

# CHAPTER 1

## On the American Primary Colors

RICHARD WRIGHT'S JOURNEY outward from the American South to the rest of the world began in 1927, when he departed Memphis for Chicago. Though perhaps he did not know it at the time, the most prominent baggage he carried was something he could never misplace or lose—the color of his skin. The fact that he was a Negro would intrude upon the very mode of his existence and would influence the direction of his thought, and most certainly later did inform the bulk of his public writing. Through succeeding geographical wanderings, Wright was transported to such scattered points as Spain, Indonesia, Argentina, and the African Gold Coast. However, he was inevitably returned to the attitudes about American racial matters that were fostered within him during his childhood and adolescence.

Wright's flight from the South—from the locale of his early experiences—was intended by him to be a quest to “learn who I was, what I might be.” The educational, often-painful peregrinations that followed only accentuated the young Negro's suspicion that “I could never really leave the South, for my feelings had already been formed by the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my

#### 4 : RICHARD WRIGHT

personality and consciousness . . . the culture of the South."<sup>1</sup> However, American Southern culture framed Wright not in the posture of a submissive Negro. Rather, he stood firm in attacking any acceptance of an imposed servile stance. Wright questioned the nature of the American society around him, whether it functioned in the South or in the North; and he demanded justifications for, or alterations within, that society. His own focus on racial problems in America usually created an image of the two worlds of his childhood experience, one black, the other white and hostile. The image often became blurred by the intensity of his own anger, which was inflamed by a sense of his being treated unjustly as a Negro in a land promising so much justice for everyone.

Wright's responses were not always patently predictable. Exceptions most often appeared when he described Negroes and whites in Northern urban settings and while, for a decade or so, he was subscribing to optimistic hopes based upon his belief in Marxism. Nevertheless, when his works are concerned with American racial topics, their tone is one of strong protest, as most readers and critics quickly note. Wright's first-published novel (but not the first he wrote), *Native Son*, remains the epitome of American-Negro protest fiction. However, the authorial outlook, the tone, and the subject matter permeating *Native Son* and many of Wright's later pieces have their foundations in the autobiography of Wright's youth, *Black Boy*, and an earlier short companion piece, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1937). For ascending to an overview of Wright—both the man and the public writer—*Black Boy* is a key document.

A chronicle of fear, frustration, and inner rage, *Black Boy* is a personal account of Wright's pre-Northern and pre-Marxist days. It is ostensibly an autobiography of

chronological events and derives its impact from Wright's constant revelations of his emotional and intellectual responses to encounters with social practices and individuals. Each word seems charged with an urgent and immediate quality. The reason soon becomes clear: whereas *Black Boy* is an anger-filled reaction to American society, it is also a sensitive quest for self-discovery. The search for a respectable and safe place in American society for Wright—for Negroes in general—is accompanied by a painful need for both a vocation and a father. In this latter respect the authorial voice in *Black Boy* has been compared to the narrative voices in some of James Joyce's works.<sup>2</sup> In a tragic way the discoveries made by the young Wright were more upsetting and shattering than those which often burst forth into the consciousness of a Stephen Daedalus-Hero-Joyce figure. Wright did learn that his vocational calling came from the domain of art. He also perceived that he was a Negro—not quite an American, not even quite a human being. *Black Boy* does conclude on a hopeful note: Wright would seek a home and his manhood in what he thought would be a more amicable environment, the American North. Nevertheless, his guarded optimism had already been undercut by a failure to find satisfaction and fulfillment in racial togetherness and familial intimacy in the South.

Penetrating deeply into the needs of an individual personality, *Black Boy* thus acquires a universal appeal. However, helpful in explaining specifically the themes, settings, and characters are the narrower concerns of the autobiography. In this respect Rebecca C. Barton has offered an incisive observation in asserting that in *Black Boy*, Wright is "the most genuine representative of lower-class life and in the best position to portray its hunger, its misery, its despair."<sup>3</sup> Actually, the dividing line between what emanates from a life in poverty and a life in America as a

Negro, especially in the South, is generally an obscure one; and much current sociological research has been devoted to locating that line and to determining, in fact, whether there is a division or, instead, an equation. In *Black Boy*, Wright blends an undertone of potential strife and violence between the white and black races with the poverty and personal conflicts within his family to produce a dominant tone of anger against white men. For instance, Wright's search for a father was a real one. His father apparently was an unrelenting tyrant who eventually ran off with another woman. He left behind to survive in rural Mississippi an already indigent family and an ill wife. The ensuing years of physical hunger, of hard work at various jobs, of deprivation of a formal education—all compounded within a social structure separating its members according to skin color—could no doubt have caused responses to race relations that really had had their sources in the individual family problems and family economic position. Yet, in *Black Boy*, precisely what Wright tries to accomplish is a fusion of the particular with the general: the story of one Negro and his family is projected into a tale of all Negroes of the South.<sup>4</sup> Negro poverty and family frictions are transformed into circumstances growing out of the general social structure. The search for a father becomes a search for Negro dignity, economic opportunity, and social acceptance in a racially integrated South, so that the father figure might be respected as a man in the world and so that a Richard Wright might not be compelled to confess bitterly, "If someone had suggested that my father be killed, I would perhaps have become interested."<sup>5</sup>

Autobiographies often provoke psychological analyses of their writers. One fascinating critical excursion into the psyche behind *Black Boy* has been offered by Ralph K. White.<sup>6</sup> From a study of Wright's autobiography, he attempts a summary of Wright's personality traits. He does

not answer the question of to what extent Wright's experiences within his family affected his attitudes toward race relations. However, he does identify those characteristics of Wright which seem to intrude upon Wright's treatment of themes in many of his works. White discerns, for example, a high frustration-satisfaction ratio, a tendency to be aggressive and to disapprove of others, a direction of aggressions toward Southern whites, an emphasis on physical safety and security, a doubtful identification with other Negroes, and a stereotyping of adult and white authority.<sup>7</sup> Wright is also credited with "a ruthless honesty of thinking."<sup>8</sup> Conceivably, all these personality characteristics might have originated in isolated experiences within his family. However, as Wright dramatizes in *Black Boy*, their origins are related to a general state of the Negro mind bound up in the daily degradations forcefully proffered by a white-controlled Southern culture. As *Black Boy* progresses, as the Richard Wright encountered in its pages matures, our understanding of his Negro-ness and of his own recognition of an encircling and threatening white Southern society is enlarged. The subject of the autobiography becomes not merely the writer or his family or his particular experiences, but the unfair interplay between white men and black men in the South.

