

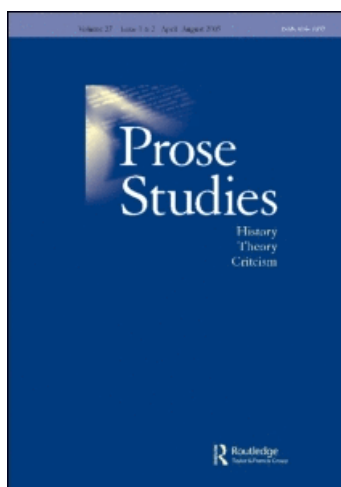
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“A Yearning for a Kind of Consciousness”: *Black Boy and the Aesthetic Solution*

KEITH WILHITE

The narrator in Richard Wright's Black Boy uses language to create a sense of self-consciousness. Language functions for the narrator as an aesthetic counter to southern racial oppression. Through a process that includes the avid reading of literature, speaking as valedictorian at his graduation, and writing short stories, "black boy" interpellates a new kind of subject for himself: a fully conscious, autonomous individual. The narrator's aesthetic creation of consciousness is mirrored in the consciousness of Wright's authorial act, an act that privileges an aesthetic truth over historical accuracy by privileging aesthetics as a means towards producing an "I."

Ideology: what is repeated and *consistent* (by this last adjective, it is excluded from the order of the signifier). So ideological analysis (or counter-ideology) need merely be repeated and consistent (by *proclaiming on the spot* its validity, by a gesture of pure clearance) in order to become, itself an ideological object.

How escape this? One solution is possible: the *aesthetic* one.¹

Roland Barthes

Much has been made of the distinction between Richard Wright and the protagonist/narrator of *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. The critical work of Timothy Dow Adams and James Olney has opened Richard Wright's autobiographic text to interpretive distinctions between author and narrator, thus introducing an essentially literary element to this particular autobiographic performance. Adams explores the concept of falsehood as "Wright's major metaphor of self,"² interpreting falsehood as an endemic necessity for black boys in their struggle for existence in the white South. In the course of his analysis, falsehood becomes emblematic of Wright's autobiographic act: the creation of a fictive self is necessary to the telling of a larger, cultural truth of the African-American experience in the South.

Black Boy emerges in Adams' account as a collective autobiography of this experience; the authenticity of the autobiography lies in the narrator's pursuit of the truth of that African-American experience. In drawing towards this conclusion, Adams calls upon Olney's distinction between the *I* of "black boy" and the *I* of Richard Wright. Olney considers Wright "a powerful example of the autobiographer of memory – a creative memory that shapes and reshapes the historic past in the image of the present."³ This idea of memory as a function of the present, "as the narrative course of the past becoming present,"⁴ is crucial to Olney's distinction between Wright and "black boy." Wright uses memory to create "black boy" and the world of "black boy," and in so doing he restructures the historic past from his present perspective. Memory functions as a device for bringing meaning out of the past and into the present. Olney refers to this idea as the "thread of memory that joins the two '*I*'s" of Wright and "black boy." Wright and "black boy" are intrinsically linked through memory, and this link provides meaning to the past (of "black boy") that has shaped the present perspective (of Wright).

The distinctions between Wright and "black boy," the combination of literary construction and autobiography, and the idea of collective autobiography deconstruct *Black Boy* by dispersing interpretive meaning. The dispersal of interpretive meaning takes place not only in the reading of the text, but in the self-consciousness of the text. In other words, it is possible to push the relationship between Wright and "black boy" one step further and argue that the "thread of memory" that connects the author Wright with the narrator "black boy" is sustained by a consciousness that manifests itself through language. Through writing, reading, and even speech, the narrator uses language to create a consciousness of self, to authenticate a sense of self within the oppressive environment of the South; Wright's text bears witness to these oppressive conditions and, thus, creates a cultural and historical consciousness that challenges conventional notions of autobiography. Through writing and reading, the narrator articulates a sense of self-consciousness that cannot be stripped from him, that is quintessentially his own. This aesthetic creation of consciousness mirrors Wright's authorial act of creation, an act that privileges an aesthetic truth over historical accuracy. The *I* of "black boy," as it emerges through language, creates the autobiographic pact between narrator and author.

