

Bigger Thomas: Richard Wright and James Baldwin

By Daniel Ogden

In 1940 an American Negro author, Richard Wright, wrote a novel, **Native Son**, which became the Negro protest novel of the 20th century. The story centers around Bigger Thomas, black offspring of the black Chicago South Side. Through Bigger we see the hate, fury, and despair which characterizes everyday existence in the black ghetto. This hate and despair, which the white race has instilled into Bigger, slowly builds within him until he explodes in the act of murder. He first kills a white girl, despoising of the body by chopping it up and then burning it; and later while he is on the run, he turns on his black girl friend and murders her.

Such a novel, of course, came to the forefront in America very soon: what with the American obsession for sex and violence — at a safe distance. Due to this American characteristic it is difficult to say exactly what its effect as a protest novel was. To be sure, good liberal whites were enraged, just as they were enraged by other protest novels of the 30's. But whether the wide reading masses of America found in Bigger Thomas a 20th century black striking out for freedom from his ghetto prison, or whether they merely saw another horror story, which filled their need for cheap sensationalism is debatable.

One person who did not approve of either *Native Son* as a protest novel or *Bigger Thomas* as the symbol of Negro freedom is another Negro author and acquaintance of Richard Wright, James Baldwin. The latter dismisses protest novels¹ as attempting to confine

¹ Baldwin's views on the protest novel are set forth in the article, »Everybody's Protest Novel,« which first appeared in *Partisan Review*, June 1949. It was later reprinted in *Notes of a Native Son*.

the myriad of human existence and experience into the narrow category of the social. The protest novel cannot do justice to human life, according to Baldwin, and there is nothing in it which can show us something about the reality in which we attempt to survive. Just what is a protest novel to Mr. Baldwin is difficult to say, especially since he lumps *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Richard Wright together.

Of more interest is Baldwin's criticism of Bigger Thomas.² Instead of seeing Bigger as the black spectre of vengeance which Richard Wright intended him to be, Baldwin sees Bigger as a monster whose actions expel him from the black race. Baldwin sees nothing in Bigger which he, as a Negro, can identify with. Instead of pride, he feels repulsion at being linked to such a person. Bigger, according to Baldwin, does nothing for his race and even less for himself. Destruction is the only companion Bigger has throughout his odyssey of crime, and his own doom is the certain end awaiting him. For Baldwin, who throughout his writings stresses the imperative need of meeting the white man with love, of conquering the hate that the white man uses to destroy the Negro mind and of rejecting vengeance for creation, Bigger appears as something worse than what the bottom of life has to offer.

If Bigger could be seen as a terrifying monster, then perhaps *Native Son* could have had the satisfaction of scaring the American white who created Bigger. Indeed, this is part of Wright's intention. However, Baldwin does not think this is accomplished. Despite Bigger's being a monster, he is harmless. This is because, says Baldwin, Bigger merely becomes what the white people always expected he was. White people hold the Negro to be a vicious savage and Bigger's actions put him in that category. Thus, concludes Baldwin, Wright has failed to scare the white race into recognizing its guilt.

Baldwin's interpretation (first published in 1951) leaves much to be desired. Under his critical eye, *Native Son* becomes a sterile exercise in social criticism and Bigger becomes a watered down symbol of what the white man fears in the Negro. This could not be further from the truth. *Native Son* is a most serious and vibrating account of a black man wandering through his personal Hell, and

² This is found in the essay, >>ManyThousands Gone>>, first published in *Partisan Review*, Nov.—Dec. 1951. Also reprinted in *Notes of a Native Son*.

Bigger Thomas is anything but a soothing reassurance for the white man.

Central to Baldwin's argument is that Bigger fills the image the white man has of the black. This is, at first glance, a difficult assertion to disprove, for the American white does see the Negro as a savage. However, this is not the only image the white race has of the black. If it were, then Baldwin's claim would be justified. What Baldwin forgets is that the white man sees the Negro as a »good-for-nothing bum«, an »ignorant idiot«, a »>>lazy-do-nothing,> and a host of other things. Being a savage is just one of the images which the Negro fills for the white man. In fact there is absolutely no way in which the black man can avoid giving the white man an image of himself since the white man subjects everything about the Negro to the existence of an image.

