chapter nine

Bigger Thomas:
Escape into the Labyrinth

“Sometimes, in his own room or on the sidewalk, the world seemed to him a strange labyrinth.”
The condition of the black man in America in the last three hundred years has been one of perennial escape, either geographically, as in Jim’s escape in *Huckleberry Finn*, or spiritually, through the church or away from the law. Only in recent years has the black American chosen to confront his (and white America’s) problems head-on, no matter how painful the encounter. In Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), we are shown the life of the black man in microcosm, when that life had begun to converge on a point that brought two irreconcilables together: abject docility and explosive rebellion. As for the latter—to paraphrase a slogan of a generation ago, it is better to die fighting on your feet than to live a slave on your knees—the implied slogan of today’s black liberation movement makes an even more specific appeal: it is better to stand and fight for your human rights than to escape into the old condition—even at the cost of life itself.

Heretofore, all of the escapes we have discussed have been from country to city, from village to town, and from rivers to Alpine countries and territories ahead. But for Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Wright’s *Native Son*, escape takes place within the urban labyrinth that has come to be called the black ghetto. In effect, his escape has been blocked; it is doomed to failure even before it begins. In this sense *Native Son* is one of the few purely naturalistic novels that contains within it a strong escape motif. There are others—the novels of Dreiser, Norris, and Crane; but in them the escape is an ancillary rather than a major motif.

Yet *Native Son* is only superficially an escape novel in the usual sense—a novel in which the hero sets out on a geographical journey or quest in order to leave behind an untenable situation for one that promises improvement. At a deeper level, Bigger Thomas’s escape—what there is of it—is an escape into the subterranean side of his own nature, an exploration
into his own inner "heart of darkness," which has brought on the implosion of rage, and which finally explodes in an act of violence perpetrated on a world that Bigger has justifiably come to hate.

The opening scene of the novel is set in an urban tenement—a setting that could hardly be more appropriate for an act of escape—as distinct from those bucolic and semibuộcic landscapes where most of the escapes dealt with in this study have taken place. This is the scene where the rat—that repulsive symbol of daily (and nightly!) life in the black ghetto—appears. The rat itself almost arouses our sympathy, as Bigger, who attempts to trap and kill him, will later arouse a similar compassion. However, the rat, as despicable as he is, is still a living thing. As such, if he merits revulsion, he also merits compassion; for not unexpectedly, both Bigger and the rat are (in the naturalistic mode) "victims of circumstance," inheritors of a "world they never made," blind creatures, threshing against an inscrutable force that would destroy them both, a world they would happily escape from given the opportunity. Of course, the rat of Book I will become Bigger himself. For like that rat, he too is trapped, in the first and in the last instance. Trapped as he is, however, he will try to escape his predetermined fate; and like the rat, he too will be destroyed by a frightened, uncomprehending (white) world.

What are some of the impelling and compelling forces that drive Bigger into choosing the futile path of this form of escape? For one thing—implicitly and later explicitly—Bigger is in revolt, not only against the white world but against his family—his younger brother, his sister, and his religious mother, the last of whom represents the escapism of resignation to her centuries-old condition of chattel and psychological slavery. All embody for Bigger the sordid tenement life he dreams of escaping. The dream, however, remains well within
the province of dream, since at this time in his country and the country's social development, a more viable, constructive escape for a black man was out of the question.

One occupational hazard of urban life is boredom. "Nothing ever happens," Bigger complains early in the book. And it is partly the escape from boredom that Bigger not only wants but needs; yet the movies he goes to from time to time in order to escape that boredom—they are fantasies in themselves, representing, as they do, the lives of an idle white elite rather than the lives of most white people—only act as temporary, ultimately unsatisfactory anodynes. For movies are a poor substitute for a more concrete, happier reality; silver screen projections are no more realizable in life than are Theron Ware's yacht-filled fantasies.

