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Un Enfant du Pays

I

> . . . and so naturally it is I an American who was and is thinking in writing in America and lives in Paris. This has been and probably will be the history of the world.
>
> GERTRUDE STEIN, *transition*, Fall 1928

In early May 1946, Gertrude Stein received an American visitor at her apartment on rue Christine, not far from Boulevard St-Germain, on the Left Bank of The Seine. As the city's most famous American resident, a leader and leading survivor of the modernist revolution in art that broke out in Paris during the first two decades of the century, Stein was accustomed to admitting strangers to the spacious rooms which she shared with Alice B. Toklas, where the walls were hung three and four deep with paintings by Cézanne, Bonnard, Picasso, Matisse. Sometimes, letting go of politeness, she would remind a caller who had been welcomed in the past and had returned with friends to see "the pictures" that her house was not a museum.

Her present visitor was there by consent. Indeed, he had sailed to Paris from New York on the raft of an official invitation from the French government, initiated by Stein. Without her intervention his application for a passport to leave the United States, rejected when it was made the first time, would probably have been turned down again. This happened, and would happen increasingly, to Americans of dubious allegiance in the postwar years, when the actual fight, on the ground and in the air, against fascism had ended and the ideological battle against communism was just beginning. One of its most famous

victims was Paul Robeson, who had been welcomed in the Soviet Union, and who, when refused a passport to fulfill a singing engagement in Canada, set up the loudspeakers on the American side of the border and broadcast a concert to Canadians listening on the other.

Like Robeson, the man who was visiting Gertrude Stein had been a Communist. Like Robeson, he was black—a Negro, as Gertrude Stein, and he himself, would have said. He was also a writer, and this, taken together with his race, made him seem to Gertrude Stein something new. Not new in the sense of being a novelty, for amusement, but new in the sense of being *modern*.

Stein was not unacquainted with black people. She was rare among white American writers in creating a novel-length work of fiction with an all-black cast: "Melanctha," which she published in 1909 in her book *Three Lives*. The story is chiefly notable as an early example of Stein's innovatory techniques: repetitious, insistent, circular sentences, which urged words to perform in the way of an artist's line, sometimes without regard for realistic meaning—as Matisse would disregard "reality" to create a true form. But "Melanctha" also exhibits the racial attitudes of its time (shared by blacks themselves), for example in equating a light brown or "yellow" skin with gentility and a very dark one with coarseness, in manner and spirit.

The man standing before Gertude Stein was dark, but if Stein retained any of her subliminal prejudice, he, by his presence alone, demolished it. He was the author of two recent books—a novel, *Native Son*, and a memoir of his Mississippi childhood, *Black Boy*—which had impressed her deeply. So much so that she regarded Richard Wright as "the most important writer in the States since herself."

This compliment—greatly welcomed by Wright, in spite of its self-regard—was delivered in a note sent by one of Stein's friends in April 1945. Wright, as it happened, was already an admirer of hers, and a correspondence began which ranged over many topics, including the daily humiliations, large and small, endured by the American black—for example, Wright had trouble finding a barber in Greenwich Village who would cut his hair—the jazz craze now sweeping Paris, and the black GIs Stein saw in the city streets. She perceived in their expressions and gestures, and heard in their speech, the American anthem played in a different key. Wright sent her books, including

his own collection of stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, and a pamphlet called "Handbook of Harlem Jive."

> You, of course, have heard of the words *jive*, *hot*, *cat*; you have no doubt heard the phrases "laying it in the groove," "beating it up," "blowing your top," etc., etc. All of these are called jive words.

Jive, he told her, meant "hiding things with words," and generally enhancing the tempo of life "through talk." America had made Negroes into a strange people, Wright went on. By "strange" he meant twisted, and it was this twistedness he had set himself the task of unwrenching. It is a terrible thing to live with, he told Stein in one letter, "but for writing it is great."

Wright had wanted to visit France some years before but had been prevented from doing so by the war and the Nazi occupation. The friendly contact with Stein reawakened his desire. Even before receiving the initial note from her friend, Joseph Barry, he had thought about Stein and her situation: "Melanctha" had captured, as no other work had, the "deep Negro dialect" of his ancestors; Stein had given a form so distinct to something that Wright had been hearing all his life that it was for him "as if I were listening to my grandmother for the first time, so fresh was the feeling it gave me." Not only had she drawn the rhythms of Negro speech on the page with an exactness which enchanted and surprised him, she had done so while living in Paris. Could there be a connection between her exile and this clarity of imagination?

"I'd say," Wright told his journal one night in January 1945, as he broke off from reading Stein's *Narration*, reminding himself once again that this woman "who is distrusted by everyone" had made him hear the speech of his grandmother,

> I'd say that one could live and write like that only if one lived in Paris or in some out-of-the-way spot where one could claim one's own soul.

It took a year, but the idea was born. He had to find out if there was another country, a place where life was lived differently.

"Gee, I'd like to go to France."
"Me too."
"Me too."
"Me too."

RICHARD WRIGHT,
Lawd Today! 1936

But, on applying to Washington at the beginning of the new year, 1946, for a passport to enable him to travel, Wright was told by the State Department that he would not be granted one. A friend of his, a magazine editor, Dorothy Norman, wrote a letter to the department, saying that she wished to appoint Wright to go abroad to represent her journal, *Twice a Year*, so that he could "report on cultural, social and political events in France" (culture being one of the best ways to get around the State Department's reluctance to allow "meddlesome" Americans to leave their own shores at the end of the war). "We were generally warned," Norman reported later in an article written for the *New York Post*,

> that it would be difficult for Richard Wright to get a passport because he was a Negro. We were warned that the Government would not like to have Wright, in particular, go abroad, because of the way in which he had always spoken out against injustice at home, and against racial discrimination in particular.
>
> I was asked why Wright, who was "after all" a "Negro," would want to go "abroad" anyway. Wasn't it his "place" to stay "here"? What "interest" could he possibly have in Europe?

The refusal stuck. "Our State Department is really a tough nut to crack," Wright unassumingly told Stein, but he appealed to her for help, if she could provide it. At her instigation, with support from Marc Chagall and Jean-Paul Sartre, an official invitation was issued to Wright to visit France with his wife and infant daughter as guests of the Cultural Relations Section of the French Foreign Ministry. Their passage across the Atlantic would be paid, and living expenses in Paris met for one month. Wright could then stay on for as long as he wished.

Following some confusion (when the offer was made, by telephone, an elated Wright exclaimed, "It's not possible!" whereupon the Frenchman at the other end of the line assumed the gesture had been declined, and replaced the receiver), the invitation was confirmed; this by itself was enough to sway the State Department. Richard Wright, ex-Communist, present left-leaning liberal, Negro radical but, in his own words, "a human being before being a Negro," author of a book *(Black Boy)* described by a Mississippi congressman as "the dirtiest, filthiest, lousiest, most obscene piece of writing that I have ever seen," set sail on April 30 aboard the SS *Brazil* with his wife and daughter for a visit to the City of Light and the City of Stein that was to last nine months.

They docked on May 8. The left-wing daily, *Combat*, coedited by Albert Camus, sent a journalist and photographer to meet the boat-train at Gare St.-Lazare. It reported Wright's arrival on the front page. The journalist, Maurice Nadeau, asked Wright if the black problem in the United States was nearing a solution. "There is not a black problem in the United States," Wright told him, "but a white problem. The blacks know what they want . . . The whites don't." A chauffeur-driven car, sent by the American Embassy, pulled up alongside the curb. Nadeau noted that the white chauffeur doffed his cap. "Richard Wright, holding his daughter, got in, not before giving me a slap on the back, accompanied by a peal of laughter."

In Paris, the trees were blossoming and the flowers were out in the gardens. Under an open sky, the effect of space and stone to one who had never laid eyes on it before was ravishing. "How beautiful!" the cultural attaché Douglas Schneider heard Wright exclaim under his breath as he instructed the driver to take them on a brief tour through the early morning traffic-free streets, down the Champs-Elysées, past the Tuileries onto the rue de Rivoli, then along the quays to the Trianon-Palace Hotel on the Left Bank, where a room had been reserved. "How absolutely beautiful." He could never have imagined that a city could contain "in so little space so many treasures, so many flowers, so many gray stones, all so very beautiful."

