Richard Wright (1908-1960)
The God That Failed

Richard Wright's most famous autobiography, Black Boy (1945), gives a tense and inspiring account of his early life, and yet it is incomplete and misleading in several ways. On one hand, it exaggerates some of the horrors of his southern childhood; on the other, it omits references to some white people who befriended him, to his own stature among groups of black youth, and to the educational advantages he had from people he knew and members of his own family who were school teachers.[1] Moreover, by ending as it does with his departure for the North (and being published just five years after his great literary success Native Son, in 1940). Black Boy conveys the over-simple message that once he had left the South he was less oppressed and his genius bloomed.[2]

A fuller picture of his life and sense of his range as an autobiographer comes from reading his accounts of the rest of his early years which were originally written for a volume called The Horror and the Glory, which was to be published with Black Boy, the two together to be entitled American Hunger or Black Hunger. When Black Boy was published separately, Wright went ahead and published many portions of The Horror and the Glory in magazines and other places.

The first three chapters, parts of which appeared in Mademoiselle, dealt with the early experiences in Chicago. His first job was in a delicatessen where he could not believe that the owner would trust him and that white waitresses would be friendly. Yet when he worked as a janitor in a hospital, the doctors refused to recognize his intelligence. The last three chapters describe his experiences with the Communist Party. These were first told in the August, 1944, Atlantic Monthly ("I Tried to Be a Communist"); then retold in a collection of essays by Wright and five other European and American ex-communists, The God That Failed, edited by Richard Crossman and published by Harper and Row (Wright's publisher) in 1949.

Today The God That Failed is almost forgotten, but in its time it was a corner-strone in the building of an anti-communist, intellectual left. Other contributors were Arthus Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Andre Gide, Louis Fisher, and Stephen Spender—men who were not turncoats or heroes of the right like Whitaker Chambers. The book was assigned in many college courses and promoted Wright as an intellectual as well as a novelist.

The selection here is the last quarter of Wright's essay in The God That Failes. He has already bristled under doctrinaire Party orders and had the humiliating experience of going to New York for a Party writers' conference but not being given a hotel reservation because he was a Negro. So he has announced his resignation, but he continues to be harassed, as represented here. His experience makes an interesting comparison with the chapters on "the Brotherhood" in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man.

Yet disillusionment with the Communist Party is not the only message in American Hunger. One may also sense Wright's despair with all America. Because of its fear, the nation, too, fails to recognize someone who wants to help it.

In 1947, Wright established permanent residence in Paris and went on to become a leader in organizations of Third World, anti-colonial intellectuals, such as the Bandung, Indonesia, Conference of 1955. He died of a heart attack in Paris in 1960.

The selection below is taken from The God That Failed, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Harper and Row, 1947). The two major biographies of Wright are Constance Webb, Richard Wright (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1968), and Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright (New York: William Morrow, 1973).

This essay by Richard Wright is reprinted from The God That Failed, edited by Richard Crossman.

1. For a summary of the exaggerations and omissions in Black Boy, see David L. Dudley, My Father's Shadow: Intergenerational Conflict in African American Men's Autobiography (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 113-14
2. Michel Fabre, "Afterword," to Richard Wright, American Hunger (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 139-40
3. "Comrades": Communist Party members. (R.F.S.)

Reading

Black Boy
http://memory.loc.gov/master/gdc/scdser01/200401/telework/Let%20Us%20now%20Praise%20FamMen.pdf