

Dale E. PETERSON

RICHARD WRIGHT, 1938–1945: FROM GORKY TO DOSTOEVSKY

Abstract: Richard Wright's infatuation and subsequent disenchantment with Communism occurred within the space of a few years and, significantly, it coincided with a shift of literary affiliation from Gorky to Dostoevsky. Wright experienced a profound identification with the life and writing of Gorky; his early fiction and literary pronouncements emulated Gorky's call to transform peasant souls into proletarian masses. Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, like Gorky's *Childhood*, charts a similar journey away from a native culture of patriarchal violence and maternal suppression. Sometime around 1942 Wright's deep engagement with Dostoevsky led to a rejection of cultural determinism and dialectical materialism. *Native Son*'s black Raskolnikov is akin to the miserable underground man and Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" is akin to that absurd visionary, Dostoevsky's "ridiculous" dreamer. Gorky and Dostoevsky shaped Wright's intellectual journey from proletarian internationalism to the existential humanism of his later works.

Keywords: Richard Wright, Gorky, Dostoevsky, Proletarian fiction; Socialist Realism; Harlem Renaissance; autobiography; existentialism; Dreiser.

© 2017 Dale E. Peterson (PhD, Eliza J. Clark Folger Professor (Emeritus) of English and Russian at Amherst College, Amherst, Mass., USA) depeterson@amherst.edu

Дейл Э. ПЕТЕРСОН

РИЧАРД РАЙТ: ОТ ГОРЬКОГО К ДОСТОЕВСКОМУ (1938–1945 гг.)

Аннотация: Длившиеся несколько лет увлечение Ричарда Райта коммунизмом и последующее постепенное разочарование в нем нашли отражение в смене литературных пристрастий — в движении от Горького к Достоевскому. Раннее творчество Райта свидетельствует о глубинной идентификации с биографией и творчеством Горького; Райт подхватывает призыв Горького к трансформации «крестьянской души» в пролетарское массовое сознание. И автобиографическая книга Райта «Черный», и «Детство» Горького намечают одну и ту же траекторию движения — уход от традиционного патриархального уклада с его деспотизмом и подавлением женского, материнского начала. Начиная с 1942 г. погружение Райта в мир Достоевского привело к отказу от детерминизма и диалектического материализма. Главный персонаж «Сына Америки», этот чернокожий Раскольников, близок к подпольному человеку, а герой «Человека, который жил под землей» — к «смешному мечтателю» Достоевского. Горький и Достоевский определили интеллектуальную и творческую эволюцию Райта — от пролетарского интернационализма к экзистенциализму и трагическому гуманизму, характерному для зрелого периода.

Ключевые слова: Ричард Райт, Горький, Достоевский, пролетарская литература, социалистический реализм, Гарлемский ренессанс, автобиография, экзистенциализм, Драйзер.

© 2017 Дейл Э. Петерсон (PhD, заслуженный профессор Амхерст-колледжа, Амхерст, шт. Массачусетс, США) depeterson@amherst.edu

In an influential article of 1945, Ralph Ellison brought attention to a cultural parallelism between “Richard Wright’s blues” and the antecedent literature of Russian serfdom: “The extent of beatings and psychological maimings meted out by Southern Negro parents rivals those described by the nineteenth-century Russian writers as characteristic of peasant life... The horrible thing is that the cruelty is also an expression of concern, of love... Wright *recognized* and made no peace with its essential cruelty.”¹ Indeed, Wright himself admitted to his intense engagement with Russian writers in an interview with Marcia Minor in 1938: “I take an author, study his works carefully, go into his life with the same thoroughness, follow the way the facts of his life are related to the fiction he created. I have done this with Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Conrad, Turgeniev.”² There is one striking omission, however, in this list of influential predecessors — Maxim Gorky, who was very much present at the dawn of Wright’s own career as a writer.