And now, finally, he was sitting down to tea with the woman who was at once an admirer, an idol, a supporter, even a sponsor. There was no hint of condescension in the relationship—Stein respected nothing more than talent in an artist, and sincerity in the person, and Richard Wright, at thirty-eight still young enough to appear boyish

to the septuagenarian modernist, was happily in possession of both attributes. More than those qualities, though, Stein looked for the new. What stimulated her most was to witness the twentieth century breaking out, in painting, in writing, in dress, even in war. The nineteenth century had come to an end in 1943, Stein wrote in her recent book *Wars I Have Seen*; the Second World War had finished it off, but she herself had played a part, "killing it dead, quite like a gangster with . . . a tommy gun." In his every aspect, Richard Wright struck Gertrude Stein as new. In an article which he wrote about her for *PM*, a magazine he contributed to in New York, he declared that his main impression of her

> is this: perhaps more than any other mind of our time, she has realized acutely the difference between Yesterday and Today.

The piece was datelined "July 13, 1946"; less than two weeks later, Gertrude Stein was dead. Following a ceremony at the Hotel de Ville, Richard Wright was made an honorary citizen of Paris.

* * *

> I like Sartre's face. Some say it is ugly. It cannot be ugly: his intelligence irradiates his features. Hidden ugliness is the most repulsive; Sartre's face has the candor of an erupting volcano. When he enters the Dôme or La Coupole, he is like a suppressed bull . . . Some faces are stingy, denying one even the flicker of eyelids. They appear starched. I love his lower lip like a white Negro's, his squint, his wandering eye, his shipwrecked eye, a slipstream of light when he enters our troubled waters.
>
> VIOLETTE LEDUC, *La Folie en tête*, 1970

"It is precisely in her stomach that Paris has recovered least," wrote *The New Yorker* correspondent Janet Flanner, another survivor from the era of Stein and Montparnasse. It seemed as if the gunpowder used to scatter the Nazis had been made by grinding down every available ounce of meat, fruit, and sugar, every shred of writing paper and toilet paper, by liquidizing every drop of milk and ink. There were

shortages of all imaginable kinds. Parisians could lunch off a legal menu in a modest restaurant for a few francs, Flanner wrote in May 1946, "if they can afford it. The white-collar and working classes cannot."

The de Gaulle government (from which de Gaulle had temporarily resigned) was trying to take steps toward a recovery, aided by two unlikely allies, each unacceptable in its own way: the American government and the French Communist Party (PCF). Unusual attempts were made to sway the allegiance of the people. One spring day a large consignment of underwear landed unexpectedly in shops all over the city, to the relief of the general public. Each garment was stamped with the phrase "Renaissance Française," the slogan of the PCF, which had manufactured the clothes and organized their supply. They were quickly snapped up, nevertheless, by a grateful public. "New underdrawers are vital to a civilized reconstruction of Europe," quipped Flanner.

The occupation of Paris had happened more or less silently, but it had ended with a bang, and the explosion caused fits of creative agitation, in theaters, publishing houses, magazine offices, in nightclubs and cafés. The straitjacket had been turned inside out, and an entire populace was free again, flexing muscles made slack by lack of use, and taking steps unhindered toward the resumption of normal life. The chief representative of this new energy in artistic circles was a writer, Jean-Paul Sartre, and his headquarters was in a café. Many of the eminent prewar figures were still active: Gide, Cocteau, Colette, Breton; the world's attention was no longer on their grand salons, however, but in the downstairs room at the Café de Flore, on the corner of the Boulevard St.-Germain and rue St.-Benoit, where Sartre held court, a philosopher-king who was not above lifting dogends off the floor to stuff his pipe with tobacco when he ran out, who gave freely of his conversation to whoever stopped at his table, so long as he or she was eager to discuss things—the peace, Marxism, American fiction—with seriousness and commitment. "It is certain," he wrote in *L'Etre et le néant (Being and Nothingness)*, "that the café by itself, with its patrons, its tables, its books, its mirrors, its light, its smokey atmosphere, and the sounds of voices, rattling saucers, and the footsteps which fill it—the café is a fullness of being." Next to the Flore, forming a corner with the ancient Place St.-Germain, was another

café, the Deux Magots. Between them, these two constituted the base camp of the postwar Parisian avant-garde.

Among Sartre's inner circle, apart from his intimate companion Simone de Beauvoir, were Camus, Jean Genet, Raymond Aron, the singer and actor Mouloudji, Boris Vian, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, editor in chief of *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal founded by Sartre in October 1945 with the express purpose of giving "an account of the present, as complete and faithful as possible." Talent existed in such abundance and variety in this group, and the idea of an intellectual king and queen with courtiers in the heart of Paris was so appealing, that the *Temps Modernes* circle became a tourist attraction in itself, admired as much for its glamour as for its products. To talk of existentialism was very much *dans le vent*, or as the Americans were starting to say, "with it."

The freedoms of the individual which Sartre wrote about in *Being and Nothingness*, in over five hundred pages of dense philosophical argument—the limits of knowledge, the nature of the emotions, the transphenomenalism of being, the distinction between *en-soi* and *pour-soi*, the intuition of nothingness and the alternatives of choice—also had their accessible side, in concepts such as the authenticity of the individual and *mauvaise foi* (bad faith). Phrases such as "the individual creates his own values," and "there is no human nature because there is no God to have a conception of it," and "man simply is" became the common currency of the young people who had come of age under the Nazi occupation, and who were now in the bloom of liberty. Sartre by himself stood for the new freedoms, and many people had taken to hanging around the Flore in the hope of catching a glimpse of him at his table in the corner, writing in his notebook. *Being and Nothingness* had, after all, been written in a café. Anyone who had ever drunk *un petit express* could recognize the waiter in the portrait drawn by Sartre to illustrate the concept of *mauvaise foi*:

> His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes towards the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally, he returns, trying to imitate the inflexible stiffness of some kind of

> automaton, while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tightrope-walker by putting it in a perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually reestablishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game . . . He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing at? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café.

It became *dans le vent* to call everything that was traditional "bourgeois," to renounce the institution of marriage, to dress in black and to profess a liking for modern jazz.

"New York is buzzing over existentialism," Richard Wright had written to Gertrude Stein a month before his departure from New York, "trying to understand it. It frightens most folks here. Too gloomy." For Wright, who had a tenacious and inquiring, if not a fine, mind, it required first-hand contact with the matter behind an idea before he arrived at a full understanding of the idea itself. He had, so to speak, to touch and feel the existentialists before he could see what the doctrine everyone was talking about was really about. When he had done that, he discovered that existentialism was all about him.

The Wrights hardly suffered from the austerity. Their needs were well catered for. The franc was cheap, and as they were guests of the government during the first month of their stay, most things were paid for anyway. Wright found himself at the center of a host of official gatherings in his honor. Throughout his sojourn he was treated, for the first time in his life, as a great man of letters.

He responded with typical curiosity and enthusiasm, taking a strong interest in Parisian literary life and seeking contact with the leading writers. He was introduced to Gide, Cocteau, and Camus (who told him that the French writers' affection for him was "*fort*"). He corresponded with German and Italian publishers over the translations of his books, got his passport amended to enable him to visit England, and generally felt like a citizen of a different world from the one he had left behind. To his editor at Harper and Brothers, he wrote: "There is such an absence of race hatred, that it seems a little unreal."

