

# Seeking Salvation in a Naturalistic Universe: Richard Wright's Use of His Religious Background in

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The religious spirit always endures. Up to now man has always been a religious animal and secular art is a sublimation of the religious feeling. (Wright qtd. in Kinnamon and Fabre 210)

## I

James Coleman laments the fact that even though “religious and biblical traditions that engender faith are arguably the most important cultural feature to African Americans,” the critical response to black literature, ironically, reflects very little of this because “the critics who write about black novels seldom deal with religious and biblical traditions in fiction” (1). This is particularly true of the way Richard Wright’s work has been studied over the years. Since most scholars have assumed that Wright’s childhood exposure to fundamentalist Protestantism was so painful and extreme that he simply recoiled from religion of any kind and developed a vision of life which was essentially secular, they have written surprisingly little about his religious background. Even Coleman argues that Wright categorically rejected

black religion, forcing him to envision “a hollow, hopeless and desolate universe” (203).<sup>1</sup>

However, a careful examination of Wright’s actual writings indicates that he, like James Joyce, Ignazio Silone, and James T. Farrell, was deeply influenced by the religious values and practices of his early childhood and used them artfully in his major work to make important affirmations, thus avoiding the “void” which Coleman sees at the center of his work (207). This is especially true of *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1991), a book which crystallizes a problem which goes to the core of Wright’s vision—how to achieve a human self while inhabiting a deter-

<sup>1</sup>While little has been written about Wright’s response to his religious background, even less has been said about the literary uses he made of it. Constance Webb regards the severe religious training in Seventh-day Adventism Wright received as a boy in his grandmother’s household as damaging to his character because it resulted in his feeling “menaced by a mysterious God who seemed somewhat like hate” (183). Webb considers a religion based on fear and guilt as psychological baggage which Wright needed to reject wholesale in order to develop as a man and an artist. Likewise, Margaret Walker argues that Wright was so repelled by his grandmother’s harsh religion that he rejected religion in any form. She regards Wright’s grandmother Wilson and his Aunt Addie, both fervent Seventh-day Adventists, as “religious fanatics” (33) from whom Wright needed to free himself. Robert Douglass contends that Wright was unable to portray religious experience coherently in some of his work because he was “perplexed about the value of Christianity as a means of black salvation and liberation” (80), concluding that Wright reacted to religion mainly with “skepticism and cynicism” (84).

Even so, one can make the case that Wright’s response to his religious background was powerfully and fruitfully split. At times he consciously adopted the standard Marxist view that religion was essentially a dangerous fantasy for oppressed people, the “opiate of the masses,” because it dissipated their energies and distracted them from understanding and reforming the real world. However, at other times he regarded the fundamentalist Christianity he had been exposed to in his childhood as an important literary resource and repository of the spiritual values he needed to overcome the crippling effects of an environment designed to reduce him to the status of a “non-man” (*Black* 288). Christian notions of redemptive suffering, conversion, and salvation of the individual go to the heart of Wright’s vision and receive especially vivid treatment in *Black Boy (American Hunger)*.

ministic environment which systematically denies one's status as a human being. Growing up in a wide variety of locations in the deep South and the urban North, Wright envisioned both worlds as prisons which blocked his attempts to develop himself as a person and hells which attacked his soul by condemning him to "meaningless pain and endless suffering" (*Black* 117). The task he set for himself in his autobiography was to "wring a meaning" (118) out of such an empty, sterile world and achieve a "new life" (296) as a morally liberated and spiritually empowered person. *Black Boy (American Hunger)* thus becomes a conversion narrative which transcends the bleak nihilism of much naturalistic literature. Wright's religious background, which he consciously rejected as a young man but made skillful literary use of as a mature writer, played a crucial role in his artistic and personal development. It was an invaluable resource, providing him not only with a rich store of dramatic imagery and symbolism but also with the spiritual and moral values he needed for a fruitful engagement of the world he describes in *How "Bigger" Was Born* where "God no longer existed" and where "metaphysical meanings had vanished" (12). Facing the void created by a world wracked by racial terror, global depression, and oncoming world war, Wright was able to construct a durable humanistic vision of life which was grounded in part in the fundamentalist religion he experienced while growing up in the deep South.<sup>2</sup>

