

ONE



Congo Square

JOAN CRAWFORD'S STRAIGHT, narrow, and lonely back. We are following her through the corridors of a moving train. She is looking for someone, or she is trying to escape from someone. She is eventually intercepted by, I think, Clark Gable.

I am fascinated by the movement on, and of, the screen, that movement which is something like the heaving and swelling of the sea (though I have not yet been to the sea): and which is also something like the light which moves on, and especially beneath, the water.

I am about seven. I am with my mother, or my aunt. The movie is *Dance, Fools, Dance*.

I don't remember the film. A child is far too self-centered to relate to any dilemma which does not, somehow, relate to him—to his own evolving dilemma. The child escapes into what he



would like his situation to be, and I certainly did not wish to be a fleeing fugitive on a moving train; and, also, with quite another part of my mind, I was aware that Joan Crawford was a white lady. Yet, I remember being sent to the store sometime later, and a colored woman, who, to me, looked exactly like Joan Crawford, was buying something. She was so incredibly beautiful—she seemed to be wearing the sunlight, rearranging it around her from time to time, with a movement of one hand, with a movement of her head, and with her smile—that, when she paid the man and started out of the store, I started out behind her. The storekeeper, who knew me, and others in the store who knew my mother's little boy (and who also knew my Miss Crawford!) laughed and called me back. Miss Crawford also laughed and looked down at me with so beautiful a smile that I was not even embarrassed. Which was rare for me.

*Tom Mix*, on his white horse. Actually, it was Tom Mix's hat, a shadow in the shadow of the hat, a kind of rocky background (which, again, was always moving) and the white horse. Tom Mix was a serial. Every Saturday, then, if memory serves, we left Tom Mix and some bleakly interchangeable girl in the most dreadful danger—or, rather, we left the hat and the shadow of the hat and the white horse: for the horse was not interchangeable and the serial could not have existed without it.

*The Last of the Mohicans*: Randolph Scott (a kind of fifteenth-rate Gary Cooper) and Binnie Barnes (a kind of funky Geraldine Fitzgerald), Heather Angel (a somewhat more bewildered Olivia de Havilland) and Philip Reed (a precursor of Anthony Quinn). Philip Reed was the Indian, Uncas, whose savage, not to say slavish adoration of Miss Angel's fine blonde frame drives her over a cliff, headlong, to her death. She has chosen death before dis-

honor, which made perfect sense. The erring Uncas eventually pays for his misguided lust with his life, and a tremulous, wet-eyed, brave couple, Randolph Scott and Binnie Barnes, eventually, hand in hand, manage to make it out of the wilderness. Into America, or back to England, I really do not remember, and I don't suppose that it matters.\*

*20,000 Years in Sing Sing*: Spencer Tracy and Bette Davis. By this time, I had been taken in hand by a young white school-teacher, a beautiful woman, very important to me. I was between ten and eleven. She had directed my first play and endured my first theatrical tantrums and had then decided to escort me into the world. She gave me books to read and talked to me about the books, and about the world: about Spain, for example, and Ethiopia, and Italy, and the German Third Reich; and took me to see plays and films, plays and films to which no one else would have dreamed of taking a ten-year-old boy. I loved her, of course, and absolutely, with a child's love; didn't understand half of what she said, but remembered it; and it stood me in good stead later. It is certainly partly because of her, who arrived in my terrifying life so soon, that I never really managed to hate white people—though, God knows, I have often wished to murder more than one or two. But Bill Miller—her name was Orilla, we called her Bill—was not white for me in the way, for example, that Joan Crawford was white, in the way that the landlords and the storekeepers and the cops and most of my teachers were white. She didn't baffle me that way and she never frightened me and she

\* The novel, which I read much later, is not my favorite novel, and, on some other day, I may detail my quarrel with it; but it is far more honest and courageous than the film.



never lied to me. I never felt her pity, either, in spite of the fact that she sometimes brought us old clothes (because she worried about our winters) and cod-liver oil, especially for me, because I seemed destined, then, to be carried away by whooping cough.

I was a child, of course, and, therefore, unsophisticated. I don't seem ever to have had any innate need (or, indeed, any innate ability) to distrust people: and so I took Bill Miller as she was, or as she appeared to be to me. Yet, the difference between Miss Miller and other white people, white people as they lived in my imagination, and also as they were in life, had to have had a profound and bewildering effect on my mind. Bill Miller was not at all like the cops who had already beaten me up, she was not like the landlords who called me nigger, she was not like the storekeepers who laughed at me. I had found white people to be unutterably menacing, terrifying, mysterious—wicked: and they were mysterious, in fact, to the extent that they were wicked: the unfathomable question being, precisely, this one: what, under heaven, or beneath the sea, or in the catacombs of hell, could cause any people to act as white people acted? From Miss Miller, therefore, I began to suspect that white people did not act as they did because they were white, but for some other reason, and I began to try to locate and understand the reason. She, too, anyway, was treated like a nigger, especially by the cops, and she had no love for landlords.

My father said, during all the years I lived with him, that I was the ugliest boy he had ever seen, and I had absolutely no reason to doubt him. But it was not my father's hatred of *my* frog-eyes which hurt me, this hatred proving, in time, to be rather more resounding than real: I have my mother's eyes. When my father called me ugly, he was not attacking me so much as he was at-

tacking my mother. (No doubt, he was also attacking my real, and unknown, father.) And I loved my mother. I knew that she loved me, and I sensed that she was paying an enormous price for me. I was a boy, and so I didn't really too much care that my father thought me hideous. (So I said to myself—this judgment, nevertheless, was to have a decidedly terrifying effect on my life.) But I thought that he must have been stricken blind (or was as mysteriously wicked as white people, a paralyzing thought) if he was unable to see that my mother was absolutely beyond any question the most beautiful woman in the world.

