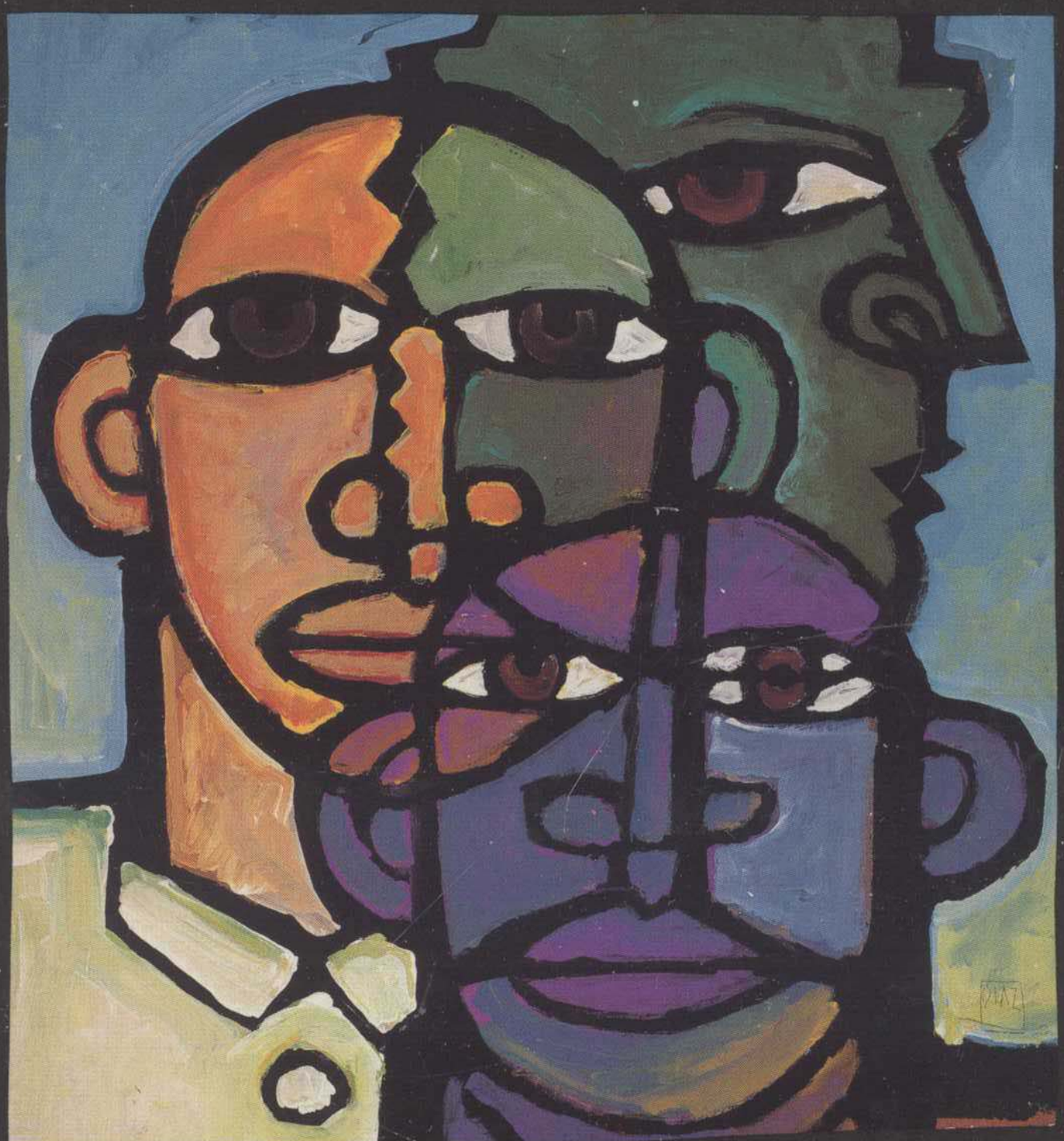
RICHARD WRIGHT



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UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN

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HarperPerennial
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WROTE THE NOTES FOR THIS VOLUME

Introduction to the HarperPerennial Edition

I hold that, in the last analysis, the artist must bow to the monitor of his own imagination; must be led by the sovereignty of his own impressions and perceptions; must be guided by the tyranny of what troubles and concerns him personally; and that he must learn to trust the impulse, vague and compulsive as it may be, which moves him in the first instance toward expression. There is no other true path, and the artist owes it to himself and to those who live and breathe with him to render unto reality that which is reality's.

