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RICHARD WRIGHT AND RALPH ELLISON:

BLACK EXISTENTIAL ATTITUDES

By
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ABSTRACT

RICHARD WRIGHT AND RALPH ELLISON:
BLACK EXISTENTIAL ATTITUDES

By
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This study attempts to establish the relationship of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison to the French existentialist writers, André Malraux, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre, by examining certain thematic parallels in their fiction and philosophies.

The first chapter studies the concept of existence of Malraux, Camus, and Sartre. As a literature of ideas, their fiction can be best understood when studied as an expression of these ideas. The differences as well as similarities of these authors are examined in an attempt to come to some conclusions concerning the pattern of existential values, assumptions, and attitudes.

Having briefly examined the major philosophical positions of Malraux, Camus, and Sartre, I will discuss, in chapter two, the fictional presentation of these concepts. All three writers are preoccupied with the themes of the isolation and alienation of the individual and his subsequent attempt to vanquish his solitude, the absurdity of the universe and the apparent gratuitous nature of human existence, and ultimately, man's attempt to create a meaningful existence within an irrational world.

The remainder of the study examines the writing of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, comparing their central themes to those of Malraux, Camus, and Sartre. Chapters three and four study the development of Richard Wright and his direct relationship with Sartre during his fifteen year residence in Paris. Although The Outsider (1953) was an obvious attempt to incorporate Sartrean doctrines, much of Wright's prior work indicates an early concern for similar themes.

Chapter five analyzes the comic-tragic vision of Ralph Ellison. With the help of a brief introduction dealing with his essays and early short stories, his only novel, Invisible Man, is examined and compared to Sartre's La Nausée and Camus' L'Etranger.

The conclusions of this study indicate that Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were concerned, sometimes as a result of a direct influence, but more often because of their own preoccupations, with the same themes and problems that fascinated Malraux, Camus, and Sartre. Although Wright and Ellison are not representative of the whole of Modern Negro Literature, this study indicates that the sensitive Negro artist, confronted with the breakdown of the American myth of equality, will turn toward an interpretation of existence which emphasizes the isolation of the individual, the irrationality of the universe, and the need for a personal commitment in the face of this reality.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the United States has witnessed a remarkable burst of literary creativity by American Negro authors. Although this activity had made itself manifest at a time when the race question has become one of the major issues confronting American society, the contemporary Negro writer is not concerned entirely with creating a literature of protest. Such Negro novelists as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison are concerned with universal human themes that relate to all mankind. In dealing with these themes, I shall attempt to draw a parallel between these American authors, and Malraux, Camus, and Sartre, who, collectively, represent the twentieth century literature of ideas.

The problem with working with a comparative study of this nature is twofold. To begin with, although Malraux, Camus, and Sartre have often been grouped together and labeled "existentialist" writers, there exists among them a wide divergence of thought. The works of Jean-Paul Sartre are largely responsible for giving existentialism a wide international audience. Albert Camus, however, disputed much of Sartrean philosophy, and refused to be called an existentialist.[1] This philosophical trend, with its diverse origins, is so heterogeneous that a concise, unambiguous definition would be most difficult.

The second problem involves the discernibility of influences. Given a certain literary and philosophical trend, which is basically European in origin, is it possible to determine the direct impact of that philosophy on American fiction? It is true that Richard Wright moved to Paris in 1946 and came under the more or less direct influence of Sartre, who published parts of Wright's Black Boy in Les Temps Modernes, a literary and philosophical journal of which he was editor.[2] In the case of Ellison, however, continental influence is extremely remote. He himself states that Invisible Man arose from an entirely American literary tradition.[3]

I would like, therefore, to outline briefly how I shall attempt to deal with these, and other problems, in this study. In spite of the difficulties involved, I believe that it will become apparent that existential themes and concepts are manifest in the novels of these unique American authors. It is hoped that an examination of this relationship will prove interesting and informative.

In a comprehensive treatment of a particular philosophy, it is somewhat arbitrary to isolate and group together three thinkers. Although there are many similarities, which I shall enumerate specifically, there is a unique development of individual thought. Because of the erroneous nature of generalizations, and because of this divergence of philosophies, Malraux, Camus, and Sartre

must be examined individually, with regard to their view of man and his universe. In this way, the unique ideological position of each writer will become evident, and certain collective conclusions will become apparent.

As a literature of ideas, their works can best be understood when considered first as philosophy, and secondly as the creative and fictional expression of that philosophy. Existential literature presents to the world a new view of the individual and must therefore be examined with an understanding of the philosophy in question. This twofold analysis will yield a working concept of the basic ideas and literary themes of Malraux, Camus, and Sartre, from which one can proceed to an examination of the works of Ellison and Wright.

With the exception of Richard Wright's The Outsider, which Richard Lehan in his study of existentialism, claims to be "the most express treatment of the existential theme in American fiction;"[4] it is doubtful if any of the novels to be discussed were written under a direct influential force. It would not be possible to claim a direct influence of Sartre, or any of the post World War II French authors on Ralph Ellison. The problem, therefore, is more one of similarity of thought. Instead of tracing direct influences, I intend to examine the way in which existential concepts, attitudes, assumptions and literary themes become apparent in the fiction of Wright and Ellison.

Richard Wright was a forceful and prolific writer. Many of his novels are preoccupied with the injustice of racial prejudice. Although a onetime devout Communist, Wright eventually became disillusioned with the Marxist philosophy.[5] In several of Wright's novels, however, he succeeds in moving away from political polemics and the racial question, and explores the problem of man's isolation and identity.

Ralph Ellison, insisting on the freedom of the creative artist, has attempted to avoid the purely polemic novel. His works are not so much concerned with "protest," as they are with the universal problems of all humanity. In explaining the ambivalent situation of the Negro writer in the United States, Herbert Hill, in his study of Negro literature, states:

> The literature created by Negroes is not only a protest against the irrational racial situation, not only an attempt to explain the unique status of the American Negro to white society and to the world, but most significantly, the literature of the American Negro is an attempt to explain the racial situation to themselves, "Who am I?" and "What am I?" . . . The demand of an answer leads not only to necessary social protest but also to the development of the creative imagination, to the search for reason and to a new concern with art and ideology.[6]

It is this search, this concern for man's humanity, that has led me to believe that a close affinity exists between the French existential thinker and the modern American Negro writer.

The themes developed by Malraux, Camus, and Sartre are important not only to a particular group of authors,

writing in a particular country, but as a reflection of the mood and temper of twentieth century man. The interrelated notions of human freedom, the absurdity of the human situation, and the search for a meaningful existence within that absurdity, are themes that are widespread throughout twentieth century literature. The distinct similarities that exist between the contemporary Negro novelist and the French existentialist emphasize the preoccupations of an age. The Negro artist has found a certain unanimity of thought with these ideas in his unique search for identity and meaning within a society which has, for the most part, rejected his humanity.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Albert Camus, "Non, je ne suis pas existentialiste," Les Nouvelles Littéraires (November 15, 1945).

[2]Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography (New York: Putnam Press, 1968), p. 67.

[3]Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Fiction," in Shadow and Act, Ralph Ellison (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 183.

[4]Richard Lehan, "Existentialism in Recent American Fiction," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, I (Summer, 1959), p. 192.

[5]Richard Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," in The God That Failed, ed. by Richard Crossman (New York: Harper and Row, 1949), pp. 115-162.

[6]Herbert Hill, Anger, and Beyond (New York: Harper Row, 1966), p. xv.

CHAPTER ONE

SARTRE, CAMUS, AND MALRAUX: THE DYNAMICS OF EXISTENCE

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SARTRE, CAMUS, AND MALRAUX: THE DYNAMICS OF EXISTENCE

The philosophy of existence associated with many contemporary authors became prominent in Europe during the years following the first World War. Although this particular philosophy has been linked in its development to the thinking of Jean-Paul Sartre, it can be traced to earlier origins. The roots of this philosophy reach back to the concept of phenomenology, first developed as a method of description by Husserl, and later applied to the concept of existence by his disciple, Heidegger. The term "existentialist," often used in this connection, has taken on various and divergent meanings. Few thinkers, including Sartre, have chosen to represent themselves as "existentialists." It is mainly through the popularization of his works, however, that this philosophy has come to the attention of a wide international audience.

The many metaphysical implications of the philosophy of existence are important because they exemplify a major twentieth century literary and philosophical trend, the effects of which have been far-reaching. In attempting to enumerate the various elements of this tendency, I shall

examine several essential ideas as expressed by certain thinkers, and then proceed, in a subsequent chapter, to see how those ideas are expressed in their literature.

As representative of this philosophical current, I have chosen three French authors: André Malraux, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Although any grouping must be arbitrary, these three lend themselves to collective interpretation as the chief architects of the contemporary literature of ideas.

The philosophy of existence of Jean-Paul Sartre is part of a larger movement of modern European philosophy which came into its own in the years following the first World War. To associate this philosophy solely with Sartre is both limiting and misleading. Even members of Sartre's circle, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, are not in complete agreement with him in their philosophical conclusions.

The vast implications of defining man's existence on earth have dominated Sartre's thinking for almost three decades. Implicit in his definition of being is the solitude and alienation of the individual, the absurdity of human life, man's gnawing anguish, and the need for a positive commitment in the face of an absurd situation. In his quest for a new morality, Sartre defines man's existence as devoid of any rationally intelligible pattern which determines his future or explains his past. Sartre

maintains, however, that recognition of the absurdity of life does not necessarily culminate in despair.

The problem of communication is of central importance in Sartre's description of being. The theme of man's isolation and alienation occupies many of Sartre's literary works, such as Huis Clos, as well as his philosophical writing. The possibility of true communication is remote, if not impossible. Man's relationship with others, according to Sartre, is marked by conflict.

Although man stands alone in the universe, and is alone in his commitment to create his being, he is nevertheless deeply and permanently involved in the destiny of all mankind. Man is free, claims Sartre, to create his own essence. The responsibility for his own being, however, extends beyond the limits of his individuality. By choosing for himself, man creates an image of man for all men:

> Quand nous disons que l'homme se choisit, nous entendons que chacun d'entre nous se choisit, mais par là nous voulons dire aussi qu'en se choisissant il choisit tous les hommes. En effet, il n'est pas un de nos actes qui, en créant l'homme que nous voulons être ne crée en même temps une image de l'homme tel que nous estimons qu'il doit être.[1]

Man, even in his solitude, is irremediably linked to all men. His commitment to mankind is as deep and as complete as his individual commitment to himself.

Sartre's definition of being implies a view of the universe that is centered around a belief in the absurd. The basic knowledge that the universe has no meaning is in

direct contrast to man's desire to find one. The absurdity of the universe stems from the indifference of the world and history to human reason and values. In a universe devoid of human significance, man is continually forced to be morally creative, that is, to create his own system of values. The non-existence of God gives man complete moral freedom. If God does not exist there can be no a priori values and there can be no higher justification of good and evil. As Sartre stated, "Dostoïewsky avait écrit: 'Si Dieu n'existait pas, tout serait permis.' ... Si ... Dieu n'existe pas, nous ne trouvons pas en face de nous des valeurs ou des ordres qui légitimeront notre conduite. Ainsi, nous n'avons ni derrière nous, ni devant nous, dans le domaine lumineux des valeurs, des justifications ou des excuses."[2]

Part of the dilemma and absurdity of human existence is that man is continually faced with a moral choice in the knowledge of right or wrong when there is no sure guide to right or wrong action. In Sartre's study of Genet, Saint Genet, comédien et martyr, which illustrates many of Sartre's philosophical theories, he concludes that there can be no universal morality. Through the life and works of Jean Genet, Sartre examines the nature of good and evil and the possibility of creating a modern value system:

> Ou la morale est une faribole ou c'est une totalité concrète qui réalise la synthèse du Bien et du Mal ... Reste que cette synthèse, dans la situation historique, n'est pas réalisable. Ainsi toute

> morale qui ne se donne pas comme <u>impossible</u> aujourd'hui contribue à la mystification et à l'aliénation des hommes.[3]

The lack of absolute good and absolute evil means that man has the freedom to produce and maintain his own sense of right and wrong. It is only through his actions that the individual can effectively establish any moral system:

> ... la morale est pour nous tout en même temps inévitable et impossible. L'action doit se donner des normes ethiques dans ce climat d'indépassable impossibilité. C'est dans cette perspective, par example, qu'il faudra envisager le problème de la violence ou celui des rapports de la fin et des moyens.[4]

Man is constantly called upon to create his own values according to his historic situation and to give them meaning through his own actions.

The individual must assume his moral responsibility and accept the absurdity of the world. To believe in an ordered universe, and a pre-determined view of human nature and good and evil is an indication of what Sartre has termed "mauvaise foi."

The concept of self deception or "bad faith," is presented in Sartre's long philosophical essay, <u>L'Etre et le néant</u>. This is Sartre's most detailed development of his philosophy of existence and his description of being. The idea of "mauvaise foi" is essential to Sartre's ontology, and is presented in one of the central chapters of <u>L'Etre et le néant</u>.

"Mauvaise foi" stems from the dichotomy between the two forms of being: the "en-soi," and the "pour soi." The

"en-soi" is the being which rests in-itself, whereas the "pour-soi" is the being which is aware of itself, such as man. The pour-soi depends on decisions and choices, and therefore does not exist in-itself, but for-itself. A man is not a coward, a homosexual, or a waiter (to use Sartre's examples), in the same way as he is six feet tall and blond. The pour-soi depends on constant decision, choice and possibility. Bad faith comes when one denies this choice and decision is abandoned. For example, a man is acting in bad faith when he claims: "I am the way I am because I am a coward;" as if being a coward were a fact in the same way as his being six feet tall is a fact. By refusing to accept his freedom he has renounced any possibility of ever becoming anything else.

Sartre further clarifies his concept by distinguishing the difference between "mauvaise foi" and a simple lie. A lie is a deception of others, whereas bad faith involves a deception of one's self:

> La mauvaise foi a donc en apparence la structure du mensonge. Seulement, ce qui change tout, c'est que, dans la mauvaise foi, c'est à moi-même que je masque la vérité. Ainsi, la dualité de trompeur et du trompé n'existe pas ici. La mauvaise foi implique par essence l'unité d'une conscience.[5]

Man must be sincere and admit to being that which he is. The individual, however, has the responsibility and obligation of constantly defining his being. For the homosexual or the coward not to consider himself as such, does not have to be an example of insincerity, for the pour-soi gives him

the possibility of becoming something else. As Sartre explains in the example of a homosexual: "Il ne veut pas se laisser considérer comme une chose; il a l'obscure et forte compréhension qu'un homosexuel n'est pas homosexuel comme cette table est table ou comme cet homme roux est roux."[6]

Self-deception is seen throughout Sartre's works as a negative response to the absurdity of the human condition. "Réflexions sur la question juive," Sartre's essay on the causes and nature of anti-semitism, is one of his central treatments of the theme of mauvaise foi. Sartre tries to show that a man chooses to be an anti-semite because he wants a solid identity, he wants to be something definite and rigid, in the manner in which a table or a rock is something:

> ... il y a des gens qui sont attirés par la permanence de la pierre. Ils ne veulent pas changer: où donc le changement les menèrait-ils? Il s'agit d'une peur de soi originelle et d'une peur de la vérité. ... ils veulent adopter un mode de vie où le raisonnement et la recherche n'aient qu'un rôle subordonné.[7]

Fear in the face of the human condition has led the anti-semite to renounce his freedom and responsibility. Man, in order to live authentically must accept his liberty to create his own being. Not to do so, as in the case of the anti-semite, is to abdicate one's humanity.

Man's response to the absurdity of the human condition does not necessarily have to be one of despair or flight from anxiety through self-deception. The individual

can live authentically in a universe devoid of meaning. In order to live genuinely, man must be constantly conscious of his freedom to choose his own destiny, and he must commit himself fully to that choice.

Man must engage himself completely, even if there is no a priori value that can help him determine his actions. "Engagement," for Sartre, is a means of lucidly confronting the absurdity and meaninglessness of our quotidian existence. Action is the only effective form of total commitment: "... il n'y a de réalité que dans l'action; ... l'homme n'est rien d'autre que son projet, ... il n'est donc rien d'autre que l'ensemble de ses actes, rien d'autre que sa vie."[8] The need for effective action and total commitment has remained an essential part of Sartre's thinking, even in more recent years. In discussing the implications of action in Saint Genet, Sartre states:

> L'action, quelle qu'elle soit, modifie ce qui est au nom de ce qui n'est pas encore. Puisqu'elle ne peut s'accomplir sans briser l'ordre ancien, c'est une révolution permanente. Elle démolit pour édifier et, pour rassembler, déassemble; du matin au soir nous entassons les copeaux, les cendres, les rognures: toute construction comporte une part au moins égale de destruction.[9]

Authenticity and commitment, for Sartre, are a way of life. Man, in order to live within the absurdity of his existence, must assume his responsibility to live fully, and face the anguish which accompanies this decision.

Sartre believes that philosophy must be lived in order to be sincere. Like Camus, Sartre has attempted to

deal with questions that arise from life. He has described human existence as it appears to his sight and insight.

Not overly pessimistic, Sartre believes that the recognition of the absurdity of the world and the fact that man is free to create his own essence will better the human condition. The ethical implications of Sartre's description of being are neither pessimistic nor deterministic. Man must accept the reality of his condition and the responsibility and anguish which accompany that reality.

The philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre as expressed for example, in L'Etre et le néant, is both intricate and obscure. The philosophical position of Albert Camus, although often paradoxical, is stated in clearly understandable terms. Camus was concerned with human problems and claimed not to be a philosopher: "Je ne suis pas un philosophe, en effet, et je ne sais parler que de ce que j'ai vécu."[10] Although Camus differed from Sartre in both his definition of the absurd and its consequences, their primary concerns are often similar. Among the themes that occur most frequently in Camus' writing are the isolation of the individual in an alien universe, the absurdity of the human condition, and man's response to the dilemma of his existence, which includes revolt, freedom, and a call to action. His main philosophical tenets were first

postulated in Le Mythe de Sisyphe, and later developed in L'Homme révolté.

Man's isolation and alienation from himself, from his fellow man, and from the universe was a particularly disturbing concept for Camus who, especially in his younger years, believed in the ideal of fraternity and a union between man and the earth. In Discours de Suède Camus exclaimed:

> La mer, les pluies, le besoin, le désir, la lutte contre la mort, voilà ce qui nous réunit tous. Nous nous ressemblons dans ce que nous voyons ensemble, dans ce qu'ensemble nous souffrons. Les rêves changent avec les hommes, mais la réalité du monde est notre commune patrie.[11]

The quest for happiness and a sense of physical exaltation can be seen throughout his earlier works, L'Envers et l'endroit (1937), and Noces (1938). Camus is constantly aware of the contrast between the eternal nature of the universe and the temporal existence of man. Camus, however, attempts to link the mortal with the immortal through a belief in the exaltation of the senses which is made possible, if only for a moment, by the magnificence of the universe: "Entre ce ciel et ces visages tournés vers lui, rien où accrocher une mythologie, une littérature, une éthique ou une religion, mais des pierres, la chair, des étoiles et ces vérités que la main peut toucher."[12]

Le Mythe de Sisyphe, published in 1942, marks a sharp transition from Camus' earlier lyrical expression of an attitude toward life to an intellectual investigation of

that attitude. Camus' metaphysical inquiry is based on his concept of the absurd, which stems from the fact that man is imbued with a desire for rationality which is constantly frustrated by the irrational nature of the universe. Whereas Sartre sees the irrationality of man's condition as a total and permanent reality, ("... une structure permanente de mon être et la condition permanente de possibilité de ma conscience ..."[13]), Camus' definition of the absurd depends entirely on the interrelation of man and the universe. The concept of the absurd, claims Camus, results not from the nature of the world, nor from the nature of man, but from the confrontation of the two:

> Je disais que le monde est absurde et j'allais trop vite. Ce monde en lui-même n'est pas raisonnable, c'est tout ce qu'on peut dire. Mais ce qui est absurde, c'est la confrontation de cet irrationnel et de ce désir éperdu de clarté dont l'appel résonne au plus profond de l'homme. L'absurde dépend autant de l'homme que du monde.[14]

Man's desire for happiness, immortality and fraternity is frustrated by the incoherent nature of his existence. Without a belief in God as the unifier of all creation, and without a belief in immortality, man's existence is meaningless. The inevitable result is a feeling of anxiety and estrangement.

The absurd is first experienced as a feeling and subsequently formulated on intellectual terms. This is not to suggest, however, that the individual is conscious of the irrational nature of his daily existence. The concept of

the absurd can only come to those who analyze their situation. The habit of living, however, often precedes the habit of thinking; so much so that one takes the place of the other. The recognition of the absurd, therefore, is in itself a victory, for only after one is lucidly confronting his situation can he begin to react against it.

Camus believed that a sense of the illogical nature of life could arise spontaneously in daily living. The mechanical nature of our lives and the deadening repetition of urbanized society is seen as a modernized form of the Sisyphus myth:

> Il arrive que les décors s'écroulent. Lever, tramway, quatre heures de bureau ou d'usine, repas, tramway, quatre heures de travail, repas, sommeil et lundi, mardi, mercredi, jeudi, vendredi et samedi sur le même rythme, cette route se suit aisément la plupart du temps. Un jour seulement le "pourquoi?" s'élève et tout recommence dans cette lassitude teintée d'étonnement ...[15]

Camus' description of the absurd situation does not lead to despair, but serves, like that of Sartre, as a point of departure for establishing a new ethical system. As early as 1939, Camus expressed the belief that man could benefit from a confrontation with the reality of his condition: "Constater l'absurdité de la vie ne peut être une fin mais seulement un commencement ..."[16]

Camus believed that man must face the absurd and the paradox that it implies with lucidity. The acceptance of the irrational nature of his existence helps to establish

the absurdist ethic which is advocated in the last pages of Le Mythe de Sisyphe. This ethic is based on lucidity, which enables man to recognize the inevitability of the absurd; and innocence, which is the belief in no transcendence and no set of absolutes. The consequences will be a life lived with intensity and freedom, and marked by continuous revolt.