Unlike the tourists who peeped round the classically proportioned pillars of the Café de Flore, Wright read his Sartre—but slowly, and piecemeal. *L'Etre et le néant* was not yet translated into English, and in any case its great philosophical universe was difficult to encompass for someone not trained in its conceptual vocabulary. The long essay "Anti-Semite and Jew" was published in *Partisan Review* in 1946; he read that, and the lecture "Existentialism and Humanism," a summary of the themes of *Being and Nothingness*, which came out in English the following year. One of Sartre's themes was that alienation, self-mutilation, the inauthenticity of the individual, grew out of the individual's acceptance of the social labels used to define him: Jew or Aryan, even ugly or handsome. In "Existentialism and Humanism," Sartre declared that "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself . . . Man is condemned to be free in his choice of action. He is doomed to bear the burden of responsibility."

Those words made sense to Richard Wright. But, he argued with Sartre when they met, from where he stood the attempt to choose to be something other than what society had determined for you might be fatal. What use was "choice" if it led to a lynching? In America, the Negro who "chose" freedom was fundamentally no more free than the Negro who chose to dwell in the forms of obsequious submission to which society had directed him. The latter was trapped by a social tyranny; the former was trapped by the knowledge that his choice might bring persecution or death.

This was the problem Wright had tackled in his novel *Native Son*, the story of a black youth in Chicago who takes a job as chauffeur to a rich liberal family. On his first night, after carrying home the drunken daughter who had been flirting with him, he smothers her with a pillow in order to avoid being discovered in her bedroom. Wright had not read any Sartre at the time he was writing his novel, but his purpose was "Sartrean" enough—to explore which ways to freedom were open to his hero:

> Having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him; having accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life . . . he chose not to struggle any more.

This is Wright in the act of formulating an "existentialism"—without at the time having the word in his vocabulary—of the black American mind. Where Sartre's decision to choose freedom led to freedom itself, for Bigger Thomas it led to the electric chair.

Contemplation of the example of Richard Wright would eventually contribute to a change in direction in Sartre's thinking, as he began to focus more on the colonial, rather than the proletarian, as the victim of capitalist oppression. He devoted several pages to the American author in the essays he was currently writing for *Les Temps Modernes*, which would later be published as *Qu'est-ce que c'est la littérature? (What is Literature?)*. And Wright drew on the rich fund of Sartre's ideas, which in Paris were in the air, part of the atmosphere of every café and salon, for the novel he started work on soon after his arrival.

As he dwelt on Sartre's ideas, there occurred a shift in the way Wright actually began to experience himself. When he went to Paris, he made a discovery, which was that *Angst* did not begin and end with the fact of being a Negro. The condition of the outsider had dimensions he had never previously had cause, or even opportunity, to explore. *Angst* was not spelled b-l-a-c-k. Until now, color itself had stood between him and this discovery. The realization made him feel like a man and not a "black man." Paris and Sartre revealed this to Richard Wright; as a revelation, it meant a great deal more than witnessing at firsthand the famous sites of the Lost Generation. This was why he came to Paris—not to walk gaily up the rue Cardinal Lemoine sniffing the footprints of Hemingway. Paris seemed to endow all its visitors with the ease of gesture that refreshed the whole person, a freedom of expression that surprised and renewed the speaker—whether an artist of the last century or a tourist stepping off the boat in 1946. But the freedom it gave Richard Wright was distinct, and he would describe it in poetic rather than philosophical terms: all his life he had felt as if he were carrying a corpse around with him; when he came to Paris, he felt the corpse slipping off his back.

When he boarded ship to take him back to New York at the end of January 1947, Wright did not imagine that he would be returning to France in a little more than half a year. In the interviews he gave to French magazines, he spoke out forthrightly against the racial

situation in America, particularly in the South (his remarks were carefully noted by the FBI), contrasted American materialism with the rich cultural outlook of the French, complimented his hosts in the government for having had the "courage" to invite a black writer as an official guest (though it's doubtful they felt that any particular courage was required), remarked on the esteem in which France held her own writers . . . and yet, he said, "My home is over there," tilting his head in the direction of the ocean he was about to cross. My anger, he meant, my struggle, my inspiration as an artist—"for writing it is great"—are over there.

So he spoke while in Paris. The moment he stepped off the boat, however, the corpse climbed onto his back again. He had dreamed of packing his newfound ease in his luggage and bringing it home with him. Instead, he found that when he left his apartment with his wife, he was waiting—and he realized he would always be waiting—for someone to come up and shout "Nigger lover!" in her face.

America was his subject; but to have to live in America in order to be able to witness what he called the "thousand little dramas" of black life as it related to white life now seemed too punishing an ordeal to endure. He had had hopes of a new brotherhood between black and white in the 1930s; but the leftist liberalism of those times had been thrown out of joint by the war.

Wright was no longer connected with the Communist Party. The admiration he had had for Stalin before the war—"the most politically sensitive volume" was how he described the dictator's *Marxism and the National Question*—had evaporated, as his understanding of the reality of the Soviet experiment matured. In his own country, the party which had once regarded him as a potential spokesman on intellectual affairs had turned on him at the first sign of skepticism. "Intellectuals don't fit well into the Party," Wright was told one night by a visiting comrade, who warned him that he should make his writing serve the revolutionary cause or risk being disciplined by the Central Committee.

In a long article published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1944, "I Tried to Be a Communist," he had made public his disillusionment. But in the elephantine memory of the FBI, there was no mechanism for forgetting, and Wright still ran the risk of being called before one of

the growing number of committees formed by the Senate to investigate the activities of Communists and former Communists—just about anybody who'd ever known a Communist, in fact. At the same time as Wright was trying to settle back into American life, the newly formed House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was setting in motion its investigation of the film industry—"the loathsome, filthy, insinuating, un-American undercurrents . . . running through various pictures," in the words of the Democratic congressman who proposed the investigations. This was the beginning of the prosecution of the Hollywood Ten, all members or past members of the Communist Party, all sent to prison.

Many other people in the entertainment or literary worlds were called to answer questions by McCarthy's committees. Had he remained in the United States, Wright would have been among them. At this time, when he felt fortified by his prestige, it is unlikely that he would have compromised either himself or his present and former friends, in which case his problems would have multiplied. At the very least, he would have found it difficult to leave the country.

And so he decided, shortly after his return to New York, to take the family back to France, this time to stay. The word was spreading. "All the young people I meet are longing to go to France," he wrote to Sylvia Beach at the end of May; writers and painters who had heard that Paris was where the interesting work was being done, that you could live cheaply in hotels there and write in cafés; ex-soldiers who had sampled the pleasures of the city during the Liberation, and who wanted more, and soon, with the implementation of the GI Bill, would be able to get it; jazz musicians who had heard that Europe—especially Paris—was in the grip of a "hot music" craze . . . all were "longing to go to France."

Wright's letter to Sylvia Beach was concerned with helping her find an agent and publisher in New York for her book about running Shakespeare and Company and publishing *Ulysses* during the 1920s. This kind favor frames the process of Wright's migration neatly. Two years earlier, a pillar of the old expatriate establishment, Gertrude Stein, had been instrumental in assisting him on his way to Europe. Now, on the eve of a self-exile which would last the rest of his life, he found himself in a position to offer a helping hand to another

central figure of the generation that had gone before, symbolically displacing it. "If I could not have April or May in Paris, I shall have August or September," Wright told Sylvia Beach; "but in any case I shall have Paris."

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> I insist, call me "racist" if you like, that white people will never be able to equal blacks when it comes to jazz; I'm sorry to repeat it so often . . .
>
> BORIS VIAN, *Jazz Hot*, 1948

The American Negro was already familiar to inhabitants of Paris in two forms: the GI and the jazz musician. Stein had questioned Wright about the black soldiers she saw swinging through the streets after the Liberation—What were they like? What were they thinking?—and received in reply a disquisition on "jitterbugs." Had she seen any jitterbugs in Paris yet? Wright had a suggestion to make: the next time she saw "some of the Negro boys" she should go up to them and ask them about this new music that seemed to have got into everybody's system. "Just say, Hello, boys. I don't dig this jive. What's it all about? Who is this Armstrong and what makes him so hot? They will tell you."

