

**THE PARADOX OF THE ETHICAL CRIMINAL IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S NOVEL  
*THE OUTSIDER: A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION***

Floyd W. Hayes, III<sup>1</sup>  
Department of Political Science  
Center for Africana Studies  
Johns Hopkins University

He damned the day he had met the man who knew so well the spiritual malady that had plagued and undone him – the dilemma of the ethical criminal, the millions of men who lived in the tiny crevices of industrial society completely cut off from humanity, the teeming multitudes of little gods who ruled their own private worlds and acknowledged no outside authority. Hating that part of himself that he could not manage, Cross must perforce fear and hate Houston who knew how close to crime men of his kind had by necessity to live.

Richard Wright  
*The Outsider*

In our civilized world, we learn to know almost only the wretched criminal, crushed by the curse and the contempt of society, mistrustful of himself, often belittling and slandering his deed, a miscarried type of criminal; and we resist the idea that all great human beings have been criminals (only in the grand and not in a miserable style), that crime belongs to greatness (--for that is the experience of those who have tried the reins and of all who have *descended* deepest into great souls--). To be “free as a bird” from tradition, the conscience of duty—every great human being knows this danger. But he also desires it: he desires a great goal and therefore also the means to it.

Friedrich Nietzsche  
*The Will to Power*

The black situation in the United States of America always has been complex, complicated, and often contradictory. The long historical nightmare – from enslavement to the present – has created a crisis of Black existence: the “psychic alienation” of being black in an anti-black world.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, white supremacy historically has operated as a global system – of imperialism, colonialism, annihilating wars, enslavement, and racism.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, following the official termination of enslavement in the United States of America, blacks found themselves the objects of continued cultural domination as white elites constructed criminalized images of them. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, industrialized cities developed, establishing police forces that buttressed systems of criminal law. Simultaneously, urban blacks made the transition from being slaves to being always already guilty of some crime in the white imagination. Legal codes – upholding racist segregation, which might be more accurately characterized as (il)legal codes – throughout the developing nation allowed, and perhaps even encouraged, increasing forms of anti-black police control and violence.<sup>3</sup> As a result of being largely excluded from formulating the laws that govern American society – although too often the target of the laws’ uneven applications – many black Americans have held as suspect a criminal (in)justice system that has historically worked against them.<sup>4</sup> Most assuredly, Richard Wright was among those black Americans who experienced the pain and anguish of social injustice and who dared to write resentfully, indicting the political hypocrisy of a nation that was democratic in theory but not in practice.

The historical and contemporary reality, and the resulting brutalizing experience of black people, has constituted the occasion and catalyst for the emergence and articulation of Africana existential thought in America. Because white Americans refused to treat blacks as fellow human beings, the consequential dehumanization produced a people whose existence and ideas have both challenged and embraced European and white American ideas. Through the pain, anguish, and desperation caused by the historic struggle to extricate themselves from what revolutionary Caribbean psychiatrist Frantz Fanon referred to as the “zone of nonbeing”,<sup>5</sup> blacks have raised

---

<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Eric Monkkenon, *Police in Urban America, 1860-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Harlan Hahn and Judson L. Jeffries, *Urban America and its Police: From the Postcolonial Era through the Turbulent 1960s* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003); Gail W. O’Brien, *The Color of Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Lewis R. Gordon, “Through the Zone of Nonbeing: A Reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* in Celebration of Fanon’s Eightieth Birthday,” *The C. L. R. James Journal*, 11 (2005): 1-43.

questions designed to give full expression to their identity and desire for liberation. Consequently, it is perhaps correct to avow that black thought always has been framed by existential distress.<sup>6</sup>

