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## Freedom in a Godless and Unhappy World

*Wright as Outsider*

Richard Wright explored existentialist themes in such fictional texts as *Native Son* (1940) and “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1944). But his most fully realized and ambitious work of existentialist fiction is his second published novel *The Outsider* (1953),<sup>1</sup> which belongs to a tradition that includes Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Heidegger, Camus, Beauvoir, and Sartre.<sup>2</sup> Wright is not, however, an unqualified celebrant of existentialism. Both in *The Outsider* and earlier fiction, his approach is critical engagement and searching dialogue with canonical works and figures in the tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Existentialism is less a doctrine than a philosophical tendency and literary movement. Existentialist thinkers reflect on a recurring set of themes, starting with recognizing, and coming to terms with, the fact that “existence comes before essence,” as Sartre famously expressed it in “Existentialism Is a Humanism.” What this means in the hands of the movement’s more atheistic thinkers (which includes Wright) is that human beings, whether taken collectively or individually, have no purpose and that human existence lacks inherent significance. The question “What is the meaning of life?” is unanswerable. Or, if it has an answer, it is “nothing.”

As agents involuntarily thrown into the world through birth, we make the meaning of our lives through deliberate and spontaneous choices. Meaning is an *act of will*, not something that we can be given or discover. This idea, or problem space, sets the stage for each existentialist writer to take the inescapable human predicament of *freedom* in a variety of directions. Typically, this leads to exploring questions about fear and loneliness, good and evil, creation and destruction, authenticity and identity, time and contingency, fate and mortality, and choice and responsibility, all themes Wright tackles in *The Outsider*.

Existentialists, aware as they are that the human predicament throws us back on ourselves as self-conscious subjects, give great attention to the subjective and emotional sides of life, sometimes in the form of

phenomenological descriptions of the immediate objects of consciousness and perception, including the images and sounds in dreams. Wright takes up this theme primarily through the lens of psychoanalysis, adding a would-be scientific angle to his existentialist perspective. This hybrid theoretical framework allows him to pursue in depth two other common themes in his writings – family life and religion. Like Freud, Wright believes that many of our psychological maladies – including our deep sense of guilt, self-hatred, and desire to be punished – have their origin in these two spheres. Moreover, Wright’s writing in *The Outsider*, like the works of many philosophers, is as much about self-clarification and self-knowledge as it is about narrative, character, and plot. Read alongside Wright’s nonfiction, the novel is not only an intriguing literary and philosophical work, but a window on its author’s own emotional life and strivings.

### Reading *The Outsider*: Racial Pitfalls

Wright came to fame by writing powerfully about racism, black life, and radical politics. Many have therefore come to think of him as primarily a black protest writer, as one who uses his art to advance a political cause or challenge negative racial stereotypes by dramatizing the plight of black folk. I doubt that this was ever an apt way to describe Wright’s literary contributions or aims (he operates in many keys, using a variety of instruments).<sup>4</sup> But it is a particularly inappropriate framework for understanding *The Outsider*, a work of philosophical fiction.<sup>5</sup>

Wright emphasizes throughout that his book is not about racial identity or racism. Cross Damon, the main character, feels himself alone in the world. His central problem is an individual one, not the “Negro problem.”<sup>6</sup> His race does not figure in his most momentous decisions: “Militating against racial consciousness in him were the general circumstances of his upbringing which had somewhat shielded him from the more barbaric forms of white racism; . . . his character had been so shaped that his decisive life struggle was a personal fight for the realization of himself” (525).

In maintaining that *The Outsider* is not principally about race relations or black identity, I am not suggesting that Wright was attempting to “transcend” race or to evade racial questions. After all, Cross is black (as are other characters in the novel) in an explicitly anti-black world where whites are in power, and his race does affect how other characters (white and black) interact with him and how the narrative unfolds. Nor do I claim that Wright was attempting to “reduce” questions of race to matters of class, as an orthodox Marxist (which Wright was not) might be tempted to do. Nor, finally, do I suppose that Wright was writing

solely for white readers (as if black people can't appreciate a literary work rich with philosophical content). Rather, my point is that Wright is reflecting upon the human condition *through* black characters, representing black individuals, even those facing oppressive conditions and violent treatment, as all-too-human embodiments of universal motifs. This approach is easily misunderstood.

In a scathing review of *The Outsider*, Lorraine Hansberry described Cross Damon as “someone you will never meet on the Southside of Chicago or in Harlem. For if he is anything at all, he is the symbol of Wright’s new philosophy – the glorification of nothingness.”<sup>7</sup> This uncharitable assessment misunderstands Wright’s purpose in exploring existentialist philosophy through fiction. Although Cross is not put forward as unique, he does not stand in for blacks in general or even for black men. Nor, as the ultimate antihero, is he a figure to celebrate or emulate. Cross is a character who, through an examination of his inner life and actions, enables Wright to pursue the philosophical questions that most interest him. If anything, his life is a cautionary tale, not a blueprint for living.

