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**Sean McCann: A Pinnacle of Feeling**

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## INTRODUCTION

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### **The Executive Disease: Presidential Power and Literary Imagination**

*In the United States the executive power is as limited and  
exceptional as the sovereignty in whose name it acts.*

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

*My ambition is to be president.*

—Allen Ginsberg, “America”

IN THE THIRD BOOK of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas undergoes a disturbing encounter with a madman whose manic energy both terrifies and compels him. Arrested for the murder of Mary Dalton, Bigger awaits trial in the Chicago jail, where he finds himself bewildered by the mix of intense emotion occasioned by his crime. He is frightened by the ruthlessness of the district attorney and by the bloodthirstiness of the press and the white public; shamed by the humiliation of his family and friends; angered by the manipulation of his mother’s minister; and unnerved by the friendship extended to him by his leftwing lawyer Boris Max and by Mary’s bereaved Communist lover Jan. Above all, he is overwhelmed by the complete estrangement from ordinary society that his actions have confirmed and by his resulting “urge to talk, to tell, to try to make his feelings known.” In the depths of Bigger’s confusion, Wright provides a comparison figure, whose frenzy mirrors Bigger’s own desperate “impulsion to try to tell.”<sup>1</sup> As Bigger learns

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from a fellow prisoner, the “insane man” is a former student driven to lunacy by the effort to write “a book on how colored people live.” He has been found in his underwear in the post office, raving about his determination to deliver his report to the president and by the nefarious designs of “the professor” who has stolen his work. “I’ll tell the President,” the man now continues to scream as prison guards try to restrain him.

“You’re afraid of me!” the man shouted. “That’s why you put me in here! But I’ll tell the President anyhow! I’ll tell him you make us live in such crowded conditions on the South Side that one out of every ten of us is insane! I’ll tell ‘im that you dump all the stale foods into the Black Belt and sell them for more than you can get anywhere else! I’ll tell ‘im you tax us, but you won’t build hospitals! I’ll tell ‘im the schools are so crowded that they breed perverts! I’ll tell ‘im you hire us last and fire us first! I’ll tell the president and the League of Nations” (397–98)

The scene is brief, but it is among the most vivid in the long, discursive last book of *Native Son*, and in its dramatic compression it effectively clarifies the main concerns of Wright’s novel—and in this fashion speaks more broadly as well to a set of literary and political attitudes that characterize a wide range of twentieth-century American literature. In both contexts, what stands out about the moment is its deep ambivalence. On the one hand, Wright’s madman suitably captures the author’s distance from the reformist liberalism that dominated U.S. politics during the 1930s. Both as a member of the Communist Party and as an African American well aware of the racial injustice at the core of many New Deal reforms, Wright had little interest in the era’s cult of the sympathetic president.<sup>2</sup> Casting that faith as a cruel delusion, Wright also neatly skewers the ineffectuality of U.S. political institutions—credible as the League of Nations—and implicitly the Negro leaders who sought to work within the system and to take advantage of the New Deal to pursue civil rights advances. In his madness, in his delusional eagerness to personalize the political (and in so doing to match the exaggerated figure of the president with the comically misplaced nemesis of the professor), and in his obsession with the material facts of segregation that reflect but do not fully plumb the depths of the oppression registered by Bigger, the “insane man” indicts what Wright thus portrays as the cruel inadequacy of mainstream liberalism.

Yet, however misguided this troubled man may be, Wright emphasizes that the impulses that drive him are not trivial and that indeed they render him a mirror for Bigger’s own stifled yearnings for understanding and self-expression. Bigger himself, after all, has imagined taking the role of the chief executive. At the culmination of the game of “play[ing] white” he has earlier acted out with his friend Gus, Bigger imagines himself as a president solely concerned to enforce the repression of African Americans, a fancy that takes Bigger’s longing for power and freedom to the limit of his imagination while simultaneously crystallizing the depth of his

