

the pastoral impulse in richard wright

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The most important shift of population in the United States during the twentieth century has been the massive migration of Negroes from the rural South to the urban North. Fleeing racial discrimination and seeking economic opportunity, for more than fifty years Southern Negroes have been flocking to Northern cities—New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit. For black migrants from the Lower Mississippi Valley, the most alluring Mecca has been—and remains today—Chicago. A common folk expression ran, “‘We’d rather be a lamppost in Chicago than the president of Dixie!’”¹ Even before the second decade of the century the migration had started, but the first migrants were only a trickle compared to the flood which followed. Black workers poured into Chicago to meet the severe labor shortage brought about by the advent of the First World War. Whereas some 10,000 migrants had come between 1890 and 1910, 50,000 arrived in the following decade, most of them after 1914.² At only a slightly lower rate the flow continued in the twenties and thirties, accelerating again in the forties, fifties and sixties. To consider the case of the state of which Richard Wright was a native son, in 1890 only 1,363 Negroes born in Mississippi were living in Illinois, but in 1930 the number had increased to 50,851, most of them in Chicago. The exodus from Mississippi to Chicago often, as in Wright’s case, was made in stages, with Memphis and St. Louis as midway stations. In 1930 these cities had respectively 35,400 and 30,600 Negro inhabitants born in Mississippi.³

The early life of Richard Wright exemplifies this major theme in Negro social history. Born in 1908 in a sharecropper’s cabin twenty-five miles from Natchez, Wright spent his earliest years moving from one farm to another after the manner of landless black farm families. At the age of five he was taken by his family to Memphis, where the father abandoned his wife and two young sons. In the summer of 1916 Wright and his younger brother accompanied their mother to Jackson, Mississippi,

for a brief visit. During the next four years Richard moved through a dreary succession of small towns in Arkansas and Mississippi: Elaine, West Helena, Greenwood, Carters, Clarksdale. After spending five more years in Jackson, he boarded the Jim Crow car of a train to Memphis on a Saturday night in November, 1925, to make "the first lap of a journey to a land where [he] could live with a little less fear."⁴ The second lap took place two years later, when Wright moved on to the Black Belt of the South Side of Chicago, his home for the next decade.

As Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* movingly demonstrates,⁵ the adjustment of Negro migrants from the rural or small-town South to the impersonal, industrial, urban North is a difficult one at best. Economic and racial considerations aside, the change in physical and climatological environment is great. It is hardly surprising that a winter in Chicago in a poorly heated tenement induces memories of warm Gulf breezes, or that the steel, concrete and asphalt jungle evokes nostalgia for the soft, verdant contours of the Southern landscape. In a blues written by Wright in collaboration with Langston Hughes, the singer complains: "I miss that red clay, Lawd, I / Need to feel it on my shoes."⁶ This nostalgic pastoral impulse is a common theme in urban Negro folklore, and it has been given memorable literary expression by Richard Wright.

Wright never relinquished his rural heritage, not in New York, where he spent the decade from 1937 to 1946, not even in the Paris of his expatriation. In 1957, three years before his death, he bought a farm in Normandy, where he spent much of the temperate part of the year writing and raising vegetables not easily available in France. These he would give to friends in Paris, telling one of them that he was essentially a countryman. One of his favorite restaurants in Paris was LeRoy's, owned and operated by an American Negro expatriate. There Wright would take his friends to feast on such down-home cuisine as collard greens and hog maws.⁷ In certain respects Richard Wright, for all his interest in European, African and Asian affairs, remained very much a native son of the American South.

In Wright's work the pastoral motif recurs frequently, particularly in the early fiction. The word "pastoral" is here used somewhat loosely to indicate a retrospective rural nostalgia from the vantage point of the author's urban present, not to suggest that Wright consciously utilized conventions of the pastoral literary tradition. Insofar as the source of Wright's pastoral impulse is literary, it derives from Genesis, not from Theocritus. But chiefly it originates directly from personal and folk experience. In the first novel that Wright wrote, the posthumously published *Lawd Today*, the protagonist Jake and three fellow postal workers in Chicago recall Southern rural pleasures in what amounts to a kind of communal choric chant of the Negro people:

"There was some good days in the South. . . ."
"Yeah, in the summer. . . ."

