

# A Tenuous Bond: The Formative Other as a Tiny Neuron

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## **I. Introduction: The Other as a Key Concept**

On November 21–23, 1985, the International Symposium on Richard Wright was held at the University of Mississippi. It was the first international conference on a major black writer in the United States. The brochure: “Mississippi’s Native Son: An International Symposium on Richard Wright (1908–1960),” distributed before the symposium, pointed out the importance of synthetic studies on Richard Wright (3). During the years since the Wright Symposium, Wright studies have moved forward. Nevertheless, a synthetic study of Richard Wright has yet to be completed. Unsuccessfully, the groping way of synthesizing the paradigm of problems in the study of Wright has never gone beyond what George Kent, one of his most sympathetic critics, sketched out. Kent pointed out the need for 1) more biographical and bibliographical studies, 2) a definitive standard edition of Wright’s works, 3) full-length studies on Wright’s reading, of his use of the social sciences, and of his relations with the Communist Party, and 4) brief studies on Wright’s psychology, his development of character, the “effectiveness of style in relation to intention,” naturalism in his works, his influence on other writers, reevaluations of his short stories, novels, autobiography, poetry, non-fiction, and comparative studies of published works with manuscript versions (98–103). It can be said that separately each one of these four items is on the way to being accomplished by such Wright scholars as Michel Fabre, Addison Gayle, Margaret Walker, and Keneth Kinnamon; how to integrate all these aspects of Wright studies, however, has never been pursued by any critic. Ineffectively, I have been groping the way of synthesizing the paradigm of problems in the study of Wright; however, Wright studies seem to have totally gone beyond what has been supposed before. While the paradigm of problems in the study of

Wright has been studied by many scholars, none of them seems ever to have suited my concerns. My greatest concern is whether there can be any specific way to feel closer to Wright and to share his mentality. In other words, while searching for the way to synthesize the study of Richard Wright, in effect, I have just intended to get rid of my defeated feelings caused by Wright's work. In the process of analyzing the message of *The Outsider* and Wright's existentialism, a method in order to bridge the immense gap between Wright and I is naturally led; it is structuralism.

Structuralism as a literary criticism was developed out of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language; it is based primarily on the distinction that Saussure made between *langue*, or language as a system (or structure) of differences, and *parole*, or individual speech acts. For Saussure language is a system of signs, and the sign is arbitrary; the whole of language is a system of difference. The system of difference applied by Saussure analogizes with the existential definition of the Being of a human being. Existentialism is a twentieth-century philosophy which deals with the Being of a human being as existence; the meaning and content of existence, however, is dependent upon the individual existentialist such as Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and so on. Although all of these use the same word *existence* to signify the Being of a human being, the concept of *existence* depends upon each philosopher. Accordingly, there seems to be a tendency to recognize existentialism as a philosophy that has no universals. Is existentialism so extremely personal as to suppose that each human being signifies his or her own existence as existence valid only for himself or herself? Existentialism is not, does not. A human being depends, for his or her existence, on others' existence. We can define our existence only by what is not that of others. There is no essence to our existence; existence is the essence to a human being. The validity to apply structuralism, whose concepts of 'differentiation' and 'arbitrariness' can be considered equivalent to the concept of the Other in existentialism, to a synthetic study of Richard Wright will be indicated.

Wright's relation to existentialism has been focused on, commented on, and criticized since 1946, when he first visited France. Naturally, at first, Wright's impression of French existentialism, his relation to the French existentialists, including Jean-Paul Sartre, and points of comparison and contrast between

