RICHARD WRIGHT: *A Reluctant Comrade*

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Richard Wright's works have often been disregarded by scholars as a mere form of propaganda in which the writer pleads the cause of the Communist Party. We must admit, however, that although Wright poses questions in his novels and short stories which are political by nature (for instance, how can the black man as an oppressed, divided, unauthentic being participate effectively in his struggle for liberation from a racist society?), the alternatives he envisages seem quite unorthodox when considered from the standpoint of the Party lines. The merging of racial conflict into class conflict remains unconvincing and the emphasis is upon individuals who find their identity by themselves, independently from any political creed. Wright's dubious use of Marxist materials becomes all too evident in *Native Son*(1940),but the first signs of deviation from ideology are to be found in some earlier stories, collected under the title of *Uncle Tom's Children*.[1]

These stories were written in the tradition of Proletarian literature and represent Wright's first attempt to replace the "Black and White" formula for that of "Friends and Enemies." As each story is told, one notices on the part of the characters a growing consciousness of the forces at work about them - and the need to take steps in an organized way. Some of the protagonists come to understand freedom as the exercise and growth of human power, as well as the repeated conquest of obstacles to this growth. Implied, of course, is the Marxist concept of society as an evolving and changing organism, a product of Man's labor and,

as such, subjected to transformation by man.

In "Big Boy Leaves Home" Wright introduces the idea that, if the Negro Individual is to survive, he must leave the South. The narrative opens with the leading characters and his three truant friends as they enjoy an almost idyllic communion with the countryside in a southern rural community. Uncomplex and natural, they entertain the reader with their harmless frolic, scufflings, and high-spirited dialogues. There is nothing rebellious about their nature. They mention the "white folks'" prejudiced attitude toward Negroes but their comments are matter-of-factly. That is how the world functions, and they are not about to challenge the natural order of things. At a certain point Buck casually translates the "No Trespassing" sign posted at the white man's property as "Mean an no dogs an niggers arlowed." They accept all and raise no questions.

The conflict is established when the boys violate the conditions of their caste. Caught naked in the swimming hole forbidden to Negroes, they try to reach for their clothes under the startled eyes of a screaming white woman. In the confusion that follows, Buck and Lester are killed by the woman's hurband who comes to rescue her. Realizing that Bobo's life is also in immediate danger, Big Boy confronts the rescuer and shoots him. From this point on, the narrative centers on the flight and pursuit of the youths by a revengeful mob. Bobo is finally arrested, but Big Boy manages to conceal himself in a kiln on the hills surrounding the village. With his face buried in clay and his eyes fixed on the mob running down the slopes, he witnesses the nocturnal lynching of his friend. Morning finds Big Boy speechless with fear, carrying with him to Chicago the impressions of the nightmarish events.

In spite of the variety of incidents and activities, the story takes place in less than twenty-four hours. The Radical changes undergone in the fate of the four boys in so short a period of time, together with the unmerciful role played by the force of circumstances, set up a situation of horror and moral outrage.Here Wright makes us laugh at the youths first, enjoy their ribald songs and jokes, and share their estasy about nature. Then comes chaos, provoked by the curtains of fear, irrationality, and ignorance separating one race from the other. The white reaction to the boys' curiosity and spirit of adventure is obviously out of all proportion. There is little the reader can do but brood over their fate and resent the hysterical white women, her escort, and the infuriated populace.

But it is not the reader alone who becomes cognizant of the ravages of the caste system in the South. On the part of Big Boy, too, there is a growing awareness of what it means to be a southern Negro. Thus. hidden on the hillsides, he dreams of turning against his persecutors the violence which has been perpetrated against his friends. The careless disposition as well as the relative naïvete displayed in the opening scene have been gradually transformed into a burning rage. He fantasizes killing whites and making the newspaper headlines:

> *"He looked at the ground as he turned a shotgun over in his hands. Then he leveled it at an advancing white man. Boom! The man curled up. Another came. He reloaded quietly and let him have what the other had got. He too cruled up. Then another came. Ermabbe they'd the newspapers say TRAPPED NIGGER SLAYS TWENTY BEFO KILLED!..."*[2]

Despite Big Boy's dreams of glory, he is saved from a direct

confrontation with the mob. The revolutionary facet of his character structure that, for a moment, is offered to our view is left unexplored. Moreover, his fantasies seem just as senseless as the events which motivated them. At the end, having shed the posture of defiant resistance, Big Boy comes to us as a frightened adolescent more concerned with his own well-being than with achieving heroic stature.

