

spare my readers a repetition of views already published, and ask their indulgence for a word or two more on the correspondent's parting shot. Murray claims that Shakespeare uses logic "as a kind of anti-logic" (witness Touchstone); thereby ("perhaps") the poet exhibits an impatience born of classroom drudgery, and (in any case) discharges the essential function of what is after all an art of feigning or lying. But Touchstone is not Shakespeare, and the jester's sophisms need not, in effect or intention, invite our approval to make us laugh. Indeed, part of the fun of being taken in lies in the exercise of extricating oneself from the trap, by grace of reason. The logic of Touchstone, to be sure, does not lend itself to summary treatment. Murray's equation of feigning with lying seems to be a more elementary, though serious, error; it turns exactly on its head a theory of literature that is, if anything, overweening in its claims for the truth and coherence of the art.

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Mr. Braun replies to Ms. Hunting:

To the Editor:

I am puzzled and distraught by Claudine Hunting's reply (*PMLA*, 89, 1974, 585–86) to my Forum piece (*PMLA*, 89, 1974, 353–54). Assuming that I was attacking her there personally, she proceeds by insult and innuendo to attack me. This is most unfortunate, since I had enjoyed her article and learned something from it (an impression confirmed by a subsequent re-reading of it); furthermore, I believe I expressed my favorable reaction quite clearly. Perhaps Hunting's virulence derives from a mistaken inference to the effect that I was somehow accusing her of plagiarism. I can see how such an inference is possible, and regret it: it was certainly not intended, and I apologize for any inconvenience it may have caused her.

As far as Hunting's replies to the essence of my remarks are concerned, I wish she had included some of them in the text of her article, or in accompanying notes: they make her arguments sounder and clearer. But I do not think that a prolonged discussion of these matters would be useful.

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Native Son

To the Editor:

While offering a rather novel argument for the propriety of Boris Max's courtroom speech in the last section of *Native Son*, Paul N. Siegel ("The Conclusion of Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *PMLA*, 89, 1974, 517–23) glosses over several important points. Significantly, as Siegel points out, Max's speech "[is] not seen and heard from Bigger's point of view, which is otherwise rigidly adhered to in the novel" (p. 519), and Wright goes on to tell us that Bigger had not understood the speech. What are we to make of this lack of understanding in light of the conclusion of the novel where Max, despite his "highly wrought" rhetorical methods, is unable to face the human reality of Bigger Thomas? What of the fact that Max in the prison cell "does not wish to talk to Bigger about the significance of his life" (p. 521)? That Siegel is unable to answer these questions, except by appeals to possible artistic flaws in Wright's technique (pp. 519, 521), points up a major weakness in his presentation; his concentration on Max to the exclusion of Bigger forces him to ignore Max's willingness to accept Bigger as an intellectual entity, "Negro," rather than as a human being facing death.

As Donald Gibson has noted, the greatest interpretive problem in the third section of the book is the centrality that Wright assigns the character of Bigger, now about to die and trying to come to terms with the meaning of his own life ("Wright's Invisible Native Son," *American Quarterly*, 21, 1969, 729). Max acts as a foil to Bigger. He is above all a rhetorician; his "understanding" of Bigger is limited by the lofty sociohistorical perspective that he urges the judge to accept as more just. Bigger does not understand Max's speech because he does not recognize himself as a rhetorical device to be wielded as a club against racial prejudice. He cannot understand Max just as, earlier, he could not understand Jan and Mary on their "slumming" expedition, because his perspective is personal rather than "objective" or intellectual. Max's rather impersonal American social history lesson, while laudable for its opposition to prejudice, is seriously defective as a message of hope and comfort for a condemned man. Whether or not Max is a Communist "spokesman" is irrelevant to the impersonality he embodies. For Max, Bigger is (to rephrase Baldwin) the Negro in America; he does not really exist except in the darkness of Max's mind. He is a social and not a personal or human problem. As such, Bigger is an appropriate object for a rhetorical exercise, and Max rises to the occasion in his courtroom speech. But, as Wright himself admitted, those who use such tactics are frequently guilty of "begging the question of the Negro's humanity" ("Blueprint for Negro Literature,"

in *Amistad 2*, ed. John A. Williams and Charles Harris, New York: Random, 1971, p. 7).