The white man fits the Negro into categories such as »savage« and »bum« in order to escape the reality which the Negro is. Divorced of anything outside the category, the Negro becomes a tool easily managed by the white man. The Negro loses all personality and all possibility to be a threat to white supremacy. At least, this is the goal of the white man. Thus, when one points to the ghetto conditions, the white man can point to the laziness of the Negroes. If a Negro commits a crime, the white man sees him only as a criminal. At no time does the white man go outside these categories which he devises. To do so would be to confront the Negro in the fullness of his being, and this is exactly what the white man is trying to avoid by allowing the Negro to exist only as a series of images.

Bigger does not scare Baldwin, or at least he says he does not. What would really have affected the white reading public, says Baldwin, is if Wright had in place of a clear-as-water monster taken a dark Negro which symbolized the darkness and uncertainty which every Negro represents to the white man. For Baldwin the Negro is immutably imbedded in the white psyche. The Negro is that black spot of anguish the white man carries buried deep under the protective layers of white supremacy. The Negro is forever a part of the white man's black past, and since the white man refuses to recognize its reality, this black past haunts him and makes him live a life governed by fear. »It is not Bigger Thomas whom we

fear, since his appearance among us makes our victory certain. It is the others, who smile, who go to church, who give us no cause for complaint, whom we sometimes consider with amusement, with pity, even with affection — and in whose faces we sometimes surprise the merest arrogant hint of hatred, the faintest withdrawn, speculative shadow of contempt — who make us uneasy; whom we cajole, threaten, flatter, fear; who to us remain unknown, though we are not (we feel with both relief and hostility and with bottomless confusion) unknown to them.» (P. 40 Notes etc.)

There is a great deal of truth in what Baldwin says, and if more white people understood this truth then there would need be no Bigger Thomases. However, what Baldwin is missing is that these people whom he describes are just as much the victim of the white man's need to fashion air-tight images as is Bigger. The white man confronted by these potential characters could easily dismiss them as »happy smiling darkies» and place them alongside Uncle Tom. Baldwin would quickly — and correctly — point out that these people are not at all »happy smiling darkies». But by the same notion, Baldwin would have to admit that the image of monster created by the white man and applied to Bigger Thomas is no more an accurate picture of reality than the appellation »smiling darkies».

Strangely enough, Baldwin commits the very sin against Bigger Thomas which elsewhere in his essays he accuses the white man of doing. Baldwin is plagued by the inability of the white liberal to understand him. He explains patiently the full picture of the position of the Negro, but the white liberal is content to remain within his preconceived picture of the Negro and, of course, fails to see what Baldwin is talking about. The white liberal sees nothing but concrete acts and nothing behind these acts. Someone does not vote: he is »apathetic». Someone lets his government paid house run down: he is »irresponsible». Someone murders a white girl and chops up her dead body with a pocket knife: he is a »monster». Once again the white man is mistaking the images he has created concerning black reality for that very reality. An whereas Baldwin elsewhere attacks this blindness, he willingly practices it in regard to Bigger Thomas. He sees the act of murder, but nothing else.

An important question is whether Bigger acts as a free man or whether his behaviour is determined by white society. Baldwin be-

believes the latter. Bigger's life is an endless floating-about in a world created for him by white racism. Unknowingly he follows the invisible dictates set up by white society inherited by him before he knew what they were. For Bigger, life is one long, unbroken monotony — a monotony filled with fantasies of destruction, the dream world of celluloid, and the inevitable explosion of internal ghetto hate. His life is moving nowhere and he is moving with it. This pattern of existence changes, however, when Bigger accidentally murders the white girl. Viewing his act, he finds that now his life has received meaning. The monotony is broken and his actions become filled with creative importance. It is this feeling of creation, repeated again in the murder of his girl friend Bess which becomes Bigger's *raison d'être* and, of course, his tragic end. It is due to these two acts that Bigger can say, fully conscious of his impending death, »... I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em. . .» (P. 392 *Native Son*.) In the face of death, Bigger is alive.

