

Book reviews

Hank Malone

a review of

Richard Wright, a biography by Constance Webb. G.P. Putnam's Sons, NYC, 442 pages \$8.95.

William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond, edited by John Henrik Clarke. Beacon Press, Boston, hardbound \$4.95, paperback: \$1.95

Whenever a better-than-third-rate book enters the midst of all the recent jet-propelled "publishing about Black" it must seemingly SCREAM! to be heard above all the confusing Noise of Publicity. Constance Webb's gigantic biography of Richard Wright (author of *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, [1] and originator of the phrase, Black Power) does not, unfortunately, scream, and so it will probably drown in libraries (at \$8.95 a copy) before it has had a chance to swim in public dialogue.

Perhaps it is just as well, for on the whole, it is a badly-flawed book, lacking an explicit comprehension of this very great writer. Though Miss Webb has obviously done her homework, recreating countless details of his life with energy and clarity, she has handled too much of the project like a Hollywood scenario, leaping arbitrarily from one chatty-and-gossipy scene to another. The book utterly lacks the insight into character I regard essential to good biography. In its present form, it is a biographical memoir of chronological anecdotes dangling loosely in Mr. Wright's spirit. Most significant, is her failure to clarify that Wright is a seminal author of gigantic proportions, as important as Thoreau and Melville in plumbing the dilemmas of the American spirit.

The greatest and most misleading temptation here is to look (in such a timely "Black biography") for a "key" to his life, a key accessible to others. Wright's origins are the Black masses. He was born and raised on a southern American plantation and moved later in his youth to the ghettos of Chicago, where he and his family received welfare aid.

Closer inspection of the details of Mr. Wright's early life (not nearly of sufficient interest to his biographer) reveals that he was not simply "another Brother on the streets" who had decided to become a great writer, to join the Communist Party, and ultimately to cut himself off from his painful roots in Black America by taking a white wife and moving to Paris to live among the existentialists.

Despite the preoccupation the Black intellectual and the Black bourgeoisie have for the overall consequences of racism, they still retain (very significantly) that ace-up-the-sleeve of the American middle classes: namely, the power and ability to greatly minimize (usually by forming) separate sub cultures) the most existential pathologies of racism.

On the other hand, it is virtually inconceivable that the Black masses could extricate themselves (victimized as they are by an institutionalized racism that fails to provide for the very literal foundation of escape and self-realization) from this fabric of total deprivation that appears to demand nothing short of revolution to set back its devastation.

I will draw this conclusion: Richard Wright survives at this moment in our history insofar as his largely empathetic identification with the Black masses lives on in the embodiment of triumphs like Bigger Thomas in *Native*

Son. Mr. Wright has clearly created, single-handedly, a genre for Black heroes in American literature, confronting the existential Violence of American life.

Yet, Wright's personal life was, in fact, a considerable distance away from the life of Bigger Thomas; they are different psychological types, one obsessed with the other. As an artist, Wright was a member of that supra-nether-world inhabited by human beings who seem to be, through miracles of circumstance, relieved of many of the fundamental burdens of caste and class.

Such social and emotional mobility never is—and never was—that simple, despite his biographer's careless attitude toward such a startling personal evolution.

In a very crucial sense, Richard Wright was far better and differently equipped than “the Brother on the street”. And like all “Examples” of personal success among the Black masses, his life must be regarded as irrelevant to the recent Black struggle which seeks “to remain in America” and to revolutionize those massive economic and political dynamics which directly brutalize an entire class of Black people.

In different words: racism effects the Black bourgeoisie and Black intellectual (Wright) in far less disadvantageous ways than it does the Black masses. The important effects of American political, economic, and social level ultimately has little to do with other aspects of racism that bar Black people from country clubs and corporation management.

This first biography confirms my notion that it must be as an artist, rather than as a totally-committed prophet, that Wright's relationship to the political, economic, and social world of the Black masses must be evaluated. It would seem that the function of an artist is ultimately truncated by the miracle of his being significantly set apart as an artist. As such the best he can probably do for others, besides creating a literary fountainhead, is to remain (like Richard Wright) apart, retaining in his work his loving and revolutionary genius for the people he understands most passionately: the people of his origins.

William Styron's recent novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, has provoked an appropriately outraged attack from ten well-known Black writers, including Lerone Bennett Jr., Alvin Poussaint, and John Killens.

Though *The Confessions* (of William Styron) has turned out to be the most forgettable “unforgettable novel” of the year, the response of these writers is in itself a valuable document insofar as it brings together compelling arguments against the pathologically-distorted attitudes of “white liberals” toward the American Black man.

It is extremely significant, for instance, that Styron in this “historical meditation” has found it, contrary to all historical evidence, necessary in his “imagination” to degrade and emasculate his fictional characterization of Nat Turner. Styron, a southerner who some regard as one of America's best writers, has found it necessary to mollify the effects of American slavery, and like Daniel Moynihan (his counterpart in Establishment Sociology) accounts for the revolutionary ardor of Black people by labeling it with demeaning “psychological” explanations. In the novel, for instance, a large part of Turner's revolutionary ambition is portrayed as an angry and uncontrollable outburst of sexual frustration. He is a revolutionary, in short, because he can't “make” white chicks. Again, “whitey-liberal” has found it necessary to psychologize the suffering of his victims.

There is no arguing against this book, not really. It is eminently insightful, and reveals perhaps more than ever before the gigantic “moral blindness” of liberals toward Black people, a blindness so important because it tells much about Negro experience during slavery but because of the manner in which it demonstrates the persistence of white southern myths, racial stereotypes, and literary cliches even in the best intentioned and most enlightened minds.

A book like Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (and its rise to the best seller list) shows us how very far the liberal Establishment has to go. And the response of these Black writers is as good a map toward enlightenment as any around.

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