The impulses toward violence within Bigger are already apparent in Book I ("Fear"). At first we see the manifestation of those impulses in the pleasure he takes in killing the rat—certainly one of a number of displacements of his hostility toward the larger world. Here, unlike his status in that world, he is master of the situation; he it is who arrogates to himself the power of a god to deal out death. Then there is the attack on a member of his own gang, Gus, in which Bigger manipulates Gus as a ventriloquist would a rag doll. In these two scenes we are aware of Bigger's rage bubbling to the surface in what might have been considered (in the ghetto of the 1930s) a calculated though "acceptable" minor explosion for the white society to absorb. After all, he assaults "only" another black man—all too reminiscent of Huck's reply when asked by Aunt Sally if anyone had been hurt by the boiler explosion aboard a river steamboat: "No'm. Killed a nigger." In each case the rage and the violence that stem from it are unrestrained. But even these are insufficient to provide a complete release for Bigger's surge toward freedom. Unhappily for Bigger—and
others—that freedom can only be found in the killing of a white woman. Bigger is not so naïve as to think he has the ghost of a chance of escaping the inevitable guilty death-penalty verdict of an all-white jury if he is tried and caught. Yet when the time comes to face that alternative, he is willing to accept the consequences of his act—as “willing” that is, as one can be under such circumstances. Bigger, of course, wants no more to die than does anyone else; but he has been placed in a position where he would rather die than continue the death-farce that is called his “life.” He is Camus’s stranger, though without the degree of self-knowledge that Meursault is eventually granted for a fleeting moment before his end.

Bigger’s escape is not just from the scene of his crime. When the time comes for his flight, a realization dawns: “It was familiar, this running away. All his life he had been knowing that sooner or later something like this would come to him. And now, here it was. He had always felt outside of this white world, and now it was true. It made things simple” (pp. 187–88).

As for Bigger’s mother’s escapism into religious fundamentalism, even before the novel opens, Bigger has already rejected it. Like Huck Finn, who also felt “there ain’t nothing to it,” Bigger is too involved in the realities of the present to embrace either his mother’s brand of religion or that other, secular, messianic “by-and-by,” Jan Erlone’s communism—the very catalyst that brought the seeds of Bigger’s fruitless rebellion to life.  

Bigger’s girl Bessie is somewhat more realistic in terms of their short-range goals; she recognizes that their blackness makes it virtually impossible for them to escape either the ghetto or their condition. However, as part of his escape fantasy, Bigger resorts to the possibility of extorting ransom money—ten thousand dollars—from the parents of the dead
Mary Dalton. But even if Bigger manages to pull off the ransom plan—extremely unlikely under the circumstances—his escape would only be an escape from one ghetto into another. In contrast, the high point of Bigger's substantive escape (as distinct from his fantasies) is his mental and metaphysical condition, which parallels that of John Andrews in Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*. Like Andrews in the earlier novel—there may have been some influence on Wright here—Bigger never feels so free as he does in the hours just prior to his capture, even though he knows the inevitability and imminence of his end.

Bigger's early fantasies, then, may correctly be called fantasies of escapism, as distinguished from true escape; the former are almost purely composed of daydreams with no resultant action, whereas the latter, as we have suggested elsewhere, leads to an action, even if it has been preceded by well-thought-out "daydreams" (abstract, rather than concrete, plans). One of these fantasies—over which Bigger and his pool-hall companions have some fun—lies in Bigger's imitation of whites in strategic positions of power most whites do not enjoy. Among these are the president of the United States; an army general; J. P. Morgan playing the stocks or, more likely, manipulating and buying them. All of these in a sense are Shrike-like suggestions (as in the false opportunities for escape set forth by the character Shrike in Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*). Bigger, however, has the satisfaction of play-acting, of "having fun," or poking fun at the white world that has cheated the black man out of his share of these perquisites. This is one way—a relatively harmless way—of getting back at the world without being taken to task for those antics by that world.

