THE PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY AND THE FICTION OF RICHARD WRIGHT

EDWIN BERRY BURGUM

THE fiction of Richard Wright looms more important than ever in the light of recent race riots such as those at Detroit against the Negroes and at Los Angeles against the Mexicans. Its recurrent theme is that race hatred and misunderstanding which these disorders show to be a vital subject for an American novelist of our generation. The acclaim Wright's *Native Son* has received testifies to the determination of the American people squarely to face the disagreeable facts of the social situation; just as their healthy reaction to these riots has been the demand for a remedy.

Richard Wright is one of the latest and most intransigeant representatives of a literary movement among our submerged nationalities which has been developing since the turn of the century as the literary analogy to the extension of our democratic ideals within the sphere of practical life. If the President's enunciation of the four freedoms, for instance, implemented by the speeches of Vice-President Wallace, may be taken as giving specific meaning and global application to the admirable but half-mystical ideals of Lincoln, this new literature is then a concrete application of Whitman's eloquent but general statement of democratic principles.

The disappearance of the frontier around 1890 is usually accepted as the opening of a new period in our history when we became aware of the presence of minority races and underprivileged workers. From this time until the first World War a movement of "muckraking" and reformism gathered impetus in the area of politics and business. It was very largely negative in nature, an attack upon graft and corruption, and only incidentally sympathetic to the common man who was their victim. The movement in fiction reflected these characteristics in the work of Frank Norris and Upton Sinclair; except that the nature of fiction demanded and secured a greater emphasis on the human suffering. But it is noteworthy that the literary movement as it gathered momentum in the new century shifted to a positive emphasis. In the work of novelists like Willa

Cather, Theodore Dreiser, and Sherwood Anderson, and poets like Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg, we no longer see Anglo-Saxon writers bemoaning the misfortunes of the poor and the foreigners, but writers still Anglo-Saxon by birth or thoroughly assimilated to Anglo-Saxon attitudes of temperament beginning to find in the foreign stock qualities superior to their own. Whether these foreigners are workers or farmers, such writers admire their self-reliance, their endurance, their zest for living, in implicit contrast to the lack of these qualities in the dominant Puritan bourgeois stock. Even after the first World War, writers like Ernest Hemingway and Dos Passos carried over this interest in the social and cultural values of common people of other stocks than their own, but infused a new note of conscious envy or sense of inferiority on their own part. The man of foreign birth who had first been commiserated for his unfortunate economic position was now admired for his preservation of the more vital values of personality which the more prosperous native stock had sacrificed. I am here not concerned with the validity of these judgments, but only with their significance as denoting the rise in prestige of the foreign born in the eyes of certain native writers. It would be idle to claim that these writers represented the major tendency in our literature. But they were there to encourage the minorities themselves.

The thirties marked the coming of age of these submerged nationalities in the historical development of an independent American culture. When Van Wyck Brooks as a literary critic wrote *America's Coming of Age* in 1917, he was thinking only of Anglo-Saxon America. But no sooner, it would seem, had our Anglo-Saxon writers succeeded in throwing off their deference to English precedents (gaining the strength to do so through their new kinship to non-Anglo-Saxon America), than these other racial elements in American society demanded their share in the new culture. They began to point out their contribution to the national pattern. At first, through autobiography or sociological writing, in the work of Jacob Riis, Mary Antin, and Randolph Bourne, but later on, by the mid-twenties, in literature also, Americans of foreign birth began to make themselves felt not as converts to the dominant Anglo-Saxon attitudes, but as modifiers of them. These new writers were now insisting upon their contribution to the newly forming pattern of national culture.