Young Richard Wright experienced a powerful identification with the life and writing of Gorky. Both were autodidacts raised in an environment only recently risen from bondage and both rejected the vestiges of serfdom in the culture that spawned them. Gorky was, in fact, seminal in the emergence of Richard Wright as a self-proclaimed proletarian writer. Coming to social consciousness in Depression-era Chicago, Wright joined the John Reed Club at the height of the Popular Front campaign. Wright was well aware of Gorky’s legendary life and inspirational example so abundantly promoted in pamphlets, newspaper, and especially in the world-famous autobiography in English translation and in Mark Donskoi’s popular film, *The Childhood of Maxim*.³ It should come as no surprise that Wright’s earliest fiction and literary pronouncements emulated Gorky’s call for the dialectical transformation of suffering peasant souls into militant socialist masses. In his first important manifesto, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright took issue with what he considered the black chauvinism of the Harlem Renaissance:

¹ Ellison, Ralph. “Richard Wright’s Blues,” In Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964: 91.

² Cited in Fabre, Michel. *The World of Richard Wright*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985: 20–21.

³ Gorky’s *Childhood* was translated in 1915 and Donskoi’s film received wide American distribution in 1938. Michel Fabre reports that Gorky left his first *Left Front* editorial meeting in 1933 with numerous articles by Gorky in recent issues of *New Masses* and *International Literature*; Wright’s private library included the 1939 International Publishers edition of Gorky’s literary and political essays, *Culture and the People*. See Fabre’s definitive intellectual biography, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: Morrow, 1973).

Negro writers must accept this nationalism, but only in order to understand it, possess it, and transcend it... a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today... To borrow a phrase from the Russians, it should have a *complex simplicity*.⁴

Very much resembling Gorky's 1934 address to the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, Wright was advocating for a selective integration of "progressive" aspects of folk culture and religion into a consciously fashioned collective myth that would promote a revolutionary attitude toward reality. By 1937, Wright stepped forward as the American Communist Party's most illustrious recruit to the newly established literary standards of proletarian realism.

A revolutionary reconception of Negro spirituals and black Christianity is precisely what distinguished the narrative structure of Wright's first collection of stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*. Soviet reviewers in 1938 were quick to notice the dialectical logic of Wright's story sequence in which each black hero chooses to risk martyrdom in progressively more elevated stages of class consciousness. Moreover, Russian readers correctly noted the unmistakable resemblance of the culminating story's heroine to the title figure in Gorky's prototypical socialist-realist novel, *Mother*.⁵ Both Gorky and Wright strategically embodied the radiant future of proletarian revolution in the prophetic shape of a peasant mother who learns to transform her Christian faith into an earthly vision of socialist solidarity. An' Sue of "Bright and Morning Star," like Gorky's Nilovna, expressed the fondest aspirations of an author who sought to become literary nursemaid to a folk culture which, in his experience, had failed to nurture resistance to oppression.

Gorky and Wright also shared a secret of psychic survival in an environment that militated against uncensored expression of inner emotion and rebellious instinct. That secret was, quite simply, that literature could better offer a lifeline to authentic selfhood than the culture one was born into. Few writers were as eager as Gorky or Wright to testify to the centrality of literature in getting a purchase on life. In the essay, "How I Studied" (1918), Gorky waxed lyrical on the subject:

⁴ Wright, Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *New Challenge* (1937, Fall): 58–60. In the same year, Wright attacked the devices of linguistic evasion and indirect aggression celebrated in Zora Neale Hurston's writing as a shameful continuation of minstrel techniques forced upon the Negro. See "Between Laughter and Tears," *New Masses* (October 5, 1937): 22–25.

⁵ The relevant points were made in early reviews of the Russian translation, "Deti Diadi Toma," by S. Vostokova, *International'naya Literatura* 7 (1938): 281–83 and V. Nevel'skii, *Oktiabr'* 11 (1939): 326–28.

The more I read the closer books bound me to the world and the more vivid and significant life became for me... Like some wondrous birds out of fairy tales, books sang their songs to me and spoke to me as though communing with one languishing in prison; they sang of the variety and richness of life... Each book was my ascent from the brutish to the human.⁶

Literacy for Gorky was the spiritual equivalent of Jacob's Ladder. Wright's testimonial to literature's power is no less enthusiastic, but more prosaic:

I read Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt* and *Sister Carrie* and they revived in me a vivid sense of my mother's suffering; I was overwhelmed... It would have been impossible for me to have told anyone what I derived from these novels, for it was nothing less than a sense of life itself. All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them.⁷

Literary realists of the "slice of life" school are perhaps the greatest believers in the power of books and literacy to free lives from the shackles of a restrictive "real life" environment.