Wright was, moreover, writing in self-conscious opposition to the black literary tradition as he understood it.<sup>8</sup> He regarded no earlier black writer as a model – and, as a proletarian writer, was particularly alienated from writers of the educated black elite. He was not “pleading with white America for justice.”<sup>9</sup> Nor was he afraid to take risks. He experimented formally and transgressed narrative conventions, feeling no need to play it safe in order to vindicate (or avoid “embarrassing”) the race through his writing. It is of course true that Wright’s works (including his writings in exile) are now canonical representations of the African American tradition. Yet, at the time, he was attempting to dramatically alter black letters, widening its genres, themes, and overall scope.

### Living Underground

This approach was not a radical break from Wright’s earlier writings. It was already evident in his novella “The Man Who Lived Underground,” widely regarded as the precursor to *The Outsider*.<sup>10</sup> Fred Daniels, having been falsely accused of murder, escapes from police custody, flees to an underground passageway in the sewer system of an unnamed city, and is transformed by his experiences and choices there. He becomes a self-conscious rebel against social convention, refusing to recognize the authority of God, law, or mammon: “Maybe *anything’s* right, he mumbled. Yes, if the world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, any act a man took to satisfy himself, murder, theft, torture.”<sup>11</sup>

Wright uses the ordinary idea of guilt as criminal offense to explore a greater loss of innocence and a more profound sense of guilt, one comparable to the Christian idea of original sin, where everyone is “guilty” whether or not they have actually done anything wrong. Wright also dramatizes Daniels’ sense of dread and solipsism by placing him alone in a pitch-black underground cave, where he must face his deepest fears (including his own mortality). He loses all sense of time, and even forgets his own name and why he came to be there in the first place. Daniels’ experience underground is a confrontation with the absurd and with an acute sense of the meaninglessness of modern social life.

Daniels is also black, and “The Man Who Lived Underground” does touch on racial themes.<sup>12</sup> But their significance to the text should not be exaggerated. For instance, Wright studiously avoids mentioning the racial identity of the watchman, who commits suicide after being accused of Daniels’ crimes and tortured by the police. The watchman serves as Daniels’ doppelgänger, as does a dead baby of unspecified race who also foreshadows his demise. In fact, Wright emphasizes that the watchman, whatever his race, is treated the same way as Daniels: “Those were the same policemen who had beaten him, had made him sign that paper when he had been too tired and sick to care. Now, they were doing the same thing to the watchman.”<sup>13</sup> The police are not, in this instance, intent on pinning the murder of a white woman on a black man: “You’re free, free as air. Now go home and forget it. It was all a mistake. We caught the guy who did the Peabody job. He wasn’t colored at all. He was an Eytalian.”<sup>14</sup> When the police do ultimately kill Daniels, they do so, not only because he is black or might expose their attempts to frame him, but also, and more importantly, because they can’t fully understand his childlike declarations or frighteningly opaque motives. They also resent what he and others like him represent – a threat to the repressive mechanisms of social control that it is law enforcement’s job to uphold:

“What did you shoot him for, Lawson?”

“I had to.”

“Why?”

“You’ve got to shoot his kind. They’d wreck things.”<sup>15</sup>

Although Wright is a militant anti-racist, “The Man Who Lived Underground” is not a racial allegory, a celebration of the black world below and an indictment of the white world above. At one point while Daniels is still underground and surreptitiously observing the activities of those aboveground, the sight of black parishioners singing hymns in church gives him not comfort or pride, but an impulse to laugh, striking him as “abysmally obscene.”<sup>16</sup> He is gripped by a feeling of “nothingness” while

watching the singers “groveling and begging for something they could never get” – namely, relief from a crippling and overwhelming sense of guilt.<sup>17</sup> When Daniels ascends from his cave to tell others of his newfound enlightenment, the black churchgoers physically throw him out of the church, regarding him as “drunk” and “crazy,” even threatening to call the police.<sup>18</sup> Episodes like this, not infrequent in Wright’s writings, are attempts to demonstrate the limits of religious consciousness.

### Living without God

Though many existentialists write, in part, to advance a political cause, *The Outsider* is not agitprop or a defense of any political ideology. It is about the individual quest for meaning and freedom in a world without a god to love and guide us.

In Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the protagonist begins his journey by exchanging words with a devoutly religious man. After taking leave of him, Zarathustra says to himself, “Could it be possible! This old saint in the woods has not yet heard the news that *God is dead!*”<sup>19</sup> Similarly for Cross, a person cannot be truly modern – cannot deal honestly with the human predicament from a scientific perspective – unless he or she is willing to live without God or religious myths: “[Cross] 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. The priest was secure and walked the earth with a divine mandate, while Cross’s mere breathing was an act of audacity, a confounding wonder at the daily mystery of himself” (494).

This stance raises the pressing question of how to distinguish right from wrong. If there are no sacred commandments promulgated by a deity, then human beings have to figure out on their own how to treat one another and how to live. To be driven by mere libidinal desire or caprice is to live like an animal, which is an undignified way for a free being to move about the world. Our capacity to deliberate and choose, like our mortality, is inescapable, and so we are responsible for our actions and are appropriately judged for how we use our freedom. But on the basis of what principles can we decide how to live, and what gives these principles their authority? The character of Cross Damon is the vehicle through which Wright explores these questions: “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 with a sense of absoluteness made intolerable by knowing that this life of his was all he had and would ever have” (494).

Fear is a primitive emotional response, as basic as any human reaction to the world we inhabit. Prior to the development of science and industry, Cross contends, humans were irrationally ruled by religious myths and a belief in magic, which provided some psychological comfort in a dangerous world. As we have come to better understand our surroundings and gained some measure of control over our environment through technology, the terrifying frontier is the human mind itself, which remains opaque even – or perhaps especially – to the person whose mind it is. Our fear turns itself inward, toward the subjective dimension of life, and becomes *dread*. Claudia Tate describes the meaning of dread in the work of Kierkegaard as “not simply fear but a dynamical emotional force which both attracts and repels man’s desire for possibility, for freedom, and, ultimately, for desire itself; and, on the other, [as] the fear of possibility, of freedom, and, ultimately, of desire.”<sup>20</sup> Dread is the starting point of Cross’s journey, and the title of *The Outsider*’s first book. But its full significance cannot be grasped without examining Wright’s reliance on psychoanalytic theory, which illuminates the depth of Cross’s challenge.

### Living without Happiness

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud attempts to understand the peculiar form of melancholia characteristic of modern persons. The early “Enlightenment” worldview held that the inner workings of the human mind were largely if not entirely transparent to introspection. The mental life of the subject was believed to be largely under the agent’s control, primarily through the faculty of reason. Freud developed a dramatically different view: an image of the psyche as an obscure sphere of complex forces mostly unavailable to direct introspection. Those impulses or ideas that do come to consciousness often mislead the subject about their true nature or origins. And many of these mental forces cannot be brought under the control or direction of reason.

Freud, unlike Weber and Marx, considered the problem of discontent as a perennial and permanent feature of the human condition. Weber thought that rationalization and bureaucratic domination make it difficult for people to be happy in the modern world. Marx thought that unhappiness is the result of economic exploitation and alienation, which will be overcome by a socialist revolution. Against these views, Freud insisted that human unhappiness is not new; nor, try as we might, can we triumph over it.

If there were no regulation of social interaction, individuals would be able to advance their interests limited only by the power they possess. Freud argued that the power of the community (whether it takes the form of

informal association or the state) is said to be “right” or “legitimate” in opposition to the individual’s power, which is regarded as a mere arbitrary force with no claim to be respected. Civilization is built upon the renunciation of libidinal (primarily sexual) and aggressive instincts. This frustration of natural human drives places the individual in perpetual and irresolvable conflict with the demands of social life. The agents of civilization – elders, teachers, clergy, and legislators – must struggle to maintain control over the inherently rebellious individual. This social control is partly achieved through brute force – police and prisons. But it is also achieved (though imperfectly) through the processes of socialization that take place in families, schools, and religious institutions. We each cultivate a “conscience” to tame and police our antisocial instincts. In effect, we learn to develop a moral sensibility, through which we *restrain ourselves* from acting on our natural instincts. The price we pay for our moral development is a loss of contentment through a heightened sense of guilt.

The superego is the internalization of parental and societal authority. Before the appearance of the superego (and the loss of innocence it brings in its wake), guilt is simply anxiety about being caught by a parental figure. But after it emerges, the distinction between *doing* something wrong and *desiring* to do something wrong disappears, since nothing can be hidden from the superego – not even “evil” thoughts. The superego punishes the ego for its forbidden wishes and deeds with the sense of guilt, calling for further renunciations of instinct through the threat of a guilty conscience.

Importantly, our sense of guilt can be *unconscious*. Thus, much of the sense of guilt produced by the demands of civilization and social life may not be recognized as such by the subject. When the guilty conscience resides in the unconscious we feel a sort of general melancholia or dissatisfaction in life. Each individual must thus find his or her own way to survive the resulting and inevitable discontent.