I should like to suggest that this linguistic creation of consciousness in *Black Boy* is challenged on linguistic terms. If, as Olney suggests, Wright situates the *I* in his text "in such a manner as to seem to guarantee a continuity of identity from four to twelve to thirty-seven,"⁶ then I would argue that this deployment of the *I* within the linguistic field of the text encounters its most significant struggle at the level of language. The

struggle to legitimate a sense of authentic consciousness takes place in confrontation with the interpellative function of ideology. My argument here stems from the work of Louis Althusser who claims that “*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects.*”⁷ The sustaining power of ideology hinges on this idea of interpellation – the ability of ideology to inscribe individuals within the systems of production that ensure ideology’s perpetuation or reproduction in the practices of its interpellated subjects. Interpellation is the term Althusser specifically uses for this rather insidious function of ideology. I would argue that Althusser’s terminology implies that, through concrete subjects, ideology engages in a verbal performance. If ideology exists in the practices of individuals,⁸ then it is perpetuated through this verbal performance of hailing that inscribes other individuals into the apparatus of ideology. It is a verbal performance that mandates a reciprocal performance (specifically a physical performance) in its recognition and acknowledgment. As I will show, within the overarching ideology of the white South, ideologies of family, religion, and crime call for specific performances that are productive only insofar as they reproduce an existing structure of ultimately oppressive relations. Wright’s narrator confronts interpellation on its own terms, situating his response within the field of language: the avid reading of literature, the graduation speech, and writing. By disrupting the reproduction of oppressive relations, the narrator’s struggle to create a sense of authentic consciousness effectively halts the interpellative process of the ideological apparatuses that attempt to ensnare him. “Black boy’s” linguistic performances remain productive, not because they reproduce existing relations, but because they interpellate a new kind of subject: the fully conscious, autonomous individual.

Whatever historical differences there may be between the narrator “black boy” and his creator, Richard Wright, their consistency of consciousness is sustained both by the narrator’s essentially linguistic performances and the writing of *Black Boy*. Though countless links exist between author and narrator, language – specifically writing – solidifies the links between the *I* of “black boy” and the *I* of Wright. In other words, I contend that the narrator’s turn to writing is no mere coincidence, that as Adams’ and Olney’s arguments make clear, Wright is advocating writing as the aesthetic solution to the oppressive ideologies of the South, and that it is through the common locus of writing that we are able as an audience to complete, as it were, the connection between narrator and author. Just as “black boy’s” narrative interpellates a new kind of subject, Wright’s text interpellates a new kind of audience. As William Andrews suggests, “Wright was virtually unique in predicating authenticity on the alienation of the individual from any community, black as well as white.”⁹ Wright’s

narrator finds himself alienated from all normative forms of communal expression in the South. By exposing the insidious manner in which all oppressive ideologies – black as well as white – in the South produce and reproduce one another, the text of *Black Boy* challenges its audience to renegotiate traditional interpretations of the African-American experience. As Andrews contends, “the most famous turn-of-the-century black autobiographers represented themselves as so much in agreement with what white Americans already believed that the old anxieties about truth to self versus believability to others seemed no longer an issue.”¹⁰ In other words, *Black Boy* negotiates an aesthetic truth of experience that does not participate in a reconciliation with the oppressive relationships inherent to the ideologies of the South, and thus, Wright’s text halts the interpellative process by producing an audience whose interpretation will negate the reproduction of oppressive relations.

Before turning to the often cited initial scene of *Black Boy*, I believe it would be useful to examine Ralph Ellison’s insights into both Wright and the South. Ellison elucidates three general ways in which African-Americans were capable of accepting their destiny during the years that comprise the experience of “black boy”:

They could accept the role created for them by the whites and perpetually resolve the resulting conflicts through the hope and emotional catharsis of Negro religion; they could repress their dislike of Jim Crow social relations while striving for a middle way of respectability, becoming – consciously or unconsciously – the accomplices of the whites in oppressing their brothers; or they could reject the situation, adopt a criminal attitude, and carry on an unceasing psychological scrimmage with the whites, which often flared forth into physical violence.¹¹

Ellison’s observation points to the three dominant ideologies operating within the field of “black boy’s” experience in the South: religion, complicitous participation in oppression, and crime. Ellison believes Wright’s attitude was nearest to the last of these, but with an “all important qualitative difference: it represented a groping for *individual* values.”¹² Certainly, the idea of “an unceasing psychological scrimmage with the whites” seems most applicable to “black boy’s” mental state; I would argue, however, that this psychological struggle evolves most prominently out of the second possibility Ellison lists. The complicitous participation in oppression is most indicative of the masquerade of repressed consciousness necessitated by the over-arching ideological apparatus of the South. As Ellison suggests, it is through a *repression* of discontent with social relations in the South that African-Americans participate – consciously or

unconsciously – in perpetuating the oppressive relationship. This repression of discontent is a denial of consciousness: the South as ideology interpellates “black boy,” calls for him to subjugate freely his conscious awareness of the oppressive social relations, and thus enter a middle ground that will reproduce the relations of oppression. It is this imperative of repressed consciousness that inspires “black boy’s” psychological struggle, forces him eventually to reject the South, and motivates his “yearning for a kind of consciousness.”¹³