So, here, now, was Bette Davis, on that Saturday afternoon, in close-up, over a champagne glass, pop-eyes popping. I was astounded. I had caught my father, not in a lie, but in an infirmity. For, here, before me, after all, was a *movie star: white*: and if she was white and a movie star, she was *rich*: and she was *ugly*. I felt exactly the same way I felt, just before this moment, or just after, when I was in the street, playing, and I saw an old, very black, and very drunk woman stumbling up the sidewalk, and I ran upstairs to make my mother come to the window and see what I had found: *You see? You see? She's uglier than you, Mama! She's uglier than me!* Out of bewilderment, out of loyalty to my mother, probably, and also because I sensed something menacing and unhealthy (for me, certainly) in the face on the screen, I gave Davis's skin the dead-white greenish cast of something crawling from under a rock, but I was held, just the same, by the tense intelligence of the forehead, the disaster of the lips: and when she moved, she moved just like a nigger. Eventually, from a hospital bed, she murders someone, and Tracy takes the weight, to Sing Sing. In his arms, Davis cries and cries, and the movie ends. "What's going to happen to her now?" I asked Bill Miller. "We



don't know," said Bill, conveying to me, nevertheless, that she would probably never get over it, that people pay for what they do.

I had not yet heard Bessie Smith's "*why they call this place the Sing Sing?/Come stand here by this rock pile, and listen to these hammers ring*" and it would be seven years before I would begin working on the railroad. It was to take a longer time than that before I would cry; a longer time than that before I would cry in anyone's arms; and a long long long time before I would begin to realize what I myself was doing with my enormous eyes—or vice versa. This had nothing to do with Davis, the actress, or with all those hang-ups I didn't yet know I had: I had discovered that my infirmity might not be my doom; my infirmity, or infirmities, might be forged into weapons.

For, I was not only considered by my father to be ugly. I was considered by everyone to be "strange," including my poor mother, who didn't, however, beat me for it. Well, if I was "strange"—and I knew that I must be, otherwise people would not have treated me so strangely, and I would not have been so miserable—perhaps I could find a way to use my strangeness. A "strange" child, anyway, dimly and fearfully apprehends that the years are not likely to make him less strange. Therefore, if he wishes to live, he must calculate, and I knew that I had to live. I very much wanted my mother to be happy and to be proud of me, and I very much loved my brothers and my sisters, who, in a sense, were all I had. My father showed no favoritism, he did not beat me worse than the others because I was not his son. (I didn't know this then, anyway, none of the children did, and by the time we all found out, it became just one more detail of the peculiar journey we had made in company with each other.) I knew,

too, that my mother depended on me. I was not always dependable, for no child can be, but I tried: and I knew that I might have to prepare myself to be, one day, the actual head of my family. I did not actually do this, either, for we were all forced to take on our responsibilities each for the other, and to discharge them in our different ways. The eldest can be, God knows, as much a burden as a help, and is doomed to be something of a mystery for those growing up behind him—a mystery when not, indeed, an intolerable exasperation. I, nevertheless, was the eldest, a responsibility I did not intend to fail, and my first conscious calculation as to how to go about defeating the world's intentions for me and mine began on that Saturday afternoon in what we called *the movies*, but which was actually my first entrance into the cinema of my mind.

I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* over and over and over again—this is the first book I can remember having read—and then I read *A Tale of Two Cities*—over and over and over again. Bill Miller takes me to see *A Tale of Two Cities*, at the Lincoln, on 135th Street. I am twelve.

I did not yet know that virtually every black community in America contains a movie house, or, sometimes, in those days, an actual theater, called the Lincoln, or the Booker T. Washington, nor did I know why; any more than I knew why The Cotton Club was called The Cotton Club. I knew about Lincoln only that he had freed the slaves (in the South, which made the venture remote from me) and then had been shot, dead, in a theater, by an actor; and a movie I was never to see, called *The Prisoner of Shark Island*, had something to do with the murder of Lincoln. How I knew this, I do not remember precisely. But I know that I read everything I could get my hands on, including movie adver-



tisements, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had had a tremendous impact on me, and I certainly reacted to the brutal conjunction of the words, *prisoner*, and *shark*, and *island*. I may have feared becoming a prisoner, or feared that I was one already; had never seen a shark—I hoped: but I was certainly trapped on an island. And, in any case, the star of this film, Warner Baxter, later, but during the same era, made a film with the female star of *A Tale of Two Cities*, called *Slave Ship*: which I did not see, either.

I knew about Booker T. Washington less than I knew about my father's mother, who had been born a slave, and who died in our house when I was little: a child cannot make the connection between *slave* and *grandmother*, and it was to take me a while (mainly because I had discovered the Schomburg collection at the 135th Street Library) to read *Up From Slavery*: but, when I read it, I no longer knew which way was up. As for The Cotton Club, I knew only that it was a dance hall which gave out free Thanksgiving dinners every Thanksgiving (!) for which my brother, George, and I, stood in line. Which means that I knew that I was poor, and knew that I was black, but did not yet know what being black really meant, what it meant, that is, in the history of my country, and in my own history. Bill could instruct me as to how poverty came about and what it meant and what it did, and, also, what it was meant to do: but she could not instruct me as to blackness, except obliquely, feeling that she had neither the right nor the authority, and also knowing that I was certain to find out. Thus, she tried to suggest to me the extent to which the world's social and economic arrangements are responsible for (and to) the world's victims. But a victim may or may not have a color, just as he may or may not have virtue: a difficult, not to say unpopular notion, for nearly everyone prefers to be defined by his status, which, unlike his virtue, is ready to wear.

The 1936 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production of *A Tale of Two Cities* ends with this enormity sprawled across the screen:

*I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and he that believeth in me shall never die.*

I had lived with this text all my life, which made encountering it on the screen of the Lincoln Theater absolutely astounding: and I had lived with the people of *A Tale of Two Cities* for very nearly as long. I had no idea what *Two Cities* was really about, any more than I knew what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was really about, which was why I had read them both so obsessively: they had something to tell me. It was this particular child's way of circling around the question of what it meant to be a nigger. It was the reason that I was reading Dostoevsky, a writer—or, rather, for me, a messenger—whom I would have had to understand, obviously, even less: my relentless pursuit of *Crime and Punishment* made my father (vocally) and my mother (silently) consider the possibility of brain fever. I was intrigued, but not misled, by the surface of these novels—Sydney Carton's noble renunciation of his life on the spectacular guillotine, Tom's forbearance before Simon Legree, the tracking down of Raskolnikov: the time of my time was to reduce all these images to the angel dancing on the edge of the junkie's needle: I did not believe in any of these people so much as I believed in their situation, which I suspected, dreadfully, to have something to do with my own.

