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**A NATIVE COUNTRY FOR THE INVISIBLE SON:**  
Portraits of the Afro-American Hero in Selected Novels  
by Wright, Ellison & Baldwin.

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**June 13, 1991.**

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Licence (Algeria)

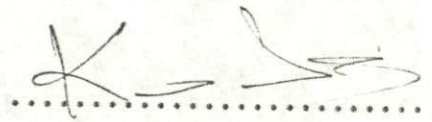
Dissertation submitted to the University of ORAN-Senia  
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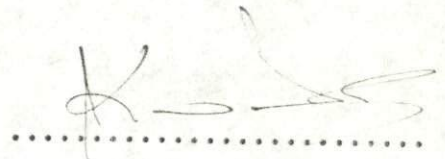
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work submitted for this dissertation is entirely the result of my own investigation. The various sources to which I am indebted have been clearly acknowledged in the Bibliography.

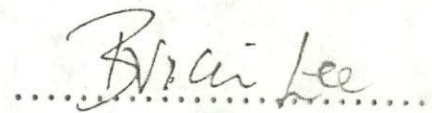


(Candidate)

I declare that the work included in this dissertation has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.



(Candidate)



(Supervisor)

DEDICATION

To the Memory of my father, Belkacem CHEREF (1925-1960)  
who sacrificed his life for an independent Algeria.

For my mother who kept the faith that I was equal to  
the task.

For those who are struggling to eradicate racism, class-  
injustice and ignorance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Among the number of scholars to whom an intellectual acknowledgment is owed, I must distinguish Mr. Lakhdar Barka Sidi Mohamed. Both his patience and example are reflected in the body of the work.

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'The Negro, who of all immigrants arrived with the least baggage, has built out of what he found here--even out of slavery--something that has beauty and dignity. Too many whites ignore it out of mistaken politeness, and too many Negroes ignore it out of mistaken shame.'

INTRODUCTION:

Both the man of letters and the historian are entangled in History. Yet, the writer's undertaking commences where that of the historian comes to a close. Undoubtedly, this is the reason why a great number of authors have played a momentous and consequential role in consciousness raising and denunciation.

Accordingly, the novel has been, par excellence, a medium for many novelists to proclaim, through positive or negative heroes, their own ideology.

As a matter of fact, Afro-American literature is not very old. Prior to the Civil War, some novels were published by Afro-American<sup>2</sup> writers, and so were some poems by Phillis Wheatley, the celebrated house slave. The writings of Frederick Douglass were rather wellknown, and his slave narrative remains, until today, a work of distinction. Nevertheless, it was not until the advent of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chestnutt, towards the end of the nineteenth century, that works, qualified as literature by those whose prerogative is to make such a judgement, were published. In the years between 1900 and the early twenties, several Afro-American novelists and poets succeeded in

publishing their works; even the great scholar W.E.B. Du Bois tried his hand at creative writing.

In the early twenties, at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, Afro-American writers made their significant declaration of independence from both the white dictatorial literary establishment and the latent urge to whiteness. The credo was stated by Langston Hughes:

I am ashamed for the black poet who says, 'I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,' as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world... We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual darkskinned slaves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter either.

However, it should be noted that the first Afro-American writers were not that prolific. They had to overcome many obstacles to make of themselves something more than "journeymen of letters." This is due to many reasons such as the Civil War, Reconstruction, the post-Reconstruction period during which the Afro-American was virtually deprived of his meagre Constitutional rights, the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, the two great migrations of the Afro-American from the rural South to the urban North, WWI, the Depression and WWII.

The rapid mechanisation of life and the progressive dehumanisation of the individual in the industrial capitalistic and consumer-oriented American society led to the Crash of 1929. Subsequently, the 1930's were the years of organised hunger marches, of mass demonstrations for an increase in relief payments and of the rise in industrial unionism. Therefore, the American intelligentsia of the 1930's allied itself with these popular movements which expressed their grievances and articulated their aspirations for social justice. The Afro-American intellectuals were no exception to the general trend. They were probably even more responsive to the social crisis than the whites. Within the Federal Writers Projects, authors like Claude McKay, Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker and Ralph



Ellison managed to fulfill their artistic talents and reveal their own community's predicament. This was partly achieved in an era marked by Sartre and Freud who, aware of the contradictions inherent in reality, attempted to impose order on a reality that appeared increasingly chaotic and impenetrable. The same could be said of Chicago's Black Belt or Harlem. For

to live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city...Overcrowded and exploited politically and economically, Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth.<sup>4</sup>

In an attempt to cope with the chaotic formlessness of the modern city, many writers used realism as an appropriate art form to achieve their objective. The advent of the city in American literature occurred by the turn of the century through novels such as Stephen Crane's Maggie, A Girl of the Streets (1891), Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900) and Upton Sinclair's The Jungle (1906). For many reasons Afro-American fiction lagged behind this change. It was not until the great Depression, with its strikes and evictions, that the predicament of the urban masses could no longer be totally ignored. The first Afro-American novelist to deal with slum life in the Northern cities, and the first to approach it through the naturalist tradition, was a Southern refugee, Richard Wright. His pioneer effort, Native Son, exerted an immense influence on subsequent 'Negro' fiction. It should be mentioned though, that urban realism was not set up by Wright. The major innovations were made by Emile Zola; they were introduced into American literature by early naturalists and adapted to the needs of a later period by James T. Farrell, Steinbeck and Dos Passos. But before Wright, this tradition was not dealt with by the 'black' writer. For Afro-American writing, in general, has been confined to humble novels, poems and plays which, in their majority, went a-begging to white America. Furthermore, white America never gave these 'Negro' writers



any serious criticism. For the mere fact that a 'Negro' could write was surprising. The Afro-American author was not expected to play a significant role in American culture. The authentic black voice was not wanted. For it is too harsh, too accusing, too haunting and too full of rage and indignation. With the advent of Wright, bitterness, which runs through the whole of Afro-American literature, is being replaced by rage.

Wright started out believing in the Protestant ethic of hard work, self-control, personal initiative, and future planning, only to discover the pervasiveness of structural racism in America. Before the appearance of Native Son, most of the novels of 'black' Americans either avoided racial issues, or were in the apologetic tradition, which portrayed heroic 'Negro' characters who were physically victimised by white racists. Wright began a new trend in protest literature by presenting a character who is psychologically thwarted by racism. The example of Native Son evoked the production of similar novels during the forties.

The postwar racial change is marked by President Truman's order to desegregate the US Army, and the Democratic Party's adoption of a Civil Rights platform in 1948. In terms of literature, the mood for change was caught in Langston Hughes' Jesse B. Simple stories. The ensuing Eisenhower years are designated as The Tranquil Fifties. In 1950, a series of Supreme Court decisions were made to put an end to segregated school and transport facilities. This is the period in which Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man was published. Yet in 1955, patience was exhausted and Mrs Rosa Parks refused the "Colored Only" bus seating and inaugurated the massive boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. By the Kennedy-Johnson decade, the momentum had grown dramatically. Sit-ins and passive resistance were common features of the social scene. Impatience with Southern prejudice and slum conditions in the



North led to the historic Civil Rights Movement. This reveals that the Afro-Americans would no longer tolerate second class status. Besides, it provoked a recognition of the 'Negro' cultural richness. Consequently, Afro-American authors like James Baldwin, who advocated total integration as the answer to racial segregation, found themselves in the limelight. On the other hand, the Civil Rights Movement gave birth to Black Power; a trend represented by radical thinkers such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seal, and Angela Davis. It also gave rise to organisations such as the Black Muslims, SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), and Martin Luther King's gradualist SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference).

It should be noted that Afro-American fiction since Wright has revealed extraordinary feats of story-telling in a range of new narrative forms that incarnate those ancestral elements present in the Afro-American community. These elements do represent the 'black' man's experience in America. This trend is best typified by authors like Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Imamu Amiri Baraka, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Ishmael Reed. This new wave of Afro-American writers is deliberately delving into 'black' folk culture and traditions, exploring its own history and creating its own myths. According to many critics, this new type of 'Negro' literature, which is chiefly directed at the Afro-American's conscience is not basically a literature of protest, but rather, a literature of affirmation. For these 'Negro' authors present 'black' life as it is lived by the majority of Afro-American--its vitality, its inventiveness, its strength, but also its poverty, its bitterness and its squalor. So, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin concentrated on the diversity of the 'black' experience in America. By emphasising the unique problems of individuals rather than the evils of racism, these 'accommodationist authors'<sup>5</sup> were generally



able to be more objective in their work. Consequently, such prominent novels as Invisible Man and Another Country dominated respectively the early fifties and sixties.

We have chosen to work on these three writers, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, for each of them depicts the Afro-American hero according to his own perception of the Afro-American predicament. Needless to say these portraits are as different as their authors might be. For as we shall see, Bigger Thomas, the Invisible Man and Rufus Scott do have different destinies in white America. This is despite the fact that they have a common denominator, which is their complexion.

Though this choice might be quite arbitrary, we have to admit that these three novelists have also been selected for their extrinsic values and their significant contribution to the American literary scene.

Probing the world of the Afro-American writers, then, we may argue that it is, in general, tragic, violent and sometimes grotesque. Similarly to their ancestors' epoch, their world bears the brunt of homicides, suicides and other adversities. Their heroes suffer from those outrages which are the lot of the common people, those people who are at the bottom of the social ladder and other oppressed minorities. The main theme of many recent novels is man's loneliness; his need of communication; his unquenched thirst for love; his initiation to a world which is hostile to love, a world in which any form of communication is difficult--if not impossible--to make; a world where alienation is the rule. In this respect, Wright, Ellison and Baldwin may be considered as spokesmen for the 'black' community. For Ellison tells that

no matter how strictly Negroes are segregated socially and politically, on the level of the imagination their ability to achieve freedom is limited only by their individual aspiration, insight, energy and will. Wright was able to free himself in Mississippi because he had the



imagination and the will to do so. He was as much a product of his reading as of his painful experiences, and he made himself a writer by subjecting himself to the writer's discipline--as he understood it. The same is true of James Baldwin, who is not the product of Negro storefront church but of the library, and the same is true of me.

Yet, one should bear in mind that the Afro-American's life is shaped by a complex interplay of culture and personality, race and social class. So, the essence of 'Negro' experience in America is rejection, and its most destructive consequence is shame. The Afro-American is ostracised by the whites for reasons that he sometimes cannot comprehend. Therefore, he is afflicted by a sense of shame. Something mysterious, he senses, must be wrong with him, that he should be so cruelly rejected. In time he comes to relate these apprehensions to his complexion--the basis after all, of his exclusion. He feels, and is made to feel, constantly filthy. We read in Go Tell It On The Mountain, for instance, that the protagonist

hated sweeping this carpet, for dust arose, clogging his nose and sticking to his sweaty skin, and he felt that should he sweep it forever, the clouds of dust would not diminish, the rug would not be clean. It became in his imagination his impossible, lifelong task, his hard trial, like that of a man he had read about somewhere, whose curse it was to push a boulder up a steep hill, only to have the giant who guarded the hill roll the boulder down again-- and so on, forever, through eternity.

The function of the novel is to make the reader conscious, and the better the book the greater the degree of possible consciousness. For the novel does not send its reader to the barricades or the altar, but rather broadens his experience, and makes him realise more fully the possibilities of the human being. For in reality as well as in the fictional world, American 'Negroes' are no longer Africans and the fundamental problem for the serious Afro-American writer dealing with them is to discover how 'Negro' life in America functions to develop 'Negro' personality. Thus, the Afro-American heroes that we shall be dealing with in this thesis do not see 'segregation as an opaque steel



jug' where they are themselves 'inside waiting for some black messiah to come along and blow the cork.'<sup>8</sup>

In the work of Wright, Ellison and Baldwin, the hero creates his self out of refusals and rejections; and 'the very strength of his resistance gives it clear form and substance.'<sup>9</sup> Hence, our main purpose will be to shed as much light as possible on the Afro-American hero in the fictional world through which he struggles: a world of uncertainty and too much trouble. For we have to bear in mind that 'in America there are twenty million black people, all of whom are in prison. You don't have to go to Sing Sing to be in prison. If you're born in America with a black skin, you're born in prison.'<sup>10</sup> In this respect, let's consider the following vivid description of a ghetto scene:

One walks the long streets and sees...the shabby pool halls, the shabby bars, the boarded up doors and windows, the plethora of churches and lodges and liquor stores, the shining automobiles, the wine bottles in the gutter, the garbage strewn alleys, and the young people, boys and girls, in the streets. Over it all hangs a miasma of fury and frustration, a perceptible darkening, as of storm clouds, of rage and despair.<sup>11</sup>

This paragraph which actually describes Harlem can be applied to any 'Black ghetto.' What is most striking here is the added dimension of pain which is transmitted to the reader through the author's keen eye for detail. What might have been a casual representation of a slum scene becomes a delicate combination of physical and psychological details. The fury, the frustration, the rage, and the despair are quite palpable.

In another extremely revealing passage, Baldwin pictures the environment, the victims, and their misery which is reflected

in every wine stained and urine splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue, and in every disastrous bulletin: a cousin, mother of six, suddenly gone mad, the children parcelled out here and there; an indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow, agonizing death in



a terrible small room; someone's bright son blown into eternity by his own hand; another turned robber and carried off to jail.<sup>12</sup>

If Chicago's Black Belt or Harlem are 'geographically part of the United States but sociologically (islands) surrounded by the rest of the country,'<sup>13</sup> one should bear in mind the terms on which the struggle for survival in the ghetto must depend:

the nature of the ghetto is somehow ultimately to make those skills which are immoral the only skills worth having. You haven't got to be sweet to survive in a ghetto; you've got to be cunning. You've got to make up the rules as you go along; there aren't any others. You can't call the cops.<sup>14</sup>

It was this milieu that impressed upon Wright, Ellison and Baldwin the determining choice which they would ultimately be compelled to make: they had to summon every available ounce of courage to get away from the sordid world of pimps, prostitutes, and racketeers; or they had to give up their quest for identity, surrender themselves, and become engulfed by the vicious circumstances of their surroundings. For the American capitalistic society has, in every single instance, provided a frame of reference that denigrated the humanity of the Afro-American. To the question "Who am I?", the white man answers: "I am white, that is, immaculate. I am the purified, the saved, the saintly, and the elect. It is the Black who is the incarnation of evil."

If we try to probe that implacable cry: 'Wash me, cried the slave to his maker, and I shall be whiter, whiter than snow! For black is the color of evil; only the robes of the saved are white,'<sup>15</sup> we may affirm that this is an attack on the core of the self, yet we may wonder about the Afro-American hero's response. If he admits the white man's equation of blackness with evil, he is lost. Resenting his authentic ego, he will try to build up a counter self according to what follows: everything "black" I now reject; but if he questions the white man's morals, he can survive. This involves an acceptance of everything that



is black. The Afro-American hero is, in short, facing a crossroads; the road of self-hatred and the road of self-acceptance. Furthermore, the Afro-American is usually defined in ridiculous reductions such as the "lady of the races". Many sociologists depict him in austere terms:

the Negro is, by natural disposition, neither an intellectual nor an idealist, like the Jew; nor a brooding introspective, like the East Indian; nor a pioneer and frontiersman, like the Anglo-Saxon. He is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His metier is expression rather<sup>16</sup> than action. He is, so to speak, the lady among the races.

Such "findings," based on prejudgements as barren as they are bizarre, operate from the double distance of racial alienation and gaucherie, and seem to fall back upon the clichés of the American minstrel show. These are the stipulations of those who 'feel that they can air with impunity their most private Freudian fantasies as long as they are given the slightest camouflage of intellectuality and projected as "Negro".<sup>17</sup> For it should be mentioned that for the horrors of the Afro-American's life, there has been almost no language, and it is the refusal of many Americans to understand that somebody paid for the nation's peace and prosperity in terms of blood and frustrated dreams that make for a great deal of the Afro-American's fury. Moreover, it can never be repeated enough that 'no white, not even of an oppressed minority, nor however strong his sense of justice and imagination, can ever know, in his skin, what it is to be a colored man in a white racist society.'<sup>18</sup> This lies behind the creation of Bigger Thomas. Native Son (1940) is a blow at the white man, for the book obliges him to recognise himself as the oppressor, and a blow at the Afro-American because it compells him to admit the price of his submission.

Whatever its weaknesses, Native Son served as a pamphlet for the times, a consciously proletarian and radical period work, yet also a sharp examination of the roots of violent racial pathology. Whilst, the



novel is broadly naturalistic, it is equally concerned with the interior human terrain. The author himself called attention to the "inside narrative" of his novel in the prefatory essay that he entitles "How Bigger Was Born":

I feel that I am lucky to be alive to write novels today, when the whole world is caught in the pangs of war and change. Early American writers, Henry James and Nathaniel Hawthorne, complained bitterly about the bleakness and flatness of the American scene. But I think that if they were alive, they'd feel at home in modern America. True, we have no great church in America; our national traditions are still of such a sort that we are not wont to brag of them; and we have no army that's above the level of mercenary fighters; we have no group acceptable to the whole of our country upholding certain humane values; we have no rich symbols, no colorful rituals. We have only a money-grubbing, industrial civilisation. But we do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even 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.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in portraying the Afro-American's wretchedness, Wright's name 'has been made to stand for a simple standard of social realism, for a view which tackles angrily and in cold sober truth the repressive contours which outwardly define black identity.'<sup>20</sup> Wright always wrote out of the deepest dissent, and the terms "anger" and "protest" are characteristic of his literary achievement.

Many Afro-American scholars did not share Wright's 'pessimistic' and even 'nihilistic' vision of a world thrown into political chaos. Nevertheless, the generation of Afro-American writers born in the twenties and coming into maturity during the post-war era were all influenced by his idealism and style. The two major Afro-American writers most affected by Wright are undoubtedly Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin.

After WWII, the American social scene witnessed profound changes in racial consciousness. Writers have thus taken their inspiration from these developments and have contributed to the process of creating



awareness and change. Afro-American writers were increasingly called upon to serve as spokesmen, interpreters of their people's needs and aspirations. They were also called upon to reveal the 'black and white' confrontation, the looting, the fires, the shoot-outs, and the police brutality associated with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950's and 1960's.

The publication of Ellison's Invisible Man in 1952 brought about the first major change in the "Wrightian" tradition. It is a work that is infinitely beyond protest. Through this work, Ellison meant to use literature as a means of discovering the forms of Afro-American "humanity". Invisible Man evokes the external "forms" Afro-Americans have either been made to accept or chosen to put on, yet portrays in its unnamed 'invisible' narrator the elusive human figure within.

Baldwin intended to examine the roots of protest literature--the anger and the rage--in order to discover a distinguishable human emotion which mirrored not only the reality but the potentiality of man. Thus was born a prefigurative literature which came forth not as a gentle plea, but as the premonition of an impending revolution with coexistence as its main purpose: 'the terms of our revolution--the American revolution--are these: not that I drive you out or that you drive me out, but that we learn to live together.'<sup>21</sup> This is plainly revealed, as we shall see, in Another Country (1962).

Prior to Baldwin's advent on the American literary scene, the prevailing trend among Afro-American artists was protest, and the leading literary figure in that movement was Richard Wright. He considered creative writing as a safety valve to release the rage and fear which develop inevitably out of the Afro-American experience, and pursued Native Son as an "experiment," an opportunity to 'free (himself) of this burden of impressions and feeling, recast them into the



image of Bigger, and make him true.<sup>22</sup> Wright also affirms that the creation of a "true" Bigger necessarily involved an attempt 'to objectify in words some insight derived from my living in the form of action, scene and dialogue.'<sup>23</sup> Thus, Wright's efforts seem to be directed towards the fictional but also the realistic presentation of his rage.

Though Baldwin accepted the "purgative" function of literature, he opposed Wright's artistic theory. Whilst he identified with the fury that Wright felt, he argued that the artist must go beyond the mere description of that fury. For he was shocked by Wright's transformation of raw, absolute fury into violence in his fiction: 'violence (as) in much of Wright's work is gratuitous and compulsive... because the root of the violence is never examined. The root is rage.'<sup>24</sup>

Basically, this is the faux pas, Baldwin asserts, which damns Wright's literary artistry and assigns it to the desolate world of social protest and racism. According to Baldwin this failure springs from Wright's inability to differentiate between his social and artistic roles; hence his tendency to convert his experience into protest and propaganda. Yet it should be mentioned that the Wright-Baldwin controversy is the latter's manoeuvre to commit a "parricide." Baldwin's objection has, undoubtedly, its foundation in self-serving efforts to assert himself by repudiating Wright because his artistic persuasion differs from his. However, self-affirmation cannot be achieved solely through a rejection of Wright's literary contribution. Besides, both Baldwin and Ellison go to an enormous amount of unnecessary trouble to set very restricted limitations upon their debt to the author of Native Son. Consequently, Irving Howe accused Baldwin and Ellison of giving up the task of the 'Negro writer' which is supposed to be the militant assertion of Afro-American freedom. In his attack on Baldwin and Ellison, Howe evoked Wright as the incarnation of



the genuine, most relevant exponent of Afro-American freedom in reality as well as in fiction. Howe praised Wright for his protest literature and reproved both Ellison and Baldwin for their failure to carry on the protest tradition. Ellison is quite unfair when he tells Irving Howe: 'I would have said that the novel is always a public gesture, though not necessarily a political one.'<sup>25</sup> This declaration is only half true. The novel is both a public and a political gesture. As Ellison fairly knows, to burn a Cadillac on a congressman's lawn is both a public and a political act as well.<sup>26</sup> For the work of art is a socio-political deed itself. It leads to further social action in the actual world by broadening the scope of possibility for its readers. Moreover, we believe that fiction does help create value, and we regard this as a very serious and "sacred" function of the writer.

The concept of the writer as prophet is another assumption which is revealed in Wright, Ellison and Baldwin's works. The artist functions as a social reformer,

this ferment, this disturbance, is the responsibility, and the necessity of writers. It is, alas, the truth that to be an American writer today means mounting an unending attack on all that Americans believe themselves to hold sacred. It means fighting an astute and agile guerilla warfare with that American complacency which so inadequately masks the American panic.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, the writer is engaged in an eternal fight to invalidate the social objections and carry on his exploration into the very depths of the Afro-American past. Central to several Afro-American writers' fiction and essays is their concept and use of history. Baldwin, for instance, delineates the necessity for a more truthful depiction of the American past and American pluralism.

Which America will you have? There is America for the Indians... There is America for the people who settled the country... There is America for the laborer, for the financier, America of the North and South, America for the hillbilly, the urbanite, the farmer. And America for the Protestant, the Catholic, the Jew, the Mexican, the Oriental and that arid sector which we have reserved for the Negro.



These Americans diverge significantly and, sometimes  
dangerously and they have much in common.<sup>28</sup>

If it is admitted that an abiding theme in Afro-American Literature, or History in general, has always been a search for the resolution of a complex fate that takes its basic source from the fact of colour, it becomes clear that Wright, Ellison and Baldwin's resolutions, in their respective novels, are no more quaint and no less intelligible than the resolutions offered by writers like W.E.B. Du Bois or Claude McKay. In this respect, a fundamental idea in Wright, Ellison and Baldwin's vision has always been that of Man, and especially of the 'Black' man, as a victim of history. By virtue of his transportation to the New World, the 'Negro' becomes as authentic a citizen of America as any of the Pilgrim Fathers could claim to be. For we are told that

the land of our forefathers' exile had been made, by that travail, our home. It may have been the popular impulse to keep us at the bottom of the perpetually shifting and bewildered populace; but we were, on the other hand, almost personally indispensable to each of them, simply because, without us, they could never have been certain, in such a confusion, where the bottom was; and nothing in any case, could take away our title to the land which we, too, had purchased with our blood.<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, Native Son, Invisible Man and Another Country seek to re-assert the humanity of the Afro-American in a world that has striven to deny meaning to his life.



NOTES:

- 1) Robert K. Bingham & Gouverneur Paulding, "Two American Writers," review of Go Tell It On The Mountain by James Baldwin and Letters of Sherwood Anderson by Sherwood Anderson, The Reporter, VIII, (June 23, 1953), p.39.
- 2) Taking into account the historical circumstances that witnessed the 'deportation' of the Africans to North America, and taking into consideration the pejorative meaning that the terms 'black', 'nigger' and 'negro' do imply, we shall be using in this thesis the expression 'Afro-American' which we consider as being neutral and interpretative of those historical factors first referred to.
- 3) Langston Hughes quoted in Hoyt W. Fuller, "The New Black Literature: Protest or Affirmation," in Addison Gayle, Jr., ed., The Black Aesthetic, (New York, 1972), pp.336-7.
- 4) Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, (New York, 1966), p.238.
- 5) Noel Schraufnagel, From Apology to Protest: The Black American Novel, (Deland, Florida, 1973), p.XI.
- 6) Ralph Ellison, op.cit., p.123.
- 7) James Baldwin, Go Tell It On The Mountain, (London, 1983), p.29.
- 8) Ralph Ellison, op.cit., p.123.
- 9) Erian Lee, "Who's Passing for Who? in the Fiction of Langston Hughes," in Robert A. Lee, ed., Black Fiction: New Studies in the Afro-American Novel Since 1945, (London, 1980), p.30.
- 10) Malcolm X in Kenneth B. Clark, The Negro Protest: Talk with James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., (Boston, 1963), p.24.
- 11) James Baldwin, No Name in the Street, (New York, 1972), p.127.
- 12) James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, (London, 1984), pp.26-7.
- 13) Fern Marja Eckman, The Furious Passage of James Baldwin, (New York, 1966), p.11.
- 14) James Baldwin in Eve Auchincloss & Nancy Lynch, "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin," in CWE Bigsby, ed., The Black American Writer, (Deland, Florida, 1969), p.212.
- 15) James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, (London, 1985), p.21.
- 16) Robert Park & Ernet W. Burgess, Introduction to the Science of Sociology, (Chicago, 1919), p.136.
- 17) Ralph Ellison, op.cit., p.129.
- 18) Colin MacInnes, "Dark Angel: The Writings of James Baldwin," in Donald B. Gibson, ed., Five Black Writers: Essays on Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Hughes and Le Roi Jones, (New York, 1970), p.119.
- 19) Richard Wright, Native Son, (London, 1984), pp.38-9.
- 20) Robert A. Lee, Black American Fiction Since Richard Wright, (South-Shields, Tyne & Wear, 1983), p.13.
- 21) James Baldwin in Fern Marja Eckman, op.cit., p.24.
- 22) Richard Wright, op.cit., p.25.
- 23) Ibid., p.34.
- 24) James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, (New York, 1986), p.151.
- 25) Ralph Ellison, op.cit., p.127.
- 26) See Ralph Ellison's "It Always Breaks Out," in Partisan Review, XXX, (Spring, 1963), pp.13-28.
- 27) James Baldwin, "As Much Truth As One Can Bear," New York Times Book Review, (Jan. 14, 1962), sec.7, part 1, p.1.
- 28) James Baldwin, "Lockridge: The American Myth," New Leader, (April 10, 1948), p.10.
- 29) James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, op.cit., p.29.



CHAPTER:ONE

WRIGHT,Richard.



'The story of the Negro in America is the story of America--or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans. It is not a very pretty story: the story of a people is never very pretty.'<sup>1</sup>

A/ INTRODUCTION:

In Notes of a Native Son, James Baldwin asserts that Native Son (1940) is

the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America...such a book...could never have been written before...nor could it be written today. It bears already the aspect of a landmark.<sup>2</sup>

Besides, its popular success marks a turning point in the history of Afro-American writing. This novel is a tale of the North, of the city, where an exasperated rage is given expression in the form of a murder. We also read in this novel about the fury, the distress, and, as Baldwin says, 'the murderous bitterness that was...eating up the lives of those around me.'<sup>3</sup> Yet, we cannot separate Native Son from the exceptional social juncture of the period: it is one of those virulent literary works, that came into existence in the late twenties and through the thirties, tackling the disparities of the American social hierarchy. It was published in 1940, i.e. one year before the USA joined in the Second World War and before the death of the New Deal. This novel was issued 'at a time when bread lines and soup kitchens and bloody industrial battles were bright in everyone's memory.'<sup>4</sup> However, half a



century after its publication, Native Son remains the epitome of Afro-American protest fiction. For one should bear in mind that in American society, the inhuman and unforgetten prejudice has been the burden of the Afro-Americans. As the US historian Herbert Aptheker points out, 'Negro oppression has been the greatest single stain upon our country's honor.'<sup>5</sup>

Though it is certainly not the first illustration of Afro-American protest writing in the history of American Literature, Native Son's celebrity and Wright's public acclaim instigated a great number of Afro-American writers who would be referred to as the "Wright School of Protest".<sup>6</sup> Among the numerous 'Negro' writers that Wright has significantly influenced in the thirties and mainly in the forties, we can mention Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Similarly to the Russian writers who claim that they have all come out of Gogol's "overcoat", we may say that many Afro-American writers have come out of Wright's cloak. For, as far as Afro-American Twentieth Century fiction is concerned, everything is marked before or after Wright. No Afro-American writer was totally immune from Wright's influence. Even the most creative of his contemporaries were obliged to acknowledge his importance and somehow resist it in order to protect their own career.

As for the publication of Native Son, it should be mentioned that the Great Depression and its numerous effects urged the Americans to cope with less sentimental and more pragmatic investigations into their social existence in particular, and into their life in general. Consequently, the literary works of the period were marked by one major theme: protest.<sup>7</sup> Far from opposing this tendency, Native Son reinforced it and pushed its limits into the field of race relations. So, the general nature of the novel is a story of an Afro-American young man who execrated and feared white people. His abhorrence is to be comprehended as a consequence of his apprehension. For Baldwin, Wright's



protagonist, Bigger Thomas,

is the monster created by the American Republic, the present awful sum of generations of oppression...the herald of disaster, the danger signal of a more bitter time to come when not Bigger alone but all his kindred will rise, in the name of the many thousands who have perished in fire and flood and by rope and torture, to demand their rightful vengeance.

We may also say that Wright is an 'author-fighter'<sup>9</sup> for he is a novelist who is preoccupied by social action. His novels are more than an accusation or a reflection of the human condition. Wright's creative works aim at counteracting a political reality. He is a novelist who acknowledged that a part of his occupation is to enhance social change. This is clearly expressed in his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing":

Perspective...is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people...Of all the problems faced by writers who as a whole have never allied themselves with world movements, perspective is the most difficult of achievement.<sup>10</sup>

Although it reveals an angry novelist, Wright's protest fiction is intended to foster progress. In this respect, Marxism was for him an economic and social frame in the 1930's and the early 1940's. It provided him with a universal vision of a similar fate that transgresses the American oppressive and colour-blind capitalistic economic structure. For he says

my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role.<sup>11</sup>

So, Marxism taught him that the Afro-Americans, in their combat for freedom and dignity, should not remain alone. The vision of an unlimited powerful proletariat captivated Wright.

Whenever we examine Wright's fictional and expressively political works, Uncle Tom's Children, Lawd Today and Native Son attract our attention. These works record and comment upon the author's experiences



with political action within the frame of American Communism. So, these pieces of fiction may be seen as investigations of Marxism as a theory of history and the historical, social and psychological evolution of the Afro-Americans. Therefore, Wright's novels and short stories are authentic documents. 'They (are) constructed from lives with which he (is) intimate. In his works, Wright (can) achieve his intention of weaving living consciousness into the impress of social theory and ideology.'<sup>12</sup>

1) General Background:

Anybody who wants to understand the circumstances in which many Afro-Americans have lived and responded to Twentieth Century USA, finds it necessary to consider Wright's creative works.

Richard Nathaniel Wright, who is best known for his autobiographical Black Boy (1945) and for his novel Native Son, occupies a special place in American Literature. He was born 'in one of the worst areas in the worst state,'<sup>1</sup> on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, in September 4, 1908, and was brought up partly by relatives and partly in orphanages after that his father had deserted the family, and paralysis had crippled his mother. Subsequently, he was suckled on resentment, nurtured on wrath, grew up on rootlessness and tasted every violent flavour of alienation and hostility that are the creation of poverty and humiliations attendant upon racism.

Being an avid reader--especially Sinclair Lewis, Dreiser and H.L. Mencken whose criticisms of America encouraged him to be a writer, and had awoke in young Wright the ability to see that his foe is not merely the white man, he became contemptuous of the perennial conceptions taught in schools, and took no account of the fundamentalist Christianity represented by the Seventh Day Adventism of his aunt and grandmother. Mainly self-educated, he would later say, 'reading grew into a passion...



what I derived from these novels...was nothing less than a sense of life itself.<sup>2</sup>

At the age of fifteen, he was on his own, departing for Chicago and leaving behind him the uncertainties of a 'nigger's life' in Memphis. Yet, he was shocked when he discovered that Jim Crowism<sup>3</sup> was prevailing in this city as well. He did not know, perhaps, that 'the most prominent baggage he carried was something he could never misplace or lose--the color of his skin.'<sup>4</sup> So, when Wright left provincial Mississippi for Chicago on the eve of the Depression, in 1927, as part of the great migration of Afro-Americans from the rural South to the urban and highly industrialised North-East and Midwest, he was, like many of his kin, unprepared for the modern city.

In Chicago, where he remained for ten years before moving, first, to New York and then to Europe (Paris), he had different occupations. The more significant came by way of the Work Progress Administration.<sup>5</sup> He joined, in 1932, the local John Reed Club and was elected executive secretary. As the situation in the John Reed Club was so stimulating for working class artists, he started producing poems some of which were published in New Masses in the period (1934-9). Thus, his literary career was launched. In 1934, he joined the US Communist Party and, as an apprentice writer, he was, to a large extent, affected by the Party 'mentors'.

His first book, Uncle Tom's Children (1938), a collection of five novellas about race and violence in the South, depicts his Mississippi origins, whereas his first novel (not the first to be published) portrays his encounter with the city. This novel, which probably did not satisfy the Party criteria, was held back and published posthumously as Lawd Today (1963). However, it should be noted that the material in it opened the way for his more celebrated novel, Native Son.



2) Party Membership:

One has to say, right from the outset, that Wright's roots were in the Afro-American peasantry of the South. His boyhood and adolescence in Mississippi, that were subjected to racist 'brutality' and 'brutalization', provided him with little expectations of bourgeois society and culture. On account of this background, he declares in his essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing"--in which he puts forward the new cultural directions that Afro-American writers would later engage in-- that the 'Negro writer is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die,'<sup>1</sup> and should not be 'the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice.'<sup>2</sup>

In this respect, Wright came to believe that a Marxist analysis of society may give to the writer an ascendance to 'buttress him with a tense and obdurate will to change the world.' In other words, it is only through a Marxist comprehension of the socio-political reality 'that the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro writer.'<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, it is the Marxist dialectic that provided Wright with a clear cut arena in which he could observe the struggle of the oppressed and the oppressors. Besides, the Communist Party became, later on, the family denied him in Mississippi, Tennessee and Arkansas. In the Party, he found the first sustained relationships of his life; and it was in the "unit" that for the first time 'he could call someone comrade.'<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of fact, he stood aloof of all the other 'Negro' organizations for he regarded their 'gradualism' as inappropriate. It was only the Communist Party, it seemed to him, that dealt with the Afro-American issue objectively, and no other political party since the Abolitionists opposed American racial hypocrisy so earnestly. Quoting a Central Committeeman, he once declared that 'from 1919 until 1932,



only one organization spoke of the class struggle. Was it the A.F. of L.? The Socialist Party? No, it was the Communist Party... that first raised the slogan for Negro rights.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Marxism and the Communist Party apprehended his creativeness and expressed the principles that gave character to his literary works roughly from 1932 to 1942.

With the coming of the Depression--especially excruciating for Afro-Americans--Wright was convinced by Marxism. Hence, he joined the Communist Party in 1934. By 1937, the year he had published "Blueprint for Negro Writing", he had become, in Daniel Aaron's words, 'the Party's most illustrious proletarian author.'<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Wilson Record, in his study The Negro and the Communist Party, states that 'the party undoubtedly influenced a great many Negro intellectuals, particularly such writers as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright.'<sup>7</sup> It influenced them not only as writers but as 'men of political action' as well. Yet, the issues that need to be examined include: the role that the writer can play in politics; the relationship they may have with one another; and how far can politics affect his literary works? In relation to these questions, Wright viewed Marxism as the only dynamic that, when fully comprehended, may confer to the writer a sense of eminence. It enables him to perform his role 'as a creator of the world in which he lives, and as a creator of himself.'<sup>8</sup> Therefore, when Wright first decided to work for the communists, he thought that the most important thing he might give is a sense of real people and the means to reach them. He knew that the Party had a programme, an ideal, but the language was still missing. His contribution, then, to the cause, was to create some of that language.

Here, then, was something that I could do, reveal, say. The Communists, I felt, had oversimplified the experience of those whom they sought to lead. In their efforts to recruit masses, they had missed the meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in too abstract a manner.