It is important to note, however, that even before Wright’s narrator enters into the field of experience outlined by Ellison, Wright opens his text onto a field of violence, fear, and flight enclosed by the narrator’s more or less immediate family. The four-year-old narrator describes setting fire to his grandmother’s house and the subsequent retribution he endures. This initial scene both establishes his familial relationships and foreshadows the violence, alienation, and ambivalence that mark his future experiences. The father is a notably impotent figure in the retribution following the conflagration. The punishment is wielded by the mother, and the narrator’s ensuing psychological trauma is rife with feminine imagery: “Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. Later, as I grew worse, I could see the bags in the daytime with my eyes open and I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid” (7). Ellison interprets this scene according to the paradoxical nature of the feminine imagery: “It was as though the mother’s milk had turned acid, and with it the whole pattern of life that had produced the ignorance, cruelty and fear that had fused with mother-love and exploded in the beating.”¹⁴ The narrator views his mother in ambivalent terms: she is both the traditional source of tenderness and nourishment, and the agent of punitive reparation. The father exists as an absence; he ceases to be a suitable agent of mimesis for the narrator in terms of a traditional model for masculinity. Though at this point in the text the father is not physically absent, he is essentially eliminated from the field of ego identity. The father’s initial impotence anticipates his actual absence in the narrator’s life.

The first chapter of *Black Boy* concludes with a collision of space and time that effectively reifies the relationship between the narrator’s familial experience and the course of his future existence. The narrator encounters his father after twenty-five years of physical absence, finding only a degenerative replica of the man he had known. The language of the scene is itself inherently violent as it presents all the accumulated anger and alienation of twenty-five years into a single moment: “a quarter of a century during which my mind and consciousness had become so greatly and violently altered that when I tried to talk to him I realized that, though ties

of blood made us kin, though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there was an echo of my voice in his voice, we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality" (34). This specular encounter, coming as it does so early in the text, establishes the critical conditions of the narrator's quest for consciousness. The estrangement alluded to in the passage, extending even to the level of language, suggests the prerequisite alienation of the narrator from any conventional field of experience, an alienation that severs the narrator from any meaningful reciprocal contact with his family:

I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, by wind and rain and sun, how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body ... (34)

The narrator's violently wrought consciousness and physical poise is set against the "animalistic impulses" and the creeping decrepitude of the father. It is the specular moment *par excellence*, and the narrator uses this opportunity to distinguish unequivocally between the consciousness he has struggled for and the primitive, contained, and unmeditated existence of the father. One cannot help but read the suggestion of an alternative existence into the shared and shadowy similarities of faces and voices – the subtle trace of the future the narrator repudiated along with the father and the South.

This idea of alternative or multiple futures raises another critical point in terms of this passage. The concept of time seeps into every aspect of the encounter. The narrator leaps across time and space, telling us things that have occurred before we learn how they will happen. This ability on the part of the narrator to traverse space and time is contrasted with the father who is "imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons," whose memories are "fastened ... to the crude and raw past," and whose life is encircled by "the horizons that bound [his] bleak plantation" (34). A sense of the past and future are captured in a synchronous moment of revelation that interpellates a reader who is on the side of the narrator. Just as the narrator rejects – or at least does not speak – the competing discourses of familial ideology, the text here creates a reader whose interpretation will renegotiate traditional discourse and ideologies concerning family.

More importantly, however, the father as patriarch represents a tangible locus within the ideological apparatus of the family. The harsh and striking contrasts between narrator and father demonstrates not only how drastically "black boy" has distanced (or will distance) himself from the ideological

discourse of family (the language is not even his own), but also emphasizes the formative influence the family has on his future struggle for consciousness. This specular encounter is the culmination of the father's impotence in the initial scene, a scene that anticipates the relationship between hunger (desire) and the absence of the father throughout the narrator's life. Nor is the father alone in this formative process: the mother, in fact, has a deeper psychological effect on the narrator. Abandoned by her husband, forced to assume all ideological roles associated with the head of the family, the narrator's mother embodies systems of both threat and reward. This ambivalent nurturing/punitive maternal relationship establishes the conditions of the narrator's future experience: "Her life set the emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, conditioned my relation to events that had not yet happened, determined my attitude to situations and circumstances I had yet to face" (100). This iconic rendering of the mother's life suggests that the initial scene prophesies the ambivalence, absence, alienation, and violence that will characterize his life in the South. Both father and mother endure as symbols of violence and alienation that will continually manifest themselves in various forms within the field of the narrator's quest for consciousness.

After the initial scene, the narrator enters a realm marked by absence, alienation, violence, ambivalence, and hunger. He is forced to negotiate a sense of identity within conflicting and hostile environments. Family, friends, and co-workers interpellate the narrator on behalf of conventional Southern ideological destinies. Essentially, "black boy" is subjected to a series of verbal performances, and it is within this linguistic field of interpellation that he must negotiate his struggle for identity.