And it had clearly escaped everyone's notice that I had already been bull-whipped through the Psalms of David and The Book of Job, to say nothing of the arrogant and loving Isaiah, the doomed Ezekiel, and the helplessly paranoiac Saint Paul: such a forced march, designed to prepare the mind for conciliation and



safety, can also prepare it for subversion and danger. For, I was on Job's side, for example, *though He slay me, yet will I trust Him, and I will maintain mine own ways before Him*—You will not talk to me from the safety of your whirlwind, never—and, yet, something in me, out of the unbelievable pride and sorrow and beauty of my father's face, caused me to understand—I did not understand, perhaps I still do not understand, and never will, caused me to begin to accept the fatality and the inexorability of that voice out of the whirlwind, for if one is not able to live with so crushing and continuing a mystery, one is not able to live.

The pride and sorrow and beauty of my father's face: for that man I called my father really *was* my father in every sense except the biological, or literal one. He formed me, and he raised me, and he did not let me starve: and he gave me something, however harshly, and however little I wanted it, which prepared me for an impending horror which he could not prevent. This is not a Western idea, but fathers and sons arrive at that relationship only by claiming that relationship: that is, by paying for it. If the relationship of father to son could really be reduced to biology, the whole earth would blaze with the glory of fathers and sons. (But to pursue this further carries us far beyond the confines of the present discussion.)

In the novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, it had been Madame Defarge who most struck me. I recognized that unrelenting hatred, for it was all up and down my streets, and in my father's face and voice. The wine cask, *shattered like a walnut shell*, shattered every Saturday night on the corner of our street, and, yes, Dickens was right, the gutters turned a bright and then a rusty red. I understood the knitted registers as hope and fate, for I knew that everything (including my own name) had long been written in

The Book: *you may run on a great long time but great God Almighty's going to cut you down!* I understood the meaning of the rose in the turban of Madame Defarge as she sits knitting in the wine shop, the flower in the headdress meant to alert the neighborhood to the presence of a spy. We lived by such signals, and long before it was safe to say *there is a rose in Spanish Harlem!*

When, at last, in the film, the people rise and fill the streets and alleys and hurl themselves onto the drawbridge of the Bastille, I was tremendously stirred and frightened. I did not really know who these people were, or why they were in the streets—they were white: and a white mob can be in no way reassuring to a black boy (even though, or if, he cannot say why). If, in the novel, it was Madame Defarge who most held me, in the film two images and one moment stand out, even from this distance. The first is a long climb up an outside staircase, in Paris, when Lucie Manette and Dr. Lorry and Ernest Defarge go to retrieve Lucie's father, Dr. Manette: for I knew about staircases. The second is when the carriage of the Marquis races headlong through a provincial village. We are confronted with the speeding wheels of the carriage, the relentless hooves of the horses, and a small, running, ragged boy, trying to get out of the way. He is knocked down, he is run over, he is killed; and I knew something about that. The moment that most stands out, for me, is that moment in the tumbrel, near the end of the film, when the seamstress (Isabel Jewell) recognizes that Sydney Carton (Ronald Colman) is dying in his friend's stead. I knew nothing about *that*, but I had been taught *greater love hath no man than this*, and something in me believed it. Yet, when Bill whispered to me, during the scene of the storming of the Bastille, "Every time somebody drops from the drawbridge, they die," though I watched the people dropping



off the drawbridge like so many dead cockroaches being swept into the dust pan, I was also aware that Bill was not telling me that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was murdering all these people, any more than that that guillotine was really going to chop off Ronald Colman's head. The guillotine was going to chop off *Sydney Carton's* head: my first director was instructing me in the discipline and power of make-believe.

For, while believing it all, and *really* believing it, I still knew that Madame Defarge was really an actress named Blanche Yurka, and that Lucie Manette was really an English girl, named Elizabeth Allan. Something implacable in the set of Yurka's mouth probably reminded me of my grandmother, and I knew that Elizabeth Allan-Lucie Manette reminded me of my music teacher, a Miss Taub, with whom I was desperately in love. When Lucie Manette and Charles Darnay are torn from each other's arms in the courtroom, tears rose to my eyes, for I knew something about *that*: yet, at the very same time, I also knew that Charles Darnay was really an actor, named Donald Woods. This was the first time in my life, after all, that I had seen a *screen rendition* (so the ads and the press put it) of a novel, which, considering my age, I could claim to know. And I felt very close to the actors, who had not betrayed the friends I had lived with for nearly as long as I had lived with the people of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

I had read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* compulsively, the book in one hand, the newest baby on my hipbone. I was trying to find out something, sensing something in the book of some immense import for me: which, however, I knew I did not really understand.

My mother got scared. She hid the book. The last time she hid it, she hid it on the highest shelf above the bathtub. I was somewhere around seven or eight. God knows how I did it, but I

somehow climbed up and dragged the book down. Then, my mother, as she herself puts it, "didn't hide it anymore," and, indeed, from that moment, though in fear and trembling, began to let me go.

I understood, as Bill had intended me to, something of revolution—understood, that is, something of the universal and inevitable human ferment which explodes into what is called a revolution. *Revolution*: the word had a solemn, dreadful ring: what was going on in Spain was a *revolution*. Revolution was the only hope of the American working class—the *proletariat*: and world-wide revolution was the only hope of the world. I could understand (or, rather, accept) all this, as it were, negatively. I could not see where I fit in this formulation, and I did not see where blacks fit. I don't think that I ever dared pose this question to Bill, partly because I hadn't yet really accepted, or understood, that I was black and also because I knew (and didn't want her to know, although, of course, she did) how much my father disliked and disliked her. My father was certainly a proletarian, but I had been sent downtown often to pay his union dues, and I knew how much he hated these greasy, slimy men—also proletarians—whom he called, quite rightly, robbers.