The freedom Camus speaks of is not an abstract, eternal freedom, but a practical, everyday freedom which enables man to escape "le sommeil quotidien." This freedom is subject to human limitations, and as such is much greater than an abstract concept: "... si l'absurde annihile toutes mes chances de liberté éternelle, il me rend et exalte au contraire ma liberté d'action. Cette privation d'espoir et d'avenir signifie un accroissement dans la disponibilité de l'homme."[17]

This freedom, combined with the fact of death and the absence of absolutes, leads to Camus' second ethical tenet, that of intensity ("la passion"). Man must live as fully as possible and appreciate the value of the present moment. Don Juan is Camus' example of the absurdist hero who exemplifies a life lived with intensity, constantly searching for multiplicity of experience.

The third consequence of Camus' ethic is revolt, that is the continual rejection of proposed solutions in order that awareness of the absurd may be preserved. Suicide and religious transcendence are rejected as a form

of evasion, not a solution to the absurd. Lucid revolt is not so much an attempt to solve a problem as a continual protest, a continual striving, and a continual struggle against the absurd: "La conclusion dernière du raisonnement absurde est, en effet, le rejet du suicide et le maintien de cette confrontation désespérée entre l'interrogation humaine et le silence du monde."[18] The conqueror or adventurer, similar to Malraux's heroes, is Camus' example of the individual who maintains a lucid sense of revolt. Total engagement consists of accepting humanity as it is, and being completely conscious of our individual role within society. Heroism must pass from conjecture to action with full recognition of the fact that one's act, although real, is limited within its human context.

One of the central implications of the absurd is that it leads to metaphysical and political revolt. L'Homme révolté, published in 1951, is a description of the theory of revolt and its consequences. Although much of this long philosophical essay is concerned with political and historical discussion, which does not concern us here, Camus also re-examines his "logic of the absurd," and the conclusions of Le Mythe de Sisyphe. Camus' passion for justice and his belief in the solidarity of man led him to reject certain former conclusions. If nothing has meaning, which seems to be his conclusion in the "myth," there can be no values, and therefore murder and violence are neither right nor wrong, just as charity or medicine are neither right nor

wrong: "Si l'on ne croit à rien, si rien n'a de sens et si nous ne pouvons affirmer aucune valeur, tout est possible, et rien n'a d'importance."[19] Sartre has continually insisted on the lack of universal values and the importance of the individual creating his own morality. Camus, however, appears to create some values that are independent of the individual. These values, which are based on a belief in human dignity and man's limitations, are justice and fraternity.

Revolt is seen by Camus as a means of linking all men together. He changes Descartes' formula, "je pense donc je suis," to "je me révolte, donc nous sommes,"[20] and he justifies this allegation in the following terms:

> Dans l'expérience absurde, la souffrance est individuelle. A partir du mouvement de révolte, elle a conscience d'être collective, elle est l'aventure de tous. Le premier progrès d'un esprit saisi d'étrangeté est donc de connaitre qu'il partage cette etrangete avec tous les hommes et que la réalité humaine, dans sa totalité, souffre de cette distance par rapport à soi et au monde. Le mal qu'éprouvait un seul devient peste collective.[21]

The response to the irrationality of man's existence, therefore, must be a positive one. Once the individual discovers the absurd he cannot remain locked in it, but must constantly seek to escape. Metaphysical revolt, which in itself can lead man out of despair, reveals the value of the individual and his potentialities. Man, in maintaining a constant struggle against his condition achieves an intellectual joy from a refusal of the absurd: "On ne découvre pas

l'absurde sans être tenté d'écrire quelque manuel du bonheur."[22] This Promethean defiance, therefore, reveals the importance of the individual as a member of society and the value of collective human experience.

The dominant theme in Camus' writing seems to be a constant reaffirmation of the value of life. Life is incomprehensible, but its irrationality does not mean that it lacks meaning. The theme of Le Mythe de Sisyphe, (seen also in L'Etranger), is that life is infinitely valuable and can be lived all the more intensely when clearly accepted as incomprehensible: "Il y a dans la condition humaine ... une absurdité fondamentale en même temps qu'une implacable grandeur."[23]

Camus himself was caught between physical rapture, as seen in his earlier works, and dismay in the face of the alien nature of existence, which proclaims the insignificance of man's fate. To accept despair, however, would be to negate the values that Camus believes to be essential to the human being: solidarity, justice and individuality, which collectively serve to raise man to the level of the gods.

A discussion of Malraux's philosophy is hindered by the fact that Malraux, as opposed to both Sartre and Camus, has not written any purely philosophical works. It is mainly through his novels that he posits his theory of being and his description of man's condition. Malraux, like

Sartre, interprets nature as nonmoral and totally indifferent to human need. In his novels, Malraux portrays the individual as an isolated and lost entity in an alien universe. The fact of man's existence is irrational and gratuitous, and hence absurd. Nevertheless, it is man's "duty," if he decides to live, to fulfill himself on earth and attempt to establish a meaningful and creative existence.

Malraux's metaphysical speculations are not precise enough to be called a system. He does, however, suggest a theory of man that foreshadows much of what Sartre and Camus were to formulate later. Without detailed reference to his literary works, I shall examine Malraux's basic concept of man, which will serve as an introduction to a subsequent investigation of the literary themes set forth in his novels.

The differential that exists between the individual and collective society is seen by Malraux as the fundamental problem of human nature. Malraux, like Camus, emphasizes the need for communal solidarity and the importance of fraternity. Malraux's heroes, as social revolutionaries, recognize this need, but as individuals they cannot completely identify themselves with the collective interest. Furthermore, their heroic stature and exceptional nature often accentuate their aloneness. Many of Malraux's earlier heroes, such as Garine in Les Conquérants, enter into revolutionary action seeking a means of vanquishing

their irremediable solitude. The collective struggle, however, serves only to heighten man's awareness of his isolation. Many of Malraux's heroes exemplify the loneliness of the individual and his continual search for communication.

Malraux gave vivid literary expression to such themes as the isolation and alienation of the individual long before they became intellectual catchwords for the followers of Sartre and Camus. Similarly, Malraux foreshadows the myth of the absurd by presenting a vision of the futility of human existence. In his early novel, Les Conquérants, Malraux raises the question of how man is to live in an alien universe and how the individual is to find meaning and purpose within an irrational existence. Like Sartre, Malraux believes that the absurd springs from the perception that human existence is gratuitous, without purpose and without reason. Malraux presents the reader with an absurd hero who has discovered that religion and metaphysics and past ideologies are powerless in overcoming the sentiment that the human condition is irrational and without purpose. The individual is isolated in an absurd universe of things from which there can be no escape.

Malraux's heroes therefore, confront a universe devoid of final meaning and indifferent to human needs. The negative aspects of existence must be faced, however, and in so doing, the self somehow manages to affirm life. Like

Camus' hero, Malraux's hero is a victim of life who can nevertheless passionately confront the enigma of existence in a spirit of protest. The irrationality of human existence is encountered by a consciousness that rebels against the concept of the absurd.

Although the knowledge of the ultimate futility of man's endeavors, and the inevitability of death generate a vision of nothingness, man must continue to build his world of meaning and create his own destiny. For Malraux, as for Camus, the fact of the absurd does not lead to despair, but is in itself a call to action. A denial of absolutes and ultimate goals often leads to a pursuance of a course of action for its own sake.

Malraux believes, as does Camus, that man must maintain a metaphysical protest against the absurd. This revolt involves a personal commitment to some action or cause. Many of Malraux's heroes escape anguish by becoming "engagé" and by fighting for the survival of their beliefs. Although the individual can expect only defeat, he must nevertheless seek out a life of action. This commitment renders life more bearable, but is never capable of eliminating the absurd.

The hopelessness of man's fate, as depicted in Malraux's earlier novels, underlies the traditional concept of heroism. If his heroes commit themselves to a course of action, the reasons of such a decision are unknown, above all to themselves. Garine, in Les Conquérants, acts with

full consciousness of the futility of all endeavors. Nevertheless, one must cherish this life, for it is all that man has:

> Je pensais encore à la phrase de mon père: "Il ne faut jamais lâcher la terre." Vivre dans un monde absurde ou vivre dans un autre. ... Pas de force, même pas de vraie vie sans la certitude, sans la hantise de la vanité du monde.[24]

Like Sartre, Malraux emphasizes that man is revealed through his actions and not through his cognition. In a universe bereft of intelligibility and devoid of ultimate values, the individual must create his own world of meaning. The truly lucid hero is conscious that he is embarking on action for its own sake and that nothing, not the passion of love, nor the commitment to a revolutionary cause, can eliminate the grievous burden of alienation.

Malraux's description of man is based only on the individual, there is no general concept. The individual is characterized by his alienation and isolation, and his need to communicate. Although the individual differs in his reaction to his condition, man's basic state is one of anguish. Stripped of all artificial means of avoiding anxiety, such as personal and political strivings, man is forced to confront the self. Malraux emphasizes the fact that man, more often than not, seeks to escape his anguish rather than lucidly confronting his condition. Many of Malraux's fictional characters, for example, seek refuge through violence, eroticism, drug addiction, and self-love.

As a final response to the absurd nature of human existence, Malraux turns to aesthetic creation. The limitations of action, caused by the isolation of the individual and the lack of ultimate objections, lead Malraux to turn to art as a means of confronting the gratuitousness of human life. The theme of art as an essential feature in establishing man's freedom, is seen in Malraux's earlier novels, such as L'Espoir, and becomes dominant in his later, Les Noyers de l'Altenburg. Like Sartre's Roquentin, Malraux feels that the creation of a work of art will make existence more bearable. Art does not in itself create man's freedom, but is a symbol of man's eternal struggle to transcend his condition. In Les Noyers de l'Altenburg Vincent Berger argues that man, through art, can give design to the universe: "Notre art me paraît une rectification du monde, un moyen d'échapper à la condition d'homme. ... Dans ce qu'il a d'essentiel, notre art est une humanization du monde."[25]

Aesthetic creation, like the concept of commitment, cannot justify man's existence, for it cannot rectify the irrationality of the universe. By creating a self-imposed meaning, however, the individual can make his life more significant within the illogical structure of the world.

Despite a general attitude of despair about man's ability to overcome the feelings of anguish and loneliness, one of the principal features in Malraux's view of man is the establishment of a basis of hope. Malraux does not base

this hope on any Christian sense of morality or God, but attempts rather to create an ethic that is not dependent on the traditional system of reward and punishment in an afterlife.

Hope, for Malraux, lies in the infinite possibilities of man. Harry Slochower, in his study of Malraux, claims that Malraux believes that dignity could be maintained through lucidity. By converting his experience to conscious thought, man is able to control his fate: "By getting to know how much he can hope ..., he can to that extent control his fate and thus become his own excuse for being."[26]

Like Sartre, Malraux believes that man, by controlling his fate, is able to maintain his dignity and hope, which give his life meaning and freedom. Malraux's heroes commit themselves to fighting for a new social order, not in the hope that it will bring an end to man's suffering, but in the hope that perhaps it will achieve communication and solidarity. The final hope of man for Malraux, lies in his ability to achieve this fraternity which will assure him of his rightful dignity.

Although Malraux, Sartre and Camus differ in the precise terminology which they use to describe the universe and man's existence, there are several conclusions which they share. Human existence is described as being devoid of any pre-established meaning or purpose. This, combined

with the fact that man has been inexplicably placed in an incoherent world, helps to create a vision of the absurd. For Malraux, Sartre and Camus, meaning and purpose are not an integral part of the universe. On the contrary, the world is characterized by lack of significance and coherence. The solution, in part, to this irrational situation lies in man's ability to commit himself personally.

All three writers appear to share the value that is placed on subjectivity. In contradiction to all deterministic doctrines, man is believed to be free. He is capable of creating his own meaning by affirming that freedom and by committing himself to life through his freely chosen acts. Only in view of man's affirmation of life can all the irrational, "absurd" elements of his existence take on meaning.

Because there is no "a priori" concept of man, he is free to create his own values and maintain his own purposes. The burden of determining his own essence results in a feeling of unavoidable anguish. To flee from responsibility in the face of this anguish would be a rejection of man's freedom and, in Sartre's words, an example of "mauvaise foi."

The knowledge of the absurdity of the world makes the individual responsible for his actions. He is free to pursue his own ends which are, he knows, worthy only because he has chosen them to be so.

For Malraux, Sartre and Camus, the human situation, although irrational, does not imply despair. Man's condition is seen as incomprehensible and incoherent, but not meaningless. Man holds the key to his existence, he alone can create order out of chaos, and meaning from the absurd.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Jean-Paul Sartre, L'Existentialisme est un humanisme (Paris: Nagel, 1960), p. 25.

[2]Ibid., pp. 36-37.

[3]Jean-Paul Sartre, Saint Genet, comédien et martyr (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 177.

[4]Ibid., p. 177.

[5]Jean-Paul Sartre, L'Etre et le néant (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 87.

[6]Ibid., p. 104.

[7]Jean-Paul Sartre, "Réflexions sur la question Juive" (Paris: Morihien, 1946), p. 22.

[8]Jean-Paul Sartre, L'Existentialisme est un humanisme, p. 35.

[9]Jean-Paul Sartre, Saint Genet, comédien et martyr, p. 29.

[10]Albert Camus, Actuelles I (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 63.

[11]Albert Camus, Discours de Suède (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), pp. 42-43.

[12]Albert Camus, Noces (Paris: Gallimard, 1949 re-edition), p. 60.

[13]Jean-Paul Sartre, L'Etre et le néant, p. 392.

[14]Albert Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 37.

[15]Ibid., p. 28.

[16]Albert Camus, interview in Alger Républicain, March 12, 1939, p. 17.

[17]Albert Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, p. 37.

[18]Albert Camus, L'Homme révolté, p. 17.

[19]Ibid., p. 15.

[20]Ibid., p. 36.

[21]Ibid., p. 36.

[22]Albert Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, p. 165.

[23]Ibid., p. 173.

[24]André Malraux, Les Conquérants (Paris: 1928), p. 268.

[25]André Malraux, Les Noyers de l'Altenburg (Paris: 1948), p. 128.

[26]Harry Slochower, No Voice is Wholly Lost (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), p. 331.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LITERATURE OF IDEAS

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A collective treatment of literary themes in Sartre, Camus, and Malraux presents several difficulties. Although there are many obvious similarities, their differences cannot be overlooked. In an effort to amalgamate their principal ideas, I have chosen three central themes that have primary importance in the works of all three authors.

The twofold theme of isolation and involvement is a major preoccupation throughout the works of Malraux, Camus, and Sartre. Man is seen as essentially alone, unable to communicate with his fellow man, yet continually searching to establish a bond among all men. The second major theme is based on the belief that the universe and individual existence are filled with inconsistencies and enigmas. Man, thrown into a world that presents no meaning or purpose, is confronted with the problem of creating a meaningful existence. The third central theme concerns man's possible response to his irrational condition. In describing the absurdity of the universe, each author examines the varied individual reactions to his dilemma, and the possibility of a positive response.

In a collective treatment such as this, I have found it necessary to omit that which is particular to an

individual author. The earlier lyrical works of Camus, for example, will not come under consideration. Likewise, the later studies of art history of Malraux will not concern us. This is not to suggest that these works do not represent valid and important steps in the development of these thinkers, but such writings are apart from the major concern of this study.

A final word should be said about the relationship between philosophy and literature. Although Sartre is more concerned with creating a philosophical system than either Camus or Malraux, the fictional writing of all three deals with the exposition of ideas. Their works can and should be appreciated as literature, and they acquire an added dimension of meaning when related to their authors' philosophical positions. Indeed, so important is the ideological content of these works of fiction that they cannot be completely understood unless seen from the viewpoint of the philosopher.

One of the principal features of Malraux's novels up to 1948 is his examination of the possibility of individual expression within a collective society. Malraux, like Camus and Sartre, views man as basically alone, unable, except for rare moments, to communicate with his fellow man. Although no political crusade or revolutionary action can completely alleviate man's gnawing loneliness, Malraux does construct a final hope of man based on his

ability to commit himself freely to a course of action. The greatest result of such a decision, however, would be an eventual joining together of individual forces.

Throughout this search for solidarity, Malraux continually emphasizes the importance of individual action and choice. In treating the problem of the individual's ability to engage himself effectively, Malraux ranges from despair in the face of individual solitude to hope in the possibility of integration of individual and collective purposes. He believes that man's hope rests in his ability to commit himself to action, not necessarily for a collective social aim, but for the action as its own self-contained end.

In Malraux's first "political" novel, Les Conquérants (1928), the theme of isolation is embodied in the novel's central figure, Garine, who goes to the Orient out of a compelling need to find a release from his irremediable solitude. Like many of Malraux's heroes, he seeks action as an anodyne for his loneliness. He is condemned to be alone, yet seeks brotherhood in collective action. Garine, embracing the cult of action, seeks solidarity but is unwilling to submit his individual freedom to party organization. Essentially alone, he represents the intellectual who is too individualistic to subordinate his ego to the demands of a collective political organization.

In La Condition humaine (1933) the scene of the action is once again the revolution in China.

The figures of the terrorist, the adventurer, and the conqueror recur in Malraux's novels, all of them seeking a measure of self-expression within the revolution. Tchen, in La Condition humaine, for example, finds meaning, like Garine, in revolutionary politics. Action, as Tchen states, gave him: "... la satisfaction de ses haines, de sa pensée, de son caractère. Elle donnait un sens à sa solitude."[1] Tchen, however, remains indifferent to the collective aims of the revolution. His personal search for meaning and communication leads him only to solitary action, he can find no satisfaction in communal enterprises.

In Le Temps du mépris (1935) Malraux is preoccupied with the theme of the submergence of the individual into the collective body. The theme of integration is symbolized by the development of the novel's main character, Kassner. He is first seen entombed in a Nazi prison and barred from all outward communication. Without any possibility of communication, Kassner is on the point of madness when he hears the knocks of the prisoner in the next cell, who is tapping on the wall and spelling out the words "comrade" and "courage." From this point on, Kassner's development moves from one of complete solitude to an increasing abandonment of his individuality. In opposing Fascism, Kassner identifies with the collective anti-fascist movement. Although his life is saved and he is able to escape death, his individual personality is lost in the common cause.

After Kassner is rescued from the Nazi prison he faces the dilemma of confronting the forces of the collective body and the resulting individual self-effacement and sacrifice. Within the mass of faces at an anti-fascist rally, for example, he cannot distinguish the face of his wife.

The final development of Kassner is one of an emerging communal personality. Self-submission is seen as the road to higher self-realization. Kassner loses his older, more romantic self and creates for himself a new, communal self. The extreme communality that emerges as the novel's major theme, however, is the opposite of the collectivity of Fascism. With Fascism the individual is forced to abdicate, whereas here the individual freely chooses to sacrifice himself. The music that is heard throughout the novel symbolizes this freedom as well as the universal appeal of human fellowship.

In L'Espoir (1937) Malraux explores the possibility of a fusion, perhaps a middle ground, between individual solitude and extreme communalism. The main character in the novel is "le peuple," who have gathered from every corner of the world to oppose Fascism. It is important to note that they have not been conscripted, but have volunteered. From the outset motivation as well as means of the various groups differ. The story shows the transformation from disorganization to unity. Catholics, socialists, communists, and anarchists, all become united against poverty and degradation.

In L'Espoir the opposing attitudes of individuality and extreme sociality are represented by Magnin, who is skeptical of the value of organization and discipline; and Manuel, who is a faithful "party man." In the course of the novel these two attitudes draw closer and closer together. Magnin modifies his individualism and Manuel begins to qualify his party thinking as he becomes aware of individual human attitudes. The novel ends with Manuel listening to Beethoven. Once again, music in its universal appeal, symbolizes the harmony of man and his infinite possibilities.

The themes of solitude and involvement which seem to come together in L'Espoir, are represented by two different prototypes throughout Malraux's novels. The lone adventurer, Garine for example, remains aloof from his milieu, always within his solitude. The dedicated revolutionary, however, like Kassner, is the embodiment of the involved individual who risks losing his identity in a collective cause. Both are seeking self affirmation through action. Although individual solitude is never vanquished, Malraux maintains the hope that dignity and fraternity will some day emerge as the dominant factors of man's existence.

Albert Camus, like Malraux, believed man's dignity to lie in the possibility of fraternity and solidarity. The individual, however, is seen as fundamentally alone and alienated in a hostile universe. Malraux's heroes were

faced with the inability to communicate with his fellow man. Meursault, in L'Etranger, is not only alienated from other men and the universe, but above all, is a stranger to himself.

Meursault, the narrator and main character of L'Etranger, is the embodiment of man's isolation. His complete honesty about his own feelings isolates him in respect to society's moral values. The novel begins with what society would consider moral unconcern and emotional deficiency: "Aujourd'hui maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J'ai reçu un télégramme de l'asile: 'Mère décédée. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués.' Cela ne veut rien dire. C'était peut-être hier."[2] By refusing to say more than he feels, or to pretend to that which he does feel, Meursault rejects society's conventional interpretation of words and acts. He therefore remains outside society and can only be seen from inside his own feelings.

The nature of Meursault's metaphysical isolation is revealed through the first person narration. Using the most economical vocabulary, he describes events without giving them any interpretation or ascertaining any motivation. Meursault's passive attitude reveals his indifference and the discontinuity of his experience. Events of the external world and his own life have no meaning to him. Meursault views life as a deaf man watching an opera, he sees the characters talk and gesticulate, but all their actions are meaningless.

Meursault's growing withdrawal from temporal existence becomes more apparent after his crime. Imprisoned in his cell, he gradually becomes indifferent to physical existence. He is unaware of time: "Pour moi c'était sans cesse le même jour qui déferlait dans ma cellule ..." (L'Etranger, P. 114). Only when condemned to death does Meursault become conscious of the gift of life.

In La Peste Camus' emphasis switches from individual solitude to individual involvement. Here Camus explores, as did Malraux in L'Espoir, the possibility of the solidarity of man when faced with the forces of evil. Camus symbolically represents metaphysical evil by a description of an imaginary plague. Those who cannot accept those forces as a manifestation of God's will band together to fight the pestilence in much the same way as "le peuple" in L'Espoir joined together to fight the forces of Fascism.