Into this existential vortex stepped Richard Wright, who articulated the anguish, suffering, anger, desperation, and resentment that gnawed at the lived experience of black people. Wright was acutely aware of the ‘culture of pretense’ that was firmly embedded in modern Western, especially American, civilization – given the apparent bad faith and hypocritical pronouncements off democracy and equal justice under the law, but coupled with the reality and practice of white supremacy and anti-black racist injustice. Here was a disjuncture – more extreme than a contradiction – that simultaneously included and excluded blacks. As a radical black intellectual warrior, Wright sought to overthrow the orthodoxy of the white American or European conception of existence and, in the process, assert the validity and complexity of the black experience. From the perspective of Africana theorist Anthony Bogues, Wright was a black heretical thinker who had the courage to expose dangerous truths about the West.<sup>7</sup>

Wright remains one of modern America’s most influential writers and political thinkers. His attempts to unmask the motives underlying Western civilization’s violent, anti-Black racism and Black people’s existential struggle for meaning and liberation in an absurd world have deeply affected subsequent generations of philosophers, literary critics, psychologists, historians, writers, political scientists, sociologists, and activists. Indeed, it has been argued that Wright’s work constitutes a discourse on racism and culture that is unparalleled in world literature.<sup>8</sup> That is because Wright was able to think through the pretensions and consequences of racist and capitalist Western culture in a way that helped to shape the content and fashion the contours of global black literary and post-colonial expression long after his death in 1960.

An abundance of scholarly and critical literature has focused on Wright’s novel of ideas, *The Outsider*.<sup>9</sup> Much of this literature has examined various themes in the novel, such as French existentialism, double consciousness/double vision, Kierkegaardian dread, the Nietzschean overman, Marxism, the Communist Party USA, God’s death, images and roles of black women, nihilism, resentment, racism, man’s search for freedom, Wright’s use of Dostoevsky, and anti-

---

<sup>6</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Yoshinobu Hakutani, “Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* and Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*,” 42 *Mississippi Quarterly*, (1989): 365-378.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: HarperPerennial/HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).

black violence and the threat of death.<sup>10</sup> However, a neglected theme among Wright scholars is his concept of the ethical criminal, which Wright mentions only once in *The Outsider*. The present discussion attempts to fill that void.

This essay examines Wright's construction of the figure of the ethical criminal in his powerful novel of ideas, *The Outsider*. The novel centers on the lived experience of the existential-nihilist hero, Cross Damon, who is the embodiment of the ethical criminal. Conscious of the negative view of blacks in the white imagination, perhaps Wright sought to explore the meaning of this kind of existence but from a different perspective—that of philosophical criminals whose crimes have their bases in ideas. These figures, these outsiders, are dangerous to the social order, in Wright's view, because they had become cynically disillusioned about their society's values. As Wright's early biographer, Constance Webb, stated:

These were the men dangerous to the status quo, for the outsider was one who no longer responded to the values of the system in which he lived. Communists and Fascists sought to share in the wealth and power of the nation by substituting themselves but without

---

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see Sandra Adell, "Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and the Kierkegaardian Concept of Dread," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 28 (1991): 379-394; Russell C. Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970); Jane Davis, "More Force than Human: Richard Wright's Female Characters," *Obsidian II*, 1 (1986): 68-83; Nick De Genova, "Gangster Rap and Nihilism in Black America: Some Questions of Life and Death," *Social Text*, 13 (1995): 89-132; Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973); Addison Gayle, *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Yoshinobu Hakutani, "Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and Albert Camus's *The Stranger*"; Hakutani, *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996); Floyd W. Hayes, III, "The Concept of Double Vision in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*: Fragmented Blackness in the Age of Nihilism," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 173-183; Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Michael F. Lynch, *Creative Revolt: A Study of Wright, Ellison, and Dostoevsky* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); Frank McMahon, "Rereading *The Outsider*: Double-Consciousness and the Divided Self," *Mississippi Quarterly* 50 (1997): 289-305; Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983); Amritjit Singh, "Richard Wright's *The Outsider*: Existentialist Exemplar or Critique" *CLA Journal* 27 (1984): 357-370; Claudia Tate, "Christian Existentialism in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*," *CLA Journal* 25 (1982): 371-395; Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright/Daemonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man a Critical Look at His Work* (New York: Warner Books, 1988); Harvey C. Webster, "Richard Wright's Profound New Novel" *The New Leader*, 36 (1953): 17-18; Kingsley Widmer, "The Existential Darkness: Richard Wright's *The Outsider*," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 1 (1960): 13-21; Sherley Anne Williams, "Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright," in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Arnold Rampersad (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995), 63-82.

