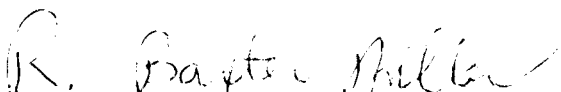


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by William J. Barnette entitled "Redeemed Time: The Sacramental Vision and Implicit Covenant in the Major Fiction of Richard Wright." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

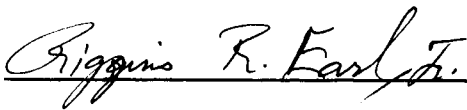


Ronald Baxter Miller, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:







Accepted for the Council:

Vice Chancellor
Graduate Studies and Research

REDEEMED TIME: THE SACRAMENTAL VISION AND IMPLICIT
COVENANT IN THE MAJOR FICTION OF RICHARD WRIGHT

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

William J. Barnette

August 1981

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To a mentor and colleague, Dr. Juanita Williamson, who introduced me to Afro-American Literature and the interrelationships between language and literature; to my parents, Mrs. Annette Barnette and the late Ewell Oscar Barnette; and to my son, William Peter Barnette.

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ABSTRACT

Critics of Richard Wright's fiction have often overlooked the use of "religious" approaches in favor of more conventional rubrics (naturalistic, Marxist, existential) in their studies. Perhaps because of a restricted definition of "religious" as orthodox rituals or dogmas, such critics saw Wright as anti-religious or areligious. This study suggests, however, that by defining "religious" in a broader context, as Tillich does in defining God as an "ultimate concern," Wright's fiction can be studied fruitfully as "religious" documents, even if the fiction eschews orthodoxy. In addition, religion may derive etymologically from the Greek religare: "to bind back." Thus Wright's fiction tries to bind back the unfulfilled covenant of American humanism. In so doing, Wright forces his fictional personae or readers, or both, to "see" the sacraments of this covenant implicitly in his works.

In the twentieth-century theologies of Tillich and Barth and their corresponding notions of "revelation," one sees that Wright's method reflects Tillich's view that reason leads to revelation and the kairos experience, whereas Flannery O'Connor, or any other traditional white southern writer (Faulkner, Warren, Tate), expresses the Barthian view (that man's reason leads always to deception and sinfulness (man is non posse non peccare). The first applications in

Wright's work come in Uncle Tom's Children, particularly in Big Boy in "Big Boy Leaves Home" and Aun' Sue in "Bright and Morning Star." Clearly, these characters embody the homo religiosus who perceives "revelation" through "seeing" truth and acting upon its demands.

Unlike the positive examples of Uncle Tom's Children, Jake Jackson of Lawd Today and Cross Damon of The Outsider display an inability to achieve a balance between the head and the heart which leads to a meaningful existence in Wright's fiction. Jake's overemphasis of the emotional seduces him to a blind acceptance of the myths of bourgeois capitalism, whereas Cross' propensity toward ratiocination drives him to an isolato status, similar to those characters in Hawthorne and O'Connor, cut off from the human community. Even in these negative examples, however, Wright projects the ideal implicitly for the reader's acceptance.

Bigger Thomas embodies an admixture of the two previously discussed characters. He gets cut off from the folk culture of Black Chicago and accidentally smothers Mary Dalton when he is trapped in her room, but he finally "deconstructs" American society through the use of a religious progression from passive victim to active Christ figure. First, the Yahwehistic motif predominates through the violence involving Mary and Bessie. Then the Christ or

messianic motif supplants the earlier violence with a reconstructed community achieved between Bigger and the sensitive reader.

Wright's most fully developed examples of the homo religiosus are freddaniels in "The Man Who Lived Underground," the autobiographical persona in Black Boy, and Fishbelly in The Long Dream. They complete the cycle of Richard Wright's ubiquitous concern for religious problems in his major characters. Wright's eternal prophecy remains, imbedded in the works themselves, urging all men to live more meaningful lives and fulfill their destinies in a society "deconstructed" from the dehumanizing myths of their past failures.

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CHAPTER I

THE WRITER, THE WORK, AND THE CRITICS

The literary art of Richard Wright deserves more serious attention. Even a twentieth-century artist of his magnitude too often has been forced into preconceived social and political categories while his literature has been sometimes largely ignored. As a result, his work has often been seen as naturalistic, Marxist, or existential treatises rather than as a modern writer's coherent search for elusive truth. Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto suggest the following unit of study in their recent edition of Afro-American Literature: A Reconstruction of Instruction:

Moving well into the twentieth century, we might study Wright's writings from the late 1930s and early 1940s in relation to folk materials, painting (Jacob Lawrence), and music (Paul Robeson). The sense of the heroic, stoic, and ironic in naturalist, socialist, and "protest" thought is a theme that might unify the whole.¹

Ironically, such an approach always limits Wright's work to certain preconceived ideological structures. Similarly, Robert Bone's assessment in The Negro Novel in America limits Wright's artistic merit to his "School of Protest" and

¹Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto, editors, "Rethinking the Interdisciplinary Course Embracing Afro-American Literature," Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1979), p. 252.

suggests ". . . there is a direct line of descent, through Native Son, from Dreiser to the Wright School."²

Although many critics, most notably Baldwin and Ellison in the fifties and sixties, have imposed such limited sociological limitations on Wright, there have been several exceptional studies published. Deserving special attention are the critical works of Keneth Kinnamon, whose The Emergence of Richard Wright remains a classic attempt to define Wright's work in its contexts (the discussion of the pastoral theme and its biblical origin is truly brilliant); Carl Brignano, whose Richard Wright overcomes many of the simplistic notions about Wright's work; and Edward Margolies, whose The Art of Richard Wright discusses perceptively the artistry and stylistic genius of Wright, an area often overlooked by Blackmur and others. Dan McCall's The Example of Richard Wright reflects another good general reading of Wright. Supplementing the earlier biography by Constance Webb, Michel Fabre's The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright has become the standard biography for inclusiveness, scholarly integrity, and tentative approach to Wright's life in relation to his works. Although Fabre's work suffers at times from a somewhat provincial and culturally prejudiced perspective, it is an invaluable aid to the scholar in the field. Additionally, a multitude of articles, monographs, and dissertations have

²Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 157.

appeared, mining other fruitful areas of inquiry--imagistic, archetypal, structural, et al.

One area, however, remains inadequately explored, as we have already suggested, and this is the question of the religious quest uniting Wright's canon. Writing about the philosophical influences on Wright, Brignano finds no unifying structure and suggests ". . . the philosophical premises from which Wright operated do not ostensibly form a neat and consistent pattern."³ Findlay C. Campbell suggests in a provocative article "Prophet of the Storm: Richard Wright and Radical Tradition" that the unity in Wright emanates from the concept of "personalism"--a term used by Wright in a speech delivered in 1936 and extrapolated to refer to the subsequent influence of social humanism.⁴ Although the thesis is interesting, Campbell's discussion omits any significant references to religious imagery, orientation, and influence so pervasive in Wright's work. As a result of this confusion over Wright's essential philosophical premises, his world view, his notion of man, most critics either identify a hodgepodge of ideas improperly mixed and ordered, as Brignano, or see Wright as a man undergoing several conversions--Marxist, existential,

³Carl Brignano, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and his Work (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, second printing, 1973), p. 120.

⁴Findlay C. Campbell, "Prophet of the Storm: Richard Wright and the Radical Tradition," Phylon 38 (March 1977), 23.

Pan African--to account for the changing perspectives. Thus Fabre states that Wright's geographical progression coincides with his spiritual, with "America and Native Son representing the Communist phase; Paris and The Outsider, the existential phase; Africa and White Man, Listen!, the anti-colonial phase."⁵ Others, like Robert Bone, find neat thematic variations within discrete periods of Wright's work: the first period concerning itself with the migration of blacks from the rural south to the urban north in America (e.g., Uncle Tom's Children, 12 Million Black Voices, Native Son, Lawd Today, and Black Boy) and the second concerning a growing international political perspective (e.g., Black Power, The Outsider).⁶ None of these rigidly arbitrary systems satisfies, since none adequately assesses the religious quest. If, for example, the last stage of Wright's career can be labelled "anti-colonial" or governed by an international political concern, why is The Long Dream, a work returning to the southern American ethos Wright knows so well, the final novel published during his lifetime?

Without such pigeon-holing schemata, this dissertation attempts to show that Wright's fiction represents a continuing quest for the sacramental vision within the artist's perception of reality. The apparent shift in his

⁵ Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, translated by Isabel Barzun (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973), p. xvi.

⁶ Robert Bone, Richard Wright (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969).

vision represents a further emanation of the same essentially religious spirit: a search for truth as perceived through the senses and validated by reason rather than an irrational vision which transcends the empirical. Wright's essential method in approaching truth resembles that which Paul Tillich manifests in his liberal theology, particularly in the three volumes of Systematic Theology and more popularized volumes such as The Courage to Be. Both reveal a distinctly anti-Barthian perspective. In answer to Barth's assertion that God revealed Himself once to all men in the Incarnation of Christ, Tillich maintained that God continues to reveal His truth to living, rational men who seek to discern and confront these revelations. Although it has become fashionable to show how artists of one century borrow the world views of the visionary prophets of the previous one, Wright's work remains closer in spirit to his contemporary Tillich than to any nineteenth-century writer such as Kierkegaard. Wright, the artist, and Tillich, the theologian, reach independent conclusions in their separate fields which show a remarkable similarity. Wright, like Tillich, remains a religious writer in the same sense that Camus was. Orthodoxy and dead ritual-forms were for him sterile because they forced people to agree compulsively with some dogmatic creed and to lose sight of their own discerning perceptions.

His use of revelation as a continuing process coincides with the theological paradigm of Tillich, but in no way borrows from it. Elsewhere, Dr. Steven Ryan has explored the

influence of contemporary physics on some of Faulkner's novels. His point was not to show that Faulkner studied or understood Heisenberg or the revolution in physics culminating in a conscious use of entropy; rather, Faulkner, the sensitive artist, merely comes to similar conclusions in literature, independent of the physicists. One finds important spurs to both Tillich and Wright in so-called "rational" systems: the Nazi ideology propounded by Hitler to Tillich, and the racist psychology promulgated by white America to Wright. Both thinkers, therefore, revised their notions of reason and rationality as a way of perceiving truth. Involved in this process is the notion of an implied or real covenant between God and His followers. Reason, as witnessed in the atrocities at Buchenwald and elsewhere or the lynchings of blacks in America, could be perverted, and as Camus suggested in The Rebel, modern man could collectively outsmart himself and believe that a lie in the guise of a myth were "true." Any sensitive person should always respect the elusive, evanescent quality of truth. For Tillich, the revelation inspired a continuing critical evaluation of conservative Protestant theology which Karl Barth's Dogmatics of Faith represented most fully. It was an attempt to show that revelation and covenant continue in the modern world. Man must redeem personal and collective history through attentiveness to the truths inherent and immanent in the world's objects and events. Through its "so-called" naturalistic, Marxist, and existential phases, Richard Wright's work remains a consistent quest for

perception. This "seeing" involves reason which transcends pure rational inquiry, seeking for the sacraments, or revealed truths, and for the covenant implied in the historical process.

In addition to sharing Tillich's continuing quest for truth in the modern world, Wright's work prefigures one side of the contemporary debate in black theology between Cecil Wayne Cone and others, who perpetuate the Barthian perspective within a black American historical context, and William R. Jones and others, who articulate the most creative continuation of the Tillich tradition. As a result, Wright's work addresses the contemporary theological debate (Tillich and Barth) as well as envisioning one side of the split a later debate causes within black theological circles. Only the most salient and understandable issues with respect to these debates will be discussed, since we have no evidence that Wright ever studied theology seriously, although we know from both Webb and Fabre that he did have an acquaintance with Tillich. Our study attempts to show that Wright's modus operandi shared a commonality with Tillich's theology.

This study of Wright's mode of perception limits its discussions to Wright's prose, primarily fiction, although occasional references will be made to the unpublished and incidental pieces as well as to the poetry. This focus derives from the lesser importance of these other areas compared to the monumental contribution of the fiction. The organizational system develops the primary theme of the sacramental vision

and the implicit covenant. The sacramental vision here refers not to the seven rites of the historical Christian Church instituted by Christ nor to the liturgical or symbolic trappings of such rites: it refers instead to something that is perceived rationally, sensually, and spiritually as having a sacred or religious significance. As an artist working consistently with this vision, Wright constructs myths designed to project a sacrament to its readers. This sacramental vision, however, remains incomplete until it is supplemented with a covenant experience. Creating within the context of the Afro-American tradition, Wright perceives this covenant as both religious and secular. Such a notion pervades the whole literary tradition of Black America; for example, in 1852, Frederick Douglass's renowned "Fourth of July" oration at Rochester comments upon both the religious and secular documents of this covenant by stating that

Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is flattered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery-- the great sin and shame of America!

The dual references to the constitution and the Bible are not undertaken lightly by Douglass; the essential covenantal obligations of God and blacks in America express a reciprocity of spiritual as well as secular ramifications which echo into the twentieth century. I will explore Wright's particular locus within this tradition and with respect to Tillich's

theology and contemporary approach to literature. Then I define and discuss the emerging sacramental vision in Uncle Tom's Children, focussing particularly upon "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star." Second, I discuss Wright's negative-example protagonists in The Outsider (Cross Damon's inability to merge the individual and communal aspects of the vision) and Lawd Today (Jake Jackson's atrophied bourgeois blindness) in terms of the Cartesian split. Third, I explicate Native Son (Bigger's magnificent though incomplected vision) and its crucial relationship to the sacramental vision. Next, I discuss the vision attained in Black Boy, "Man Who Lived Underground," and The Long Dream. Finally, the conclusion comments on the relationship between religious thought and literary form in terms of my study's contribution and suggests further studies needed in this area of inquiry.

CHAPTER II

RELIGION AND LITERATURE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY BACKGROUND FOR WRIGHT'S CONTRIBUTION

Like several other writers such as Blake, Whitman, and Camus who have been perceived as "religious," Richard Wright has often criticized the dogmas of orthodox Christianity. A religious approach to his work, at least superficially, might appear a discordia concors. On a deeper level, however, Wright's fiction represents a religious quest. In order to understand Wright's position as a religious writer, certain general knowledge about the relationship between literature and religion in the twentieth century is essential. For example, the debate between the humanists and the apologists for orthodox religion, a heated affair in its contemporary manifestations, is important. Contemporary theologians such as Tillich and Barth have debated issues which relate to a religious approach to literature. Scholars such as Merleau-Ponty have made interesting discoveries in this field of inquiry. Black theologians, such as Jones and Cone, have also participated in the debate and its implications for the Afro-American literary tradition. To place Wright's fiction rightly within the tradition of religious literature in the twentieth century, a critical discussion of each of these central areas remains essential.

Literature and religion are often studied in the twentieth century with satisfying results. T.S. Eliot's "Religion and Literature" in Essays Ancient and Modern, as well as Cleanth Brooks' The Hidden God and Nathan A. Scott's Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier, are but a few of the notable studies. Indeed, Scott's rationale for studying literature as a religious document or emanation serves as a model for many, if not all, competent studies in this area. He states that "The Word of God begins to be heard not only in scripture and proclamation and sacraments of the community of faith, but also in all the intellectual and cultural forms which, as they arise out of man's deepest encounter with his world and his own humanity, are stamped by a self-authenticating genuineness and relevance."¹

The critical discussion of the relationship between literature and religion almost always presupposes some understanding of the contemporary manifestations of the persistent debate between humanism and religion. For centuries, the debate between the humanists, on the one side, and the religionists, on the other, has continued with fervor. Although it would be useful to trace the historical, philosophical, and literary ramifications of this split from the

¹Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Theology and the Literary Imagination," Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature, edited by Nathan A. Scott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 13.

fifth century B.C. in Greece until 1980, such a rendering must remain outside the purview of this chapter for obvious reasons; still, I must explore recent developments of this debate. Some of the literary participants in the debate in the twentieth century have marvelled at the tremendous scientific and technological progress man has made and proclaimed with Hamlet, "What a piece of work is man/ How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!/ In form and moving how express and admirable!"² Others have supported the darker view, internalized in Hamlet's own mind's ruminations on the poisoned kingdom. Man's faculties may be God-like, but they are also capable of monstrous violations of humane and ethical principles, witnessed by Hamlet in Claudius' murder of his brother and by contemporary man in the Nazi atrocities during the Second World War and the unjust lynchings of many blacks on their native soil. To the latter group, such activities reveal the impossibility of man's attempt to claim that reason can usher in a more properly humanistic state. The fervent debate in the twentieth century between the humanists and the religionists has continued as heatedly and unabatedly as in any previous era.

Jacques Maritain expresses a strong critique of the humanist position in The Range of Reason, a work emphasizing

²William Shakespeare, "Hamlet," The Complete Dramatical and Poetical Works of Shakespeare, edited by John S. Hart (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1878), Act II, Scene II, p. 676.

the folly of twentieth-century man's attempts to construct a world governed solely by rationality. Like Camus and Wright and others, Maritain reminds the readers that the most inhumane political regime in the history of mankind, e.g., Hitler's Third Reich, operated upon a quasi-rational system. The horror, of course, was not just that the extermination of millions of Jews and other "undesirables" was carried out on a massive scale, but that, more importantly, the atrocities were the cold-blooded ramifications of a so-called rational myth based upon the innate superiority of the Aryan race. Unlike Camus and Wright, however, Maritain seems to prefer indicting the efficacy of reason by condemning its prostitution in this obvious case and generalizing to all such Faustian notions. The intellectual range and depth of Maritain's Catholicism allows him to praise only reason's limited parameters in a classical paradigm while castigating Communist and Marxist alternatives. The truths of the church are "revealed," not just through the natural world or right reason (recta ratio), but further, through faith in the revelations not accessible to reason. As Maritain states:

After the disillusionment of "anthropomorphic humanism" the atrocities of the anti-humanism of our day, what the world needs is a new humanism, a "theocentric" or integral humanism which would consider man in all his natural grandeur and weakness, in the entirety of his wounded being inhabited by God, in the full reality of nature, sin and sainthood.³

³ Jacques Maritain, The Range of Reason (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. 194.

With particular reference to reason, Maritain avers that "secularized reason" led to the acceptance of the principle that "man alone, and through himself alone, works out his salvation."⁴ Such a development, to Maritain, is a twentieth-century recapitulation of hubris and should be eschewed.

Concurring with Maritain's basic position in many respects, many conservative Protestant theologians in general, and Karl Barth, in particular, have constructed theological systems (Barth's Church Dogmatics being by far the most comprehensive) which have agreed that reason and revelation are not compatible.⁵ According to Barth, reason alone cannot corroborate the truth of the Gospel; only faith in the unique revelation of God, the "Wholly Other," through the Incarnation of Christ at a unique moment in human history, can provide the proper awareness of truth. Rejecting his liberal seminary training, Barth attacks the humanist's concern for reason in creating a more humane world or a progressively more perfect world as spiritually blind to the essential oneness of all historical periods after Christ and the true nature of man. Alexander McKelway, a Barthian, explains it this way: "Barth, who insists that theology must begin with God's revelatory answer, which is the only basis

⁴Ibid., p. 190.

⁵Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Volume III, Part II, edited by T.F. Torrance and G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clarke, 1960).

upon which man can ask his questions . . . rejects any such natural capacity to apprehend the divine, and bases man's ability to speak of God on God's grace and our faith."⁶

According to Barth, mankind is always and everywhere the same creature, to paraphrase Samuel Johnson's poem "The Vanity of Human Wishes," and, in the orthodox sense, is non posse non peccare, i.e., not capable of not sinning. Of extreme importance here are the dual assumptions concerning history and mankind that this approach is based upon: history after the unique revelation of Christ is unitary and static as is the nature of mankind moving through history, and post-Christian revelations are minimized by stressing their subordinate function to the central event. Barth's theology, according to John Updike, a sensitive observer, is

one of the triumphant "No." . . . Barth's tactic was to isolate, to repel and exclude everything--kultur, idealism, natural theology, polymorphous religiosity--that might be confused with the narrow ground of Biblical revelation where he makes a stand, a ground finally narrowed to a phrase: "The last word I hope to say as a theologian and also as a politician is not a term like 'grace' but a name, 'Jesus Christ.'"⁷

⁶Alexander J. McKelway, The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich: A Review and Analysis (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), p. 29. McKelway was a gifted student of Barth and was chosen to write an objective and scholarly study of Tillich, Barth's antagonist and friend. As a result, McKelway provides a running commentary on the Barthian view in the footnotes, making the book almost as revealing about Barth as about Tillich.

⁷John Updike, "To the Tram Halt Together," New Yorker (March 12, 1979), 138.

