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RICHARD WRIGHT: A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

By DONALD B. GIBSON

The following essay focuses on the major critical materials available on the work of Richard Wright, and its emphasis is on material most likely to be useful to the critic of Wright's work. Most materials of a strictly biographical nature (except the most important ones) are not included. Materials which deal briefly with Wright or do not focus primarily on him are likewise omitted. This essay has the intention of suggesting in broad outline what has so far been accomplished in regard to the life and work of Wright.

I. BIBLIOGRAPHY

There are several bibliographies of the work of Wright which vary considerably insofar as their usefulness is concerned. Of some value to the student of Wright is M. D. Sprague's "Richard Wright: A Bibliography," *Bulletin of Bibliography*, XXI (September-December, 1953). More helpful, more complete and more recent is the bibliography of works compiled by Michel Fabre and Edward Margolies, "Richard Wright (1908-1960)," *Bulletin of Bibliography*, XXIV (January-April, 1965), 131-33, 137. It is reprinted in Constance Webb's biography of Wright cited below. Jackson Bryer's selected checklist of criticism on Wright was published in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, I (Fall, 1960), 22-33. It is not complete—it does not pretend to be—but the major works on Wright up to mid-1960 are cited there. It has extensive listings of major reviews of nearly all of Wright's books. Less extensive, but valuable because published so recently and because of the choice of entries, is the bibliographical list contained in Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy's *Images of the Negro in American Literature*. Less useful because sketchy is Abraham Chapman's *The Negro in American Literature*, Stevens Point, Wisconsin, 1966.

II. EDITIONS

A good amount of Wright's fiction is in print in paperback editions. Not everything, however, is available. *Black Boy* is in Harper and Row's Perennial series. Walker and Company has an edition of *Lawd Today*. Two editions of *Native Son* are currently in print, the Harper and Row Perennial edition as well as the Signet edition. Harper and Row has also reprinted *The Outsider*. Universe Books has in print the universally scorned *Savage Holiday*. *Uncle Tom's Children* is currently in two editions, one by Signet and the other by Harper and Row. *White Man, Listen!* is in Doubleday's Anchor series. *Twelve Million Black Voices*, *Black Power*, *The Color Curtain*, *Pagan Spain*, *The Long Dream*, and (most regrettably) *Eight Men* are currently out of print. "Five Episodes" from an unfinished novel appears in Herbert Hill's *Soon One Morning* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 140-64.

III. BIOGRAPHY

Until very recently there has been little biography of Wright beyond his own autobiographical writing—such things as *Black Boy*, "The Man Who Went to Chicago," and "I Tried to Be a Communist." Most of the accounts of Wright's life have been drawn from these sources. This has posed a problem, especially in regard to his early life, because *Black Boy* is clearly highly fictionalized. Its materials are organized and expressed with obvious intention not simply of telling about life, but of changing specific social opinions. Hence a good deal is left out or changed for the sake of serving the writer's intention. Embree's *13 Against the Odds*, Viking, 1945, relies heavily upon Wright's own published comments about his life, though it manages to go somewhat beyond those sources. Several articles in *Ebony* (see Bryer's bibliography mentioned above) reveal some surface facts of Wright's expatriate life. Undoubtedly the most complete work of a biographical nature is Constance Webb's recent biography, *Richard Wright*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968. It contains a wealth of new material but relies too heavily on Wright's published materials for its account of the early life. Some interesting biographical material is contained in "Reflections on Richard Wright: A

Symposium on an Exiled Native Son " printed in Herbert Hill's *Anger and Beyond*, Harper and Row, 1966, a symposium participated in by several people who knew Wright personally, Horace Cayton, Arna Bontemps, Saunders Redding and Herbert Hill. James Baldwin's " Alas, Poor Richard " in *Nobody Knows My Name*, Dial Press, 1961, gives a certain perspective upon the life and character of Richard Wright, though obviously from an extremely biased point of view. Saunders Redding's " The Alien Land of Richard Wright," in Hill's *Soon One Morning*, says something meaningful and interesting about Wright's life, his self-imposed exile and its effect, direct effect, on his writing. John Williams' novel, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, Signet, 1968, is in large part a *roman à clef* and has Richard Wright as one of its chief characters.

IV. CRITICISM

A. *Reviews*: There are hundreds of reviews of Wright's works. Many are of some value, but generally they have the limitations of reviews. Of the reviews, the ones that seem to me at the moment to be most relevant are those which appeared in the leftist press, for they are likely to give us some insight into the thorny problem of Wright's relation to the Communist Party, and perhaps they might help in describing the role which Marxism plays in Wright's fiction. The most important point to make here is simply that Wright was reviewed extensively in the American and foreign press. Jackson Bryer's bibliography, cited above, lists many of the reviews.