## II

<sup>2</sup>Novelists of the American South have tended to regard their religious traditions as particularly important in shaping their visions and have often argued that such respect for religion has given the literature of the South a distinctive quality. Flannery O'Connor, for example, once remarked that "[i]n the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological" (44). Identifying with a region deeply rooted in a rich Christian tradition, O'Connor perceived "the greatest possible advantage" in living in "the Bible Belt" because it gave her access to a culture that took religious belief seriously, a world that enabled her "to make belief believable" (201) in ways which would be difficult for writers operating in other regions where religious belief and practice had eroded to a point where they no longer seriously affected daily life. Working within a Bible Belt environment allowed O'Connor to avoid the sterile nihilism and slippery relativism that she felt

*Black Boy (American Hunger)* employs two integrally related stories: an outward narrative documenting the injustices and brutalities of the deterministic social environment which traps Wright in both South and North, and an inward narrative which dramatizes his transcendence of that environment with his own spiritual energy and free will. Externally, the segregated South is presented as a Dantean hell in which he feels “forever condemned, ringed by walls” (296). Memphis, like Dante’s Dis, is a “dead city” (11) where his family falls apart, and he is threatened with starvation and condemned to emotional abandonment in an orphanage where he feels “suspended over a void” and “lost” (35, 37). His subsequent life in a bewildering series of locations such as West Helena, Arkansas, where his uncle is murdered by racist whites, and Jackson, Mississippi, where he considers himself a stranger in his grandmother’s stern household, serves to reinforce his terror and isolation. As a teenager, he is acutely aware of the racial violence and injustices of southern life, becoming deeply alienated from a society which “casts him in the role of a non-man” (288).<sup>3</sup>

When he heads north in search of a better life, he finds different forms of the hell he experienced in the South. Arriving in Chicago,

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Alice Walker makes similar claims about her resources as a southern writer. Deploping modern literature of the mainstream where “the gloom of defeat is thick” (5), she insists that the religious traditions she assimilated while growing up in rural Georgia deepened her vision of life, helping her to make important affirmations central to her work. Although, unlike O’Connor, she was not able to identify with any particular denomination, Walker has always maintained a deep respect for the African American religion she experienced as a child in rural Georgia, arguing that it was an “antidote against bitterness” for black people (16). Like William Faulkner, Harper Lee, and other southern novelists, she extensively uses Christian motifs in her fiction both as powerful sources of myth, symbol, and imagery and also as repositories of important values which are at the core of her vision.

For a fuller discussion of these matters, see my essays on Lee and on O’Connor and Walker.

<sup>3</sup>Warren Carson provides valuable insights on Wright’s painful experiences

he realizes that his “fantasies” of finding a promised land are “mocked” when he is confronted by a city which evokes both T. S. Eliot’s wasteland and Dante’s inferno, “an unreal city” covered with “palls of grey smoke” and “flashes of steam” while assaulting his senses with a constant “din” (307). The harsh environment of this “machine city” (308) is made even worse two years later by the onset of the Great Depression, which condemns Wright to even more degrading forms of poverty and human insignificance while threatening the civilized world with chaos.

This hellish and massively deterministic outward narrative, however, is balanced by an extremely affirmative inward story which becomes more prominent as the autobiography develops. While Wright is physically starved by the naturalistic environment he endures in both South and North, he is nourished by tapping into a number of resources which help to satisfy his psychological, moral, and spiritual needs. As a child in Memphis, he is able to ameliorate the terror of his external life by recoiling into himself: “I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others. I held myself in. . . . My imagination soared; I dreamed of running away” (35). As his outward circumstances become even more intimidating with his mother developing a serious illness which plunges his family into extreme poverty, and the white world becomes more violent and repressive, confronting him with its “white-hot face of terror” (64), Wright is able to secure a measure of moral balance by cultivating an inward self nourished by his active imagination. While his outward self remains frozen in terror, his secret life “soar[s],” and he begins to develop the notion that he can “run away” to a better world (35).

This doubleness which Wright cultivates at an early age is the key to understanding his complexly divided reaction to the severely fundamentalist religion he experienced as a member of his grandmother Wilson’s household in Jackson from 1920 to 1925. In these formative years he outwardly rejects the Seventh-day Adventism which she imposes on the family, rebelling strongly against its puritanical restrictions, rigid dogma, and authoritarian rule. But he is simultaneously inwardly attracted to its highly dramatic vision of the world, seeing it

as an imaginatively compelling alternative to his mother's religious stance, which is a static and passive acceptance of suffering grounded in the image of "Christ upon the Cross" (376).