Within its limits, which they gladly accepted, they began to express in literary form the idioms they were introducing into the national language and to present with affectionate detail those idiosyncrasies of personality some of our Anglo-Saxon writers were already intrigued by. Building upon this real but partial acceptance into the literary community, validated as it now was by the holding of political office and the possession of some economic power, these minority peoples now for the first time could express their awareness of the meaning of democracy and of the dignity of their share in it. But at the same time they could not fail to be acutely conscious of the partial character of their attainment. What had been achieved only made them the more cognizant of the long road ahead to anything like a real equality of opportunity and prestige. Their confidence in their potentialities as part of the amalgamation of a truly inclusive culture was contaminated by the knowledge that they had been forced to fight every inch of the way and a suspicion that the tolerance of the dominant Anglo-Saxon would lessen the more he found he had to tolerate.

The particular social relationship of the particular people to the Anglo-Saxon control determined the precise blend of suspicion and confidence in the literary expression.

The Negro, who has been treated worst of all despite a Civil War which ended in his specific emancipation, could not fall prey to any delusion of democracy, however personally prosperous. He could not share the optimism of other peoples in our society that their partial acceptance was either a temporary blot upon the escutcheon of our ideals or only part of the neglect of the working class in general. If self-assertion seemed to be winning acceptance for other minority groups, he could only conclude that his traditional policy of trust and cooperation was wrong. He developed a hatred of his old submissive self and a greater hatred for the whites who pretended to love and admire him in proportion as he remained without dignity. The Negro, once given a taste of dignity, drew the lesson that he had only himself to depend upon, and developed an inner core of tenacious resentment as he became aware that he was victim of the most glaring hypocrisy of all.

The new Negro, taught at length by our liberal tradition to trust himself and to expect equality, is alert for any manifestation of its spuriousness and is ready to die in shame or violence rather than

submit any longer to the indignities of the past. His intransigence, it must be confessed, can hardly be palatable even to philanthropic whites. We must guard against a retreat into fear when we make the startling discovery that the rôles have been reversed. It is no longer we whites who are in the position of granting equality if we please, but the Negroes who are wresting it from us whether we please or not. Such is the first shock that we get from Wright's novels. We are shaken once and for all from our complacency. If we are foolish and reactionary, we shall react by terror. If we are wise, we shall recognize that we have brought this impasse upon ourselves. But, above all, we shall become convinced that the impasse exists, and cannot be conjured away. This is the way the modern Negro feels. He is on the point of rebellion when he is mistreated. He is watchful for hypocrisy, scornful of the insufficiency of the good intention, determined not to sell his birthright for the small change of petty concessions. The Negro today feels that the gulf is absolute between the white skin and the black, save for two exceptions. They will trust those whites who stand shoulder to shoulder with them in a common fight to escape poverty and ignorance. They will trust those whites who risk a similar poverty and suffering to aid them in their own escape.

And so the new Negro literature, at its best when it is least influenced by white modes of feeling, is more bitter than that of any other minority group. This bitterness, turned inward and warped into melancholy during the period of the blues, becomes more and more direct in expression until it reaches an explosive violence, scarcely to be restrained, in Wright's fiction. Though neglected by white readers until the thirties, the new movement was actually earlier under way than the expression of other groups. Beginning about the year 1900 (as the *Negro Caravan* suggests), with the stories of Charles W. Chesnutt (whose work was at first taken for that of a white writer), it became a vigorous school early in the twenties, when the magazine *Opportunity* was founded and Claude MacKay and Langston Hughes were beginning to attract attention. This later work, especially when poetry, carried into esthetic expression the idioms and cadences of Negro speech, and reflected Negro sentiments in such genuine detail that its Negro origin could never have been mistaken. But though often written in a tone of aggressive resentment, its themes are usually a grim exposure of suf-

fering to which the Negro helplessly submits rather than a narration of his revolt.

