

Richard Wright and his Anxious Influence: On Ellison and Baldwin

And in this lies Wright's most important achievement: he has converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and "going underground" into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly, and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America.

– Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues"

In *Uncle Tom's Children*, in *Native Son*, and, above all, in *Black Boy*, I found expressed for the first time in my life, the sorrow, the rage, and the murderous bitterness which was eating up my life and the lives of those around me. His work was an immense liberation and revelation for me. He became my ally and my witness, and alas! my father.

– James Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard"

It is not easy being a father. Sigmund Freud was right, no matter how bizarre his evidential sources: the children will come for you. To be a father is to have children, to have them under your gaze, but also to set them freer than you may have ever intended. Fatherly authority is defined, in many ways, by the insistence of his subjects on the rights of refusal, contestation, and overcoming. That is what it means to have children. They are yours, if you are the father. They inherit you. But they also belong to themselves. And that belonging-to-self thing is largely generated by struggle, opposition, and overcoming. Parricide.

Richard Wright is in this way very much the father of two of the most important African-American writers writing in his shadow: James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. Important in their own right, forging different yet intersecting aesthetic sensibilities and legacies, Baldwin and Ellison share a common fatherly origin. Wright fathers Baldwin and Ellison, he sets them free, and, through struggle and opposition, they become their own kind of writers. What were the historical terms of that paternal origin? What did it make possible, in terms of the professional and writerly life of Baldwin and Ellison? And what kinds of surmounting of the father were

necessary in order for those lives to thrive on the national- and world-stage? What is this parricide of the great writer by two great, perhaps greater, writers?

The historical moment is important and, in its own way, relatively straightforward. After a difficult childhood, documented in archetypal terms in *Black Boy*, his autobiographical work rooted in early twentieth century Mississippi and surrounds, Wright moved to Memphis, Tennessee at age 17 and then continued to Chicago just over a year later. Leaving the South meant leaving all sorts of things behind: Jim Crow, a particular form of religiosity, complex and oppressive family relations, and forms of life that defined the rural black South in the early twentieth century. Arrival in Chicago meant urban forms of life, which, for Wright, meant an early job as a postal worker (from which he was let go during the Great Depression) and membership in the communist party. This latter piece is an important part of mid-century African-American literature, especially in terms of his role as father to Baldwin and Ellison. The communist party introduced Wright to an ideology and worldview that fundamentally transformed his relationship to the rural South. No longer just a *personal* objection to his family's loyalty to the Seventh Day Adventist church, communism allowed Wright to both deepen his critique of religion and broaden his sense of what oppression is and how it works. Though he later leveled severe critiques of the party in novels such as *The Outsider*, communism informs much of his later non-fiction, including, perhaps most emphatically (and controversially), his essay "Tradition and Industrialization" from the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris. It is precisely the *anti-tradition* impulse of communism that drew Wright in, and that critical relationship to traditions and habits never quite leaves his thinking, no matter how much he evolves as a cultural and political critic. It is also a site at which both Baldwin and Ellison offer their substantial critiques.

But communism and the communist party also helped make Wright a *professional* writer. To be sure, he had been writing since middle school and clearly understood himself to be a writer in the existential sense, but the communist party, first through the short-lived journal *Left Front* (shut down by the party in 1937) and then continuing publications in *The New Masses* and *Daily Worker*, made Wright's writing a profession, a vocation in the fullest sense.¹ These professional and personal relationships were fraught from the beginning, and increasingly so as he developed as a writer and thinker. Wright's move from Chicago, where he had productive relationships with white communist party members, to Harlem was not without difficulty and pain. In New York City, conflicts with white members intensified, at times erupting in physical violence, and deteriorating relationships culminated in him ultimately leaving the party itself.² And yet Wright was appointed and worked as the Harlem editor of *Daily Worker* for a spell and also edited *New Challenge* – a literary magazine that had a short, but eventful life. As an editor, Wright opened up writerly possibilities for both Baldwin and Ellison. With his formal, executive position, Wright offered Baldwin and Ellison editorial work that helped them to network early publications – precisely the sorts of connections needed to develop as thinkers and writers. Like Wright, Baldwin was an autodidact, having taught himself the craft of literature and expressive voice through disciplined reading and informal tutelage from the likes of Wright, Beauford Delaney, and others, whereas Ellison's education at Tuskegee, especially in his work with Morteza Drezel Sprague (*Shadow and Act* is dedicated to Sprague) and a variety of music professors, emerged as a writer from formal education. But both needed Wright's access to publications in order to get started in Harlem. In this sense, Wright was, for Baldwin and Ellison, a father with connections. He made their *professional* lives as writers possible. That is, he made it possible for them to choose writing as a profession, which, in turn, becomes a broader and

