Wright's novel concerns Cross Damon, a proud and self-loathing man whose psychological impulses and radical personal philosophy have led him to a nihilistic alienation from basic social obligations and cultural presuppositions. Feeling oppressed and coerced by personal relationships and faced with the prospect of indebtedness and imprisonment, Cross is fortuitously involved in a subway train accident, which produces a corpse that is mistakenly thought to be his. "[E]mbracing the opportunities" this affords him, he jettisons his identity, appropriates the name of a dead man, and initiates a number of ill-fated attempts to establish a new life:

His repudiation of his ties was as though his feelings had been water and those watery feelings had been projected by his desires out upon the surface of the world, like water upon pavements and roofs after a spring rain; and his loyalty to that world, like the sun, had brightened that world and made it glitter with meaning; and now, since last night, since he had broken all of the promises and pledges he had ever made, the water of meaning had begun to drain off the world, had begun to dry up and leave the look of things changed; and now he was seeing an alien and unjustifiable world completely different from him. It was no longer his world, it was just a world. (461)

The titles of the book's five sections indicate something of the trajectory of accumulating fatality: Dread, Dream, Descent, Despair, Decision. Along the way he is led to first murder a friend, for fear his deception will be exposed, and then to murder three white men who "outrage" and insult his sense of the nature and requirements of authentic existence.

This is a novel of ideas, which is to say that its plot contrives to provide a psychological case study of a philosophically reflective character—"the hungry type of mind that needed only a scrap of an idea to feed upon, to start his analytical process rolling" (584)—whose real function is to be a vehicle for the explicit expression of a set of propositions. These propositions can be designated as follows: (1) the compulsive, often criminal, acts of a social and psychological "outsider" most clearly evidence the dialectical relationship between desire and "voluptuous dread" that is intrinsic to all human beings, although this relationship is usually disavowed, repressed, and evaded; (2) the outsider type sees too deeply for his own good that most human beings cannot tolerate the freedom that the instability of existence affords them; (3) as a consequence of industrialization, modern civilization has produced a pervasive attitude that is paradoxically both relativistic and absolutistic—a mundane and complacent failure to abide by any transcendent truth such that each individual must function as his/her own god and lawmaker; (4) this combination of the desire to evade freedom and the dreadful absence of conviction has produced a situation ripe for totalitarianism, which is less an expression of one or another political ideology than a psychological predisposition, and a sensual predilection, that uses ideas as a guise for exerting the will to power over others.

There is a perhaps surprising insistence throughout the book that race is not a central element in the development of Cross's attitudes, ideas, and actions. After Cross decides to adopt a new identity and go on the lam, his sense of freedom and isolation is said to have "no racial tone. . . . he was just a man, any man who had had an opportunity to flee and had seized upon it" (455). What's more, "[i]t was not because he was a Negro that he found his obligations intolerable" but despite it, insofar as "a sharp sense of freedom . . . had somehow escaped being dulled by intimidating conditions" (774). This insistence may reflect the author's desire to escape the ghetto of critical attribution by demonstrating the wider scope of his concerns. It may also reflect a seemingly contradictory conviction—whether the author's or the character's, it is hard to say—that, at least for a certain type of person, unconstrained subjectivity is itself a transcendental truth. Or it may constitute a denial or evasion that serves to characterize the extremity of Cross's alienation and to indicate one more reason why he is doomed.

