

I BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS ME

BY RICHARD WRIGHT

I WANT to reply to Mr. David L. Cohn, whose article criticized my novel, *Native Son*, in the May issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. In the eyes of the average white American reader, his article made it more difficult for a Negro (child of slaves and savages!) to answer a cultured Jew (who has two thousand years of oppression to recommend him in giving advice to other unfortunates!) than an American white. Indeed, Mr. Cohn writes as though he were recommending his 'two thousand years of oppression' to the Negroes of America! No, thank you, Mr. Cohn. I don't think that we Negroes are going to have to go through with it. We might perish in the attempt to avoid it; if so, then death as men is better than two thousand years of ghetto life and seven years of Herr Hitler.

The Negro problem in America is *not* beyond solution. (I write from a country — Mexico — where people of all races and colors live in harmony and without racial prejudices or theories of racial superiority. Whites and Indians live and work and die here, always resisting the attempts of Anglo-Saxon tourists and industrialists to introduce racial hate and discrimination.) Russia has solved the problem of the Jews and that of all her other racial and national minorities. Probably the Soviet solution is not to Mr. Cohn's liking, but I think it is to the liking of the Jews in Russia and Biro-Bidjan. I accept the Russian solution. I am proletarian and Mr. Cohn is bourgeois; we live on different planes

of social reality, and we see Russia differently.

'He [Wright] wants not only complete political rights for his people, but also social equality, and he wants them now.' Certainly I want them now. And what's wrong with my wanting them now? What guarantee have we Negroes, if we were 'expedient' for five hundred years, that America would extend to us a certificate stating that we were civilized? I am proud to declaim — as proud as Mr. Cohn is of his two thousand years of oppression — that at no time in the history of American politics has a Negro stood for anything but the untrammelled rights of human personality, *his* and *others*'.

Mr. Cohn implies that as a writer I should look at the state of the Negro through the lens of relativity, and not judge his plight in an absolute sense. That is precisely what, as an artist, I try *not* to do. My character, Bigger Thomas, lives and suffers in the real world. Feeling and perception, from moment to moment, are absolute, and if I dodged my responsibility as an artist and depicted them as otherwise I'd be a traitor, not to my race alone, but to *humanity*. An artist deals with aspects of reality different from those which a scientist sees. My task is not to abstract reality, but to enhance its value. In the process of objectifying emotional experience in words — paint, stone, or tone — an artist uses his feelings in an immediate and absolute sense. To ask a writer to deny the validity of his sensual per-

ceptions is to ask him to be 'expedient' enough to commit spiritual suicide for the sake of politicians. And that I'll *never* consent to do. No motive of 'expediency' can compel me to elect to justify the ways of white America to the Negro; rather, my task is to weigh the effects of our civilization upon the personality, as it affects it *here* and *now*. If, in my weighing of those effects, I reveal rot, pus, filth, hate, fear, guilt, and degenerate forms of life, must I be consigned to hell? (Yes, Bigger Thomas hated, but he hated because he *feared*. Carefully, Mr. Cohn avoided all mention of that fact. Or does Mr. Cohn feel that the 'exquisite, intuitive' treatment of the Negro in America does not inspire fear?) I wrote *Native Son* to show what manner of men and women our 'society of the majority' breeds, and my aim was to depict a character in terms of the living tissue and texture of daily consciousness. And who is responsible for his feelings, anyway?

Mr. Cohn, my view of history tells me this: *Only the strong are free*. Might may not make right, but there is no 'right' nation without might. That may sound cynical, but it is nevertheless true. If the Jew has suffered for two thousand years, then it is mainly because of his religion and his other-worldliness, and he has only himself to blame. The Jew had a choice, just as the Negro in America has one. We Negroes prefer to take the hint of that great Jewish revolutionist, Karl Marx, and look soberly upon the facts of history, and organize, ally ourselves, and fight it out. Having helped to build the 'society of the majority,' we Negroes are not so dazzled by its preciousness that we consider it something holy and beyond attack. We know our weakness and we know our strength, and we are not going to fight America *alone*. We are not so naïve as that. The Negro in America became politically mature the moment he realized that he could not fight the 'society of the majority' alone and organized the National Negro Con-

gress and threw its weight behind John L. Lewis and the CIO!

I urge my race to become strong through *alliances*, by joining in common cause with other oppressed groups (and there are a lot of them in America, Mr. Cohn!), workers, *sensible* Jews, farmers, declassed intellectuals, and so forth. I urge them to master the techniques of political, social, and economic struggle and cast their lot with the millions in the world today who are fighting for freedom, crossing national and racial boundaries if necessary.