According to Baldwin, Bigger had surrendered to the American image of the Negro. Bigger accepts only this picture of himself and acts according to it. It is in this manner, Baldwin says, that the murders can be seen as acts of creation. »The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro's heart: and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality. Then, he, like the white enemy with whom he will be locked one day in mortal struggle, has no means save this of asserting his identity. This is why Bigger's murder of Mary can be referred to as an 'act of creation' and why, once this murder has been committed, he can feel for the first time that he is living fully and deeply as a man was meant to live.» (P. 41 *Notes* etc.) The American image of the Negro is one of hate and Bigger has surrendered himself to that hate.

But what is it in these two acts that is inconsistent with Bigger's prior life as presented. Prior to the first murder, Bigger was clearly living the way American society had planned for him to live. He stayed within the ghetto: he had no aspirations, and he lived with no expectation of ever crossing the white line of fear. In other words (Baldwin's), Bigger was flitting the image America had of him, and this is exactly the purpose these images of white America

serve. Why then are these not acts of creation? Why does Bigger not feel he is living, as indeed he is not? Baldwin sees only the act and nothing else. Bigger has been driven by hatred to murder and this hatred has been perpetrated by the white man. Thus Bigger surrenders to the power of the white man.

The act of murder in itself does not constitute Bigger's adherence to the reality which the white man has placed before him. To conform to a reality dictated by another person it is necessary that one has absolutely no feeling of responsibility. One does not feel that the reality is one's own, and one does not claim responsibility for it. Instead, this reality is merely something to be followed along for lack of something better. Without responsibility there is no feeling that one is doing anything. Instead, one is merely responding to a series of situations, the outcome of which has no importance for the individual involved. Life becomes passive, monotonous and meaningless. This is Bigger Thomas before he commits the acts of murder.

Responsibility is that which differs Bigger's two acts of murder from his life up to that point.

It is these two acts and these two acts only that Bigger claims ownership to. He could make excuses, he could lie, he could run from himself. But he does not do this. On the contrary he goes out of his way to accept these acts. That is why he feels that he is living. Bigger does not try to engineer the fake kidnapping plot so that he can disassociate himself with the murder. It is his consciousness that he is a murderer and that he is fooling these white people that drives him to these and other actions.

Thus, Bigger's committing murder does not place him under the power of the American myth but instead destroys that myth. In other essays, Baldwin emphasizes the need for the American Negro to accept his situation as being an American Negro in order that he can be able to rise to the status of manhood. This does not mean that the Negro should become white, but that he should become conscious of his experience in America which is uniquely his so that he can rise against the American myth, shatter it, and force the white man to accept him in the fullness of his being. One way in which this can be done is for the black individual to stop, wherever he is, look at his situation and claim responsibility for it. This

is what constitutes saying, »I am Black» and this is what Bigger Thomas does.

This is not to say that there is no element of determinism in *Native Son*. On the contrary, determinism dominates from beginning to end. As the novel opens, Bigger is tracking a rat in his family's tenement room. The rat shows himself, again, backed up against the wall, heaving with hatred. Bigger smashes him with the skillet. This opening sets the tone for the whole novel. Later on, when Bigger is on the run, Wright takes up the image of the rat. This time it is Bigger who is the rat backed up against the wall, and he is being tracked down by the police and vigilantes just as he tracked down the rat at the beginning of the novel. Bigger is doomed from the beginning. First, he is living under the domination of a force he cannot see and does not understand. With the act of murder, he rises up to challenge this very same force, only to be condemned to destruction. Bigger is one voice against the universe and he does not have a chance. There is absolutely no way that he could escape murdering a white girl either in the novel or in present day America. Wright sees the Negro in a situation he has had no say in bringing about, doomed to make his act of rebellion and then to be snuffed out by the unyielding power of whiteness.

Bigger does commit two acts in which he can say, »I am alive», and thus break the bonds which hold him. But even this free act is determined to end in doom according to Wright. Actually, to speak of free act versus determination is misleading. In Negro life free will and determination are not so clearly divided as they are for the white. Due to the experience of slavery, the black man has had to live with both, intermingled to such an extent that to the outside observer, what appears to be determined behaviour is really an act of freedom and what is taken for freedom is really an act of submission. Many Southern Negroes followed white civil rights workers to the polls, not because they saw a value in voting but because they had learned that the white man was to be obeyed. In just the opposite manner, a white liberal will decry that the Black Panthers are letting themselves be determined by hate, but they see themselves as forgers of their freedom. Freedom and determination are not easy to disentangle in American Negro life and they certainly are not easy to discern in *Native Son*.