The two sides of the problem of individual involvement in a collective organization are represented by Tarrou and Dr. Rieux. With these two characters, Camus presents the opposite poles of individualism and collectivism, as Malraux was able to present his two prototypes of the lone adventurer and the collective revolutionary. Tarrou, the rugged individualist, feels that it is wrong to compromise with any society which sacrifices individuality for the good of the collective body. Rieux has come to the realization that preoccupation with one's innocence, and retreat from the world, is a form of consenting to the evils that already

exist. Rieux revolts against the existing evils and sacrifices happiness for duty and the concept of fraternity: "Rien au monde ne vaut qu'on se détourne de ce qu'on aime. Et pourtant je m'en détourne, moi aussi, sans que je puisse savoir pourquoi ..."[3]

These two aspects are symbolically reconciled in a moving and lyrical tribute to the brotherhood of man. The night bathing scene seals the friendship between Tarrou and Rieux and gives them both a deep feeling of happiness:

> Devant eux, la nuit était sans limites. Rieux, qui sentait sous ses doigts le visage grêlé des rochers, était plein d'un étrange bonheur. Tourné vers Tarrou, il devina, sur le visage calme et grave de son ami, ce même bonheur qui n'oubliait rien, pas même l'assassinat. (La Peste, p. 277).

The two agree that while one must fight for the victims of the plague, still, if one lives only for that, there remains no reason for fighting. Man has a right, they both agree, to love and happiness here and now.

Rieux and Tarrou have accepted the mystique of brotherhood at the same time as they have affirmed man's capacity for joy, tenderness, and love. Camus concludes, as did Malraux, that man must fight in behalf of one's fellow man, and through such action confirm the nobility of mankind.

Sartre, perhaps even to a greater degree than Camus or Malraux, emphasizes the problem of communication. Man's condition, according to Sartre, is one of isolation and alienation, filled with never-ending anguish made greater

by the fact that he cannot effectively express the nature of his feelings to his fellow man.

Sartre's protagonist in La Nausée, Roquentin, is an example of an isolated individual who cannot accept his solitude. The experience of "nausea" reveals to Roquentin a universe that is frighteningly alien. He is "de trop," alienated from himself, from the universe, and from others. Because of his absolute solitude, Roquentin is completely free; he has no social attachments, no responsibilities, and no goals. Consequently, life for him is without meaning and purpose. In his aloneness there is no God, and no determined values to which he can relate good and evil.

Sartre believes that man, in his solitude, is free to create his own values and his own meaning in a meaningless world. It is this realization that causes Roquentin's great sense of anguish and his inability to act.

Unlike Camus and Malraux, who occasionally glimpse moments of brotherhood, Sartre does not admit to the possibility of man's eliminating his fundamental solitude. Involvement for Sartre is not the opposite of aloneness, but a commitment to the freedom that isolation brings, and an eventual acceptance of the responsibility of that freedom.

Engagement for Sartre implies a free commitment to a course of action. Individual responsibility which stems from man's freedom and isolation will inevitably result in personal suffering and anguish. A commitment to life

entails a confrontation with that responsibility and the resulting anguish.

In Sartre's trilogy, Les Chemins de la liberté, the social world is seen as irrational and chaotic. The only order and meaning possible are those which are imposed by the individual through his own decisions. In the third novel of the trilogy, La Mort dans l'âme, Sartre emphasizes a pursuance of action for its own sake, without concern for its ultimate political or social aims.

At the conclusion of Part I of La Mort dans l'âme Mathieu who has never been able to engage himself effectively in any action, is seen as one of the mass of soldiers, disorganized, waiting to be picked up by the approaching Germans. Mathieu encounters a platoon which has decided to make a last stand against the Germans and defend a village until they are all killed. They realize that there is no logic or reason for their action; their defense will surely not alter the course of the war. Their pride and dignity as human beings, however, dictate their refusal to accept defeat. Mathieu, realizing that he will die for nothing, decides to join them. For the first time he has accepted his freedom and his responsibility to make a choice: "... personne n'est mon juge, ... personne ne peut décider pour moi. Il décida, et, à l'instant, son coeur dégringola de branche en branche."[4] For the first time Mathieu realizes the validity of action and its resulting effect on his existence:

> Pendant des années, il avait tenté d'agir en vain: on lui avait volait ses actions à mesure; il comptait pour du beurre. Mais ce coup-ci, on ne lui avait rien volé du tout. Il avait appuyé sur la gâchette et, pour une fois, quelque chose était arrivé. Quelque chose de définitif, ... (La Mort dans l'âme, p. 187).

Within fifteen minutes Mathieu is the only survivor, and he realizes with joy that in this fifteen minutes he has attained a life of freedom. As he is about to be killed one senses his liberation: "... Mathieu tira encore. Il tira: il était pur, il était tout-puissant, il était libre." (La Mort dans l'âme, p. 193).

Camus' portrayal of the man of action (Rieux, for example) and Malraux's prototype of the conqueror are both similar to Sartre's treatment of action in good faith. They have no illusions of there being ultimate, absolute goals. Although there are no definitive ends, and in the final analysis all action is useless, one must commit oneself as fully as if it were for eternity. The only true goal is man himself, and the assertion of his humanity against destiny.

Man's search for meaning and logic in a universe that presents him with no discernible purpose or meaning has led to a vision of the absurd. The inherent irrationality of man's condition is an important part of the philosophies of Sartre and Camus. Long before "l'absurde" became a fashionable intellectual catchword for the post

World War II generation, however, Malraux had given unforgettable artistic expression to the consequences of man's search for meaning. Tchen, in La Condition humaine, asks "Que faire d'une âme, s'il n'y a ni Dieu ni Christ?" (La Condition humaine, p. 226). Each of Malraux's heroes attempts to answer this question according to his own particular mode of existence.

As a foreshadowing of a more explicit treatment of the absurd by Sartre and Camus, Malraux raises the question of how man is to live in an alien universe that presents no meaning or purpose to man's cry for commitment. Like the heroes of Sartre, those of Malraux persist in a quest for a meaningful destiny which is destroyed from the start. The absurd hero, despite his nihilism, and despite his victimization, continues in his search for human dignity. Garine, in Les Conquérants, like Rieux, in Camus' La Peste, realizes the gratuitousness of existence. The realization that nothing will change the irrational nature of the world generates a passionate yet inexplicable affirmation of human freedom.

Malraux's heroes are imbued with a tragic greatness, seeking out a life of action while expecting only defeat. In Les Conquérants, Garine, realizing the futility of all endeavor, embraces the cult of action in order to face the absurd without submitting to it. His complete realization of his condition comes upon him in a growing state of fever, as he faces death. He realizes that death causes the

temporality of all existence and that in the end he must abandon everything. Garine is close to Camus' concept of the hero in his realization that life is only a game in which he is wholly absorbed:

> Au fond, je suis un joueur. Comme tous les joueurs, je ne pense qu'à mon jeu, avec entêtement et avec force. Je joue aujourd'hui une partie plus grande qu'autrefois, et j'ai appris à jouer: mais c'est toujours le même jeu. Et je le connais bien; ...[5]

Within the absurdity of human existence, Garine has come to know the value of life: "J'ai appris aussi qu'une vie ne vaut rien, mais que rien ne vaut une vie." (Les Conquérants, p. 216).

Neither Garine nor Perken in La Voie Royale aim to better society. Their protest against existence reveals that nothing is worth conquering. The passion and the action itself, however, are superior to the final end. Death for them, as it was to be for Meursault, stands as the proof of the value of temporal existence. Perken, as he is about to die, states: "Il n'y a pas ... de mort ... Il y a seulement ... moi ... moi ... qui vais mourir ..."[6]

Malraux's adventurer lives by his will and his ability to overcome, if only for a moment, the absurdity of the universe. The value of revolution as a mode of action lies not in its political consequence, but in the act itself. Although the inevitability of death nullifies all action in the end, it also reaffirms the absolute quality of life and one must therefore exist against and in spite of it.

In Les Conquérants, as well as in his other novels before 1948, Malraux raises the basic question that was to preoccupy both Sartre and Camus, as well as a host of other twentieth century writers: how is man to lead a meaningful existence in a meaningless world? Despite the alienation of the self, and despite the ephemeral nature of existence, Malraux has uttered a cry for total personal commitment.

In a postface added to Les Conquérants[7] Malraux looks back on this work of his youth and reviews the changes in him and in the world. Malraux now repudiates the ideal of international man and is not too hopeful for the future. In Les Voix du silence and the books that have followed, Malraux has bidden farewell to revolutionary politics and turned to the study of the history of art. It appears that art, for Malraux, offers a final respense to the inconsistency of existence. Les Conquérants, as well as his other novels before 1948, however, remains as a vivid and arresting portrayal of the absurdity of the universe and the absurd hero who will emerge more uncompromisingly in the works of Sartre and Camus.

The literature of absurdity is born from the recognition on the part of many modern writers that meaning and purpose are not an integral part of the universe in which man finds himself. For writers such as Camus and Sartre the world is characterized by a lack of significance and coherence. Many of their heroes are aware that there is no reason for the world or their own existence, and are thereby

forced to create their own meaning. The inevitability of death, the contingency of human existence, the essential isolation of man, and the inexplicability of the universe has led to a vision of the absurd that is experienced by various characters in the works of Camus and Sartre.

In Le Mythe de Sisyphe, Camus philosophically expounds his view of "l'absurde," whereas in L'Etranger, he directly conveys this experience. Meursault represents the confrontation of man's finite nature with the external nature of the universe. He is a stranger facing the world and he realizes the futility of all effort. It is because of Meursault's refusal to play the "game" of life and his denial of the seriousness and permanence of human emotions, that society cannot allow him to exist. Meursault, like Sisyphus, must push on relentlessly in a meaningless world.

A somewhat more positive attitude is embodied by Rieux's confrontation with the absurd in La Peste. Camus' main theme centers on the necessity of evil and human suffering, and man's reaction to these senseless events. The story exists on three levels: the personal, which is the story of Oran and the individuals which inhabit it; the political, which, as many critics have pointed out, contains many indirect references to the German occupation; and the universal, in which the plague symbolizes metaphysical evil.

In its broadest terms, the universal, Camus removes the novel from time, in an attempt to diagnose the human

dilemma and offer some remedy. The strict anonymity of the narrator directs the interest of the reader away from himself and toward a representative group of human beings. Like Malraux, Camus is more interested in the general human condition than in individual human psychology.

The suffering and death of innocent children in La Peste dramatize the senselessness of the plague. The reaction to this inexplicable evil is either to accept it, as does the Jesuit Priest, Father Paneloux, or to revolt against it, as does Dr. Rieux. Father Paneloux, as he states in his first sermon, interprets the plague as being of divine origin, and therefore punitive in purpose. The attitude of Rieux, however, typifies that of the "révoltés," those who cannot accept Paneloux's interpretation. They see themselves as condemned to an inconceivable punishment for an unknown crime. When Paneloux, after the death of Judge Otho's son, claims that man cannot understand the final meaning of suffering, and should therefore love that which exceeds his understanding, Rieux responds: "Non, mon Père ... Je me fais une autre idée de l'amour. Et je me refuserai jusqu'à la mort d'aimer cette création où des enfants sont torturés." (La Peste, p. 240)

Rieux, like many of Malraux's heroes, is able to commit himself to a struggle against his irrational existence. Although nature is seen as implacable and unrelenting, several men nevertheless band together to resist their situation. Rieux's revolt represents a

commitment to action that perhaps, in the end, will not contribute to the destruction of evil. By his decision to act, however, Rieux asserts his essential nobility.

Rieux is conscious of the fact that all his victories will always be conditional. Camus emphasizes, like Malraux, the importance of the act itself; of becoming, rather than being. Man's efforts are ultimately condemned to defeat, but he must accept the absurdity of his existence and fight against evil by stressing commitment to action for its own sake.

An arresting figure in La Peste is the old Spaniard, who appears to embody not only the inherent absurdity of life, but also the value of that absurdity. He is convinced that he alone knows how to live, and he spends his entire day transferring peas from one pan to another. The old Spaniard has contempt for his fellow man, and does not believe that men will ever learn from the plague or the evil it represents. Rieux grasps the truth of what the old man says, and he too realizes that the plague will never completely disappear. He feels, however, that he must continue with his people: "Le vieux avait raison, les hommes étaient toujours les mêmes. Mais c'était leur force et leur innocence et c'est ici que, par dessus toute douleur, Rieux sentait qu'il les rejoignait." (La Peste, p. 336).

Camus, like Malraux, never loses sight of the inevitablity of man's defeat in death. The fact of man's death will always be a reminder of the fortuity and impermanence of any existence. The true value of life, according to Camus, can be grasped only when one realizes its basic irrationality. Rieux, by virtue of his revolt, confirms the fundamental grandeur and freedom of man. In so doing, like many of Malraux's heroes, he is able to create his own meaning from a purposeless universe.

One of the central literary themes in Sartre's works is the search for justification of human life in a world that is devoid of explanations. Sartre's hero recognizes no duties, no rights, no responsibilities, and no loyalties. His relation with the universe is problematic and confusing. The main question that Sartre's hero seeks to answer is that which concerns his own existence: "What am I?"

In La Nausée (1938), Sartre's first novel, we get an analysis of the inner demoralization of a man. The novel, supposedly the intimate journal of a young intellectual, Antoine Roquentin, has few external events. Roquentin has come to the provincial city of Bouville in order to complete his historical study of the Marquis de Rollebon. The events of the novel, however, are actually a chronicle of the inner life of Roquentin. From the outset he is preoccupied with two problems: how to escape the waves of nausea which overcome him, and how to find events which he may think of as "adventures." His nausea, however, does not

come from the outside (as a sickness), but as a result of his attempt to understand the nature of Being and existence. Roquentin is unsuccessful in achieving any sort of insight into reality. He does succeed, however, in contemplating the nature of existence, and as a result, experiences nausea. Searching for the justification of existing things, Roquentin concludes that they have no reason for being. They are neither necessary nor meaningful, but rather, like himself, "de trop."

Seeking "adventures," Roquentin searches for an experience that would have an aesthetic form; that is, a beginning, a middle, and an end. An example of an adventure would be the experience of "seeing" one grow old: "On voit une femme, on pense qu'elle sera vieille, seulement on ne la <u>voit</u> pas vieillir. Mais par moment, il semble qu'on la <u>voie</u> viellir et qu'on se sente vieillir avec elle: c'est le sentiment d'aventure."[8]

Adventure, for Roquentin, is the opposite of the experience of nausea, and he therefore seeks one to get rid of the other. His awareness that he is superfluous and the realization that he <u>is</u> nausea, leads him to believe that he cannot live isolated and meaningful pieces of existence. Time, for Roquentin, is a haphazard relating of events without significance.

Roquentin gives up his research because he believes that the past only exists and has meaning as far as people in the present choose to sustain that event and give it

meaning. He realizes that he had been using the Marquis de Rollebon as an excuse for his own existence: "M. de Rollebon était mon associé: il avait besoin de moi pour être, et j'avais besoin de lui pour ne pas sentir mon être." (La Nausée, p. 140).

As Roquentin prepares to leave Bouville without any clear idea where he will go or what he will do, he listens to a song at a cafe which sometimes gave him the feeling of adventure: "Some of these days/ You'll miss me honey." (La Nausée, p. 245). He realizes that the melody exists in and for itself, as its own explanation. If the record were broken, for example, the melody would continue to exist by itself: "Elle n'existe pas puisqu'elle n'a rien de trop: c'est tout le reste qui est de trop par rapport à elle. Elle est." (La Nausée, p. 244). Roquentin realizes that all along all he has wanted was simply this: to be; "et moi aussi j'ai voulu être." (La Nausée, p. 244). Being, however, is denied him. He begins to think that the solution to the problem of the nothingness of existence might be aesthetic. He thinks of the composer and the singer of the song as having been "sauvés," like heroes in a novel: "Ils sont un peu pour moi comme des morts, un peu comme des héros de roman: ils se sont lavés du péché d'exister. Pas complètement, bien sûr - mais tout autant qu'un homme peut faire." (La Nausée, p. 248). The song itself is an example of adventure. The act of creating the song has meaning, and is given a sort of permanence by

the singer. The act of aesthetic creation, therefore is an adventure. Roquentin asks, "and why not I?" (Est-ce que je pourrais pas essayer ..." La Nausée, p. 248). The novel concludes with Roquentin reflecting on the type of book he will write, in order that he may, in part, justify his existence. The novel will be, and is, La Nausée.

Roquentin, like Meursault, recognizes that social conventions and the values of daily existence offer only the appearance of meaning and justification. Both Roquentin and Meursault eventually revolt against the absurdity of their existence. Camus' protest, however, stems from the sense of the positivity of life. Whereas Roquentin never transcends his vision of nothingness, Meursault's final realization is one of exaltation and joy of life in the present moment. Roquentin's protest is negative because it results, not from a recognition of the value of physical existence, but from the realization of his nothingness and his homelessness.

In La Nausée, Sartre has attempted to express the ineffable experience of the absurd. Roquentin has accepted the nothingness of his existence as a fact. He no longer sees the world as ordered and valuable, but as a senseless proliferation of alien objects. For Sartre, the absurdity of the universe and man's revolt against it, originates from the negative value of human experience. Unlike Malraux and Camus, Sartre, as we shall see in the subsequent section,

does not establish a positive basis of hope in response to the dilemma of human existence.

The works of Malraux, Sartre, and Camus present the reader with a description of a chaotic, meaningless world. For the most part, however, this is not a mere pessimistic pronouncement, but rather a presentation of a contemporary problem with the possibility of a solution. Confronted with an absurd universe, the modern hero can choose to exist lucidly, or seek to escape through various means.

Although Malraux appears to be more optimistic than either Sartre or Camus, many of his characters are not capable of a confrontation with their condition. In La Condition humaine, for example, Clappique seeks to mask his anguish through alcohol, in much the same way as Ferral uses sex and eroticism to escape the nothingness of his being. Gisors, with his addiction to opium, succeeds in avoiding any decisions or exercise of personal freedom. Human possibilities, according to Malraux, depend on man's ability to act through choice. Clappique, Ferral, and Gisors have abdicated that choice and are therefore unable to act as human beings.

Malraux believes that, through a personal commitment of the will, man can confront the absurdity of his condition and its accompanying anguish and loneliness. Garine, in Les Conquérants, and Kyo, in La Condition humaine, are two examples of the hero who has chosen to act within the irrational context of his existence. Garine

and Kyo seek to give direction to their lives by participation in insurrection and revolution. The eventual outcome of their struggle is secondary to the fact of their commitment. Revolutionary action, although not a panacea for man's predicament, does represent for many of Malraux's heroes a major form of self-expression. Through intense experience, the adventurer is able to dominate his existence, and thereby ascribe his own personal meaning to his life.

Another area which offers man a valid response to the human condition is that of artistic creation. Although many critics have pointed to Malraux's later works as an indication of the importance he gives to aesthetic expression, this theme can be traced as far back as La Voie royale, and continues with L'Espoir and Les Noyers de l'Altenburg.

In contrast to the prototype of the adventurer, the hero who engages in aesthetic and cultural activity is primarily speculative. These characters seek in art a final response to the perplexities of the human situation. Revolutionary action for them is only another aspect of the futility of human endeavor. Claude, in La Voie royale, for example, fuses the life of action and artistic contemplation. He is obsessed with art forms as an alternative to the life he has created through action. Claude, however, eventually abandons his sculpture to join the dying Perken.

The theme of the essential function of art is given greater importance in L'Espoir. Alvear is one of Malraux's characters who perceive the limitations of action: "L'homme n'engage dans une action qu'une part limitée de lui-même; et plus l'action se prétend totale, plus la part engagée est petite. Vous savez bien que c'est difficile d'être un homme ... plus difficile que ne le croient les politiques."[9] Alvear embodies the thought that the purest in man can be reached through a work of art: "Le plus pur de nous, ce ne sont pas toujours les mêmes oeuvres qui permettent d'y accéder, mais ce sont toujours des oeuvres." (L'Espoir, p. 701). Alvear believes, and perhaps Malraux as well, that in art, above all other forms of action, is to be found the essential in man.

In Les Noyers de l'Altenburg (1948), man's dignity and freedom are pursued not through politics or adventure, but through an involvement in the history of the visual arts. In the great debate which takes up the entire second section, the nature of man's being is discussed. Walter Berger, Vincent's uncle, asks: "Existe-t-il une donnée sur quoi puisse se fonder la notion d'homme ...?"[10] The thought is presented that man's essence can be found on the creation of culture, that is, great works of art. As Count Rabaud states: "Je crois à un homme éternel, ... parce que je crois à l'éternité des chefs-d'oeuvre." (Les Noyers, p. 113).

Malraux links man's freedom with his creativity. The individual therefore has the capacity to humanize the world, and through his creations to transcend the fatality of existence. As Walter Berger states: "Le plus grand mystère n'est pas que nous soyons jetés au hasard entre la profusion de la matière et celle des astres; c'est que, dans cette prison, nous tirons de nous mêmes des images assez puissantes pour nier notre néant." (Les Noyers, p. 99).

Malraux's final hope for man lies in his ability to create personal meaning through a commitment of the will, be it through action or aesthetics. The central theme of L'Espoir and Les Noyers de l'Altenburg, is the grandeur of man in his hope, his action, and his defeat. Malraux's novels treat the inevitable defeat of man, but affirm the greatness and the victory of his will. The most striking scene in L'Espoir is the descent from the mountains by the wounded aviators. Even in defeat, they have maintained their essential dignity and nobility: "Mais ce n'était pas la mort qui en ce moment s'accordait aux montagnes: c'était la volonté des hommes." (L'Espoir, p. 836).

Camus, like Sartre and Malraux, believed man's existence in the universe to be without any clearly definable meaning or purpose. Although the world is irrational and meaningless, man alone has the power to shape his life through his freely chosen acts. Camus' hero who freely commits himself to life finds that although his existence is enigmatic, it is not without value.

The concept of self-deception ("mauvaise foi") is never as fully developed in the works of Camus and Malraux, as in those of Sartre. In Camus' novels, as in those of Malraux, we see examples of characters who seek to respond to the absurdity of their condition through an escape. For them, self-deception offers an evasion of their anguish and individual responsibility.