No matter what interpretations of Wright's personality result from a process of easy detection or intense scrutiny and no matter how significant a delineation of the author as constructed from *Black Boy* is to our understanding of his other works, Wright's autobiography stands as an impressive social document. It also may be appreciated for its artistic merits: such fictional devices as dramatic dialogue, vivid physical description, images, symbols, and alliterative language are used effectively and often gracefully by Wright, who by 1945 had become an experienced short-story writer and novelist. The opening lines contain con-

trolling images that form a fitting prelude to most of the content that follows. Describing a day in his fourth year, Wright says, "I crossed restlessly to the window and pushed back the long fluffy white curtains—which I had been forbidden to touch—and looked yearningly out into the empty street."<sup>9</sup> This restlessness of youth is emphasized throughout the work. The street operates as a symbolic barrier dividing different worlds. It additionally functions as a symbolic path of flight, first from one Southern town to another and finally to the North. As the youthful Wright continually tries to push aside the alluring white curtains, a lesson is eventually gained: the Southern whites have established severe penalties for a black man's venturing beyond the curtains. A Negro may approach them if he dares; but for his own survival, he should turn back. The young Wright of *Black Boy* tends to be curious and bold. He often infiltrates beyond the curtains, discovering in time the perils on the other side; but he also develops a contempt for Negroes who remain behind, for Negroes who do not risk. The personal tragedy for Wright, and for the Southern Negro collectively, is that he must leave the South or endanger his life if his boldness is to take him past the curtains.

Wright tells us in *Black Boy* that his initial awareness of the existence of separate black and white worlds occurred in a color vacuum. Although he knew as a child that there were people called whites, he felt no innate emotional response to them. He did sense something different, for he never associated with light-skinned people except for those among his relatives who looked white. However, a train trip from Mississippi to Arkansas soon alerted him to "Jim Crow" practices and instilled in him, "with a sharp concreteness that would never die," the knowledge of two distinct races.<sup>10</sup> A short time later Wright's uncle was killed by a white Arkansas mob, and Wright and his family

fled the town. The Negro boy had learned at firsthand what the whites will and can do to black men they feel threatened by. Either through experience or through sad and tragic tales told to him by other Negroes, Wright, as he grew up, collected information and formed impressions about the ways in which contacts between the two races contained hidden and real dangers. Even white children were to be placed on the other side of the race curtain. Encounters with them were confined to rock-throwing skirmishes near a railroad roundhouse that physically divided the two worlds. The youthful Wright began to perceive whites not as real persons but as parts of a general, abhorrent, and potentially destructive force.

The effects of such a seemingly senseless social structure were profound for Wright. His entire being was challenged by the hate and the threats stemming from what, by now, had become a group of almost unreal people, of "invisible whites." Although actually never physically abused by them, the young Wright was "as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings."<sup>11</sup> He dreamed of his own vindictive heroics against whites during fantasies of black-initiated racial mob violence; however, no real personal contacts of this nature with whites were ever established to diminish or intensify these fantasies. Wright's imagination helped to create an environment both terrible and strangely remote—as he explains, "something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment."<sup>12</sup>

Wright's vision of a hostile Southern white culture was strengthened even more in time. Support came from his observations during various job experiences in Jackson, Mississippi, and Memphis during the early and mid-1920s. He began to see the manner in which Negro labor was exploited. Not only did he feel that ignorance was being forced upon Negro workers, but he discovered the ways in

which a Negro must hide his sense of outrage behind a facade of cheerful subservience in order to remain employed even at menial tasks. Appearance and reality were not merely themes for literary fiction; for the Negro they were real elements in a game surrounded by daily abasement and latent violence. Choices in the game were limited among Negroes, for the whites could always hold out the threat of injury or death and could often find allies among white lawmen. Wright saw the Southern Negro acting out a role assigned to him by the whites, in time even repressing the realization that his life was stunted. The Negro thus had to develop "a delicate, sensitive controlling mechanism" that shut off his mind and emotions "from all that the white race said was taboo."<sup>18</sup> A normal life in the society was replaced by devious and subversive activities. Ways and means were found to cheat white men behind their backs, to gain triumphs great in black men's eyes but hardly noticed as victories by the whites. For example, a teen-aged Wright engaged himself in such illegal activities as stealing money from his employer in a movie box office and bootlegging liquor into a hotel where he worked as a bellboy. Through such actions the Negro ironically reinforced the white man's preconception that he was immoral and prone to crime. His deeds were, in fact, subdued reactions to, and meager consolations for, the repressions forced upon him by the whites.

In *Black Boy* Wright defines a sensitive Negro as one who should not consume a lifetime playing in a consolatory contest of deceit against whites. By engaging in illicit affairs no society admires, he would be preventing his honest impulses from surging into the open—even if such a course should confront the white South with hate and retaliatory violence. Although Wright fully understood the influence of the menaces constantly discouraging the Negro from active and open rebellion, *Black Boy* reveals Wright's am-