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Deep Marxism: Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and the Making of a Postwar Aesthetic

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The text contains its own gloss.¹

Return of the Native Son?

In January 1955, less than two years after its American debut, the French translation of *The Outsider* was published. Translated as *Le Transfuge* (literally, *The Defector*) by the French Cubist painter Guy de Montlaur, the edition was prefaced by a new introduction written by Wright. Unexpected by a readership inured to the third-person foreword, the introduction's opening, which forewent clarity for strangely calibrated sentences, did little to mediate its unconventional presence. Rather than offer readers pragmatic guidance on how to approach his long-anticipated second novel, Wright wrote at odd angles about its production.² Clear that *The Outsider* was "the first" of his "literary efforts projected out of a heart with no ideological burdens," Wright offered no positive terms to indicate what that freedom signified. In sentences where proper nouns are offered — such as the one in which Wright affirmed the novel as evidence of his "search for a new attitude to replace Marxism" — the rhematic emphasis on "search" nullified thematic expectations associated with the many faces of "Marxism" in circulation during the Cold War. By Wright's rhetorical calculation, Marxism was no longer the proper name for an ideology, theory of political economy, or philosophy of dialectical and/or historical materialism, but a degenerated affective state that resulted, one was left to presume, from the vagaries of contemporary political appropriations. Leaving the reader at the threshold of interpretation, Wright exits the subject of Marxism and ideology to conclude with a perfunctory acknowledgment of his "much improved" writing conditions in Paris. Though it is not without illocutionary force, Wright's introduction was compromised by a lopsided semantics of contradiction in which meaning never ran downstream.

No stranger to “the Henry James style–Preface,” Wright’s introduction to *The Outsider* signaled a radical departure from his previous explanatory style.³ Whereas his prior efforts, which included the famous corrective “How Bigger Was Born” (1940) and the photo text *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), published a year later as an additional though lesser-known supplement to *Native Son*, were designed to eliminate confusion about the social and political value of his work, his most recent iteration seemed to court the inverse reaction. What could such a strategy mean for an author once so desperate to lift the “sociological fog” that obscured his critical message?⁴

While such indeterminacy has the potential to confirm the most troubling aspects of Wright’s postwar reputation — as an author suspended between cultures, political platforms, and philosophic schools — his elusive rhetoric was both strategic and instructive. Far from wishing to alienate the reader, Wright’s introduction functions as a primer to the critical form of *The Outsider*, which dialectically examines the limits of orthodox Marxism (or, Marx without Hegel) and Idealist ontology (or, Hegel without Marx) in the context of the twentieth century’s most pernicious ideological advent, that of totalitarianism.

As a political concept, totalitarianism evolved from a particular name for Mussolini’s doctrine of Italian fascism as “a new political style — everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state” to an appellation associated with nationalist socialism throughout Europe to, finally, the Cold War formulation that expanded the term to include Communist regimes.⁵ While Wright was working on *The Outsider*, the term was repurposed by major political theorists on the peripheries of the Left, including Hannah Arendt and J.L. Talmon in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952) respectively. Wright was in possession of both books, and although it is impossible to say with real precision the extent to which he engaged with either, his novel offers a critique of the theoretical foundations of both. Whereas Arendt’s staggering work of political philosophy insisted on the specific character of modern despotism in the twinned forms of Nazism and Stalinism, on “totalitarianism, not merely dictatorship,” Talmon’s *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* saw the possibility for totalitarian practices to flourish in ostensibly free democracies, where nominally free citizens are stripped of any real power despite possessing highly coveted civil rights. If this form of governance, which Talmon identified as “totalitarian democracy,” appears to resonate with the Marxian indictment of liberalism, Talmon’s dread and invalidation of revolution disabuses us of the connection. Wright’s theorization of totalitarianism in *The Outsider* encompasses the flawed polarized logic in both. For Wright, totalitarianism was not a degeneration of Western democracy, but a symptom of it.

In order to show how, why, and to what end Wright examined (and exposed) the inner link between the ideological positions of demotic Marxism and Idealist ontology in the context of Cold War totalitarianism, the critique offered in *The Outsider* must be situated in the context of his evolving political and theoretical relationship to

Marxism. Although *The Outsider* constitutes a radical shift in form, Wright's impulse to thwart appropriative logic in the context of his personal relationship to Marxist thought is prefigured by and is an extension of an earlier rupture: his break, in both style and method, from the principles of proletarian literature in his formal and conceptual overhaul of *Native Son's* final scene.⁶ Anxious that his ending, which had "Bigger going smack to the electric chair," too closely resembled the narrative logic of *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), Wright turned to heterodox Marxist rhetorician Kenneth Burke, from whom he appropriated the idea of a poetic Marx.⁷ Wright took seriously Burke's recommendation that committed writers discard propagandistic mandates for a more gestural ethic, and implemented Burke's proposal in his ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful "poetic revision" of the novel's final scene. While Wright's revised conclusion had helped him to actualize his pledge to produce a story that left readers "without the consolation of tears," his attempt to forge a dramatic method informed by Marx, but external to Party-sanctioned forms of schematization, fell short.⁸ The totalizing effect of Wright's final scene was not enough to undo the narrative's causal logic, which advanced a base-superstructure model of social understanding. Communism, rather than Marxism, emerged as the novel's watchword.