Contrasting strikingly with Barth's orthodoxy, Paul Tillich's theological edifice contained in his Systematic Theology and popular works such as The Courage to Be and The Dynamics of Faith attempts to integrate theology into various other disciplines--the classics, psychiatry, anthropology, history--thus providing a creative dialogue which could hopefully create a voice to speak to the anxiety of the twentieth-century man. Since I attempt to show that Richard Wright's fiction embodies the attitude of Tillich's theology toward the covenant and revelation, a more detailed analysis must be attempted, compared to that on Barth. If Barth's definition of God was the "Wholly Other," Tillich's redefinition emphasized man's ability to perceive and penetrate this "ultimate concern": "God," Tillich asserts in Systematic Theology, "is the answer to the question implied in man's finitude. . . . This does not mean that first there is a being called God and then the demand that man should be ultimately concerned about him. It means that whatever concerns a man ultimately becomes God for him."⁸ Revelation and its place in Tillich's system becomes much more far-reaching and important than it was in Barth's, since the process of revelation continues through time in a historical context even in the contemporary world. As a result of this emphasis upon the continuing revelation, Tillich also broadens the

⁸Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Volume I (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 211.

definition of the term "sacrament" from its restrictive and exclusively liturgical usage:

To the degree in which a church emphasizes the sacramental presence of the divine, it draws the realms preceding spirit and history, the inorganic and organic universe, into itself. . . . The sacramental consecration of the elements of all of life shows the presence of the ultimately sublime in everything and points to the unity of everything in its creative ground and its final fulfillment. It is one of the shortcomings of the Churches of the "word," especially in their legalistic and exclusively personalistic form, that they exclude, along with the sacramental element, the universe outside man from consecration and fulfillment. But the Kingdom of God is not only a social symbol; it is a symbol which comprises all of reality. And if the churches claim to represent it, they must not reduce its element to one element.⁹

A corollary to Tillich's sacramental notion of the universe and man's participation in it is that the contemporary questions and issues of history come within the purview of theology. As Page Smith, a historian interested in theological influences on our culture, has stated, Tillich reintroduced the importance of history to the world of the theologian. As Taylor says, for Tillich ". . . history is primarily the record of those dramatic occasions on which the 'eternal breaks with the temporal' in the fullness of time. If this is the case, then history is of critical importance for the theologian because he finds therein a continuing

⁹ Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Volume III (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 377.

revelation of God."¹⁰ Such a position reveals an essential part of Tillich's emphasis on the dynamic view of history and the important role of man as a potential perceiver and interpreter of these immanent occurrences. Plainly, this notion of the dynamic world and man's efficacious role in shaping its future contrasts sharply with the Barthian view.

When Smith speaks of the "fullness of time" in quoting Tillich, he raises another important issue. What exactly does this concept involve and how does it relate to our study of Wright? We must consider Tillich's concept of kairos and its dual meaning in Greek thought. In his discussion of Christian revelation from Systematic Theology, Tillich borrows heavily from the Greek words for time and their corresponding connotations:

We spoke of the moment at which history, in terms of a concrete situation, had matured to the point of being able to receive the breakthrough of the central manifestation of the Kingdom of God. The New Testament has called this moment the "fulfillment of time," in Greek, kairos. . . . Its /kairos/ original meaning--the right time, the time in which something can be done--must be contrasted with chronos, measured or clock time. The former is qualitative, the latter quantitative.¹¹

As so often happens in Tillich's work, the application of Greek concepts to the Christian setting provides a marvelous hybrid when juxtaposed with African and Indian notions of

¹⁰Page Smith, The Historian and History (New York: Vintage Books, 1960; reprint 1966), p. 70.

¹¹Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Volume III (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 369.

time and the ramifications in Richard Wright's fiction. Tillich's impact upon twentieth-century American thought remains great, for as Brauer's study of Protestantism in America concludes, Tillich's ". . . call for the reinterpretation of the insights of the gospel into contemporary concepts, his insistence upon a true dialectical relationship between man's basic questions and the insights of the Biblical faith, and his ability to draw from and interrelate vast areas of modern man's creativity in art, literature, philosophy, psychiatry and sociology caught the imagination of the American intellectual community."¹² For our purposes, however, the key influences have been the sacramental view of the universe, the continuing revelations of God (however defined) and the efficacy of man's ability to perceive these revelations and to experience kairos, or meaningful time. Each of these concepts operates within Richard Wright's fiction. Each prophetically prefigures one side of the contemporary debate in black theology in our own times, one conservative and one liberal, one emphasizing reason and one faith.

As with Wright's fiction, Mercier Eliade's work also defines the homo religiosus. His cross-cultural and transhistorical studies of the comparative myths of the sacred view of the universe are seminal. They illuminate and augment Wright's fiction, as well as our understanding of

¹²Jerold C. Brauer, Protestantism in America (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, N.D.), p. 285.

such scholars as Frazer, on the one hand, and Levi-Strauss, on the other. His interdisciplinary approach documents the interrelationships between cultural anthropology, comparative religion, and literature in a scholarly fashion. Of particular importance to our study of Wright are Eliade's work on the definition of the sacred in various cultures, the subsumption of the various definitions into one sacramental theory of the universe, and the implications of the theory for creating a valid transcultural concept of time. Each of these major contributions, the product of vast researches in the history of religions and mythologies, underscores and corroborates Tillich's theological research. Tillich and Eliade taught a seminar at the University of Chicago for a few years after both had become prominent in their respective fields, and the stimulating dialogue must have been beneficial to both scholars. The breadth and depth of Eliade's research into the nature of the homo religiosus amazes the sensitive reader in other fields. Free of the usual technical jargon, Eliade tries to build bridges of understanding so that any interested person from another area--literature or theology, for example--can make intelligent use of his research in his field.

In defining the homo religiosus, Eliade suggests that this man believes in sacred reality which transcends the world and yet manifests itself within the world at the same time. In Cosmos and History, Eliade focuses upon the sense of dislocation for the modern man by contrasting his lack of

the religious impulse to the heightened sense of this impulse in archaic man and suggesting that "The chief difference between the man of the archaic and traditional societies and the man of modern societies with their strong imprint of Judeo-Christianity lies in the fact that the former feels himself indissolubly connected with the cosmos and cosmic rhythms, whereas the latter insists that he is connected only with History."¹³ To be alive and in touch with the myths of such a society means that the "world is no longer an opaque mass of objects arbitrarily thrown together; it is a living Cosmos, articulated and meaningful."¹⁴ To perceive the sacraments of the universe, the homo religiosus must perceive the world through its symbolic, i.e., sacred functions, while recognizing that symbols are not transcendent. Eliade states that "Symbolic thinking is not the exclusive privilege of the child or poet or of the unbalanced mind: It is consubstantial with human existence, it comes before language and discursive reason. The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality--the deepest aspects--which defy any other means of knowledge."¹⁵ He warns against any split or false dichotomy between the profane and the

¹³Mercier Eliade, Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. vii.

¹⁴Mercier Eliade, Myth and Reality (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 141.

¹⁵Mercier Eliade, Images and Symbols (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), p. 12.

sacred realms by showing that each is inextricably bound to the other. He cautions, "Let us beware, however, of supposing that symbolism refers only to 'spiritual' realities. For to archaic thinking, such a separation between the 'spiritual' and the 'material' is without meaning: the two planes are complementary."¹⁶

The moments of intense illumination embodied in objects or events or awareness of the sacred and sacramental qualities immanent in the universe involve a concept called hierophany by Eliade, and as he suggests emphatically, these moments make any distinction between the sacred and the profane meaningless.

Apparently nothing distinguishes any moment of profane time from the timeless instant attained by enlightenment. Rightly to understand the structure and function of such an image, one must remember the dialectic of the sacred: any object whatever may paradoxically become a hierophany, a receptacle of the sacred, while still participating in its own cosmic environment.¹⁷

Such an awareness of the interrelationship between the sacred and profane has far-reaching implications with respect to the Christian notions of history and revelation. As we have already seen, for the Barthian the plan of God is too mysterious and thereby often inaccessible to man's clear purview; however, for the Christian with a need to decipher

¹⁶Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 84.

the continuing revelations of God in and through history, a problem arises. Eliade puts it rather well by identifying the difficulty of perceiving historical significance,

For since the Incarnation of Christ, the Christian is supposed to look for the interventions of God not only in the Cosmos (with the aid of the cosmic hierophanies, of the Images and Symbols), but also in historical events. This is not always an easy undertaking; we may, without too much difficulty, read the "signs" of the divine presence in the Cosmos; but the corresponding "signs" in History are much more disguised.¹⁸

This then causes the Christian to approach every historical event with Kierkegaardian dread, ". . . since for him even the most commonplace historical event, while continuing to be real (that is, historically conditioned) may conceal some new intervention of God in history."¹⁹

Finally, Eliade's work agrees with Tillich's kairos in that "This mythic time or sacred time is qualitatively different from profane time, from the continuous and irreversible time of our everyday, de-sacralized existence."²⁰ In addition, however, Eliade supplements this abstraction with a specific reference outside of Christianity to the use of such a concept in India. The redemption of time or the

¹⁸Ibid., p. 170.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 171.

²⁰Ibid., p. 57.

idea of translating time into eternity exists, then, not uniquely within the Christian religion but has cultural analogues elsewhere as well. In India, Eliade affirms, "Ksana corresponds to kairos; the one like the other may become the 'favorable moment' through which one passes out of time and into eternity."²¹ Such a corroboration of Tillich's kairos reinforces the African notions of time to be discussed next in the context of the discussion of black theology.

Although it would be an oversimplification even to imply that the current debate in black theology furthers the Tillich/Barth dichotomy, it is certainly one provocative way within which to show both the continuities of the dual sides of Protestant thought in twentieth-century America and the significant contributions that are currently being made by various black theologians. Benjamin E. Mays' The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature (1938; rpt. 1968) assesses and evaluates works of literature into a coherent discussion of black religious attitudes which accurately and almost prophetically predicts the emergence of Richard Wright. Mays' seminal study identifies blacks' ideas about God, collectively and individually, in America. He argues convincingly that these ideas can be divided into three historical periods:

²¹Ibid., p. 172.

Their ideas about God developed, as can be validated historically, along the lines of the Negro's most urgent needs and desires. Prior to 1860, the Negro's ideas of God were developed around slavery. After the Civil War, they grew out of the wrongs of Reconstruction. Since 1914, they are inseparable from the social and economic frustrations which the Negro meets in the modern world.²²

While the last period most concerns Wright's fiction, the previous two are inextricably bound to the last. All reflect that the covenant for black Americans meant social involvement: the sense of the continuing revelation has been an integral part of black religious consciousness in America for a long time. Mays exhibits this covenant with voluminous references to the spirituals, poems, slave narratives, and novels. As previously noted, the merging of religious and social covenants can be illustrated clearly by Frederick Douglass' "Oration at Rochester on the Fourth of July."

In addition to the relationship between historical experience and divine consciousness, Mays further proposes the three dominant ideas of God fostered by the literature, namely, the compensatory or traditional belief in God, the idea that God supports social justice whether in traditional forms or otherwise, and the idea that God should be abandoned as a "useful instrument" in perfecting social

²²Benjamin E. Mays, The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature (New York: Russell and Russell, 1938; reprint 1968), p. 255.

change. Mays explains the predominance of the third idea in the post-World War I period:

It is significant to note that prior to 1914, one finds no ideas of God that imply doubt and repudiation. Since the war, and particularly since 1920, there is a wave of cynicism, defeat, and frustration in the writings of young Negroes where God is concerned.²³

Significantly, Mays discusses Nella Larsen's novel Quicksand. Almost prophetically and unconsciously, he evokes the career of Richard Wright by commenting, "It is not too much to say that unless liberal prophetic religion moves more progressively to the left in the effort to achieve complete citizenship rights for the Negro, he will become more irreligious and he will become more militant and communistic in his efforts to attain full manhood in American life."²⁴ Finally, Mays suggests that the black American's consciousness of God derives solely out of his social environment and is not nurtured by the prevailing theologies of his precarious times. In his own words, "The Negro is not interested in any fine theological or philosophical discussion about God. He is interested in a God who is able to help him bridge the chasm that exists between the actual and the ideal. The Negro's life has been too unstable, too precarious, too uncertain, and

²³Ibid., p. 244. See William R. Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture," in Perspectives of Black Theology, edited by Rosino Gibellini (Brescia, Italia: Queriniana, 1978). Jones disagrees with Mays and supports his position with various sources (slave narratives, slave seculars, and Payne's account of slavery conditions).

²⁴Ibid.

his needs have been too great for him to become sufficiently objective to theologize and philosophize about God."²⁵

While certainly Dr. Mays' statements may have been fairly accurate concerning the year 1928 with regard to theological contributions, the contemporary outburst of theological activity in general and the current debate between black theologians show that a dearth of theologians no longer exists. C.W. Cone's The Identity Crisis in Black Theology, a neo-Barthian attack on the liberation theology group--Joseph Washington, James Cone, and J. Deotis Roberts, among others--castigates the principal impetus of the movement for emphasizing contemporary political events at the expense of the fundamental truths revealed in the Bible. Like Barth, Cone appeals to the biblical creeds and dogmas which undergird the orthodox believer's faith in an apolitical and conservative fashion and excoriates his theological rivals for hubris and blindness to the most important side of the Gospel's message. According to Cone, "The essence of black religion is the encounter with an Almighty Sovereign God":

In the midst of this awful situation, God forced himself upon the slave as a highly exceptional and extremely impressive Other, radically different from everything known in the world. He was a God of power whose existence was more real and more powerful than the absurd situation of slave life. . . . Thus politics is not the starting point of black religion. Rather, God is.²⁶

²⁵Ibid., p. 255.

²⁶Cecil Wayne Cone, The Identity Crisis in Black Theology (Nashville: AMEC, 1975), pp. 83 and 139, 141.

Reacting against this approach, William R. Jones reflects on the split in contemporary black theology, and his attempts to reconcile the divergences and build bridges of understanding and mutually reinforcing dialogue between humanism and religion are reminiscent of Paul Tillich. For example, Jones defines the split in black theology as follows:

It is characteristic of most writers on black religion to relegate black humanism to a theological limbo. James Cone and Benjamin Mays, for instance, classify it as "secular," "non-religious" and "anti-religious," thus denying its value and status as an authentic expression of black religious experience.²⁷

Against such condescending and restrictive descriptions, Jones develops a theology for humanism which is essentially non-theistic--a humanocentric perspective with which to approach religious truth. Carefully, however, Jones emphasizes the fact that the theology of autonomy/liberation which he advocates in no way seeks the demise of the black church; rather, it seeks to engage it in dialogue concerning central issues such as theodicy and the implication of an active/inactive faith. As with Dr. Rieux in Camus' The Plague, Jones suggests that while he may not be able to be a saint in the orthodox sense, he refuses to bow down to pestilences such as

²⁷William R. Jones, Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology (Garden City, J.J.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), p. xv. His refutation of ethnic suffering promulgated by God is masterful and his use of Camus evokes memories of The Courage to Be. The question of theodicy is central to any theological perspective.

racism or Nazi atrocity either. In this way, Jones separates the evil and injustice from the responsibility of God or inevitability, thus attacking implicitly the Augustinian notion of evil espoused by Father Paneloux in The Plague: that man is responsible for evil and injustice by choosing not to do God's will. The radical humanism of Camus obviously has influenced Jones' theology, adding another dimension to the argument.

Secondly, Jones proposes the redefinition and restructuring of humanism itself. Classical humanism and its sources (Aristotle's works, for example) fostered a class system and slavery: deconstruction of systems must precede any reconstruction of humane values. R. Baxter Miller clearly shows the ramifications of Jones' position. The New Humanists of the 1930s, he asserts, evaluated literary merit more on class distinctions than on technical success or humanistic judgments. Hence, scholars such as Irving Babbitt, while "emphasizing gentility . . . condemned naturalism, a 'barbaric' style."²⁸ In addition, these academicians opposed electives in the Harvard curriculum and revered tradition and its inherent values, stimulating a query, "Does tradition legitimize values? Do they, rather, legitimize tradition? Answering 'yes' to tradition alone, the New Humanists avoided

²⁸R. Baxter Miller, Introduction to Black American Literature and Humanism (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1981), p. 108.

talking about the lower classes, the subject of much naturalistic fiction . . . its characters lacked those genteel qualities which justified being alive."²⁹ Miller uses the term "rehumanize" to describe what happens, as so often happens in Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry: the emergence of a literary world similar to others in Afro-American literature in general and to Richard Wright's canon in particular. He challenges tradition, which has dehumanized black values and black people. Both Jones and Miller want to redefine humanism as being separate from religious orthodoxy, classical traditions, and enshrined truths (Bacon's "Idols of the Theatre"). In this way, "the humanocentric predicament" described by Jones and "the medium of culture and knowledge" discussed by Miller make possible a way out of the cul de sac proposed by Maritain between religion and humanism: this humanist perspective, thus defined, is as "religious" as any orthodoxy. When Jones describes the central affirmation of humanism, in "Theism and Religious Humanism," as "the functional ultimacy of the human being--i.e., the radical freedom and autonomy of humankind," the language, as well as the intent, reminds the reader of Tillich's "ultimate concern."³⁰ Explicitly, Jones

²⁹Ibid., p. viii.

³⁰William R. Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism," Christian Century (May 21, 1975), 520.

makes this emphatic by mentioning in the same article that "Growing numbers of theologians are consciously adopting the thesis of radical human creativity, to the extent that the difference between religious humanism and such theists as Tillich, Bonhoeffer, Novak, and Numiry is not as great as we may think."³¹ And it should be remembered that the distinctions between theistic and non-theistic humanism are inconsequential for Jones.

John Mbiti's New Testament Eschatology in an African Background discusses African influences on the religious perspective of black Americans. What Mbiti discovers about the African notion of time relates to Tillich's kairos and Eliade's use of the similar concept in the Indian ksana. In discussing the lack of any concept of linear time, or what the Greeks would call chronos, Mbiti states,

For the Akamba, Time is . . . simply a composition of events that have occurred, those which will immediately occur. What has not taken place, or what is unlikely to occur in the immediate future, has no temporal meaning--it belongs to the reality of "no-time." . . . From this basic attitude to Time, other important points emerge. The most significant factor is that Time is considered a two-dimensional phenomenon; with a long "past," and a dynamic "present." The future as we know it in the linear conception of Time is virtually non-existent. . . . The future is virtually absent because events which lie in the future have not been realized and cannot,

³¹ Ibid.

therefore, constitute time which otherwise must be experienced. . . . It is, therefore, what has taken place or will occur shortly that matters much more than what is yet to be.³²

This concept has ramifications for our study in that Richard Wright's use of the African concept of time is crucial and relates to the kairos of Tillich and Eliade's homo religiosus with respect to the sacramental view of the universe and the implicit covenant.

³² Joseph Mbiti, New Testament Eschatology in an African Background (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 24. Trudier Harris suggests that African slaves had trouble adjusting to a Christian view of the invisible God in America because of the African notions of a visible God they left behind. Her remarks were delivered in "Black Women Writers and Humanism" at a conference on "Black Literature and Humanism" in Knoxville, 1978. The University Press of Kentucky is publishing representative articles from this conference in July, 1981. This idea relates to Wright's fiction also.

CHAPTER III

REVELATION AND SACRAMENTAL VISION IN

UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN

In Richard Wright's first celebrated work of fiction, Uncle Tom's Children (1938), the religious impulse becomes a dominant motif. Many critics (Bone, Kinnamon, Kent) have recognized the trends, including the Marxists, who have generally been hostile. The prevalence of the religious imagery remains strikingly central to an understanding of the stories included in Uncle Tom's Children. Wright views man's disjunction from the cosmic harmonies and the secular analogue of the Social Fall. His attempts to perceive and effectuate a redemptive return, the reestablishment of covenant, appear in all the stories. His fiction embodies the sacramental vision and Tillich's notion of the covenant, in which man can perceive the continuing revelations of God.¹ A close examination clarifies Wright's religious emphasis in terms of his characterizations, his use of violent acts of assertion, and the rendering of folk-culture materials. The

¹Mercier Eliade, The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969). Of special importance, in general, is the section, "A New Humanism," pp. 1-11, and the definition of the homo religiosus on pp. 8-9 in particular. In addition, the "Preface" discusses "hierophanies" with respect to the homo religiosus as those moments when the secular objects and events become imbued with a sacred significance.

effort places his work within the framework of traditional religion in American literary history.

According to Randall Stewart's excellent study, Christian Doctrine and American Literature, two religious traditions predominate in nineteenth-century American literature: the Puritan orthodoxy permeating Hawthorne and Melville and the radical humanism associated with the Whitman/Emerson tradition.² Dr. Stewart asserts that the attitude in twentieth-century American literature, especially in the South, has been dominated exclusively by the view of man that is consistent with Christian doctrine, i.e., the Pauline notion of man as non posse non peccare. The existence of Richard Wright's fiction, rather, serves as a reminder that a minority of writers in the South did not share in the traditionally static world view supporting the orthodoxy of a Robert Penn Warren and the Fugitives. Its "ultimate concern" (Tillich's phrase) was to attack such a world view for its attendant racism. The word religion has to be reexamined and redefined to see Wright's work within its rubric--a contradiction, since Wright vehemently defied and vilified orthodox religion through Marxist, and later through humanistic, approaches. Etymologically, religion comes from the Latin religio, a word meaning the bond between man and God, but there is also a possibility that

²Randall Stewart, Christian Doctrine and American Literature (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958).

the word derives from religare, a word meaning to bind back. This latter etymology works well when applied to Wright's fiction, since he attempts to "bind back" the American covenant, in both a religious and secular sense, to extend the promises to a future reality in which black men can participate fully in American life on their own terms. Creating within the Afro-American tradition, Wright perceives this covenant as both sacred and civil. He implies that American history might have to be redeemed from the illusions and indecencies of the past and that a melioristic hope for self-definition is not totally unthinkable. The darkness and violence of his own vision mark the frustrations and failures of the American experiment thus far.

This study suggests a certain theoretical methodology be applied to Wright's major fiction. Three important terms with respect to the thesis--covenant, sacrament, and sacramental vision--need to be carefully defined for our purposes.

