

RICHARD WRIGHT



THE RESTORED TEXT ESTABLISHED BY THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA

THE OUTSIDER

THE OUTSIDER



HarperPerennial
A Division of HarperCollins Publishers

A hardcover edition of *The Outsider* was originally published in 1953 by Harper & Brothers. A paperback edition was published in 1965 by Perennial Library and reissued in 1989. The text as restored by The Library of America was published in 1991 in a volume entitled *Richard Wright: Later Works* which also included *Black Boy (American Hunger)*

THE OUTSIDER. Copyright © 1953 by Richard Wright. Notes and chronology copyright © 1991 by Literary Classics of the United States, Inc. Restored edition copyright © 1991 by Ellen Wright. Introduction copyright © 1993 by Maryemma Graham. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, address HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information, please write: Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

First HarperPerennial edition published 1993

ISBN: 0-06-081248-6

93 94 95 96 97 OPM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THE OUTSIDER

RICHARD WRIGHT

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY MARYEMMA GRAHAM

THE RESTORED TEXT ESTABLISHED BY THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA

For Rachel
my daughter who was born on foreign soil

ARNOLD RAMPERSAD
WROTE THE NOTES FOR THIS VOLUME

Introduction to the HarperPerennial Edition

The Outsider is Richard Wright's second installment in a story of epic proportions, a complex master narrative designed to show American racism in raw and ugly terms. The kind of racism that Wright knew and experienced, a racism from which most black people of his own time could not escape, remained the central element in his fiction. Stories of American racism and economic injustice told in the way Wright preferred to tell them have all but gone out of fashion. Ironically, however, it is precisely Wright's "fictions" which are coming to life for us today: The stories of Bigger Thomas (in his earlier book *Native Son*) and Cross Damon bear an uncanny resemblance to many contemporary cases of street crime and violence; and the media's often thoughtless exploitation of the negative and sensational aspects and perceptions of black communities is probably even more frequent in real life today than in Wright's world of fiction.

There is also a prophetic note in Wright's construction of the criminal mind as intelligent, introspective, and transformative. As a number of critics have noted, Cross Damon is a good example of Wright's attempt to cast light upon the revolutionary potential of the average black person: Cross is articulate and assertive, and engages in actions—up to and including murder—that represent explosive acts of resistance sparked by his refusal to be dominated or to let others be dominated by political ideologies or social forces.

The Outsider appeared in 1953 during the height of McCarthyism in the United States and the advent of the

Cold War in Europe, two events which had a significant bearing on its initial reception. The year before, Ralph Ellison had published *Invisible Man*, a highly acclaimed novel which made apparent the extremely symbolic nature of racism and its peculiar effect on the individual psyche. And in the same year, Algerian psychiatrist Frantz Fanon published his influential study, *The Wretched of the Earth*, which examined the psychological oppression heaped on the masses of African people as a result of French colonialism. Seen within this context, Wright's first exile novel takes on a significance which must be carefully assessed.

Early critics saw *The Outsider* as Wright's attempt to become "universal," to move outside the racial paradigm. They suggested an important shift in Wright's ideological and aesthetic sensibilities had occurred, one that linked him more closely with French existentialism than with African-American writers. This opinion served a useful purpose in a sense, for it shielded Wright from some of his critics who would tend to characterize him as an "ex-Communist and rabble-rouser" who had been a serious critic of American race relations. According to this interpretation, Cross Damon symbolizes modern man, whose existential dilemma is manifested through an internal rather than an external conflict. Sensitive and intelligent, Cross denies his racial identity and feels free to act upon the world in order to invest it with meaning. In doing so, he accepts a great deal of responsibility and displays divine or demonic power (as the name "Damon" suggests) in the new life he has created for himself as Lionel Lane. Such actions on the part of an individual come at great cost, however; for Cross Damon, the price is his death, the cause and meaning of which he struggles to understand. This existential analysis was accepted by and large due to the similarities

between Wright's novel and *The Chips Are Down*, a novel by Jean Paul Sartre, a leading French intellectual and proponent of existentialism whom Wright had come to know in Paris.

Unfortunately, we do not have the benefit of Wright's own expressed ideas concerning the conception and meaning of *The Outsider*, as we do for *Native Son*. (Ever conscious that his work be fully understood and correctly represented, and especially in response to hostile reviewers, Wright wrote "How Bigger Was Born," which is now regularly included in the text edition of his most famous novel.) In the absence of these kinds of insights, the fully restored text of *The Outsider*, presented to us by the Library of America as Wright wished it to be, is an important milestone in literary studies. This source becomes the single most important evidence needed for examining a novel that won greater acceptance for Wright within the European community, and, at the same time, placed him outside the tradition of African-American writing with which he had been most identified.