Religion, for Camus, can be a form of bad faith when it is not approached honestly. In L'Etranger, the figure of le Curé, who appears at the end of the novel, is an example of a man who engages in self-deceiving principles. His self-deception stems from his denial of earthly happiness and his abstract concept of immortality. Although he devalues existence, he holds out the promise of its being extended. The Curé serves as a means of awakening Meursault to an awareness of what he himself believes.

A complete devotion to religion, although it might not be the response favored by Camus, does not have to be an example of bad faith. The Jesuit Father Paneloux in La Peste, is an example of a man who has totally, and without inconsistency, accepted the will of God. The essence of his belief is that faith can only come with complete acceptance of God's will in all things. Father Paneloux does not lose his religious fidelity, even in the face of death. Refusing to call a doctor, he dies demonstrating his final compliance with the will of God.

Meursault, who embodies the most authentic response to the human situation, accepts the realization that there are no explanations other than those man creates for himself. Rejecting external explanations as self-deceiving, Meursault eventually comes to a realization of the value of life. Faced with death, he is able to reject the priest's belief in a divine purpose and accept the indifference of the universe. His death sentence binds him irrevocably to all men, who will share an eventual common fate.

Meursault is able to maintain a lucid sense of revolt through his ability to accept man's condition as impermanent and contingent. His rebellion is not in the name of humanity, but for its own irrational ends. Similarly, Dr. Rieux, in La Peste, not understanding the forces that dominate his existence, commits himself to action for its own sake. His response to the incomprehensibility of his situation is one of stoic resistance: "... on ne peut pas en même temps guérir et savoir. Alors guérissons le plus vite possible." (La Peste, p. 231).

The dominant fact of man's existence, as seen in Camus' novels, is his ability to commit himself to freely chosen acts. Consequently, Camus maintains that through lucidity and purposefulness, man can maintain a protest against the absurdity of his existence, and by so doing, assert his rightful dignity.

The central themes in Camus' works are not overly pessimistic. Throughout his fictional writing, even in his

later works, one can see the lyrical expression of an exaltation of life. Images of a love of life, which include the sea, the sun and the brotherhood of man, can be seen in L'Etranger and La Peste, as well as such earlier works as Noces. Meursault, at the conclusion of his life, grasps the greatness of existence. His strange happiness at the end of the novel embodies the beauty of the physical nature of existence. The certainty of death leads him not to lamentation, but to the affirmation of the privilege of life: "J'ai senti que j'avais été heureux, et que je l'étais encore." (L'Etranger, p. 138).

Camus, like Malraux, realizes that the finality of death emphasizes the importance of revolt as an action in itself. The final meaning of Camus' concept of revolt in an absurd world can be summed up in his quotation from Obermann at the beginning of the fourth letter of Lettres à un ami Allemand: "L'homme est périssable. Il se peut, mais périssons en résistant, et si le néant nous est réservé, ne faisons pas que ce soit une justice."[11]

Throughout the works of Malraux and Camus isolated, but consistent, moments of optimism can be seen. Sartre, by contrast, does not resound with hope for a meaningful existence. Commitment to an action in "good faith" that is, without illusions as to its ultimate usefulness, can provide some response to the absurd but is never capable of replacing it. Sartre's emphasis in his fictional works is clearly on the negative aspects of

commitment; that is, the great majority of characters who are incapable of confronting their situation with lucidity and honesty. In responding to the question of how one is to live a meaningful life, Sartre appears to have explored all the negative reactions, holding out only a glimmer of hope for a positive response.

Sartre's most explicit fictional study of "mauvaise foi" is his novella L'Enfance d'un chef (1939). Lucien, like Roquentin, questions his existence. He feels he is sleep-walking, and he wonders if he can be sure he is Lucien, or is he just "playing" at being Lucien. He hungers to become something firm, to find a role to play that will assure him of a fixed being. Lucien, ultimately content to be what other people make him, has abdicated his humanity by denying his freedom of choice.

Lucien's first real escape into self-deception comes with his study of Freud. Up until this time he has been disturbed and anxious because he senses the insubstantiality of his life. Psychoanalysis relieves him of his anxiety because he is now able to take seriously the role he had been playing:

> Lucien était délivré de ses inquiétudes. Il s'était jeté avec avidité sur la psychanalyse parce qu'il avait compris que c'était ce qui lui convenait ... il n'avait plus besoin de se faire mauvais sang et d'être toujours à chercher dans sa conscience les manifestations palpables de son caractère. Le véritable Lucien était profondément enfoui dans l'inconscient; il fallait rêver à lui sans jamais le voir, comme à un cher absent.12

Lucien's second example of unauthenticity comes when he joins an anti-semitic group. As Sartre points out in his "Réflexions sur la question juive," the anti-semite turns to prejudice in an attempt to escape from the nothingness of his existence. Lucien joins the anti-semitic group as part of his search for a solid fixity. He now can assume a definite being as "the man who hates Jews." With his loss of free subjectivity, Lucien only exists because of Jews and his hatred for them. As Roquentin used the Marquis de Rollebon as an excuse for his being, Lucien employs others to provide him with an image of himself so that he may escape the responsibility of deciding, on his own, the nature of his existence and what he wants to make of his life.

One of the fundamental assertions of Sartre's philosophy is that man is nothing but what he makes himself. In his fiction, therefore, a character is defined by his action and his capacity to act. In Le Sursis, the second novel of trilogy, Les Chemins de la liberté, Mathieu and all the other characters (with the exception of Phillippe and Gomez), are "reprieved" from the agony of free choice. The decrees of the government choose for them, and they are therefore relieved from all personal responsibility. Individual liberty is now subordinate to the state. Mathieu's refusal to commit himself against that suppression exemplifies his complicity in his loss of freedom and emphasizes his escape from individual responsibility. Although he feels vaguely impelled to join the Republican forces in Spain, he cannot

take such a step. He thinks of joining the Communist party, but is prevented from doing so by his lack of any strong convictions. Mathieu does not, in short, succeed in asserting his freedom.

The opposite of this avoidance of responsibility comes when men find the courage to recognize and engage their freedom, as does Mathieu in his final action in La Mort dans l'âme. By risking everything without regard to its outcome, Mathieu is able to confront death and the irrationality that, up to this point, has been the dominant factor of his existence.

In one of his earlier stories, "Le Mur," Sartre examines the possibility of maintaining dignity in the face of death and absurdity. "Le Mur" appears to confirm the belief that although man's situation is senseless and tragic, it does not rule out integrity, nobility, and valor. Although Sartre's style contains none of Camus' beautiful physical imagery, the central theme of "le Mur" is not dissimilar to that of Camus' short story "L'Hôte." Both authors point out that even in guilt and failure man can retain his values and defy the world and its inherent irrelevance. Man's highest value is integrity, and both Sartre and Camus emphasize that it is completely independent from social utility.

Man retains, according to Sartre, the final possibility of achieving a meaningful existence through artistic creation. Although Sartre is close to Malraux, he is not as

positive as to the outcome of such a pursuance of aesthetics. The fact that Roquentin will (and did) write a novel does not assure him of a significant revolt against his destiny. Roquentin does believe, however, that he can escape the extrinsicality of existence through the permanence of an aesthetic creation. Art, in this sense is the imposition of form upon an amorphous flux, i.e., human existence. Sartre is far from the platonic ideal of art as truth because it recreates the external. On the contrary, he believes that there are no forms except those that are newly created in a work of art. Man, therefore, can become the creator, imposing his own structure on life.

The prevailing conviction in Sartre's fictional works is that man is predestined to a vain struggle and defeat at the hands of life. It is only rarely that a Sartrean character is able to overcome the irrational forces that dominate his existence. Sartre's novels are a chronicle of the confrontation with the nothingness of the absurd. The myriad of characters that pass through his works represent, for the most part, an unauthentic response to the inconsequence of human life. One can not help but wonder if Sartre is not, at present, contemplating a new novel that will present a more positive response to the dilemma of existence.

The major themes that characterize the fictional work of Malraux, Camus, and Sartre deal with the essential

question of how man is to live a meaningful existence in a purposeless universe. They are all concerned with the individual's efforts to make his life significant and avoid the anonymity of eternity. Alone and alienated, man relentlessly seeks to commune with his fellow man. In describing man's condition, Malraux, Sartre, and Camus have recorded his successes and failures in his fight to establish a purpose in a chaotic and incoherent world.

In the subsequent chapters we shall see that two American Negro authors, although not by any means working as a "school," were to develop strikingly similar literary themes. The American Negro, out of the actual physical experience of isolation and alienation, comes to think of himself as a lost individual. Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, grasping the inconsistencies and absurdities of American life, desperately seek to establish a means of effectively defining their existence.

FOOTNOTES

[1]André Malraux, La Condition humaine, in Romans (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliotèque de la Pléiade, 1947), p. 227; citations from La Condition humaine in my text are to this edition.

[2]Albert Camus, L'Etranger (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 9; citations from L'Etranger in my text are from this edition.

[3]Albert Camus, La Peste (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 230; citations from La Peste in my text are to this edition.

[4]Jean-Paul Sartre, La Mort dans l'âme (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 174; citations from La Mort dans l'âme in my text are to this edition.

[5]André Malraux, Les Conquérants (Paris: B. Grasset, 1928), p. 216; citations from Les Conquérants in my text are to this edition.

[6]André Malraux, La Voie royale (Paris: B. Grasset, 1930), p. 268.

[7]André Malraux, "Postface," in Romans, pp. 161-178.

[8]Jean-Paul Sartre, La Nausée (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), p. 84; citations from La Nausée in my text are to this edition.

[9]André Malraux, L'Espoir, in Romans, p. 704; citations from L'Espoir in my text are to this edition.

[10]André Malraux, Les Noyers de l'Altenburg (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 150; citations from Les Noyers de l'Altenburg in my text are to this edition.

[11]Albert Camus, Lettres à un Ami Allemand (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 63.

[12]Jean-Paul Sartre, L'Enfance d'un chef, in Le Mur (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), p. 179.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EARLY YEARS OF RICHARD WRIGHT

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On July 30, 1947 Richard Wright left the United States for Paris, where he was to spend the rest of his life.[1] Once there, the young American author developed a close intellectual relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and their circle of friends. Wright had met Sartre a few years before in the United States and was fascinated by the man and his ideas. While in France Wright wrote The Outsider, a long philosophical novel with many obvious parallels to the works of Sartre. With the exception of this novel, there is a tendency on the part of Wright's critics to discount any lasting influence of Sartre and his circle. In "A Symposium on an Exiled Son," all the participants agreed that Sartre's influence was both short-lived and superficial. As Ara Bontemps summarized: "He was so much an American with very deep roots in Southern Negro life that the effort of the Sartre crowd to take Dick over was bound to fail. Although he was definitely influenced by them over a period of two or three years it was not lasting, it really didn't take."[2]

Bontemps and the great majority of critics seem to have overlooked, however, that Wright had developed certain ideas and literary themes which were indigenous in his

writing, long before he had met or read Sartre, which were remarkably close to those of his European counterparts. It was precisely because Wright was an American Negro that he was fascinated by the concept of freedom, the idea of revolt, and the theme of alienation and isolation.

Wright believed that the American Negro was alone in an unintelligible and hostile world. The fear and dread of Sartre's fictional characters was, for the Black American, the reality of everyday life. Sartre believed that the condition of man was to live in anguish and seek total freedom within the absurdity of human existence. Wright, like Sartre and Malraux, believed that man could attain his personal freedom through a total commitment to the ideals of human dignity. For Wright, who was inexorably linked to the cause of the Negro, this commitment meant the collective involvement of his people.

The experience of a sensitive Negro in America led Wright to a preoccupation with the dispossessed, and the search for human values and dignity in a society that has not granted the Negro his share of humanity. A closer look at Wright's earlier works will show that these ideas which were so close to the European experience of two World Wars had already germinated in the talented and angry young American author.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in L'Etre et le néant, describes man's alienation as an ontological phenomenon resulting from,

and inherent in the nature of human experience. Sartre's fiction is a chronicle of man's isolation and his inability to escape the loneliness of his condition, as exemplified by Roquentin in La Nausée. Richard Wright's characters also suffer from an agonizing sense of alienation. Wright differed from Sartre, however, in that he believed man's estrangement to be an historical phenomenon, and not universal, occurring anytime and anywhere. For Wright, man's isolation is not necessarily a part of his ontological state, but results rather from the nature of the society in which he lives and his relation to that society.

Although Wright's position does not resound with hope, it does not have the "tragic" tone of much of Sartre's works. Like Camus, Wright holds out the hope that man will be able to escape from the despair of his loneliness. He depicts the anguish of human isolation, but concludes his works almost invariably with a subtle plea for brotherhood and human solutions to man's miseries.

Wright, like Camus, believed man's existence to be irrational because of his longing for order, justice and fraternity, and the inability of the universe in which he lives to satisfy these desires. Camus' concept of the absurd was an important part of his metaphysical investigation, and arose out of the European experience and the growing tragedy of the Algerian situation. Wright's recognition of the downfall of the past myths of brotherhood and innocence comes from the experience of a Black man living in

southern United States. Wright fled from the South, seeking freedom and a new sense of possibility in Chicago. In this great urban center, however, he discovered an ever increasing industrialized society which used men as machines, shaping them to fit the needs of the day. Wright's belief in a new liberty was crushed as he came to realize the frustrating and alienating effects of this new industrialization. In his introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's study of the Black ghetto area of Chicago, Black Metropolis, Wright stated:

> Everywhere in the Western world men are rejecting the life of an industrialization which has pounded their lives to meaninglessness, which has reduced them to appendages to machines. Defiantly men hoist up the old slogans of liberty, love, justice, and happiness; and no authority, civil or religious, has yet found a way to divest their minds completely of a belief and trust in these magic signs. (Even Freud, ... began to search for some way to reconcile man's inordinate desires with a world that contained no feasible promise of their fulfillment.)[3]

Sartre believed the irrationality of man's condition to be universal, based not on any confrontation, but inherent in the nature of all things. In this sense, Wright's position more closely resembles that of Camus, or Malraux who believed the absurdity of the universe to be a product of contemporary history, of war, and of the European situation:

> Europe, grand cimetière où ne dorment que des conquérants morts et dont la tristesse devient plus profonde en se parant de leurs noms illustres, tu ne laisses autour de moi qu'un horizon nu et le miroir qu'apporte le désespoir, vieux maître de la solitude ...[4]

Malraux's heroes, in an attempt to find an antidote for their "malaise," sought other cultures and other adventures.

Like Malraux's conquerors, Wright's restless, violent Negroes sought out a life of action in the hope that a commitment to a collective cause would help vanquish their sense of isolation and rejection. The need for some monumental action was linked with the longing to "belong," to be involved with others in a panoramic ideal:

> I've even heard Negroes say that maybe Hitler and Mussolini are all right; ... because they felt that these men "did things," ... There was in the back of their minds, when they said this a wild and intense longing (wild and intense because it was suppressed!) to belong, to be identified, to feel that they were alive as other people were, to be caught up forgetfully and exultingly in the swing of events to feel the clean deep organic satisfaction of doing a job in common with others.5

Wright, like many intellectuals in the 1930's in the United States and in Europe, was attracted to Communism. The reasons which impelled him to join, and those which eventually brought about his break with the Party, reveal a personal search for a universal ideal which would establish the past belief in the brotherhood of man. Wright originally saw the Communist Party as an effective instrument in achieving a communal, and better, world: "With the exception of the church and its myths and legends, there was no agency in the world so capable of making men feel the earth and the people upon it as the Communist Party."6 With the inability of the church or any other organization

to provide the American Negro with hope and belief in his own humanity, Wright turned to Communism.

Wright's reason for leaving the Party was simply that he did not want to be bound by its decisions. Like so many of Malraux's fictional characters seeking brotherhood within the group, he was too individualistic to submit to organized collective control. Wright realized that his break with the Party represented a severe blow to his search for fraternity and involvement:

> I headed toward home alone, really alone now, telling myself that in all the sprawling immensity of our mighty continent the least known factor of living was the human heart, the least sought goal of being was a way to live a human life ... I would hurl other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human. (The God that Failed, p. 162).

Although disillusioned, Wright, like Camus, was not to give up all hope in the greatness of man and his capabilities.

The literature of Richard Wright is primarily one of protest. Out of the experience of Southern Negro life came a sense of outrage that was best expressed in a literature of challenge, aimed at dramatizing man's inhumanity to man. Wright presented his ideas concerning the writing of protest fiction at a conference of Midwestern writers sponsored by the Communist Party, in 1936. Wright outlined the main points of what he called "Personalism," as follows:

> Personalism as a medium of literary expression will emphasize tendency rather than form or content. Personalism will foster expression of protest in terms as individual and personal as possible.

> Personalism will represent the highest intensity of social consciousness possible.
>
> It represents all forms of revolt in writing.
>
> Personalism will be anti-aesthetic insofar as it will seek to push art beyond mere contemplation. In short, its expression must become an objective art, having immediacy as its aim. Though using a high emotional content, its aim and end will be beyond the mere power to move. It will seek to make those who come in contact with it take sides for or against certain moral issues, and these issues will be elementary ones.[7]

Very early, therefore, Wright raised his voice in favor of a literature of social protest and personal commitment. At the center of his writing, however, as it was later to develop, is the notion that man is capable of benevolence. Wright often protested against man's lack of humanity, but only out of a belief that inhumanity could be abolished.

Sartre's condemnation of racism differs from Wright's only in that Wright views prejudice from the vantage point of the oppressed, and therefore his writing takes on a greater sense of urgency and immediacy. Sartre, the philosopher, felt duty bound to speak out against hatred and prejudice. In an introduction to "La Putain Respectueuse," written for Twice A Year, Sartre states:

> The writer cannot accomplish much in the world. He can only say what he has seen. I have attacked anti-semitism. Today in this play I attack racism. I do not believe my writings have much importance, or that they will change anything or even make friends for me. So much the worse: I am doing my job as a writer.[8]

We can think of Wright's literature as developing over three successive stages. Although by no means distinct

"periods," several differences and thematic changes can be traced from one point in his literary career to the next. Wright's early fiction, comprised mainly of short stories written in the 1930's, and culminating in Native Son (1940), represents a literature of social protest characterized by violent and emotional scenes. The theme of alienation and isolation, which can also be seen in his earlier works, develops more fully in Wright's autobiography, Black Boy (1945). For the next eight years Wright did little writing, and the inevitable changes in his thinking resulted in The Outsider. Man's inability to find fellowship within the group, and the inherent irrationality of the universe become the dominant assumptions in this long philosophical probe into the meaning of man's existence and his search for order and reason in a chaotic world.

With the help of this introductory study of some of Wright's lesser known essays we can now examine these three stages, and in so doing evaluate the effect of Wright's emigration to France and the ensuing influence of Sartre and his circle. With frequent reference to the works of Malraux, Sartre, and Camus, we can observe differences and similarities, and point to direct influences wherever possible.

Wright's early volume of short stories, Uncle Tom's Children (1938), indicates a strong preoccupation with the theme of rebellion through action. Many of Wright's

earlier heroes, like those of Malraux, betrayed by their environment, seek fulfillment of their personality and liberation and dignity for their people through violent action. Each of these stories portrays a Negro in extreme protest against his surroundings. Although Wright was completely engaged in the racial question and contemporary social protest, the ideas presented in these stories encompass the whole of humanity.

"Big Boy Leaves Home" tells the story of the murder of a white man by two Negro boys after their companions had been killed without provocation. Motivated by fear and dread, Big Boy is forced to flee his home, chased by the mob that kills his companion. Big Boy, who is the forerunner of the vengeful and bitter Bigger Thomas in Native Son, dreams of an act of revenge, but can only hide in a hole while the mob searches for him, and escape in the back of a truck at dawn.

In "Down by the Riverside" a long-suffering Negro, Mann, revolts against Jim Crow conditions in his fight for survival. Mann, his pregnant wife Lulu, her mother, and their young son Pee Wee, are trapped by the flooding Mississippi. Mann, in an attempt to save his wife, takes her to the hospital the only way possible: in a stolen boat. Fighting against the current, Mann passes the half-submerged house of Mr. Heartfield, the rich white man from whom the boat was stolen. Upon seeing a Negro rowing his

boat, Heartfield fires at Mann who, seized with panic, returns his fire and kills the white man. When Mann finally arrives at the hospital his wife is dead and he is ordered to help with the rescue work. During the storm he saves many white people, the last of whom are Mrs. Heartfield and her two children. Despite his heroism, Mann is accused of the murder and quickly sent to be shot. As he is led away he breaks free and runs toward the river. It is neither the hope of escape nor fear that motivates his flight, but rather the hope that he will be able to die through his own act without submitting to their sentence:

> His fear subsided into a cold numbness. Yes, now! Yes through the trees? Gawd! They were going to kill him. Yes, now he would die! He would die before he would let them kill him. Ahll die fo they kill me! Ahll <u>die</u>![9]

Throughout his life Mann had been motivated by fear and helplessness. Only his final act, a defiant suicide, similar in form and purpose to the final act of Sartre's Mathieu, enables him to define his being and achieve a personal sense of freedom. Mathieu, at the moment of his death, grasped the importance of his act: "Je décide que la mort était le sens secret de ma vie, que j'ai vécu pour mourir; je meurs pour témoigner qu'il est impossible de vivre; ..."[10] Although Mann is not as philosophically lucid, he too realizes that his final action is a repudiation of a life lived in fear and submission. By refusing

to be lynched and bringing about his own death, Mann has achieved his own sense of personal dignity.

Another example of a suppressed Negro who achieves a sense of pride and freedom through a personal and violent protest, is Silas in "Long Black Song." After discovering that a white traveling salesman has seduced his wife, Silas kills him. Instead of accepting the violation of his woman and his own sense of manhood, he chooses an act of defiance that will cause his own death. Sarah, his wife, begs him to run away before the white population discovers the murder he has committed; but he refuses:

> Go eay fer whut?. . . It don make no difference . . . Fer ten years Ah slaved mah life out t git mah farm free . . . Now its all gone. Gone . . . Ef Ah run erway, Ah ain got nothin. Ef Ah stay n fight Ah ain got nothin. It dont make no difference which way Ah go. Gawd! Gawd, Ah wish all them white folks wuz dead! . . . Ah wish Gawd would kill em all! (Uncle Tom's Children, p. 124).

