THE NATIVE'S NIGHTMARES AS ENABLING DISCOURSE IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

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Abstract

Several scholars have drawn attention to the existence, in Native Son, of more than one discourse. However, such critics have focused mainly on Richard Wright's use of heteroglossia in the novel as evidenced by the different voices of Bigger Thomas, Max and the third person narrator, the state attorney's arguments in the court room, and the rhetoric of the press. Yet Wright's striving "to make words disappear" leaving us conscious only of our response to his art, suggests that his language operates not only at the linguistic but also at the paralinguistic level. In this paper, I explore Wright's use of nightmare as a technique for creating a field of discourse that is enabling for Bigger in his quest for self definition. I argue that the nightmares that begin each of the three sections of the novel constitute a "private" field of discourse for Bigger, separate from the "objectifying" discourse of the establishment that occupies most of the narrative, and that these "internal" and "external" discourses also contextualise Bigger's perception of himself as subject or object.

> "*Native Son* is a work of assault rather than withdrawal; the author yields himself in part to a vision of nightmare" (Irving Howe: "Black Boys and Native Sons").

1. Introduction

In this paper I explore Richard Wright's use of nightmare as a technique for creating a field of discourse in *Native Son* that is enabling for the hero, Bigger Thomas in his quest for self definition. Each of the three sections of the book opens with a nightmare of some sort that not only jolts Bigger into reality but also catapults him into action. "Nightmare"

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is used here both in its narrow sense of a bad dream and in its broader sense of a haunting fear or a harrowing experience. In this context Bigger's desperate battle with the rat in the Thomas family's tiny apartment, as well as his bad dreams about bloody human heads after he accidentally kills the white girl, Mary Dalton, for instance, constitute nightmares. "Discourse" is used to refer to the way in which the use of a linguistic or quasi-linguistic system in a particular domain (such as a dream or vision) helps to constitute the objects to which it refers. I argue that Wright is creating a "private" field of discourse for Bigger, separate from the "objectifying" discourse of the establishment that occupies most of the novel, that it is not only private but also internal because it signals to Bigger in a special way and he interprets its signs in a way that no one else is able to do. Only in this "other" discourse does Bigger seem able to initiate the definition of self that he seeks in the narrative. These "internal" and "external" discourses, I contend, also contextualize his perception of himself as subject and object.

2. Discourse and Subjectivity: Nightmare as Enabling Discourse

The existence, in *Native Son*, of more than one discourse, has been noted by other scholars, notably R.B.V. Larsen (1972), Charles De Arman (1978), Wimal Dissanayake (1986), James A. Miller (1986) and Craig Werner (1990). Except for De Arman and Werner, these critics have focused mainly on Wright's use of heteroglossia in the novel as evidenced by the different voices of Bigger, Max and the third person narrator, the state attorney's arguments in the court room, and the rhetoric of the press. Larsen says of the newspaper accounts that "Wright is sardonically using the news accounts and Buckley's courtroom summation as nothing less than the "official" voice of society, its condensed, collective view of the whole situation" (107). This official voice, according to Dissanayake, sees Bigger only in subhuman terms, and by representing it as he does Wright is calling on blacks, represented by Bigger, "to scrutinize and reject those aspects of their culture and personality which conform to the terms defined by the regnant discourse and thereby pave the way for the assertion of their own identity" (484). Contesting Larsen's assertion that Bigger is inarticulate and therefore incapable of speaking for himself, Miller argues that Bigger recovers his voice at a crucial moment in the

concluding scene of the novel, while Werner draws attention to the hero's communicative competence in the call-and-response tradition of the African American community, which Bigger demonstrates when he "plays white" with his friend Gus.