I would try to put some of that meaning back. I would tell Communists how common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them.<sup>9</sup>

However, he, who had only reached--with difficulty--the eighth grade, and who has been earning his living by street sweeping for 'thirteen dollars a week,' had been indexed as an intellectual. As a matter of fact, 'intellectuals don't fit well into the Party.'<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, intellectuals were used to reach the 'black proletariat' or, as Daniel Aaron points out, the 'ultimate purpose in bringing in intellectuals and writers was simply to turn them into instruments of propaganda.'<sup>11</sup> In other terms, what was expected of the communist writer, under the Party restraints, was simply to produce literary works that would serve, instantaneously, the 'Revolutionary cause'. This is a strategy to which Wright refused to adhere.

### 3) Disenchantment:

According to Constance Webb, Wright's family close friend and his biographer, Wright's disenchantment with the Party had become known in private circles by 1942. However, his disavowal of the Party was publicly announced in 1944 in the essay entitled "I Tried to be a Communist" that appeared in Richard Crossman's collection The God that Failed (1949). The decision to leave the Party was very difficult to take for the Party provided him, for about a decade, with 'a sense of dignity' that he had always aspired to. He once avowed that he 'owes (his) literary development to the Communist Party and its influence, which has shaped (his) thought and creative growth. It gave (him his) first full-bodied vision of Negro life in America.'<sup>1</sup>

Paradoxically, he underwent, during the decade he spent as an active member of the Communist Party, a violently imperfect 'enlightenment' at the hands of his communist mentors. In most of his fictional work,



Wright is trapped in a dual duty: he attempts to find his way as an artist through his way as a 'propagandist', thus assuming an overlap of art and militancy. Accordingly, he 'asked for a definition of what was expected from the writers--books or political activity. Both, was the answer. Write few hours a day and march on the picket line the other hours.'<sup>2</sup> In such a situation, one of the reasons of his severance with the Party was the conflict over the way to use his time and energy for the Party and for his creative writing. He 'wanted to be a Communist, but (his) kind of Communist. (He) wanted to shape people's feelings (and) awaken their hearts.'<sup>3</sup> For, he realised that it was of a cardinal importance and more significant to use, in his own way, his creativeness and fictional work to spread Marxism rather than to fulfill such time-consuming Party responsibilities as attending everlasting unit meetings and organizing committees against the high cost of living.<sup>4</sup> When the Party viewed with disfavour his writing, Wright told 'one of the leaders of World Communism' that he was 'not trying to fight (them) with (his) writing,' and that he had 'no political ambition.' He was only 'trying to depict Negro life.'<sup>5</sup> For Wright had the impression that in the Party procedures of changing philosophy into action, something of the promise was being relinquished; the Party considered Marxism as 'an ideology for the working classes rather than an ideology of the working classes.'<sup>6</sup> For the objectives of Marxism, as put into action in American Communism, were less analytical than political. The effect was, neither theory nor praxis, but the achievement of power. So, Marxism was subjected to the abuses of narrow political interest.

Bearing in mind that Karl Marx had written once that 'the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law,'<sup>7</sup> Wright did not make a stand against Communism for the pseudo-



efficiency of the bourgeois type of social leadership. In opposing the Party, he did not give up Marxism; he simply intended to bring to an end the tyranny of the US Communist Party. In other words, his scission with the Party did not imply a total disillusionment with Marxism. As he asked for his break from the Party, he emphasized the fact that there were 'no ideological differences' that compelled him to do so. He simply did 'not wish to be bound any longer by the Party's decisions.' i.e. the split was with the Party, not Communism as such. In this respect, he did want his words to be 'accepted in the spirit in which they (were) said.'<sup>8</sup> However, after the split, the Party maltreated him. His comrades designated him as 'a petty bourgeois degenerate' and 'an incipient Trotskyite.' At this stage Wright had not even 'read any of Trotsky's works' but 'it had been Stalin's Marxism and the National and Colonial Question that had captured (his) interest.'<sup>9</sup>

On grounds of the ingratitude he had to bear, he, who was neither an 'intellectual' nor a 'petty bourgeois degenerate,' but a talented writer who offered his physical and mental capacities to raise his people's consciousness,

knew in his heart that (he) should never be able to write that way again, should never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, should never again express such passionate hope, should never again make so total a commitment of faith.<sup>10</sup>

After his resignation from the US Communist Party, he went into exile, never to return. Yet, he was fully aware in his innermost being that he 'will be for them, even though they are not for (him).'<sup>11</sup> As for James Baldwin who would almost have the same fate, Wright knew what exile means as does every Afro-American artist. For he first came to suffer from exile in his native land. 'He must have wondered what the real thing would be like,'<sup>12</sup> and what would be its impact on his daughter to be brought up in a country which would not 'value' her



according to her complexion. Yet, after Wright's exile, many people felt he need not exile himself for 'he was an American; his prophetic anger, birthed by his country, was interwoven with his great talent.'<sup>13</sup>

4) Relevant Fiction:

a) Uncle Tom's Children

Though he reached celebrity on grounds of the impact of his novel, Native Son, Wright first came to the attention of the general reading audience, in 1938, with the publication of four novellas, about race and violence in the rural South. This collection, Uncle Tom's Children, is Wright's real breakthrough into recognition. Yet in 1940, after the great success of Native Son, he expanded the collection to include an autobiographical essay, The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, and a story, Bright and Morning Star. These five indignat novellas, that were written while he was living in Chicago, depict his Mississippi origins. His experiences in the South gave him much of the subject-matter: these stories are chiefly pictures of critical moments in 'black and white race relations.'

Uncle Tom's Children is most easily comprehended as the illustration of the pride, hatred and terror that are inseparable parts of the Afro-Americans' daily lives. These Afro-Americans are reluctant to live in resignation. Besides, the Great Depression and the subsequent social restlessness, in the USA, play a momentous rôle in some of the stories such as Fire and Cloud.

However, as one tale introduces the next, the Marxist undertones unfold gradually into functional materials of the stories until individual achievement and social salvation are reached under the banner of the Communist Party. Though Marxism is trenchant in some of the stories, 'it does not overshadow the central focus: the life of ignorance, fear and shame forced upon the Southern Negro.'<sup>1</sup> As for the resolution of



these Southern racial problems, around which revolves the subject-matter of Uncle Tom's Children, the Marxist approach is a factor of optimism.

With this collection, Wright did not mean to write a book 'which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good.'<sup>2</sup> For, when people shed tears and condole with the deplorable conditions that are the fate of the Afro-Americans, they get rid of the urgency to alter these painful conditions. Then, when he entitles his book, Uncle Tom's Children,<sup>3</sup> Wright looks back to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852). In alluding to this 'mythical father', Uncle Tom, he makes his characters the offspring of a cliché. Nevertheless, these descendants are different. They stand aloof from their 'father' that may be sympathized with. This is a new generation, Wright seems to say, that declares: "Uncle Tom is dead."

It is in these 'Southern' stories that the reader may perceive the theme, the structure, the plot, the language, and the 'ideational' content of all of Wright's later fictional works. In this regard, Uncle Tom's Children 'represent Wright the artist at his best.'<sup>4</sup> In depicting his characters, the author reproduces the vernacular of Southern Afro-Americans and Whites. That being the case, large parts of this collection are composed essentially of dialogue and soliloquy. On the other hand, these stories which, substantially, comply with the picaresque model, are compiled in such a way to suscite in the reader a feeling of ethical abhorrence. For in every story there is a 'wrong' that is 'chastised' by Southern law or tradition: as a portrait of an outrageously inequitable society, the heroes in Uncle Tom's Children are men who are chased, men desperately urged to violence, men 'who face the grim alternatives of flight or martyrdom.'<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in each of the five tales, the writer amplifies the protagonist's sense of duty, shifting from a teen-ager to a person in authority, from a



sufferer to a conqueror, so that the stories will engender a swelling of militancy. As this militancy of action heightens with the succeeding tales, Uncle Tom's Children seem to have a novel-like climax. The five short stories have a functional importance for the collection as a whole; for each story gradually uplifts the reader from wretchedness to self-assertion.

Though the Party was apprehensive about Wright's ideas and could not admit the vivid portrait of the Afro-Americans which he was depicting in every story, Wright, in Uncle Tom's Children,

set himself a conscious problem: what quality of will must the Negro possess to live and die in a country which denies his humanity? If one could not understand this fundamental, then one could not begin to understand any Negro in the United States.

b) Black Boy

In Black Boy (1945), Wright's greatest achievement was merely to show the white American people what their fellow 'black' citizens had to endure. The novel compels us, right from the outset, to consider Southern life from an Afro-American perspective. Thus, we read of a white dominated society whose purpose is to keep the 'Negro' in his 'place':

The white South said that I had a "place" in life. Well, I had never felt my "place"; or, rather, my deepest instincts had always made me reject the "place" to which the white South had assigned me.

In this respect, Wright's autobiography, Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth, as its subtitle indicates, chronicles, episodically, the author's up-bringing in a South where lynching, Jim Crowism, and every humiliating form of racial segregation are rife; and where the destiny of a 'Black Boy' is not only unsubstantial or vague, but may very easily lead to annihilation. As it covers the writer's life only up to 1927, this literary work is also a personal chronicle of Wright's pre-Northern and pre-Marxist period. Yet, Black Boy may be read as an



acerb criticism of the inequities and perfidies of a white man's world.<sup>2</sup>

In evaluating Black Boy, the reader is beset by a difficulty: how much of the book is true autobiography and to what extent should it be read as an essay in 'black and white' race relations? For one knows that Wright tries to fulfill, in this particular work, a combination of the singular with the plural: the tale of one Afro-American and his kin is made to represent the story of all Southern Afro-Americans. He told Constance Webb that 'he would use himself as a symbol of all the brutality and cruelty wreaked upon the black man by the Southern environment.'<sup>3</sup> Hereupon, the subject-matter of the autobiography is not simply the author or his family or his particular experiences, but the prejudiced intercourse between 'white men and black men' in the South.

While writing Black Boy, Wright gave a lecture, at Fisk University in April 1943, before an interracial assembly. In highlighting some of the pathetic phases of his boyhood, the audience became agitated. For neither the Afro-Americans nor the whites wanted a portrait 'of the shabbiness and emptiness of life lived under white domination as reflected in the personalities and relationships in his own family.'<sup>4</sup> Such statements were not supposed to be revealed in public but debated in close circles. Accordingly, Black Boy is an exploration of the South of Wright's youth, a study of the Southerner's racial attitude, and an exhaustive inquiry in which the author controls every single detail.<sup>5</sup> In scene after scene Wright pictures his boyhood as a disobedient drifter, unable to conform with the set of values which is effective in his tough and bitter family and in Southern life as a whole. At the age of twelve he has, he says, 'a conviction that the meaning of living comes only when one (is) struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering.'<sup>6</sup> So, his desire to write was a



strong impulse to reveal his existence. What haunted him was an apprehension of insubstantiality. He was afraid of being dehumanised and reduced to what the white South had wanted him to be: a nonentity.

In Black Boy, we also read of Wright's emergence from a 'black society' and his 'search of an articulated opposition to Western racism and bourgeois society.'<sup>7</sup> Here, it should be noted that the social and literary critiques of H.L. Mencken, and the radical novels of Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser, were his first readings of significant literature. For he notes 'I derived from these novels... nothing less than a sense of life itself. All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel.'<sup>8</sup> When the book was published, Wright was no longer a member of the Party; and the autobiography reveals that the author's 'language had broken out of the Party's spell.'<sup>9</sup> But, when the book was chosen by the Book-of-the-Month-Club, Wright declared: 'I am as collectivist and proletarian in my outlook as when I belonged to the Communist Party, and the Negroes are my people. But there is a need to think and feel honestly, and that comes first.'<sup>10</sup>

The secondary topic of the book is the author's categorical rejection of the Afro-American ethos<sup>11</sup> brought about by the way in which the Afro-American community had counteracted his strivings for self-fulfillment: 'I had been kept out of their world too long ever to be able to become a real part of it.'<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, what made Wright hostile to his family and, to a large extent, the 'Negro' community, was their connivance in his own humiliation. This is delineated by the protagonist's (Richard) symbolic defiance of his uncle Tom: 'Do you think I want to grow up and weave the bottoms of chairs for people to sit in?'<sup>13</sup> As a result he remained an 'outsider', a lonely craftsman whose significant purpose was the fulfillment of the individuality. Therefore, Black Boy may be read as a narrative of



emotional responsiveness to the inequities and prejudices of a closed society. It is by way of allegories that Wright represents the existence of the Southern Afro-American in this closed society. Towards the end of the autobiography, these allegories fuse together to create a terrible dilemma: the artist-hero has to decide whether to opt for the appalling choice of martyrdom or exile. He chose the latter. He set out for Chicago where his personality might 'grow differently,... drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps... bloom.'<sup>14</sup> In portraying his own intellectual and emotional growth and presenting himself as the paradigm of the innocent hero, victimised by a guilty society, Wright's Black Boy announces a basic form of Afro-American writing, that of the 'Bildungsroman', or, how I got my consciousness raised. For, Wright notes that his

mother's suffering grew into a symbol in (his) mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone of (his) life, coloured the men and women (he) was to meet in the future, conditioned (his) relation to events that had not yet happened, determined (his) attitude to situations and circumstances (he) had yet to face.<sup>15</sup>

c) Lawd Today

Uncle Tom's Children and Black Boy are works about Wright's South, but his settlement in the city gave birth to a documentary novel. Started in the mid-thirties and completed in 1957, Lawd Today was suppressed simply because it did not meet Party criteria. Eventually, the book was published three years after the author's death. As it is Wright's first novel, Lawd Today (1963) was written during his stay in Chicago, and deals with the disreputable environment of an Afro-American postal clerk. The author's major concern is the portrait of the Afro-American people and their life in a white-controlled,



capitalistic urban society. However, it is obvious that the reason why the Party intellectuals, whose major purpose was to promote their ideology, resented Lawd Today: Jake Jackson, the protagonist, is an anti-hero whose life is a striking picture of the depravity generated by the 'Black Belt'. We read of his activities in a cyclic way: on a wintry day, he first batters his wife, rambles in the neighbourhood, works on an eight-hour shift in the post office and ends the day in a Bacchanalia where he is swindled and 'beaten up'. When he returns home, he batters his wife again. In addition, he bribes to keep his numbing job and lies to get loans. So, in Lawd Today, Wright pictures a 'soul already corrupted rather than a Negro struggling manfully to maintain his integrity against a hostile, threatening environment.'<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, Wright was a communist when he wrote Lawd Today. But, producing such a controversial book in the thirties, suggests that the author was not completely under Party discipline. He was, indeed, a neophyte writer, 'guided', to a great extent, by the Party aestheticians. Nevertheless, 'his artistic integrity was stronger than any political doctrine.'<sup>2</sup>

The dream which opens the novel, displays Jake's character. This dream describes, to a certain extent, the littleness of Jake's endeavours and foreshadows the subject-matter of the novel: the inanity and the limitations of the protagonist's life. In this novel, Wright tries to typify a 'more precise image of the proletariat to which the Party had committed itself.'<sup>3</sup> We read of Jake and his companions, Bob, Slim and Al, as migrants from the South. They surely came to Chicago for better occupations and more liberty. But they seem to realise that there is almost no alteration as far as their status, as Afro-Americans in a white-dominated society, is concerned. 'The only difference between the North and the South is, them guys down there'll kill you, and those up here'll let you starve to



death.<sup>4</sup>

As the action of the novel takes place on a single day: February 12, which is President Lincoln's birthday, there is a recurrent reference to Emancipation. Yet, there is an irony about Jake's fate: though his forefathers have been freed, he is portrayed as a modern bondsman. He is, as a matter of fact, in debt to various creditors. In this respect, Wright explores various forms to 'manumit' his protagonist. The author hints at Booker T. Washington's recommendation to "cooperate and get along", and at Marcus Garvey's "back-to-Africa" movement. Nevertheless, one of the characters wonders 'if we went back to Africa, what would we do?'<sup>5</sup> Here, Wright seems to suggest that Jake and his friends ought to understand that their immediate sordid environment is partly their own achievement and it is only through united and sustained strivings that they can change it. For social justice should be their major concern. But there is a need for revolutionary leadership:

"...I wish there was a man somewhere who knowed how to lead and could lead. ..."  
"...and who would know how to speak out all these things so folks'd understand'em. ..."  
"There'll be a man like that someday. ..."  
"...and things start to change then."  
"...for something like that I wouldn't mind maybe fighting and dying."<sup>6</sup>

In Lawd Today, Wright shows, in a subtle way, how capitalism, with its specific set of values, can repress the individual's personality in general and the Afro-American's individuality in particular. In other words, Jake and his companions are corrupted 'by the false promises of the capitalist world'<sup>7</sup> in which personality is frequently defined in terms of money. One of the numerous frustrations in Jake's life is his incapacity to earn the money which is, for him, synonymous with authority. The author's emphasis upon 'long green', as Jake's paramount achievement, is to reveal the absence of elementary human values in



the protagonist's life. For instance, Jake is visibly fascinated by the Hollywood myths of heroism and 'gangsterism', for he asserts that gangsters 'have a plenty of fun...dress well in sporty clothes. Drive them long, sleek automobiles. And get money to throw away.'<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Jake, Slim, Bob and Al are only dimly aware of the economic forces that exploit them because they do not understand the reason why 'few rich folks owns the whole world...and runs it like they please.'<sup>9</sup> Jake considers the USA as a country of absolute liberty and fortune and regards as 'Reds' whoever criticise America. Here, the author derides the people's anti-communist attitudes for they are the hopeless victims of the capitalistic ideology. Thus, their stand is inconsistent as well as erroneous. In Lawd Today, the protagonist is the spokesman of this category of people when he remarks:

Now them guys, them Commoonists and Bolshehicks, is the craziest guys going! They don't know what they want. They done come 'way over here and wants to tell us how to run our country when their own country ain't run right. ...Why don't they stay in their own country if they don't like the good old USA?...And they go around fooling folks, telling 'em they going to divide up everything. And some folks ain't got no better sense than to believe it, neither. Just weak-minded, that's all!<sup>10</sup>

From a structural point of view, it should be noted that Wright must have been inspired by Joyce's Ulysses, as there are obvious similarities between the two novels. The action in both works, for instance, happens on a twenty-four hour period. However, for Dan McCall, Lawd Today 'is not really a novel. (It) is a long story unwound.'<sup>11</sup>

As an earlier work of which the setting is in Chicago's Black Belt, the material made way for Wright's major artistic achievement, Native Son. i.e. The 'Negro' as a bigoted-hero, which so 'scandalised' the Afro-American community when Native Son was published, was formerly portrayed by Wright many years earlier in Lawd Today. For Wright, then, Lawd Today was certainly a precursor of Native Son.



B/ Native Son

When Native Son appeared in 1940, Irving Howe has written that 'American culture was changed forever' for it was no longer possible to reiterate 'the old lies...Richard Wright's novel brought out in the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may destroy (the American) culture.'<sup>1</sup>

The novel's publication inflamed the readers and the author and his novel were subjected to a severe polemic. Yet, most of the attacks and counter-attacks concerning Native Son do not concern the book's literary value. It seems certain that Wright anticipated these vehement reactions. For in a letter to Margaret Walker Alexander, he remarked that 'if this book is published, you'll hear about it. The liberals, the CP, the NAACP--all of them will have their reservations.'<sup>2</sup>

However, Native Son has often been called 'the finest proletarian novel of all.'<sup>3</sup> The novel's plea may be for an indulgent, socialist society where such crimes, as the ones Bigger Thomas committed, could not happen. In this respect, Wright abundantly pictures, on the one hand, Bigger's desolate and void milieu and, on the other hand, the distressing and implacable white world, so that to demonstrate that



Bigger's behaviour, deeds and destiny have been affected by his position in the American social hierarchy. 'Wright was correct in insisting that the real criminal in the case of a Bigger Thomas is not he but is the class dominating the society that produced him.'<sup>4</sup> For we often obtain from excessive wretchedness individuals such as Bigger Thomas. This is common to all peoples. Thus, the 'monster nigger' is the unavoidable pathological product of terror, humiliation and anger.

Native Son is most plainly read and comprehended as a virulent exegesis on American 'Negro and white' relations; and the fundamental reality of the fear-hate background of race relations in the USA is placed at the core of the novel:

there is...no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees and to varying effect, simple, naked and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives, of the cruelest vengeance, their women, to break the bodies of all white people and bring them low, as low as that dust, into which he himself has been and is being trampled.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, Native Son has often been compared to Dreiser's An American Tragedy (1925). Yet, it should be noted that Bigger Thomas differs from Clyde Griffiths, the protagonist in Dreiser's novel, in the intensity of the resentment and the sanguinary abhorrence provoked by his condition as a 'black' drifter inhabiting a squalid ghetto in the world's most opulent society. In creating Bigger Thomas, Wright has in mind the image of an Afro-American who can be electrocuted but not defeated. For he knows that Bigger is

an American product, a native son of this land... a product of a dislocated society... a dispossessed and disinherited man... (who) lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out... But, granting the emotional state, the tensivity, the fear, the hate, the impatience, the sense of exclusion, the ache for violent action, the emotional and cultural hunger, Bigger Thomas, conditioned as his organism is, will not become an ardent, or even a lukewarm, supporter of the status quo.<sup>6</sup>



Accordingly, Native Son can be regarded as a novel by means of which Wright intends to express a premonition. The protagonist, Bigger Thomas, will 'loom as a symbolic figure of American life, a figure who (will) hold within him the prophecy of (the) future.' (p.23)

When Wright made up his mind to write the novel, he had, first, to face self-censorship. He thought of the various and unpredictable reactions of the whites who might say that 'this man is preaching hate against the whole white race.' (p.24) Furthermore, he wondered about the reaction of his 'white and black' comrades in the Party. For he knew that the Party considered all 'Negroes' as heroes and was blind to the slum life that handicapped 'spirit and personality'. In this sense, one need to mention that while Wright was working in a Chicago South Side Boys' Club, he encountered a myriad of 'black' boys whose age varied from eight to twenty-five. 'They were a wild and homeless lot, culturally lost, spiritually disinherited, candidates for the clinics, morgues, prisons, reformatories, and the electric chair of the state's death house.'<sup>7</sup> So, it is evident that Wright based his characterization of Bigger on the lives of these young people. Moreover, the author had also been inspired by his own personal experiences. For Bigger asserts that he dwelt in Mississippi, quit school at the eighth grade, had been in Chicago for five years, and his father had been killed, years ago, in a riot in the South. In Black Boy (Wright's autobiography), we notice Richard's similarity to Bigger: born in Mississippi, a formal schooling that ended at the eighth grade, abandoned by his father during his boyhood, and going North to Chicago at the end of his teens. There is another significant similarity that may be singled out when one is reading Native Son. In Black Boy we read of 'Uncle' Professor Mathews who, after knocking down a white woman, sets her house on fire so as to obliterate any evidence. Years after, Wright used almost the same incident as a major event in Native Son: Bigger Thomas acci-



dentally kills Mary Dalton and incinerates the body to destroy the evidence of his crime.

Wright's protagonist is, thus, a synthesis of situations, portraits and personalities that the author had to cope with. The 'Communists who doubted (his) motives did not know these boys, their twisted dreams, their all too clear destinies; and (he) doubted if (he) should ever be able to convey to them the tragedy (he) saw.'<sup>8</sup> Wright also wondered about the reaction of the 'black bourgeoisie' which looked down upon the Afro-American who remained at the bottom of the social ladder. For he knew 'from long and painful experience' that the Afro-American lawyers, bankers, doctors and dentists would be embarrassed by Bigger's portrait. 'They would not relish being publicly reminded of the lowly, shameful depths of life above which they enjoyed their bourgeois lives.' (p.26) But Wright felt the need to couch on paper his perception of the Afro-American in his bleak milieu. Notwithstanding, all the different claims that might oppose the novel, Wright took the initiative to write it. For

what Bigger meant had claimed (him) because (he) felt with all of (his) being that he was more important than what any person, white or black, would say or try to make of him, more important than any political analysis designed to explain or deny him, more important, even, than (his) own sense of fear, shame and diffidence. (p.26)

Native Son is the conclusion of Wright's determination to voice his position: his own perception of American Marxism, not the one that is displayed by the US Communist Party. Wright substantially says

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo; and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.

In this novel, then, Wright attempts to delineate a truer historical and accurate picture of the proletariat to which the Communist Party had bound itself. He had started this work in Lawd Today and the development



came in the form of Native Son. Consequently, this novel is a rejection of extremist doctrine from the vantage point of Afro-American experience. Wright attempts, at first, to reproduce that awareness, and in so doing he confronts it with the Party's communism. So, Bigger's series of adventures and vicissitudes, or his 'consciousness raising', are intentional. 'This (is) not simply a literary device, but a means of coming to grips with the abstraction and romanticization of the proletariat which had infected Western Communist Ideology.'<sup>10</sup>

For Wright, the issue of the consciousness of the proletariat and, subsequently, that of political organization is more complicated. It implies 'the dark and hidden places of the human personality.'<sup>11</sup> In his essay, "How 'Bigger' Was Born", Wright is unambiguous:

the civilization which had given birth to Bigger contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith, had sensitized him and had left him stranded, a free agent to roam the streets of our cities, a hot and whirling vortex of undisciplined and unchanneled impulses. ... I was fascinated by the similarity of the emotional tensions of Bigger in America and Bigger in Nazi Germany and Bigger in old Russia. All Bigger Thomases, white and black, felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless. ... certain modern experiences were creating types of personalities whose existence ignored racial and national lines of demarcation. (p.21-2)

In this respect, we read in Native Son of a character--Bigger Thomas, who is a man devoid of his quintessence. A man whose state is suspicion, his condition is seclusion and his response is a murderous violence. Besides, he is a marginal whose fundamental experiences are of flight, arrest and trial. Yet, throughout the novel, we follow his attempt to manifest his ego, to bring into being his personality and, on top of all, to achieve an existence.

Here, Wright seems to emphasize that premise which enunciates that reality is socially constructed. This postulate builds up out of the Marxist contention that the individual's psychology is conditioned by the economic and political process; i.e. the individual's consciousness



is the product of his specific status in the economic mode of production. Furthermore, the American social theorist, Karl Mannheim, argues in his work that 'man's consciousness is determined by his social being. That is, man acquires meaning from society, and these meanings or knowledge, whether valid or not, comprise man's consciousness.'<sup>12</sup>

Making use of the aforementioned premises, particularly that reality is constructed from a specific position in the social hierarchy, one should bear in mind that the Afro-American is, by definition, an American of an African descent. This state of being gives birth to a feeling of 'twness' as W.E.B. Du Bois would say:

It is a peculiar sensation...this sense of always looking at one's...soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,--this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the elder selves to be lost.<sup>13</sup>

This sense of 'twness' is faced with a double negation. The Afro-American is neither admitted as an American, for he is 'black', nor is he acknowledged as a human being for he dwells on the lowest level of the American social strata. Moreover, the white American views him as an 'ape' that should be caged. Here, the author shares his protagonist's fortune for he writes that Bigger is 'dual in aspect'.

He (is) an American, because he (is) a native son; but he (is) also a Negro nationalist in a vague sense because he (is) not allowed to live as an American. Such (is) his way of life and mine; neither Bigger nor I reside fully in either camp. (p.27)

On a broad scope, we also read in Native Son about that combination of economic oppression and educational limitations which ensure that the Afro-Americans are not able to find any political expression to voice their wrath. In the novel, Wright depicts Bigger Thomas



standing on a Chicago street corner watching planes piloted by whites and exclaims, 'Goddamn!'. This indicates a bitter reaction that may reflect the countless indignities and humiliations he suffers from. All of Bigger's life, the author seems to suggest, is controlled and defined by his abhorrence and his apprehension. Later, this apprehensiveness drives him to assassination and his aversion impels him to rape. According to James Baldwin,

Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being subhuman and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to these brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, Bigger has often been viewed as an anti-hero. He is not merely freakish but he is spiritless as well. As the first part of the novel is entitled 'Fear', it chronicles all sorts of fear that condition Bigger's behaviour. He is also incapable of affection and fidelity; he is a resentful young man whose accidental killing of a white rich girl gives a sense of 'freedom' he has never known before. One may also say, to a certain extent, that Bigger's assassination of Mary Dalton, the white girl, has got a philosophical motivation. For Bigger has been treated so far as a cipher. He has been deprived of all his flesh and blood. He has been reduced to a spectral presence in the white man's mentality. Bigger kills the girl so that to emerge from his 'invisibility'. He wants to force the whites to acknowledge his life. Bigger 'has established an identity through murder, but that identity by virtue of its horror, has cut him off from the human community of which he longs to be a part.'<sup>15</sup>

As far as the plot is concerned, the novel is divided into three 'books'. The span of time covered by the first two books is almost three days. The third book covers more than a month.

Book I, which is entitled 'Fear', delineates, similarly to Lawd Today,<sup>16</sup>



a day in the life of twenty year old Bigger Thomas: from the time he awakes in the morning and kills a rat in the sordid, unventilated one-room apartment he shares with his mother, sister and brother, till he comes back to sleep late at night having just smothered a white girl. So, Bigger's day symbolically starts and ends up in death.

In this first section, Wright depicts Bigger's actions in such a way to demonstrate the absurdity of Bigger's life. After the rat killing scene, we read of Bigger wandering in the streets with members of his gang (Gus, G.H. and Jack). They 'play white'. To enliven themselves, they perform roles of government officials, generals and financial magnates. Conscious that in real life, the political, military and financial positions are out of their reach, their imaginations play with these prohibited occupations. So, these limitations drive them towards marginality and criminality: they scheme to rob a white man's shop. Later, Bigger goes to a cinema to watch a trivial Hollywood film in which the 'great white world' stimulates and disconcerts him all the more. When he comes back from the cinema, he ferociously quarrels with Gus in a pool-room. Next, he attends a job interview that had been fixed for him by a relief agency. Consequently, Bigger is hired as a chauffeur by Mr. Dalton, a philanthropic white opulent man and 'a supporter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,' (p.93) who possesses an immense real estate on Chicago's South Side where Bigger's family dwells. Bigger's first task is to take Mr. Dalton's daughter, Mary, to the university. But Mary directs Bigger to the Communist Party headquarters where they pick up Jan, Mary's communist boyfriend.

To their attempts to fraternize with him, Bigger responds with apprehension and suspicion for he wonders if they

were making fun of him? What was it that they wanted? Why didn't they leave him alone? He was not bothering them... He was very conscious of his black skin



and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin? Did not white people despise a black skin? Then why was Jan doing this?(p.106-7)

After being compelled to share with them the same table in a 'Negro' restaurant, to which he has been forced to take them, Bigger drives them around a park. On the back seats, Jan and Mary drink heavily and make love. After Jan leaves, Mary is too drunk to get to her room by herself. So, Bigger helps her to her bedroom and lays her on the bed. At that precise moment, Mary's blind mother comes into the room and calls to her daughter. Scared of Mrs. Dalton's reaction if ever she realises that Bigger is in her daughter's bedroom, he puts a pillow on Mary's face so that she could not answer her mother's callings. When Mrs. Dalton goes away, Bigger realises that he has smothered Mary. Near the assassinated white girl, Bigger ponders--for the first time in his life he is fully conscious of the relationship that exists between the Afro-American and the white dominated society which, so far, had seemed to him as a 'Big White Fog' that blurred his vision. He thinks of those white people who pretend that 'black' people rape white women in order to lynch them. Consequently, he feels the necessity to act. He knows that this is not the first time he has killed. He has killed many times in his heart, has suppressed in himself sensations which would generate reprisals from the white people. Now, he has, to protect himself, to acknowledge Mary's death and put the body out of sight. Hence, he shoves Mary's corpse into the furnace. With this barbaric act, Bigger ends his first day in the Dalton's place. Then, he goes home.

All Bigger's behaviour is determined by fear. He abhors white people for he is scared of them. He is perfectly aware that they are the main cause of his immutability and his inhibition. For he asserts

I just can't get used to it...I swear to God I can't. I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help



it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence. (p.58)

However, he refuses to acknowledge his own fearfulness. For this would mean self-hatred. In order to soothe himself, he directs his resentment and violence towards his gang. We are told that he is fascinated with the idea of Blum's robbery which

would be a violation of ultimate taboo;...a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would turn loose upon (him);...a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over (him);...a challenge which (he) yearned to make, (p.52)

but he is apprehensive. He is also appalled that his gang might know about his fear. So, he acts aggressively towards them to demonstrate to himself his bravery. He also detests Mary for he '(feels) something in her over and above the fear she (inspires) in him,' (p.105) and murders her for he is afraid that his help will be misinterpreted. Bigger's being is, thus, a combination of abject fear and repugnance.

Book II, which is entitled 'Flight', traces Bigger's developing consciousness while his life is in jeopardy. Though he smothers Mary accidentally, he is determined to take upon himself the murder. For the first time in his life he is going to face the consequences of a pre-meditated deed.

He (has) murdered and (has) created a new life for himself. It (is) something that (is) all his own, and it (is) the first time in his life he (has) had anything that others could not take from him...His crime (is) an anchor weighing him safely in time; it (adds) to him a certain confidence which his gun and knife (does) not. (p.143)

Bigger feels he has no physical existence. He thinks of himself as 'a badge of shame...attached to a black skin', a naked and transparent creature standing upon 'a shadowy region, a No Man's Land'. Life, for him, has been a forbidden stage. A stage on which he has no part to



perform. He is perhaps accepted but not admitted as a human being with yearnings and aspirations. As he has nothing to do, he spends his time either loafing around or in cinemas and pool-rooms. But Mary's assassination reveals to him his proper self. For the sake of survival, Bigger manifests his vitality, tactical skill and combativeness. All that he and his friends have yearned to perform in the ordinary fields that have been exclusively opened for the young white Americans has been refused to him because of his complexion. So, he experiences Mary's murder as an emblematic annihilation of the obscure and manifest forces that crushed him. For one knows that Bigger's life is devoid of any meaningful achievement. Yet, Wright seems to suggest: if the Afro-American is legally barred from accomplishment, he will affirm this demand through illegal measures. 'That is the symbolism of Bigger's name: he aspires to action on the epic plane; he seeks a challenge worthy of his manhood; he insists on something "bigger" than the cramped horizons of ghetto life.'<sup>17</sup>

Ironically, Bigger achieves a significant resurgence exclusively by means of macabre and gruesome deeds. To divert people's attention from his atrocity, he commits more ignominious actions. He incriminates Jan, the Communist, for 'Reds do anything'. As a result, Jan is arrested. In the meantime, Bigger, dressing the story up, has announced to his girl friend Bessie Mears his involvement in Miss Dalton's sudden absence. She hesitantly assents to Bigger's plan which aims at simulating a kidnapping and blackmailing the Daltons. Here, Bigger is shown as an 'outlaw-hero'. He gets, as a Cain, a new faith in his transcendence. The characters that evolve around him are apparently blinded by abstract conceptions of reality.

Bigger has transgressed the laws and the habitual conventions. This sudden release, then, is represented in the episode of the kidnap-note. Here, Bigger is an artist: he creates imaginative worlds, produces



scenarios and abuses people the way he has been abused. This combination of creation and violation is, in Native Son, Bigger's criminal act, but for Wright it is a revolutionary act.

However, Bigger fails to materialize his stratagem because the newspaper men discovered Mary's carbonized bones in the furnace. This unexpected incident leads to Bigger's escape with Pessie. They both hide themselves in an abandoned tenement. He is scared that she might be a burden, for 'he could not leave her here and he could not take her with him. If he could take her along she would be crying all the time; she would be blaming him for all that had happened,' (p.275) so he decides to assassinate her. He makes love to her then batters her head with a brick. When 'the job (is) done', he throws Bessie's body down an airshaft and lies down to sleep, astounded by the act.

And, yet, out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him a queer sense of power. He had done this. He had brought all this about. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight. (p.279)

In an obnoxious and absurd world that does not regard him as a human being and that 'dichotomizes his personality', Bigger has adopted a sanguinary ego. Ironically, Bigger plays the role of the 'Negro monster' that the white world should hold in leash to safeguard the 'white race'. Bigger seems to accept this role as others accept resignation, indifference or sycophancy. We read that

he hated his mother for that way of hers which was like Bessie's. What his mother had was Bessie's whiskey, and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion. He did not want to sit on a bench and sing, or lie in a corner and sleep. (p.280)

Thus, Bigger's alienation from his family is by his own free will. We learn that his mother, his sister and girl friend have each opted for



a personal adaptation to 'Negro life' but he cannot find himself in either his mother's morbid concern with Christianity, his sister Vera's YMCA ethics, or Bessie's drunkenness, for all these are retreats from reality. He could have committed himself to resignation or drunkenness but he opts for violence and assassination to articulate his anguish. Yet, by rising up against the established order, he feels a 'sense of wholeness' that enables him to achieve an acute vision.

