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# *The Outsider* and Richard Wright's Apocalyptic Creation

Mikako Takeuchi

With *Native Son* (1940), which disclosed the turbulent inner world of a young black American in an urban ghetto, and *Black Boy* (1945), an autobiography of his early life in the segregated South, Richard Wright (1908-60) stood on the literary forefront as the spokesman of the African American mind. In his second published novel *The Outsider* (1953), however, Wright took a new turn and brought forth a black intellectual whose primal concern is not racial.

Wright, who ended *Native Son* before Bigger Thomas's execution with a feeling that two murders were enough, made his new novel far more demonic with five murders and one suicide caused by the unrelenting logic of the protagonist. This six-hundred-page spectacle of horror seemed to have less impact on Wright's contemporaries than *Native Son* did. To some, Wright's exile in France appeared to have lessened his earlier grip. Saunders Redding, for example, criticized that "in going to live abroad Richard Wright had cut the roots that once sustained him."<sup>1</sup> Another stated that nowhere in the whole volume could Wright give one vital picture of the life in Chicago's Southside because "he has forgotten," and a black newsweekly condemned the novel as unreal as "a cheap drugstore whodunit."<sup>2</sup> The thought-ridden protagonist of *The Outsider* feels that "being a Negro was the least important thing in his life" (385), and he is indeed remote from Bigger Thomas, who wallowed and struggled in the American racial environ-

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ment. Written in exile and loaded with abstract thoughts, the novel tended to be regarded as a work infected with the European philosophical ideas then in vogue. In Arna Bontemps's words, it was Richard Wright's "roll in the hay with the existentialism of Sartre."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, *The Outsider* has its force to make the reader participate in the seemingly "unreal", and that power undoubtedly derives from Wright's own hard-won philosophy molded throughout his life which spurred him on a journey all the way out of the Deep South through the North and away from the entire country. This novel of ideas can be read as a form of Wright's autobiography of thoughts which he needed to write for the modern age.

The novel begins with Cross Damon, a twenty-six-year-old postal clerk in Chicago, held at bay by his pregnant mistress and his wife's relentless demand for compensation. A subway crash brings him all of a sudden out of this deadlock: finding himself being made officially dead by mistaken identity, Cross decides to keep playing dead. After killing an old friend who happens to find him alive in a dubious hotel, he flees to New York and assumes the new identity of Lionel Lane. He gets acquainted with the white Communists, Gil and Eva Blount, and agrees to move in with them to be involved in desegregating their apartment building run by a Fascist landlord. Yet he soon finds Gil's authoritarianism to be not any less a menace to his concept of freedom than the landlord's racism. Accordingly, upon stepping into the scene of their violent grapple with each other over the racial policy, Cross strikes both the Communist and Fascist to death without compunction. Still later, he silences another Communist official who has got hold of the evidence of his criminalities. Eva Blount, Cross's sweetheart, plunges from the sixth-floor apartment at the discovery of his monstrous deeds. The nightmarish unfolding of the narrative comes

to an ironical end with Cross being shot down by Communist henchmen.

Cross Damon embodies the modern man who searches for life in the meaningless world. Or rather, he is a twentieth-century demon incarnate, who explores power structures to destroy every pretense of civilization. The first thing he instinctively negates is religious premises. Cross is a student of Nietzsche in seeing that the origin of God is not in piety but in fear. Named after “the Cross of Jesus” by his mother, he has been brought up with the sense of fear of “an invisible God” instilled in him by his mother. God has always been an image of “a huge and crushing NO” to him (22), and his adulthood debauchery is in great part a backlash against his mother’s doctrine of self-mortification. With Nietzschean criticism Cross observes that his mother’s religious passion was born of her own “ressentment”. She was driven to religion by the torment of her husband’s infidelity, and although she was a school teacher in the South, “her real profession was a constant rehearsal in her memory of her tiny but pathetic drama” of unhappiness (28). It was by this motive force of grief and discontent that Cross as an infant was taken along to God.