Although Wright had intended for his appropriation of Burke's Marxian "poetics of action" to reflect the structural nuance of his own position between Marxisms, this critical distinction was lost on his readers. Wright's response to widespread critical misprision was twofold. Publicly, he directed his anger toward the liberal press. Exercising little self-control, Wright blasted liberal journalists, focusing the majority of his vitriol on David L. Cohn, whose negative review of *Native Son*, "The Negro Novel: Richard Wright," confused the novel's representation of violence with advocacy. Privately, Wright blamed himself. His segmented approach to Marxism, evidenced by his attempt to "weave" Marxism into his novel via seven "poetic motifs," had done little to distinguish it from other forms of social protest.⁹ Wright's characteristic sensitivity to reviews was thus compounded by the emergence of an inconvenient truth: his attempt to approximate Marxist critique in narrative form was weakened not only by the interpretive constraints of his readership, but by serious restrictions in his own understanding of Marx's thought. Wright's experience with Burke, whom he had trusted for his apparent sensitivity to race, and ultimately turned to for his heterodox interpretation of Marx, had clearly led him astray. At odds with both the Party and America's first Marxist, Wright began to shift his focus away from Marxist appropriations in both literature and politics to the principal texts of Marx's thought.¹⁰

An Outsider Emerges

To claim that Richard Wright became a Marxist in the midst of his fallout with the Communist Party is paradoxical, but for the self-styled artist and intellectual the

paradox stands. In 1940, Wright began to assemble a Marxist library that exceeded his prior, Party-based focus on revolutionary strategy (Lenin) and the role of minorities in the revolution (Stalin).¹¹ Aware that the truth in Marx's thought lay in its method, Wright embarked on a six-year study of dialectics, in which he swapped Marxism's "mass leaders" — William Z. Foster's joint appellation for Lenin and Stalin — for Marx and Hegel. Wright's first acquisition was *Capital*, Volume I (1867), which he purchased in New York just before he left for Cuernavaca, Mexico that April. In the subsequent months and years before his move to France, Wright acquired volumes II and III of *Capital* (posthumously published in 1885 and 1894, respectively), Marx's and Engels' *The Civil War in the United States* (1861), and *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), and Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1910) and *Science of Logic* (1929). In addition to these primary texts, Wright obtained two supplementary aids for his reading of Hegel, William Wallace's *Prolegomena to the Study of Hegel's Philosophy and Especially of His Logic* (1894) and *The Logic of Hegel* (1892). Significantly, Wright did not trade the Scottish philosopher's explanations of Hegel for Alexandre Kojève's. Though the latter was the unqualified spearhead of the postwar Hegel revival on the Continent, leaving an indelible imprint on French intellectual culture in which Wright was soon to be immersed, his admiration for Stalin who had, according to Kojève, replaced Napoleon as the "culmination of the end of history" had, for Wright, trumped his philosophical dexterity.¹²

As was the case for his reading of *Permanence and Change*, non-fictional documentation of Wright's impressions of the above texts is limited. Outside of a humorous story recorded in his 1946 essay "How Jim Crow Feels," in which Wright is stopped by a Mexican guard who finds a copy of *Capital* in his luggage and assumes he is a Communist, specific details on this period (1940-46) in Wright's Marxist evolution are sparse, obscured by more dramatic biographical aspects and events including his separation from the Party in 1942, official break in 1944, and move to France in 1946. Although these events affirmed nothing more than Wright's autonomy from oppressive ideological institutions (i.e., the State and the Party), the combination of his political remove and distance from existing communities of dissident Marxists subjected Wright to a new and higher degree of cultural and political suspicion. It did not matter that Wright's isolation was self-selected, nor that his decision to maintain independence from groups mired in a similar theoretical quandary, including two famous (and separate) clusters that included his friends Ralph Ellison and the West Indian Trotskyist C.L.R. James, was one of self-preservation and intellectual integrity. What did matter was that Wright's independence seemed to take him further from those forms of oppression (i.e., the "Negro-hating South," American bourgeois society, and the CPUSA) that had not only marked his work but "stealed his talent."¹³ Phrased as an expression of concern, Constance Webb, more than likely speaking on behalf of her husband at the time, C.L.R. James, perhaps said it best when she expressed concern that Wright would "lose himself" in France among the existentialists, who

“blamed the individual for the problems of society.”

Preliminary unease with Wright’s move(s) proved prophetic when *The Outsider* was finally published in the United States on March 16, 1953. White ex-Communists praised the novel for its political remove and considered it Wright’s perfectly timed exit from the race-based sociological novel and entry into the cosmopolitan novel of ideas, going so far as to cast it as a melodramatic cognate to Whittaker Chambers’s book *Witness* (1952).¹⁴ Those closer to Wright’s actual politics, including Communist playwright Lorraine Hansberry, the militant novelist and critic Lloyd Brown, and Left critic J. Saunders Redding eviscerated Wright for his generic and political departure.¹⁵ For Margaret Walker, Wright’s movement through Jung, Husserl, and Heidegger impedes his search to go beyond the “simple and immediate” to the “universal and profound.”¹⁶ Yet the cruelest, and consequently the most culturally deft review came not from an expected antagonist, but from longtime friend to Wright, distinguished writer and critic Arna Bontemps. Cutting to the quick, Bontemps leveled the novel’s political, formal, and philosophical tensions to pronounce the book as the prurient product of Wright’s “roll in the hay with the existentialism of Sartre.”¹⁷

Though few critics before and after were as pointedly crass in their characterization of the novel’s relationship to French thought, Bontemps’ trumped-up critique of Wright’s philosophical foray was prolonged by decades of critical confusion on the precise relationship of *The Outsider* to Continental philosophy. While critics no longer reduce the novel’s philosophical topoi to a simple (and sycophantic) relation between Wright and the postwar French intellectuals with whom he was associated, the process of identifying in order to assess Wright’s philosophical (and consequently, political) investments via *The Outsider*’s philosophical references remains compulsory, as if the novel’s intrinsic meaning and value as an historical artifact of the Cold War hinges on a lost allusion to one, or several, Continental philosophers referenced in the novel among Cross Damon’s reading. While this process has produced several brilliant essays that successfully disprove Wright’s intellectual acquiescence to Sartre, the critical disruption is only temporary — Sartre is deposed only to be replaced by another, this time German figure linked to both Wright’s postwar intellectual interests and Damon’s philosophical library.¹⁸ No longer Sartrean, Wright is assigned Damon’s philosophical stance and becomes Nietzschean (Thompson), Husserlian (Gilroy), and Heideggerian (Atteberry and JanMohamed). Marx, who is not listed in the novel among Damon’s reading and is, on all but one occasion, only mentioned in the context of Communist appropriations, is accordingly eliminated from critical consideration — emerging only to confirm that the novel’s residual representations of Marx serve as evidence of the “scar left by Wright’s years as a communist.”¹⁹