“. . . when you didn’t have nothing to do but lay in the sun
 and live.”
 “I use’ to get out of the bed feeling tired, didn’t want to do
nothing!”
 “Look like the South just makes a man feel like a million-
 aire!”
 “I use’ to go swimming in the creek. . . .”
 “Fishing’s what I love! Seems like I can smell them catfish
 frying right now!”
 “And in the summer when the Magnolia trees is in blos-
 som. . . .”
 “. . . you can smell ‘em for half a mile!”
 “And them sunflowers. . . .”
 “. . . and honeysuckles.”
 “You know, we use’ to break them honeysuckles off the stem
 and suck the sweetness out of ‘em.”
 “And them plums. . . .”
 “. . . so ripe they was busting open!”
 “And sugarcane. . . .”
 “. . . and blackberries. . . .”
 “. . . juicy and sweet!”
 “And in the summer at night the sky’s so full of stars you
 think they going to fall. . . .”
 “. . . and the air soft and warm. . . .”
 “. . . smelling like water.”
 “And them long rains in the winter. . . .”
 “. . . rain sometimes for a week. . . .”
 “. . . and you set inside and roast corn and sweet potatoes!”

Corrupting this Eden, however, is the blight of racism. The passage continues:

“Boy, the South’s good. . . .”
 “. . . and bad!”
 “It’s Heaven. . . .”
 “. . . and Hell. . . .”
 “. . . all rolled into one!”⁸

This paradoxical contrast between natural bounty and human cruelty generates the tension that informs Wright’s view of the rural South.

Though the pastoral motif may be found in much of his work, non-fiction as well as fiction, Wright developed the theme most fully in “Big Boy Leaves Home” and “Long Black Song,” two short stories in the collection *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938). The first of these is a tale of truancy, murder, lynching and flight set in rural Mississippi. The theme of “Big Boy Leaves Home” is a familiar one in American literature generally and the central one of Wright’s fiction as a whole: the initiation of a youth into violence and his escape from it. Big Boy, indeed, may be considered a kind of post-pubescent black Huck Finn who must light out for the territory—ironically, in Wright’s story, the urban “territory” of Chicago—in order to achieve his freedom. But the theme develops with a special poignance in the story through the use of what might be termed an Edenic-pastoral motif.

As "Big Boy Leaves Home" opens, the title character and three friends having absented themselves from school, are enjoying an excursion in the countryside. They divert themselves with ribald songs, scuffling and high-spirited horseplay. The idyllic setting and the exuberant animal spirits of the boys combine to invest the scene with a charming natural innocence (despite, or perhaps with the aid of, their awakening sexuality, which is in any case necessary for the ensuing confrontation with a white woman). As the boys come "out of the woods into cleared pasture," they lie with "their shoulders . . . flat to the earth . . . their faces square to the sun." As they sing, they begin "pounding bare heels in the grass." Clearly they are, however briefly, enjoying a harmonious relationship with their natural environment. Deciding to go swimming in a nearby creek despite the prohibition of the irascible white owner of the property, they undress, becoming naked in this Edenic setting. As they lie on the bank after their swim, the natural description is particularly peaceful: "A black winged butterfly hovered at the water's edge. A bee droned. From somewhere came the sweet scent of honeysuckles. Dimly they could hear sparrows twittering in the woods. They rolled from side to side, letting sunshine dry their skins and warm their blood. They plucked blades of grass and chewed them." At precisely this moment a white *woman* appears suddenly on this paradisiacal scene, precipitating the immediate murder of her white fiancé and of two of the boys, the lynching a few hours later of another of the boys and Big Boy's close escape from a similar fate. Hiding from the lynch mob, Big Boy is forced to kill a rattlesnake. After it is dead, "he stomped it with his heel, grinding its head into the dirt."⁹ Contributing a certain emotional resonance to the story, then, is a pattern of incident reminiscent of Genesis: the Garden, nakedness, the woman, the snake. Into the pastoral innocence of Big Boy's world intrudes violent white racism, driving him from the the Southern garden toward the uncertain freedom of the North. A similar episode occurs in Wright's last extended fiction of Southern life, the novel *The Long Dream* (1958).