When we study Wright in order to develop an ideological and artistic map of African-American literature, he is all too often identified primarily in terms of his early works, the impact of which on the subsequent literature is viewed to be both liberating and inhibiting. In other words, modern black literature is defined on the one hand as one that derives from Wright's school of "protest fiction" or, on the other hand, one that seeks to write against that tradition. The latter trend is said to be represented by James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison and more recently by the work of African-American women writers in general. The career Wright started after his move to Paris was, many critics contend, not only a mistake, but also was marked by a decline in his literary

abilities, beginning with the publication of *The Outsider*, a book which records Wright's disillusionment with communism.¹

Revisiting *The Outsider* serves an invaluable function for examining Wright from a different perspective, especially in the wake of communism's collapse as a world power and in our own post-Cold War era. First, we need to make these epochal developments central to our contemporary reading of Wright's novel. Equally important is the need to uncover more of the complicated connection between the life and the work of a great writer who was above all concerned with questions of oppression and resistance and the relationship between domination and the oppositional strategies that form the individual and social practices of black people.

Toni Morrison's fiction helps us to reconstruct history in texts which resemble meditations more than novels. Her works involve a complicated network of associations and imagery which challenge the reader's sensibilities and linguistic acumen. Unlike Morrison, Richard Wright's fiction as essay critique was concerned primarily with his own present and with framing the contradictions posed by racism and the responses it created. Training himself to perceive experience in intellectual terms so as to understand it rationally, Wright's greatest strength derived from his ability to symbolically appropriate the culture of violence, exploitation, and terror which was firmly planted in his own consciousness by the time he left the South at nineteen.

The books that best capture the meaning of southern racism and brutality and the consequences in the urban

¹Robert Bone, James Baldwin, Warren French, Horace Cayton, Arna Bontemps, J. Saunders Redding, and most recently, Andrew Delbanco in *The New Republic* (March 1992: 28-33) have all held this position.

North are generally understood to be *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*, respectively, books Wright wrote at a relatively young age and which established his career as a major writer. In these works, Wright engaged the discourse on racism by focusing on physical poverty and extreme methods of social control in the form of violence against blacks and their consequent counter-violence or ultimate death. Wright portrays the heinous crimes committed against black people with power and passion no writer had ever been able to do.

Wright's most memorable character in this regard is Bigger Thomas, a black gang member living on Chicago's South Side who is responsible for the deaths of two women and is psychologically transformed by his acts of violent resistance. He comes to fully accept the deaths he has caused as an act of empowerment, as a definition of his identity when he says, "What I killed for, I *am*." Likewise, the episodes in the lives of black people which Wright selects for *Uncle Tom's Children* develop their own characters who variously resist and rebel, making the necessary choices that sustain them, even if on a limited basis. But Wright's emphasis on rebellious violence, his characters' seemingly blatant disregard for human relationships and lack of remorse, do not satisfy many a contemporary reader accustomed to more subtle ways in which blacks and other subordinated groups locate and interpret their resistance/accommodation to and/or transformation of the dominant culture.

By creating a text of his own life in the autobiographical *Black Boy*, Wright became a paradigmatic statement of the black intellectual's struggle to resist domination and become an agent of transformation. In that remarkable and now well-known life story of a difficult and repressive childhood and adolescence, Wright told how he learned systematically to "be natural, to be real, to be

myself," he says, only ". . . in rejection, rebellion and aggression." Wright's success owed much to his own genius, his penetrating vision, and his active involvement in powerful ideological, social, and political movements during the 1930s—Marxism and communism. And although Wright became disenchanted with the Communist party in the United States, he remained a Marxist with a revolutionary vision of societal change, continuing his activist commitments throughout his life.

Thus, Wright's early writing, like his life, is paradigmatic, that is, broadly representative of black life. It recounts the journey from slavery and a disenfranchised existence in the agricultural South into the cities, both South and North, where dreams were shattered and hopes denied. This is the centerpiece around which most of us have been taught to frame Wright's contribution to American culture and from which his fictional texts extend.

The events surrounding the creation and publication of *The Outsider* are little known. The book generated nothing like the response his first novel had, and some critics even suggested Wright had sold out to a more cosmopolitan, European way of life. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. It is worth pausing over the events that transpired between the publication of *Native Son* and *The Outsider*, if we are to understand the critical role Wright's "flight" from the United States played in enlarging and expanding his master narrative of American racism. Wright moved quickly to consolidate his personal life and to pursue an active writing career in the wake of the unprecedented success of the first book by a black American to receive national acclaim and its enthusiastic acceptance by both white and black—even if somewhat reluctant—audiences. Another book, *12,000,000 Black Voices*, was published along

with "The Man Who Lived Underground," in which he first treated more explicit existential themes. *Native Son* opened on Broadway while Wright continually wrote autobiographical articles, radio programs, and film scripts.

Wright's continuing political interests and his race relations work made him even more visible as a writer and spokesperson. Various offices in national writers' organizations and peace groups such as the League of American Writers and the American Peace Mobilization, as well as local organizing in Harlem, were part of a steady regimen of anti-racist activity.