Wright seems to make Mrs. Damon’s devotion to God exemplify that the origin of religious enthusiasm is a hidden and vengeful wish for salvation through the inverted rhetoric that only the suffering and powerless are truly blessed. Nietzsche thought that behind the Christian will to be good were the emotions of vengeance and hatred. These hidden emotions gave birth to ascetic ideals, through the pursuit of which the suffering expected to have *their* kingdom come. As a matter of course, man “projected all his denials of self, nature, naturalness out of himself as affirmations, as true being, embodiment, reality, as God.”<sup>4</sup> Cross reflects that “his dread had been his mother’s first fateful gift to him,” and his instinctive rebellion for freedom originates from this

image of a terrifying God: "This God's NO-FACE . . . had posited in him an unbridled hunger for the sensual by branding all sensuality as the monstrous death from which there was no resurrection" (22).

Cross's rebelliousness leads him to an existential philosophy of life that "a man creates himself" (65). The subway crash, which he survives as the officially dead, enables him to break with the old conditions and to create a new life. The experiment, however, plunges him into a new sense of dread, which generates from having to face his existence without any recourse other than his lonely will. The image of the church closed after his own funeral symbolizes how outside of any human promises or accepted assumptions he is: "The church across the street was still there, but somehow it had changed into a strange pile of white, lonely stone, as bleak and denuded of meaning as he was" (128). Cross's murder of his old friend, whom he runs into after his supposed death, is a symbolic execution to the world that was binding him with moral prescriptions, or the world that is epitomized by his mother's conception that "life is a promise . . . God promised it to us" (29).

In the dining car of the train bound for New York on which he takes flight, Cross happens to face a priest and a District Attorney, the incarnation of law and religion he is to challenge. He observes the priest as representing the world of self-sufficient stability enabled by embracing an established dogma:

He disliked most strongly all men of religion because he felt that they could take for granted an interpretation of the world that his sense of life made impossible. The priest was secure and walked the earth with a divine mandate, while Cross's mere breathing was an act of audacity, a confounding wonder at the daily mystery of himself. (156)

The priest is depicted as a self-protective hypocrite whose true aim is power. This same priest refuses to be a witness for a black waiter who is in danger of losing his job by a white woman's false accusation; instead of getting "mixed up" in such a trouble, the priest thinks his real job is "saving souls" and flies off for Rome to see the Pope(221). Wright's ironical presentation of religious figures contains an echo of Nietzsche's deprecation of the ascetic priest whose ideal "believes in its absolute superiority, convinced that no power exists on earth but receives meaning and value from it."<sup>5</sup>

Wright's criticism of religion is less an intellectual adoption of philosophical concepts than an outgrowth of his Southern experience. Coming to age in an austere home environment, his youthful hostility was naturally directed to his grandmother who stifled his freedom and creativity by maintaining "a hard religious regime" in the home. Wright's cynicism to religion arose from his youthful insight into the will to dominate which was the hidden emotional essence of his extremely religious family. He writes in his autobiography: "Whenever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn."<sup>6</sup> It was obvious to him that the racial domination by white America, which was a part of the world's imperialism, was practiced in the name of God and that the black church, in a way, functioned as its stronghold. As long as an individual tries to numb his or her mind by the submission to a dogma, there would be no change.

As Michel Fabre points out, Wright did not minimize the role of religion in the works written out of the wish "to stress the folk tradition."<sup>7</sup> In contrast to *Black Boy* where religion is rejected as a means of escape that confines one to passivity, *12 Million Black Voices*

(1941) presents the nourishing aspects of the black church by viewing it as the source of black people's miraculous life force.<sup>8</sup> Wright valued the pagan element surviving under the surface of African Americans' "formal profession of the Christian virtues of meekness and altruism."<sup>9</sup> Black music is a repository of this untamed life force as he told in an interview about his love of gospel singing. What Wright saw at the core of black music, spiritual or secular, was an "affirmation of desire."<sup>10</sup>