Baldwin brings up the relevant question of how *Native Son* can be called a social protest when, in fact, Wright does not describe Bigger in a social context. Bigger does not function in a family, a neighborhood, or a race. He is alienated from everyone: except for Bessie whom he murders. Wright is not interested in presenting a picture of the black race in America but the lonely horror of the isolated individual. By concentrating on the individual at the expense of the race, Wright becomes a very American writer, as Baldwin points out. American literature from Cooper onward has idolised the individual. It is always the individual who must complete his destiny, not the community and not the country.

It is difficult in Wright's works to find a strong tie between the central character and the community. At some place or other in the story the main character must depart on his lonely way and he does so to the exclusion of those who are left behind. This tendency reaches its culmination in the novel, *The Outsider*, where Wright creates a Nietzschean Overman who severs all contacts with humanity and pays with his life for doing so.

There is no love between Bigger and his black brothers and sisters, according to Baldwin. (Strangely enough, Baldwin is criticized by Cleaver for just the same reason.) Bigger is dominated by hate for both the white and the black. Before the murders, he wants nothing to do with them. After he is found out, he wants them out of his sight because they do not feel pride in what he has done. Bigger, and probably Wright, is the black individual who shows the way of freedom to his people, only, however, to be rejected because they do not have the insight or the consciousness that he has.

On the one side, Bigger shows no common bond with his people whereas, on the other, he is accepted by the white Marxist. This makes Bigger an even less credible Negro for Baldwin. He has lost his place at home and has turned himself into the white man's cause. In other words Bigger has been duped. However, I do not believe either Bigger or Richard Wright (at least in his novels) to be so stupid. One of Wright's themes through his works is the relationship of the white liberal to the Negro. In this relationship Wright sees little to commend the liberal. The Negro's true desires are never known by the liberal. There is never complete communica-

tion between them, just as there is never complete communication when Baldwin and his white friends meet. This is true in *The Long Dream*: it is true in *The Outsider* and it is true in *Native Son*. Perhaps Bigger is accepted by Max, his Communist lawyer, but he is never understood by him. Max is the first person whom Rigger has met, to whom he feels like pouring out all the repressed emotions and thoughts which no one has dared listen to. But, in the end, Max becomes afraid of Bigger also. The reality of Rigger is too much for the white liberal and it is almost too much for Bigger himself.

For Baldwin, *Native Son* stops after Max has made his impassioned plea for Bigger. In keeping with the rest of the book, Max does not ask that Bigger be tried for an act, but for what he is — black. Max does not plead for justice because he feels that such terms have no meaning anymore. The only way, according to him, that crimes such as Bigger's can be stopped is for them to see the reality of the American Negro. »Let us banish from our minds the thought that this is an unfortunate victim of injustice ... Rather, I plead with you to see a mode of life in our midst, a mode of life stunted and distorted, but possessing its own laws and claims, an existence of men growing out of the soil prepared by the collective but blind will of a hundred million people ... Men are men and life is life, and we must deal with them as they are; and if we want to change them, we must deal with them in the form in which they exist and have their being». (Pp. 358—359 *Native Son*.) Max is asking that the white people see Rigger in the fullness of his being, not in an isolated act of murder. Indeed, Bigger as an entity is more horrible to them than the act of murder. They are more afraid of what Bigger is than of what he has done.

After reading Max's speech, the reader feels that here Wright has crested a white who understands the negro. Max is speaking in Bigger's language when he says, »The actions that resulted in the death of these two women were as instinctive and inevitable as breathing or blinking one's eyes. It was an act of creation!» (P. 366 *Native Son*.) If Max's speech were the end of the novel as Baldwin feels then we could assume a unity between the black murderer and the white liberal. However on the last pages of the book, Bigger becomes too much even for Max. It would seem that despite the brilliance of the words uttered in the courtroom, they

were just that — words. Max was speaking about Bigger, but he really had not accepted Bigger's reality. »'What I killed for must have been good!' Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. 'It must have been good. When a man kills, it's for something... I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em ... It's the truth, Mr. Max, I can say it now, 'cause I'm going to die. I know what I'm saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way ...' Max's eyes were full of terror. Several times his body moved nervously, as though lie were about to go to Bigger; but he stood still.» (P. 392 *Native Son*.) Confronted face to face by Bigger, Max has to back down. What Bigger is, is something more terrifying than what he had thought. Seeing the American Negro in the eye as no one else in Wright's novels does, Max is overwhelmed with the anguish of his revelation. In the end Bigger is alone, cut off from his racial surroundings, and misunderstood and feared by the white world which accepts him.