essentially changing its structure for governing. The greatest danger to the government stemmed from those millions of individuals who held no dreams of the prizes the nation held forth; in them, whether they knew it or not, a revolution had already occurred and was biding its time until it could translate itself into a new way of life.<sup>11</sup>

*The Outsider* is Wright's most obvious fictional display of philosophical ideas, manifesting as it does the author's major contribution to Africana philosophies of existence.<sup>12</sup> As Gordon indicates, Africana existential thought emerges as a result of the lived experience of being black in an anti-black world. It is this historical and contemporary encounter with the pathology of racism that gives rise to the anxieties of blackness, which constitute the seminal subject matter of black philosophers of existence. *The Outsider* is philosophically important, among other things, because its narrative reveals unique philosophical concepts and problems often challenging received philosophical perspectives.<sup>13</sup> In what follows, I pursue a phenomenological description of Wright's ethical criminal; I explore the structure of his everyday life world, seeking to reveal what lies at the core of his alienated human experience in the modern industrial world. That is, I attempt to elucidate the meaning of the ethical criminal's being in the world.<sup>14</sup> This project also shows how literature opens us to the domain of possibilities and how metaphor proffers philosophical power for thinking about the black struggle for liberation and change.<sup>15</sup>

Since God had been the natural genesis of Western values and the origin of all of their meaningfulness, the concept of God's implosion only hastened the expansion of a smoldering culture of nihilism, an anxiety of the soul, a contamination of despair.<sup>16</sup> God's demise, for Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, meant that everything was possible because there were no longer any

---

<sup>11</sup> Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), 313.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana*.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Gooding-Williams writes that "some literary fiction is philosophically significant precisely because it produces new philosophical vocabularies and thus new philosophical problems. See his important book, *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2001), 12.

<sup>14</sup> Hwa Yol Jung, "An Introductory Essay: The Political Relevance of Existential Phenomenology," in *Existential Phenomenology and Political Theory: A Reader*, edited by Jung, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1972), xvii-iv; Jung, *The Crisis of Political Understanding: A Phenomenological Perspective in the Conduct of Political Inquiry* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979); Maurice Natanson, "Phenomenology and the Social Sciences," in *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*, Vol. I, edited by Natanson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 3-44; George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Natanson, *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, translated by Graham Parkes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).

prohibitions on human conduct.<sup>17</sup> This is the conclusion of all outsiders – human beings who are conscious of and therefore do not deny the barbarism, inhumanity, and savagery of modern Western civilization.<sup>18</sup> Modern European and white American thinkers have spilled considerable ink discussing civil society, but few, if any, explore the meaning and practice of civility as the main ingredient of civilization.<sup>19</sup>

Richard Wright understood this contradiction; and he embraced the resulting paradox in the construction of his central character, Cross Damon, the powerful figure of the ethical criminal. Damon is the criminal type, who stares into the abyss of desire, wrenched by moral nihilism. For Wright, there is little, if any, actual justice in the American (il)legal system; from his perspective, the rational-legal perception of modern civilization is a veil of illusion. Barbarism and savagery, not civility and justice, are deeply implanted in the heart of modern Western civilization. Damon declares: “You call this *civilization*? I don’t. This is a jungle. We pretend that we have law and order. But we don’t, really. We have imposed a visible order, but hidden under that veneer of order the jungle still seethes”.<sup>20</sup> The ethical criminal’s motto is: Everything is possible, nothing is necessary. One can do whatever one pleases. For Wright’s ethical criminal, all of modern society’s ethical laws are suspended. He is a man who acts like a God; he tries to live beyond good and evil. But is he successful?