Wright's account of his own life in *Black Boy* (1945) displays an intimate identification with Gorky's life narrative in *Childhood (Detstvo)*. Both writers shared a brutal upbringing and vagabond existence; deprived of fathers, disappointed in mothers, they were shuttled in and out of households dominated by sporadic violence and suffocating piety. Both volumes, as their titles indicate, deliberately expand a personal memoir of formative experience into an exemplary life, charting a pilgrim's progress out of the slough of despond. While it is customary (and appropriate) to read *Black Boy* as a reiteration one hundred years later of Frederick Douglass' prototypical slave narrative of 1845, given its celebration of the rise to literacy of a self-emancipated man, it is no less appropriate to read Wright's autobiography as a work engaged in conscious dialogue with the paradigmatic narrative of proletarian self-development — namely, the work Erik Erikson aptly called "the Bolshevik legend of Maxim Gorky's Youth."⁸ Wright's own description of *Black Boy* in an interview from 1945 accords with Gorky's narrative project:

I wrote the book to tell a series of incidents strung through my childhood, but the main desire was to render a judgment on my environment...

⁶ Gorky, Maxim. *On Literature*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973: 16–17.

⁷ Wright, Richard. *Black Boy* [1945]. New York, Harper, 1989: 274.

⁸ Erik Erikson's essay is included in *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton, 1950: 315–68.

That judgment was this: the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings.⁹

Readers of Gorky's childhood memoir immediately confront, as do Wright's readers, an intimate domestic scene in which maternal discipline stifles a traumatized child. A terrified four-year-old stands before the corpse of his father and witnesses the labor pains of his grieving mother as his grandmother holds him close, stilling his questions and literally cloaking him:

"And why should I shush?"

"Because you are making too much noise," she said, laughing.

The way she spoke was caressing, cheerful, rhythmical. We became firm friends from the first day, but now I wanted her to take me out of that room as soon as possible.¹⁰

Later, at his father's grave, the child and grandmother notice several trapped frogs desperately scrambling to climb out of the rapidly filling pit. "Will the frogs get out?" "No, it's already too late." These early episodes already convey subtle undercurrents of affection and resistance that continue to mark the adult narrator's ambivalent attachment to his birth environment.

Black Boy begins with the stifling of a four-year-old who has been hushed and confined behind the immaculate white curtains of his grandmother's pious home; bored and impatient, he ignites with broomstraws "the hems of the curtains" that separate him from the world outside. Caught, young Richard is severely punished by his mother. He becomes obsessed with a delirious vision of wobbly, udder-like bags hanging above his head threatening to drench him with "some horrible liquid." Wright surely means to evoke both the suffocating protectiveness of "Black Belt" family life and the overhanging spectre of white terror. As in Gorky's *Childhood*, *Black Boy* accumulates a bewildering sequence of traumatic episodes shaped within a larger narrative arc; the child resists the temptation to submit to a domestic culture that cultivates punitive discipline, outbursts of anarchic rage, and a disabling resignation to suffering. Gradually the author's persona withdraws from the coercion and seduction of traditional folk ways and emerges, in premature adolescence, as a rebellious native son.

Despite the generic and structural resemblances in these two exemplary autobiographies, the dominant tone of Wright's narrative is far more alienated from its home culture than anything we find in the

⁹ Cited in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*: 252.

¹⁰ Translations are my own from "Detstvo" in Gorky, A.M. *Sobranie Sochine-nii*. Vol. 9. Moscow: Gosizdat, 1962: 9–166.

recollections of “Maxim the Bitter.” Gorky’s *Childhood* leads toward a necessary, but ambivalent break from traditional peasant culture. No portrait is more revealing than Gorky’s nuanced depiction of his earthy grandmother, Akulina Kashirina. Her zest for life showers the child with gifts of *bliny* and *byliny*, of sweet pancakes and heroic folk tales, to nurture his body and soul. Yet the beautiful images she evokes have a darker tinge. Her luxurious hair becomes a handle for physical abuse by her husband as well as symbol of smothering affection when young Gorky wraps her thick braids around his neck under the spell of her enchanting stories. The traditional culture she imparts is richly endowed with colorful metaphors and lively rhythms of speech that accompany scenes of abuse and passive endurance. The home culture promotes stoic strength in a child of Old Russia, but not active resistance to evil. Despite grandmother’s disapproval, Gorky gravitates toward an ostracized, bookish intellectual who fosters the child’s independent thought. Nonetheless, something of value resides in the folk’s culture of survival.