oppression (18). When he encounters the insane man in jail, then, he suitably recognizes a kindred spirit. Confronting the madman, Bigger has “the sensation that the man was too emotionally wrought up over whatever it was that he had lost. Yet the man’s emotions seemed real; they affected him, compelling sympathy. . . . Bigger had the queer feeling that his own exhaustion formed a hair-line upon which his feelings were poised, and that the man’s driving frenzy would suck him into its hot whirlpool” (397–98). Indeed, as a near double to Bigger, the insane man resembles no one so much as Wright himself.<sup>3</sup> Both in his attempt to draft a structural account of the effects of racial segregation and in his grandiose expectations, the madman’s effort to write the book on the oppression of African Americans echoes the mission that Wright assumed with *Native Son*—so much so that the brief episode in which he appears can be taken to illuminate a crucial point of connection between Wright’s ambitions and the very political attitudes he appears to scorn.

In his determination to address the president, Wright’s madman picks up on and subtly mocks a central element of the politics of the New Deal: the hope that the grandeur of the presidency might provide a means to transcend the corruption, indifference, and inadequacy of local political and civil institutions. *Native Son*, it might be noted, outlines a directly comparable agenda—using Bigger Thomas’s anger and suffering to deliver a report on racism not to local authorities or community leaders, nor to similarly frustrated African Americans, nor even to Wright’s fellow radicals or Communist Party members, but directly to the vast American public invoked by Max when he explains that Bigger’s case “touches the destiny of an entire nation” (444). As the title of Wright’s novel indicates, *Native Son* casts its address toward an emphatically national audience, aiming not only to depict the incidental cruelty of segregation or bigotry, but to reveal racism as the core issue of American history—“the key to our future, that rare vantage point upon which every man and woman in this nation can stand and view how inextricably our hopes and fears of today create the exultation and doom of tomorrow” (444). In the process it casts itself as rising, symbolically as well as intellectually, above the many habits and institutions that conspire to obscure and localize the injustice. On one level, then, the madman’s lunatic aim of reaching the deaf ear of the president amounts to the most fundamental demonstration that the American public still ignores that key vantage, remaining mired in deliberate ignorance and convenient parochialism. But for that very reason, the figure of the president remains the most direct representation of the sovereign perspective that both Max and his creator seek.<sup>4</sup> All through *Native Son*, it is often noted, Bigger Thomas seeks out elevation, yearning for “a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of” (418).<sup>5</sup> Apart from the historical and political vantage proposed by Max—which Wright ultimately appears to reject—and apart from Bigger himself, the madman’s president is the novel’s sole concrete embodiment of that transcendent perspective. As he later suggested when he remarked

that Roosevelt was the man “who really gave me a chance to write books,” Wright’s literary ambitions virtually mimic the image of the liberal presidency that his novel also mocked.<sup>6</sup>

In this fashion, *Native Son* can be seen to take part in a larger discourse on executive power that was a central feature of the New Deal and, more generally, of U.S. politics over the whole course of the twentieth century. What is striking, for instance, about Wright’s retrospective account of the origins of his literary career is not just that by 1945 he downplayed the role of the Communist Party in his development, but that, as an alternative, he mentioned neither the Federal Writer’s Project nor even the New Deal, but Roosevelt the man, casting the relation between the president and himself in just the directly personal terms that moved other members of the New Deal coalition. “We are stunned,” Wright confided to his journal on FDR’s death, “as though someone we know or who is related to us is dead.”<sup>7</sup> That tendency—to view policies and political action almost wholly in executive terms and, further, to see the executive branch itself as embodied in the intimate person of the president—was in good part a legacy of Roosevelt’s celebrated political genius. But more fundamentally still it was a consequence of some of the main structural reforms pursued during the New Deal, whose combined action pointed toward the establishment of a virtually new constitutional order, aptly summarized by Theodore Lowi as “presidential government.” Reshaping to varying degrees nearly every structural feature of U.S. politics—the relations between federal and state governments, between the three branches of the federal government, and among voters, officials, and parties—the “Roosevelt Revolution” laid the groundwork for what Lowi sees as an “entirely new” political system best characterized as “a plebiscitary republic with a personal presidency.”<sup>8</sup> In the regime inaugurated by the New Deal, the president would stand at the head of a system of executive administration, acting in theory as the active voice of the nation as a whole; overcoming the resistance and narrow partisanship of other political institutions; and in so doing working to create a more intimate and democratic relation between the nation and its government. As Harold Laski explained in the same year Wright’s novel was published, by exercising the “great power [that] alone makes great leadership possible,” the president could seize “the unique chance of restoring America to its people.”<sup>9</sup>