From the point of view of its political implications, "Big Boy Leaves Home" accomplishes very little if one still insists on classifying it as "propaganda." There is, to be sure, the full disclosure of the racial problem but Wright falls short of turning partisan on the issue. The flight North is not presented as a quest whose results could ultimately affect the whole community, but rather as a solitary path to survival under some specific circumstances. Read within the context of the other tales in *Uncle Tom's Children*, "Big Boy Comes Home" represents a moment of disbelief and desolation. There are no hopes for reconciliation, no foreshadowings of a turning point in race relations in the South. Yet, one has to agree that as Wright deemphasizes race and focuses on the universal implications of the economically oppressed people, the stories acquire a harsh and militant pose, and the tone, to a certain extent, becomes more optimistic.

In "Down by the Riverside," Wright creates a character whose simple Christian virtues are complemented by an almost biblical courage and determination. Constance Webb tells us that the idea for the plot was taken from Burrow's *Social Basis to Consciousness*. Supported by extensive factual material, Burrow defends the view that group consciousness precedes individual consciousness.[3] Combining this notion with his life-long knowledge of Negro folk religious mysticism, Wright produced a social context which allows the Negro personality to grow in

dignity and strength.

Mann, the hero of Wright's second piece, finds himself trapped in a cabin during an overflow of the Mississipi River. Having to take his pregnant wife, Lulu, to the safety of a Red Cross Hospital, he sets out in a boat stolen from a white family, the Heartfields. Also in the post are Mann's small son, Pee Wee, and Lulu's mother. As he battles against the ocean of rushing and dark waters, Mann passes by the home of the Heartfields. In spite of the dim lights, Heartfield recognizes his boat, and starts firing at Mann. In self defense, he shoots back at Heartfield who falls dead into the river. He continues his journey, but does not reach the hospital in time to save Lulu and the baby. He is then recruited by a military man to set sand bags on the levee. Next, he is conscripted to help patients to escape from the flood-besieged hospital. Informed that there are people who might still be in danger in their floating homes, Mann and another Negro go searching for them in a boat. Unfortunately, for Mann, the first victims they are able to contact are none other than the Heartfields. Mann considers turning upon his would-be accusers with an axe, but he changes his mind and forgets his personal safety to save his enemies. Once back to the hills, he is shown no mercy by the family. Tried under martial law, he refuses to submit and is shot in the back.

For most of his blunted, repressed existence, Mann had felt his destiny to be something he should stoically endure. Animated by a strong faith in God and in the Ten Commandments, he thought his life was to be put in perspective as part of a larger divine design. In a way, Christianity had provived the means through which he had been able to retain some sense of dignity in a world which threatened him with disintegration. While fighting against a

malevolent nature and the ghost of the white man's law Mann's beliefs had once more filled him with humble courage. "He would have to trust God and keep on and go through with it that was all."[4] It was still from religion that he derived the energy to rescue the Heartfields.

But clearly, for Wright, to be mystical is not necessarily to change this world into a better place to live; and it seems to have been equally clear for him that while Christianity can help the Negro individual to keep some sense of self, it remains a dead letter unless it can offer objective possibilities for the elimination of oppression. Instead of providing him with tools for a dynamic encounter with the world, Mann's faith had taught him resignation and forbearance. He had laid down his sword and shield by the riverside, but that had not been enough to cast off fear, violence, and injustice from his life. After he is convicted of murder, he turns to God, still hoping for some sort of celestial interference: "Gawd, don let em kill me! Stop em from killing black folks."[5]

Mann finally understands that in spite of his Christianity he has returned empty-handed from his confrontation with the world. Thus, when dying must come, Mann decides at least to control the moment of his own death, in an effort to rescue his personality from the inertia it had hitherto been immersed:

> *His fear subsided into a cold numbness. Yes, now! Yes, through the trees? Right thru them trees!... They were going to kill him. Yes, now he would die! He would die before they would let them kill him. Ah'll die fo they kill me! Ah'll die... he ran straight to the right, through the trees, in the direction of the water. He heard a shot.*[6]

If Mann cannot avoid death, he can nevertheless rob it of its sting. For an instant he is able to adequately externalize himself, this externalization assuring him some degree of concreteness and freedom. The fact of Mann's desperate resistance underlines a profound qualitative difference between the Negro he had been and the Negro he has become in this single, final instant. The idea that the Black man ought to defend himself when denied of his legitimate right to the earth is treated with renovated vigor in the remaining short stories.