—Richard Wright to Antonio Frasconi, 1944

In a 1939 article entitled "The Negro: 'New' or Newer," the black critic Alain Locke hailed the publication of Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* the previous year as "a well-merited literary launching for what must be watched as a major literary career. . . . With this, our Negro fiction of social interpretation comes of age."[1] Roughly a decade and a half earlier, Locke had heralded the advent of another dramatic watershed in the Afro-American literary tradition: the New Negro Movement, also known as the Harlem Renaissance. But this latter phenomenon had involved many black artists working in a wide range of fields. Accordingly, one might suspect that Locke's grand characterization of

[1]Alain Locke, "The Negro: 'New' or Newer: A Retrospective Review of the Literature of the Negro for 1938." *Opportunity* 17 (1939): 8.

Wright's relatively thin collection of four novellas may have been tinged with nostalgia on his part after he had witnessed the precipitous subsidence of white interest in things black that followed the heady 1920s when, as Langston Hughes put it, "the Negro was in vogue." We are left with the question: Did *Uncle Tom's Children* truly merit Locke's rich praise?

With the hindsight of over half a century, we must answer "yes." Indeed, the confidence with which one would respond itself testifies to the tremendous impact of Richard Wright's arrival on the American literary landscape and the extent to which the aftershocks of his work continue to be felt even today. His first published book, *Uncle Tom's Children* marked the beginning of what might be termed modern black "protest" literature; furthermore, at the time it constituted the most unrelenting and rage-fueled critique of white racism ever to surface in fiction written by blacks directed toward a mainstream American readership. *Native Son* aptly deserves acknowledgment as the most influential African-American novel of the twentieth century. However, it was *Uncle Tom's Children* that brought Wright to the attention of white critics and readers, many of whom had never encountered a black text that so moved and challenged them, thereby preparing the ground for *Native Son*, the book that changed the course of American letters.

Born on September 4, 1908, to a schoolteacher and a former sharecropper who soon deserted his family, Richard Wright was raised by his mother and her relatives in a South dominated at nearly every turn by racial subordination. As his fellow author Margaret Walker puts it, "The state of Mississippi, Adams County, U.S.A., where Richard Wright was born, . . . was a

veritable hell."[2] The system of segregation known as Jim Crow had been in place since the late nineteenth century, and lynchings and other savage physical assaults on blacks were not uncommon in the decades before World War I. Although Wright was not above exaggerating the harshness of his life to make a political point, it is clear from his autobiography that his youth in the South was scarred by constant, brutal repression. In particular, Wright viewed the attempt by whites to break the spirits of Southern blacks, to make them complicitous in their own oppression, as perhaps the key racist imperative; and he resisted as doggedly as he could.

One form of both resistance and temporary escape for the young Wright was reading. Blessed with a vivid imagination, he found himself drawn early in life to books as well as to creative writing, in no small measure because both were forbidden to him. At home, his authoritarian maternal grandmother condemned fiction as sinful; and in his community, whites refused to permit blacks access to the public libraries. On the one hand, the story of how Wright as a young adult was able to borrow library books by pretending to be acting on behalf of a white employer demonstrates his ingenuity and stubbornness. On the other hand, it indicates the extent to which the Southern racist code consistently forced blacks to participate in a self-abnegating and degrading masquerade. If, as Wright felt quite strongly, many blacks were too often willing to accede to such humiliation, *he* would not do so if he could help it. For a young black man in the South with such a rebellious attitude, there were few viable options; flight was ultimately the one that Wright took.

[2]Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (New York: Amistad-Warner, 1988), 13.

Wright left the South in late 1927 with a ninth-grade education and few marketable skills. To make matters worse, he had not been settled in Chicago long before the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression. The low point for Wright during these years came when he was forced to apply to the Bureau of Public Welfare in order to take care of his mother and brother, who had joined him in the city. If such nightmarish experiences served to exacerbate Wright's growing disenchantment with the American economic system, his reading not only helped him to begin understanding his painful, confusing reality but also provided crucial models for meaningful self-expression.

