

RICHARD WRIGHT'S "AMERICAN HUNGER"

Author(s): Gerian Steve Moore

Source: *CLA Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (September, 1977), pp. 79-89

Published by: College Language Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44329328>

Accessed: 24-04-2020 20:34 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

College Language Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *CLA Journal*

RICHARD WRIGHT'S *AMERICAN HUNGER*

By GERIAN STEVE MOORE

In many respects *American Hunger*¹ is a disappointing and, at times, even a reactionary book. It is the final section of *Black Boy*, Wright's celebrated novel about growing up in Mississippi. And, like *Black Boy*, it has very little good to say about the black community. Actually, *American Hunger* serves as one of the clearest reflections of Wright's alienation and estrangement from the rhythm and tempo of the black community. Even though his book offers a penetrating analysis of the psychological dilemma caused by oppression, Wright is nevertheless naive in his tendency to place too much faith in the white liberal establishment and its radical allies.

Nowhere does Wright indicate this naivety more clearly than in his brief but bitter experience with the Communist Party. While the Communist Party viewed itself as a revolutionary organization and sided with black people on many issues, it revealed itself as just another white liberal organization whose interest in black people was secondary and seldom went beyond meaningless lip-service when it came to the important questions facing the black community like that of community control. Yet despite the fact that *American Hunger* was written some time after his break with the Party, and one might, therefore, assume a certain advantage of hindsight, Wright still expressed ambivalence about his connection with the Communists. At one point, he even went so far as to say that he was willing to accept the Party although it had rejected him as a traitor to its cause. Wright saw no fundamental contradiction between the expressed ideas of the Communist Party and their functional relationship to the black community. But his refusal to deal with this question is not just a matter of oversight but one of dependency.

He seemed to possess an intense yearning to be validated by white people. In other words, to have them corroborate his

¹ Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

feelings instead of having faith in what he himself felt to be true. This is the psychological motivation behind Wright's attraction to the Party, and the reason he found the break so traumatic. On a much deeper level, Wright was extremely grateful to the Communists for having essentially saved him by making it possible for him to escape the many perils of the ghetto. It was through the Party that he had developed some of his most meaningful relationships and had met his first wife—a fact that he does not mention in this book at all. But Wright was most grateful to the Party for having provided him with a means of understanding his own experience, which, in turn, enabled him to link his experience to that of oppressed peoples throughout the world.

But although the Party, through its ideology, had been of great advantage to Wright by giving him a perspective on his own experience, his relationship to the Party prevented him from fully comprehending the nature of that experience. This resulted in persistent problems in Wright's fiction—a lack of depth, a refusal to go beneath the surface, and a constant reliance on a kind of symbolic portrayal to express reality. The tendency to deal with only surface reality is a direct result of his involvement with the Communist Party whose ideology seeks to abstract human experience and tries to fit it into categories. In fiction, especially fiction about the black experience, such attempts often result in stereotypes.

This is why many critics have referred to the heroes in Wright's fiction as being essentially one-dimensional stereotypes, lacking in any fundamental human complexity. The reason for this is that most of Wright's heroes are an extension of his ideas. The issue here is not that there is anything inherently wrong with fiction that is rooted in ideas, but that Wright's ideas were not rooted in his understanding of black people. He tries to impose a system of ideas on the black experience without attempting to deal with it on its own terms. Wright seems to have had little sympathy for the work of men like W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, or Alain Locke. Most of his references are to European intellectuals who share his same sense of alienation. This is a serious shortcoming and has contributed to much of the critical ambivalence surrounding Wright's work.

Ralph Ellison is the critic who perhaps best symbolizes this ambivalence—although Baldwin is usually the critic most referred to in this connection. But unlike Baldwin who dismissed much of Wright's best known works, such as *Native Son*, essentially as being short-sighted and stereotypical, Ellison's position is less clear and becomes apparent only on close reading. In his now famous essay, "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison places Wright's autobiographical novel, *Black Boy*, in the blues tradition. He calls attention to the blues as an art born of suffering. In what has come to be accepted as the standard definition of the blues, Ellison states that "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, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."² In placing the novel in the tradition of the blues, Ellison not only places it in the context of its culture but gives it its proper identity as art, thus refusing to see the novel solely as an autobiography reflecting black life. Unlike other critics (mainly whites), Ellison refrains from viewing Wright as an exception or as a symbol of southern blacks. Instead he seeks to locate him in terms of circumstance and specific place:

Born on a Mississippi plantation, he was subjected to all those blasting pressures which in a scant eighty years have sent the Negro people hurtling, without clearly defined trajectory from slavery to emancipation, from log cabin to city tenement, from the white folks' fields and kitchens to factory assembly lines; and which, between wars, have shattered the wholeness of its folk consciousness into a thousand writhing pieces.³

And, as Ellison states in summing up his own assessment of the novel, *Black Boy* describes this "process in the personal terms of one Negro childhood." On this point, Ellison is adamant, even if he does slightly over-state his case. But what he is attempting to do is set the record straight by giving the novel its proper identity so as not to confuse the issue as many white critics have done in their evaluation of *Black Boy*. Most

² Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," *Shadows & Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 78.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

have viewed the novel as an autobiographical description of the brutality Wright suffered as a child and have taken this to be a summary of the experience of all Negroes who grew up in the South. Ellison vehemently rejects this line of thinking and attempts to deal with the novel as art, which, he maintains, white critics have failed to do.

But Ellison, like his white counterparts, has little real interest in the novel as art. His real concern is with Wright's perception of black folk culture. He places the novel in the blues tradition as a convenient way of dismissing it as a statement about black culture, while at the same time trying not to undermine its significance as a work of art. Even though Ellison succeeds in fooling his reading public about his basic intentions, it is doubtful that he has much regard for the artistic merits of *Black Boy*. Beyond stating that *Black Boy* has certain features in common with the blues tradition—features such as the basic attitude of the writer and the tone of the novel—Ellison fails to show how the novel serves as an extension of the blues, either in terms of its perspective or its basic structure.

The aspect of the novel that most occupies Ellison's attention is Wright's assumption that black folk culture is inherently brutal and acts as a barrier against the affirmation of individual will. In his own elusive and subtle way, Ellison actually accuses Wright of not understanding the basic character of black culture. He argues that Wright's assertion of his individual will runs counter to the group's consciousness and its will to survive. The basic conflict, as Ellison sees it, is not caused by the limitations of black folk culture or the restraints it places on the individual, but by Wright's own misunderstanding of the group's basic character. According to Ellison, *Black Boy* represents "a groping for *individual* values, in a black community whose values were . . . defined as 'pre-individual.'"⁴ Ellison borrowed this concept from Edward Bland, a black critic who pointed out that:

In the pre-individualistic thinking of the Negro the stress is on the group. Instead of seeing in terms of the individual, the Negro

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

sees in terms of "races," masses of peoples separated from other masses according to color. Hence, an act rarely bears intent against him as a Negro individual. He is singled out not as a person but as a specimen of an ostracized group. He knows that he never exists in his own right but only to the extent that others hope to make the race suffer vicariously through him.⁵

Ellison states that in such a society the development of one's own individuality depends upon a "series of accidents" within the black family. He doesn't mention just how these accidents shape one's individuality. Neither is it clear just what constitutes an accident in this sense. What Ellison seems to be alluding to, however, is the relative powerlessness of the black family and its inability to provide the child with a sense of himself. In this sense, he seems to be in basic agreement with Wright. He suggests that the black family is incapable of giving the black child a sense of his individual destiny because of its preoccupation with the need to survive. Ellison does point out that the pre-individual state of the black family impresses upon the "Negro child the omniscience and omnipotence of whites to the point that whites appear as a human as Jehovah, and as relentless as a Mississippi flood."⁶ But what Ellison fails to realize is that it is precisely this enforced feeling of powerlessness that Wright so vehemently rejected and sought to define himself against.

Ellison, moreover, avoids dealing with the real issues raised in *Black Boy*. In one part of his discussion, for instance, Ellison takes up the matter of beatings, which occupies an important place in the novel. Wright took a negative view of the beatings he received as a child and saw them as not only an example of the underlying brutality of the black family, but also as further evidence of its attempt to stifle and check individual initiative. But Ellison, instead of explaining this brutality as a result of the oppressive conditions the black family has had to endure, merely states that these beatings were for "the child's own good." Such a cop-out is not only absurd but lays the blame on the victim for circumstances over which he has no control. Ellison implies that Wright had no understanding

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

of the forces operating against the black family and as a consequence suffered from certain misconceptions. But, despite his own argument that *Black Boy* is an expression of Wright's unique vision, Ellison is not really ready to accept that as fact. It is precisely Wright's vision that is being brought into question. The point is that Ellison could care less about *Black Boy* as an extension of the blues tradition. The idea was useful only as a tool to hide his real concerns.

Now the issue here is not that Ellison is incorrect in his basic assumptions but that the method he employs makes his assumptions suspect. James Baldwin made similar observations about *Native Son*, but he did not start out by saying that the novel was an extension of the blues, which would have, as in the case of Ellison, only confused the issue.