In the film, I was not overwhelmed by the guillotine. The guillotine had been very present for me in the novel because I already wanted, and for very good reasons, to lop off heads. But: once begun, how to distinguish one head from another, and how, where, and for what reason, would the process stop? Beneath the resonance of the word, *revolution*, thundered the word, *revenge*. But: *vengeance is mine, saith the Lord*: a hard saying, the identity of the *Lord* becoming, with the passage of time, either a private agony or an abstract question. And, to put it as simply as it can be



put, unless one can conceive of (and endure) an abstract life, there can be no abstract questions. A question is a threat, the door which slams shut, or swings open: on another threat.

I was haunted, for example, by Alexandre Manette's document, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, describing the murder of a peasant boy—who, dying, speaks: *I say, we were so robbed, and hunted, and were made so poor, that our father told us it was a dreadful thing to bring a child into this world, and that what we should most pray for was that our women might be barren and our miserable race die out! (I had never before, observes Dr. Manette, seen the sense of being oppressed, bursting forth like a fire.)*

Dickens has not seen it at all. The wretched of the earth do not decide to become extinct, they resolve, on the contrary, to multiply: life is their only weapon against life, life is all that they have. This is why the dispossessed and starving will never be convinced (though some may be coerced) by the population-control programs of the civilized. I have watched the dispossessed and starving laboring in the fields which others own, with their transistor radios at their ear, all day long: so they learn, for example, along with equally weighty matters, that the Pope, one of the heads of the civilized world, forbids to the civilized that abortion which is being, literally, forced on them, the wretched. The civilized have created the wretched, quite coldly and deliberately, and do not intend to change the *status quo*; are responsible for their slaughter and enslavement; rain down bombs on defenseless children whenever and wherever they decide that their "vital interests" are menaced, and think nothing of torturing a man to death: these people are not to be taken seriously when they speak of the "sanctity" of human life, or the "conscience" of the civilized world. There is a "sanctity" involved with bringing a child

into this world: it is better than bombing one out of it. Dreadful indeed it is to see a starving child, but the answer to that is not to prevent the child's arrival but to restructure the world so that the child can live in it: so that the "vital interest" of the world becomes nothing less than the life of the child. However—I would not have said any of this then, nor is so absurd a notion about to engulf the world now. But we were all starving children, after all, and none of our fathers, even at their most embittered and enraged, had ever suggested that we "die out." It was not *we* who were supposed to *die out*: this was, of all notions, the most forbidden, and we learned this from the cradle. Every trial, every beating, every drop of blood, every tear, were meant to be used by us for a day that was coming—for a day that was certainly coming, absolutely certainly, certainly coming: not for us, perhaps, but for our children. The children of the despised and rejected are menaced from the moment they stir in the womb, and are therefore sacred in a way that the children of the saved are not. And the children know it, which is how they manage to raise their children, and why they will not be persuaded—by their children's murderers, after all—to cease having children.

But I was haunted, too, by the fact that it is Dr. Manette's testimony, written in prison, and recuperated by Ernest Defarge upon the storming of the Bastille, which dooms his son-in-law to death. The Defarges seize and hide this document in order to use it against the son-in-law at the latter's trial: at which trial, Dr. Manette is chief witness for the defense—or, in other words, in fact, his son-in-law's only hope.

Manette wrote his testimony in agony and silence, never expecting to see his daughter again, and unable, of course, to imagine that his daughter would marry one of the descendants of the



house which had condemned him to a living death. His testimony ends: *them and their descendants, to the last of their race, I . . . denounce them to Heaven and to earth.* His son-in-law is the descendant of the "race" which had imprisoned him, and the "last" of that race, denounced by him, is flesh of his flesh, his granddaughter. Which connected for me, horribly, with the testimony of Madame Defarge, sister of the murdered boy: *that brother was my brother, that father was my father, those dead are my dead and that summons to answer for all those things descends to me!* Her husband reluctantly agrees that this is so, whereupon Madame Defarge says, *Then tell wind and fire where to stop, but don't tell me!*

I understood that: I had seen it in the face, heard it in the voice of many a black man or woman, sweeping the pavement, wrestling with the garbage cans, men and women whose children were dying faster than those MGM extras dropping from the drawbridge. *If I love you, I love you, and I don't give a damn. You my nigger, nigger, if you don't get no bigger. I will cut your dick off, I will cut your balls out. I ain't got to do nothing but stay black and die and I'm black already! Honey. Don't be like that. Honey. Don't die and I'm black already! Honey. Don't be like that. Honey. Don't do me like that. We in this shit together, and you need me and I need you, now ain't that so? Who going to take care of us if we don't take care of each other?*

I feared, feared—like a thief in the night, as one of my brothers would put it—to connect all this with my father and mother and everyone I knew, and with myself, and to connect all this with black Uncle Tom: no more than I had wished to be that fleeing fugitive on that moving train did I desire to endure his destiny or meet his end. Uncle Tom really believed *vengeance is mine, saith the Lord*, for he believed in the Lord, as I flattered my-

self I did not: this inconvenient faith (described, furthermore, by a white woman) obscured the fact that Tom allowed himself to be murdered for refusing to disclose the road taken by the runaway slave. Because Uncle Tom would not take vengeance into his own hands, he was not a hero for me. Heroes, as far as I could then see, were white, and not merely because of the movies but because of the land in which I lived, of which movies were simply a reflection: I despised and feared those heroes because they *did* take vengeance into their own hands. They thought that vengeance was theirs to take. This difficult coin did not cease to spin, it had neither heads nor tails: for what white people took into their hands could scarcely even be called vengeance, it was something less and something more. The Scottsboro boys, for example—for the Scottsboro Case has begun—were certainly innocent of anything requiring vengeance. My father's youngest son by his first marriage, nine years older than I, who had vanished from our lives, might have been one of those boys, now being murdered by my fellow Americans on the basis of the rape charge delivered by two white whores: and I was reading Angelo Herndon's *Let Me Live*. Yes. I understood that: my countrymen were my enemy, and I had already begun to hate them from the bottom of my heart.