The use of the term covenant in the Afro-American tradition, briefly mentioned earlier, derives from the Judeo-Christian tradition and its biblical analogues (Mount Sinai, the Arc of the Covenant, the Children of Israel's plight through diaspora to Canaan, etc.), as well as the "new covenant" in the New Testament vis a vis the Incarnation of Christ. The covenant converts existential realities such as the horrors of the Middle Passage or the brutalities of

slavery into representative emanations of the violated covenant in more recent times. The sensitive black American artist easily sees the relationship, for example, between the Children of Israel under Pharaoh and his analogous situation in slavery in America. Further, the "old covenant," closely associated with the Old-Testament notion of God, emphasizes a wrathful, violent Creator (Yahweh) with a stern legalistic desire to enforce the law in a dogmatic fashion, while the "new covenant" simply replaces the former view with that of a merciful, compassionate liberator (Jesus Christ). Wright uses both of these views in his fiction, most interestingly in Native Son. In addition, he uses the covenant to reflect an on-going, reciprocal relationship between black men and their notions of revealed truth. In a recent study comparing the works of Richard Wright and Bernard Malamud, Evelyn Cross Avery makes the lack of a covenant a significant distinction between Jewish and black American writers. In her view, Malamud, a contemporary Jewish writer, wrote in a manner which was fully constrained by a traditional covenant, while Wright, a twentieth-century black writer, labored under no such tradition. Malamud typifies the Jewish victim who is ". . . burdened by tradition, by time, and a history of suffering, but must accept Abraham's covenant with God. When Malamud's victims assume responsibility for their past, they are reborn. The 'new life,' paradoxically, is found in the old."³

³Evelyn Cross Avery, Rebels and Victims (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1979), p. 6.

Avery emphasizes the importance of the covenant to the Jewish writer and its relative unimportance to the black writer, assuming that because it is not often explicit that no such tradition exists in Afro-American letters. As a result, she affirms that for the black writer like Wright, "Meaning is not found in the past, but in the present. The rebel's identity depends on action."⁴ Avery's perspective overlooks the central relationship between the past and the present and the centrality of the continuing covenant in Afro-American literature.

Besides the covenant, the "sacraments," and by extension the "sacramental vision," both require a fuller, more precise definition. The sacraments, in this sense, have no relationship to the seven sacraments in the historical Christian Church; rather, "sacraments" refer to a perspective on the sacred quality in the universe. A character responds to the sacred truths inherent in the universe either by acknowledging them or denying their significance. In this way, the character recapitulates the dilemma of the homo religiosus, discussed previously in Eliade's work. The "sacramental vision," then, refers to whether the character in the story retains the sacred significance of the events, objects, and circumstances of the narrative or whether he does not. In either case, the author makes a statement

⁴Ibid.

concerning the character's perspective. If the character attains the "sacramental vision," the author corroborates the position. If the character remains blind to the sacredness, then the author projects an alternative response more congruent with the "sacramental vision." Thus Wright comments, throughout his work, on the perception of his characters with respect to the covenant, the sacraments, and the total sacramental vision.

Typically, Wright's characters juxtapose the current reality to an alternative possibility outside the parameters of the story, thus restoring the covenant in the reader's mind. In limiting Wright's fiction to a realistic or mimetic mode, some critics miss the visionary, prophetic quality in it. For example, Modernism in Literature, a recent textbook on contemporary literature edited by Todd K. Bender, lists Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" in the section on realism, even though a close analysis of this story refutes any purely realistic appraisal. What works better in this case in point is an approach which emphasizes the central significance of the religious motifs in Wright's fictional world.

The limiting strictures of orthodox religious approaches must also be broadened to include a definition of God and revelation in secular terms. Wright often attempts to "deconstruct" the purportedly religious justifications of American society by exposing the glaring injustices

perpetuated by such a system.⁵ As Wright, the author, speaks through the various fictional characters, he exposes reality only to point toward its transcendence in a revived and reunited "covenant" and "sacramental vision," a reconstituted Yahweh and Christ synthesis. This major theme permeates his major fiction.

The Wrightian pattern in Uncle Tom's Children, particularly in the rich opening and closing pieces, "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Bright and Morning Star," reflects a different orientation toward the homo religiosus. Stewart associates the paradigm with the Hawthorne/Melville tradition which leads directly to the world of Flannery O'Connor and other writers in the twentieth century.⁶ In The Negro Novel in America, Robert Bone assesses Wright's work "the Protest School" and labels "Bright and Morning Star" a crude propaganda piece. George Kent, however, sensitively disagrees with such an opinion while observing, in Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture, that "the term protest covered Richard Wright for thirty years, concealed his depths from

⁵"Deconstruct" here refers to Derrida's term, used in reference to his critical study of Husserl's system of phenomenology. David Allison glosses the term quite well in a footnote on page xxxii-xxxiii of Jacques Derrida's Phenomena and Speech (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). The act of "deconstruction" involves taking a system apart to create new possibilities for a synthesis.

⁶To explain the continuation of this split into the twentieth century in the South, I have written an essay, "Two Notions of Revelation: A Brief Comparative Study of Selected Short Fiction of Richard Wright and Flannery O'Connor," which discusses the ramifications of Stewart's thesis. It is currently being considered for publication.

us, so that we are just now beginning to find what his meaning is."⁷ Wright's characters embody not the Old Adam or Oedipal myopia characteristic of, say, Flannery O'Connor's fictional world, but the keen and penetrating vision through which we can "see" the truth and its sacramental significance all too clearly. His characters in Uncle Tom's Children are Promethean in their attempts to steal the fire of racial justice in an oppressed world. The characters--Big Boy, the traumatized adolescent and protagonist in the story named for him, the allegorical Mann, the distraught victim of vigilante violence in "Down by the Riverside," Silas, the proud and betrayed farmer in "Long Black Song," Reverend Taylor, the dedicated minister with a renewed sense of mission in "Fire and Cloud," and especially Sue, the consecrated mother in "Bright and Morning Star"--all must experience a violent confrontation with the racially segregated world to pursue the collective and individual meaning in their lives. John Timmerman observes rightly that in Wright's early fiction "this assertion, or lack of it, is not merely individual but is a tribal assertion, an individual assertion is a type or component of the whole."⁸ And as a result of this confrontation,

⁷Robert A. Bone- The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 157-160 in "The Wright School" and George Kent, "Introduction," Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972), p. 11.

⁸John Timmerman, "Symbolism as a Syndetic Device in Richard Wright's 'Long Black Song,'" CLAJ, 14, Number 3 (March 1971), 292.

each character memorably discovers the truth which reveals a violation of the covenant, both in a religious and secular sense. The action fuses the synthronic breakthrough--the violated covenant--with the diachronic mode which projects and promulges an improved world in which the covenant might be restored and traditional readers might be "rehumanized" into the human ideal.⁹ These characters experience a merging of folk-consciousness with religious tradition. Their actions create a community. Contrasting with the violence in O'Connor's fiction, the violence in Wright does not come from the spiritual pride and sinfulness of the protagonists; rather, it emanates largely from an irrational racism which denies the black characters full participation in American life. Finally, the use of dialect and folk culture in Uncle Tom's Children serves to preserve and further the human community and to project beyond the limited parameters of the stories themselves to a dynamic future in which the horrible sacrifices of the martyrs will be vindicated.

In "Big Boy Leaves Home," the initial story of the volume, the protagonist's perceptions of the world change,

⁹R. Baxter Miller, "Does Man Love Art? The Humanistic Aesthetic of Gwendolyn Brooks," Black American Literature and Humanism (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1981), p. 108. For an interesting discussion of the implicit covenant in the Afro-American tradition, see Benjamin E. Mays' The Negro's God as Reflected in his Literature (New York: Russell and Russell, 1938). In addition, many historians are beginning to discuss a national covenant in America. For a recent example, see John F. Wilson's Public Religion in American Culture (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), especially "The Shape of the National Covenant," pp. 23-44.

as do those of his friends. In this way, he resembles other prototypes in American literature (Sherwood Anderson's narrators in "I'm a Fool" and "I Want to Know Why" and Twain's Huck Finn come immediately to mind.) but there are significant differences as well. With the fatalistic determinism of a Sophoclean tragedy, the events transpire, moving inexorably to a final catastrophe. The events are simple to relate. Handled by Mark Twain, the scenario might have been the story of American youth escaping, like Huck Finn, from the civilizing influences of school and society and going to find fulfillment in the natural world of the swimming hole. Wright's black youths--Bobo, Big Boy, Lester, and Buck--cannot, however, escape to a pastoral retreat. The bucolic setting which encompasses the swimming hole is owned by Mr. Harvey. Keneth Kinnamon's excellent article "The Pastoral Impulse in Richard Wright" accurately assesses the importance of the theme and suggests that the pastoralism here emanates far more directly from Genesis than from Theocritus or other Greek classical sources, thereby underscoring the primacy of biblical influences on Wright's work.¹⁰

The four Black characters enjoy a harmonious relationship with each other, in the idyllic opening sections of the story and with the natural world:

¹⁰Keneth Kinnamon, "The Pastoral Impulse in Richard Wright," Midcontinent American Studies Journal, 10 (Spring 1969), 41-47.

A black-winged butterfly hovered at the water's edge. A bee droned. From somewhere came the sweet scent of honeysuckles. Dimly they could hear sparrows twittering in the woods. They rolled from side to side, letting sunshine dry their skins and warm their blood. They plucked blades of grass and chewed them.¹¹

This essentially romantic position emphasizes the harmonious relationship between the central characters and the natural world, a quality certainly reminiscent of Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up" and various other romantic pieces; however, the placid calm very quickly becomes juxtaposed with the "fallen" world, a world infected with racism and the corollary that the white man--in this case, Mr. Harvey and his son--attempts to own the natural world. The tone is unmistakable spiritual hubris. Scatological references to belching and farting intensify and heighten the idyllic state, reminiscent of medieval poetry. There, even Christ shares the bodily functions.

The natural world becomes charged with a strikingly different tone after the tragic misunderstanding at the swimming hole. The naked black characters in quest of their clothes are confronted by a white woman, the younger Harvey's betrothed. Setting up the deaths of Lester and Buck, as well as the death of young Harvey at Big Boy's hands, she screams. The escape from the water hole, as with the trip of Joyce's fictional narrator to "Araby," changes irrevocably the

¹¹Richard Wright, Uncle Tom's Children (New York: Harper and Row, 1936), p. 27. All subsequent references to the stories in this collection will be listed by page numbers in parenthesis.

attitude of the characters toward themselves and the natural world. No longer Edenic in tone, experience becomes menacingly charged with nightmarish threats, the most menacing of all being the irrational thrust of the blind mob bent on revenge. As Big Boy flees to the kiln, his eyes have been opened to another view concerning nature as "His feet slid in the dust. He kept his eyes straight ahead, fearing every clump of shrubbery, every tree" (p. 40). The nightmare embodies the virulent racism which infects the entire landscape, symbolized, as Kinnamon and others have pointed out, by the snake which Big Boy confronts and kills and the subsequent fears he has of "the long white fangs ready to sink into his neck, his side, his legs" (p. 42).

The sterile racial climate culminates in the mob, intent on irrational lynching, and this mob likewise gets described with coil imagery borrowed from the snake-white racism emblem already encountered. Some of the mob, after all, come with "coils of rope slung around their shoulders" (p. 46). In an extremely perceptive article, Blyden Jackson describes the artistry Wright employs in the use of Big Boy's perspective. The writer forces the reader to "see" the lynching and its ramifications. Blyden Jackson suggests the blind ritual:

It is an efficient mob, a homogenous grouping. Yet no one has fully organized it. It has no officers and no carefully compiled manner of behavior. Still it operates like a watchmaker universe. Its

members know what they are supposed to do, and they do it, as if they are performing the steps of a ritual dance--which of course they are. For that is the real secret of the people gathered around Bobo on his Golgotha. They are responding not only to xenophobia and to an obscene lust for power. They are acting tribally, even as every lodge member, black or white or yellow or red, who ever gave a secret handshake and every Babbitt who ever applauded a toastmaker's feeble attempts at jollity at the luncheon of his service club.¹²

Opposed to this dead, ritualistic view of the world is the vision embodied in the black New Adams of the work. This vision transcends the sterile static quality of the Harveys' white world view. The sense of folk solidarity through imagery uniting the folk community, the clear view of the world's reality and possibility, and the use of dialect all suggest a dynamic vision of an old world evolving into a new one.

Folk imagery includes the spirituals such as "Dis Train Bound for Glory," and the real trains headed north provide a leitmotif. As the long history of chattel slavery developed in America, an intricate method of communication appeared. A double communication took place. On one level, the spirituals denote Christian and racial submission, but on the other, they imply abolition and freedom. Such duplicity, or "puttin' on ole massa," would allow a slave to

¹²Blyden Jackson, "Richard Wright in a Moment of Truth," *The Waiting Years: Essays in Negro American Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), p. 140.

sing about a train bound for glory, but the train probably suggests escape from an intolerable living condition. The literal train and the symbolic train ironically complement each other in the religious meaning of the story. The significance of the north in the Afro-American literary tradition, usually in the form of the North Star (it is interesting that Wright mentions at one point in this story a star in the east) remains an archetypal representation of the freedom possible in the geographical location as well as in mind.

Finally, the significance of Big Boy's salvation bears consideration; after all, he flees the church sanctuary, where he would be captured immediately, to get to the kiln, hewn by his own hands, the representation of self-assertion. He carries the remnants of the church with him to his particular calvary. The assertion, usually violent, becomes almost a prerequisite for Wright's hero. The character must accept what he says and what the old folks say and transcend the social limitations into a culturally pluralistic world. To appreciate another culture is to acknowledge its language. Although there are many dialect-forms in the stories, it is obviously outside the scope of this study to deal comprehensively with them. A few of the most prominent are "Ahma" for "I'm going to," "feets" for "feet," and "zero copula" as in "They after me." Each of these features can be found in the field records of the Linguistic

Atlas of the Gulf States, currently being prepared for publication by the University of Georgia Press.¹³

The final synthesis Big Boy achieves at the end of the story, after he has fully "seen" Bobo's redemptive sacrifice and etched it indelibly into his soul's consciousness, remains only potentially actualized. As has been suggested earlier, Big Boy carries the sacramental remnants from the church with him to the kiln; the communion, subsumed in the corn bread crumbs he has carried with him to the emblematic crucifixion from his mother's kitchen; furthermore, although the communion remains at his bosom unfulfilled, the light still comes at the end. One probably associates the image with Hopkins' Holy Ghost in "God's Grandeur." or some other traditional religious writer, but for Wright the light reflects only a possibility. Riding the truck northward,

¹³Robbins Burling, English in Black and White (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973). Wright's ear was unerring with respect to the speech of southern blacks, and that he pioneered in a prophetic way the study and use of such dialect to create art strikes me as a tremendously important contribution. Its legacy stretches to the current debate, e.g., the Ann Arbor court case decision, and beyond to the larger context concerning whether Black English is a dialect or a separate language system. I disagree with those who suggest that Wright's literary dialect suffers from his prolonged absence from America (Blyden Jackson and others) and am currently working on a study correlating Wright's dialect in The Long Dream, the last published novel, with the Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States records. I am familiar with these records, since I have conducted several dialect interviews for the LAGS project. Such a study is long overdue.

Big Boy "sees" a light revealing the possibility. In Wright's words,

The blades of daylight had turned brightly golden. The sun had risen. The truck sped over the asphalt miles, sped northward, jolting him, shaking out of his bosom the crumbs of corn bread, making them dance with the splinters and sawdust in the golden blades of sunshine.

(p. 53)

The truck is heading north, underscoring the relationship between the Great Migration and the black man's hope for realizing the vision on earth.

"Down by the Riverside," "Fire and Cloud," and "Long Black Song" are interesting, but less successful stories. The protagonist in each--Mann, Reverend Taylor, and Silas--comes to self-understanding after confronting a clear violation of the covenant in his own life. The melodramatic qualities of the first two pieces tend to defeat the art; the third involves one of the most explicit treatments of the distinctions between kairos and chronos to appear in Wright's fiction. Silas' wife, Sarah, ignores linear time, or chronos, while her daughter, Ruth, amuses herself by smashing a clock. The white salesman of the gramophone is obsessed with clock time. Unfortunately, even the juxtaposition fails ultimately because Sarah's sexual frustrations make her succumb to the salesman's lust and prevent her from sharing her husband's agrarian ideal. She fails to achieve kairos. The middle three stories of the collection are artistically inferior to

"Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Bright and Morning Star": fictions which succeed at transcending chronos.

In Sue, protagonist of "Bright and Morning Star," Wright creates a strong, humane woman who is herself caught between the worlds of compensatory Christianity and the Marxism of her sons. The blurring of the former imagery with the latter forms an interesting development in the story. The title derives from an old hymn, and the songs run throughout the story, infusing a leitmotif for all else. The sense of the Personal Saviour taking great care in the welfare of His children is underscored by Sue's calling attention to his anthropomorphic qualities: "He walks wid me, He talks wid me, He tells me Ahm His own . . ." (p. 184). "Them ole songs," Sue relates, she learned as a child on the farm:

Every Monday morning from the corn and cotton fields the slow strains had floated from her mother's lips, lonely and haunting. She had poured the yearning of her life into the songs, feeling buoyed with a faith beyond this world. The figure of a Man nailed in agony to the Cross, His burial in a cold grave, His transfigured Resurrection, His being breath and clay, God and Man--all had focused her feelings upon an imagery which had swept her life into a wondrous vision.

(p. 184)

The covenant-experience had been violated less by the death of her husband than the "Cold white mountain, the white folks--their laws" which "had swum into her vision and shattered her songs and their spell of peace" (p. 184). To fill the void, the new and terrible vision of her sons,

Johnny Boy and Sug, began to supplant the old traditional religion in her eyes "and day by day her sons had ripped from her startled eyes her old vision, and image by image had given her a new one, different, but great and strong enough to fling her into the light of another grace" (p. 185). The reciprocity and admixture of the old vision with the new one often confused her and "the past and present would become mixed in her; while toiling under a strange star for a new freedom the old songs would slip from her lips with their beguiling sweetness" (p. 185).

The violent scene in which the sheriff's mob beats Sue to the ground for her refusal either to tell them the whereabouts of her son or to be passively accepting of their uncalled-for invasion of her home provides a perfect example of the inevitability of the emblem of white racism. The understated and clinical description of the final blow serves to arouse our sympathies directly: "The blow caught her high on the cheek; her eyes went blank; she fell flat on her face. She felt the hard heel of his wet shoes coming into her temple and stomach" (p. 197).

Dazed by the blow, Sue reveals the names of the comrades to Booker, a white man she finds later to be an informant, thus precipitating the crisis of her life: both the old vision, with its grace of Christ, and the new vision, with its grace of brotherhood, had left her.

Mired she was between two abandoned worlds, living but dying without the strength of the grace that either gave. The clearer she felt it the fuller did something well up from the depths of her for release; the more urgent did she feel the need to fling into her black sky another star, another hope, one more terrible vision to give her the strength to act.
(p. 204)

The key to this dilemma has been provided by the sheriff's own insensitivity to her role as a suffering mother, trying desperately to preserve her family, in his suggestion that she "Get yuh a sheet, cause he's gonna be dead!" (p. 196). The sheet provides the method by which she can redeem her life and give it kairos. In addition, Sue's contact with folk-culture--knowing the short-cut across the creek to get to Johnny Boy--becomes her modus operandi. The Greek notions concerning time--chronos meaning chaotic, linear time devoid of purpose, and kairos meaning the significant redemptive moment when the individual can connect himself to the cosmos, the universe, and the folk community--are both at work here. Tillich uses this distinction to refer to the Christian revelations, and Wright clarifies the kairos of Sue's life as she prepares to act:

She stood straight and smiled grimly; she had in her heart the whole meaning of her life; her entire personality was poised on the brink of a total act. "Ah know! Ah know!" She thought of Johnny Boy's gun in the dresser drawer. "Ah'll hide the gun in the sheet and go after Johnny Boy's body."

(p. 207)¹⁴

¹⁴Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Volume III: Life and the Spirit History and the Kingdom of God (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 369-372.

Knowing the revelation and sensing intuitively the redemptive mission to restore the covenant even in death makes Sue a significant figure in Wright's world. Her vision culminates in the horrible mutilation and torturous death of her son, as well as her own death after she accomplishes her sacred mission in shooting Booker before he can inform the sheriff concerning the other members of the party. Her death captures an affirmation of human justice and transcendence.

Her lips moved soundlessly. Yuh didn't git yuh didn't yuh didn't. Focused and pointed she was, buried in the depths of her star, swallowed in its peace and strength; and not feeling her flesh growing cold, cold as the rain that fell from the invisible sky upon the doomed living and the dead that never dies.

(p. 215)

Some critics, such as Carl Brignano and P. Jay Delmar, misinterpret Sue's death. Brignano sees it as a sacrifice to Marxism, limiting her death to ideology, speaking of "Sue who at the end of 'Bright and Morning Star,' has offered her life for the cause, Marxism, in the trust and hope of a new and dignified freedom under the aegis of a political star."¹⁵ Delmar says Sue is a tragic figure whose particular hamartia is a dividedness between Christianity and racial pride.¹⁶ But Sue's soul is not divided, nor is she a martyr

¹⁵Carl Brignano, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and his Works (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 153.

¹⁶P. Jay Delmar, "Tragic Patterns in Richard Wright's Uncle Tom's Children." Negro American Literature Forum 10 (Fall 1974), 236-238.

to Marxism, intent on destroying religion for the masses; rather, she experiences a profound merging of the Marxist/Christian imageries into a consistent transcendent vision, culminating in a social apocalypse.