While Wright composed *Native Son* in 1938 and 1939, the Roosevelt administration was in the midst of the effort to forge that new constitutional order, and both the personality of FDR and the power of his office stood at the forefront of popular awareness and public debate. During those years, while domestic concern about the growth of Fascist and Communist tyrannies on the continent was rapidly growing, a good part of political discussion in the U.S. was preoccupied with the fate of the Roosevelt administration’s Executive Reorganization Act, a signal event

in the making of the distinctly American style of presidential government and an unexpected source of intense controversy about the proper role of the federal government and the executive branch in political life.<sup>10</sup> In popular memory, the seemingly dry topic of executive reorganization has been overshadowed by the high drama of the contemporaneous court-packing struggle, but during the later thirties, the former was equally controversial, and it may have been more central to the ambitions of New Dealers and more consequential for the long-term development of the U.S. political system. For, in their plan to create a bureaucratically streamlined and robust executive office, Roosevelt and his advisers acted out of a long-standing progressive desire to strengthen the president's control of the federal administration and in so doing to also expand the power of the president at the expense of Congress and of state and local governments.

In this respect, the Roosevelt administration's plan for executive reorganization was far more significant than the "apparently routine" proposal for reformed management that FDR himself cast the bill as being.<sup>11</sup> In public, FDR described the reorganization plan by referring merely to "efficient and economical conduct of governmental operations."<sup>12</sup> In private, he suggested that a robust reorganization bill would amount to the nearest possible approximation of a new "Constitutional convention"—a restructuring of the nation's political institutions legitimized by the mandate Roosevelt and the New Deal had received in the landslide 1936 election.<sup>13</sup> The academic advisers who pushed the plan forward were more direct and still more emphatic. Operating on the conviction that "the development of executive leadership" amounted to "one of the great contributions of modern democracy to government," they viewed the creation of a powerful, independent executive office as "an epoch making event in the history of American institutions."<sup>14</sup> As Louis Brownlow, chair of the presidential commission that drafted the necessary legislation explained, executive reorganization would concentrate power in the president's hands so that "the national will [might] be expressed not merely in a brief, exultant moment of electoral decision, but in a persistent, determined, completed day-by-day administration of what the nation has decided to do."<sup>15</sup> In short, the plan looked forward to a day when the president, because of his administrative powers and his popular legitimacy, could act independently of Congress and partisan or parochial interests on behalf of the collective will. The assumption, as another New Dealer said, was that "the President, and not either party, was now the instrument of the people as a whole."<sup>16</sup>

Despite FDR's extraordinary popularity, however, the administration's first Executive Reorganization bill went down to defeat in the spring of 1938, the victim of intense congressional and popular resistance. Opposition came not only from the committed enemies of the New Deal, who organized a demagogic public relations campaign, but from liberal members of the press and from a surprisingly large number of voters who worried, as one man put it, that the bill would "give the

President [the] powers of a Julius Caesar.”<sup>17</sup> In response, FDR backed away from the bill and in a rare moment of defensiveness assured the American people that he had “no inclination to be a dictator.”<sup>18</sup> The moment marked a turning point for the New Deal. Though the administration eventually got a much watered down version of the bill through Congress in 1939, the weakness of the revised plan indicated both the wide resistance to the grandest ambitions of the Roosevelt men and the “political torpor” that had befallen the reform agenda they supported.<sup>19</sup>