He comprehends why the white people cannot see his life, his being. The white people think of the Afro-American in terms of a cliché: he is either viewed as a "blackguard" or a "Sambo". They refuse to admit his human qualities. Bigger profits by this ignorance when he plots with his girl friend to blackmail the Daltons; he confesses to her that the authorities would never presume that they are involved. For

they might think (Mary) is in it herself, just to get money from her family. They might think the reds is doing it. They won't think we did. They don't think we got enough guts to do it. They think niggers is too scared. (p.185)

Furthermore, even supporters of the NAACP and other welfare organizations, such as the Daltons are not able to perceive the Afro-American's wretchedness. They suppose that their charity may promote the 'Negro' cause and, consequently obliterate misery and hatred. Paradoxically, they uphold the system which generates this misery and this hatred in the first instance. Mrs. Dalton's sightlessness epitomizes the blindness of the white liberals at large. We are told, in this respect, that Mr. Dalton is not revengeful. He has sent a dozen ping-pong tables to the South Side Boys' Club. To this declaration, Max exclaims

My God, man! Will ping-pong keep men from murdering? Can't you see? Even after losing your daughter, you're going to keep going in the same direction? Don't you grant as much life-feeling to other men as you have? Could ping-pong have kept you from making your millions? This boy and millions like him want a meaningful life, no ping-pong. (p.332)



Similarly, the communists do not regard Bigger as a tangible human being. They see him as a figure of abuse rather than a human being with flesh and bones and sensations to be acknowledged. It follows that 'he (feels) toward Mary and a Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate.' (p.107) It should be noted that they consider him as an equal, as far as the Party's policy is concerned, but as individuals they seem to be very paternalistic.

You know, Bigger, I've long wanted to go into those houses, (reference is made here to the Black Belt)...and just see how your people live...We know so little about each other. I just want to see. I want to know these people. Never in my life have I been inside a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They're human...There are twelve million of them...They live in our country... in the same city with us. (p.109)

What remains of Book II describes Bigger's flight. He ducks from one roadway to another, from one lodging place to another and from one roof to the next till 'there were no more roofs over which to run and dodge.' (p.305) Finally, with the force of the water pointed towards him by the firemen's hoses, he is pushed off the tank over which he has found refuge. Then, he is dragged down the stairs, his head bumping along the steps.

In Book III, of which the title is 'Fate', we read of Bigger's attitude after his capture: he is imperturbable. We are told that, now, he is not scared of anyone 'for he (knows) that fear (is) useless; and toward no one in the world (does) he feel any hate now, for he (knows) that hate (will) not help him.' (p.311) So, he steadfastly refuses to utter a single word. For

having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him; having accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life; having felt in his heart some obscure need to be at home with people and having demanded ransom money to enable him to do it - having done all this and failed, he chose not to struggle any more. (p.312)



Nevertheless, Max, Bigger's communist lawyer, is taking pains to assist him. This has aroused in Bigger a sense of hope. Bigger realises that Max is the only white person who has ever really endeavoured to break the seal of his personality. After twenty years of conditioning during which he refused to believe in any human being, particularly whites, he unexpectedly exposes his soul to Max. The point Wright is making is that nobody has ever before acknowledged his worth and elementary rights. 'But how on earth could they help him? He wanted help, but dared not think that anybody would want to do anything for him now.' (p.328) For he is conscious that the white people abhor 'Negroes' assuming that 'black skin (is) bad,' and is simply 'the covering of an apelike animal.' (p.313) That is the reason why, on his way for the inquest, he fully realises that, unlucky as he is and born for dark doom, the whites

were determined to make his death mean more than a mere punishment (for) they regarded him as a figment of that black world which they feared and were anxious to keep under control. (In other words,) they were going to use his death as a bloody symbol of fear to wave before the eyes of that black world. (p.314)

It should also be mentioned that Bigger does not deny his responsibility for Mary's death because he knows that he abhors all whites with such an intensity that he feels pleased to assume that he has smothered her intentionally. He tells Max that he hates her, 'even though she's dead...and I ain't sorry she's dead...she acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog. I was so mad I wanted to cry.' (p.387)

Mary's death is, ironically, Bigger's rebirth. Realising that he is in a godless world; a world marked by the absence of freedom, harmony and standards, he brings into existence his proper world of rage and violence that he knows to be real. In so doing, he has granted his existence purpose and vision. He, thus, conforms to Camus' statement



that 'violence is at the roots of all creation.'

Writing of Native Son, James Baldwin asserts that each Afro-American is a potential Bigger Thomas. Nevertheless, Baldwin reproaches Wright for his prejudiced representation, for there are intricacies and intensities to the 'Negro' psychology and existence that Wright has not examined. To portray Bigger only in terms of fury and resentment, and bar all other qualities, is to introduce an impediment to the Afro-American's emancipation. So, according to Baldwin, Bigger is a 'monster'. However, Wright is depicting a character who is so alienated from the prevailing social values that he feels the urge to establish his proper ethics:<sup>6</sup> for Bigger an act of assassination is an 'act of creation.' This act of creation elevates Bigger from namelessness to acknowledgment. As a rebellion of the long-submitted ego, he alone fulfills a startling deed. Thereby he imposes his presence on the white world. So, with the emergence of a new Bigger, i.e. a new 'nigger', the author delineates for the white people a hideous and dreadful picture of the Afro-American's latent revolt against centuries of white prejudice and oppression. Silas' resolution to struggle, as it is revealed in the Southern background of "Long Black Song", involves, here, the snowy urban setting of Native Son, with an implicit hint of the sordid Black Belt that has been pictured in Lawd Today. Here, Wright wonders what will happen if all the Silas, the Bigger Thomases and the Jake Jacksons decide to exteriorise their terrors, disaffections and inhibitions onto the American socio-political scene? On account of this, the critic Charles Glicksberg asserts that it is

sheer nonsense to insist that the act of killing made Bigger free, (on the contrary) Wright is holding a loaded pistol at the head of the white world while he mutters between clenched teeth: "Either you grant us equal rights as human beings or else this what will happen."<sup>18</sup>

Book III is also a pursuit for ways out. When Bigger is confronted by death, he hopelessly pursues an anchor or anything that may



give his existence and death a significance. For even religious morals cannot comfort him. We are told that the old Reverend Hammond, the pastor of his mother's church, comes to Bigger's cell to console him. But Bigger determinedly rejects his magnanimity. For he '(fears) that the preacher (will make) him remorseful.' (p.319)

One should bear in mind that Bigger has repudiated the Judeo-Christian morality, and identified himself with his brutal and destructive force that led him to crime. Like Marx who had admitted that religion 'is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions,'<sup>19</sup> Wright has discerned the real historical meaning of Christianity, among the Afro-Americans, as not a means of exploitation, but as a wise adjustment to oppression. This stand is represented in the novel by Reverend Hammond and Bigger's mother.

While Reverend Hammond is praying for his soul, Bigger realises the significance of the words without paying attention to them. For his mother used to tell him about the suffering, the hope and the love that await for him in eternity. Yet, he regards with disgust this prayer because it makes him feel a guiltiness stronger and deeper than the guilt of Mary's assassination. 'He (has) killed within himself the preacher's haunting picture of life even before he (has) killed Mary; that (has) been his first murder.' (p.322) Besides, the preacher reveals to Bigger the wretchedness and the desolation that Man had been subjected to and how, thanks to the Lord, He has been redeemed. Rev. Hammond substantially says:

'Son, fer thousand's of years we been prayin' for Gawd t' take th' cuss off us. Gawd heard our prayers 'n' said He'd show us a way back t' 'Im. His Son Jesus came down t' earth 'n' put on human flesh 'n' lived 'n' died t' show us the way. Jesus let men crucify 'Im; but His death wuz a victory. He showed us tha' t' live in this worl' wuz t' be crucified by it. This worl' ain' our home. Life ever' day is a crucifixion. There ain' but one way out, son, 'n' tha's Jesus' way, the way of love 'n' forgiveness. Be like Jesus.



Don't resist. (p.322-3)

Nevertheless, Bigger is afraid of the pastor. He even dislikes him for the Reverend asks him 'to bow down and ask for mercy;' but his self-esteem will not allow him to do that, not while he is still alive, 'not while the sun (shines).' Here, one may say that Marxism has often been a propitious frame of reference for Wright, but he refused formal religion, mainly formal Christianity, as a solution to problems principally secular such as Bigger's bleak existence that whites have forced upon him in his particular social milieu. On the other hand, Bigger wonders about Jan and Mary's respective stands. For both are begging him to trust himself.

The old Reverend's visit is followed by that of the young communist, Jan Erlone. Admitting that he had not understood what Bigger felt the night they forced him to eat with them, Jan confesses that he was 'kind of blind' and in a sense he is 'the one who is really guilty'. Then, he tells Bigger

I've never done anything against you and your people in my life. But I'm a white man and it would be asking too much to ask you not to hate me, when every white man you see hates you. I - I know my...my face looks like theirs to you, even though I don't feel like they do. But I didn't know we were so far apart until that night...I can understand now why you pulled that gun on me when I waited outside that house to talk to you. It was the only thing you could have done; but I didn't know my white face was making you feel guilty, condemning you. (p.324-5)

Through his attempt to comprehend Bigger, Jan is liberated from the Party restraints. Also, Bigger, who has been scared and hated Jan, is now enlivened by his frankness and audacity. For Jan confesses that he got something out of the pain he suffered from. It enables him to see deeper into men. It was in prison, mourning for Mary, that he thought of all the Afro-Americans who have been lynched and those Africans who have been snatched from their kin in times of slavery. Thereby, he comes to realise that he is able to endure his affliction. He asks



Bigger to be on his side for he 'can fight this thing with (him), just like (he has) started it. (He) can come from all those white people and stand here with (him).' (p.326) In this stand, Jan is not trying to urge Bigger to commit other abominable crimes nor is he expressing banalities and figments of the imagination. He analyses himself, in an introspective manner, and detects his own onesided views: he has been an ignorant 'formalist' in spite of the cause he is defending. At this precise moment, Bigger feels that 'a particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stepping still at his feet. The word had become flesh.' (p.326) This is an experience that occurs to him for the first time in his life: a white man has become a human being.

As Jan is an advocate of Communism, the lawyer Max is, to a certain extent, Wright's spokesman and the Party's mouthpiece. Yet, both Jan and Max stand for an alternative to Christianity. They typify a new religion which aims at changing the world's perception and Man's condition on earth. Jan and Max propose to Bigger a different world's perception from the one he is accustomed to: a new form of human brotherhood devoid of racial discrimination. However, Bigger repudiates their doctrine as being hollow and incompatible to his existence. 'Hence, the political commitment that saved Wright from nothingness is not available to Bigger.'<sup>20</sup>

As for Bigger's murder of Mary, Max asks him a series of tendentious questions such as: 'Why did you do it?...Did you plan it?...Did anybody help you?...Had you been thinking about doing something like that for a long time?...How did it happen?...Did you rape her?' (p.385-6) Max, the Marxist, wants also to know the reason why Bigger did not inform the 'Negre leaders' about his anxiety and fear. To this query, Bigger expounds:

Aw, hell, Mr. Max. They wouldn't listen to me. They



rich, even though the white folks treat them almost like they do me. They almost like white people, when it comes to guys like me. They say guys like me make it hard for them to get along with white folks. (p.394-5)

During the trial, however, Bigger is almost totally incapable of comprehending Max's peroration. He understands the spirit of the speech but cannot grasp the real significance of the terms, because Max does not refer to Bigger as an authentic human being but as an abstract notion. When Max and Bigger talk together in private, they have no difficulty in understanding one another. Yet, during the trial Max speaks of a characteristic personage, a symbol. For Max tells Bigger that 'in a certain sense, every Negro in America's on trial.' (p.405) He also tells the jury that 'this man (Bigger) is different, even though his crime differs from similar crimes only in degree. The complex forces of society have isolated here for us a symbol, a test symbol.' (p.420) Thereby, Max attempts to explain Bigger from a historical, economic and sociological angle. Later on, in his cell, Bigger tries to reveal to Max the hidden motives of the murder that made him understand his humanity. Nevertheless, Max can only put forward a vague argument about the social inequities and the need for people to believe in themselves so that to put an end to all the possible strife and intolerance. Bigger, in order to back up his argument, firmly states:

I ain't trying to forgive nobody and I ain't asking for nobody to forgive me. I ain't going to cry. 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... I didn't want to kill!... But what I killed for, I am! It must've been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder. (p.461)

In hearing these words, Max gets restless for his body moves nervously and 'his eyes (are) full of terror.' Bigger reassures him that he is all right but the lawyer does not face him and leaves him by himself in his cell with a 'faint, wry, bitter smile.'

We may infer from this passage, which is also the book's concluding



scene, that Wright emphasizes Bigger's non-identification with Max's ideology. Bigger's murderous act stands for a revolutionary act. The author acknowledges in his protagonist the hopelessness which is the prerequisite for absolute and violent revolutionary commitments. He comprehends these commitments not as the result of a deliberate choice but of obligation. The absolute humiliation of the human being, the absolute reaction--'the need for a whole life and acted out of that need.' (p.28) For Wright, then, the violence of Bigger Thomas and, to some extent, the lumpen proletariat, is 'not only an objective force of revolution; violence (cannot) be separated out from the formation of consciousness.'<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, such a revelation appalls Max, the Communist. On the other hand, the author, in depicting his protagonist, does not imply that every single Afro-American should 'smother' a 'white rich girl' for the sake of an existential fulfillment; he rather focuses upon the fact that there are intricacies, proper to the Afro-American community, that are not totally grasped by a delegate of a seemingly deep revolutionary ideology. Besides, Wright's anti-hero is the product of centuries of humiliation and crucifixion. His murderous act is, for the author, a legitimate means to achieve "freedom".

It must be admitted that in Native Son, Bigger has an important position and is by no means a figment. He is a typical figure to Buckley, the State's Attorney, and to the public at large. The author makes it sufficiently clear that these people's determination to kill Bigger is an indication of a primitive need to execute a ritualistic manslaughter and, by this means, to wipe out the latent menace presented by all the Afro-Americans. So, 'death is (Bigger's) portion, ... he runs to death; coming from darkness and dwelling in darkness, he must be, as often as he rises, banished.'<sup>22</sup>

In order to evaluate correctly the significance of the final section, it is imperative to comprehend what occurs in the concluding



pages of Native Son. At first, one does not necessarily agree with Baldwin when he asserts that Bigger 'wants to die because he glories in his hatred and prefers, like Lucifer, rather to rule in hell than serve in heaven.'<sup>23</sup> The point is that Bigger, by means of introspection, ultimately manages to voice his proper ego which is totally different from the one bequeathed to him by all the other characters in Native Son.

In this novel, Wright portrays an American who has faith in absolutely nothing. The author's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, does not abide by any morals except his violent self-conduct, for he is radically alienated from all the cultural ethics. In this sense, Wright seems to articulate a prophetic vision: Afro-American people such as Bigger may be a constant and hazardous menace to the roots of America. In other words, Wright reveals 'the hatred and the resentment of the ghetto masses and exposes a psychic wound so deep that only violence can cauterize it.'<sup>24</sup> However, many 'comrades' criticized Wright's approach towards the Afro-American people after the publication of the novel. They alleged that the Afro-American and white masses are not represented in Native Son; and this results in giving the reader an imperfect, and thereby, a false picture of the American reality.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, Wright was threatened by revocation from the Party. 'All that had saved him was his enormous popularity and public acclaim.'<sup>26</sup>

Rereading Native Son, half a century after its publication, one may deduce that Wright is exploring, in addition to the social injustices and racial segregation, a cardinal issue. He is asking a fundamental question about Man's essence: what is Man's morality in a world entirely lacking purpose and meaning? For he says:

a world whose fundamental assumptions (can) no longer be taken for granted; a world ridden with national and class strife; a world whose metaphysical meanings (have) vanished; a world in which God no longer (exists) as a daily focal point of men's lives; a world in which men



(can) no longer retain their faith in an ultimate here-after...a world whose nature (is) conflict and action, a world whose limited area and vision imperiously (urge) men to satisfy their organisms, a world that (exists) on a plane of animal sensation alone. (p.22)

In this sense, Bigger Thomas, from a conceptual point of view, anticipates Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man who also affirms his need for liberty and identity in this hostile world.

I hurt folk 'cause I felt I had to; that's all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me no room. Lots of times I tried to forget 'em, but I couldn't. They wouldn't let me...I'll be feeling and thinking that they didn't see me and I didn't see them. (p457)



NOTES:

A/ Introduction:

1. James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, (London, 1985), p.24.
2. Ibid., pp.30-1.
3. James Baldwin, "Richard Wright," Encounter, (April, 1961), p.58.
4. James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, op.cit., p.32.
5. Herbert Aptheker, Afro-American History: The modern Era, (Secaucus, NJ, 1971), p.28.
6. For the American critic Robert Bone, literature for the "Wright School" is 'an emotional catharsis--a means of dispelling the inner tensions of race. (The) novels often amount to a prolonged cry of anguish and despair.'  
Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America, (New Haven, 1965), p.158.
7. Reference is made here especially to the social novels of Steinbeck, Farrell and Dos Passos.
8. James Baldwin, op.cit., pp.41-2.
9. A term coined by Malcolm Bradbury in The Modern American Novel, (Oxford, 1984), p.98.
10. Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in Gayle Addison, Jr., ed., The Black Aesthetic, (New York, 1971), p.323.
11. Richard Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," in Richard Crossman, ed., The God that Failed, (New York, 1963), p.118.
12. Cedric J. Robinson, Black Marxism, (London, 1983), p.421.

1) General Background:

1. Dan McCall, The Example of Richard Wright, (New York, 1969), p.49.
2. Richard Wright, Black Boy, (London, 1947), pp.274-5.
3. Before the Civil War, Jim Crow was a minstrel character who epitomized the happy slave. As race relations changed in the aftermath of emancipation, "Jim Crow" became synonymous with segregation.
4. Russel Carl Brignone, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works, (Pittsburg, 1970), p.3.
5. The WPA (Work Projects Administration; later Work Progress Administration) was a New Deal organization, instituted by President Roosevelt (1933-45) in 1935, to counteract some of the consequences of the post-1929 Depression. WPA included the Federal Arts, Theatre, and Writers Projects. It disappeared, officially, in 1943.

2) Party Membership:

1. Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," op.cit., p.321.
2. Ibid., p.316.
3. Ibid., p.321.
4. Dan McCall, op.cit.
5. Ibid., p.50.
6. Daniel Aaron, "Richard Wright and the Communist Party," New Letters, (Winter, 1971), p.178.
7. Wilson Record, The Negro and the Communist Party, (Chapel Hill, 1951), p.305.
8. Richard Wright, op.cit., p.321.
9. -----, "I Tried to be a Communist," op.cit., p.120.
10. Ibid., p.128.
11. Daniel Aaron, op.cit., p.42.

3) Disenchantment:



1. Dan McCall, *op.cit.*, p.62.
2. Richard Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," *op.cit.*, p.135.
3. *Ibid.*, pp.145-6.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p.143.
6. Cedric J. Robinson, *op.cit.*, p.434. Underlines are mine.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Richard Wright, *op.cit.*, p.148.
9. *Ibid.*, p.130.
10. *Ibid.*, p.162.
11. *Ibid.*, p.158.
12. James Baldwin, "Richard Wright," *op.cit.*, p.59.
13. Henrietta Wiegel, "Richard Wright," in David Ray and Robert M. Farnsworth, ed., Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives, (Ann Arbor, 1973), p.74.

#### 4) Relevant Fiction:

##### a) Uncle Tom's Children

1. Russel Carl Brignano, *op.cit.*, pp.13-4.
2. Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography, (New York, 1968), p.168.
3. Margaret Walker Alexander, "Richard Wright," in David Ray and Robert M. Farnsworth, ed., *op.cit.*, p.64.  
She asserts that the 'title Uncle Tom's Children is a misnomer and misleading. It is an abominable title chosen as usual by the publishers... Anyone of the stories would have made a better title for the book.'
4. Russel Carl Brignano, *op.cit.*, p.X.
5. Robert Bone, Richard Wright, (Minneapolis, 1969), p.31.
6. Constance Webb, *op.cit.*, pp.157-8.

##### b) Black Boy

1. Richard Wright, Black Boy, *op.cit.*, p.284.
2. Ralph K. White, "Black Boy: A Value Analysis," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, XLII, (October, 1947), p.460.  
According to White, 'the chief hate-objects' in Black Boy 'are the Southern whites.'
3. Constance Webb, *op.cit.*, p.205.
4. *Ibid.*, p.206.
5. In a letter addressed to Wright, William Faulkner discussed Black Boy in these terms: 'It needed to be said, and you said it well... as well as it could have been said in this form... I hope you will keep on saying it...'  
Constance Webb, *op.cit.*, pp.208-9.
6. Richard Wright, *op.cit.*, p.111.
7. Cedric J. Robinson, *op.cit.*, p.417.
8. Richard Wright, *op.cit.*, p.275.
9. Dan McCall, *op.cit.*, p.57.
10. Constance Webb, *op.cit.*, p.208.
11. As a matter of fact, Wright established for himself, unlike his family, an agnostic position and had dismissed Christianity.
12. Richard Wright, *op.cit.*, p.166.
13. *Ibid.*, p.177.
14. *Ibid.*, p.285.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.110-11.

##### c) Lawd Today



1. Edward Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright, (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill., 1969), p. 91.
2. Brian Lee, American Fiction: 1865-1940, (London, 1987), p. 128.
3. Cedric J. Robinson, op. cit., p. 125.
4. Richard Wright, Lawd Today, (London, 1965), p. 180.
5. Ibid., p. 110.
6. Ibid., p. 182.
7. Brian Lee, op. cit., p. 129.
8. Richard Wright, op. cit., p. 34.
9. Ibid., p. 173.
10. Ibid., p. 36.
11. Dan McCall, op. cit., p. 22.

B/ Native Son

1. Morris Dickstein, "Wright, Baldwin, Cleaver," in David Ray and Robert M. Farnsworth, ed., op. cit., p. 183.
2. Margaret Walker Alexander, op. cit., p. 62.
3. Brian Lee, op. cit., p. 125.
4. Herbert Aptheker, op. cit., p. 260.
5. James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, op. cit., p. 38.
6. Richard Wright, Native Son, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1984), p. 23.  
All subsequent quotations are from this edition.
7. Richard Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," op. cit., p. 134.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 162.
10. Cedric J. Robinson, op. cit., p. 425.
11. Ibid., p. 426.
12. Karl Mannheim, Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge and Social Psychology, in Klotman Phyllis R. and Melville Yancy, "Gift of Double Vision: Possible Political Implications of Richard Wright's 'Self-Consciousness' Thesis," CLA Journal, (Sept., 1972), p. 111.
13. W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, (New York, 1982), p. 45.
14. James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," Partisan Review, (June, 1949), p. 585.
15. Robert Bone, Richard Wright, op. cit., p. 22.
16. As in Lawd Today, the plot and setting in Native Son begin on a wintry day in Chicago.
17. Robert Bone, op. cit., p. 21.
18. Dan McCall, op. cit., p. 65.
19. Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in Robert Tucker, ed., The Marx-Engels Reader, (New York, 1972), p. 12.
20. Robert Bone, op. cit., p. 22.
21. Cedric J. Robinson, op. cit., p. 427.
22. James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, op. cit., p. 43.
23. Ibid., p. 44.
24. Robert Bone, op. cit., p. 25.
25. In April 1940, Wright had written to Mike Gold: 'If I should follow Ben Davis' advice and write of Negroes through the lens of how the Party views them in terms of political theory, I'd abandon the Bigger Thomases. I'd be tacitly admitting that they are lost to us, that fascism will triumph because it alone can enlist the allegiance of those millions whom capitalism has crushed and maimed.' Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, in Cedric J. Robinson, op. cit., p. 439.
26. Constance Webb, op. cit., p. 157.



CHAPTER: TWO

ELLISON, R a l p h.



'The Negro is a sort of seventh son born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American World, --a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.'<sup>1</sup>

'Today it makes little difference...what the Negro thinks or dreams or wills. In the soul-life of the land he is today, and naturally will long remain, unthought of, half forgotten; and yet when he does come to think and will and do for himself, --and let no man dream that day will never come, --then the part he plays will not be one of sudden learning, but words and thoughts he has been taught to lisp in his race-childhood.'<sup>2</sup>

#### A/ INTRODUCTION:

Some thirty-eight years ago, an unknown writer, no longer young, published a first novel and won the National Fiction Award for 1952. There was the novel but who was the author of Invisible Man? For his life was similar to a parable, moving from Oklahoma-City to New York via Alabama. Yet, with the publication of Shadow and Act (1964), Ralph Ellison appears to the public view. This book is composed of most of his essays, from the beginning of his literary career to the present. In the preamble to Shadow and Act, Ellison tells of his struggle to become a writer:

I found the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel, and were encouraged to feel. And linked to this was the difficulty, based upon our long habit of deception and evasion, of depicting what really happened within our areas of American life, and putting down with honesty and without bowing to ideological expediencies the attitudes and values which give Negro American life its sense of wholeness and which render it bearable and human and, when measured by our own terms, desirable.<sup>3</sup>

This combination of the moral and the artistic is, for the writer, a central fact. However, one of Ellison's difficulties, one particular to any Afro-American who tries to express his own personality in his own



terms, i.e. when an Afro-American tries to think beyond what has been conceived before, or when he voices a perception of reality which contradicts or defies the group's vision, there is a movement, sometimes undeliberate, to bring him back into line or to exclude him. Hence, for an Afro-American writer such as Ellison, this statement of a personal perception is especially pathetic, for the consequent exclusion carries with it the charge of "selling out" or "trying to be white."

On the other hand, Ellison has always affirmed his identity as an Afro-American. For he declares

I recognize no American culture which is not the partial creation of black people. I recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in music, even in assembly line processes, which does not bear the mark of the American Negro.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Ellison is one of the few Afro-American writers who have struggled to express the impact of the 'Negro' on American culture and the relationship between the two. In this respect he once declared in an interview:

I consider myself both (a 'Negro' and an American) and I don't see a dichotomy. I'm not an American because I arbitrarily decide so. I write in the American tradition of fiction. My people have always been Americans... Culturally speaking, I inherited the language of Twain, Melville, and Emerson, after whom I'm named. No, it makes a very dramatic statement when you say, 'I am not American, I feel alienated.'<sup>5</sup>

Before the publication of Invisible Man (1952), Ellison was a "Trojan" writer, publishing whenever possible and doing odd jobs to make ends meet. Beyond the circle of his family, friends and relatively few readers of literary and radical journals, Ellison's name was not known before 1952. With the appearance of Invisible Man, Ellison moved suddenly into the front ranks of American writers. Before this public success, he had published ten short stories and thirty-seven essays on literature and politics. Ellison has published no second novel. Still, he has published twelve stories since Invisible Man, along with dozens



of essays and interviews, some of which are collected in Shadow and Act.

Though his first writings testify to Richard Wright's influence, Ellison had already begun to discover his proper style and topics. He was afraid that his old mentor was more interested in politics than in art. Moreover, he had the impression that Wright did not know much about the profound significance and the witty language of folklore. Perhaps most important, Ellison aimed at picturing Afro-American life more positively than Wright. He felt that very few writers comprehended and articulated the Afro-American predicament with the mordant wit and the enthusiasm of the orators and musicians he had listened to in Oklahoma-City.

Native Son and Invisible Man stand as the two most significant books in the history of Afro-American fiction. Ellison's novel summarizes all of Wright's existential wrath, all of Langston Hughes' sense of negritude, all of James Baldwin's sense of America, and all the sense of lonesome, vulnerable identity that is the fundamental substance of the most remarkable Afro-American writing of the twentieth century.

Perceiving the Afro-American as the creation of the eyes that see him, Ellison demonstrates that 'Negroes' are not considered as human beings, but as functions. Therefore, it is the 'nigger' who is seen instead of the human being who remains invisible to both 'black and white' worlds. In a highly symbolic narrative Ellison extends the 'invisibility' of the 'Negro' to modern man, so that the Afro-American becomes the paradigm of human existence in contemporary America. Ellison's nameless protagonist, an existentialist underground man who discovers that identity exists not in the eyes of others but in the creation of an ego through an effort of will, proclaims the possibility of re-emerging into the world in an obstinate determination to be and to work. As an ex-underground hero he might reveal the ways in which a singular and dehumanized world could be re-humanized. Hence,



the racial turmoil as we know it...was only a distant thunder, not necessarily promising rain. In that state of nervous calm, Ellison could produce a novel which, regarding the character and fate of American Negroes--indeed the character and fate of our whole multi-racial society--was both a summation and a prophecy.

Accordingly, the Invisible Man is an identifiably Afro-American whose life is so profoundly human that readers all over the world identify and sympathise with him.

It should be mentioned that Invisible Man revives, and often refers to, the debut of the novel as a literary form: to Cervantes, Defoe, Fielding and, chiefly to works by great nineteenth-century novelists such as Dostoevsky, Twain, James and, especially Melville. F.W. Dupee calls Invisible Man 'the veritable Moby-Dick of the racial crisis.'<sup>7</sup> Like Moby-Dick, Ellison's novel is a comprehensive novel, one that tries many things: both are rhetorical tour de force containing letters, political speeches, songs, sermons, bars, fights, churches and dreams. Yet, Ellison has described his novel as one about 'innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality.'<sup>8</sup> Still, one wonders how did this first novel by an unknown writer come to be regarded as a classic in a short time? One has to bear in mind that Invisible Man has been conspicuously reviewed by journals such as the Saturday Review, The New Yorker and The New York Times. Famous scholars such as Delmore Schwartz, the editor of Partisan Review (1943-55), were extremely exuberant. Schwartz regretted that 'the language of literary criticism seems shallow and patronizing when one has to speak of a book like this...It is a book which ought to be reviewed by William Faulkner, the author of Light in August.'<sup>9</sup>

Taking heed of his warning that 'for the novelist, of any cultural or racial identity, his form is his greatest freedom and his insights are where he finds them,'<sup>10</sup> it is important to note that rather than writing specifically for a white audience, as his detractors



suggested, Ellison focused his novel on issues affecting Afro-Americans, 'on the lingering problem, for example, of finding black leadership that was effectively responsive to the black group's own needs and wishes.'<sup>11</sup> Ellison also felt drawn to praise the Afro-American ethos that has maintained the community. Accordingly, he has stated that folklore<sup>12</sup> explains the Afro-American's self-consciousness and plight. For, unwilling to embrace totally the white American's values and perceptions, the Afro-Americans set up in folklore their own modes of expression: 'another instance,' observes Ellison, 'of man's triumph over chaos.' In folklore, past experiences are 'polished', appraised and revived. Afro-American folklore unfolds 'symbols which express the group's will to survive...values by which the group lives and dies...the group's attempt to humanise the world.'<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the author is fully aware of the blankness of the Afro-American community's fate, and wonders if the 'Negro' writer should reveal only those negative aspects of his community and ignore other factors that had sustained the group? In his work, though, we may notice a development of a central theme: 'the more conscious a person is of his personal, cultural and national history, the freer he becomes.'<sup>14</sup> This is an indication of the influence of writers such as Wright, Malraux and Hemingway. This shows itself in Ellison's emphasis on individuals who by perseverance and volition manage to stand independently.

In his style we can also see a change from social realism to surrealism. Ellison's endeavours to contrive a language, to articulate the tempestuous and kaleidoscopic world as perceived by his self-conscious hero, led him to use modernist techniques such as surrealism, multiple perspectives and stream of consciousness, to depict a world that is violent and out of focus. Writing about his style he claims that

to the extent that we can use these forms and techniques...and draw from the uniqueness of Negro speech and from the uniqueness of our experience as Americans, we have



something to add to the general quality of...American literature.<sup>15</sup>

However, what makes his work typically Ellisonian is the use of Afro-American folklore. Furthermore, the novel's remarkable fullness of references to early novels, fairy tales, classical literature, philosophical, political and psychological works by major writers and thinkers such as Marx, Malraux and Joyce, gives to readers, who know the works referred to, a cluster of alternative reference points. Nevertheless, as Robert Bone points out

it remains to place Ellison in his twentieth-century tradition. What is involved is a rejection of the naturalistic novel and the philosophical assumptions on which it rests. From Ellison's allusions to certain of his contemporaries--to Stein and Hemingway, Joyce and Faulkner, Eliot and Yeats--one idea emerges with persistent force: Man is the creator of his own reality.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Invisible Man's relevance to the various problems of Afro-Americans can be used to reduce it to the level of a documentary of the 'Negro's' predicament.

To read such a...brilliant novel...it is to find, among one's richest satisfactions, the sense of immersion in all the concrete materialities of Negro life. One hears the very buzz and hum of Harlem in the racy, pungent speech of his West-Indians and his native hipsters, and all the grotesquerie in his opening account of the dreary little backwater of a remote Southern Negro college has in it a certain kind of empirically absolute rightness. Indeed, the book is packed full of the acutest observations of the manners and idioms and human styles that constitute the ethos of Negro life in the American metropolis; and it gives us such a sense of social fact as can be come by nowhere, in the stiffly pedantic manuals of academic sociology.<sup>17</sup>

Few writers have made more incisive statements about the dehumanizing strains that have been put upon Afro-Americans. Thus, Invisible Man is one of the most trenchant artistic depictions we have of the Afro-American under these dehumanizing pressures; and at the same time, a statement of the human triumph over those conditions.<sup>18</sup> For, in Ellison's novel, the hero is duped, beaten and even lynched; but conscious of his origins in a sustaining tradition, he succeeds in



persevering with courage and high style. This emphasis on the heroic impulse in Afro-American life has contributed to Ellison's impact on many writers such as Ishmael Reed, Tony Morrison, James Alan McPherson, and Alice Walker. Nevertheless, critics have often wondered why the author of Invisible Man 'disappeared' after the 'one-big-book'.

Ellison has been diversely considered as a 'Negro writer' and as a one-book-novelist. As his Invisible Man 'was cited in 1965 by a pannel of two hundred authors and critics as the work of American fiction most likely to endure of all those published since 1945,'<sup>19</sup> his fiction, Ellison wrote, 'became the agency of (his) efforts to answer the questions: who am I, what am I, how did I come to be?'<sup>20</sup> and the answer his protagonist finally comes up with is that he is all that he has been: 'I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me.'<sup>21</sup> However, our objective, in dealing with Ellison's Invisible Man, is to shed as much light as possible on Ellison's nameless hero, and on the fictional world in which he evolves: a world of dubious honors, shadows and much adversity.

#### 1) General Background:

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma-City in 1914, seven years after Oklahoma was admitted to the Union. His parents Lewis Ellison from Abbeyville, South Carolina, and Ida Milsap Ellison from White Oak, Georgia, had moved from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to benefit from the proclaimed 'greater freedom' of this New Territory. Ellison remembers the 'Oklahoma blacks' who felt that 'no matter what their lives had been, their children's lives would be lives of possibility.'<sup>1</sup> For, as Robert Bone observes, in the Oklahoma territory,

race relations were more fluid than in established communities. Frontier attitudes persisted well into the present century, and Ellison was raised in a tradition of



aggressiveness and love of freedom. He is proud of his frontier heritage, and to it may be traced his fierce individualism and his sense of possibility.<sup>2</sup>

Born in such a newly established state, Ellison took from his milieu a different perspective from that, for instance, of Wright who had been born into the closed world of 'Negro' sharecroppers in Mississippi. When his father--a construction worker--died, in 1917, Ellison was only three years old, and the rest of the family had to face an unbearable poverty. This compelled the mother to support the family as a domestic servant. Still, Ralph and Herbert, his younger brother, felt that the worlds of the well-off and the whites were accessible. This mentality was certainly promulgated by the father who was, in fact, an avid reader who named his son after Emerson (1803-82), the American philosopher, essayist and poet. This attitude was also reinforced by the resolute mother who brought home records and books rejected in the white homes where she worked as a maid. Moreover, being an activist and an ardent supporter of Eugene Debs' Socialist Party, she would often tell her sons 'if you young Negroes don't do something about things, I don't know what's going to happen to this race.'<sup>3</sup> Years later, Ellison would recall his mother's role in his being a writer, for he says:

(my mother) certainly had something to do with encouraging my interest in reading. She had no idea that I was going to become a writer, or if she did, she had more insight into me than I had into myself, because I thought I was going to be a musician. My mother always encouraged me to do something, and to be good at it--she insisted upon that. It was my father who wanted me to be a writer. I didn't discover that until many years later...until after I had written Invisible Man and talked with an older cousin, who told me that my father had used to say, "I'm raising this boy to be a poet." Of course he had given me the name (Ralph Waldo).<sup>4</sup>

In Oklahoma-City, a town that was music-centered, the most venerated heroes were the musicians. Ellison heard church-performers and marching bandsmen. He wanted to become a musician who could read music as well as create it. Accordingly, he learned music-theory at the local



High School and gathered an accurate knowledge of many brass instruments of which the trumpet was his favourite.

