

# The Importance of the City in *Native Son*

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**E**VEN the most ardent admirers of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, which was first published in 1941, seem to agree that the conclusion to the story of Bigger Thomas is badly flawed. Not only is the third section of the novel annoyingly discursive, but Wright fails to integrate his intellectual position, interpreted as Communism, with his visceral response to Negro life in America.<sup>1</sup> Recently critics have defended the third section by insisting that Boris Max, Bigger's lawyer, is not a spokesman for the author, or, if he is Wright's spokesman, he is not a Communist.<sup>2</sup> While this criticism is commendable in that it directs our attention to Wright's artistry instead of to his ideology, it continues to isolate Bigger at the end as either a potential revolutionary or an existential hero. It places the focus upon Bigger's rebellion alone, and says little or nothing about the significance of Max's defeat.

No one has considered Bigger's relationship to Max and to State's Attorney Buckley as voices which represent two conceptions of the city. Wright has deliberately juxtaposed three scenes from a window, each offering a view of the streets and buildings beyond. In the first, Bigger is alone and tries to perceive meaning in the city, but finds none. In the next, Buckley calls Bigger's attention to a city he already knows, the city which threatens to destroy him. Finally, Max describes an ideal city, a dream for the future in which Bigger can find fulfillment as a human being. The novel's main theme is not man versus society, in which Bigger is an heroic or antiheroic rebel in the Romantic tradition. Its real theme is as old as the Greco-Roman world: man's need for human community and, in this case, the city's failure to provide it.

Wright was thoroughly familiar with the actual city of Chicago: with its stockyards and sooty factories, its gangland killings, its storefront churches, its cynical politics. But he also knew its mythical possibilities. Chicago was a young city, if one measured it by years, yet it was old as all great cities are old, "old enough" Wright said, "to have caught within the homes of its long, straight streets the symbols and images of man's age-old destiny, of truths as old as the mountains and seas. . . ." <sup>3</sup> Remembering his impressions of Chicago as a young man fresh from the South, he said:

. . . there is an open and raw beauty about that city that seems either to kill or endow one with the spirit of life. I felt those extremes of possibility, death and hope, while I lived half hungry and afraid in a city to which I had fled with a dumb yearning to write, to tell my story.<sup>4</sup>

Wright fled to Chicago as others of his race had fled to the cities of the North. Modern black literature is filled with indictments of the "promised land," and no one has written harsher indictments than Wright himself. Yet even in his disappointment he could describe Chicago as a place to fulfill man's potentialities. Wright's experience falls into the pattern of experience of Western man.

The history of the city in our culture has expressed both the best and worst sides of human nature. The city organized aggression in ways which the village could not. It was civilized man who created war, and he also created the attitudes accompanying war, one of which is that only "by wholesale human sacrifice can the community be saved."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the city has often embodied man's loftiest dreams. It has represented his attempt to find happiness by sharing his life with others.

In imaginative literature, the mythical secular city is often the setting for the depiction of "the good life": Bacon's New Atlantis, Campanella's City of the Sun, Yeats's Byzantium. In the Book of Revelation heaven is envisioned by St. John as the New Jerusalem, the celestial city which St. Augustine was to call the City of God. But

the City of God had its mythical antithesis — a corrupt, demonic, sinister City of Man. Here, as Northrop Frye points out, the straight streets described by the prophet Isaiah are twisted into a labyrinth or maze. Instead of symbolizing man's true home, the "demonic city" is a place that is foreign, a place where one is alone and easily lost.<sup>6</sup>

Near the end of the second section of *Native Son* ("Flight"), Wright used these dialectical opposites to describe Chicago. Having become a fugitive, a murderer in hiding, Bigger reflects upon his life: "Sometimes, in his room or on the sidewalk, the world seemed to him a strange labyrinth even when the streets were straight and the walls were square; a chaos which made him feel that something in him should be able to understand it, divide it, focus it." As he lies concealed in a room of an abandoned tenement, the early morning light interrupts his reverie, and he jumps up to look out the window:

The snow had stopped falling and the city, white, still, was a vast stretch of rooftops and sky. He had been thinking about it for hours here in the dark and now there it was, all white, still. But what he had thought about it had made it real with a reality it did not have now in the daylight. When lying in the dark thinking of it, it seemed to have something which left it when it was looked at. Why should not this cold white world rise up as a beautiful dream in which he could walk and be at home, in which it would be easy to tell what to do and what not to do? If only someone had gone before and lived or suffered or died — made it so that it could be understood! It was too stark, not redeemed . . . .<sup>7</sup>

This echo of the New Testament hints at the earthly paradise which will be presented to Bigger at the novel's conclusion, but in this scene Bigger looks at the city and sees only its cruel indifference, the inscrutable maze which expresses the bewilderment of its black inhabitants.