Silas sends his wife and baby to her Aunt's house and waits with loaded gun for the lynch mob to arrive: "Ahm gonna be hard like the is! So hep me, Gawd, Ah'm gonna be hard! When they git me outta here they's gonna know Ahm gone! . . ." (Uncle Tom's Children, p. 125). Silas, therefore, chooses to die in a final defiant act of destruction against that which he hates. He kills as many whites as he can, and when the mob sets fire to his house, he stays inside and burns with quiet stoicism. This is the one vengeful act that Big Boy dreamed of. Like Malraux's revolutionaries, Mann faces death lucidly and defiantly, and by so doing preserves his human dignity.

In "Bright and Morning Star," Aunt Sue, a traditional Negro folk heroine ("Aunty") is portrayed as a Christian turned Communist. Her heroism, however, involves an inner fortitude much greater than a commitment to Communist ideology. Wright, even at the time of his affiliation with the Party, believed that there were forces stronger than Communism that tended toward revolution.

Sue is a religious widow with two grown sons, Johnny-Boy and Sug. Sug has been jailed because of his affiliation with the Communist Party, and Johnny-Boy has taken over the district party leadership. When a scheduled meeting of the Party is discovered by the white community which is determined to crush the movement, Johnny-Boy goes off to warn the members not to show up. While he is gone the sheriff comes looking for him and beats Sue in an attempt to find out where he is. Sue, however, remains obstinate:

> The sheriff walked past her. The others followed. Yuh didn't git whut you wanted! Sue thought exultingly. N yuh ain gonna <u>never</u> git it! Hotly, something arched in her to make them feel the intensity of her pride and freedom; she groped to turn the bitter hours of her life into words of a kind that would make them feel that she had taken all they had done to her in stride and could still take more. (<u>Uncle Tom's Children</u>, pp. 196-197).

Sue has maintained her dignity through her refusal to submit. Later, with an absurd irony similar to that in Sartre's "Le Mur," Sue unwittingly divulges the names of the party members to an informer whom she believes to be a loyal party member. Refusing to accept her defeat, Sue conceals

a gun under a wrapping sheet for her son. Arriving at the field where Johnny-Boy is being tortured, Sue manages to kill the informer before he can reveal the names of the party members. Both Johnny-Boy and Sue are then killed by the frustrated mob. At the moment of her death, Sue once again asserts her defiance and freedom:

> She gave up as much of her life as she could before they took it from her. But the sound of the shot and the streak of fire that tore its way through her chest forced her to live again, intensely. She had not moved, save for the slight jarring impact of the bullet. She felt the heat of her own blood warming her cold, wet back. She yearned suddenly to talk. "Yuh didnt git whut yuh wanted! N yuh ain gonna nevah git it! Yuh didnt nevah git it! Yuh didnt kill me; Ah come here by mahsef . . ." (Uncle Tom's Children, pp. 214-215).

The personal commitment of Sue, like that of Silas and Mann, and not unlike the commitment of the heroes of Malraux, involves a total revolt against their environment and a defiance of death. In order to preserve her human dignity and her love for the cause in which she believed, it was necessary for her to sacrifice her life. In so doing she achieved a new sense of personal freedom and pride.

Although often technically crude, these short stories give an early indication of many of the themes and ideas developed in Wright's later works. Written at a time when he was primarily concerned with social issues, they represent a commitment to personal protest against injustice.

Betrayed by their environment and often isolated from members of their own race, Wright's bitter characters are seeking an effective means of vanquishing their

alienation and sense of personal ineptitude. Camus, in his study of the motivating forces of metaphysical revolt, seems to have also pointed to the essence of the American Negro's struggle for survival: "La révolte est, dans l'homme, le refus d'être traité en chose et d'être réduit à la simple histoire. Elle est l'affirmation d'une nature commune à tous les hommes, ..."[11]

A further similarity can be drawn between Wright's heroes and Malraux's revolutionaries who felt an inexplicable need to commit themselves to a social cause. They too felt the need to escape their anguish and loneliness through violent action. Tchen in La Condition humaine, for example, finds in action: "... la satisfaction de ses haines, de sa pensée, de son caractère. Elle donnait un sens à sa solitude."[12]

The commitment of Wright's heroes is more urgent because it involves the basic struggle for physical and mental survival. Silas and Mann are similar to Tchen in that they feel a compelling need to express their sense of outrage and frustration. The heroes of Malraux, like those of Sartre, when they are able to decide to act, do so out of a sense of metaphysical alienation and a realization of the absurdity of all human endeavor. Wright's early heroes have no sense of the philosophical, their protest does not emanate from the ineffable desire to create a meaningful destiny. Far from being hyper-conscious of their situation, as are Mathieu and Roquentin, they are inarticulate and

uneducated. It is their very inadequacies, however, that lead them to violent revolt. Realizing that the society in which they live has placed them next to obscurity, Wright's heroes conclude that the only meaningful action left open to them is one of violence.

Native Son, Richard Wright's first novel, is primarily concerned with dramatizing the plight of the Negro in Chicago's black ghetto. Although Native Son appears to be a novel of social protest, it is also a good example of how other, more metaphysical inquiries, are indigenous in Wright's fiction. In an effort to lay bare the personality of Bigger Thomas, Wright has probed the motivating forces behind his devastating actions. As Bigger's personal drama unfolds, Wright develops such themes as the possibility of man's freedom, his personal isolation and alienation, the inherent absurdity of modern American society, and the nature and form of rebellion.

Upon its publication in 1940 Native Son was widely regarded as a naturalistic novel, in the tradition of Dreiser. Although there are many complex forces at work, Bigger's vengeful and violent revolt is largely motivated by environmental factors. Bigger's frustration and gnawing sense of isolation in the face of the white majority led him to react violently against that society which has rejected him. It appears that Wright had his bewildered protagonist in mind when, in his introduction to Black Metropolis, he asked: ". . . what peculiar personality

formations result when millions of people are forced to live lives of outward submissiveness while trying to keep intact in their hearts a sense of the worth of their humanity?" (Black Metropolis, p. xxx).

Bigger, in one sense, is a product of a dislocated society. He has been conditioned by hatred and a sense of exclusion. His fear and anxiety can ultimately only be expressed through violence, crime, and alienation. Bigger's growing sense of being wronged leads him to an early forewarning: "Everytime I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me . . ."[13]

Bigger's drive toward violence, however, is motivated by forces sometimes greater than environmental influences. Bigger, like Meursault in L'Etranger, is an outsider; out of touch with the society in which he lives and unable to relate to its values or standards. Meursault, a metaphysical outsider, is alienated from himself and the world around him. For him love and murder are meaningless, even in a negative sense. Bigger's sense of solitude originates not from a metaphysical emptiness, but rather out of racial motives:

> . . . I just can't get used to it, . . . I swear to God I can't, I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the

> time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence . . . (Native Son, pp. 22-23).

The dread and fear with which Bigger faces the world emanates from a physical sense of estrangement. His anguish and frustration are expressed through a violent rebellion directed against his relationship with the world in which he lives. Bigger's protest differs from that of Meursault, in that it is directed toward his own particular condition, rather than toward the total scheme of creation.

Although the nature of their rebellion differs, the motivating forces behind the reaction of both Meursault and Bigger Thomas are very similar. In L'Homme révolté Camus, describing the origins of revolt, states: "La révolte naît du spectacle de la déraison, devant une condition injuste et incompréhensible."[14] Meursault's metaphysical rebellion originates because he finds himself adrift and isolated in an uncomprehensible society. Bigger, like Meursault, finds himself in a world which, for him, has lost all metaphysical and moral foundation. Alienated from the mainstream of society, he can find no way to bridge the gap between his aspirations and the reality of his condition. In "How Bigger was Born," Wright explained: "In Native Son I tried to show that man, bereft of a culture and unanchored by property, can travel but one path if he reacts positively, but unthinkingly to the prizes and goals of civilization; and that path is emotionally blind rebellion."[15]

Bigger is twenty-two years of age, and shares a one room, rat-infested apartment with his mother, brother and sister. Bigger's central conflict is symbolically enacted in the opening scene of the novel, when he traps and kills a large rat who inhabits the apartment. Like the rat, when Bigger blocks the entrance to its hole with a box, the four members of the family are entrapped in their one room kitchenette. Sensing its defeat, the rat, its belly bulging with fear, rises on its hind legs in a futile act of defiance as Bigger hurls a heavy skillet. Bigger, like the trapped rat, reacts out of fear as he violently turns on his oppressors.

The irrational social scene which sets the background for Bigger's actions as it does for those of Meursault, motivates the protagonist toward rebellion. Wright, like Camus, reveals a society strained by contradictions between real and professed motives. No longer believing in the God of tradition, Bigger cannot succeed in explaining the irrational social injustices that exist in his day to day existence. In one of the absurd ironies that exist in the world of Native Son, Bigger discovers that his philanthropic employer, although he donates thousands of dollars to Negro organizations, refuses to let his large real estate company rent anything but slum apartments to black families, and only within strictly defined ghetto boundaries.

In Le Mythe de Sisyphe Camus explains the nature of alienation and absurdity: "Un monde qu'on peut expliquer

même avec de mauvaises raisons est un monde familier. Mais au contraire, dans un univers soudain privé d'illusions et de lumières, l'homme se sent un étranger. Ce divorce entre l'homme et sa vie, ... c'est proprement le sentiment de l'absurdité."[16]

Wright, in his essay "How Bigger was Born," seems to have come close to Camus' definition of the absurd:

> All Bigger Thomases, white and black, felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless. . . . these personalities were mainly consequent upon men and women living in a world whose fundamental assumptions could no longer be taken for granted; a world ridden with national and class strife; a world in which God no longer existed as a daily focal point of men's lives; a world in which men could no longer retain their faith in an ultimate hereafter.[17]

Meursault's rejection of society evolves as metaphysical brooding, and a denial of conventional values: "Que m'importaient la mort des autres, l'amour d'une mère, que m'importaient son dieu, les vies qu'on choisit, les destins qu'on élit, ..."[18] Bigger Thomas, however, moved by a sense of personal outrage, seeks action, like the heroes of Malraux, as a mode of self-expression. Other characters in the novel seek to escape the reality of their condition through alcohol, as does Bigger's mistress, Bessie; or through religion, as does his mother. Bigger, however, feels he can only forget his condition through violent and intense action:

> Of late he had liked to hear of men who could rule others, for in actions such as these he felt that there was a way to escape from this tight morass of fear and shame that sapped at the base of his

> life. He liked to hear of how Japan was conquering China; of how Hitler was running the Jews to the ground; of how Mussolini was invading Spain. He was not concerned with whether these acts were right or wrong; they simply appealed to him as possible avenues of escape. (Native Son, pp. 109-110).

Bigger takes a job as a chauffeur for the Daltons, a wealthy white benevolent family. After driving Mary, the Dalton's daughter, home from an evening with Jan, her Communist boyfriend, Bigger has to carry Mary up the stairs because of her drunken condition. As he is about to leave, Mrs. Dalton, who is blind, enters the room. Paralyzed with fear that she might discover his presence in her daughter's bedroom, Bigger holds a pillow over Mary's face. In the brief moments that Mrs. Dalton stands in the doorway, Mary suffocates. In order to protect himself, Bigger burns Mary's body in the furnace.

Although Bigger's murder was an accident, he has long dreamed of such an act. His killing of Mary gives him a new sense of freedom and identity. He has discovered his own personality and a capacity for action on a grand scale. Like Malraux's revolutionaries, Bigger finds release from his anguish and frustrations through violent action. Up to this time Bigger has cowered in fear before the white world. Now, as he plots his next move, the many possibilities that are opened to him give him a new sense of power and freedom:

> He lay again in the bed, his mind whirling with images born of a multitude of impulses. He could run away; he could remain; he could even go down and confess what he had done. The mere thought

> that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his own hands. (Native Son, p. 179).

For Bigger the murder of Mary Dalton becomes the one meaningful act of his life, from which he can redeem his personality and control his destiny.

After his killing of Mary, Bigger, afraid of being alone, enlists the aid of his mistress Bessie. Realizing however, that his isolation, even from his own race, is a fact of his existence and cannot be vanquished by such a relationship, he kills his accomplice. Unlike his first murder, this act was not accidental or necessary for his protection. It was simply proof of his new ability to act. Although he is afraid he will be overwhelmed by a feeling of guilt, this second murder also gives him a sense of power and freedom:

> In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had happened to him. He was living truly and deeply . . . Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight. (Native Son, p. 225).

Bigger is finally discovered as the murderer and captured after a search of the entire Negro section of Chicago. A white Communist lawyer, Max, becomes his attorney, and tries to explain Bigger's crime sociologically. Privately, however, Max fails to comprehend the nature of Bigger's act. Bigger tries to explain that his action has made him understand himself as a man, that the murder has defined his personality: "What I killed for I am! . . .

What I killed for must've 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 'em. . . ." (Native Son, p. 392).

In the final pages of Native Son, Bigger Thomas, condemned to death, attempts a reconciliation, like that of Meursault, between man and the absurdity of his environment. Rejecting religion, he is determined to die alone, as he has lived. In talking with Max, however, he realizes that other men have lived and felt as he has. Bigger is finally able to send a belated gesture of fraternity to Jan, whose help Bigger had rejected throughout. As Max is leaving his cell for the last time, Bigger calls out to him: "Tell . . . Tell Mister . . . Tell Jan hello. . . ." (Native Son, p. 392).

As his death approaches, Bigger, like Meursault, is free of fear of life and death. As his execution nears, he has no remorse; instead he is seen with "a faint, wry, bitter smile." (Native Son, p. 392).

Native Son is as much a study of an alienated and lonely individual as it is an examination of prejudice and hatred and its effects. Bigger Thomas, failing to achieve a personal sense of identity and a meaningful relation to others, desperately searches for a means of overcoming his isolation.

The theme of the alienation of modern man can be traced throughout the literature of the twentieth century in both Europe and America. Albert Camus' novel, L'Etranger is perhaps the most notable attempt to describe a man totally unrelated to anything or anyone, a man for whom everything is meaningless. Erich Fromm, in his psychoanalytical study of the individual in contemporary society, The Sane Society, describes the phenomenon of alienation as:

> . . . a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts--but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship.[19]

In Native Son, Richard Wright's protagonist is forced into an alien existence because of the irrational nature of the society in which he lives. Bigger Thomas depends on his acts to define his own creativeness and personal sense of freedom. Bigger is, in the most complete sense, alone; an example of what Eric and Mary Josephson described in their study of the estranged individual, as a man who "has become mechanized, routinized, made comfortable as an object; but in a profound sense displaced and thrown off balance as subjective creator of power."[20]

Richard Wright, in his portrayal of an alienated individual, also expresses his social criticism by exposing the irrationalities of contemporary society. Bigger Thomas reacts to the underlying contradictions of the American community which proclaims the inherent worth of the

individual, and yet everywhere denies this worth to the American Negro. For Bigger, the opposite poles of aspiration and satisfaction can only be briefly united through violence and crime. Native Son is not only the story of a socially deprived black man, but in some degree, of all individuals who are rejected by their environment and who rebel against this betrayal with blind and futile fury.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography (New York: Putnam Press, 1968), biographical information contained in first chapters.

[2]"Symposium on an Exiled Son," reprinted in Anger and Beyond, ed. by Herbert Hill (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 209.

[3]Horace R. Cayton and St. Clair Drake, Black Metropolis (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), Introduction by Richard Wright, p. xxiii; citations from Black Metropolis in my text are to Harcourt, Brace and Company (New York, 1945).

[4]André Malraux, La Tentation de l'occident (Paris: B. Grasset, 1926), p. 124.

[5]Richard Wright, "How Bigger was Born," Saturday Review of Literature, XXII, 6 (June 1, 1940), p. 4.

[6]Richard Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," in The God That Failed, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); citations from The God That Failed in my text are to Harper and Row (New York, 1963), p. 155.

[7]Quoted by Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography, p. 138.

[8]Jean-Paul Sartre, Introduction to "La Putain Respectueuse," translated by Harold Clurman in Twice a Year, 10th Anniversary Issue, 1938-1948 (New York: Twice a Year Press, 1948), p. 17.

[9]Richard Wright, Uncle Tom's Children (New York: Harper and Row, 1940), p. 102; citation from Uncle Tom's Children in my text are to Perennial Library edition (New York, 1965).

[10]Jean-Paul Sartre, La Mort dans l'âme (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 174.

[11]Albert Camus, L'Homme révolté (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 307.

[12]André Malraux, La Condition humaine, in Romans (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliotèque de la Pléiade, 1947), p. 227.

[13]Richard Wright, Native Son (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), p. 23; citations from Native Son in my text are to Harper and Row, Perennial Classics edition (New York, 1966).

[14]Albert Camus, L'Homme révolté, p. 21.

[15]Richard Wright, "How Bigger was Born," Saturday Review of Literature, XXII, 6 (June 1, 1940), p. 17.

[16]Albert Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe (Paris: Gallimard, 1940), p. 18.

[17]Richard Wright, "How Bigger was Born," Saturday Review of Literature, XXII, 6 (June 1, 1940), pp. 17-18.

[18]Albert Camus, L'Etranger (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 169.

[19]Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955), p. 111.

[20]Eric and Mary Josephson, ed., Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1962), p. 10.

CHAPTER FOUR

RICHARD WRIGHT: BLACK BOY IN PARIS

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Reading Richard Wright's autobiography, Black Boy (1945), one is struck by the utter despair of a childhood filled with fear and hatred, and the resemblance of these early experiences to those of his fictional characters. The themes of loneliness, isolation, anxiety and dread which were so powerfully evoked in Wright's portrayal of Bigger Thomas correspond closely to the experiences of Wright's early childhood in Mississippi. Rebellion, a recognition of the absurdity of life, and a tormenting sense of isolation are the underlying themes in this powerful autobiography. The last third of Black Boy, which contains many interesting insights, was rejected by Wright's publisher, and has never been made available to the reading public.

As a result of Wright's early experiences, he soon developed an attitude of total revolt against a world that was without meaning or sense of justice. At an early age Wright felt he was destined to question everything:

> At the age of twelve I had an attitude toward life that was to endure, that was to make me seek those areas of living that would keep it alive, that was to make me skeptical of everything while seeking everything, tolerant of all and yet critical. . . . It directed my loyalties to the side of men in rebellion; . . ."[1]

Although there is a close correlation between Wright's attitude and Camus' description of the metaphysical rebel, a distinction should be made as to the origins of their revolt. Camus, in describing the nature of revolt said: "La révolte métaphysique est le mouvement par lequel un homme se dresse contre sa condition et la création tout entière."[2] In 1945 Wright, enraged at the racial injustice facing the Negro in America, based his protest on the historical phenomena of segregation and discrimination. This rebellion was directed at the black man's relationship with the society in which he lived, rather than against the total scheme of creation.

Wright often saw the universe as hostile, absurd and incomprehensible. For him, as for Camus, the irrational nature of the universe originated from a confrontation of man's inherent sense of justice and reason, and the entirely irrational nature of the universe. Both authors were aware that the principle of justice, as they understood it, was in sharp contrast to the injustice witnessed in the world. In Black Boy Wright explains the dilemma of one who has grasped the irrational nature of society and is powerless to correct it:

> It was inconceivable to me that one should surrender to what seemed wrong, and most of the people I had met seemed wrong. Ought one to surrender to authority even if one believed that authority was wrong? If the answer was yes, then I knew that I would always be wrong, because I could never do it. Then how could one live in a world in which one's mind and perceptions meant nothing and authority and

> tradition meant everything? There were no answers. (Black Boy, p. 182).

Although this concept of the irrationality of human existence comes close to that of Camus, it differs from that of Sartre in that it is dependent on Wright's particular relationship with the world. Sartre believed that the universe was chaotic by its very nature, that "nothingness" was inherent in both man and the world, and therefore both were meaningless. Wright's sense of the absurd ensues not from any ontological discovery, but from an unjust harassment by an unjust society; and is thus contingent on his particular confrontation with that society.

The third major current running through Black Boy is a compelling feeling of loneliness and isolation, resulting in a constant feeling of dread and anguish. In a moving passage, Wright describes the nature of racial isolation as he recounts his reaction after being forced by his white co-workers to leave a job:

> For weeks after that I could not believe my feelings. My personality was numb, reduced to a lumpish, loose, dissolved state. I was a non-man, something that knew vaguely that it was human but felt that it was not . . . What I did feel was a longing to attack. But how? And because I knew of no way to grapple with this thing, I felt doubly cast out. (Black Boy, p. 213).

As this sense of isolation deepened, it began to transcend racial feelings, and became metaphysical as well as physical. As seen in The Outsider, Wright believed anxiety and alienation to be a universal condition. In 1945, however, Wright's reaction was not so philosophical. The black man

in America, isolated by society, rebels against this decision, motivated by his violated sense of justice. Camus' Meursault, an example of a metaphysical rebel, is totally unresponsive to the values of society, and is alienated because of this indifference. For him, there can be no "justice," for right and wrong have no meaning. He is not against society's values, but beyond them. His rebellion is not against the particular world in which he lives, but rather against the very nature of all existence. Wright, although he was later to involve the protagonist of The Outsider in a similar revolt, did not at this time envision rebellion in such metaphysical terms.

Wright, like Sartre, believed that man lived with anxiety and dread. The condition of man was to live with his anguish and seek freedom and meaning within the absurdity of his existence. In the last third of Black Boy, (written at the same time as the rest of his autobiography, but rejected by his publisher) Wright expressed the anguish and dread of his everyday existence:

> From the accidental pain of southern years, from anxiety that I had sought to avoid, from fear that had been too painful to bear, I had learned to seek those areas of life, those situations, where I knew that events would complement my own inner mood. I was conscious of what was happening to me; I knew that my attitude of watchful wonder had usurped all other feelings, had become the meaning of my life, an integral part of my personality; that I was striving to live and measure all things by it.[3]

Wright, like his fictional characters, living in a hostile world, was condemned to an overwhelming burden of anguish, dread and isolation. The phenomena which led to Wright's pessimism were not unlike Sartre's experience of two World Wars. The experiences endured while he was imprisoned in a concentration camp resemble, although in exaggerated form, those of a Negro living in the southern states early in this century. Both societies depended on power and fear to maintain the status quo of everyday life. Furthermore, the master-slave relationship present to some degree in both instances, replaced normal intercourse between individuals. From this experience, which Sartre described as "extreme situation,"[4] came the beginning of a deep rooted sense of defeat, frustration and isolation.