If somehow racial fraternity could be achieved in the Southern setting of natural bounty, then paradise could indeed be regained. Such is the unrealized dream of the protagonist of Wright's story "Long Black Song." Sarah is a simple young Negro farm wife living in northern Mississippi shortly after World War I. During the absence of her husband Silas on a trip to town to sell his cotton crop, she is seduced by a young white man selling phonographs during the summers to finance his college studies. When Silas returns and discovers her infidelity, he kills the white man and is himself killed by a lynch mob.

Unlike the protagonists of the other stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Sarah of "Long Black Song" does not participate directly in interracial violence. Indeed, she not only participates in interracial sexual intercourse, but she has vague notions of interracial amity in the context of

harmony in the natural order. It is this harmony, a merging of the rhythm of human life into the rhythms of the natural world, that is Sarah's ideal. Her senses have been closely attuned to natural sensations and her emotions to the pastoral environment: "Yes; there had been all her life the long hope of white bright days and the deep desire of dark black nights. . . . There had been laughter and eating and singing and the long gladness of green cornfields in summer. There had been cooking and sewing and sweeping and the deep dream of sleeping grey skies in winter. Always it had been like that and she had been happy."¹⁰ "White bright days and dark black nights"—the phrase is reiterated throughout the story to represent natural harmony and, finally, to suggest the possible racial harmony in the South yet to be attained.

One important component of Sarah's feeling for harmony with nature is her strong sexual impulse, which is not fully satisfied by her husband Silas, who is older than his wife. Her frustration began when her young lover Tom left: "The happiness of those days and nights, of those green cornfields and grey skies had started to go from her when Tom had gone to war."¹¹ Though a good provider, Silas was distinctly Sarah's second choice sexually. And even Silas had been absent for a week. Sarah, then, is an easy mark for seduction by the young white man. In this way sex, central to the feeling of natural harmony of this earth-mother figure, becomes the trigger for the extreme disharmony of racial conflict.

One of the difficulties between the races is the cultural difference between the black rural folk and the "modern," urban whites. In point of fact, most whites in Mississippi in 1919 were also rural folk, but Wright makes his white salesman a college student studying science in Chicago, antithetical indeed to Sarah as he intrudes his profit-motivated, clock-regulated values into her natural order. But even before his appearance the conflict was suggested by the symbol of the clock. Sarah's baby finds pleasure in striking an old, broken clock: "Bang! Bang! Bang!" The refrain is repeated no fewer than eleven times in the first section of the story. Negroes need no clock, for their lives are close to the pulse of the earth itself, unlike the whites, whose mechanical, rational civilization is sterile and artificial. The clock-symbol suggests this, but Wright rather laboriously makes the point explicit in a conversation between the salesman and Sarah:

"But why let her tear your clock up?"

"It ain no good."

"You could have it fixed."

"We ain got no money t be fixin no clocks."

"Havent you got a clock?"

"Naw."

"But how do you keep time?"

"We git erlong widout time."

"But how do you know when to get up in the morning?"

"We jus git up, thas all."

"But how do you know what time it is when you get up?"
"We git up wid the sun."
"And at night, how do you tell when its night?"
"It gits dark when the sun goes down."
"Havent you ever had a clock?"
She laughed and turned her face toward the silent fields.
"Mistah, we don need no clock."
"Well, this beats everything! I dont see how in the world
anybody can live without time."
"We jus don need no time, Mistah."