The first section of *Native Son* ("Fear") shows the city as a closed society. Not regarding Bigger and his people as human, the real city shoves them from sight. It herds them into a carefully defined space, and then ignores them.

Yet, like Orwell's London in 1984, it intimidates the members of this sub-human world in subtle ways. The enormous billboard of the State's Attorney points a finger at the black community and says, "IF YOU BREAK THE LAW, YOU CAN'T WIN" (p. 16).

Growing up in the slums of Chicago's South Side, Bigger has lived in a constant state of fear. Its ramifications spread like ripples in a pond, so that Bigger hated and feared everyone, even members of his own black family. He hid behind a mask of toughness so as not to acknowledge the full extent of this fear, for if he knew "what his life meant . . . he would either kill himself or someone else" (p. 14).

But Chicago not only creates fear, it also causes frustration. It holds forth its gifts and then withdraws them. "It was not," Wright says, "that Chicago segregated Negroes more than the South, but that Chicago had more to offer, that Chicago's physical aspect — noisy, crowded, filled with the sense of power and fulfillment — did so much more to dazzle the mind with a taunting sense of possible achievement that the segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the South."<sup>8</sup> Bigger feels a momentary sense of wholeness when he shares the city through its movies or its newspapers, but the reality of his situation soon changes this feeling to discontent.

Mary Dalton's world symbolizes everything that Bigger saw in the movies, and it is just as unattainable. The fact that she has treated him as a human being, at the same time that she clung to the traditional symbols of wealth and authority, only makes Bigger feel his degradation all the more: ". . . after they had shunted him off into a corner of the city to rot and die, they could turn to him, as Mary had that night in the car, and say: 'I'd like to know how your people live'" (p. 225).

When Bigger murders Mary it is an accident, but Wright makes it clear that killing is an act Bigger had

often committed in his mind. After Mary's death he feels released from the terrible tightness in his chest. He feels alive, more free than ever before. He is a "man reborn." He has "created a new world for himself."

So much attention has been given this "new world" that one critic has argued that the novel is "essentially ended" after the second section.<sup>9</sup> Yet as the third section opens, Bigger is numb with despair. His new self, which was based upon hatred, has not sustained him. He hungers for another set of values to give his life meaning, "a vast configuration of images and symbols whose magic and power could lift him up and make him live so intensely that the dread of being black and unequal would be forgotten; that even death would not matter, that it would be a victory" (p. 256).

Exhausted and dejected, Bigger is shown a second view of the city by State's Attorney Buckley. Counting on being re-elected if Bigger is convicted of murder in the first degree, Buckley visits him in his cell and pretends to befriend him. He "led Bigger to a window through which he looked and saw the streets below crowded with masses of people in all directions. 'See that, boy? Those people would like to lynch you. That's why I'm asking you to trust me and talk to me. The quicker we get this thing over, the better for you'" (pp. 281, 282). Buckley offers Bigger safety from the mob if he confesses. The scene he points to is a city of hatred which provides Bigger with no alternative but to hate in return. Even if Buckley's false promise were true, his protection would further isolate Bigger from the human community and an understanding of himself.

Boris Max also befriends Bigger, but he does not pretend to offer him safety. Instead he gives Bigger those "images and symbols" he wants by insisting that Bigger articulate his reasons for having killed Mary. In probing Bigger's innermost feelings, Max treats him as a human being, but in such a way that Bigger "felt a recognition

of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered before" (p. 333). Bigger now tries to "see himself in relation to other men, a thing he had always feared to try to do, so deeply stained was his mind with the hate of others for him" (p. 334). He wonders if there are others outside his cell who struggle as he does, and he envisions himself

standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, and the sun's rays melted away the differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good upward toward the sun. . . . Had he been blind all along? . . . Was there some battle everyone was fighting, and he had missed it? (pp. 335-336)<sup>10</sup>

Agonized by the thought of having never really lived, he now for the first time desperately wants to live.

