebellion, as well as some significant nation wide strikes by UPS in 1996, and GM in 1999 seemed like indicators of a left ward shift in the period. None of this has however translated into any kind of sustained movement, and at the top of society politics have moved to the right. We are however in a very different era than the post war boom years that followed World War II. After four recessions since 1972, a steady erosion of wages and living standards, and an unpopular, intractable war abroad the anger and frustration amongst working class people is more palpable than ever.

The late Thirties early Forties marked the beginning of a conservative era that would last until the next social upheavals of the sixties and seventies. As it is today, people in the 40s were *genuinely* doubtful about the potential for social change; Unlike today, people still believed that class struggle was possible. Although Wright and Camus' protagonists, Bigger and Mersault, stand condemned at the end of each respective novel's conclusion, they are highly conscious of themselves as social beings—a complete transformation from their alienated state in their respective introductions (see Intro).

The retreat of a generation from the principles of revolutionary socialism is aestheticized into tragedy by Wright and Camus. Literature is a re-working of the imagination upon the social contradictions of human kind under capitalism. *Native Son* and *L'Etranger* are important to know and compare if only to help us

appreciate the tragic toll upon the human imagination caused by the decline and fall of working class consciousness at a time when struggle was not a distant memory.

Both Wright and Camus tried to use their fiction as a means to salvage humanism within Marxism after it had been so trampled upon by Stalin. Each was looking for a way to avoid throwing away the Marxist baby with the Stalinist bath water. As was described in the introduction the extent to which they fail is not so much a mark of a personal failure but a societal one. As we saw in our close reading in the Introduction their works expose society's failure to maintain the gains of the revolutionary spirit born in 1917 and born to fruition in the 1930s. And in this sense also, each work foreshadows the rise of the New Left, however militant and angry it had lost to a great extent its revolutionary class perspective.

For each writer Existentialism, and with it its debt to Romanticism's idealism (see below), provided another way--a way to navigate through the landmines left by Stalinism. As Sartre said "Existentialism est un Humanisme." What better tradition to borrow upon when the politics of revolutionary Marxism and the hopes of 1917 were now being masqueraded by the horror of Stalinism. In the name of Socialism Stalin betrayed every single gain that the Russian working class had fought and died for. Millions were slaughtered. Much of the leadership of the Bolshevik uprising was rounded up and shot or sent off to die in Siberia. Stalin, a "socialist" had just made a pact with Hitler, a fascist. To the credit of Wright and Camus, they tried to show the incredible potential that was born out of 1917 through the literary tradition of Existentialism. Yet, unlike

Sartre they were not looking for a third way—a political program to preserve the gains of Marxism while abandoning Stalinism. No, if anything one could say that their enterprise was more closely related to Marx than was Sartre's. For each of them human liberation was not an abstract ideal. They didn't fall into the metaphysical or phenomenological to avoid Stalin's abstract notions of the human. They instead wanted to write about the "real lives" of "real human beings." Both *Bigger* and *Mersault* are painfully human. It is only when each sets up the actions of the protagonist in the fiction that the ideological contradictions surface and the words render meanings that Wright and Camus expect us to interpret and use to break free. It is then the universal humanism in all tragedy that makes it such a convenient vehicle to render the notion of class universality that Wright and Camus hone through the human particular engaged in world that would deny his material force and dissociate his subject from the realm of ideas that his social being had first articulated.

Chapter 10

Bigger as Existential Hero

“The most that I could say of Bigger was that he felt the *need* for a whole life and *acted* out of that need; that was all.”

--Richard Wright, *How Bigger was Born*

As I mentioned in the introduction, Richard Wright’s novel is rarely taught in courses on existentialism. Most often his text is taught as an example of protest fiction. Yet, it is actually a better example of existentialism than it is protest fiction. Most texts from the genre of protest fiction do not critique social movements.¹⁶⁸ Yet, *Native Son*, from beginning to end offers a clear example of the inadequacies of the leaders of the Communist Party. Despite the serious effort by Frank and Mary Dalton to bring Bigger into political activity, their arguments fall on deaf ears. The cultural divide between their world and Bigger’s is far too deep. Bigger can barely stand to be seen with them.¹⁶⁹ In the Part III, Max, a CP veteran, delivers a lengthy argument about Socialism that fails to connect with Bigger’s consciousness. In the end Max “shrinks” away from Bigger and walks away sad and visibly shaken. Hardly the grist for protest fiction.

What I killed for must’ve been good!’ Bigger’s voice was full of frenzied anguish. ‘It must have been good! When a man kills, it’s for something....I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ‘em...It’s the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, ‘cause I’m going to die. I know what I’m saying real good

¹⁶⁸ See Barbara Foley, “The Politics of Poetics,” in *Richard Wright*, eds., Gates and Appiah. pp. 188-200.

¹⁶⁹ Richard Wright, *Native Son*. 71-74

and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way....'

Max eyes were full of terror. Several times his body moved nervously, as though he were about to go to Bigger; but he stood still.¹⁷⁰

Existentialism is the dominant philosophy governing *Native Son*. For the most part Wright is influenced by a French, Marxian view of existentialism.

The emergence of an 'existentialist' version of Marxism in France after the war was aided by the growing French interest in Hegel and the impact of the publication of Marx's early writings. The experience of the war had destroyed confidence in the clear analytical rationalism so deeply embedded in the French philosophical tradition. Hegel, with his philosophy of history, his concepts of alienation and the dialectic, his phenomenology of consciousness, seemed to offer a deeper understanding of recent experience.¹⁷¹

Far from representing a retreat from Marxist politics, it is in fact only an abandonment of the Communist Party, which had itself, rejected a genuine Marxist philosophy, to make alliances with the United States during World War

II. McLellan again states the matter succinctly:

The radical interpretation of Hegel offered by Kojève and Hyppolite [made Hegel available for French Marxists] aided the rapid assimilation of Marx's early writings into the French Marxist tradition in the immediate post war years. This assimilation had to be made in opposition to the French Communist Party, whose intellectuals were enclosed, both politically and philosophically, in a stultifying Stalinism until the mid-1950s. In politics, the French Communist Party was obliged to follow the interests of Moscow, which often dictated a conservative line in internal French politics, while in

¹⁷⁰ Richard Wright, *Native Son*, (New York, 1991), p. 429.

¹⁷¹ David McClellan, "Existential Marxism," p. 280.

philosophy there was little more to be done than repeat the laws of dialectical materialism as formulated by Stalinism.¹⁷²

Marxist Existentialism was a return to Marx's roots, found in the early writings on Hegel. It provided a way for Wright to preserve the central tenants of Marxist philosophy, while casting off the "socialist" shell of the C.P.¹⁷³ Although this seems contradictory, I will show how most critics who read *Native Son* as a rejection of class politics are in fact wrong.

First and foremost *Native Son* is about class. From the very first moment that we hear the "Brrrrng" of the alarm clock in the opening lines of *Native Son* the reader is propelled into the impoverished world of Bigger Thomas and made conscious of his family's frustrations and desires to rise above their condition. Setting here symbolizes poverty, as in a naturalist novel: "Light flooded the room and revealed a black boy standing in a narrow space between two iron beds, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands. From a bed to his right the woman spoke again."¹⁷⁴ Their situation is perhaps most keenly felt when the brothers have to turn their backs in the one room flat while his sister gets dressed. The shame of poverty is felt everywhere. Bigger's mother is constantly harping on him to get a job, and he himself sees far beyond his meager circumstances to a

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 281.

¹⁷³ Stalinist Russia was "Socialist" in name only, if Socialism is defined as Marx and later Lenin defined it as "workers control and power." Because of the suffocating atmosphere of Stalinism, Existentialism is too often misunderstood as a reaction to Marxism and Enlightenment ideas, when in fact is not simply an individualist philosophy as it is more often than not portrayed.

¹⁷⁴ *Native Son*, p. 3.

place where Blacks are not aloud. “Why they make us live in one corner of the city? Why don’t they let us fly planes and run ships....” Bigger wants to know.¹⁷⁵

Bigger should not, however, be read as a character from social realist fiction or from their great precursor the Naturalist Emile Zola. In those earlier texts the subject is more often than not the environment itself. For example *Nana* is more about Nana’s world than Nana. Another example of the Naturalist tradition is *Maggie a Girl of the Streets*. In each of these texts the focus is on the objective environment, and not the individual and his or her effort to change things.

To the contrary, Bigger blazes across the opening scene as a conqueror that hunts down and kills “the huge black rat” to save his little family who are scared half to death in their run down tenement. Bigger is introduced to the reader as an ideal example of Arthur Miller’s anti-hero. He is highly conscious of his class:

Day in and day out there was nothing but shouts and bickering. But what could he do? Each time he asked himself that question his mind hit a blank wall and he stopped thinking. Across the street and directly in front of him, he saw a truck pull to a stop at the curb and two white men in overalls got out with pails and brushes. Yes, he could take the job at Dalton’s and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice.¹⁷⁶

One of the clearest scenes that represent the heightened subjectivity of this novel is the scene when Bigger and his friend Gus are in dialogue standing on the streets. As a lead up to the scene Wright gives us a metaphor that pushes the boundaries of Naturalist fiction:

¹⁷⁵ *Native Son*, p. 20.

¹⁷⁶ *Native Son*, p. 12.

