



## “UTILE DULCE” IN RICHARD WRIGHT’S *NATIVE SON* AND TERRY MC MILLAN’S *BREAKING ICE*

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In *Novelists on the Novel*, Miriam Allott asserts that “in general, the novelists desire to emphasize the *utile* at the expense of the *dulce* has usually had damaging effects on his adjustment of ‘the uncommon’ and ‘the ordinary’, interfering with the effect of verisimilitude which it is important for him to achieve and also impairing his vision of purity of vision”(Allott 1965, 74). One reaction to such a statement is concurrence; another is that Miss Alcott has not presented a just distinction. In fact there never has been a distinction between the *utile* and the *dulce*, the didactic and the amusing, in art, and such a neat bifurcation is not likely to occur. The new critics of twentieth century Britain and America worked assiduously to prove that the successfully completed work of art was an organic whole embodying its own set of attitudes and assumptions and divorced from the values of the author, the rude touch of sociology and history. The art-for-arts-sake writers and critics of nineteenth-century France and England had taken an even more extreme position: completed works become precious, lapidary artifacts free of didacticism. One supposes that Miss Alcott-like so many who have suffered their influence-has the critical canons of these two groups in mind when she speaks of an infringing *utile* and its corruption of “pure” artistic vision. In the light of this war between *utile* and *dulce*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Terry McMillan’s *Breaking Ice* are the two texts taken for study.

Published in 1940, *Native Son* was read and misread again, after a relative peaceful critical interlude of several decades. In many ways recent American criticism of this novel is more sophisticated than that of the 40’s. But in at least one fundamental area it has not materially changed-and this area invites exploration, for it involves the assumption that the novel is an attack on white society. Sorting out the Motley comments by critics both Black and White, one finds a cluster of opinions surrounding each of three related issues. First, *Native Son* is charged with being too emotional, the emotion most frequently cited being hatred, rage and vengefulness. Secondly, the book is allegedly too didactic, particularly in the long summing-up by the lawyer for the defense, Mr. Max, who is supposedly a confirmed Marxist. And finally, though this is not always stated in the form of a charge, the novel is said to use emotionalism and didacticism to place a burden of guilt heavily on the shoulders of the intended white audience.

The claim that Richard Wright was the witless instrument of wild and overpowering feelings over which he has no control is applied mostly to Book I and II of *Native Son*. One of the first reviews of the book, for example, called it “a blinding and corrosive study in hate”. The reviewer, David L. Cohn did not mean merely that Bigger Thomas hated all whites, or even that twelve million Negroes did, but that Wright himself was “hate consumed”. According to Mr. Cohn, the book was an “incitement to violence” and “the preaching of white hatred of Negroes by the Ku Klux Klan” (Cohn 1940).

Later James Baldwin in “Alas, Poor Richard, I” discovered in much of Wright’s work a “murderous bitterness” and violence:

This violence... is gratuitous and compulsive. It is one of the severest criticisms that can be leveled against his work... The root is rage. It is the rage, almost literally the howl, of a man who is being castrated... Thus, when in Wright’s pages a Negro male is found hacking a white woman to death, the very gusto with which this is done, and the great attention paid to the details of physical destruction reveal a horrible attempt to break out of the cage in which the American imagination has imprisoned him for so long (Baldwin 1961, 188).

Irwing Howe concurs that Wright’s work is “choked” with such uncontrollable feelings. In telling white readers that they are hated he says, Wright strikes them with “the full weight of his anger”. Unlike Baldwin, Irwing Howe finds this to be good, since if the negro is to “assent his humanity”, as both Baldwin and Wright discovered, “he must release his rage”

But Wright is not swamped by a lust for revenge, and the change that *Native Son* is emotionally abandoned cannot be supported. Books I and II are certainly dramatic, if not melodramatic. From the hysterical killing of the huge fanged black rat in the crowded apartment to the shootout on the top of the ice-covered water tank, the narrative whirls forward on a flood of surging feelings, authentic passion there is, but the issue is not so much what Wright felt as how he disciplined, or failed to discipline, what he felt. How could a man who was “choked” with any emotion, let alone rage and hatred, produce a novel of this caliber? Wright may well have harbored powerful feelings, but he was not having some sort of lengthy tantrum when he constructed the coherent, meaningful expressive story of Bigger Thomas. Wright did not make his white hate-able. The worst one can say of the various Daltons is that they are literally or figuratively blind; they are not “evil”. Even Buckley, the



prosecutor, is more stupid than satanic. And it is the white man, Max, who is clearly intended to be the most intelligent and human person in the book- the author's spokesman for the truth.

Wright consciously rejected, as he has stated explicitly in "How Bigger' was born", his original ending for the book, which showed Bigger strapped and waiting in the electric chair. Wright was not carried away by his emotions, and he did not want his readers to be so, either; we are not intended to dissolve in pity or fear, but to see clearly. The stress was not to be on the pathos or cruelty of Bigger's death, but on its meaning, on what Wright called "the moral... horror of Negro life in the United States" (Wright 1940, 19).