He deeply resents his grandmother's reducing his reading and writing to "devil's work" (41) and her forbidding him to listen to music, dance, and play sports with his friends. He also strongly resists her forcing him to attend the Seventh-day Adventist school taught by his Aunt Addie and regards as useless the "all-night ritualistic prayer meetings" which she makes the family attend (138). Moreover, he bristles at her forbidding him to work on Saturdays, the day on which Adventist services are held, because this denies him an opportunity to make the money he needs to buy decent clothes and supplement the meager diet which the Wilsons offer. Most of all, however, he is repelled by his grandmother's conception of an Old Testament God who rules by fear and violence since such a deity resembles too closely the white figures who rule a then segregated South. While in the early years of his stay in his grandmother's house at 1107 Lynch Street he makes a pretense of worshipping such a God and accommodating himself to a strict religious regimen, he later explicitly spurns his grandmother's religious beliefs, refusing to testify to her faith and also rejecting her orders to attend church school and services. He physically threatens his Uncle Tom and Aunt Addie when they attempt to coerce him into obeying the severe religious demands made on the family. In the final year of his stay on Lynch Street he is not on speaking terms with any family members, except his mother, and is regarded by his grandmother as a lost soul headed for eternal damnation. When he leaves Mississippi for Memphis in November, 1925, he is motivated not only by a desire to free himself of the deep South's harshest forms of racial discrimination and violence but also to liberate himself from his grandmother and her repressive religious practices.

But another part of Wright is fascinated by the stern but imaginatively evocative vision of life embraced by Seventh-day Adventism, and this has an enduring effect on his personal development and writing. In *Black Boy (American Hunger)* he stresses how he is "pulled toward emotional belief" by the powerful sermons he hears in church:

The elders of her church expounded a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fires, of seas vanishing, of valleys of dry bones, of the sun turning to ashes, of the moon turning to blood, of stars falling to earth, of a wooden staff being transformed into a serpent, of voices speaking out of clouds, of men walking on water, of God riding whirlwinds, of water changing into wine, of the dead rising and living, of the blind seeing, of the lame walking, a salvation that teemed with fantastic beasts having multiple heads and horns and eyes and feet; sermons of statues possessing heads of gold, shoulders of silver, legs of brass, and feet of clay; a cosmic tale that began before time and ended with clouds of the sky rolling away at the Second Coming of Christ; chronicles that concluded with Armageddon; dramas thronged with all the billions of human beings who had ever lived or died as God judged the quick and the dead. (119)

Such dramatic images fire the young Wright's lively imagination, would fascinate him throughout his life, and play a prominent role in his personal and artistic development. As Constance Webb points out, "Richard never tired of talking about the peculiarities of that religion" (397) and enjoyed discussing Seventh-day Adventism with his friend Arna Bontemps, who was also reared in that sect and taught for a brief period in an Adventist school.

Although Wright's rational nature rejected religion as a dangerous anodyne for black people because it provided them with fantasies which distracted them from addressing political and social problems in the real world, the imaginative and emotional sides of his personality were strongly attracted to Seventh-day Adventism for a number of reasons. At the most literal level its belief in "the lame walking" would provide him with hope that his mother could recover from the paralysis which had become a "symbol" in his "mind" of "meaningless pain and endless suffering" (*Black* 117), a vision of life which could bring him to personal despair. At a purely aesthetic level the colorful images evoked in sermons would catalyze Wright's fertile imagination, com-

binning with the murder mysteries, gothic tales, and western stories he read in pulp magazines to move him to write crude horror stories such as “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half Acre.”<sup>4</sup> More broadly, the prospect of sinners being burned in “vast lakes of eternal fires” while the just would rise to heaven in the Second Coming of Christ furnished Wright with an apocalyptic narrative as an imaginative foundation for his later political beliefs and literary strategies. The fire and brimstone sermons which fascinated him as a boy would become the equally fiery Jeremiads found in his early Marxist poetry as well as Max’s courtroom speeches in *Native Son* (1940). And although Wright stubbornly resisted the pressures of his mother and grandmother to testify to his spiritual conversion, all of his writing may be seen as his own testimony of the racial, political, and economic injustices inflicted on people by inhumane social systems. Wright’s work thus can be regarded as his attempt to make “the blind” truly “see” a corrupt world and then reform it. From his early political poems published in radically leftist journals in the 1930s to the many haiku he composed shortly before his death in 1960, Wright’s entire *oeuvre* is an extended quest for “salvation” in a naturalistic universe which was designed to condemn people to the prison of social injustice and the hell of spiritual emptiness.