In 1934, he had gone off to Tuskegee Institute as a scholarship student. His aim was to study composition under William Dawson, the Afro-American conductor and composer. The Tuskegee Institute along with its father-founder Booker T. Washington, became the illustration for the College and its Head that is experienced by the nameless hero of Invisible Man in his Southern youth. So, at Tuskegee, Ellison majored in music but financial difficulties obliged him to leave after three years there. Besides, in Alabama, there were pressures, specific to the Deep South, to cope with. For both the Afro-Americans and the white Alabamians tried to oblige him to perform functions he found repulsive. Yet he felt he was not forced to 'meet every challenge some peckerwood came along with,'<sup>5</sup> and in time he found it relatively simple to

outmanoeuvre those who interpreted (his) silence as submission, (his) efforts at self-control as fear, (his) contempt as awe before superior status, (his) dreams of far away places and room at the top of the heap as defeat before the barriers of their stifling, provincial world. And (his) struggle became a desperate battle which was usually fought, though not always, in silence.<sup>6</sup>

Still, the constraints and hostilities, he faced at Tuskegee, fertilised Ellison's artistic awareness. He transformed the essence of his Tuskegee experience into the symbolic action of Invisible Man, which elucidates certain stages of his college years in Alabama. For instance, when Jim Crowism was at its worst, he realised that he was able to 'escape the reduction' forced upon him by 'unjust laws and customs.' Realising that he was the victim of stupid persecution, and having to face, as a matter of fact, the Jim Crow facilities, he would

move to the back of a Southern bus, or climb to the peanut gallery of a movie-house--matters about which (he) could do nothing except walk, read, hunt, dance, sculpt, cultivate ideals, or seek other uses for (his) time--than to tolerate concepts which distorted the actual reality of (his) situation or (his) reactions to it... thus was (he) disciplined to endure the absurdities of both conscious



and unconscious prejudice, to resist racial provocation and, before the ready violence of brutal policemen, railroad "bulls", and casual white citizens, to hold (his) peace and bide (his) time. Thus was (he) forced to evaluate (his) own self-worth, and the narrow freedom in which it existed, against the power of those who would destroy (him).<sup>7</sup>

Though music was his primary concern, in 1935, during his second year at Tuskegee, he made a significant move towards writing. He started studying the sources and techniques of modern fiction and poetry. The literary work that profoundly attracted him, that year, was T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," of which he said, it 'moved and intrigued me but defied my powers of analysis.'<sup>8</sup> So, during his third year at the college he started writing poetry for the first time.

During his three years at Tuskegee Ellison stared down the old Southern visions of Afro-American life, and by following the 'New Negroes of Tuskegee,' he was maturing despite the general atmosphere of intellectual trepidation at the college. However, because of a confusion about his scholarship at the end of his third year Ellison was without the forty-dollar tuition fee for the coming year, and had no money to subsist on. He decided that rather than working in Alabama, where it would be hard to save money for the fall term, he would venture North. What he knew about New York made it sound like a magic place, and he looked forward to getting work there; and maybe he could also appease his desire to tackle life from other new angles. He was also attracted to New York because of that magical promise of greater freedom.

New York was one of the great cities prominent in the Negro American myth of freedom, a myth which goes back very far into Negro American experience. In our spirituals it was the North star and places in the North which symbolised freedom and to that extent I expected certain things from New York.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly he had difficulty in finding a job in New York. It was 1936--the middle of the Great Depression. Yet, on his second day in Harlem, Ellison came across Langston Hughes. Through Hughes he met



Wright. Immediately, an intimacy between the two men developed for they shared the same pain: they were left-wing Afro-American intellectuals with Southern backgrounds attempting to survive in New York and struggling to generate art in the heart of the Great Depression. Ellison's new friends encouraged his leftward tendencies. Wright was an active member of the Communist Party when they met, and Hughes was a member of the radical American Writer's Congress. Ellison took part in social gatherings<sup>10</sup> and wrote articles to back up Communist Party issues, but he never joined this party resenting its oversimplification and manipulation. Moreover, he eventually rejected the Party's orientation to elevate politics above literature. He firmly believed in the transcendental value of artistic technique and insisted on historical and psychological credibility in fiction. Nevertheless, Wright was so strongly affected by his friend's capacity to analyse literature that he compelled him to write a short story for New Challenge but Ellison begged off. He was a musician and had no writing experience. Wright 'forced his hand' by asking for a short review of a newly published novel: Waters Edward Turpin's These Low Grounds. With this review, Ellison took the 'fatal step' on the way to becoming a writer. In February 1937 he was broken by the dreadful news of his mother's sudden death but he was determined to continue to practice his writing. He became with Wright's help a beneficiary of the New Deal's Federal Writers' Program from 1938 to 1942. In this respect, he once pointed out that he 'first started writing under WPA--that is (he) was able to give time to writing because (he) could do work for them and learn to do (his) own,'<sup>11</sup> and in Shadow and Act he confesses that 'writing provided me a growing satisfaction and required, unlike music, no formal study--but the designation "writer" seemed to me most unreal.'<sup>12</sup>

During the years he spent in the WPA, Ellison was totally aware of language and folklore as keys to the past and to individual iden-



tuty. As early as 1940, and unlike Wright, he was reluctant to picture the Afro-American merely as the victim of external forces. He started to consider Afro-American characters, who were, with the help of their strength, folklore and history, able to comprehend their environment. This desire for conscious heroes indicates his eventual split with several of his literary and political companions such as Wright whose "Blueprint for Negro Writing" was initially a model for Ellison's fiction and criticism. Here, it should be noted that in the thirties, Ellison was well versed in left-wing politics. He plainly perceived the writer's duty to produce works embracing the great social issues of the era, and wrote many virulent radical essays, short stories and reviews. However, by the early forties, he refused to limit his views of Afro-American culture and character to the rules of current political theory. As the forties wore on, it became obvious to Ellison that timeless art transcends political dispute. For

the ideology changes, but the human experience, the joy and the pain, the anger and the exultation which should go into art remains... It isn't yours; it's a group thing which you share in and which you communicate... if you do that, then it seems to me a far more important thing than being ideologically committed. The novel is a form which attempts to deal with the contradictions of life and ambivalence and ambiguities of values. It isn't easy for ideologues to deal with it. They don't trust it because the form itself insists upon a certain kind of truth, a certain kind of objectivity. <sup>13</sup>

Such a stand made radicals of the forties and fifties apprehensive about Ellison's political tendencies. Even Wright feared that his talented 'protégé' would casually 'betray' him; and during the sixties when Black Arts Movement artists and critics were calling for ever more radical poems and stories, Ellison was considered with a certain mistrust. For instance, on speaking tours at college campuses, he was often met by Afro-American students' coldness and sometimes even disdain.

On a different level, his success can be noticed when one bears in mind



the various posts he held in the Arts and Letters Institutes, Clubs, Academies and centers; in addition to the numerous awards and honors he had, such as Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres, awarded to him by André Malraux, the French Minister of Cultural Affairs, in 1970. Yet,

Ellison's achievements are too enormous to be reduced to rhetorical formulation. His success proves that intelligence, perseverance, discipline and love for one's work are, together, too great a combination to be contained, or even defined, in terms of race.<sup>14</sup>

## 2) Relevant Fiction:

### a/ Shadow and Act

Shadow and Act (1964) is a compilation of seven apprentice pieces written in the forties, which reflects the writer's political and social interests, and seven essays on Jazz and the Blues, which appeared mainly in the late fifties. In addition to the three interviews, there are three first rate essays on literary topics. Accordingly, we are informed about the writer and the circumstances that have formed his perception of life.

These pieces that were published at irregular intervals (the earliest appeared in 1942 and the most recent in 1964) are arranged under three headings: literature (mostly American); Jazz and Blues; and social commentary (dealing primarily with culture and politics). The primary significance of these essays is autobiographical. Yet, they do not say much about his life in any conventional biographical sense. Their first appeal appears to be that here, finally, the 'Invisible Man' begins to rise from the underground. Here is Ellison's 'real autobiography.' Certainly, the autobiographical indications are explicit in two pieces, the "Introduction," and "Hidden Name and Complex Fate." Furthermore, the writer largely draws upon his own background for the reviews and interviews. By enclosing essays written over a stretch of twenty-two years, Ellison shows certain facets of his evolution from



the twenty-year old leftist WPA worker to the seasoned author of 1964 who is not 'primarily concerned with injustice, but with art.' In his "Introduction" the author presents a kind of excuse, revealing that the essays 'represent, in all their modesty some of the necessary effort which a writer of (Ellison's) background must make in order to possess the meaning of his experience.'<sup>1</sup> When the first of the essays was written, he considered himself 'in (his) most secret heart at least --a musician,' not a writer. 'With these thin essays for wings,' he notes, 'I was launched full flight into the dark.'<sup>2</sup>

From a glance at the publication date of every text, we may deduce the development of a young intellectual's consciousness. Consequently, the basic significance of these essays 'whatever their value as information or speculation, is autobiographical.'<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the collection has thematic unities that are even more compelling. Its force is obtained from its fundamental disparity of Afro-American life, as perceived through the lens of politics, sociology and popular culture, with 'Negro' life as seen and lived by one conscious, questioning Afro-American.

As it deals with the image and role of the Afro-American in the United States, Shadow and Act is essential reading for anyone attempting to understand Ellison, the man or the artist. For, while Invisible Man is a tale of a man's effort to comprehend his society and himself, the essays delineate Ellison's own fortunate struggle to master the craft of the writer and to understand, and then affirm, the intricacies of his own rich cultural experience.

In his numerous lectures and in Shadow and Act, Ellison emphasized the Afro-American writer who cannot comprehend his writing until he comprehends his negritude, but at the same time he is not able to perceive and articulate his negritude until he understands his art and craft. This led Ellison to appear as a controversial figure in the



debate about the objectives of Afro-American writing and about literature as a social weapon. Eventually, he concludes that he is a writer not a 'black writer.' Though he has been attacked by many radical artists and critics, he affirms that it is his art that confers on him his identity and that it is his loyalty to his art that gives him the possibility to universalise his experience as an individual 'Negro,' as a man. He insists that the best art generates the best politics. For Ellison, the writer who assumes that good art must be explicitly 'engagé', spoils the image of the Afro-American he endeavours to defend. For one would get the impression that when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell.<sup>4</sup> The violent Bigger Thomas, the hero in Wright's Native Son, is preferred to, the bewildered nameless Invisible Man. Unnoticed here is the view that Afro-Americans are indisputably human and that

their resistance to provocation, their coolness under pressure, their sense of timing and their tenacious hold on the ideal of their ultimate freedom are indispensable values in the struggle, and are at least as characteristic of American Negroes as the hatred, fear and vindictiveness which Wright chose to emphasize.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Ellison clearly expresses his disagreement with Wright as far as the objective of art is concerned:

Wright believed in the much abused notion that novels are "weapons"--the counterpart of the dreary notion, common among most minority groups, that novels are instruments of good social relations. But I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject.

He also affirms that just as he, and most Afro-Americans, have controlled themselves to live normally in a hostile America, his work is a result not of political struggle as such but of controlled literary struggle. The artist's responsibility is not to negate but to metamorphose resentment and prejudice into art.

In Shadow and Act, Ellison goes back more and more to these



variegated themes: the connection of the Afro-American folk culture to American culture in general, and the engagement of the Afro-American artist to his ethnic group.

This is not to say that this collection is without predecessors. As an examination of 'Americana' from the extensive perspective of a writer, this compilation is in the same tradition as Henry James' The American Scene (1907) and James Baldwin's Notes of a Native Son (1955). Furthermore, Shadow and Act has also been a source for others such as Imamu Amiri Baraka's Home (1966). Though Ellison's and Baraka's perspectives differ very much, for Home articulates Baraka's 'black nationalism,' and Ellison in emphasising the Afro-American's particular contributions to American society, may be considered as an Afro-American cultural nationalist. Yet their books are identical in form; they are both composed of essays on Afro-American art and politics. Besides, they both have autobiographical suggestions.

Shadow and Act has also a lasting accuracy as a unified work of art because of its author's straightforward decision to shed some light upon himself and certain aspects of Afro-American life. As a varied work that is composed of literary essays, breezy interviews and autobiographical reflections alongside a formal address, this compilation is a well-unified whole, held together by Ellison's capacity as artist/philosopher/editor. In this sense, Stanley Edgar Hyman asserts that this collection is 'a monument of integrity, a banner proclaiming the need to keep literary standards high,'<sup>7</sup> and Ellison adds,

be that as it may, these essays are a witness of that which I have known and that which I have tried and am still trying to confront. They mark a change of role, a course, and a slow precarious growth of consciousness... The very least I can say about their values is that they performed the grateful function of making it unnecessary to clutter up my fiction with half-formed or outrageously wrong-headed ideas.



B/ Invisible Man

Although we come to know the Invisible Man, this Afro-American figure with no face and no name, as a constantly jeopardised Odysseus under the polyphemal white eye of society, he is no man and every man at the same time. He is a voyager on a modern epic quest urged by the message his grandfather reveals in a dream: 'To whom It May Concern... Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.' Therefore, his principal search is for a name. During his quest, he is given another name by the Brotherhood, but it is useless. For, when he becomes a "brother," he realised that the Brotherhood does not elucidate his inner apprehensions.

The very premise of Invisible Man is that it is a 'novel about the disappearance of self and the collapse of moral perspective.'<sup>1</sup> It also brings to mind the namelessness and exposure experienced by the modern Afro-American, in particular, and modern man in general. For Ellison says, 'who knows' but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you.'<sup>2</sup> So, if Invisible Man, which may once have appeared to be limited to the particular situation of the Afro-American at mid-century as a 'Negro novel,' it is above all an American novel about 'blacks and whites' together. It simply develops Wright's aphorism: 'the Negro is



America's metaphor.' In this respect, Ellison once declared

I believe any novel becomes effective to the extent that it deals quite eloquently with its own material--that is, you move from the specific to the universal--and that there's no reason why any novel about Negro background, about Negro characters, could not be effective as literature and in its effectiveness transcend its immediate background and speak eloquently for other people...and will speak to the other people.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of its dramatic episodes, Invisible Man's fundamental mode is comedy. Even the regrettable tales of Trueblood and Ted Clifton have funny aspects. The basic statement of the novel, that the hero cannot be seen is comical. The comedy is used to match the seriousness of Ellison's 'studies of blindness and sight, lightness and darkness, perception and ignorance, being and nothingness, the strange ambiguities and "polarities" of life.'<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Ellison's intent is to create another world-view, another cosmology springing from his own specific grounds, but transgressing them as his new world realises itself.

Each effect in Invisible Man reveals the inside of the nameless hero; we are below the skin level, and Ellison does not try to define the Afro-American predicament, or to condemn society, but to demonstrate how the protagonist is affected, 'what the view is from the prison of blackness and invisibility.'<sup>5</sup> Thus, Ellison avoids techniques of social protest fiction as well as the precise allusions to history and place those notions of time and space which are the current landscape of the Afro-American mind, as it has become merged in American consciousness for more than three centuries. Invisible Man is an investigation of the psychology of oppression. It is the tale of an internal quest. The migration is from innocence to experience, not just from rural South to urban ghetto and the underground. Ellison develops this story with the help of myths and rudiments of folk art to universalise the tale further, and the protagonist's journey is finally 'a pilgrimage of the



self.' Commenting on the nature of this novel, Ellison affirms that he wanted

to see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom, I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction. I was to dream of a prose which was flexible, and swift as American change is swift, confronting the inequalities and brutalities of our society forthrightly, but yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity and individual self-realisation. It would use the richness of our speech, the idiomatic expression and the rhetorical flourishes from past periods which are still alive among us.

The tale of Invisible Man is fairly simple. It is about the typical migration and radical change of a Southern Afro-American progressin to the New Foundland of Harlem. It can also be considered as an epic journey from Southern oppression to Northern invisibility or as 'a record of a Negro's journey through contemporary America, from South to North, province to city, naive faith to disenchantment.'<sup>7</sup>

The story is narrated by an invisible powerless young man looking back at his visible innocence, i.e. a growing-up human being looking back at the broken chrysalis. On this level, Ellison makes his story a weave of allegories, departing from the predictable patterns of the social protest novel by mixing naturalism and fantasy, moving without transition from one level of ideas to another and skilfully emphasising his hero's spiritual and psychological development. By using a relatively simple plot structure, the author focuses on the quality of the experience at hand.

The plot structure of Invisible Man is schematic. The novel employs 'a cumulative plot,' developing the same fundamental episode in an emotional crescendo: the hero struggles idealistically to live by the precepts of his immediate social group, then is defeated by the bigotry of the society. The result is his fall into hopelessness. This occurs in four large movements: a) the struggle in college, the abor-



tive attempt to get Mr. Norton's trust and exclusion. b) His job hunting in New York and then the fight and explosion at Liberty Paints. c) His "resurrection," and his fall into radical activism then his rejection. d) The meeting with Rinehart, and the beginning of the riots, ending in the fall underground. Every episode is an evolution to a denouement followed by a reversal. The novel's prologue and epilogue simply arrange these series of denouements and setbacks, and define the emotional downfall of the Invisible Man. This type of structure shifts the reader from an Afro-American individual's experience to the ordeal of an entire community. In an interview entitled "The Art of Fiction," Ellison points out:

In my novel, the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North; this, as you will notice in reading Negro folktales, is always the road to freedom--the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open.

Ellison uses many folk concepts to give structure to Invisible Man. Underlying the 'black-white' concept is a play on the belief of blackness as evil and whiteness as good. The diversion here is that the nameless narrator discovers his enlightenment as he finds his blackness; his 'movement upward' is also a fall into a lightless crypt. According to Afro-American folklore and history, though, this obscure manhole does lead to the land of liberty.

Ellison's Invisible Man is an intelligent young Afro-American adjusted to what he thinks is the philosophy of the white world: 'Keep This Nigger Boy Running.' Right from the outset, we find him like a bear, by his own confession, hibernating and unknown to anyone in a Harlem tenement basement. There, he meditates upon his past experiences which soon are to be narrated. We can, meanwhile, symbolically comprehend one of his worries. Around him, in this dark crypt, he has rigged electric fixtures. He has tapped a power line and is currently stea-



ling the electricity that enlightens his hibernation. On the ceiling and walls there are 1369 lighted bulbs. Such a metaphorical illumination sets the tone of the novel. It is from one frame of reference a psychological study, impressionistically narrated. The light provided by the 1369 bulbs is used by the author as a metaphor of the self-consciousness that gives the hero his life and form.

Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form...  
Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well;  
and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility. (p.10)

There is also a serio-comic motive about the 1369 light bulbs that are made so much of in the prologue. The light bulbs are his means of fighting the Monopolated Light and Power Company, and the writer's way of representing the effects of self-recognition on the power struggle that occupies most of the novel. After first discovering his own light by burning the contents of the briefcase, which are paradoxically the real keys to his identity and the only source of light, he can begin to take his revenge on the power monopoly he has been subjected to. He is not under their control anymore. He cannot defeat them, but he can subvert them by depriving them of part of their power.

The loss of identity subsequently illustrated in the novel

I had no doubt that I could do something, but what, and how? I had no contacts and I believed in nothing. And the obsession with my identity which I had developed... returned with a vengeance. Who was I, how had I come to be? (p.210)

is a figure that expresses the Invisible Man's confusion and despair as his world disintegrates. In the black crypt his old selves are eliminated one by one as he looks for illumination. In turn he destroys the various symbols and signs of his former identities: the high school diploma, the doll which is a bitter symbol of Tod Clifton's death, and the name given him by the Brotherhood. Then he thinks of 'castration' and sees that seclusion has been his ordeal: he has been cut off



from the world of possibility;

until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility. Step outside the narrow borders of what men call a reality and you step into chaos--ask Rinehart, he's a master of it--or imagination. (p.450)

Imagination in the end rescues the protagonist and makes his escape from battle a victory, for it gives us his story. Still, he wonders,

why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I've learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labelled 'file and forget,' and I can neither file nor forget. (p.467)

In his "grave" he is not dead but hibernating, preparing for a spring of the heart, a return which can be either death or resurrection:

there's a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring - I hope of spring. But don't let me trick you, there is a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of thee as in the smell of me. And if nothing more, invisibility has taught my nose to classify the stench of death. (p.468)

The Easter of the spirit can mark the advent of the new man who is no longer a hero, invisible, nameless and deprived but an authentic hero. In this respect, the prologue introduces the nameless narrator in his underground hibernation meditating upon the experiences of his life, eating vanilla ice-cream, drinking sloe gin, listening to Louis Armstrong's recording, "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue?", and attempting to 'wrest out of the confusions of his experiences some pattern of meaning and resilient core of identity.'<sup>9</sup> The following twenty-five chapters are a first-person narrative flashback that covers some twenty years of the hero's life coming to an end with the beginning, the hero's fall into a coalpit. Moreover, the prologue presents a tableau of the Invisible Man after he has finished writing the novel, an image of his present state. He has found out that he is invisible, and taken the first step that he must take after the discovery. He has kept his wrath and his pain by incarnating them in art, and has come face to



face with his identity in the process.

The effect of Invisible Man comes neither from naturalistic depictions nor from the credibility of the story but from symbolic elements connecting the stages of the hero's journey. A series of metaphors are combined in the outline of the hero's life to consolidate Ellison's perception of the American predicament. The fundamental metaphor is, naturally, that of invisibility that can be 'light, darkness and transparency.' The novel highlights the internal aspect of invisibility. The whites, the author observes, 'see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination, everything and anything except me.' (p.7) Blackness and absence are the Afro-American's lot, that is 'nothing nowhere.' Besides, this novel's fundamental metaphor leads to the dilemma of identity, for the Afro-American cannot retract from nothingness or espouse invisibility: 'why, if they follow this conformity business they'll end up by forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a color but the lack of one.' (p.465) Yet, both 'black and white' are negative; the author has employed 'black and white' as a dual ambiguity so that the 'power of black' is a moral consideration, not a question of genetics or pigmentation. In this sense, the novel unfolds the hero's love for the college but he is expelled before long by its president, Dr. Bledsoe, a great educator and leader of his race, for permitting a white trustee to visit the "wrong places" in the vicinity. Bearing what he thinks as letters of recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe he comes to New York. The letter actually warns prospective employers against him. He is hired by white radicals and becomes an Afro-American leader, and in the Brotherhood, he eventually realises that, throughout his whole life, his relations with others have been schematic; neither with Afro-Americans nor with whites has he ever been visible.

The opening of Invisible Man is both a nightmare and a farce at



the same time. A shy Afro-American boy comes to a white smoker in a Southern town. A kind of stag party where 'all of the town's big shots (are) there in their tuxedos, wolfing down the buffet foods, drinking beer and whisky and smoking black cigars.' (p.19) Here, the boy is to be awarded a scholarship. Pushed to the front of a ballroom with many other Afro-American boys, a sumptuous blonde tantalizes and frightens them by dancing totally naked. Then, they are gathered in the ring, and after the battle-royal, one of the young fighters, his mouth full of blood, is invited to deliver his high-school valedictorian's address; a kind of prepared speech of gratitude to his white benefactors. Standing under the lights of the noisy smoky room, the men make him repeat himself; an accidental reference to equality almost ruins him, but he gets a beautiful leather-briefcase containing a scholarship to a 'Negro' college. This episode 'is not the high point but rather one of the many peaks of a book of the very first order. The valedictorian is himself Invisible Man.'<sup>10</sup> At the end of this episode, the boy dreams that he has opened the briefcase given to him together with his scholarship and that he finds an inscription reading: "To Whom It May Concern: Keep This Nigger Boy Running." So, he keeps running. He goes to his college and is thrown out for having innocently taken a white trustee through a "Negro mill" which happens to be also a whore house. His entire experience is to follow this scheme. 'Strip down a pretense, whether by chance or accident, and you will suffer penalties, since the rickety structure of Negro respectability rests upon pretense and those who profit from it cannot bear to have the reality exposed.'<sup>11</sup>

So begins the story. In the South, once, an Afro-American boy was awarded by the whites a scholarship to a 'Negro state college.' He was to learn the teachings of Booker T. Washington, that is 'the practical service to the Negro community, humble dignity...and intellectualised acceptance of white authority.'<sup>12</sup> So, the protagonist bluntly constructs



his aspirations on that basis. Humbly and innocently he learns about resignation. As a reward, in his third year, he is chosen to chauffeur a visiting white trustee of the college. The day is a disaster. Taking a back road he allows the delicately sensitive donor to see the Afro-American in all his sordidness. Following a conversation with Trueblood, a sharecropper who is notorious for he has committed incest, the trustee faints and is taken to the only available refuge, a saloon and a brothel at the height of its weekly business with the Afro-American vets of a psychiatric hospital. Within the day, the hero is expelled from the college of conformity, the next day begins his journey North with the expectation of greater freedom.

So, while he is chauffeuring Mr. Norton, they approached Jim Trueblood's backroad cabin. The hero alleges that Trueblood has had incestual relations with his own daughter. Norton orders that the car be stopped. He goes to Trueblood and asks for the story. In the presence of the astonished Invisible Man, Trueblood complies in full detail. Ellison has already depicted him 'as one who told the old stories with a sense of humor and a magic that made them come alive.' (p.42) Also, as one 'who made high plaintively animal sounds.' (p.43) Now the story is: sleeping three abed because of the extreme cold, his wife, daughter, and himself, as if in a dream well beyond his control, just naturally, incest occurred. Before committing this outrageous act, Trueblood has been a no man, but now he freely admits

The niggus up at the school come down to chase me off and that made me mad. I went to see the white folks then and they gave me help. That's what I don't understand. I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin' me out of the country, they gimme more help than they ever give any other coloured man, no matter how good a nigguh he was. (p.60)

This irony illustrates a moral issue. Trueblood, in the middle of the night which he describes as 'plum black' and as 'black as the middle of a bucket of tar,' (p.48) has made his daughter pregnant. For this he



is rewarded. Similarly to the 'white folks' who treat him fine, Norton gives him a hundred-dollar bill. The Invisible Man is fooled, of course, and expelled from school in a hurry. He vainly objects to the college president:

'But I was only driving him, sir. I only stopped there after he ordered me to...'

'Ordered you?' he said. 'He ordered you. Dammit, white folk are always giving orders, it's a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse? Couldn't you say they had sickness - smallpox - or picked another cabin? Why that Trueblood shack? My God, boy! You're black and living in the South - did you forget how to lie?'

...

'But I was only trying to please him...'

'Please him? And here you are a junior in college! Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are you getting around here?'  
(p.116)

Here we may consider some of Ellison's reactions to Tuskegee Institute that can be noticed in his novel's depiction of the Invisible Man's college days. For the novel's hero is a student at the 'beautiful college,' where he listens with respectful awe to Reverend Homer A. Barbee's story of the college founder's life. Like Booker T. Washington, the novel's 'Founder' outmaneuvered the traditional afflictions on his route to Afro-American leadership. Delivering a speech in the college chapel, Barbee says:

...into this land came a humble prophet, lowly like the humble carpenter of Nazareth, a slave and a son of slaves, knowing only his mother. A slave born, but marked from the beginning by a high intelligence and princely personality; born in the lowest part of this barren, war-scarred land, yet somehow shedding light upon where'er he passed through. I'm sure you have heard of his precarious infancy, his precious life almost destroyed by an insane cousin who splashed the babe with lye and shrivelled his seed and how, a mere babe, he lay nine days in a deathlike coma and then suddenly and miraculously recovered. You might say that it was as though he had risen from the dead or been reborn. (p.100)

Yet, the young hero of the novel does not outlive being splashed with lye as a baby, but suffers the humiliation of the battle-royal. In other words, before being offered a scholarship to the 'beautiful



college,' the Invisible Man is blindfolded, boxed and duped by counterfeit coins thrown on top of an electrified carpet.

In Invisible Man, Dr. A. Herbert Bledsoe, the college principal, is the M.C., skillful in satisfying opulent white benefactors like Mr. Norton. This fictionalised Washington figure knows exactly the way to

approach white visitors...with his hat in hand, bowing humbly and respectfully...he (refuses) to eat in the dining hall with white guests of the school, entering only after when they (have) finished and then refusing to sit down, but remaining standing, his hat in his hand, while he (addresses) them eloquently, then leaving with a humble bow. (p.90)

During Barbee's chapel speech in the presence of the white visitors and students, Bledsoe behaves himself

with the decorum of a portly headwaiter. Like some of the guests, he (wears) striped trousers and a swallow-tail coat with black-braided lapels topped by a rich ascot tie. It (is) his regular dress for such occasions, yet for all its elegance, he (manages) to make himself look humble. (p.96-7)

Emphasising his humble image, Bledsoe's trousers 'inevitably bagged at the knees and (his) coat slouched in the shoulders.' (p.97)

Yet, one should bear in mind that Bledsoe's humble appearance conceals a violent "grandee." That is, behind the childish, willing-to-please-mask, Tuskegee's principal is a cruel 'wheeler-dealer,' known as 'The Wizard.' In his office he shouts at the Invisible Man for ignoring the difference between 'the way things are and the way they're supposed to be.' (p.119) Here one cannot help thinking of Booker T. Washington 'the master tactician, interracial diplomat and archetypal "trickster,"<sup>14</sup> who bears, in more than one respect, a striking and intentional similarity to Dr. Bledsoe. Representing his methods and rise to power in the South to the ingenuous nameless narrator, Bledsoe could well have been peddling Washington's own master stroke formula:

Negroes don't control this school or much of anything else...nor white folk either. True they support it,



but I control it. I's big and black and I say "Yes,suh" as loudly as any burr-head when it's convenient, but I'm still the king down here. I don't care how much it appears otherwise...Let the Negroes snicker and the cracker laugh!...The only one I even pretend to please are big white folk...son...When you buck against me,you're bucking against...rich white folk's power,the nation's power...It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself...I didn't make it,and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am.(p.119-20)

Earlier,Bledsoe paralysed the protagonist with his talent to hide his fury in front of Mr. Norton. Before entering the white man's room, Bledsoe,who had been fuming with rage at the hero a while ago,'stopped and composed his angry face like a sculptor,making it a blank mask, leaving only the sparkle of his eyes to betray (his) emotion.'(p.87)

Expelled from the 'beautiful college,' the protagonist,like the author,ventured North. He expected New York to be a sort of 'Mecca of equality,' where Harlem is depicted as 'a glamorous place,a place where wonderful music existed and where there was a great tradition of Negro American style and elegance.'<sup>15</sup>

When the hero,in the Golden Day Bar,tells one of the veterans that he is on his way to New York,the veteran voices his excitement:

'New York!' he said. 'That's not a place,it's a dream. When I was your age it was Chicago. Now all the little black boys run away to New York. Out of the fire into the melting pot. I can see you after you've lived in Harlem for three months. Your speech will change,you'll talk a lot about 'college,' you'll attend lectures at the Men's House...you might even meet a few white folks. And listen,' he said,leaning close to a whisper,'you might even dance with a white girl!...(you are) going free,in the broad daylight and alone. I can remember when young fellows like (you) had first to commit a crime,or be accused of one,before they tried such a thing. Instead of leaving in the light of morning,they went in the dark of night.(p.126-9)

However,in "Harlem is Nowhere," written for Magazine of the Year in 1948,Ellison discusses the ordeal endured by a lot of Afro-Americans who ventured North. For most of them realised that Harlem is,by no means,the 'Land of Freedom' proclaimed in folk tales.



To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city...Harlem is a ruin...the reality of well over four hundred thousand Americans;a reality which for many defines and colors the world. Overcrowded and exploited politically and economically,Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth.

...if Harlem is the scene of the folk-Negro's death agony, it is also the setting of his transcendence. Here it is possible for talented youths to leap through the development of decades in a brief twenty years...Here the grandchildren of those who possessed no written literature examine their lives through the eyes of Freud and Marx, Kierkegaard and Kafka, Malraux and Sartre.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, in New York, the hero takes a job at Liberty Paints, keeping paint white by adding drops of pure black, under the ironic slogan, "If It's Optic White, It's The Right White," that has been invented by an Afro-American, the aged and evil minded Lucius Brockway. The protagonist becomes a machine among the machines, and realises that the uneducated Brockway is the heart of the whole industry. In the boiler room an explosion occurs after which the hero wakes up in a hospital, where he is 'resurrected' by white doctors using an electroshock. Chapter eleven opens with a monstrous image of demons: 'I was sitting in a cold, white rigid chair and a man was looking at me out of a bright third eye that glowed from the center of his forehead.' (p.188)

Eventually, when he has recovered from his accident in the paint factory, he comes across the Harlem eviction of an old Afro-American couple. Their poor belongings on the pavement, the wife tries to come back into their flat to pray. When the marshals in charge refuse permission, the crowd riots. Suddenly, in the melée, the Invisible Man hears himself screaming, 'Black men! Brothers! Black Brothers!' (p.223)

Under the aegis of his colloquial eloquence, the crowd returns the furniture to the flat. Then a few minutes later, the police arrive and he looks for a way to flee. In his escape, he stops at a traffic light where he hears a quiet penetrating voice say, 'that was a masterful bit of persuasion, brother.' (p.233) In a nearby coffee-shop, the man, Brother



Jack, one of the Brotherhood's "big shots," asks him,

perhaps you would be interested in working for us... We need a good speaker for this district. Someone who could articulate the grievances of the people... They exist, and when the cry of protest is sounded there are those who will hear it and act. (p.237)

So, the Brotherhood, which is to a large degree the Communist Party, is the answer to his needs. It offers him a cause, social equality and a job.

As the names of characters, factories, clubs and institutions, even names of things such as the sambo doll, can be indefinitely explored in the novel, it should be noted that the characters' names are earned through some significant action. They are names that adequately reflect the characters' individuality. The "Invisible Man" is an earned name, similarly to "Jack the Bear" which is his underground name; for his time in the dark crypt is considered as a period of hibernation. The names serve as clues to the character's function or nature in Invisible Man. For instance, when we consider Brother Jack, we should bear in mind that a common slang meaning for the term "Jack" is money. This is an illustration of the financial nature of the relationship that exists between the hero and the Brotherhood. When the nameless protagonist has been jobless and out of money, his main reason for joining the Brotherhood is the "fat salary" they offer. This is focused upon at the end, when Brother Jack, disciplining him, affirms: 'you were not hired to think. Had you forgotten that? If so, listen to me: You were not hired to think.' (p.377)

In the Brotherhood the hero is soon acknowledged, adored and given credit. He is certain that the Brotherhood is leading the Afro-Americans in the right direction. Now he is willing to combat Ras the Exhorter, the leader of a unique Afro-American movement. Suddenly, the internationally guided Organization changes its Harlem policy. Its plan to improve the 'Negro's' social condition is disavowed. Unless the Invi-



sible Man is willing to renounce the former policy, the hopes of his fellow Afro-Americans, he must sacrifice identity once more. Alone, the hero must count on Ras the Exhorter, who becomes Ras the Destroyer, and who, in a fourth of July celebration, electrifies Harlem as the nationalist leader of a gigantic race riot. This is neither the time nor the place for intellectualism. The protagonist is chased and to survive he has no choice but to hide in a coalpit. There we find him when the novel begins. 'That is the pattern, from rural copse to cosmopolitan forest.'<sup>17</sup>

Tod Clifton, a young intellectual in the Brotherhood, obstinately turns to peddling black Sambo dolls on the street, singing and making them dance. Just as the Invisible Man has been the Brotherhood's eloquent spokesman, Tod Clifton has been its handsome face. When the hero finds him selling Sambo dolls, he is appalled that Tod should have chosen to 'plunge outside of history and peddle an obscenity.' He wonders why

had he turned away? Why had he chosen to step off the platform and fall beneath the train? Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history?... Why should he choose to disarm himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to 'define' himself?(p.353)

The novel's protagonist is reluctant to acknowledge that Tod has found his identity as a Brotherhood's doll, and chooses to live by juggling with a mask rather than being the manipulated figure of the Organization. Nevertheless, this raise of consciousness enables the nameless narrator to put into question the Brotherhood's policy. For in his uncompromising 1944 review of Gunnar Myrdal's An American Dilemma, the author himself stated that the Communist Party was no more sincere in its interests in Afro-American matters than was the New Deal Administration. But 'sincerity,' he remarks, 'is not a quality one expects from a political party, not even revolutionary ones.'<sup>18</sup> In Invisible Man, therefore, the hero's determination to abandon his forthright



support for the Brotherhood is based on his finding that this Organization is susceptible of imposture. It is based on racism, the 'old American disease.' The Brotherhood shamelessly sacrifices Harlem's concerns for the sake of 'international' objectives, and attempts to model the hero according to its conception of the 'good Negro': the one who agrees to use his energy and his art exactly as the Organization orders.

Besides, what lies behind the Communists' strategy is the scientific attitude; not the individual but the mass. According to this positivistic philosophy the hero has been formed. For the sake of the Brotherhood, he is told by Hambro, the communist philosopher, certain sentimental notions will have to be renounced. The very idea of race, that core and defense of Afro-American unity, should be sublimated. Nor is there place in the Organization's teaching for feelings. Everything should be logical. In response to this situation, the protagonist, like his creator, asks for Afro-American unity and self-determination.

