

Richard Wright and Albert Camus: The Literature of Revolt

STEVEN J. RUBIN, *University of South Florida*

The early fiction of Richard Wright, comprised of short stories written in the thirties and culminating in *Native Son* (1940), is primarily an expression of personal outrage and frustration. Although Wright's literary heritage has been traced to the American Naturalists,¹ recent readings of his works suggest that Wright was not as confined by that tradition as has generally been believed.² Working within the framework of social protest, Wright probed other more metaphysical issues, which were later to become of even greater importance to him. In dramatizing the plight of each of his heroes, from Big Boy in "Big Boy Leaves Home," to Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Wright explored the motivating forces behind their actions. As their personal dramas unfolded, he developed such themes as the possibility of freedom, man's isolation and alienation, the inherent irrationality of modern American society, and the nature and form of personal rebellion within that society.

Native Son is, as Edward Margolies in *The Art of Richard Wright* points out, as much a psychological novel with clear existential implications, as it is sociological.³ Bigger Thomas is not only a Black man struggling against an oppressive white society, but also Wright's archetypal rebel, desperately seeking recognition and meaning within a world that has offered him none. Alienated from the mainstream of society and betrayed by his own environment, Bigger, like Wright's earlier heroes, searches for an effective means of vanquishing his personal sense of worthlessness. Ironically, like the protagonists of *Uncle Tom's Children*, Bigger's revolt is simultaneously victorious and self-destructive.

The literature of revolt is born from the recognition on the part of many modern writers that meaning and purpose are not an integral part of the universe in which man finds himself. *Native Son*, written at a time when Wright was preoccupied with social issues, also represents an examination of the nature of personal rebellion, a theme which dominated much of the thinking of such modern European writers as André Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre, and especially Albert Camus.

In its most universal form, rebellion, according to Camus, involves a protest against the condition in which man finds himself: "La révolte métaphysique est le mouvement par lequel un homme se dresse contre sa condition et la création tout entière. Elle est métaphysique parcequ'elle conteste les fins de l'homme et de la création."⁴ Finding the world to be unjust, the rebel protests against being

¹Wright's literary relation to the American naturalists was first articulated by Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), p. 372; and later by Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 142-43.

²Among the most interesting of Wright studies dealing with this issue are Richard E. Baldwin, "The Creative Vision of *Native Son*," *Massachusetts Review*, 14, (Spring 1973), 378-90; and John R. May, *Toward a New Earth* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1972), pp. 164-72.

³Edward Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 106.

⁴Albert Camus, *L'Homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 39.

a part of that universe and attempts to reorder his world according to his own version of justice. The act of revolting, even when it involves a level of injustice to match that which is prevalent in society, results in apocalyptic moments of freedom and power. The result, according to Camus, is not only a new respect for one's self, but also a new sense of order and unity within the universe. This acceptance of a self imposed order is what ultimately moves both Camus's Meursault (*L'Étranger*), and Wright's Bigger Thomas toward a peaceful reconciliation with their fates.

In Wright's first volume of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), physical rebellion becomes the dominant theme and the means by which his characters achieve freedom and identity. Wright's early heroes seek fulfillment of their personality and a purpose to their otherwise meaningless existence through violent action. In similar fashion, Bigger Thomas, confused and alone, can find no conventional way to bridge the gap between his aspirations and the reality of his condition. In "How Bigger was Born," Wright explained the need for rebellion: "In *Native Son* I tried to show that man, bereft of a culture and unanchored by property, can travel but one path if he reacts positively, but unthinkingly to the prizes and goals of civilization; and that path is emotionally blind rebellion."⁵

As the novel opens, Bigger is seen as a man conditioned by hatred and a sense of racial exclusion: "I just can't get used to it," Bigger said. "I swear to God I can't, I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Everytime I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. God-dammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence."⁶ Throughout Book I, "Fear," Bigger is portrayed as a man in conflict, not only with white society, but also with his surroundings, his family, his peers, and ultimately with himself. Bigger is not able to escape the sordidness of his condition through religion, as does his mother, or through alcohol, as does his mistress Bessie. For him there are no external evasions, and as his anxiety and frustration mount Bigger begins to feel a sense of impending disaster: "Bigger felt an urgent need to hide his growing and deepening feeling of hysteria; he had to get rid of it or else he would succumb to it . . . his self-trust was gone. Confidence could only come again now through action so violent that it would make him forget" (*Native Son*, pp. 30-31).

