

**"To make a bridge from man to man": Existentialism in
Richard Wright's *The Outsider***

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The Outsider (1953) is Richard Wright's most explicitly existential novel, a novel born, as it was, less than a decade after Jean-Paul Sartre "burst into fame in October 1945" (Rowley 326). In a letter to Gertrude Stein, dated 28 March 1946, Wright wrote, "New York is buzzing over existentialism. It frightens most folks here. Too gloomy, they say" ("Letter"). But as is evident in *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), Wright knew gloom well; it was an emotion he would soon give name to: existentialist dread. In the summer of 1947, the year he would sail for France, Wright read *The Concept of Dread*, in which Kierkegaard wrote, "dread is an alien power which lays hold of an individual, and yet one cannot tear oneself away." This line would appear as the epigraph to *The Outsider*, a book which stands alongside Camus's *The Stranger* and Sartre's *Nausea* as one of the clearest statements of the 20th century's most influential philosophy.

As it turns out, Richard Wright was an existentialist *avant la lettre*. Showing off his collection of books by Soren Kierkegaard to C.L.R. James, Wright boasted, "everything that [Kierkegaard] writes in those books I knew before I had them" (qtd. in Gilroy 159). And as Russell Carl Brignano rightfully argues, *Native Son* clearly "contains an unconscious existentialism" (123). But while it is certainly the case that *Native Son* exhibits a certain existentialist sensibility, Bigger is "a prototype for an existential hero" only in the weakest sense (143). *Native Son* vacillates too severely between existentialism and naturalism to be a full-blown existential novel.¹ As George Cotkin argues, in *Existential America*, "to be existential is, ultimately to join with Camus's Sisyphus in a tragic acceptance of the limitations of existence while exulting in each affirmative breath of life, in each push of the stone up the mountain" (3). Emile Zola, for Wright, had been an early literary model (Rowley 326), and limitations determined by external social forces (racist America in the 1930s and 40s) and biology (Bigger's race) define Zola's naturalism. Given the degree to which Bigger Thomas is driven to self-destruction by a culture that sees him only as "some half-human black ape" (Wright, *Native* 408), the existentialist dictum "man is free" hardly seems applicable to *Native Son*.²

Unlike the protagonist of *The Outsider*, Cross Damon, who, due to a freak subway accident, is given the chance to recreate himself and "do with himself what he would, what he liked" (Wright, *Outsider* 111), Bigger

Thomas's choices are limited, and he knows it: "Yes, he could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action" (12). When Bigger and Gus see an airplane skywriting, Bigger expresses the desire to be a pilot. He tells Gus, "I *could* fly a plane if I had a chance" (17); and Gus responds, "if you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you *could* fly a plane" (17). This is a reality Bigger Thomas simply cannot live with. He cannot accept the "limitations of existence" imposed on him by a white world (Cotkin 3). He tells Gus:

"But I just can't get used to it [...] I swear to God I can't [...] Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence [...]" (20)

The course of Bigger's life speaks to the reality that, if you are black in America, "you whipped before you born," and that you "don't have to do nothing for 'em to get [you]" (351).

To be sure, Bigger was able "to create a new life for himself," and did so through the act of murder (105): "He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him" (105). But Bigger had always sensed that his life would come to a tragic end.³ He tells Gus, "sometimes I feel like something awful's going to happen to me [...] I don't know. I just feel that way. Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me [...]" (20). While Bigger unquestionably makes murderous choices, Bigger's life, wrought from the alembic of indifferent "sociological pressures" and "multiple compulsions," was never his own to live (Abrams 263). Bigger's fate was spelled out for him in "tall red letters: YOU CAN'T WIN!" (Wright, *Native Son* 13).

Cross Damon's life, though, is manifestly different. While Damon, like Bigger, is "a man standing outside of the world" (Wright, *Outsider* 7), his "intuitive sense of freedom" (105) compels him to "create a new life" (108) as a man with "no party, no myths, no tradition, no race" (483). Damon's realization that "he was free" comes after he is believed to have been killed in an accident in the Chicago subway (113). "The authorities mistakenly identify the mutilated remains of another man as Cross Damon, and Damon decides to let his previous identity and its problems

vanish with the burial of this stranger” (Tate 369). But even before the accident, Damon “knew he was alone and that his problem was one of the relationship of himself to himself” (Wright, *Outsider* 10). The subway accident was the catalyst that forced Damon not only to understand, in concrete terms, the reality that “he was alone [...] a man tossed back upon himself [...]” (129-30), but to act on that knowledge. Now he “would have to imagine this thing out, dream it out, invent it, like a writer constructing a tale [...]” (110). “That all men were free” became “the fondest and deepest conviction of his life. And his acting upon this wild plan would be but an expression of his perfect freedom” (111).

