from Chapter 13 of *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright (293-294)

That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the
sink, I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean,
sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a
raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling
everything European or German, laughing at the weaknesses of people, mocking God, authority. What was
this? I stood up, trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of the 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 a weapon?
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 . . .

I ran across many words whose meanings I did not know, and either looked them up in a dictionary
or, before I had a chance to do that, encountered the word in a context that made its meaning clear. But
what strange world was this? I concluded the book with the conviction that I had somehow overlooked
something terribly important in life. I had once tried to write, had once reveled in feeling, had let my crude
imagination roam, but the impulse to dream had been slowly beaten out of me by experience. Now it
surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. 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.

As dawn broke I ate my pork and beans, feeling dopey, sleepy. I went to work, but the mood of the
book would not die; it lingered, coloring everything I saw, heard, did. I now felt that I knew what the white
men were feeling. Merely because I had read a book that had spoken of how they lived and thought, I
identified myself with that book, I felt vaguely guilty. Would I, filled with bookish notions, act in a manner
that would make the whites dislike me? . . .

Steeped in new moods and ideas, I bought a ream of paper and tried to write; but nothing would
come, or what did come was flat beyond telling. I discovered that more than desire and feeling were
necessary to write and I dropped the idea. Yet I still wondered how it was possible to know people
sufficiently to write about them. Could I ever learn about life and people? To me, with my vast ignorance,
my Jim Crow station in life, it seemed a task impossible of achievement. I now knew what being a Negro
meant. I could endure the hunger. I had learned to live with hate. But to feel that there were feelings denied
me, that the very breath of life itself was beyond my reach, that more than anything else hurt, wounded me.
I had a new hunger.

In buoying me up, reading also cast me down, made me see what was possible, what I had missed.
My tension returned, new, terrible, bitter, surging, almost too great to be contained. I no longer felt that the
world about me was hostile, killing; I knew it. A million times I asked myself what I could do to save
myself, and there were no answers. I seemed forever condemned, ringed by walls.

*From page 329-330*

My excessive reading puzzled Aunt Maggie….she declared that I was going about the business of living
wrongly, that reading books would not help me at all. But nothing she said had any effect. I had long ago
hardened myself to criticism.

“Boy, are you reading for law?” my aunt would demand.
“No.”
“Then why are you reading all the time?”
“I like to.”
“But what do you get out of it?”
“I get a great deal out of it.”

And I knew that my words sounded wild and foolish in my environment, where reading wax almost unknown, where the highest item of value was a dime or a dollar, an apartment or a job; where, if one aspired at all, it was to be a doctor or a lawyer, a shopkeeper or a politician. The most valued pleasure of the people I knew was a car, the most cherished experience a bottle of whisky, the most sought-after prize somebody else’s wife. I had no sense of being inferior or superior to the people about me; I merely felt that they had had no chance to learn to live differently. I never criticized them or praised them, yet they felt in my neutrality a deeper rejection of them than if I had cursed them.

Repeatedly I took stabs at writing, but the results were so poor that I would tear up the sheets. I was striving for a level of expression that matched those of the novels I read. But I always somehow failed to get onto the page what I thought and felt. Failing at sustained narrative, I compromised by playing with single sentences and phrases.…I spent hours and days pounding out disconnected sentences for the sheer love of words.

I would write:

“The soft melting hunk of butter trickled in gold down the stringy grooves of the split yam.”

Or

“The child’s clumsy fingers fumbled in sleep, feeling vainly for the wish of its dream.”

“The old man huddled in the dark doorway, his bony face lit by the burning yellow in the windows of distant skyscrapers.”

My purpose was to capture a physical state or movement that carried a strong subjective impression, an accomplishment which seemed supremely worth struggling for. If I could fasten the mind of the reader upon words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response, I felt that I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative. I strove to master words, to make them disappear, to make them important by making them new, to make them melt into a rising spiral of emotional stimuli, each greater than the other, each feeding and reinforcing the other, and all ending in an emotional climax that would drench the reader with a sense of a new world. That was the single aim of my living.

From 150-151

I felt that the Negro could not live a full, human life under the conditions imposed upon him by America; and I felt, too, that America, for different reasons, could not live a full, human life. It seemed to me, then, that if the Negro solved his problem, he would be solving infinitely more than his problem alone. I felt certain that the Negro could never solve his problem until the deeper problem of American civilization had been faced and solved. And because the Negro was the most cast-out of all the outcast people in America, I felt that no other group in America could tackle this problem of what our American lives meant so well as the Negro could.

But, as I listened to the Communist Negro speakers, I wondered if the Negro, blasted by three hundred years of oppression, could possibly cast off his fear and corruption and rise to the task. Could the Negro ever possess himself, learn to know what had happened to him in relation to the aspirations of Western society? It seemed to me that for the Negro to try to save himself he would have to forget himself and try to save a confused, materialistic nation from its own drift toward self-destruction. Could the Negro accomplish this miracle? Could he take up his bed and walk?

Election time was nearing and a Negro Republican precinct captain asked me to help him round up votes. I had no interest in the candidates, but I needed the money. I went from door to door with the precinct captain and discovered that the whole business was one long process of bribery, that people voted for three dollars, for the right to continue their illicit trade in sex or alcohol. On election day I went into the
polling booth and drew the curtain behind me and unfolded my ballots. As I stood there the sordid implications of politics flashed through my mind. “Big Bill” Thompson headed the local Republican machine and I knew that he was using the Negro vote to control the city hall; in turn, he was engaged in vast political deals of which the Negro voters, political innocents, had no notion. With my pencil I wrote in a determined scrawl across the face of the ballots:

    I Protest This Fraud

    I knew that my gesture was futile. But I wanted somebody to know that out of that vast sea of ignorance in the Black Belt there was at least one person who knew the game for what it was. I collected my ten dollars and went home.