significant identity out of which emerges some of the most important fiction and non-fiction of the mid-century.

The professional connections, however, tell only one part of the story, a part that is largely about Wright's positioning as a professional father. He was also a father of ideas, of visions of blackness and Black life that provoked intense reaction from Baldwin and Ellison both. Indeed, one could say with real confidence that Baldwin made a name for himself as a critic of Wright. Baldwin's critique is *always* concerned with Wright's first serious novel: *Native Son*. For better or worse, Baldwin never quite moves on to Wright's other fiction and non-fiction, save for some allusions to *Black Boy* and the reports of southern Black life that emerge from that memoir. In taking aim at Bigger Thomas and what that character said about Wright's vision of the meaning of Black life and history, Baldwin sees not just a certain one-dimensionality in that vision, but also, more emphatically (and controversially), a kind of participation in white supremacy, its gaze, and its construction of what is meant by "blackness." Baldwin's early essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," arguably his first big splash as a writer at age 24, centers this criticism on the figure of Bigger as an extension of what white people have made of Black life and people. Baldwin writes:

For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that *he has accepted a theology that denies him life*, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth.³

The protest novel, as characterized by Baldwin, aims to accomplish two things: document atrocity or injustice and describe a life that exceeds or resists that injustice. This is why Bigger's acceptance of life-denying theology is so important; the *true* atrocity, the construction of Bigger's blackness under the gaze of white violence, is obscured by the presentation of Bigger as exemplary of the African-American experience. And so, Baldwin concludes, *Native Son* is a

failure. The failure “lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.”⁴ Baldwin underscores here how *Native Son* fixes blackness inside a rejection of life and without beauty. Nothing exceeds that rejection and lack of the beautiful. There is no humanity to Bigger. Baldwin’s attack amounts to a very real, immanent critique of Wright’s fiction and vision of antiblackness, of the relation between violence and Black subjectivity, and, in Wright’s own view, of a vision of Black people’s lives. Indeed, recalling his critique of protest literature in such pointed terms, Baldwin reports how Wright accused him of betrayal – a betrayal that exceeds a dispute between two men, elevated to the level of putting Black humanity itself under critical scrutiny. “Richard accused me of having betrayed him,” Baldwin writes in a later essay, “and not only him but all American Negroes by attacking the idea of protest literature.”⁵ In this dispute, a key issue in mid-century African-American thought comes into focus: what and who are Black people, and to what extent is Black life held under and controlled by the white gaze? What power, what capacity, and what substance of life is available to African-Americans in an antiblack world?

Baldwin never retracts or substantially revises this criticism of Wright, and his engagement with the literary father never substantially moves away from *Native Son*, despite Wright’s two decades of fiction and non-fiction that followed. For Baldwin, Bigger defines Wright and Wright defines Black life in the character of Bigger. With that said, however, it is important to realize that Baldwin also recognized the force of Wright’s insight. In “Many Thousands Gone,” Baldwin calls *Native Son* and the figure of Bigger “a report so indisputably authentic” that one can barely fathom the terms of objection and critique. And yet Baldwin offers just that. His critique in “Many Thousands Gone” turns on the complexity of life concealed by