Without contesting the relevance of philosophical themes to *The Outsider*, I insist that the novel’s relationship to philosophy, and specifically the form of its representation, cannot be understood outside the impress of Wright’s Marxist education. Though frequently overshadowed by *The Outsider*’s twinned critique of

Stalinism and Fascism — two evils symbolically killed off in the novel’s representation of the “double totalitarian murder” of Communist Gil Blount and Fascist Langley Herndon—Wright’s narrative offers a full-scale critique of totalitarian thought anticipating Slavoj Žižek rather than Hannah Arendt.²⁰ For Wright, as for Žižek, totalitarianism was not the name of a diabolical political entity or coupling of diabolical political entities, but a metonym for unnameable, shape-shifting networks of power in which we are unendingly bound.²¹ Philosophy, frequently viewed from within its ranks as a discourse external to State-sponsored regimes of power, was for Wright (as for Marx) a part of this network.²² Social critique was necessarily immanent — that is, issued from within the contradictions of existing social relations; the notion of issuing a critique from outside the system was the realm of ideology. Though he does not, in *The Outsider*, go so far as to equate philosophy with oppressive political regimes, he does demonstrate — through his dramatization of Damon’s uncritical embrace of reified philosophical concepts, including Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, Nietzsche’s nihilism, and Kierkegaard’s critique of atheism or faithlessness — the extent to which philosophers act, mostly unconsciously, as functionaries of the State.

Early Days in France: Negotiating Hegel and Marx

When Wright began work on *The Outsider* in 1946, he was not yet versed in phenomenology, nor was he especially well read in French existentialism. He had, however, expressed interest in writing a novel that pursued a philosophical problem, that of consciousness, and was eager to advance his project on modern alienation in an intellectual culture that neither shrank from nor sentimentalized his independence from extant political or social groups.²³ Wright describes this independence in his essay “I Choose Exile” (1950):

France is, above all, a land of refuge. Even when there is a shortage of food, Frenchmen will share their crusts of bread with strangers. Yet, nowhere do you see so much gaiety as in Paris, nowhere can you hear so much spirited talk. Each contemporary event is tasted, chewed, digested. There is no first-rate French novelist specializing in creating unreal, romantic historical novels! The present is to be understood and they find it exciting enough. “The problems of philosophy,” says Jean-Paul Sartre, “are to be found in the streets.” I have encountered among the French no social snobbery. The more individualistic a man is, the more acceptable he is. The spirit of the mob, whether intellectual, racial, or moral, is the very opposite of the spirit of French life. SOIT RAISONNABLE (be reasonable) is their motto.²⁴

Although Wright had not yet secured the novel’s narrative structure, his newfound freedom from knee-jerk ideological judgment provided him with the necessary space

to move between opposed philosophic modes, idealism and materialism, in search of a critical (rather than strictly political) position that embraced the individual even in its recognition of the individual as a socially constituted subject.

While the French intellectual embrace of Wright functioned as a key form of intellectual support and confidence to an embattled intellectual, his concept for the novel came not from French philosophy, but from by an unresolved tension in his reading of Marx and Hegel. A committed materialist who rejected as illusory the idealist notion of “pure thought,” and the understanding of consciousness as “an entity in possession of its own truth,” Wright remained critical of Marxism’s categorical rejection of consciousness as immaterial.²⁵ For Wright, inquiry into the sundered consciousness was not a decadent, epiphenomenal concern fated to intensify social atomization, but a procedure necessary to any radical disruption of the existing social order. The elaboration of a revolutionary alternative to advanced capitalism required a reevaluation of the individual outside the determinist concept of “human potential,” which maintained an interest in the capacities of man only insofar as those capacities were among those that benefited the collective.

Without challenging Marx’s definition of consciousness as a material concept that described an individual’s relation to his environment, Wright wished to expand the conceptual terrain of environmental degradation beyond its naturalist trappings. According to Wright, human wretchedness was insufficiently represented by rote descriptions of class warfare, which tended to overemphasize the visible conditions of catastrophic social phenomena (including poverty and racism) at the cost of the particular conditions of forms of ideological servitude. A 1948 letter to Dorothy Norman provides a record of Wright’s frustration with such positivist currents in Marxist thought:

The Right and Left, in different ways, have decided that man is a kind of animal whose needs can be met by making more and more articles for him to consume. If man is to be contained in that definition and if it is not to be challenged, then that is what will prevail; and a world will be built in which everybody will get enough to eat and full stomachs will be equated with contentment and freedom, and those who will say that they are not happy under such a regime will be guilty of treason. How sad that is. We are all accomplices in this crime.... Is it too late to say something to halt it, modify it?²⁶

Wright found an answer, albeit a provisional and ultimately disappointing one, later that year in the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (henceforth, RDR), an anti-Stalinist organization led by former French Trotskyist David Rousset that pledged to “give new life to the principles of liberty and human dignity by linking them to the struggle for social revolution.”²⁷ Though Wright was long disenchanted with what he

referred to as “politics proper,” the 1948 Soviet blockade of Berlin, which carried the threat of a Third World War, softened his position.²⁸ As additional encouragement, nearly everyone in Wright’s immediate social circle backed the organization.²⁹

Wright’s public support of the RDR lasted approximately eleven months. Though he did not have an official position, his role in the organization approximated that of a cultural attaché. Wright educated the philosophical Left on the particular difficulties that African American dissidents experienced at home and abroad on at least three occasions, the first delivered at the RDR’s inaugural conference, “The Internationalism of the Mind,” held at the Sorbonne. Though there was much buzz around Wright’s involvement, his tenure as the organization’s African American ambassador was brief, ending when Rousset compromised the RDR’s position of non-alignment, of “neither Washington nor Moscow,” by lessening his previously unqualified condemnation of Western capitalism. Though Rousset never established clear ties to the U.S., his political stock dipped, and the organization disbanded within the year.