Ellison said that when Afro-American leadership is not bestowed by the Afro-American community,

Negro people are exploited by others; either for the good ends of democratic groups or for the bad ends of fascist groups... As long as Negroes fail to centralize their power, they will always play the role of sacrificial goat, they will always be "expendable." Freedom, after all, cannot be imported or acquired through an act of philanthropy, it must be won.<sup>19</sup>

Ellison's plainly articulated split with naturalism, as far as his fiction is concerned, must be considered in the light of his consciousness that indomitable ideologues, especially communists, represented an awesome menace not only to his artistic sensibility, but to his 'national' sensibility as well.

In The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, Harold Cruse clearly analyses the harmful role that the left has played in the Afro-American's struggle for 'self-determination' and 'liberation.' Accordingly,



Ellison is conscious of this role when he makes the following remarks:

They fostered the myth that Communism was twentieth-century Americanism, but to be a twentieth-century American meant, in their thinking, that you had to be more Russian than American and less Negro than either. That's how they lost the Negroes. The Communists recognized no plurality of interests and were really responding to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy and when the war came, Negroes got caught and were made expedient in the shifting of policy. Just as Negroes who fool around with them today are going to get caught in the next turn of the screw.<sup>20</sup>

The Communists were the first to lead the attack against Ellison when Invisible Man appeared in 1952. In the debate between Ellison and his detractors we shall refer to Cruse's account of the anti-Ellison attack that occurred at a writers' conference in 1965.

Cruse affirms that the writers, who took part in the conference, did not have the ability to cope with the issues raised by Ellison's critical and aesthetic methodology. Moreover, he asserts that 'the radical left-wing will never forgive Ellison for writing Invisible Man.' Yet, one wonders why? The answer is quite clear. The literary left, both Afro-American and white, were raging over: a) Ellison's dismissal of white controlled leftwing politics; b) his tough representation of the Communists; c) the novel's clear dismissal of the aesthetics of social realism. In addition to his unforgivable offense of obliquely attacking the Party through his characterisation of the Brotherhood in the novel, Ellison was attacked for having articulated a new aesthetic universe, one that is aiming at developing its own laws of form and content. For the Party, a fictional work 'should extol the virtues of the working classes,' and 'the extolling should take place along Party lines.'<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, John O. Killens, in the 1952 edition of the newspaper "Freedom," subsequently comments on Invisible Man:

Mix a heavy portion of sex and a heavy, heavy portion of violence, a bit of sadism and a dose of red-baiting (Blame the Communists for everything bad) and you have the making of a best seller today. Add to this decadent mixture of a Negro theme with Negro characters as Uncle Toms, pimps, sex perverts, guilt-ridden



traitors--and you have a publisher's dream. But how does Ellison present the Negro people? The thousands of exploited farmers in the South represented by a sharecropper who has made both his wife and daughter pregnant. The main character of the book is a young Uncle Tom who is obsessed with getting to the "top" by pleasing the Big, Rich White folks. A million Negro veterans who fought against fascism in World War II are rewarded with a maddening chapter (of) crazy vets running hogwild in a down home tavern. The Negro ministry is depicted by an Ellison character who is a Harlem pastor and at the same time a pimp and a numbers racketeer. The Negro people need Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man like we need a hole in the head or a stab in the back. It is a vicious distortion of Negro life.<sup>22</sup>

Many critics, like Harold Cruse, disagree with this restrictive view. Even if Cruse does not consider all the Afro-Americans as 'a beautiful, pure people who are unsullied by the social and psychological ravages of American capitalism.' He rather affirms that 'we certainly have among us, crooks, pimps, whores, perverts, shysters, sadists, addicts, number hustlers, careerists and Uncle Toms who might also be incestuous;' but, according to John O. Killens 'we should not honor their presence in life by treating such characters in novels.'<sup>23</sup>

The other facet of Ellison's rejection of the Brotherhood's policy can be illustrated by the use of sexual effects. For there are two sexual affairs in the novel but they perform different functions. The first adventure happens when the hero is sent downtown to give a lecture on "The Woman Question," only to discover that the authentic question is the one Ras asks earlier, when attempting to comprehend the motives that may urge the Afro-American to join the radical group. Ras wonders whether it is women or money that is confusing the Invisible Man's ideology. Still, the woman who seduces him in her flat is confusing the concept of brotherhood with "biology."

Why did they have to mix their women into everything? Between us and everything we wanted to change in the world they placed a woman: socially, politically, economically. Why, goddammit, why did they insist upon confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle, debasing both us and them - all human motives. (p.337)



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The issues of self-identity and the search for meaning are thematic focal points in the novel. Woven into the composition of the narrative, are the relationships between cause and effect and between appearance and reality. Accordingly, numerous symbols the hero carries on his progress relate him to his past. He carries the shiny briefcase awarded him after the battle-royal. This award can be interpreted as a kind of 'a leather bribe given to buy the invisible man's allegiance to the status quo.'<sup>24</sup> When the school's principal offers it to him, he says, 'Boy...take this prize and keep it well. Consider it a badge of office. Prize it. Keep developing as you are and someday it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people.' (p.31) He carries it as a safe-conduct into the white world of "busy-ness". In the end it is filled only with the hero's hidden identity papers which he burns. Thus he finds the 'destiny of (his) people.' The briefcase is a symbol of himself, a receptacle of images which he despises but cannot lose: 'What's in that briefcase?' they said, and if they'd asked me anything else I might have stood still. But at the question a wave of shame and outrage shook me and I ran.' (p.455) Along with the briefcase, he has brought plain-featured cues of his patrimony such as the pieces of his landlady's "bank":

the cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, whose white eyes stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest. It was a bank, a piece of early Americana, the kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth. (p.258)

In a fit of rage, he breaks the clichéd image of prejudice. However, he feels guilty and takes the bits with him, unable to liberate himself of the disintegrated symbol of the past. Moreover, in the briefcase, there is the paper dancing doll with all its despicable connotations of the Afro-American who peddles himself as the white man's buffoon. There-



fore, this disreputable past constantly interferes into the hero's present. Yet, Invisible Man is not a historical novel, but it discusses the past as an encumbrance and as a means of advancement to the future. The protagonist finds out that history does not progress like an 'arrow or an objective, scientific argument, but like a boomerang: swiftly, cyclically, and dangerously.' He notices that when he is not aware of the past, 'he is liable to be slammed in the head with it again when it circles back.'<sup>25</sup>

As the novel unfolds, the hero learns that by accepting and evaluating all his experiences, he can 'look around corners' into the future. For he declares:

And now all past humiliations became precious parts of my experience, and for the first time, leaning against that stone wall in the sweltering night, I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. (p.408-9)

In one of the novel's very significant scenes, the author reflects on the value of Afro-American folklore and common Afro-American people he has forgotten. He notices some Afro-American young men in an underground station and contemplates their behaviour.

Yes, I thought, what about those of us who shoot up from the South into the busy city like wilde-jacks-in-the-box broken loose from our strings - so sudden that our gait becomes like that of deep-sea divers suffering from the bends? What about those fellows waiting still and silent there on the platform...standing noisy in their very silence; harsh as a cry of terror in their quietness? ...walking stiffly with swinging shoulders in their well-pressed, too-hot for summer suits, their collars high and tight about their necks, their identical hats of cheap black felt set upon the crown of their heads with a severe formality above their hard conked hair? It was as though I'd never seen their like before. (p.354)

The Brotherhood has always told him that such men are 'out of time,'



that they are anachronistic and insignificant. Presume, though, that these men were of a remarkable importance? The idea suddenly affects him:

who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can) - who knew but that they were the saviours, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it. What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a mad man full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge? (p.355)

The hero's realisation of the Afro-American masses' value is significant in many ways. It is in conformity with the democratic ideal that people have elementary rights, such as that of taking part in the political process. No downtown organization has the right to make categorical decisions for the people in Harlem (uptown). The protagonist also perceives that Afro-American people, though ignored and duped by the white majority, have succeeded to keep their proper perception of life and honour. So, he does not have to be ashamed of his grandparents. For, at last, he comes to realise that he is one of the "jacks-in-the-box": he is an individual but related to a tradition. By the end of the novel, he feels 'as though (he carries) a heavy stone, the weight of a mountain on (his) shoulders.' (p.357)

Another skein of key imagery is the various tokens of Southern Afro-American life that are used to depict the history of oppression since 1619, date of the appearance of the first African 'Negro' slaves in North America. In Chapter thirteen, the "resurrected" hero is confronted by his mythic past; and the first substantiation of his new identity is when he 'presides' over a demonstration against an eviction. Earlier, he realises that it is impossible for him to reject his Southern patrimony when he meets a seller of Carolina yams; the food is



'forbidden fruit,' for it reminds him his pure and simple country ancestry, but he eats it, revolting against the constraints of conformity: 'They're my birthmark,' (he says). 'I yam what I am.' (p.215) Then he sees the old couple being removed and lists their belongings which record the poverty-stricken Afro-American's life for a century:

a portrait of the old couple when young...a pair of crudely carved and polished bones, 'knocking bones,' used to accompany music at country dances, used in black-face minstrels...had he been a minstrel?...a straightening comb, switches of false hair, a curling iron, a card with silvery letters...reading 'God Bless Our Home'; and...nuggets of High John the Conqueror, the lucky stone...a whisky bottle filled with rock candy and camphor, a small Ethiopian flag, a faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln...three lapsed life insurance policies with perforated seals stamped 'Void'; a yellowing newspaper portrait of a huge black man with the caption: Marcus Garvey Deported. ...a fragile paper, coming apart with age, written in black ink grown yellow (that) read: Free Papers. Be it known to all men that my Negro, Primus Prove, has been freed by me this sixth day of August, 1859. (p.219-20)

These indications of folk myth and history pervade the novel; the hero, in his new role, does not reject this culture but sticks to it. Yet, he comes back to Louis Armstrong's catechetical and challenging question: 'What did I do/To be so black/And blue?' and realises that as contemptible as the Afro-American's past is, it is all that he has. He embraces it in his quest for identity. Nevertheless, he cannot forget his grandfather's last words. His grandfather, an 'odd old guy,' who was 'the meekest of men,' confesses on his deathbed:

Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yesses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or burst wide open. (p.17)

This confession also reveals the grandfather's recommendation to his grandchildren that they should be extremely vigilant. In embracing the Afro-American ethos, they should not forget the nature of their oppressors. On the other hand, commenting the old man's confessions, Ellison



declares that

as a weak man who knows the nature of his oppressor's weakness (,) there is a good deal of spite in the old man, as there comes to be in his grandson, and the strategy he advises is a kind of jiu jitsu of the spirit, a denial and rejection through agreement...his mask of meekness conceals the wisdom of one who has learned the secret of saying the "yes" which accomplishes the expressive "no".<sup>26</sup>

It should be noted, though, that through the adoption of the blues, the protagonist moves from shame to pride in his tradition. 'I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves,' he records. 'I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed.' (p.17) Yet, in their analysis of the novel's folk references, few reviewers have dealt with spirituals and gospel music. Like the blues allusions, the function of the many subtle indications to holy folk music is to develop the texture of the novel's prose. Certain scenes are really dominated by religious forms. At first, the protagonist is embarrassed of the "pagan" sacred forms and is not liberated of his illusions until he acknowledges their grandeur and their wisdom, and their usefulness as a bridge to the past. As the novel unfolds we see the hero's embarrassment concerning 'black church music,' during his stay in the South. At school, during the spring festivals when the white wealthy benefactors come to be solicited, the sacred forms are used as entertainments. On his way to his chapel seat, the Invisible Man hears voices 'mechanically raised' in songs by students whose faces are 'frozen in solemn masks.' Deprived of authentic sensibility, the hard-faced performers answer the white rich trustee's requirement for a sign of 'black docility.' Like the songs performed at minstrel spectacles, the spirituals appear to be 'an ultimatum accepted and ritualized, an allegiance recited for the peace it imparted.' (p.93) To that extent, observes the narrator, the students loved the songs, 'loved (them) as the defeated come to love the symbols of their conquerors.'



A gesture of acceptance, of terms laid down and reluctantly approved.' (p.93-4) In contribution, Bledsoe starts his favourite spiritual, "Live a Humble." For the wealthy white benefactors the students sing "Lead Me To a Rock That Is Higher Than I," in compliance with the minstrel show cliché that the Afro-Americans are extremely humble. Jim Trueblood and his country quartet of gospel singers, invited to divert the rich guests are also the cause of the students' shame. The students consider Trueblood and all the local 'black peasants' with a certain disdain, but seem to accept, occasionally, their "primitivism" mainly for the benefit of the college.

We were embarrassed by the earthy harmonies they sang, but since the visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet... How all of us at the college hated the black-belt people... during those days! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down. (p.43)

So, the blues is a cardinal creative theme throughout Invisible Man. The blues enable Trueblood to confront, bravely, his milieu after the calamitous incident of making his daughter pregnant. The blues explains the texture of much of Invisible Man's prose:

My stomach felt raw. From somewhere across the quiet of the campus the sound of a guitar blues plucked from an out-of-tune piano drifted towards me like a lazy, shimmering wave, like the echoed whistle of a lonely train, and my head went over again, against a tree, and I could hear it splattering the flowering vines. (p.122)

Ellison is probably one of the first writers to make a critical attempt to relate the blues to the specific Afro-American literature. In an article on Black Boy entitled "Richard Wright's Blues," he defines the form as a symbolic action:

the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. 27



This conception turns out to be a significantly precise manifesto for his novel, Invisible Man. If we want a 'near-tragic, near-comic lyricism,' in a fictional picture, we have to consider the novel's final tableau of the Harlem race-riot. Here, Ras the Exhorter, alias Ras the Destroyer, as a bitter Afro-American nationalist, elevates himself as an Abyssinian leader, armed with spear and shield, and rides out against the police rifles. The scene is depicted through the eyes of an anonymous Harlemiter:

'Hell, yes, man, he had him a big black hoss and a fur cap and some kind of old lion skin or something over his shoulders and he was raising hell. Goddam if he wasn't a sight, riding up and down on his ole hoss, you know, one of the kind that pulls vegetable wagons, and he got him a cowboy saddle and some big spurs.'

'Aw naw, man!'

'Hell, yes! Riding up and down the block yelling, "Destro 'em! Drive 'em out! Burn 'em out! I, Ras commands you. You get that, man," he said, "I, Ras commands you - to destroy them to the last piece of rotten fish!" And 'bout that time some joker with a big ole Georgia voice sticks his head out the window and yells, "Ride 'em, cowboy. Give 'em hell and bananas." (p.452)

This passage also illustrates the witticisms, stories and idiosyncracies of speech which embellish Ellison's fiction, and which are extracted from his experience in Oklahoma and Alabama; many others are dug out from notes he has made while conducting researches and interviews in Harlem for the Federal Writer's Project. In his fiction then, the lore is more than a local colour; it is sacramental and reflective of an entire way of life.

With the narrator's discovery of (Proteus Bliss) Rinehart's life, he realises that he has been missing some significant aspects of Harlem's history. Rinehart, a symbol of possibility through imagination and masking, is the typical swindler, ensuring the Invisible Man of a stratagem to slip through the fingers of his pursuers. Rinehart is also an expert and a deft master of improvisation. He takes his name from different sources, including a rallying cry for riots at Harvard



University and blues by Jimmy Rushing: Rinehart, Rinehart/It's so lone-  
some up here/On Beacon Hill...<sup>28</sup> Underlying this is the postulate that  
if the narrator had remained in contact with the people rather than  
the downtown Brotherhood, he would have learnt about such Harlem figures  
as Rinehart and about the American in general. Moreover, he would have  
learnt more about the complicated realities behind the *mise en scène*--  
'the "heart" of the experience as well as the "rine."<sup>29</sup>

The Rinehart section, therefore, is full of significance. His experience  
of using a disguise initiates the Invisible Man to the reality of  
masks and the world of possibility. For Ellison affirms:

His world was possibility and he knew it. He was  
years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy  
and blind. The world in which we lived was without bound-  
aries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the  
rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps  
only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth  
was always a lie. (p.401)

Thus, Rinehart 'like his prototype, Melville's Confidence Man,' has  
several masks, 'from the Reverend B.P. Rinehart, Spiritual Technologist,  
to Rine the sweet man and numbers runner.'<sup>30</sup> For Ellison, Rinehart is a  
kind of 'opportunist who has learned to live in a world which is  
swiftly changing and in which society no longer has ways of bringing  
pressure...or even identifying him. Thus he can act out many roles.'<sup>31</sup>  
Accordingly, Rinehart's function in the formal structure of the narra-  
tive is to reveal to the Invisible Man a way out from Ras the Destro-  
yer's prosecution and 'a means of applying, in yet another form, his  
grandfather's cryptic advice'<sup>32</sup> to his predicament.

Invisible Man's focus on art and analysis, and its prudent  
allusion to the clear advocacy of violence, can be interpreted by the  
"activists" as the "buggy jiving" of a white middle-class renegade, or  
the "fuss" of a "private ego trip."<sup>33</sup> As for the use of violence, which  
is a traditional means of revolt, the Afro-American did not resort to  
such a means because



violence as a means of changing freedom in the United States has not been practical for Negroes - certainly not in the South where we are outnumbered and where the major instruments of destruction are in the hands of whites. It would be foolish to have tried it that way... But it seems to me far more effective... to work upon the basis of what is there and that is the constitution of the United States. (However) it takes far more courage for some of the children to walk on the streets of Birmingham, Alabama, with police dogs after them and with threats of tear gas and shootings - it takes far more courage to do that than to put a plastic bomb in a mailbox.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, in Invisible Man, the hero and his community are subjected to a form of brutality, but it is 'a brutality chastened by Freud and Frazier and Joyce and mother wit. Ellison serves up his ferocity with intense calculation, his humor with elaborate premeditations; we can take the elevator up and down the levels of irony.'<sup>35</sup>

The distinctive characteristics of Ellison's literary style can be traced back to his musical background. For the changing styles in the novel, from Naturalism to Expressionism to Surrealism, are built upon the principle of modulation. These changes in speed and abruptness correspond to the writer's sense of American reality, suggesting the fluidity and discontinuity of American life.

Being told that many scenes in Invisible Man are surrealistic and asked if his vision of American life was surrealistic. Ellison states that one does not have to

confuse the theory of surrealism with the eye that sees the chaos which exist within a given society... I try to see life as it is. I try to see it in terms of its contradictions, in term of its values, in terms of its pace, in terms of its nervous quality... what is called surrealism in one place might be seen as mundane reality in another.<sup>36</sup>

As the mode of narration is impressionistic, Ellison takes the opportunity to communicate the largest part of the novel's meaning through a wide range of imagery. Yet it may not be improper to show that there is a good deal more social and political commentary being dealt with in the novel through a highly planned if somewhat covert structure. With that logic of interpolation, the novel does not always unfold in a



linear way, but is rather rendered by images and symbols that have something like a life of their own. That is to say, Ellison uses different masking techniques such as double-entendre, understatement, irony and ambiguity. 'There is something deliberately elusive in his style, something secret and taunting, some instinctive avoidance of explicit statement which is close in spirit to the blues.'<sup>37</sup>

Technically, Invisible Man is a tour de force, using a wide range of fictional techniques to convey a complex authorial stand and establish a fictional world that transgresses realistic depiction or simple probability. With the action moving from realism to hallucinatory fantasy without a "fissure" in the ridges of style. Invisible Man is an accomplished performance, shifting from simple method to highly complex and subtle modes of narration. Here, Ellison particularly shows his craftsmanship in his language, which is based on colloquial idioms, and keeps the rhythm and texture of speech throughout. Yet, the form of the novel itself reveals Ellison's skill most clearly. For it is such a form that enabled the writer to couch on paper the vicissitudes of the nameless narrator. It would be unnecessary to review his experiences right from the outset when he falls into the coal cellar, that 'source of heat, light, power and... perception.'<sup>38</sup> The fall enables him to understand his human condition. He comes to realise that his graduation speech, for example, does not offer him fame and dignity but shame and a mouth full of blood; the scholarship sends him on the downward road to painful afflictions and discomfiture; his attempts to win the white trustee's trust and assistance are the cause of his expulsion from college; his endeavours to lead his people towards brotherhood lead to his treason of Harlem, and help to flash a community-destroying race-riot.

The novel concludes with the hero waiting in his dark crypt, waiting for the right moment to act. He is facing a dilemma. After al



the various experiences, after discovering that the concepts he began with were shallow, after getting a more tangible perception of the world, giving up religion, his academic objectives, his cultural background, the Brotherhood and the social and political theories, he ultimately comes to a personal view of life which is more realistic and mature. Nevertheless, one may wonder what is his future destiny? What is he going to do? Anyone can have a similar fate, i.e. go through these peripeteia and end up in a state of hibernation, similarly to the protagonist at the end of Invisible Man. For Ellison the nameless hero would certainly

learn to deal with himself. Whatever he did when he returns, so to speak, should be based on the knowledge gained before he went underground. This is a question of self-knowledge and ability to identify the processes of the world. Beyond that he has his freedom of choice... I certainly would not suggest that he follow some plan which I thought would be good for me as an individual.<sup>39</sup>

In this sense, we see that the issue of identity and existence that Ellison is dealing with transcends the issues of social justice and equity; it is not a matter of 'the Negro problem' or 'race issues.' As this novel reveals in its prophecy, 'we must all know who we are before we can be free--and there is no freedom for a white "I" until there is freedom for a black "Thou."<sup>40</sup>

Accordingly, Invisible Man is a story of the discovery of the realities that should be faced before an authentic identity can be accomplished.

For the memoir

which is titled Invisible Man, his memoir, is an attempt to describe reality as it really exists rather than in terms of what he had assumed it to be. Because it was the clash between his assumptions, his illusions about reality, and its actual shape which made for his agony.<sup>41</sup>

In the novel's ultimate sections, the hero realises that he lives in an absurdly shifting world, an oscillating place on the verge of tragedy where one necessarily needs the capacity not only to 'laugh to keep from crying' but to be prepared to act creatively under coercion.



Besides, it is made clear in the beginning and end that the novel's hero is also its designer, and that the writing of the novel is itself part of the experience, and of the discovery of an identity which is the subject-matter of Invisible Man. What is positive in both the structure and the existence of the novel is that the hero does survive through the transformation of his experience into art. Moreover, the pithy and sententious question which comes at the end of Invisible Man shows the scope of Ellison's vision: 'Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?' This is voiced out of that 'perceptible obscurity' the hero has enlightened with 1369 light bulbs, and while it is as dual and ironic as the whole novel, it clearly conveys Ellison's purpose. Yet for many reviewers Invisible Man is clearly 'a prelude to and preparation for something like redemption, and therefore an extremely dangerous and difficult novel to follow.'<sup>42</sup>



NOTES:

A/ Introduction:

1. W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, (New York, 1982), p.45.
2. Ibid., pp.112-3.
3. Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, (New York, 1966), p.XVIII.
4. James Alan McPherson, "Indivisible Man," in John R. Hersey, ed., Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974), p.44.
5. Allen Geller, "An Interview with Ralph Ellison," in C.W.E. Bigsby, ed., The Black American Writer, (Deland, Florida, 1969), p.165.
6. F.W. Dupee, "On Invisible Man," Book Week, Washington Post, 26 Sept., 1965, p.4.
7. Ibid.
8. Ralph Ellison, op.cit., p.126.
9. Delmore Schwartz, "Fiction Chronicle: The Wrongs of Innocence and Experience," Partisan Review, 19, (May-June, 1952), p.359.
10. Ralph Ellison, op.cit., p.73.
11. Robert O'Meally, New Essays on Invisible Man, (New York, 1988), p.8.
12. Folklore perceived as a forceful current way of talking and singing in certain situations. Afro-American folklore-blues, tales, spirituals, dozens, jokes and sermons-is a fertile source for the writer. Here the Afro-American ethos is maintained and reproduced in very eloquent language.
13. Robert O'Meally, The Craft of Ralph Ellison, (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p.2.
14. Ibid., p.1.
15. Allen Geller, op.cit., p.166.
16. Robert Bone, "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of the imagination," in John R. Hersey, ed., op.cit., p.104.
17. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright," in Donald B. Gibson, ed., Five Black Writers: Essays on Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Hughes and Le Roi Jones, (New York, 1970), p.14.
18. Robert Penn Warren, "The Unity of Experience," in John R. Hersey, ed., op.cit., p.26.
19. Marcus Cunliffe, The Literature of the United States, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1970), p.360.
20. Ralph Ellison, op.cit., p.XIX.
21. Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1986), p.409.

1) General Background:

1. Robert O'Meally, The Craft of Ralph Ellison, op.cit., p.7.
2. Robert Bone, "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of the Imagination," op.cit., p.96.
3. Robert O'Meally, op.cit., p.8.
4. John R. Hersey, "A Completion of Personality, A Talk with Ralph Ellison," in John R. Hersey, op.cit., p.2.
5. Ralph Ellison and Hollie West, "Groing up Black in Frontier Oklahoma," The Washington Post, August 21, 1973, p.3.
6. Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, op.cit., p.128.
7. Ibid., pp.128-9.
8. Ibid., p.169.
9. Ralph Ellison, "Harlem's America," New Leader, Sept.26, 1966, p.2.
10. One evening, he accompanied Wright to a fund raising affair for the Spanish Loyalists, where he met André Malraux.
11. Allen Geller, op.cit., p.154.
12. Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, op.cit., p.IX.



13. Robert O'Meally, *op.cit.*, pp.3-4.
14. James Alan McPherson, *op.cit.*, p.45.

2) Relevant Fiction:

a) Shadow and Act

1. Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, *op.cit.*, p.XXI.
2. *Ibid.*, p.IX.
3. *Ibid.*, p.XV.
4. *Ibid.*, p.119.
5. *Ibid.*, p.121.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Ralph Ellison in Our Time," in John R. Hersey, *op.cit.*, p.42.
8. Ralph Ellison, *op.cit.*, p.XIX.

B/ Invisible Man

1. Malcolm Bradbury, The Modern American Novel, (Oxford, 1984), p.132.
2. Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, *op.cit.*, p.469. All subsequent references will be to this edition.
3. Allen Geller, *op.cit.*, pp.165-66.
4. Robert O'Meally, New Essays on Invisible Man, *op.cit.*, p.15.
5. William J. Schaffer, "Ralph Ellison and the Birth of the Anti-Hero," in John R. Hersey, *op.cit.*, p.118.
6. Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, *op.cit.*, p.113.
7. Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in John R. Hersey, *op.cit.*, p.36.
8. Ralph Ellison, *op.cit.*, p.174.
9. Earl H. Rovit, "Ralph Ellison and the American Comic Tradition," in John R. Hersey, *op.cit.*, p.153.
10. Saul Bellow, "Man Underground," in John R. Hersey, *op.cit.*, p.27.
11. Irving Howe, *op.cit.*, p.37.
12. Floyd R. Horowitz, "Ralph Ellison's Modern Version of Brer Bear and Brer Rabbit in Invisible Man," Mid-Continent American Studies Journal, IV, p.21.
13. Tuskegee was initially chartered as an ordinary school, planned to form Afro-American teachers. An important syllabus in mathematics, science, language and literature was always proposed. As early as 1900, Tuskegee had a music department. Still Booker T. Washington decided to transform Tuskegee into a professional institute similar to his alma mater, Hampton Institute. He recommended the education of the 'head, heart and hand.' Washington was always skeptical of curriculums for Afro-Americans which were solely academic, and remonstrated against them in his speeches and writings. He wanted his students to possess the knowledge of 'actual things instead of mere books alone.'
14. John White, Black Leadership in America (1895-1968), (London, 1985), p.156.
15. Ralph Ellison, "Harlem's America," *op.cit.*, p.2.
16. Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, *op.cit.*, pp.283-4.
17. Floyd R. Horowitz, *op.cit.*, p.27.
18. Ralph Ellison, *op.cit.*, p.296.
19. Ralph Ellison, "Editorial Comment," Negro Quarterly, Winter 1934, p.298.
20. Larry Neal, "Ellison's Zuit Suit," in John R. Hersey, *op.cit.*, p.61.
21. *Ibid.*, p.62.
22. Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, (New York, 1984),





- p.235.
23. Ibid.
  24. William J. Schaffer, *op.cit.*, p.124.
  25. Robert O'Meally, The Craft of Ralph Ellison, *op.cit.*, p.103.
  26. Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in Stanley Edgar Hyman, "The Negro Writer in America: An Exchange," Partisan Review XXV, (1958), p.220.
  27. Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, *op.cit.*, p.90.
  28. Ibid., p.181.
  29. Robert O'Meally, *op.cit.*, p.91.
  30. Stanley Edgar Hyman, *op.cit.*, p.201.
  31. Allen Geller, *op.cit.*, p.159.
  32. Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *op.cit.*, p.221.
  33. Thomas A. Vogler, "Invisible Man: Somebody's Protest Novel," in John R. Hersey, *op.cit.*, p.128.
  34. Allen Geller, *op.cit.*, pp.163-4.
  35. Dan McCall, The Example of Richard Wright, (New York, 1969), p.8.
  36. Allen Geller, *op.cit.*, p.155.
  37. Robert Bone, *op.cit.*, pp.104-5.
  38. Ralph Ellison, *op.cit.*, p.221.
  39. Allen Geller, *op.cit.*, pp.156-7.
  40. William J. Schaffer, *op.cit.*, p.126.
  41. Allen Geller, *op.cit.*, p.159.
  42. Thomas A. Vogler, *op.cit.*, p.149.



CHAPTER: THREE

BALDWIN, James.



'I fought to make you look at me. Because I was not born to be what someone said I was. I was not born to be defined by someone else, but by myself, and myself only.'<sup>1</sup>

A/ INTRODUCTION:

If one were to compose a short list of American writers whose biographies may be said to match the history of a culture and an era, who incarnate in their work the shame and magnificence, the power to create and to ruin which deform and dignify the American 'leprous time,' James Baldwin would stand very near the top.

Attaining its crown and prosperity during the great age of tribulation in the nineteen-sixties, Baldwin's credo might be said to have invested the arts of literature with Martin Luther King's preachments on the politics of race.<sup>2</sup>

For in several ways Baldwin, like Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and President John F. Kennedy, represented the spirit of change that affected America during the sixties.

The advent of James Baldwin in the sixties seemed, to more than one, to typify as well as to express the violence and discontent of Afro-Americans struggling to come to terms with racial oppression and to attain their civil and human rights.

For Maya Angelou, he is the playwright and novelist 'who burned with a righteous indignation over the paucity of kindness, the absence of love and the crippling hypocrisy he saw in the streets of the United States,'<sup>3</sup> and felt in the hearts of his fellow countrymen.



As for Wole Soyinka, what he remembers most about 'Baldwin's quite animated contributions, (is) the paradox of the intensity of his beliefs in the racial question, and the suppression of its inherent subjectivity for him as a black man.'<sup>4</sup>

Therman B. O'Daniel in a rather comprehensive evaluation of Baldwin's works argues that the author has achieved 'phenomenal success' as a writer because he is 'a bold and courageous writer who is not afraid to search into the dark corners of our social consciences, and to force out into public view many of the hidden, sordid skeletons of our society.'<sup>5</sup>

During Baldwin's funeral, Amiri Baraka affirmed that

he made us feel for one thing, that we could defend ourselves and define ourselves, that we were in the world not merely as animate slaves, but as terrifyingly sensitive measurers of what is good or evil, beautiful or ugly.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, Baldwin's 'great contribution,' affirms the poet Stephen Spender, is that 'he finds words to express what one knows to be true: how it feels to be an American Negro.' In the scope of his works 'he has solved the problem of integration: not by love, but by imagination using words which know no class nor color bars.'<sup>7</sup>

There have been, naturally, objectors, none more so than Eldridge Cleaver in his attack on Baldwin as a 'castratus,' and a sexually confused obsequious writer. In his Soul on Ice, Cleaver alleges that in Baldwin's work, there is

the most grueling, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in the writings of any black American writer of note in our time.

According to Cleaver, then, Baldwin has the power to create castrated 'blacks' deprived of manly qualities by self-violation. Yet he is expert in scanning the implications of unconscious motivation inspiring his characters. Here, Cleaver allows him 'a superb touch when he



speaks of human beings, when he is inside them--especially his homosexuals.<sup>9</sup>

In an essay entitled "Notes on a Native Son," Cleaver devotes almost as much space to the endeavour of attacking Baldwin as Baldwin had once employed himself to the work of overmastering Richard Wright. Cleaver blamed Baldwin for ethnic self-hatred and traced its motive to a desire to capitulate to white men. He accused Baldwin of 'embodying in his art the self-flagellating policy of Martin Luther King.'<sup>10</sup> and condemned him for being as diffident and petulant as Wright had been masculine and intrepid.

Baldwin discards the tradition of the protest novel for he senses that it negates life, 'the human being...his beauty, dread, power,' and insists that 'it is categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.'<sup>11</sup> He wants to write the way Jazz musicians sound, to reflect their sympathy, and it is remarkable that Baldwin's tendency in Another Country, for instance, is to emphasise the individual characters' experiences in a way that is analogous to Ralph Ellison's depiction of Jazz:

true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment...springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight or improvisation, represents...a definition of his identity, as a member of<sup>12</sup> the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition.

Rising up against Wright even while confessing that Wright had deeply influenced him, Baldwin intended to write a fiction in which the Afro-American would be disintegrated as a social 'phantom of hatred and condenscension',<sup>13</sup> and instead a new genre of Afro-Americans, in all their particularity and complexity, would be devised. 'He wanted to distance himself from a mentor like...Wright, better to understand more clearly where he himself, his own self and voice, began and Richard's let off.'<sup>14</sup>



In so doing, he managed to create for himself a new repertoire: love as a vehicle of racial fraternisation. This is not for Baldwin an indistinct longing for an insignificant brotherhood, but a painful confrontation with reality, leading to the struggle to metamorphose it. In racial terms, the Afro-American as a victim of his past, which is marked by suffering and injustice, is in a moral position to persuade the white man, the oppressor, to put an end to his self-deception and start the process of redemption. 'And if the word integration means anything thing,' Baldwin wrote in 1962 in an essay entitled "My Dungeon Shook," 'this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.'<sup>15</sup> Two of the purest articulations of his belief in the dynamic of change are the closing challenges of the pieces entitled "In Search of a Majority" and "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel": 'The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in;'<sup>16</sup> and 'We made the world we're living in and we have to make it over.'<sup>17</sup>

Having fought most of the sixties, battles for a better social order, he has been assailed both by Muslims and 'black militants' for holding to his 'old-style American liberal ideology and faith.'<sup>18</sup> His refusal to adopt radicalism or to veil his homosexuality have not always served his interests, but they underline his personal complexity. Towards the end of the 1960's it seemed that Baldwin was nearing the artistic philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. In 1969, for instance, his straightforward reply to the question "Can Black and White Artists Still Work Together?" revealed that he was about to give up his initial stand. He had visibly concluded that warnings and implorations no longer served any valuable objective, for he asserts:

I will state flatly that the bulk of this country's white population impresses me, and has so impressed me for a very long time, as being beyond any conceivable hope of



moral rehabilitation. They have been white, if I may so put it, too long; they have<sup>19</sup> been married to the lie of white supremacy too long.

This is a turning point for Baldwin. The tone here is plainly of despair; it is distantly removed from the optimistic posture that typifies his first works.

By 1972, the year of No Name in the Street, the liberating possibilities of love appeared to be consumed in that horrible decade of assassination, riot and repression, of the Black Panthers and Attica. Social love had now become for Baldwin more a pathetic recollection than an alternative to cataclysm. Violence, he now believes, is the judge of history. In his fiction, this shift in emphasis is visible. Though love may still be a sustaining personal force, its social usefulness is put into question. At the end of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (1968), the young radical (Christopher) enlightens the middle-aged hero (Leo) about the new reality: "Guns," said Christopher. "We need guns."<sup>20</sup>

It is probably within this context, that years later Chinua Achebe still recalls his first encounter with Baldwin's writing as a 'miraculous experience.' He confesses that 'nothing that I had heard or read or seen quite prepared me for the Baldwin phenomenon.'<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Achebe quite rightly compares Baldwin to Captain Thomas Sankara, former leader of Burkina Faso, assassinated in his fourth year of rule by his second in command. Sankara had the audacity to read a lecture to President François Mitterrand of France. Consequently, the 'socialist veteran' launched a long counter-attack of which the sting is in the tail: 'Sankara is a disturbing person. With him it is impossible to sleep in peace. He does not leave your conscience alone.' So, for Achebe 'principalities and powers do not tolerate those who interrupt the sleep of their consciences. That Baldwin got away with it for forty years was a miracle.'<sup>22</sup> Hence, for many critics Baldwin is the disturber of peace, or 'God's black revolutionary mouth. If there is a



God, and revolution his righteous natural expression.<sup>23</sup>

In the last interview Baldwin gave, though overwhelmed by pain, he was as earthy and direct as he has always been intellectually challenging. For he begged writers to 'continue to be witnesses of (their) time; that (they) must speak out against institutionalized and individual tyranny wherever (they) find it. Because if left unchecked it threatens to engulf and subjugate us all.'<sup>24</sup>

Yet, a correct understanding of Baldwin and his work must take into consideration a complex combination of psychological and social factors sometimes thought to be antithetical. Baldwin has not only dug out from his private predicament the symbolic profile of his race's wretchedness but he has done so without eclipsing the singularity of his personal experience.