Wright's uncompromising vision of Bigger, and thus Black life generally, as the product of white people's hatred and persecution – while also affirming the authenticity of Wright's vision. “[N]o American Negro,” Baldwin famously writes, “exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull,”⁶ which bears witness to the rage of living under regimes of antiblackness. In the very same moment that he admits this constant presence, Baldwin makes a decisive turn. African-Americans might live with this figure in the skull, and the figure might represent or prefigure the social and political possibilities opened up and closed off in interracial spaces, but that life is not the entirety of Black life. Far from it, in fact. Of Bigger and what we ought to make of how he lives the oppressive affects of the white gaze, Baldwin writes:

We are limited, however, to Bigger's view of them, part of a deliberate plan which might not have been disastrous if we were not also limited to Bigger's perceptions. What this means for the novel is that a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life.⁷

This “way of life,” which Baldwin will elsewhere refer to as “tradition,” names the folkways and secrets of Black life not in the margins of American life generally, but at the center of Black life turned back into itself, into the contours, complexity, and richness of life lived between Black people. *The relationship that Negroes bear to one another*. It is a way of life in the fullest sense: words and affects, institutions and language, stories and histories, traditions and counter-traditions. Wright *should* have seen, and surely did see, this complex of life between Black people, but in configuring Bigger as the receptacle of white hate made into a total identity, he elides that complexity in the name of a one-dimensional sense of Black life always beholden to the violence white people enact.

Upon Wright's passing in 1960, Baldwin revisited the legacy of his literary father in “Alas, Poor Richard.” The essay is long and rambling, full of anecdotes that swing from deeply

sympathetic – suggesting rekindled love for Wright upon his passing – to familiar terms of disagreement and dispute. Baldwin recalls Wright in Paris; the two of them shared the status as writers in exile. But whereas exile for Baldwin always meant clarity and sharpened focus on the meaning of the United States, Wright, in the account given in “Alas, Poor Richard,” saw Paris as relief from the suffocating racism of their home country. In that sense, a new home. Baldwin’s response to this is two-fold and reveals so much of his criticism of Wright’s early fiction. First, Baldwin expresses an abiding concern, with no small bit of snark and hostility, that Wright was unable to see the plight of Black people in Paris who hail from the colonies. What about their life? What story might they tell about antiblackness in Paris? Second, and most important for his larger interpretation, Baldwin sees Wright’s exile as an erasure of the kinds of Black life that made his fiction possible. Flight from the United States and the embrace of a new exilic form of existence, with all of its implications of a kind of racial liberation, is a matter of interpretation and diasporic fellow-feeling; Baldwin chides Wright for not discerning the common plight with African and West Indian migrants. But rejection of the United States is a rejection of the memories and histories that made Wright’s vocabulary, tone, thematic concerns, and entire world of affects possible –both as rage and as resistance. His inability to see the latter and only see the former limits Wright’s self-understanding, an understanding that, for Baldwin, *should* have been clarified from the position of exile. Alas, poor father Richard was unable. And so his moral and political vision suffers, confirming the limits Baldwin had long since documented.

Baldwin’s attack on Wright parallels much of what Ellison had to say about the limits of *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and other novels. The 1964 essay “The World and the Jug” contains Ellison’s most pronounced critique of Wright. In this essay, Ellison works his critique through a response to Irving Howe’s 1963 essay “Black Boys and Native Sons.” Howe’s essay argues that

Wright's *Native Son* manifests a kind of essence of Black life in the United States – confirming what Baldwin feared a reading of *Native Son* would generate. The “truth” told by *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, according to Howe, was “that Negroes were far from patient or forgiving, that they were scarred by fear, that they hated every moment of their suppression even when seeming most acquiescent, and that often enough they hated us, the decent and cultivated white men who from complicity or neglect shared in the responsibility for their plight.”⁸ Ellison notes that this reduces literature to sociology, which, in turn fails to attend to the aesthetic dimensions of not only African-American literature, but of Black life itself. What is blackness freed from sociological characterization and its limits? In other words: what is Black *life* as life, not as a social category or limiting stereotype? What is the Black *subject*, as opposed to what is the Black *object*? Simple questions, but transformative and potent in the hands of Ellison as he responds to what Howe calls Wright's “truth.” For Wright, according to Howe, “had told his contemporaries a truth so bitter, they paid him the tribute of trying to forget it.”⁹ One can imagine how Baldwin and Ellison would have received this accusation from a white critic, essentially instructing them on the truth of antiblackness. The wrong kind of paternal authority. Wright's truth is acknowledged by Baldwin, to be sure. Bigger lives in the skull of all African-Americans, and this is why *Native Son* is both important and worthy of targeting with critique. It tells a *kind* of truth, but, as Ellison notes, it is a truth that carries with it an important tradition of everyday cultural resistance. And so a truth that exceeds Wright's treatment of it. Ellison writes:

But there is also an American Negro tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain. It is a tradition which abhors as obscene any trading on one's own anguish for gain or sympathy; which springs not from a desire to deny the harshness of existence but from a will to deal with it as men at their best has always done.¹⁰

Howe emphasizes Black suffering and rage, and so sees Wright as a provocative sociologist of

African-American experience, but cannot see how Wright is also a truncated version of Black art and artistry. For Ellison, this means Howe, like Wright, cannot see Black excellence – “men at their best.”

What is this art and artistry? Ellison, like Baldwin, turns to the blues tradition as not just an example, but as a foundation of Black resistance and world-making. Blues is more than a musical form. It is, rather, a comprehensive rewriting of the terms of relation between Black people, their lives, and to the world of antiblackness. Speech, sound, gesture, communication, and the existential spatiality of each is transformed by the blues aesthetic. Ellison writes:

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.¹¹

In his, her, or their lyricism, the African-American writer exceeds sociology. Literature *is* or *becomes* art. According to both Baldwin in “Alas, Poor Richard” and Margaret Walker in *Richard Wright: Daemoniac Genius*,¹² Wright derides this motif as “art for art’s sake” as defanged literature separated from the affects that generate moral and political outrage. But, again, the blues aesthetic – that form of outrage and resistance linked to the very origins of African-American life – marks the transformation of sociological facts and realities into something more profoundly human: cultural expression and its traditions. This transformative effect is central to literature itself, Ellison claims, and Howe’s (as well as Wright’s) insistence on the plane of the sociological is tantamount to a lowering of expectations for African-American writing. Ellison notes that

...the question of how the ‘sociology of his existence’ presses upon a Negro writer’s work depends upon how much of his life the individual writer is able to transform into art. What moves a writer to eloquence is less meaningful than what he makes of it. How

much, by the way, do we know of Sophocles' wounds?¹³

We ask for documentation of the Black writer's wounds, but not those of Sophocles and all those white writers represented by the ancient Greek's name. Ellison calls us back to the literary as an aesthetic space, but also to a space that reflects the lush complexity of Black memory and cultural practice. Which, calls Ellison away from, and then against, the literary father. Wright was a literary presence for Ellison, without a doubt, a genuine father figure, but the meaning of that presence cannot be rendered on the plane of sociology. Rather, Ellison's literary text articulates Wright's presence as a sort of parricide. The parricide happens precisely in the moment of Ellison's embrace of a blues aesthetic in *Invisible Man*, an embrace that rejects the one-dimensionality of the sociological. Art for art's sake? No. Art in honor of a history of Black resistance? Yes. And so Ellison concludes his polemic against Howe with a plain statement, one that comes back to the question of *influence*, that peculiar form of literary friendship and familial relation. "I respected Wright's work," Ellison writes, "and I knew him, but this is not to say that he 'influenced' me as significantly as you assume. Consult the text!"¹⁴

