

The horror and the glory of language



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Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy* is not only a story about one man's struggle to find freedom and intellectual happiness, it is a story about his discovery of language's inherent strengths and weaknesses. And the ways in which its power can separate one soul from another and one class from another. Throughout the novel, he moves from fear to respect, to abuse, to fear of language in a cycle of education which might be likened to a tumultuous love affair. From the very beginning of the novel we see young Richard realize the power of language when he follows his father's literal directions and kills a cat he has befriended(12). Although he knows that this is not really what his father wants him to do, following these directions explicitly temporarily gives him a sort of power over his father's wishes. At the same time it reveals a weakness in his father, i.e., his lack of control over language gives him less power. Later, when Richard must defend himself against attackers who repeatedly try to steal his mother's money(21), he learns a new and symbolic lesson: Victory can come when one has money, words (the grocery list), and a big stick to defend one's self. His next experience with language frightens him away from it. He becomes "blind with anger"(29) when he is forced to clean four letter words from places he has written them. He does not understand how, in his innocence, he could have misused something which had only done him good in the past. After this experience, Richard shies away from the use of powerful language for many years. In one scene he refuses to blot the ink from a stack of envelopes(36), fearing, perhaps, the power of the written word, and in some way fearing that this action will bring back memories of the hateful day he had to blot out his own words from walls of his town. Although his love of language is soon reinforced when Ella reads him the wonderful story of

Bluebeard and His Seven Wives(44), he is severely rebuked for it-which proves to him again that language can be dangerous. He says that his response to the story Ella reads him is an “ emotional response”(47), and that it carries a “ sharp, frightening, and almost painful excitement”(48) with it. This gives him further respect for language and its power. At the same time it again brings fear, because his aunt tells him that novels are the “ Devil’s work.” This fear stays with him through the next few years. So much so that he cannot even write his name on the blackboard. When he raises his arm to write his name, his mind goes blank and empty-he cannot even remember his name at this point, much less write it. He continues to ignore in language that which he does not like, does not understand, or does not agree with. He uses its power sparingly: writing letters to relatives when his mother is sick, and reading only sporadically, until a new job teaches him that ignorance of language does not work in his interests either. When he is selling newspapers that he has not been reading, he is advised by an older black man that he should read what he is selling. It seems impossible that in all the time he has been selling these papers he has not yet read one of them, and so one must believe that he has unconsciously been ignoring the fact that these papers are written by the Ku Klux Klan(153). Now that he can no longer ignore language and its power, it seems that once again he must turn the written word to his own uses, abusing it in order to fend for himself. To this end he begins selling insurance to black sharecroppers who are too illiterate and uneducated to know that they do not need it. He does this knowingly, understanding that he is robbing these people through his use of language, of power-he is using a power against the powerless that they cannot resist because they do not understand. Despite his self-loathing over

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these incidences of fraud, he continues to pursue a use of language for his own benefit. He publishes a story in three installments (even though he is not paid for these stories, this is a success), and decides he wants to write novels for a living. As he moves along this course he finds himself faced again with the fear of language. This time though, it is others who fear language-his language. The case in point is a speech which he wishes to deliver at his graduation from school (207). The principal summons him to his office and informs Richard that he must give a speech which is pre-written, and that he cannot give his own. Richard claims that he has the right to give the speech he has written, and when the principal balks, Richard realizes that he has actually frightened him with the power his words may have over the whites who are coming to the graduation. Richard does not want to face the fact that his words may have an adverse effect on the audience, he still shies away from fully understanding the power of language, saying he wants to learn, but there are some things he'd rather not know(208). This power over language puts Richard outside of the law, or so he feels. As he says later in the story, " I no longer felt bound by the laws which whites and blacks were supposed to obey in common, I was outside those laws"(237). In this new form Richard begins to devour reading material, as if he is forming within himself a new sort of creature, a creature who wishes only to read and read more. He uses a co-worker's library card and checks out book after book, something alien to not only the blacks who surround him, but the whites as well. His suspicion that words are the ultimate power is confirmed when he reads a book by H. L. Mencken and realizes that the man is fighting with his words, using them as weapons, " as one would use a club"(193). When he finally escapes to the North, and

leaves the “ Southern Night[s]” behind, we see a new Richard. This new Richard is now fully exploiting his use of language. We see this when he takes an exam to enter the Postal Service. He no longer tries to hide his knowledge of language in the North, but instead begins to fully explore it. Even the whites around him don’t read, and are amazed to find that he reads the American Mercury. He also begins to use language to learn about other things. He studies books on social issues which are addressed through studies of sociology and psychology and calls these his “ most important discoveries”(327). They are his most important discoveries in this second half of the book because they will soon lead him to embrace new social concepts. This latest immersion in reading isolates Richard, as he is sucked deeper into language and further away from the common people who surround him. Of this condition he writes “ Emotionally, I was withdrawn from the objective world; my desires floated loosely within the walls of my consciousness, contained and controlled”(328). He enters an almost mystical realm, and he is “ stupefied by its dazzling magic,” and “ awed by [its] vast, delicate, intricate, and psychological structure”(332). He joins a black literary group and finds that even they are far below the realm in which he resides. He finds them to be completely preoccupied with sex, as if they are a baser form of life than himself. He despises them for this and feels that they will never really live the way they should. With this more arrogant attitude he again turns to language for money, abusing his knowledge of it to rip off insurance customers who themselves can barely survive. At this point his arrogance reaches a penultimate height. He considers a woman he has been sleeping with: “ I stared at her and wondered just what a life like hers meant in the scheme of things, and I came to the conclusion that it meant

absolutely nothing”(341). To be fair, he has also decided that his own life means nothing. But his actions give the lie to this statement. With an objective view that could only seem to come from on high he continues to place himself above the rest of America, implying that he alone knows that the “ Negro” and white worlds cannot live a full and human life until the white world can come to terms with the black one. At this point in the novel Richard begins to discover communism and its wide open arms in the black community. He begins reading communist magazines with the same vigor he once read the great white authors of the past. Their message entrances him and he seems to go through a sea change-he feels that he has at last found something good he can do with his power over language. But he finds, in the end, that even these communists he wants so badly to help fear language more than anyone-seeing it as a tool of the intellectual and not as something which can reach the common people. He panders to their belief and agrees that “ writing is not important”(388) even though he knows better. But even this will not convince them that he is one them; they accuse him of “ talking like a book”(389). Even though he tells them he is a common man and sweeps streets for a living, they will not truly accept him within their group. In the end, Richard Wright finds that he is isolated from the rest of society by his love of, and power over, language. He finds that those who write are individuals who can never truly be part of the larger family which is their culture. And although he truly wants to be a part of his culture and brought into the fold, he will be forever separated from the common people by vast gulfs of understanding and reality. His trail of discovery has led him down a path of no return. Now that he has power over language, he can never go back.