How different is Wright’s portrayal of his cultural patrimony. Furious to find himself abandoned by a father whose only remaining potency is sexual, young Richard forever associates the paternal image with biological and spiritual hunger. Just as the black matriarchy and its piety fails to provide adequate nurture for defense against Southern racism, so, too, does the male sharecropper fail to lift Southern sons to true manhood. Wright’s valedictory image of his own father is a bitterly antipastoral portrait of a man with a hoe:

I was to see him again, standing alone upon the red clay of a Mississippi plantation, a sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands...though ties of blood made us kin, though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there was an echo of his voice in my voice, we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly different levels of reality. (*Black Boy*, 40)

Black Boy is relentless in its enumeration of the deprivations the future author suffered on home soil. Richard Wright’s account of his literary ascent up from the ignorance and oppression of life in the Black Belt is a far more bleak indictment of the poverty of a native birthright than the bitter wisdom that Maxim Gorky’s *Childhood* imparts. Gorky’s writing did not uproot itself from the vernacular subculture of the historic Russian folk. Gorky may have liberated himself personally from the seductive fatalism and piety of the Russian *narod*, but he continued to believe that selective aspects of the folk’s lore had contributed to his own formation as a young rebel from the banks of the Volga.

Richard Wright's profound alienation from the culture of Southern black folk eventually led to his disenchantment with Gorky's faith in collectivism and social engineering. By 1945, when *Black Boy* was published, Wright had already outgrown his close identification with Gorky and his association with the Communist Party. The years of gradual disaffection after 1938 coincided with Wright's long encounter with Gorky's nemesis, Fyodor Dostoevsky, that "cruel genius" who laid bare the "Oriental passivism" and the "dashing nihilism" of the broad Russian soul.¹¹ As early as 1927 Wright had read *Poor Folk* in Memphis and we know that he avidly pursued the works and biography of Dostoevsky in Chicago's libraries and bookstores; indeed, he reread analytically with his Brooklyn friend, Jane Newton, all the major Dostoevsky novels while at work on *Native Son*.¹²

Commentators have long acknowledged that *Native Son* is more like an American *Crime and Punishment* than an exemplary proletarian novel, even though it does contain a lengthy Marxist rationale for antisocial behavior.¹³ Wright's portrait of a black Raskolnikov seems, however, to be a radical revision of Dostoevsky's psychological and spiritual understanding of homicidal violence and human culpability. At first glance, the parallels between the intellectual Raskolnikov and inarticulate Bigger Thomas apply more to the plotting than to the deep content of the novels. In each, a young ghetto dweller is humiliated by a social position which renders him impotent to alleviate family suffering. The daily frustration of a conflict between altruistic and egoistic impulses creates suppressed rage and a pretense of indifference. Gradually, a hidden determination to take willed action against injustice forms. But when the occasion to deliver a lethal blow arises, that blow falls by reflex action, conditioned by contingent circumstances and internalized fear. Ironically, a second, unintended victim is struck as a consequence of the murderer's compulsion to hide from exposure. Both Raskolnikov and Bigger suffer a lacerated psyche, torn between

¹¹ Cited from a letter of December 16, 1911 to Professor Ovsianiko-Kulikovsky in Maksim Gorky, *Selected Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997): 160. See also Peace, Richard A. "Some Dostoevskian Themes in the Work of Maksim Gorky," *Dostoevsky Studies* 8 (1987): 143–54 for a survey of Gorky's antagonistic and conflicted response to his predecessor.

¹² Michel Fabre has followed the chronology and sequence of Wright's Dostoevsky readings in several of his books; see especially *The World of Richard Wright*: 20–21 and *Unfinished Quest*: 170–71.