Wright's sacramental view of the universe appears in Uncle Tom's Children. His earliest memories of growing up in Mississippi in a sharecropper's shack, recorded in Black Boy, are of the fields, the sky and the birds moving about, all framed in the cabin door: a nostalgia reminiscent of a Whitmanesque quality, but as Wright states in an unpublished essay, ". . . most American landscapes have been robbed of their sylvan beauty by the fact that almost every lynching in American history has taken place in such an arcadian setting."¹⁷

For the traditional southern writer like Flannery O'Connor there is a mistrust of the machine and its logical extension, the highly industrialized city. Miss O'Connor uses huge yellow monsters--bulldozers--gorging themselves on the earth, ironic avatars of progress, in "A View From the Woods. Later, Wright vividly depicts the demonic American city in Native Son. Despite the similarities, Wright rebelled against the static world view of the traditional South and its inherent racism to create the black New Adams.

¹⁷ Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, translated by Izabel Barzun (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973), p. 7.

CHAPTER IV

LAWD TODAY AND THE OUTSIDER: WRIGHT'S NOVELISTIC TREATMENTS OF THE CARTESIAN DICHOTOMY

If Big Boy and Sue from Uncle Tom's Children embody Wright's religious ideal, then Jake Jackson and Cross Damon from Lawd Today and The Outsider represent examples of negative heroes with respect to achieving a balance between the heart and the head. The split between the subjective and objective realities, first articulated by Descartes in the seventeenth century but certainly operative in the western world to the present day, has been commented upon by critics of contemporary literature such as Cleanth Brooks as a touchstone for studying the literature of this century. Although Brooks has lectured concerning the ramifications of the Cartesian split in the works of Faulkner, O'Connor, Percy, and others, he has not discussed the theme in Richard Wright's novels Lawd Today and The Outsider, works dealing with under-cut heroes: fictional personae who fail to embody the characteristics of the homo religiosus characters in Uncle Tom's Children, or the more fully actualized treatments in The Man Who Lived Underground, Black Boy, and The Long Dream.¹

¹This notion of a Cartesian split remains a fascinating analytical tool for studying literature from the eighteenth century to the present. Mr. Brooks was a visiting professor of English at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville in 1976. I audited his course on "Contemporary American Literature and Culture" and heard his lecture on the Cartesian split thesis. At the time, he was publishing the essay, but I have not discovered it in print. As a result, I am relying upon my lecture notes as documentation.

Such former heroes represent an overemphasis of either the head and reason, represented clearly in Cross Damon, the protagonist of The Outsider, or the heart and emotion of Jake Jackson, the main character in Lawd Today.² Here I consider Jake Jackson and Cross Damon as negative examples; however, their complex characters preclude any generalizations concerning absolute categories of good and evil. A balanced view of both points to the artistic integrity of Wright's creations and provides a place for them in the Wright canon.

Begun early in Wright's career, tentatively titled Cesspool, and published posthumously in 1963, Lawd Today represents a bold experimental novel in somewhat of a Joycean and Dreiserian mold. Using the third person point of view, Wright intersperses snatches of a radio show commemorating the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birthday as an ironic leitmotif for one day in the life of Jake Jackson, a black postal worker in South Chicago. In beginning the novel with the radio program, Wright provides an ironic focus with several implications. First, the use of Abraham Lincoln's birthday immediately evokes the image and the reality of emancipation in the modern world of twentieth-century America.

²Addison Gayle, Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), p. 229. Interestingly, in this recent biography of Wright, Gayle calls attention to the Cartesian split by quoting Margaret Walker concerning autobiographical elements in The Outsider. Ms. Walker concludes that "It was Descartes, then, not the existentialists who had been correct all along."

The recurring juxtaposition between the high points of Lincoln's life and legacy and the psychological and economic slavery of Jake's nightmarish existence are initiated by the use of the radio show at the beginning of the novel. Second, the use of time in its chaotic, linear dimension begins here as the glib radio announcer intones, "At the next tonebeat the time will be exactly eight-o'clock, Central Time . . . ting . . . courtesy of the Neverstop Watch Company."³ Third, the presence of radio probably did more than anything else to reduce the importance of folk ballads and other legitimate manifestations of folk culture, thereby purporting to render them simplistic, archaic, and vestigial. Additionally, the radio, coupled with the popular press, did

³Richard Wright, Lawd Today (New York: Avon Books, 1963), p. 8. All subsequent references to the novel will be listed by page numbers in parenthesis. There are other points in the novel when linear time seems to function as a reminder of Jake's spiritual separation. At Doc's "Tonsorial Palace," "The big clock went ticktock . . . ticktock . . . ticktock," (p. 66) as Jake discusses how much money Doc's political influence will cost. During the bridge-game sequence, "Jake could hear his watch ticking in his vest pocket. He felt a sense of wellbeing; it was the first he had felt that day" (p. 85). This reference perhaps ironically exposes his control over the game while not being able to control his destiny, a theme explored most successfully in Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game." The most telling example of this comes when Jake gets assigned to the dating machine in "The Squirrel Cage," when "His mind and body had fallen in with the rhythm of the thing" (p. 153). Finally, as Jake seeks refuge in a bar after being rolled and beaten, the striking emblem of linear time becomes operative. "Above their heads an old clock ticked away the time" (p. 217). Each of these references corroborates the disjunction between linear time and mythic time in this novel, in Wright's canon, and in Afro-American literature as a whole.

more to stifle non-conformity and individual thinking than anything else until the advent of television. Fourth, the tone of the highly formal radio program juxtaposes with the jive talk of the urban blacks throughout the novel. As a result, the ubiquitous and continual recurrence of the electronic quantifying background comments on Jake's life and reminds the reader throughout the novel of the juxtapositions of racial justice and institutional racism, linear time and mythic time, sterile culture and legitimate folk culture, and pretentious formal discourse and dialectal jive talk. In addition to these juxtapositions, Wright uses newspaper headlines, reminiscent of Dos Passos' Big Money, ads, and a pastiche of various emblems of twentieth-century American life to underscore its individual and collective blindness.

Beyond the parameters of the media devices, however, Wright constructs three separate divisions--"Commonplace," "Squirrel Cage," and "Rats' Alley"--to report on Jake's day, and the commentary suggests certain realities concerning Jake's spiritual blindness and his inability to perceive the potential kairos of his life in an almost unrelenting fashion. Notwithstanding the predominance of what Anne Cauley sensitively calls Jake being "a jailer of self" in the novel, there are several ways in which the novel celebrates black urban life for its linguistic solidarity, albeit a purely male black world in this case, its raucous humor, and its sympathetic

treatments of various methods for dealing with institutionalized racism in the black community.⁴ Time and time again, the raucous humor of the subtle brotherhood of the postal workers, Al, Bob, Slim, and Jake breaks through the facade of bleakness in the novel. The most compelling example is, of course, the extensive playing of the dozens by Al and Jake while Bob and Slim respond during the card game in "Commonplace." The piling up of incredibly creative insults centering finally on female descendants culminates in Jake's refusal to devise a comeback to Al's final statement that

When my greatgreatgreatgreat grandma who was a Zulu queen got through eating them missionary chitterlings, she wanted to build a sewer ditch to take away her crap, so she went out and saw your poor old greatgreatgreatgreatgreat grandmother sleeping under a coconut tree with her mouth wide open. She didn't have to build no sewer ditch.

(pp. 95, 96)

Besides the dialectal accuracy and the raucous humor of Lawd Today, the positive description of certain vital institutions in the black community also figures prominently. For example, Trudier Harris observes that Doc Higgins' Tonsorial Palace, a typical black barbershop, is a place where Jake can be a man isolated from the emasculating presence of the dominant white society.

⁴Anne Cauley, "A Definition of Freedom in the Fiction of Richard Wright," CLAJ, Volume '19, number 3 (March 1976), 330.

Jake can assume the role if not the substance of a concerned husband and provider. His position is not tenuous; his image of himself is not threatened. The barbershop is a soothing, comforting, supporting environment. Jake sleeps there when he can't at home; he communicates with people instead of talking at them, as he does with his wife.⁵

In spite of Jake's positive connections to the fecundity and solidarity of black culture, however, the overwhelming attitude toward Jake's blind bourgeois character is scathingly critical, although editorially neutral. Like the ensemble technique Chekhov uses so well in The Cherry Orchard and Bullins perfects in The Corner and other plays, Wright manipulates the several characters in this group (Al, Bob, Slim, and Jake) to get the reader to simultaneously identify with their collective conditions and plight under the heel of institutionalized racism and to lament their inability to find a methodology to forge a new, more vital life for themselves. Related to this lack of communication, embodied most completely in the sterility of the marriage of Jake and Lil, is the conflict between money, purely materialistic values, ethical values, and humanity which exists in a capitalist bourgeois society. The theme figures prominently in Lorraine Hansberry's Raisin in the Sun and Lonnie Elder III's Ceremonies in Dark Old Men. This novel savagely indicates the sterility of modern bourgeois culture in which often the

⁵Trudier Harris, "The Barbershop in Black Literature," BALF, Volume 13, number 3 (Fall 1979), 114.

soundness of human relationships becomes sacrificed to the expediency of dehumanized objects. Jake beats his wife at the beginning of the novel and at its end, projecting onto her his misguided lust and irresponsibility and his inability within a racist society to be a man, to make money as the sole measure of his worth. Jake considers Lil's tumor operation solely in terms of the five-hundred dollars it will cost him. Psychologically, Jake's jealousy over the way Lil talks to the milkman measures, as Lil points out, his own lust and guilt rather than her culpability. She suggests, "'cause you so loose you think everybody's loose! If you is half as fair with me as I is with you, we wouldn't never fuss. But it's just like a person who's cheating to think another one is . . ." (p. 16). Jake's unleashed violence at various points of the novel issues from an impotent frustrated man who knows at some level, even early in the novel, that such violence is doomed to futility. After physically and verbally assaulting Lil, "deep in him he knew he had not done what he wanted, he had not solved anything" (p. 22).

Jake's individual problem, and the problem for all urban workers caught in this particular treadmill, remains that he accepts too sentimentally the cliches and justifications of a capitalist society which is bent upon destroying all human values. Subtly, in order to become a cog in the vast wheel of the mechanistic society, consistently evoked in "The Squirrel Cage" section detailing the eight-hour shift

in the Post Office, Jake learns to accept quite blithely the lies which are deceiving him from seeing the truth, thus making him an agent of his own dehumanization. Jake, thus programmed, mouths all of the platitudes of the white middle class in America, as Lewis Leary has pointed out, the main ones being that Communism is bad ("Why don't they stay in their own country if they don't like the good old U.S.A?" p. 37), capitalism is the way to get money fast ("Cold hard cash runs this country, always has and always will," p. 32), and reading addles one's brain ("if you addle your brains you'll have bookworms in the brain," p. 73).⁶ Further, at least one other critic, Owen Brady, thinks that Jake Jackson's middle-class values prefigure the black middle class twenty years before E. Franklin Frazier's The Black Bourgeoisie.⁷ Most tellingly, Jake can see no connection between Nazi Germany's treatment of the Jews and the racist South's persecution of blacks and concludes, "That's what's wrong with this country, too many Jews, Dagos, Hunkies, and Mexicans" (p. 36). Paradoxically enough, Jake feels he embodies the free-thinking western man at those moments when he shows himself to be totally manipulated by the popular

⁶Lewis Leary, "Lawd Today: Notes on Richard Wright's First/Last Novel," CLAJ, Volume 14, number 4 (June 1972), 412.

⁷Owen Brady, "Wright's Lawd Today: The American Dream Festering in the Sun," CLAJ, Volume 22, number 2 (December 1978), 167.

press. For example, Jake reads an article concerning Einstein's theory of space-bending and suggests, "See, now a dumb guy would fall for all this kind of stuff. See how folks get their minds made up for 'em?" (p. 36).

In this novel, as elsewhere, Wright seems concerned with the naturalistic mode of writing. Whether or not Michel Fabre's feeling that the boy who enters the South Side Public Library and spurs the post-office employees to remark, "too much reading may addle his brains" is a fictionalized version of the author Richard Wright, the sensitive reader can notice various ways in which the book uses autobiographical details to effect verisimilitude in the naturalistic mode.⁸ Like Jake, who worked at the Chicago Post Office, Richard had to study the timetables endlessly (p. 12). Further, when the racial riot following the drowning of a young black boy and the bombings of black dwellings are discussed in Lawd Today (p. 176), the material seems to derive almost totally from an early essay Wright wrote entitled "Ethnographical Aspects of Chicago's Black Belt," and published in New Letters in 1972.⁹ More importantly, however,

⁸Fabre makes this point in an editor's note to Richard Wright, "Ethnographical Aspects of Chicago's Black Belt," New Letters, 34, Number 1 (Fall 1972), 61.

⁹Ibid. The following quotation refers to the drowning and race riot:

On July 27, 1919, there was a clash of major proportions between white and black. It began as a brawl at a bathing beach and resulted in the drowning of a Negro boy. This, in turn, led to a riot in which 38 lives were lost--

the clarity with which Jake and his cronies view such fictionalized realities only serves to further emphasize the selective perception and delusions of their world-view.

Ultimately, moreover, Jake's violations of human dignity spring not from the animality of the naturalistic mode but from religiosity of the homo religiosus. The worst violation comes when Jake borrows one hundred dollars, ostensibly to help defray expenses for Lil's operation, but actually to finance a mesmerizing night of whoring and dancing at Rose's place. Jake gets rolled, beaten up, and ejected into the street by the bouncers. Returning home to again beat Lil, Jake completes the squalid circle. The novel's final natural imagery underscores the terrible sense of loss and the gaping split between the natural world and human beings who are totally cut off from its nurturing qualities:

23 Negroes and 15 whites--and 537 persons were injured. After three days of mob violence, affecting several sections of the city, the state militia was called out to assist the police in restoring order. It was not until August 6 that the danger of further clashes was regarded as past (p. 64).

The following quotation makes reference to the bombing of Negro homes in Chicago:

A form of organized resistance to the moving of Negroes into new neighborhoods was the bombing of their homes and the homes of real-estate men, white and Negro, who were known or supposed to have sold, leased, or rented local property to them. From July 1, 1917 to March 1, 1921 the Negro housing problem was marked by no less than 58 bombings (p. 64).

Outside an icy wind swept around the corner
of the building, whining and moaning like an
idiot in a dark pit.

(p. 224)

Finally, Jake represents an archetypal black urban man whose fantasies and delusions prevent his effective confrontation with the urban dehumanized capitalist state of twentieth-century America. Too often, he lets his heart rule his head, and the fantasies he possesses ultimately possess him as he sacrifices his rationality to a sentimentalized view of his cultural locus, his view of reality, and of himself. While recognizing the superstition of Lil's reading Unity, a devotional magazine, and praying to Jesus as hollow wish-fulfillments, Jake fails to see his own fantasies as functioning in precisely the same fashion. His desire to emulate the gangsters, projections of wish-fulfillment for power and money, and his insistence upon dressing "sharp as a tack," an ironic reminder of Carlyle's Sartor Resartus, both show the tendency in Jake's bourgeois myopia. While one can certainly understand Jake's need to compensate in these ways for his dehumanized state in the throes of industrialism and racism, the reader places the blame upon his shoulders, at least in part. The imagery of the chaotic machine dulls our sensitivities in "The Squirrel Cage" section as "The clattering of cancelling machines rose like the rumble of an underground volcano" (p. 121), and the human images merge with the animal and the chaotic machine to promote the death-

in-life-theme.¹⁰ The men's work makes them feel "Like a squirrel turning in a cage" (p. 155), and when the white women touring the facility observe them, they feel "like monkeys in a zoo" (p. 148). Treated like machines, "they had fifteen minutes in which to empty their bowels and bladders and check in again" (p. 137). When Jake gets assigned a most significant duty, that of stamping the exact time of day on each parcel of mail, he relents and becomes one with the purveyor of linear time.

Jake made sure that his dauber had the correct time of day, and . . . he began stamping with the dauber, hitting the inkpad and then the stamps on the letters. Boombomp, boombomp, boombomp, boombomp. . . . Boombomp, boombomp, boombomp, boombomp. . . . His mind had fallen into the rhythm of the thing.

(p. 153)

Understandably, they leave such a chaotic machine-world at the end of the shift, perhaps foreshadowing Ellison's masterpiece "King of the Bingo Game" in the same vein, feeling like "dead men come back to life" (p. 195). While the reader's sympathies

¹⁰The ironies inherent in animal imagery and the theriophilic paradox have been noted with respect to authors as diverse as Swift and Shakespeare. In Lawd Today, Wright makes simultaneous use of these two themes in an explicit fashion. Animals are not educable, but humans are. A certain Mrs. Rosenthal, a noted philanthropist in Lawd Today, gives a one-million-dollar donation to a black school in the South and a five-million-dollar donation for a hospital for stray dogs and cats (p. 68). In describing the white part-time postal employees, Jake's mind exclaims, "And soon's they get out of school they's going to be big shots. But a nigger just stays a nigger" (p. 122). As Blyden Jackson suggests in The Waiting Years (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1976), the Ogre of irony is virtually ubiquitous in Afro-American Literature.

are engaged in Jake's character, however, the reader ultimately laments his limitation of vision. His desire to join the National Guard with Al while still remembering the black preacher's exhortation to tear that building down becomes a psychic emblem for the catatonia of his bourgeois blindness, a measure of his recurring "haunting and hungering sense of incompleteness" (p. 55).

If Jake's world represents an overemphasis of the heart's inherent tendency to romanticize and sentimentalize objective reality into a selectively perceived system of rationalizations, Cross Damon's world represents its converse with respect to the Cartesian-split thesis: Cross becomes an archetypal representation of the man who lives rationally, "seeing" through the delusions of all persons, inclusive of himself. For those critics who see Cross Damon as Wright's Mersault, therefore, the notion of the persona as an existentialist hero has been both appealing and seductive. Actually, the novel reflects quite the opposite, as Brignano has stated, or Wright's repudiation of existentialism unless welded to commitments and promises. As Kingsley Widmer suggests, "Cross is simultaneously the hero and the victim of his existential lucidity."¹¹ Notwithstanding this critical dictum, Fabre suggests that this is the first American existential

¹¹Kingsley Widmer, "The Existential Darkness: Richard Wright's The Outsider," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, Volume 1, number 3 (Fall 1960), 19.

novel and truly its point of departure must always deal sensitively with the philosophical issues. Additionally, and uncharacteristically for Wright, the author tries to subordinate racial considerations and their ramifications to the more universal philosophical problems, although critical opinion is divided on this issue.

Before beginning to assess the novel with this thesis in mind, however, one must contemplate and assess the importance of its date of publication in 1953. Fabre reminds readers that the year that The Outsider appeared in the book stores was a year in America dominated by the spectre of Senator Joseph McCarthy. At one particular point in the novel, in fact, Ely Houston, a major character in the novel, refers directly to this climate, saying that "People are so tender-skinned these days. . . . Everybody's trying to be other than they really are: something official, approved of, safe" (p. 133). It seems quite understandable that given such an intolerant and paranoid social climate a novel with such revolutionary views about individualism embodied in Cross would be panned by all critics of the American literary establishment, both black and white. Only two critics--Orville Prescott, who praised "the stark pessimism" of the novel as a symptom of the twentieth-century moral and ethical ethos, and Henry F. Winslow, who called

Cross "The American full-sized tragic figure," dissented from the prevailing critical blasts.¹²

That Wright was reworking and expanding the earlier materials of Lawd Today--a novel, as we have seen, about black postal workers in the south side of Chicago--seems unmistakable, a fact that critics have universally noted, the latest being Robert Felgar in Richard Wright (Twayne: Boston, 1980). In addition to being related to the earlier protagonist Jake Jackson, however, Cross Damon belongs alongside such other isolato characters in American fiction as Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter by Hawthorne and Hawkshaw in "Dry September" by Faulkner and others who temporarily or permanently isolate themselves from the social community and the human community. If Jake Jackson revelled in the black folk-community and uncritically accepted its support from time to time, Cross sets himself up to contemptuously repudiate that folk-community. Indeed, at various points in the novel, Wright has Cross denying racial motives for his actions. While Joe Thomas, his friend, regrets his isolation from the group at The Salty Dog, a local hangout, he both remembers a Cross better adjusted to accepting the black folk-community and posits a reason for his change. He recalls Cross tossing

¹² Fabre, p. 143. For a more extensive collection of reviews on this book or any other Wright selection, see John M. Reilly, editor, Richard Wright: The Critical Reception (New York: Burt Franklin and Company, Inc., 1976).

coins from the eleventh-floor window to the street below to watch "them little antlike folks" who go "scrambling and scratching and clawing after them few pieces of money."¹³ Clearly, even though Cross makes humor for his buddies in this act, he observes this description with "a detached smile" and, as Joe says, as "a man standing outside of the world" (p. 6). The reason for Cross' detachment, Joe surmises, is his intellectual side seen in "all them big, deep books he used to tell us about" and Booker, another crony in the bar, concurs, saying "Man, in the closet: books. In the bathroom: books. Under the bed: books. I said, 'Crossy, you ain't got no flu germs; you got bookworms!'" (p. 6).

Cross' alienation in the first section of the novel centers also on his inability to handle any human relationship. His estranged wife Gladys becomes the victim of his perverse violence when he tries to attack her and claim she is imagining it; his long-suffering mother, a model for the follower of the dictates of compensatory religion seen earlier in Mrs. Thomas in Native Son, excoriates his irresponsibility in not caring for his three sons and wife and in his impregnating his girlfriend Dot; and his girlfriend Dot, a naive, under-aged young tart who has lied to Cross about her age,

13

Richard Wright, The Outsider (New York: Harper and Row, 1955; originally published in 1953), p. 5. All subsequent references to the text will be listed by page numbers in parenthesis.

refuses to have an abortion and persists in her attempts to coerce him into doing the right thing.¹⁴

Thus trapped, Cross finds a way out from under an irresolvable situation when he gets trapped in a subway accident and is mistaken for one of the victims of the tragedy. Wright attempts to make this mistaken identity as plausible as possible in that the victim's head gets crushed beyond recognition, and Cross' overcoat and papers are found on the victim's body. Cross extricates himself from the wreckage with only minor injuries and manages to bring along the eight-hundred dollars he has previously borrowed from the postal union to solve the personal difficulties concerning wife, mistress, and mother.