Then their eyes were riveted; a slate-colored pigeon swooped down to the middle of the steel car tracks and began strutting to and fro with ruffled feathers, its fat neck bobbing with regal pride. A street car rumbled forward and the pigeon rose swiftly through the air on wings stretched so taut and sheer that Bigger could see the gold of the sun through their translucent tips. He tilted his head and watched the slate-colored bird flap out of sight over the edge of a high roof.

‘Now if I could only do that,’ Bigger said
Gus Laughed.

Gus and Bigger see the world as it is: “They got everything,” says Gus; “They own the world,” says Bigger.¹⁷⁷ Yet the insightful societal critique expressed through Gus and Bigger’s dialogue reflects a more optimistic and capable protagonist than the typical victims we find in Naturalist fiction.

This blending of Existentialism and Naturalist fiction causes many critics to find fault in *Native Son* because of the manner that Wright borrows on so many genres and movements (existentialism, realism, naturalism, tragedy, etc) to create a kind of ill-fated smorgasbord. This stems from a misunderstanding of Wright’s Existentialism, and perhaps a more generalized misunderstanding of Existentialism all together. For as I have argued above, Existentialism should not be viewed in opposition to Marxism, but more like a return to Marx’s Hegelian roots, which reinvest the subject with a universal transformative power lacking in the more abstract Stalinist theories of language. This is why Wright’s text is preoccupied with the question of consciousness and social conditions.

Writers who are categorized as existentialists are never accused of having too many movements and genres in their fiction. Camus borrows upon Realism,

¹⁷⁷ *Native Son*, pp. 21-22.

Naturalism, Romanticism and Tragedy, in the writing of *L'Etranger*, but no critic has ever had a problem teasing out the dominant genre governing the text.

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* also borrows heavily on Tragic form, and Romantic themes, but is again never criticized for trying to do too much. But neither of these two texts make as an explicit an argument about race and class as does *Native Son*. I would argue that given the backlash against Stalinism, most academics cannot see past the politics of *Native Son*, to appreciate the text as a fine example of existentialist philosophy.

This is a tragic mistake, in my opinion, for *Native Son* could help in a very unique way to give our students a clearer understanding of the continued relevance of existential ideas in today's modern world.

The first problem that most reader's stumble upon in trying to understand *Native Son*, is that there are in fact two Bigger Thomas'. There is the Bigger as seen through the eyes of his mother, Max, and interestingly enough, this same viewpoint is seen by Mary Dalton and her father. Then there is the "real" Bigger Thomas. The one we see when he is on the street speaking with his friend and the one we come to know through Wright's use of internal monologue. Most readers, including much of the reader's of his day could not see Bigger as anything other than a stereotypical Black "thug." But to read Bigger as such, would be the same as reading Camus' Mersault as an apathetic, insensitive, lout. In inventing Bigger, Richard Wright did say that he wanted to create a novel that "Banker's wives wouldn't cry over," as they did in his first publication, *Uncle Tom's Children*, but this was not to say he was creating some two dimensional character

who was merely a victim of his environment.¹⁷⁸ Richard Wright describes who he meant Bigger to be in the following passage:

From these items I drew my first political conclusions about Bigger: I felt that Bigger, an American product, a native son of this land, carried with him potentialities of either Communism or Fascism. I don't mean to say that the Negro boy I depicted in *Native Son* is either a Communist or a Fascist. He is not either. But he is product of a dislocated society; he is dispossessed and disinherited man, and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out. Whether he'll follow some gaudy, hysterical leader who'll promise rashly to fill the void in him, or whether he'll come to an understanding with the millions of his kindred fellow workers under trade-union or revolutionary guidance depends upon the future state, the intensity, the fear, the hate, the impatience, the sense of exclusion, the ache for violent action, the emotional and cultural hunger, Bigger Thomas, conditioned as his organism is, will not become an ardent or even luke warm, supporter of the *status quo*.¹⁷⁹

Richard Wright poured over all of the biographical details of the real life killer in order to portray as accurate a portrait of the impoverished, Black man from the hood that he was able to do. He himself said that he wanted to get away from the minstrel like, apologist characters, which parade through Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Bigger is as much an existentialist as any of the more well-known existential heroes. True to the form, Bigger transforms from a state of alienation and frustration to one of connectedness and freedom. He comes to understand, as do all French Existentialists that action is bound up in social relations, which allow the protagonist to evolve. Again we are seeing a Hegelian philosophy of

¹⁷⁸ See James Baldwin's critique of *Native Son*.

¹⁷⁹ Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," in appendix *Native Son*, pp. 446-447.

history, with “his concepts of alienation and the dialectic, his phenomenology of consciousness, seemed to offer a deeper understanding of recent experience,” as the perspective most influencing Wright’s existentialism.

We perhaps see this most clearly the moment Bigger commits the murder of Mary Dalton. Before that point he was just like Camus’ Mersault was before he himself kills the Arab on the beach. Once having killed Mary, however accidental her death was, Bigger is thrust into a world of action. The murder has freed him from the shackles of his oppressive routine, which was produced by the racist, profit driven world he was born into. Suddenly he has something he never had before, confidence:

He had murdered and created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had anything that others could not take from him. Yes, he could sit here calmly and eat and not be concerned about what his family thought or did. He had a natural wall from behind which he could look at them. His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time; it added to him a certain confidence which his gun and knife did not.¹⁸⁰

Wright, who is very much conscious of the existential character he has created, allows the chapter designations to follow Bigger’s shift in consciousness. Chapter 1 (prior to Mary’s death was titled “fear” but after having killed Mary a new chapter begins called “flight.” Never before did it seem possible for Bigger to flee his circumstance, but the crime itself, ironically, becomes a vehicle to set him free, however temporarily (chapter three is titled fate). This theme of crime and freedom is common in the Existential novel. Both Raskanikov and Mersault

¹⁸⁰ *Native Son*, pp. 104-105.

are “free” once they commit the crime. Bigger’s greatest moment is perhaps when he is chatting with the detective, before he takes flight. At that moment it is Bigger who is running the show. Everyone is now moving as a result of Bigger’s actions. On the one hand, the fact that it takes a crime to set these souls free is a sad commentary on the world they live in. Many argue for reasons such as this that Existentialism is a highly pessimistic philosophy, because it represents an abandonment of class politics. Freedom now rests with the individual, and is only possible in so far as the individual is willing to commit violence upon another. On the other hand, it is not the crime that actually sets them free, but merely offers up an opportunity to know what they did not know of before: namely that they were not free. There is in this equation two types of freedom: The individual, hedonistic freedom, and the freedom that comes from breaking from the yokes of oppression brought on by the routinized and mechanized existence of class society. Andre Gide’s *L’Immoraliste* offers a perfect example of the former, and Crime and Punishment’s Raskalnikov agonizes over the two types of freedom for much of the novel.

The proof of Bigger as primarily an existential hero opens up larger questions concerning the relationship between existentialism and tragedy. There is very little written comparing the two. More often than not tragedy is viewed, as Williams says above, as something separate from social production. In Chapter 7 we will further explore this relationship between tragedy and existentialism and the extent to which Marx’s famous axiom below is applicable to our assertion of the recurrence of tragedy in the 1940s:

Men make their own history, but not of their own free will, not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Karl Marx, "Poetry of the Future," *The Eighteenth Brumaire. Marxist Literary Theory*, pp.35-38

Chapter 11

Meursault's Existential Rebellion

But it is bad to stop, hard to be satisfied with a single way of seeing, to go without contradiction, perhaps the most subtle of all spiritual forces. The proceeding merely defines a way of thinking. But the point is to live.

—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

In spite of Camus' rejection of the label of "existentialism," Meursault is the quintessential existential hero. He is thrown headlong into the "absurdite du monde," a world that Camus has created for him alone. In his refusal to feel or express even the faintest sign of emotion over events that would leave most of us shattered, the reader comes to understand the universe's indifference, and subsequently the morality of the existentialist. Meursault must transcend his apathy of emotion that has led to his killing of an Arab, not to become a more feeling type of guy, but to "purge du mal" so that he can finally see the human condition and true nature of freedom. Finally, he understands why his mother took a "fiancé" at the end of her life: "Si pres de la mort, maman devait s'y sentir liberee et prete a tout reviver." To be happy, the goal of every existential hero, he must see himself for what he truly is: a man in a world with no meaning or hope, who, nevertheless, is a part, "si fraternal enfin" to "la tender indifference du monde."¹⁸²

In contrast, many believe that Camus condemns Meursault to death for refusing to feel any emotion over the death of his mother. And, while it is true that this insensitivity and/or apathy propels Meursault towards a kind of fate, in which

¹⁸² Albert Camus, *L'Etranger* (New York, 1955), p. 138.

events act upon him rather than he upon events, and in that path his plight is similar to that of Bigger's, Mersault is also brought to the scene of his own crime in an almost unconscious state. In the final analysis, Mersault is not condemned for a lack of feeling. As we have described above, Mersault who in spite of now understanding Maman, still insists, "Nobody, nobody, had the right to cry over her."

Mersault is our existential hero from the outset because his problem is one of freedom and responsibility. He is unlike the Director and his mother's friends who are critiqued for their over concern with appearances and lack of feeling towards his mother's "fiancé," and he is equally unlike his mother's "fiancé," who will probably miss her the most, but who is incapable of filling the shoes of the existential hero because of his lack of resistance (for example when he is made to follow along in the rear during the funeral procession of his "fiancé.")¹⁸³ Mersault's problem stems not from acquiescence to false ideologies or a lack of feeling; rather, he is condemned for his inability to see himself as an actor compelled by the true order of things to be responsible for his actions. He is as Sartre said, "compelled to be free," a concept that Sartre borrowed from Heidegger, which originates from the latter's concept that existence proceeds essence. With this notion of freedom comes a responsibility to self and others.