¹³ Magistrale, Tony. "From St. Petersburg to Chicago: Wright's 'Crime and Punishment'." *Comparative Literature Studies* 23 (1986): 59–69 offers a parallel reading that, unfortunately, is marred by a specious claim that Bigger Thomas and Raskolnikov undergo "similar moral awakenings" and growth toward reconciliation with their fate.

an impulse to disclaim a shameful deed or to claim it proudly as a voluntary transgression, a sign of autonomy. Each novel exposes to public view a representative social pathology and concludes by staging a show trial. The question posed by each novel is: “Who or what is responsible for the brutal crime so typical of our society?”

Ultimately, it matters that the ambiance predisposing Raskolnikov to commit a crime is a cultural ideology of heroic self-assertion whereas Bigger is cornered into murderous violence when he internalizes and reacts to a racist presumption that he is bestial. The Russian suffers from the societal affliction of a superhuman idea while the American black man suffers from the societal infliction of a subhuman self-image. Nonetheless, both victims are also victimizers and each novel explores in depth a variety of discourses that compete to resolve a complex case.

Richard Wright’s copy of *Crime and Punishment* was dog-eared to mark Chapter 5 of Part IV, the chapter in which Raskolnikov has his first interview with the cunning prosecutor, Porfiry Petrovich.¹⁴ In a display of enmity masked as friendship, Porfiry sets his trap:

“But how did I treat you just now, I, the examining lawyer? Prompting you and giving you every means for your defense: illness, I said, delirium, injury, melancholy... Though, indeed, all those psychological means of defense are not very reliable and cut both ways.”¹⁵

Similarly, Bigger’s eloquent defense attorney, Boris Max, ensnares him in a determinism which his client desperately seeks to escape. The line of argument Raskolnikov and Bigger would prefer is quite different; they could live with their acts, however deplorable, if they could be convinced that the alleged crime was a voluntary act of self-determination. In a profound and, I believe, deliberate irony, Wright enlists Bigger’s Communist attorney to perform unwittingly the same function as Dostoevsky’s sly prosecutor. In both novels, the legal arguments serve as a catalyst to the injured pride of the criminal, prodding him to claim a specious, self-deluding responsibility for a tragic destiny in which he has at most colluded. As early as 1940, Wright understood that an identity shaped by reaction is less than wholly autonomous.

¹⁴ Fabre, Michel. *Richard Wright: Books and Writers*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990: 39.

¹⁵ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment* [1923], transl. Constance Garnett. New York: Random, 1950: 350. Cited from the Constance Garnett translation Wright read; although his library copy was apparently purchased after 1943, it is reasonable to assume he was making note of a place he flagged in many previous readings of the novel.

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright gradually gives Bigger Thomas his own voice to express the lived panic and reactive aggression of a black boy from the urban underclass. When this occurs, Wright's novel dares something new in the literature of proletarian protest. Bigger voices the interiority of cultural inferiority in a language that does justice to the inarticulate outrage of the "uncultured." In effect, Wright's black Raskolnikov neither repents nor relents; instead, he rattles the bars of his cage and seeks, for the first time, to make outsiders hear his paradoxical rumblings. Not by accident Bigger's voice echoes the puzzled and tortured introspection heard in Dostoevsky's "underground." Like his Russian precursor, Bigger vacillates between seeking acceptance or rejection from those who claim to understand him. Both of these unhappy beings acknowledge having transgressed and violated a better inner self, but they enter conflicting pleas in extenuation of their crimes. One plea asks compassion for enacting society's low estimate of the natural self: "They wouldn't let me... [be good]". The other plea solicits respect for a necessary act of self-assertion: "It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something."¹⁶ The moral reality of the punished criminal is a human conundrum, not a sociological formula.