Angelo Herndon was a young, black labor organizer in the Deep South, railroaded to prison, who lived long enough, at least, to write a book about it—the George Jackson of the era. No one resembling him, or anyone resembling any of the Scottsboro Boys, nor anyone resembling my father, has yet made an appearance on the American cinema scene. Perhaps to compensate for this, Bill now takes me to See Sylvia Sidney and Henry Fonda in the Walter Wanger production of Fritz Lang's *You Only Live*



Once, I, also, either with her or without her, I don't remember, see the Warner Brothers production (or *screen rendition*, which pompous formulation I adored) of a novel I had read, Ward Greene's *Death in the Deep South*, brought to the screen by (I think) Mervyn LeRoy, as *They Won't Forget*, starring Claude Rains; and Samuel Goldwyn's production of William Wyler's *Dead End*, again starring Sylvia Sidney. Who also starred in the film version of a play Bill took me to see, the WPA Living Newspaper production,—*one third of a nation*—.

It is not entirely true that no one from the world I knew had yet made an appearance on the American screen: there were, for example, Stepin Ferchit and Willkie Best and Manton Moreland, all of whom, rightly or wrongly, I loathed. It seemed to me that they lied about the world I knew, and debased it, and certainly I did not know anybody like them—as far as I could tell; for it is also possible that their comic, bug-eyed terror contained the truth concerning a terror by which I hoped never to be engulfed.

Yet, I had no reservations at all concerning the terror of the black janitor in *They Won't Forget*. I think that it was a black actor named Clinton Rosewood who played this part, and he looked a little like my father. He is terrified because a young white girl, in this small Southern town, has been raped and murdered, and her body has been found on the premises of which he is the janitor. (Lana Turner, in her first movie, is the raped and murdered girl, which is, perhaps, a somewhat curious beginning for so gold-plated a career.) The role of the janitor is small, yet the man's face hangs in my memory until today: and the film's icy brutality both scared me and strengthened me. The Southern politician (Rains) needs an issue on which to be re-elected. He decides,

therefore, that to pin the rape and murder of the white girl on a black man is insufficiently sensational. He very coldly frames a white Northern schoolteacher for this crime, and brings about his death at the hands of a lynch mob. (And I knew that this was exactly what would have happened to Bill, if such a mob had ever got its hands on her.) Unlike the later *Ox-Bow Incident*, in which a similar lynching is partially redeemed by the reading of a letter, which, presumably, will cause the members of the mob to repent the horror of what they have done and resolve to become better men and women, and also unlike the later *Intruder in the Dust*, which suggests the same hopeful improbability, *They Won't Forget* ends with the teacher dead and the politician triumphantly re-elected. As he watches the widow walk down the courthouse steps, he mutters, seeming, almost, to stifle a yawn, *I wonder if he really did it, after all.*

And, yes: I was beginning to understand *that*.

Sylvia Sidney was the only American film actress who reminded me of a colored girl, or woman—which is to say that she was the only American film actress who reminded me of reality. All of the others, without exception, were white, and, even when they moved me (like Margaret Sullavan or Bette Davis or Carole Lombard) they moved me from that distance. Some instinct caused me profoundly to distrust the sense of life they projected: this sense of life could certainly never, in any case, be used by me, and, while *His eye* might be on the sparrow, mine had to be on the hawk. And, similarly, while I admired Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney (and, on a more demanding level, Fredric March), the only actor of the era with whom I identified was



Henry Fonda. I was not alone. A black friend of mine, after seeing Henry Fonda in *The Grapes of Wrath*, swore that Fonda had colored blood. You could tell, he said, by the way Fonda walked down the road at the end of the film: *white men don't walk like that!* and he imitated Fonda's stubborn, patient, wide-legged hike away from the camera. My reaction to Sylvia Sidney was certainly due, in part, to the kind of film she appeared in during that era—*Fury; Mary Burns, Fugitive; You and Me; Street Scene* (I was certain, even, that I knew the meaning of the title of a film she made with Gene Raymond, which I never saw, *Behold My Wife*). It was almost as though she and I had a secret: she seemed to know something I knew. *Every street in New York ends in a river*: this is the legend which begins the film, *Dead End*, and I was enormously grateful for it. I had never thought of that before. Sylvia Sidney, facing a cop in this film, pulling her black hat back from her forehead: *One of you lousy cops gave me that*. She was always being beaten up, victimized, weeping, and she should have been drearier than Tom Mix's girl friends. But I always believed her—in a way, she reminded me of Bill, for I had seen Bill facing hostile cops. Bill took us on a picnic downtown once, and there was supposed to be ice cream waiting for us at a police station. The cops didn't like Bill, didn't like the fact that we were colored kids, and didn't want to give up the ice cream. I don't remember anything Bill said. I just remember her face as she stared at the cop, clearly intending to stand there until the ice cream all over the world melted or until the earth's surface froze, and she got us our ice cream, saying *Thank you*, I remember, as we left. *You Only Live Once* was the most powerful movie I had seen until that moment. The only other film to hit me as hard, at that time of my life, was *The Childhood of Maxim Gorky*, which, for me, had not

been about white people. Similarly, while *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* had concerned the trials of a finally somewhat improbable white couple, *You Only Live Once* came much much closer to home.

It is the top of 1937. I am not yet thirteen.