This is the existential and psychological context – a life without God or happiness – in which we must understand Cross and his decisions. He is in lonely rebellion against authority and social demands, trying to overcome his deep sense of malaise. What makes Cross special – that is, atypical – is that socialization has only partially tamed him. He confronts the human predicament with eyes open, without the consolations of religion *or* political ideology.

### Cross as Outsider

Cross’s mother names him after the crucifixion of Jesus (391), and his sense of dread is also from her legacy (385, 489). This “baleful gift” is not a matter

of genetic inheritance but a consequence of the strict Christian ethics that shaped his conscience. Despite his mother's efforts to repress his natural instincts, Cross is bursting with forbidden desire. He fears this force within him, and the result is a deep sense of self-hatred that shapes the rest of his existence: "As he descended the stairs, his mother's scolding [in response to learning Cross had impregnated his underage mistress] intensified his mood of self-loathing, a mood that had been his longer than he could recall, a mood that had been growing deeper with the increasing complexity of the events of his life" (384).

Cross, who had been a philosophy major at the University of Chicago, is an atheist. His atheism is not merely or even mostly about nonbelief. It is deeper. It's about his unwillingness to submit to the dictates of another being, whether earthly or divine. Neither reason nor desire would allow it. As an intellectual, he is also keenly aware that "there [is] no cure for his malady" (388). He was once a prodigious reader of serious and challenging books but then stopped reading altogether. "Ideas had been his only sustained passion, but he knew that his love of them had that same sensual basis that drew him achingly to the sight of a girl's body swinging in a tight skirt along a sunny street" (419). Having abandoned his studies, he mostly gets drunk with friends and seeks casual sex.

Though he has a solid job at the post office, Cross is under severe economic constraints. Worse, he finds himself pressured to marry Dot, a girl he impregnated but does not love; if he does not, he will be charged with statutory rape. He's estranged from his wife Gladys (who refuses to grant a divorce) and has three sons whom he financially supports but rarely sees. Once Gladys discovers his situation – despite Cross's diabolical plot to conceal it from her – she demands that he sign over their house and car and take out a large loan against his future salary, to ensure that she and the children will be financially secure if he's convicted. Feeling trapped, Cross yields to Gladys's demands. These circumstances set the stage for Wright's primary concern: the psychological ramifications of deliberately choosing to live as an outsider.

Wright uses the term "outsider" in a variety of ways to refer to a diverse set of characters – blacks in general (though they are also said, by district attorney Ely Houston, to be "insiders" who are "gifted with a double vision" [500]), Gladys, Houston himself, Communists, and Eva Blount (the only woman Cross ever loves). Wright's first use of the term suggests that he means people who are stigmatized and excluded in society and who cope with their marginalization through minor acts of defiance, without stepping too far out of line or even understanding their transgressions as such (396). But the outsider that Wright is most interested in is the completely alienated

yet enlightened and self-conscious rebel: “Were there not somewhere in this world rebels with whom he [Cross] could feel at home, men who were outsiders not because they had been born black and poor, but because they had thought their way through the many veils of illusion?” (396).

Cross comes into his own as an outsider after a subway crash that leaves him largely uninjured but kills several others, including another black man of roughly Cross’s build. Mistaking him for the dead man, the authorities conclude that Cross has died in the accident. Cross has to decide whether to allow his family, friends, and coworkers to believe that he is dead, which would solve his most pressing problems but also incur a number of personal costs. He would be leaving his mother and sons behind, all of whom he loves and would miss. Nonetheless, this is the path he ultimately chooses. To demonstrate his commitment to this new life, Wright has Cross murder one of his closest friends (Joe Thomas) to avoid having his plan thwarted.

Thus Cross elects to “die” and is reborn of his own choice (he earlier considers and rejects suicide as an option). Like Jesus Christ, he perishes only to be resurrected, though not to save all humankind but only himself. He breaks all ties to his past and unburdens himself of all existing commitments and relationships. He is not bound, as most are, by tradition but is in every way free. He can fashion his life and identity however he chooses. He can even rename himself (“Lionel Lane”), which he does after moving from Chicago to New York City to begin his new life. Such self-naming might seem a trivial thing or a mere practical exigency but for Cross it is a symbolic expression of freedom. It reflects his struggle against his mother, the initial shaper of his superego. He resents her having given birth to him, raising him in accordance with an austere moral code, and naming him using Christian iconography. To choose his own name is an act of rebellion.