"Long Black Song" presents a more developed account of this movement from emotional and social bondage to freedom - this freedom being essentially an internal state of feeling resulting from the hero's discovery of himself and of the world which made him. Even though its political content needs qualification, "Long Black Song" - to a larger extent than the two first stories - can be understood as a dress rehearsal of actual social liberation envisaged in both "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star."

The story is related in the third person from the point of view of Sarah, a Negro farm mother who is seduced by a white travelling salesman while her husband is away, in town. When Silas returns home, he finds the man's hat and wet handkerchief lying in his bedroom, and, despite Sarah's protests to the contrary, he recognizes her betrayal. Overcome by rage, Silas attempts to whip Sarah, who flees with the baby. The following morning the white salesman shows up at their farm with a friend to collect money for the gramophone he had sold Sarah. They are met on the road by Silas, who kills one and horsewhips the other. Later, Silas entrenched in a burning house, chooses to fight to the death rather than give himself up to the posse of lynchers.

Although the story line is relatively simple, characterization, to quote Edwin Burgum, "grows more complex as the narrative unfolds."[7] The focus is initially kept on Sarah, whose introspective

and poetic nature seeks fulfillment in dreams, and in melancholy memories of a more carefree past. Sarah longs for a harmonious world where man - black and white - could live at peace with each other and with the land: "... black man and white man, lands and houses green cornfields and gray sides, gladness and dreams...yes, somehow they were linked like spokes in a spinning wagon wheel. She felt they were. She knew they were..."[8] Ironically.Sarah's unfaithfulness becomes the trigger for burning racial enmities , which cut down the very possibilities of fulfillment of her vision. After her betrayal, Wright shifts attention to Silas, the external action being now associated with an inner development in the personality of the protagonist.

Hard work and property accumulation: such had been the means through which Silas had expected to achieve respectability in a white dominated community. He had believed that if he practiced the same bourgeois code of the oppressor he could win the dignity and social standing his Negro self yearned for. Through the years he had managed to pay for his farm and buy some more land. At that time he had even thought about hiring somebody as a field hand: "Sho, hire somebody! whut ya think? Ain tha the way the white folks do? Ef yuhs gonna git anywheres yuhs gotta do just like they do."[9] Sarah's seduction by the salesman awakens in Silas the hatred for whites he had given up for his share in the American dream. He realizes that the apparent solidity of his world is the result of a deformation of reality along the lines of wish-fulfillment:

> *The white folks ain never gimme a chance. They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothin in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life.*[10]

Furthermore, Silas comes to see Sarah's unfaithfulness as a consequence of the bourgeois attitude he had developed towards life. In his obsession "to have," Silas had failed to satisfy Sarah's deepest need for tenderness and affective, thus creating the emotional precondition for the betrayal. For Silas, awareness of reality is the source of all loss, all pain, the very element through which he comes to know the uselessness of his past existence. His personality, thus expanded, demands a change in its externalization, which takes the form of warlike action. Forbidden by a caste system to live on his own terms, Silas refuses the terms the white world has tried to impose upon him, for they clash with his sense of honor and dignity. When he kills some of his persecutors and decides to stay in the house to be burned to death, he is not motivated by thoughts of revenge alone. There is a positive motive power behind his attitude, namely, an uncontrollable yearning for a perfect self, which survives his disillusionment with the external world.

In "Long Black Song," then, Wright makes his hero fight the oppressor with the same violence which had been almost a privilege of the latter. Yet, Wright does not dwell on its use as a generalized social weapon. From the individual's awareness of his authentic relationship with the world to the practical projection of this awareness into actions that can promote the collective good is the theme of Wright's fourth piece.