Wright and them were dealt with. Although I count 144 items of those commentaries and criticisms which have been written about Wright's existentialism, many as late as 2007, most of them are still within the framework of the earlier trends. They have followed Constance Webb's way of discussing in her "Notes Preliminary to a Full Study of the Work of Richard Wright," (1946) and remain simply a comparison rather than a search for his originality. Nonetheless, in his aptly titled "Wright and the French Existentialists," Michel Fabre, in a discussion of Richard Wright's existentialism, summarizes its significant meanings in Wright's novels (159). Arguing that Wright was an existentialist long before he heard the word, Fabre analyzes Wright's social, literary, and political contacts with Camus, Sartre, and de Beauvoir. I share Fabre's assurance that Wright's interest in existentialism was not perfunctory, and that there are some similarities between Wright's existentialism and the existentialism of some others but that for the most part they are different. Wright's interest in existentialism was not perfunctory; it is necessary for us focus on the various existential issues such as existence, freedom, environment, the Other, dread, death, the bet, God. However, it can be said that all of these existential issues should be examined in terms of the Other as Albert Camus asserts in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (33), Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (248–53), Søren Kierkegaard in *Sickness unto Death* (13–14), Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (92–93), Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (303–33), and Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*. (162). According to Martin Heidegger, the Being of a human being always exists with and towards the Other as long as it is Dasein [the Being of a human being]; it obtains in one's relationship with the Other.

Needless to say, the Other is defined as an existential term in this paper, operating as a self-contained system of difference. The Other signifies the other person or another person or persons, one's environment, one's situation, indeed even whatever within oneself causes one to sense or question his or her existence or identity or self. Accordingly, the term the Other in this paper encompasses either a singular other or a plural others. The existential structure of the protagonists' psychology, a structure through which they must always identify those people and that outside themselves with the Other, the entity which inevitably exists in relationships to their [protagonists'] Being and to

their selves, will be clarified. Nonetheless, the Other is not always defined as that person or thing opposing oneself. The Other does not make a definitive interpretation of Wright's writings, but it shows openness to different interpretation of Wright's writings. The Other as a key concept is not a fixed but a fluid one; that is, it may be defined as a movement or a function rather than as a concept. Accordingly, it is fair to say that the Other is defined as such because or as long as it is not fathomable and is recognized as undefinable. Wright's text is independent of Wright, the reader, and external reality, but it is dependent on the systematical interrelationship which relates each one of these to any other or to all of these. Wright's text is seen here as an objective structure undergirded by the interrelationship of all these aspects or realization of the Other.

Of course, fear, hate, pride, and shame discussed in this paper are peculiar to an individual who lives his or her individual life; they, however, are dealt with here as signs in order to show the way how organically they are related one another in terms of the Other. What I attempt to do in this paper is to illuminate Wright's existential literary world and to discuss a part of the possibility of forming a tenuous bond that bridges the immense gap between Richard Wright and the reader, focusing on *Native Son*, from the standpoint of the Other, one of the key concepts both in existentialism in the sphere of philosophy and in structuralism in the sphere of literary criticism.

## II. Bigger Thomas as an Existential Hero

*Native Son* was invariably described as a *protest novel* during the first 25 years after the book first appeared in 1940. The aims of the novel of protest are generally understood to be to reveal injustice, to communicate information usually suppressed and, above all, to arouse the reader's emotion, so that the need for action will be strongly felt. There is no doubt that Wright had these aims in mind in the making of *Native Son*. Nevertheless, during the second 25 years since its first publication, it has been acknowledged that Wright's power as an artist far transcends this consideration. It seems safe to say that the novel has been thoroughly re-evaluated; it has sometimes been characterized as an existentialist novel, for example, as suggested in Curmie E. Price's poem "The Ballad of Bigger Thomas" (1969) on the violence in *Native Son* and its

relation to existentialism:

Bigger than your doubt, Thomas,  
the sensible world beats its head  
against city streets, trying  
to make sense of your existential act.

Now that we're talking debts,  
let's admit it: Camus' Meursault  
owes something to Wright's Thomas,  
who taught them all the exaltation  
of violence in a contingent world.

Oh yes, yes; I've heard of Sartre,  
Genet, and the absurd; just yesterday,  
however, lost in *Native Son*, I had put  
my fist through a gray world before I knew it.

Call it instinct, mammoth expectations.  
Bigger Thomas rides again along  
the tributes of my thoughts. (48)

At the end of this section, we will see in what way Camus's Meursault owes something to Wright's Bigger.