Unfortunately for Cross, as he attempts to remain incognito, his friend Joe comes upon him in a flophouse room he has rented and he succumbs to a brutal murder to protect his dream of potential freedom and a new life. Whereas earlier Cross had beaten Gladys who "went down like a log" (p. 63), now Cross sees Joe as "This clown . . . tearing down his dream, smashing all that he had so laboriously built up" (p. 107). Cross consistently recognizes his crimes and his

¹⁴Perhaps Constance Webb is right in suggesting that Wright's relationship with his mother prefigures Cross' ambivalence toward his mother and that "Fiction was interlaced with autobiography throughout the book." For a fuller account of Webb's position, see Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1968), p. 313.

guilt and is aware of his dehumanization, a characteristic that contrasts with Jake's inability to face his responsibilities. Also, it is significant that the idea of linear time provides a backdrop for the murder of Joe Thomas when "time flowed on as though nothing had happened" (p. 114).

Fleeing finally to Harlem, Cross confronts several foils to his isolato status. First there is Ely Houston, the hunchbacked district attorney, whom he meets on the train and has extensive intellectual interchanges with throughout the remainder of the novel concerning his outsider status. The relationship between Cross and Ely immediately suggests that of Raskolnikov and Porfiry in Crime and Punishment. Second there are the "spiritual bloodhounds" (p. 188)--Gil Blount, Jack Hilton, and Langley Herndon--men who use brute power and ideological rigidity to gain total control over people's lives. The first two are members of the Communist Party who try to recruit Cross and, in the process, show that the Party, like the church, demands a total sacrifice of individuality to ideology, while the third is a Fascist landlord, full of the racist ideology aimed at exterminating blacks as a final solution. Third there are the Hunters, Sarah and Bob, who remind Cross of his racial ties and obligations and of the failure of the Party to accept such reciprocal humane obligations. Fourth there is Eva Blount, the aesthetic and sensitive artist who has been forced to marry Gil Blount and sacrifice her feelings on the altar of Party loyalty. What

brings the foil-relationships to completion is Cross' murder of first the "spiritual bloodhounds," Gil Blount and Langley Herndon, who are physically attacking each other over the right of a black man (Cross) to live in Herndon's building. Afterwards, Cross has to murder Jack Hilton, the third spiritual bloodhound, because he has retrieved a bloody handkerchief linking Cross to the dual murders. In each of his murders, Cross has a rational motive to be sure, but Cross also knows that his murders link him inextricably to those forces he wishes to destroy. Cross states after murdering the first two ideologues, rationalizing more than his earlier attempt to justify his murder of Joe Thomas:

He too had acted like a little god. . . . As Hilton and Gil had acted toward Bob, so he had acted toward Gil and Herndon; he had assumed the role of policeman, judge, supreme court, and of executioner--all in one swift, terrible moment. But if he resented their being little gods, how could he do the same? Oh Christ, their disease had reached out and claimed him too. He had been subverted by the contagion of the lawless; he had been defeated by that which he had sought to destroy. . . . He had become what he had tried to destroy, had taken on the guise of the monster he had slain.

(p. 230)

Besides the obvious redundancy of this passage, a problem Wright has too often in The Outsider, the key focus suggests Cross' awareness of his complicity in the murders.

These murders further poison his relationship with Eva, a seductive hope in the novel for Cross reattaching himself to the human community through the efficacy of human

love. The parallels between Cross' relationship with Eva and Raskolnikov's similar attachment to Sonia can be noted, but there are striking differences between the two as well. After all, the salvation Eva proffers Cross is humanistic, not at all the Christian orthodoxy Sonia offers Raskolnikov. With respect to this point, Sarah, who returns to the Catholic Church almost exactly recapitulating the Bishop's speech in Dostoyvesky's "The Grand Inquisitor's Scene" from The Brothers Karamazov, would be closer to Sonia's role than Eva. At any rate, Cross rejects both offers and reveals the truth to Eva, thereby driving her to suicide over despair caused by his ultimate deception. She leaps out of a window, a convenient prop it seems in this often melodramatic and preachy novel.

At the end, Cross gets murdered by the Party, but not before delivering his message to the world in general and to Houston in particular. "Alone a man is nothing. . . . Man is a promise he must never break. . . . Starting off from scratch is no good. Tell them not to come down this road. . . . The myth men are going. . . . The real men are coming" (p. 439). The message becomes the message of the isolato whose intellect has cut him off effectively from the nurturing solace of his emotional, human, and communal needs. Like many of Flannery O'Connor's characters (Shepherd in "The Lane Shall Enter First," Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and Mr. Fortune in "A View from the Woods"), Cross is stranded,

cut off from love because of his intellectual pride, and the deception creates a human tragedy. As Robert Bone perceptively states, "Finally, Wright perceives, one must choose between the need to rebel and the need to be loved. In Native Son, by endorsing Bigger's existential self, he chooses determinism. In The Outsider, by disclaiming Cross, he chooses love."¹⁵ The reason for Wright's disclaimer resides with Cross' inability to merge his head and his heart into an organic, functional unity.

In Wright's two novels of negative examples, Lawd Today and The Outsider, the sensitive reader observes the typical Wright protagonist caught between the Scylla of Jake's sentimental delusions and the Charybdis of Cross' ratiocinative tortures. In simpler terms, the Cartesian split discussed earlier explains the heroes' limitations quite succinctly: Jake's overemphasis of the heart over the head leads to a false notion of himself and his culture and to his tragic degradation, while Cross' overdevelopment of the head over the heart leads to a horrible isolation and a tragic cul de sac. These negative or disjointed heroes point transitionally to the fully developed Wrightian hero who finds a balance between the two sides of the human psyche: characters like the

¹⁵Robert A. Bone, Richard Wright (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 46. I agree that this is a sensitive quotation although I disagree with his assertion concerning Wright's "determinism" in Native Son. For my discussion of this issue, see the following chapter on Native Son.

protagonist in "The Man Who Lived Underground," Wright, himself, as a fictional persona in Black Boy, and Fishbelly in The Long Dream. These characters merge the individual and collective visions in the fictional form and perceive the "revelations" and project the fulfillment of the covenant in a future time.

CHAPTER V

WRIGHT'S RELIGIOUS QUEST: BIGGER'S "DECONSTRUCTION"

IN NATIVE SON

Bigger Thomas of Native Son is a key figure in Wright's fiction because he embodies characteristics of both the homo religiosus (Big Boy and Aunt Sue in Uncle Tom's Children) and the negative-example heroes (Jake Jackson and Cross Damon). To many critics, his characterization in Native Son has often been viewed as an artistic failure. Both Robert Bone and Michel Fabre have criticized Wright's portrayal of Bigger as an unsuccessful attempt to combine elements of Dreiser's Clyde Griffith and Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov within one fictional character. This criticism seems rather questionable as I see it. / Rather than trying to fit Bigger into the molds of European fiction or the naturalistic novel, a preferable approach toward Bigger underscores the religious quest undeniably present in the characterization. Actually, Bigger embodies both the Yahweh/prophetic character of the Old Testament and the Christ/messianic make-up of the New Testament in Native Son. Bigger "deconstructs" the American experiment by forcing a regression through violence to the Yahweh/prophetic paradigm. In "Fear," the opening section of the novel up until the murder of Bessie, the Yahwehistic motif predominates, while in "Flight" and "Fate," the final sections of the narrative, the Christ motif predominates and completes the cycle. A close reading of the

novel's sections corroborates this reading of Bigger's character and the paradox of his isolation at the end of the novel can be resolved in the sensitive reader's imagination.

For some critics, the work represents a continuation of the naturalistic movement in America: a novel derivative from Dreiser and others in this literary and realistic mode in its attempt to capture a true portraiture, through mimetic devices, of Negro life in a Chicago ghetto after the migration northward. On the whole, however, attempts to discuss Native Son as a realistic or mimetic novel fail to see its interconnectedness with the earlier works, Uncle Tom's Children, discussed earlier, as well as two seminal essays, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" published in 1937 in New Challenge and "How Bigger Was Born," first published on June 1, 1940 in Saturday Review and included in later editions of the novel. The novel's relationship with these essays, as well as its coherent emphasis upon the homo religiosus and sacramental vision, remain centrally important in placing this work in the Wright canon. Without this approach, the critical analyses of Native Son as a novel and Bigger Thomas as a character have remained incomplete and fragmentary.

During the Marxist apprenticeship period of Wright's career, a brief and highly significant work appeared in New Challenge in the fall of 1937. While the work embodies Wright's prevailing commitment to the Marxist vision, it also subsumes, paradoxically enough, his disinclination toward any

binding ideological stance and central statement concerning the artist's role as a catalyst toward raising the religious consciousness of the masses by juxtaposing the normative or empirical world with its inherent potential projected into the future. As discussed earlier, this dynamic view of society and notions of continued revelation are similar to the religious position of Tillich, Jones, et al. It is highly significant that even in this Marxist phase of Wright's career, these existential concerns are expressed. Our examination of this important essay focuses upon the dynamic view of society the artist operates with, the importance of folklore to the artist's vision, the redemption of history through a heightened perspective (kairos), the rejection of ideological rigidity by the artist, the relationship of the artist to tradition and the pursuit of truth, and the role of the artist.

As Wright expresses a dynamic view of society in the essay, he suggests "an emphasis upon tendency and experiment, a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired is the one which points the way for Negro writers to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Negroes in mood and outlook."¹ Rightfully, the artist rejects a static

¹Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" in Voices from the Harlem Renaissance, edited by Nathan Irving Huggins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 396. Efforts to get a copy of the original from New Challenge (Volume 2, 1937) have thus far been unsuccessful. Only two libraries in America--the New York Public Library and the Beinecke at Yale University, have extant copies of the work. I have relied on Huggins' reprinted version while waiting on requests for copies of the original. Page numbers to Huggins' will be placed in parenthesis.

view of history and proceeds to try and capture a world in a state of flux which can be transformed into a more humanistic environment. The artist should never limit himself to verisimilitude or realism as a final objective; he should picture the real in art as a way of projecting a possibly reconstituted whole, a more fully actualized ideal. The influence of the Hegelian dialectic becomes apparent.

Related to this projection of an improved world, for the artist, is folklore as a manifestation of the world lived. Various critical attacks on Wright's rejection of black folk culture (Kent, Stepto, Jackson) notwithstanding, Wright's statements show a marked respect for the raw materials of the artist:

Negro folklore contains, in a measure that puts to shame more deliberate forms of expression, the collective sense of Negro life in America. . . . Here are those vital beginnings of value in life as it is lived, a recognition that makes the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old. And at the moment this process starts, at the moment when a people begin to realize a meaning in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed.

(p. 397)

At the same time that Wright acknowledges the importance of folk culture, he sees it as a stage of continued development rather than a completely actualized world. Therefore, its function involves at least two contradictory impulses: first to codify and verify the lived existence of a cultural group and second, to project beyond to a future manifestation of that group.

According to Wright, the artist must attempt a redemption of history through time by positing a heightened awareness of the meaning of an event in history, a kairos experience, as applied to circumstances freed of ideological rigidity. Wright comments that "A Spanish writer recently spoke of living in the heights of one's time. Surely, perspective means just that" (p. 400). As Wright avers, "Yet, for the Negro writer, Marxism is but a starting point. No theory of life can take the place of life. Every iota of gain in human thought and sensibility should be ready grist for his mill, no matter how far-fetched they may seem in their immediate applications" (p. 400).

Although T.S. Eliot and others of the western literary world see tradition as a muse, Wright discounts it as "no longer a guide" (p. 402). His ideas would become the center of the raging debate in the nineteen sixties over a black aesthetic, and its relationship to so-called universal truths engaged many of the best minds in Afro-American letters and hearkened back to Wright's seminal statement of principles in the "Blueprint." Tradition, in western culture, as George Kent and others have pointed out, provides no beacon-light for the Afro-American artist, so he must assume the mantle of a prophet, seer, and artificer--the homo religiosus dedicating himself to the Promethean task of creating in his art the embryonic future world. Or as Wright explains in the following passage:

By his ability to fuse and make articulate the experiences of men, because his writing possesses the potential cunning to steal into the inmost recesses of the human heart, because he can create the myths and symbols that inspire a faith in life, he may expect either to be consigned to oblivion, or to be recognized for the valued agent he is.

(p. 399)

His value derives from his ability to lift the "level" of consciousness higher" and thereby create a dialectic between the world as it is and the potentialities of the future to reinstate the violated covenant to its proper status.

Finally, the "Blueprint" expresses a thoroughgoing Marxist perspective that Wright believed fervently in at the time of its publication; nevertheless, as we have seen, the seeds for Wright's eventual rebellion against the strictures of Marxist ideology are also present in the work's discussion of the dynamic world and the artist's individual responsibility in helping to nurture and shape its creation. The ambivalence that Wright must have felt, at least unconsciously, appears:

Further, this dramatic Marxist vision, when consciously grasped, endows the writer with a sense of dignity which no other vision can give. Ultimately, it restores to the writer his lost heritage, that is, his role as a creator of the world in which he lives, and as a creator of himself.

(p. 399)

Here we see a "dramatic" vision, a moving and changing reality rather than a static printing of the inexorable resolution, and the primacy of the role of the artificer and prophet. The conflicts foreshadow the break with the

ideology Wright inevitably moved toward as the Communist Party prepared to threaten his dynamic vision and autonomy as an artist.²

Although Native Son excellently fulfills the promise of the "Blueprint," some critics have found the novel an artistic failure. R.P. Blackmur, for example, suggests that in Native Son "everything is taken seriously except the writing."³ More recently, John R. May indicts a lack of complexity in the novel, stating that "From a literary standpoint--and I reflect here what seems to be a consensus of critics--Wright is less successful than either Ellison or Baldwin. . . . Great literature, at any rate, seems to thrive on ambiguity, and this is at least one quality that Native Son does not possess."⁴ Both critics approach the novel in a myopic fashion, largely because of their overdependence upon the literary values of western tradition. Wright answers such critics clearly in "How Bigger Was Born," an essay describing the genesis of the novel and its relationship to his other work. This book was to be his Moby Dick

² Richard Wright discusses the break with the Communist Party in two articles published in 1944 entitled "I Tried to be a Communist," Atlantic Monthly (August and September). Later, these articles were incorporated into The God That Failed, edited by Richard Crossman (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 115-162.

³ R.P. Blackmur, Language as Gesture (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1952), p. 413.

⁴ John R. May, Toward a New Earth (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), p. 169.

and the critics be damned. One can easily imagine that Wright could have responded about Native Son as Melville did in a letter to Hawthorne describing the completion of Moby Dick: "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb . . . Content--that is it; and irresponsibility; but without licentious inclination. I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling."⁵ Wright, like Melville, was charting a new course in a novel. As Wright stated this affirmation in an earlier version of "How Bigger Was Born," he wanted to avoid repeating Uncle Tom's Children, "a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good. . . . I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."⁶

While Wright's assessment of Native Son as a breaking away from his earlier forms rings true in many respects, in some ways the book remains closely related to Uncle Tom's Children. Admittedly, the urban atmosphere of Native Son smothers the pastoral calm of Uncle Tom's Children and exposes

⁵Herman Melville, "To Nathaniel Hawthorne," The Portable Melville, edited by Jay Leyda (New York: The Viking Press, 1952), p. 453. For additional echoes of Melville in Wright, with parallels between Native Son and Moby Dick, see Barry Gross' "Art and Act: The Example of Richard Wright," Obsidian, Volume 2 (Summer 1976), number 2, 5-19.

⁶Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," Saturday Review (June 1, 1940), 19.

the dehumanization of the city quite well. As Fritz Gysin describes this apparent progression from idyllic landscape in Uncle Tom's Children to sterile wasteland in Native Son in Wright's work, he says, "In Native Son there is no room for the beauty of nature; the landscape is that of the ghetto: cold, unhealthy, dangerous."⁷ This atmosphere actually coincides, however, with the shift in attitude toward nature already noted in Uncle Tom's Children when the world becomes a nightmarish threat because of the racist environment. Even in capturing the atmosphere of Chicago, however, Wright is not being totally realistic. Like Dostoyvesky's St. Petersburg, Wright's Chicago possesses an ambience not photographically exact but poetically truthful.

Since 1940, Bigger Thomas has become as secure an archetype as other fictional characters such as Huckleberry Finn, Ahab, and Jay Gatsby. As with these other national personae, Bigger's character has been much debated, and several possible readings of his character have emerged. Some readers, influenced by the mimetic mode, tend to read Bigger--and indeed all other Wright characters--as alter egos of the artist Wright. In the hands of a sensitive critic, such an approach can be insightful and valuable, but it remains only partially satisfactory. A second approach to Bigger involves seeing him as a purely realistic character and analyzing the

⁷Fritz Gysin, The Grotesque in American Negro Fiction: Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison (Berne: Francke, 1975), p. 107.

various psychological and sociological determinations for his behavior. This approach adds several useful insights to an understanding of Bigger's significance to Wright's canon in that it correlates with his concern for sociological and psychological literature and approaches; however, it tends to overlook what seems to emerge as a peculiar religious focus in Native Son. A close examination of each of these readings will help to discriminate the critical methodology and "see" Bigger as a homo religiosus consistent with the whole novel.

Wright, perhaps as much as any artist in the twentieth century, studied, pondered, and cultivated a virtual obsession for the twin disciplines of sociology and psychology in his mission to see art as a means of redeeming time. This interest makes him a most representative, indeed almost archetypal twentieth-century artist. John M. Reilly comments upon Wright's contemporary quality in his "Introduction" to Richard Wright: The Critical Reception:

Indeed, it is fundamental to our culture that we are preoccupied with finding the significance of experience by reconciling the conflicting interpretations of environmental determinism and self-determinism. Wright gave unusual power to this interpretive conflict, as readers of Native Son are aware.⁸

There is a certain kind of logic inherent in seeing Bigger Thomas as an alter ego of Richard Wright. After all,

⁸ John M. Reilly, Richard Wright: The Critical Reception (New York: Burt Franklin and Company, 1978), p. x.

he acted the role of Bigger in the unfortunate movie version of the novel, in spite of the many obstacles to his being able to assume the character's physical attributes, since he was considerably older than the ideal Bigger. Such an incredible personal sacrifice certainly lends support to Wright's emotional involvement with Bigger's life. Several critics have added other parallels to the list of similarities between Bigger and Richard or have commented upon this sense of the alter ego as it functions in the novel. Examples of the latter are Warren French's statement in The Social Novel at the End of an Era that "Bigger Thomas was the youth that Richard Wright might have become if he had not saved himself" and Lewis Gannett's review in The New York Herald Tribune that said that Bigger was the character "Richard Wright just missed becoming."⁹ Of the former, Kenneth Kinnamon's analysis of the various similarities between Bigger and Richard is that ". . . both are Mississippi-born blacks who migrated to Chicago; both live with their mothers in the worst slums of the Black Belt; both are motivated by fear and hatred; both are rebellious by temperament; both could explode into violence."¹⁰ Added to this list, Fabre discusses Richard's propensity for shyness around strangers, leading to a silence

⁹ Warren French, The Social Novel at the End of an Era (Carbondale and Evansville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), p. 234. Reilly, p. xiv.

¹⁰ Kenneth Kinnamon, The Emergence of Richard Wright (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 15.

certainly similar to Bigger's inarticulateness when confronted with white society.¹¹ The catalogue of the ways in which Bigger functions as an alter ego for Richard remains impressive and evocative; nevertheless, the persona must always be separated from the artist to avoid the heresy of any simplistic equation between the creator and the fictive character.

Another reading of Bigger stems from Wright's comprehensive working knowledge of the modern disciplines of psychology and sociology, the twin vehicles for the naturalistic writer in our times, as applied to blacks living in an urban ghetto. Bigger assumes the shape of a laboratory specimen embodying the inevitable outcome of a certain set of environmental stresses, most importantly the racist society and its exclusionary emphases, in a novelistic setting. According to this view, Native Son is a textbook naturalistic novel modelled on Dreiser's The American Tragedy, in which the author divorces himself from the action and makes no editorial evaluation on the inexorable events. In several ways, this reading satisfies the sensitive reader. Certainly, it remains the only piece of fiction in Wright's work for which we have concrete evidence of psychological autobiography. Dr. Frederick Wertham, a psychiatrist interested in the

¹¹ Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973), p. 15.

relationship between his discipline and the creative process, uncovered in Wright's psyche through hypnosis events which may have been the unconscious model for Bigger's relationship with the Daltons in Native Son. In Wertham's words, "The data here are sufficient to show that unconscious material enters definitely into a work of art and can be recovered by analytic study. Only unconscious factors with a high emotional value are significant in literary creation."¹² Wright's voracious appetite for sociological studies, especially if they involved the experiences of blacks in America, is also well-documented by his biographers. Constance Webb calls attention to this extensive scientific interest in a striking way in the following passage:

Just as one sees when one walks into a medical research laboratory jars of alcohol containing abnormally large or distorted portions of the human body, just so did he see and feel that the conditions of life under which Negroes are forced to live in America contain the embryonic prefigurations of how a large part of the body politic would react under stress.¹³

Wright also wrote a sympathetic "Introduction" to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's Black Metropolis, exposing his interest in the sociological aspects of the race problem in the United States. Wright speculates that Bigger Thomas is a composite of several black youths he knew as he grew up and

¹²Frederick Wertham, "An Unconscious Determinant in Native Son," Journal of Clinical Psychopathology and Psychotherapy, Volume 6. (July 1944), 111-115.