Werner's argument is a particularly interesting one, as he places *Native Son* somewhere at the crossroads of modernism and Afro-American blues. The novel, according to him, shares the hallmarks of modernism such as alienation and fragmentation and the search of the protagonist/artist for a language or means to express himself (119). In addition, Werner argues that Wright was aware that the Negro voice was far removed from the American mainstream, hence his construction of a façade (i.e., in the form of African American blues) to convey the plight of Bigger; a kind of "signifying" in both its Afro-American and deconstructive senses (121). For him, Bigger shares the Afro-American blues singer's alienation from both the white world and the black community. While this idea of a façade is an attractive one and ties in with my argument in this paper, however, Bigger's lonely journey for meaning seems at variance with the communal nature of African American blues as expounded by Amiri Baraka, whom Werner cites as his main authority on the blues. Baraka explains that blues, like Negro work songs and spirituals, contain an inherent African call-and-response mechanism, with response being the community's answering witness to the caller's alienation. But although Bigger's cry of pain is real it does not attract a communal response, and Werner himself remarks, justly, I think, that the agony that *Native Son* emits still awaits an answer.

In the opening scene of the novel the Thomas family wakes up to their first nightmare in their encounter with the rat. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright recounts his own "nightmare" with the rat and explains his use of the scene:

Then, one night, in desperation. . .I sneaked out and got a bottle. With the help of it, I began to remember many things which I could not remember before. One of them was that Chicago was overrun with rats.. . .At first I rejected the idea of Bigger battling a rat in his room; I was afraid that the rat would "hog" the scene. But the rat would not leave me; he presented himself in many attractive guises. So,

cautioning myself to allow the rat scene to disclose only Bigger, his family, their little room, and their relationships, I let the rat walk in, and he did his stuff (460).

As his writer's imagination of the scene is stimulated by "a bottle," so will Bigger's manliness, submerged in the squalor of the Thomas's one room kitchenette, emerge in his battle with the rat. For prior to the rat nightmare Bigger had only been involved in petty crimes against his fellow blacks, actions that caused him no fear because they were unlikely to attract the attention of the police. And when he backs out of the Plum robbery that he had earlier agreed to undertake with his friends he does so in order to conceal his fear of getting into trouble with the whites. In the rat scene, however, while the rest of the family is "paralyzed by terror," Bigger renounces his fear of the rat and is "galvanized" into action (Giblin Brazinsky, 1984:107), and it is the rat whose "belly pulsed with fear" (5). (In one play based on the novel, Mr. Dalton is identified with the rat: "we calls 'em Old Man Dalton" [Giblin Brazinsky, p.108]). The point here is that in the rat scene Bigger is the subject, not the object.

In a similar manner, Bigger is propelled by a terror of nightmarish proportions into the accidental murder of Mary when the "white blur" of Mrs Dalton appears in her daughter's doorway:

> He turned and a hysterical terror seized him, *as though he were falling from a great height in a dream*. A white blur was standing by the door, *ghostlike*. It filled his eyes and gripped his body (emphasis added, 85).

The atmosphere of dreams and ghosts conjured up in this quotation are in keeping with the general nightmare world that Bigger inhabits in the novel. Terrified by Mrs. Dalton's "ghost" and particularly by the prospect of her finding him with her daughter, he does not notice Mary give up the ghost under the pressure of his hand as he tries to muffle her voice with a pillow. And with the departure of the "white blur," Bigger "felt that he had been in the grip of a *weird spell* and was now free" (emphasis added, 87). We note that this "freedom" from Mrs. Dalton's "spell" comes to Bigger at the cost of Mary's life. This, I suggest, is

what Bigger means when, in the final section of the novel, he tells the communist lawyer Max, "What I killed for, I am" (428). The real Bigger has always eluded the Daltons, and now under Mrs Dalton's spell, Mary is not real to him either, and he thus suffocates her without much thought and burn up her dismembered body in a manner symptomatic of a somnambulist. Even his assessment of the implications of the murder is couched in language that evokes an atmosphere of fantasy and dream:

> The reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place. She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman (87).