Here Damon expresses the central tenets of existentialism: “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (Sartre, “Existentialism” 15); “man is nothing else than his plan” (32); “man chooses his own self” (17); “man is condemned to be free [...] Therefore, [the existentialist] thinks that man, with no support and no aid, is condemned every moment to invent man” (23).⁴ Damon refuses to believe his life was “spared” (in the subway accident) because such a belief “implied that some God was watching over him, and he did not believe that. It was simply the way the dice had rolled” (Wright, *Outsider* 101). He

disliked most strongly all men of religion because he felt that they could take for granted an interpretation of the world that his sense of life made impossible. The priest was secure and walked the earth with a divine mandate, while Cross’s mere breathing was an act of audacity, a confounding wonder at the daily mystery of himself. He felt that the attitude of the priest was predicated upon a scheme of good and evil ordained by a God whom he was constrained out of love and fear to obey [...] Cross had to discover what was good and evil through his own actions, which were more exacting than the edicts of any God because it was he alone who had to bear the brunt of their consequences with a sense of absoluteness made intolerable by knowing that this life of his was all he had and would ever have. (158)

While “the world of most men is given to them by their culture” (184) and are therefore not “required [...] to conceive the total meaning or direction of his life” (115), Cross realizes that man is “something” only because he “will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence” (Sartre, “Existentialism” 15).

Cross Damon’s overwhelming sense of dread—or what Heidegger calls “forlornness”—comes from his knowledge that, since “God does not

exist,” we “have to face all the consequences of this” (21), and the consequences are that, “beyond themselves, their dreams, their hopes, their plans, [modern man] know[s] there is nothing[....] (Wright, *Outsider* 461). In *Nausea*, Sartre writes, “now I knew; things are entirely what they appear to be—and behind them [...] there is nothing” (131). But the existentialist hardly celebrates the death of God. The existentialist, Sartre argues,

thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because that fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoievsky said, “If God didn’t exist, everything would be possible.” This is the very starting point of existentialism. (“Existentialism” 22)⁵

Early in the novel, Cross wishes he could embrace religion. He watched his mother “driven [...] into the arms of religion for the sake of her sanity” (27). Religion, he saw, assuaged the grief born of “her own experience” and “thwarted hopes” (27). Cross thinks his “mother was lucky; she had a refuge, even if that refuge was an illusion” (27).

Unlike his mother, Damon is unable to make what Kierkegaard called “the leap of faith” that would “placate his sense of dread” (455), the very dread that comes from knowing “we are not free not to be free” (Duncan 51).⁶ Damon’s dread is, in this sense, inescapable, and he knows it; he knows that “we realize our freedom to its fullest extent when we experience the state of mind called dread” (Strathern 58).⁷ Wright writes, Damon “would also know that there was nothing that either he or [his mother] could do about it, that there was no cure for his malady, and, above all, that this dilemma was the meaning of his life” (*Outsider* 25). Because Damon is unwilling to make the leap, he does not have the luxury of believing “that there was another world into which he could somehow escape when he died” (455). In this sense, then, Damon’s existentialist sensibility is more Sartrean than Kierkegaardian because, while he is not “an atheist” (459), his worldview is wholly secular. If Damon rejects the role of religion in shaping the self, he equally rejects “all political movements” (210); and, in this way, *The Outsider* gives voice to Wright’s disenchantment with Communism.⁸

In *The Outsider* the Communist party embodies values inimical to individual freedom. Throughout the novel, Damon’s “decisive life struggle [is] a personal fight for the realization of himself” (183). As Gil tells