A key moment in his literary career came when he went to speak at Fisk University in Nashville at the invitation of Horace Cayton. Here in the South, talking to other young people at a prestigious, historically black institution, Wright felt more confident than ever that he should make his personal story public.

The Fisk visit bridged an important gap between Wright and the black intellectual community. He had not grown up with this group in the South; he was introduced to it only after he moved to Chicago, and was often alienated from this class of individuals, according to biographers. Nevertheless, intense interactions with black intellectuals usually occurred at key junctures in his life and provided critical support for his projects. There was, for example, the work that came out of the black Southside Writers Group, which Wright organized in Chicago, to provide an opportunity for black writers to critique each other's work. Active in this group were Arna Bontemps, Frank Marshall Davis, Theodore Ward, and Margaret Walker, among others. From this experience came "Blueprint for Negro Writing," written in 1937, perhaps the clearest and most powerful statement about the role and function of African-American litera-

ture ever to be written. There Wright began a close friendship with Margaret Walker, a native southerner and writer like himself. Unlike Wright, Walker had come to Chicago to complete college.² It was she who sent Wright clippings on the Robert Nixon case, upon which he based the story of *Native Son*.

After the autobiography which had been inspired by the Fisk visit, Wright provided a long introduction to *Black Metropolis* by his friend Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake. This book was to become the classic study of black urban life in the United States.

It was during these years that Wright became more and more interested in psychoanalysis, especially the psychology of oppression and violence. He continued to read extensively on the subject and helped to found the LeFargue Clinic as a free psychiatric clinic in Harlem. It bears mentioning here that the large volumes of mail from or about black prisoners generated by *Native Son* could only have stimulated this interest; it also created a direct relationship between Wright and the black prison community, which was unusual for writers of his time. For example, Wright had championed the cause of Clinton Brewer, a convicted murderer, who had become a talented musician during his incarceration. Seeing the possibility of rehabilitation, Wright got Brewer's music recorded and arranged for his release, although Brewer was apprehended for a second murder shortly thereafter.

Wright's forays into crime psychology and the interest he maintained in young black males as the target prison population suggests a dynamic in Wright's own psyche which is frequently ignored. His identification with this aspect of the black community not only served

²See Allison Davis's chapter on Wright in *Leadership, Love, and Aggression*, (New York: Harcourt, 1983), for a discussion of Wright's relationship to the traditional black middle class.

the purposes of his fiction, but also reflected his desire to gain deeper insight into the one process which could give objective meaning to the lives of black people as the "wretched of the earth." The physical prison in the real world was not unlike the symbolic prisons Wright created in his fiction.

Wright tried writing a story about the Brewer case, just as *Native Son* had been based on the Robert Nixon case in Chicago. But Wright had taken this kind of story as far as it could go within his current thinking. The experiences of his middle years—personal, political, and intellectual—required a different aesthetic response.

Wright's move to Paris provided an appropriate context for this change to take place. The decision to leave the United States seems to have been based on several things: his break with the Communist party, which he had made official by publishing "I Tried to Be a Communist" in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1944, thus cutting ties of long standing; his need to find a less hostile environment to live in with his wife and growing family; and the warm reception and contacts he had made on his earlier visit to Europe.

By moving to Paris, however, Wright was departing for the first time from the archetypal migration pattern that characterized the lives of most black people of his time. He had moved from Mississippi to Memphis and then on to Chicago and New York. This trek provided him with the objective basis for bringing to consciousness effects of the particular class and racial phenomena he had experienced. On the other hand, the move to Paris provided an environment where he could become a world-class intellectual, where the issues of race and class could take on greater significance as he became more knowledgeable about the independence movements in colonial countries and developed friendships

with those who would play leading roles in the anti-colonial movements in their respective homelands. Wright did not write about Paris, nor did he speak French fluently. But Paris gave him something he didn't have: a view (vision) of the black experience and of the colonized world from an international perspective. His anti-racism became more solidly anti-imperialism; his interest in black people in the United States became a Pan-African and Third World interest.

Wright's contacts with West Indian and African intellectuals brought him in touch with *Presence Africaine*, an important magazine founded in 1946 which promoted racial and Pan-African solidarity, especially the ideas of the Negritude literary movement espoused in the works of its founding members, Leopold Senghor, Aime Césaire, and Alioune Diop. Good friendships developed with George Padmore and C. L. R. James, two black revolutionaries who, like Wright, had been members of the Communist party.

His friendships with Gertrude Stein, Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus exposed Wright to the core of French existentialism. The intensity of the African-American experience gave both meaning and expression to this philosophy, which provided another window through which he could see the inhumanity and negative consequences of racism and oppression. Like his conversion to Marxism, Wright accepted existentialism as an ideology that could be developed for and applied to those who were oppressed.

The Outsider must be seen against this background of anti-colonialism, anti-fascism, and anti-racism, sentiments all shaped by Cold War politics and Wright's own personal experiences in organized political movements. In looking both backward and forward in terms of Wright's career, *The Outsider* marks a critical turning