Bigger's fantasies of "escape" take a number of other forms: one of these lies in the pool hall and the gang he hangs out with there; another lies, as already suggested, in the movies he goes
to see rather regularly: "In a movie he could dream without effort; all he had to do was lean back in a seat and keep his eyes open" (p. 12). That is, the darkened theater becomes an opiate of forgetfulness for Bigger, a comfortable womb where he can enjoy a state of near oblivion. A third lies in his dreams of making money through petty burglary and, ultimately, armed robbery. One of these fantasies concerns something that Bigger knows he will never have the opportunity to try: fly an airplane that skywrites, like the one he sees doing that job in the early part of the novel. The sky-writing plane becomes for him a symbol of the unattainable freedom he craves but will never enjoy. Given the plight of the overwhelmingly vast majority of black people in the 1930s—and for that matter, many whites in that time of widespread economic distress—it is highly doubtful that Bigger will ever seriously be able to entertain that ambition. Thus, Bigger can never make this kind of escape a consequential act, except in the fantasy of escapism. And when he does make his lunge into flight, we know that his flight (from his pursuers and the law) and escape are not necessarily synonymous in Bigger's case; that unlike such flights (from the law) as Tom Joad's, Bigger's is hopeless. For when Joad escapes, it is from one reality into another, no matter how hard or undesirable that second reality is. Tom, in that final escape of his, has a sense of mission—to lift up his people. Bigger's "escapes" (before they turn into concrete flight) are largely from harsh fact into euphoric fantasy. One reason that Bigger's escape can never be as effective as Joad's is our knowledge that

Bigger cannot "escape," as Tom Joad can, for he cannot find the community which the Joads discover on the road. The only community he faces is a machine-like mob, white and black.³

Bigger's attempt to escape his trap comes up against a wall of frustration that separates him from wider opportunities and
the possibility of a way out: “But what could he do? Each time he asked himself that question his mind hit a blank wall and he stopped thinking” (p. 11). The way out is constantly blocked: to be a flyer one must be white. To do anything outside the role his society has assigned to him, he has to be white.

Another symbol of freedom, as unattainable as flying an airplane, is the pigeon Bigger watches early in the novel, which, like the airplane, can also fly. Free as a bird is no idle phrase for Bigger, for this bird, like the plane, represents another kind of freedom to Bigger, notwithstanding the fact that both bird and plane are themselves subject to the laws of gravity and aerodynamics. Of course, Bigger’s sense of the symbolic, if it is not subtle, is certainly not designed to place any restrictions (physical or spiritual) on what he feels to be the freedom others enjoy.

Although Bigger is not overly enthusiastic at being hired as a chauffeur by the Dalton family, he takes the job, for the relief agency has confronted him with the certainty of having his family cut off relief if he refuses. However, as coercive as it is, this may be a kind of provisional escape from the ghetto—a room of his own in the huge house of a wealthy white family. Yet that escape is always provisional, never complete. The white world—the Dalton house, the luxury of that house, its neighborhood—is an incomprehensible and threatening world to Bigger; it makes him feel vulnerable and exposed, even though the Dalton’s are supposed to be in favor of improving the lot of the black man. In short, the ghetto is ambiguously both trap and womb, offering imprisonment and superficial security.

Bigger’s act of murder is itself the climax of Bigger’s true escape, even though, paradoxically, it is the initial step of his escape too. In the works discussed previously, the climax takes place with the decision to escape and the escaper acting on that decision. In Bigger’s case the climax to the escape comes before
any concrete plan for escape has been worked out, or even before the actual escape itself. The climax of the escape actually lies in the murder of the Dalton girl, even before Bigger flees—indeed, the actual flight itself is muted, presented in low key, played down. True, a paradox of sorts. Yet unlike the flight that follows the act of violence and the built-in fantasies that are born in Bigger as a result of the flight, the killing of Mary Dalton, a white woman, is itself a psychologically liberating act for Bigger:

His act of murder seems to him to have released immense potentialities that had lain imprisoned within his personality. While he is actually running away from pursuit in desperation, he conceives himself to be a Tamburlaine capable of reducing the whole world to the prostrate state it had imposed upon him and he has now escaped. He seems now to be flying the forbidden airplane above a remote and impotent world.4

In short, the act of murder itself has become the liberative trigger mechanism of his escape, and thus a climax to it too.