Wright, however, was never (unless we are to take The Outsider as a definitive statement of his thought) as philosophically pessimistic as Sartre. His sense of despair and alienation is more historical than metaphysical, based on the downfall of the American dream of equality. If, as Wright claims, isolation is an historical phenomenon, there is always the hope, however dim, that it can some day be vanquished. Throughout the works of Wright there is the view, not to be found in those of Sartre, that the dreams of equality and fraternity could exist as reality; and the greatest value of protest would be to restore those lost dreams.

Seeking refuge from an alien society, Wright left New York and the United States shortly after the publication of Black Boy; he was never to return again.

After Wright moved permanently to Paris, he underwent a gradual change, which most critics agree was not good for his writing. The reader is struck by the sheer force and bitterness of Wright's anger and outraged sense of justice in Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son and Black Boy. In Paris, Wright found peace from overt racial hatred and subsequent personal happiness with his wife and two daughters. Whatever else Paris might have given him, it appears to have detracted from the force and power of his fiction. We can only speculate as to the reasons why, but it becomes obvious, even to the most superficial reader, that Wright's later fiction, such as The Long Dream (1958) and Savage Holiday (1954), contain none of the moving power and anger of his earlier works.

The Outsider, written during Wright's early years in Paris, and published in 1953, is interesting because of its obvious attempt to incorporate Sartrean doctrines. The novel suffers from the inclusion of long polemics and philosophical monologues which seem forced and unnecessary. Nevertheless, The Outsider presents us with a most explicit philosophical statement, and therefore deserves examination. Wright has used the Sartrean themes of freedom, the nature of dread and anguish, and the irrationality of the universe, to explore the meanings of man's existence.

In his previous works, specifically Native Son and Uncle Tom's Children, Wright's heroes, impelled by a sense of racial injustice, violently rebelled against the white dominated society in which they lived. In The Outsider, however, Cross Damon is obsessed, not with race, but with an idea. The violent acts that he commits are, in a sense gratuitous, carried out according to metaphysical plan. In his search for freedom and ultimate purpose, Cross eventually conceives of himself as a superman, a man who has transcended all conception of good and evil. In his attempt to understand the enigmatic nature of existence Cross comes to recognize no rules and no human obligations: "We twentieth century westerners have outlived the faith of our fathers; our minds have grown so skeptical that we cannot accept the old scheme of moral precepts which once guided man's life. . . . we try to steer our hearts by improvised, pragmatic rules which are, in the end, no rules at all."[5]

The Outsider is Wright's first novel where there is no great struggle between black and white. Cross does not conform to Wright's previous stereotype of the Negro hero. He is not illiterate, but articulate, introspective and philosophical. His revolt does not emanate from an outraged sense of justice, but from the knowledge that human existence, by its very nature does not conform to his concept of what life should be.

Bigger Thomas, in Native Son, at the end of his struggle achieves a new sense of freedom. He begins to realize for the first time that he has the ability to create a new life for himself and live out the consequences of his freely chosen actions. Cross Damon, in one sense, can be seen as a continuation of the final development in Bigger Thomas' growth toward individuality and freedom. Cross is free to define his own existence, and he vainly struggles to establish his own identity.

Cross, like Mathieu in Sartre's Les Chemins de la liberté, is a former student of philosophy who feels ensnared by the tedium of his middle class existence. He is bored with his wife and his job as a postal clerk. Living a meaningless life, he becomes caught in a hopelessly involved trap that he himself helped to create. His abandoned wife begins to demand more money for herself and her three children. His mistress, whom he has impregnated, threatens to accuse him of rape (she is under age) if he will not marry her. Cross himself is consumed with a nameless anxiety, made worse by the fact that there is no one to whom he can confide the nature of his anguish.

Cross feels his entrapment more intensely each day, and dreams of escape. He is compelled, however, like Mathieu, by the metaphysical task of finding the meaning of his life. In his desperate search for an end to his dread and anguish, Cross longs for a deeply felt total experience,

capable of giving some order to the chaotic nature of his life.

Unlike Wright's earlier heroes, Cross is not preoccupied with the task of living in a white dominated society. In his effort to face the human predicament and understand himself, he was alone; alienated from those of his own race as well as the white. He was an isolated individual; one of those men who according to Cross, ". . . were outsiders not because they had been born black or poor, but because they had thought their way through the many veils of illusion." (The Outsider, p. 28).

As the circumstances of his life continue to plunge him into despair, Cross finds temporary escape through alcohol. A fortuitous subway accident, however, in which Cross is mistakenly declared dead, gives him his longed-for freedom. The idea occurs to him that he might remain "dead," and be able to begin his life anew, freed from his old obligations and attachments: "He, of all people on earth, had a million reasons for being dead and staying dead! An intuitive sense of freedom flashed through his mind. Was there a slight chance here of his being able to start all over again? To live a new life?" (The Outsider, p. 83).

With his new freedom, he can now assume a new identity and live as he pleases. His freedom, however, brings with it a new sense of dread, as he realizes that he must now act according to the dictates of his own values.

He must now practice what has previously been merely a philosophical precept. He is free in a world stripped of all former sanctions, and must now act according to his own mandates and beliefs.

Fleeing Chicago, Cross finds it necessary to commit a murder in order to preserve his freedom. After killing a Negro who has recognized him as an old friend he escapes to New York and a new life.

The second part of the novel, entitled "Dream," traces Cross' flight to New York and his subsequent new identity. On the train to New York Cross meets several significant characters, the first of whom is a Priest. Like Meursault, Cross is disdainful of a religious interpretation of life, believing it to be a too easy explanation of the absurdities of human existence. For Cross, all absolutes are a manifestation of a false sense of security:

> He disliked most strongly all men of religion because he felt that they could take for granted an interpretation of the world that his sense of life made impossible . . . He felt that the attitude of the Priest was predicated upon a scheme of good and evil ordained by a God whom he was constrained out of love and fear to obey; . . . (The Outsider, p. 123).

While talking with the Priest, Cross is introduced to Ely Houston, the New York District Attorney. Cross fears Houston as another "outsider," who comprehends the dilemma of the alienated individual. Houston, as a hunchback, is a physical outsider. But like Cross, he is also a metaphysical outsider, because he too "has seen through

the veils of illusion." Houston echoes Cross' belief that: "Some men are so placed in life by accident of race or birth or chance that what they see is terrifying." (The Outsider, p. 133).

In the course of his conversation with Houston, Cross comes to the frightening realization that "man is nothing in particular." (The Outsider, p. 135). Perhaps, reasons Cross, man's insignificance is the metaphysical terror that he must keep hidden, most of all from himself.

While on the train, Cross also meets Bob Hunter, a Negro waiter who eventually introduces him into the Communist Party.

Once in New York, Cross chooses Harlem as his new domain and begins the task of establishing a new identity. It occurs to Cross that he is now completely alone: by killing a man he has rejected society's rules. He feels that he can no longer relate to any traditional concept of good and evil. Contrary to his past life, he is now to live without roots or definite identity; he has no name, no past and no bonds that are able to sustain the feeling that he belongs: "What really obsessed him was his nonidentity, which negated his ability to relate himself to others." (The Outsider, pp. 142-143). Cross now faces the perplexing dilemma of living within a society from which he is totally alienated.

Within his first weeks in New York, Cross becomes involved with the Communist Party and decides to go to live

with Gil Blount, one of the Party leaders, and his wife Eva. He has no illusions as to the Party's plans to use him for their own ends. Although he is both fascinated and repelled by their ability to control men's lives, Cross hopes, in his own way, to use them for his immediate purposes. He also feels that his association with them might counteract his extreme loneliness: "To be with them was not at all a bad way of ending his isolation and loneliness . . ." (The Outsider, p. 164).

The third section of the novel, "Descent," deals with the complications that arise while Cross is living with the Blounts. When Gil and his Negro-hating landlord become involved in a bloody fight, Cross kills them both without any apparent motive except that they, acting like little gods, violate his sense of what humanity should be. In becoming involved with the Communists he had come to realize that behind their ideology was a simple and repulsive lust for personal power: ". . . not just the exercise of bureaucratic control, but personal power to be wielded directly upon the lives and bodies of others." (The Outsider, p. 199). In killing these two men, however, Cross emulated that which he despised; he too had played God, had become the judge and the executioner. This act, differing from his previous murder which had emanated from a personal motive, puts him irrevocably outside human society. Grasping the enormity of his act, Cross realizes that he has become the monster he had tried to destroy:

> He too had acted like a little god. He had stood amidst those red and flickering shadows, tense and consumed with cold rage, and had judged them and had found them guilty of insulting his sense of life and had carried out a sentence of death upon them. . . . their disease had reached out and claimed him too. (The Outsider, p. 231).

In the fourth section of the novel, "Despair," Cross finds it necessary to commit still another murder, shooting a second member of the Party, John Hilton, who knows that he has killed Gil. Significantly, Cross first engages him in a long philosophical debate in which Hilton insists on the nothingness of man. Life, claims Hilton, is meaningless, with no ultimate justification for anything done on earth, and if there is no basis of justification, then man has free license to do whatever he wants; man is God: "You're looking for paradise on earth, . . . You're seeking something that doesn't exist. You want to redeem life on this earth with so-called meaning--But what you see before your eyes is all there is." (The Outsider, p. 299). Cross, acknowledging no moral law, shoots him. Once again, Wright reiterates the theme of the death of God and of all previous moral values. Cross, rejecting old myths and traditions carries out what to him is the logical conclusion of his desires.

Cross begins to fathom the consequences of his acts and the utter destruction he has perpetrated. The one hope he has to redeem his lost humanity is his love for Eva, the wife of the slain Gil Blount. In a final effort to vanquish his loneliness, Cross confesses his crimes to her.

She, however, cannot comprehend such inhuman acts, and refuses to believe it possible: "Eva was too good, believed too strongly in life. Maybe this belief in goodness was her life, and once it was gone, what then?" (The Outsider, p. 329). When the truth is finally revealed to her, her only recourse is to end her life in a bloody suicide. Cross' one hope in life and in the future is thereby cancelled: "He was now locked in loneliness." (The Outsider, p. 405).

In the last section, "Decision," Cross begins to face the truth about himself. He has broken all laws, and finds the world about him to be without meaning. As an alienated man, he has recognized no disciplines and no attachments, he has cast off all family, friends and love.

Ely Houston, the District Attorney, discovers his guilt, but having no evidence, decides to let him live out the consequences of his own acts. Houston believes that Cross has grasped the absurdity of existence and will thereby continue to live in eternal isolation: "You are your own law, so you'll be your own judge . . ." (The Outsider, pp. 429-430). Cross, however, is finally shot down in the streets, presumably by the Communists who are also convinced that he has killed two of their leaders.

When Cross is found by the District Attorney, shot and bleeding to death, Houston insists on asking him why he has chosen to live as he has, apart from the world and its laws. Cross replies: "I wanted to be free . . . to

feel what I was worth . . . what living meant to me . . ." And when Houston then asks what he had found in his search for freedom and a meaningful existence, Cross answers: "Nothing. . . . The search can't be done alone . . . Never alone . . . Alone a man is nothing." (The Outsider, p. 439).

Cross' final words are an attempt at a vision of fraternity: "I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others . . . To make a bridge from man to man. . . Tell them not to come down this road. . . ." Although Cross still believes that the old myths are dead, at the moment of his death he embraces a new humanism: "We must find some way of being good to ourselves . . . Man is all we've got. . . ." (The Outsider, p. 439). Realizing the meaninglessness of his condition, Cross eventually must also acknowledge that there must be a mode of rebellion which is not, in itself, destructive of mankind and its endeavors.

From this summary of The Outsider it is obvious that the novel is lacking on many levels. By conveniently removing all previous obligations, Wright's uncommitted protagonist is free to follow the dictates of his desires and the subsequent consequences of his freely chosen acts. The action, however, depends too heavily on contrived situations, leaving the reader largely unconvinced as to the actual "freedom" of Cross Damon. His original break with

the past comes by way of a subway accident in which he is mistakenly identified as dead. The events of his new life in New York evolve as a result of a chance meeting with the Communists. The murders he commits are not entirely gratuitous, as Wright would have us believe, but follow a series of coincidences and chance encounters.

The second major criticism is that the novel is continually interrupted by obviously staged philosophical discussions. Whereas Camus, in L'Etranger for example, is able to skillfully evoke the mood of alienation and absurdity, Wright continually has his protagonist engage in long polemics. Wright insists, for example, on specifically enumerating the terms of Cross' freedom and isolation: "Cross had to discover what was good or evil through his own actions, which were more exacting than the edicts of any God because it was he alone who had to bear the brunt of their consequences . . ." (The Outsider, p. 123).

One of the interesting contrasts between The Outsider and Wright's earlier works can be seen in his treatment of Communism and its individual party members.[6] In Native Son, Jan and Max, the novel's principal exponents of Communism are presented sympathetically, as sincere individuals attempting to aid social justice. In The Outsider, however, Gil Blount, Hilton, and the other Party members are shown as ruthless and fanatical in their desire to control men's lives. When talking of their purposes,

Cross exclaims: "Their aims? Direct and naked power!" (The Outsider, p. 364).

Wright's main argument against the Communists is their total neglect of the individual as a creative force. They have grasped the obsolescence of religion as a provider of values, and have attempted to fill the void with a politics of power. In their lust for power, however, they have negated the role of individual freedom, and this, according to Wright, is unforgivable: "'We Communists do not admit to any subjectivity in human life,' Gil said with a slow even smile, as though proud that he could utter such a horrible statement so lightly." (The Outsider, p. 174). Wright, like Sartre (although Sartre has been sympathetic to Communism), believed that no ideological or political system could, in itself, create an authentic being.

The principal question which Wright seeks to answer in The Outsider is what happens to the alienated individual who has rejected all conventional definitions of good and evil? What is to prevent the nihilist who has repudiated all contemporary values from embarking on a career of crime, violence and murder? In L'Homme révolté, Camus, exploring the many ramifications of this same problem, stated:

> Le trône de Dieu renversé, le rebelle reconnaîtra que cette justice, cet ordre, cette unité qu'il cherchait en vain dans sa condition, il lui revenait maintenant de les créer de ses propres mains et par là, de justifier la déchéance divine. Alors commencera un effort désespéré pour fonder, au prix du crime s'il le faut, l'empire des hommes.7

Cross, like Meursault, recognizing the death of all previous myths, remains detached, aloof and completely objective to all around him. Cross' self-reliance originates from the realization that there are no fixed values and no God; and therefore, all is possible. His decision to assume full responsibility for his condition, however, transcends the consequences of his atheism. He accepts the death of God as free sanction to set up and maintain his own value system: ". . . I'm not even an atheist . . . Now, what does this mean--that I don't believe in God? It means that I, and you too, can do what we damn well please on this earth." (The Outsider, p. 360).

Cross' one great desire in his search for meaning and identity is freedom. As his odyssey begins to unfold, however, it becomes obvious that the freedom he attains is a negative one. Unable to commit any meaningful act, his freedom, like that of Mathieu, becomes meaningless.

Like Roquentin, in Sartre's La Nausée, Cross suffers from "nausea;" he is hyperconscious of his condition of nothingness. Like Roquentin, he is driven by an emotional compulsion to experience something solid, something that would be deeply felt enough to remove his sense of anguish and allow him to confront successfully the irrational nature of his existence:

> He had long yearned to be free of all responsibility of a certain sort, but not because he hadn't a capacity for responsibility. What had irked him about his past responsibilities had been their dullness,

> their tenuity, their tendency simply to bore him. What he needed, demanded, was the hardest, the most awful responsibility, something that would test him and make him feel his worth. (The Outsider, p. 143).

Cross, following the same paradoxical syndrome as Roquentin, constantly seeks to avoid the ambivalent feelings which come with despair; thus abdicating his very humanity: "He passed the train's huge engine and longed to become uncaring and passively brutish as that monster of steel . . . To swap the burden of this sorry consciousness for something else!" (The Outsider, p. 137).

With the arresting figure of Ely Houston, however, Wright presents us with an example of an individual, also an outsider, who has been able to deal successfully with the absurdity of his condition. Whereas Cross, like the great majority of Sartre's characters, is unable to confront the nightmare of his existence; Houston is able to skillfully use all his resources to establish a rapport with the nothingness of his life. By assuming the role of protector of society's values, he has established himself as his own law, accountable to no one but himself. Under the banner of law enforcer, he plays God, assuming the role of judge and executioner. Houston is thereby capable of living simultaneously outside and inside society.

In illustrating Cross' quest for freedom Wright is largely concerned with the individual and his ability to create his own being. Wright emphasizes Sartre's belief that man is a product of his own free choice and there are

no outside forces which can lay claim to man's destiny. Cross' search for a meaningful existence, however, leads him only to futile destruction. At the time of his death he has not solved the problem of living in a world that presents him with no meaning or purpose.

Wright attempted to show that Cross could be capable of engaging his freedom, as was Mathieu at the time of his death. Cross, however, remains unable to convert his freedom into any meaningful act. He is free, but free for what? He cannot live up to any commitment, either to himself or to society. Unlike Meursault, who believes in the greatness of human life even in defeat, Cross cannot cope with his freedom or his isolated existence. For Cross there is no remedy for the loneliness of the individual. Although his final attempt was at a vision of fraternity, his life's search was a failure.

Wright died in his adopted country in 1960 at the age of 50. From the time of his writing of The Outsider until his death he continued to write fiction and was at work on another novel at the time of his death. Savage Holiday, published in 1954, was the first novel written by Wright which ignored the racial issue; for all the characters are white. The Long Dream (1958) was to be the beginning of a series of novels based on the life of an American Negro expatriate living in Paris. His unfinished

novel was to be a continuation of the story of Fishbelly, the hero of The Long Dream.[8]

There was a marked change in Wright's fiction after his move to Paris, and his best and most significant works, with the possible exception of The Outsider, were produced before that time.

The novels of Richard Wright follow the tradition of protest, as exemplified in the works of Camus and Malraux, against the degradation and anonymity of the individual. Malraux's heroes left their homeland to seek, in less materialistic cultures, an opiate for their lost individuality. Betrayed by their original environment, Wright's heroes also sought, through violent action and revolutionary protest, a fulfillment of their personality.

The theme of isolation and man's attempt to find solidarity within the group can be seen not only in Wright's novels, but is perhaps most vividly illustrated in the personal life of Wright himself. Communism represented for him the attraction of revolutionary action, the hope of building a new world where all men regardless of race would have their rightful dignity, and the myth of fraternity. The failure of Communism, however, was its downgrading of the individual which it viewed as an anonymous instrument in a total plan.

Wright, as well as many of his characters, was among the dispossessed and the disinherited. Big Boy in "Big Boy Leaves Home," is the prototype of the bitter and vengeful

outsider. Bigger Thomas, angry and violent, was the epitome of the bereaved anti-hero. Like Camus' Meursault, Bigger hovered on the perimeter of society. As Wright explained in his essay "How Bigger was Born:" "He was an American because he was a native son, but he was also a Negro nationalist in a vague sense because he was not allowed to live as an American. Such was his way and mine; neither Bigger nor I resided fully in either camp."9

The most poignant example, therefore, of a bereft individual searching for meaning and purpose was Richard Wright himself. From his early experience in the South, Wright developed a sense of aloneness and deprived individuality. For him, the themes of isolation and involvement, and the search for meaning in an irrational and alien universe were not merely philosophical concepts, but the record of intensely lived experience. The great tribute to Richard Wright was that he was able to express these experiences as literature.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Richard Wright, Black Boy (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945), p. 112; citations from Black Boy in my text are to Harper and Row, Perennial Classics edition, (New York, 1966).

[2]Albert Camus, L'Homme révolté (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 39.

[3]Last third of Black Boy (unpublished), quoted by Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography (New York: Putnam Press, 1968), pp. 279-280. Webb recounts that Wright, while discussing the works of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus, exclaimed: "Why! they are writing of things that I have been thinking, writing and feeling all of my life." At one point in the conversation he went over to the bookshelves, and picking up a bound volume of Black Boy, exclaimed: "Look, this is existentialist," and proceeded to read the passage quoted in the text. (Wright's quotes from Webb, conversations with Wright, p. 279).

[4]Albert Votaw, in his article on Sartre: "The Literature of Extreme Situation," defines "extreme situation" as a situation ". . . in which the use of power is so radically unbalanced that communication becomes totally impossible." (Horizon, vol. 20, No. 17, September, 1949), p. 145.

[5]Richard Wright, The Outsider (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), p. 358; citations from The Outsider in my text are to Harper and Row, Perennial Library edition (New York, 1965).

[6]For a detailed account of Wright's eventual break with the Communist Party, see: Richard Wright, "I tried to be a Communist," in The God That Failed, ed. by Richard Crossman (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 115-162.

[7]Albert Camus, L'Homme révolté (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), pp. 41-42.

[8]Part of Wright's unfinished novel has been published as "Five Episodes," in Soon One Morning, ed. by Herbert Hill (New York: Knopf, 1963).

[9]Richard Wright, "How Bigger was Born," Saturday Review of Literature, XXII, No. 6 (June 1, 1940), p. 18.

CHAPTER FIVE

RALPH ELLISON: THE ODYSSEY OF AN INVISIBLE MAN

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Ralph Ellison has often acknowledged his literary debt to Richard Wright. It was, Ellison recounts, through the encouragement and tutorship of the older artist that he began his writing career. Their differences, however, are more obvious and more significant than their similarities. These differences run very deep in their creative writing and lie at the heart of their individual philosophies.

