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ABSTRACT

The existential implications in Bontemps' "Black Thunder," Richard Wright's "Native Son," and Ellison's "Invisible Man" are explored in this paper. Each of these novels exhibits a concern about man structuring his existence through the choices he makes in an absurd world. Gabriel, the protagonist of "Black Thunder," differentiates himself from the other characters and identifies himself as an existential hero at the end of the novel when he steps out of a trance to surrender; although he is physically destroyed by execution, his act assumes heroic magnitude because he has struggled against the absurd until the end. It is with the death of Mary Dalton in "Native Son" that Bigger, in his own mind, ceases to exist as an object. Bigger's state of mind after the murder allows him to combat the irrational world. The "Invisible Man" depicts an odyssey as the protagonist moves from situation to situation, encountering disillusionment at each turn; he learns, finally, to "believe in nothing if not in action" when he has been stripped of all meaning by passivity and submission to absurdity. (LL)

THE EXISTENTIAL DIMENSIONS OF AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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by

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The use of the term existential to describe bodies of literature from Aeschylus to Pynchon is so abused that one feels the necessity to exercise a degree of caution, almost timidity, when applying the term to any aspects of fiction. Undergraduates, as well as some fairly sophisticated graduate students, think nothing of using the term with an almost incredible intellectual promiscuity: hence, one is confronted quarterly or semesterly, depending upon the calendar under which one is working, with facile and somewhat pretentious statements concerning the "existential despair in King Lear," "the existential milieu of Salinger's fiction," "the undercurrent of existential thought in the poetry of Shelley." No one suffers in a narrative, but "suffers existentially;" no one loves, but "loves existentially;" and there is even an occasional reference to "existential deaths."

Therefore, I long ago concluded that when students, and, very often, teachers use the term existential, what they are attempting to communicate is that the work being discussed is incomprehensible to them. My suspicions were recently confirmed in a discussion with a college instructor whose shallowness appalled me: after viewing the AFT production of Genet's The Maids, she declared the work "very existential;" the next production, The Man in the Glass Booth, she described as "extremely existential;" and I really shudder when I realize that we still

have three more AFT productions which will probably lend themselves to categories ranging from "rather existential," "somewhat existential," to "non-existential." After all, the very word is so formidable that, under ideal circumstances, it can end any further discussion of a work and provide a shield behind which one can conceal his ignorance.

Precisely because I am aware of the prevalence of the charlatanism that I have described, I was somewhat reluctant to present this paper, and very often found myself questioning the validity of my critical approach. What are all of the nuances contained in the term existential? Could there be for any literature, and particularly Afro-American literature, the formulation of an existential hermenutics? Inasmuch as only one of the writers whom I have chosen indicated any interest in existential thought per se, was I not imposing on these texts specialized philosophical constructs that were more related to my own pedagogical or polemical biases than to the writer's intention?

Almost all of these questions were answered indirectly by students, for what I observed over six years of teaching at the

University of California is that the philosophical issues raised in papers submitted in my course in Afro-American literature were not substantively different from those raised in my course in Modern European literature. While treatment of the racial dimension of the novel was never neglected--certainly, anyone will concede that it is virtually impossible to discuss the Afro-American novel without having reference to the complex history and culture of Black Americans--several basic ontological issues surfaced in each class:

1. The problem of the protagonist's attempt to assert his authenticity in the faces of forces, whether individuals or institutions, that would deny that authenticity.

2. Estrangement from the "crowd," or mass commitment and a concomitant commitment to develop the self.

3. The atrophy of the will, or its opposite, the commitment to rebellion.

4. The emergence of the anti-hero or outsider whose ethical and moral impulses or codes find their sources within the person rather than externally imposed.

Although the language or terminology differed in each class, the basic concerns were the same; and my subsuming these concerns under the umbrella term of existentialism was a result of my viewing the works more closely and realizing that if it was true that one or more of these themes invariably surfaced in the writings of Europeans, it was also true that they appeared invariably in Afro-American literature, whether or not they were consciously injected into the texture of the work by the writer.