One of the most significant of these early models was H. L. Mencken, whose books Wright had tracked down while living in Memphis in the mid-1920s after an editorial in a local white paper had vehemently attacked the iconoclastic and thorny social critic. Mencken's work had an immediate and galvanizing impact on Wright, who describes his response in this famous passage from his autobiography, *Black Boy*:

> I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weaknesses of people, mocking God, authority. What was this? . . . Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were.

> Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon?[3]

What is so riveting about Wright's recollection here is the extent to which he was absolutely awestruck by the apparent capacity of literature to act, even to do violence, in the world. Desperately seeking a way to strike back at the oppressive forces dedicated to silencing him and to throttling his intellectual growth, the young Wright found in Mencken and, later, in American naturalists and realists such as Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Sinclair Lewis crucial literary paradigms for rendering social critique. It was not until he had moved to Chicago, however, that he was exposed to the systems of analysis that enabled him to more fully understand the bases for the oppression of blacks in the United States and then to feel capable of dramatizing it in fiction.

In "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright's earliest and most ambitious extended comment on black literature, he contends that, "anyone destitute of a theory about the meaning, structure and direction of modern society is a lost victim in a world he cannot understand or control."[4] In Chicago, Wright was deeply influenced by a number of major intellectual movements that together helped him to develop this all-important "theory." First, there was his ongoing exposure to the fiction of both American and European naturalists, whose work emphasized the power of external forces to shape personality. The scholar Michel Fabre notes that

[3]Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, res. ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 293.

[4]Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing." *New Challenge* 2.2 (1937): 61.

naturalistic fiction also "convinced Wright that his life, hemmed in by poverty and racism, was not the only life to be circumscribed."[5] That is, such texts showed Wright that although blacks may have suffered disproportionately under the exploitative social system in the United States, they were not its only victims. It would have been almost impossible for Wright to conceive of interracial efforts to bring about economic justice without first acknowledging the shared experience of oppression. The deterministic perspectives of the naturalists helped to provide him with this insight.

Wright encountered more systematic and rigorously analytical considerations of these same issues through his contact with the influential school of social science research headed by the well-known Robert E. Park at the University of Chicago. In his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, the landmark sociological study by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Wright acknowledges his debt to this scholarship:

> It was from the scientific findings of men like the late Robert E. Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth that I drew the meanings for my documentary book, *12,000,000 Black Voices*; for my novel, *Native Son*; it was from their scientific facts that I absorbed some of that quota of inspiration necessary for me to write *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy*.[6]

The impact of literary naturalism and the work of the "Chicago" sociologists on the development of Wright's

[5]Michel Fabre, "Beyond Naturalism?" in *Richard Wright*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 41.

[6]Richard Wright, Introduction, in *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, vol. 1, revised edition, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton (New York: Harbinger-Harcourt, 1970), xviii.

ideas during these years was considerable. Nonetheless, the single greatest intellectual force in his life at the time was communism.

Wright's introduction to communism came, appropriately enough, through his seeking out support for his burgeoning literary interests. Invited in 1933 to attend a meeting of the Chicago John Reed Club, the local affiliate of a nationwide organization of artists sponsored by the American Communist party, Wright found among the bright, ambitious young people there a commitment to both art and radical politics that encouraged him in his attempt to use literature to effect social change. In Ralph Ellison's words, Wright's discussions with these other aspiring artists "sharpened his conception of literary form and the relationship between fictional techniques and the world-view of Marxism."[7] Furthermore, the club's interracial membership provided Wright for the first time with a sense of community that had been lacking in his relations with both whites and, all too often, blacks before this point.