Bigger takes a job as a chauffeur for the Daltons, a wealthy white philanthropic family who support the NAACP but are nevertheless one of the city's biggest slum landlords. Through a strange series of circumstances Bigger, in a moment of fear and panic, kills their daughter Mary. The murder, although ostensibly a mistake, is an accident only in the narrowest sense, for Bigger has long dreamed of such an act. The full meaning of his crime does not become clear to him until after the murder, but he had long had a foreboding of such violence: "I feel like something awful's going to happen to me. . . . Naw, it ain't like something going to happen to me. It's . . . It's like I was going to do something I can't help" (*Native Son*, p. 24). Bigger fantasizes about destruction, of dropping bombs on the white world, and in one rare moment of insight even admits to the possibility of murder as an antidote to his extreme

⁵Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," *Saturday Review*, 1 June 1940, p. 4.

⁶Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1940), pp. 22-23. All further references to this work appear in the text.

anguish and despair: "He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else" (*Native Son*, p. 14).

Bigger's killing of Mary becomes the one meaningful act of his life, giving him a new sense of freedom and identity and a capacity for action on a grand scale. Up to this time Bigger has cowered in fear before the white world. Now, as he plots his next move, the many options that are opened give him a new sense of power and possibility: "He lay again on the bed, his mind whirling with images born of a multitude of impulses. He could run away; he could remain; he could even go down and confess what he had done. The mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands" (*Native Son*, p. 179).

Out of apparent fear of betrayal, Bigger brutally slays his mistress Bessie. These two acts place him irrevocably outside the social order of all men, both white and black. Unlike his killing of Mary, the murder of Bessie is neither accidental nor truly necessary for his protection. It is simply proof of his new ability to act. Although Bigger is afraid he will be overwhelmed by a feeling of guilt, this second murder, like the first, gives him a sense of liberation and an even greater control over his destiny: "In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply . . . Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight" (*Native Son*, p. 225).

Bigger is finally discovered to be the murderer and is captured after a search of the entire Black section of Chicago. Max, a white Communist Party lawyer, becomes his attorney and presents an impassioned plea, linking Bigger's deviant actions to his environment and the transgressions of a prejudiced society. Privately, however, Max, whose thinking does not go beyond sociological explanations, is somewhat bewildered as to Bigger's true motivation. Bigger tries to explain that his action has made him understand himself as a man: "What I killed for I am! . . . What I killed for must've 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" (*Native Son*, pp. 391-92).

In *L'Homme révolté*, 1951 (*The Rebel*, 1954), Camus, describing the origins of revolt states: "La révolte naît du spectacle de la déraison, devant une condition injuste et incompréhensible. Mais son élan aveugle revendique l'ordre au milieu du chaos et l'unité au coeur même de ce qui fuit et disparaît."⁷ In Camus's novel, *L'Étranger*, 1942 (*The Stranger*, 1946), Meursault's metaphysical rebellion originates because he finds himself adrift and isolated in a meaningless society. Bigger, like Meursault, is also alone in a world which has lost all metaphysical and moral foundation. Without God and without absolutes, he lacks an a priori basis for moral and ethical choice. As Wright explained: "All Bigger Thomases, white and black, felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless. . . . These personalities were mainly consequent upon men and women living in a world whose fundamental assumptions could no longer be taken for granted; . . . a world in which God no longer existed as a daily focal point in men's lives; a world in which men could no longer retain their faith in an ultimate hereafter."⁸

⁷Albert Camus, *L'Homme révolté*, pp. 21-22.

⁸Richard Wright, "How Bigger was Born," pp. 17-18.

In 1940, the same year that *Native Son* was published, Camus first formulated his theory of the absurd and explained the irrationality of man's existence in terms very similar to those used by Wright: "Un monde qu'on peut expliquer même avec de mauvaises raisons est un monde familier. Mais au contraire, dans un univers soudain privé d'illusions et de lumières, l'homme se sent un étranger. . . . Ce divorce entre l'homme et sa vie, l'acteur et son décor, c'est proprement le sentiment de l'absurdité."⁹ Meursault, Camus's absurd hero, reacts to his condition with indifference and a rejection of conventional values: "Que m'importaient la mort des autres, l'amour d'une mère, que m'importaient son Dieu, les vies qu'on choisit, les destins qu'on élit."¹⁰ Bigger, motivated more by an immediate sense of fear and anger than by any philosophical awareness, seeks to escape his condition through violent and intense action: "Of late he had liked to hear tell of men who could rule others, for in actions such as these he felt that there was a way to escape from this tight morass of fear and shame that sapped at the base of his life. He liked to hear of how Japan was conquering China; of how Hitler was running the Jews to the ground; of how Mussolini was invading Spain. He was not concerned with whether these acts were right or wrong; they simply appealed to him as possible avenues of escape" (*Native Son*, pp. 109-10).