Richard Wright, therefore, had the advantage of an already developing tradition of Negro literature of protest. His greatness is to be found in the honesty and the power with which he transfers into fiction these convictions of the new Negro where they presented themselves in their most direct and least sophisticated form, unmodified by bourgeois standards, either Negro or white. In most of Wright's short stories, for instance, the Negro is an uneducated poor farmer or share-cropper of the deep South, living in rigid ostracism apart from the white world. A few stories in which the Negroes have found a common basis of feeling and action with poor whites who know something about Communism are an exception. In most of them, the possibility of equality with whites, or even of any sort of cooperation with them, is beyond the limit of experience. But these men have nevertheless caught the contagious spirit of democracy as it has been sweeping through the masses of the nation generally. All of his Negroes are psychologically convinced that they are men with rights. When his young Negro is caught by a white swimming in a forbidden pond, he talks back, defying the segregation. When the white starts to shoot him, he grabs the pistol and kills. Even though he has to flee north, he carries with him a determined spirit without regret. The Negro who has spent years trying to enlarge his small farm and become prosperous like a white farmer, when he finds his ambition frustrated, discovers his mistake in accepting bourgeois ideals and destroys everything. When such men are put upon, their spontaneous reaction is no longer to cringe, but to fight back; and when the fight proves futile, they prefer to die rather than submit. They are simple persons in the terms of formal education, but circumstances have forced upon them an intensity of emotional conflict which is more like the stuff of classical tragedy than any other quarter of American life can present.

Native Son translates into a metropolitan environment such a temperament where the conflicts become more complex and cause the breakdown of the personality. It is an environment, also, paradoxically, where constructive contact with whites becomes a possibility. The novel treats of the difficulties of such a contact for both

parties. For we must remember that, if the short stories were written to reveal the new Negro to whites, *Native Son* endeavors to disclose both to each other.

The first reaction of the white reader is probably an awareness of his own inadequacy in such a situation. It dawns upon him that he is probably only a variant of the Daltons in his good intentions towards the Negroes. If he has taken pride in his practice of equality, in his magnanimous freedom from prejudices, he begins to see how, from the Negro's point of view, he must have appeared as sentimentally patronizing as the informality of Jan and Mary. He begins to recognize that barriers of suspicion and prejudice do not drop on both sides when he wills it. There are two persons concerned in a relationship of equality; for equality, where individuals are involved, is a form of friendship, and friendship is a reciprocal activity.

Normally the establishment of friendships is facilitated by the existence of a larger framework of common class or group beliefs and interests. When, in place of this preliminary awareness of common attitudes, the opposite exists, an awareness of hostile ones, the winning of friendship becomes a gradual process. Each side must assure the other that he is an exception to the group to which he would normally belong. It therefore becomes an instance of obtuseness and arrogance, of indifference to the individuality of the other person, when we assume in him an automatic response of delighted receptivity to our advances. Despite Mary's sophistication and Jan's radical beliefs, they have not realized that to Bigger Thomas they are no more individuals than Bigger is to them. When they make advances to him, it is not to him as individual, but to him as Negro, indeed, to him as a Negro of the old school, grateful for whatever charity a white may offer. If they do not see that they are treating him as a type, they cannot be expected to see how inevitably he at the same time is treating them as a different type. Bigger knows nothing of their radical theories. All he knows is that Mary is the sort of girl who is likely to get him into trouble with both whites and blacks, and ultimately with Jan himself, since she is his lover. When they insist upon his eating with them in a Negro cafe habituated by his friends, they seem to think he ought to appreciate this evidence of their democracy. They do not realize either that to his friends in the cafe his presence will seem a disloyalty to his race, evidence of his having sold out to the whites, or that his own wishes

in the matter have been completely ignored. Their equality therefore becomes an act of racial superiority through the very compulsions they mistakenly think are causing its breakdown. The meaning of social equality has never been as adequately defined in a novel.

Our delusion, however, regarding the nature of equality is but one example of the larger problem of the actual limitation of our horizons. Direct experience is the intensest authentication of abstract statement. There is no financial depression in the effective sense of the phrase, as a determinant of one's immediate relationships with others, if one's income and normal associations afford him a way of life bereft of emotional participation in deprivation, lacking any approximation of equality with the deprived in pain or renunciation or spiritual suffocation. The prosperous, therefore, in all sincerity conclude that the underprivileged who complain are exaggerating, since their own circumstances do not set up a similar compulsion to rebel. Whatever lies beyond the horizon of close personal contacts becomes an abstraction. The poor man who is habitually seen from the window of a limousine is an allegorical man who is defined not in terms that he would himself understand, but those selected by the specific relationship between the two classes which is to the profit of the person making the judgment. Similarly, the millionaire in his limousine is an abstraction to the man who never meets one in the subway. No amount of education or personal cleverness can overcome these limitations which testify to the authority of direct relationships within the group. Whatever is without the group is distorted, unknown and therefore frightening, or not worth knowing and complacently ignored. Only thus can history explain the psychology of fascists, who are certainly neither stupid nor illiterate.