### III

Fire, which Keneth Kinnamon has described as “a central metaphor of [Wright’s] creative imagination” (10), plays a particularly strong role in *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*). Initially, it is linked with Wright’s fears that he lives in a hellish world that can suddenly destroy him. The opening scene portrays Wright as a small child fascinated with the “quivering coals” in the fireplace of his grandmother’s house as he attempts to relieve the boredom of remaining silent while she is recuperating from an illness. He lights a straw and touches the curtains, which

<sup>4</sup>This memoir, Wright’s first published prose, appeared in the spring of 1924 in a black newspaper, *Southern Register*, in Jackson, Mississippi. Unfortu-

then erupt in “red circles” of flame which threaten to burn down the house (4). The scene ends with his mother punishing him with a severe beating that first reduces him to unconsciousness and then makes him “lost in a fog of fear” (7). At age four, Wright wonders which is more destructive, the physical fire which nearly destroys him and his family or the hot emotions of his mother who has “come close to killing” him (8). As a child, therefore, Wright is already strongly imbued with the sense of a world that matches the Seventh-day Adventist vision of the radical instability of earthly life and the ever-present danger of death and damnation by fire.<sup>5</sup>

Fire is also employed in a later scene when Wright and his mother visit his father who has left the family to take up with a lover in a Memphis apartment. His father refuses to provide any support for his wife and two sons and indeed laughs at their pleas for help. This traumatic episode reduces Wright to fears of abandonment and starvation, and he is haunted for many years afterward by the hellish image of “my father and the strange woman, their faces lit by the dancing flames” (140). Here again, fire is used to suggest a world where a relatively secure existence can be suddenly destroyed by forces which the young Wright can neither understand nor control. So when his grandmother later calls him “a black little devil” and strikes him when he disobeys her, he feels “an aching streak of fire burning and quavering

<sup>5</sup>Wright’s fiction contains many examples of a character’s life being forever changed for the worse by a single dramatic turn of events. Bobo in “Big Boy Leaves Home,” for example, finds his life completely turned upside down when a white woman accidentally discovers him swimming naked with his friends in a white man’s pond. This results in terrible racial violence which forces him to leave his southern home forever and head north on a speeding train. Likewise, in *Native Son* Bigger Thomas’s entire life changes when he kills Mary Dalton in panic after he is surprised in her bedroom by her mother. Saul in “The Man Who Killed a Shadow” also is plunged into self-destructive violence when he murders a white woman to stop her from screaming, something which he fears will arouse the lethal violence of whites and result in his being lynched. The lives of the central characters in “The Man Who Lived Underground,” *The Outsider* (1953), and *Savage Holiday* (1954) are also turned around suddenly by surprising chance events which

on my skin" (48). Her later admonition that he will "burn forever in a lake of fire" (135) if he fails to accept her moral codes and religious practices reinforces strongly in his young mind that he lives in a terrifying world that can suddenly erupt with fiery violence and destroy him. (His grandmother's frighteningly severe view of the world is later ominously paralleled when Wright as a teenager hears about a black man being lynched, ritualistically hung, and burned when he is alleged to have violated the South's racial codes.)

As a young boy, Wright's only resource in psychologically coping with such a terrifying world is to protect himself by withdrawing into a compensatory inward life. He does this in his early childhood in Natchez by experiencing the simple beauties of the natural world as he responds to its "coded meanings" in "wonder" and "delight," enjoying the sights of "the dreaming waters of the Mississippi" and "the wet green garden paths in the early morning" (8). A few years later, he experiences similar pleasures vicariously when Ella, a boarder in his grandmother's house, reads him a story about Bluebeard, and he becomes "enchanted and enthralled" as the story, like fiery sermons, transforms external reality with "magical presences" (45). But here the experience of literature transfigures the image of fire, making it a purifying agent instead of a destructive force. It kindles Wright's inner being, as his "imagination blaze[s]," creating a new "sense of life" which is "deepened" (45), enriched.