Damon, “we Communists do not admit any subjectivity [...] [Y]ou are an instrument of the Party. You exist to execute the Party’s will. That’s all there is to it” (223, 233). While Damon had “a passion to recast, reforge himself” (241), men like Gil, Blimin and Hilton “had resolved their tangled emotions in the rigid disciplines of Communist politics, thereby rejecting from their hearts the pathos of living, purging their consciousness of that perilous subjective tension that spells the humanity of man” (241). Damon cannot understand “why some men wanted to be free and some did no, why some needed freedom and others did not even feel its loss when they did not have it” (246-47). Damon rejects Communism because it subordinates individual will to a party platform. But in rejecting Communism, Damon is not dismissing the importance of “human solidarity” (Sartre, “Existentialism” 9). Far from celebrating the isolated individual adrift like “a bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic” (Melville 939), existentialists admit the necessity of others for identity. As Sartre writes,

thus, the man who becomes aware of himself through the *cogito* also perceives all others, and he perceives them as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he can not be anything [...] unless others recognize it as such. In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person. The other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself” (“Existentialism” 38-9).

Brignano, then, is incorrect to suggest *The Outsider* “in fact rejects the very existential precepts that the book’s main character lives by” (121). He writes, “when *The Outsider* is considered together with Wright’s nonfiction of the 1950s, it reinforces our sense of an authorial disposition valuing contact and cooperation among people to produce improved personal psychic conditions and social configurations” (121-22).⁹ It is clear, though, that Damon knows “he had to become human before he could mingle again with people. Yet he needed those people and could become human only with them” (Wright, *Outsider* 177). At the end of the novel, as Damon lays dying, Houston asks him what he found in life, and Damon answers: “Nothing [...] The search can’t be done alone [...] Never alone [...] Alone a man is nothing [...] Man is a promise that he must never break [...]” (561). He goes on to say, “[I wish I] had some way to give the meaning of my life to others [...] To make a bridge from man to man [...] We must find some way of being good to ourselves [...] Man is all we’ve got [...] I wish I could ask men to meet themselves [...] We’re different from what we seem [...] Maybe worse, maybe better [...] But certainly different [...] We’re strangers to ourselves” (562).

Damon's view here is entirely consistent with Sartrean existentialism. As Sartre writes, "when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that *he is responsible for all men*" (16; emphasis mine).¹⁰ By asserting that "alone a man is nothing," and wishing he could "make a bridge from man to man," Damon is admitting responsibility for all men; and "our responsibility," Sartre argues, "is much greater than we might have supposed, because it involves all mankind" ("Existentialism" 17). While Richard Wright denied he was an existentialist (Gomez 137), *The Outsider*, nevertheless, articulates its central tenets, among them, the freedom to recast and reforge the self, and in this, lies its optimism.

Notes

¹ M.H. Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, writes, "this thesis, a product of post-Darwinian biology in the nineteenth century, held that a human being exists entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul nor any mode of participating in a religious or spiritual world beyond the natural world; and therefore, that such a being is merely a higher-order animal whose character and behavior are entirely determined by two kinds of forces, heredity and environment. A person inherits compulsive instincts—especially hunger, the drive to accumulate possessions, and sexuality—and is then subject to the social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu into which that person is born. [...] [Naturalist writers] tend to choose characters who exhibit strong animal drives such as greed and sexual desire, and who are helpless victims both of glandular secretions within and of sociological pressures without [...] The end of the naturalistic novel is usually 'tragic,' but not, as in classical and Elizabethan tragedy, because of a heroic but losing struggle of the individual mind and will against gods, enemies, and circumstances. Instead, the protagonist of the naturalistic plot, a pawn to multiple compulsions, usually disintegrates, or is wiped out" (262, 263).

² In "This, Too, Is America," Charles J. Rolo writes, "Black Boy is an autobiography, a document in race relations and a moral indictment; it combines the unashamed subjectivity of Rousseau's *Confessions* with the harsh realism of Zola's *L'Assomoir* and the crusading fervor of his *J'accuse*" (67).

³ I am using "tragic" here in the naturalist sense, as defined by Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (263).