From Richard Wright's Black Boy we know of the pain and anguish of his younger years. That he was sincere in his account of these years in the South, we can have no doubts. We can be equally certain that they shaped and determined the outrage and frustration that marks his fiction. Ellison, however, came from a distinctly different environment; one that was equally important in shaping his ideas and attitudes.

Ellison spent the first eighteen years of his life in Oklahoma City, which was at the time of his youth a relatively new city. As such it offered a greater sense of possibility and freedom to its Negro community than most of the older cities. Ellison recounts that Oklahoma, "had no tradition of slavery, and while it was segregated, relationships between the races were more fluid and thus more

human than in the old slave states."[2] Although he was also aware of the traditional limitations of Negro life in America, there was no furious sense of injustice and anguish that was so much a part of Wright's early life. "I recognized limitations, yes;" Ellison states in the same essay, "but I felt no innate sense of inferiority which would keep me from getting those things desired out of life."[3]

Ellison feels that it is this sense of possibility that is lacking from Wright's view of the individual. For Ellison, Negro life, like all human existence, is a blend of complex and contradictory forces. He is sensitive to the tragedy of life, but at the same time acknowledges its richness and beauty: "I felt it important to explore the full range of American Negro humanity," writes Ellison, "and to affirm those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous condition of servitude."[4]

Ellison's concept of the individual and his literary skill are both related to his early experiences in Oklahoma City. One of the main forces which later helped to shape his craft and his personal philosophy was music. He was always interested in music, studying the trumpet from the age of eight, and later, classical harmony in high school.[5] Equally important was his early exposure to country blues and Southwestern jazz, of which Oklahoma City was one of the acknowledged centers. "In school," Ellison reminisced in a recent interview, "The classics were pushed at us on all

sides, and if you danced, if you shared any of the social life of the young people, jazz was inescapable, it was all around you."[6] The local heroes were not the politicians of the sport figures, but the great jazz musicians such as Charlie "Bird" Parker and Charlie Christian, and the Blues singer Jimmy Rushing, all of whom made regular stops in Oklahoma City.

In 1933 Ellison went to Tuskegee Institute to study musical composition under William Dawson, the Negro conductor and composer.[7] For three years he studied composition and trumpet until his interest in literature gradually overshadowed that of music.

As an instrumentalist and composer, it was natural for Ellison's fiction to develop along the lines suggested by music. Invisible Man, with its many sections which complement and enhance each other in form and content, reflects the discipline and harmony implied in classical composition. The direct influence of jazz and the blues, however, is much more marked throughout the novel. Jazz showed Ellison the beauty of experimentation while keeping within the limitation of a central framework. At the same time, the blues presented him with a unique view of the human condition which allowed for both tragedy and optimism.

The essence of jazz is improvisation. Its form consists of a series of "solo" breaks that deviate and strike out from the main framework of the piece.[8] Invisible Man's

abrupt shifts in style and swift flow of language are based on the sudden change of key modulation found in the great jazz improvisations. At the same time these "improvisations" manage to remain within the framework of the central idea of the novel, becoming an integral part of the whole. Just as a jazz musician is not free to cast off all restraint, Ellison strives to achieve a certain freedom of form, while being conscious of a structural framework.

The form of jazz composition also presented Ellison with an aesthetic example of a successful group-individual relationship. Great jazz improvisation depends on reaching a delicate balance between the individual and the group. As Ellison states:

> . . . true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment . . . springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition.9

The problem of the individual and his relation to society becomes a central theme in Invisible Man. Ellison himself has been faced with the problem of maintaining his individual identity as an artist, and at the same time fulfilling a social role as a part of the Negro movement. It is perhaps his greatest achievement that, unlike Richard Wright, he was able to affirm in his fiction the full range of Negro experience, and at the same time, transcend the realm of "protest."

Equally important as an influence in Ellison's view of the human condition has been the blues. Ellison sees the blues as a metaphor of human existence which defines both the tragedy and the greatness of man. The blues, he explains were more than lyrics and music, they were a retelling of life's experience. The blues singer, claims Ellison in talking of Jimmy Rushing, "was not simply a local entertainer, he expressed a value, an attitude about the world for which our lives afforded no other definition." Despite the reality of segregation, he further explains, "there was an optimism within the Negro community and a sense of possibility; . . . and it was this rock-bottom sense of reality, coupled with our sense of the possibility of rising above it which sounded in Rushing's voice."[10]

When Ellison talks of the "secular existentialism of the blues,"[11] he is referring to the view of individual possibility which it sets forth. Unlike Wright, Ellison has grasped not only the plight of the Negro, but also the sense of being able to rise above the Negro's condition. It is this confrontation between the force of circumstance on one side and the refusal to deny the sense of human possibility on the other that brings Ellison's view of the individual close to Sartre. Ellison, like Sartre, is concerned not with the tragedy of circumstance, but with man's response to the absurdities of his condition. It is this confrontational clash between reality and the possibility

of a transcending freedom that is echoed in the blues. Ellison defines the blues as follows:

> The blues is an art of ambiguity, an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance . . . They are the only consistent art in the United States which constantly remind us of our limitations while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go. When understood in their more profound implication, they are a corrective, an attempt to draw a line upon man's own limitless assertion.12

To portray the Negro as a victim, as does Wright, is to emphasize circumstance over possibility. Although the blues begin with personal disaster, (the main themes are often those of personal disaster), the emphasis is on the human response to the unfortunate events of his life. In Invisible Man, Ellison's primary concern, like that of Sartre, is with the individual response to the absurdity of his condition. Ellison's hero is not presented as a Negro victimized by a white society, but rather an adventurer. His journey is full of disillusionment and frightening confrontation with the nature of reality. At the center of the novel, however, lies a sense of possibility, a feeling that within man's own limitations, he is capable of an inner freedom.

One of the most interesting facts behind the development of Invisible Man is that there is nothing prior to the novel with the possible exception of one very short story, that in any way predicts the greatness of the novel. Encouraged by Richard Wright, Ellison wrote several short stories, and some essays, mostly on music. At the time that

Ellison first entered publication, (his first article appeared in 1937, and his reviews and essays appeared regularly through 1943), he was strongly attracted to left wing politics. Much of his production of these years reflects a sense of outrage at obvious social injustices, and a leaning toward Communism as the only viable social solution. His disillusionment with the Communist Party was later to become obvious in his description of the Brotherhood in Invisible Man.

The experience of the Second World War led Ellison to affirm his feelings for America for the first time. His love for his country, with all its implied ambiguity, was the subject of a short story published in 1944, "In a Strange Land."[13] The hero is an American Negro sailor in the Merchant Marine, who, while on leave in Wales, is attacked by a group of white American sailors. He is rescued from a brutal beating and befriended by some local Welshmen. Their friendship is sincere and they display no racial prejudice. Nevertheless, the hero remains for them a black Yank. He is moved, through a series of ironic perceptions to reflect that the beating he has just received is part of a family quarrel, which Welshmen finally cannot understand. America, he asserts, is his own country, and he is a black Yank. At a meeting of the local singing society, he finds himself, without bitterness, suddenly rising for the singing of the "Star-Spangled Banner":

> It was the voice of another, over whom he had no control. His eyes throbbed. A wave of guilt shook him, followed by a burst of relief. For the first time in your whole life, he thought with dreamlike wonder, the words are not ironic.[14]

As a final solution to the Negro dilemma, however, it is somewhat incomplete, as Ellison illustrates in another story, "Flying Home," also published in 1944.[15] Its title, taken from a jazz piece by Benny Goodman and Lionel Hampton, suggests the theme of the story, which is the need to affirm a black identity within the framework of America.

The flyer, a member of a Negro air school during the war, crashes into an Alabama cotton field while on a training mission. As he waits for a rescue plane from the base, he is met by an old Negro field hand whose attempts at friendship repel him. However, when he is met by the white plantation owner who orders him to be put into a straight jacket, the hero begins to realize that his only allegiance can be to one of his own race. His final salvation and his final rescue are through this old black ex-slave. Here again the moral is obvious: living between black and white, he is undeniably black. The conclusion, however, is no more satisfactory than that of "In a Strange Land." Ellison does not appear able to resolve the problem of the dual identity of the Negro. At the end of Invisible Man, the hero struck by the absurdity of his ambivalent identity, must escape to the relative protection of an underground cave.

An escape into the irrational is also the motivating force behind the hero's disturbing behavior in "King of the Bingo Game."[16] This is the only story among Ellison's early fiction that gives any indication of the complexity of Invisible Man; and as such, bears little resemblance to those that have come before it.

The story begins in a mood of protest similar to that of Wright's Native Son. Ellison's hero is unemployed and cannot get a job because he has no birth certificate. His wife is dying because he has no money to get her a doctor. His last chance to solve the crushing circumstances of his life lies in his having stolen five bingo cards, and in so doing, he maintains a chance against fortune. When the game begins he struggles to keep up with his five cards and with fading hope. He wins, however, and it takes him several moments to collect himself before he can stumble forward, screaming "bingo!"

He has won $36.90, but even more important, he now has a chance to win the jackpot. He is told to press the button that will spin the wheel, and if it stops at double zero, he will win the grand prize. He presses the button and watches the wheel spin but to his own amazement as well as all those in the audience, he cannot let go. He suddenly realizes that as long as he presses the button he is master over the wheel, he can control the wheel and his destiny: "And then he knew, . . . that as long as he pressed the button, he could control the jackpot. He and

only he could determine whether or not it was to be his."[17] Pressing the button, he feels a new sense of power. It occurs to him that he has forgotten his name, but this is of no importance for he has been reborn as "The-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo." He has discovered the source of all creation. "This is God!" he shouts, "This is really the true God!"[18] When two policemen and the master of ceremonies finally manage to take the button, he watches without surprise, the wheel come to rest on double zero. He is content with the knowledge that he has learned the secret; he is a winner. He does not, however, see a short bowlegged man come up behind him and deliver a fatal blow. He has only time for a last thought that his luck had run out onstage.

In this story, Ellison is able, for the first time, to move out of the mechanical, determined world. Although he places his protagonist in a naturalistic setting, he quickly moves into a world of unreality and insanity. His hero has had one glorious moment of lucidity, he has perceived the nature of creation, and for that he must pay the price.

The basis for his hero's actions is no longer ethical, but metaphysical. His madness is similar to that of Malraux's Baron Clappique in La Condition humaine who finds that, through the roulette wheel, he too can control his destiny: "Il retrouva aussitôt le bouleversement passif qu'il cherchait: de nouveau, il lui sembla saisir sa vie,

la suspendre à cette boule dérisoire."[19] For both of them, their actions take them outside the ordinary world of reality, and are a sort of metaphysical suicide. The madness of Ellison's hero arises from a need to embrace his destiny, and to escape a determined world. The hero's journey out of the world of reality, and into madness, is similar to that of the hero of Invisible Man who, after many more intricate experiences, must also take refuge in the irrational.

Gunnar Myrdal, in his study of the American racial problem, An American Dilemma,[20] states that the United States, as opposed to almost every other nation, was created. Whereas other nations "grew" into existence, the United States was established through a conscious act. At the very base of its foundation was the stated ideal: "All men are created equal." America, according to Myrdal, is based on a promise. The American dilemma is the contrast between that promise and the reality of American existence. The confrontation of the ideal with the actual, of the hope with the achievement, results in a recognition of the absurdity and irrationality of American life.

Myrdal, in his discussion of the ambiguities and inconsistencies of American society, successfully poses the dilemma of the hero of Invisible Man. The novel is the chronicle of man's encounter with the nature of American society in particular, and the universe in general; and his

subsequent disillusionment. Through a series of initiatory experiences, the hero is finally forced to shed his previous view of an ordered universe, and accept as reality the chaotic order of things. Ellison is not only concerned with his hero's recognition of his dilemma, but also, and more important, his response to his condition. Like Camus, Ellison demonstrates that man must not only be lucidly aware of the absurdity of his existence, but must also be able to act against and in spite of his condition.

The terms of the central metaphor of invisibility are stated in the prologue by the narrator (who is never named), "I am an invisible man," he explains, "I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me . . . That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact."[21] To state that he is a victim of other people's insensitivities, however, is to state only half the problem. He has also learned, as the Prologue is also the end of his journey, that he too must share the responsibility for his invisibility: "I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial." (Invisible Man, p. 16). Ellison himself explains the problem as follows:

> Invisibility has to do with the failure of most of us to regard the individual we contact as a human being, . . . on the other hand, you have the failure of the individual to exert himself, to be mature, to run the risk of humanity . . . and so he contributes to his own invisibility.[22]

His refusal therefore, to accept full responsibility for his humanity, adds to his invisibility. Like many of Sartre's heroes (who are guilty of "mauvaise foi"), he is willing to accept other people's definition of his being, playing out the role created for him by others. In defining the terms of his existence, he must eventually reject all previous roles and assert his own humanity.

The series of events which make up the novel are structured so that each one parallels and anticipates the one following it. The movement of the novel, therefore, is circular. The beginning is the end, as the novel is a flash-back, and the Epilogue merely adds insight and completes what had already been stated in the Prologue.

The technique and style employed by Ellison are as varied and complex as its content. The novel shifts from realism to impressionism to surrealism, and then back to realism. His swift changes in tone reflect the nature of the society which he describes, itself enigmatic, discontinuous, and constantly changing. In addition, Ellison has been able to employ successfully dreams, symbols, folklore and myth to add to the meaning of his protagonist's adventures.

To explain how he discovered his invisibility, the narrator takes his readers through a long flashback in time. He has attempted, he explains, to define the terms of his existence. He begins by describing his search for identity and its major hazards:

> All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, . . . I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. (Invisible Man, p. 19).

He is told that he resembles his grandfather, who is the first to spell out the terms of his existence for him. On his deathbed he offers the following advice: "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. . . . Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, . . ." (Invisible Man, pp. 19-20).

The hero interprets this advice as a sort of Booker T. Washington attitude, and attempts to follow a career of social responsibility and humility. His grandfather's advice, however, continually comes back to puzzle him, and he must ultimately reinterpret its ambiguous meaning. To find the meaning of the advice motivates much of the hero's actions.

As head of his High School class, the narrator is invited to give the graduation speech before a group of local white business leaders. Before he is allowed to deliver his speech, however, he with a group of other young black boys, is subjected to the most brutal humiliation, all of which prophesies future episodes. In a "Battle Royal," the boys are blindfolded and forced to fight one another. The white man succeeds symbolically in pitting Negro against Negro, and thereby turning his potency

against himself. After that, the boys must watch a nude white dancer, much to their fear and shouts of derision of the white men. To be paid for their night's work, they must scramble for gold coins (which turn out to be brass imitations), on an electrified rug. It is in this setting, to the accompaniment of curses and drunken shouts, that he is finally allowed to give his speech preaching humility and responsibility for the Negro, for which he is rewarded with a scholarship to a Negro university.

That night he dreams a dream that signifies the whole of his career:

> That night I dreamed I was at a circus with him (his grandfather) . . . later he told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. "Them's years," he said. "Now open that one." And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. "Read it," my grandfather said. "out loud."
>
> "To Whom It May Concern," I intoned. "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." (Invisible Man, pp. 34-35).

In the course of his journey he will receive several of such papers, all of which bear the same message. He is, however, continually blind to their content. Each of these documents signifies the beginning of a new identity for the hero, and a new section of the book. The first of these is his scholarship.

The Negro college is pictured as a latter day Garden of Eden, and the hero is symbolically portrayed as

Adam. Once again, he accepts someone else's view of himself. He and the other students are completely ruled over by Dr. Bledsoe, president of the college, and a despotic father image for all.

In his third year of college, the narrator is expelled for driving one of the school's white benefactors outside the dream world of the college. They first encounter a Negro peasant, Jim Trueblood (another significant name), who has realized his dream of having sexual relations with both his daughter and his wife. Not only has he remained "true" to his blood, but he has also acted out the most deeply hidden desire of the white philanthropist, Mr. Norton. When Mr. Norton asks to learn his secret, asks how he has managed to survive his ordeal, Trueblood answers simply, "I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen." (Invisible Man, p. 63). Although the hero does not comprehend the full import of this statement, he will much later come to a similar conclusion.

On the way back to the college, the narrator further jeopardizes his future by taking Mr. Norton, by his order, to a nearby bar, the Golden Day, where unfortunately the insane veterans from the asylum are gathered. For exposing Mr. Norton to this side of Negro life, the hero is expelled from school. His major sin, he is told, is obeying a white man, instead of pretending to obey him. He is thereby cast out of the Garden of Eden, losing his Adamic

identity. He now feels a lost sense of identity: "Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it." (Invisible Man, p. 91).

Before leaving, he is given several letters of recommendation by Dr. Bledsoe which will supposedly secure him a job in New York. This is the second document that marks the start of a new identity. The letters do not recommend him, but rather tell of his expulsion in a manner designed to assure his failure. In essence, the letters contain the same statement as the message in his dream: "keep this nigger-boy running."

Armed with his letters of recommendation, the narrator heads for New York. At the bus station he encounters one of the inmates he had met at the Golden Day. This time it is an insane member of society who gives him valid advice: "Be your own father, young man, and remember, the world is possibility if only you'll discover it." (Invisible Man, p. 139). Once again, it is too early for the hero to accept the truth, for he must discover it for himself.

In New York his sense of optimism prevails. He still believes that he will succeed in an ordered world: "I would work hard and serve my employer so well that he would shower Dr. Bledsoe with favorable reports." (Invisible Man, p. 140). It is not until the son of one of the men he is to see reveals the true content of Bledsoe's

letter that the truth begins to dawn on him: "Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan." (Invisible Man, p. 170). He decides to try to act on his own, and gets a job at the Liberty Paint factory.

What follows is a comic, surrealistic account of his initiation into the industrial world in particular, and the nature of black-white relations in general. The slogan of Liberty Paints is "Keep America Pure With Liberty Paints," and their pride and joy is "Optic White," made exclusively for the government. "It's the purest white that can be found," the foreman explains, "Nobody makes a paint any whiter. This batch right here is heading for a national monument." (Invisible Man, p. 177). The secret of its pure whiteness, however, lies in mixing ten drops of black dope in every can of "Optic White." This episode, like all the others in the novel, has many allegorical extensions. White becomes whiter and stronger, Ellison seems to be saying, by absorbing the Negro's virility. This incident parallels the "Battle Royal," where the middle aged whites were able to participate vicariously, and thereby gain strength from the Negro's potency.

Ellison's hero, however, uses the wrong dope, and produces a poor grayish imitation of "Optic White." He is relegated to assisting an old Negro in the basement because of his inefficiency. When a fight develops between the two,

they neglect to watch the pressure gague, and a huge explosion results.

The next scene finds the narrator in a hospital witnessing his own operation. Once again Ellison makes use of surrealistic and comic elements to symbolize the death and rebirth of his protagonist. The doctors are in the process of performing the equivalent of a frontal lobotomy to destroy his identity. He is pronounced cured when he can no longer remember his name. After this, they complete his "rebirth," by cutting a heavy cord which is attached to his navel.

Out of the hospital, the hero must once again search for a new identity. In an act that symbolizes the death of his old self, he empties a spittoon over the head of someone he believes to be Dr. Bledsoe. He is befriended by Mary, an old Negro woman who appears to be the only character in the novel who does not have "a secret plan," for him. She also represents, like several characters he meets in Harlem, that which is uniquely Negro in his past, something he seeks to deny.

He is soon recruited by the "Brotherhood," Ellison's fictional equivalent of the Communist Party. His membership certificate is the third document he receives which contains essentially the same message as the two previous ones. It marks the third section of the book, one which shifts from surrealism to a realistic account of the Brotherhood's activities. His new identity, one which he will

also have to discard eventually, is now defined in political terms.

Politically active in Harlem, he meets a series of diverse characters, all of whom are significant. Ras, "the Exhorter," for example, is based on the life of Marcus Garvey, the originator of the Back to Africa movement of the thirties, and represents the appeal of Black Nationalism. "You my brother," Ras tells the narrator, "Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men brother? Shit, mahn. That's shit! Brothers the same color. We son's of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! (Invisible Man, p. 321).

One of Ellison's most fascinating figures in his range of Harlem characters is B. P. Rinehart ("the P. is for 'Proteus,' the B. for 'Bliss'"23), the Harlem hipster. In order to escape two of Ras' gang, the narrator dons dark glasses and a wide brimmed hat. He is immediately mistaken for someone called Rinehart, who is himself an enigma. Rinehart is a man of many identities: racketeer, philanthropist, lover and reverend. Contemplating the comic absurdity of Rinehart's existence, the hero comes to the startling realization of the multiple possibilities of existence: "Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? . . . His world was possibility and he knew it." (Invisible Man, p. 430). The narrator, however, is frightened by these possibilities.

for Rinehart is the personification of chaos. Although he has many appearances, he has no fixed identity. As the symbol of chaos, it is significant that Rinehart foretells the Harlem riot, the last scene of the novel.

As the riot begins, the narrator joins a group of men who burn down their own tenement house. He is exalted by the nature of their act: they too have grasped their possibility, and have applied their freedom to action: "I was seized with a fierce sense of exaltation. They've done it, I thought. They organized it and carried it through alone; the decision their own and their own action." (Invisible Man, p. 474).

He begins to realize for the first time that his life too could contain a sense of possibility and freedom, if he could only act according to his own beliefs. He begins to discover too, that the Brotherhood had planned and organized the riot so that they could use it for propaganda. He realizes that he has been deceived by them, and recognizes "the absurdity of the whole night." (Invisible Man, p. 485). It is with this final revelation, while being chased by Ras and a white gang, that he falls into an uncovered manhole.

The novel has thus come back to the beginning. The Harlem riot is a re-enactment, on a grand scale, of the "Battle Royal." The white man has once again succeeded in setting black against black, in order to strengthen his own cause.

The Epilogue is a continuation of the Prologue. The hole into which he has fallen presents no exit, so he has decided to remain and contemplate the meaning of his adventures. In his cellar, which is a sort of a coal bin in the basement of a house rented to whites only, he first secures light by burning all the old symbols of his previous identities: his High School diploma, Bledsoe's letter, and his Brotherhood identification. He is then able to tap a powerline from the "Monopolated Light Company," and is supplied with sockets from a junk man ("a man of vision"). He wires his cave with 1369 light bulbs, and plans to wire the walls and even the floor in the near future.