Richard Wright's defection from the optimistic teleology of Gorky's faith in historical materialism is best captured in the work that coincided with his break from Communism and his turn toward a Dostoevskian despair: "The Man Who Lived Underground."¹⁷ A deliberately literal-minded realization of the "underground" metaphor, Wright's title alludes to Dostoevsky's anti-hero, but also signals a revision of the Russian prototype. Whereas Bigger Thomas was closely akin to the underground man's divided psyche, Wright's man who lived underground is more closely related to the desperate visionary who emerges from the final pages of Dostoevsky's "Dream of a Ridiculous Man."¹⁸ Indeed, Wright seems to be experimenting with a new genre beyond protest literature, choosing a protagonist who embodied something beyond proletarian brotherhood. Remarkably, the Negro identity of the narrator only becomes evident after twenty pages that relate the Kafka-like ordeal of an anonymous innocent enmeshed in a

¹⁶ Wright, Richard, *Native Son* [1940]. New York: Harper, 1989: 388, 392.

¹⁷ Originally a short novel rejected by Harper & Brothers, it first appeared in two brief excerpts in *Accent* (Spring, 1942) before being published in novella form in the 1944 anthology titled *Cross Section*. My citations are taken from the posthumous collection: Wright, Richard. *Eight Men*. Cleveland: World, 1961: 27–92.

¹⁸ Dostoevsky's parable of 1877 was available in the well-known Macmillan series of Constance Garnett translations. My citations are from the volume titled *An Honest Thief and Other Stories*. New York: Macmillan, 1923, the English text Wright was most likely to have read.

dark labyrinth. In flight after making a forced confession to a murder he didn't commit, Fred Daniels has no recourse except to disappear down a "manhole" into a sewer system, a refuge he refers to as his "cave." Wright's black protagonist has been flushed with other refuse into a black hole of non-existence, yet Wright is simultaneously constructing a parody of the Platonic cave in which an ordinary man is privileged to see darkly reflections of a higher world. Ultimately, like Dostoevsky's "ridiculous" dreamer, Fred Daniels experiences a sudden conversion from radical alienation to a quixotic compassion for the absurd human condition.

Fred Daniels' story enacts the unsponsored "thrownness" of human existence; he is thrust into an underground life that is linked to, but separate from the institutions of civic life. Life in the underground offers Daniels an exhilarating, but frightening liberation from the constraints of civilized behavior. He is free to ignore the attachments and values that regulate the social consensus above ground; having no status to maintain, he is able to move with dream-like impunity in and out of human lives, spying on the delusions and trivial pursuits of those ignorant of the sewer below. Daniels raids the world above to decorate his cave with meaningless dollars and diamonds oblivious of guilt or blame cast on others. Among other things, Wright is surely creating a parable that illustrates the carnivalesque glee of the dispossessed who are free to play with the commodities, the "serious toys" of symbolic power. At the same time, Daniels is also in the lion's den of a cruel, indifferent universe, overwhelmed by the awareness that also torments Dostoevsky's despairing dreamer: *'nothing in the world mattered'* (308). Daniels has stood by helplessly watching a baby's body swirl with excrement in the sewer, "feeling that he had been staring for all eternity at the ripples of veined water skimming impersonally over the shriveled limbs" (34).

Eventually, the spectacle of his lawless existential freedom induces in Daniels a moral vertigo that is expressed in recognizably Dostoevskian language:

Maybe *anything's* right, he mumbled... He straightened with a start. What was happening to him? He was drawn to these crazy thoughts, yet they made him feel vaguely guilty. (64)

Having experienced the imaginative riot the mind unleashes when "all is permissible," Wright's underground man, like Dostoevsky's desperate dreamer of a corrupted Edenic innocence, feels compelled to emerge from his manhole and preach an absurd truth, much like Father Zosima's admonition: "Each is responsible for everyone and everything." Daniels' radical alienation from an unjust world has produced first rage then a compassion that belies his detachment from fellow

beings. Ultimately he speaks of universal guilt and dreams of a higher harmony than existence allows. Both Dostoevsky and Wright leave their readers with the uncomfortable paradox of a saving word that cannot be tolerated by religious or legal norms of justice. An indiscriminate compassion for all humanity in its guilty separation from a universal harmony is absurd. Dostoevsky's ridiculous man preaches despite knowing his dream cannot be translated into adequate words. And Fred Daniels is driven back down into his dark cave by a policeman named Law/son who murders him: "You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things" (92).