"Black boy" is interpellated by religious ideology through his mother, grandmother, and Aunt Addie. He is hailed by a sense of community based on shared religious belief; he feels isolated from the community, however, by the hypocrisy and the stifling of consciousness inherent to this ideology: "Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn" (136). This passage concludes a section in which the grandmother, the mother, and Aunt Addie are engaged in an argument over "some obscure point of religious doctrine" (133). "Black boy" inappropriately interjects an idea into the argument (what exactly is not disclosed, only that it "must have sounded reekingly blasphemous" (133)), and the grandmother reaches out to strike him only to miss her mark and fall headlong off the porch. A heated, physical battle ensues between "black boy" and Aunt Addie, concluding with the exchange: "'I'll always keep a knife for you,' I told her. 'You've got to sleep

at night,' she whimpered with rage. 'I'll get you then.' 'If you touch me when I'm sleeping, I'll kill you,' I told her" (135). Not only does this exchange reiterate the continuing rage and violence within the family, but it deconstructs the idea of community proffered by the religious ideology. Religion is simply another impetus to violence. Recounting his experience at the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, "black boy" confides: "While listening to the vivid language of the sermons I was pulled toward emotional belief, but as soon as I went out of the church and saw the bright sunshine and felt the throbbing life of the people in the streets I knew that none of it was true and that nothing would happen" (102). There is no substance beneath the verbal performance, there is no truth in the language of religion, and religion offers no sense of agency that could possibly alter the oppressive social relations of the South. Even though the ideology of religion hails "black boy" as part of the religious community, he remains isolated on the outskirts because he recognizes that there is no real community. Religion functions to turn members of the same race against one another in the form of arguments over the inconsequential minutia of doctrine.

As suggested by Ellison, the criminal ideology in *Black Boy* serves as a tangible locus of conflict between blacks and whites in the South. Adams points out that "[w]hites deliberately set up situations where blacks were forced to steal, and not only did they like to be stolen from, they forced blacks to lie by repeatedly asking them if they were thieves."¹⁵ While applying for a job with a white family, "black boy" is questioned about his criminal instincts: "'Now, boy, I want to ask you one question and I want you to tell me the truth,' she said. 'Yes, ma'am,' I said, all attention. 'Do you steal?' she asked me. I burst into a laugh, then checked myself. 'What's so damn funny about that?' she asked. 'Lady, if I was a thief, I'd never tell anybody.'" (145). "Black boy" recognizes the intrinsic link between lying and thievery as necessitated by the social relations between blacks and whites in the South. He is also cognizant of the oppressive situations that lead members of his race and class to steal. Yet for all this awareness, the narrator remains trapped in the false collapse of naivete and thievery as interpellated by white society. He cannot recognize the complexity of the social relations, as is shown by his insistence on separation; but this insistence on separation cannot initially extricate itself from a criminal community. He is repeatedly interpellated by those ensconced in the criminal ideology: "'How in hell you gonna git ahead?' I had been asked when I had said that one ought not steal" (199). This type of question functions as a hailing device, a lure to ensnare "black boy" within an ideology that insists upon stealing for survival. This interpellation by a criminal ideology continues through the employees at the cinema where

“black boy” works. “Are you with us” (204), he is asked; in other words, will “black boy” reciprocate the interpellation with the prescribed criminal act. For a time he wavers on the brink of this ideological community: “I reasoned stealing was not a violation of my ethics, but of [the cinema’s white proprietor]; I felt that things were rigged in his favor and any action I took to circumvent his scheme of life was justified. Yet I had not convinced myself” (203). But he does eventually convince himself, at least temporarily. He participates in the ticket scheme at the cinema, he takes a gun from a neighbor’s house and pawns it, and he breaks into a college storehouse and steals canned goods and sells them to restaurants. “Black boy” enters into the criminal ideology with an eye toward flight and separation; when he procures enough money he will board a train for Memphis. As Ellison mentions, there is a distinct aspect of individuality to the narrator’s criminal involvement. When he boards the train and situates himself in the Jim Crow coach, he discovers he is crying: “In that moment I understood the pain that accompanied crime and I hoped that I would never have to feel it again. I never did feel it again, for I never stole again; and what kept me from it was the knowledge that, for me, crime carried its own punishment” (207). He rejects the criminal ideology because he recognizes its consequence – and it is not one of punitive reparation, not the threat of literal imprisonment. The punishment “black boy” is referring to is futility: “I did not approve of [stealing] because I knew that, in the long run, it was futile, that it was not an effective way to alter one’s relationship to one’s environment” (200). Stealing merely functions to perpetuate the oppressive relations inherent to the South. There is nothing to be gained through a criminal ideology: there is no essential change predicated by the act, there is no true sense of agency, and most importantly, there is no chance of attaining a sense of individual consciousness.