When one's abstract views are contrary to the movement of history, this distortion is of what is essential in the unexperienced. But where it is precisely the essential or typical which is rightly known, the ignorance of the nonessential tends rather to guarantee the escape from a waste of effort upon the irrelevant. The essential, under such circumstances, is not distorted, but embodied instead in the large simple pattern of allegory. If, in other words, what falls without our immediate experience is always allegory, this allegory may be either a distortion of reality or only a simplified, larger-than-life presentation of it. In the latter case, one will not be in error in

the long run, but he will make regrettable mistakes in specific actions. But it remains true, all the same, that even when a theory of society which history is proving to be valid is accepted by the group, whatever passes beyond the horizon of the group will be known only in an abstract way, symbolically, and will remain unknown or distorted in detail. The union worker, we may assume, knows the capitalist more accurately as a type than the employer his worker, because his first hand experience and superior understanding of social conditions affords him a valid insight into his general character. Each, nevertheless, will inflate the specific image of the other to an extent that will make it seem improbable to the other person. The sociological value of fiction is that it provides a partial solution of this dilemma. If it is constructed on the proper abstract basis, it pushes our horizon beyond the limits of our effective experiences, and provides a more authentic understanding of the individual. It is the particular value of *Native Son* that this service, which in most novels is only a by-product of the nature of fiction, becomes the conscious purpose that determines its method.

The conflicts that form the plot of *Native Son* take their particular form from the characters' ignorance of these limitations, just as Wright's firm hand in their delineation is a consequence of his awareness of them. Bigger Thomas, the Negro boy, weighed down by his illiteracy, is no more ignorant of the individuality of the rich philanthropists, the Daltons, than they are of his. They recognize him as a type, the underprivilegd adolescent who has been in trouble with the police, and are prepared to treat him according to a formula which seems enlightened to them, rehabilitation through a job as their chauffeur in an atmosphere of kindly intentions. They fail to recognize that their theory is the approach of private charity which the Negro people are no longer willing to accept; and that, despite Bigger's apparent humility, circumstances have fashioned him into its incorrigible opponent. They know Bigger more specifically than he them, but their specific knowledge is worse than useless since it is used to justify an untenable premise. Bigger, on the other hand, who cannot be said to know the Daltons with any specificity, is right in his general view of them. For him they are allegorical figures from another world, millionaires who live sumptuously on rents torn from the poor Negroes of a segregated district. In this fundamental matter his underprivileged station has afforded

him a superior insight. He senses their inconsistency and unfairness in attempting to conceal from themselves and the Negro population by the small benefactions of charity the monstrous oppression from which they draw an income huge by comparison. Despite his illiteracy, then, Bigger's awareness of his relationship to the Daltons is more sound than theirs of him.