Bigger's ordained consequence, incarnated in his relationship to other characters, the elements of setting, and the series of events conceptualized also as the Other, which lead to his imprisonment, illuminate him as an existential hero. The structure of Bigger's existentialist character is realized in terms of the Other. Although Bigger, in fact, belongs to the black community, he has pride and is articulate regarding his perception of the white world as the Other because of that pride. His pride, nevertheless, is not sufficient in its strength to shake off his shame as reflected in this assertion of its limitation by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* that:

Pride does not exclude original shame. In fact it is on the ground of fundamental shame or shame of being an object that pride is built. It is an ambiguous feeling. In pride I recognize the Other as the subject through whom my being gets its object-state, but I recognize as well that I myself am also responsible for my object-ness. I emphasize my responsibility

and I assume it. In one sense therefore pride is at first resignation; in order to be proud of *being that*, I must of necessity first resign myself to *being only that*. (386)

Even though Bigger's pride is a feeling without equilibrium, and it is a reaction of bad faith, it is by this pride that Bigger assumes his responsibility and is defined by his need to struggle with an extremely determined definition of the self by the Other. Needless to say, the white world is the very essence of the Other for Bigger, but that isn't all.

The beginning scenes of the novel make manifest what becomes a most requisite element of Bigger's personality: the interrelationship between his strong fear, hate, pride, shame, and the Other. Bigger's fear, hate, pride, and shame, which are clearly evident when we first meet him, are more explicitly realized in his interaction with his family and gang as the Other in Book One; Sartre, for example, explains fear, pride and shame as the original reactions toward the Other: "Shame, fear and pride are my original reactions; they are only various ways by which I recognize the Other as a subject beyond reach, and they include within them a comprehension of my selfness which can and must serve as my motivation for constituting the Other as an object" (387). Bigger tries to shake off his strong fear and shame, in order to be responsible for his actions; and finally he, in Book Two, is motivated to rebelliousness by wishing to be recognized by those who are the Other or to be integrated into them without being humiliated by them. Bigger, who at the beginning of Book Three is awakened, is fundamentally described in terms of the Other as done by Sartre:

It is by thrusting myself toward my possibles that I shall escape fear to the extent that I shall consider my object-ness as non-essential. This can happen only if I apprehend myself as being responsible for the Other's being. The Other becomes then *that which I make myself not-be*, and his possibilities are possibilities which I refuse and which I can simply contemplate — hence dead-possibilities. (383)

Fear, which proves to be as strong an element of Bigger's personality as his pride, Martin Heidegger also succinctly summarizes in his *Being and Time* in terms of the Other:

In one's concern with what one has taken hold of, whether with, for, or against, the Others, there is constant care as to the way one differs from them, whether that difference is merely one that is to be evened out, whether one's own Dasein has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up in relationship to them, or whether one's Dasein already has some priority over them and sets out to keep them suppressed. The care about this distance between them is disturbing to Being-with-one-another [Dasein], though this disturbance is one that is hidden from it. If we may express this existentially, such Being-with-one-another has the character of distantiality. (163–64)

The entity Heidegger denotes by the term “Dasein” is the Being of a human being. According to Heidegger, this quality of being “disturbing” is characteristic of the existential hero who primordially has distantiality. What is here expressed by “disturbing” can be concretely explained as fear:

*That which fear fears about* is that very entity which is afraid — Dasein. Only an entity for which in its Being this very Being is an issue, can be afraid. [ . . . ]

One can also fear about Others, and we then speak of “fearing for” them [Fürchten für sie]. This fearing for the Other does not take away his fear. Such possibility has been ruled out already, because the Other, *for* whom we fear, need not fear at all on his part. It is precisely when the Other is *not* afraid and charges recklessly at what is threatening him that we fear most *for* him. (180–81)

Wright begins *Native Son* at a point when the elements of his hero's distantiality from the Other have already conspired to bring about Bigger's ultimate fear. As the title of Book One implies, Bigger most often becomes completely enwrapped by fear when he is confronted with the white world or with merely a suggestion of confrontation. The seeds of Bigger's dread seem to be rooted in his difference from both the black and the white worlds, a difference which has led him to conceive of them as the Other. Consequently, quite early on, in Book One, Bigger's distance from the Other, including both the black and white communities, becomes the essential element of the dramatic action through which Bigger's characterization unfolds. His distantiality from the Other, or the distance from the Other, is organically related to Bigger's fear, hate, pride, and shame.