After the governor has refused Max's plea for clemency, Max goes to Bigger's cell, where communication seems impossible. Anxious for more than consolation, Bigger asks Max, ". . . how can I die!" Max tries to make Bigger see that he must join the human community in spirit if he is to be saved. He takes Bigger to the window of his cell and points to the tall buildings of downtown Chicago. He tells Bigger that human hopes have built those skyscrapers and that faith in dreams keeps them from falling. A few men, he continues, have gotten control of the buildings and blocked the entrances. "But men," he said, "men like you, get angry and fight to re-enter those buildings, to live again" (p. 390). He asks Bigger to believe in himself, to know that his feeling of anger is warranted. Furthermore, he wants Bigger to see his life joined with others in humanity's struggle to fulfill itself. To strive and resist oppression is human, but to kill is wrong.

Max's speech is a classic statement of humanistic ideals. That Wright intended this interpretation of Max is clear from the archetypal "visionary" setting in which he places his two characters. Max has painted a picture of the earthly paradise and has shown it to Bigger in the hope that he might vicariously participate in it. The situation

echoes not only the Book of Revelation but also a rich secular tradition, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Anchises's prophetic description of Rome to Aeneas in *The Aeneid*. As Maynard Mack put it, we are reminded of "man's recurring dream of the civilized community, only one of whose names is Rome."<sup>11</sup>

The ending of the novel is brought into perspective if we see Max's vision of the human community in conflict with Bigger's need to understand his own life. When Bigger rejects Max's vision, he does not reject Communism, he rejects the traditional values of Western civilization as symbolized by the city. Specifically, he rejects the *community* because it is less necessary to him than his own identity, his own humanity, which the real city has denied him. He tells Max that he does believe in himself, because that is the only thing he has left. He also knows *why* he killed: ". . . when I think about what you say I kind of feel what I wanted. It makes me feel I was kind of right. . . . They wouldn't let me live and I killed. Maybe it ain't fair to kill, and I reckon I really didn't want to kill. But when I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am" (p. 391). He now knows that he killed because he wanted to live not as an animal but as a human being. Conscious or unconscious, killing was an assertion of his human identity against those who had treated him as though he were merely a rat in a maze.

Bigger accepts his fate, but Max is visibly shaken. His "eyes were full of terror" and he "groped for his hat like a blind man" (p. 392). Ironically, Max has been the midwife at the rebirth of Bigger Thomas. His Socratic questions have made Bigger see that it is right to fight for one's humanity, even unto death. The emotion Wright depicts in Max is something akin to Aristotle's tragic "fear": "There but for the grace of God go I." In leading Bigger to a discovery of himself, Max has caught a brief glimpse of Bigger's world, and the irrationality of

that world has frightened him. Max is basically a rational man, who believes in man's capacity to recognize evil and to remove it. Bigger recognizes evil as an inextricable part of his life. Not only does Max recoil from such a nightmare vision of reality, but he also knows that he is, in part, responsible for its existence.

The final parting of Max and Bigger reveals the tragic situation to both men. Max has held out two possibilities for Bigger: self-knowledge, and a share in the human community. Bigger has achieved the first, but it is a Pyrrhic victory. He is at peace with himself and has no hatred in his heart, but his "bitter smile" as he watches Max go indicates that he knows murder has placed him beyond the pale of human fellowship.

That the city remains blind to its sins is as much a part of the novel's impact as Bigger's acceptance of himself as a killer. Wright admitted that he had placed Max in Bigger's cell to register the moral "horror of Negro life in the United States," and he went on to explain that "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."<sup>12</sup> Horror invented Richard Wright, and *Native Son* exposes the "demonic city" at the heart of American civilization.

The trial scene particularly characterizes Wright's concern for society. He pits Max against Buckley, as true and false prophets, engaged in a verbal battle concerning not only Bigger's life but also the welfare of the city. The debate is not, as some critics complain, a mere rehash of the novel's themes, but an exciting dialectical argument reminiscent again of *Paradise Lost*.

The trial is seen as a ritualized event designed to protect the city from the forces of evil. It is clear from the time of the inquest that "evil" has already been defined. The evidence Buckley brought against Bigger then was



supposed "to make white men and women feel that nothing short of a quick blotting out of his life would make the city safe again." Later, as State's Attorney for the people in the courtroom, Buckley confirms them in their self-righteousness. Sounding like an Old Testament prophet, he warns them that there is a beast in the city, that the city must destroy the beast if the social fabric is to remain whole. His language is biblical. Bigger is depicted as a "maddened ape," "a rapacious beast" who has left his den. Every decent human being should want to "crush with his heel the woolly head of this black lizard, to keep him from scuttling on his belly farther over the earth and spitting forth his venom of death" (p. 373). Buckley ends his oration to the jury by urging its members to tell the people that, in the city, "jungle law does not prevail" (p. 378).