The dissolution of the RDR had unexpected consequences for Wright. Though habituated to political disappointment, Wright was unprepared for the sudden upsurge of political militancy among friends previously committed to positions of Left non-alignment. Albert Camus, whom Wright had admired for his strident independence in political and artistic pursuits, aligned himself more closely with staunch anti-Communists including Arthur Koestler, who by then had financial and ideological ties to the CIA. Sartre was even more disappointing. Unlike Camus, Sartre saw the RDR’s political openness as its chief weakness. Voluntarism would not, according to Sartre, foster a revolutionary movement but would, as evidenced by the RDR’s political precariousness, promote instability. Calling instead for definitive action supported by a stable political structure, Sartre began to voice support for the organizational principles of bolshevism. Though he remained ambivalent about the role of Stalin in the revolution — he opposed forced labor camps but unequivocally supported the Soviet invasion of Hungary — Sartre moved closer to *Parti communiste français* (henceforth PCF), an organization with notoriously “backward prejudices” on race that had personally attacked Wright two years prior.³⁰

Despite clear points of animus, there was never an official break between the two. Save for one occasion in 1953 when Wright characterized as “stupid” Sartre’s claim that “one could work with the Party while still criticizing it” in a *New York Times* article Wright remained mostly loyal to Sartre well after the latter’s full-blown Communist conversion.³¹ Wright publicly sided with Sartre over French intellectuals with whom he had much more in common, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who had entered into full, public battle with Sartre over his uncritical “ultrabolshevism.”³² Continued sympathy for his friend notwithstanding, Wright emerged from the ordeal newly hardened against the French philosophical Left, and began to critically reexamine his place within it. Wright noted that although he thrived socially and intellectually in France, his critical capacities had languished under what he described as the

“curated freedom” of the French.³³ On one hand, he had witnessed an unparalleled and almost “mythical sense of intellectual freedom” among the French, who were not only undeterred by the persistent antagonism between the mind and materialism, but made the contradiction of consciousness and environment central to existentialist humanism.³⁴ On the other, Wright remained suspicious of the ease with which French intellectuals transformed social struggles into episodic causes célèbres. Aspects of Sartre that Wright had initially found appealing, such as his “voluntary identification of the French experience” under occupation with the colonized people of the Africa, were now cast in a different light. Though he never went so far as to characterize Sartre’s position as co-optive, as he had with the Party, he increasingly came to see Sartre’s position as both privileged and illusory. In place of open enmity grew the seeds of critique.

Philosophy as a Discourse of Domination

Despite his increasing disillusionment with the micropolitics of postwar French intellectual culture, Wright was not yet prepared to reject in toto the transformative potential of ontological inquiry. Though he had moved beyond the existential humanism of Sartre, the allure of the phenomenological approach to modern philosophical questions, especially the problem of individual freedom in an imposed reality, persisted. Reminded, once again, that cultural proficiency did not constitute metacritical understanding, Wright redoubled his efforts and turned to the father of twentieth-century phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, for guidance.

Wright located his investigation of Husserlian phenomenology in Husserl’s *Ideas towards a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (1913), the third installment in Husserl’s lifelong project to redeem philosophy as a science through the development of an unprejudiced description of the essential structures of subjective experience. Though Husserl’s philosophy was then considered the intellectual terrain of professional philosophers in whom Wright had little faith (including the French philosophical Left and Husserl’s most famous pupil, Martin Heidegger, who by 1949 was publicly judged a *Mitläufer*), *Ideas* was an expansive text at the cusp of process philosophy and social psychology, two areas of inquiry in which Wright had an abiding interest. Beyond Husserl’s potential contribution to already-existing intellectual interests, Wright considered the philosopher’s emphasis on the possibility for subjective experience, unfettered by the necessity of a collective synthesis, a welcome reprieve from the humanist worldview of the French Left which seemed to tolerate difference, including racial difference, as a *provisional* stage in the process of universalization.

Wright’s immersion in Husserl was intense but short lived. If Wright thought that he was, in Husserl’s *Ideas*, undertaking a more focused version of Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* (1911), which he had read with great interest the year before, what he found was a long and frustrating exercise in speculative futility. Objectives and

concepts that initially captivated Wright, including Husserl's representation of the transcendental ego as an experiential domain, his promise to deliver a full, scientific account of consciousness on all of its "cognitive, volitional, affective levels," and the possibility for the "mediating philosopher" to temporarily bracket imposed reality to experience weightlessness and astonishment (phenomenological reduction), were undone by Husserl's historical relativism and utter lack of concern for the materiality of the body.³⁵ Husserl's claim that the "mediating philosopher" could stand apart from existing social and historical conditions was the epitome of ideology. Only ideologists, to paraphrase Marx from *The German Ideology*, could claim to stand beside their own class, and to produce ideas that existed beyond social practices. While other dissident Marxists also interested in the possibility for Husserl's method to elaborate on the under-theorized notion of the utopic in Marx remained comfortable linking the phenomenological reduction or *epoche* to utopia in the context of a "purely mental experiment," such as Paul Ricoeur, Wright could not abide a theory of perception that refused to take into consideration the concrete dynamics and logics of actually existing conditions of oppression, including the monumental and *structural* problem of racism, to experience the world anew.³⁶ No thing-in-itself, the body under racism did not translate into a "bodymind" that could be returned to its "primordial givenness."³⁷ No matter how disciplined in his study of Husserl's theories of the phenomenological and eidetic reductions, Wright's body was not something he could theorize away.