*Fury*, MGM, 1936, is, I believe, Lang's first American film. It is meant to be a study of mob violence, on which level it is indignant, sincere, and inept. Since the mob separates the lovers almost at the beginning of the film, the film works as a love story only intermittently, and to the extent that one responds to the lovers (Sylvia Sidney and Spencer Tracy). It is an exceedingly uneasy and uneven film, with both the lovers and the mob placed, really, in the German Third Reich, which Lang has not so much fled as furiously repudiated, and to which he is still reacting. (The railroad station at which the lovers separate is heavy with menace, and the train which carries Sidney away to go to work in another town is rather like the train to a bloody destination unknown.) Lang's is the *fury* of the film: but his grasp of the texture of American life is still extremely weak: he has not yet really left Germany. His *fury*, nevertheless, manages to convey something of the idle, aimless, compulsive wickedness of idle, terrified, aimless people, who can come together only as a mob: but his hatred of these people also makes them, at least, unreal. God knows what Lang had already seen, in Germany.

By the time of *You Only Live Once*, Lang had found his American feet. He never succeeded quite so brilliantly again. Considering the speed with which we moved from the New Deal to World War II, to Yalta, to the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, to



Korea, and the House Un-American Activities Committee, this may not be his fault.

(One of the last of his films, entitled *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, starring Joan Fontaine, Dana Andrews, and Sydney Blackmer, is an utterly shameless apology for American justice, the work of a defeated man. But, children, yes, it be's that way sometimes.)

Lang's concern, or obsession, was with the fact and the effect of human loneliness, and the ways in which we are all responsible for the creation, and the fate, of the isolated monster: whom we isolate because we recognize him as living within us. This is what his great German film, *M*, which launched Peter Lorre, is all about. In the American context, there being no way for him to get to the *nigger*, he could use only that other American prototype, the criminal, *le gangster*. The premise of *You Only Live Once* is that Eddie Taylor (Henry Fonda) is an ex-convict who wants to go "straight": but the society will not allow him to live down, or redeem, his criminal past. This apparently banal situation is thrust upon us with so heavy a hand that one is forced—as I was, even so long ago—to wonder if one is resisting the film or resisting the truth. But, however one may wish to defend oneself against Lang's indictment of the small, faceless people, always available for any public ceremony and absent forever from any private one, who *are* society, one is left defenseless before his study of the result, which is the isolation and the doom of the lovers.

Very early in the film we meet the earnest and popular prison chaplain—a priest: we meet him as he pitches the ball to the men who are playing baseball in the prison courtyard. It is a curiously loaded moment, a disturbing image: perhaps only an exiled Ger-

man, at that period of our history, would have dreamed of so connecting games and slaughter, thus foreshadowing the fate of the accomplice, who is, in this case, the priest. The film does not suggest that the priest's popularity has anything to do with the religious instruction he, presumably, brings to the men—his popularity is due to his personal qualities, which include a somewhat overworked cheerfulness: and his function, at bottom, is to prepare the men for death. His role, also, is to make the prison more bearable, both for the men in the courtyard and the guard behind the machine gun in the tower. And he is, also, of course, to prepare these men for their eventual freedom beyond these walls—which freedom, according to Lang's savage and elaborately articulated vision, does not and probably cannot exist.

The film has a kind of claustrophobic physicality—Sidney is first seen, for example, behind a desk, trapped, and Lang forces us to concentrate on her maneuvers to free herself, smiling all the way. (She's trapped behind her desk by a telephone and an apple vendor who has come to City Hall, where Sidney works, to complain that policemen eat his apples for free.) The first reunion of the lovers takes place with bars between them: it takes a moment before they realize that the gate is open, the man is being set free. There is a marvelous small moment in the flop house, with Fonda pacing the room the way he paced the cell, and pausing at the window to listen to the Salvation Army Band outside, singing, *if you love your mother, meet her in the skies*. I cannot imagine any native-born white American daring to use, so laconically, a banality so nearly comic in order to capture so deep a distress.

The genuine indignation which informs this film is a quality which was very shortly to disappear out of the American cinema, and severely to be menaced in American life. In a way, we were all



niggers in the thirties. I do not know if that really made us more friendly with each other—at bottom, I doubt that, for more would remain of that friendliness today—but it was harder then, and riskier, to attempt a separate peace, and benign neglect was not among our possibilities. The Okies, of *The Grapes of Wrath*, were still crossing the plains in their jalopy and had not yet arrived in California, there, every single one of them, to encounter running water, and to become cops. Neither Steinbeck nor Dos Passos had yet said, *my country, right or wrong*, nor did anyone suppose that they ever could—but they did; and Hemingway was as vocal concerning the Spanish revolution as he was to be silent concerning the Cuban one.

There is that moment in the film, in prison, when Fonda whispers to Sidney, through jailhouse glass, *Get me a gun*. Sidney said, *I can't get you a gun. You'll kill somebody!* and Fonda says, *What do you think they're going to do to me?*

I understood *that*: it was a real question. I was living with that question.

It is the priest who covers for the trapped and weary girl when she attempts to smuggle a gun into the prison, and it is the priest whom Fonda murders, with a gun. And I wondered about that, the well-meaning accomplice and his fate: he is murdered because Fonda does not believe him, even though he is, in fact, speaking the truth. But the prisoner has no way of knowing with whom the priest is playing ball at the moment and so dares not risk believing him. This dread is underscored by the film's last line, delivered (in the dying prisoner's memory) by the priest: *the gates are open*. I knew damn well that the gates were *not* open, and, by this time, in any case, the lovers were dead.