They would, would they? It's not easy to picture: Gertrude Stein meets the jitterbugs. Wright was well-informed in one sense, though: Paris, or at least St.-Germain-des-Prés, was going through a jazz craze. It was not Armstrong they were listening to—it was Dizzy Gillespie, king of *le bebop*. "Gillespie's sixteen black musicians will play for the first time in France, at Salle Pleyel, tomorrow night," Boris Vian told readers of *Combat* on February 19, 1948. "Just about every young American jazz musician now plays bebop . . . one more inexorable step in the evolution of jazz, which was born centuries ago when the first slaves arrived from Africa in the southern United States."

The indefatigable Vian—he wrote novels, plays, songs, and just about everything else, as well as playing the trumpet himself—reviewed the latest sounds from across the ocean in a number of newspapers and magazines, all at the same time, including one he founded himself, *Jazz News*. For him, as for others of the St.-Germain elite,

this taste in music was inseparable from an interest in the social conditions in which blacks lived, particularly in the American South. Vian wrote in his jazz column in *Combat* about the introduction of antilynch laws in Southern states which previously did not have them, and about the censoring in Memphis of the film *New Orleans* because of the appearance in it of Louis Armstrong. ("It's an astonishing decision when you see to what point the poor Mr. Armstrong is exploited in this movie.") He also ridiculed the racist remarks which had been directed against Gillespie by a few hooligans in the Salle Pleyel.

For most of the *rats-de-cave* of St.-Germain, whether committed café-thinkers or not, jazz was the modern thing. Even Sartre liked it, especially when his friend Vian was leading on trumpet at Club du Tabou, on rue Dauphine. Jazz was the doh-ray-me of the newly fashionable philosophy. It spoke of the new liberalism and permissiveness. It was blue. It spoke of defiance and protest. It was rude and erotic. It was supremely of the moment. "Man simply is"—and what could be more simply "is" than the black man playing his way out of a past that had enslaved him? The black jazz musician was man-simply-is par excellence, improvising his freedom nightly, clearing a playground of sensual delight in the existential gloom. His notations, a new aesthetics of *Angst*, delivered the message which the young *rats-de-cave* were prepared to hear: jazz, the black man's mastercrime of cultural defiance, was the ultimate antibourgeois art. In its very first cry of origin, from the auction blocks of the Deep South, as Vian reminded the serious readers of *Combat*, it was freedom music.

The Wrights arrived back in Paris at the end of the first week of August 1947. They stayed at first with friends near the river and eventually bought a house on rue Monsieur le Prince, a broad street in the Latin Quarter, running from the Carrefour de l'Odéon to the Jardins de Luxembourg. "I shall have Paris"—but the novelty had faded, and he saw France through eyes a little less dewy now. French plumbing exasperated him. He had to drive halfway across Paris just to pick up half a dozen packets of cigarettes, or to buy his coal on the black market. He had brought his large American car with him,

an Oldsmobile, and people stopped on the pavements to look at it, and at him, when he was driving through the streets. "I don't know whether to feel proud or ashamed. I'm ashamed most of the time."

But his love affair with the intellectuals continued. On ship, he had read Sartre and de Beauvoir and Camus. "How those French boys and girls think and write," he told his journal. "How keenly they feel the human plight." Nothing like their movement existed anywhere else in the world. They were serializing the French translation of *Black Boy* in *Les Temps Modernes*. When Wright went into a restaurant for lunch one day, a group from the magazine, eating at another table, sent over a bottle of red wine with their compliments. He and his wife often dined with Sartre and de Beauvoir; Wright found them generous and sympathetic; de Beauvoir called him her favorite American. Ellen Wright became de Beauvoir's literary agent. Sartre asked Wright to read over the film script of his play, *La Putain respectueuse (The Respectful Prostitute)*, which told the story of a prostitute in the American South who found herself in the absurd position of sheltering a Negro being hunted by a white mob for the supposed crime of raping her on a train. Wright also wrote an introduction to the English translation of the play.

By the end of the year, three of Wright's own books had been translated into French: *Les Enfants de l'Oncle Tom*, *Un Enfant du pays*, and *Black Boy*, which kept its original title. *Black Boy* had particular success. Black boys were *dans le vent*. Indeed, the most talked about novel of the year in Paris in 1947 was the work of an American black writer, but he was not Richard Wright. The book was published in French as *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, by Vernon Sullivan. The English title would be *I Will Spit on Your Graves*, but as was explained in a preface by the book's translator—Boris Vian, again—Sullivan had no hope of seeing his work published in his native country. For one thing, it was obscene, containing many descriptions of sexual acts. For another, it was extremely violent, and the violence was that of a black against whites. *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* charts the erotic adventures of a light-skinned Negro, Lee Anderson, after he takes up a job managing a bookshop in the small Southern town of Buckton. Like Joe Christmas in Faulkner's novel *Light in August*, Lee is light enough to pass for white. He becomes fixated on two sisters, but his desire

to dominate them sexually is morbidly, fatally, connected to a need to obtain vengeance on behalf of his darker-skinned brother, a victim of white violence in the past. Seducing a series of white girls with pathologically inspired energy, Lee revels in a private revenge (they do not realize he is a Negro); but it is not sufficient to satisfy him, and in the end he murders both sisters, before being killed himself by a police bullet.

According to the translator, Sullivan's light skin would have enabled him to live, like his protagonist, among whites, but he preferred "les Noirs." While *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* became highly successful, Sullivan remained an enigma. In fact, this Afro-American novel was a hoax. The book had been written in French, and "Sullivan" was a ghost. His real name was Boris Vian.

The book earned Vian a good deal of money, but he was correct in pointing out the dangers of publication in his spurious preface, for *J'irai cracher* was prosecuted for obscenity: the first such trial of a French novel since that of *Madam Bovary* in 1857. Had Vian read *Native Son*? *J'irai cracher* was written in August 1946 (in two weeks) while Wright was in Paris. *Native Son* would not be published in its French translation until several months after the appearance of the pseudo-American novel, but Vian read English, was up-to-date in things American—especially Afro-American—and it seems unlikely that he would have ignored the major work of the black American everyone was talking about. In fact, he translated a fifty-page story by Wright for the French-African journal *Présence-Africaine*, "Bright and Morning Star," which came out in the same month as *J'irai cracher*. In the preface to *J'irai cracher*, Vian mentions as influences on "Sullivan" the works of Henry Miller and James M. Cain, both of whom were enjoying a vogue in French translation, but the theme of the "black" novel is almost identical to that of *Native Son*, in which a young Negro kills a white girl, half accidentally, but also with feelings of triumphant revenge—"it made him feel free for the first time in his life"—for the slow death he has suffered throughout his entire life.

Wright and Vian were acquainted through Sartre, but not intimately. Neither man recorded any comment on the other. Vian, tall and handsome and up-to-the-minute in everything, might even have regarded Wright as a bit of a *vieux jeu*, a "square": he didn't know

about bebop, he didn't know how to dance, and the sight of French boys throwing French girls into the air to the sound of ersatz New Orleans rhythms at the Club du Tabou made him feel depressed. "I hated that place," he confided to his journal. He wanted France to be France, not a paler version of America.

But writing to Gertrude Stein shortly before his first departure for Europe, he had noted that "Negro hot music" was a crossroads at which white and black could meet. As a child in the South, he would never have thought it possible, but when he came North, white boys "would corner me and tell me the deep meanings buried in a solo trumpet." It was among the many surprises Paris held in store that there was a white boy there who would do that, too.