After Mary Dalton’s murder, Bigger talks to Bessie about the possibility of leaving town with the hoped-for ransom money. He offers to split the swag with her if she will help him in his bid for freedom. However, assuming that they manage to make good on their (actually Bigger’s) ransom plans, and are relatively successful in fleeing the immediate locality, Bigger’s escape, ultimately, can only be an escape to the edge of the ghetto, not beyond it. In the ghetto there is a sort of security (weak as that security is) in relative anonymity; beyond the pale of the ghetto, he would be exposed to an even greater vulnerability than he is within the ghetto—as Yakov Bok, in Bernard Malamud’s *The Fixer*, discovers under similar circumstances but, of course, for other reasons. Yet his escape, even within the ghetto, can only be, like the
ghetto itself, labyrinthine. It will turn out to be nothing more than an escape from one dead end to another, inasmuch as another ghetto would not be much more secure than his present one. The real escape of Bigger finally lies in his existential act of double murder. If Mary Dalton's murder was an ambiguous act, almost accidental in its lack of planning, cold intention, and execution, then the murder of Bessie comes within the wider province of cold choice—that is, the rationalization is present in Bigger that Bessie will be a drag on any effort he might make to get far enough away; that, in fact, she would be more hindrance than help. Thus, he must get rid of her before she can talk. This is the critical act that reinforces Bigger's existential sense of freedom. Like Camus's rebel, he too acts to counter society's "no" with his own. Thus:

Out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him a queer sense of power. He had done this. He had brought all this about. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply. (p. 203)

Yet this escape through violence is self-defeating—obviously! As Robert Bone puts it, it is "an escape that never really gets beyond the perimeters of the Black ghetto." Yet Bigger's rebellion may be traced back immediately to the discrepancy between Bigger's half-believed-in dreams and the reality his society offers him. As Albert Camus sees it, "The spirit of rebellion can exist only in a society where a theoretical equality conceals great factual inequalities." Concludes Camus: "With rebellion, awareness [i.e., sight] is born."

To turn to the visual metaphor, often noted in the critical literature on *Native Son*, the others in this tragedy of multi-dimensional blindness are blind too—either literally, as in
Mrs. Dalton's case, or figuratively, as in the instances of Mary Dalton, Jan Erlone her friend, and even the more socially aware Communist defense lawyer, Max. All “see” Bigger through their own astigmatic vision of life, which in the crisis proves to be totally inadequate for an analysis of Bigger’s rage and the hang-ups that make for it. Even Max, who perhaps comes closer than the others to something of an answer to Bigger’s enigma—his Marxist view of the part that social and economic determinism plays—does not even touch the ancillary but equally important psychopathological problems that impel Bigger to become the thing that society has made of him and that sooner or later society must confront if it hopes to save not just its Biggers but itself. The liberation that Bigger experiences by his “rebellion” (i.e., the murder of two women) is not quite the expression of revolutionary insurgence—at least in terms of Old Left theory as distinct from New Left practice—that even Max the (Old Left) Communist lawyer had bargained for; liberation, in the parlance of the time, should primarily liberate the “masses,” not the self. In the logic of the revolutionary ethos (of the thirties), by participating in the liberation of the masses, one ultimately liberates oneself. Again, in dealing with the rebellion of the individual, which hardly cleaves to any party line, Camus puts it this way: “Rebellion breaks the seal and allows the whole being to come into play. It liberates stagnant waters and turns them into a raging torrent.”

Thus, Bigger's rebellion not only liberates him psychologically but gives him a sense of possibility—dubious though that sense is—that nothing else can. Further, Bigger resembles Camus’s rebel far more than he does Frantz Fanon’s conscious (or class-conscious) colonial rebel. For “up to this point he [the rebel] has at least remained silent and has abandoned himself to the form of despair in which a condition is accepted even though it is considered unjust.” The rebel is
not rebelling against what James Baldwin has called a "previous condition"; he is attempting to escape it. Bigger's escape (or rebellion)—the two are used interchangeably here—may be thought of as coming within the metaphysically existential province of choice, although Wright, at the time he wrote the book, probably did not consciously or deliberately conceive of Bigger in those terms. Certainly, Bigger himself does not think of escape, consciously or otherwise, in those terms.