Cross had to discover what was good or evil through his own actions which were more exacting than the edicts of any God because it was he alone who had to bear the brunt of their consequences with a sense of absoluteness made intolerable by knowing that this life of his was all he had and would ever have. For him, there was no grace or mercy if he failed.<sup>21</sup>

Wright’s anti-hero, Cross Damon, is overwhelmed by a fear of the dreadful. Entitled “Dread,” the first section of the novel contains the epigram from Walter Lowrie, the translator of

---

<sup>17</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1994); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, (New York: Penguin Books, 1969).

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Bernard Wasserstein, *Barbarism & Civilization: A History of Europe in our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Michael Weinstein, *Culture Flesh: Explorations of Postcivilized Modernity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); P. M. Forni, *Choosing Civility* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002); Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *Civility & Subversion: The Intellectual in Democratic Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 171.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 156-157.

Soren Kierkegaard's text, *The Concept of Dread*: "Dread is an alien power which lays hold of an individual, and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has a will to do so, for one fears what one desires".<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard expresses the same idea in slightly different form in the body of the text, and the context surrounding it there helps us to understand the dialectical manner in which Cross Damon must be viewed.

In *The Outsider*, a black man in urban America who in many respects transcends the assumed limitations of his blackness. As such, Wright fashions a conception of blackness as a complex system of meanings, and consequently proffers a new paradigm of the black hero (or anti-hero) for modern, crisis-ridden America. He proposes the ethical criminal as the black hero of a nihilistic age – an atheistic and morally destitute world – and introduces the paradox of the avid pursuit of greatness when no transcendental standard exists.

As the novel opens, Damon is suffused with feelings of alienation and self-loathing. As a post office employee, he has developed a friendship with several fellow workers; yet, his personal reading, intellectual autonomy, and persistent search for the meaning of things separate him from them. Similarly, his relationships with black women are alienating and discomfiting: Alas, Wright does not harbor positive views of black women. Damon drinks heavily – perhaps to alleviate his loneliness. Having bequeathed him a curiously paradoxical name (god-like but demoniacal) that seems to have rendered him always guilty of something and engulfed by a sense of dread from birth, Damon's mother constantly berates him for his sorry performance as husband and father. His wife appears antagonistic and conniving; Damon suggests that she entrapped him into the marriage. Finally, he is entangled with a minor whom he impregnates. She and her friends are out to get Damon; they intend to take legal action against him. In essence, Damon's blackness is significant because it constitutes the cultural matrix for understanding his predicament as an outsider in modern American society; it embodies the moroseness of black existential dread.

Yet, as a result of a freak subway accident, Damon is enabled to escape his situation and to (re)create himself in familiar existential terms. Thinking he is dead, his relatives and friends hold a funeral for him, as Damon watches in God-like fashion. Following the event, Damon finds it necessary to kill a talkative friend who discovers that Damon is not dead. He leaves Chicago

---

<sup>22</sup> Walter Lowrie, introduction to *The Concept of Dread* by Soren Kierkegaard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), xii.

for New York City. On the way, he tries to master his dread and control his guilty thoughts and feelings. It is during this journey that Wright complicates even more his representation of black existential life. He chooses this occasion to demonstrate how the ordinary experience of black people in the United States of America enables them to see with a special clarity of vision – dreadful objectivity – the same constellation of problems which existentialist thinkers had identified in more lofty and abstract arrangements.

In this way, Wright creates an almost superhuman (clearly Nietzschean) black anti-hero whose alienation and dread place him both outside of and yet very much inside modern American, that is to say Western, civilization. By now responsible for four murders and a suicide, Damon is the ethical criminal who is highly knowledgeable, and deeply perceptive. In contrast to (but recalling) Du Bois' representation of the double consciousness as a horrifying burden in *The Souls of Black Folk*,<sup>23</sup> Wright's complex image of blackness as double vision is a source of strategic power, freedom, and knowledge. Here is an intellectually powerful figure, a philosophical criminal, who struggles to find some meaning in his complex existence.<sup>24</sup> The philosophical criminal is a criminal, not so much because of what he does, but because of what he feels and thinks. What characterizes him, Wright tells us, is that he thinks through multiple layers of illusionary veils – e.g., Christianity, law, racism, ideology, fascism, communism, and traditional family relations.