¹³Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), p. 169.

that he knew a real Biggy Thomas in Jackson, Tennessee, further adding support to those who wish to see the novel as a purely naturalistic novel--a mimetic mode, using psychology and sociology to make the piece as compellingly real as possible.

Although these readings are often provocative and stimulating, they remain, at best, fragmentary. Philip Bolton, for example, tries to argue that Bigger's "paranoia" is an important ingredient in Native Son. He suggests that as readers "We come to share his paranoid, myth-shaped, somewhat anachronistic and quite helplessly racist perceptions" and that Bigger's escape from this prevailing paranoia in Book IV makes this "paranoia . . . the informing or structural principle of Native Son."¹⁴ Unfortunately, Bolton's thesis can and must be refuted, since it does not contain the "delusional" quality of all definitions of a paranoid state: Bigger's so-called paranoia derives not from any repressed homosexual tendencies, as Bolton suggests, but from the utterly real, palpable persecutions of the KKK and white society, transforming the world into a landscape of ubiquitous nightmare. Such a keenly developed sensitivity as Bigger's reflects clear-sightedness, not paranoid myopia, in such a world. Two other critics, Phyllis Klotman and Katherine Fishburn, use Wayne Booth's concept of "moral distancing" to

¹⁴H. Philip Bolton, "The Role of Paranoia in Richard Wright's Native Son," Kansas Quarterly, Volume 7, number 3, 121.

apply to Bigger's characterization as it reveals a character predetermined to react as he does in the novel and from whom we can thus withhold any moral judgments.¹⁵ Once again, the critics limit Bigger to a certain mimetic stricture and ultimately fail to understand the full meaning he embodies for us as readers.

A mimetic mode transforms itself into a religious and prophetic mode in Native Son and in much of Wright's fiction. In order to assess the "sacraments" and a "sacramental vision" incorporating these sacraments into a coherent vision, Wright sought to use realism. In fact, one of the greater ironies is that Wright has been criticized for the overly melodramatic, sensationalistic, propagandistic court scenes of Native Son on the grounds of their being unrealistic. This criticism does not take into consideration the fact that these speeches came largely from a real murder case involving Robert Nixon, which took place in Chicago. Fabre duly takes note of Wright's use of articles concerning the Nixon case:

The Tribune had immediately transformed the murder into a sexual crime and made a great deal out of the charge of rape, although the prosecution never explicitly brought this

¹⁵Phyllis Klotman, "Moral Distancing as a Rhetorical Technique in Native Son: A Note on Fate," CLAJ, Volume 18 (1974), 284-291. Katherine Fishburn, "The Victim and the Rebel," Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel Victim (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1977), pp. 54-111. Admittedly, this is an oversimplified treatment of the two readings, but it expresses the central thesis accurately.

charge against Nixon. If the articles that Bigger read about himself in prison seem unduly exaggerated, it is well to remember that Wright was quoting word for word from the Tribune reports of the Nixon case, which made him out to be a repulsive and apelike creature.¹⁶

Thus even when his tendencies toward the didactic and rhetorical tend to defeat his artistic purposes in the conclusion of Native Son, the author was painstaking in his attempts to capture a realistic portrayal ("sacraments" and "sacramental vision"), but this realistic world is not his final goal. As an alternate reading suggests, Bigger's vision at the end supercedes America's violation of a sacred covenant. As R. Baxter Miller says, "For Wright's protagonist Bigger Thomas, the laws are inhumane because these imperfect emblems cannot transform the ideal world of primal types into the real world's decrees."¹⁷

A starting point for the discussion of Bigger's character involves a personal observation concerning the difficulty of teaching students from a predominantly white state university to sympathize with Bigger's plight. In a sophomore class concerning the study of World Fiction (English 202), I have often taught Crime and Punishment and Native Son among other novels. Many students have responded quite

¹⁶Fabre, p. 172. Actually, Fabre points out that Margaret Walker sent Wright the articles concerning the Nixon case at his request.

¹⁷R. Baxter Miller, "Introduction," Black American Literature and Humanism (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1981), p. x. I was graciously allowed to read the manuscript before its publication by Dr. Miller, the editor.

sympathetically to Raskolnikov's articulate rationalization for his double murders but unsympathetically to Bigger's unarticulated understanding of his actions. Raskolnikov's abstruse and philosophical rationalizations make it easier for a prejudiced view toward the inarticulate Bigger to emerge. And that is precisely the point. A repressive white society has silenced Bigger's voices, representing both dehumanization and emasculation. His logos has been unjustly stolen. In the Gospel of St. John, the word "logos" refers to the divine creative principle as well as speech. The editor of The Oxford Annotated Bible comments,

The Word (Greek "logos") of God is more than speech; it is God in action, creating (Gen. 1.3; Ps. 33.6), revealing (Amos 3.7-8), redeeming (Ps. 107.19-20). Jesus is this Word (v. 14). He was eternal (in the beginning; compare Gen. 1.1); personal (with God); divine (was God). Was, not "became" (Contrast v. 14).
(p. 1284)

Several things about this passage reflect Bigger's situation. If speech represents the embodiment of the Divine creation, then Bigger's deprivation represents a spiritual as well as a physical violation. Bigger becomes more and more a redemptive black Christ as the novel progresses, and his ultimate isolation and separation (his Golgotha) reflect the spiritual blindness of those around him rather than the censure of his character at the end of the novel.

"How Bigger Was Born" details quite sensitively the attitude Richard Wright had toward the fictionalized version of himself and other black Americans caught between image and

reality in the American experiment: although some parts of the essay use the naturalistic terminology "like a scientist in a laboratory" and "invent test tube situations" and other similar phrases, when the discussion centers around the fictional creation of Bigger, the imagery shifts to a profoundly religious and sacramental tone.¹⁸ Wright suggests that "With the whole theme in mind, in an attitude almost akin to prayer, I gave myself up to the story" (p. XXX). He subordinates the pure mimesis or realism to revelation: "Then I'd read it over and over, adding each time a word or a phrase, a sentence until I felt that I had caught all the shadings of reality I felt dimly were there. . . . That was the deep fun of the job: to feel within my body that I was pushing out to new areas of feeling, strange landmarks of emotion, tramping upon foreign soil, compounding new relationships of perceptions, making new and--until that very split second of time!--unheard of and unfelt effects with words" (p. XXX). In discussing a crucial scene in Bigger's cell, Wright sharpens his focus: "I felt that what I wanted that scene to say to the reader was more important than its surface reality or plausibility" (p. XXXI). Two other points deserve attention: Here, as in Twelve Million Black Voices,

¹⁸Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," Native Son (New York: Harper and Row, 1940; rpt. with this essay as "Introduction" and an afterword by John Reilly in 1966), p. xxi. All subsequent references to the essay and the novel will be listed in parentheses.

Wright uses the present tense to heighten the impact and immediacy of the black experience in America and to express a collective sense of community. What further underscores this relationship between Native Son and American literature is Wright's concluding statement in "How Bigger Was Born" that

We Americans have only a money grubbing, industrial civilization. But we do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease even the spiritual hunger of a James; and we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him.
(p. XXX)

Bigger embodies the Yahweh/prophetic character of the old covenant as well as the Christ/messianic make-up of the new covenant. He "deconstructs" the American experiment by returning through violence to a paradigm of the Yahweh/prophet. From "Fear," the opening section, until the murder of Bessie, the Yahwehistic motif predominates. In "Flight" and "Fate," the final sections, the Christ motif completes the cycle.

Bigger's alienation from the dominant myths of white society and the folk culture and religion of his mother is complete. The huge poster proclaiming Buckley's candidacy of law and order and the inaccessible planes piloted by white men overhead underscore the poignancy of his alienation. So does the game of "playing white" in which he and Gus engage. Even in the most squalid scenes, however, Bigger envisions a possibility beyond the ugliness. Wright evokes the calm

"undulating pigeons" of Stevens' "Sunday Morning" or the reverence of a Whitman or the inspiration of a Hopkins:

Then their eyes were riveted; a slate-coloured 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-coloured bird flop and wheel out of sight over the edge of a high roof. . . . "Now if I could do that," Bigger said.

(pp. 23-24)

The feelings of isolation and alienation created in Bigger the rhythms of his life: "indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger--like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force" (p. 31).

The superficial movies Gus and Bigger see promote the myths of the white culture and perpetuate the various accompanying stereotypes. Together, the movies evoke enticements to those outside western culture. One movie pictures "white women lolling on beaches, swimming and dancing in night clubs." The poster of another portrays "black men and black women dancing against a wild background of barbaric jungle" (p. 32). The stereotypes of blacks and communists and Bigger's response resemble the dramatic irony of a Sophoclean tragedy, as he asserts, "Say, maybe I'll be working for folks like that if I take that relief job. Maybe I'll be driving them around" (p. 33) . . . Maybe he had a daughter who was a hot kind of girl" (p. 36).

The spirituals and the consolation of religion appear as undercurrents in "Fear." The soothing calm of the spirituals in Uncle Tom's Children has turned into stridently irritating reminders of passivity in Native Son. Products of his mother's compensatory religion, the spirituals endanger self-fulfillment because they focus on passive resignation rather than active accomplishment. For Bigger, they are anathema: measures of his own estrangement from a passive community.

When Bigger leaves the world of the ghetto to accept the job at the Daltons, the resulting culture shock becomes a major problem. Outside of black Chicago, he moves without any sense of community. The affluence of the Daltons disturbs him. Their early comments to him focus upon the empty jargon of social science at its dehumanizing worst.

He was going among white people, so he would take his knife and his gun; it would make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness,

(p. 44)

Metaphorically, Mrs. Dalton, the blind woman, and her husband use an alien language that confounds Bigger. She mentions his "new environment" and concludes that "I think it's important emotionally that he feels free to trust his environment" (p. 48). Having already responded ritualistically to their previous queries, he reflects "not speaking really; but hearing his words issue involuntarily from his lips, as of a force of their own" (p. 47).

Bigger listened, blinking and bewildered. The long strange words they used made no sense to him; . . . He felt from the tone of their voices that they were having a difference of opinion about him, but he could not determine what it was about. It made him uneasy, tense, as though there were influences and presences about him which he could feel but not see. He felt strangely blind.
(p. 48)

The incongruities continue for Bigger as Mary, the daughter of the Daltons, treats him as if he were a human being. Earlier, he had tried the duplicity of playing a role--a modern version of "puttin' on ole massa" by acting the way a black man was supposed to.

He had not raised his eyes to the level of Mr. Dalton's face once since he had been in the house. He stood with his knees slightly bent, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped; and his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things. There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence; none had ever told him that in so many words, but their manner had made him feel that they did.

(p. 50)

Compounding his notions of alienation and debasement, the clock ticks, but he does not turn to look. The scene is symbolic. Bigger is forever alienated from the kairos of the Dalton's world. From the opening discordant ring, Bigger experiences only the chronos or linear, the chaotic sense of time. For Bigger, the clocks (pp. 38, 61, 87, 88) beat chaotically, forever excluding him from the order of community.

Additionally, Mary's facile notions about black culture become painstakingly obvious when she forces Bigger to drive her and Jan to Ernie's Kitchen Shack for dinner and asks naive questions about black people's lives. Bigger's

encounter in Mary's bedroom culminates in her death and represents the predominant Yahweh/prophetic function of Bigger in "Fear." Terrified when he sees Mrs. Dalton enter the room, he smothers Mary unknowingly while trying only to keep her quiet. This tragedy and the violent dismemberment of the corpse and subsequent burning are part of the "deconstruction" Bigger embodies. Given such a racist society, the mere appearance of Bigger in the same room with Mary would be considered tantamount to rape for many prejudiced people. The violent manner must be dramatized to provide a sufficiently efficacious warning and prophecy to American society through a violent shock. The clinical description of the scene adds a certain level of horror to the message as well. Like Jeremiah castigating a sinful society, Bigger's actions affect ideally a "deconstruction" of the myth of the enlightened liberal American society.

The "Flight" section describes Bigger's attempts to flee from prosecution after an attempt to implicate Jan in Mary's death and an abortive kidnap attempt. The imagery harkens back to the opening scene throughout most of this section: the caged animal stalked by various persistent predators. Except for the section describing Bessie's rape and murder, the Christ vision predominates throughout the remainder of the novel. The accidental murder of Mary has provided a violent focus to his previously meaningless life. His crime "seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this. . . . The hidden meaning

of his life--a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide . . ." (p. 101),

Starting in "Fear" and continuing throughout the novel, the theme continues relentlessly. His family and friends hide behind dead and empty rituals: "They needed a certain picture of the world; there was one way of living they preferred above all others; and they were blind to what did not fit" (p. 102). That Vera and Mrs. Thomas were blind was apparent, but so was Buddy, his younger brother. The blindness of those around him separated him from their sightless vision and community:

He did not look at them; they were simply blind people, blind like his mother, his brother, his sister, Peggy, Britten, Jan, Mr. Dalton, and the sightless Mrs. Dalton and the quiet empty houses with their black gaping windows.

(pp. 163-164)

Bessie's particular blindness, escape through alcohol, poses certain problems. Certainly, the Bessie section of "Flight" continues the violent "deconstruction" of the Yahweh motif, and the cold-blooded murder and rape of Bessie poses a thorny problem, but the clinical description of the acts makes it abhorrent and ghastly, striking deeply into the reader's consciousness. The explanation that he had to destroy Bessie to protect himself from detection sounds hollow and empty, and our sympathies for Bigger are strained virtually to the breaking point. Still, Bessie's passivity and escapism link her significantly to Mrs. Thomas' religion. The violent act

reminds one to eschew passivity and escapism and to assert an individual identity forged apart from the prevailing myths of white society.

The problem of Bessie's death cannot be resolved ultimately. The gruesome, loathsome details of Bigger's crushing her skull with a brick allows for no full acceptance of his motives except partially as a prophetic paroxysm, reinforcing Bigger's dehumanization--a measure of society's sin. Yet Bigger's feelings toward Bessie are far from simple. At times, he views her sexuality as the fecundity of the natural world, a reforging of himself. This potential relationship seems possible only in the imagination.

He felt two soft palms holding his face tenderly and the thought and image of the whole blind world which had made him ashamed and afraid fell away as he felt her as a fallow field beneath him stretching out under cloudless sky waiting for rain, and he floated on a wild tide, rising and sinking with the ebb and flow of her blood, being willingly dragged into a warm night sea to rise renewed to the surface to face a world he hated and wanted to blot out of existence, clinging close to a fountain whose warm waters washed and cleaned his senses, cooled them, made them strong and keen again to see and smell and touch and taste and hear, cleared them to end the tiredness and to reforge in him a new sense of time and space;--after he had been tossed to dry upon a warm sunlit rock under a white sky he lifted his hand slowly and heavily and touched Bessie's lips with his fingers and mumbled.

(p. 128)

The cleansed baptism of his senses, the reforged "sense of time and space" represent an altered world in which his sexuality can be raised above the "vegetable love" of

Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" to a consecrated union between two redeemed souls.

Other echoes of the Yahweh/prophetic theme appear in "Flight." Commenting on the significance of his actions, Bigger wishes "that he could be an idea in their minds." He hopes that his black face and the image of his smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning her could hover before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and yet not destroy" (p. 123). He calls attention to the justice of the old Yahweh code in a legalistic sense, saying "The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score" (p. 155). More and more, Wright emphasizes the messianic Christ figure as Bigger's proper fictional identity. Increasingly, Bigger's portrayal becomes the redemptive black Christ embodying the violated covenant of white American liberalism: his voice, his logos, has been taken from him, depriving him of any meaningful relationship to the redemptive community and its kairos. As a result of his rejection of both the white liberal myth and the black church's compensatory religion, Bigger becomes a scapegoat. No other character in the novel shares his redemption; only the sensitive reader following his poignant "deconstruction" can fully participate in the meaning of his life, thereby elevating his status to that of a tragic hero, a black Prometheus beckoning to a reconstituted, more humane society.

When Bigger gets caught, the reference to the crucifixion becomes explicit: "Two men stretched his arms out, as though about to crucify him; they placed a foot on each of his wrists, making them sink down in the snow" (p. 253). He moves into symbolic time. In an article, "Mythic Patterns in River Niger and Ceremonies in Dark Old Men," Chester J. Fontenot distinguishes conceptions between linear and mythic time:

. . . the linear consciousness advocates the annihilation of the Black historical past, while the mythic consciousness threatens to keep the past alive through the social conditions of the present. The former attempts to substitute for the Black historical past a version of progress which by its very nature, implies that the conditions Black people have had to live under are vestiges of a bygone age of disharmony. According to this theory, Black people are no longer slaves, but have been integrated as full participants in society. The extent to which Black people have not become full participants in American society indicates their unwillingness to accept the routes the larger society has created for them.¹⁹

Contrasted to this linear conception, the mythic view "insists on the constant recreation of the Black historical past through the actions of white Americans against Black people.

. . . The oppression of Black people tends to create a mythic consciousness wherein 'progress' is not seen as something achieved by the humanistic grace of Anglo-Americans, but is rather the product of sacrifice by Black Americans.

¹⁹Chester J. Fontenot, "Mythic Patterns in River Niger and Ceremonies in Dark Old Men," MELUS, 7, number 1 (Spring 1980), 41.

Progress, in this sense, is not organic, but is an imposed system on linear history. This is viewed as not really progress, but as appeasement."²⁰ Bigger embodies mythic consciousness in "Flight" and "Fate" by focusing upon the emptiness and hypocrisy of the linear conception, especially as espoused by liberal white Americans. The linear view separates Bigger from his logos, isolates him from kairos or sharing in the idea of redeemed time and stifles mythic consciousness.

"Flight" has several examples of clock time. In the beginning of a dream, Bigger hears the "ringing of a quiet distant church bell," and moves ahead of Whites rushing at him, and finally hurls his bloody head squarely into their faces" (p. 156). The oppressive toll of the booming bells reinforces the opening Brrrrng of the alarm clock at the beginning of the novel, a sequence ending with the persistent "dongdongdong . . ." (p. 156). Also related to this theme is a "dim-ly lit" Black church (p. 237). The appeal lies in the certainty of mission, the assurance of mythos, and Bigger's vulnerability. Bigger's watch has stopped. As so often happens in Wright, the hymns embody the ambivalence toward religion. The hymns "vibrated through him, suffusing him with a mood of sensitive sorrow" and "seeped into his feelings, whispering of another way of life and death, coaxing him to lie down and sleep and

²⁰Ibid., p. 42.

let them come and get him, urging him to believe that all life was a sorrow that had to be accepted" (p. 237). As Bigger puts it, the religious view had a "heart which he needed but could never have unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up his hope of living in the world. And he would never do that" (p. 237).

Bigger's ambivalence concerning a black nationalist messiah underscores his existential predicament. He notices other black people who "Even though black. . . there was too much difference between him and them to allow a common binding and a common life" (p. 109). Even his despair concerning the Messiah is only partial, for he tries to keep the hope alive that "one day there would be a black man who would whip the black people into a tight band and together they would act and end all fear and shame" (p. 110).

In "Fate," the concluding section, Wright completes Bigger's regeneration as the black Christ and makes the cycle complete. The authentic voice of Bigger contrasts strikingly with the various orthodoxies voiced in "Fate." These false fictions include the stereotyped racism replete with animal imagery emanating from Buckley's vitriolic attack in court, the enlightened liberalism of the Daltons, the Marxist summations by Max, and the traditional orations of orthodox Christianity uttered by Reverend Hammond. Bigger, by contrast, remains silent: Bigger "steadfastly refused to speak" (p. 254). Even if he had the power . . . he did not know what he could have said" (p. 380). As Bigger relates

this desire for his voice, he finds that "The impulsion to try to tell was as deep as the urge to kill" (p. 286). Now beyond ideological interpretations (Christian, Marxist, etc.), Bigger strives to find his own logos. In the end, the meta-physical presence of death has replaced the racism earlier oppressing his psyche. "As the white mountain had once loomed over him, so now the black wall of death loomed closer with each fleeting hour. But he could not strike blindly now; death was a different and bigger adversary" (p. 383). Jan helps him to develop an authentic voice. After all, Jan had forgiven Bigger for his accidental murder and the attempt to implicate him in Mary's murder,

Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other men hate him: a particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stopping still at his feet. The word had become flesh. . . . He saw Jan as though someone had performed an operation upon his eyes, or as though someone had snatched a deforming mask from Jan's face.

(p. 268)

Notice the compelling use of biblical imagery focusing upon the redemptive figure of Christ (man made flesh), the sacramental revelation implied in eye imagery (making acute vision possible) and the removal of grotesque masks (providing a sharp real picture of the man). As the false voices or ideological spokesmen are all undercut in "Fate," the overt racism of Buckley gets exposed. The colossal irony of the Dalton's liberalism is revealed: Mr. Dalton sends ping pong tables to the South Side Boy's Club, but rents substandard housing to the Thomas family (p. 273).

Wright masterfully constructs a microcosm of American society as Bigger, in his cell, responds to his family and friends. Bigger feels the strong violation of the covenant when his mother bows down to Mrs. Dalton.