After Bigger takes the plunge into violence, Chicago's South Side becomes for him a labyrinth—Wright's word—from which there is no egress. Almost before he makes his first bid for freedom, he knows, more instinctively than rationally, that there is no true or lasting escape for him. Like the rat in the book's first pages, Bigger is trapped—except that he is no rat but a human being caught in the grip of circumstances in a world he might have shared were life ordered in some other, more equitable way:

He could not leave Chicago; all roads were blocked, and all trains, buses and autos were being stopped and searched.

He was trapped. He would have to get out of this building. But where would he go? (p. 208)

Trapped. There is an irony here, since even the more familiar and innocuous amusement park labyrinth (or maze) has a way out, as well as a way in, assuming that one does not panic and disorient himself in the process of finding it. In Bigger's instance, the "escape" itself finally ends by becoming Bigger's greatest trap. Indeed—and it is doubtful how consciously aware Bigger is of this—if he would escape from the labyrinth of the city and society, he must first escape from the labyrinth of his own mind. But when he "blows his mind," as the saying has it, he has temporarily found an escape of sorts. However, even that
escape demands murder rather than creation; an act of despera-
tion rather than an act of imagination. Mary Dalton may have
been a crude do-gooder, a guilt-ridden liberal-turned-fellow-
traveler and later Communist, even a stupidly blind representa-
tive of the exploitative society. But apart from her naïveté
and her innocence, she is not so evil or so hypocritical that she
deserves to suffer violent death for that lack at the hands of a
victim, even though in her bumbling, good-intentioned (but
blind) way, she was trying to help that victim.

The buildings in the black ghetto where Bigger hopes to hide
out are more than just a symbolic labyrinth from which he
comes, and from which he hopes to escape: “There were many
empty buildings with black windows, like blind eyes, buildings
like skeletons standing with snow on their bones in the winter
winds” (pp. 147–48; italics added). But Wright moves be-
yond the image of the labyrinth to the city as jungle. In the
scene where Bessie desperately tries to get him to decide on
where they should hide, Bigger suggests they occupy one of the
condemned tenement houses. “There’s plenty of ’em,” he tells
her. “It’ll be like hiding in a jungle” (p. 193). Thus, the urban
escape turns into an escape from the twentieth century itself.
The escape here has mythic overtones—an escape into a Congo
of the soul, a kind of Emperor Jones fantasy of man attempting
to escape the very fate he has already set in motion. Yet the
abiding and overarching image is that of escape into a city
that is already “like a jungle”—or a labyrinth.

After his discovery, Bigger jumps from rooftop to rooftop
in his attempt to evade his pursuers, dodging behind chimneys
—all part of the experience of a man caught in a labyrinth. For
the urban labyrinth is only an extension of the ghetto labyrinth,
the ghetto itself a microcosm of the larger labyrinthine world
of the city. “History has many cunning passages, contrived
corridors,” says T. S. Eliot in “Gerontion,” and Bigger finds
this to be true of the city and the ghetto that are at once his life and symbolic of it. That is, like history's "cunning passages"—something also created by men—so the labyrinth contains within it the cruelly deceptive suggestion of hope for a way out.

Blindness itself is a labyrinth, or symbol of it. We might start with Mrs. Dalton's literal (and symbolic) blindness, which precipitates Bigger's first panicky act and extends all the way through to the other characters: Mr. Dalton is blindly philanthropic toward the very black man he exploits by overcharging his victims for the rat-infested tenements that they inhabit and that he owns; Jan Erlone and Mary Dalton are each blind in their own way as to what and who Bigger Thomas is or represents; certainly, the vigilante-like mob that roars for Bigger's life outside the jailhouse is blind with hatred—not so much of Bigger but of what he, in their hate-filled minds, represents for them; and Max, the Communist lawyer, is blind because all he can see in Bigger is the victim victimized by his society. Were the scales lifted from Max's eyes, he would be shocked—as he eventually is—to learn that Bigger's one exalted moment of freedom was that point in time when he had truly escaped the trammels of his society by destroying the person who represented the double standard and ambiguity of that society.