However, Ellison is correct in his basic premise. Wright's rejection of black folk culture does pose serious problems in his work and tends to compromise its basic significance. He, for the most part, fails to deal with what Baldwin calls those complex mechanisms for survival which are so central a part of the black experience. Viewed in this perspective, one can readily accept Ellison's reading of *Black Boy*—Wright had missed some of the more important aspects of the black experience. But this has little to do with his misconceptions. One would assume, to follow Ellison's line of reasoning, that if we are to view *Black Boy* solely within the confines of art, then as a novelist, Wright is entitled to his misconceptions as long as they serve as a functional part of the novel as an art form. For, as Ellison points out, the novel is guided by the principles of "artistic selectivity," which eliminate from art those elements of experience which contain no compelling significance." The autobiography, on the other hand, is guided by a different set of principles and has to seek as much as possible to remain true to the experience it describes.

This is not to say that the writer of an autobiography is not at liberty to take license, but that experience, rather than imagination, provides the artistic framework in which he must operate. The autobiography only strives to be art when the writer seeks to project an image of himself beyond the circumstances of his life. It is in this sense that *Black Boy* differs from the

more traditional forms of black autobiography such as the slave narrative or the autobiographies of W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Although *Black Boy* contains elements from the traditional forms of the black autobiography, it represents a departure from the basic format of the autobiographical narrative and employs a pattern similar to *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Like *Black Boy*, the character in this novel also seeks to define himself against the limitations of his society. And, like *Black Boy* it is the story of an artist. But the important difference between both *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Black Boy* and the traditional black autobiography such as *Up From Slavery* is that the traditional autobiography poses no serious indictment against society except by implication. This did not occur in the black autobiography employing the traditional format until the publication of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, in which the individual life of one man serves as both an indictment against the society as well as an example of black manhood in the process of affirming itself against the limitations imposed upon it by the social order.

The *Autobiography of Malcolm X* is the greatest achievement of the black autobiography employing the traditional elements. It combines elements from the slave narrative, relying on the resources of oral culture, and expresses a growth in awareness as well as aspects of the Horatio Alger myth. But while the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* represents the greatest achievement of the black autobiography, it also represents a dramatic turn in autobiographical expression. It specifically relates to a black social and political context and projects the image of the black man in his encounter and triumph over the restrictions of a racist society.

Black Boy, on the other hand, presents the black man in retreat from his society. The difference is not so much a matter of attitude but of sensibility and basic perspective. Wright was an artist engaged in the process of trying to discover his place in a society that denied him. Unlike Malcolm X, he lacks the political perspective necessary to understand his relationship to the society and to give his art a definite focus. Malcolm X actually became a symbol of the very culture that Wright had

come to reject and shows it to be a vital force capable of transforming itself and offering sustenance to the individual. Above all, what the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* demonstrates is how one can discover both value and purpose in affirming his identity in his relationship to black culture. What Wright's work shows, especially his most recent publication, *American Hunger*, is that in his rejection of black culture he could find no refuge in art and ultimately had to abandon it altogether, later turning to journalism as a means of coming to grips with his experience.

This pattern of self-depreciation, clearly discernible in *Black Boy*, reached disastrous proportions in *American Hunger*. In establishing the connection between the two books, the distance Wright has travelled beyond himself becomes clear. He has completely lost touch with his own basic impulses. He made one last desperate attempt to re-establish those links in the novel, *The Long Dream*, to try and discover the pattern in his life, but by that time it was too late. *American Hunger* serves as a prelude to this final disaster.

In *American Hunger*, there are none of the brief flashes of lyricism that punctuate *Black Boy*; none of the blazing ludicity or the quick turns of irony that characterize Wright's work at its best. *American Hunger* is a desperate book and it appears that Wright is groping for something he neither comprehends nor fully accepts. The only real problem is that he has virtually no idea of what he is after; he cannot understand the nature of the experience he is trying to describe. Clearly, he is not in full command of his creative powers, and *American Hunger* seems like one of those books one simply writes to get over with.