*Dead End*, on the other hand, left me cold, and so did *Street Scene*, for the same reason: my streets were funkier and more dangerous than that. I had seen the gangster, Baby-Face Martin (Humphrey Bogart), in *my* streets, with his one-hundred-dollar suits, and his silk shirts, and his hat: sometimes he was a pimp and sometimes he was a preacher and often he was both: but Baby-Face always had the same taste in women, boys, and cars. I knew no one like the heroine, Drina (Sylvia Sydney), except certain high-yellow birches, whose concern for their younger brother, if they had any concern, would long before have forced them to hit the block, hit the road, or hit a clean old banker, and steal the keys to the long old highway; or, in other words, the severity of the social situation which *Dead End* so romanticizes (somewhat like its direct descendant, *West Side Story*) utterly precludes the innocence of its heroine. Much closer to the truth are the gangster, his broken mother, and his broken girl—yes: I had seen *that*. The script is unable to face the fact that it is merely another version of that brutal fantasy known as the American success story: this helpless dishonesty is revealed by the script's resolution. I was by no means certain that I approved of the hero's decision to inform on Baby-Face, to turn him over to the police, and bring about his death. In my streets, we never called the cops, and whoever turned anyone in to the cops was a pariah. I did not believe, though the film insists on it, that the hero (Joel McCrea) turned in the gangster in order to save the children. I had never seen any children saved that way. In my own experience, on the contrary, and not only because I was watching Bill, I had observed that those who really wished to save the children became themselves, immediately, the target of the police. I could believe—though the film pretends that this consideration never



entered the hero's mind—that the hero turned in the gangster in order to collect the reward money: that reward money which will allow the hero and heroine to escape from the stink of the children: for I had certainly seen attempts at *that*. Should the hero and heroine take the younger brother with them into that so celebrated American mainstream, the boy, having no friends, and finding, therefore, no resonance, no corroboration of himself anywhere, will become either a derelict, or the most monstrous of patriots. Or, perhaps (trying to escape and atone, or, perhaps, simply trying to live) the boy will become a kind of revolutionary, a superior and dedicated gangster: for there is a reason that the heroes of the poor resemble so little (and yet so closely resemble) the heroes of the rich. I do not wish to be misunderstood as suggesting, for example, that the late Adam Clayton Powell was in any way whatever a bandit, but that is what the white world called him. Harlem's position, therefore, as concerned Adam, was that Adam might have his faults, but that he was certainly a better man than any of his accusers, his accusers being on our backs: and that is why Harlem never abandoned him. Of course, I could not have said any of that then, either. I knew about Adam only that he was the son of "old" Adam, the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, of which church we had been members when I was little; and that he had been instrumental, in the wake of the 1935 Harlem riot, in getting black people hired—for the first time—in the stores on 125th Street where we spent so much of our money—the word, "money," here being meant to convey the image of black fistfuls of nickels and dimes.

In any case, the happy resolution of *Dead End* could mean nothing to me, since, even with some money, black people could move only into black neighborhoods: which is not to be inter-

preted as meaning that we wished to move into white neighborhoods. We wished, merely, to be free to move. At the time that I am speaking of we had not yet even begun to move across the river, into the Bronx.

Bill takes me to see my first play, the Orson Welles production of *Macbeth*, with an all-black cast, at the Lafayette Theater, on 132nd Street and Seventh Avenue, in Harlem.

I do not remember if I had already read *Macbeth*. My impression is that I read the play when Bill told me she was taking me to see it. In any case, before the curtain rose, I knew the play by heart.

I don't think that the name, *Shakespeare*, meant very much to me in those years. I was not yet intimidated by the name—that was to come later. I had read a play which took place in Scotland. Bill had not warned me—she may not have known—that Welles had transposed the play to Haiti.

I am still about twelve or thirteen. I can be fairly certain about all this, because my life changed so violently when I entered the church, and I entered the church around the time of fourteen. When I entered the church, I ceased going to the theater. It took me awhile to realize that I was working in one.

There is an enormous difference because the first time I ever really saw black actors at work was on the stage: and it is important to emphasize that the people I was watching were black, like me. Nothing that I had seen before had prepared me for this—which is a melancholy comment indeed, but I cannot be blamed for an ignorance which an entire republic had deliberately incultured.

The distance between oneself—the audience—and a screen



performer is an absolute: a paradoxical absolute, masquerading as intimacy. No one, for example, will ever really know whether Katharine Hepburn or Bette Davis or Humphrey Bogart or Spencer Tracy or Clark Gable—or John Wayne—can, or could, really act, or not, nor does anyone care: acting is not what they are required to do. Their acting ability, so far from being what attracts their audience, can often be what drives their audience away. One does not go to see them act: one goes to watch them *be*. One does not go to see Humphrey Bogart, *as Sam Spade*: one goes to see Sam Spade, *as Humphrey Bogart*. I don't wish, here, to belabor a point to which we shall, presently, and somewhat elaborately, be compelled to return: but, *no one*, I read somewhere, a long time ago, *makes his escape personality black*. That the movie star is an "escape" personality indicates one of the irreducible dangers to which the moviegoer is exposed: the danger of surrendering to the corroboration of one's fantasies as they are thrown back from the screen. The danger is as great for the performer: Bette Davis may have longed, all these years, to play Mrs. Alving, in *Ghosts*, and Spencer Tracy may have carried with him to the grave an unfulfilled *King Lear*—nobody was about to let them try it, for fear that their public would feel themselves betrayed, This is one of the reasons that Joan Crawford, for example, doesn't like the film *Rain*, in which she starred. God knows that it's not a very good picture, but Crawford didn't write the abysmal script. She made the mistake, and very honorably, after all, of trying to be Miss Sadie Thompson instead of Miss Joan Crawford, and the kids didn't like that at all.

For the tension in the theater is a very different, and very particular tension: this tension between the real and the imagined *is* the theater, and this is why the theater will always remain a neces-

sity. One is not in the presence of shadows, but responding to one's flesh and blood: in the theater, we are re-creating each other. Clearly, now, when speaking of the theater, I am not referring to those desperate and debilitating commercial ventures on which Broadway embarks each season, or those grim "revivals" of stillborn plays of which London is so fond, or those "adaptations" of American monstrosities which have been the rage of Paris for so long. Nor, in the present instance, is the term, "one's flesh and blood" meant to refer, merely, to the spectacle of a black boy seeing, for the first time in his life, living black actors on a living stage: we are *all* each other's flesh and blood.