The unconscious basis upon which most whites excuse Negro oppression is as follows: (1) the Negro did not have a culture when he was brought here; (2) the Negro was physically inferior and susceptible to diseases; (3) the Negro did not resist his enslavement. These three falsehoods have been woven into an ideological and moral principle to justify whatever America wants to do with the Negro, and, whether Mr. Cohn realizes it or not, they enable him to say 'the Negro problem in America is actually insoluble.'

But there is not one ounce of history or science to support oppression based upon these assumptions.

The Negro (just as the Mexican Indian today) possessed a rich and complex culture when he was brought to these alien shores. He resisted oppression. And the Negro, instead of being physically weak, is tough and has withstood hardships that have cracked many another people. This, too, is history. Does it sound strange that American historians have distorted or omitted hundreds of records of slave revolts in America?

We Negroes have no religion that teaches us that we are 'God's chosen people'; our sorrows cannot be soothed with such illusions. What culture we did have when we were torn from Africa was taken from us; we were separated when we were brought here and forbidden to speak our languages. We possess no remembered cushion of culture upon

which we can lay our tired heads and dream of our superiority. We are driven by the nature of our position in this country into the thick of the struggle, whether we like it or not.

In *Native Son* I tried to show that a man, bereft of a culture and unanchored by property, can travel but one path if he reacts positively but unthinkingly to the prizes and goals of civilization; and that one path is emotionally blind rebellion. In *Native Son* I did not defend Bigger's actions; I explained them through depiction. And what alarms Mr. Cohn is not what I say Bigger *is*, but what I say *made* him what he is. Yes, white boys commit crimes, too. But would Mr. Cohn deny that the social pressure upon Negro boys is far greater than that upon white boys? And how does it materially alter the substance of my book if white boys do commit murder? Does not Mr. Cohn remember the Jewish boy who shot the Nazi diplomat in Paris a year or two ago? No Jewish revolutionist egged that boy to do that crime. Did not the Soviet officials, the moment they came into power, have to clean up the roaming bands of Jewish and Gentile youth who lived outside of society by crime, youth spawned by the Czar's holy belief that social, racial, and economic problems were 'actually insoluble'?

Now, let me analyze more closely just how much and what kind of hate is in *Native Son*. Loath as I am to do this, I have no choice. Mr. Cohn's article, its tone and slant, convince me more than anything else that I was *right* in the way I handled Negro life in *Native Son*. Mr. Cohn says that the burden of my book was a preachment of hate against the white races. It was not. No *advocacy* of hate is in that book. *None!* I wrote as objectively as I could of a Negro boy who hated and feared whites, hated them because he feared them. What Mr. Cohn mistook for my advocacy of hate in that novel was something entirely different. In every word of that book are *confi-*

dence, resolution, and the knowledge that the Negro problem can and will be solved *beyond* the frame of reference of thought such as that found in Mr. Cohn's article.

Further in his article Mr. Cohn says that I do not understand that oppression has harmed whites as well as Negroes. Did I not have my character, Britten, exhibit through page after page the aberrations of whites who suffer from oppression? Or, God forbid, does Mr. Cohn *agree* with Britten? Did I not make the mob as hysterical as Bigger Thomas? Did I not ascribe the hysteria to the same origins? The entire long scene in the furnace room is but a depiction of how warped the whites have become through their oppression of Negroes. If there had been *one* person in the Dalton household who viewed Bigger Thomas as a human being, the crime would have been solved in half an hour. Did not Bigger himself know that it was the denial of his personality that enabled him to escape detection so long? The one piece of incriminating evidence which would have solved the 'murder mystery' was Bigger's humanity, and the Daltons, Britten, and the newspaper men could not see or admit the living clue of Bigger's humanity under their very eyes! More than two thirds of *Native Son* is given over to depicting the very thing which Mr. Cohn claims 'completely escapes' me. I wonder how much of my book escaped *him*.

Mr. Cohn says that Bigger's age is not stated. It is. Bigger himself tells his age on page 42. On page 348 it is stated again in the official death sentence.

Mr. Cohn wonders why I selected a Negro *boy* as my protagonist. To any writer of fiction, or anyone acquainted with the creative process, the answer is simple. Youth is the turning point in life, the most sensitive and volatile period, the state that registers most vividly the impressions and experiences of life; and an artist likes to work with sensitive material.

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