*Native Son* ends lightened briefly by the moment when Bigger becomes aware of the structure of his existence, which can only be understood from a realization of the Other: his family, his black community, the white world, and both black and white women. Nevertheless, although they ironically turn out to have been the irresistible Other for Bigger, at the same time he never wants to be one of the Other; he feels differentiality toward them; he can never merge into them even if he wanted to. Bigger's "faint, wry, bitter smile" (850) after saying good-bye to Max suggests Bigger's differentiality toward himself. Bigger is absolutely an Other toward himself. Bigger's otherness reminds us of Camus's assertion: "For ever I shall be a stranger to myself;" (Camus *The Myth of Sisyphus* 24) which is a basic idea of his absurdity. Bigger world's exactly proves the validity of Camus's absurdity:

This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together. (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 26)

Absurdity as a unique linkage with the Other is seen in Bigger's world. Furthermore, Bigger's rebellion, which ends leaving some possibility of living together with the Other, reminds one of Camus's predication of rebellion: "Man's solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and rebellion can only be justified by this solidarity" (*The Rebel* 27). Bigger is an existential hero, whose existence is defined by the Other and who has been living and who now will die in the absurd world. It is clear that Wright recognized the absurdity of existence represented in Camus's Meursault before meeting Camus in the autumn of 1947. Nevertheless, at the same time, we are surprised once again at Curmie E. Price's acuity that "Meursault owes something to Wright's Thomas."

The powerful messages expressed in *Native Son*, first, too strongly defeat the reader for him or her to recover; second, they pose a question of what the world in which we live is all about. The reader, initially depressed by Bigger's brutality and the peculiarities of his world and feeling that he or she can have nothing in common, may unexpectedly find a common ground in his or her world and Bigger's when he or she looks into Bigger's world in terms of the



Other. The world itself is one; there is no essence to Bigger's world as well as to anybody's world; there only exist certain differences between the former and the latter or in the former's relation to the latter. Once the structure of Bigger's psychology is clarified in terms of the Other, the reader can objectively read Bigger's story, calmly analyze, and feel himself or herself as an Other who lives in their common world.

### III. Conclusion: Richard Wright's Existential World

Wright's existentialism is undergirded by 'differentiation' and 'arbitrariness' in his various relationships to the world: his relationship to things, to himself, to the Other, and so on. Wright's existentialism operates as an intermediary between his writing and his life. The richness of his literary experiences results from his extraordinary way of struggling in order to reveal the unexpectedly complicated and mutually restrictive psychological structure between his relationships to the Other and to himself. For Richard Wright, to discover his self simultaneously means to discover the distance between himself and the world, and between himself and the Other who lives there; his discovery is accompanied by ambivalent feelings such as his relief and discouragement, joy and sorrow, astonishment and strangeness. These ambivalent feelings, violently expressed in *Native Son*, are objectively or sometimes cynically described in *Black Boy* when Wright casts back his life and analyzes his psychological structure in terms of the Other as a narrator, likening his psychological structure to young Richard's. Although it is doubtful whether Wright had been granted enough time to mature by the time he wrote *The Outsider*, the reader can sense calmness and ease flowing in the depths of the context. This calmness and ease signal Wright's generosity toward the Other, but they never signify indifference and resignation toward them. Richard Wright never gives up living his life among the troublesome Other and continues to write to find an answer to the psychological, sociological, and philosophical question of his Being as a human being. Richard Wright's literary world, in my opinion, will be defined as his challenge to the impossible, that a human being always must transcend his or her self and must live in a world where anything always exists as it is and where the Other, as well as one, also tries to transcend his or her self.