Baldwin sees *Native son* and Bigger Thomas only within the context of the Depression. A social protest novel is tied to its social surrounding, the change in the latter causing the novel to be lost in history, losing its relevance. By allowing his view of the protest novel to decide what *Native Son* is, Baldwin misses much of the importance of the novel. Reading *Native Son* is not like roading *Grapes of Wrath*. Although thirty years have gone, labor unions have become respectable. Negroes have received more attention, and there is no Depression, *Native Son* reads as if it were written yesterday, or possibly tomorrow. This is because the fundamental problem which Wright explored in all his works is just as much a reality today as it was then; and this is the problem of white racism. Baldwin seems to have missed this fact. This can perhaps be explained by his having written his essay in the early 1950's. Anyway, he is not the only one who found Wright dated (and Bigger a monster). Theodore Solotaroff in an afterword to the 1964 edition says, »No doubt the sensationalism of *Native Son* helped to shatter the indifference of its readers in 1940, but one could hardly justify the necessity for it today. On the contrary, the immediate effect of Wright's melodrama is to revitalize prejudices and projections on both sides and to contribute to the apocalyptic aura that inflames

the imagination of our crisis but distracts from and weakens our understanding of it.» (P. 394 afterword, *Native Son*) Mr. Solotaroff is writing during the time of liberal optimism; when Martin Luther King was more the hope for the white man than the black. Solotaroff would probably have reacted in a similar manner, if not in the same words, to Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. To the white liberal it is always the Negro, be it King, Malcom X, Wright or Baldwin who »goes too far» or who »created harmful sensationalism,,.

What Solotaroff and Baldwin have in common is that they both missed the depth of Wright's perception. Wright saw the white racism which was strangling both the white and the black man and he laid it bare in his writing. If one sees him merely as a social protest writer, as both Solotaroff and Baldwin do, then much of Wright's insight is lost. Wright is not talking about the Depression: he is talking about racism. Wright is not talking about poverty: he is talking about racism. Depression, poverty, rat infested apartments, violence, hate, and insanity — these are not topics in themselves but different social phenomena grounded in white racism. And it is just this relationship which the white liberal refuses to see. It is easy to cure unemployment; that is a social matter. But it is not easy to cure racism, because that sits at the darkest recess of the human mind, as Baldwin, Wright, and others have attempted to point out. The reality of racism as the power crushing the black man is what makes *Native Son* a contemporary novel. What Wright described in 1940 is still current in 1970. This brings us to Baldwin's last criticism. According to him, Bigger Thomas constitutes no threat to America. »The idea of Bigger as a warning boomerang not only because it is quite beyond the limit of probability that Negroes in America will ever achieve the means of wreaking vengeance upon the state but also because it cannot be said that why they have any desire to do so.» (P. 44 Notes etc.) This was written in 1951. *The Fire Next Time* was written in 1963. Due to the warning and the tone of the latter article one should not be too harsh on Baldwin's judgement in 1951, especially since most Americans react in 1970 the way Baldwin reacted in 1951. However, it is necessary to point out that Bigger Thomas is a threat. He was a threat in 1940 and he is a threat in 1970. If there will be a 1980 for America depends

on how well Americans understand this threat. Bigger Thomas is still a threat today because the racism which Wright depicted in 1940 is still rampant in America. So long as racism is the ruling force in America, there will be Bigger Thomases. The Bigger Thomases are not appeased by a loaf of bread and a new playground. The Bigger Thomases are not interested in how earnestly white liberals are concerned about them. What the Bigger Thomases are interested in is just how long will it take white America, including the white liberal, to cut away its own racism. And the Bigger Thomases have stopped waiting for an answer.

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