3. Contesting the Dominant Discourse

As Edward Kearns observes, in the scene in which Bigger murders Mary Dalton Wright blurs the point of view (one of several techniques he employs to undermine the dominant discourse in the novel) so that it is not clear whether we are being shown Bigger's perspective or that of the third person narrator. By so doing, the writer is able "to present his scene in concrete detail while at the same time producing an atmosphere of fantasy and dream" (1971:150). This atmosphere of fantasy and dream is probably what Irving Howe refers to as Wright's "vision of nightmare," and it is appropriate to the writer's purpose in the sense that the only way for Bigger to achieve self-definition is by contesting the white world's fantasy of the Negro through an engagement with the world of fantasy. In other words, just as Bigger, after the murder of Mary, outwits the whites "by acting as the whites expect him to act, that is by becoming his own stereotype" (Kearns, 1971:147), so does he, in order to pierce the veil of illusion and symbolic existence imposed on him by the white world and its objectifying discourse, confront that fantasy on its own purloined ground, that is, by entering into the world of fantasy. That the nightmare technique creates an enabling discourse for Bigger is evidenced by the fact that words and images are carefully chosen to clinch the height of Bigger's terror at crucial moments in the story when he strikes out against the regnant voice of society and the illusions and

stereotypes that it feeds on.

In this regard, Bigger perceives the "white blur" (Mrs. Dalton) cited above as the blur of the white world that has always clouded his vision of himself as a discrete individual, and which he must, to use his own words, "blot out" (23). Mary meant nothing to him, except as a symbol of whiteness: "Mary had served to set off his emotions, emotions conditioned by many Marys. And now that he had killed Mary he felt a lessening of tension in his muscles; he had shed an invisible burden he had long carried" (114). Further evidence to support this point is to be found, as Keams points out, in Bigger's keeping the 'reality' of his actions as impersonal as possible during the murder:

> From the moment he removes his pocket knife to the moment he leaves the scene, the name "Mary" appears only once and the pronoun "her" not at all. He must, for his own sake, keep the "reality" of his actions impersonal that is, as indifferently abstract as possible (1971:150).

Having been reduced by the "white blur" to an abstracted and unreal personal existence, Bigger is now predisposed to reduce that blur to an abstraction. This demonstration of impersonality towards the white world is another significant step towards renouncing the fear of that world that had dominated his life (the first step being his encounter with the rat discussed above). By the time Bigger experiences his next nightmare, which comes after his murder of Mary Dalton, he is ready to renounce all his fear:

> The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared...His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time; it added a certain confidence which his gun and knife did not (105).

The murder itself was "like a nightmare... He felt that he had been dreaming of something like this for a long time, and then, suddenly, it

was true" (89). The fact is that he has been living through the fear of doing "something like this," as he tells us in the scene where he "plays white" with Gus:

"Every time I think of 'em, I feel 'em," Bigger said.

"Yeah; and in your chest and throat, too," Gus said.

"It's like fire."

"And sometimes you can't hardly breathe...."

Bigger's eyes were wide and placid, gazing into space.

"That's when I feel something awful's going to happen to me...." Bigger paused, narrowed his eyes. "Naw, it ain't like something going to happen to me. It's.. .It's like I was going to do something I can't help...." (22). The 'something' that Bigger is frightened of is what he terms "blotting out" the white people who generate his objectification. It would seem that from the beginning this nightmare (and several others) has been part of what Wright calls Bigger's "elusive core of being, that individual data consciousness which in every man and woman is like no other" (qtd in Butler, 1992:685). Through this data consciousness, some form of communication seems to have taken place between Wright and his protagonist that no other person is privy to until after the writer's purpose has been served, that is, after the nightmare has come true (and has thus ceased to be a nightmare). This nightmare, like others in the narrative, is a "sign" (in the deconstructive sense) which Bigger alone recognizes and interprets through his individual data consciousness.

It is perhaps an unconscious desire to safeguard this "data consciousness" in his head from interference by the "other" that accounts for his going for the head of his victim each time he kills (the rat, Mary, Bessie)—heads which come back to haunt him (165-6). It may also account for his "seeing" heads where there are none. For instance, he perceives the houses of the black ghetto as great heads rising up towards him, and when with Bessie he sees "a snow covered building whose many windows gaped blackly, like the eye sockets of

empty skulls" (167). The "data" in his "consciousness" includes his authentic identity, which is always "under erasure" by the "other's" fantasy of the Negro that is making a claim for authenticity: "In the very look of (Mr. Dalton's) eyes Bigger saw his own personality reflected in narrow, restricted terms" (131). (We are reminded here of Ralph Ellison's invisible man's statement that "You often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds.") Bigger's struggle to rid himself of the image of Mary's bloody head is also an effort to "blot out" the "white blur" that has been cast on his black identity:

> There was only one thing that worried him; he had to get that lingering image of Mary's bloody head lying on those newspapers from before his eyes. If that were done, then he would be all right (113).