Undoubtedly, the most significant ideological construct in *Black Boy* is represented by the white South: “To our minds the white folks formed a kind of superworld” (229). The white world is ever present in “black boy’s” alienated experience as he tries to resolve the constant tension between black and white. The narrator contextualizes the tension in his description of working for a white family: “I was tense each moment, trying to anticipate their wishes and avoid a curse, and I did not suspect that the tension I had begun to feel that morning would lift itself into the passion of my life” (149). This omnipresent tension can be defined, at least in part, as the conflict between the narrator’s emerging consciousness and the ideological prohibition against any sense of black consciousness in the South. The narrator is growing cognizant of the ideological apparatus that subjugates black consciousness: “I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted and passed to keep out of my

consciousness; I was acting on impulses that southern senators in the nation's capital had striven to keep out of Negro life; I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo" (169). As suggested by Ellison, the repression of this dream of consciousness leads to a complicitous involvement in the machinery of oppression on the part of African-Americans, and this repression further serves to perpetuate the ideology to which they are subjected.

"Black boy" is interpellated by this ideological possibility in the figure of an old classmate named Griggs. The narrator encounters him in the course of searching for steady, summer employment: "[Griggs] clapped me on the shoulder; his face was full of fear, hate, concern for me. 'Do you want to get killed?' he asked me. 'Hell no!' 'Then for God's sake, learn how to live in the South!'" (183). Griggs makes it clear to the narrator that he must learn how to negotiate a "black performance" if he is to survive in the South. He must subjugate himself in his relations with Southern whites; he must repress his conscious abhorrence to the discriminatory relations between whites and blacks, must remain ever vigilant to the role designated for him by the South. Griggs issues a final plea to "black boy" at the end of this interpellative encounter: "'When you're in front of white people, *think* before you act, *think* before you speak. Your way of doing things is all right among *our* people, but not for *white* people. They won't stand for it'" (184). The thinking Griggs encourages "black boy" to do is not that of a self-actualized consciousness. Griggs' consciousness is based upon the instinctual urge to survive, a consciousness rooted in putting food on the table, a way of thinking that perpetuates the oppressive conditions of the South. This ideology demands that "black boy" and other members of his race willfully submit to the necessity of the oppressive state for their own survival. As the narrator accounts, this submission is active: "I began to marvel at how smoothly the black boys *acted out* the roles that the white race had mapped out for them" (196-7, emphasis added). He recognizes the physical performance required by this interpellative performance. One is hailed to suppress consciousness – or at least subsume it beneath a more predatory, instinctual consciousness – and one capitulates by performing their assigned role. It is the practice, the *acting out* of the roles assigned to the African-American race that sustains the ideology of the South.

This active subjugation is perhaps nowhere more poignantly represented than in the figure of Shorty: "Hardheaded, sensible, a reader of magazines and books, he was proud of his race and indignant about its wrongs. But in the presence of whites he would play the role of a clown of the most debased and degraded type" (227). "Black boy" recounts a scene in which Shorty allows himself to be kicked by a white man in exchange for a quarter.

Afterward the narrator reflects, "I witnessed this scene or its variant at least a score of times and I felt no anger or hatred, only disgust and loathing" (228-9). He is repulsed by this complicitous participation in the oppression of his entire race. "Black boy" confronts Shorty: "'How in God's name can you do that?' 'I needed a quarter and I got it,' he said soberly, proudly. 'But a quarter can't pay for what he did to you,' I said. 'Listen, nigger,' he said to me, 'my ass is tough and quarters is scarce.' I never discussed the subject with him after that" (229). Like Griggs, Shorty is not unconscious of his actions, nor is he unaware of the implications of the role he is playing. Griggs, Shorty, and countless others are engaged in an active participation within the Southern ideology, an ideology that mandates they repress their conscious abhorrence to the oppressive relations between whites and blacks, a repression that in turn renders them willful accomplices in their own oppression. "Black boy" admits that he, too, is capable of "falling quickly into that nigger-being-a-good-natured-boy-in-the-presence-of-a-white-man pattern" (234), but he sees the violence and hypocrisy inherent in this facade. The narrator understands that what Griggs and Shorty are doing is the result of a "delicate, sensitive controlling mechanism that shut off their minds and emotions from all that the white race had said was taboo" (197). By playing the roles prescribed for them, Griggs and Shorty perpetuate the social structure that forbids a member of their race from breaking free of those roles, from aspiring beyond the performance that necessitates their survival. "Black boy" cannot submit to Griggs' interpellation, nor can he take up and follow Shorty's example; in the end he must unequivocally dismiss this performance as incapable of satiating his hunger, his alienation, and yearning for consciousness.

This ineffectual chain of ideological substitutions that ultimately leads the narrator toward a vocation in writing has a broader and more immediate effect. The narrator begins to negotiate a sense of consciousness and identity in terms of language. He asks, "how could one live in a world in which one's mind and perceptions meant nothing and authority and tradition meant everything?" (164). The ideological apparatuses of religion and crime and the repression of consciousness that marks the ideology of the white South all sustain the authority and tradition of oppression that the narrator is struggling against. He yearns for an identity that will give credence to his own thoughts and perceptions, that will value a sense of personal consciousness over and above the performances that perpetuate the oppressive state. Through language, the narrator initiates an aesthetic process that will forge his sense of personal consciousness and that will eventually halt the interpellative process of these oppressive ideologies.