But Wright takes the errors of the Daltons for granted. He is concerned, rather, with the fact that Bigger, though his insights are basically more sound than the Daltons', cannot use them constructively. Sensing shame and futility in his mother's consolation from a religion that demands submission to misery and the renunciation of any hope for a better life, what might have been a healthy inner need to act is perverted by the sort of action his environment provides. At the outset Wright keys his novel to this interpretation. Bigger kills the rat that has been frightening the women folks, and then frightens them the more by flaunting its dead body in their faces. His courage is that overcompensation for fear called bravado. It passes beyond the needs of the situation and defeats its own end here as in later crises in the novel. Its source is his acceptance of the ideals of the white race as they have penetrated his ghetto. Flying an airplane symbolizes the freedom and mastery of the white race he would like to share. Knowing that he cannot, his helplessness creates an inner state of fear which (as it has transformed his healthy impulse of courage into bravado) sets up the direct motivation of hatred, and transforms what might have been a healthy social activity into petty thievery. But, to this uneducated boy, hatred for the whites is too remote and turns inward. It vents itself upon his family with their misguided notion that decency is rewarded, upon his black neighbors, from whom his gang steals, upon the gang for the pettiness of its objectives, and upon himself for his inability to attain more grandiose ends. When he accepts the job with the Daltons, it is to escape these pressures which he hates. But they have all the same been furnishing him with the uneasy stability of belonging to some grouping. In his new environment he is alone in a white world, which becomes the more formidable since he cannot treat it with the unalloyed hatred it semes to him to deserve. The apparent kindliness of the Daltons obscures the simplicity of their allegorical meaning and intensifies his inner conflicts by introducing an element of intellectual doubt to add to his fear.

Behind Wright's narrative is the unspoken assumption that Negroes must have some organization for common protest that shall enable them to bring the abstract objective into productive relationship to the specific situation, that will afford understanding and guidance in the specific situations as they arise. In its absence, as the recent Harlem riots showed, an inevitable demand will spend itself in anarchistic violence to the defeat of its profound and laudable intention. For Negroes *Native Son* is a warning that there is no alternative to right organization except the futility of individual violence into which Bigger is led.

Alone with these whites, whom Bigger fears but is no longer so sure he should hate, his fear and hatred rise into a crescendo as the situation feeds his incompetence with more serious temptations. When it becomes part of his duty to put the drunken daughter of the Daltons to bed, the strain between abstract knowledge and ignorance of the immediate situation reaches the breaking point. His fear that he may be thought by her parents to be planning her rape would have been unjustified had he known the Daltons as individuals. But it is valid both as a generalization of the white world and as a temptation her previous freedom with her lover seemed to be proffering him. In his state of excitement his handling of this difficult situation defeats his intention. He smothers to death the girl he does not wish to be charged with raping. His motives here and elsewhere are quite different from those of Dostoevsky's Roskolnikov, to whom he has been wrongly compared.

His trial of constructive action has been a failure. What follows up to his arrest is the tale of one savage, misguided act after another. But Bigger has become blind to their savagery. His uncertain groping for some valid avenue of self-fulfillment before the murder now gives way to the authority of his excitement. He enters a world of paranoid fantasy, in which his acts of frenzy seem to him not so much the clever concealment of his initial mistake as the unfolding of a grandiose plan of conquest. He has lost his sense of belonging with anybody, black or white, and his need to belong with anybody. His act of murder seems to him to have released immense potentialities that had lain imprisoned within his personality. While he is actually running away from pursuit in desperation, he conceives himself to be a Tamberlaine capable of reducing the whole world to the prostrate state it had imposed upon him and he has now escaped.

He seems now to be flying the forbidden airplane above a remote and impotent world.

But this picture of his immediate reaction to his crime cannot be isolated from his subsequent attitudes. After his arrest he reverts to an apathy of complete worthlessness. His arrest and the white crowds howling for his lynching puncture his fantasy and restore him to the only contact with reality he has ever known. As long as he lacks a fraternal mechanism for its transformation, it is the only contact with reality the underprivileged Negro of our day can ever know: the certainty that there is nobody in our society who is worse treated. Now Bigger no longer possesses the illusion of power in individual hatred. He has reverted to the animal docility of slavehood. His self-respect reawakens when he finds a single man who understands him, and by understanding him enables him at last to bridge the gulf between the abstract and the particular. In the long final section of the novel his Jewish communist lawyer repeats for him the therapeutic service David performed for the distraught Saul of Browning's poem.