What Camus ultimately condemns Mersault to death for, and Wright, Bigger, is not the absence of feeling, but the missed opportunity to see in death, the purpose and meaning of existence. This existential goal is brought to the fore,

¹⁸³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

not just through characterization, but also through analysis of the progressive patterns of light imagery which permeate the first half of *L'Etranger*. During the funeral procession the crackling tar pavement beneath a sizzling sun is one of two scenes where Camus uses light imagery to convey a key point. The second one is when Mersault is standing on the beach with the dazzling sun in his eyes at the moment he pulls the trigger. Each of these scenes that abound in light imagery is set around a death scene--first his mother's and second the Arab's.

The first significant reference to light is when he keeps vigil at his mother's wake:

D'avoir ferme les yeux, la pièce m'a paru encore plus éclatante de blancheur. Devant moi, il n'y avait pas une ombre et chaque objet, chaque angle, toutes les courbes se dessinaient avec une pureté blessante pour les yeux. C'est à ce moment que les amis de maman sont entres. Ils étaient en tout une dizaine, et ils glissaient en silence dans cette lumière aveuglante.¹⁸⁴

The next time the light imagery reappears is on his way to the grave sight:

Le ciel était déjà plein de soleil. Il commençait à peser sur la terre et la chaleur augmentait rapidement....Aujourd'hui, le soleil débordant qui faisait tressaillir le paysage le rendait inhumain et déprimant.

As the procession continues Mersault notes how

Il me semblait que le convoi marchait un peu plus vite. Autour de moi, c'était toujours la même campagne lumineuse gorgée de soleil. L'éclat du ciel était insoutenable...Le soleil avait fait éclater le goudron...Pérez m'a paru très loin, perdu dans une nuée de chaleur.¹⁸⁵

The light imagery is interesting because it becomes progressively unbearable and increasingly more omnipresent. Why does the light become progressively worse

¹⁸⁴ *L'Etranger*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁵ *L'Etranger*, pp. 34-35.

as our protagonist nears his mother's grave site? And why does it effect all of the characters and objects in the scene? Even their boots become stuck in tar overheated from the blazing sun. The answer is at the heart of our existential hero's problem. A perceptive reader will recognize that light blazing through the funeral scene, compels them to see the two narrative events as part of an equation: Light equals death. Light symbolizes a lack of consciousness just as death symbolizes a lack of hope. The light does not help Mersault see, but blinds him instead, because he is not yet conscious of the freedom that underlies his existence. If he were he would not be lead towards the events which compel him to kill the Arab on the beach.

The scene at the beach offers the same blinding light as the day of his mother's funeral. « Le soleil tombait. Presque d'aplomb sur le sable et son éclat sur la mer était insoutenable. » Once again the sun is « écrasant. Il se brisait en morceaux sur le sable at. sur la mer....Pendant tout ce temps, il n'y a plus eu que le soleil et ce silence. » It is « le meme eclatement rouge,» that compels him to act :

Sur le sable, la mer haletait de toute la respiration rapide et étouffe de ses petites vagues. Je marchais lentement vers les rochers et je sentais mon front se gonfler sous le soleil. Toute cette chaleur fois que je sentais son grand souffle chaud sur mon visage, je serrais les dents, je fermais les poings dans les poches du mon pantalon, je me tendais tout entier pour triompher du soleil et de cette opaque qu'il me déversait. A chaque épée de lumière j'aille du sable, d'un coquillage blanchi ou d'un débris de verre, mes mâchoires se crispaient.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ *L'Etranger*, pp. 77-78.

And then finally he wins his battle; at the very moment that the light crashes through him forcing him to pull the trigger, the light is vanquished:

“C’était le même soleil que le jour où j’avais enterre maman et, comme alors, le front surtout me faisait mal et toutes les veines battaient ensemble sous la peau. A cause de cette brûlure que je ne pouvais plus supporter, j’ai fait un mouvement en avant. Je Savais que c’était stupide, que je ne me débarrasserais pas du soleil en me déplaçant d’un pas...l’Arabe a tire son couteau qu’il m’a présente dans le soleil. La lumière a gicle sure l’acier et c’était comme une longue lame étincelante qui m’atteignait au front....Je ne sentais plus que les cymbales du soleil sur mon front et, indistinctement, le glaive éclatant jailli du couteau toujours en face de moi. Cette épée brûlante rongait mes cils et fouillant mes yeux douloureux. C’est alors que tout a vacille. La mer a charrie un souffle épais et ardent. Il m’a semble que le ciel s’ouvrait sur toute son étendue pour laisser pleuvoir du feu. Tout mon être s’est étendue et j’ai crispe ma main sur le revolver. La gâchette a cède, j’ai touche le ventre poli de la crosse et c’est la, dans la bruit a la fois sec et assourdissant, que tout commence. J’ai secoue la sueur et le soleil, le silence exceptionnel d’une plage ou j’avais été heureux.¹⁸⁷

The burning, like the burning that made his head throb the day he buried his mother, is what makes him move forward. The scene becomes a battle between himself and the light. In the end he overcomes his opponent, the light and its heat, and finally “secoue la sueur et le soleil.”

It is through Camus’ use of light imagery that the funeral and murder scene are connected. This light pattern transcends both scenes and grows in intensity because our protagonist begins his existential journey half conscious: “The man of bad faith...is half conscious and deceptive; he fails to reflect about himself and

¹⁸⁷ *L’Etranger*, pp. 79-80.

his role in the world. He lives sluggishly in the swampy depths of self-deception. He may accept what he should reject or reject what he should accept.”¹⁸⁸

Mersault fails to reflect; thus death overwhelms him; a thing he could have avoided a while longer had he reflected on the ethical problems evolving from a world, without the possibility of an afterlife, without the existence of a god or any other essence that proceeds his existence. French existentialism, heavily influenced by Marxism develops from a yearning for self, by a self that has become alienated from what he produces. Yet, freedom, although experienced by individual characters in *L'Étranger*, Mersault's mother for example, means more than freedom for the individual. Existential freedom is an ethical and aesthetic resolution to the alienation of the individual who is exploited and oppressed under capitalism. The a priori value of freedom is itself immediately an ethical value, because one is free to act or not, and in the absence of a higher moral authority, those actions have meaning only in so much as they connect with the world and are tied into others' preconditioned freedoms. Such a degree of self-consciousness arrives too late for Mersault, he “fail[s] to reflect about himself and his role in the world,” until he is on death row. The insight finally occurs just after the Priest leaves his death chamber:

Pour la premier fois..., j'ai pense a maman...et moi aussi, je me suis senti prêt a tout revivre. Comme si cette grand colère [contre la Prêtre] m'avait purge du mal, vide d'espoir, pour la premier fois devant cette nuit chargée de signes et d'étoiles, je m'ouvrais pour la première fois a la tendre indifférence du monde. De éprouver si pareil a moi, si fraternel enfin, j'ai senti que j'avais été heureux, et que je l'étais encore.

¹⁸⁸ *The Existential Imagination*, eds., Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamilton (Greenwich, 1963), p.16.

Finally, Mersault understands the absurdity of his existence. Now having fully accepted the limits of the Priest's logic concerning an absolutist philosophy, he is prepared to live for the very first time. The changed setting reflects his now fully conscious state; instead of a blinding sun, it is night time, and although truly alone in his cell he begins to empathize with others, including his mother.

Once having faced the absurdity of existence, he is connected with humanity: for Mersault the final proof of his connectedness, "Pour que tout soit consommé, pour que je me sente moins seul, il me restait à souhaiter qu'il y ait beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon exécution et qu'ils m'accueillent avec des cris de haine. »¹⁸⁹

In the end Mersault has fulfilled the ethical requirement of the existential hero : even under negative conditions he recognizes that to transcend his alienation and loneliness he must become self-conscious of his existence in a world without meaning, it is only then that he can recognize the freedom of others as a pre-condition for his own freedom and happiness.

¹⁸⁹ *L'Etranger*, p. 138.

Chapter 12

Unlikely Bed Partners: Tragedy and the Existential Imagination

Tragedy is the hope of the “existential imagination.”
 --Frederick Karl, *The Existential Imagination*

Tragedy and existentialism should never have had anything in common. The former, whether ancient or modern, relies on universals for meaning. The latter creates protagonists whose meaning insists upon the negation of such commonly perceived “meanings.” In other words, tragedy is regarded as what happens when the universe exacts its toll for stepping out of line, while existentialism is perceived as what happens when the individual realizes that that preconceived universe no longer exists. Yet, both have one thing in common: a focus on man and his or her relations with each other, not on his relations with any absolute. In some sense all tragedy is an effort towards reconciliation of social relations even though in the end the tragedy tells us that that reconciliation is impossible. Yet, such efforts towards reconciliation are not a historical. Wright and Camus do not merely repeat tragic plots within an existential formula. The difference between human interaction in a universe with god and human interaction in a world without god is an important distinction. For the truths that flow from *Oedipus* is not the same as those that flow from works such as *Native Son* and *L’Etranger*. At the end of *Oedipus* the protagonist’s must live in a world where he is no longer free to act. The primacy of fate is re-established, but at the end of *Native Son* and

L'Etranger, each is compelled to live in a world where the value of freedom and responsibility supersede the preconditioned social conditions he is born into. In other words at the end of an ancient tragedy awareness of this irreconcilable does not compel an ancient hero to act, because his world is still ruled, and judged by fate and the gods. On the other hand, awareness of his condition compels him to recognize that he alone is responsible for his actions. What stands as a constant throughout the 2500 years that separate these tragedies is another body of literature that owes its existence to this theme of reconciliation. That genre is known as the pastoral. The pastoral stands as a genre between ancient and modern tragedy as a great equalizer. Its existence allows one to conceive of the ordinary man capable of actions fitting a king. In other words the pastoral opens the door for the ordinary to be extraordinary. Yet, it will take the Enlightenment and the class struggles that were born from it, to move those actions beyond the harmony and humility of the pastoral and very much Christian world to a point where once again as Aristotle said, his actions will have consequences of magnitude within a universe that remains irreconcilable. To understand how Wright and Camus' works are not mere repetition of tragic form, we will consider the humanist strand within each genre, and the degree to which the Enlightenment restructured, rather than abandoned, the humanist revival that preceded it, through a re-working of the heroic protagonist.