Early in the narrative, while still laboring under the religious urgings of his family, "black boy" is sent to his room to pray. He uses this hour of

solitude to sketch his first story: "I had never in my life done anything like it; I had made something, no matter how bad it was; and it was mine" (120). Here is a tangible representation of identity, of a consciousness that could not be stripped from him. "Black boy" longs to share his story with someone, but realizes that his family would not accept his offering: "they would think I had gone crazy" (120). He decides to read the story to a woman who lives next door, but here too he discovers dismay and confusion. She cannot understand why he wrote it, why anyone would write; for her, "nothing [was] more alien than writing or the desire to express one's self in writing" (121). In this initial act of writing there remains an aspect of alienation and alterity that the narrator cannot resolve. This preliminary foray into writing is not yet sufficient to halt the chain of ideological substitution. His battles with religious ideology continue; his interpellation by the criminal ideology and the Southern ideology are still to come. Nevertheless, an aesthetic foundation is being formed, and "black boy" takes his first step towards creating a solution to the authority and tradition that squelches the meaning of his personal perceptions. "Black boy" will return again and again to the language of literature and writing as an attempt to resolve the alienation and hunger inherent to his experiences in the South.

While still a young boy in school, the narrator writes "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre." Following its publication in the *Southern Register*, he is confronted by his schoolmates, and the encounter is reminiscent of the one with the neighbor woman; they, too, "could not understand why anyone would want to write a story" (167). A wall is created between himself and his peers through writing: "They looked at me with new eyes, and a distance, a suspiciousness came between us. If I had thought anything in writing the story, I had thought that perhaps it would make me more acceptable to them, and now it was cutting me off from them more completely than ever" (167). "Black boy" had anticipated a sense of oneness with his schoolmates as a result of the story, as if through writing he could create a collective experience. Alterity and alienation persist; through writing, the narrator begins forging a personal consciousness that separates him from others and renders him suspect. His peers want to know who told him to write the story, where he copied it from, and why it was being published. At home his grandmother wants to know why he is publishing lies (fiction); his mother equates writing stories with being "weak-minded" (168). Writing is alien to the ideological constructs within which his friends and family exist. Here, to be weak-minded is to be independent of a traditionally prescribed ideological context. This tension flares up again during the graduation speech. The principal has prepared a speech for "black boy" to read: "I know what's best for you. You can't afford to just say *anything* before those white people that night" (175).

When “black boy” refuses, the principal becomes angry and exasperated, and he begins taunting the narrator; teaching positions that had not yet been offered to “black boy” are now hypothetically revoked on the basis of his contrariness to the school system. The narrator sees through the facade: “He was tempting me, baiting me; this was the technique that snared black young minds into supporting the southern way of life” (175). “Black boy” recognizes the ideological interpellation, and he rejects the principal’s technique. The narrator emphasizes the priority of his own words – “Professor, I’m going to read my own speech that night” (175) – attesting to an irreducible aspect of identity in both the writing and delivery of the speech. The narrator recognizes the power of performance in the representation of self, as well as the power of language to shape and fashion identity. On graduation night he reads his own speech: “When my voice stopped there was some applause. I did not care if they liked it or not; I was through” (178). In the same spirit as the first story that he wrote, there is a sense of self present in this scene, a sense of personal identity made tangible through language, a sense of personal consciousness that could not be stripped from him. He says he is through – through with school, through with childhood; he heads out to confront the world with an emergent sense of identity founded upon his own writing.

Arguably, reading initially plays the most influential role in the narrator’s yearning for a sense of consciousness. The magazines, newspapers, and books that he reads instill in him the belief that there is something more to experience than what he is being offered through the ideologies of the South. Certainly, it is valid to argue that literature and writing represent another ideology that interpellates the narrator. My interpretation does not assume that “black boy’s” struggle for personal consciousness exists outside of ideology. Nevertheless, I would argue that by acknowledging the aesthetic interpellation of literature, the narrator halts the interpellative process of the oppressive ideological apparatuses he encounters in the South. The interpellation by, and the submission to, ideological apparatuses ensures the reproduction of oppressive relations. “Black boy’s” urge to read and to write fosters his awareness of this reproductive process; by rejecting religion, crime, and the repression of consciousness, by turning to writing, “black boy” creates an aesthetic solution to the vicious cycle of oppressive relations: he refuses to perpetuate the relations that reproduce the oppressive state. Within “black boy’s” narrative, reading and writing oppose systems of ideological oppression, thus negating their interpellative power – at least at a single moment in time within the field of the narrator’s existence.