#### 1) General Background:

Baldwin is a 'much photographed man' so there is little we can add to the familiar portrait. Yet, it should be noted that a few years before the stock market crash of 1929, he was born in New York City, in the largest 'black community' in the Western World: Harlem, USA. In spite of this, James Arthur Baldwin who was born on August 2, 1924 considers himself a Southerner. Besides the fact that his parents were born in the South, he declared that 'if they had waited two more seconds (he) might have been born in the South.'<sup>1</sup> Similarly to Wright and Ellison, Baldwin is a product of the Great Migration, and his childhood's Harlem was, and perhaps still is, very much like Styx. As a child in Harlem's ghetto, Baldwin was relatively shielded from direct, personal contacts with white racism. White oppression was an abstract force, responsible somehow for the pauperism and anguish he was subjected to, it was 'the invisible cause of a visible result.'

Growing up in a sordid Harlem tenement neighbourhood, the young Baldwin



was ill-equipped to face the privation his family suffered from. Still less was he psychologically prepared to cope with the implacable animosity of his step-father, David Baldwin, a tyrannical paranoid labourer and storefront preacher, who married James' mother in 1927, accepting her illegitimate three-year-old son only with the most grudging hostility. We are told that his father hated him 'because (he) was black... little, (and) ugly.' For Baldwin confesses that he 'used to put pennies on (his) eyes to make them go back.'<sup>2</sup>

Flinching from his father's hatred, James became all the more profoundly attached to his mother, in an evident Oedipal pattern. In an interview with Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynch, Baldwin declares that his father

was righteous in the pulpit and a monster in the house. Maybe he saved all kinds of souls, but he lost all his children... I've hated a few people, but actually I've hated only one person, and that was my father... He didn't like me. But he'd had a terrible time, too. And of course I was not his son. I was a bastard. What he wanted for his children was what in fact I became. I was the brightest boy in the house because I was the eldest, and because I loved my mother... I could take some of the pressures off my mother and in a way stand between him and her... I had to learn to stand up to my father.<sup>3</sup>

Also, since his mother had to work as a domestic to support the family, James, as the eldest, was compelled to assume a maternal role towards his eight half-brothers and sisters. According to the poet and actress Verta Mae Grosvenor, Baldwin's mother affirms that when her son, 'Jimmy,' was seven years old, he told her 'I'm gonna be a great writer someday, Mama... It's the only thing I wanted to do.' His mother still remembers her son 'sitting at the table holding one of his younger brothers or sisters and always reading.'<sup>4</sup>

The boy was brought up under the double repression of poverty and the storefront church. When he was fourteen years old, he experienced a profound religious crisis after which he entered a youthful ministry. There, he was in search of safety, having convinced himself



that safety was synonymous with God. Almost four years later, he renounced the ministry; it had given him little more than the illusion of safety, and it had tried to limit both his freedom of action and imagination. For

the principles governing the rites and customs of the churches in which I grew up did not differ from the principles governing the rites and customs of other churches, white. The principles were Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, he moved from Harlem to New York's famous Greenwich Village and started practising the craft of writing. Hence, the second crisis of his life was his split with his milieu, i.e. his father's ethos. These two crises are the matrix of his first novel Go Tell It On The Mountain, and his first play The Amen Corner.

As for his political education, Baldwin asserts in the "Introduction" to The Price of the Ticket, that it is through the friendship of a certain Eugene that he met 'sometime between 1943 and 1944,' that his political life began. As Eugene was a member of the Young People's Socialist League and urged Baldwin to join in, the latter outdistanced him by becoming a Trotskyite. Yet, as Baldwin affirms: 'My life on the left is of absolutely no interest,' for 'it did not last long.'<sup>6</sup>

Baldwin graduated from high school in 1942, having served on the staff of the school literary magazine. This experience enabled him to discover the means to transcend his assigned fate. Soon after graduation he left home, resolved to earn his living as best he could, while developing his talent as a writer. Baldwin tried various jobs, both war- and peace-time. After six years of inhibitions and false starts, however, he had two fellowships--one was a Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Trust Fellowship granted on Wright's recommendation; but no tangible publications to his credit. This initial literary failure, coupled with the pressures of his personal life, drove him into exile. In 1948, at



the age of twenty-four, Baldwin, following the lead of his first mentor-Wright, left America for Paris--with forty dollars, Bessie Smith's records, a typewriter and 'no French,' never intending to return. He remained abroad for nine years. Europe gave him a world perspective from which to tackle the issue of his own identity. Two years after his arrival in Paris, Baldwin suffered a breakdown and went off to Switzerland to recover.

There, in that absolutely alabaster landscape, armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter, I began to try to recreate the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight...I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America...but in Europe she helped me to reconcile me to being a "nigger."

Go Tell It On The Mountain (1953), which brought Baldwin his first recognition as a writer of talent, The Amen Corner, a play first produced in 1955, and Notes of a Native Son (1955) are the achievement of those years and the momentary resolution of a tortured mind. For in 1973, he declared to Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. that he left the United States in

November 1948, Armistice Day... (He) left because (he) was a writer. (He) had discovered writing and (he) had a family to save. (He) had only one weapon to save them, (his) writing. And (he) couldn't write in the United States.

On the artistic level, Baldwin felt that he was not able to survive the institution of racial segregation in America which reduced him to a "Negro writer." He aimed at finding out how the uniqueness of his experience might be used to create a common bond among humanity. A theme developed in Another Country and Giovanni's Room. He assumed that if the USA were not a sanctuary, perhaps Europe would be. Maybe, as Wright pointed out, 'there is more freedom in one square block of Paris than in all of the United States.'<sup>9</sup>

Paradoxically, his Parisian exile gave him the opportunity to realise that he was not by-himself in that predicament. For he affirms that the



## Algerians

were not at home in Paris, no more than I, though for a different reason. They remembered, as it were, an opulence, opulence of taste, touch, water, sun, which I had barely dreamed of, and they had not come to France to stay. One day they were going home, and they knew exactly where home was. They, thus, held something within them which they would never surrender to France. But on my side of the ocean, or so it seemed to me then, we had surrendered everything, or had had everything taken<sup>10</sup> away, and there was no place for us to go: we were home.

On the other hand, his nine-year self-imposed exile in Paris was spent among a literary coterie of established writers such as Chester Himes, William Styron, Wright and Norman Mailer. Buttressed by his literary achievements, Baldwin returned to America in July 1957.

His return was animated by a sharp interest in the first move of the 'black civil rights' struggle. In autumn, he crossed the Mason-Dixon line for a first hand evaluation of the racial situation in places like Birmingham, Atlanta and other notorious parts of the 'Deep South.' He wanted to understand the situation in this part of the country which varied from the Northern ordeal only in that Southerners used a different strategy to converge on the same objective: keep the "nigger" in his place.

Consequently, he actively involved himself in denouncing the condition of the Afro-Americans both in the North and in the South. He was later to record this tormenting experience in No Name in the Street. Almost overnight, he became the mouthpiece of 'the wretched of the earth,' his remarks more angry and his public pronouncements more direct and provocative.

Another issue that we can never overlook is Baldwin's controversy with Wright. Baldwin thought that the latter would impede his progress just as his father had. This seems to be the motive behind his 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" in which he rejects militant writers like Wright.



Baldwin's dispute with Wright was, in a sense, a classic demonstration of the younger writer's desire to put an end to his old mentor's influence over him before he could set out on his own. If we have to take for granted Baldwin's own later regrets, the question of protest must have been a decisive one in his quarrel with Wright. Yet, one may assume that Baldwin felt a powerful desire to take an individual stand. For he declares that Wright 'had never really been a human being for me, he had been an idol. And idols are created to be destroyed.'<sup>11</sup> Hereby, Baldwin led himself to schemes to pull down his father-idol, but his victory proved to be obsolete. This can be illustrated as follows.

Oh, that his father would die!--and the road before John be open, as it must be open for others. Yet in the very grave he would hate him; his father would but have changed conditions, he would be John's father still.<sup>12</sup>

When Wright died in 1960, Baldwin as a writer was liberated: he became himself. His work turned to be more militant and more sharp, i.e. his writing became similar to the committed literature which he reproved in 1950. As Michel Fabre puts it, 'in 1960 he experienced no more difficulty in putting on Wright's shoes as a committed writer.'<sup>13</sup>

In January 1987, Baldwin was awarded L'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur, and the same year in November 30, he died in his Villa in St. Paul de Vence, succumbing to months of sickness. According to many sources, Baldwin was suffering from AIDS, but Quincy Troupe affirms that it was cancer.

After his death, Wole Soyinka had these words for him:

At the Welcome Table in the Great Beyond, I have no doubt that we shall find Jimmy seated between some Grand Master of the K.K.K., Governor Wallace and the Scottsboro Boys, enjoying a wise laugh at the former's unease, applying to their self-inflicted wounds the soothing balm of his imperishable, celestial prose.<sup>15</sup>

## 2) Relevant Fiction:

To be continually glorified as one of America's greatest



essayist must be very exasperating for a man who really wants to be acknowledged as a novelist. For the specific 'black' condition that Baldwin analyses in his essays is identical to the one that constitutes the matrix of his fiction. Yet, Langston Hughes alleges that Baldwin uses in the essay

words as the sea use waves, to flow and beat, advance and retreat, rise and take a bow in disappearing...he is much better at provoking thought in the essay than he is in arousing emotion in fiction.

His novels and other fiction aside, the books which first generated the sharpest depreciation and acclaim were those of social, cultural and political nature. These were his essays, the first among which was Notes of a Native Son (1955) and the last being The Evidence of Things Not Seen (1985).

Retrospectively, the first result of self-recovery in Switzerland was an immense creative outburst. First appeared two works of appeasement with his racial heritage. Go Tell It On The Mountain (1953) and The Amen Corner (1955) typify a search for roots and an acceptance of the Afro-American past. Then came a series of essays which diagnose the 'psychic history' of America. These constitute a living witness of Baldwin's struggle to circumscribe the experiences that have shaped him. For when he returned to America in 1957, he was ready to challenge society. Several essays in Nobody Knows My Name (1961) reflect his first impressions of America; but this is a transitional book, still largely concerned with issues of identity. Protest, however, becomes the dominant theme of his next three books. In Another Country (1962), The Fire Next Time (1963) and Blues For Mister Charlie (1964) he falls back upon a tradition of protest writing which he formerly denounced in "Everybody's Protest Novel."

If we intend to focus our attention on Baldwin's works, we may declare that the identity of the loner has been the center of all of his wri-



ting and the autobiographical element is present in much of his fiction. Furthermore, the character of the loner is intensified by the special experience, within the American context, of being 'black.'

It should be noted that the term loner refers to that existential dilemma the Afro-American is faced with: an existence without essence in a hostile world.

As a boy, he felt isolated by the severe disciplinarian religiosity of his father who was a lay-preacher. Although James, the eldest in a family of nine children, became a preacher at the age of fourteen, he grew up with a tortured need to struggle against the authoritarian father. His first novel, Go Tell It On The Mountain is an impressive evocation of his youthful sense of isolation and his attempt to find a personal identity in the household and the world into which he was born.

a) Go Tell It On The Mountain

Considering this work from an analytical point of view, we may assert that it is a novel of violence, despair and suffering. It portrays the attempts of a suffering 'black' family to find hope through religion. This novel is also the expression of Baldwin's desire to link the history of single individuals (John, Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth) with the larger processes of the Afro-American community; and these individuals/characters are seen as alienated, victimised and dislocated. In achieving this undertaking, he bears in mind the 'Negro's' past, 'a past of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation.'<sup>1</sup>

If many critics compared this novel to Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), Professor Brian Lee, in considering its 'strengths and weaknesses,' thinks that it is 'much closer to another great autobiographical novel, Sons and Lovers.'<sup>2</sup> Yet the central event of Go Tell It On The Mountain is the religious conversion of an



adolescent boy. In a long autobiographical essay, which forms a significant part of The Fire Next Time, the author reveals that he was writing about his own experience. Therefore, in this novel, he blends memoir and fiction to narrate his Harlem childhood and his parents' predicament.

On this basis, it should be noted, right from the beginning, that Go Tell It On The Mountain tells the saga of a 'black' American family in the ghetto of Harlem. One must also admit that the author's own family situation may have provided the living matrix for the dramatic presentation of the Grimes' intertwined and sometimes irreconcilable aspirations, frustrations and conflicts.

By a series of flashbacks, the writer keeps us conscious that the present involves John's quest for identity, the fulfillment of which is to be comprehended within the context of his elders' lives. Thus, the struggle for identity is the major issue of this novel. For Baldwin dissects three generations of an Afro-American family whose life span extends from slavery to the present time. The book probes the Afro-American's possibility of achieving identity through Christianity. Unfolding in a series of major movements, the story proceeds as follows: the first movement introducing the search of fourteen-year-old John Grimes for identity amid the harsh religious frustrations of his elders and his brother Roy's disobedience; the second presenting Florence's tragedy, incapable of surmounting the idea of the 'Negro' she has internalised from the regnant white culture, she is unable to remain at peace with herself and others; the third presenting Gabriel Grimes-John's step father-barred from total achievement by his attempts to flee from his irreligious impulses; the fourth presenting Elizabeth-John's mother-who, after a short fulfillment in clandestine love, shrinks into the frustrated and frustrating arms of Gabriel. The final movement is the incredible escape of John from the search for identity



into the apparent safety of religious ecstasy.

Assessing the contributions of Go Tell It On The Mountain, one of the critics asserts that

one of the best things this novel does is to capture all the uniqueness, foreignness, and exoticism of Negro life. Like an anthropologist, Mr. Baldwin shows us these people under the aspect of homogeneity; their individual lives represent their collective fate.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the author seeks, in a quite ambitious manner, to give an aesthetically valid vision of the Afro-American's burden in the USA, i.e. the trances and the psychic traumas of the religious life form a major theme in this novel. This is the reason why this work appears as 'a densely-packed, ominous, sensual, doom-ridden story, lit by rare beauty, love and human penetration. The theme is life and religion and how both, wonderful and terrible, can create and destroy.'<sup>4</sup> The scene is the Temple of the Fire Baptized in Harlem during two days and a long night; from which place, Baldwin takes us back and forth in time among the lives of 'the saints' present in the congregation.

Though it is composed of many scenes portraying the earlier lives of the other characters, the novel's principal emphasis is totally upon the protagonist, John. The story has as its purpose to depict John's liberation from the flesh, the devil and from his step-father as well. The society's role is also focused upon as a determining factor in John's life, but that emphasis is limited, for given the perspective of the novel, 'the forces affecting John stem directly from the characters of others in the novel, especially his father and mother, Gabriel and Elizabeth.'<sup>5</sup>

In this context, one must say that Go Tell It On The Mountain is more than a social document, or a 'mirror carried along a road way'--Lenox Avenue in the novel, delineating the religiosity of an Afro-American family in a slum. Go Tell It On The Mountain is a historical indictment. In this work, Baldwin vividly depicts, within the boundaries



of the religious sphere, the way the 'black' community was deprived of its history and the ways and means with the help of which it may attain it again. The white man is identified with the Pharaohs and the 'Negro' identifies himself with the Jews of Exodus.

Consequently, in the tale of each character, white men emerge as remote executioners whose inhumanity leads Richard-John's father to suicide, whose insolent sexuality leaves Deborah-Gabriel's first wife battered by the side of the road, whose dumbfounded power makes the wretchedness of the ghetto all the more gloomy.

In the novel, fewer than half of the two hundred fifty odd pages reveal John's speculation, and these are found at the beginning and end of the story, like 'the side panels of a triptych' whose pivotal tableau ("The Prayers of the Saints") reports the converging tales of John's aunt, step-father and mother.

Parts I and III, respectively, "The Seventh Day" and "The Threshing Floor," are set in Harlem. The action of Part II, "The Prayers of the Saints," however, takes place for the most part 'down home.' Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth belong to a transitional generation. Thus, this is a novel of the Great Migration that some critics consider as Baldwin's unequalled novel.<sup>6</sup> It ranks with Wright's Native Son and Ellison's Invisible Man as an important contribution to American fiction. One feels in this novel, the author's confidence, control and mastery of style. For this novel goes beyond the walls of the storefront church to the core of Afro-American experience in the USA. This is Baldwin's earliest world.<sup>7</sup>

The novel ends, then, with Baldwin giving notice of his provisional deliverance, of his realisation of a new, more agreeable religion, the religion of love. Homosexuality will be, for a long time after Go Tell It On The Mountain, the vehicle through which he transmits his alienation from God and society.



b) The Amen Corner

This play, written in the early fifties, was first professionally produced in 1965 and published in 1968.

In "Notes for The Amen Corner," which preface the published play,

Baldwin speaks of his intention to write for the theatre. For he was

absolutely determined that (he) would not, not at that moment in (his) career, not at that moment in (his) life, attempt another novel... (he) knew that (he) had more to say and much, much more to discover than (he) had been able to discover in Mountain.

The plot of the story is relatively simple and is developed in an unequivocal, realistic form, with no flashbacks or expressionistic expositions.

On Sunday morning of Act I, Sister Margaret Alexander, who has been pastor of the church for many years, preaches the sermon upstairs and goes down to her apartment to finish packing for a trip to a Philadelphia church. She wants to take with her David, her son, who has been, until the time of the play, a good boy who plays piano for Sunday school and church. Yet David tries not to accompany his mother. When Sister Moore, Sister Boxer, and Brother Boxer (Elders of the congregation) enter the apartment, they insidiously criticise Margaret for her new refrigerator, the expense of her trip, and her son's misbehaviour. Through their conversation, we discover that Luke, David's father, is back in New York, working in a jazz club downtown. Then Luke comes home very sick. We realise, with David, that Margaret took her son and left Luke a decade ago, after their baby daughter's death. For she confesses that she '(got) away from the stink of whisky--to save (her) baby--to find the Lord.' (p.40) Though Luke is about to die, Margaret ends Act I by leaving for Philadelphia, without her son.

Here Baldwin develops a theme that deals with the distortion of one of the fundamental concepts of Christianity: humanitarianism. The basis of the Christian creed is the commiseration and kindness of one human



being for another; and we would expect one as holy as Margaret would practice what she preaches. Nevertheless, we are struck by a pitiless, insincere devotion, which becomes visible when Luke comes back home and breaks down. Despite her husband's need, Margaret refuses to defer her trip to Philadelphia because 'the Lord made (her) leave that man in there a long time ago because he was a sinner. And the Lord ain't told (her) to stop doing (her) work just because he's come the way all sinners come.' (p.41) Here is a vivid illustration of the inconsistency of the 'Saint' who grudges to help an 'unsaved' brother--her husband-- simply because he is a "sinner."

Act II takes place late the following Saturday. The acerbic critical whispers of the church elders are assuming tremendous proportions, nurtured by the expositions of Margaret's past and her son's current behaviour: 'How come she think she can rule a church when she can't rule her own house,' (p.46) accuses Brother Boxer, who is vexed by Margaret mainly because she has stated that it would be a sin for him to drive a beer truck.

David and Luke have their only conversation in this act about their past as a family, about music and about pain. More dead than alive, Luke is granted a key invocation of the play in his counsel to David:

Son--don't try to get away from the things that hurt you... Sometimes that all you got. You got to learn to live with those things--and--use them. I've seen people--put themselves through terrible torture--and die--because they was afraid of getting hurt. (p.51)

Later, Luke reveals to his son his impending death because of the lack of love at the critical time when Margaret left him.

The most terrible time in a man's life, David, is when he's done lost everything that held him together... it's just gone and he can't find it... Then that man starts going down.

If don't no hand reach out to help him, that man goes under... It don't take much to hold a man together. A man can lose a whole lot, might look to everybody else that



he done lost so much that he ought to want to be dead, but he can keep on--he can even die with his head up, hell, as long as he got that one thing. That one thing is him, David, who is inside--and, son, I don't believe no man ever got to that without somebody loved him. (p.53)

When Margaret comes back from Philadelphia to confront the impatient elders, the delinquent son, and the dying husband, Luke reminds her of that truth that she seems to have forgotten, 'Maggie, ... we didn't get married because we loved God. We loved each other. Ain't that right?' (p.66) As for their son, he warns, 'I don't care what kind of life he lives--as long as it's his life--not mine, not his mama's, but his own. I ain't going to let you make him safe.' (p.71) To Margaret's numerous attempts to make Luke repent, he replies, 'I guess I could have told you--it weren't my soul we been trying to save.' (p.71) Act II ends with the meeting of the elders, in the church, to decide Margaret's eviction while she is in her kitchen weeping and praying 'Lord help us to stand... Lord give me strength.' (p.72)

Act III opens with Margaret ascending to the church early the following morning. There, she talks with Mrs. Jackson who has come from the hospital where her baby has died. In the church service of Act I, Mrs. Jackson had come to ask for prayers for her sick child. At that time, Margaret, asking the young woman why her husband was not with her, said, 'maybe the Lord wants you to leave that man.' (p.24) Now Margaret's stand has changed. To the woman's scare of having more babies, and the dread of going through more pain, Margaret remarks, 'that ain't right... You ought to have another baby right away,' and advises her to 'get on home to (her) husband... to (her) man.' (p.75)

Margaret returns downstairs, while the elders meet above to confirm her eviction. Talking to David, who comes home drunk, she confesses her motherly protective need to seek his 'salvation.'

I remember boys like you down home, David, many years ago--fine young men, proud as horses, and I seen what happened to them. I seen them go down, David, until they was



among the lowest of low...You think I want to see this happen to you? You think I want you one day lying where your daddy lies today?(p.87-9)

However, David rejects his mother's care, 'You want me to stay here, getting older, getting sicker--hating you?...Mama, I want to be a man. It's time you let me be a man. You got to let me go.'(p.88)

While David is deserting her, Margaret recalls the love she once felt for Luke and reveals to Odessa that she

tried to put (her) treasure in heaven where couldn't nothing get at it and take it away from (her) and leave (her) alone. (She) asked the Lord to hold (her) hand. (She) didn't expect that none of this would ever rise to hurt (her) no more. And all these years it just been waiting for (her), waiting for (her) to turn a corner. And there it stand, (her) whole life, just like (she) hadn't never gone nowhere. It's an awful thing to think about, the way love never dies!(p.90)

Baldwin affirms that this last line is the first line he wrote for the play.(p.9) At the end Margaret walks into Luke's bedroom and as they embrace, singing is heard from the darkened church: 'The Old Ship of Zion.' Here, she confesses 'I never stopped loving you, Luke. I tried. But I never stopped loving you.'(p.95) And Luke dies.

Luke's subsequent death causes Margaret's regrets and intensifies the awareness of her own identity. She is compelled to reevaluate those values that hastened her adversity and she appears in the final scene totally conscious of the terror of her behaviour.

Margaret mounts into the church where the elders are singing, 'I'm gonna sit at the Welcome Table.' She starts a sermon, but interrupts it in embarrassment when she realises that it is not David who is sitting at the piano but one of the saints from Philadelphia. As the gossipy Sister Moore screams, 'Look at her! the gift of God has left her,'(p.97) Margaret talks with what Baldwin certainly means to be God's authentic message:

Children. I'm just now finding out what it means to love the Lord. It ain't all in the singing and the shouting. It ain't all in the reading of the Bible...It ain't



even...in running all over everybody trying to get to heaven. To love the Lord is to love all His children--all of them, everyone!--and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!(p.97)

Margaret comes down the stairs. The lights dim down in the church and dim up on Margaret as she falls beside Luke's bed. The curtain falls down.

In The Amen Corner, Baldwin attempts to reproduce the ritual of the 'black church,' as he experienced it, in the ritual for the theatre.

For he reveals:

I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically speaking, comes the act of the theatre, the "communion" which is the theatre. And I knew that what I wanted to do in the theatre was to recreate moments I remembered as a boy preacher, to involve the people, even against their will, to shake them up, and, hopefully, to change them.(p.10-11).

c) The Fire Next Time

It should be noted that the scope of the collected essays stretches over a variety of topics, whose function is to elucidate the plight of the Afro-American in twentieth century USA. These essays evolve around issues such as alienation, the quest for identity and the need for love.

Besides,

what is important about Baldwin's essays is the style and eloquence with which he evokes the torment and human devastation of American racism and his ability to make us feel, if only momentarily, that redemption is possible.

Yet it is in the autobiographically-based-essay that Baldwin has been sharp. In the best of his essays, it is the author's intuition of his own history that tends to create and substantiate his ideas. For Baldwin's essays that do not bring into play the poignant personal experience as a substructure are sometimes flimsy and questionable in comparison to those that do. An essay like, for instance, "Everybody's



Protest Novel," which is recalled for its detraction of Wright,' seems pretentious and lacking in personality.'<sup>2</sup>

As a 'Negro polemicist who railed against the race-supremacy beliefs of white Americans,'<sup>3</sup> we can assert that Baldwin's The Fire Next Time (1963) comes from a morally outraged consciousness. This compilation is different from his earlier work in the essay form. To a great extent, Baldwin has substituted prophecy for criticism, exhortation for analysis, and the fruit is rather troubling. For The Fire Next Time gets its title from a slave song: 'God gave Noah the rainbow sign,/No more water the fire next time.'<sup>4</sup> The word 'fire' in the title can either connote violence or purging. The former may probably refer to the Black Power Movement which, at the time, started taking over when the integrationist Civil Rights Movement was falling off. In the case of purging, 'fire' stands for a radical catharsis through racial violence. This will, presumably, put an end to that moral deadlock in which America finds itself.

The two autonomous essays that compose this small book with the incendiary title were published late in 1962. "My Dungeon Shook" appeared originally in December as "A Letter to My Nephew" and "Down at the Cross" appeared initially in November as "Letter from a Region in My Mind." The book as a whole was published in 1963 and thus belongs to a period--the early sixties--when Baldwin was highly prolific.

The One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863) serves as the occasion for the first essay of the book. Moreover, the particular circumstances that conditioned the 'Negro' as an American are largely analysed in "My Dungeon Shook." This essay is much like a 'father-son chat.' Baldwin uses the letter as a personal channel in order to convey his thoughts. He addresses his nephew in an effort to impress upon him the odds for his survival in America--odds deliberately manipulated in order to minimise and



virtually prevent the achievement of success:

You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. (p.16)

This passage typifies the difference of this essay from the others, for the mood is not provocative; it is not intended to encourage his nephew to rage. Baldwin himself is not spiteful; his only objective appears to be the stimulation of a consciousness within the boy who is supposed to perform his role in life in conformity with the regulations that have been stipulated by society. The essay is not a direct condemnation of the social system. Rather, it has the effect of providing ways and means that will help in the elaboration of a counter-strategy for survival.

Here, the author offers to his nephew a concise three-point battle strategy to ponder about. Its most important aspect is the retention of probity. Baldwin advises young James that he must keep an inherent faith in his own dynamic for accomplishment; he must, at all events, decline the overt stratagems that are maintained by whites to nullify his dignity and inhibit his opportunities for success.

Secondly, in neutralising these perversions of truth, he must be aware of his own past, and he must depend exclusively on the omniscience of his own experience. As one cannot progress in an abyss, Baldwin implores his nephew never to reject his history or his own experience, but to celebrate that past and use that experience as a guiding influence in his life.

The Afro-Americans have been able to survive in this white man's world, the author says, simply because they were able to love each other. So, his last point is that it is extremely important to preserve that



love as an inducible force, oriented towards the acceptance of white people, who are hopelessly 'trapped in a history which they do not understand...we, with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.'

(p.16-17)

"Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region of My Mind," exposes the recollections of the author's childhood. If in Go Tell It On The Mountain he made us familiar with certain aspects of his Harlem past, here, Baldwin focuses on quite different things: the boy's increasing consciousness of the narrow world he inhabits as an Afro-American; his attempt to flee from a depraved existence by undergoing a religious conversion and becoming at fourteen a revivalist preacher. Then he gets to what is his professed subject, the Black Muslim Movement. He tells of the television programme he once shared with Malcolm X, and the brief visit he paid to the Movement's first-in-command, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad in Chicago. Baldwin reports this meeting with forceful details. On his leaving the Movement's quarters, the leader insisted on providing him with a car and driver to protect him 'from the white devils until he gets wherever it is he's going.' Baldwin tells us that he accepted, adding wryly: 'I was, in fact, going to have a drink with several white devils on the other side of town.' (p.69)

Baldwin also offers some data on the Black Muslim Movement's aims and finances, suggesting that it is a sense of identity, a 'sense of their own worth'<sup>5</sup> that the Muslims intend to restore to deprived Afro-Americans. Even for Baldwin, the quest for identity is one of the major forces that sustain all of his writings. Consequently, it has become the theme upon which a great deal of the critical attention has been concentrated. For Baldwin, the solution to self-discovery is suffering. He argues in The Fire Next Time, for instance, that the Afro-American must find an access, however painful, to his past



of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible. (p.84)

The Afro-American must be able to evaluate the experiences that resulted from this 'endless struggle' so that to 'achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity.' (p.84) Fearing any kind of misunderstanding, Baldwin emphasises his definition of suffering. For he avers 'I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering...but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are.' (p.84)

The author also remembers, in this compilation, his "green" ministry and utters an acerbic criticism on the Christian church which, ironically, connotes a move from the 'artist-as-interrogator' concept to the 'community-action' stand affirmed by 'Negro' writers like Amiri Baraka. For Baldwin affirms:

When I faced a congregation, it began to take all the strength I had not to stammer, not to curse, not to tell them to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike. When I watched all the children, their copper, brown and beige faces staring up at me as I taught Sunday School, I felt that I was committing a crime in talking about the gentle Jesus, in telling them to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life. ...I had been in the pulpit too long and I had seen too many monstrous things. I don't refer merely to the glaring fact that the minister eventually acquires houses and Cadillacs while the faithful continue to scrub floors and drop their dimes and quarters and dollars into the plate. I really mean that there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair. The transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended, and salvation stopped at the church door. (p.40-41)

Fundamentally, this is the position towards Christianity that is adopted by the Black Arts Movement. Christianity becomes a white man's religion, deprived of all love and tenderness, planned to ensure the



social, political, and economic enslavement of the Afro-American. The consequence of this scheme was the savage postulate that tolerance of pains, debasements, and frustrations imposed by the white society were a sine qua non condition of the felicity of the other world. As a character in The Amen Corner asserts: 'Folks like us ain't got nothing and ain't never supposed to have nothing. We's supposed to live on the joy of the Lord.'<sup>6</sup>

The issue of Baldwin the mouthpiece versus Baldwin the artist has been widely debated. The Fire Next Time, according to Edward Watson, established Baldwin as 'a civil rights pamphleteer,' therefore corroborating 'the identification of the author with things sociological rather than literary.'<sup>7</sup>

However, Baldwin entirely rejects this role:

The country is going through a crisis and I've been thrown up as this kind of public figure because I'm the top Negro in the country--whatever that means...It's like Sidney Poitier being America's only Negro movie star. That's the country's fault, not ours. But I'm still trying to speak just for me, not for twenty million people...You know, the real point is that people like me and Harry Belafonte and even Martin Luther King are not Negro leaders. We're doing our best to find out where the people are and to follow them.

For some critics, 'the commitment to action,' in The Fire Next Time, 'is by no means sufficiently delineated; a program of revolutionary engagement is more insinuated than clearly described,'<sup>9</sup> but suggestion in itself reveals Baldwin's shift from the days when Rufus Scott's suicide, as we shall see in Another Country, appeared to him to be a significant key to the meaning of life.

In this essay the author reveals that there is an urgent necessity to bring to an end the 'black' people's ordeal in America; for one should be able to convince white people, through rational argument, of this urgency; but experience shows that it is vain to expect them to act with determination in accordance with their own convictions, since it



is against their interest to do so. Consequently, the Afro-Americans are compelled to adopt more revolutionary actions. He concludes, 'there is simply no possibility of a real change in the Negro's situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure.' (p.74) If one disapproves of this call to action, pretending that it is not that clear, Baldwin, a few pages later, makes it quite clearer:

At the center of this dreadful storm, this vast confusion, stand the black people of this nation, who must now share the fate of a nation that has never accepted them, to which they were brought in chains. Well, if this is so, one has no choice but to do all in one's power to change that fate, and at no matter what risk--eviction, imprisonment, torture, death. (p.88)



B/ Another Country

If identity seems the major theme in Go Tell It On The Mountain, for instance, it may be pointed out that in Another Country, Baldwin is concerned with sex and love as vehicles in the accomplishment of full being; while Baldwin first novel is a means through which the author tackles his own youth, his religious background, and family relationships, especially his step-father, Another Country deals with another dimension of identity--sexuality. We may be even more correct to affirm that while Go Tell It On The Mountain uses religious experience as a key metaphor for the quest of identity, the novel under study makes use of sexuality, homosexuality in particular, as the metaphor. Homosexuality in Another Country is to be viewed as the exclusively valid category of love. For in a review of André Gide's Madeleine, Baldwin pictures the possibility of "mixing" with the other sex as 'the door to life and air and freedom from the tyranny of one's own personality.'<sup>1</sup>

This novel has given birth to a great amount of detraction. The majority of reviewers and critics, while unwillingly acknowledging a literary value here and there in the novel, have anathematised or



pulled it to pieces.

According to Robert Bone, Another Country is 'a failure on the grand scale.' For 'the plot consists of little more than a series of occasions for talk and fornication;<sup>2</sup> and for William Wasserstrom, this novel turns out to be 'a touch shrill. A work of almost sheer will rather than passion, mind not guts, it comes off less as an exfoliation of art and energy than as a programmatic text.'<sup>3</sup>

After discussing 'the big sex scenes,' Stanley Edgar Hyman concludes that 'one could not call Another Country a success but it has considerable successes in it, along with the peepshows;<sup>4</sup> and for William Barrett, it is 'a powerful and disturbing novel' with elements that are bare and offensive, but that the writer reaches occasionally a 'Faulknerian surge of power and violence.'<sup>5</sup>

Eugenia Collier asserts that the novel has 'something offensive for everyone;' that its depictions of sex and humiliating allusions to race result in 'a lurid tale...seasoned with violence and obscenity.'<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the most eloquent declaration on behalf of Another Country is proffered by Norman Podhoretz's "In Defense of a Maltreated Best Seller" which acclaims 'the militancy and cruelty of its vision of life;' for this critic, Baldwin accomplished in this novel 'a unique blend of subtlety and forcefulness, anger and understanding.'<sup>7</sup>

Before analysing this novel, we should note that when Baldwin returned to America, in the spring of 1960 after a protracted period of exile in Europe, he said that he had two books in process, a collection of essays entitled Nobody Knows My Name and a novel called Another Country about which he affirmed: 'it's over five hundred pages long... it's about five people in New York.'<sup>8</sup>

Another Country is about a decisive year in the lives of a group of people who dwell in a sort of underworld of interracial and intersexual relations. Furthermore, in terms of the literary development, the



novel takes on considerable dimensions as it stands for a direct attack, not only on a few sterial sexual and social taboos, but on the cultural domination, the despotic perception and interpretation, of the WASP view as it functions in literature and in life. We are quite persuaded that the reviewers were just not ready to have their (class) privilege of defining the dynamics of their own social experience assumed by this "nigger" from Harlem.

Thematically, Baldwin has been audacious to contend, in a straightforward manner, with the habitual taboo subjects of American society and culture: interracial sexual intercourse, homosexuality as a standardised mode of experience, and bisexuality as an authentic adventure. Thus, Another Country 'is an excursion into those areas of experience which are generally avoided,<sup>9</sup> or only alluded to. The topic, in this novel, is most promising, for Baldwin brings together the two 'races' and examines the relations between 'whites and blacks' in present day New York.

Furthermore, Another Country embodies a diversity of other no less important topics that recur in Baldwin's fiction and essays: the quest for personal identity; the need to become conscious of the deep horror and happiness in sexual encounters; the accusation of the American dream as being haunted by prosperity, status and power; and the wretched reality that makes life tragic. As the novel unfolds, the human personality in all of its mysterious confusion is portrayed with vigour and pungency. For the author, when the novel appeared, said:

What I was trying to do was create for the first time my own apprehension of the country and the world. I understood that if I could discharge venom, I could discharge love (they frighten me equally). When I was a little boy, I hated all white people, but in this book I got beyond the hate. I don't care what anybody says; I faced my life by that book and it's a good book. It's as honest as I can be.