As an adult, Wright can use his own art to calm his fears, illuminate his mind, and bring order to his experiences. It thus allows him to transcend the narrow limits imposed upon him by a racist environment intent on reducing him to a soulless object. The imaginative experience generated by literature therefore serves the quasi-religious function of transforming Wright's inner self, enabling him to experience the conversion in his personal life which he was unable to achieve in an institutional church. After dropping out of the religious school presided over by his zealous Aunt Addie and enrolling in public schools, Wright experiences for the first time in his life a four-year period of unbroken formal education in which he begins to cultivate a strong habit of reading and writing. This proves to be a pivotal experience

which “revitalize[s] (his) being” and opens up a productive “future” (147). He thus is able to overcome several of the traps set by his environment which keep him in his “place” and help him to begin a meaningful journey on his own “strange and separate road” (148).

Here again, a paradoxical linkage is established between his painful experiences as a Seventh-day Adventist and his liberating life as a reader and a writer. His grandmother’s church requires the literacy which his father lacked because it is centered in reading the Bible, a book that transfigures the reader’s soul and leads to a “salvation” not possible in the segregated South. In the same way Wright’s reading and writing deepen his inward life, broaden his vision, and empower him to see his own life in salvific terms. It is no accident that some of his most meaningful early literary experiences consist of reading the Bible in Sunday School when he lives in West Helena and later in Jackson when he and his family read from the Scriptures before every meal. Achieving literacy in early twentieth-century Mississippi, therefore, acquires some of the same meaning as it had in the South during slavery, becoming a kind of subversive activity which develops important human qualities which the social system is designed to destroy. As Wright notes when he is taken aback by a white woman’s negative response to his writing a story, “My environment contained nothing more alien than writing or the desire to express oneself in writing” (142). Even reading the cheap pulp fiction which he finds in popular magazines such as *Flynn’s Detective Weekly* proves liberating since it provides a “gateway to the world” which was closed to him by his social environment (151).

These early experiences with literacy in Mississippi prepare him for the more serious engagement with reading and writing which he undergoes in Memphis and Chicago. Such experiences are endowed by Wright with quasi-religious significance and are explicitly linked with what he had learned as a Seventh-day Adventist. Just as the sermons which fascinated him tell of “the blind seeing,” Wright’s impassioned reading of modern fiction in Memphis “open[s] up new avenues of seeing and feeling,” leading to a radically “new life” (296). In the same way, his literary involvement in Chicago helps him to construct a

transformed self which is capable not only of clearly diagnosing the social problems which had beset him in the South, but also of providing him with a coherent strategy to deal productively with these problems. Here, too, he lives a radically divided life, outwardly working a number of menial jobs so that he can support himself and his family and inwardly developing the enriched consciousness he needs as a writer and activist. Working a mechanical job in the Chicago post office by day, he reads and writes at night, as his "true feelings race . . . along, underground, hidden" (328). Significantly, he titles the second part of his autobiography "The Horror and The Glory," suggesting not only the split between the pain of his outward life and the rich satisfactions of his inward being, but also the Seventh-day Adventist belief that the agonies of earthly existence will one day be redeemed by the "glory" of a conversion made possible by the Second Coming.

But where Wright's development of a significant inward life in the South is a largely personal affair which he is unable to share with anyone, he is able in Chicago to make connections with like-minded people and groups which help broaden his vision and give it social and political relevance. He becomes a member of the South Side Writers' Group in 1936, a collection of young black writers and intellectuals which includes Margaret Walker, Frank Marshall Davis, Horace Cayton, and Arna Bontemps, people with whom he would establish strong friendships and who would exert positive influence on his writing. As Walker stresses in her biography of Wright, he had "a great need for such associations because they ameliorated the deep alienation" (286) dating back to traumatic experiences which he had endured in the South, experiences which threatened to blight his spirit and thus cripple his imagination.

He also becomes a member of Chicago's John Reed Club, which Hazel Rowley describes as "Wright's University" (78) because it put him in contact with young leftists such as Herbert Gold, Jack Conroy, and Nelson Algren, who saw their radical politics as a kind of "new faith" (354) which could renew the American society which the Great Depression had brought to the brink of collapse. Here again, in his autobiography Wright uses strongly religious terminology to express

his artistic beliefs. He envisions himself as a “witness” for oppressed people, a “voice” for the inarticulate and silenced masses (398). In Chicago Wright takes on the role of a writer who would do much more than articulate a personal vision and begins to see his writing as his grandmother had envisioned her religion and church: a powerful means of transforming the world.