The second major critical charge against *Native Son* focuses on its third section and especially on Max's long speech to the court. Frequently this criticism is indirect, alleging that Richard Wright has failed as an artist. "The whole of Book III", Edward Margolies declared, "seems out of key with the first two thirds of the novel". Among other deficiencies, the section is unrealistic and "transparently propagandistic". One of the Signet afterwards calls Book III "a tract" and "an absurd switch to didacticism". Robert Bone uses the word "agitprop" and Brignano repeats the accusations that in Book III Wright simply follows the Party line: the section is not that which "will tend to stand in the way of favorable aesthetic judgments", of course, but it evidences Wright's "heavy-handed manipulation of his Marxist materials" (Brignano 1970, 82).

Wright has reasons for handling Book III as he does. In the first two books much is perceived through the barely awakened consciousness of Bigger, and although this matures somewhat, it is never the instrument that Wright needs to tell the whole story. To place Bigger's life in perspective, he requires another angle of vision, a perception more intellectual and informed. In short, there is no good reason why a writer should not shift gears in the course of a novel, if he has cause and can bring it off.

Possibly the most provocative reading of *Native Son*, published by Black critics as well as white, holds that the book allocates blame to and threatens punishment of white society; i.e., that it is a guilt in the "guilt" of its intended readership.

James Baldwin for example, has discussed the novel in terms of 'rightful vengeance' against the "wickedness" of a society "consumed with guilt." Bone asserts that *Native Son* presents a "guilt-of-the-nation thesis," while Nathan A Scott is sure that it must be "hell" for white readers. Irwing Howe says that Wright is "speaking from the black wrath of retribution" in telling white readers that history can be a punishment" (Black Boys and Native Sons, p. 355).

Obviously, one must confront the existence of racism and its consequences in American society. But while one can agree that the book is addressed primarily to white readers, and clearly establishes a relationship between (white) racism and (Black)crime, it does not follow that Richard Wright is talking about guilt as it is ordinarily conceived. It would be a mistake to leap to the conclusion that he must be vindictively fixing blame on white America and promising an eye for an eye. Reading Max's speech carefully one sees nothing of the sort. It says very plainly that the traditional guilt theory, as applied to race relations, was simplistic and pernicious, and that best to discard it.

The position that Wright takes in *Native Son* was subtle and easily misunderstood if one insisted on either/or terms. "There is philosophical confusion at the heart of *Native Son*," says Robert Bone. On the other hand, Wright takes the "environmentalist view, and "Bigger's actions are presented as inevitable, compulsive, beyond conscious control, or in a word unfree." On the other hand, Wright says that Bigger has, through murder, "created a new life for himself," which presumes "the elements decision, purpose, choice and moral agency. The emphasis is on the creative act, which by definition cannot be unfree" (Margolies, 74).

This criticism, while accurate at its facts, assumes that there are only two (contradictory) possibilities open to Wright, determinism and what Bone terms "existential freedom." Actually, Wright believes in both necessity and a measure of personal freedom; one can exercise choice in immediate, limited ways despite the fact that by the "I" which is making these decisions has been shaped by forces outside of itself. For all practical purposes, there need be no contradiction. To set up two mutually exclusive extremes, and then to demand that Wright chooses one or be accused of "philosophical confusion," is to oversimplify Wright, if not life itself.

In the black narrative, the judgment rendered by the white world manifest itself in a pattern of extra legality. Moving from an initially limited position, the black protagonist often finds himself outside the dictates of a society that attempts to confine him, and his expanding consciousness tends to the realization that it is not humanism or moral righteousness that brings the adverse rulings of the white world but a quest for personal power and a desire for psychological stability purchased at the



price of the black American. Once the protagonist has moved beyond image of Black society, however, he was not assured freedom. According to the standards of the world he has rejected, he was a criminal. The shades of the prison house are likely to clash at any moment, and a renewed captivity is always imminent. At times this makes the final position seem almost as circumscribed as the initial one.

By linking the problems of *utile* and *dulce*, Terry W. Ward Jr. in "Everybody's protest Novel: the era of Richard Wright" presented a balanced opposing views of Baldwin and Ann Petry. Baldwin's accusation of *Native Son* as "falling into the trap of the protest novel, of re-enforcing the social framework it was designed to challenge, of failing to destroy the myth of black inhumanity" (Graham 2004, 175-67). Baldwin attributed the failure off Bigger Thomas in being less of a character "than a categorization unable to transcend the status of stereotype. Ann Petry's "The Novel as social criticism" (1950), on the other hand, articulates the awareness that critical dismissal of protest literature was a matter of fashion, a way of promoting the idea of art for art's sake. She argued that all great novels were a species of propaganda, reflecting the writers' awareness of the political, economic, and social events of her or his time. Dickens, Tolstoy, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Dostoevsky, George Eliot, and Wright all projected such awareness in the medium fiction.