A fortuitous event bequeaths to him the thing he most wanted: “All of his life he had been hankering after his personal freedom, and now freedom was knocking at his door, begging him to come out” (454). The task before him is to figure out what kind of man he wants to be (“he would have to imagine this thing out, dream it out, invent it, like a writer constructing a tale” [456]), and to do so without a guide or model.<sup>21</sup>

Cross’s choice is not politically motivated but rather an attempt to find personal satisfaction in the affirmation of a truly free existence. Nor does his race figure in his deliberations: “There was no racial tone to his reactions; he was just a man, *any* man who had had an opportunity to flee and had seized upon it” (455). However, we should note the conception of freedom Cross operates with: to do whatever one likes without being encumbered by one’s past or commitments. We should also note the limits of what this freedom can deliver. While Cross is “free,” this

freedom does not erase his dread: “He was empty, face to face with a sense of dread more intense than anything he had ever felt before. He was alone. He was not only without friends, their hopes, their fears, and loves, to buoy him up, but he was a man tossed back upon himself when that self meant only a hope of hope” (471).

So what does “Lionel Lane” do with his newfound freedom? He lives as a thoroughgoing *nihilist* – an atheist who is fundamentally amoral and who, through his choices, self-consciously imposes order and normative significance on an inherently meaningless life and world.<sup>22</sup> “[Cross] passed the train’s huge, sighing, black engine and longed to become as uncaring and passively brutish as that monster of steel and steam that lived on coal” (508). Cross lies, betrays, steals, invades others’ privacy, commits adultery, covets another’s wife, and refuses to honor his mother. Mostly, he kills or indirectly causes others to die. As murder is considered the greatest wrong one can do to another human being (showing disrespect to God might be worse), an existentialist meditation on killing gives Wright a perfect opportunity to think about the rational basis for a purely secular ethics. Cross desires to act on an unrestrained libido and to be free from the surveillance and punishment of his superego. Though he does not believe in God, he chooses to become a “little god” himself, deciding by a pure act of will what is right and wrong; judging others and dispensing punishment; and treating others either as obstacles to the achievement of his aims or objects to be used to satisfy his cravings.

### Playing God

Cross throws his lot in with a group of Communists – black and white, men and women, all outsiders like him. He moves into the Greenwich Village apartment of a Communist Party Central Committee member, Gilbert (or “Gil”) Blount, and his artist wife Eva. Despite their aggressive attempts to recruit him, Cross refuses to join the party or accept its ideology. He finds Marxist theory useful for analyzing modern industrial society, but cannot accept the Communists’ failure to respect human subjectivity, privacy, and personal freedom, or the way they use people as mere means to political goals.

Gil and Eva’s landlord, Langley Herndon, is a retired real estate broker, and a fascist. He particularly hates blacks and is outraged to find that a Negro now lives in his building. (Gil hopes to turn this irrational hatred to his advantage and use Cross as bait in his fight against fascism.) Cross is ambivalent about fascism as well. Fascists recognize, if only dimly, that capitalism is a doomed economic system and that anomie threatens us all.

Yet Cross cannot tolerate the emphasis on blood, soil, God, and tradition. Nor can he abide the fascist conviction that might makes right.

Cross hates Blount and Herndon, both for who they are as people and for what they represent. So when he happens upon the two of them in a bloody fight, he spontaneously decides to beat them to death. What do these two dark figures represent? Underneath the ideologies of communism and fascism is a naked will to power. This is not about sovereign or institutional power but interpersonal power: “It was power, not just the exercise of bureaucratic control, but personal power to be wielded directly upon the lives and bodies of others” (583).

Cross’s impulse to kill Herndon and Blount is described as “imperious” (612), and it quickly dawns on him that he isn’t very different from either man: “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” (616). His condemnation of Blount and Herndon is also a self-indictment; he possesses the same impulses that he despises in others. Yet his motives remain partially opaque. To help him make sense of his choices and fully grasp why he had become a monster, he needs the mutual understanding and self-clarification that can only come through someone similar, another outsider.

Initially, district attorney Houston merely speculates as to the motives of the murderer, relying on his own instincts as an outsider: “Such a killer, if he existed, would have to, for psychological reasons, be akin to both of them, wouldn’t he? At least he’d have to *understand* them” (671; original emphasis). This murderer, neither a Communist nor a fascist, would be moved by a different philosophy of life – “that no ideas are necessary to justify his acts” (671). Houston claims that he and Cross have the same lawless impulses that drive men like Blount and Herndon, except they don’t act on them. Of course, Cross has acted on them, more than once, which Houston later discovers but cannot prove.

Cross’s vast existentialist personal library back in Chicago is the clue Houston needs to unlock Cross’s motives. He knows then that Cross is one of those who “wallowed in guilty thought” (820). Wright, relying on the Freudian idea of sublimation, suggests that these philosophical ideas are a mere rationalization for the forbidden desires of the men haunted by them. Existentialism functions analogously to Communist and fascist ideas in the lives of similar men: “For Cross had had no party, no myths, no tradition, no race, no soil, no culture, and no ideas – except perhaps the idea that ideas in themselves were, at best, dubious!” (775).