#### IV

Although Wright is initially skeptical of the communist speakers he hears in Washington Park in his early years in Chicago, regarding their ideas as “too simple” and “frozen” in “ignorance” (319), he gradually becomes strongly attracted to communist ideology because it has some of the same imaginative and emotional appeal that drew him to the sermons he heard in his grandmother’s church. Marxist thought provides him with “a new faith” embedded in an apocalyptic vision of history in which capitalist “sinners” would be punished and the “righteous” proletariat experience a kind of heaven, a classless society (355). A fiery revolution would bring this about, annihilating a corrupt capitalistic system, just as the lake of fire of his grandmother’s religion would put an end to the old order of things and make possible the Second Coming of Christ. While Wright as a child gives his “emotional belief” to sermons which proclaim “the dead rising and living” (119), as a young radical he is equally drawn to communist ideology which, in the words of Eugene Pottier’s “*Internationale*,” urged the dispossessed masses to “Arise, you prisoners of starvation” and “Arise, you wretched of the earth” (qtd. in 450, 451).

Communism, therefore, becomes for Wright what it was for writers like Silone and Arthur Koestler, a potentially attractive secular equivalent to the religion he knew as a child, a mode of personal redemption and cultural salvation. His involvement in the John Reed Club and Communist Party not only end his isolation as a person by providing him with “the first sustained relationships in [his] life” but also make available to him a colossal vision of human solidarity by “uniting scattered but kindred people into a whole,” supplying a “common

bond" (373-74) which would bring the world's people together with a transcendent ideal. For this reason Wright compares the Communist Party to a "church" whose "myths and legends" can reveal "man's destiny on earth" (441).

This is why he can ascribe a certain "glory" (441) to Ross's admission of guilt when he is falsely accused by party members of veering from communist orthodoxy. Wright sees Ross's prostrating himself before party authority, irrational though it is, as a clear sign of his absolute faith in a system of belief beyond the self and transcending human rationality. Although Wright is deeply troubled by the party's treatment of Ross, portraying its trial of him as a kind of "black mass" and a miniature version of Stalin's show trials (439), he admires Ross for his abrogation of self before a political commitment which has become a kind of religious devotion.

Wright eventually leaves the party for some of the same reasons that he rejects his grandmother's religion, regarding both as unacceptable encroachments on his personal life and threats to his developing the kind of consciousness he needs in order to become a writer and a fully developed human being. Party officials, like his grandmother, take a dim view of his intellectual life and artistic aspirations, seeing them as encouraging heretical beliefs and an unhealthy individualism. He thus comes to see party ideology as similar to Seventh-day Adventist dogma in that both are static systems which lock their members in "militant ignorance" (390).

But he never becomes like Ross, a person who can accept his personality's being "obliterated" (140) as a way of maintaining his membership in the party which he identifies as his only means of salvation. Nor does Wright become like Todd Clifton in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), a man who chooses to commit suicide rather than live outside the party's systems of belief. For, unlike Ross and Clifton, Wright possesses important psychological and moral resources which predate his party membership and can therefore survive his rejection of communism. Unlike Ross, whose only belief system is communism, Wright can fall back upon what he terms "[t]he spirit of the Protestant ethic," a "heritage of free thought" which calls upon man "to work and re-

deem himself through his own acts” (436). This spirit of independence and free inquiry which one “suckled, figuratively, with one’s mother’s milk” (436) sustains Wright throughout his life, enabling him to develop new forms of spiritual and moral beliefs long after he separates himself from institutions like communism which falsely claim to support these beliefs and then translate them into reality. He can thus commit himself to existentialist philosophy after rejecting Marxist ideology because it nourishes the self which the Communist Party tries to eradicate. He can also commit himself to Pan-African politics after becoming disillusioned with communist politics because they keep alive his faith in freeing oppressed people, uniting them in a Third-World utopia which bears some similarity to the Seventh-day Adventist vision of an apocalyptic second coming which will bring justice to oppressed people. And at the end of his life, when he has lost most of his faith in organized systems of belief, he is able to keep his soul alive by writing over two thousand haiku, “like a monk in a cell,” as Michel Fabre observes (512), at his retreat at Moulin d’Ande. These tiny poems, which employ ordinary images from the natural world to distill spiritual essences, bring Wright’s religious life full circle, since they greatly resemble the prose poems in *Black Boy (American Hunger)* which he uses to capture the “vague sense of the infinite” as he gazes in wonder at “the yellow dreaming waters of the Mississippi River” (8).