The argument that only Wright and Ellison professed any interest in existential thought does not make my thesis any less valid, for it should be kept in mind that when we speak of existentialism, we are not referring to a definable philosophical construct; for as Kierkegaard himself reminds us, it is impossible to reduce existence to a system; but we are concerned about man as a being constantly structuring his existence through the choices that he makes and never fully attaining the goal; we are speaking of the horror of carving out an existence in an absurd world--absurd in the etymological sense of being dissonant, incoherent, choatic; and above all, man the rebel, who bellows an unambiguous NO to the forces that would limit and define his humanity. I became even more convinced of the validity

of my thesis when I realized that for each of the Black protagonists whom I had chosen to examine, there invariably came a point in his psychic development when his battle moved beyond the racial plane to a struggle with an entire universe whose inhabitants did not share his intensity, his heightened awareness, or his willingness to struggle to the death. The statement of Chen, Malraux's young terrorist in Man's Fate, that men are the vermin of the earth and the true terrorist must learn to live with solitude and act alone, is echoed by Bontemps' Gabriel Prosser and Wright's Bigger Thomas. Only the racial contexts differ. Each protagonist, to paraphrase Camus, has learned "to live absurdly through permanent rebellion," to act against those established ideologies, whether racial or social, that threaten one's being with a total spiritual annihilation. Sisyphus, then, is reified in the literature of all races, all cultures, all eras.

Bontemps' Black Thunder, published some five years before Native Son, is far too often simply treated as a good historical novel. Students, teachers and critics all piously rejoice in Bontemps' having created an admirable black hero. Yet a closer look at the fictive universe of the book clearly betrays the error of such a limited approach to the text. The theme of the book is stated in a brilliant fusion of narrative techniques

when the narrator reveals the working of Bundy's mind to us:

> Oh, it was hard to love freedom. Of course, it was the self-respecting thing to do. Everything that was equal to a ground-hog wanted to be free. But it was so expensive, this love; it was such a disagreeable compulsion, a bondage.

This theme is further reiterated in a conversation between Juba and Gabriel:

> Gabriel: There ain't nothing but hard times waiting when a man get to studying about freedom.
>
> Juba: H'm, like a gal that loves a no-count man.
>
> Gabriel: There ain't no peace for him lessen he can fly.

The view that freedom is "so expensive," "a disagreeable compulsion," and "a bondage" separates Gabriel from the other characters in the novel. They would submit to the absurdity, represented by chattel slavery, rather than risk the inevitable discomfiture that would result from open rebellion. They are deaf to the strange music Gabriel hears when the words Liberty, Equality and Fraternity are articulated. They lack the ability to shun superstition or defy the gods as Gabriel does. And when Gabriel stands alone at the end of the novel, psychologically metamorphosed into the general, and steps out of a trance to surrender, he becomes the true anti-hero, the man who never surrendered even in

the face of overwhelming odds. His conduct is that of one who is disoriented (notice how often the nouns "dream" and "trance" are used to describe his state in the last section of the novel), he is physically destroyed by execution, but his act assumes heroic magnitude because he has struggled against the absurd until the end. He joins company with Camus' metaphysical rebel who states, "I rebel. Therefore, we exist."

Native Son, Richard Wright's most widely read novel, has probably been subjected to more critical scrutiny than any other Afro-American work. Criticism has focussed largely upon two problems: (1) the failure, philosophically, of the novel as a work of Marxist propaganda, and (2) the aesthetic failure of the novel, characterized by heated debates about its structural flaws. A few less adventurous souls have turned to Wright's essay, "How Bigger Was Born," seeking a map that would lead them through the labyrinth of the novel. And even such notables as James Baldwin have taken time to write critiques in which they argue that Bigger was "atypical" of the average Black--a rather peculiar observation, when one considers that the true making of a hero or an anti-hero is, in fact, that he is different!

Significantly, there has been virtually no close critical reading of the novel for an understanding of the rather subtle substructure upon which it is constructed--an existential milieu that is radically different from the earlier Uncle Tom's Children that prepares us for Wright's later filing with existentialism, as represented in The Outsider and the short story "The Man Who Lived Underground." Even Kingsley Widmer, in his cogent essay "Black Existentialism: Richard Wright," restricted himself to those works that were explicitly existential and made no reference to Native Son. The novel, if one were to heed the more simplistic explications of it as articulated in critical journals and classroom situations, was simply about the dehumanizing aspects of ghetto existence.

Yet, if one read carefully only the final episode in the novel, he would be forced to conclude that Wright's intentions had to be much broader. Bigger's statement to Max--much to the chagrin of those who insist upon a socio-political interpretation of the novel--raised questions that transcended the very boundaries of the narrative:

> I didn't want to kill, but what I kill for I am... It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something....I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for them....

The crucial part of this quotation is the equation of the act of destruction (killing) with creation of a self. Even the notion of feeling "things hard enough to kill for them" further supports the idea of Bigger's evolution from a mere existent or, as Heidegger and sartre would label the state, being-in-itself, to a conscious acting being, the last two states represented in the existential paradigm as being-for-itself and being-in-the-world or being-among-others. The "faint, wry, bitter smile" on Bigger's face at the end of the narrative represents not only a triumph over life, but a triumph over the fear of death. In spite of its awkward moment, its obvious structural flaws, and its artificially imposed structure, the entire book lends itself to this interpretation.