Perhaps the deepest intuition of the ethical criminal is that life is filled with adversity. His firmest judgments are that adversity itself is evil; evil is in the world and not merely in the self; evil cannot be rationally justified. In some respects the ethical criminal internalizes evil into his spirit as he makes war upon the world, himself, and other selves. Human existence may not be good, for it is hardly that, but depravity is more bad than imprudent; nothing is really necessary, it's just unfortunate. As adversity becomes self-loathing, it precipitates a loathsome world. Here we have nihilism writ large, the single attitude toward human existence that the ethical criminal embraces; it becomes quintessential to his being. From this perspective comes the affirmation of struggle that drives the ethical criminal's life. Wright indicates: "He had the kind of consciousness

---

<sup>23</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1961).

<sup>24</sup> Floyd W. Hayes, III, "The Concept of Double Vision in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*: Fragmented Blackness in the Age of Nihilism," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 173-183.



that could grasp the mercurial emotions of men whom society had never tamed or disciplined, men whose will had never been broken, men who were wild but sensitive, savage but civilized, intellectual but somehow intrinsically poetic in their inmost hearts.”<sup>25</sup>

Significantly, the ethical criminal rejects the legitimacy of the American criminal (in)justice system. Wright tells us that the law is one of America’s numerous veils of illusion. In his view, the (il)legal system and its laws are established by lawless people. “Only men full of criminal feelings can create a criminal code,” declares Wright (1991: 378).<sup>26</sup> As a careful and clear-eyed examination of American history would disclose, those who historically have formulated US law often have been lawless people themselves. They and their descendants created a body of societal rules that had very little to do with justice and more to do with the self-interests of ruling class whites. In their social relations of power and racism with people of color in America, Europeans and their white American descendants have exhibited criminal behavior. European colonialists’ treaties with Native Americans, slave codes, the original pro-slavery US Constitution, racist Supreme Court decisions (e.g., *Dred Scott* [1857] and *Plessy v. Ferguson* [1896]), segregation laws, or the inequitable application of contemporary law, are glaring examples of the lawless contradictions within the system of American law.<sup>27</sup> It was the American

---

<sup>25</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 342.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 378.

<sup>27</sup> Derrick Bell, *Race, Racism, and American Law* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980); Joe Domanick, *To Protect and to Serve: The LAPD’s Century of War in the City of Dreams* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994); Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2000); *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. (19 How.) 393 (1857); David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); A. Leon Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process—the Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Jill Nelson, editor, *Police Brutality: An Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000); Gail W. O’Brien, *The Color of Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

(il)legal system and its laws that condemned Damon merely because he was black, making his ordinary existence criminal. When one's normal everyday existence is defined as criminal, a great amount of resentment can be the result. Cross Damon, the ethical criminal, embodies this attitude.

For Wright, the distinguishing element of the ethical criminal is that in breaking the laws of society, he is guilty-free. This attitude emerges from his view that the criminal (in)justice system is bankrupt; the law in modern American society is shrouded in illusion. According to Wright, even those sworn to uphold the law disbelieve its veracity. During the train ride to New York, Damon and New York District Attorney Houston engage in a perceptive exchange about American law and those who break the law. Although Damon is cautious in discussing these matters with Houston, himself an outsider as a result of physical deformity, Damon's outsider consciousness compels him, as it does Houston, to scrutinize the law and assert the consciousness of the ethical criminal. Due to social and economic oppression, black Americans are outsiders, but fear of white supremacy forces them to conceal their anger and resentment. Yet, there are those who overcome their fears of legal condemnation and act out their resentment, essentially rejecting the American system of criminal (in)justice. Significantly, it is the district attorney – a man sworn to defend and enforce the law but also a man with criminal impulses – who understands and acknowledges the manner in which the (il)legal system has oppressed black Americans; Wright then articulates through Houston the ethical criminal's philosophy of self-conduct. When Damon asks if Houston is sympathetic to those who break the rules of civilization, the district attorney responds: "In a way, yes. . . . But it all depends upon *how* the laws are broken. My greatest sympathy is for those who feel that they have a *right* to break the law."<sup>28</sup> But how and where does the ethical criminal exist?