B. *Aesthetic Criticism*: Robert Bone in his *Negro Novel in America*, Yale University Press, 1958, condescendingly places *Native Son* among the three " major " novels written by Black Americans. His simplistic notion that Negroes are either " nationalists " or " assimilationists "—along with his " Reader's Digest " conception of Marxism—determines the view of *Native Son* presented in the book. Bone does not deal with Wright's other works. Hugh Gloster's far more balanced *Negro Voices in American Fiction*, Chapel Hill, 1948, deals more reasonably with its subject because Gloster has more sympathy and respect for the writer. Gloster concentrates on *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*. A valuable explication of some of Wright's fiction is contained in Edwin Berry Burgum's

"The Art of Richard Wright's Short Stories," in *The World's Dilemma*, Russell and Russell, 1963. His explication of "Long Black Song" is the only extensive exploration of that story so far printed. Edward Margolies' book, *The Art of Richard Wright*, has just been published (1969) by the Southern Illinois University Press. His *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century American Authors*, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1968, contains a chapter on Richard Wright.

C. *Sociological Criticism*: Probably the sociological essays on Wright that have been most widely read are those by Baldwin contained in *Notes of a Native Son*, "Many Thousands Gone" and "Everybody's Protest Novel." Both have been helpful in discrediting Wright in that they lend support to current critical tastes which are hostile toward literature having social or political implications. Ralph Ellison's treatment of *Black Boy* in "Richard Wright's Blues," *Antioch Review*, V (1945), reprinted in *Shadow and Act*, is the most extensive treatment of that book. The essay, however, is largely a disquisition on the Negro in America. Nonetheless it remains an important part of the body of Wright criticism. Arthur P. Davis's "The Outsider as a Novel of Race," *Midwest Journal*, VII (1955), points out the extent to which Wright's novel is not simply a philosophical treatise and unrelated to the major concerns of his other fiction. Edwin Berry Burgum's "The Promise of Democracy in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," in *The World's Dilemma* (cited above), discusses *Native Son* in terms of its implications about race and in terms of its relation to minority groups in the United States. Wright's own "How Bigger Was Born," *The Saturday Review of Literature* (June 1, 1940), and in the Harper and Brothers first edition of *Native Son*, is an attempt to place Bigger Thomas in sociological perspective, to document the character by means of example from life. Hubert Creekmore's "Social Factors in *Native Son*," *University of Kansas City Review*, VII (1941), shows how the novel relates to existing social conditions. John Reilly's "Afterword" in the Perennial Classics edition of *Native Son* sees the novel as Wright's "own assault upon society." Here too he sees Bigger Thomas as Wright's conception of "the archetypal nigger." (I assume he means something not unkind in that.) Less sociologically oriented is Rich-

ard Sullivan's "afterword" in the Signet edition of the novel. He assumes a naive anti-communist pose in discussing the book, but attempts a balanced evaluation. Hardly fitting within the category outlined here, but fitting better elsewhere is R. K. White's "Black Boy: A Value Analysis," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, XLII (1947). White's use of *Black Boy* is absurd, but his instincts are right. Hence he writes an article useful to the critic insofar as it analyses the values expressed by Wright in the book. His methods are questionable, but his findings are of the kind that a literary critic might well have arrived at.

The burden of criticism of Wright's work has been sociological, a fact that might have been even more apparent were the attempt in this essay to be all-inclusive. So very many of the articles not exclusively about Wright, but containing material on him (and hence not dealt with here) are sociological in orientation. The burden of a large number of single articles is philosophical. The great emphasis on philosophy in Wright has been the result of our contemporary preoccupation with existentialism, a preoccupation which Wright shared.

D. *Philosophical Criticism*: Nick Aaron Ford's and Nathan Scott's work on Wright is outstanding among the articles of a philosophical or ideational nature. Ford's "The Ordeal of Richard Wright," *College English*, XV (1953), deals with *Native Son* and *The Outsider* and contrasts the Marxist element of the one with the existentialist element of the other. In "The Search for Beliefs: The Fiction of Richard Wright," *University of Kansas City Review*, XXII (1956), Nathan Scott likewise deals with *Native Son* and *The Outsider*, the emphasis being on the latter work. The value of Scott's work lies in the relating of Wright to a general cultural context. He gets beyond the parochialism of much of the Wright criticism and suggests a perspective which must be akin to the way Europeans have seen the work of Wright. From his vantage point Wright seems far more a participant in the broad scheme of Western thinking and writing than most have seen him as being. Similar in its emphasis upon matters other than sociological is Kingsley Widmer's "The Existential Darkness: Richard Wright's *The Outsider*," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* (Fall, 1960). Widmer deals with the novel as "an American existentialist fable." The problem of existential-

ism in Wright's fiction, especially the influence on him of the French existentialists, has been indeed a matter of great concern among Wright's critics.

V. INFLUENCE

Robert Bone has gone furthest in attempting to establish the influence Wright has had on subsequent writing and writers. Unfortunately Bone's vision is so very narrow hence his view of what he calls "the Wright School" is in need of revision. The exchange between Ralph Ellison and Irving Howe which began in *Dissent* (Autumn, 1963) and was carried through two issues of *The New Leader* (December 9, 1963 and February 3, 1964), has in large measure to do with Wright's influence on subsequent writers, especially Ellison and Baldwin. Ellison's side of the debate is reprinted in *Shadow and Act*, Random House, 1964 (Signet, 1966), and Howe's side is reprinted in *A World More Attractive*, Horizon Press, 1963.

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