What emerges from Baldwin's and Ellison's critical engagements with the shape of Wright's fiction is a vision of post-war Black subjectivity that could not be reduced to violent resistance. Art stands outside the agonistic social space of the interracial, yet occupies neither neutral nor ephemeral space. Rather, art is central to African-American world-making on the margins of and outside the white gaze and its violence. In "Alas, Poor Richard," Baldwin recounts Wright's own hostility toward this critical shift, decrying "art for art's sake" as a kind of aesthetics divorced from the visceral life of antiblackness. Why would sublimation of the experience of antiblack racism in aesthetic practices be preferable to a direct embrace of the rage such racism produces, which can then be channeled into the sorts of political action that flows

from it? Does the move to aesthetic practice and vernacular cultural expression and strategy obscure the need for a complete reordering of our social and political space? These remain open questions between Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison, and here we can see how the anxious dispute between Wright and his children prefigures contemporary debates about afropessimism and the meaning of Black cultural production in an antiblack world. Is all cultural production stained with antiblackness? We also see, for example, why a contemporary like Frantz Fanon evokes the power of Wright's fiction as protest and all of its attendant affects, marking, in an early afropessimist iteration, Black cultural production with abjection. This mid-century dispute tells a long story about Black life, its history, and the politics of its expressive culture. We are still working through this dispute.

It is worth noting that, in his own quiet way, Wright wrote back to Baldwin and Ellison in the late essay "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," collected as part of the 1957 volume *White Man Listen!*. The essay takes a long journey through African-American literature, introducing key conceptual distinctions along the way, and repeatedly coming back to the intertwining of literary expression and "folk utterances" drawn from the sacred and secular traditions of documenting pain, outrage, and resistance.¹⁵ African-American literature, Wright argues, has exactly the kinds of national roots and routes Baldwin and Ellison evoke, but in this essay the "sharp turn toward strictly racial themes" – rather than a universal humanism – remains a sign of the enduring centrality of white violence in renderings of Black life. If African-American literary expression "assumes the common themes and burdens of literary expression which are the heritage of all men," Wright concludes

Then by that token you will know that a humane attitude prevails in America towards us. And a gain in humaneness in America is a gain in humaneness for all. When that day comes, there will exist one more proof of the oneness of man, of the basic unity of human life on this earth.¹⁶

This passage confirms a lot of what Baldwin and Ellison had to say about Wright, and then confirms deeper conceptual terms: the meaning of humanism for, and perhaps from, the future. One wonders what discussion flows from this framing of the dispute. But, in the end, this piece by Wright garners no real attention from his literary children. Instead, he remained for them locked in his initial moment: Wright is Bigger, and barely more.

These are the perils of fatherhood, whether the biology and culture of reproduction or the figure of influence in literary life. Wright bequeaths a name to Baldwin and Ellison: *you are Black writers, African-American writers, and you speak to and from the infrastructure of American memory and history*. Indeed, this is precisely what *Native Son* accomplishes. With *Native Son*, Wright held a mirror to white Americans, allowing them to see themselves not only in Mary and her parents – white liberals who nonetheless reproduce structures of exploitation and Black suffering – but in Bigger Thomas himself. Bigger is Black, but he is also white America worked through its brown-skinned other. Baldwin understood this in two steps. There is a Bigger inside the skull of every Black person. And Bigger is also the creation of white America, just like Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom. What does it mean to work through this dilemma – registering the effects of white terror while also affirming the transcendent beauty of Black life – after Wright and the parricidal work of Baldwin and Ellison? This is the work of reckoning with the very Americanness of America. It is our ongoing task. And for all three writers, our ongoing responsibility to the vicissitudes of the memory and history of racial violence.

¹ Many of these pieces are republished in Richard Wright, *Byline, Richard Wright: Articles from The Daily Worker and New Masses*, ed. Earle V. Bryant (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015).

² For Wright's account of this experience in the party, see Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

³ James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 33. Emphasis mine.

⁴ Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 33.

⁵ Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," in *The Price of the Ticket*, 611.

⁶ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *The Price of the Ticket*, 77.

⁷ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," 72.

⁸ Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent* (Autumn 1963): 355.

⁹ Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," 366.

¹⁰ Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 111.

¹¹ Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," in *Shadow and Act*, 78.

¹² Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright: Daemoniac Genius* (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), 227.

¹³ Ellison, "The World and the Jug," 111-112.

¹⁴ Ellison, "The World and the Jug," 139-140.

¹⁵ Richard Wright, "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 750ff.

¹⁶ Wright, "The Literature of the Negro," 773.