The raw and primitive human energy that is the essence of black music provides a leitmotif to the action of *The Outsider*. Taking an apartment in Harlem, Cross hears raucous jazz flowing out from his landlady's room :

He came to feel that this music was the rhythmic flauntings of guilty feelings, the syncopated outpourings of frightened joy existing in guises forbidden and despised by others. He sensed how Negroes had been made to live in but not of the land of their birth, how the injunctions of an alien Christianity and the strictures of white laws had evoked in them the very longings and desires that that religion and law had been designed to stifle. He realized that this blue-jazz was a rebel art blooming seditiously under the condemnations of a Protestant ethic. . . . (178)

In Wright's scheme of the novel, this "musical language of the satisfiedly amoral," which stands in opposition to the established value system, not only represents black rebelliousness but also the eruption of the universal vital force seeking for liberation.

Taking up his new identity of Lionel Lane from a tombstone, Cross as a demon is reborn to the world to find it filled with "little gods." Herndon and Gill, a Fascist and a Communist respectively, are

the first little gods Cross faces, and these two figures embody the grotesque nature of believing in the one and the only truth of their own. Herndon's "truth" is the old-fashioned racist ideology that "God made him and his kind to rule over the lower breeds" (264), and he makes this the philosophical justification for his hatred of all non-Anglo-Saxons. On the other hand, Gil is a preacher of the absolute unworthiness of individuality. Despite his idealistic notion of desegregation, he relentlessly forbids the black dining car waiter to organize a union, just as the priest refused to rescue the same waiter by witnessing to his innocence. Gil represents a transformer of the religious ideal of self-mortification for the secular ends, with a doctrine that the voice of the Party is absolute and that being a Communist means "negating yourself." To Cross the Communist Party turns out to be nothing but a systematization of man's naked will to power through the negation of individual freedom. He marvels at "the astuteness of both Communist and Fascist politicians who had banned the demonic contagions of jazz" (269). In this wonderment Cross obviously identifies himself with the untamed vital force of jazz that is diametrically opposed to the denial of human subjectivity practiced by racism and totalitarianism.

In *Native Son* it is a Communist lawyer, Max, who calls people's attention to the vicious cycle of the history of oppression. In his defense of Bigger's murder, Max discusses that Americans, who had escaped from the European power structure, in turn oppressed others in the New World. The Communist lawyer wonders if "the laws of human nature stopped operating after we had got our feet upon our road."<sup>11</sup> Although Wright's ambivalence toward the Communist Party is detectable in Max's ultimate limitation in understanding Bigger,<sup>12</sup> the Communist figure at least is depicted as a conscientious upholder of Marxist thoughts. In *The Outsider*, however, it is the Communist who oppresses



others under the mask of a defender of freedom, and the change in Wright's stance is evident.

Much of *The Outsider* was in fact motivated by Wright's split with the Communist Party. Although Wright had expected the Party to be the means of freeing himself from the intellectual isolation of the Black Belt and of realizing his wish for human unity, he found the Party's pressure on him to be a propaganda writer increasingly oppressive. The Party's stance on World War Two caused his eventual estrangement. Whereas Wright held that the war should not be a justification for suspending social progress at home, the Party unconditionally endorsed Roosevelt in order to avoid antagonizing the government and refrained from any open criticism of racial discrimination in the army. Wright was keenly aware of the nation's self-contradiction, and believed that if Americans had philosophical integrity, their fight for freedom and democracy at home should be no less intense than their anti-Fascist fight overseas. When he was awarded the Spingarn medal in 1941, the Communist party forced him to change the pacifist message of his acceptance speech to an appeal for African Americans to fight for the world's democracy. As Michel Fabre indicates, "the turnabout that the Party forced him to make was one of the most mortifying events of his career."<sup>13</sup> Wright made a public disclosure of the Party's terrorizing authoritarianism in his "I Tried to Be a Communist" in 1944, and every speech and writing of his has been ever since exposed to the Party's denigration.