'I got beyond the hate': this is the significant sentence and the key



to the novel's topic. Throughout the work, the leitmotif of solitude and the need for love is reiterated, for we read that

he stood there, wide-legged, humping the air, filling his barrel chest, shivering in the rags of his twenty-odd years, and screaming through the horn Do you love me? Do you love me?... And again Do you love me?... This, anyway, was the question Rufus heard, the same phrase, unbearably endlessly, and variously repeated with all the force the boy had.<sup>11</sup>

As one can notice, this fundamental interrogation which is formulated early in the novel, runs inextricably through the strands of the narrative, and imposes itself upon one's attention in the concluding section. As Eugenia Collier aptly indicates, 'this is not primarily a book about race or sex. It is a novel about the individual's lonely and futile quest for love.'<sup>12</sup>

Love, as the main object of Baldwin's quest, is an energetic, emphatic force with the potential to metamorphose men's lives, it is

something more like fire, like the wind, something which can change you. I mean energy. I mean a passionate belief, a passionate knowledge of what a human being can do to change the world in which he finds himself.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of its construction, *Another Country* intends to embrace within its scope and to probe the roots of America's social malaise. Love in this novel is a much more crucial social issue. Its ramifications on the canvas of American life are no longer simply suggested, but dramatised within the context of interracial relationships. The author, in this particular piece of fiction, departs from his vision of man as *Homo Theologicus*; his characters are more and more unconscious of the existence of the revengeful God of Go Tell It On The Mountain. This conceptual shift is by no means, however, an obvious sign that Baldwin has completely rejected the old cosmology.

In Another Country, sexual love (the author's new doctrine of carnal salvation) functions as a healing replacement for love in the religious sense, or where there is sometimes no redemption whatsoever.



In this book, the writer is very much concerned about whether the sex experience generates a transcending love to differentiate between the heterosexual and homosexual experience. Here, the majority of the men have been involved in a homosexual act and, as a result, they have defined their sex for the future. They have decided whether the homosexual experience is or is not valid for their existence. Hereby, Baldwin echoes this conundrum when he asserts:

That argument, for example, as to whether or not homosexuality is natural seems to me completely pointless--pointless because I really do not see what difference the answer makes. It seems clear, in my case, at least in the world we know, that no matter what encyclopedias of physiological and scientific knowledge are brought to bear the answer never can be Yes. And one of the reasons for this is that it would rob the normal--who are simply the many--of their very necessary sense of security and order, of their sense, perhaps, that the race is and should be devoted to outwitting oblivion--and will surely manage to do so.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, throughout Another Country, the superiority of homosexual love is emphasised. Here, exclusively, can one experience full surrender and total orgiastic pleasure. Heterosexual love, comparatively, is a vague mimicry. In many passages resentment of women reaches extravagant dimensions:

Every time I see a woman wearing her fur coats and her jewels and her gowns, I want to tear all that off her and drag her someplace, to a pissoir, and make her smell the smell of many men, the piss of many men, and make her know that that is what she is for, she is no better than that, she does not fool me with all those shining rags, which, anyway, she only got by blackmailing some stupid man. (p.208)

Baldwin's intimate preference for homosexuality as a means for the communication of love becomes even more articulated in this novel. It is this bias that Eldridge Cleaver seizes upon as a ground for his assault on Baldwin in Soul on Ice. In this work, however, Cleaver does not succeed in making a clear cut distinction between his appraisal of Baldwin's artistic work and the man. Eventually, the autobiographical aspect becomes as important a criterion as the work of art itself. It follows, then, that Cleaver's condemnation of Baldwin's artistry is



partly founded on the homosexual subject which is reiterated in many of his works.

When the book unfolds, Eric, Rufus, Vivaldo and Cass are dispersed after a period of great intimacy and love.

Rufus is starving on the Bowery: wandering the streets; sleeping in hallways, subways and movies. 'Sometimes (he) sort of peddled (his) arse' in order to eat. (p.56) Eric is in France, Cass is at home being a wife and a mother, and Vivaldo, solitary and frustrated, is attached to a sexually promiscuous woman painter. We read that despite a reciprocal affection in the group, they were fundamentally united by a profound admiration for Rufus.

They are reunited at the end of the first section by Rufus' death. The scattering and reunification are basic to the author's prime objective which is the revelation of every character's development, i.e. their loss of innocence. Besides, these five characters, who find themselves in New York, from Harlem, the South, New England and Brooklyn are further related by having denied their pasts, and the personalities imposed by their roots.

From a symbolic point of view, the novel is highly expressive, mainly in its title and setting. The title, Another Country, may typify many aspects of the story. It symbolises New York City, the place for which Yves departs as an innocent who looks forward to a new life. It also stands for the Ghetto of Harlem, the "other country" within the City, that no white can never understand,

(they) kept you here, and stunted you and starved you, and made you watch your mother and father and sister and lover and brother and son and daughter die or go mad or go under, before your very eyes? And not in a hurry, like from one day to the next, but, every day, every day, for years, for generations? Shit. They keep you here because you're black, while they go around jerking themselves off with all the jazz about the land of the free and the home of the brave. And they want you to jerk yourself off with the same music, too, only keep your distance. Some days, honey, I wish I could turn myself into one big fist and



grind this miserable country to powder...there's no way in the world for you to know what Rufus went through,not in this world,not as long as you're white.(p.343-4)

The title can also represent other countries. 'If you're talking of yourself and Vivaldo - there are other countries - have you ever thought of that?'(p.343) says Cass to Ida,suggesting that a white and 'black' have the possibility to live together in such a country with less guilt and scare and more possibility of happiness;France is such a country where an idyllic love affair of two males may incarnate the affection and concern unavailable to them in New York -

(Eric's and Yves' arms) locked around each other, then they drew apart,and,holding hands,stumbled into the bedroom,into the great haven of their bed. Perhaps it had never before seemed so much like a haven,so much their own,now that the terrible floodwaters of time were about to overtake it. And perhaps they had never before so belonged to each other,as they did now,...Love is expensive, Yves had once said...One must put furniture around it,or it goes. ...But,for the moment,they were simply exhausted and at peace with one another and loath to leave the only haven either of them had ever found. ...Eric fell asleep, thinking,Life is very different in New York.(p.223-5).

The title can also be interpreted as the location wherein the ethos of the dominant white people leads to spiritual chaos,for those values are essentially success-oriented;as Cass affirms to Eric: 'I don't think there's any hope. We're too empty here. ...This isn't a country at all,it's a collection of football players and Eagle Scouts. Cowards. We think we're happy. We're not. We're doomed.'(p.397-8)

As far as the setting of the novel is concerned,the author's depiction of New York encompasses striking images of malaise,scenes and gestures which reveal the moral chaos of modern urban life. New York - 'the city which never slept,'(p.14) - is vividly depicted in terms of despair,danger,indifference and violence:

New York seemed very strange indeed. It might, almost,for strange barbarity of manner and custom,for the sense of danger and horror barely sleeping beneath the rough,gregarious surface,have been some impenetrable exotic city of the East. ...It seemed to have no sense whatever of the exigencies of human life;it was so



familiar and so public that it became, at last, the most despairingly private of cities. ... This note of despair, of buried despair, was insistently, constantly struck. It stalked all of the New York avenues, roamed all of the New York streets. ... He could not escape the feeling that a plague was raging, though it was officially and publicly and privately denied. (p.227-8)

Within this nightmarish context, the main feature of the principal characters becomes readily perceptible--the existential reality of loneliness and alienation.

One was continually being jostled, yet I longed, at the same time, for the sense of others, for a human touch; and if one was never--it was the general complaint--left alone in New York, one had, still, to fight very hard in order not to perish of loneliness. This fight, carried on in so many different ways, created the strange climate of the city. (p.228)

In an urban milieu where the physical climate reflects the moral state of the people, New York, as the setting, becomes the symbol of contemporary American civilisation and its spiritual destruction. Here, the writer, to all intents and purposes, communicates this state in an interview:

I miss New York but I can't work there. I can't write. I must have isolation in order to start again. Pressures are too much in New York. You spend all your time resisting. You don't find out what you are thinking or dreaming. It isn't personal. It's the city. <sup>15</sup>

Consequently, New York City emerges, in the novel, as a sort of wasteland where every character struggles to live and to relate to another so that to justify his own self-consciousness and to restore his sense of being human:

It was a city without oases, run entirely, insofar, at least, as human perception could tell, for money; and its citizens seemed to have lost entirely any sense of their right to renew themselves. Whoever in New York, attempted to cling to this right, lived in New York in exile--in exile from the life around him; and this paradoxically, had the effect of placing him in perpetual danger of being forever banished from any real sense of himself. (p.311)

The real world of Baldwin's novel - the world of which New York City is a microcosm - is presented with tangible and creative force. New



York, here, is 'a hot house of ideas and possible human relationships,'<sup>16</sup> where the interracial and bisexual bed switching constitute an enthusiastic attempt to attain love in this loveless city.

As far as the novel's structure is concerned, there are three sections in Another Country: a) "Easy Rider", b) "Any Day Now", c) "Toward Bethlehem"; but revealing the evident does not single out the complexity of the plot in a book that seems to be rigorously constructed. The plot is composed of four main narrative accounts involving two principal characters in each strand: Rufus Scott (an Afro-American) and Leona (a Southern white woman); Ida Scott (Rufus' sister) and Vivaldo Moore (a white man); Cass and Richard Silenski (a white couple); and, Eric Jones and Yves (white homosexuals).

These narrative strands meet and interlace at different points throughout the novel in a sort of wonderland of interracial (whites and Afro-Americans) and intersexual (bisexual, homosexual, heterosexual) relations in New York City. Yet, it is the narrative account of Vivaldo and Ida which is central to the book's movement; it is the existence of these two characters which runs through the three sections. Hence, the novel appears to be basically their tale; for the emphasis at the end is on their reconciliation as the fundamental norm of value in Another Country, with the new mode of life for Eric and Yves as incarnating a secondary value.

Moreover, we may also say that, structurally speaking, the novel is composed of two articulating parts. Book I shows how bad things really are in America. Books II and III contain the redemptive movement, the symbolic journey to "another country."

The central figure of Book I is Rufus Scott, a gifted jazz drummer who is driven to suicide by the adversities of a racist society. Susceptible, spiteful and violent, he sublimates his resentment by pounding on the white skin of his drums. With something of the same



malevolence, he tortures his white mistress, eventually bereaving her of reason. Racked by this guilt, he throws himself from the George Washington Bridge.

Before this tragic incident, Rufus, who is in a lamentable state, is characterised by a hatred and hopelessness that his friends cannot fully understand. He is fighting within himself both the imaginary and the real aspects of the racial segregation, and, thereby, cannot communicate with Leona, the Southern pathetic poor white woman that he picks up with the deliberate purpose of sexual exploitation, and getting rid of her before she can "bug" him with her story. For we are told that

he had planned to visit his family but the thought of what a ball it would be to spend the day in bed with Leona...he wondered if he should proposition her or wait for her to proposition him. He couldn't beg. But perhaps she could. The hairs of his groin began to itch slightly. The terrible muscle at the base of his belly began to grow hot and hard. ...Something touched his imagination for a moment, suggesting that Leona was a person and had her story and that all stories were trouble. But he shook the suggestion off. He wouldn't be around long enough to be bugged by her story. He just wanted her for tonight. (p.20-3)

In this context, we may infer that Rufus Scott, as a central figure, is just like Richard, the protagonist in Blues for Mister Charlie, who has believed in the 'black' sex myth. Having been refused the chance to affect 'the swing of the social pendulum,' he takes pride in the only sphere of authority in which he feels himself capable: sexual prowess. He boasts to Pete about his sexual achievements with white women in Greenwich Village as a vehicle of exalting his own pride:

They can't get enough of what little Richard's got- I give it to them, too, baby, believe me. You say black people ain't got no dignity? Man, you ought to watch a white woman when she wants you to give her a little bit. They will do anything, baby, anything!<sup>17</sup>

For the protagonist, then, these women have become symbols of white tyranny and exploitation. By virtue of their complexion alone, he has identified them as accomplices in a huge scheme to which the Afro-



American, in general, has fallen victim. In fact, this is his golden opportunity to revenge every 'black' man in America.

For Professor Brian Lee, 'Baldwin's attempt to substitute Eros for Caritas...in Another Country, is a failure...because he drains the sexual act of reality by using it as the vehicle for a variety of metaphors.'<sup>18</sup> At first, there is a crossing of swords between the Afro-American and white figures, where the exclusive arsenal is the myth of the Afro-American sexual prowess. So, when Rufus has coition with Leona,

he wanted her to remember him the longest day she lived. And, shortly, nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor a lynch mob arriving on wings. Under his breath he cursed the milk-white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs. She began to cry. I told you, he moaned, I'd give you something to cry about, and, at once, he felt himself strangling, about to explode or die. A moan and a curse tore through him while he beat her with all the strength he had and felt the venom shoot out of him, enough for a hundred black-white babies. (p.31)

If we examine the above passage, it appears that in Baldwin's imagination the basic quality of sexual relations is that of hostility--a combat in which the adversaries fight to shield their personalities. It would further appear that in such a strife the male partner is compelled to be the vanquisher, and through his victory he immediately accomplishes a denial of the female partner's legitimacy as a being and an affirmation of his own heroic existence.

In his book Sex and Racism in America, Calvin Hernton argues that sexuality in 'black America' is indissoluble from, and indeed the logical result of racial attitudes in the US. For the Afro-American's psychological relations are predetermined by external social factors over which he has little control, and he may quite logically try to balance his social privation by advocating a sexual heroism that is psychologically functional but hardly appropriate as a response to his more than concrete socio-economic ordeal.<sup>19</sup> For we are told that Rufus and Leona



encountered the big world when they went out into the Sunday streets. It stared unsympathetically out at them from the eyes of the passing people; and Rufus realised that he had not thought at all about this world and its power to hate and destroy. He had not thought at all about his future with Leona, for the reason that he had never considered that he had one. Yet, here she was, clearly intending to stay if he would have her. But the price was high: trouble with the landlord, with the neighbours, (and) with all the adolescent in the Village. (p.36)

Besides, Rufus has suffered racial prejudice for quite a long time, so that even Leona's innocent comments make his blood boil. He has also been frustrated for so long that, now, every white is a scapegoat. We read that he still remembers

his days in boot camp in the South and (feels) again the shoe of a white officer against his mouth. He was in his white (Navy) uniform, on the ground, against the red, dusty clay... The white officer, with a curse, had vanished, had gone forever beyond the reach of vengeance. (p.22)

The evocations of the frustrating love of Rufus Scott for Leona, and of the eventually successful one of Vivaldo for Ida--and even more, maybe, of the male 'black-white' friendship of Rufus and Vivaldo--are sometimes very moving, as well as deeply evocative of the numerous impediments to interracial love. Though the author puts most of the culpability for this frustration on the whites--since the overall racial situation in America is the white man's creation--he is very prompt to allow that the Afro-Americans have been equally distorted by these situations. Hence, Rufus justifies his torture of Leona by accusing her of loving only his sex, for he tells Vivaldo that 'this chick can't get enough.' (p.64) Leona is made to realise that Rufus' hatred for her is really because he is 'black.' Yet, she never stopped telling him that there 'ain't nothing wrong in being coloured.' (p.60) However, Rufus cannot believe that he is 'good enough' for her. For the hatred he feels for the whites is too deep in his marrow.

How I hate them - all those white sons of bitches out there. They trying to kill me, you think I don't know? They got the world on a string, man, and they trying that



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string around my neck, they killing me. ... Sometimes I lie here and I listen - just listen. They out there, scuffling, making that change, they think it's going to last forever. Sometimes I lie here and listen, listen for a bomb, man, to fall on this city and make all that noise stop. I listen to hear them moan, I want them to bleed and choke, I want to hear them crying, man, for somebody to come help them. They'll cry a long time before I come down there. ... It's going to happen one of these days, it's got to happen. I sure would like to see it. ... Sometimes I listen to those boats on the river - I listen to those whistles - and I think wouldn't be nice to get on a boat again and go someplace away from all these nowhere people, where a man could be treated like a man. ... You got to fight with the landlord because the landlord's white! You got to fight with the elevator boy because he's white. Any bum on the Bowery can shit all over you because maybe he can't hear, can't see, can't walk, can't fuck - but he's white! (p.74-5)

Rufus and Leona's affair which starts on a high note of sexual excitement, ends in Leona's madness and Rufus' suicide, for the 'black and white' pasts of the two lovers rise up and drive them both to enstrangement and destruction, i.e. the social and psychological pressures of living with Leona had so riven Rufus that he commits suicide.

In a previous essay, Baldwin avers that 'when men can no longer love women they also cease to love or respect or trust each other, which makes their isolation complete. Nothing is more dangerous than this isolation, for men will commit any crimes whatever rather than endure it.'<sup>20</sup> Thus, Rufus leaves the world with a curse on his lips, and the only legacy he leaves behind is the memory of his wretchedness. Here, the author vividly depicts Rufus' suicide:

He began to walk slowly to the centre of the bridge, observing that, from this height, the city which had been so dark as he walked through it seemed to be on fire. ... it was freezing cold. He raised his eyes to heaven. He ... the ... ht, You bastard, you motherfucking bastard. Ain't I your ba ... oo? He began to cry. ... He knew the pain would never stop. He could never go down into the city again. He dropped his head as though someone had struck him and looked down at the water. It was cold and the water would be cold. He was black and the water was black. (p.93)

As he is about to jump into the Hudson River, he thinks of Eric, Ida and then,



he whispered, I'm sorry Leona, and then the wind took him. ...He felt a shoe fly off behind him, there was nothing around him, only the wind, all right, you mother-fucking God almighty bastard, I'm coming to you. (p.93)

When they bring Rufus' body to his parents' place, his body was 'so broken and lumpy - and ugly.' Rufus' father stares at it and says: 'they don't leave a man much, do they?' For we are told that his father was beaten to death with a hammer by a railroad guard and brought home just like Rufus. Ida's mother is so scared that she asks her husband to pray for the deceased; he fulminates: 'Pray? Who, pray? I bet you, if I ever get anywhere near that white devil you call God, I'll tear my son and my father out of his white hide! Don't you ever say the word pray to me again, woman, not if you want to live.' (p.407)

If we try to define the crisis of identity in Baldwin's works as a basically moral strife of vice and virtue waged within the consciousness of man, then Rufus' suicide comes to symbolise the evil aspect of the battle, 'the tragic aspect in its outmost potentiality.'<sup>22</sup> Yet, we may wonder if Rufus is a victim of a hostile world, or is he essentially a brainless young man who is victimised by his own lack of purpose?

That Rufus is angry is obvious, and it is true that there is not much he can do to lessen his wrath. Nevertheless, it is a false reading to allege that the author, in this typical novel, implies that the Afro-American who is subjected to racial prejudice has little recourse at his disposition but to be angry and cross the Styx. So, if Rufus makes his choice of escaping pain through suicide, this choice is not an ineluctable one.

Rufus is, concisely, a peculiarly non-resistant Bigger Thomas whose "sanguinary" impulses turn back upon himself. Similarly to Bigger, he was set up to provoke the conscience of the American nation. For the underlying source of Rufus' suicide is the total failure of his white



friends to understand the abyss of his hopelessness.

The people who knew and felt affection for Rufus are made partly responsible for his suicide, although where precisely their responsibility lies is never made obvious. Evidently, one may venture to say that they did not comprehend the extent of Rufus' pain because they are white.

'Because I'm black,' says Ida to Vivaldo

I know more about what happened to my brother than you can ever know. I watched it happen - from the beginning. I was there. He shouldn't have ended up the way he did. That's what's been so hard for me accept. He was a very beautiful boy. Most people aren't beautiful, I knew that right away. I watched them, and I knew. But he didn't because he was so much nicer than I. (p.405)

Rufus Scott, who is basically the hero of Another Country, is killed off quite early in the story; yet it is his physical disappearance that gives the book the most significant organising principle that fastens all the other sections together. With the probable exception of Richard Silenski, who is seemingly too far gone in egotism to acquire anything from his experience, all the other principal figures, Vivaldo, Eric, Cass and Ida, are deeply influenced by Rufus' life and death.

Nevertheless, to allege that Rufus is the hero of this novel requires specifications, and it is in these specifications that we can probably single out the major weakness of Another Country. In concrete terms, 'Rufus is more of an influence than a character, an ethereal emanation rather than a concretely delineated personality.'<sup>23</sup> In all respects, Baldwin provides a real picture of Rufus' affair with Leona, but beyond this much of what has been revealed is obscure history of the deterministic kind, and the author seems to have taken for granted that to enunciate that Rufus is 'one of the fallen' is an operative alternative for a real description of the hero. Let's examine, for instance, the following passage.

Beneath them Rufus walked, one of the fallen, for the



weight of this city was murderous--one of those who had been crushed on the day, which was every day, these towers fell. Entirely alone, and dying of it, he was part of an unprecedented multitude. There were boys and girls drinking coffee at the drugstore counters who were held back from his condition by barriers as perishable as their dwindling cigarettes. They could scarcely bear their knowledge, nor would they have borne the sight of Rufus, but they knew why he was in the streets tonight, why he rode subways all night long, why his stomach growled, why his hair was nappy, his armpits funky, his pants and shoes too thin, and why he did not dare to stop and take a leak. (p.14)

This passage is undoubtedly touching in its enunciation of pain and enstrangement in the midst of human indifference, but we are less informed about Rufus than about his fellow travellers in despair, and about the anonymous and depraved city in which he lives and perishes. Yet, we may infer that the nature of Rufus' ordeal is that because he is 'black' and, therefore, dispossessed; he has had a love affair with a white woman that ends in tragedy because of the racist milieu in which they are obliged to live.

In the "hodge-podge" of Greenwich Village, the author brings together the remains of the group, those whose lives are connected to Rufus' destiny. His bosom friend is Daniel Vivaldo Moore, a young unpublished, and unmarried writer of Italian-Irish background. An 'Irish-wop' who has fled from the slums of Brooklyn of which he says:

You had to be tough, they'd kill you if you weren't, people were dying around us all the time, for nothing. I wasn't really much interested in hanging out with most of those kids, they bored me. But they scared me, too. ... You had to be a man where I come from, and you had to prove it... all the time. ... Most of the kids I knew are dead or in jail or on junk. I'm just a bum; I'm lucky. (p.115)

Cass, a girl of upper-class New England stock, has rebelled against her milieu to marry Richard, an aspiring writer. She is depicted as a perspicacious happy housewife with a loving husband--Richard Silenski, an ex-polish teacher and an author of "Dime" novels. Though Cass has lived most of her life within the protection of privileged birth and colour, her journey into the underworld of racial segregation and



social sordidness is relatively short. When Rufus was still alive, whatever hints she may have got of the deficiencies of her life are effectually contained by her care for her family. 'You are my life - you and the children. What would I do, what would I be, without you? I'm just as self-centred as anybody else. Can't you see that?' (p.110) Yet her marriage is taking a wrong turn because she realises that she has conformed to all of her husband's exigencies; and as his literary success develops, she realises that he is more of a stranger.

The other friend is Eric Jones. Having left Alabama for a career as an actor in New York, he has experienced a double exile, and is about to come back from a two-year stay in France.

As each of these friends has misunderstood Rufus in his crucial hour, 'it is the moral obtuseness of the whites that Baldwin means to stress.'<sup>24</sup> Thus, the issue of betrayal, in Another Country, is worthy of remark, though it is not that easy to apprehend the exact specifics of the matter. Vivaldo thinks that he has done all that a man can do for a friend in need. He has fed Rufus and bought him drinks, but since he is white and Rufus is 'black'; that, in a segregated society remains the most painful reality. His betrayal, then, is his vain attempt to see the manifold anatomy of Rufus' despair. Consequently, Vivaldo is so troubled by this impression that he seems resolved to atone for his "sin" by falling in love with Rufus' sister, Ida. However, we see him, as the story unfolds, impeded by his complexion from total expression. Until Rufus' death, his cognizance of his friend's predicament appears to be limited to the supposition that pain is universal, a limitation that, supposedly, leads to his failure to save Rufus in his time of urgent need. Even after his friend's funeral, we see him in his self-reproach fighting desperately to hold on to his certitudes:

I knew I failed him but I loved him, too, and nobody there wanted to know that. I kept thinking. They're coloured and I'm white but the same things have happened,



really the same things, and how can I make them know that.  
(p.117)

Having killed off Rufus early in the novel, Baldwin carries on the theme of retaliation and reconciliation through the character of Ida Scott. Enraged by her brother's death, on whom she has relied to rescue her from the streets of Harlem, Ida avenges herself on the first white man she encounters. She takes up her abode with Vivaldo, apparently in love, but she is actually exploiting the arrangement to further her career as a blues singer.

Ida's love affair with Vivaldo is the focal topic of the novel. Throughout its turbulent development, the writer probes all the forces, individual and racial, that make love between 'black and white' almost impossible. At last, Vivaldo and Ida survive their ordeal by learning to know each other. This chiefly involves the white liberal - Vivaldo - refusing simple explanations and learning to live as Ida must, with the racial problem obsessing every single moment of his life. 'I don't want you to be understanding,' Ida says wearily to him in a final scene. 'I don't want you to be kind, okay?' (p.420) and at their last clasp which the author vividly describes, we learn that:

They stared at each other. Suddenly, he reached out and pulled her to him, trembling, with tears starting up behind his eyes, burning and blinding, and covered her face with kisses, which seemed to freeze as they fell. She clung to him; with a sigh she buried her face in his chest. There was nothing erotic in it; they were like two weary children. And it was she who was comforting him. Her long fingers stroked his back, and he began, slowly, with a horrible, strangling sound, to weep, for she was stroking his innocence out of him. (p.420)

At this crucial moment in her life, it is obvious that it requires the valiant forbearance of a now reborn Vivaldo to drag her from the bottomless pit of hopelessness, exactly the sort of help that would have, quite literally, rescued Rufus from the George Washington Bridge.

Towards the end of the novel, however, Vivaldo attains a new sense of reality. This strengthens Ida, who has come unwillingly to love



him, to confess her deception. In a gesture of appeasement, she slips from her finger a ruby-eyed-snake ring--a gift from Rufus, and a token of her legacy of resentment.

Experience, then, implies loss of innocence. Such a loss of innocence is also significant in most of Another Country, after Rufus' death.

Characters like Vivaldo and Cass fall in "chaos" from the invulnerability of their illusioned, puerile worlds. As Cass reveals to Eric, in their farewell rendez-vous at the Museum of Modern Art: 'I saw that I'd loved him like...a child, and now the bill for all that dreaming had come in. How can one have dreamed so long?' (p.395) As for Baldwin, youth and innocence are intertwined, this stand is further illustrated by Cass' confession:

I'm beginning to think...that growing just means learning more and more about anguish. That poison becomes your diet - you drink a little of it every day. Once you've seen it, you can't stop seeing it - that's the trouble. And it can...drive you mad. ...You begin to see that you yourself, innocent, upright you, have contributed and do contribute to the misery of the world. Which will never end because we're what we are. (p.396-7)

In this scene, in particular, Eric watches Cass' face 'from which the youth was now, before his eyes, departing; her girlhood, at last, was falling away from her.' (p.397) As she realises that her growth is irreversible, she avows to Eric, 'you did something very valuable for me...I hope you will never forget it...I'll never forget you.' (p.398)

In a more economical and less romantic scene, Vivaldo finds out truths by way of Ida's revelations of her infidelity. He does take a step towards a certain deliverance when he pleads with her, 'Please, Ida, whatever has to be done, to set us free--let's do it.' Her reply, 'let me finish my story,' (p.408) implies that the process of regenerating oneself in reality so that to grow is permanent. So, Ida carries on revealing to Vivaldo how she, literally and figuratively, prostituted herself in order to flee from the ghetto:



I knew there wasn't any hope uptown. A lot of those men, they got their little deals going and all that, but they don't really have anything, Mr. Charlie's not going to let them get but so far... There was only one thing for me to do, as Rufus used to say, and that was to hit the A train. So I hit it. ... I used to see the way white men watched me, like dogs. And I thought about what I could do to them. How I hated them, the way they looked, and the things they'd say, all dressed up in their damned white skin, and their clothes just so, and their little weak, white pricks jumping in their drawers. You could do any damn thing with them if you just led them along, because they wanted to do something dirty and they knew that you knew how. All black people knew that. ... I used to wonder what in the world they did in bed, white people I mean, between themselves, to get them so sick. ... I liked you, but I certainly hadn't planned to get hung up on a white boy who didn't have any money... but I thought I needed somebody to help me... I think I wanted to go to bed with you, not to have an affair with you, ... And there weren't any other coloured men, ... I didn't see any way out, except - finally - you. And Ellis... Richard knows about me and Ellis... but that's not why I'm telling you... I'm trying to bring this whole awful thing to a halt. If that's possible. (p.408-10)

It is all genuine because Vivaldo is facing a really new experience. He is the recipient of an event involving another person's separate life and feelings. When Eric tells him, in the phone call interrupting the above scene, 'life is catching up with us,' he really means that such confrontations with other people and ourselves are essential to bring out deeper hidden sensations. As one never achieve selfhood in isolation from humanity, one must be willing to pay the price, reveal one's fantasies and frustrations, and face the horrors of these revelations. Here, the author seems to emphasise the fact that the Afro-Americans are much more aware of the racial prejudice, and more conscious of their destiny, in comparison to the whites. For

it is a very different matter, and results in a very different intelligence, to grow up under the necessity of questioning everything--everything, from the question of one's identity to the literal, brutal question of how to save one's life in order to begin to live it. White children... whether they are rich or poor, grow up with a grasp of reality so feeble that they can very accurately be described as deluded--about themselves and the world they live in.<sup>25</sup>

Rufus and Ida are portrayed as being beyond a certain naiveté. They



are too accustomed with brutality, the spiritual and sexual exploitation, and the reprehensible humiliations. Yet, Ida feels that she has been

robbed...of the only hope (she) had. By a group of people too cowardly even to know what they had done. And it didn't seem to (her) that they deserved any better than what they'd given (her). (She) didn't care what happened to them, just so they suffered. (She) didn't really much care what happened to (her). But (she) wasn't going to let what happened to Rufus, and what was happening all around (her), happen to (her). (She) was going to get through the world, and get what (she) needed out of it, no matter how. (p.407)

Books II and III are also dominated by Eric Jones, the young actor who has gone abroad 'to find himself.' His teen-age in Alabama was marked by a homosexual experience with an Afro-American youth. In New York he has a short, brutal, and radically stormy affair with Rufus, from which he escapes to France. We are told that Rufus has 'despised Eric's manhood by treating him as a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, (and) by treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity.' (p.54) He has also hated him because Eric is from Alabama; 'perhaps he had allowed Eric to make love to him in order to despise him more completely. Eric had finally understood this, and had fled from Rufus, all the way to Paris.' (p.53)

There, he falls in love with Yves, a Parisian street boy, who is depicted as someone who 'had lived by his wits in the streets of Paris, as a semi-tapette, and as a rat d'hotel.' (p.187) Through an intelligent courtesy, Eric wins his love. As Book II opens, they are enjoying an idyllic holiday in a rented villa on the Côte d'Azur. Eric must soon return to America, however, where he has accepted a part in a Broadway play. After a convenient interval, Yves will join him in New York.

Since the love affair of Eric and Yves is the turning point of the novel, we must pause to analyse its broader implications. Book II starts with a highly charged, symbolic prose:



Eric sat in his rented garden. Flies buzzed and boomed in the brilliant heat, and a yellow bee circled his head. Eric remained very still, then reached for the cigarettes beside him and lit one, hoping that the smoke would drive the bee away. Yves' tiny black and white kitten stalked the garden as though it were Africa, crouching beneath the mimosas like a panther and leaping into the air. (p.183)

Here Baldwin tends to enrich his sexual motives with mythic significance. For, he pictures in this Mediterranean garden what seems to be a homosexual paradise. Then, in an allegorical relation he brings the idea of homosexuality and the one of Africa so that they stand for the possibility of liberation.

In this episode on the Mediterranean coast, we move backward to the cradle of Man, back to the place where the sexually and racially human past was not that different, back in the lost Eden: 'he was, briefly and horribly, in a region where there were no definitions of any kind, neither of colour, nor of male and female.' (p.297)

Eric is a focal point of the novel. Through his engagement to Yves, he brings an element of order into the confusion of his personal life. Besides, when he returns to America as the preacher of inexpressible phallic mysteries,<sup>26</sup> his friends' sense of reality is rehabilitated. Cass commits adultery with Eric, and as a result, she is reconciled to her crumbling marriage. Vivaldo gets at Eric's hands 'a rectal revelation' which enables him to face Ida's bitter confessions. The novel ends as Yves joins Eric in New York, announcing, supposedly, a new departure for everybody and a new age of sexual and racial freedom; i.e. the two lovers restored in their love will construct a new Eden out of the nightmarish New York, which will be 'that city which the people from heaven had made their home.' (p.426)

Eric is the first of Rufus' friends to confront his demons and attain a sense of identity. He, in turn, redeems the other characters, thereby 'introducing them to the mysteries of the human heart.'<sup>27</sup>



From this vantage point, we can see the novel that Baldwin was trying to write. With the collapse of traditional values - even of sexual normality - homosexuality becomes an allegory of the modern condition. The author says of Eric,

there were no standards for him because he could not accept the definitions, the hideously mechanical jargon of the age. He saw no one around him worth his envy, did not believe in the vast, grey sleep which was called security, did not believe in the curses, panaceas, and slogans which afflicted the world he knew; and this meant that he had to create his standards and make up his definitions as he went along. It was up to him to find out who he was... (p.211)

Compelled to fashion his own standards as he goes along, Eric is to serve as a 'footnote' to the twentieth century distress. The homosexual becomes the symbol of the existential man. Yet, what Eric stands for is more poignant than merely an attack on the masculinity of the American he-man. His capacity to find out who he is, to admit it, and to be sincere to his emotional impulses, however socially denied they may be, is an indication of one of Baldwin's perceptions: Eric's homosexuality is a 'burden' he has to carry through life, but rather than disavow it as Vivaldo attempts, and fails to do, he learns, by the time he comes back to New York, to admit it, and it is exactly because of his capacity to come to terms with himself that he becomes so strong an influence on his friends. For Vivaldo he is the apostle who announces the truth that to love a fellow man need not be a humiliating act; for Cass Silenski he is the affectionate friend with whom adultery is a virtue: a genuine journey of self-discovery; and even Ida, 'the embattled fury of the novel,' witnesses her impulsive resentment vanish as she realises that she has almost little choice but to establish a friendship with Eric.

That homosexuality is a distortion cannot be denied for it negates one of the Creator's basic laws, which is the regeneration of our kind. Yet, the issue with which Baldwin has for long been concerned



is that of how to present effectually the homosexual as a genuine vehicle of change in society. Thus, Eric's role in Another Country lies chiefly in the dynamic he possesses to metamorphose the world by virtue of his homosexual tendencies. Here, one feels that Baldwin, in his depiction of Eric, has wanted, above all, to be loyal to his own experience. Eric, for instance, is conscious of his isolation and the hostile attitude of the society at large. In 1984, the author declared in an interview that

the terrors homosexuals go through in this society would not be so great if the society itself did not go through so many terrors which it doesn't want to admit. The discovery of one's sexual preference doesn't have to be a trauma. It's a trauma because it's such a traumatized society...It is the terror of the flesh that causes people to hate homosexuals. As it is a biblical culture, people are supposed to mortify the flesh for they believe that the wages of sin is death.

Furthermore, if in Another Country the writer attempts to celebrate homosexuality as the highest form of love, this novel does not deal exclusively with homosexuality. One of the major preoccupations of this work is not really an attempt to give a detailed picture of the 'pornographic sensibility,' but more significantly a preoccupation to solve the conundrum of the individual's freedom. Freedom, in this novel, is a state of revolt; and to lay claim to it is to affirm the individual's ability to deny conventional morality. For Baldwin declares: 'I suppose...that one's sexual preference is a private matter. I resent the interference of the State, or the Church, or any institution in my only journey to whatever it is we are journeying toward.'<sup>29</sup>

He also seems to be really worried about that conflict between conventional morality and nature which is liable to generate problems of sexual identity. Nature stands for a liberality which admits every behaviour, while conventional morality imposes certain limitations on human beings for the sake of keeping the established moral order. To



resolve such a conundrum, the bisexual personifies a dual perspective. With his dual experience, he can live in conformity with his human nature as well as with the sort of social circumstances governed by those moral precepts.

According to Colin MacInnes, Another Country 'is the least overtly personal of James Baldwin's novels, the most ambitious and... the least successful.'<sup>30</sup> For he cannot admit the fact that Eric, who is depicted to the reader as a devoted "queer" from his boyhood, would all of a sudden have had an affair with Richard's wife for which nothing in this figure predetermines this.