The first section, or Book I, presents Bigger as a totally passive being, an object that is responded to and acted upon rather than an agent of action. His responsibility to his family weighs heavily upon him and is externally imposed; the demands of his peers follow a similar pattern; the white world in the abstract,

overhead, the cars that swoop by him obliviously further emphasize his non-existence, and even the language and attitudes of the Daltons during their initial interview of Bigger clearly relegate him to the world of thing rather than person. One need only examine the expression of liberal philanthrophy stated by Mr. Dalton in the presence of Bigger:

> Don't you think it would be a wise procedure to inject him into his new environment at once, so he can get the feel of things?....Using the analysis contained in the case record the relief sent us, I think we should evoke an immediate sense of confidence....

Mr. Dalton could well have been discussing a pet or an article of furniture, something to be arranged for or arranged. And while I would not deny the racial aspects of this statement, what is most startling about it is the speaker's mechanical approach to Bigger's existence. In a later section of the novel, when Bigger moves to another level of conscious awareness, his comment to Max reveals his rejection of himself as mere object:

> Mr. Max, a guy gets tired of being told what he can do and can't do. You get a little job here and a little job there....Pretty soon you can't hope for nothing. You just keep moving all the time doing what other folks say...so the world can roll on and other people live....

Even Mary Dalton and Jan--perhaps one should say particularly Mary and Jan--see Bigger as object or thing: a possible union member, a possible Marxist, another object of their grand scheme for the salvation of the proletariat. Never is Bigger consulted as person; never is there an awarenes he frightened Black boy is being denied any choices of self actualization; and it is precisely this treatment of Bigger that is directly responsible for the tragic events that culminate Book I of the novel.

It is with the death of Mary Dalton that Bigger Thomas as object ceases to exise, and Writht prepares his readers for a new Bigger, one who is prepared to define his relationship with the world and structure a self.

It is in Camus' The Rebel that we find the philosophical analogue to Bigger's transformation in the second and third books of the novel. In his discussion of rebellion, Camus argues:

> (It) is born of the spectacle of irrationality confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition,...an impulse to demand order in the face of chaos. (Rebellion) is an urge to transform but for reasons found within itself since it cannot find them elsewhere....

It is precisely on these grounds that Bigger redefines the "accident" as "murder." The narrator places this in perspective by describing Bigger's state of mind immediately after the killing of Mary Dalton:

> Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident. He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed. That was what everybody would say anyhow....And in a certain sense, he knew that the girl's death had not been accidental. He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstances to make visible or dramatic his will. His crime seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this....There was a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that someday he would be able to say publicly that he had done it. It was as though he had an obscure but deep debt to fulfill himself in accepting the deed.

Bigger's redefinition of the act allows him to combat that irrational world delineated in Camus' text; but far more significantly, it allows him to create a self, to discover a moral vantage point over those who previously controlled and defined his existence. Fear and shame are substituted by pity and loathing in his response to his family. The Thomas family now appears to Bigger as being comprised of people who have allowed themselves to be stripped of all of their humanity; he emphasizes these feelings through his later perception of each member of the family as stunted and blind:

> He felt in the quiet presence of his mother, brother and sister a force inarticulate and unconscious, making for living without thinking, making for peace and habit, making for a hope that blinded...(they)wanted and yearned to see life in a certain way; they needed a certain picture of the world....The whole thing came to him in the form of a powerful and simple feeling; there was in everyone a great hunger to believe that made him bline, and if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted and never be caught.

Bigger, in his new found discovery, realizes that the whites, also particularly the Daltons, were also "blind." And the significance of the second book is that one witnesses a total metamorphosis of Bigger Thomas from a passive object to an active agent demanding his own fate. His manipulation of the Daltons, his misleading the private detectives, his rejection of his peers--all give credence to Bigger's description of himself as "a man reborn."

If the novel has, perhaps, a major flaw, it consists of the narrator's inability or unwillingness to sustain the characterization of Bigger and existentialist; for between the second and third books, Bigger's new found internal freedom is far too often restricted by the old fears of the first book and the implicit sense of remorse suggested by the images of the dead Mary Dalton that intrude upon Bigger's peace of mind. Yet, the thrust of the

novel's meaning remains existential as evinced by Bigger's response to the preacher in which the narrator informs us that Bigger had destroyed all commitment to religious dogma before he killed Mary Dalton. Indeed, as we discover late4 in the novel, Bigger was one for whom God was already dead. Therefore, his final statement, "What I killed for I am," is a statement of affirmation, not negation; of self-authentication, not self-obliteration.