The little gods Cross Damon confronts in *The Outsider* incarnate Wright's conviction that Communism and Fascism are two power systems equally brutal in their denial of individuality. Wright's disenchantment led him to an existential philosophy of life with "a kind of grim exhilaration in facing a world in which nothing could be taken for

granted, a world in which one had to create and forge one's own meaning for one's own self."<sup>14</sup> Cross Damon's "bubbling glee" at the spectacle of the Communist and Fascist little gods grappling with each other in mortal combat stems from a deep contempt that he shares with the author for self-righteous believers of the absolute.

Cross's involvement with the Communist officials reveals how a belief in the absolute could be a systematization of man's desire to be a god. That their ideology is nothing but a means to fulfill their passion for power is epitomized in Gil, who assumes the air of indisputable authority and reduces humanity to a mere instrument to substantiate his desire. This disdainful self-authorization seizes Cross's interest in this colossal system of power : "It was its believing that it *knew* life ; its *conviction* that it had mastered the act of living ; its *will* that it could define the ends of existence that fascinated him against his volition" (255). Wright's criticism of the political system is directed to unveiling the fundamental hypocrisy of any ideology which desires to wield power under the guise of a faith in a "truth".

*The Outsider* is a criticism of life that, as long as one's action is driven by "ressentment" or the feeling of victimization, one inevitably becomes what one initially intended to denounce. The irony of the revolutionary movement Cross sees is that those who challenge the rulers to build their paradise are in fact the mere "Jealous Rebels" (487), whose desires are only to continue the game of domination which they believe made them the initial victims. Cross perceives that what is going on among the Communists is the naked exploitation of humanity :

Its essence was a voluptuousness, a deep-going sensuality that took cognizance of fundamental human needs and the answers to

those needs. It related man to man in a fearfully organic way. To hold absolute power over others, to define what they should love or fear, to decide if they were to live or die and thereby to ravage the whole of their beings — that was a sensuality that made sexual passion look pale by comparison. (267)

The hypocrisy of those upholders of the absolute truth is that they do not really believe in any better future but love the world as it is to hold the godlike position in their turn.

This power game is in itself a “nameless religion,” in which tactics of exercising the sensual desire for power are mastered by living its rituals. In a sense, Cross murders to execute the participants in this evil faith. Upon discovering that a Party official, Jack Hilton, has got hold of the evidence of his murder of Gil, he finds himself being snared into this shameless mechanism of power which works at the core of the Communist Party. Cross’s murderous intent takes on decisiveness at the knowledge of Hilton’s intention to let him free and to use the death of Gil as a piece of good luck for assuming a higher position. Cross holds that the very fact that Hilton lets him live for the sake of power is most offensive to his sense of life. “You were going to make me a slave,” he declares to Hilton, “I would never have been able to draw a free breath as long as I lived if you had had your way” (402-03). In the subsequent scene of the locked-room murder of Hilton, Cross turns the radio up to full volume to muffle the pistol shot in the blast of jazz music, which fills the room in a diabolic flood. This completes Cross’s dramatic presentation of himself as a free man who is not to be subdued by any kind of authority.

Cross thus asserts his absolute right for freedom based on his concept that “Man is nothing in particular” until he is tracked down by

assassins and dies with a final realization that "Alone a man is nothing . . . Man is a promise that he must never break . . ." Critics are often divided in the interpretation of the ambivalence of the novel's outlook on life. Robert Felgar, for example, says that Wright hardly endorses the concept of absolute freedom and that the action of the novel ultimately rejects the existentialist philosophy that gave an intellectual background for Cross's behavior.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Michael F. Lynch argues that Wright resolved the conflict of *Native Son* in the ultimate devaluation of collectivism and naturalism in *The Outsider*. To Lynch, Cross's social message at the end is unconvincing and it reinforces Wright's conviction that freedom is man's natural element. Accordingly, the introduction of naturalistic motifs toward the end "should not be mistaken for a reversal of his existential thesis."<sup>16</sup> Eberhard Alsen seems to be in-between in interpreting the novel as Wright's own brand of existentialism which "combines Jean Paul Sartre's humanist ethics with an environmental determinism similar to that in the naturalist novels of Zola and Norris."<sup>17</sup>