Both literary discourses focus on a protagonist who is not in a state of conflict with the Gods or some social system but with others. Raymond Williams describes this process in his essay "Tragedy and Revolution." In a search for "the

structure of tragedy in our own culture” he gets to the root of tragedy in describing how the tragic action, “often undercuts the ordinary association between fundamental human values and the acknowledged social system,” a social fact that becomes for Williams “a structure of feeling” that is acted out by the tragic figure.¹⁹⁰

This emphasis upon the question of what it is to be human is at the basis of all existential philosophies. Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamalian sum up the humanist influences on the leading existential philosophers in their introduction to *The Existential Imagination*. They write:

All four [Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre] assume that existentialism is a philosophy of man, that its philosophical “answers” are not responses to technical problems in metaphysics, epistemology, or ontology, but those concerned with the welfare of man here and now, with that part of himself which he cannot escape. It provides, as Sartre feels, a new basis for humanism in which man instead of God is the divine creator and in which subjectivity is the sole universe man must explore.¹⁹¹

Tolstoy records the feelings of a man who suffers from what Kierkegaard called ‘fear and trembling,’ the ‘sickness unto death.’ In his despair, he faces the possibility of suicide, the complete nullification of his self. Tolstoy suggests, here as elsewhere, that the individual may need to face death before he can make the decision that will change his life...nineteenth century Hamlets who must suffer because a seemingly ordered world turns out to be disordered and meaningless, in brief, absurd.¹⁹² Everyone must himself make the choice between good and evil, and everyone must carry the responsibility for the choice he has made. Perhaps it

¹⁹⁰ Williams, “Tragedy and Revolution,” (p.244-250).

¹⁹¹ *The Existential Imagination*, p. 15.

¹⁹² *The Existential Imagination*, p. 13.

is Dostoevsky who sheds the most light on this question of the relationship between existentialism and tragedy. He writes: “Thou shalt love life more than the meaning of life.”¹⁹³

The historical link then between existentialism and tragedy is Humanism. Camus’ definition of the absurd shows to what extent his philosophy is meant as what Robbe Grillet describes as “the characteristic of humanism, whether Christian or not, is precisely to recover *everything*.”

It would be overly simplistic and historically inaccurate, however, to assume that Camus or Wright merely repeat this humanist strand without altering its meaning. Although Camus is interested in recovering a meaning to life in a godless universe, he is also as interested in exposing the irreconcilability of the individual and his social condition. Consider, for example, the following passage concerning Camus theory of the absurd in the *Existential Imagination*:

The absurd is a condition that results when man seeking happiness and reason confronts a meaningless universe, what Camus calls the ‘unreasonable silence of the world.’ Put another way, the absurd results from the implicit antagonism between the individual mind and the collective world in which both strain against each other without the possibility of either satisfactory embracement or resolution.¹⁹⁴

Consider also the following critique by Barbara Foley, who rejects the notion that *Native Son* is a tragedy:

Native Son, by contrast [to Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*] orders its narration of Bigger’s fate to suit the requirements of apologue rather than those of narrative tragedy. Even its title offers a declaration about social reality rather than an invitation to identification and catharsis. Where the minute and lengthy delineation of Clyde’s early

¹⁹³ *The Existential Imagination*, p. 12.

¹⁹⁴ *The Existential Imagination*, p. 13

life renders his motivations and actions transparent and predictable, the headlong pace of *Native Son* produces certain opacity in its protagonist. [And Bigger's] is not the hubris of a tragic hero: on the contrary; it is a twisted assertion of identity... [It] is thus grotesque rather than tragic, and Bigger's fate, emotionally gripping as it may be, is ultimately subordinated to Wright's bitter social commentary.
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In both passages above each critic delineates a theme of irreconcilability that both ancient and modern tragedy attempts to resolve through the humanist model of identification and catharsis. Yet, what neither critic considers is how the ancient tragic model has not simply been repeated, but in some sense re-invented, and within that re-invention there is an element of irreconcilability that both brings to the fore within the notion of reconciliation, by calling forth its opposite, as well as the unraveling of the possibility of any reconciliation because the authors, who now consider reconciliation, do so in a world that is hostile, competitive, and fragmented--a universe, in essence, unknowable to the Greek mind.

I believe that it is the incorporation of the pastoral into our understanding of modern tragedy that helps to understand how each work continues in the humanist vein, but within a transformed tragic model. In his work, *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, William Epton describes the "old pastoral" in the following terms:

The essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way).

¹⁹⁵ Barbara Foley, "The Politics of Poetics," in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, editors, Henry Louis Gates and K. A. Appiah (New York: 1993) p. 194.

In Epton's definition, the old pastoral, offers a solution to Oedipus' universal which left only the upper classes capable of profound feeling through identification and catharsis with a fallen person "above ordinary" stature.

Such notions of a universal feeling shared by high and low produced a body of literature known as mock pastoral which in adding a touch of humility, poked fun at the absurdity of such equanimity of feeling. Yet there is a "permanent idea" that remains in spite of the "pretense [that] no doubt makes some characters unreal." Such "permanent thought" is contained in "the feelings expressed or even the situation described." Yet, I would take issue with Epton's notion of a "permanent idea," for while the Proletarian novel may indeed use the model of the pastoral, it is not without significant changes.

In a world still under the shadow of the Enlightenment, where such considerations need not be absurd at all, but revolutionary in nature, the pastoral reappears, not as mock pastoral, but a "realistic pastoral": In his critique of Proletarian literature Epton makes some fairly provocative points. He says,

My own difficulty about proletarian literature is that when it comes off I find I am taking it as pastoral literature; I read into it, or find that the author has secretly put into it, these more subtle, more far reaching, and I think more permanent ideas.¹⁹⁶

The "permanent ideas" that Epton refers to offer a more literary bend to what he believes is an effort on the part of the writers of proletarian literature to collapse the distinction between propaganda and literature, the same error that Foley has reintroduced above. The comparison that Epton makes between propaganda and

¹⁹⁶ William Epton, *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, (New York: 1974), p.20.

literature is a key one, because it is just this blurring of the lines that has lead many critics to see a false opposition between art and politics: A false distinction that has lead to the idea that existentialism is a reaction to the Enlightenment. Such a concept stems from a narrow view on what the Enlightenment was all about. It is an effort by some critics to reduce the Enlightenment to a purely rational phenomenon, devoid of human emotion—a reaction to and an irretrievable departure from the humanist strand that I am arguing is the fuel for the return to tragedy in the works of Wright and Camus. Yet, such an opposition is a false dichotomy.

If we begin at the level of the text, and from the place where we left off in exploring the imagery patterns in *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*, we can see that it is precisely this re-occurrence of light imagery which distinctly links these existentialist works to the Enlightenment. It is fact Enlightenment ideas which furnishes existentialism with a yearning after reason and creed.

We said above that the light imagery referred to an absence of consciousness on the part of the protagonist. Once the protagonist “saw the light” so to speak, he had insight into his true, existential condition. The Enlightenment in fact served to rationalize and make knowable the very idea of consciousness about the world we live in, and to remove the cloak of myth and the irrational that had served the ancients as explanation to the unexplainable. Yet, today many see existentialism at odds with enlightenment ideas. This lack of connectedness between our own times and the Enlightenment is the result of a dominant critical tradition which sees the Enlightenment as a good idea gone bad: Lyotard, who

regards Hegel and Marx as the main inheritors of Enlightenment ideas sees the project as having foundered:

This idea of progress as possible, probable or necessary was rooted in the certainty that the development of the arts, technology, knowledge and liberty would be profitable to mankind as a whole.

After two centuries, we are more sensitive to signs that signify the contrary. Neither economic nor political liberalism, nor the various Marxism's, emerge from the sanguinary last two centuries free from the suspicion of crimes against mankind... What kind of thought is able to sublimate Auschwitz in a general (either empirical or speculative) process towards a universal emancipation?¹⁹⁷

On the other hand, Peter Burger more aptly shows that existentialism is founded upon the Enlightenment ideas of “the fusion of a didactic intention with the principle of rational critique.”¹⁹⁸ Burger rejects what he sees as set of wrong ideas about what the Enlightenment is about and challenges what much academic criticism has accomplished in narrowing the definition of the Enlightenment to contain only its strictly scientific components. In a similar vein, Raymond Williams, suggests that what the Romantics criticized as reason was not the reasoning activity, but the abstraction and final alienation of this activity, into what was called a rational, but was in fact a mechanical system:

Characteristically, it detached the techniques of observation and description from the purposes for which these were intended to serve.... The tragedy of naturalism is the tragedy of passive suffering... because man can never really change his world.... no intervention by god or man. But what has to be said is that this movement of mind, claiming its origins in reason, was theoretically and factually a mystification of real social reality.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ J.F. Lyotard, “Defining the Postmodern”, *ICA Documents* 4 (1985), p. 6.