Disappointed as he must have been, Wright's renewed sense of alienation had a silver lining — it was the final push he needed to secure the narrative structure of *The Outsider*. Though the title was still in flux, Wright determined that the novel would be a "darkly drawn character study," that used philosophy to track the lived experience of a black man struggling with modern forms of alienation. Husserl would figure largely in this dramatization, underpinning the novel's major acts of "creative destruction" including Damon's death hoax and selective amnesia, in Wright's very thinly veiled assault on reduction proper. Finalizing the particulars of his novel with renewed exigency, Wright harnessed the pain, anger, and frustration from his philosophical isolation, combined it with existing political frustration with polarized Cold War politics, and channeled it into a nearly eight-hundred-page treatise against totalitarian thought.

The Novel

Divided into five alliteratively titled books drawn from Kierkegaardian categories, "Dread," "Dream," "Descent," "Despair," and "Decision," *The Outsider* tells the story of Cross Damon, an erstwhile philosophy student at the University of Chicago, now employed as a postal worker on Chicago's South Side. The novel opens with Damon entering his local bar, The Salty Dog, where he drinks, excessively enough to be reprimanded by his friends, to forget his life. Damon is married with children, but

has an underage mistress who claims that she is pregnant. Saddled with debt, two young boys, a critical wife, and a drinking problem, Damon faces the possibility of having his affair double his troubles. Despairing, Damon takes to the streets, where fate intervenes in the form of a fatal 'L' train accident. After crushing the skull of the accident's only other survivor (on whom Damon plants his identification), Damon flees to New York and assumes a new identity. Damon's social death — an undeclared reference to, and critique of, Husserl's call for the temporary destruction of given reality in order to reemerge in the world unencumbered — and rebirth as Lionel Lane sets the stage for the remaining three books of the novel, in which Wright dramatizes the tragic consequences of Damon's flight from reality.

Before the novel is given over to the more fantastic aspects of Wright's eccentric premise, it introduces the reader to its interpretive coordinates — Marxism, Idealist ontology, and the misreading of both — and its dialectical structure through a protracted opening scene designed to frame Damon's eventual flight from reality as the final stage of a Hegelian odyssey long in the making. Although Wright was warned against opening with a scene that his editor, John Fischer, insisted was "superfluous" to the novel's dramatic action, Wright fought for its inclusion.³⁸ Wright knew — both from his experience with misreadings of *Native Son* and his awareness of U.S. intellectual culture — that if he did not foreground the novel's critical underpinnings they would be lost in the novel's steady stream of melodrama. Crucial to apprehending the novel's negative form, Wright uses this frame to dramatize the "cataclysmic danger and criminal ruthlessness" as Marx writes, that results from the adoption of transhistorical consciousness.³⁹

Following several paragraphs in which Wright locates the reader in the novel's alternative temporality — he describes a group of huddled black men "sloshing" down the dark streets of Chicago on a particularly frigid February toward their local bar before dawn — Wright immediately shifts the narrative focus from the collective suffering of men working the midnight shift to Damon's particularized reading habits and thought experiments. Wright's move from environmental concerns — his naturalistic description of the elemental brutality of Chicago's harsh winters, the misery of working life, and the annihilation of the body — to the vatic montage of remembered events from Damon's learned past forecasts the storm that is to come: the constructed violence of the protagonist's consciousness.

Although the present-tense experiment dramatized in the novel — the possibility for life after social death — is one ostensibly gifted to Damon by an 'L' train accident, it is prefigured in the novel by two elaborate thought-experiments that introduce the connection between Damon's philosophical charlantry and his mercenary logic. In the first of these episodes, Damon's friends recall a moment from several years back where their friend, who is standing on the eleventh floor of the Post Office, tosses coins out his window to unsuspecting passersby:

Early in the evening, when the rush hour was on, he used to — we were working on the 11th floor then — lift up the window, run his hand in his pocket and toss out every cent of silver he had. Just throw it all out of the window to the street. And then he'd lean out and watch the commotion of all them little antlike folks down there going wild, scrambling and scratching and clawing after them few pieces of money and then, when the money was all gone, they'd stand looking up to the window of the 11th floor with their mouths hanging open like fishes out of water. And Cross'd be laughing to beat all hell. And Cross'd say that them folks was praying when their faces were turned up like that, waiting for more money to fall. Haha.⁴⁰

While the men recall this comical reprieve in an otherwise monotonous workday with fond nostalgia, their mirth is disrupted by Damon's refusal to join in on the laughter. No longer "laughing to beat all hell," Damon's real-time expression is marked by "detachment."⁴¹ Disappointed but unsurprised by Damon's willful remove, the men, who had summoned up the scene in an attempt to remind their depressed friend of better times, re-signify the memory in accordance with Damon's intellectual vanity. Aware on some level that Damon's former immersion in "big deep books" had given rise to his "crazy stunts," the ensuing conversation establishes the novel's first formal connection between Damon's cruel experiments and his reading practices.⁴²

Although all are ignorant of Damon's former life as a student — Wright does not provide readers with the specific titles in Damon's library until Book Five (where readers learn, through the compulsive detective work of District Attorney Ely Houston, that Damon possessed texts by Jaspers, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Hegel) — each contributes to a conversation that introduces the reader to Damon's bibliomania. Beginning with pure physical description in which the men recall the ever-present "batch under his arm" and the mass of "big and little books" in the "clothes closet, bathroom, and under the bed" of his cramped apartment, the conversation moves on to the psychology behind Damon's stockpile.⁴³ Two men in the group, who go by the nicknames "Pink" and "Booker," offer insight into their friend's reading practices, which they describe as "frenetic":