Although the motivating forces behind their actions differ, both protagonists conform to a very similar pattern: alienation, a sense of frustration with conventional order and values, an accidental murder, a realization of the meaning of that murder in terms of their role in society, a separation (physical and emotional) from their world, and a final coming to terms with their individual fates. While in his cell, Meursault is moved to an awareness of his own mortality. He comes to accept the absurdity of the universe: "la tendre indifférence du monde" (*L'Etranger*, p. 171). He learns that man cannot significantly change the course of his destiny, nor the brevity of his life. What is most important is how he relates and reacts to what he has been given. Meursault's final pronouncement indicates his ability to accept the conditions in which he lives: "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" (*L'Etranger*, p. 172).

In the final pages of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, condemned to death, also attempts to understand the relationship between man and the absurdity of his environment. Rejecting the solace of religion, he is determined to die alone, as he has lived. In talking with Max, however, he realizes that other men have lived and felt as he has. He is finally able to send a belated gesture of fraternity to Jan, whose help Bigger has rejected throughout. As Max is leaving his cell for the last time, Bigger calls out to him: "Tell . . . Tell Mister . . . Tell Jan hello" (*Native Son*, p. 392).

As his death approaches, Bigger, like Meursault, is free of fear of life and death. He has finally made peace with himself by realizing that his actions, although self-destructive, were the only possible responses to the series of injustices and irrationalities within his existence. As his execution nears, Bigger has no remorse; instead he is seen with "a faint, wry bitter smile" (*Native Son*, p. 392).

⁹Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940), p. 18.

¹⁰Albert Camus, *L'Etranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 169. All further references to this work appear in the text.

Although the reactions of these characters indicate a shared vision on the part of their authors, there is a basic difference in the pattern of revolt and its motivation between Wright's Bigger Thomas and Camus's Meursault. Meursault's actions are the result of his comprehending the chaotic nature of the universe. Bigger acts out of hatred, fear, and an innate longing to be free. Uneducated and inarticulate, he reacts unthinkingly to the underlying contradictions of an American society which proclaims the inherent worth of the individual and yet everywhere denies that worth to the Black man. Unlike Meursault, Bigger is not aware of the metaphysical implications of his protest. It is only after his action that he begins to experience a new knowledge of himself, his existence, and the nature of his surroundings. Directed immediately against the white majority, his rebellion eventually assumes a universal dimension and ultimately is, like that of Meursault and Ellison's invisible hero, a protest against the entire scheme of things.

Native Son is as much a study of an alienated and lonely individual struggling to understand his existence, as it is an examination of racial prejudice and its effects. Bigger is forced into an alien existence because of the irrational and unjust nature of the society in which he lives. For Bigger, the opposite poles of aspiration and satisfaction can only be briefly united through violence. Murder becomes, paradoxically, the one creative act of his life: "He had murdered and had created a new life for himself" (*Native Son*, p. 101). Like Cross Damon, Wright's Dostoevskian hero in *The Outsider* (1953), Bigger is able to kill without remorse, for good and evil have become meaningless to him. Killing has become part of Bigger's definition of himself; and although Wright does not attempt to justify or condone murder, he does strive to explain the necessity of Bigger's actions.

Although *The Outsider* has many obvious parallels to the works of Sartre, Camus, and the post World War II European writers, there is little to indicate that Wright was influenced by the French existentialists during the writing of *Native Son*. His vision of an absurd world emanated more from firsthand experience in America than from literary sources. Wright clearly perceived the inconsistencies of the American system and tried to show, through Bigger Thomas, a man struggling within that system. Living in a society that had placed him next to obscurity, Bigger turns to violence as the only meaningful action open to him.

"What peculiar personality formation results," Wright later asked, "when millions of people are forced to live lives of outward submissiveness while trying to keep intact in their hearts a sense of worth of their own humanity."¹¹ The answer, in part, is given by Wright in *Native Son*. Written in 1940, the novel gives an early indication of Wright's existential vision and the themes that were to preoccupy his thinking in the years to come.

¹¹Richard Wright, Introduction, *Black Metropolis*, ed. by Horace R. Clayton and St. Clair Drake (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), p. xxx.