The association between reading and consciousness begins early in the narrator’s life. Though he is unwittingly peddling a racist newspaper (the

realization of which will shake the foundations of his anti-racist beliefs about the North), he begins to foster his relationship with literature by reading the magazine supplement inserted within the newspaper. Evenings, after completing his paper route, he locks himself in his bedroom and reads story after story, reveling in the exotic exploits:

Though they were merely stories, I accepted them as true because I wanted to believe them, because I hungered for a different life, for something new. The cheap pulp tales enlarged my knowledge of the world more than anything I had encountered so far. To me, with my roundhouse, saloon-door, and river-levee background, they were revolutionary, my gateway to the world. (129)

The stories offer “black boy” the dream of something apart from tradition and authority. With their new and different worlds, the stories are a validation of the individual perspective, of a unique way of seeing and knowing that encourages one to stand apart from the ordinary. The narrator says, “I dreamed of going north and writing books, novels. The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed” (168). The narrator positions himself in terms of writing; he wants to go to the North to write. Writing in the North will bring him the experiences and perspectives he craves. By going North, by writing, he will validate his existence: “I felt I had to go somewhere and do something to redeem my being alive” (169). Writing is equated with identity, a sense of personal consciousness.

En route north, “black boy” settles for a time in Memphis where he broadens the horizon of his reading experience. He buys secondhand books and copies of “*Harper’s Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *American Mercury*” (226) with the extra money from his job. By using a white man’s library card, the narrator becomes acquainted with the works of Mencken. He reads voraciously, continually yearning for the new perspectives that books create within him: “It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different” (249). When “black boy” eventually boards a train north for Chicago, leaving behind the culture of fear and terror that has formed him, he leaves because of the possibilities exposed to him through the books and magazines: “the accidental reading of fiction and literary criticism that had evoked in me vague glimpses of life’s possibilities.”¹⁶ Southern life had denied him the possibility of identity, and the struggle and alienation and fear had precluded him from even knowing himself, from fulfilling his yearning for identity:

I had been what my surroundings had demanded, what my family – conforming to the dictates of the whites above them – had exacted of

me, and what the whites had said that I must be. Never being fully able to be myself, I had slowly learned that the South could recognize but a part of a man, could accept but a fragment of his personality, and all the rest – the best and deepest things of heart and mind – were tossed away in blind ignorance and hate.¹⁷

The South – in all its familial, cultural, and political manifestations – thwarts any real sense of self or possibility of personal consciousness. Driven by literature, compelled by the desire to write, “black boy” heads north for Chicago with a dream of satiating his yearning for consciousness.

As Olney so aptly points out, the South of “black boy’s” experience is a vicious cycle of “violence, fear, panic, and flight,”¹⁸ initiated in the first scene and enduring until the flight northward. For Olney this cycle of violence, fear, panic, and flight “is the narrative of ‘black boy,’ and when he gets aboard that train it signifies the end of that identity, the death of ‘black boy’ – and ... the eventual birth of Richard Wright.”¹⁹ This observation is compelling in its distinction between author and narrator, as well as for its Orphic overtones concerning the creative act: the act of creation that threatens or compels the devastation of at least a portion of the artist. Yet I am suggesting that Olney’s argument implies another alternative, one closely linked to this notion of the creative act, one that Olney himself appears to endorse in later consideration of *Black Boy*.

Wright’s narrator says, “I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feelings had already been formed by the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, black though I was, the culture of the South.”²⁰ An irrevocable trace of the violence, fear, panic, and flight remains as an essential aspect of “black boy’s” consciousness. Olney is right to argue that the flight northward marks the end of childhood and the beginning of Wright’s life as man and author, but I believe that “black boy’s” identity endures as an essential aspect of the creative act that informs Wright’s life as author, specifically the author of *Black Boy*. Olney contends that “[i]n Wright’s text *I* is assumed to be an appropriate marker of identity at all times and in all states of consciousness: for the boy of four both in his right senses and in delirium, for the youth of twelve in extreme terror, and for the man of thirty-seven engaged in remembering, speculating, and writing.”²¹ He quickly follows this proclamation by saying that “this is simply the convention of any autobiography written in the first person,”²² but in *Black Boy* this is particularly significant. The critical work of Olney and Adams has helped to define “black boy” as a literary construction; what keeps “black boy” from being merely fictional, and what makes *Black Boy* “a record of childhood and youth,” is this unity of consciousness guaranteed by Wright’s deployment of *I*. I would like to argue that this unity of

consciousness is sustained at the level of language, specifically through the aesthetic act of writing. In other words, “black boy” and Wright converge at the common locus of writing, but neither at the cost of the other’s demise – “black boy’s” textual narrative does not cease to exist at the expense of Wright’s authorial narrative. The narrator’s struggle for consciousness, figured as it is in language (reading, speech, writing), is the narrative of “black boy.” It is the narrative of emergent consciousness struggling within and against the violence and fear and panic of the South. “Black boy’s” narrative does not end: it is the formative force of Wright’s creative act – the writing of *Black Boy*. If one agrees that “black boy” is a literary construction, then one must also concede that it is no mere literary coincidence that “black boy” should use language and writing as a means of forging his own identity and consciousness. Wright is advocating an aesthetic solution to ideological objectification: “Black boy’s” narrative identity endures as the aesthetic exigency to Wright’s aesthetic rendering of experience. Writing guarantees the autobiographic pact that enables us to identify Wright with his narrator.