II

> . . . the ritual of opening the morning mail, invariably rich with amusements and doubly so when a mail boat had arrived from New York the previous day. There were the unbelievably bad manuscripts from Americans who interpreted modernism as an unsystematic garbling of words and from Englishmen who apparently thought emancipation meant the spilling of the nastiest thoughts left over from puberty. There were threatening unpoetic letters demanding whether *transition* were going to publish that poem sent a year ago—*yes or no*!! There were those precious newspaper clippings which, with few exceptions, ran true to form—preliminary sneers at the Joyce-Stein contributions (the names, for some reason were always linked together), the inevitable wisecrack about the small "t" in *transition* and the naive speculations about the magazine being composed on the terraces of Montparnasse cafés. And then, in magnificent contrast, the occasional appearance of an excellent manuscript from some person completely unknown.
>
> EUGENE JOLAS, letter to Robert Sage, 1930

"The French weeklies are carrying my stories," Wright reported in a letter to his friend back home, Owen Dodson, "and I'm writing articles

for some French dailies." Writing them in English, he meant; they would then be translated into French. Several new short stories saw the light of day in this manner; it was a function of Wright's happy engagement with the literary circles of Paris. It was also a case of necessity, for, with the war only two years ended and austerity still the prevailing weather, there were no literary weeklies, monthlies, quarterlies, or anything else in English being printed in Paris, apart from the *New York Herald-Tribune*.

Had Wright presented himself at the house of Gertrude Stein twenty years or so earlier, she would have introduced him to Eugene Jolas and Elliot Paul, editors of *transition*; to Ford Maddox Ford of *transatlantic review*; and to Ernest Titus of *This Quarter*. There were also *The Exile*, edited by Ezra Pound, *Broom*, *New Review*, *Boulevardier*, *Tambour*, and many others, most of them remaining in existence for about a year.

In 1947–48, there was nothing. The young writer stepping off the boat, with all the proper names of literary Paris sounding echoes of a grand society in his head, found that there was nowhere to take his work. Wright was unusual among Anglophone artists in becoming actively involved in the French domestic literary scene.

Things improved between spring 1948 and spring 1949, when three literary magazines came into being. Two of them were bilingual, with writing in both English and French. One of those was not even new, being a reincarnation of the 1920s magazine *transition*. Whereas the original *transition* had been a hotbed for American modernism, however, the revived version consisted mainly of translations of work by the French avant-garde. It was edited by a Frenchman who wrote in English, George Duthuit, to whom the title had been sold by Maria Jolas, and its connection with the generation of Joyce and Co. was through an Irishman who wrote in French.

Samuel Beckett's contributions to Duthuit's *transition* were mainly in the role of (uncredited) translator. (On an occasion when some of his own poems were printed, Duthuit poked gentle fun at Beckett's poor spoken French, in the list of contributors.) Like its forerunner, Duthuit's magazine was open to the work of painters, and Beckett made one enduring contribution, a set of "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," an aesthetic manifesto in the form of conversations about painting.

B. Total object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object. Question of degree.

D. More. The tyranny of the discreet overthrown. The world a flux of movements partaking of living time, that of effort, creation, liberation, the painting, the painter. The fleeting instant of sensation given back, given forth, with context of the continuum it nourished.

Not much of a welcome there for the fresh-faced young writer with his Hemingwayesque short stories in his satchel. For that he would have to wait until February 1949, when the magazine *Points* was born. *Points* was also bilingual and had two editors, one for each language, but it was more innocent than *transition* (note the uppercase "P"). It also had more money, being owned and edited (in the English department) by Sinbad Vail, the son of Laurence Vail, a Montparnasse "character" of the 1920s, and the American heiress Peggy Guggenheim. So eager was Guggenheim for the published-in-Paris tradition to be extended, with her genes, that she bullied her son into it. The money she provided was sufficient for him to get on with doing the things he liked best—driving fast cars, playing billiards, drinking—and still put out regular issues of *Points*.

The result was a far cry from Duthuit's gnomic "tyranny of the discreet otherthrown." According to one contributor, Vail's method of editing the magazine was to "wait until he had enough manuscripts to fill up eighty-four pages and then take the lot down to the printer's, and that was that." Try as he might, Vail could not rouse in himself an enthusiasm for literature. Poetry, especially, bored him. In an editorial written when the magazine reached five years of age, he looked back with weary languor on *Point's* origins:

> It was in the summer of 1948 that I first thought about starting a magazine. I was in Venice on holiday, a holiday from God knows what as I was not doing anything anyway . . . I vaguely thought about opening an art gallery in Paris, but I knew even less about art than literature . . .
>
> I often wonder why anyone ever starts a little literary magazine in the first place. There are vague ideas running around that they are

> created to publish writing that never has a chance in the commercial press, "new" writing, "experimental" writing and even "good writing" . . . but I think the real reason is to give the editor and his pals an outlet for their own work plus an egotistical desire to acquire "fame" or "notoriety" which in other circles are achieved by eating goldfish in public.

At least now there was a space where the writer could write in English in Paris, and enough Guggenheim money ("I vaguely thought of opening an art gallery in Paris . . .") to ensure that it did not succumb—like almost every other little literary magazine—to a shortage of funds. *Points* even paid for the work it published—3,000 francs for a short story (about £2 or $6), less for a poem. It wasn't much, but writers used to publishing their work in little magazines might have been surprised to be paid at all.

Vail continued to favor prose, eventually setting up a *Prix Points* and assembling a short-story anthology ("I once thought that all the stories in this anthology were very good. Now I think I'm bored with all of them"). He sacked his poetry editor in time for *Points* 16, and in the same issue cut out the French writing: "We discovered that we hardly had any French readers," he wrote in that favored tone of things going from bad to worse. From having been bimonthly, *Points* began to appear as a quarterly, and during some quarters did not appear at all, falling victim to the law of diminishing returns which affects all magazines of new writing—the "newer" the writing, the greater the difficulties of survival.

What kept *Points* going for so long (it folded in 1955), apart from money, was Vail's easygoing manner, which attracted some more serious literary types to the magazine's offices on rue Bernard Palissy. Vail's highborn *ennui* ("I've been told to try and be original for once and not write an editorial; but then I do so little writing and it is so nice to see one's name in print, even in one's own magazine.") concealed a knack for attracting contributors of genuine quality to his pages. In the first six months of its existence, *Points* published poems by David Gascoyne, Philippe Jaccottet, Nazim Hikmet; stories by Herbert Gold, René de Obaldia, Henri Thomas, and Michael Hamburger; articles on French theater (by Arthur Adamov) and on the phenomenon

of Jean Genet, whose *Journal du Voleur* had just been published in French. Not a bad half year for any new magazine.

Planted among the sparse advertisements for bookshops and restaurants at the back of the early numbers of *Points* was a notice announcing the birth of another magazine, *Zero*. It was based in rue Jacob, in the attic hotel room of a puckish American of Greek extraction, Themistocles Hoetis, who had arrived in Paris in September 1948. Although only twenty-three, he was officially a war veteran with a disability pension, having been shot down over Normandy. The magazine which he founded in partnership with a friend from Brooklyn, Asa Benveniste, can lay claim to being the first entirely English-language literary magazine in Paris after the war.

Hoetis and Benveniste went for a clutch of well-known writers—Christopher Isherwood and William Carlos Williams both contributed to the first issue—to bolster the efforts of the young Paris-based hopefuls. The debut was planned for the end of 1948. Then it was advertised in *transition* and *Points* for early 1949, but had to be postponed again because of the usual shortage of cash. Hoetis located a printer near the Boulevard St.-Michel who would print the magazine for $250, a sum well beyond the editors' reach. They eventually scrambled it together with the help of a third party:

> A young seventeen-year-old American I met by chance when landing at Cherbourg the fall before was the key. I had helped him find a piece of lost luggage in the dockyards, and although he was traveling on to Switzerland by car and I to Paris by train, we exchanged addresses. He visited our scene in Paris several times, and was made aware of our printing problems and agreed to help out. When my next disability check came in early December, I sent it to him at his school near Lausanne, whereupon he cashed it for double the amount of the official French franc rate in Paris. He then smuggled it back to me by hollowing out a pocket in a thick old book and mailing it to my hotel. His name was Irving Thalberg, son of the actress Norma Shearer and MGM's famous producer Irving Thalberg—the subject I later learned of Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Last Tycoon*. It was Irving junior who saved the day with smuggled cash for the first issue of *Zero*.