But what I couldn't understand was why Cross wouldn't believe anything in the books he read. One time he was all hepped-up over one writer and the next time he was through with 'im and onto another.⁴⁴

Before Damon is given a chance to respond to the above observation, his antagonistic friend Joe (whom he kills a few scenes later) follows the observation with two questions. The first, in which he asks Damon "how come [he] don't read no more," is met with deflection.⁴⁵ Damon, obviously dismayed by a question that so patently

calls forth his present despondence, responds defensively that “books are a thing of the past” since given up along with so many other “childish things.”⁴⁶ Approaching Damon with a similar question but from a different angle, Joe asks, “how come [he] was reading all them books?” Damon’s comparatively “quiet” response, that he “was looking for something” offers something much truer.⁴⁷

Embedded in Damon’s answer that he “was looking for something” is the crux of Wright’s introductory provocation (in his Preface to the French edition of *The Outsider*) with which this essay opened. Like Damon, Wright studied Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger, and published essays on Karl Jaspers’ philosophy, specifically his anti-totalitarian tract *The Origin and Goal of History* (1953).⁴⁸ Yet despite the terminological and textual connections linking Wright’s “searching” (“for an attitude to replace Marxism”) with Damon’s “looking” (for a single failsafe solution to his web of problems), theirs remain discrete and conflicting intellectual journeys. Similarities in content are disrupted by an absolute severance in method. Damon’s scattered, non-systematic reading, evidenced by his wanton embrace and disposal of philosophers based on their superficial application in a given moment — an approach that Fredric Jameson characterizes in a different context as the endless, solipsistic “pursuit of the existential traveler” — exists as a deliberate point of contrast to Wright’s scrupulous study of an interpretive process designed to help the subject understand how things work.⁴⁹ In contrast to Damon’s philosophical cherry picking, Wright neither “used” nor “applied” the fruits of his intellectual labor to any particular advantage, and censured those who did, including the much-beloved Black Marxist Kwame Nkrumah, at personal and political cost. Rather, his study of Marx provided him with the critical acumen and theoretical structure necessary to recast the specific conditions of his experience — including visible forms of oppression (racism, racist capitalism) to the more abstract “blind zones” of alienation that he experienced among the French Left — in an historical dialectic that paired seemingly isolated parts in a single, tyrannical system.⁵⁰

The methodological disconnect between Wright and Damon is further supported by Damon’s consistent misrepresentation of Karl Marx. In an otherwise vast Marxist repertoire, Damon doesn’t read Marx. For Damon, Marx is a figure of antiquity, one consigned to museums:

Imagine the British, past masters of exploitation and duplicity, allowing a Karl Marx into their British Museum to pore over and unravel the pretensions and self-deceptions of British banditry. Such records of blatant chicanery served thoughtful and astute men as guides in the building of new, scientific and more efficient methods of deception!⁵¹

Damon’s unimaginative, and worse, unhistorical, approach to Marx as a “monument of the past” underpins his failure to recognize the present-day import of Marx’s

revolutionary theory beyond its Communist appropriations.⁵² This particular aspect of Damon's misapprehension of Marx is supported on three other occasions in the novel in which he conflates Karl Marx with the major figures associated with Russian Bolshevism and the bureaucratic regime of the Cominform. It is "Karl Marx" who strips men of their humor, and transforms them into Bolshevik automatons.⁵³

The Outsider's distinction between Marx and Marxism — and between reading and (in)citing Marx — is conceptually supported by the paradoxical thesis proposed by Étienne Balibar in *The Philosophy of Marx* (1995). When Balibar declares: "there is no Marxist philosophy and never will be, and yet Marx [remains] more important for philosophy than ever before," he troubles the "strict connection" between the philosophical and political system attributed to Marx and the form and content of Marx's work, which gains its critical edge by its very externality to either genre or system of thought.⁵⁴ *The Outsider* advances a similar proposal. Without abjuring Marx, Wright offers a twinned critique of philosophy without Marx (Cross Damon), and of orthodox Marxism without philosophy (the Communist Party).

Wright reserves the novel's only mention of a Marx unattached to Communist bureaucracy for Sarah Hunter, a non-aligned Black Marxist who urges her husband Bob, a Caribbean man who has been censured by the Party for organizing outside the specific directives of the Party, to leave the rank-and-file life and to "read Marx and organize" on his own.⁵⁵ Sarah reminds Bob that she will continue to support their family even after the Party has cut off his stipend, but he refuses to break rank, reciting a gunfire of rehearsed logical fallacies, including Lenin's loyalty to Party dogma — "A good Bolshevik obeys. Lenin obeyed, didn't he? Molotov obeys" — in order to buoy up support for his continued subordination.⁵⁶ Sarah, however, refuses to yield and expresses her unedited disgust with her husband's position, characterizing his passive loyalty to the Party as the weak-willed race trading of an Uncle Tom. After she has issued a final insult against his masculinity, asking him if she has married a "Marxist or a mouse," he finally accepts defeat and agrees to continue to organize beyond the scope of Party orders. Bob's refusal earns him the support and admiration of his wife and Damon, but the consequences of standing his ground (and deliberately disobeying the Party's demands that he stop organizing black workers) cost him his life. We learn secondhand that the Communist Party has double-dealt with the Office of Immigration and informed on Bob's illegal residency. As a result, Bob is deported back to Trinidad, a nation also embroiled in Cold War geopolitics, where his death is imminent.

Through the comparatively minor story of Sarah and Bob Hunter, Wright offers a utopic point of contrast to the novel's surfeit of well-worn ideological positions, including its representation of the Communist Party's plethora of ethico-political sins, the Fascist racism of Langley Herndon, and the intellectual sophistry and socio-political vacuity of Damon and District Attorney Ely Houston. Although Sarah Hunter's political integrity results in tragedy, her non-aligned Marxism is the novel's

closest approximation to Wright's own political position. Sarah's didactic speeches to her husband regarding the necessity of an unmediated approach to Marx's thought and the devolution of the Communist Party's commitment to racial equity carry the weight of Wright's own voice.⁵⁷ Significantly, what distinguishes Wright from Sarah Hunter is the extent to which the latter has thrown off the yoke of subjugation.