He . . . felt their naked shame under the eyes of white folks. . . . They ought to be glad. Had he not taken fully upon himself the crime of being black? Had he not done the thing which they had dreaded above all others? Then they ought not stand here and pity him, cry over him; but look at him and go home, content, and feeling that their shame was washed away.
(p. 275)

As for Max, Bigger's reaction is much more complicated. While he fights for Bigger's life, the extensive Marxist speeches in court do not clearly win Bigger's total confidence. On a personal level, Bigger's grasping after a voice seems lost on Max even at the poignant moment at the end: "Many times, when alone after Max had left him, he wondered wistfully if there was not a set of words which he had in common with others, words which would evoke in others a sense of the same fire that smouldered in him" (p. 337). Bigger comes to his own voice by accepting the meaning of his life when he discovers his own sensitivity and breaks down, "But I ain't hard Mr. Max. I ain't hard even a little bit. . . . He rose to his feet. But . . . I--I won't be crying none when they take me to that chair. But I'll b-b be feeling inside of me like I was crying. . . . I'll be feeling and thinking that they didn't see me and I didn't see them" (p. 389). Because of Max's ideological rigidity, he cannot fully understand Bigger's "new word" and states

weakly, "It's too late for you now to . . . work with . . . others who are t-trying to . . . believe and make the world live again. . . . But it's too late to believe what you felt, to understand what you felt" (p. 390)²¹

Bigger's final resolution can be shared only by the sensitive reader who transcends the limited false voices in the novel to hear the one authentic voice for freedom. Admittedly, the "Fate" section has been criticized often for its melodrama and lack of subtlety; however, Bigger's painstakingly developed Christ figure capable of speaking for new human potentialities "deconstructed" from the old ideologies remains a central archetype for the Afro-American experience. Freed from the restrictive mooring of ideology (Christian, Marxist, Segregationist et al.), Bigger's logos reflects an open-ended future for the self-created and self-crafted Afro-American.

²¹The "new word" refers to Dostoyevsky's use of the term to refer to Raskolnikov's philosophy in Crime and Punishment, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1959), p. 24.

CHAPTER VI

THE VISION ATTAINED IN "THE MAN WHO LIVED UNDERGROUND," BLACK BOY, AND THE LONG DREAM

The Wrightian hero balances intellect and emotion. Such a homo religiosus finds a way of integrating his individual vision of truth, his "revelation," if you will, with his ties within the folk community. The protagonist in "Big Boy Leaves Home" and Aun' Sue in "Bright and Morning Star" embodies the ideal. In the case of Bigger Thomas, one finds the simultaneous presence of both attributes. In some ways, he is a negative example, but in others, a positive one. He projects an alternative future, a "deconstructed" American society with covenant fulfilled.

In the years between "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1941) and Black Boy (1945) and the publication of The Long Dream, Wright lived in France (1946-1960) and his energies turned increasingly toward political and universal issues. The period produced several seminal works of nonfiction such as Black Power (1954), The Color Curtain (1956), and Pagan Spain (1956). The Outsider, the only piece of his fiction published during this period, suffers from long-winded and polemical speeches throughout. The speech of the protagonist concerning industrialism and modern man in The Outsider could virtually have been entirely lifted from either White Man Listen! or The Color Curtain, a fact commented upon by Robert Felgar and others. But Wright finally does come home

to an American dream with the writing of The Long Dream, reestablishing the connection between Fishbelly, Richard alias Black Boy, and freddaniels. His cycle completes itself with one final evocation of his American "home."

"The Man Who Lived Underground," the most artistically satisfying and most focused picture of Wright's homo religiosus, is Wright's version of "The Grand Inquisitor's Scene" from Dostoyvesky's The Brothers Karamazov.¹ Black, poor, and terrified, the protagonist burrows underground after bolting through an open window in order to escape from the pressure tactics of three white policemen, who in trying to force a murder rap on him, have forced him to sign a confession. He seeks refuge in an opened sewer and the threatening water Wright depicts recalls "Down By the Riverside." Closing the sewer lid, the protagonist finds a small protected cave from which he emerges to make some sense of his disjointed life.

In a series of forays, the protagonist experiences various reminders of the world aboveground, but his perspective has been irrevocably changed. First he hears the human voices of a Black church choir reverently intoning the lyrics of consoling hymns. He finds something "abysmally obscene" (p. 523) about the posturings of the Black voices, perhaps

¹Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," The Richard Wright Reader, edited by Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 517-577. All subsequent references to the text will be listed by page numbers in parenthesis. See also Fyodor Dostoyvesky, The Brothers Karamazov (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 292-314 for "The Grand Inquisitor's Scene."

because they reflect a passive resignation to compensatory religion and are deadened by their participation in this ritual. Here the protagonist has no meaningful sense of time, which to him has been somehow suspended, and his only sense of it is "when a match flared and measured time by its fleeting light" (p. 523). As is characteristic in Wright's work, the opposition between the religious orthodoxy and his rational religion strengthens the opening section. Uncharacteristically, however, the sensitive protagonist does not automatically consign the church members to oblivion as Bigger does to Reverend Hammond in Native Son; rather, he later returns to the church desperately wishing to effect a synthesis which embodies both the humanistic community in the church and his radical individualism. He still feels innocent and apart.

The protagonist sees three other encounters which corroborate and intensify this theme. Finding a "tiny nude baby" dead and floating on the sewer stream, he instinctively associates the corpse with the singing in church he has just left, as "his roused feelings told him that it was dead, cold, nothing, the same nothingness he had felt while watching the women sing in the church" (p. 524). In a poetic passage, the tone of Eberhart's "For a Lamb" comes through in "The eyes were closed, as though in sleep," but the final two independent clauses of the passage, "the fists were

clenched, as though in protest; and the mouth gaped black in soundless cry," undermine the resignation (p. 524). A third reminder of the spiritual death of America comes when the protagonist finds himself peering into a mortician's office in the embalming room where "the nude waxen figure of a man stretched out upon a white table" (p. 525).

The scene in the movie theatre, the fourth emblem death-in-life theme in the story, requires more lengthy treatment, in terms of the theme itself, the relationship to Wright's canon and the Afro-American tradition. The section recalls Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game" and Wright's earlier trip to the movies with Gus and Bigger in Native Son. In the latter, Trader Horn presents irrational primitive blacks, while The Gay Woman treats fatally seductive white women. As with the nameless protagonist in "King of the Bingo Game," Wright's protagonist strives unsuccessfully to awaken the audience to truth and to strip away the veneer of the illusions of the "jerky shadows": "These people were laughing at their lives . . ." (p. 527). The shared prophetic vision, as in Ellison, gets ignored by the audience, "these people" who "were children, sleeping in their waking, awake in their dying" (p. 528).

The protagonist's dreams along the way heighten the avatars of spiritual death and the illusory existence above ground, as the reader assesses the dichotomy between the filthy stench of the underground and the manifest pretensions and delusions of the ground above. The protagonist makes

the dichotomy more emphatic. Often he steals food to live, and then begins his "pure" thefts of contemporary artifacts. Along the way he scavenges a radio, a cleaver, a tool-box, glue, money, diamonds, gold watches, and a typewriter--the adored icons of a brutally dehumanized bourgeois culture, for as the protagonist suggests, "they were the serious toys of the men who lived in the dead world of sunshine and rain he had left, the world that had considered him, branded him guilty" (p. 543). Bringing these objects to his own cave, he "reconstructs" their essential relationship to the world: Above, an innocent boy is chastized for stealing a radio which he did not steal and a night watchman commits suicide, having been accused of stealing money he never touched. Obviously, injustice exists, and people are wrongly accused. The protagonist's "reconstruction" involves wiring the radio and the lights in his cave, an act in part recapitulated so effectively nine years later in Ellison's Invisible Man (1953), wall-papering his domain with glued-up money, seeing it as "Just like any paper" (p. 542), and hanging gold watches and diamonds all around the cave. Periodically, he scornfully imitates the way "they talk" above ground and labels the world above him "a wild forest filled with death" (p. 549). This dark forest suggests Dante's similar venture into the unredeemed regions of the cosmos.

When he arranges the gold watches, emblems of linear time and sterility, the chronos the world operates on, "He stared with an idle smile, then began to wind them up; he

did not attempt to set them at any given hour, for there was no time for him now" (p. 549). The suggestiveness of the passage is ambiguous. Is there no time for him here in the sense that he has totally rejected the chaos of linear time which runs the world above for a mythic notion of time below ground? Or does no time suggest an apartness, an alienation from communal connections with obligations? Or does the phrase "no time" represent an acquiescence to the amoral, linear time he has discovered or had revealed? At first the third possibility appears, as the protagonist discusses an amoral, nihilistic perspective, reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor's Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find": "Maybe anything's right" (p. 550). Quickly, however, the narrator's guilt and subsequent attempts to share his prophetic wisdom with those aboveground suggests the rejection of both alienation and acceptance. Beneath the earth, he has found the kairos experience. He wants to redeem others from bourgeois materialism's distorted reality. Wright's story resolves the problem of time. The protagonist at first mistakes the typewriter's sounds for a clock; later, when the protagonist gains mastery over the typewriter, he associates this with a control over his own time (kairos), as he types "freddaniels," his "reconstructed" identity, a naming similar to that of the protagonist in Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game," who also attains a new identity in the course of the story.

Once the protagonist wishes to share his vision, his prospective audience, the black church, religious authority,

and the policemen, the civil authority, become highly significant. His reception at the Black church emanates from his isolation and guilt, and his recognition of that guilt promotes "the drive to go somewhere and say something to somebody" (p. 561), evoking Bigger's attempts to share his vision with Max at the end of Native Son. Also, like Dostoyvesky's Christ in the scene of "The Grand Inquisitor" from The Brothers Karamazov, he is repudiated by those "so-called" Christians who reject his urgent plea, "But mister let me tell," and crucify him metaphorically for his filth, stench, rowdiness, and craziness. The ironic juxtaposition between the soft sublimity of the lyric hymns and the harsh callousness of the members of the congregation underscores the Christ motif in the protagonist's prophecy. After rejection by the church, the protagonist tries to make the policemen "see" where he has been and what he has learned. He admits quite readily, "I'm guilty" (p. 565), to the authorities. Not just himself, however, but all men are guilty. In order to redeem his vision, he must share its collective guilt with others. As he puts it, "Mister, when I looked through all of those holes and saw how people were living, I loved 'em . . ." (p. 571).

A mood of high selflessness throbbed in him. He could barely contain his rising spirits. They would see what he had seen; they would feel what he had felt. He would lead them through the holes he dug and . . . he wanted to make a hymn, prance about in physical ecstasy, throw his arm about the policemen in "fellowship."

(p. 572)

As he intones the hymn, "Glad, glad, glad, oh so glad/ I got Jesus in my soul," he embodies its true religious vision, not the dead empty ritualistic rendering he had heard earlier; unfortunately, a policeman shoots him fatally at precisely this moment, blindly suggesting, "You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things" (p. 576).

While several critics, among them Robert Bone and others, have seen the conclusion of "The Man Who Lived Underground" dark, bleak, and pessimistic in its indictment of American institutional racism, one must not lose sight of the meaning of his final murder.² "He sighed and closed his eyes, a whirling object rushing alone in the darkness, veering, tossing, lost in the heart of the earth" (p. 576).³ As in Arna Bontemps' "A Summer Tragedy," when the muddy, swollen Mississippi's waters get transformed explicitly into a baptismal for the elderly couple, so in this story the dark

²Robert A. Bone, Richard Wright (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 30.

³I think the religious ending also implicitly undercuts the naturalistic imagery in the remainder of the story. While eating a pork chop sandwich, the persona, "like a dog . . . ground the meat bones with his teeth, enjoying the salty, tangy marrow" (p. 531). Elsewhere, "his fingers toyed in space, like the antennae of an insect" (p. 525). A man who works without light in the coal-bin is "like those sightless worms that inch along underground by a sense of touch" (p. 529). The protagonist also squeezes through a hole in an "eel-like fashion." Notwithstanding these images and the reference to his body as an object, the story concerns much more than a naturalistic perspective.

waters of the sewer can likewise baptize and promulgate the message of the living artist and artificer freddaniels.

Ultimately, the end of "The Man Who Lived Underground" remains pessimistic only to the dwellers above ground--not to the sensitive readers who share the religious message of Wright's protagonist. Unable to accept this perspective, William Goede writes an article and compares Wright's hero unfavorably to Ellison's Invisible Man:

We note that Wright's hero surfaces where he went down. Nothing has happened in any significant way, and he is finally killed. The Invisible Man, on the other hand, endures, and if we can believe him, is on his way back to us, a man of wisdom and hope, a man to argue, not slavery, but humanity.⁴

Indeed, one could just as easily assert that nothing has happened in any significant way to Young Goodman Brown in the dark forest of Hawthorne's story or to Dante during his trek in The Divine Comedy. Obviously, Goede has missed the key point that freddaniels experiences kairos and makes that highly significant experience accessible to the reader as well. In fact, a great deal of significance has occurred in the story: the protagonist has moved from innocence to guilt, from ignorance to knowledge, from chaotic chronos to meaningful kairos, and, ultimately, from death-in-life to life-in-death.

Black Boy, Wright's classic autobiography concerning growing up Black in the southern United States, creates

⁴William Goede, "On Lower Frequencies: The Buried Men in Wright and Ellison," Modern Fiction Studies, 14, number 4 (Winter 1969-70).

both a fictional persona and an artificer capable of communicating the same vision freddaniels achieves in the sewer. The idea for Wright's book came after a lecture at Fisk University on April 9, 1943. After recognizing the therapeutic effect of retelling the events of his life, Wright decided to collect them into an autobiographical form, and the result in 1945 was an American masterpiece. Perhaps no person can fully understand the seething bitterness of the Black experience in the American South without digesting the book's contents.

Wright's autobiography remains true to a mythic religious paradigm rather than to a purely scientific and empirically defined standard. This places Black Boy squarely within the autobiographical genre because, as Morris Dickstein states, Wright "sorted his memories into a coherent fable, aiming, like all great autobiographies, to fashion a myth rather than to convey information about the past."⁵

⁵Morris Dickstein, "Wright, Baldwin, Cleaver," in Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives, edited by David Ray and Robert M. Farnsworth (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971; rpt, k973), p. 186. Obviously, Dickstein means to comment upon Wright's use of black folklore, the story about the gluttonous black preacher who dines with his family, or the over-stated description of his dipsomania at age thirteen. Exaggerations and overstatements are quite common in all American autobiographies from the earliest times, and Black autobiographies such as The Autobiography of Malcolm X tend to use these devices as well. For a fuller treatment of the genre and Black Boy's place within it, consult Roy Pascal's Design and Truth in

The approach remains consistent with the evocation of the homo religiosus. The evolving consciousness of the persona of Wright becomes the self-authenticating voice for the religious-consciousness of Black America, stripped of orthodox rigidities.

One of the greatest problems concerning critics of Black Boy is Wright's reputed blindness to the efficacy of the Black church and Black folk culture. Gerian Steven Moore suggests that "Black Boy . . . presents the black man in retreat from society," a point echoed by George Kent, Saunders Redding, and Alaine Locke, to name a few others.⁶ There is a terrible paradox involved in assessing Wright's attitude as totally negative to Black Culture, however, because he uses its raw materials, here in Black Boy and elsewhere, to create art. Perhaps, in Twelve Million Black

Autobiography (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), an overview of the genre; G. Thomas Couser's American Autobiography (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), a good study of American examples; and Steven Butterfield's Black Autobiography in America, a flawed study which is valuable in general terms. These generic applications are beyond the purview of this dissertation.

⁶Gerian Steven Moore, "Richard Wright's American Hunger," CLAJ, 30,, number 1 (September 1977), 85. Moore suggests that this tendency stems from Wright's need to be validated by white people, a debatable assumption. A new source of criticism for Wright's alienation from Black Culture comes from some Black critics who claim Wright does not create believable Black woman characters and that his inability to do so makes him blind to the Black woman's role historically in nurturing and preserving Black culture. A recent discussion session at the 1981 Annual Meeting of the C.L.A. in New Orleans focused on these and other issues in Afro-American Literature.

Voices (1941), Wright created one of the most influential paeans to the beauty and perseverance of Black Culture that has ever been created.⁷

Certainly, Wright does attack orthodox religion, a component of Black Culture, in Black Boy, but he seems only to criticize the limiting strictures of the fundamentalist perspective of Aunt Addie or Granny Wilson to support his radically individualistic perspective. In his description of a revival meeting at which all the children are coerced into accepting salvation, a scene reminiscent of Langston Hughes' "Salvation," Wright says, "The tribe, for its own safety, was asking us to be one with it. Our mothers were kneeling in public and praying for us to give the sign of allegiance."⁸

This point of view admittedly seems only minimally aware of the survival strategies of the church and the sociological significance of such cultural centers. Wright argues in Black Boy for empirically verifiable data and belief based on reason, not mysticism or superstition. As noted in an earlier chapter, such a view places Wright's perspective in the Aquinas tradition which anticipates Tillich's work in this

⁷Robert Felgar, Richard Wright (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), pp. 38-43. Felgar makes an interesting point about the shift from the narrative voice "we" in Twelve Million Black Voices to the "I" of Black Boy being highly significant to this point.

⁸Richard Wright, Black Boy (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1947; rpt. 1945), p. 101. All subsequent references to the text will be listed in parenthesis.

century; in this tradition, one believes that reason ultimately provides the basis for truth and "revelation." Wright says as much to Granny Wilson, the matriarchal grandmother with white features and a fanatic Puritanism, that "I needed proof before I could believe, that I could not commit myself to something I could not feel or see" (p. 101). As Wright had discovered in The Communist Party, he intimates in certain Christian sects that mind-control is the goal and that "The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn" (p. 119). Nevertheless, Wright sees the unity in Black Culture between the secular and the religious areas, stating that the Bible stories were "secularized to the level of our street life, rejecting all meanings that did not fit that environment" (p. 72).

Wright's criticism of orthodox religion comes down to an aversion to any institution that acquiesces to the status quo and strives to control and emasculate individuality.

The ethos of the racist South has never been more scathingly depicted than in Black Boy, inspiring the wrath of more conservative critics on both sides of the issue. Senator Bilbo's famous diatribe against the book from the floor of the United States Senate represents the virulent white racism, but Black critics such as Alain Locke also attacked roughness and stylistic crudity. Hearing that Locke shivered when he read Black Boy, Wright retorted that "he

needs to shiver a little, life is cold."⁹ In Black Boy, Blacks are faced with living in a world dominated by white racism. The racist spectre of white mythology costs Wright's friend, Ned's brother Bob, his life for being in the same room with a white prostitute. Blacks are never allowed their voice, or "logos," and linguistic emasculation becomes a prevalent theme as the narrator, too, oversteps his place. When social lies are preferred, he tells the truth.

Given such a restrictive environment, Wright shows the inevitable reactions of violence. The tension between Blacks and whites causes violence to erupt periodically: Wright's mother forces him to fight through the street gangs to bring back the groceries, and he confronts Uncle Tom with a razor to avoid a beating. Metaphorically, Wright shows the debilitating effects of racism as he describes the feelings of young blacks in a locomotive. "When the men were not looking, he would climb into the engineer's cab and pull our small bodies to the window and look out, imagining that we were grown and had got a job as an engineer running a train and that it was night and there was a storm and we had a long string of passenger cars behind us, trying to get

⁹ Bilbo's comments appear in Ray and Farnsworth, p. 16, in a speech being delivered to the Senate to oppose integration of the Armed Forces, while Wright's retort to Locke is quoted from Fabre, p. 281.

them safely home" (pp. 52, 53). In the most artistically satisfying depiction of white oppression, Mr. Olin, a white man, succeeds in getting Richard and Harrison, employees of rival optical companies, to box each other. Such sport becomes a metaphor for all Afro-American experience--a significance not lost on Ralph Ellison, who used this scenario so well in "The Battle Royal" section of Invisible Man. The disgust and bitterness felt by Blacks who succumb to the pressures and actually attack each other rather than repudiate their roles becomes something for which Richard feels he "could never properly atone" (p. 213). As Nathan Scott suggests, the world in Black Boy "is, in effect, the world of the concentration camp. Just as, at Dachau and Buchenwald, the prisoners turned against each other and fought among themselves and were each others' torturers, so too was it in this black underworld out of which Wright himself came."¹⁰

But Wright redeems the ethos of the racist South through his artistic voice. In a sense, Black Boy, like Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, reflects an evolving consciousness. Robert Stepto identifies this quest for a voice and literacy as a characteristic of the Slave

¹⁰ Nathan A. Scott, "Search for Beliefs: The Fiction of Richard Wright," University of Kansas City Review, 23 (October 1956), 23.

Narrative, a genre Black Boy fits nicely into.¹¹ The unarticulated narrator finds his self-authenticating voice and "sees" the relationship between the real world and the world of fiction; for example, Wright sees his mother's suffering represented fictionally in Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt and Sister Carrie. In one of the most poignant passages of Black Boy, Wright has to forge a note to the librarian to use a white man's card to obtain several Mencken books. Finding that he, too, could use "words like weapons," Wright places himself quite correctly in a tradition that

seemed defensively critical of the straightened American environment. These writers seemed to feel that America could be shaped nearer to the hearts of those who lived in it. And it was out of these novels and stories and articles, out of the emotional impact of imaginative constructions of heroic or tragic deeds, that I felt touching my face a tinge of warmth from an unseen light; and in my leaving I was groping toward that invisible light, always trying to keep my face so set and turned that I would not lose the hope of its faint promise, using it as my justification for action.

(p. 227)

At the end of Black Boy, the literate artist has transcended the narrow straits of the South to head North and perhaps "win some redeeming meaning" for his life (p. 228). Mingled

¹¹Robert Stepto, "I Thought I Knew These People: Richard Wright and the Afro-American Literary Tradition," Massachusetts Review, 18, Number 3 (Autumn 1977), 533. Stepto lists the following five other characteristics of the genre: violence and growing hunger, skepticism toward Christianity, portraiture of a black family valiantly trying to maintain unity, an impregnable isolation, and a desire to follow the North Star resolved by riding the freedom train.

with the ashes of a First Edition of Black Boy after his death, Wright's cremated body is a striking memorial to this redemption and to the biblical injunction that a prophet is often without honor in his own country.