Nowhere is this question-begging more apparent than in the last scene of the novel. Following Max's lecture on the evils of "the rich people" and on the need for Bigger to believe in himself, Bigger laughs. Siegel comments, "These words work upon Bigger. They give him what he wants. Ironically, however, they cause him to go further than Max intended" (p. 521). If indeed there is irony, then Bigger is certainly a party to it. His laugh is followed by a self-definition which embodies the core of Max's advice as well as his courtroom speech: "But what I killed for, I am! . . . What I killed for must've been good! . . . I can say it now, 'cause I'm going to die." "Ironically," Max cannot accept this bald explication of destructive creativity. Images of blindness used earlier by Max in the courtroom and by Wright throughout the novel are now applied to Max himself: "[He] groped for his hat like a blind man"; on leaving the cell "he did not turn around" to look at Bigger, and when Bigger called to him, "Max paused, but did not look." In this, the most important scene in the entire novel, Max is blind while Bigger can see. The "irony" is compounded in that Bigger sees not only what he is, but what Max is. Bigger had laughed earlier and after Max leaves the cell, "he smiled a faint, wry, bitter smile." Wright has orchestrated this last scene to draw out Max by allowing Bigger to admit his own identity. He succeeds; the orator is speechless. Rhetoric cannot circumscribe Bigger Thomas. Bigger accepts himself finally as a full human being; he thinks about his family and about Jan, and at the same time shouts out the meaning of his own existence by repeating the ideational basis of Max's rhetoric. Faced with this incarnation of his own destructive/creative dialectic, a dialectic finally stripped of all its rhetorical trappings, Max is left, like Conrad's Kurtz, "full of terror." The "irony" is entirely appropriate; the raw humanity of Bigger Thomas prevails, while Max's "understanding of Bigger" (p. 521) is deflated by that final bitter smile, that self-awareness and insight evoked by the prospect of an imminent death.

After becoming disenchanted with Communist literary dogma in the early forties, Wright, in *The God That Failed*, proposed his own artistic ethos: "I would hurl words into [the] darkness and wait for an echo; and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words . . . to create a sense of the hunger for life which gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human" (ed. Richard Crossman, New York: Harper, 1949, p. 162). In the conclusion of *Native Son* Wright is clearly moving in this direction. He gives the socialist historian his soapbox and allows him to exhaust his supply of rhetorical devices, but in the end finds him

sadly lacking when confronted with the "inexpressibly human." Max is a witness, but he neither understands nor shares the struggle of the naked human psyche to come to terms with its own destructive potential as well as its "hunger for life"; Bigger, in proclaiming and embracing his own contradictory nature, destroys Max's rhetorical defenses and achieves at least the bare minimum of spiritual comfort by accepting himself (and forcing us to accept him) as a man.

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Form and Spenser's Venus

To the Editor:

Humphrey Tonkin's attempt to relate Spenser's Venus and Adonis to Britomart and Artegall and Florimell and Marinell in "Spenser's Garden of Adonis and Britomart's Quest" (*PMLA*, 88, 1973, 408–17) is vitiated by his association of Venus with form. We might wish that Tonkin had consulted John Erskine Hankins' *Source and Meaning in Spenser's Allegory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) as well as Kermode and Ficino as well as Pico: no commentator on the Garden of Adonis can afford to ignore Hankins' discussion of it (pp. 234–86).

Tonkin's identification of Venus as "the principle of form" (p. 412) results in part from his identification of Venus as the female principle only. He overlooks the description of her as hermaphroditic—"she hath both kinds in one, / Both male and female, both vnder one name: / She syre and mother is her selfe alone, / Begets and eke conceiues, ne needeth other none" (*FQ* iv.x.41)—and ignores her bisexuality. But Spenser's Venus is androgynous; and as she is more than the female principle, she is also more than the principle of form.

Tonkin is accurate in asserting that Venus is not *mater*, *materia*, but Venus "activity" in *The Faerie Queene* is to be explained with reference to conventional Renaissance Neoplatonism rather than to "Spenser's break with traditional ways of describing creation" (Tonkin, p. 412). Spenser places Venus in Chaos in "An Hymne in Honovr of Loue" (ll. 57–63), and although she is not to be identified with matter, she is to be found acting in it. Hankins has argued for the similarity of Spenser's and Ficino's ideas here, and a brief look at Ficino's treatment of Venus is useful for an understanding of the role of Venus in *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser's Venus, like Ficino's Venus Pandemos, is a generative deity (*FQ* iv.x.44–47). Ficino identifies Venus as the genital nature of things in the lower world: distinguishing between Venus Urania and Venus Pandemos, he assigns the latter a mother—whom he identifies as matter—because of the etymo-