In his cellar he is protected from the pain and disillusionment of an absurd world. His emergence, if it occurs, will be a rebirth with a new self-knowledge. He has achieved a certain degree of intellectual lucidity, which is symbolized with his 1369 light bulbs. He no longer views the world as an ordered, logical place. He has accepted the responsibility of his humanity and its implied freedom. He must emerge because he is, by his very nature, a social being. He is uncertain, however, as to what he will find:

> The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath. There's a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring--I hope of spring. (Invisible Man, p. 502).

Invisible Man explores, perhaps more fully than any other novel dealing with the black man, the full range of Negro experience. Although Ellison affirms the unique qualities of Negro life, the problems that concern his hero are envisioned as both American and universal, dealing with all mankind. His protagonist must accept the fact that he is a Negro as the first condition of his existence. He serves, however, because of his basic humanity, as a vehicle for problems suffered by modern man in general. It is because of Ellison's concern with the universal and metaphysical that we can talk of his relationship to Sartre, Camus, and Malraux.

Unlike Richard Wright, we cannot trace any direct influence between Ellison and the French writers. As Richard Lehan suggests in his article on American Existentialism,[24] Sartre's direct influence on Ellison is most remote. The problem is more one of affinity of mind, with both authors sharing a common tragic vision. Ellison's protagonist, like many of Sartre's, is lost in a disordered and chaotic world. It is only when he can accept the true nature of the absurdity of his existence, that some limited catharsis can take place.

Invisible Man presents the same problems and themes as seen in the writing of Sartre and Camus. The primary concern of Ellison's hero is a search for the meaning of

identity in a modern world. Like Sartre's heroes, he is seeking a new source of values in a world without God. He questions the possibility and meaning of action in an absurd situation. He is eventually obliged to confront, like Camus' heroes, the logic of the absurd, and the possibility of fulfillment within that context. Once aware of the chaotic nature of existence, as we shall see, the narrator of Invisible Man comes to a conclusion similar to that of Sartre's heroes, who have also recognized the meaninglessness of life.

If Sartre's and Camus' influence on Ellison is at best indirect, there are other more tangible forces which, as Ellison freely admits, have helped shape his fiction. The first is Richard Wright, who in turn was directly influenced by Sartre. Although their differences have been pointed out, Ellison was, at least for a time, as Alain Locke states: "a protege of Wright, who predicted for him a bright future."[25]

In addition to Dostoevski's Notes from Underground, Ellison's novel also bears close resemblance to Wright's novella, "The Man Who Lived Underground."[26] Wright's hero also falls into an abandoned underground room, and seeking refuge from the chaos of the social world, makes it his home. Instead of illuminating his cellar with light bulbs, he wallpapers his room with one-hundred dollar bills, hangs gold watches and rings on the walls, and scatters diamonds over the floor. He too arranges for light by stealing power

from the Electric Company. Like Ellison's hero, he is here able to contemplate the nature of things, achieve a degree of lucidity, and thereby find his freedom underground. Ellison appears to maintain some hope that his hero will successfully emerge as a social being. Wright's protagonist, however, is shot without provocation by a white policeman upon his entrance into the upper world. When the policeman is asked why he killed him, he answers, "I had to. You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things."[27]

This story points out both the differences and similarities between the two authors. Both heroes reject the terrors of the real world, and find refuge in an underground escape. Whereas Ellison glimpses the possibility of a successful emergence, Wright is overwhelmed by the force of both metaphysical and racial circumstances.

The second major direct influence on Ellison, was Andre Malraux, of whom he is often fond of talking. "Most of all I was reading Malraux," Ellison says of his early literary interests, "I thought so much of that little Modern Library edition of Man's Fate that I had it bound in leather."[28] In another essay, he refers to Malraux as "my literary ancestor."[29]

There are several thematic similarities which Invisible Man shares with Malraux's novels. The first is the problem of the individual achieving identity within the group. Ellison was preoccupied, as he explains, "with the puzzle of the one-and-the-many; the mystery of how each of

us, despite his origin in diverse regions . . . is, nevertheless, American."[30] Jazz presented Ellison with the only true example of a perfect relationship where an individual could affirm both his uniqueness and his group identity: "The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization."[31]

The narrator of Invisible Man, like many of Malraux's heroes, vainly searches for a way to achieve this "delicate balance." In Les Conquérants, for example, the novel's two protagonists, Borodin and Garine, represent the two opposing sides of the problem of group and individual identity. Borodin, at the cost of his individuality, succeeds in vanquishing his solitude, joining forces with the Communists. Garine, however, represents the extreme individualist who cannot submit to the collective demands of the Party. As the Communist Nicolaïef says of him: "Il n'est pas communiste, voilà. Borodin est logique: il n'y a pas de place dans le communisme pour celui qui veut d'abord . . . être lui même, enfin exister séparé des autres."[32] Ellison's invisible hero, like Garine, cannot submit to collective control. The experiences of both characters serves to emphasize the failure of the Communist Party to admit the worth of the individual. Although Malraux and Ellison both envisioned an ideal relationship between the individual and the group, the problem remained enigmatic in their fiction.

Ellison seems to be drawn to Malraux's theory of commitment to revolutionary action. He is quick to point out, however, that what intrigued him was not the political aspects of this commitment, but the fact that Malraux's characters were motivated to action by more metaphysical forces:

> I noticed . . . that whenever the heroes of Man's Fate regarded their condition during moments of heightened self-consciousness, their thinking was something other than Marxist. . . . the book lives not because of a political position embraced at the time, but because of its larger concern with the tragic struggle of humanity.[33]

In La Condition humaine, action is embraced as a means of arraigning the human condition. Revolution, therefore, becomes a creative act where the success or failure of the endeavor is secondary. Tchen, the terrorist, finds that violence gives meaning to his existence. His failure to kill Chaing-Kai-Shek emphasizes that his revolt is against man's condition and not against a particular idea or political system.

The Harlem riot scene in Invisible Man recalls this theme of commitment for its own sake, which recurs in Malraux's novels. Ellison's hero is intrigued by a mob which has been able to organize and, as the only effective means of expressing their protest, burn down their own tenement. The gratuitous nature of their act places them with Malraux's Tchen, and also recalls the early heroes of Wright's short stories. They are also similar to Sartre's Mathieu,

who commits himself to certain death in order to engage his freedom in some effective action. In their final commitment, all these characters express what is at the same time human and tragic in their condition.

The conclusion of Invisible Man closely resembles that of Sartre's La Nausée; both of which illustrate Malraux's theory of art. In the last pages of Invisible Man and in the Epilogue the hero begins to affirm his identity. As we shall see, Ellison, like Sartre, offers no solution, but points to an ambivalent hope.

After the hero falls into the coal bin which will be his home, he dreams a terrible nightmare. All the people who have tried to use him, (his High School Superintendent, Dr. Bledsoe, Mr. Norton, Ras, and the members of the Brotherhood), hold him prisoner. When he tells them: "I'm through with all your illusions and lies, I'm through running." (Invisible Man, p. 492); they castrate him. In spite of the intense pain, he begins to laugh; and when they ask him why he is laughing, he answers, "Because at a price I now see that which I couldn't see." (Invisible Man, p. 493). What he now realizes is that all of these people have not only been deceiving him, but have actually been castrating him all along. The act itself is merely representative of how everyone whom he had tried to please had helped to deny his humanity, and to "keep this nigger boy running." The clash between his illusion and the actual shape of reality has finally taken place. He believes now that his

disillusionment is conclusive evidence of the chaotic order of things. He must abandon all previous concepts of himself, for he can no longer define himself through others or according to a political doctrine. He must now begin to create his own being.

Like Roquentin, Ellison's invisible hero finally realizes that he must accept his humanity and his capacity to act: "My world has become one of infinite possibilities." (Invisible Man, p. 498). Like Roquentin, he has chosen to act, for he has undergone the transformation from "ranter to writer," and the result will be, and is, the novel. The very act of writing down his experiences is an attempt at communication; a social act aimed at redeeming man. As Ellison points out: "Invisible Man is a memoir of a man who has gone through that experience and now comes back and brings his message to the world. It's a social act, it is not a resignation from society but an attempt to come back and be useful."[34] Ellison uses the first person narration, like Sartre, to constantly remind the reader that this is the hero's and not his book.

The final effort of the protagonist, therefore, is one of rising above existence through artistic creation. When Roquentin dreams of the book he will write he states: "... il faudrait qu'on devine, derrière les mots exprimés, derrière les pages, quelque chose qui n'existerait pas, qui serait au-dessus de l'existence."[35] Just as Roquentin contemplates the melody of a Negro jazz song before he

decides to write a novel, Ellison's narrator feels a growing sense of substance and form by listening to the tunes of Louis Armstrong.

Art, either music or literature, presents both characters with a means of confronting their existence. The creative act represents a final response to man's insignificance. Malraux believed that man, by putting a form on a formless flux, is able to create his own meaning. In Les Voix du silence he stated: "Chacun des chefs d'oeuvre est une purification du monde, mais leur leçon commune est celle de leur existence, et la victoire de chaque artiste sur sa servitude rejoint, dans un immense deploiement, celle de l'art sur le destin de l'humanité."[36] Like Sartre, Malraux believed that art represented a means of defining the world, instead of letting the world define man. This, therefore, is the final possibility of Ellison's hero. Ellison himself recognized that this theory of artistic transcendance is found, above all, in Malraux:

> Life is as the sea, art a ship in which man conquers life's crushing formlessness, reducing it to a course, a series of swells, tides and wind currents inscribed on a chart. Though drawn from the world, "the organized significance of art," writes Malraux, "is stronger than all the multiplicity of the world; . . . that significance alone enables man to conquer chaos and to master destiny."[37]

The hero of Invisible Man attempts to create order out of his life, therefore, through the creation of a work of art. The outcome is uncertain, but, like Roquentin, the effort has been made.

At the end of his journey, the riddle of the narrator's grandfather once again returns to him, and he feels for the first time he has truly understood it: "Could he have meant, hell, he must have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence." (Invisible Man, p. 496). His grandfather's philosophy, therefore, was not a superficial "yes," or a role playing as "the good Negro." Instead it was a plea for the hardest responsibility. With the acceptance of his humanity, the hero must begin to take responsibility for both the principle of equality, and the people who have violated it. In the Prologue he had stated: "even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all. But I shirked my responsibility." (Invisible Man, p. 17). Like Camus, Ellison must affirm the brotherhood of man, even when the reality lags far behind the dream.

The conclusion of the novel is enigmatic. The narrator knows he must emerge, but he is not sure of what he will find. Nevertheless, his adventure ends, not on a note of despair, but with a sense of hope. "Life is to be lived," he concludes, "not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat." (Invisible Man, p. 499). His fate, therefore, closely resembles that of Sisyphus, who, according to Camus, was also content. By confronting the absurdity of his existence, and reacting against it, there is hope for the narrator.

Like Camus' Meursault, Ellison's hero, reacting against his environment, finds that he cannot live within society. Meursault is condemned by society because he cannot abide by its rules and he cannot conform to the role it has given him. Although the narrator of Invisible Man is not actually imprisoned by society, he feels that he must escape the irrational pattern of the world. Nevertheless, both protagonists are able to affirm, even in defeat, man's existence. Just as Meursault was able to experience a final happiness in his knowledge of the absurd: "je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde."[38]; Ellison's hero is able to proclaim: "In spite of all I find that I love." (Invisible Man, p. 501).

The dimensions of Ellison's work transcend the limits of racial protest. His ability to evoke the beauty and diversity of the Negro experience, is a great part of his talent. His hero, however, is never forced to struggle, like so many of Wright's heroes must do, to affirm his humanity to a white majority. Ellison's protagonist attempts to blame his failures on his color, but eventually comes to the realization that they have a more general, more human, and therefore more tragic cause. His disillusionment with the people he meets and his particular social situation only serve to preface a greater, more profound disillusionment with the entire nature of existence.

Ellison's ability, therefore, to explore the most metaphysical, as well as purely historical problems, gives

his novel a relevancy and frightening urgency for all serious readers. "Who knows," Ellison's invisible hero concludes, "but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (Invisible Man, p. 503).

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ralph Ellison, "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure," in Shadow and Act, Ralph Ellison; Signet Books (New York: New American Library, 1966), pp. 33-41.

[2]Ibid., p. 25.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., p. 36.

[5]Ibid., p. 23.

[6]Ibid., p. 29.

[7]Robert Bone, "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of Imagination," in Anger, and Beyond, ed. by Herbert Hill (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 88.

[8]Ibid., pp. 89-90.

[9]Ralph Ellison, "The Charlie Christian Story," in Shadow and Act, p. 229.

[10]Ralph Ellison, "Remembering Jimmy," in Shadow and Act, pp. 235-236.

[11]Ralph Ellison, "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia," in Shadow and Act, p. 215.

[12]Ralph Ellison, "Remembering Jimmy," in Shadow and Act, p. 238.

[13]Ralph Ellison, "In a Strange Land," Tomorrow, III (July, 1944), pp. 41-44.

[14]Ibid., p. 44.

[15]Ralph Ellison, "Flying Home," in Cross Section, ed. by Edwin Seaver (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1944), 469-485.

[16]Ralph Ellison, "King of the Bingo Game," Tomorrow, IV (November, 1944), pp. 29-33.

[17]Ibid., p. 31.

[18]Ibid., p. 32.

[19]André Malraux, La Condition humaine, in Romans (Paris: Gallimard, Biblioteque de la Pléiade, 1947), p. 204).

[20]Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944).

[21]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: New American Library, 1952), p. 7; Citations from Invisible Man in my text are to Signet Books edition (New York: New American Library, 1952).

[22]Rochelle Girson, "Sidelights on Invisibility: Interview with Ralph Ellison," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXVI (March, 1953), p. 59.

[23]Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in Shadow and Act, p. 71.

[24]Richard Lehan, "Existentialism in Recent American Fiction: The Demonic Quest," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, I (Summer, 1959).

[25]Alain Locke, "From Native Son to Invisible Man," Phylon, XIV (1st quarter, 1953), pp. 34-35.

[26]Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," in Cross Section, ed. Edwin Seaver, pp. 58-102.

[27]Ibid., p. 102.

[28]Ralph Ellison, "A Very Stern Discipline," Harpers, Vol. 234 (March, 1967), p. 86.

[29]Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," in Shadow and Act, p. 164.

[30]Ibid., p. 166.

[31]Ralph Ellison, "Living with Music," in Shadow and Act, p. 189.

[32]André Malraux, Les Conquérants (Paris: B. Grasset, 1928), p. 251.

[33]"The Art of Fiction: An Interview with Ralph Ellison," in Shadow and Act, p. 170.

[34]Allen Geller, "An Interview with Ralph Ellison," The Tamarack Review (Summer, 1964), p. 11.

[35]Jean-Paul Sartre, La Nausée (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), p. 248.

[36]André Malraux, Les Voix du Silence, IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 256.

[37]Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," in Shadow and Act, p. 94.

[38]Albert Camus, L'Etranger (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 138.

CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

This study of the French existentialist writers and their relationship to Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison has tried to show that, the question of influence aside, these authors share a common view of modern man and his universe. Their heroes function according to existential values and follow the existential pattern of experience. To say, however, that a particular novelist places his heroes in an existential situation, does not mean that he adheres to the philosophical implications of Existentialism as understood by Sartre and Heidegger. The term existential, therefore, implies a broad connotation that emphasizes certain themes and a certain view of the individual.

Certain thematic similarities exist in all the novels studied. The individual is portrayed as isolated from the main stream of society. In the case of Wright and Ellison, the protagonist's physical and racial alienation serves to symbolize a greater, more general loneliness. The universe is pictured without absolutes, where traditional gods and myths no longer govern the lives of men. The nature of man's experience is not ordered or rational, but chaotic, marked by meaningless encounters with nothingness. Although man's possible response to the absurdities of his condition is examined, no certainties are offered as a panacea.

A collective study of these authors is important, I believe, not to determine specific influences, which will not ultimately add to our insight, but because seen collectively, their thought represents a major trend in the literature of ideas. An understanding of Malraux, Camus, and Sartre, therefore, can enhance our appreciation and understanding of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

Although Wright and Ellison do not represent a Negro "school" of thought, for both write from a highly personal point of view, it is interesting to speculate why the Negro artist is drawn to the vision of existence held by the French writers. It is easy to point to sociological theories, and claim that the unfortunate circumstances of Negro life in the United States has led to a tragic interpretation of existence. To be sure, this is true, and a large part of the problem. Ellison's Invisible Man, however, transcends the racial questions, and Wright also eventually develops themes other than social protest.

The Negro is a victim of a highly ironic phenomenon of American society. By virtue of his color he is easily recognized, and as a group he is everywhere known. As an individual, however, the Negro becomes "invisible." Although unseen, Ellison's hero affirms his existence: "I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids--and I might even be said to possess a mind."[1] The phenomenon of invisibility, therefore, has served to dramatize and symbolize the loss of individuality and the alienation of man, both

black and white, American and European, in modern society. Because of the unique position of the Negro as a physical outsider, the irrationality of modern society becomes all the more readily apparent. In Wright's The Outsider, Ely Houston, the hunchback, explained the nature of the problem. "Some men are so placed in life," claimed Houston, "by accident of race or birth or chance that what they see is terrifying. Life converts the lives of such men into something dreamlike."[2] This awareness, therefore, on the part of the American Negro, of the meaninglessness of existence, often comes as the direct result of a recognition of the inconsistencies of American society.

Some conclusions concerning the existential attitudes which motivate much of the action in the novels studied can now be made. To begin with, the basic nature of the universe is portrayed as absurd. Existence is meaningless, and there is no rationally intelligible pattern of creation. To a greater or lesser extent, the heroes of these novels recognize this fact. Sartre's Roquentin and Ellison's invisible hero start from a state of relative philosophical innocence, but gradually move toward an acknowledgment of the chaotic nature of things. Both protagonists record the progress of an innocent mind coming in contact with the absurd.

The isolation of the individual and his failure to find fellowship within the group is the second major theme studied. The unsuccessful attempt to find meaning within

communal life can be seen throughout the works of Malraux, as well as those of Wright and Ellison. The modern hero is at odds with his environment and, as in the case of Camus' Meursault, also with himself.

Struck by a sense of alienation, and convinced of the meaninglessness of existence, the existential hero is faced with the modern dilemma. In a world devoid of all ultimate purpose and justification, in a world without God and without absolutes, on what basis can man choose to act? The modern hero, therefore, eventually comes to the conclusion, often with demonic results, that the only verities are those that are self-imposed. Cross Damon is able to kill without remorse, for good and evil have no meaning for him. The protagonist is portrayed as free, capable of determining his own necessities for action and his own meaning.

The response to man's perplexing condition is varied and complex. Recognizing the irrationality of the absurd, man must also recognize the need to act within the absurdity of his condition. The great majority of Sartre's characters, however, do not succeed in confronting their existence. They seek, as does Lucien in L'Enfance d'un chef, to escape their humanity and reduce themselves to a solid fixity, thereby denying all possibility. Ellison's invisible hero is also guilty, at least at his start, of "mauvaise foi," refusing to assume the burden of freedom. Ellison is able, nevertheless, to posit a new foundation for action at the conclusion of Invisible Man. He, like Sartre, does not offer any

solutions, but looks toward the possibility of action, believing that his underground hero will emerge and be capable of some social action.

Camus' theory of metaphysical rebellion is another valid response to man's condition. Although Wright's heroes lack philosophical insight, they too revolt against their particular relationship with the universe, and eventually against the entire nature of creation. Ellison's narrator's disillusionment with his particular condition only serves to symbolize a greater, more tragic disappointment, like that of Meursault, with existence in general. The ability to confront lucidly one's condition, and a refusal, at the same time, to be dominated by it, constitutes the beginning of metaphysical revolt.

The belief that art is perhaps the ultimate response to the tenuity of man's existence is held by all the authors studied. In the fourth section of L'Homme révolté, Camus stated that rebellion becomes creative through artistic creation:

> ... l'art romanesque refait la création elle-même, telle qu'elle nous est imposée et telle qu'elle est refusée. Sous l'un de ses aspects au moins, cet art consiste a choisir la créature contre son créateur. Mais, plus profondément encore, il s'allie à la beauté du monde ou des êtres contre les puissances de la mort et de l'oubli. C'est ainsi que sa révolte est créatrice.[3]

Malraux, like Camus, came to the conclusion that art held the power to create the present and purify, through a metamorphosis, the past. The creative art, therefore, is capable

of transforming the absurd and of giving human existence an aesthetic order. Sartre's Roquentin and Ellison's invisible man eventually attempt to find some form of fixity and permanence in the world of creative endeavor.

It is evident, therefore, that a similar view of existence is held by these writers. This is not to diminish the fact that Ellison and Wright are writing from an American Negro point of view. It appears, however, that the Negro has found that the existential concept, with its concern with meaning and identity, corresponds closely to the Negro experience in a country which has striven to deny Negro personality.

For both Wright and Ellison, race and the Negro experience have become part of the creative imagination. Richard Wright has developed a literature of protest, sometimes brilliant in its intensity. The foundation of that protest is a physical sense of isolation, originating from the pain and anguish of racial prejudice. For Ellison, however, that which is racial and regional is merely a shadow of that which is universal. The symbol of invisibility is used to convey not only the meaning of Negro humanity, but the dilemma of twentieth century man in general who, like Malraux's adventurers, is denied dignity and purpose. Ellison succeeds in establishing a new order, a new basis of action founded on the absurdist viewpoint. Like Camus, he has grasped the possibility of the greatness of man despite his limitations.

Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were preoccupied with the same problems, although Americanized, as those that fascinated and puzzled the French existentialists. They all share a common vision, sometimes tragic and yet often recognizing the ability to transcend that tragedy. Existential attitudes and conclusions became a metaphor for the condition of the Negro, but on a larger scale, for all mankind. We must, in the final analysis, respond affirmatively to Ellison when he asks: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"[4]

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: New American Library, 1952), p. 7.

[2]Richard Wright, The Outsider (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p. 133.

[3]Albert Camus, L'Homme révolté (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), pp. 330-331.

[4]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 503.

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