The world of Richard Wright is structured in the relations among the

reader, the protagonists, the other characters, the narrator, and Wright. Whether the relations are racial or non-racial is not the point; whether Wright's existentialism is racial or no-racial is not the point. The underlying structure of Wright's world and his existentialism is the relation itself. Further, the Other will be a key concept to narrow, reduce, and bridge the gap between Wright and the reader. It seems to be indispensable for the reader, living in a thoroughly different world from Wright's, to keep the mutual relationship between him or her and Wright open, fluid, in order to realize what is Wright's true self.

Wright's works primarily interest the reader in the racial destiny of black Americans and his life as a black American. In general, his life seems to be well revealed. I, nevertheless, notice in his texts that his works, his stories, and his characters show another aspect of Wright's life; they uncover Wright's consciously or unconsciously strong commitment to the Other. His imaginative writing is his challenge to the world and to himself to express his strong will to recognize, comply with, and overcome those who are the Other even if they violate his freedom. Accordingly, the Other could be a theme not only for knowing Wright's existentialism, but also for understanding the world of Richard Wright as our own.

It is likely that there are many readers who are inclined to bury any thought of Richard Wright after having been defeated and puzzled by the brutality of *Native Son* and seeing their world filled with dread certainly haunted all their days. Such readers who feel that their superficial sense of justice cannot be any match for Richard Wright's seem to have lost their power to consider the reason why Wright needed such brutality. That such brutality can only resuscitate the Other, who was going to die, is rather easily understood by reading *Black Boy* and rereading *Native Son* in terms of the Other; and, finally, the significance of murder which revives the Other is clarified by *The Outsider*. Nonetheless, unfortunately, it seems to be difficult to hope that the reader, who may have already been suffocated by *Native Son*, will read the other works of Richard Wright. Once the reader tries to experience his or her self as an Other to Richard Wright when he or she reads Wright's works, it is very easy to imagine that it would have been almost suffocating for Wright himself to write those works, but still he had to write because to write was the way in which to ex-

press his self to the Other and so live his life. In conclusion, the concept of the Other, one of the key concepts both in existentialism in the sphere of philosophy and in structuralism in the sphere of literary criticism will be very effective in understanding the world of Richard Wright, which is of course his own world, but at the same time ours.

In *White Man, Listen!*, Wright speaks of both his and the reader's attitude of mind in order to understand the operations and structures of the world where Wright and his reader have their existence:

The basic assumption behind all so-called objective attitudes is this: If others care to assume my mental stance and, through empathy, duplicate the atmosphere in which I speak, if they can imaginatively grasp the factors in my environment and a sense of impulses motivating me, they will, if they are of a mind to, be able to see, more or less, what I've seen, will be capable of apprehending the same general aspects and tones of reality that comprise my world, that world that I share daily with all other men. By revealing the assumptions behind my statements, I'm striving to convert you to my outlook, to its essential humaneness, to the generality and reasonableness of my arguments. (77–78)

Unexpectedly, here Richard Wright himself verifies the thesis of this paper; this assertion of Wright's, in fact, will help to make a great step toward conceding the contention and conclusion of this paper. All of the things surrounding Wright's life, literature, and philosophy will be elucidated from the standpoint of the Other, which is organically born of Wright's existentialism. Richard Wright was a writer who knew well that writing was not to form an insouciant relationship with readers as representations of the Other, but to embark on an arduous relationship with them. The greatest act Richard Wright was capable of performing was to praise his life lived together with the Other; in spite of his being aware of the worst forms of existence of life, he made the enormous effort of overcoming them and still found life positive.

It might be supposed that the Other brings about a change in the relationship between Wright and the reader, the change which might be slight but sure, through naturally stimulating the reader to identify himself or herself with one of those Other who undergird both Wright's literary world and his overwhelming self. The formative Other can be a tiny neuron, which will

carry some information of Wright's body, brain, and writings to the reader and enable the reader to rewire parts of the variable relationships between Wright and the reader.

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