The ethical criminal dwells in the crevices of post-civilized modern industrial cities.<sup>29</sup> An existential-nihilist rebel, he believes that human existence is pointless and absurd. It leads nowhere and adds up to nothing. Existence is completely gratuitous in that there is no justification for it, but there is also no reason not to live. The outsider/ethical criminal is a man who has embraced a pessimistic philosophical outlook, a philosophy of self-fortification and self-conduct, that does not

---

<sup>28</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 171.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Weinstein, *Culture Flesh: Explorations of Postcivilized Modernity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

deny the ugliness of world, but takes it as it is.<sup>30</sup> He attempts to become a free spirit, perhaps god-like, who has rejected all of the expectations and restraints that have characterized human existence since the emergence of the Christian era. Yet, as a modern man, he is a person absent of the moral and ethical controls of Christianity. He is an intellectual who has all the unique benefits of being no stranger to modern Western knowledge, but he has either renounced it or has somehow succeeded in avoiding its oppressive power and minimized the degree to which he has been victimized by its tentacles. There is no doubt that he is an atheist, but he has transcended it as well. Wright describes him as a civilized savage who feels no requirement to worship any god. He is a modern intellectual with the mind, consciousness, and behavior of a pagan; he has not been subdued by modern society.

The ethical criminal is a civilized savage who demystifies Western culture. He thinks through the illusory aspects of modern Western civilization—myths that Europeans foisted upon all of us in order to forestall their fears, and thus pacify their dread. Yet, the ethical criminal concludes that these very myths are dying in the West's intellectual and emotional consciousness. These myths no longer possess utilitarian value; Western Europeans and their white American descendants have jettisoned them. A growing cynicism now smolders in the soul of an increasingly decadent and morally destitute Western civilization. Wright's ethical criminal, reminiscent of the Nietzschean last man,<sup>31</sup> rebels against those myths, as they constitute a culture of pretense in post-civilized modern American society. Since modern America represents the devaluation of its most sacred political values (e.g., legal freedom, justice, and equity), the ethical criminal breaks the laws of an increasingly decadent society *sans* remorse. Cross Damon is a criminal; yet, he thinks of himself as innocent.

The ethical criminal believes the world has no intrinsic meaning. He can try live with meaninglessness, he can try to create his own meaning and impose it on the world, or, more realistically, he can try to impose his own meaning and values on a small part of the world, in particular on his own microcosm and those with whom he interacts. The collapse of the idea of objective meaning leaves him free to create his own life. Self-creation is how the 'will to power' expresses itself in human life. Wright's anti-hero attempts to create his own values and laws by

---

<sup>30</sup> For an insightful historical examination of philosophical pessimism, see Joshua F. Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethics, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

which he will live. The ethical criminal tries to stand beyond God and the human, becoming a little secular god himself. That is, he seeks to live beyond good and evil. He is an atheist in whose heart and mind religion has no meaning. In the wake of God's death, the molds for the formation of the human were broken. Now the ethical criminal's highest elevation is the embodiment of his own philosophy of conduct, which would be based on his own individual desires. He is self-possessed. He seeks to become autonomous. He is the personification of Nietzsche's heroic individualism.<sup>32</sup>

In one of the most intriguing episodes in the novel, Damon encounters and overwhelms members of the Communist Party. Since the party cannot discover Damon's true identity, members are frightened of him. As one party member says:

Lane, what the hell ghastly joke is this you're pulling? Who the god-damn hell do you think you *are*? What are you *doing* here? When we try to check on you, we run into a maze that leads nowhere. That's no *accident*. Are you a spy? Frankly, we doubt it; we thought so at first, but you've not been close enough to us to get hold of any information. Don't you think, now, that we are scared of you. If we were, you'd not be breathing now . . . But we want to know . . .<sup>33</sup>