Even in the ghetto, Bigger cannot seem to escape the Daltons, who own the very tenement house Bigger lives in with his mother, brother, and sister. There (in the ghetto) he is trapped, finally, irrevocably:

He looked round the street and saw a sign on a building: THIS PROPERTY IS MANAGED BY THE SOUTH SIDE REAL ESTATE COMPANY. He paid eight dollars a week for one rat-infested room. He had never seen Mr. Dalton until he had come to work for him; his mother always took the
rent to the real estate office. Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god. He owned property all over the Black Belt. Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot. (p. 148)

Finally, the labyrinth Bigger tries to escape from is more than the city; it is a condition—of his mind, of his inarticulateness, which, like the city itself, creates a labyrinth of its own.

In the manhunt for Bigger—another route Wright's naturalism takes—one senses that this is no hunt for a man but for an animal. Once the hunt gets under way, Bigger acts impulsively, from fear. Fear, which precedes escape, now builds to, and impels, that escape—takes it over, as it were. In almost every plan of escape discussed previously—and they have all virtually been prototypical escapes—there is at least some vague plan on the part of the escaper; even Lieutenant Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, though initially impelled by fear of the Italian military police, knows, when he thinks things over in retrospect, that he will be on his way to Milan, away from the war—a plan that he vaguely senses will eventually lead him out of Italy itself. Bigger has no such plan or even a hope for one—for where would he go? Fear is the governing agency, to the extent that it eliminates rationality and puts in its place the kind of fantasizing that has led him into his impasse in the first place. Thus, his fear and anger, and the fantasy that grows out of them, are, before and after the climactic escape, the moving forces of Bigger's life.

As the police dragnet tightens around Bigger's hideout—"Surround the block," yells one of his pursuers—the pursuers themselves become animals—predators—stalking prey rather than game. As they move in for the kill, they themselves seem hostile to law, peace, and order. Their "shouts of wild joy"
sound strangely incongruous for these appointed (or self-ap-pointed?) defenders of the public weal. Like Bigger's, their feelings also seem to be a blend of fear, hatred, and sadism, so that they are white doubles, as it were, to Bigger. Where Bigger fears whiteness, these "guardians of the law" fear blackness. The difference between them and Bigger, however, is essentially one of status rather than personality or motivation. But for his color, Bigger might easily have found himself among the hunters rather than in the (black) skin of the hunted.

After he murders Bessie, Bigger's consciousness of whiteness becomes overwhelming. He observes that the streets are covered with a thick blanket of snow. But white does not only describe the non-color of snow; it is the color of the larger world beyond the ghetto, a world against which Bigger, like an unprepared fighting cock, has been pitted. He now sees whiteness all about him: in the blur of the blizzard, in Mary Dalton's mother, in the white cat in the Dalton household, omnipresent like Poe's black cat and possibly serving a similar sense of foreboding. And, finally, the whiteness is there in the faces of real enemies and would-be friends. What we have here is the reverse image of Melville's "power of blackness ten times black" made over into its white counterpart, for after Bessie's murder, whiteness for Bigger is something to run from, no matter in what shape or form it comes.

In the act of running away, Bigger learns that the white world, as symbolized by the snow-blanketed streets, is everywhere—that wherever he runs, he will be brought up short, confronted by the very world he is trying to flee. In sum, for Bigger, there is no way of escaping the white world short of death.

Where the other escapers in this study have used flight as a means of escaping untenable situations, flight for Bigger becomes more than a means; it is an end, whose purpose is to
break through the mask of unreal reality—to break through one’s existence as a "cipher," as Robert Bone calls Bigger, in order that he may find himself as a man and as an individual. Says Bone:

[Bigger] has moved beyond the law, beyond convention, beyond good and evil, and he is now able to see beyond the surfaces of things. His sudden release [or escape] from the invisible forces that oppress him propels him toward a deeper vision of reality.\(^\text{10}\)

Yet Bigger—like Huck Finn, Frederic Henry, John Andrews, Tom Joad, and Jake Blount—is also in flight from the law. (It is amazing how many escapers flee the law in their effort to escape the gravitational pull of the society that they have injured, but more important, that has injured them!) Yet although there is something pastoral in the escapes of those other escapers, Bigger never for one moment considers escape from the urban area into the "garden"—even before the necessity for such a decision arises. His escape remains concentrated within the labyrinth of the black ghetto. Even a Jake Blount can move from town to town—and his plight is almost as hopeless as Bigger's. Not so Bigger. Like the rat in the early part of the book, he is trapped in a closed society.