This is the truth which it is very difficult for the theater to deny, and when it attempts to do so the same thing happens to the theater as happens to the church: it becomes sterile and irrelevant, a blasphemy, and the true believer goes elsewhere—carrying, as it happens, the church and the theater with him, and leaving the form behind. For, the church and the theater are carried within us and it is we who create them, out of our need and out of an impulse more mysterious than our desire. If this seems to be saying that the life of the theater and the life of the church are dependent on maverick freak poets and visionaries, I can only point out that these difficult creatures are *also* our flesh and blood, and are also created by our need and out of an impulse more mysterious than our desire.

In the darkened Lafayette Theater—that moment when the house lights dim in the theater is not at all like the dimming of the house lights in the movies—I watched the narrow, horizontal ribbon of light which connects the stage curtain to the floor of the stage, and which also separates them. That narrow ribbon of light then contains a mystery. That mystery may contain the fu-



ture—you are, yourself, suspended as mortal as that ribbon. No one can possibly know what is about to happen: it is happening, each time, for the first time, for the only time. For this reason, although I did not know this, I had never before, in the movies, been aware of the audience: in the movies, we knew what was going to happen, and, if we wanted to, we could stay there all afternoon, seeing it happen over and over again.

But I was aware of the audience now. Everyone seemed to be waiting, as I was waiting. The curtain rose.

Between three and four years later, that is, around the time that I was seventeen, my best friend, Emile, took me to a movie at the Irving Place Theater, a Russian movie, since America and Russia were allies then. My friend is a Jew—an American Jew, of Spanish descent: he was then, and is today, one of the most honest and honorable people I have ever known. He took me to the movie because he was trying to help me leave the church. I had not been to a film, or a theater from the time of my conversion, which came hard upon the heels of *Macbeth*.

At this time of my life, Emile was the only friend I had who knew to what extent my ministry tormented me. I knew that I could not stay in the pulpit. I could not make my peace with that particular lie—a lie, in any case, for me. I did not want to become Baby-Face Martin—I could see that coming, and, indeed, it demanded no spectacular perception, since I found myself surrounded by what I was certain to become. But neither did I know how to leave—to jump: it could not be explained to my brothers and sisters, or my mother, and my father had begun his descent into the valley. Emile took me to this film, of which I remember only a close-up of a tambourine. I played the tambourine, in

church: the tambourine on the screen might as well have been Gabriel's trumpet. I collapsed, weeping, terrified, and Emile led me out. He walked me up to Herald Square. It was night. He talked to me; he tried to make me see something—tried to do something only a friend can do: and challenged me, thus:

Even if what I was preaching was gospel, I had no right to preach it if I no longer believed it. To stay in the church merely because I was afraid of leaving it was unutterably far beneath me, and too despicable a cowardice for him to support in any friend of his. Therefore, on the coming Sunday, he would buy two tickets to a Broadway matinee and meet me on the steps of the 42nd Street Library, at two o'clock in the afternoon. He knew that I spent all day Sunday in church—the point, precisely, of the challenge. If I were not on the steps of the library (in the bookshelves of which so much of my trouble had begun!) then he would be ashamed of me and never speak to me again, and I would be ashamed of myself.

(I cannot resist observing that this still seems to me a quite extraordinary confrontation between two adolescents, one white and one black: but, then, I had never forgotten Bill's quiet statement, when I went down to her house on 12th Street to tell her that I had been "saved" and would not be going to the movies, or the theater anymore—which meant that I would not be seeing her anymore: *I've lost a lot of respect for you*. Perhaps, in the intervening time, I had lost a lot of respect for myself.)

But beneath all this, as under a graveyard pallor, or the noon-day sun, lay the fact that the leap demanded that I commit myself to the clear impossibility of becoming a writer, and attempting to save my family that way. I do not think I said this. I think Emile knew it.



I had hoped for a reprieve, hoped, on the marked Sunday, to get away, unnoticed: but I was the "young" Brother Baldwin, and I sat in the front row, and the pastor did not begin his sermon until about a quarter past one. Well. At one thirty, I—*tip-toed*—out. The further details of my departure do not concern us here: that was how I left the church.

I am fairly certain that the matinee, that Sunday, was *Native Son* (also directed by Orson Welles) at the St. James Theatre. We were in the balcony, and I remember standing up, abruptly and unwisely, when the play ended, and nearly falling headlong from the balcony to the pit. I did not know that I had been hit so hard: I will not forget Canada Lee's performance as long as I live.

Canada Lee was Bigger Thomas, but he was also Canada Lee: his physical presence, like the physical presence of Paul Robeson, gave me the right to live. He was not at the mercy of my imagination, as he would have been, on the screen: he was on the stage, in flesh and blood, and I was, therefore, at the mercy of *his* imagination.

For that long-ago *Macbeth* had both terrified and exhilarated me. I knew enough to know that the actress (the colored lady!) who played Lady Macbeth might very well be a janitor, or a janitor's wife, when the play closed, or when the curtain came down. Macbeth was a nigger, just like me, and I saw the witches in church, every Sunday, and all up and down the block, all week long, and Banquo's face was a familiar face. At the same time, the majesty and torment on that stage were real: indeed they revealed the play, *Macbeth*. They were those people and that torment was a torment I recognized, those were real daggers, it was real blood, and those crimes resounded and compounded, as real crimes do:

I did not have to ask, *what happens to them now?* And, if niggers have rhythm, these niggers had the beat—*tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow*, and—*thou shalt be King hereafter!* It is not accidental that I was carrying around the plot of a play in my head, and looking, with a new wonder (and a new terror) at everyone around me, when I suddenly found myself on the floor of the church, one Sunday, crying holy unto the Lord. Flesh and blood had proved to be too much for flesh and blood.

For, they were themselves, these actors—these people were themselves. They could *be* Macbeth only because they were themselves: my first real apprehension of the mortal challenge. Here, nothing corroborated any of my fantasies: flesh and blood was being challenged by flesh and blood. It is said that the camera cannot lie, but rarely do we allow it to do anything else, since the camera sees what you point it at: the camera sees what you want it to see. The language of the camera is the language of our dreams.