⁴ Throughout *The Outsider*, Wright alludes often to Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," which ends, the old waiter

“disliked bars and bodegas. A clean, well-lighted café was a very different thing. Now, without thinking further, he would go home to his room. He would lie in the bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep” (33). In *The Outsider*, Book 2 ends with: “Finally, toward dawn, [Damon] turned over on his side and slept like a rock for the first time in many weeks” (238); in Book 4 Damon “groaned softly and did not close his eyes in sleep until dawn” (422). Later in the novel, Wright writes, “it was dawn before [Damon] managed to sleep” (471). In Book 1, Damon “went into an ill-lighted tavern that reeked of disinfectant and sat in a rear booth and listened to the radio pour forth jazz music that linked itself with his sense of homelessness” (112); and in Chapter 5, he “longed for the shelter of a well-lighted place, something like a huge hotel lobby with throngs of people and hard, glaring electric bulbs shedding clarity and safety upon everything [...]” (557). Wright also often alludes to Nietzsche. Not only does he use a line from Nietzsche as an epigraph to Book 5, but he also repeatedly echoes Nietzsche’s admonition, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you” (89). To take only two examples, after killing Gil and Herndon, Damon realizes that “he had become what he had tried to destroy, had taken on the guise of the monster he had slain” (Wright, *Outsider* 295). Later, Damon thinks, “perhaps he was staring right now at the focal point of history: if you fought men who tried to conquer you in terms of total power you too had to use total power and in the end you became what you tried to defeat [...]” (313). Brignano suggests that calling *The Outsider* existential is problematic because of Nietzsche’s influence. He writes, “Cross Damon may be interpreted through both Nietzscheism and French existentialism, thus expanding the problems on the philosophical level alone” (155-56). But Robert C. Solomon, in *Living with Nietzsche: What the Great “Immoralist” Has to Teach Us*, (2003), makes a convincing case that Nietzsche, too, was an existentialist. Solomon writes, in *Living with Nietzsche* “I question the existential perspective as such and ask whether, in terms of Nietzsche’s own writings, it is an appropriate way of approaching him, whether Nietzsche is or can be properly considered an ‘existentialist.’ My answer, as one might expect, is ‘yes’” (18). In his conclusion, Solomon asks, “so is Nietzsche an existentialist? Is his classical sense of responsibility sufficient to align him with the more bootstrapping philosophies of Kierkegaard and Sartre? My answer is, I think so” (206). In the Translator’s Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Walter Kaufmann suggests, “one reasonable perspective for *Beyond Good and Evil* is to see it somewhere between Kierkegaard and Ibsen on the one hand and Freud and Sartre on the other” (xvi).

⁵ In a conversation with Blimin, Damon echoes Dostoevsky’s assertion: “If God didn’t exist, everything would be possible” (qtd. in

Sartre, "Existentialism" 22). Damon remarks, "now, what does this mean—that I don't believe in God? It means that I, and you too, can do what we damn well please on this earth" (460). This perspective is, for Sartre, "the very starting point of existentialism" ("Existentialism" 22).

⁶ Wright was reading Kierkegaard at the same time he was writing *The Outsider*, and the influence is quite apparent (Rowley 357). Claudia C. Tate, in "Christian Existentialism in *The Outsider*," and Lewis A. Lawson, in "Cross Damon: The Kierkegaardian Man of Dread," usefully illuminate the ways in which Wright utilizes Kierkegaard's ideas. One of the ways in which Kierkegaard's influence curiously manifests itself in *The Outsider* is in Wright's description of Cross Damon and District Attorney Ely Houston, as well as in Damon's relationship with his mother. Kierkegaard, as all reports suggest, "was always frail," and "had an abnormal curvature of the spine" (Duncan 19). As Walter Lowrie notes, "there can be no doubt that Soren was a very frail child, and whatever his malady may have been, it pursued him to the end, probably occasioning his early death. It is perhaps most plausibly attributed to a marked curvature of the spine, occasioned, as he believed, by a fall from a tree in early childhood [...] The sense of his physical inferiority was an acute distress throughout his whole life. He commonly spoke of it as 'a disproportion between my soul and my body'" (40, 41). In *The Outsider*, Damon is also described as frail and sickly. He writes, "[Damon] hunched determinedly forward and his crinkled pajamas bagged about his gaunt body and the muscles of his neck bulged [...] He was despairingly aware of his body as an alien and despised object over which he had no power, a burden that was always cheating him of the fruits of his thought, mocking him with its stubborn and supine solidity" (16, 17). Ely Houston, the District Attorney who shadows Damon throughout much of the novel, is a hunchback: "The hump on his back was prominent but not as noticeable as cross would have thought it would be, so naturally did it blend in with the man's general build. Cross had not particularly noticed this deformity when Houston had first sat down, but now he remembered that Houston had moved forward to the table with a motion that slightly resembled that of a creeping animal, holding his trunk still as he walked" (163). Houston claims that his "deformity made me free; it put me outside and made me feel as an outsider. It wasn't pleasant; hell, no. At first I felt inferior. But now I have to struggle with myself to keep from feeling superior to the people I meet" (171). Kierkegaard, during what's come to be known as "the Corsair Affair," was ridiculed in a "persistent stream of articles and sketches in *Corsair*" (Strathern 61). The caricatures of Kierkegaard showed "the bent, stick-thin, little young-old man with his crablike gait, his uneven-length trousers, and his huge umbrella" (61-2). Being held up to "public ridicule" (62), for Kierkegaard, "wasn't pleasant" (Wright, *Outsider* 171). But like Houston, who grew to feel superior to those around him, Kierkegaard "wished to be reviled by