¹⁹⁸ Peter Burger, *The Decline of Modernism* (Penn State, 1992), p. 9.

¹⁹⁹ Raymond Williams, “Tragedy and Revolution,” in *Marxist Literary Criticism*, p.248-250.

The Enlightenment represented a decisive shift away from the more religious references behind the play of darkness and light imagery patterns in literary and non-literary text that we see played out in texts since the advent of Christianity. Beyond good and evil, light instead referred to knowledge both scientific and societal.

The use of light imagery has a long history in Western Literature. Some of the first references we get to sight are found in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The images of blindness and sight refer respectively to ignorance and insight during the debate of Teresias, the blind prophet, and Oedipus. Teresias cannot literally see Oedipus but he sees the truth about his fate. Oedipus can literally see Teresias, but cannot see the truth of his own condition. Art and literature of the Middle Ages uses light and dark imagery to represent good and evil. Renaissance imagery rejects the good/evil, light/dark, paradigm and returns to the sight/blindness, knowledge/ignorance paradigm of Ancient Greece. During the Baroque period light bounces everywhere²⁰⁰ in an almost celebratory way. In Baroque poetry it seems to escape any referential meaning, but functions more as a play on language--art for arts sake.²⁰¹

The Enlightenment, however, permanently changes the relationship between the light as signifier and truth as signified, by making the truth a knowable reality. Following the quite decadent and exaggerated use of language, in particular the use of light imagery that we find in the Baroque period we arrive

²⁰⁰ see French Baroque Poets

²⁰¹ typically prior to great social upheavals writers and artists become more obsessed with form—see Roman Satire, Baroque and Symbolists' poets.

at an entire epoch devoted to this relationship between light and knowledge, the Enlightenment proper. It is this period that has a most profound influence upon Existentialism. And it is in this debt that Existentialism owes to the Enlightenment that gives Existentialism its politics and the light imagery, in Camus' *L'Etranger* and Wright's *Native Son*, its meaning.

Although there were many important Enlightenment ideas, probably the most important and influential was the idea that knowledge belonged to Man, not God, a wild idea that would have had one burned as a heretic for a thousand years proceeding this new epoch. Along with this understanding comes a certain moral imperative to seek out this knowledge. The obsession that over took Diderot and others in the writing of the *Encyclopedia* was but one manifestation of this entirely new concept.

Camus' Meursault borrows on Enlightenment ideas both as embracement of its renewed humanism and a reaction to rationalism without the quality of intention. The Enlightenment brought forth humanism in reaction to the neo-classicism following the Renaissance that was spurred on by the Bourgeois revolutions taking part around the world. Yet, unlike the humanism of Ancient Greece and later the Renaissance, that emphasized the human form and artistic achievement, the Enlightenment privileged the mind and its more rational side, it rejected, in many fundamental ways, humanity's more intuitive side, but not its emotional side that underlies human intention. 19th century Romanticism grew up as an infantile reaction to what the Romantics believed was the extreme rationalism of the Enlightenment epoch, but in doing so they present a false

dichotomy between emotion and reason. Enlightenment ideas do not reject emotion, but insist that it be filtered through our understanding and not through unmediated thought. And although many critics read *L'Etranger* and *Native Son* as a rejection of Enlightenment ideas, Meursault and Bigger are primarily Enlightenment figures.

Not only is Meursault extremely rationale, his persona resembles that of the philosopher/intellectual. Throughout the text we are made aware that he is above the others both in terms of intelligence and perception. The extended light metaphor foreshadows his own rise in consciousness that takes place at the end of the novel that comes about only when he gains understanding on the nature of his mother's feelings. An interesting passage in a *Happy Death* reveals the importance of understanding in the existential hero's awakening. Meursault says: It takes time to live. Like any work of art life needs to be thought about...which was like one of those cells where a man learns to know what he is by what is more than himself.²⁰²

A similar light pattern occurs in *Native Son's* first death scene, the murder of Mary Dalton. There you see light, ghostly image of the blind Mrs. Dalton which fills the room. After he kills Betsy, he enters into a blinding snow storm that creates white out conditions. This is not just background imagery, but highly referential of a particular moral point. For Bigger, as for Meursault, light does not represent consciousness but a lack of it, and it is only once the protagonist is conscious that its blinding image recedes into the background.

²⁰² Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*. p. 74.

What singles out Mersault and Bigger, and the fact that most often leave critics seeing him as an anti-Enlightenment figure, is the degree to which they are alienated. Most have assumed that their alienation stems from the same rationalism that typifies the Enlightenment, but in fact their alienation stems from a pre-condition of class society.

In regards to *L'Etranger's* conclusion, as Meursault waits alone on death row, hoping the crowds of people laugh at him on his execution day critics often see this moment as an example of Meursault's rejection of Enlightenment ideas, but in truth it is a classic example of the Enlightened Man who has discovered there is no God or meaning in the Universe save death, but is in fact a happy man. It is his consciousness that sees past the ordinary and routine that makes him happy. He is the polar opposite of the old man, Salamano, and his dog, a man so wrung out by the world's drudgery that he knows only hatred and cruelty. Salamano, who is caught between a false dichotomy, work and art (he chooses a job at the railroad for a pension rather than pursue a career in the theater), does not have Meursault's capacity to utilize knowledge (man made) as a basis for figuring out his mistaken world view. Meursault learns how to be happy once he comes to the understanding that consciousness is everything. Before his awakening he cannot love, he can only feel. Much of the novel is devoted to his sensual relationship with Marie. It is a very tender affair, yet not one that he holds any fierce attachment towards because it is a relationship that is devoid of understanding. Meursault is not the protagonist of *L'Immoralist*, whom Andre Gide condemns for his hedonism which he mistakes for true happiness.

Meursault is much more rationale and thus by the end he does represent an existential ideal.

In the end it is not Meursault's apathy or misery that does him in, but rather the world itself with all of its race and class divisions. Crime again draws us to the text's key moment—our protagonists' awakening. This is because crime is a daily part of the lives of working class people. Meursault, tries as he might, cannot escape it. It draws him in, and in one second, in a move to defend himself he kills the Arab. Once in court the system's wheels are exposed, as they are in *Native Son*, and we see that his individual intent, the circumstances of his actions, are all that matter. He has been condemned before he walked in the room. He is a man who did not visit his mother, and for that he is read as a killer by the state. The entire situation is, to use Camus' terminology, absurd. Mersault is a cog in the wheel; most things are out of his control. Yet the answer is not that Mersault is not responsible because of the existence of systematic oppression and a godless universe. Rather he is keenly responsible, for in this enlightened world, action is supreme. It is a twist of tragic irony that the one moment in his control, when he fires the last four shots, he makes his first conscious choice, and it is only then that he moves towards a state of awareness. Bigger, also understands that his conscious actions have more weight than the inadvertent murder of Mary.

It is just this principle of what is irreconcilable that most critics miss when interpreting *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*: Again Epton sheds light on a seeming contradiction:

The poetic statements of human waste and limitation, whose function is to give strength to see life clearly and so to adopt a fuller attitude to it, usually bring in, or leave room for the reader to bring in, the whole set of pastoral ideas. For such literary achievements are likely to attempt to reconcile some conflict between the parts of the society; literature is a social process, and also an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored. ...So 'fundamentally true' goes to 'true about people in all parts of society, even those you wouldn't expect,' and this implies the tone of humility normal to pastoral.²⁰³

Epson is critiquing a certain rigidity that occurs when weighing in too heavily on either side of the conflict. So, for example, just as many misunderstand the political nature of *Native Son*, as anti-aesthetic, most see *L'Etranger* as apolitical, and yet it is indeed a political novel. Existentialism, rather than a negative, individualist reaction to Marxism, is rather an effort to skirt the political landmine of Stalinism. It is yet another example of throwing out the baby with the bath water. Karl Marx was a product of the Enlightenment. Out of the three post Hegelian heavy weights—Feurbach, Nietzsche, and Marx, he was the most influenced by the Enlightenment and the one who most believed in Enlightenment ideas. In writing *Capital* Marx borrowed on both the Enlightenment's humanism as well as its rationalism to explain why the system worked the way it did and how it could be overthrown. He created, if you will, a science for the revolutionary to understand and follow. Unfortunately, much the Enlightenment's rationalism was seen as an intellectual precursor to the systematic terror under Stalinism, and was rejected out of hand.

²⁰³ William Epton, *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, pp. 19.

Literary figures like Camus are often viewed as anti-intellectual, artistes, who celebrate the irrational and the absurd. Existentialism becomes branded as a Bourgeois, individualistic, nihilistic philosophy devoid of any politics. Yet, such an idea is in effect non-dialectical. Epton offers a much more dynamic explanation for Meursault's role as a stranger in modern society.