The ambivalence of *Native Son* is perhaps fitting in this context. While Wright composed his novel, progressive hopes in the ability of the president to rise above ordinary politicking and lead a unified nation toward a new era of democratic reform had been raised to a historic peak and, in but a short time, shown to be badly exaggerated. *Native Son* all but directly addresses that situation. Appealing subtly to the transcendent authority of a sovereign president, Wright’s novel also undercuts that appeal by envisioning the presidency as but one more element of an unresponsive political system. In the process, *Native Son* takes up the two most potent impressions of executive power that circulated in public debate during the late thirties. The Roosevelt administration and its intellectual champions defended an unchained president as an instrument of democratic community, the simultaneous expression and servant of a popular will otherwise hindered by corrupt institutions and needless division. Its critics cast the executive branch as a secretive cabal driven by an illegitimate appetite for power. Those two, structurally counterpoised images of the presidency echo throughout American literature of the twentieth century, providing the basic terms for what can be read as an extended meditation on the relation of executive power to democratic government. In this fashion, as we will see more fully below, they also combine to build the symbolic drama at the heart of *Native Son*.

### ***Principles, Parties, and Persons: The Political Culture of the Nineteenth-Century Presidency***

The controversy surrounding the Executive Reorganization bill during the late thirties was, of course, but one moment in a far longer history of presidential power in U.S. politics—one, however, that dramatized structural transformations in the institutions and culture of government that only rarely became the subject of explicit public dispute. The Roosevelt administration was unsuccessful in bringing about the thorough constitutional reconstruction that some of its most enthusiastic proponents advocated. But by nearly all accounts the New Deal did contribute substantially to a long-term reordering of political institutions exemplified by the shift toward the plebiscitary, president-centered regime de-

scribed by Lowi. Over the course of the twentieth century, as the administrative and security capacities of the federal government expanded, the authority and prominence of the president likewise grew, and American politics increasingly became a national drama focused on the personality of the president.<sup>20</sup> Precisely because the executive office never gained the full powers that some New Dealers sought, moreover, the ideal of presidential leadership remained a continually appealing vision. When political failures or frustrations needed to be explained, the weakness of the president or of his office could be called on to account for the problem. Time and again, therefore, intellectuals, policy makers, and politicians invoked the image of the president as a popular statesman capable of rising above the limitations imposed by other institutions and able therefore to call American citizens to a more complete national destiny. In Clinton Rossiter's paradigmatic formulation, the president would be frequently invoked during the postwar decades as "the one-man distillation of the American people."<sup>21</sup>

But, while most historians and political scientists agree that the New Deal was a pivotal era in the reshaping of American politics, the history of presidential government reaches back well before the 1930s. In their view of the president as an engine of democratic reform, FDR and his allies drew on theories of government that had been first popularized during the Progressive Era, especially by Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—each of whom not only shaped aspects of the reform agenda that culminated in the New Deal, but sought, in theory as well as practice, to justify new models of presidential leadership to carry out that agenda. The vision of executive leadership TR and Wilson helped create displays in turn an exceedingly complex relation to American political history, both drawing on possibilities latent in the nation's constitutional design and fundamentally rewriting some of the prevailing customs of governance.

As one feature of the complex system of federalized and divided powers devised by the framers, the presidency has always been, among the most distinctive features of American government and a source of dispute and conflicting expectations from the first. During the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and the intense period of debate that led up to ratification in 1789, the presidency was one of the most heated topics of disagreement—with anti-Federalists denouncing the office, in Edmund Randolph's famous words as "the foetus of Monarchy" and Federalists defending, in Hamilton's equally celebrated phrase, an effective government's reliance on "energy in the executive."<sup>22</sup> Their conflicting views testify to differing interests and convictions that would remain fundamental sources of political conflict in the United States throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. But in this manner they also speak to a dynamism incorporated by design and compromise into the new constitutional order. For, in creating an office that combined the head of state and the head of government in a single person, and in setting it at odds with an independent legislature and judiciary, the framers knowingly experimented with