Eventually, Cross recognizes that he's a hypocrite, repudiates nihilism, and regrets his amoral choices: "He was not Lionel Lane. He was nothing, nobody . . . He had tossed his humanity to the winds, and now he wanted it back" (679). Even setting aside the murders, he has violated numerous freely made commitments – obligations to his spouse, children, friends, and lovers. He betrays them so that he can unburden himself and follow his base desires, rationalizing his treachery by calling it "freedom." In the end, Cross realizes that no one can find freedom or meaning in life alone. Each needs others, which means creating and keeping commitments.

In a final and desperate attempt at redemption, Cross confesses everything to Eva, hoping that she, as a fellow outsider, might understand, forgive, and still love him. But she is horrified and responds by committing suicide. Ultimately, the Communists figure out that Cross is a killer and hunt him down. As he lays dying in a hospital room, Houston is eager to find out why Cross chose to live this way. He learns that Cross sought freedom but went about it all wrong: "I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others . . . To make a bridge from man to man . . . Starting from scratch every time is . . . is no good. Tell them not to come down this road . . . Men hate themselves and it makes them hate others" (840).

### Meursault, Bigger, and Wright

In the autumn of 1947, Wright read Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*, which was first translated into English by Stuart Gilbert with the title "The Outsider" (later editions were titled "The Stranger"). In his journal, Wright wrote "What is of course really interesting in this book is the use of fiction to express a philosophical point of view."<sup>23</sup> Although he had already tried his hand at this genre before with "The Man Who Lived Underground," Wright was clearly influenced, and perhaps provoked, by Camus's book, and a systematic comparison of Cross with Meursault would, I think, prove illuminating.<sup>24</sup> Here I mention just a few things to enhance our appreciation of Wright's contributions to existentialist philosophical fiction.

Both Cross and Meursault commit senseless murders without giving the matter much thought and without feeling any regret. Meursault, however, does not kill from passion – neither love nor hate nor fear. He doesn't kill because of any ideals. He just does it, and without much thought for the consequences. He shoots four bullets into a man ("the Arab"), "and it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness."<sup>25</sup>

Meursault, like Cross, is highly intelligent, observant, and in rebellion against society. Though his revolt is somewhat quieter, he too feels himself free to act on his instincts rather than follow social rules. He's not interested

in politics or social justice causes. He is driven by sexual desire and other physical needs, like sleep and food. He doesn't believe in God and has no patience for religion. Even after he has been condemned to death, he refuses to turn to religion for solace. He regards his life as absurd, as having no real meaning, whether long or short, peaceful or violent. As a result, he doesn't think of his life choices as particularly momentous or in need of justification; he simply acts. Yet at the end of his life, though facing the guillotine, Meursault (unlike Cross) is actually happy, in part because society hates him and others like him, which Meursault takes perverse comfort in – "For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate."<sup>26</sup>

When Houston finally confronts Cross with his crimes, he makes the following charge: "Last night you stood there in my office and committed the greatest and last crime of all. You did not bat your eye when I told you that your mother was dead. It hurt you, yes; I could see it, but you rode it out. Boy, you had killed your mother long, long ago . . ." The accusation would be peculiar if not for the fact that Wright is here making a pretty direct reference to the character Meursault, who is ultimately convicted of murder because he reacted without grief to the death of his mother. The prosecutor accuses Meursault of "burying his mother with crime in his heart!" (96). Perhaps when Cross attributes his dread to his mother what he is really saying is that he blames her for forcing him, by giving birth to him and teaching him Christian morals, to live a life of meaninglessness and dread.

Cross can also be usefully compared to Wright's most famous literary character, Bigger Thomas. While Cross is a well-read, articulate black intellectual, Bigger has had limited formal education and struggles to convey his thoughts to others. Bigger isn't married and doesn't have children, so he has fewer commitments. But in other ways, the characters are similar. Both are, first and foremost, rebels – individuals striving for freedom and meaning in a world that cannot accept or understand them. Both suffer from deep existential loneliness and dread/fear (Book One of *Native Son* is called "Fear"). Bigger and Cross are men with tremendous pride (self-respect) and a fighting spirit. Both are extremely self-reflective, which is not to say that either understands himself entirely. Neither is inclined to accept or is motivated by a political ideology. Both develop personal relationships with Communists, but neither actually joins the party or any other political organization. Each needs another "outsider" to help him understand himself and to feel understood – defense attorney Max (for Bigger) and district attorney Houston (for Cross) – and this mutual recognition is supplied by someone white.