The realistic sort of pastoral (the sort touched by mock-pastoral) also gives a natural expression for a sense of social justice. So far as the person described is outside society; so far as he is forced by this into crime he is the judge of that society that judges him. This is a source of irony both against him and against the society, and if he is a sympathetic criminal he can be made to suggest both Christ as the scapegoat (so invoking Christian charity) and the sacrificial tragic hero, who was normally above society rather than below it, which is a further source of irony.²⁰⁴

This irony that Camus exposes in the character of Meursault is mostly missed when critics concern themselves with Camus' rift with Sartre over the dogmatism of the Communist Party, as well as Camus' rejection of revolutionary violence as a means to an end. As I've said above, given what we know today about Stalinism you don't have to be a Bourgeois, individualist, or a pacifist for that matter, to want to reject systematic violence and the Communist Party. By the time of the writing of *L'Etranger*, all the gains of the Russian Revolution had been betrayed and the Party was indeed a giant bureaucratic machine controlling whole people and countries under the guise of Socialism.²⁰⁵

Camus rejected Marxism, but not the principles of moral value of struggle as humanity attempts to liberate itself from the mechanization of class society. He

²⁰⁴ William Epton, *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, pp. 16-17.

²⁰⁵ Leon Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*.

rejects Marxism as he has come to see it under the directives of Stalinism played out through his directives into the Communist Party. Camus writes in *Combat*, 1946:

Terror is legitimized only if we assent to the principle: ‘the end justifies the means.’ And this principle in turn may be accepted only if the effectiveness of an action is posed as an absolute end, as in nihilistic ideologies, . . . or in those philosophies which make history an absolute end (Hegel, followed by Marx: the end being a classless society, everything is good that leads to that.

Camus insisted that to accept “Marxism as an “absolute philosophy” was no more than to legitimize murder. “In the Marxian perspective,” he wrote in the explosive *Combat* article, “a hundred thousand corpses are nothing if they are the price of the happiness of millions of men.”

Yet Ronald Aronson is correct to note that even as he spelled out his anti-Communism, Camus rejected in advance the Cold War. These same articles attacked the growing East-West confrontation, and condemned the atmosphere of terror caused by the new war ‘now being prepared by all nations.’ Aronson continues with this apt comment: “Camus sought a self-consciously utopian goal, ‘a world in which murder is not legitimate.’ The nonviolent orientation pitting him against Communism now led him to explore alternatives to war.”²⁰⁶

Had Camus known another Party other than one lead by Stalinism, he may have taken a different position. After all, he was a member in 1936-1938, after many of the atrocities had already been committed under Stalin’s New Economic Policy’s that began in 1928. It wasn’t that Camus had shifted to the right political spectrum, rather the Communist Party had shifted rightward and Camus

²⁰⁶ Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, pp. 89-90.

no longer felt it held the interests of the common man. His effort to pose some moral absolute outside of Marxism, history and politics was a reaction to the horrors of Stalinism and not to the potential for human liberation. He is reacting to violence when it is left outside the parameters of human understanding, and couched instead within the domain of bureaucratic and systematic oppression.

A good example of this distinction is seen in Camus' diatribe against violence in his drama, *Les Justes*. *Les Justes*, is one Camus' historical play and is set in Moscow in 1905. It presents a small group of terrorists prepare and carry out the assassination of Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovitch. Yanek, the man who throws the bomb, is made prisoner and executed. What counts here is not the plot itself but as Germaine Bree writes, "what counts is the atmosphere which sustains the drama and in great part conveys its meaning."²⁰⁷

Kaliyev: I threw a bomb against tyranny
 Skouratov: No doubt. But it's the man who got it....
 Kaliyev: I carried out a verdict.
 Skouratov: No doubt. No doubt. We've nothing against the verdict.
 What is a verdict? It's a word around which one can argue through
 night after night. What we don't like...no, you wouldn't care for the
 word...Shall we say that it is the amateurishness of the thing, its slight
 untidiness. The results are unquestionable. Everybody saw them. Ask
 the Grand Duchess. There was blood you understand, a lot of
 blood.²⁰⁸

Yanek Kaliyev must accept his personal responsibility for the deed and as Camus explains there is a world between a Kaliyev and the 'complacent' bureaucratic organizers of mass murder in our time. Germaine Bree makes a relevant critique of *Les Justes*:

²⁰⁷ Germaine Bree, *Camus*, p. 152

²⁰⁸ Albert Camus, *Les Justes*. (Paris: 1950).

In a sense *Les Justes* delineates more clearly than any other of the three other plays [*Caligula*, *Le Malentendu*, *Les Justes*] the issues which Camus raises and which concern him deeply. The greatest tragedy for any man in Camus' theatrical world, whether *Caligula*, *Martha*, or even *Kaliyev*, is to make of this earth 'a desert,' that is, to destroy that part of life which is joy and love or, in the case of a social tyranny like that of the plague, to make their enjoyment nearly impossible. A second tragic error is to abandon that which gives man his dignity: his sense of responsibility. In each play just such a destruction lies at the source of the action; when the sense of responsibility is perverted it becomes a sense of guilt which in its wake brings the judge and with him collective humiliation and collective irresponsibility.²⁰⁹

What gets lost in this false dichotomy between the Enlightenment and existentialism, in fact a false separation between reason and emotion is a true understanding of Camus' political commitment as expressed by his novels, in particular, *L'Etranger*.

Yet, there is something more profound that gets lost behind all of these historic distortions: a communiqué sent by the author to educate and inform its readers through their imaginations. Nothing extends itself to our consciousness like a work of art. As a reviewer of Alan Wald writes,

In these times of post-modernist malaise, the notion of the politically committed writer is all too often consigned to the historical attic along with 'clapped-out' ideologies such as Marxism. Fortunately, there are some Marxist intellectuals such as Alan Wald who are able to rescue the heirlooms of Marxist traditions in cultural commitment, celebrate their

²⁰⁹ Germaine Bree, Camus, pp. 187-188

virtues, critically appraise their weaknesses and produce relevant guidelines for today's political and cultural activists.²¹⁰

Art does have the ability to enlighten the mind and stir a person to act. Literature "engage" shouldn't just be read and/or taught as some historical phenomenon now long past, but should be used to awaken the minds of our students and excite them to think for themselves and critique this oppressive but engaging world where we find ourselves. This understanding is couched in the form of tragedy for the purpose of manifesting a universal critique of contemporary society.

In conclusion, Epton's idea of the pastoral helps us to view the relationship between the existentialism and the Enlightenment in a much more dynamic way. Epton concludes his introduction in the following passage while considering how far the ideas of the pastoral are universal, in a critique of the Hegelian dialectic:

It may be that men always go down in droves, and that all versions of the claim to individualism bogus; but that gives reason why the prop of individualist theory is needed. Once you have said that everything is One it is obvious that literature is the same as propaganda; once you have said that no truth can be known beyond the immediate dialectical process of history it is obvious that all contemporary artists must prepare the same fashion plate. It is clear too that the One is limited in space as well as time, and the no less Hegelian Fascists are right in saying that art is patriotic. And the dialectical process proceeds through conflicts, so we must be sure to have plenty of big wars. Of course to talk like this is to misunderstand the philosophy, but once the philosophy is made a public creed it is sure to be misunderstood in some way. I do not mean to say that philosophy is wrong; for that matter pastoral is worked from the same philosophical ideas as

²¹⁰ see Phil Shannon's review of Alan Wald's, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals: Selected Essays on Marxist Traditions in Cultural Commitment*.

proletarian literature—the difference is that it brings in the absolute less prematurely.²¹¹

Of particular interest is Epton's point that "once you have said no truth can be known beyond the immediate dialectical process of history it is obvious that all contemporary artists must prepare the same fashion plate." Epton posits a universal, however, in his notion of the pastoral that does seem to exist outside of the dialectical process. This point is fundamental to a larger question this dissertation has taken up: How do tragic forms persist if we no longer believe in permanent, a historical meaning? To say that humanism is the core of tragedy and that this influence has existed since the birth of Athenian democracy, aren't we suggesting that there is something that exists outside of history. Key to seeing our way out of this contradiction is Epton's use of the word "immediate." He takes issue with proletarian literature because of its claim to something new: Once you view "ideas of the pastoral" in a wide sense that takes in all and not simply a part of a particular literary form's development, then you side step the contradiction of universality and the historical dialectic. Although Epton is more interested in the reoccurrence of the pastoral than tragedy, he poses a useful model for us when we consider the persistence of tragic form in the modern novel. Epton shows us the dangers in trying to do away with politically uncomfortable influences in an effort to carve out something new. The problem with the "communist aesthetic" is that in refusing to be dependent on the necessary precursor of Christianity, they enter into a more dangerous relationship

²¹¹ William Epton, *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, pp. 22.

with Hegel, who would deny anything permanent, but instead moves us towards abstraction. Epton's pastoral is a "queerer business" because it is "permanent and not dependent on a system of class exploitation," unlike tragedy, but I am arguing that it is the idea of harmony amongst the classes which we see in the pastoral which opens up the door for a modern tragic hero. The requirements for the pastoral are less strict. All it requires is a society of uneven class distinction. It has thus persisted because class society has persisted and attempts to show that they are indeed unable to be reconciled. Epton is wrong however to ignore the persistence of form without change. Tragedy in the modern era evokes the image of an ordinary person as a hero because of the social transformation and the establishment of the working class as a player. He is finally able to become a universal subject because of the workers revolution that showed how ordinary people can transform their condition. Tragedy requires a certain tension between these classes that only arises at specific moments in history, at the end of a period of stability for a new class that has positioned itself and at the very beginning of a re-establishment of a reactionary class. It reflects in other words the anxieties of social progress through the eyes of the class that has momentarily asserted itself. The pastoral, merely reflects class antagonisms throughout literary history and attempts to reconcile them. Tragedy critiques those antagonisms and posits the heroic individual in an effort to resolve what is essentially irresolvable.