As is obvious in Wright's statement that he has "stopped practicing the '-isms',"<sup>18</sup> arguments over which camp the novel belongs to would be of little purpose. It may rather be that Wright's critical mind projects the personal and the social onto global humanity. Cross's final words, "I'm *innocent*. . . That's what made the horror . . ." is not a self-justifying assertion of the right for total freedom but an expression of despair uttered by a man who has committed himself to live the malady of the modern age to the extreme.

Cross's newly expressed wish for human unity is not abrupt or affected in light of Wright's whole scheme because the novel is also a psychological drama in which the protagonist's violent drive for the murder of logic and his dispassionate self-criticism arise in alternate

tides. Around each time he succumbs to his relentless logic of killing, Cross lapses into a state of self-consciousness of acting as a little god by judging others with scornful finality. He continuously finds himself becoming the same monster he destroys, and is dismayed at the fact of his contracting the disease he hated. In a way Cross is conscious of himself as symbolical of the godless modern age, which proceeds toward a new sense of "the total and the absolute."

It is notable that Cross often projects his dilemmatic self-image upon the whole human society. Seeing the irony that he himself comes to assume total power in his rising impulse to defeat Hilton, Cross cannot help but feel as if he was staring "at the focal point of modern history" (328). Similarly, when he shudderingly dissuades himself from his egotistic logic that he should kill Eva in order to spare her from the despair of discovering his monstrosity, Cross compares his deadly thinking process to the madness of the modern era which is thrusting its way with newly invented gods be it science or industry or any ideological belief in a truth :

As he stood there in the dark straining at a decision, he could see that the grinding mechanisms of man's thought could destroy all of life on earth and leave this watery globe bare of the human beings who had produced the thinking . . .

Living thus tensely in his thoughts, Cross knew that this executing of the sentences of thought on life was kind of continuous madness whose logical end was suicide. (442)

The supreme irony is that his violent assertion of total freedom through cold-hearted logic created the absence of freedom. District Attorney Ely Houston forces him to realize this by not enforcing the law against his complete crime and leaving him at a loss in a void of meaning. Cross

is assassinated in the end, but his death is at the same time a suicide, the logical end of wielding the sense of omnipotence upon others. In that sense Cross dies a vicarious death for man's future by completing his demonic quest.

Wright once said that "Americanism is a kind of religion," and that everyone talks about freedom in America "because there's so little of it around."<sup>19</sup> Cross Damon is in part a criticism of America itself in that he falls into the contradiction of generating a lack of freedom in his quest after freedom. *The Outsider* was written in the midst of the rise of McCarthyism, which Wright suffered from both because of his uncompromising antiracist pronouncement at home and abroad and his past membership in the Communist Party. In fact the FBI started an investigation as early as 1942 concerning the possibility of prosecuting Wright for sedition because of his writing of *12 Million Black Voices*, and has continued to monitor his activities ever since.<sup>20</sup> Wright's vindication of himself in 1950 against being branded as Un-American pervades with the same irony he directs at the Communists in *The Outsider*:

My Un-Americanism, then, consists of the fact that I want the right to hold, without fear of punitive measures, an opinion with which my neighbor does not agree; the right to travel wherever and whenever I please even though my ideas might not coincide with those of whatever Federal Administration might be in power in Washington. . . .<sup>21</sup>

The nation's political intolerance Wright came to undergo at the breakout of the Cold War was no less plaguing than the authoritarianism of the Communist Party he had fled from. The heap of dead bodies *The Outsider* brings about reflects Wright's deep concern over the

ultimate futility of any drive for “the total and absolute” in the post-atomic-bomb era.