Taking Terry McMillan's *Breaking Ice*, published in 1990, in the light of criticism weighted in Wright's *Native Son*, it would be interesting to note the categorization of *utile* and *dulce* based on the two celebrated works. First, Wright's *Native Son* and McMillan's *Breaking Ice* are products of two important moments in African American literary history- the Harlem Renaissance and the New Black Renaissance. The short stories in *Breaking Ice* were written and collected under the banner of "The New Black Aesthetics", a phrase coined by Trey Ellis. It was a kind of *glasnost*, in the belief that "all contemporary African-American Artist now create art where race is not the only source of conflict. We are new breed, free to write as we please, in part because of our predecessors, and because of the way life has changed" (McMillan 1990, xviii).

The decades following the passage of the Civil Rights legislation in 1960's and 1970s witnessed enormous and unprecedented transformations in the composition of the African American and mainstream American Communities and their respective politics. Economist, political scientist and sociologist have documented at length the changes within African American Communities as Civil Rights and racial integration allowed African Americans greater though still limited access to mainstream institutions, professions and corporations through equal opportunity and affirmative action programs. These new forms of access helped empower a significant portion of African Americans, who quickly found themselves endowed with increased purchasing power and (with the help of anti-discriminatory housing laws) the means to move to the neighborhoods of their choice and to send their children to better schools at the primary, secondary and college levels in greater numbers than ever before. Thus, a new ever expanding middle class was created within African American Communities. This class's existence, combined with the decidedly antibourgeois slant of Black Nationalism, forced African Americans to try to articulate a new meaning for "race" and its subsequent effects upon black political and economic life, since that life was no longer legally circumscribed, at least not openly.

It was this section of the lives of the rising middle class's that the writers in *Breaking Ice* bring to the fore. The collection of the writings of new generation of African American writers emerging with strong voices, "who have each seen the world from a different stair". The experiences embodied in the writings are "distinctive and in some cases unconventional". There was preferment of art forms which were patronized by Suburban Middle Class. There was no denying of the inspiration of white Commercial popular culture. The folk memory was often compromised. It was a product of a new fed good buoyancy of arriving at multi-ethnic American lives. There was a pre-occupation with the 'present'. In each of the short stories, the racial identity is over-determined by other themes of identity. Terry McMillan specifically mentioned in the Introduction of *Breaking Ice* that:

This is not to say that I for one minute negate the value and significance of writers who made a contribution to African American literature up through the sixties whose work may have fallen under the heading of "protest" literature. .... The following stories are warm-hearted, some gingy, some have a sting and a bite, some will break your heart, or cause you to laugh out loud, sit back and remember, or think ahead. You may very well see yourself, a member of your family, a loved one, or a friend on these pages, and that is one thing good fiction should do: let you see some aspect of yourself ( Mc Millan 1992, xviii).

If "good fiction is not preaching" and of not trying to convince the reader of something one wonders the possibility of such a work art. The separation of 'dulce' from 'utile' has been and is considered as an important factor in determining the strength of art. But then, the process of categorization usually involves some arbitrariness, and the more generalized and inclusive the category, the less serviceable it is in the office of precise definition. Both *utile* and *dulce* have suffered from the vagueness of categorization. If a work entertains us sufficiently, it falls into the latter class, regardless of its preaching and polemics. If we



are not amused, the work falls in the former division despite the fact that it contains some terribly entertaining scenes. And strategic literary questions either remained unanswered or receive a response that accords with the whim of the critic. For example, is *Moby Dick*, a home of transcendental preaching or a thrilling adventure of whaling industry? Is William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* on history or a pleasurable throwback to the plantation Tradition? To moist that the works are perfect blends of *utile* and *dulce* is to avoid, the issue, since Melville is clearly more self-consciously polemical than Styron, and Styron is not entertaining at all to an informed reader. The ideological component of art is part of its reason, and only those who deceive themselves in the manner of Miss Allott can believe that it somehow encroaches on amore important element and distorts verisimilitude and pure artistic vision. The verisimilitude of a work of art is always contingent to which the author's vision corresponds to the reader's conception that determines the accuracy of his work. The nearer the artist is to the people, the greater will be his chance of giving a just description of reality. Miss Allott, the art-for-arts'-sake school, and the new critics have attempted to make a close circle for the intelligentsia, and when the touch of humanity or the "engaged" voice of the artist who defines his task as the liberation of men and the satisfaction of the needs of free men confronts them, they cry out: "This is not what I mean at all." There always is a host of ideologies competing, combining and conflicting in an attempt to gain the ear of art, but there never isan essential distinction between *utile* and *dulce*.

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