a novel political system that differed both from parliamentary and monarchical governments and from classical republican ones as well. The resulting institutional tensions would become defining features of American political life. Indeed, in the view of political theorist Harvey Mansfield, the signal innovation of the American Constitution lay less in the fact that it codified the legitimate powers of government in a written document, then in the way it created in the separation of powers a unique institutional framework for containing the inherent conflict between republican government (deliberative, law bound, and prey to faction and stagnation) and executive power (antinomian, unitary, prey to the abuse of prerogative), making it a dynamic but relatively stable engine of American government.<sup>23</sup>

A case can be made following Mansfield that a profound ambivalence about executive power has been built into American politics since the earliest days of the republic and that the various recurring caricatures of the president—as the leader of the nation or as an institution bound “clerk”; as prototyrrant or feeble figure-head—are alternative, partial views of the complex relations at the core of American government, each possibility rising to the fore depending on context and the interest of the viewer. The predominant understanding of American constitutionalism through the nineteenth century held that the popular will was expressed primarily through the legislative action of Congress.<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, the concentration of executive power in the hands of a single person always implied the threat of tyranny and abuse. But one important consequence of the doctrine of popular sovereignty and of the long-standing distrust of public power has been an equally prevalent dissatisfaction with congressional preeminence and party competition.<sup>25</sup> From this vantage, the frustrations presented by representative democracy—in calcification, or corruption, or parochialism—could easily make executive power, and its promised capacity to invoke prerogative and burst the shackles of law, seem an appealing, alternative means for articulating an otherwise neglected popular will.<sup>26</sup>

In the words of its most devoted literary antagonist, Gore Vidal, this was “the executive disease” that infected the United States from its origins, driving the republic toward the imperial decline Vidal relentlessly indicts.<sup>27</sup> Seen by its light, the vision of presidential leadership advanced during the Progressive era and institutionalized by the New Deal may appear less a radical innovation than a resurrection of an ideal of the president as a “patriot king” long latent in political mores.<sup>28</sup> That was certainly the way that Teddy Roosevelt and Wilson, both enthusiastic imperialists, cast their own contributions to the twentieth century’s model of presidential leadership. Rebuking conventional partisan politics and claiming to act beyond narrow legalism and hidebound institutions, each cast himself as an innovator who reinvigorated the civic ideals that flourished among the Revolutionary generation. Praising TR, Woodrow Wilson imagined his future rival to be recreating the “the spirit of civic duty” that had prevailed in the early days of the Republic. “The scale

of our thought is national again," Wilson claimed. "Once more our presidents are our leaders."<sup>29</sup>

Whatever long-term continuities exist, however, most political scientists and historians agree that the "modern" presidency differs markedly from anything anticipated by the founding fathers or familiar in the nineteenth century. The framers did sometimes speak of the executive as a nonpartisan guardian of the general interest, but they meant by that role something quite different from what Laski imagined when he cast the president as the proto-Socialist hero of a reunified people or even from what FDR invoked when he claimed that he bore "the duty of analyzing and setting forth national needs and ideals which transcend and cut across all party affiliation."<sup>30</sup> In the philosophy of the framers, the president's stature as head of state was never joined to the thought that he might be a spearhead of democracy or the moving spirit behind any partisan or domestic policy agenda, and there was certainly no suggestion, of the type made by the Brownlow commission, that the executive might use administrative powers to outflank Congress and state governments. The most energetic Federalist defenders of the early presidency were the least democratic of the framers, and they typically viewed the executive not as an advocate of the popular will or as the initiator of innovation, but as a figure whose wisdom and prestige would enable him "to withstand the temporary delusions" of "the people" and to recognize when their "interests" were "at variance with their inclinations."<sup>31</sup> The presidency from this perspective was to be not, as New Dealers would suggest, "the instrument of the people as a whole," but, an institutional rival to the democratic enthusiasms of the legislative branch and therefore but one, crucial player in the system of antagonistic powers that the framers thought necessary to check democratic passions.