Bigger, it is true, understands very little of the content of these discussions. But the lawyer's patience and kindliness of intention in conducting them are enough to convince him of their central meaning. It is enough that they are taking place in such a milieu. Through this elementary fact Bigger comes to feel that there is one man in the world who understands him better than he understands himself, and can bring to the surface of his consciousness that longing to be of some value to himself and to society which the distortions of his hatred had concealed. So starved and twisted has been his former emotional life, that this simple experience of a single friendship takes on the proportions of a sufficient achievement for a lifetime. He cannot conceive of a further goal to live for. The lawyer embodies that principle of equality which Bigger has been unable to articulate, though he reacted against Mary Dalton's mistaken Bohemian notion of it that Jan had shared. Max's willingness to endure criticism for defending him and a social ostracism similar to his own has put them on a common basis of understanding. And from this common basis Bigger is able to see for the first time that he is not alone in his struggle and his torment.

Bigger Thomas is of course not a typical Negro. Some of his actions, like the slaying of the rat, are symbolic presentations of his

personal traits. But though Bigger himself is an individual and not a symbolic figure, the reader accepts him as representative of other men unlike him in various respects. As often happens in contemporary fiction, the extreme disorders of personality which he exhibits are only an exaggeration of the latent characteristics of apparently more normal persons. In a world where there is scarcely a man so illiterate as not to be aware of our publicized ideals of democracy and apply them directly to his own circumstances, Bigger's hatred is shared in varying degrees by every Negro and every worker, and indeed by every individual who feels deprived of a chance to fulfill his potentialities. The only differences are in the depth to which the hatred is buried, the adequateness with which it is controlled, or in the extent to which it is diluted by compensations. Other characters besides Bigger's turn out to be examples of this common hatred with the variety of qualifications I have just mentioned.

For a time, it is true, we do not get this impression. We follow Bigger's activities so closely that we share his collapse after his arrest. But in place of the apathy into which he falls, we recoil with loathing from a sudden recognition that we have been identifying too closely with his fantasies. His murders now stand forth in all their gruesome tabloid clarity. At this point Wright introduces the insincere rhetoric of the district attorney and the white mob's demand for lynching. They reawaken our sympathy for Bigger, and bring home to us the relationship between his depravity and the dominant social pressures which constantly verbalize the principles of justice and democracy but deny any adequate application of them. As though to prove that such hypocrisy does not merely produce Biggers in the black race but corrupts our whole social fabric, we become aware that this white mob is only concealing its affinity with what is vicious in Bigger by seeking from his lynching a similar paranoid satisfaction of its own frustration. Our loathing of the mob cancels out our reaction against Bigger, and our disgust turns toward the deplorable social system which is responsible for both of them. Bigger's hatred of the whites is itself a variant of the common insecurity of the common man in our culture.

Fortunately there are forces at work to avert catastrophe in our national life. The demand for Negro labor in time of war, the growing acceptance of Negroes by the trade unions, the appearance of Negroes in the top ranks of virtually every cultural and intel-

lectual profession, the President's committee on fair employment practices are but a few of the justifications for optimism. Wright might have chosen as his theme the conflict between these two groups of forces, and resolved it in an atmosphere of confidence that history cannot reverse itself and progress is inevitable. But if treated generally, with the stress on the social forces, a distortion of sentimentality, of the good intention, would be likely. If, on the other hand, the stress were on individual relationships, a powerful and beautiful novel might be written. But it would fail to give the right impression of the general state of affairs. Or it would become a novel not of the Negro people but of proletarian life, whites and blacks working together towards a common end, to the neglect, emotionally, of the racial element altogether.

Wright, on the contrary, has preferred to accept the general situation as it is today. He makes his reader intellectually aware of the economic and political forces at work. But he focuses our attention upon their effect on the individual personality. Desirous above all of banishing our complacency, he is not interested in the rosy promise of the future. He knows that this promise will not be valid unless whites are stimulated to action by a sense of guilt and blacks are guided by some better plan than anarchistic individualism. And so he translates the underlying social forces into their specific exhibition in the relationships of individuals. But he does not neglect the case for hope. Just as he depicts the crisis as the immediate consequence of wrong personal relationships, he seeks to show that the promise of the future depends immediately and specifically upon the capacity for making the right ones. Doubtless this capacity itself is contingent upon a plausible philosophical view of the general situation. But the important point Wright is making is that this general view needs to be written into the very structure of the personality as a capacity for friendship. The relation between Bigger and his lawyer Max, to which the end of the book is devoted, is intended to serve as prototype of the proper constructive relationship between men generally.