## V

Late in his life, Wright wrote a long essay, “Memories of My Grandmother,” which was never published and remains in the Richard Wright Papers at Yale’s Beinecke Library. In it, he professes a strong admiration for the woman he depicts in such negative terms in *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, and he also reveals her enduring influence on his life. He stresses that the habits of mind and vision of life which he received from his grandmother’s religion strongly influenced his development as a man and a writer:

Their teachings and their religion, by encouraging me to live be-

yond the world, to have nothing to do with the world, to be in the world but not *of* the world . . . implanted germs of such notions in me. . . . These events which create fear and enchantment in a young mind are the ones whose impressions last the longest; perhaps the neural paths of response made in the young form the streets, tracks, and roadways over which the vehicles of later experience run. (Qtd. in Fabre 36)

Wright makes very explicit here what is implicit in *Black Boy (American Hunger)*: the seeds of his adult vision of life had been planted in his childhood when Seventh-day Adventism both fascinated and repelled him, creating in his young mind “fear and enchantment” or what he would later term “The Horror and the Glory.” The “neural paths” created in his early years by his religious training do indeed provide “streets, tracks, and roadways” over which the “vehicles of later experience” do “run.” Wright’s religious background ultimately deepens and broadens his mature work, enabling him to transcend the shallow determinism and facile pessimism of works like Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) and Jack London’s *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), which express naturalistic theory in a simplistic, doctrinaire manner. The spiritual and moral depth of Wright’s best work, such as *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), *Native Son*, and *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, also endows it with a thematic richness, complexity, and resonance missing in typical protest literature of the 1930s, such as Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited* (1933), and Edward Dahlberg’s *Bottom Dogs* (1930). While such dated works have become footnotes to literary history, Wright’s masterworks continue to disturb and inspire modern readers.

Wright, who in “Memories of My Grandmother” also expresses a desire to explore “the living springs of religious emotion” (qtd. in Rowley 85), energizes and deepens the meaning of his major work by drinking deeply from these springs. *Black Boy (American Hunger)* illustrates this vividly by describing in a powerful way Wright’s emergence from the hell of American racism to experience a kind of “salvation” through the exercise of will and spirit. He transcends the world which “imprisoned” the “soul” (40) of his father and “crushed” the “spirit” (168) of his grandfather, achieving a liberating “new life” as a major

American writer (296). Although he could not as a boy testify to the experience of God in his grandmother's church and was not able to be baptized into his mother's Methodism, he was able as a mature artist to testify eloquently to his own and his people's experience and thus use words as weapons which, in Irving Howe's view, changed American life "forever" (17). His autobiography, which documents his success in "wringing a meaning" out of "meaningless suffering" (118), can be seen as part of a long tradition of Christian conversion narratives centered in the quest for redemption and salvation. In the final sentence of the Book-of-the-Month Club edition of *Black Boy* published in 1945, Wright stresses this when he emphasizes his desire to find "some redeeming meaning" for mankind's "having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars" (285). His autobiography, which begins with a Dantean image of hell, the "Red circles" (10) of fire which threaten to annihilate Wright and his family, concludes with a potent image of hope, the stars which Dante observes at the end of *Inferno* as he journeys onward to Purgatory. As Fabre notes, Wright's journey, unlike Dante's, was an "unfinished quest," a "continuous exploration of the American soul" (530). But it moved well beyond the dead ends of deterministic despair because it made such careful use of important religious motifs which Wright received from his fundamentalist Christian background.

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## The Snow of Things

I don’t know if Jesus ever walked  
in snow, through a storm of snow  
blowing icy pieces stinging against  
his face, in his eyes, snow melting  
and freezing again in his hair until  
it hung in stiff cords on his shoulders,  
against his forehead. I’ve never seen  
him pictured that way.

I don’t know if he ever witnessed snow,  
Jesus, wrapped in robes that couldn’t  
keep out a winter wind of the mildest kind.  
He would have had to swaddle his feet  
in layers of cloth and around his sandals  
to walk through the snow of a mountain  
pass, using his staff along the narrows