Further, where other escape novels climax with the escape itself, in *Native Son* escape, as such, is not climactic; it is central both in the formal structure of the novel (Part II, "Escape") and in Bigger's heart. It is not simply a means but an end. Yet, end as it well may be, Bigger eventually comes to find himself in a place from which any escape is impossible. His flight (or attempted flight) forms the bridge from one prison (ghetto) to another (the literal prison and, eventually, the death house in that prison).
Like Huck, who puts his interrogators off the trail by various devices of dissimulation, so Bigger, in the first step of his flight after Mary Dalton’s murder, decides to use the Communist pamphlets that Jan Erlone had given him to put his pursuers off his scent and point the finger of suspicion at Erlone and his Party friends. His desperation, then, not only makes for flight but for a certain crude, though desperate, ingenuity.

Again like Huck, Bigger is an escaper from a hypocritical society: the Dalton’s and their philanthropy remind one keenly of Aunt Sally and her family, who can also treat black men, “philanthropically” (in their own fashion) yet be capable of subjected them to the degradation of slavery. To this extent, Bigger’s twentieth-century society has not moved any appreciable distance from Huck’s.

Like Tom Joad, but not for the same reasons, Bigger kills. Unlike Tom, however, who kills the first time in self-defense and second in a spirit of avenging retribution, Bigger kills out of a mixture of fear and anger. Yet in both Tom’s and Bigger’s instances, the killings precipitate escapes—from the law at first remove and from society generally. Like Cain, whose name these escapers bear, they are doomed to wander the earth, ever seeking a haven they are unable to find, ever hoping for the rest that never comes, ever dreaming the dream that will never materialize. Thus, both Tom Joad and Bigger Thomas are the products of their respective societies, as to a lesser degree the other escapers are. For abuse from without leads to alienation from within. And the one word to describe the condition of the escape-murderer is alienation, as battered and worn a verbal catchall as that word has become.

Like Jake Blount’s escape in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Bigger’s too is without hope—except that in Bigger’s case, he knows there is no hope. Perhaps in this sense, Bigger’s is the
truer victory, for he fights on even after he knows the cards have been stacked against him—surely a heroic act under any circumstances. Unlike Blount in the other novel (whose action ironically takes place in the South, from which Bigger’s family—such as it is—had come), Bigger chooses not to hope. In this respect, Bigger was already an “existentialist” before either the word (in its contemporary sense) or the philosophy it referred to had become fashionable. The loss of hope in Bigger becomes transformed into a vow: “A small hard core in him resolved never again to trust anybody or anything. Whatever he thought or did from now on would have to come from him and him alone, or not at all” (p. 289).

The book ends as it began. In the beginning, Bigger is caged within the labyrinth of his urban society; by the time we get to the end of the book, he is still caged, but now by his society. And although Native Son has been seen as crude in its technique—a black proletarian novel wherein the departure or escape lies in the hero’s non-salvation—this work is probably the most powerful statement of rebellion and escape that has been made in the American novel in the first half of the twentieth century.

1. Richard Wright, Native Son (New York, 1940), p. 17. Used with the permission of Harper & Row, Publishers. All further quotations are taken from this edition.

2. Not that rebellion as such (even in Bigger’s sense) is absolutely without some satisfaction, if we take into account Frantz Fanon’s concept of violent rebellion as therapeutic act, as set forth in his Wretched of the Earth. By fruitless, we mean of course the rebellion that has as its objective a realizable goal within the larger social cosmos—even at the risk that that realization may well be vitiated by the very rebellion (or reaction to it) that set out to reach that (realizable) goal.


7. Ibid., p. 15.
8. Ibid., p. 17.

11. It has been noted that Bigger's name has a kind of counter-symbolism as Tom Joad's does not. That is, Bigger is no *Uncle* Tom, but a bigger—the small "b" is no typographical error!—Thomas. That is, he is a larger-than-life figure. However, even Tom Joad's name bears a certain symbolism in that it is an assonantal echo of John Doe—a kind of Everyman-in-the-street whose name (among poor Oklahoma sharecroppers) will become legion.