Zero was always going to need cash, smuggled, borrowed, or conned. Marlon Brando was the target of a later sting. Vail, who faithfully promoted *Zero* in his *Points* editorials, helped Hoetis out at one stage with an unreturnable loan. He reported in *Points* 18 that the *New York Times* stringer in Paris had "suggested I merge with *Zero*, give them my money and let them do the work." Vail promised to call the magazine "Zoints."

The first issue of *Zero* eventually appeared in the spring of 1949, with a moon-faced sketch of its editor on the cover in bold black and red strokes. In among the work of Isherwood, Kenneth Patchen, and others, it included a significant pairing of writers, one famous and the other unknown, one rich, the other penniless, both living in Paris and both black.

Unlike Vail, Hoetis could offer no payment for the work he printed, but he had succeeded in winkling a short story out of Richard Wright, which had previously appeared only in French. It was called "The Man Who Killed a Shadow"; it reiterated the theme of *Native Son* in miniature (and of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*), and it was followed in the pages of *Zero*, as if by a policeman on the point of arresting it, by an essay called "Everybody's Protest Novel," the first Paris publication—almost the first publication of any kind—by the twenty-four-year-old James Baldwin.

Baldwin's reasons for quitting New York were in essence the same as Wright's—in a letter written home he spoke of "a violent anarchic, hostility-breeding" pattern, with race at the bottom of it, which was eroding the fabric of his identity—but the circumstances of his arrival could hardly have been more different. No chauffeur-driven car to meet him, no room reserved at the Trianon-Palace, no Gertrude Stein, no "beautiful, absolutely beautiful" at the revelation of the wide boulevards and the quays. He had holes in his socks and $40 in his pocket. He was a ragamuffin with a big talent. His suitcase held a change of clothes, the manuscript of a half-finished novel, copies of the Bible and the works of Shakespeare, which he carried with him everywhere, and something by each of his more modern heroes, Dostoyevsky and Dickens. He had not an ounce of Wright's success—in New York he had stumbled from one badly paid job to another, trying to help his

widowed mother feed a family of eight—nor a cent of his healthy bank balance. His stepfather had died insane, he had lost the Christian faith which had sustained him through every crisis, and had, on the same day, so to speak, accepted the burgeoning of his homosexuality—not welcomed in Harlem, where he lived, nor in the church in which he had served as a young minister. About the only thing of value he carried with him to Paris was the address of Richard Wright.

Baldwin and Wright had met in New York. Too callow to aspire to approach the older writer on equal terms, Baldwin had nevertheless been helped by him to gain a fellowship in order to buy time to go on with his novel. It went under the provisional title "Crying Holy." When Wright saw the first fifty pages in 1944, it was a mess. But Wright was sufficiently convinced of the talent of its author, and of the promise of the work itself, for him to recommend Baldwin for an award from the Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Trust. That was five years earlier; the money had long since been spent and "Crying Holy" was still a mess. One of his reasons for quitting America ("I didn't go to Paris," Baldwin would say later. "I left New York") was to try and turn the mass of pages into a novel. And yet another reason—though he shrank from admitting it—was that Richard Wright was there.

Baldwin arrived, by air, on November 11, 1948. A friend from New York met him off the connecting train and led him straight to St.-Germain, where Hoetis was at the Deux Magots, engaged in the latest phase of the continuing *Zero* editorial meeting which was to last throughout that winter. Hearing of the imminent arrival of Baldwin, whom he knew vaguely from Greenwich Village, he arranged for Wright to be present. When Wright saw his protégé, he rose and welcomed him, as he always did in New York, with a smile and a paternal "Hey, Boy!" These were the first friendly words that Baldwin heard in Paris, and just about the last he would hear from Richard Wright.

Baldwin was a noticeably tense young man, slight in stature, with extravagant hand gestures and a facial expression that could veer from tragic to comic, encompassing everything in between, in a moment's conversation. Immediately after his arrival, as he put it to a journalist who spoke to him about it later, "he 'went to pieces,' a process begun

at home but hastened by his exposure to the chill of Paris . . . 'I'd gone to pieces before I left New York. But I really did go to pieces when I got to Paris.' " Going to pieces was a part of Baldwin's defense against the world; and also, by now, a part of his style—something which, as a friend meeting him then for the first time noticed, "explained everything and excused everything."

Hoetis settled him into a cheap hotel—and for Baldwin it had to be cheap indeed—on the rue du Dragon, a few doors down, as he surely noticed, from a house in which Victor Hugo had once lived. After a few days, Hoetis returned with some other acquaintances and they parceled Baldwin up and shipped him across the Boulevard St.-Germain to a more agreeable abode on the rue du Verneuil, a pleasant street of ancient houses running parallel to the Seine. This was a small hotel, mainly for students and student types, run by a tolerant Corsican matriarch called Mme. Dumont. The Hôtel du Verneuil was low in comfort—just one or two toilets, of the type that the French call "à la Turque" but which the rest of the world knows as French, serving seven floors—but high in other benefits. It was international, friendly, and Mme. Dumont was relaxed concerning the payment of rent.

She was relaxed about other things, too. Soon Baldwin was using his room—and, when his delay in handing over the rent exceeded even Mme. Dumont's patience, other people's rooms—for a string of seductions, "mostly young French boyfriends," according to Hoetis, "a few of whom were shady characters." He had spent the years between fourteen and seventeen in the pulpit, embracing the morality of the scripture he preached with extreme fervor. And when he broke free of the church, and renounced its Calvinist strictures, he did that with extreme fervor, too. "In some deep, black, stony, and liberating way," he wrote, "my life, in my own eyes, began during that first year in Paris." And he determined to stay there until he had made himself a writer—or nothing at all. "Go for broke" was Baldwin's motto; he virtually made a scripture out of *that*.

The architecture of Baldwin's everyday existence was totally ramshackle—he borrowed and couldn't pay back, took commissions and didn't fulfill them, made appointments and failed to keep them—yet somehow quite elegant at the same time. He was generous with his money on the rare occasions when funds allowed him to be, and with his time and sympathy when they did not. He offered wise counsel

to friends in need; with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, he was a wit, a talker of brilliance, a writer of potential genius.

Except that he never seemed to find the time, or the space, or the warmth (cheap hotel rooms were cold) to get much writing done. People went to cafés to keep warm, and sometimes to write; but in the cafés they would meet other people, and the one thing Baldwin never could resist was conversation.

One of Baldwin's new friends from the Hôtel de Verneuil was an American, even younger than Baldwin himself but with equally intense ambitions to write, called Otto Friedrich. He soon began to make a record of his encounters with the youthful literati in St.-Germain. One evening in the summer of 1949, he had an argument with Herbert Gold, who also lived at the Hôtel de Verneuil, and one or two others, about Baldwin. A man called Newman was "denouncing Jimmy," saying that the twenty-five-year-old Baldwin had never fulfilled himself.

> Somehow this turned into an argument with Gold and his wife about Saul Bellow, now living on the rue de l'Université, and Edith Gold said Bellow is the most talented writer in America . . . I said Jimmy had more talent than Saul Bellow would ever have, and they all glared at me. Edith said it was "presumptuous" of me to compare someone who had published two novels with someone who hadn't published a single one.

A few nights later, Newman got into an argument with Baldwin himself, and Baldwin "raged at him about all kinds of past history from Greenwich Village. Newman got very defensive. 'Well, I may not know much about literature,' he began one round, and Jimmy said, 'Why, you know nothing *whatever* about literature.' "

The hangout for Baldwin and his crowd of writers, radicals, runaway youths, and assorted patrons who helped provide him with food and beer was La Reine Blanche, on the other side of the street—in every sense—from the Café de Flore. Cheap and seedy, it had a reputation of being a place for homosexuals, but it was popular with the Verneuil set, whatever their orientation happened to be. Otto himself was engaged to be married to a girl who had her own room at the

Verneuil—in 1949, even when in Paris, respectable young Americans did not cohabit before marriage—and Baldwin was just as often seen in the company of one of his many "girlfriends" as with another male. Paris was a magnet for young people from all over Europe after the war, some of them illegal, and one night La Reine Blanche was raided by "two fat characters in raincoats" looking for foreign *rats-de-cave* without identity papers. Otto Friedrich (typically) had his papers in order, so there was no trouble for him, but Baldwin (typically) had forgotten to carry his with him.