Later, they discuss his studies:

"What yuh gonna be?"
"*Be?* What do you mean?"
"What yuh goin t school fer?"
"Im studying science."
"Whuts tha?"
"Oh, er . . ." He looked at her. "Its about why things are
as they are."
"Why things is as they *is?*"
"Well, its something like that."
"How come yuh wanna study tha?"
"Oh, you wouldnt understand."
She sighed.
"Nah, Ah guess Ah wouldnt."¹²

Before dying himself, her militant husband Silas expresses his wish that " 'alla them white folks wuz dead! *Dead*, Ah tell yuh! Ah wish Gawd would kill em *all!*' " In contrast to this anguished, nihilistic desire for genocide is Sarah's faith in a harmony of the races in a harmonious natural order. Her utopian vision is in ironic contrast to the realities of racial violence which the story presents, but it is deeply felt and movingly stated:

Somehow, men, black men and white men, land and houses, green cornfields and grey skies, gladness and dreams, were all a part of that which made life good. Yes, somehow, they were linked, like the spokes in a spinning wagon wheel. She felt they were. She knew they were. She felt it when she breathed and knew it when she looked.¹³

This affirmative sentiment, the one hopeful note in "Long Black Song," is certainly incongruous with Wright's official allegiance to the Communist point of view, for the party line at this time was advocating black separatism and industrialization in the South. But Wright did not integrate his mind and feelings on this issue, and the conflict between the pastoral impulse and the urban realities remained unresolved and usually submerged. However strong his intellectual commitment to Marxism, the fact seems to be that emotionally Wright shared the common misgivings of so many American writers about the intrusion of the machine into the American garden. Recalling one of his childhood dwellings in West Helena, Arkansas, he writes in *Black Boy*:

In front of our flat was a huge roundhouse where locomotives were cleaned and repaired. There was an eternal hissing of steam, the deep grunting of steel engines, and the tolling of bells. Smoke obscured the vision and cinders drifted into the house into our beds, into our kitchen, into our food; and a tarlike smell was always in the air.¹⁴

Contrastingly, in *Lawd Today*, *Uncle Tom's Children*, *12 Million Black Voices*, *Black Boy* and *The Long Dream*, Wright's prose grows lyrical, sometimes floridly so, when it depicts Southern pastoral scenes and delights. Often, of course, he is merely heightening the contrast with the racial violence that occurs in these settings, but the rural attachment is real. As a Negro Communist dedicated to a more humane operation of the industrial economy, the early Wright could have little intellectual sympathy with the Southern Agrarians, who were taking their stand against industrialism and in favor of social conservatism and paternalistic racism, but he shared to some degree, especially in "Long Black Song," their emotional nostalgia for the pastoral tranquilities of rural life.

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footnotes

1. Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York, 1941), 88. Earlier, in his first novel, Wright had given a slightly different version: "'*Lawd, I'd ruther be a lamppost in Chicago than the President of Mississippi. . .*'" *Lawd Today* (New York, 1963), 154.

2. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York and Evanston, 1962), I, 53, 58. See also Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago and London, 1967), especially Chap. 7.

3. Paul Breck Foreman, *Mississippi Population Trends* (Nashville, 1939), 113, 117, 120. It should be pointed out that the white emigration from Mississippi has also been great. The difference is directional. As Foreman shows (106-117), the black characteristically goes due north—to Chicago; the white goes due west—to Texas.

4. Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York, 1945), 181.

5. For expressions of the pastoral impulse in this work, see 32-34, 41, 46, 92, 135.

6. "Red Clay Blues," *New Masses*, XXXII (August 1, 1939), 14.

7. Information obtained in an interview with O. Rudolph Aggrey, May 10, 1965. See also Ollie Harrington, "The Last Days of Richard Wright," *Ebony*, XVI (February, 1961), 85, and Herbert Hill, Horace Cayton, Arna Bontemps and Saunders Redding, "Reflections on Richard Wright: A Symposium on an Exiled Native Son," *Anger, and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States*, ed. Herbert Hill (New York, 1966), 201. Henry F. Winslow has said, "Wright was rural and first focused on the rural realities. . . ." Letter to Kenneth Kinnamon, December 12, 1964.

8. *Lawd Today*, 155.

9. *Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas* (New York, 1938), 3, 5, 6, 20-21, 49. Cf. Genesis 3:15: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." Biblical allusions are common in Wright's works.

10. *Ibid.*, 175. Cf. Reverend Taylor's similar feelings in "Fire and Cloud," *Uncle Tom's Children*, 224-227.

11. *Ibid.*, 175.

12. *Ibid.*, 178, 183.

13. *Ibid.*, 213.

14. *Black Boy*, 52.