Damon's superior intellect puts him in possession of the patent duplicity of the Communist Party nihilists' will to power. Employing a cold-blooded Marxian analysis of capitalist industrialization, he mocks the Communists' quest for power, suggesting that they are similar to Western imperialists:

Now, during the past thirty-five years, under the ideological banner of Dialectical Materialism, a small group of ruthless men in Russia seized political power and the entire state apparatus and established a dictatorship. Rationalizing human life to the last degree, they launched a vast, well-disciplined program of industrialization which now rivals that of the United States of America in pretentiousness and power . . . Again I say that what happened in Russia, just as with what happened in America, could have happened under a dozen different ideological banners . . . If you lived in Russia and made such a statement, they'd shoot you; and if you lived in America and made such a statement, they'd blacklist you and starve you to death . . . Modern man still believes in magic; he lives in a rational world but insists on interpreting the events of that world in terms of mystical forces.<sup>34</sup>

Damon's power of erudition enables insight into the systematic lies of his Communist Party adversaries. He pierces the veil of the Party's illusions, pointing out the organization's

---

<sup>32</sup> Leslie P. Thiele, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul: A Study of Heroic Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 472-473.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 476.

contradiction between idealism and naked power. To one of its functionaries, Damon declares authoritatively:

I'm propaganda-proof. Communism has two truths, two faces. The face you're talking about now is for the workers, for the public, not for me. I look at facts, processes . . . You did what you did because you had to! Anybody who launches himself on the road to naked power is caught in a trap . . . You use idealistic words as your smoke screen, but behind that screen you *rule* . . . It's a question of *power!*<sup>35</sup>

The ethical criminal Damon is a product of Wright's urgent mission to challenge the decadence of post-civilized modern Western society's barbarism and savagery, especially the lived experience of black people forced to "live in but not of" American society. Wright seems to be arguing that a decadent social order with a bankrupt legal system brings into existence a philosophical criminal. The ethical criminal is a lawless man inhabiting a lawless and decadent social order. For various reasons, he does not believe that his victims have a right to exist. Yet, he attempts to rein in his lawless impulses, which forces him to live in a subjective prison. This requires self-mastery and lucid intellectual power. Yet, the ethical criminal has a certain self-possessed callousness that allows him to break modern society's rules without feeling guilt, because, he considers himself innocent!

The ethical criminal's dilemma is that he still lives in the wake of modern civilization, even though his death-of-God decree is succeeded by the realization that modern culture has become dehumanized at the same time that it remains all too human. At the novel's end, Wright seems to suggest that a nihilistic-existential approach bears its own chaotic and suicidal logical illogic, which, tragically, is the ultimate irony of a philosophy dependent upon ambiguities. Wright seems to be saying that the path of the complex, knowledgeable, powerful, yet cynical ethical criminal ends in destruction. In what appears to be Wright's rejection of existential nihilism, the ethical criminal Damon cannot transcend human existence; he cannot exist as a god beyond good and evil. The human cannot be concerned only with the self, its fears, and desires. Wright seems really to be suggesting that people must be responsible not only for the self, but also for others. Individualism, heroic or not, is inadequate. Shot by a Communist Party operative and dying, Damon's quest has been necessary but not sufficient. He declares weakly:

I wanted to be free . . . To feel what I was worth . . . What living meant to me . . . I loved life too much . . . Alone a man is nothing . . . Man is a promise that he must never break . .

---

<sup>35</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 476-477.