Max's speech contains the same imagery: there is a beast in the city, he argues, but the beast is *in us*. In keeping with the mission of the true prophet, Max tries to awaken the people to their responsibility for the evil they are suffering. The continuing oppression of the Negro has placed a corpse in our midst, Max says: "It has made itself a home in the wild forest of our great cities, amid the rank and choking vegetation of our slums! It has forgotten our language! In order to live it has sharpened its claws! It has grown hard and calloused! It has developed a capacity for hate and fury which we cannot understand! . . . By night it creeps from its lair and steals toward the settlements of civilization! And at the sight of a kind face it does not lie down upon its back and kick up its heels playfully to be tickled and stroked. No; it leaps to kill!" (pp. 361, 362). By denying the black man a place in their civilization they have threatened their own lives. Max presents an apocalyptic vision to the jury: the city will die if its citizens do not act to remove the evil they themselves have created. If Max seems a tragic figure at the end of *Native Son*, so does America.

America began as a nation by declaring her independence from England, but long before this act America's forefathers declared their independence from the oppression of the Old World. Max refers to this fact when he says, during the trial, that the pilgrims had come "from lands where their personalities had been denied. . . . They came from the cities of the old world where the means to sustain life were hard to get or own" (p. 359). In carving out a new empire for themselves, they often used others as they had been used, and in so doing forgot, or rejected, the human community. It seems at times that in this New Eden every Adam was left to his own devices.

Older cultures than America's have taken the idea of the human community for granted. Aristotle assumed that man was a political animal — one who belonged to a "polis." Aristotle could not conceive of defining man in any other way. But most American ideals still take the form of individual aspirations, just as many of the most admired American thinkers have appealed to a higher self than that called forth by society. Thoreau's *Walden* and Emerson's *Self-Reliance* are testaments to the human spirit which chafes under the yoke of convention. America may have had her vague dream of the Ideal City; the Puritan John Winthrop was able to say to his fellow passengers aboard a ship sailing for America that "Wee shall be as a City upon a Hill. . . ." Yet her need for "The Great Society" has always seemed less urgent than the need for self-definition. At the root of the American experience there is this tension. In rejecting Max's dream of the earthly Paradise for a belief in his own integrity, Bigger has indeed proven himself to be a native son.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 150, 151. Edward Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro Authors* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1968), p. 81. Dan McCall, *The Example of Richard Wright* (New York: Harcourt, 1969), pp. 90, 91. Kenneth Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 142.

- <sup>2</sup>See Donald B. Gibson, "Wright's Invisible Native Son," *American Quarterly*, 21, No. 4 (1969), 728-738. James Kennedy, "Content and Form of *Native Son*," *College English*, 34 (Nov., 1972), 269-283. Paul N. Siegel, "The Conclusion of Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 89 (May, 1974), 517-523.
- <sup>3</sup>Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Native Son"*, ed. Houston A. Baker (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 39.
- <sup>4</sup>Richard Wright, Introduction to *Black Metropolis*, vol. 1, 3rd ed., by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton (New York: Harcourt, 1970), p. xvii.
- <sup>5</sup>Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, 1961), p. 45.
- <sup>6</sup>Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 150. It is interesting to note, as George Steiner did, that the first Gothic novels were set in old country mansions, but in the nineteenth century the scene shifted to the "encroaching vastness of the city." *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1961), pp. 195, 196.
- <sup>7</sup>Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 225, 226. All subsequent references to *Native Son* are to this edition, and will be found in parentheses in the text.
- <sup>8</sup>Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," p. 29.
- <sup>9</sup>Morris Dickstein, "Wright, Baldwin, Cleaver," in *Richard Wright, David Ray and Robert M. Farnsworth*, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), pp. 184, 185.
- <sup>10</sup>It should be remembered that the preacher who visits Bigger in his cell also offers "symbols and images," but Bigger has already rejected Christianity because he was not included in its conception of creation (p. 264). Furthermore, the preacher promises him a salvation that hinges upon his admission of guilt. Jan Erlone, on the other hand, who was willing to share that guilt, could not offer "symbols and images."
- <sup>11</sup>Maynard Mack, *The Garden and the City: Retirement and Politics in the Later Poetry of Pope* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), p. 3.
- <sup>12</sup>Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," pp. 46, 47.