Wright also made invaluable literary contacts through his involvement in the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), a branch of the Works Project Administration established in 1935 to provide employment for professional writers during the Depression. Although the membership rosters of the various FWPs read like a who's who of American literature of the 1930s, the author Arna Bontemps singled out the Chicago branch as a hotbed of black artistic energy. In 1950, Bontemps recalled, "No other writers' project in the country produced comparable Negro talent during the depression. Chicago was

[7]Ralph Ellison, "Remembering Richard Wright," *Delta* 18 (1984): 6.

definitely the center of the second phase of Negro literary awakening."[8]

A decade earlier, the young writers of the New Negro Renaissance had boldly declared themselves artistic agents of change, bent on breaking old molds and discarding outworn paradigms. As their spokesperson Alain Locke put it in "The New Negro" in 1925, "The day of 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'mammies' is . . . gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on. . . . The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts."[9] In the 1930s, young writers such as Theodore Ward, William Attaway, Margaret Walker, Frank Yerby, and Willard Motley similarly sought to distinguish themselves from their immediate predecessors. In "Blueprint for Negro Writing," for instance, Wright, the most famous member of this group, criticizes earlier black authors for the way in which they chose to appeal to white readers:

> Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people.[10]

In contrast, the authorial stance of many of these new writers of the 1930s was confrontational and direct;

[8]Arna Bontemps, "Famous WPA Authors," *Negro Digest* 8.8 (1950): 46.

[9]Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (1925; reprint, New York: Antheneum, 1968), 5.

[10]Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," 53.

their literary mode of choice, neonaturalism; their ideological orientation, Marxist; and their perspective, that of the proletariat—the Afro-American rural folk and urban working class. As Wright puts it in "Blueprint," the contemporary black author was "being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die."[11] With this driving sense of mission and the ideological support of the white political left, Wright and his fellows set out to change the world with their pens.

Although his first publication appeared in the mid-1920s, Wright's artistic maturity dates from the early 1930s, when he began to publish poetry in radical periodicals such as *Left Front*, the literary magazine of the Chicago John Reed Club, and the American Communist party's *New Masses*. During this time, Wright also turned to journalism, with his first article (on the boxer Joe Louis) appearing in *New Masses* in October 1935. By May of 1937, when Wright left Chicago for New York City, he had established himself as one of the leading young writers of the American Communist party, which he had formally joined a few years earlier. Indeed, after arriving in New York, he was appointed head of the Harlem bureau of the *Daily Worker*, the Party's official paper; and he composed over two hundred articles in the last seven months of 1937 alone. In addition, he participated in the New York WPA Writers' Project, and he helped run *New Challenge*, a literary journal initially founded in 1934 as *Challenge* by the black writer Dorothy West.

During these productive years, Wright's creative energies also found outlet through fiction, with notably

[11]Ibid., 59.

mixed results. Throughout the mid-1930s, for example, he futilely attempted to find a publisher for the book that was to appear posthumously as *Lawd Today!* His proposal for another novel, tentatively entitled "Tarbaby's Dawn," met a similar fate. In contrast, Wright's short fiction received more encouraging responses. In early 1936, "Big Boy Leaves Home" was accepted for publication in *The New Caravan*; and in 1937, "Fire and Cloud" took second place in the O. Henry fiction competition and won five hundred dollars in a contest sponsored by *Story* magazine, which published it in March 1938. This award marked a real turning point in Wright's career, for it led directly to Harper's decision to bring out his collection of four novellas.

Uncle Tom's Children appeared in the spring of 1938 and created an immediate sensation. The majority of reviewers hailed Wright as a powerful, new black voice, dedicated, as Sterling Brown put it, to "revealing a people whose struggles and essential dignity have too long been unexpressed."[12] Even Eleanor Roosevelt favorably mentioned Wright's collection in her newspaper column, which boosted its sales considerably. The Book Union offered *Uncle Tom's Children* as one of its selections, and *The Nation* acclaimed it as among the ten best books of the year. In addition to the sudden celebrity that *Uncle Tom's Children* brought Wright, the money earned by the book, as well as a Guggenheim Fellowship that he received in 1939, allowed him to focus his energies over the next two years on the project that was to result in *Native Son*.

The success of *Uncle Tom's Children* was underscored by Harper's publication of an expanded edition of the

[12]Sterling A Brown, "From the Inside," review of *Uncle Tom's Children*, by Richard Wright, *Nation* 146 (1938): 448.

book in 1940. Besides the four original novellas, this new text included "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," an autobiographical sketch that had been initially published in 1936 in *American Stuff*, an anthology of work by FWP writers, and "Bright and Morning Star," an award-winning story that had appeared in *New Masses* in May 1938. With these additions, the collection, as we now know it, was complete.