Perhaps most important for our purposes is Bigger and Cross's shared attitudes toward religious belief, mortality, and conventional morality. Though Bigger and Cross are both raised by a mother who is intensely religious, neither has any interest in or respect for religion. Though facing execution, and showered with his mother's pleas for him to turn to God, Bigger denies the existence of a deity, the efficacy of prayer, the reality of "souls," and the existence of life after death.<sup>27</sup> When Bigger's attorney Max asks Bigger why he didn't seek a sense of "home" in black churches, he replies, "I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it. I didn't want that kind of happiness."<sup>28</sup> Bigger embraces the outlook similar to that of a nihilist, using deception and violence to achieve his aims without regret or repentance. And he is willing to go to great lengths, including killing those he ostensibly cares about, to save himself.

Cross and Bigger are brutal murderers. Yet what is most interesting to Wright about them is not that they kill or how they kill but *why* they kill. They do it not only out of pride, desire, hatred, or fear but also to realize a primitive sense of freedom that civilization, try as it might, can never fully extinguish. To take hold of that freedom is a basic existential act beyond good and evil but also, for the sake of social life, necessarily condemned and punished, with all the psychological anguish this imposes on the actor. Understood in this way, Bigger's last words are somewhat less mysterious: "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."<sup>29</sup>

Why would Wright develop two characters who are so unsympathetic, with whom few (if any) readers can fully identify, and whom most detest? Part of the answer has to do with the philosophical and psychological questions Wright explores in these novels, as already discussed. But it is also clear that Wright, an outsider himself, *could* identify with them, at least in part. And he thought that others, if they were fully honest with themselves, could see a bit of themselves in Bigger and Cross too.

Shortly after the publication of *Native Son*, Wright delivered a lecture at Columbia University titled "How 'Bigger' Was Born," included as an essay in subsequent editions of the novel.<sup>30</sup> Wright explains that Bigger represents a personality type he became familiar with during his time in the South and in Chicago. There are, he insists, millions of "Biggers," some black, some white. Biggers are "bad," violent, and unremorseful. Their violence can be directed toward oppressors or the oppressed (consider Bigger's murder of his girlfriend Bessie or Cross's murder of Joe Thomas). Biggers take what they want without regard for whether their actions are right or

wrong. They are not afraid of conflict, not even violent confrontation, and are prepared to risk their lives to satisfy their desires. Bigger is willing, even eager, to break social rules and taboos and prepared to suffer the consequences if necessary. But they are also, Wright notes, prone to depression and mental illness. And their lives typically come to violent ends. Despite this remarkably grim characterization, Wright confesses he identifies with the Bigger type and secretly desires to act like a Bigger but is too timid to do so.<sup>31</sup>

One can hardly miss the resemblance between Cross and Wright, which can be gleaned through a comparison of *The Outsider* with *Black Boy (American Hunger)*.<sup>32</sup> These are two black former postal workers who move from Chicago to New York to start a new life. Wright too was an intellectual with a philosophical bent of mind and a strong interest in existentialism, comfortable around other black or white intellectuals. He was raised under strict Christian discipline but was never attracted to a life of faith. He regarded himself as a man of science and favored rationality, secularism, and humanism. These characteristics (especially his intellectualism and atheism) made him somewhat alienated from ordinary black folk life, and made many blacks suspicious or frightened of him. Wright was also drawn to Marxist theory, but ultimately found that he could not abide Communists' authoritarian tendencies. Many of the claims that Cross makes in his long speech to the Communist Blimin (749–764) also appear in Wright's nonfiction writings on Western modernity, industrialization, and imperialism.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Wright was himself on a quest for personal freedom, which is part of the reason he left the Communist Party and emigrated to France. "I hold human freedom as a supreme right and good for all men, my conception of freedom being the right of all men to exercise their natural and acquired powers as long as the exercise of those powers does not hinder others from doing the same."<sup>34</sup> Although Wright was deeply engaged by the human predicament identified by existentialists, his own conception of freedom reflects a fairly conventional, even liberal, moral outlook. Like Cross, Wright ultimately rejects nihilism, the will to power, and a life beyond good and evil. Yes, he wrote an existentialist novel. But it is one that is as much critique as it is celebration.<sup>35</sup>

## Notes

1. Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, in *Richard Wright: Later Works* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 367–841. Parenthetical page references in the main text are to this work.