his fellow citizens so that he could become a better man. He would use them to make him a better Christian” (63). Cross Damon, Ely Houston, and Kierkegaard all had at least one thing in common: They were outsiders. It’s interesting to note, too, that while Kierkegaard inherited the “sins of the father,” Cross Damon inherited the sins of the mother. As Elmer H. Duncan writes, Kierkegaard’s father, Michael Kierkegaard, “had a deep sense of guilt and sorrow, which never left him, though he lived to be eighty-two. This he passed on to his sons,” Peter and Soren (18). Michael Kierkegaard, who “had seduced a servant-maid who was entirely dependent upon him,” had confessed something to his sons, though it is not clear to what exactly he confessed (Lowrie 75). The substance of his confession may have been adultery, or it may have been that he had cursed God on the Jutland heath when he was eleven years old (71). As Duncan writes, “it is not clear whether the old man confessed to them, or they only guessed the truth, but somehow the sons came to know the sins of their father” (19). Whatever the “sin,” young Soren, who was inordinately close to his father, inherited his father’s “guilt-ridden personality” (Hannay 35). Similarly, in *The Outsider*, Damon “was aware, intimately and bitterly, that his dread had been his mother’s first fateful gift to him. He had been born of her not only physically but emotionally too. The only psychological difference between them was that he was aware of having received this dark gift from her at a time when he was too young to reject it, and she had given it to him in a period of her life when her intense grief over the death of her husband had rendered her incapable of realizing the full import of what she had been doing” (21). Damon was “too close to her and too far from her; much too warm toward her and much too cold. If only he understood her less! But he was cut off from that; he was anchored in a knowledge that offended him. And this image of his mother’s incestuously tinged longings would linger with him for days and he could curse her for it, and finally he would curse himself for living in a crazy world that he could not set right” (27). In a passage that one might expect to find in a biography of Kierkegaard, with only minor emendations, Brignano writes, “from his mother’s strict Protestant religion [Cross Damon] has acquired, without a corresponding belief in a God-savior, a sense of dread that accompanies the presence of a Protestant God, whose ‘awful face’ is shaped ‘in the form of a huge and crushing NO” (158).

⁷ In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard writes, “Reflection,” or the equivocation that follows from being unwilling to make a choice, “can be halted only by a leap [...] When the subject does not put an end to his reflection, he is made infinite in reflection, i.e., he does not arrive at a decision” (105).

⁸ See Wright’s “I Tried to Be a Communist,” in *The God That Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman (1949).

⁹ In “Existentialism,” Sartre is at pains to “defend existentialism against” some of the very charges Brignano makes against *The Outsider*. Catholics and Communists, Sartre writes, “charge us with having ignored human solidarity, with considering man as an isolated being” (9). Brignano suggests, as well, that *The Outsider* illustrates the “grim and dark side of existentialism” (163). And, “as is generally known, the basic charge against [Existentialists] is that we put the emphasis on the dark side of human life,” but Sartre wonders if those “who accuse existentialism of being too gloomy” are “complaining about it, not for its pessimism, but much rather for its optimism. Can it be that what really scares them in the doctrine I shall try to present here is that it leaves to man a possibility of choice? (Sartre, “Existentialism” 10, 11).

¹⁰ The awareness of our responsibility for others results in anguish. As Sartre argues, “the existentialists say at once that man is anguish. What that means is this: the man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a lawmaker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, can not help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility. Of course, there are many people who are not anxious; but we claim that they are hiding their anxiety, that they are fleeing from it [...] Anguish is evident even when it conceals itself. This is the anguish that Kierkegaard called the anguish of Abraham” (“Existentialism” 18-9).

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