We think that this critic seems to forget that 'it was only love which could accomplish the miracle of making a life bearable - only love.' (p.395-6) For in this novel, in particular, the author seems to ask a cardinal question whether one believes that love is the paramount value and that sex is the most natural articulation of love. For one must dare to realise that the inhibition of one's impulses towards a sexual expression of the love one feels for members of one's own sex is abnormal, because this perversion of body and instincts may end by destroying one's capacity for any kind of sexual experience whatever. Nevertheless, as Edward Margolies avers,

somehow, sex and love and a vague knowledge of the enormities of the human heart are not sufficient to resolve the immense social, psychological, and moral issues of racism and alienation that Baldwin poses. They may represent a start but certainly not an end.<sup>51</sup>

Still, in Another Country, the author assumes an increasingly militant tone, emphasising the supremacy of the Afro-American and the homosexual by virtue of their constant pain. The homosexual and the Afro-American are presented as one in that they know both the value of suffering and are, thereby, both redeemable. The common white American, on the other hand, because he has underestimated his self-knowledge, lives in a sort of psychic hell. This posture did not prevent Eldridge



Cleaver from attacking Baldwin's protagonist,

Rufus Scott, a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man's pastime of committing suicide, who let a white bisexual fuck him in the ass, and who took a Southern Jezebel for his woman, with all these tortured relationships imply, was the epitome of the black ennuich who has completely submitted to the white man.<sup>32</sup>

As all of the principal characters attain a form of self-knowledge about themselves and about one another, the book ends on a note of reconciliation that stimulates the consciousness. For the author once expressed the issue as follows: 'Another Country is about the price you pay to make a human relationship.'<sup>33</sup> Hence, "Another Country" is the country of love which reveals people's nature and makes reconciliation possible even when those to be reconciled are of different 'races' or of the same sex;

Whites coupled with Negroes, heterosexual men coupled with homosexuals, homosexuals coupled with women, none of it involving casual lust or the suggestion of neurotic perversity, and all of it accompanied by the most serious emotions and resulting in the most intense attachments.<sup>34</sup>

Within the context of his own maturity as a novelist, we presume that Another Country will come to be perceived as the book in which for the first time the impressive intelligence of Baldwin the essayist becomes totally at the disposal of Baldwin the novelist, in which for the first time he tries to communicate with full simplicity and with a minimum of 'polite rhetorical elegance,' and in which for the first time he ventures to stand as a writer who should be feared for his sharp vision, and the demands he makes from the world. Are these the reasons why so many critics disapproved of Another Country? The interrogation is worth pondering.



NOTES:

A/ INTRODUCTION:

- 1) Quincy Troupe, "James Baldwin: The Last Interview," in Quincy Troupe, ed., James Baldwin: The Legacy, (New York, 1989), p.193.
- 2) William Wasserstrom, "James Baldwin: Stepping Out on the Promise," in Robert A. Lee, ed., Black Fiction: New Studies in the Afro-American Novel Since 1945, (London, 1980), pp.74-5.
- 3) Maya Angelou, "A Brother's Love," in Quincy Troupe, ed., op.cit., p.41.
- 4) Wole Soyinka, "Foreword," in Quincy Troupe, ed., op.cit., p.17.
- 5) Therman B. O'Daniel, "James Baldwin: An Interpretative Study," CIA Journal, (Sept., 1963), pp.37-8.
- 6) Amiri Baraka, "Jimmy!" in Quincy Troupe, ed., op.cit., p.129.
- 7) Stephen Spender, "James Baldwin: Voice of a Revolution," Partisan Review, (XXX, 1963), p.260.
- 8) Eldridge Cleaver, Soul on Ice, (New York, 1968), p.99.
- 9) William Wasserstrom, op.cit., p.83.
- 10) Ibid., p.82.
- 11) James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, (London, 1985), p.23.
- 12) Ralph Ellison, "The Charlie Christian Story," Saturday Review of Literature, (May, 1958), p.42.
- 13) Irving Howe, "James Baldwin: At Ease in Apocalypse," in Kenneth Kinnamon, ed., James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974), p.97.
- 14) Amiri Baraka, op.cit., p.131.
- 15) James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, (London, 1984), p.17.
- 16) James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son, (New York, 1986), p.114.
- 17) Ibid., p.126.
- 18) Robert A. Lee, Black American Fiction Since Richard Wright, (South Shield, Tyne & Wear, 1983), p.19.
- 19) James Baldwin, "The Price May Be Too High," New York Times, (Feb., 1969), p.9.
- 20) James Baldwin, Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone, (New York, 1986), p.369.
- 21) Chinua Achebe, "James Baldwin," in Quincy Troupe, ed., op.cit., p.214.
- 22) Ibid., p.216.
- 23) Amiri Baraka, op.cit., p.134.
- 24) Quincy Troupe, ed., James Baldwin: The Legacy, op.cit., p.25.

1) General Background:

- 1) Kenneth B. Clark, The Negro Protest: Talk with James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, (Boston, 1963), p.5.
- 2) Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynch, "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin," in CWE Bigsby, ed., The Black American Writer, (Deland, Florida, 1969), p.212.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Verta Mae Grosvenor, "Vous êtes Swing," in Quincy Troupe, ed., op.cit., p.52.
- 5) James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, op.cit., pp.34-5.
- 6) James Baldwin, The Price of the Ticket, (New York, 1985), p.7.
- 7) James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, op.cit., p.18.
- 8) Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "An Interview with Josephine Baker and James Baldwin," in Quincy Troupe, ed., op.cit., p.165.
- 9) Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography, (New York, 1968), p.247.
- 10) James Baldwin, No Name in the Street, (New York, 1972), p.24.
- 11) James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, op.cit., p.157.



- 12) James Baldwin, Go Tell It On The Mountain, (London, 1983), p. 167.
- 13) Michel Fabre, "Fathers and Sons in James Baldwin's Go Tell It On The Mountain," in Kenneth Kinnamon, ed., op. cit., p. 137.
- 14) Quincy Troupe, ed., op. cit., p. 20.
- 15) Wole Soyinka, op. cit., p. 18.

2) Relevant Fiction:

- 1) Langston Hughes, "From Harlem to Paris," in Kenneth Kinnamon, ed., op. cit., p. 9.

a) Go Tell It On The Mountain

- 1) James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, op. cit., p. 84.
- 2) Brian Lee, "James Baldwin: Caliban to Prospero," in CWE Bigsby, ed., op. cit., p. 172.
- 3) Steven Marcus, "The American Negro in Search of Identity," Commentary, (Nov., 1953), p. 461.
- 4) Colin MacInnes, "Dark Angel: The Writings of James Baldwin," in Donald B. Gibson, ed., Five Black Writers: Essays on Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Hughes, and Le Roi Jones, (New York, 1970), p. 121.
- 5) Donald B. Gibson, ed., op. cit., p. XXI.
- 6) In "The Last Interview," James Baldwin tells Quincy Troupe of his frustration in not having the National Book Award in 1954 for Go Tell It On The Mountain. For years later, one of the jury told him that since Ralph Ellison won it the year before, for Invisible Man, they could not give it to another 'Negro writer' the following year. Yet, Baldwin feels that the reason behind this denial is because he was not 'scrubbed and squeaky clean' for the American Literary Academy.  
Quincy Troupe, ed., "James Baldwin: The Last Interview," op. cit., pp. 205-6.
- 7) The title of the novel, from a Negro Spiritual Christmas song, is the first line of "Go tell it on the mountain, / Over the hills and everywhere; / Go tell it on the mountain, / That Jesus Christ is born." Previous working titles of the novel were Crying Holy and In My Father's House. The genesis announced in a shortened form implies the hero's new birth: the step in his quest for identity illustrated by his conversion at the end of the novel. (See appendix).

b) The Amen Corner

- 1) James Baldwin, The Amen Corner, (London, 1968), pp. 8-9. (All subsequent references are to this edition).

c) The Fire Next Time

- 1) Mel Watkins, "The Fire Next Time," New York Times Book Review, (May, 1972), p. 18.
- 2) Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, James Baldwin, (New York, 1980), pp. 25-6.
- 3) Edward Margolies, Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth Century Negro American Authors, (New York, 1968), p. 123.
- 4) James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, op. cit., p. 89. (All subsequent references are to this edition).
- 5) Karin Möller, The Theme of Identity in the Essays of James Baldwin: An Interpretation, (Goteborg, Sweden, 1975), p. 110.
- 6) James Baldwin, The Amen Corner, op. cit., p. 34.
- 7) Edward A. Watson, "The Novels and Essays of James Baldwin: Casebook of a 'Lover's war' with the United States," Queens Quarterly,



- (Summer, 1965), p. 399.
- 8) Nat Hentoff, "'It's terrifying'," New York Herald Tribune Books, (June, 1963), pp. 5-6.
  - 9) Stanley Macebuh, James Baldwin, (New York, 1973), p. 153.

B/ Another Country

- 1) James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, op. cit., p. 131.
- 2) Robert Bone, "The Novels of James Baldwin," in Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy, ed., Images of the Negro in American Literature, (Chicago, 1966), p. 278.
- 3) William Wasserstrom, op. cit., p. 92.
- 4) Stanley Edgar Hyman, "No Country for Young Men," New Leader, (June, 1962), pp. 22-3.
- 5) William Barrett, "James Baldwin's Another Country," Nation, (May, 1965), pp. 514-5.
- 6) Eugenia Collier, "The Phrase Unbearably Repeated," Phylon, 25, (1964), p. 288.
- 7) Norman Podhoretz, "In Defense of a Maltreated Bestseller," in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., On Contemporary Literature, (New York, 1964), pp. 232-5.
- 8) Mike Thelwell, "Another Country: Baldwin's New York Novel," in CWE Bigsby, ed., op. cit., p. 181.
- 9) Fred L. Standley, "Another Country, Another Time," Studies in the Novel, (Spring, 1972), p. 510.
- 10) Fern Marja Eckman, The Furious Passage of James Baldwin, (New York, 1967), p. 142.
- 11) James Baldwin, Another Country, (London, 1984), p. 18. (All subsequent references are to this edition).
- 12) Eugenia Collier, op. cit., p. 288.
- 13) James Baldwin, Colin MacInnes, and James Mossman, "Race, Hate, Sex and Color: A Conversation," Encounter, (July, 1965), p. 56.
- 14) James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, op. cit., p. 128.
- 15) Dan Georgakas, "James Baldwin in Conversation," in Abraham Chapman, ed., Black Voices, (New York, 1968), p. 662.
- 16) Robert A. Lee, op. cit., p. 21.
- 17) James Baldwin, Blues for Mister Charlie, (New York, 1964), p. 41.
- 18) Brian Lee, op. cit., p. 173.
- 19) Calvin C. Hernton, Sex and Racism in America, (New York, 1966), p. 150.
- 20) James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, op. cit., p. 132.
- 21) One cannot help thinking of Rufus Scott, when one reads the following: 'I was to meet Eugene sometime between 1943 and 1944 and "run" or "hang" with him until he hurled himself off the George Washington Bridge, in the winter of 1946. We were never lovers: for what it's worth, I think I wish I had been. When he was dead, I remembered that he had, once, obliquely, suggested this possibility. ...When he was dead, I realised that I would have done anything whatever to have been able to hold him in this world.'  
James Baldwin, The Price of The Ticket, op. cit., p. 13.
- 22) Karin Möller, op. cit., p. 12.
- 23) Stanley Macebuh, op. cit., p. 89.
- 24) Robert Bone, op. cit., p. 280.
- 25) Benjamin Demot, "James Baldwin on the Sixties: Acts and Revelations," in Kenneth Kinnamon, ed., op. cit., p. 162.
- 26) The novel is marked by a good deal of 'boozing' and five orgasms-- one per eighty pages approximately.
- 27) Edward Margolies, op. cit., p. 118.
- 28) Richard Golstein, "Go The Way Your Blood Beats: An Interview with James Baldwin," in Quincy Troupe, ed., op. cit., p. 178.



- 29) Ibid., p.183.
- 30) Colin MacInnes, op. cit., p.132.
- 31) Edward Margolies, op. cit., p.121.
- 32) Eldridge Cleaver, op. cit., p.47.
- 33) Dan Georgakas, op. cit., p.666.
- 34) Norman Podhoretz, op. cit., p.234.



'A change in the Negro situation implies a radical change in the country. It is not a matter of placing a few well scrubbed darkies in a few strategically located windows. It is not a matter of so many black clerks or so many black cops...It is a matter of altering all our institutions in the direction of a greater freedom, recognizing that the Negro is an integral part of this nation, has also paid for it with his blood, and is here to stay. He can't go back to wherever he came from anymore than anyone else can.'<sup>1</sup>

'People don't give things up; things are taken away from them. I'm not frightened...I am just frightened of chaos, apathy, indifference - which is the road people took to Auschwitz.'<sup>2</sup>

CONCLUSION:

As colour is not just a human or a personal reality but also a political reality, the key to America's redemption lies in whether or not it can hug a 'black face. If it cannot do that, I do not think the country has a future. Until the darkness of my skin stops panicking my countrymen, they risk chaos.'<sup>3</sup>

In this respect, we have found in the fiction of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin the ethos of what might be referred to as a culture of revolution. Jean Paul Sartre has already examined that ethos in his preface to Frantz Fanon's work on racism and colonialism, The Wretched of the Earth (1961). Summarising the antithetical views of the colonial and the autochthone as seen by the colonial at a time of a seething rebellion, Sartre argues, 'we find our humanity on this side of death and despair; he finds it behind torture and death...The child of violence, at every moment he draws from it his humanity.'<sup>4</sup> Such an ethos can be seen in much twentieth century Afro-American writing; in fact it may well illustrate a thematic concern which is a distinctive feature of 'Negro' literature in the United States. For much Afro-American fiction is permeated with blood; it plainly affirms



that the 'black' man's experience in America is inevitably a seething one. This violence in the text is characterised by destruction and self-destruction. Therefore, acts of homicide and self-annihilation in Afro-American fiction can often be considered as desperate efforts to redeem dignity in the face of a dehumanising oppression. In this respect, the murders of Bigger Thomas in Native Son, the death of Tod Clifton in Invisible Man, and Rufus Scott's suicide in Another Country are probably the most powerful manifestations of this situation in Afro-American writing.

Tod Clifton, the incarnation of 'black pride' and aesthetics, in the novel, is murdered by a white policeman; but his killing is also a deliberate act of self-destruction. Having realised that he has been manipulated by the white leaders of the Brotherhood, Clifton resigns from his job as an organiser. He then abandons himself to the degrading act of selling Sambo dolls which, manipulated by invisible strings, are tokens of his own debasement. Arrested for illegally selling dolls, Clifton refused to accept the white imposed humiliation anymore; and Ellison's unnamed narrator pictures his homicide as an oddly gorgeous ballet movement:

And I could see the cop bark a command and lunge forward, thrusting out his arm and missing, thrown off balance as suddenly Clifton spun on his toes like a dancer and swung his right arm over and around in a short, jolting arc, his torso carrying forward and to the left in a motion that sent the boxstrap free as his right foot travelled forward and his left arm followed through in a floating uppercut that sent the cop's cap sailing into the street and his feet flying, to drop him hard, rocking from left to right on the walk as Clifton kicked the box thudding aside and crouched, his left foot forward, his hands high, waiting.

He is waiting for the only reaction he can expect from the white policeman, and he dies of it. Yet there is something beautiful in that last symbolic challenge of white oppression as the naive narrator is told by a witness, an 'apple cheeked boy' who can see the power and



dignity in Clifton's ultimate act, and the boy confers a kind of god-like dimension on Clifton by speaking of him in the present tense as he tells the narrator after Clifton's assassination: 'Your friend sure knows how to use his dukes. Biff, bang! One, two, and the cop's on his ass!'<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Clifton's suicidal challenge of police authority moves closer than most acts of self-annihilation to another sort of violence which is important in contemporary Afro-American fiction. Sartre defines this violence as 'neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment; it is man re-creating himself.'<sup>7</sup> This "creative violence" is not the seething act in which a man merely affirms his masculinity or his supremacy. Rather, in Afro-American fiction there is a kind of violence in which a character discovers, or may be rediscovers, his human nature.

Creative violence is important in Wright's Native Son, Baldwin's Another Country, and especially Ellison's Invisible Man. For to be a 'Negro' in America and 'to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.'<sup>8</sup> The essential quality of the Afro-American's life is frustration; every demand he makes on life is rejected. For he dwells in a universe that extends, at least, the opportunity of accomplishment to every individual but himself. This will lead us to observe that there are in America 'tremendous reservoirs of bitterness which have never been able to find an outlet, but may find an outlet soon.'<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the Afro-American is still ostracised in his mother country. For he realises the extent of the white man's unheld promise:

And all these laws and speeches don't mean shit. They do not mean shit. It's the spirit of the people, baby, the spirit of the people, they don't want us and they don't like us, and you see that spirit in the face of every cop. Them laws they keep passing, shit, they just like the treaties they signed with the Indians. Nothing but lies, they never even meant to keep those treaties, baby, they wanted the land and they got it and now they mean to keep it, even if they have to put every motherfucker in this



country behind barbed wires, or shoot him down like a dog. It's the truth I'm telling you. And you better believe it, unless you want to be like your brother and believe all that okey-doke about Jesus changing people's hearts. Fuck Jesus, we ain't about to wait on him... They didn't want him to change their hearts, they just used him to change the map.

Since the time of slavery, the literature dealing with the Afro-American experience has continued to have a strong non-fictional backbone. Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery, for instance, 'distressing' as it may be to modern readers because of its ethics and politics, draws an undeniable effectiveness from its author's personality. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Black Boy, and other statements of personal experience powerfully enlighten the social and psychological conditions under which the Afro-Americans have been forced to live, and they do constitute important instruments of persuasion in the antiracist upheavals. In this sense, the appending of an actual Preface or Epilogue and Prologue to a narrative that is obviously fictional intensifies the reader's sense that the events and situations represented in the novel are certainly typical and representative of the environment under examination. Wright accomplishes a similar purpose in "How Bigger Was Born," the preface to Native Son. Arguing that the hero, Bigger Thomas, is a wholly typical combination of many young men the writer himself has known. Thus, Wright creates a concretely sociological context for his narrative and, accordingly, supports the validity of his radical examination of American society.

For Wright and Ellison, the Preface or the Epilogue are more than secondary extensions to their respective novels; they substantiate the representative quality of the heroes and incidents pictured, and thus, crucially contribute to the rhetorical effect of the works. 'History is here subordinated to fiction, but not separated from it, since the testaments of veracity increase the reader's sense of the probability



of the writer's created world.<sup>11</sup> Yet this admixture of fact and fiction is much more explicit in Invisible Man, for the reader immediately recognises a series of shrouded replications of authentic persons and incidents from history: the college is obviously Tuskegee Institute, its founder closely resembles Booker T. Washington, Ras the Exhorter is based on Marcus Garvey, and the Brotherhood is clearly the American Communist Party. By willfully withholding explicit references, however, the author aims at making his novel both a symbolic version of a specifically Afro-American predicament and a vivid comment on the common experience of existential man.

Wright, Ellison and Baldwin are Afro-American writers and identifiable as such by the society at large. As they do come from diverse backgrounds, their personalities and sense of morality are different. For each is acutely conscious, in his own way, of the Afro-Americans' predicament; and each is sensitive to the racial issue in the United States. Nevertheless, their reactions to their observations and experiences are specifically individual. Yet it should be mentioned that their common denominator is a precise and painful consciousness of a condition which may be exceptional.

One of the numerous ways in which Wright differs from Ellison and Baldwin is in his obsession with the idea of infringement of established order. For his protagonist steps outside the borders of conformity. Though we suppose that his hero is breaking the law, his concern is not mainly for law as for the customs governing society. He does not feel regrets for such a violation but his only guilt stems from fear of retaliation from the police--the protectors of the established order. He knows that he can be killed, mutilated or both:

Ahm gonna be hard like they is! So hep me, Gawd, Ahm gonna be hard! When they come fer me Ahm gonna be here! N when they git me outta here theys gonna know Ahm gone! Ef Gawd lets me live Ahm gonna make em feel it!...Yuh die ef yuh fight! Yuh die ef yuh don fight! Either way yuh



die n it don mean nothin.<sup>12</sup>

In this respect, Bigger Thomas is much like Silas when he accepts his impending doom. Yet, Bigger is even-tempered for his ultimate consciousness arises from a more complex situation and stretches over a long period of time. He first feels the necessity to transgress the boundaries of convention when he decides to rob the white man's store. Fear, however, prevents him from committing the theft; it is also fear of the established order which causes him to smother Mary Dalton. With this accidental assassination, he releases himself from the limitations of law. Therefore, the murder enables Bigger to consider himself and his condition in a completely new perspective.

In a Chicago rat-infested slum, Bigger's panic-born assassination of his white female victim, Mary Dalton, his own family pressures and splits, the murder of his girl friend Bessie, and his eventful pursuit by the Chicago police and his trial and execution, constitute the vehicle for a passionate accusation of racial segregation and the cycle of 'black misery.' The book's open violence, and the brutality which energises Bigger play against a desolate determinist big-city landscape. The novel's memorable opening scene in which the hero kills a rat anticipates how he, in his turn, will ultimately become the hunted rat himself, a fugitive blindly seeking escape from an abusive wheel of social and racial circumstances.

The 'Negro' as a creature so embittered and so brutalised by the experience of life imposed upon him by America, and so full to bursting of pent-up violence and venom, is a constant menace to white America. Accordingly, Bigger Thomas is the prototype of such a threat. As the novel unfolds, we read of the hero, in his one room sordid ghetto tenement, smashing to death a cornered rat. His story, is the story of a 'cornered rat.' He is continually cornered, first physically, by Jan and Mary in the 'Negro' restaurant; by Mary's blind mother in her



daughter's room; in his own room by white inspectors; near the furnace by white newsmen and ultimately by the police who have been chasing him for Mary's assassination; spiritually, he has been cornered by his own life in his native country. So Bigger Thomas is a "rat", a 'nauseating human rodent,' devised by the white American society 'that must bear full responsibility for making him the vicious, repulsive, furtive individual he is.'<sup>13</sup>

Whether Wright was correct or not in affirming that the 'black and white' Biggers of the world were potential fascists, one thing is sure: the Biggers would not accept the status quo. For Bigger Thomas denied the alternative of organised action and goes to his death feeling that the assassinations he committed were good, because, at last, he has done something meaningful.

Since the advent of Bigger Thomas, we have witnessed in Afro-American writing the disgusted 'black' protagonist who has endured a lifetime of humiliation with no saving grace or relief, and so traumatised that he is bound to attack anyone if ever his psychological equilibrium is slightly shaken. Yet this 'black' hero is basically different from Bigger Thomas. For he is much more a threat to himself than to others. His resentment has consumed those inner resources that are the prerequisite for any human relationship. This type of hero is incarnated in Baldwin's Rufus Scott. For neither the authentic love of Leona, his Southern white girl friend, nor his friends' assistance can absolve his traumas or save him from committing suicide. Nevertheless, this type of hero has been foreshadowed by Ellison's unnamed and Invisible Man, whose physical retreat to underground parallels the beginning of a similar burrowing into his own mind.

Ellison's Invisible Man is a sleepwalker in a world never real enough for him to believe in. He experiences a series of awakenings, only to find himself taking part in still another level of nightmare.



The unnamed hero is invisible because no one sees him as he is, and it is the role of every episode to confirm the fact that this 'black' man is condemned to a hopeless struggle to be properly seen. Though this central figure is a Southern Afro-American, he is, in Ellison's rendering, an 'everyman.' For Ellison's novel chronicles a series of initiatory experiences through which the naive protagonist learns, to his disillusion and horror, the way of the world. A world which is, at times, distorted by satire; tragic and comic; real and surreal; and grotesque and normal. Here, Ellison's hero is unheard, unfelt, and unseen. Besides, this hero, who is at the same time the narrator, is never identified by his name. Even though he experiences a series of changes throughout the novel, he remains for the reader an invisible "I." Though he repeatedly engages life, he is repeatedly frustrated and at the end falls down into his underground. He makes a series of journeys into the white world but finds himself finally in darkness. He looks for rationality but ends up in chaos. Hence, his search for identity leads him all the way to utter negation. In his manhole, he is back to where he began with this difference only, that he has enlightened his underworld and he now knows where he is. For his coal cellar is not a sewer, as the author has pointed out, but a source of heat and light and power. It is a place where the hero converts all his losses to assertion. Therefore, his fall is finally an ascension.

In his cellar, the hero writes his memoirs. We are told that

he has travelled from infancy to adulthood, from dark to light and from unseeing to vision, a stock of personal and representative historical experience which equips him to speak as the astute and amused voice of both the Prologue and Epilogue.<sup>14</sup>

For he has realised that many American heroes have discovered: that he is unable to order and reorganise the world. However, he can arrange and name his personal perceptions of the world. This is not the artist as hero so much as the hero out of fateful necessity having to become



an artist. For it is only in the symbolic freedom of lexical space that he can both find and be himself. In writing his book, the Invisible Man has devised his face. Furthermore, he is imposing a pattern on reality which elucidates and extends his own awareness rather than curtails it. Yet he confesses, 'the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals.'<sup>15</sup>

Invisible Man explores and explains many aspects of the Afro-American life. Among many other issues, it reveals, even more precisely than Native Son, the real relationship between Power and the 'black' man. For, when the hero dreams of reading that message: 'Keep This Nigger Boy Running,' we may say that this message is for every "nigger."

Many other episodes are quite relevant to the present day Afro-American's condition. The battle-royal episode, for instance, where blind-folded 'blacks' fight for fictitious awards, reveals that the Afro-Americans are constantly manipulated by external forces over which they have no control. The hero's involvement with the Brotherhood is a caricature of the relationship between the 'Negro' and the American Communist Party. Similarly, the Liberty Paint episode has special relevance to the history of the 'black' people in America. As his job in this paint factory is to make pure white paint by adding drops of black dope, the comment implicit in this depiction is about assimilation and identity. The hospital scene has a special relevance too. This scene reveals the malevolent intentions of society. For it aims at performing a lobotomy on the Afro-American in order to make him docile, harmless, and to blot out his past. However, in spite of the statement of faith with which the novel closes, that the protagonist can accomplish visibility, the Invisible Man speaks



in the conviction of absolute failure. For the only possible way in which he might exist is in a significant act of vengeance. Yet, on this level, he has already been preceded by Bigger Thomas. Also, his world is not as simple as Bigger's. For simple assassination will not solve anything. Nevertheless, he accomplishes revenge and existence only in a nightmarish underground.

Baldwin's hero, in Another Country, dies violently and prematurely, without even the promise of transcendence and growth in 'wisdom' like the Invisible Man. Rufus' heroism arises, typically, from the struggle and violence of his experience. His conception of love is significantly carnal, he cannot afford to suffer from a 'failure of nerve' for the most probable result of this is not simply a withdrawal from reality, but death. For Rufus is so devitalised by his suffering that he sees no way out but suicide, if with a curse on his lips. Another Country is, first of all, a sort of evaluation and judgement of the whole of the American society and an attempt to define its character. It is also a further general statement of inter-relatedness among individuals of different stocks. The title comprises both registers.

When Baldwin wrote this novel, he placed the denouement of the so-called traditional novel right at the beginning instead of the end where it usually is. For it should be noted that Rufus Scott's section is undisputably the strongest and most powerful section of the novel. As he kills off his central figure early in the novel, all that follows this first section is to explore responsibility and to determine the roles that each character has played, and most of all Rufus' responsibility for his suicide. Thus this novel is mainly about the characters' interrelatedness and about the responsibility the society has in conditioning their lives. Yet, it should be pointed out that if Baldwin's fiction is replete with artist-characters whose sensitivity



exposes them to the malice of their society, they tragically respond to their perceptions. Richard, in Go Tell It On The Mountain, is an artist who rather than accepting the humiliation, commits suicide. In Another Country, Rufus follows the same pattern, though the cause of his death is slightly different. Nevertheless, not all Baldwin's artist-characters do commit suicide. Eric, for instance, profoundly aware of the complexities of life, prefers not to remove himself from this world, but rather to construct around himself a new world in which its citizens glorify 'the God of pain and suffering.' Here, we have to admit that Baldwin has a consummate gift for evoking what we believe to be the most elusive of emotions for any writer--that of pure animal love; and not mere sex, but a tender, erotic passion. For if the homosexual character has always been in Baldwin's fiction the genuine symbol of theological and secular rebellion, in Another Country he tries to present the homosexual hero as the single individual who can find that country where there is no injustice. However, this is not a really convincing vision, simply because Baldwin seems to be more concerned with the redemption of the individual's soul than with the health of society.

In their progression along the road to self-identity, Bigger Thomas and Rufus Scott are not like the Invisible Man who seems to have arrived at the goal of complete self-realisation; but on the other hand, and probing the different reactions of the white American reading public vis-à-vis the emergence of heroes such as Bigger Thomas and Rufus Scott, we may affirm that it condemns, in its totality, 'black writing.' Here we wonder why does the 'white psyche' thrive upon the denial of Afro-American literary attempts? Hoyt W. Fuller in examining this reaction, arrives at a logical interpretation:

Negro literature is dismissed as "protest literature" because, if it deals honestly with Negro life, it will be accusatory toward white people, and nobody likes



to be accused, especially of crimes against the human spirit. The reading public must realise, then, that while it is the duty of any serious writer to look critically and truthfully at the society of which he is a part, and to reveal that society to itself, the Negro writer, by virtue of his identification with a group deliberately held on the outer edges of that society, will, if he is honest, call attention to that special aspect of the society's failure.<sup>16</sup>

The problem here is that white people are incapable of coming to terms with the American reality, and therefore, they neither accept nor face the sordid social conditions to which Afro-American writers call attention. In refusing to do so, they liberate themselves from the obligation to justify the mass exclusion of the Afro-American community from taking part in the great American Dream. In this sense, 'whether wrong headed or right, protest will always be essential in order to stir (the American) civilisation into self awareness and thus prevent it from stiffening into an inhuman immobility.'<sup>17</sup>

In this context, Baldwin and Margaret Mead, for instance, realised that Black Power rather than integration, promises a more feasible solution to the problems of racial discrimination. Moreover, they both agree that 'democracy should not mean the levelling of everyone to the lowest common denominator. It should mean the possibility of everyone being able to raise himself to a certain level of excellence.'<sup>18</sup> For self-respect can only be obtained through the establishment of a new, independent society which is attuned to the needs of the Afro-American. Yet, do we need to accept, either as sufficient or inevitable, the choices that Bigger Thomas, or the Invisible Man or Rufus Scott make in order to resolve their predicament? The question is quite delicate. Nevertheless, there is something positive out of the nightmarish existence of these Afro-American heroes. For, to some extent, they are able to turn their political dispossession to moral advantage. So they are morally superior beings for they have suffered, and 'people who cannot suffer, can never grow up, can never discover who they are.'



The 'black' man, who has survived in America, has always been conscious of the precariousness of his life, and therefore knows its value and meaning.

That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it, knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth--and indeed, no church--can teach.<sup>19</sup>

However, the Afro-American hero does not intend to become a living example of the traditional powerlessness of the 'black' man within the white power structure. As his mind has been perverted by the degradation to which he has been subjected, we can see the corrosive fires of hatred burn brightly within him. Hence, he is sometimes obsessed with the idea of revenge as the only recourse for redress. For we are told that 'for us, it all began with the Bible and the gun. Maybe it will end with the Bible and the gun,'<sup>20</sup> and

I know what I would do if I had a gun and someone had a gun pointed at my brother, and I would not count ten to do it and there would be no hatred in it, nor any remorse. People who treat other people as less than human must not be surprised when the bread they have cast on the waters comes floating back to them, poisoned.<sup>21</sup>

A specific remark, regarding this quotation, may be made here. The author's intention seems to be to alert us to the fact that violence is a legitimate and logical response to injustice.

Frustrated by the miscarriage of social justice, the Afro-American can only counsel the power of violence. If he cannot single out a specific culprit for a confrontation, he transfers his hostility to whites in general, who are responsible for 'all the crimes' and 'all the misery' he has ever known. Yet the cause of these atrocities may stem from the hopeless condition of the Afro-American community: 'my Daddy's got no power... because he's black. And the only way the black man's going to get any power is to drive all the white men into the sea.'<sup>22</sup> Even if resentment is a venom which will eventually kill him,



his own disenchantment has already been metamorphosed into 'vials of hatred':

I'm going to learn how to drink it--a little every-day in the morning, then a booster shot late at night: I'm going to keep it right here, at the very top of my mind. I'm going to remember...all those boys and girls in Harlem and all them pimps and whores and gangsters and all them cops. And I'm going to remember all the dope that's flowed through my veins. I'm going to remember everything--the jails I been in and the cops that beat me and how long a time I spent screaming and stinking in my own dirt, trying to break my habit. I'm going to remember all that, and I'll get well.<sup>23</sup>

In May 1976, receiving an honorary degree in Atlanta, Baldwin expressed his belief that change was really taking place. For he confesses,

When I was born, blacks generally were born trapped into a white man's fantasy. Black children are not trapped into a white man's fantasy now...I feel a great wheel turning. This has never been a white country and the truth is coming out. Blacks have always been a part of this country but the country was never able to accept that. But we are flesh of the flesh, bone of the bone. And we will triumph.<sup>24</sup>

This is an expression of faith in the possibility of restructuring American institutions so that the Afro-American children cannot only survive but flourish as well. For the future of the Afro-American is precisely as bright or as gloomy as the future of America. 'It is entirely up to the American people...whether or not they are going to face and deal with and embrace the stranger whom they maligned so long.'<sup>25</sup> Such a possibility can only be revealed by a shrewd observer; and for Baldwin, the writer is a witness. He tells Margaret Mead that 'we are meant to be witnesses to a possibility which we will not live to see, but we have to bring it out.'<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the Afro-American novelist must never give up or underestimate the legitimacy of his own experiences. He must rather reaffirm those experiences within the broader context of human worth and values. He has to accept the role of flambeau which is the *raison d'être* of the artist in society. For



'the precise role of the artist...is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest,so that...to make the world a more human dwelling place.'<sup>27</sup> In acknowledging the reality of his life, the artist is bound to reject all the illusiory notions. For he remains constantly conscious of men as they fumble within the shabby darkness of their lives in an attempt to discover who they really are and their relationship to each other. It is the artist who can dispel this darkness and bring his people into a confrontation with those past experiences and lead them towards a genuine moral emancipation.



NOTES:

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- 2) James Baldwin in Eve Auchincloss & Nancy Lynch, "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin," in CWE Bigsby, ed., The Black American Writer, (Deland, Florida, 1969), p.215.
- 3) James Baldwin in W. Wasserstrom, "James Baldwin: Stepping Out on the Promise," in Robert A. Lee, ed., Black Fiction: New Studies in the Afro-American Novel Since 1945, (London, 1980), p.94.
- 4) Jean Paul Sartre in Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, (New York, 1963), p.20.
- 5) Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, (London, 1986), p.351.
- 6) Ibid., p.353.
- 7) Jean Paul Sartre, op.cit., p.22.
- 8) James Baldwin, "The Negro in American Culture," Cross Currents, (Summer, 1961), p.205.
- 9) James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," Saturday Review, (Dec.21, 1963), p.44.
- 10) James Baldwin, Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone, (New York, 1986), p.367.
- 11) Barbara Foley, "History, Fiction, and the Ground Between: The Uses of the Documentary Mode in Black Literature," PMLA, (May, 1980), p.394.
- 12) Richard Wright, Uncle Tom's Children, (New York, 1965), p.125.
- 13) Jackson Blyden, "The Negro's Negro in Negro Literature," Michigan Quarterly Review, (Fall, 1965), p.292.
- 14) Robert A. Lee, Black American Fiction Since Richard Wright, (South-Shield, Tyne & Wear, 1983), p.18.
- 15) Ralph Ellison, op.cit., p.468.
- 16) Hoyt W. Fuller, "Contemporary Negro Fiction," Southwest Review, 50, (Autumn, 1965), p.324.
- 17) Walter B. Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954: Some Interpretations of Literature and Society, (Cambridge, Mas., 1956), p.289.
- 18) James Baldwin & Margaret Mead, A Rap on Race, (Philadelphia, 1971), p.136.
- 19) James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, (London, 1984), p.70.
- 20) James Baldwin, Blues for Mister Charlie, (New York, 1985), p.157.
- 21) James Baldwin, No Name in the Street, (New York, 1972), p.192.
- 22) James Baldwin, Blues for Mister Charlie, op.cit., p.35.
- 23) Ibid., p.36.
- 24) James Baldwin in Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, James Baldwin, (New York, 1980), p.14.
- 25) James Baldwin in Kenneth B. Clark, The Negro Protest: Talk with James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, (Boston, 1963), p.13.
- 26) James Baldwin & Margaret Mead, op.cit., p.201.
- 27) James Baldwin, "The Creative Dilemma," Saturday Review, (Feb.8, 1964), pp.14-5.



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### Go Tell It on the Mountain

Christmas Spiritual

Arr. by Olive J. Williams

*Allegretto*

Go tell it on the moun-tain  
Tell it on the moun-tain  
moun-tain

Over the hills and ev-ry-where - Go tell it on the

moun-tain that Je-sus Christ is-a-born.  
Tell it on the moun-tain  
moun-tain Christ is born.

1 When I was a sin-ner, I prayed both night and day; 1  
2 When I was a sick-er, I sought both night and day; 1  
3 He made me a watch-man up-on the cit-y wall; And

asked the Lord to help me, and He showed me the way.  
2 He taught me to pray.  
if I any a Chris-tian, I am the least of all.

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