Without doubt, the singular most discussed book written by an Afro-American in the past decade is Invisible Man. Moreover, even those critics who would dismiss all of Afro-American literature in serious discourse related to the philosophical dimensions of fiction invariably treat Ellison's work. Much of the excitement about Ellison's novel, of course, is its appeal to symbol chasers, to those critics who believe that the merit of a work lies in the number of obscure allusions that it contains. Still, for reasons which I will entertain during the question-and-answer period, it is considered a safe work. Still, one must concede that the novel has certain intrinsic merits that make it a masterpiece of modern existential literature.

Perhaps Ellison's intellectual background determined the form and content his art would assume. His unabashed admiration for Malraux, his broad acquaintance with literature in general, and his public stance as novelist-philospher are all evident in his writings. Ironically, however, I have always found his discussions of his major work, Invisible Man, somewhat elliptical and incomplete. The writer's discussion of pieces of paper, notes and speeches to indicate major junctures in the novel, his imposition of Kenneth Burke's paradigm of the novel as movement from purpose to passion to perception, and his explanation of the allegorical significance of the names of some of the characters, e.g., Sybil, Rhinehart, Trueblood, all may enhance our appreciation for the novel, but somehow ignore the major philosophical problem.

That Invisible Man depicts an odyssey cannot be denied; we observe the young protagonist as he moves from situation to situation, encountering disillusionment at each turn. What is less obvious, however, is the Kafkaesque nature of the protagonist's plight, the fact that he must be held at least indirectly responsible for his own plight; for if it is true that the invisibility to which the hero in an enlightened state refers, resides in the eyes of others, it is equally true that it is his own

blindness that allows him to become victim. It becomes rather difficult to see that point because of the narrative perspective: Ellison has his protagonist relate the narrative to us in retrospect. We are then presented with a hero who has forced us to see the comic in an apparently tragic situation.

Like K. in The Castle, he is in search of the elusive, the indefinable, and perhaps the illusory. From the Battle Royal scene to the final retreat underground, the quest for the ideal is met with frustration and failure. The school, the factory, the Brotherhood, all promise something that is never actualized or concretized; and it is only years later, sitting in his hole that the protagonist realizes this. Most important, however, is the fact that Ellison's protagonist, like Kafka's K., is a victim of what was referred to in Greek mythology as veleitas, an imperfection of the will that impedes one from acting decisively in one's own best interest. Like K., he pursues the illusion even when it is obvious that it lacks substance, e.g., his wish to return to the school after he has been suspended; he willingly submits the self to others to dispose of as they wish. The most dramatic examples of this would be his allowing

the Brotherhood to furnish him even with a new name; and like all of Kafka's heroes, he is capable of momentary spurts of rebellion but incapable of sustaining them. It is as if, to paraphrase the late Robert Lindner, there is a biological necessity for rebellion; but neither of these characters, neither Ellison's nor Kafka's, is able to sustain it. That is why if Invisible Man learns anything in thenovel that is worthwhile, it is to "believe in nothing if not in action." Passivity and submission to absurdity have stripped him of all meaning. The lesson learned in this novel is that one is at least partly responsible for one's own self-effacement; and if Ellison presented a more optimistic portrait of modern man than Kafka, he was able to do so only because he was able to work these ideas into the prologue and epilogue.

I will be the first to admit that what I have presented is largely an introduction to a vast and complex topic. Any one of the three novels treated could have been examined in greater detail; my concern was not to prove that a given novel revealed an existential orientation but to establish a possibility for broader discussion of the topic. As teachers of literature, if we are at all serious, we experience literature not merely as

distinct artifacts of divergent racial experience, but as views of reality that negate of affirm our own views. Hence, while a literature may be created in a specific racial or cultural milieu, while the events of history may very well determine its form as well as its content, it inevitably returns to the question, "What does it mean to be, to exist, to authenticate one's self?" It is my firm belief that all literature worth reading and discussing entertains this question, and that literature which fails to do so is doomed to be ephemeral and evanescent. My experiences in teaching Afro-American literature have convinced me that this challenging and disturbing question is woven into the fabric of every major Afro-American text, and that the problems posed by the questions raised in contexts that may appear to be exclusively racial have their parallels with larger metaphysical concerns. In short, the only element that separtates Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov and Wright's Bigger Thomas is geography with an accompanying accident of race. Both might say, "What I killed for I am."