Then the question of most interest becomes: why writing? In other words, if we agree that “black boy” is the literary representation of the young Richard Wright, and if we agree with Adams that Wright “meant the work to be collective autobiography, a personal record of countless black Americans growing up with a personal history of hunger, deprivation, and constant racism,”²³ then why create a protagonist who struggles to render this experience meaningful through writing? Certainly, a career in writing is not representative of the vast majority of black Americans living during the years portrayed in *Black Boy*. The answer lies in the aesthetic process which offers to Wright, and in turn “black boy,” a solution to the hunger and deprivation by creating a medium coterminous with the violence and fear that mark “black boy’s” experience, that shape him internally, and that fuel his yearning for consciousness. Through literature and writing, “black boy” discovers the possibility of a struggle against oppressive conditions that does not recreate these conditions. For example, in the course of reading Mencken’s *A Book of Prefaces*, he grapples with the violence of the author’s words:

Yes, this man was *fighting, fighting* with words. He was using words as a *weapon*, using them as one would use a *club*. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as weapons? No. It *frightened* me. I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it. (248, emphasis added)

What “black boy” discovers in Mencken – and what he had already sensed with the publication of “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre” and in the conflict

over the graduation speech – is that language and writing participate in the struggle, but not at the expense of identity. Writing becomes the essential element in the forging of a sense of consciousness for “black boy” – a consciousness that stands in opposition to the oppressive relations of the South by refusing to perpetuate them. Thus, for “black boy,” writing comes to epitomize the singular, individual act, standing in tremulous isolation against the ideological apparatuses of falsehood and oppression, evolved from a courage that bears witness to an irrevocable fear and violence.

In a fascinating examination of the role memory plays in assuring a sense of identity, Olney discusses *I* as “memory come alive”: “This would be to conceive of memory as the sole ground of subjectivity and source of identity, but it would also imply a unity of consciousness and a continuity of being – *figured in language* – that is quite at odds with the general tenor of modernist and postmodernist writing.”²⁴ Though ostensibly interpreting Beckett through a Kafkaesque lens, Olney’s observation has significant implications for *Black Boy*, as well as the autobiographic tradition. From here it seems but a short space to move from the “thread of memory” that links the *I* of Wright and his narrator to a sense of consciousness, created and sustained by language, that guarantees an irrevocable bond between author and narrator in this autobiographic performance. Olney’s comment seems to move us towards an autobiographic *I* that essentially creates its counterpart outside the text: *I* as guarantor that an author actually exists. If in *Black Boy* linguistic performances enable the narrator to form a sense of authentic consciousness, and if writing functions as the autobiographic pact that identifies Wright as the author of *Black Boy* with his narrator, then we must face the ironic possibility suggested by Olney’s observation: the authoring of autobiography made possible only after the *I* of memory has manifest itself in language. The linguistic consciousness of memory – memory’s *I* – never expires, only metamorphoses: across the field of language, it is the ambiguous signifier that guarantees a unified conscious with its author. Wright’s narrator is literally memory come alive through language – consciousness created and sustained in language. In *Black Boy*, language itself guarantees the unified consciousness between “black boy” and Wright.

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 104.
2. Timothy Dow Adams, “I Do Believe Him Though I Know He Lies: Lying as Genre and Metaphor in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*,” *Prose Studies* 8/2 (1985), 172.
3. James Olney, “Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Autobiography: The Ontology of Autobiography,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 243.

4. Olney, "Some Versions of Memory," 241.
5. *Ibid.*, 248.
6. James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 241.
7. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards and Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 173, emphasis in the original. On the interpellative function of ideology see particularly 173–86.
8. *Ibid.*, 166. Althusser claims that "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices."
9. William L. Andrews, "Richard Wright and the African-American Autobiography Tradition," *Style* 27/2 (1993), 281.
10. *Ibid.*, 273.
11. Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1994), 83.
12. *Ibid.*, 83, emphasis in the original.
13. Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 169. Unless otherwise noted, all references to *Black Boy* are specific to Part One of this edition, "Southern Night." Henceforth, page numbers will follow quotations from this source.
14. Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," 85.
15. Adams, "I Do Believe Him Though I Know He Lies," 181.
16. Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1950), 296.
17. *Ibid.*, 297.
18. Olney, "Some Versions of Memory," 246.
19. *Ibid.*, 245.
20. Wright, *Black Boy* (1950), 298.
21. Olney, *Memory and Narrative*, 241.
22. *Ibid.*, 241.
23. Adams, "I Do Believe Him Though I Know He Lies," 173.
24. Olney, *Memory and Narrative*, 232, emphasis added.