This final point brings us to our concluding question: if Wright's position is clearly beyond Damon's, if his understanding of the revolutionary import of Marx's thought is more closely aligned with the Hunters (and particularly Sarah Hunter), why the overwhelming focus on a subject position he clearly finds reprehensible? The answer to this question is twofold. First, Wright used books to work through ideas, not only those that he found "life-furthering" but those "harmful to man," those it was necessary to "fight" and "seek to destroy."⁵⁸ These ideas were never abstract in the sense that they were separate from lived experience. In both his literary and non-fictional work, Wright maintained a relentless focus on actually existing forms of political and psychological destruction. In *Native Son*, Wright worked through his tendentious relationship to Communism and a rudimentary form of cultural nationalism (Bigger's final conversion) linked to Stalin's Black Belt emendation through a pointed rejection of white paternalism via Bigger's murder of Mary and his dismissal of his Communist attorney Boris Max. Although aspects of the novel were misread — particularly its critical objective — the subjects of Wright's critique were relatively transparent. In *The Outsider*, the social allegory is less accessible, especially to a reader unattuned to Wright's highly individuated Marxist program. Known adversaries including the Communist Party and proponents of Fascism are present in the novel, but they make up only part of Wright's critique. Much more significant to Wright is Damon's failure to understand the contemporaneity of Marx, and specifically the sustained revolutionary potential of Marx outside the appropriation of his thought as an organizational doctrine for the Communist movement.

Second, *The Outsider* is a novel intent on proving the necessity of its own destruction. Unlike *Native Son*, which left room for the production of a liberal counternarrative in which Bigger transcends his present conditions of poverty and ignorance through educational and economic reform, *The Outsider* eliminates such provisions from consideration. Having abandoned, after *Native Son*, the "conception of the black hero proper," Wright created in Damon an allegorical figure representative of the self-destructive capacity of capitalist logic itself.⁵⁹ Damon self-destructs not because he lacks intellectual, social, and economic support, but because he has transformed these material sources of comfort and security into abstract concepts in which he sees no real value. In contrast to Bigger Thomas, Cross Damon not only has had access to education, but has attended a prestigious, private university and has a personal library filled with heady philosophical tomes. Though he makes bad financial decisions that involve gambling and excessive drinking, he has a steady income, a family, a lover, and friends. While some readers of influence have come to identify Damon's intellectual

prowess and cunning with the so-called fascist legacy of Marcus Garvey (Thompson), a more apt association might be with the philosopher Louis Althusser, whose strict rebuke of humanism takes on a murderous cast in Damon.⁶⁰

In Damon, Wright fulfills his promise to never again create a consummate figure for bourgeois mourning, yet he stops short of producing precisely the “preachment of hate” he so vigorously denied in his defense of the ethical import of *Native Son*.⁶¹ Damon’s actions reflect Marxism’s degeneration into a lethargic political philosophy animated by ideologists so cut off from grassroots activism that it ceased to be humanist in any meaningful sense of the term, but the novel ends on a redemptive note. Damon’s final words are not those of a criminal giving confession, but of a broken man indicting the desiccated intellectual culture of which he is a part:

“The search can’t be done alone,” he let his voice issue from a dry throat in which he felt death lurking. “Never alone....Alone a man is nothing.... Man is a promise that he must never break.”⁶²

Notes

1. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).
2. All quotes attributed to Wright's introduction are from his original untranslated draft in the Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
3. See Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2001) 198.
4. This language comes from a letter that Wright's friend, the African-American attorney Ulysses Keys, wrote to him regarding the public response in Chicago to *Native Son*. The letter is quoted in Rowley, *Richard Wright* 198.
5. See Benito Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism" in *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions* (Rome: Ardita, 1935).
6. For specifics on Wright's Marxist revision of *Native Son*, see Konstantina Karageorgos, "Richard Wright's Poetic Marxism," *Lineages of the Literary Left* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, forthcoming).
7. Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Row, 1993) 435.
8. Wright, "How Bigger Was Born" 433.
9. Quotation marks are used as shorthand to recall Wright's language for revision. "Poetic Motifs to Be Woven into Final Scene," Box 43, F. 606, Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
10. For a thorough account of the early days of Wright's shift from Communism to Marxism, see Karageorgos, "Poetic Marxism."
11. Specific titles in his pre-1940 library included Andrei Zhdanov's *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writer's Congress* by A. Zhdanov, Maxim Gorky (pseud), N. Bukharin, K. Radek, A. Stetsky (1934); Vladimir Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (1917), *State and Revolution: Marxist Teaching about the Theory of the State and Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution* (1917), *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1903), and *Women in Society* (1913); Joseph Stalin's *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question: A Collection of Articles and Speeches* (1934). Texts and dates in Wright's library were scrupulously recorded by Michel Fabre in *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* (Oxford: U Mississippi P, 1990).
12. Though it may seem a minor point, Wright's selection of Wallace over Hegel runs counter to Paul Gilroy's characterization of Wright's postwar understanding of Hegel as "Kojévian." Paul Gilroy, "'Without the Consolation of Tears': Richard Wright, France, and the Ambivalence of Community," *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 184.
13. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1993) 163.
14. Granville Hicks, "The Portrait of a Man Searching: Richard Wright's New Novel of Violence Probes the Struggle to Understand Life," *New York Times Book Review* (22 Mar. 1953): 1.
15. Hansberry and Brown accused Wright of perpetuating the oppressive political and cultural policies maintained by Cold War regimes of power. See Lorraine Hansberry, "Untitled Review," *Freedom* 14 (April 1953): 7, and Lloyd Brown's "Outside and Low," *Masses and Mainstream* 6 (May 1953): 62-64.
16. Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright: Daemoniac Genius* (New York: Harper, 2000) 319.
17. Arna Bontemps, Review of *The Outsider* by Richard Wright *Saturday Review* (28 March 1953): 15-16.
18. See Jeffrey Atteberry, "Entering the Politics of the Outside: Richard Wright's Critique of Marxism and Existentialism," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51:4 (2005): 873-95; Gilroy, "Ambivalence of Community"; Sarah Relyea, "The Vanguard of Modernity: Richard Wright's *The Outsider*," *Outsider Citizens: The Remaking of Postwar Cultural Identity in Wright, Beauvoir, and Baldwin* (London: Routledge, 2006) 59-90; Abdul R.