Dissanayake mentions that in the Hindu tradition it is said that in order to realize one's true identity one has to pierce the veil of illusion that obstructs one's vision (1986: 485), and identity, vision and visibility are linked in this context. The "fantasy" of the Negro is in the white, blurry, even bloody head, which must be gotten rid of in order to break the illusory veil of Negro identity. Breaking skulls and severing heads, even those of rats, is symbolic of trying to step out of the cage into which Bigger has been forced. Little wonder, then, that after he kills Mary, he is relieved that "the ice was broken" (106).

4. Emerging From the Illusory Shell of Dominant Discourse

The nature of Bigger's emergence out of the objectifying dominant discourse and its illusory shell has been a topic of much debate. Some critics have argued that the narrator's voice is synonymous with Bigger's and that it is the closest to a liberating discourse that Bigger gets. Larsen, for instance, asserts that "the third person narrator... refuses to go beyond the projective range of Bigger's consciousness and hence is committed to close identification with Bigger (1972: 105). Clearly, the third person narrator is more politically informed than Bigger himself is, a fact that raises doubts about their being synonymous. Besides, as Miller rightly notes above, the last scene of the novel is dominated by the voice of Bigger, his narrator having

receded into the background (1986: 505). Dissanayake makes the claim that *Native Son* "sought to challenge the dominant and encompassing cultural discourse, thereby underlining the need for the establishment of newer power relations in society" (1986: 483), but contends that;

> in terms of conscious literary art, [Wright] fails to dislodge the existing discourse [because he would have] had to produce rhetorical and grammatical tropes which would serve to dislodge privileged subjects, objects, events and forms of behavior and attitudes to life. He could do that only by deploying a figural language that was wholly antipathetic to the existing discourse which circumscribed power. This, it is quite evident, Wright was unable to accomplish" (1986: 485).

This point is challenged by Dennis Baron, who points out that in the novel the author introduces his own point of view, as distinct from that of the narrator. (We may recall Kearns' point about the writer's subversion of point of view cited above.) Baron argues that Wright does this through stylistic devices such as recurrent imagery or narrative syntax (1976: 27-8). And there is certainly no shortage of recurrent imagery in the text, for as Dissanayake' s reading of the novel reveals, the central image of blindness and seeing reinforces "the point that a deeper understanding which transcends blind stereotypes is needed if there is to be a harmonious and mutually satisfying relationship between blacks and whites," and "Bigger Thomas's crimes, committed in blind fury and fear, give him, in a sense, a vision which helps him to perceive his true self in relation to society" (1986: 484-5). Ironically, although Dissanayake' s discussion of Wright's use of imagery illuminates Bigger's emergence from the illusions on which the regnant discourse of the society's institutions operates, he does not consider such imagery a part of "conscious literary art," and for him Wright (and, by implication, Bigger) has failed to dislodge the dominant discourse. In Werner's view, however, based on Langston Hughes' description of blues as laughing to keep from crying, Bigger's "wry bitter smile" at the end of the novel, as well as other ironic laughs Bigger has with his friends, constitute

"signifying" in the blues vein.

While Wright may not have succeeded in dislodging the authoritative discourse in Dissanayake's terms, that is, by subverting it, Bigger does "shake this discourse to its foundations" (Miller, 1986:505) and break out of it as he triggers off the ideological debate between the state attorney Buckley and Max which seeks to define his existence while he chooses a position that places him decisively outside of the existing social framework by remaining detached from the debate. Ironically, while this debate rages on about Bigger as a symbolic Negro, his main concern is with his private self, his personal fate, and with the blindness of white society regarding who the "real" Bigger is. For when he tells Max, "What I killed for I am" (428), he is articulating his understanding of the relationship between who he is and what he has done, affirming himself but denying the senseless crime that society has made of his life. But Max's blind retreat as he "groped for his hat like a blind man" (428) shows that he is incapable of understanding Bigger the discrete individual.