"Fire and Cloud" more deliberately than the other stories defines its political intentions. It also shows Wright trying to add a new dimension to racial conflict by suggesting its dependence on class and economy. A depression-ridden South provides the setting for the narrative which centers on a Negro minister, Taylor, and his starving Negro community. Preacher Taylor had so

far been able to receive help for his parishioners from the white town officials, but suddenly relief and food are cut off without further explanations. A demonstration sponsored by the Communist organizers is being planned in order to protest against the measures taken by the civic leaders, and Taylor's support is anxiously sought. Meanwhile, the mayor, a chief of police, Bruden, and Lowe, the chief of an industrial squad, try to dissuade Taylor from encouraging the protest march. Taylor decides that he will not support the demonstration, but if his parishioners choose to go, he will march with them. His decision frustrates the designs of the white authorities, and the night before the rally takes place Taylor suffers a serious beating at the hands of a mysterious white group. Instead of frightening him, the whites' brutality redirects his attitude towards his role as a community leader. He heads the integrated march which forces the city government to capitulate and change the policy toward the poor.

Although in the past Taylor had striven to maintain a harmonious relationship with the white leadership, he had been motivated neither by fear nor by a desire to consolidate his power within the congregation. He had believed that the Great God Almighty had called him to lead his folks to the Promised Land - not through violence, but through prayer and peace. At no point had he been aware of how much he had served the whites' purposes by keeping his folks away from action. He had only thought of fulfilling God's wishes. Through experience, Taylor discovers his error of judgement and then tries to act according to his expanding convictions. Whereas before he had considered secular revolution irreconcilable with the will of God, now he starts to perceive connections between the two ways of acting - that of works and that of prayers. The hunger that haunts his people, together with his

own sufferings, makes him establish connections between religion and politics. God demands that men fight for their rights, for "He made the earth for us all! He ain tol no lie when he put us in this world n said be fruitful and multiply."[11] Furthermore, Taylor's developing social vision extends beyond his Negro community to embrace "the people," exploited blacks and whites: "It's the people!... We cant hep ourselves er the people when we was erlone."[12] Success will depend on union, for freedom belongs to the strong.

Here we evidently have to do with a story line quite similar to that of other proletarian fiction produced in the 1930's and 1940's:[13] Exploited workers and peasants coming to a new awareness of the world, stirred by a new hope in the masses as the motive power of modern history, decided to take upon themselves the struggle to change the structure of society which oppresses them. Yet Taylor does not become a Communist even though he adheres to the line of action proposed by the Party. When he moves from religious contemplation to revolutionary vocation, he is only adapting his Christian principles to the contingency of a historical here and now. Moreover, the enlargement of his point of view comes as a result of his private experience, not from his exposure to the Party ideals. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of white Communist organizers who sympathize with Negroes shifts the focus from racial conflict to class struggle; but their characterization ramains shadowy and underdeveloped, their participation in the events almost insignificant. The Party is seen from a different perspective in "Bright and Morning Star," where it is assigned a very distinct role in the establishment of a new order and the achievement of a society free of racial prejudice. Although here Wright makes class struggle the main issue, Negro-white relations in Brignamo's phrase, "remain a special problem."

In "Brught and Morning Star," Sue is the Black mother of two Communists - Johnny Boy and Sug - and the narrative unfolds from her point of view. As Sue moves throught a rainy evening, she remembers the hardships she has undergone in life and how her Christian beliefs have been substituted by the same ideals which give strength to her sons. Sue's reminiscences are interrupted by Reva, a white girl who comes to tell her that the sheriff and other city officials know about a secret Party meaning that is going to take place the following day. Sue delivers the message to Johnny Boy, who goes out to warn his comrades of the danger. Immediately after his departure Sue receives the visit of the sheriff and a white group who want some information about Johnny Boy and other Party members. When Sue refuses to talk, they beat her severely. A white informer who has just joined the Party arrives and tells Sue Johnny has been caught by the mob. Although she mistrusts Booker intensively, she decides to tell him the identity of the members, so that he can finish Johnny's task. Meanwhile, Reva returns and reveals to Sue that Booker is a traitor. Determined to kill Booker before he can say anything, Sue takes a rifle and goes to the place where her son is being tortured. When the traitor is about to blurt out the names of the Communists, she shoots him, whereupon she and Johnny Boy are both killed.