JanMohamed “*The Outsider: Patricidal Desires*,” *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright’s Archeology of Death* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 175-209.

19. Sarah Hunter, a non-aligned black Marxist, issues the novel’s single reference to Marx outside the parameters of the Party. I discuss this in the essay’s final section. See also “Ambivalence of Community” 170.
20. Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003 [1953]) 436.
21. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions of the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001).
22. Étienne Balibar discusses Marx’s critique of the “political sociology of modern intellectuals” in *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1995). In *The German Ideology*, Marx identified professional philosophers as an oppressive class of intellectuals, or “ideologists.”
23. Wright knew from extensive conversations with Simone de Beauvoir, who had spent a significant amount of time at his Charles Street apartment and had been instrumental in securing his official invitation to travel to France, the extent to which his ideas, combined with his experience, would be accepted beyond their liberal curb appeal. The exception to the French intellectual embrace of Wright came, unsurprisingly, from the *Parti communiste français* (henceforth PCF) press, who introduced Wright to its readership as a “renegade” who had already “failed” as an “authentic” Marxist ideologue even before he “deserted” the Party (Kanapa 3). Still, this criticism did not disturb Wright, who was long accustomed to the Party’s rote defamations of his life and work. Jean Kanapa, “*Il y a deux littératures américaines*,” *Les Lettres Françaises* (5 February 1948).
24. Wright, *Outsider* 4. Wright wrote “I Choose Exile” for *Ebony* magazine in 1950, but the editors refused the piece on account of its “sharp criticism of American culture and its bleak portrayal of African-American life in Chicago’s South Side” (qtd. in *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, eds. Jerry W. Ward and Robert J. Butler [Westport: Greenwood, 2008] 192).
25. Richard Wright, “The Outsider: First Draft, Typescript, Corrected,” Richard Wright Papers. Box 48 Folder 604.
26. Michel Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1990) 325.
27. See Ian Birchall’s extensive obituary for Rousset in *Revolutionary History in A Paradise for Capitalism? Class and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Belgium*, ed. Al Richardson (London: Socialist Platform, 1998).
28. Wright’s rebuke of “politics proper” is one repeated throughout the forties and fifties. See *Black Power: Three Books from Exile* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008) for his pointed critique of Kwame Nkrumah’s Marxist propaganda as both “politics proper” and “politics plus” and a 1955 interview in which he describes his sustained “passion for politics” as “illogical.”
29. High-profile members included Simone de Beauvoir, André Breton, Albert Camus, Michel Leiris, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre.
30. Quoted in Ian Birchall’s *Sartre Against Stalinism* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2004) 80. Similar to the CPUSA of the 1920s, the French Communist Party did little to mask its lack of concern for individuals in the African diaspora, and obviously reduced all questions of oppression to a mechanical model of class.
31. Fabre, *Richard Wright* 375.
32. For more, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1974).
33. Wright, “The Outsider: First Draft.”

34. *ibid.*
35. See Sebastian Luft, "On the Future of Husserlian Phenomenology," <http://www.newschool.edu/nssr/husserl/Future/Part%20Two/Luft.html>.
36. See Paul Ricoeur's *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1967).
37. This sentence is activated by a deliberate, unmarked shift from the Kantian concept of the "thing-in-itself" to the phenomenological (originally Heideggerian) concept of "mindbody." Both posit the return to one's "primordial givenness" or "true subjectivity" as a kind of freedom.
38. Although his new set of narrative concerns would be both unpopular and misunderstood by his American readership, Wright refused to open the novel according to generic and political expectations.
39. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, trans. S. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1964) 37.
40. *Outsider* 6.
41. *Outsider* 7.
42. *Outsider* 6, 7.
43. *Outsider* 8.
44. *ibid.*
45. *ibid.*
46. *Outsider* 9.
47. *Outsider* 8.
48. Fabre, *Richard Wright* 81-82.
49. Ian Buchanan, *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham: Duke UP, 2007) xvi.
50. See Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981).
51. *Outsider* 484.
52. Balibar, "Philosophy" 1.
53. *Outsider* 242. When a joke that he has made to Communist Gil Blount has fallen flat, he blames Blount's lackluster sense of humor on his excessive Marxism.
54. "Philosophy" 1, italics original.
55. *Outsider* 258.
56. *ibid.*
57. While didactic speeches are, at this point in his writing career, a trademark of Wright's prose, Sarah Hunter is the first female character in Wright's literary corpus given a speech with such political heft.
58. Michel Fabre and Keneth Kinnamon, eds. *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1993) 164.
59. Fabre and Kinnamon, *Conversations* 167.
60. See Mark Christian Thompson's "Richard Wright's Jealous Rebels: Black Fascism and Philosophy" in *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture Between the Wars* (U Virginia P, 2007) 143-70. In his essay, Thompson conflates Damon and Wright, and associates both with the fascism of Garvey. I completely disagree with Thompson's method and interpretive conclusions.
61. See Wright, "I Bite the Hand That Feeds Me," *Atlantic Monthly* (June 1940): 826-28.
62. *Outsider* 585.