When this reaction by Max is considered, his court speech, regarded by Larsen as the "contextual appraisal of the incomprehensible brutality and breathless suspense earlier in the novel" (1972:109), cannot pass for the humane liberating discourse for Bigger that Larsen makes it out to be. For while it is true that Max interrogates Bigger as a human being rather than as the symbol of Negro-ness that Britten the district attorney and others perceive him to be, Max refuses to see the discrete individual that is Bigger. For instance, his image of Bigger as the oppressed Negro forms a wedge between him and the new entity that Bigger has become. Thus Miller is right in saying that Bigger and Max "are on different wavelengths" (1986:107). For like the white authorities who fail to read the sign of Bigger's humanity, and thus fail to read what Doyle Walls calls "one of the most blatant linguistic clues" (1985:128) to the solution of the murder of Mary (i.e., the use of "say" in Bigger's "Do what this letter say"), Max also fails to perceive beyond his abstract symbolical illusions to the concrete reality of Bigger the unique individual.

What all this means is that for Bigger to define himself he must break out of these illusory discourses, an act which, I suggest, he achieves

through the medium of his nightmares and the resultant bashing and severing of heads, brutal as the latter series of actions may seem in the "real" world. The views put forward by Baron and Kearns, that it is possible for the author to 'insert himself' into the text by, among other things, introducing his point of view (as distinct from that of the narrator) into the novel, lend credence to my argument that there is a discourse, a form of communication between Bigger and his writer in which the narrator does not always partake. The nightmare technique, I contend, serves as the medium through which this "private" discourse is played out. Every nightmare that Bigger experiences in the narrative seems to work on his imagination, or his data consciousness, if you will, to elicit from him a self-defining act. As Werner notes above, and as Wright himself confirms in the following comment about his writing of Black Boy, the Negro voice has receded so far into the American mainstream that for the Negro writer the words he uses are not as important as the *response* generated by them:

> If I could fasten the mind of the reader upon words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response, I felt that I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative. I strove to master words, to make them disappear.

Thus very often for Wright the signified takes precedence over the signifier, and in this regard the nightmare technique is appropriate because it serves to focus attention on Bigger's response to stimuli (i.e., nightmares). According to Jerry Ward, Wright's writing is concerned with the "control of language and how language is made to mean, and that control is *paralinguistic*" (emphasis added, 1986:524). What Wright shares with Bigger Thomas transcends words, has to transcend words, for Bigger to gain a voice that cannot be drowned out by the American mainstream. In narrating his murder of Mary to Max, Bigger says: "I knew what I was doing all right, but I couldn't help it. That's what I mean. *It was like another man* (Wright?) *stepped inside of my skin and started acting for me....*" (italics mine, 352). The decisive action of the murder is thus visualized as emerging from a dual identity, which he apparently shares with his writer. It is not mere coincidence that in "How 'Bigger' Was Born" Wright discloses his "stepping in [the story] and speaking outright on [his] own" (458).

The close affinity between writer and protagonist makes possible the relay of information from one data consciousness to the other.

The final pages of the novel belong to the new Bigger who has emerged from his battle with the white world of fantasy transformed from symbolic Negro into discrete entity. Having thus cracked open the shell (or skull) of illusion, Bigger now defies any definition by an "other": "when I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am..." (429). Having renounced fear and flight, he forms a conception of fate which will enable him to die believing in himself: "Aw, I reckon I believe in myself.. I aint got nothing else.. .I got to die..." (428). He even manages a gesture of comradeship towards Jan, Mary's white communist boyfriend, by dropping the "Mister" before Jan's name. And finally when in court Max constructs his sentimental image of the American people proceeding to their doom like sleepwalkers, Bigger is wide awake, his nightmare over.

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