Epton also offers us a model to see, in a way that neither Foley, nor Karl and Hamalian, do; that the outsider as critic that we see in both Bigger and Meursault's roles have the capacity to be tragic, just as Proletarian novels are

indeed “covert pastorals.” There is however one important exception. The pastoral is an effort towards reconciliation. Tragedy is an effort to live with that which is irreconcilable. Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the overly formalized endings of Shakespeare’s tragedies. Often some incidental character will give a final speech that attempts to tie up the loose ends in an utterly inept fashion. Therefore, all is not well that ends well.

The theme of that which cannot be reconciled continues, with a modern twist that includes the theme of human understanding inherited from the ideas of the Enlightenment, an understanding which allows the protagonist to ponder this irreconcilability, not as an absolute, but as a feeling by the character, that the world need not be pre-determined. The tragedy flows from hope and not the despair that the world can be re-invented, anew, but not of his own choosing. He thus re-invents himself in the modern era so that he may encompass the tragic not as a predetermined fate, but as a universal consciousness that one may aspire. Camus understood this only too well when he wrote his first and most autobiographical novel. In *A Happy Death* he describes how

Meursault, in silence, felt in himself extreme and violent powers to love, to marvel at his life with its countenance of sunlight and tears, this life in its salt and hot stone—it seemed that by caressing this life, all his powers of love and despair would unite. That was his poverty that was his sole wealth. As if by writing zero, he was starting over but with a consciousness of his powers and a lucid intoxication which urged him on in the face of his fate.²¹²

²¹² Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: 1972), p83.

With the same inability to reconcile his own fate, Bigger Thomas, in the last section of *Native Son*, titled "Fate" also feels the same surge of life through his veins:

What I killed for must've been good! Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. "It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something...I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em...It's the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, 'cause I'm going to die. I know what I'm saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way.

In the end, as each protagonist rushes towards his fate, he has learned to live and be happy through his understanding of his irreconcilable condition. His happiness depends, in fact, on understanding this irrefutable fact. They have no choice but to be martyrs for a cause not of their own choosing, but with the new found freedom of the hero who is compelled to act. In these scenes both Camus and Wright attempt to escape the moral imperative of Christianity, that insists that the protagonist be remorseful for his actions on account of some divine imperative, through the logic of the Enlightenment. Through their understanding they can be "outside" Christianity's obligations and yet are set up again with a whole new set of obligations--the obligation to be free and happy, in a world in which Meursault reminds us "Il n'y avait pas d'issue."²¹³ In understanding the facts each has, interestingly escaped the morality of the judge in Meursault's trial, who said <<J'en ferai la prevue, messieurs, et je la ferai doublement. Sous l'aveuglante claret des faits d'abord et ensuite dans l'éclairage sombrer que me fournira la

²¹³ Albert Camus, *L'Etranger*. p. 100.

psychologie de cette criminelle. >> ²¹⁴ This new found consciousness is the source of their new found freedom, which relies on their knowledge that they are free to act and therefore responsible. Finally their awareness stems from a union between their understanding and their desire to live and be happy. The “persistent” drama of the human tragedy compels the character to live, happily, in a world of irreconcilable differences where there exists, nonetheless, potential to transform ones condition.

²¹⁴ Albert Camus, *L'Etranger*. p. 117.

Chapter 13

The Politics of Tragedy

Although the birth of modernism represents a decisive break from traditional aesthetic models, we have seen how modern texts, like *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*, rely on classical paradigms in the formation of their literature by borrowing on a humanist tradition. Accepting as a premise, some dynamic relationship between art and history, and in spite of cataclysmic social and economic changes in capitalist society, classical aesthetic models do survive. This is not to suggest, that they persist unchanged. In fact, the question of “permanent ideas” has come down to how one defines the relationship between aesthetics and society, which is influenced by historical influences bearing down upon the critic.

The initial paradox, posed at the beginning of my dissertation upon discussion of Wright’s most famous fictional work, *Native Son* is not really a paradox at all. The novel reveals a preponderance of classic, tragedian elements, and yet is widely regarded as the ground breaking, pro-typical work that forged the tradition of the Black protest novel *because* it relies on universals to express its intent. How is Wright or Camus for that matter able to appropriate classical models without undermining the originality of their works? The answer is more simple than we might have imagined. It is there re-hashing of old forms

juxtaposed to their modern, existential, condition that creates a tension which the modern reader can relate to.

Many theorists and philosophers have examined the question of repetition and the persistence of classical models in modern aesthetics, but as we have seen, none dared to consider the social and political ramifications of such repetition in the existential novel. Thus, instead of merely re-affirming the value of classical model upon the Western literary canon, I have demonstrated that both Wright's and Camus' usage of classical paradigms fits with the social foundations of [their] aesthetic forms. Such an effort has forced us to re-gig the entire question of categorization as it pertains to the Western literary canon. And while Wright and Camus may never make in to a course on Tragedy, in spite of the fact that they do indeed repeat the Aristotelian formula for tragedy, it may be more painful for an academic who reads this dissertation to categorize them comfortably into the respective genres of the protest and existentialist novel.

Perhaps another way to understand our way out of the paradox is to consider what Walter Benjamin wrote about when he described the disappearance of the "Aura" in his famous essay, "The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In it he blames the destruction of the aura (the work's uniqueness and originality) upon the advent of photography, and with it the age of mass reproduction. His essay functions as a warning and a critique of the use of art for political means. His case in point is Fascism's use of art to lull the masses into a kind of admiring stupor for Hitler. With the anesthetization of politics comes fascism, in Benjamin's mind.

Yet in that essay one hears the same critique made of political writers of the time of Wright and Camus. Benjamin is making a classic anti-Marxist, anti-modernist, argument in his essay, although it is aimed towards the Fascists. In it he waxes nostalgic for a distant past where the uniqueness and originality of a work of art mattered. There are two problems here that pertain to the topic of this dissertation. Firstly, he poses the “aura” as a time before the aestheticization of the political. In other words even with Benjamin, we are back to some pure notion of art, that as I have argued, in a Marxist fashion, simply doesn’t exist. Secondly, and more directly pertaining to this section on classical paradigms, I would argue that the “aura” of the work of art has not shriveled up, but has been re-invented. As some wise person once said, “there’s nothing new under the sun.” Or to put it more critically, using a quote from Leon Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution*, “the human imagination is economical.” The mind continually regurgitates old forms, but they do not always function in the same manner. Because of the degree to which both Wright and Camus have been falsely categorized no one would imagine that they are writing tragedy and that their “uniqueness” has been preserved on account of the dynamic way that this traditional form interacts with their respective text’s radical content, which in Camus is referred to as Existentialism and in Wright as Protest Fiction..

Let us review with Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. From beginning to end it takes on the form of a tragedy, a fact that we have demonstrated in our critique of Joyce Ann Joyce’s, *Richard Wright’s Art of Tragedy*. In her text we saw how she uses Aristotle’s *Poetics* as a guide to show to what extent *Native Son* follows

the traditional rules of Tragedy. Beginning with the first scene she describes Bigger as a sort of anti-hero who rescues his family from “the big, black rat.” She goes on to describe Bigger’s lack of “interiority” as a classic example of the tragedian heroes, who unlike the protagonists of the modern novel are understood through their actions rather than their thoughts and emotions. Yet we have seen that it is at best anachronistic and at worst a historical to discuss tragedy as mere repetition. This is not to disregard Joyce’s point. *Native Son* does indeed follow a tragic outline, as does *L’Etranger*.²¹⁵ The point is not to dispute the reoccurrence of tragic form within modern texts. Arthur Miller is right to argue that the common man is an even more fitting subject of tragedy than were the nobles of Sophocles’ day. The question I have raised, and hopefully sufficiently answered, is why one would ignore the reappearance of these tragic forms, as if we had somehow re-created the conditions of Fourth century Athens? And why are these forms so persistent? Although Miller rightly gives an historical context for his defense of the tragic anti-hero, unlike Joyce, what they both have in common is a complete disregard for the question of the form itself. They seem much more interested in how the text mimics the content of tragedy, but pay very little attention to how it mimics the form of tragedy. Yet, according to Leon Trotsky:

Tragedy is a high expression of literature because it implies the heroic tenacity of strivings, of limitless aims, of conflicts and sufferings. In this sense, Stephun was right when he characterized our ‘on the ever’ art, as he called it, that is, the art which preceded the War and the Revolution, as insignificant.

Bourgeois society, individualism, the Reformation, the Shakespearean dramas, the great Revolution, these have made impossible the tragic

²¹⁵ see Aristotle’s *Poetics*

significance of aims that come from without; great aims must live in the consciousness of a people or of a class which leads a people, if they are to arouse heroism or create a basis for great sentiments which inspire tragedy. The Tsarist War, whose purpose did not penetrate consciousness, gave birth to cheap verse only, with personal poetry trickling by its side, unable to rise to an objectivity and unable to form a great art.

Following Trotsky's unwitting example I am arguing here that both Wright and Camus' usage of tragic form represents much more than the novelistic tendency to imitate past genres, for the mere sake of it. Rather their use of the genre serves to mark a key moment in human development: the possibility to get beyond images the martyr and evoke instead the image of the tragic hero.