Richard Wright's long journey from Gorky to Dostoevsky, from proletarian internationalism to existential humanism was accomplished in a few brief years. Wright could not find support for his painful self-awareness in black nationalism or in historical determinism. Like Gorky he was the child of a folk who had recently risen from bondage. And like Gorky, he denied that human dignity could be adequately nurtured by the insular vernacular subculture of former serfs and slaves. In his courageous battle to express the full extent of his revolt against cultural determinism, Wright first identified with the promise of a colorblind proletarian revolution and then, disenchanted with the shallow psychology of class-consciousness, he risked a leap of faith in an inalienable, essential humanity that transcended the proudly erected walls of racial, class, and gender identity. Sometime around 1942 Wright's reading of Dostoevsky led him to a visionary intuition of man's essence that prefigured the existential humanism of his expatriate years in France. Russian writers were powerfully present in the background of Wright's intellectual evolution. A heroic figure of resistance to cultural marginalization, Richard Wright walked in tandem with Gorky and Dostoevsky while also remaining an exemplary African American soul.

REFERENCES

- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment* [1923], transl. Constance Garnett. New York: Random, 1950.
- Dostoevsky, F.M. *An Honest Thief and Other Stories*, transl. C. Garnett. New York: Macmillan, 1923: 307–25.
- Ellison, Ralph, "Richard Wright's Blues." In Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964.
- Erikson, Erik. *Childhood and Society*. New York, Norton, 1950: 315–68.
- Fabre, Michel. *Richard Wright: Books and Writers*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.
- Fabre, Michel. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. New York: Morrow, 1973.
- Fabre, Michel. *The World of Richard Wright*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1985.

- Gorky, A.M. "Detstvo." In Gorky, A.M. *Sobranie Sochinenii*. Vol. 9. Moscow: Gosizdat, 1962: 9–166.
- Gorky, Maxim. *On Literature*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973.
- Gorky, Maksim. *Selected Letters*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Magistrale, Tony. "From St. Petersburg to Chicago: Wright's 'Crime and Punishment'," *Comparative Literature Studies* 23 (1986): 59–69.
- Nevel'skii, V. "Deti Diadi Toma," *Oktiabr'* 11 (1939): 326–28.
- Peace, Richard A. "Some Dostoevskian Themes in the Work of Maksim Gorky," *Dostoevsky Studies* 8 (1987): 143–54.
- Vostokova, S. "Deti Diadi Toma," *International'naya Literatura* 7 (1938): 281–83.
- Wright, Richard. "Between Laughter and Tears." *New Masses* (1937, Oct. 5): 22–25.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy* [1945]. New York, Harper, 1989.
- Wright, Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing." *New Challenge* (1937, Fall): 58–60.
- Wright, Richard. "The Man Who Lived Underground." In Wright, Richard. *Eight Men*. Cleveland: World, 1961: 27–92.
- Wright, Richard. *Native Son* [1940]. New York: Harper, 1989.

MELUS

Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States



The World, The Multi-Ethnic Text, and the Critic

VOLUME 42, NUMBER 3

FALL 2017

MELUS is a prestigious and rigorous journal in the field of multi-ethnic literature of the United States, and has been a vital resource for scholarship and teaching for more than forty years. Published quarterly, MELUS illuminates the national, international, and transnational contexts of US ethnic literature.

Articles in MELUS also engage newly emerging art forms such as graphic narrative and internet blogs, as well as multi-ethnic film, history, and culture.



Forms of Citizenship and Belonging

VOLUME 42, NUMBER 1

SPRING 2017



New Perspectives on Puerto Rican, Latina/o, Chicana/o, and Caribbean American Literatures

VOLUME 38, NUMBER 2

SUMMER 2013



Questions of Legibility

VOLUME 42, NUMBER 2

SUMMER 2017



Space, Land, and the Global Environment of Ethnicity

VOLUME 36, NUMBER 3

FALL 2013

The journal is sponsored by the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States. Founded in 1973, the society endeavors to expand the definition of American literature through the study and teaching of Latina/o American, Native American, African American, Asian and Pacific American, and ethnically specific Euro-American literaryworks, their authors, and their cultural contexts. Learn more and subscribe at: bit.ly/MELUS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

MELUS