In terms of subject matter, *Uncle Tom's Children* reflects the diversity of sources upon which Wright drew throughout his career in constructing his fiction. Not only did he mine his own firsthand knowledge of the South for material, but he also incorporated information gathered from his journalistic research. A series of interviews that he had conducted with black Communists in the mid-1930s proved especially helpful.

With regard to style, narrative strategies, and themes, *Uncle Tom's Children* demonstrates Wright's voracious assimilation of a wide range of literary influences. His reading of naturalists such as Dreiser and Norris, for instance, is quite evident, particularly in his depiction of human survival as often entailing struggle at the most immediate, physical level. Dramatic examples include Big Boy's battles with the snake and the dog in "Big Boy Leaves Home" and Mann's trials in the flood in "Down by the Riverside." Moreover, the psychological assumptions underlying naturalistic fiction prepared Wright for the economic determinism informing the Marxist literary aesthetic, which explains in part the readiness with which he adapted many of the tactics of what was termed proletarian fiction (or social realism) in the 1930s. Wright fully shared the social realists' commitment to focusing on the lives of working people vying desperately not just with the whims of a godless

world but also with the racism and economic exploitation that, in their overwhelming insistence, themselves become tantamount to natural forces. In addition, he was mightily impressed with the sheer polemical vigor of the leftist writings to which he was exposed through his John Reed Club associates. In an essay entitled "I Tried to Be a Communist," Wright describes his initial reaction to reading this material: "The revolutionary words leaped from the printed page and struck me with tremendous force."[13] As he did in the case of Mencken's work, Wright stresses the enormous power driving this writing, a power exploding in the service of rigorous social critique and energized by the liberatory hope that Marxism could offer and that literary determinism alone could not.

The extent to which Wright himself acknowledged the impact on his artistic sensibility of the American naturalists, of Russian realists such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and of Marxist thought tends to obscure the importance of other crucial literary sources. The first consists of the popular fiction that Wright devoured in his youth; Horatio Alger novels, detective stories, and other "pulp" works—he read them all. The second is that diverse body of literature broadly termed "Modernist," produced by, among others, James Joyce, William Faulkner, D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, and Marcel Proust. Wright himself singled out Gertrude Stein, whose "Melanctha" he describes in *I Wish I'd Written That* as "the first realistic treatment of Negro life I'd seen when I was trying to learn how to write. . . . [T]his story made me see and accept for the first time in my life the speech of Negroes, speech that fell all around

[13]Richard Wright, "I Tried to Be a Communist," *Atlantic Monthly* 174.2 (1944): 62.

me unheard."[14] (Echoes of Stein's experiments are especially evident in "Long Black Song.") Finally, like most of the young leftist authors of his generation, Wright was tremendously moved by the unadorned, straightforward prose style of Ernest Hemingway.

A third, often underestimated influence on *Uncle Tom's Children* is the literature produced by the New Negro Renaissance writers, a group with whom Wright, in some ways, did not want to be associated. In "Blueprint," for example, he contends that the contemporary black realist "requires a greater discipline and consciousness than was necessary for the so-called Harlem school of expression."[15] Yet he also urges black authors to acknowledge not just "the nationalist character of the Negro people" but also the extent to which "this nationalism is reflected in the whole of Negro culture, and especially in folklore."[16] The path that Wright and others took in seeking to tap the creative resistance and communal spirit informing the rich folklife of their people was one blazed a decade earlier by the very New Negro writers whose limitations Wright wished to transcend. In the case of Langston Hughes, the most influential Harlem Renaissance poet of the black folk, not only did Wright know of his work, but in the mid-1930s he delivered at least one public lecture on it.

It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of Hughes and other black authors on Wright's handling of folk materials, for *Uncle Tom's Children* represents one of the most ambitious and complex fictional uses of

[14]Richard Wright, Introduction to "Early Days of a Woman," in *I Wish I'd Written That: Selections Chosen by Favorite American Authors*, ed. Eugene J. Woods (New York: Whittlesey-McGraw Hill, 1946), 254.

[15]Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," 63.

[16]Ibid., 56.