Tragedy requires a certain tension between these classes that only arises at specific moments in history, at the end of a period of stability for a new class that has positioned itself and at the very beginning of a re-establishment of a reactionary class. It reflects in other words the anxieties of social progress through the eyes of the class that has momentarily asserted itself. So for example Athenian tragedy arises when a new class has positioned itself based on democratic principles rather than kinship lines, and when those democratic principles are about to be undone by the corruption that ensues in Aristotle's day. Shakespearean tragedy appears on the heels of the Renaissance when the monarchy asserts its domination over the religious hegemony of the middle ages and just before that hegemony will be challenged in the Baroque era by the church that reasserts itself through the frenzy of the witch hunts. Existential tragedies appear at the end of the social movements that momentarily positioned themselves over the Bourgeoisie only to be repelled by the consolidation of world capitalism during and after World War 2. The pastoral, as we have seen, merely

reflects class antagonisms throughout literary history and attempts to reconcile them. Tragedy critiques those antagonisms and posits the hero/martyr in an effort to resolve what is essentially irresolvable in the moment he or she appears on the world's stage.

By 1940 the world had seen what the new working class was capable of. After 1917 and the 1930s there was no doubt in the minds of millions that the working class did have the power to transform society. 20th century novels reflect the rise of this new protagonist as well as 19th century novels reflected the consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie, signaling an end to Romantic idealism born out of the revolutions in the 18th century. The novels of the 30s are replete with working class souls struggling against a common oppressor. Far from tragic they utilize the classic form of the bildungsroman. The action revolves around an individual with a time line stretching over the years rather than days as is common in tragedy. There is also no fall from a great height on account of some era made by the protagonist. The novels of the thirties in particular are more influenced by Naturalism than Tragedy. Of course to this day Wright is considered a naturalist because of his indictment of society's racism. For example, in the preface to one recent compilation of critical perspectives on Wright, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes the following:

To be sure, the compelling strength of Wright's naturalism bred a host of imitators....But one of Wright's most enduring legacies was to have bred—through reaction—the movement of African American modernism exemplified by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Both Ellison and James Baldwin sought to define their theory of literature against Wright's by promoting the bildungsroman as affording the richest political and aesthetic possibility for African-American fiction; to them it was a form that could

reveal the triumph of the individual questing consciousness over oppressive forces.²¹⁶

I have not denied Wright's naturalism, but suggested that Wright's critics are often too quick to hit him with that label before truly appreciating other genre's influencing his form, including tragedy. Trotsky explains that the type of tragedy that does reoccur in the twentieth century is quite different from the tragedy of Shakespeare's time:

. . . Tragedy based on detached personal passions is too flat for our days. Why? Because we live in a period of social passions. The tragedy of our period lies in the conflict between the individual and the collectivity, or in the conflict between two hostile collectivities in the same individual. Our age is an age of great aims. This is what stamps it. But the grandeur of these aims lies in man's effort to free himself from mystic and from every other intellectual vagueness and in his effort to reconstruct society and himself in accord with his own plan. This, of course, is much bigger than the child's play of the ancients which was becoming to their childish age, or to the mediaeval ravings of monks, or the arrogance of individualism which tears personality away from the collectivity, and then, draining it to the very bottom, pushes it off into the abyss of pessimism, or sets it on all fours before the remounted bull, Apis.

Trotsky is of course writing this in the early twenties, when the revolutionary fervor was at its height. It isn't until we get to the late Thirties and early Forties that we see the recurrence of tragic characters that are not "flat," but rich and complex, as we have seen in the characters of Meursault and Bigger. This is extremely significant, and yet as we have seen very little has been noted about this classical revival of tragic form in novel's of the early Forties. Tragedy occurs at this time because the world is changing, and with that change is the need for that which is irreconcilable to be played out again. What is so irreconcilable?

²¹⁶ *Critical Perspectives*, xiii

None other than the last glimmer of revolutionary potential on the eve Stalin's rightward shift away from its working class base.

Leon Trotsky's comments below on that same question again reveals some key insights:

In the tragedies of Shakespeare, which would be entirely unthinkable without the reformation, the fate of the ancients and the passions of the mediaeval Christians are crowded out by individual human passions, such as love, jealousy, revengeful greediness, and spiritual dissension. But in every one of Shakespeare's dramas, the individual passion is carried to such a high degree of tension that it outgrows the individual, becomes super-personal, and is transformed into a fate of a certain kind. The jealousy of Othello, the ambition of Macbeth, the greed of Shylock, the love of Romeo and Juliet, the arrogance of Coriolanus, the spiritual wavering of Hamlet, are all of this kind. Tragedy in Shakespeare is individualistic, and in this sense has not the general significance of Oedipus Rex, which expresses the consciousness of the whole people. None the less, compared with Aeschylus, Shakespeare represents a great step forward and not backward. Shakespeare's art is more human. At any rate, we shall no longer accept a tragedy in which God gives orders and man submits. Moreover, there will be no one to write such tragedy.

Having broken up human relations into atoms, bourgeois society, during the period of its rise, had a great aim for itself. Personal emancipation was its name. Out of it grew the dramas of Shakespeare and Goethe's "Faust". Man placed himself in the center of the universe, and therefore in the center of art also. This theme sufficed for centuries. In reality, all modern literature has been nothing but an enlargement of this theme....

Tragedy occurred during what is known as the Golden Age of Greek Society. This high point in artistic and literary achievement of Athenian society was brought on by the success of wars abroad with Persia. It was also a time of social upheaval that created great tensions amongst the upper classes. Compared to Epic, when class relations were virtually static, 5th century Athens brought a new layer of nobles into the ruling classes. They created what we know as Athenian democracy: the birth place of Western Democracy. Prior to this period power was inherited. Now elections challenged centuries of rule of some of the old, established noble families. Tragedy at its most basic level represents the

insecurities of great men and women whose class position was being challenged for the first time. We don't see a recurrence of tragic form (according to Aristotle's *Poetics*) until Molière whose plays appear at the birth of the second great social transformation, modern Capitalism. Again Trotsky sheds light on this question of the reoccurrence of tragedy:

If one were to regard the Decadent and the Symbolist schools, with all their off-shoots, from the point of view of the development of art as a social form, they would appear merely as scratches of the pen, as an exercise in craftsmanship, as a tuning of instruments. The period in art when it was 'on the eve' was without aims. Those who had aims had no time for art. At present, one has to carry out great aims by the means of art. One cannot tell whether revolutionary art will succeed in producing 'high' revolutionary tragedy. But Socialist art will revive tragedy. Without God, of course. The new art will be atheist. It will also revive comedy....The new art will revive all the old forms, which arose in the course of the development of the creative spirit. The disintegration and decline of these forms are not absolute, that is that they do not mean that these forms are absolutely incompatible with the spirit of the new age. All that is necessary is for the poet of the new epoch to re-think in a new way the thoughts of mankind, and to re-feel its feelings.²¹⁷

The reappearance of tragic forms in the late thirties and early forties, at the end of the great working class upheavals that threatened to overthrow Capitalism, represents the working class anxieties that their hopes for transformation of society were rapidly vanishing. That explains not just the text's form and content but their popularity. Both *Native Son* and *L'Etranger* struck a nerve because they appealed to an anxiety that many felt at the time after the great social upheavals of the early and mid-thirties. The war and post-war boom that occurred in American society would reassert class stability, and Stalin would pull

²¹⁷ Leon Trotsky, "Revolutionary and Socialist Art" in *Literature and Revolution*, pp. 242-245.

the entire Party into making alliances with the class forces that they had once had hoped to overthrow.²¹⁸

To this day there has not been social upheaval of the size witnessed in the 30s. Although the 50s did usher in the largest strike wave in US history, in the absence of revolutionary parties--like the Communist Party--to lead the struggles forward, they did not have the same impact as the great upsurges of the 30s. By the time of the Civil Rights and anti war movements McCarthyism had rooted out most of the left from the working class. Also the American working class enjoyed the largest sustained boom ever. These two factors lead many to the conclusion that the working class was bought off. In addition around the world it wasn't the working class but peasantry that was leading revolutions—Cuba, China, Vietnam—and throwing off the shackles of Western imperialism. In addition the world wide working class saw a decrease in manufacturing jobs and an increase in white collar service economy jobs. All of these factors coupled with the horrors of Stalinism which were released to the world under Khrushchev in 1954, lead many academics to see Marxism as outdated.

The consequences on literary interpretation are felt to this day. In place of Marxism we ended up with Postmodernism, which is truly a reaction to Modernism, which owes its existence to the Russian Revolution of 1917. Some of the distortions I have demonstrated came from attempts to analysis on texts written by authors who were political and created political texts as Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Albert Camus' *L'Etranger*.

²¹⁸ Although the 50s did witness the largest general strikes in the history of the United States, because Communists had effectively been rooted out their was not a Party to make these manifestations more influential.

This dissertation has been an attempt to further a revival of Marxist analysis back in the academy as well as an effort to re-gig the way that we teach works by authors from this period. Through our close reading of the two works we have seen how their respective texts open up discussions not just on Existentialism and protest but Tragedy as well. In some ways our close reading as challenged the way in which we take on the question of Aesthetics and reality. We have seen that the text far from being just a mirror often seeks to be much more. In these works under discussion the authors have gone so far as to reach into to our consciousness and ask us to do something. Works such as these are meant to inspire. Anything short of that is a disservice not only to Wright and Camus but to the future integrity of literary interpretation. Someone once said, those who can do, those who can't teach, as if teaching were merely repetition. Yet, to teach works by L'crivaines engage is to do more than repeat what has already been done. To teach it rightly is to attempt to engage our students to act. Act against all the horror, mechanization, and racism that our profit driven world instills upon us daily, and act for the future of humanity that continues to shine forth no matter how bleak the world may be in great works such as *Native Son* and *L'Etranger*.

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