Wright's accomplishment, unfortunately, is not as good as his intention. Though he conveys some impression of what he means, he is confused and repetitious in presenting the case for hope. This is in part the result of a change in method. Up to this point in the narrative he has been following the general plan of Dreiser's *Ameri-*

can Tragedy. Using an objective method to reveal the subjective state of their hero's personality, on the theory of the influence of environment, both authors have tended to pile up an unnecessary quantity of substantiating detail. But Dreiser's trial scene is monotonous rather than confused. He continues to use the same technique. Wright, on the contrary, departs at this point from Dreiser's method and no longer follows the external probabilities of the situation. The character of Max's plea to the court can hardly be justified. His public speeches would never convince a jury since they are only projections of his private conversations with Bigger in his cell. Even though during the entire novel we have been interested in Bigger's inner life, we have seen it largely through the frank interpretations of the author, without distortion of the probabilities of everyday life either in the action or the dialog. Both are now distorted. What the lawyer says becomes ambiguous and where he says it unlikely. The objective method is superseded by a symbolic one. Wright is no longer the detached commentator but allows his personality to merge with that of the lawyer. This change of technique was doubtless dictated by Wright's desire to involve his audience in a direct emotional appeal. He is addressing them symbolically when Max addresses the court symbolically as thought he were still clarifying Bigger's mind. His intention, if successful, would have brought the book to a crescendo of hope for the future as Max and Bigger, the author, the court, and the readers merge in a common understanding of friendship and equality. But since Wright is unable to put his message in the clear detail of the earlier sections of the book, the effect is not that of the concluding speech in *Waiting for Lefty,* but of a sudden plunge into Dostoievsky. Wright begins to share the confusions and even something of the hysteria, the negative aspects of which he has been elucidating.

The tone of the book changes. What had given *Native Son* its refreshing atmosphere of sanity was the awareness its objective method assured, that the author had been untouched by the maladies he described. The characters, the situations, our whole social fabric, we had realized with consternation are parallel to the decadence of Russia before the Revolution, which Dostoievsky exposed so thoroughly, and so obviously shared. Wright, like Dreiser, had stood aloof from the terrible deeds of his characters. But when he turns to the case for hope, the ambiguity of its statement is no more convincing than the frank mysticism of Dostoievsky. That social ori-

entation towards the common man which alone permits a genuine approach to groups beyond our immediate experience has been clarified. But the clarification is a deduction the reader skims from the restless surface of its vague restatement. It is lost among the many other matters Wright tries to clear up at the same time: whether Bigger should be hanged or not; to what extent Bigger has got the lawyer's meaning and accepts his friendship; what precisely were Bigger's paranoid fantasies. It was easier apparently for Dostoievsky to accept the mystic belief of Christianity that part of man is innately good and at war with his innately evil impulses than for Wright to hunt with the aid of psychology for the ray of hope veiled in the depths of social decay. The anxious verbosity of Max's pleas evokes the suspicion that Wright, against his intention, shares that counterpart of the social neurosis he describes which is the unconscious fear that hope itself is a fantasy.

Perhaps in a world where grounds for hatred are so valid, even so talented an author may be forgiven if he cannot present with equal skill the case for love and understanding. We may expect that among all our national minorities the Negro will be the last to do so, and that he will do so first in those areas of the working class where genuine friendships can be taken for granted. But as the Negro becomes conscious that he too has his heroes in this war, as he becomes aware that the war is offering him the chance to show initiative, that the war itself is a protest against oppression, as he sees the white world yielding before the pressure of his merit as well as his demands, his psychology will change. He will then know that he has won a place of dignity in the American society and the newest Negro literature is likely to be the story of his positive achievement.

New York University