. I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others . . . To make a bridge from man to man . . . Starting from scratch every time is . . . is no good. Tell them not to come down this road . . . Men hate themselves and it makes them hate others . . . We must find some way of being good to ourselves . . . Man is all we've got . . . I wish I could ask men to meet themselves . . . We're different from what we seem . . . Maybe worse, maybe better . . . But certainly different . . . We're strangers to ourselves." He was silent for a moment, then he continued, whispering: "Don't think I'm so odd and strange . . . I'm not . . . I'm legion . . . I've lived alone, but I'm everywhere . . . Man is returning to the earth . . . For a long time he has been sleeping, wrapped in a dream . . . He is awakening now, awakening from his dream and finding himself in a waking nightmare . . . The myth-men are going . . . The real men, the last men are coming . . . Somebody must prepare the way for them . . . Tell the world what they are like . . . We are here already, if others but had the courage to see us . . ."<sup>36</sup>

The ethical criminal Damon has searched in vain for the meaning of life. He has found neither meaning nor values – or so it would appear. His apparent predicament is complicated when, after he has committed four murders and has been directly responsible for another death, he whispers in his dying moment, "In my heart...I'm...I felt...I'm *innocent*...That's what made the horror."<sup>37</sup> Again, the significance of Damon's dying statement is contextualized by Kierkegaard's observation: "The qualitative leap is outside of ambiguity, but he who through dread becomes guilty is innocent, for it was not he himself but dread, an alien power, which laid hold of him, a power he did not love but dreaded – and yet he is guilty, for he sank in the dread which he loved even while he feared it."<sup>38</sup>

Significantly, the contradiction is that in fighting other little gods, the ethical criminal becomes the very thing against which he has struggled – a little god. Yet, Wright demonstrates that the black man, as ethical criminal, cannot step outside of history – to become a little god, create new values, and live in accordance with those values – and survive. Wright seems to be suggesting that the black man (or black people, as such) cannot become a free spirit in the existing American social order, even if he becomes as lawless as his white oppressors. His quest for freedom, knowledge, and self-mastery is not enough. Wright seems to be arguing that the oppression of blacks, especially in the absence of God, makes their lives hopelessly meaningless. At the novel's end, ethical criminal Damon does not find meaning in his life through the lived experience of heroic individualism. His new ethics have demanded the thoroughgoing stripping away of his attachments (to family, friends, employment, ideologies, religion, political

---

<sup>36</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 585.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 586.

<sup>38</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 39.

organizations, laws, and other human beings) so as to purge his creative will of every trace of necessity. However, he is murdered by one of his white communist adversaries. Wright seems to be saying that the struggle for black liberation cannot be an individual project; rather, it must be a collective vocation. Even so, freedom is unobtainable. The ethical criminal is the response to the emergence of the uncivil savagery and barbarism of modern culture, which flourishes in an environment shaped by increasing decadence and nihilism. He has sought to be creative—to create new values by which to live. But the ethical criminal cannot successfully create a new self; nor can he create new values and the meaning of his life. Ultimately, he cannot achieve authentic self-mastery as a little god. Realizing this, perhaps the only thing the ethical criminal can do, Wright suggests, is to pull oneself together and employ one's knowledgeable vision in order to help others to pierce the many illusionary veils that characterize the horror of an oppressive post-civilized modern society.

Knowing and seeing what is happening in the world today, I don't think that there is much of anything that one can do about it. But there is one little thing, it seems to me, that a man owes to himself. He can look bravely at this horrible totalitarian reptile and, while doing so, discipline his dread, his fear and study it coolly, observe every slither and convolution of its sensuous movements and note down with calmness the pertinent facts. In the face of the totalitarian danger, these facts can help a man to save himself; and he may then be able to call the attention of others around him to the presence and meaning of this reptile and its multitudinous writhings.<sup>39</sup>

There is no final overcoming or transformation for the individual or the social order. The ethical criminal Damon cannot live beyond good and evil. Perhaps beyond good and evil there is nothingness.

---

<sup>39</sup> Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 492.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Floyd W. Hayes, III** (Ph.D., University of Maryland), now retired was Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science, and Coordinator of Programs and Undergraduate Studies, Center for Africana Studies, at Johns Hopkins University. The author of numerous articles and book chapters, Hayes focuses on Africana political philosophy, politics, and policy. He offers senior seminars: Richard and Modernism: Philosophy, Literature, and Politics; and Black Existential Thought, respectively. He is the editor of *A Turbulent Voyage: Readings in African American Studies*. Hayes authored a book, entitled “Domination and *Resentment*: The Desperate Vision of Richard Wright.”