*The Outsider* is a milestone of Wright’s philosophy he has built through his life-long journey from the Deep South to the North and eventually out of the whole country. Each phase of his migration was an all-out confrontation with power, and his visceral sense of humanity incessantly drove him to challenge the will to dominate, whether it is religious dogmatism, racial discrimination, totalitarianism, or state nationalism. The power struggle the novel demonstrates is as complex as what the author himself experienced, something that could not be explained away by plain dichotomy. From the vantage point of his exile Richard Wright condensed his hard-won view of the plights of the modern age in *The Outsider*, and he manifested himself ever more decidedly as a writer of the human race.

#### Notes

1. Saunders Redding, “The Alien Land of Richard Wright,” *Soon, One Morning : New Writing by American Negroes, 1940-1962*, ed. Herbert Hill (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1963) 59.
2. Lorraine Hansberry, rev. of *The Outsider*, *Freedom* Apr. 1953 : 7 ; rev. of *The Outsider*, *Jet Magazine* 26 Mar. 1953 : 42.
3. Arna Bontemps, rev. of *The Outsider*, *Saturday Review* 28 Mar. 1953 : 15 -16.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, 1872, 1887, trans. Francis Golffing (New York : Doubleday, 1956) 226.
5. Nietzsche 284.
6. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York : Harper Perennial, 1993) 129, 159 -60.
7. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (William Morrow, 1973 ; Urbana and Chicago : U of Illinois P, 1993) 262.
8. See Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York : Thunder’s Mouth, 1988) 67-73, 130-31.

9. Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre, eds., *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson : UP of Mississippi, 1993) 108.
10. Kinnamon and Fabre, eds. 242-43.
11. Wright, *Native Son* (New York : Harper Perennial, 1993) 465.
12. Michael F. Lynch also discusses Keneth Kinnamon's statement that "As a fervent party member, Wright maintained a thoroughly Communist point of view in *Native Son*" as refutable. From Lynch's point of view, Wright's strain to make Bigger represent the oppressed is due to "his guilty consciousness on some level that he would soon abandon communist ideology and propaganda." See Lynch, *Creative Revolt : A Study of Wright, Ellison, and Dostoevsky* (New York : Peter Lang, 1990) 98-100 ; Kinnamon, *Emergence of Richard Wright : A Study in Literature and Society* (Urbana and Chicago : U of Illinois P, 1973) 125.
13. Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest* 225. Although Wright eventually supported the U.S. entry into the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor at the end of 1941, he "did not retreat in inch when it came to civil rights," and the differences in viewpoints resulted in his break with the Communist Party.
14. Wright to Edward Aswell, his editor at Harper's, on Aug. 21, 1955, qtd. in Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest* 230.
15. Robert Felgar, *Richard Wright* (Boston: Twayne, 1980) 113, 119.
16. Lynch, *Creative Revolt* 130 ; —, "Haunted by Innocence : The Debate with Dostoevsky in Wright's 'Other Novel,' *The Outsider*," *African American Review* 30. 2 (1996) : 257, 264.
17. Eberhard Alsen, " 'Toward the Living Sun' : Richard Wright's Change of Heart from *The Outsider* to *The Long Dream*," *College Language Association Journal* 38. 2 (1994) : 217.
18. Kinnamon and Fabre, eds. 137.
19. Kinnamon and Fabre, eds. 127, 123.
20. V. P. Franklin suggests that *12 Million Black Voices* was written while Wright was still a member of the Communist Party, therefore the Marxist element of this work may not be unrelated to many of the communist writings in the 1930s and early 1940s which gave effusive analyses of black life and culture to attract African Americans to the party. See Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths : Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition* (New York : Scribner, 1995) 207, 435.
21. Wright, "I Choose Exile," unpublished ms., 1-2, qtd. in Fabre, *The World*



*of Richard Wright* (Jackson : UP of Mississippi, 1987) 177.