2. See Michel Fabre, "Richard Wright, French Existentialism, and *The Outsider*," in *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982), 182–198.
3. For a discussion of Wright's relationship to existentialism that posits a sharper break with the tradition (particularly its French strains) than I suggest here, see Nina Kressner Cobb, "Richard Wright: Exile and Existentialism," *Phylon* 40, no. 4 (1979): 362–374. Cobb argues that Wright crafts *The Outsider* to contest the idea, associated with Sartre, that existence precedes essence and to make the case for a strong form of determinism.
4. See Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in *Richard Wright Reader*, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Da Capo, 1997), 36–49. Originally published in 1937.
5. In writing such fiction, Wright is not merely "quoting" his favorite philosophers or using philosophical ideas in a purely didactic way. He is exemplifying philosophical positions (others' and his own) through narrative, characters, situations, and symbols. To be sure, his protagonists do sometimes indulge in philosophical discourse (including long lectures and extended internal self-reflection). But Wright also embodies philosophical stances through his characters' choices and lives, and thereby shows the virtues and limits of these ideas in practice. For more on the difference between "philosophical quotation" and "philosophical exhibition," see Lewis White Beck, "Philosophy as Literature," in *Philosophical Style: An Anthology about the Writing and Reading of Philosophy*, ed. Berel Lang (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980), 234–255. Also see Robert Gooding-Williams, *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2001), 10–14.
6. For a contrasting view, see Floyd W. Hayes, III, "The Paradox of the Ethical Criminal in Richard Wright's Novel *The Outsider*: A Philosophical Investigation," *Black Renaissance* 13 (2013): 162–171. Also see Lewis R. Gordon, "Bigger-Cross Damon: Wright's Existential Challenge", in *Philosophical Meditations on Richard Wright*, ed. James B. Haile III (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 3–21.
7. Lorraine Hansberry, review of *The Outsider*, *Freedom* 14 (April 1953). Hansberry may have been led to this reading by the fact that the theme of nothingness, as a feature of the human condition, looms large in the existentialist tradition, particularly in the early work of Sartre, whose *Being and Nothingness* is a classic in the genre. Wright explores this theme as well, but "glorification," as I will argue, is not the best way to describe his efforts.
8. Wright was often unflattering in his appraisal of the achievements of black writers before him, particularly those of the "black bourgeoisie." Here I describe his self-conception as a writer without supposing that he represented the black literary tradition accurately or that no black writer before him had similar ambitions.
9. Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," 38.
10. See, for example, Ronald Ridenour, "'The Man Who Lived Underground': A Critique," *Phylon* 31 (1970): 54–57; and Michel Fabre, "Richard Wright: The Man Who Lived Underground," *Studies in the Novel* 3 (1971): 165–179.

11. Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," in *Eight Men* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1961), 56.
12. For a reading of "The Man Who Lived Underground" that places greater weight on the fact that Daniels is a racialized subject, see Glenda R. Carpio, "Liminal Subjects, Mixed Genre: Richard Wright and the African American Story," in *Liminality and the Short Story: Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing*, ed. Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann (New York: Routledge, 2014), 213–224. Carpio argues that, though the story is no simple racial allegory, Daniels' experiences aboveground as a persecuted and marginalized racial Other are key to the philosophical import of the novella.
13. Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," 61.
14. *Ibid.*, 74.
15. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
16. *Ibid.*, 24.
17. *Ibid.*, 26, 25.
18. *Ibid.*, 68.
19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. and ed. Adrian Del Caro, ed. Robert B. Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6.
20. Claudia Tate, "Christian Existentialism in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*," *CLA Journal* 25 (1982), 370.
21. Note that while Fred Daniels, in "The Man Who Lived Underground," writes only his name and the first line of his story ("It was a long hot day"), here Cross "writes" the whole tale.
22. This brand of nihilism resembles Nietzsche's, at least on one prominent reading of that thinker's work. See Arthur C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
23. See Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 321.
24. For a comparison that arrives at rather different conclusions than I do, see Yoshinobu Hakutani, "Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and Albert Camus's *The Stranger*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 42 (1989): 365–378. Also see Steven J. Rubin, "Richard Wright and Albert Camus: The Literature of Revolt," *International Fiction Review* 8 (1981): 12–16.
25. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage International, 1998), 59.
26. *Ibid.*, 123–124.
27. See Richard Wright, *Native Son*, in *Richard Wright: Early Works* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 724–726, 778–779.
28. *Ibid.*, 778.
29. *Ibid.*, 849.
30. Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," in *Early Works*, 851–881.
31. *Ibid.*, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 874, 855.
32. Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, in *Richard Wright: Later Works* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 1–365. *Black Boy* originally published in 1945; *American Hunger* originally published in 1977.

33. See Richard Wright, *Black Power: Three Books from Exile* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), a volume that contains the books *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), and *White Man, Listen!* (1957).
34. Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* in *Black Power*, 709.
35. For invaluable critical feedback on previous versions of this essay, I thank Glenda Carpio, Julian Lucas, and Robert Gooding-Williams.