> So, they said, "Ah-hah, and what do you do?" He said, "I'm a writer." They said, "Ah-hah, and what do you write?" He said, "Novels, stories, articles." They said, "Ah-hah, and who do you write for?" He said, "*Partisan Review* and *Commentary* and the *Nation*." They said, "Qu'est-ce que c'est ça?" They looked as if they were about to drag him away, but then he had an inspiration and said, "And also for *Les Temps Modernes*—for Jean-Paul Sartre." And then they said, "Ah," and there was no further trouble.

He hadn't written anything for *Les Temps Modernes*, in fact, though Hoetis—"the social lion," as Otto called him—had taken him to lunch with Sartre, at which he tried to inveigle Sartre into writing a piece for *Zero*. Sartre promised to think about it, and at the same lunch expressed an interest in republishing an essay Baldwin had written for the American magazine *Commentary*, entitled "The Harlem Ghetto." Nothing came of either project.*

Baldwin was now cut off from the New York journals which had sustained him—just—and was deeply involved in café life and in his own mostly desperate love affairs. "Crying Holy" took on the aspect of a prison, from which he frequently attempted to escape through new projects, new titles, new first chapters. "The new novel is only on page 19," wrote Friedrich in his ongoing commentary on the Verneuil scene at the beginning of October 1949, "which doesn't look very promising";

*Sartre gave Hoetis a prose outline of his new play, *Nekrassov*, in 1955, which Hoetis, by then publishing books rather than magazines, included in translation in *The Zero Anthology*, together with an extract from *Le Diable et le Bon Dieu* (1951).

> I was in his room this afternoon, and read what was in the typewriter, and it sounds just like "Crying Holy" all over again—has a character called Gabriel who discovers the Lord, and whose mother was a slave. I said, "Is this new novel just a new version of 'Crying Holy'? He said, "Well, yes and no."

"Crying Holy" was constantly being smoothed and rechiseled—taking different titles at different stages. It would eventually turn into *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, but that would take another three years.

One thing Baldwin did manage to complete, however, was the essay he had promised to give Hoetis for the first issue of *Zero*, "Everybody's Protest Novel." He finished it eventually, that is—while the rest of the issue was being printed, Baldwin's piece was still stuck in his typewriter. "Everybody's Protest Novel" was surrounded by confusion, in fact. It had been started while Baldwin was still in New York, and was expected by *Partisan Review*. To the slightly disgruntled *Partisan* editor, William Phillips, a slightly apologetic Baldwin explained, as his essay came off the presses, "*Zero* was here and you were there." (*Partisan* reprinted it anyway.) This tangle of intentions was nothing compared to what followed the essay's publication in Paris.

The bulk of the four-thousand-word piece is taken up with a discussion of Harriet Beecher Stowe's pro-emancipation novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which Baldwin had read and reread obsessively as a child, but which he now pronounced "a very bad novel." For Baldwin, it was the function of the novel to reveal the human being in all his complexity; "only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves. It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist."

Seven or eight years earlier, he would have said "the business of the minister" before going on to preach a sermon. Although he had stepped down from the pulpit, it was a theological energy that continued to activate his language, refined and redirected. "Everybody's Protest Novel" is full of this energy: the words *truth, freedom, revelation* resound throughout it with a sacred purpose, which is to affirm a devotion to the human being, "not to be confused with a devotion to humanity which is too easily equated with a devotion to a Cause."

When Baldwin said that Mrs. Stowe's novel was "very bad," he

meant that while it may have succeeded as a pamphlet, it failed dismally as a novel. And it was precisely here, in his apprehension of the aesthetic merit of a piece of literature, and in his consideration of the supremacy of that aspect, that he differed most from Richard Wright. Wright was a social realist, and the fervor of the ex-Communist fired his pen as much as that of the ex-minister fueled Baldwin's. For Wright, it was important that a novel, story, or play have not so much a revelatory or spiritually improving function as a socially improving one.

"Everybody's Protest Novel" is a remarkable piece of writing. One of Baldwin's first publications, it is already the product of a mature style. It not only contains all of Baldwin's preoccupations but suggests the totality of his potential. All his themes as a writer—with the exception of homosexuality, into which he was opening his investigation in a companion piece for the second issue of *Zero*—are present here. Most pronounced is the theme which had exercised him, in a different realm, while he was still an adolescent—the choice between redemption and damnation:

> We find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our [social] categorization. And escape is not effected through a bitter railing against this trap; it is as if this very striving were the only motion needed to spring the trap upon us. We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed. Society is held together with legend, myth, coercion, fear that without it we will be hurled into that void, within which, like the earth before the Word was spoken, the foundations of society are hidden. From this void—ourselves—it is the function of society to protect us; but it is only this void, our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation, which can save us—"from the evil that is in the world."

For a twenty-four-year-old from a Harlem slum, with an education which had to be curtailed, for economic reasons, when he was seventeen, this is precocious. Toward the end of his discussion, Baldwin fulfills a promise he had made at the beginning, to show that "those novels of oppression written by Negroes . . . raging, near paranoiac

. . . [reinforce] the principles which activate the oppression they decry." If Richard Wright did not recognize his own silhouette in that sentence, he had only to read to the end of the essay to find it fleshed out. Baldwin suggested that Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, was nothing more than Uncle Tom's descendant, "flesh of his flesh." Beneath the subversive facade of Wright's protest novel lay a continuation, "a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy." Baldwin portrayed the nineteenth-century crusader and the contemporary novelist "locked together in a deadly timeless battle, the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses."

It was a subtle argument, but its conclusion left no room for doubt over Baldwin's feelings about the work of the man everyone had taken for his mentor. "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real."

The protest novel was a ghetto; Baldwin would like to sweep it away—and, by extension, its architects along with it.

On the spring day on which *Zero* was published, Baldwin made a foray into the Brasserie Lipp. Whomever he was looking for, it was not Wright, but there he was, sitting at a table, and he called Baldwin over.

> Richard accused me of having betrayed him, and not only him but all American Negroes, by attacking the idea of protest literature . . . And Richard thought that I was trying to destroy his novel and his reputation; but it had not entered my mind that either of these could be destroyed, and certainly not by me.

This is more than slightly disingenuous. The page and a half devoted to *Native Son* at the end of "Everybody's Protest Novel" may be small-arms fire, but the aim is deadly. Then, hardly had Baldwin stepped back out on to the Boulevard St-Germain than he set to work on another essay, "Many Thousands Gone." It is a prolonged attack on *Native Son*.

> *Native Son* does not convey the altogether savage paradox of the American Negro's situation . . . *Native Son* finds itself at length so trapped by the American image of Negro life . . . that it cannot pursue its own implications . . . This is the significance of *Native Son* and also, unhappily, its overwhelming limitation.

By the time this essay was completed, in the following year ("Many Thousands Gone" was published in *Partisan Review*, November–December 1951), the rift between Baldwin and Wright had widened and was more or less unbridgeable. Hoetis's congenial notion of having "the old black writer and the young black writer" at the same table, thrashing out ideas over café au lait and funneling the results into *Zero*, was misjudged. The novel which Wright had looked through in 1944 was nearing completion, and Baldwin was launching it with high hopes indeed. He knew he was, as he said, "smart." He even knew he was smarter than Wright. "All literature is protest!" Wright had snapped at him in the Brasserie Lipp, a copy of *Zero* lying on the table before them like the map of a disputed territory. All literature may be protest, replied the pupil who has learned so much he can outsmart the teacher, "but not all protest is literature."