Refusing out of pride "to regard himself as an exploited victim" and lacking "the itch to right wrongs done to others, though those wrongs did at times agitate him," Cross deplores "color consciousness" as a humiliatingly narrow and an insufficiently detached perspective on human existence (815). And he rejects racial identification as just another form of self-deluding affiliation; he makes no demand "that he be given his share of a mythical heritage" (573) because "the insistent claims of his own inner life had made him too concerned with himself to cast his lot wholeheartedly with Negroes in terms of racial struggle. . . . [H]is decisive life struggle was a personal fight for the realization of himself" (525). It is indicative that race figures less as emotional motivation or contextual explanation than as a forum for existential analysis. Wright has a second outsider type, the deeply ambiguous, white district
attorney, Houston, develop an idea probably derived from W. E. B. DuBois's famous argument that the American Negro has developed a "double consciousness" as a consequence of living simultaneously "inside and outside of our culture"; but in Houston's speculation, derived from looking into his own heart, the outsider condition will remain with Negroes even after civil rights are fully granted because that condition has made them "centers of knowing," and this will make it difficult for them to "live the normal, vulgar, day-to-day life of the average white American" (500).

As a novel of ideas, Wright's book is in quite conscious dialogue with a set of precedent texts that had done much to establish the tenets of existentialism, a philosophy of life very influential at the time of the book's composition, which emphasized that there is no objective principle of absolute value and that a human being has no defining essence:

Maybe man is nothing in particular. Man may be just anything at all. And maybe man deep down suspects this, really knows this, kind of dreams that it is true; but at the same time he does not want really to know it? . . . And every move he makes, might not these moves be just to hide this awful fact? To twist it into something which he feels would make him rest and breathe a little easier? What man is is perhaps too much to be borne by man. . . . (507)

In fear and trembling at the likelihood of loneliness, ostracism, and punishment, the outsider must, with radical innocence, undertake to define himself through actions that are authentic to his individualistic subjectivity. However, most people succumb to "bad faith," willful, but often unconscious, denial that is to varying degrees "an indigenous part of living": "The daily stifling of one's sense of terror in the face of life, the far-flung conspiracy of pretending that life was tending toward a goal of redemption, the reasonless assumption that one's dreams and desires were realizable" (572).

The extended, sometimes ponderous expository speeches that Wright puts in the mouths of Cross and Houston show his familiarity with Friedrich Nietzsche's excoriations of institutionalized delusion and suppression of the self, The Genealogy of Morals and The Will to Power and with Soren Kierkegaard's The Concept of Dread. While elements of the plot owe much to Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, a study of a murderer driven to confess his crime to a detective because he recognizes he is not the superman above the moral law that he thought he was, and to Albert Camus's just recently published novel, The Stranger (published in England as The Outsider), a study of alienation, indifference, and contingency that culminates in accidental murder and execution (compare Houston's shock at Cross's lack of emotion upon hearing that he has caused his mother's death—"the greatest and last crime of all"—with a similar reaction recorded in Camus's book). Closer to home, Wright's story demands to be read in the light of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (published a year earlier), just as that novel demands to be read in the darkness of Wright's long short story "The Man Who Lived Underground" (published in 1945). In both Invisible Man and The Outsider, a man is expelled by contingency from the organizing structures of normal life, adopts a perspective of extreme alienation that allows him to discover the pervasive human need for self-delusion, becomes involved with and repudiates the Communist Party's attempts to exploit racial antagonism for its own ends, discovers that he can manipulate the prejudiced expectations and projected fantasies of white people, and develops the credo that man makes himself.

Finally, it must be said that in many respects The Outsider seems intended as dialogic counterpoint to the book that had made Wright's reputation, Native Son, particularly in regard to the dramatic difference between the two protagonists. Bigger Thomas is as much a victim of his inarticulate lack of self-awareness as he is of the social forces and circumstances he could never comprehend; whereas, Cross Damon victimizes himself, in equal measure, by means of his articulate hyperconsciousness and his disdain for those same social forces. It is all there in his name: Wright's protagonist is a cross of burden and suffering for himself and for all who would try to know him; but he is kept from personifying expiation because he belongs to another line entirely, that of the daimon, the Greek term for a spirit or power that is beyond good and evil—a being part-human, part-god—from which Christianity derived demon (for purposes closely related to the book's analysis of the institutional will to power and the human need to renounce freedom).

Further Information

Sources


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