Nicknamed Fishbelly in The Long Dream, Rex Tucker recapitulates the roles of freddaniels and the autobiographical Wright: he represents the completed cycle of Wright's homo religiosus. Notwithstanding the several negative criticisms from various sources, its strength makes it a crucially important work.¹² The Long Dream represents a homecoming, both emotionally and intellectually. The memories, especially about Black Southern Culture, are intensely ambivalent, but rank among the most objective evocations in Afro-American Literature.

Both the title of the novel and the three major divisions suggest the dichotomy of dream and reality. The Long Dream suggests the unreality imposed upon Blacks by institutional racism, regionally and nationally. Part I of the novel, "Daydreams and Nightdreams," centers around the education of Rex Tucker into this world, a bildungsroman concerning his initiation into Black adulthood. He "sees" Black experience through the distorted lens of the white South. "Days and Nights," the second section, concerns

¹²Richard Wright, The Long Dream (New York: Doubleday, 1958; rpt. 1969). All subsequent references to the text will be listed by page numbers in parenthesis.

itself with Fishbelly's collaboration with his father and ultimately with the white power structure as well as his subsequent disillusionment after the Grove-fire incident and his father's murder. "Waking Dreams," the concluding section of the novel, relates Fish's redemptive moment when he extricates himself from the "deadness" of the past--both his mother's religion and his father's partial collaboration--and escapes as his own man. He resurrects himself from the ashes of the past.

Black folk culture and solidarity are the means for his redemption. Chris, the older Black, crucified for alleged relations with a white prostitute; Tyree, his father, a scapegoat brutally slain to cover up the fire incident's principals; the Black trusty, who warns Fish in jail about Bert the stool by saying "It's raining and you can't see it!" (p. 365); and especially Zeke and Tony, who console Fish from France, all signify Black Culture and its persistent drive for human dignity against the overwhelming odds perpetuated by racism in the American South. Incredibly enough, moreover, several critics have missed this sympathetic treatment, including the usually perceptive Blyden Jackson who compares The Long Dream unfavorably to the first two sections of Native Son as a measure of Wright's dislocation from the cultural scene:

When he follows his home country north, as he does in the first two books of Native Son, he is still on his native ground. When he tries to return to it, as in The Long Dream, seeing

it through eyes other than his own,
 he has deserted the one source of his
 greatest strength. He has become, that
 is, in all too sad a consequence, his own
 Big Boy away from home.¹³

Admittedly, the novel deals, at various points, with Black Culture in a uniformly negative manner. In Part I, "Daydreams and Nightdreams," Fish and his friends engage in self-destruction. They argue vociferously with Sam, a youngster who expresses the radical notion of the desirability of a return to the African homeland, and implicitly accept the predominant "white" values. Attending "Colored Day" at the Fair, Fish and friends metaphorically strike out at themselves by hurling balls at the Nigger Head until Tony finally succeeds. The victim's "body" was "chained to the hole in the canvas," emblematically recalling slavery, while Fishbelly is compelled to respond, for "That obscene black face was his own face and, to quell the war in his heart, he had either to reject it in hate or accept it in love. It was easier to hate that degraded black face than to love it" (pp. 45, 47). Additionally, they persecute the homosexual Aggie West, refusing to allow him to play baseball and

¹³Other similar-minded critics include Harold Isaacs, "Five Writers and Their African Ancestry," Phylon (Fall 1960), 254-265, who feels Wright is too unaware of the great strides America had made during his sojourn in France, and Saunders Redding, "Home is Where the Heart Is," New Leader (December 11, 1961), 24, who feels that Wright had "forgotten the American idiom" in addition to Blyden Jackson, The Waiting Years (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1976), p. 145, who believes that Wright in France had become his own "Big Boy away from home." In terms of Redding's critique, I

beating him unmercifully, knowing all the while that "We treat 'im like the white folks treat us" (p. 39). They encounter the fatally seductive white woman at the Fair, a brazen wench who bares her white breasts to them, a trap seen more vividly in Chris' later martyrdom and castration. "Fishbelly saw a dark, coagulated blot in a gaping hole between his thighs and, with defensive reflex, he lowered his hands to his groin" (p. 77). His father's ambivalent relationship to both Black Culture and the white power structure in Clintonville arises from his funeral business and his involvement in prostitution and vice, and this makes Fish see his father as "consumed by self-hatred" (p. 71). In a highly significant dream, Fish relates all of these negative impressions about Black Culture to the notion of linear time, "a big white clock with a white face and two white hands flung wide to its warning . . . for the clock began a loud striking like somebody beating a drum TICK TOCK and the clock began striking thunderingly DONG DONG and he was amazed when the clock spoke DON'T DON'T" (pp. 81, 82). The white world's strict parameters on sexuality shape a metaphor for restrictions on all Black life.

Fishbelly first encounters the sexual lessons of white society through his name. His real name Rex becomes Fishbelly

am currently assessing its validity by comparing the speech patterns of blacks in the LAGS Survey with the literary forms used by Wright in The Long Dream in an article to be published in The Tennessee Conference of Linguistics Bulletin.

when he mistakenly calls the bladders of fish bellies. Immediately, the name connotes both sexuality and white values. Fish associates the distended fishbellies with Mrs. Brown's pregnancy, and his friends relate their similarities to prophylactics. When Fish observes his father having an affair at the funeral parlor, he sees a poster of a white girl strolling seductively upon the beach and later cuts out a newspaper ad picturing a white woman. Fish's friend Teddy attacks his spiritual emptiness and whiteness associated with his name:

Fishes is to the sea what buzzards is to the air;
 they scavengers! Now a fish's belly's white and
 Fishbelly feels he's white. But he's white is on
 the bottom, on the belly, where you can't see it.
 That's how come Fishbelly puts on airs, lives in a
 big house, primps. Old Fishbelly's white 'cause
 his papa's a great big whale eating dead folks!
 (p. 100)

After the mudball fight, a scene reminiscent of "Big Boy Leaves Home," Tony and Fish get arrested for trespassing and Chris' castration becomes an existential threat. After he eats the frayed photograph of the white woman in the police car on the way, he faints twice when a policeman pulls out a knife and gets close to him and censures him for looking too closely at a white woman at the drive-in. Finally, however, on the third time, Fish refuses to comply with the policeman's Pavlovian stimulus, thereby showing his growing attempt to control his own destiny, stating, "He was willing to die, but he would never faint again, not as long as he lived" (p. 121).

Tyree, his father, releases him from jail, but to Fish he pays too high a price because he plays the role of a subservient docile black, not accepting his right to exist apart from that role. For Fish at this point he becomes "a father he had never known, a father he loathed and did not want to know" (p. 126).

Returning home from this initiation, Fish feels alone without his father's support, for in his eyes Tyree was already "castrated" (p. 144). In one day, Fish has been confronted with the brutality and racism of white society and the ineffectual limitations of his father's capitulations to the status quo. Like Jake Jackson, Tyree measures human worth by capitalistic or materialistic standards. "I'm a man! I got a business, a house, property, money in the bank" (p. 145). Fish accepts his father's proffered sexual experience in Maude's house and becomes more attracted to adjusting to his father's world view. In spite of his mixed feelings, the return to the Black Belt signals a renewal: "He found a dime in his pocket and bought a loaf of bread and walked along in the sun, nibbling at the crust, savoring the taste, reconciled to the sky, the trees, the dusty road, and sensing once more his body belonging to him" (p. 139).

Part II, "Days and Nights," discusses Fish's attempts to merge his life with Tyree's dreams and conduct business in the Black Belt. Emulating his father, he takes a mulatto mistress, Gladys, and begins to assume the role his father has

adopted. Gladys becomes an important key to Fishbelly's evolution because she is virtually white and seems oblivious to her connections with Black Culture vis a vis white racism.¹⁴ To Fish, "she was not as pretty as Gloria [Tyree's mistress], but she reminded him of her. She had defeated-looking, moist, hurt, brown eyes that were almost always downcast in gaze, and she had an air of sophisticated fatigue" (p. 170). As for Tyree's contention that Gladys or any woman is "meat and that's all," Fish tries to set her and her illegitimate daughter up in an apartment and seems to love her in a way foreign to his father's capabilities.

The grotesque Fourth-of-July fire at the Grove, based upon an actual fire that a family friend had told Wright about, makes Fish "see" the collaboration of Tyree with the white power-structure in its true light.¹⁵ Tyree has been a

¹⁴All three of Wright's heroes--freddaniels, Wright, and Fishbelly--must confront the fatally seductive white woman's lure. In perhaps Wright's fullest treatment of the theme, "The Man Who Killed a Shadow," Saul Saunders and the white librarian blindly reenact the cultural stereotype. One of Faulkner's stories, "Dry September," discusses Miss Minnie Cooper, an aging and virginal matron, who accuses Will Mayes, a Black man, of rape. Since Wright's story focuses upon Saul Saunder's psychology exclusively and tells little or nothing about the "shadow's" motivations, and Faulkner's story does the converse, a close comparative study of these two stories might complete the picture of the sexual myth concerning black men and white women in America. Currently, I am working on such a study and continue to see a great deal of room for comparative studies of black and white southern writers.

¹⁵Fabre, p. 563. He reports that Mathilda Foley, a family friend, told him in detail of the Rhythm Club fire in Mississippi and that Wright used these details later to create the Grove-fire incident section of The Long Dream.

silent partner in the venture with Dr. Bruce, a local black dentist, and they have been paying off Chief of Police Cantley to overlook fire-code violations. Reluctantly, Fish must accept the idea that his father's status and money derive, at least in part, from collusion with the mortal enemy, and that collusion has been responsible for forty-two black deaths, including Gladys': "his manhood cringed as he realized once more that the money he had been spending had come partly from her earnings" (p. 277). When challenged and singled out for blame, Tyree elevates his status beyond his integrity. Fish recapitulates the pattern of his father by collecting rents and developing many condescending and uniformly negative attitudes toward his black clients. He "sensed in them a profound lassitude, a sort of lackadaisical aimlessness, a terribly pathetically narrow range of emotional activity veering from sex to religion, from religion to alcohol" (p. 199) and comes to "conceal compassionate impulses" (p. 203) and adopt Maude's dictum that "Money's always clean, son" (p. 202). Tyree's death and the ramifications of the Grove fire, however, change Fish irrevocably, forcing him to confront fully what his father stood for, accepting this more sympathetically than his mother's religion.

Additional autobiographical details have been provided by the critics as well. In Native Sons (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott and Company, 1968), Edward Margolies discusses autobiographical similarities between Rex Tucker and Richard Wright, and Constance Webb claims that Wright called The Long Dream a second "autobiography," and says "while he typed, or stared at the wall, forgotten episodes of his childhood had swum to the surface of his mind and assumed such importance that they compelled him to write only of a Southern experience" (p. 72).

In the final section of the novel, Fishbelly becomes the transformed FishyO of Zeke's letters, as he refuses to compromise with the white power-structure (as Zeke warns, "just don't go biting on any old hook with a worm on it," p. 37). He opposes the bad-faith efforts of deadened conservatism represented by his mother's impending marriage to Jim, a funeral-parlor worker. Accused unjustly of a rape of a white woman, he languishes in prison for a year and a half before breaking his ties with Clintonville and seeking his own identity elsewhere. Hiding the remaining checks, he refuses adamantly to disclose their existence and thereby connects himself to his father's world more closely. He adopts a more accepting view of Tyree's struggle by suggesting that "Papa did what he could" and by denying his mother's simplistic notion that Tyree was being punished for his sins by God. Fish's leaving Clintonville is not an escape from reality but a flight toward it.¹⁶ Refusing to compromise as even Tyree had done, he admits, "Papa, I'm leaving . . . I

¹⁶The artistic failure of the unpublished "Islands of Hallucinations" has been commented upon by Webb and other critics. Obviously, Wright's spiritual and geographical home remained always the American South, and his attempts to render another ambience such as Paris were most often disappointing efforts. Amira Baraka's "Afro-American Literature and the Class Struggle," BALF 14, number 1 (Spring 1980), 7, suggests that "The whole of Wright's life is a metaphor for flight . . . from the South, from whites, from Blacks, from the Communist Party, and from the U.S., finally from reality, though obviously the last was mitigated by his ability to record his experience accurately." Wright's flight is to reality, not from it.

can't make it here" as a measure of owning up to his inability to placate whites as his father had done through playing a subservient role. In a vignette on the plane, Fish confronts an Italian immigrant's son who visits his dead father's village in Italy to better understand what his father called "America 'my wonderful romance'" (p. 380). Wright exposes the irony quite well, saying "That man's father had come to America and found a dream; he [Fish] had been born in America and found a nightmare!" (p. 380).

But Fish's flight opens up a new possibility for a reconstituted human covenant for himself and others who can escape the narrow parameters of America's institutionalized racism. "That in him which had always made him self-conscious was now the bud of a new possible life that was pressing ardently but timidly against the shell of the old to shatter it to be free" (p. 383). Fish returns the checks to MacWilliams, a sympathetic and ineffectual white lawyer, thereby freeing himself from Clintonville. In the imagery of the final passage, he uses the phraseology of salute to explain his psychology.

He was now voluntarily longing to pledge allegiance to a world whose brutal might could never compel him to love it with threats of death. . . . He prayed wordlessly that a bright, bursting tyrant of living sun would soon lay down its golden laws to loosen the locked regions of his heart and cast the shadow of his dream athwart the stretches of time.

(p. 384)

Fish Tucker builds upon the strength and dignity of the purgatory of the Black Belt and transcends the compensatory religion of his mother, as well as the dehumanizing compromise of his father, to complete the religious vision of freddaniels and Wright himself.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Critics of Richard Wright's fiction have often overlooked the use of "religious" approaches in favor of more conventional rubrics (naturalistic, Marxist, existential) in their studies. Perhaps because of a restricted definition of "religious" as orthodox rituals or dogmas, such critics saw Wright as anti-religious or areligious. This study suggests, however, that by defining "religious" in a broader context, as Tillich does in defining God as an "ultimate concern," Wright's fiction can be studied fruitfully as "religious" documents, even if the fiction eschews orthodoxy.¹ In addition, religion may derive etymologically from the Greek religare, "to bind back."² Thus Wright's fiction tries to bind back the unfulfilled covenant of American Humanism. In so doing, Wright forces his fictional personae or readers, or both, to "see" the sacraments of this covenant implicitly in his works.

¹Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Volume I (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), p. 211.

²American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language makes this claim for a possible etymology. In this sense, Wright seeks to "bind back" the American covenant, which, in Afro-American culture, is both secular and religious. See Chapter II for a fuller treatment. Also see Jean Wagner's Black Poets of the United States from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes, translated by Kenneth Douglas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), a classic study of the conflation of the secular and religious in terms of Black poets.

In the twentieth-century theologies of Tillich and Barth and their corresponding notions of "revelation," one sees that Wright's method reflects Tillich's view that reason leads to revelation and the kairos experience, whereas Flannery O'Connor, or any other traditional white southern writer (Faulkner, Warren, Tate), expresses the Barthian view that man's reason leads always to deception and sinfulness (man is non posse non peccare). The first applications in Wright's work come in Uncle Tom's Children, particularly in Big Boy in "Big Boy Leaves Home" and Aun' Sue in "Bright and Morning Star." Clearly, these characters embody the homo religiosus who perceives "revelation" through "seeing" truth and acting upon its demands.

Unlike the positive examples of Uncle Tom's Children, Jake Jackson of Lawd Today and Cross Damon of The Outsider display an inability to achieve a balance between the head and the heart which leads to a meaningful existence in Wright's fiction. Jake's overemphasis of the emotional seduces him to a blind acceptance of the myths of bourgeois capitalism, whereas Cross' propensity toward ratiocination drives him to an isolato status, similar to those characters in Hawthorne and O'Connor, cut off from the human community. Even in these negative examples, however, Wright projects the ideal implicitly for the reader's acceptance.

Bigger Thomas embodies an admixture of the two previously discussed characters. He gets cut off from the folk

culture of Black Chicago and accidentally smothers Mary Dalton when he is trapped in her room, but he finally "deconstructs" American society through the use of a religious progression from passive victim to active Christ figure. First, the Yahwehistic motif predominates through the violence involving Mary and Bessie. Then the Christ or messianic motif supplants the earlier violence with a reconstituted community achieved between Bigger and the sensitive reader.

Wright's most fully developed examples of the homo religiosus are freddaniels in "The Man Who Lived Underground," the autobiographical persona in Black Boy, and Fishbelly in The Long Dream. They complete the cycle of Richard Wright's ubiquitous concern for religious problems in his major characters.

This "religious" approach has borrowed heavily from extra-literary sources: the theology of Tillich; the cultural structuralism of Levi-Strauss; the comparative religion studies of Eliade, Mbiti, and Scott; and the Black theological perspectives of Cone and Jones. As such, the study is not therefore purely literary or thematic, but is an interdisciplinary synthesis. The disadvantage of this approach is more than compensated for by the results. For example, the link between chronos and kairos, the dual notions of chaotic and redeemed time, and linear and mythic time consciousness in the Afro-American tradition has not been established before

this study. Second, this study reassesses several underrated works and uses textual sources to reveal that Wright is much more sympathetic to Black Culture than many critics have assumed.³ Finally, the contribution of the study derives from the in-depth interpretation it provides into Wright's fictional world.

Several additional studies have been suggested as a result of the ramifications of this dissertation. Other supposedly irreligious contemporary writers might be productively studied, using a contemporary theological paradigm as a tool (studies of Pynchon or Hawkes come readily to mind). Second, critics might focus more on structural patterns, narrative techniques, and inter-relationships in Wright's fiction, since I have concerned myself primarily with devices relevant to character-development. Third, my research uncovered a need for significant comparative studies of Black and white writers from the South; as a result, I postulated that a monograph study of Flannery O'Connor and Richard Wright was long overdue, as well as comparative studies of others (Faulkner and Wright, for example). Another area of particular concern involved the concept of "logos" discussed in the

³Such critics as Robert Stepto, Saunders Redding, and Blyden Jackson have stated these views. Since I am a white critic, my response to these Black critics must remain qualified by that fact. Their responses are formed by a greater familiarity with Black Culture than I possess. Nevertheless, the works do reveal more positive responses to Black Culture than have been previously recognized.

section concerning Bigger in Native Son. It became clear that more studies were needed correlating the accurate use of literary dialect with the Linguistic Atlas of the United States data now being accumulated in various centers to broaden the base of understanding between literature, applied linguistics, and semiotics.⁴ I am reading a paper in this vein at next year's SAMLA convention in Louisville entitled "Two Uses of Literary Dialect: A Comparative Study of Flannery O'Connor's 'A Displaced Person' and Richard Wright's 'The Man Who Was Almost a Man.'"

Finally, my study attempts to plumb the depths of one of the most important American artists. Too often, as George Kent and others have shown, Wright's work has been simplified to a sociological or political statement, while the complexities remained glossed over.⁵ I have striven to grapple with some of those questions in order to place Wright's work more exactly within the tradition of Afro-American Literature. Four works in particular--The Man Who Lived Underground, Lawd Today, The Outsider, and The Long Dream--have been consistently undervalued or distorted in Wright's canon and my explications may at least stimulate a debate and perhaps a

⁴The most valuable data for Wright's fiction about the southern ethos would be the Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States, being prepared for publication by the University of Georgia Press in Athens, Georgia. Lee Pederson is the editor of the project.

⁵George Kent, "Introduction," Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972), p. 11.

reassessment of their relative merit. Wright's eternal prophecy remains, imbedded in the works themselves, urging all men to live more meaningful lives and fulfill their destinies in a society "deconstructed" from the dehumanizing myths of their past failures.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH, THE POTENTIAL AUDIENCE,

AND THE INHERENT LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

This dissertation addresses a potential audience consisting of those readers with a double consciousness concerning both modern religious thought in the western world and Black American Literature. As a white critic, I have endeavored to treat the literature as an organic component of Black Culture, not to abstract it from that Culture, even though I can understand that culture only vicariously. As a result, this study promotes and contributes to several traditions of Wright scholarship --the white literary establishment, the Black scholarly world, and the literary formalist school to name but a few --in a sanguine fashion. Although my research and methodology will completely satisfy none of these diverse critical schools, in part because of its paradoxically extrinsic relationship to Black Culture, the dissertation will nonetheless ideally complement traditional readings and facilitate fresh ones rather than negating previous critical interpretations. Perhaps a mutual exchange of ideas can then create a greater understanding and dialogue between white and Black scholars concerning the primacy of studying all literature in the broadest perspective possible.

VITA

William Joseph Barnette was born in Charleston, West Virginia, on November 20, 1946. He attended public school in South Charleston, and was graduated from South Charleston High School in 1964. The following year, he entered Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina, from which he graduated with an A.B. degree with a major in English in 1968.

Returning to West Virginia, he pursued an M.A. degree in English at Marshall University, and was graduated in August 1970. While there, he was a teaching assistant for two years and initiated his formal teaching career on a full-time basis. In 1969, he taught English at Northern Virginia Community College, and in 1970, he taught at Glenville State College.

In 1970, he joined the faculty at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee. In 1973, he began work toward his Ph.D. degree in English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He participated in a faculty exchange program at Tennessee State University from 1974 to 1976. In 1977, he was granted tenure at Austin Peay. He was the recipient of a Faculty Development Grant from Austin Peay in 1976; a teaching assistantship in 1978-79 and a Dissertation Year Fellowship in 1979 from the University of Tennessee. In August 1981, he received his Doctorate, with a major in English and a minor in Philosophy.