* * *

> Unable to see it, I invented the biggest and loveliest prick in the world. I endowed it with qualities: heavy, strong and nervous, sober, with a tendency towards pride, and yet serene. Beneath my fingers, I felt, sculpted in oak, its full veins, its palpitations, its heat, its pinkness, and at times the racing pulsation of the sperm.
>
> JEAN GENET, *Journal du Voleur*, 1949

Before getting down to work on the essay in which he would take direct aim at Wright, Baldwin had a second commission to fulfill for *Zero*. "Preservation of Innocence" was published in *Zero* no. 2, Summer 1949. Its theme, like the theme of "Everybody's Protest Novel," is "know thyself," though this time the subject of the sermon was not race but homosexuality. And the young ex-minister was preaching

the virtues of that tendency, not the vices. It exposes the repressions implicit in the approved image of American machismo, as exemplified in the novels of James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler. And it shows the young homosexual to have been a feminist:

> In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at man's estate, that mindless monster, the tough guy, has been created and perfected, whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals and whose attitude towards men and women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust. It is impossible for a moment to believe that any Cain or Chandler hero loves his girl; we are given overwhelming evidence that he wants her, but that is not the same thing and moreover, what he seems to want is revenge . . . The woman, in these energetic works, is the unknown quantity, the incarnation of sexual evil, the smiler with the knife. It is the man, who, for all his tommy-guns and rhetoric, is the innocent . . . Men and women have all but disappeared from our popular culture, leaving only this disturbing series of effigies with a motive power which we are told is sex. . . .

Sexual difference was not something Richard Wright had ever had cause to deal with at close quarters. It existed outside his nature, outside nature itself. It was linked to perversity. A friend wrote to Wright about Baldwin's using the word *filthy*. Yes, Wright replied, that was the word. He felt uncomfortable in Baldwin's presence. "It's always the same with homos." Another friend told him: "Behind all that Baldwin says is a kind of useless, quiet, shameful weeping." Wright agreed with that, too. Unbowed by the worst that American racism could aim at him, homosexuality still presented itself as a threat. "Yeah, he can write," a friend of Baldwin's recalled Wright saying at the time, "but he's a faggot."

Faggot, with its overtones of camp cliquishness, was precisely the wrong term for Baldwin's still developing, still exploratory, relationship with his own sexuality. The investigation of the self was a mission he undertook with displaced religious zeal. The pure in spirit, in Baldwin's lay theology, were those prepared to accept, not resist, the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart. "Preservation of Innocence" is not as subtle a piece of writing as "Everybody's Protest Novel." But

although the two essays share a set of overlapping concerns, "Preservation of Innocence" is distinct in a particular way—there is nothing in it about race—and Baldwin surely would not have written it had he stayed at home. This was a subject which, as Hoetis says, *Partisan Review* (which had reprinted "Everybody's Protest Novel" without stating where it had been first published) would not touch "with a ten-foot pole." Paris was freeing his pen and nourishing his ambition; the subtitle he gave to this, the second chapter of his search for the American soul, was "Studies for a New Morality."

III

> Spent yesterday evening at the Geists. The Sarrautes were there as well. The latter started showering with praise that sod Jean Genet, who boasts (with talent, I must confess) of being a thief, a scoundrel and a prostitute . . . Who dares to speak of goodness here? Goodness has nothing to do with it.
>
> JEAN HÉLION, *Journal d'un peintre*, *c* 1950

Where but in the pages of *Zero* (circulation: approximately one thousand) was the new morality to be studied? Baldwin snatched his subtitle out of the Parisian air, which was thick with talk of ethics, values, old and new moralities, the nonexistence of God. "Man is nothing else than what he makes of himself." If there had been certainty in shared values before the war—in the nineteenth century, as Gertrude Stein put it in *Wars I Have Seen*—then the war itself had shattered it. The intellectual world was in a crisis of conscience. Whom to write for? Whom to condemn? How to define resistance and collaboration? Some, like Camus, had worked fearlessly for the Resistance; others had joined the day the peace broke out. The definition of collaboration widened to the point where it appeared to trap anyone who had not actively resisted, and often the fiercest accusers were those whose own hands were not spotlessly clean. Simone de Beauvoir endorsed the purges carried out after the Liberation—"there were certain men who could have no place in the world we were trying to build"—while people whispered about her own behavior before it (among other "lapses," she had produced programs for Radio Natio-

nale, which supported the Vichy government). Camus and Jean Paulhan, on the other hand, men with impeccable reputations, spoke out against the purges and sought forgiveness for writers whose behavior had been foolish rather than wicked. "We are all responsible for an absence of values," wrote Camus.

Sartre promised a set of "existentialist ethics" but meantime, swinging between the forces of Left and Right, showed a lack of resolve which resulted in passages such as this appearing in *Les Temps Modernes*:

> In no country in the world is the dignity of work more respected than in the Soviet Union. Forced labor does not exist because the exploitation of man by man no longer exists. The diverse measures applied in American prisons contrast singularly with the equitable dispositions of collective work in the Soviet Union.

Even Richard Wright must have questioned his loyalty when, at an introduction he himself had brought about, he beheld Sartre and de Beauvoir publicly snubbing the American ex-Communist Louis Fischer as Fischer tried to enlighten them about the horrors of the Stalinist regime.

Nineteen forty-nine was the year in which Gallimard published Genet's autobiographical novel, *Journal du Voleur*, which contained, amid a wealth of jeweled obscenity, loving, lingering descriptions of other men's penises, their smells, sizes, crooks, and bumps. So enthusiastically did literary Paris embrace the author of this eulogy to the decay, not the preservation, of innocence, that it is tempting to see him as a demonic force absorbing the guilt that pervaded the city. Genet felt neither the need to deny the suggestion of collaboration, as so many did, nor to puff up dubious credentials as a *résistant*. On the contrary, he admired the Germans and was given to praising Hitler—anything to keep alive the happy memory of French humiliation, or to shock bourgeois society into a sense of its own moral emptiness.

The scandalized pleasure with which Paris and the larger world at once reviled Genet's lyrically obscene novels, poems, and plays helped keep the existentialist vaudeville in business. "Philosophy as farce" would have been as good a billing as any. Vian drew up a list of signs by which the uninitiated could recognize the existentialist in the St.-Germain night:

> Disheveled hair, falling in curls over the forehead. (See the famous portrait of Arthur Rimbaud, patron of all existentialists.)
>
> Shirt open to the navel, winter or summer.
>
> The existentialist, not having a pillow, goes everywhere with the book by Sullivan, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes.*

The cheap press—*les torchons*—made the most of it. The weekly *Samedi-Soir* took to reporting every statement made by the godless thinker as soon as he said it (and sometimes before he said it) and satirized the pilgrimages to the Flore by tourists in the hope of glimpsing Sartre (who anyway had since decamped to another bar, the Pont-Royale). "Monsieur Boubal," *Samedi-Soir* reported, in July 1949,

> manager of the most famous café in the world, started a revolution in St.-Germain by installing a fridge where Jean-Paul Sartre used to sit.
>
> At first sight, there is nothing to make a fuss about. But this outrage of "Lèse Sartreté" would have been unthinkable only six months ago. The bench where "The Sartre"—as Boubal calls him—used to place his then unknown behind had remained untouched until now. And suddenly Boubal, in spite of his reading of the Blue Guide classics, has shamelessly pushed aside the historic bench and put a fridge there instead.

"After midnight," *Samedi-Soir* claimed, "existentialists hide in the Club du Tabou . . . On certain nights, the existentialists throw themselves screaming into frenzied jitterbugs and boogie-woogies."

This conflation of youthful hedonism with existentialist ideology appalled de Beauvoir, who recorded Sartre's irritation with the attacks: "wandering about, dancing, listening to Vian play the trumpet—where was the harm in that?" How was the world to be expected to have confidence in a philosopher "whose teachings inspired orgies"?

One youthful hedonist who was welcomed into Sartre's inner circle, given pages and pages to play with in *Les Temps Modernes*, and yet remained outside it, refusing to sit stony-faced at the master's feet, was Vian himself. Making free with all the materials of his daily life for his unending stream of writings, he invented for one of his novels a philosopher called Jean-Sol Partre, author of *La Lettre et le néon*, a study of neon lighting.