In spite of Johnny Boy's heroism, the story belongs to Sue whose inner development Wright carefully unfolds to the reader. Enduring hard years, Sue had learned to cling hard to Him nailed to the cross and to suffer without mumbling a word. Wrapped in the strength of her vision, she had obeyed the laws of the whites with resignation and even a bitter pride. For Sue, all the darkness and hollowness of this world would be compensated in an after-death

life, foreshadowed by the old hymn, "Bright and Morning Star."

Then one day her sons had filled her eyes with a new, terrible vision. They had taught her to hope for a secular freedom and to fight toward the realization of this freedom. Nonetheless, Sue's conversion to Communism had not result from a conscious knowledge of ideology .Loving her sons, she also loved what they were trying to do. And precisely because her motivations had been, above all, emotional she had never felt total identification with the aims of the Party. She'd often have misgivings about the validity of her sons' blind commitment.

For Sue, as for the characters in *Uncle Tom's Children*, a learning process is basic. Her awareness of her betrayal is accompanied by complex changes within her personality. Instead of accepting the shame and degradation of submission, Sue turns to action, and offers herself totally to the cause of the organization her son so fiercely believes in. Again, her desire to assist the Party does not stem from an insight into the dynamics of Marxism. Her decision arises from a determination to expiate an error and from the need to assert and establish her individual pride and freedom. In dying, Sue affirms to the world that she exists - not as a mere object or thing, but as a being capable of reacting consciously and vigorously to an environment which hampers the cultivation of her human capacities. Under these circumstances, the life-destroying aspect of death is even driven out of consciousness by the psychic gratification that she derives from the sacrifice. It becomes the price one has to pay to hold together - if only for a moment - meaning and life. But Sue and Johnny also die secure that their renunciation will prepare for the world a future, that their lives have not been given in vain. Having passed to the level of collective solidarity, they find martyrdom rewarding for its

part in the process of social change. And the vision of a Marxist society, where the Black man will regain the right to realize his most vital drives and wishes completes the tone of these short stories.

We may therefore say that, as each narrative develops , Wright's heroes depart radically from that archetype of self-annihilation, the crying "Uncle Tom" who knew his place before whote folk. A deepened consciousness of their situation leads to a change in their mode of relationship with objective reality which becomes one of involvement and responsibility. Illiterate and unverbalized as they are, they nonetheless maintain their ultimate passion for fulfillment, even to the point of destruction by the outside world which denies them. As they come to see the world as a reality in process, in transformation, they acquire a blind and unshakable conviction in the success of their quest.

Through Johnny and Sue, Wright proposes to find a home for the Negro's awakening revolutionary urges within the dispensation of Communism. Yet, regardless of whether or not Wright had written these places for the "Greater Honor of the Party," as one critic puts it.a thematic split remains. In the last analysis, what sustains Wright's heroes is not ideology, but the impulse to give final meaning to their lives. Furthermore, to emphasis on class rather than race as a basis of differentiation is certainly undermined by the uneasy suspicion his characters show towards whites. Even Sue cannot avoid distrusting her white comrades. And Booker's betrayal evidently poses a question as to the identity of the Negro's allies. Indeed, judging from this duality we have just described, we might be justified in concluding that Wright's existential experience sometimes seems to overrun his Communist training.

Notes

[1] For an extensive analysis of Marxism in the fiction of Richard Wright, see Edward Margolies' *The Art of Richart Wright*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969).

[2] Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967),p. 44.

[3] Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1968), p. 387.

[4] Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*, p. 71.

[5] Wright, p. 101.

[6] Wright, p. 102.

[7] Edwin Berry Burgum "The Art of Richard Wright's Short Stories," *Quarterly Review of Literature*, 1 (Spring 1944), 207-208.

[8] Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*, p. 126.

[9] Wright, p. 125.

[10] Wright, p. 125.

[11] Wright, p. 167.

[12] Wright, p. 172.

[13] See, for instance, Granville Hicks, *Proletarian Literature in the U.S.A.* (New York: International Publishers . 1936).

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