The book concentrates on his experience in the north, but unlike *Black Boy*, Wright provides us with only a bare outline of that experience. Very little substance informs this book, most of it being taken up by the discussion of his disillusionment with the Communist Party. This portion of *American Hunger* had already been published in the anthology *The God That Failed*, a collection of essays by a group of European and American writers chronicling their involvement with the Communist Party. The potentially richer sections of the book, sections dealing with life in Chicago and the periods of adjustment

to what amounted to an alien environment, are simply passed over, providing us with very little detail. This weakens the significance of the book, making it little more than a rather feeble attempt to get at something by avoiding getting down to the fundamental issues. Had Wright developed the sections of the book dealing with his life in the north, it would have been a richer and, indeed, a more significant book. But as it stands, it fails to approach the magnitude of *Black Boy* or any other of Wright's major novels. The social context that had influenced *Black Boy* is gone and the book reads more like an extended essay in which the self becomes a projection of an inner void. It lacks both the energy and the kind of conviction that Wright conveyed in *Native Son* and in short stories like "The Man Who Lived Underground" and "Big Boy Leaves Home." The basic failure of *American Hunger* is that there is an absence of any real dramatic encounter with the self at gut level and vast areas go unexplored.

However, there are moments in *American Hunger* when Wright comes through with some explosive insights. While these constitute the better sections of the book, Wright does not follow through or really develop these insights into anything substantial. In one moment of insight he defines an act of treason as being a crime against the individual:

My knowledge of how Negroes react to their plight makes me declare that no man can possibly be individually guilty of treason, that an insurgent act is but a man's desperate answer to those who twist his environment so that he cannot fully share the spirit of his native land. Treason is a crime of the state.

This is one of the rare instances in which Wright uses the experience of black people as a means of defining his relationship to America. He defines the concept of treason from the perspective of black people and gives it a completely new definition but he does not really probe the idea suggested here in terms of its fullest implications. He fails to redefine America from a totally black perspective. This is just one instance. He goes on to argue that the real danger facing the country comes from those who are no longer capable of responding to the system and suggests a kind of revolutionary inevitability, which simply doesn't hold up under historical evidence. For those who have

been demoralized by a system are the ones who are the least capable of changing it. Revolutions do not spring automatically from the head of Zeus; they involve the ability of men to act. These conclusions serve as examples of the influence of Marxism on Wright's thinking. For Marxists would argue that revolutions are essentially the products of certain historical forces, rather than of the ability of people to act when they have decided that they have had enough.

But what is even more revealing than Wright's refusal to address himself to the more substantive issues he raises in *American Hunger* is what he has to say about himself. He states that:

I hungered to share the dominant assumptions of my time and act upon them. I did not want to feel, like an animal in a jungle, that the whole world was alien and hostile. I did not want to make individual war or individual peace. So far I had managed to keep humanly alive through transfusions from books. In my concrete relations with others I had encountered nothing to encourage me to believe in my feelings. It had been by denying what I saw with my eyes, disputing what I felt with my body, that I had managed to keep my identity intact.

What this passage reveals is the extent to which Wright depends on forces outside himself for self-justification. He found it almost impossible to deal with anything as it specifically affected him. Even as he writes he seems totally unaware of the contradiction involved in what he is saying. One does not keep his identity intact by denying himself. But the emotional thrust behind the passage becomes clearer when one considers that it was written in reference to his involvement with the Communist Party. This passage shows that the reasons for Wright's attraction to the Communist Party were not so much an ideological commitment as the feelings of acceptance the Communists gave him. He would just as easily have joined the Catholic Church had it given him the same kind of emotional support he found in the Communist Party. Wright desperately needed a confirmation of himself and was prey to anyone who offered it. This is the real tragedy of Richard Wright, and this is what eventually carried him to France, looking for the kind of emotional confirmation of self that he found absent in America.

Wright states, in the concluding pages of *American Hunger*, that all his life he had "a hunger for a new way to live." This hunger became the dominant theme in his life. Because it consisted of one retreat after another, he was never able to really confront the agony that kept nagging away at his gut. And it is not that he hated himself, but that he was frightened by what he knew about the human condition. He just wanted to get away from it and to feel free to experience the sensations of life as any human being would. But it was too painful and, above all, far too terrifying. For Wright knew, as perhaps few of us come to accept, that life is an extremely delicate affair and something one just doesn't take for granted. This is why Wright notes in *American Hunger* that the hardest thing in the world for him to do is to tell the truth. He knew that life is filled with many truths and that none of them had succeeded in setting him free. They merely teased him into opening up old wounds and revealing the same old vicious lies. In the end it simply got to him and he went to Europe, hoping to find refuge in a foreign land. *American Hunger* is Wright's epitaph to his native land, one last desperate attempt to wrestle a vision of himself from the throng of racism. The fact that the book is less successful than some of his other works has little bearing on Wright's attempt. We can congratulate him on a bold effort.

Benedict College
Columbia, South Carolina