As Wilson and TR rightly suggested, moreover, even this early view of the president as a nonpartisan shield of the national interest did not survive the first generation of American leaders. With the rise of Jacksonian democracy and the creation of the first mass party system, and with the increasing intensity of regional as well as factional division, the notion that the president should rise above partisanship and act through the federal government to protect the common good quickly faded.<sup>32</sup> In Andrew Jackson's mass popularity, Americans witnessed the creation of a new model of the democratic presidency, in which the president aspired to act, in Jackson's words, as "the direct representative of the American people." (The stance occasioned, in Moby Dick's apostrophe to Jackson, one of the rare invocations of the sovereign presidency by a major nineteenth-century American writer.)<sup>33</sup> But, the Jacksonian presidency would little resemble the idea of presidential government that developed during the twentieth century. Both by philosophy and by policy, Jackson and his allies acted less to strengthen than to disperse the powers of the federal government and the executive branch. Unlike the Federalists, who had envisioned the federal government as an elite guardian of the common

good, Jackson spoke tellingly of plural “public interests” rather than a singular “public interest,” and he suggested that Washington should leave “individuals and States as much as possible to themselves.”<sup>34</sup>

As antistatists and party builders, Jacksonian democrats likewise influenced the development of a political culture that would long shape the understanding of the presidency and its relation to the parties, even among their political opponents. Viewing the president’s authority as stemming less from the Constitution than from popular opinion, Jacksonians, along with their Whig contemporaries, accordingly celebrated the executive not for its capacity to rise above partisan passion, but mainly for its ability to articulate popular preferences through party organization.<sup>35</sup> The Jacksonian president was thus less national statesman than party representative and ultimate distributor of spoils. Elevating the platforms cobbled together out of the party’s diverse interests above any pretense to virtuous, character-driven rule, the nineteenth-century Democrats claimed to value “principles rather than persons.”<sup>36</sup> The consequence, as Alexis de Tocqueville recognized at the time, was to encourage the creation of a decentralized political regime where power was distributed among the states, Congress, and the parties. Intense party conflict—built in large part around patronage and loyalty—and provincial jealousies thus dominated political life during the nineteenth century. With the exception of the Jackson and, of course, Lincoln administrations, presidential politics often seemed no more significant, and drew only slightly more voter participation, than the factional rivalries that dominated Congress and local governments. Prevailing constitutional doctrine also emphasized the restrictions on presidential action and on the reach of the federal government. Not only did structural restraints limit the chances for presidents to wield significant power; political customs, rooted in deference to long-established constitutional attitudes, also limited the occasions when presidents might speak directly to the public or even to Congress. Until Woodrow Wilson revived the practice in 1914, for example, no president since Jefferson had delivered a State of the Union address in person and none could, without finding creative ways to disavow the practice, express his policy preferences or personal attitudes directly to a popular audience. Even as candidates, aspirants for presidential office during the nineteenth century were expected to bow to party platforms, leave campaigning to party leaders, and comport themselves as dutiful public servants reluctant to assume the heavy burdens of office. Few opportunities thus existed for presidents to distinguish themselves from their parties or to establish themselves as symbolic figures in the popular mind.<sup>37</sup>

In cultural stature as well as political power, therefore, the nineteenth-century presidency was rivaled by the prominence enjoyed by other political officials, and the role of the office in the significant literature of the era was a comparatively minor one. With the exception of Jackson and Lincoln, the nineteenth-century presidents acted, in the words of one historian, “as little more than chief clerks of personnel.”<sup>38</sup>

They received less attention from the press overall than congressional politicians and were often less prominent public figures than celebrated senators and governors.<sup>39</sup> Even a poet like Whitman, who would prove vital to the creation of the image of the “Redeemer President,” frequently portrayed the chief executive as something much less grand and powerful than later writers would envision. Memorializing Lincoln as the savior of the Union, for example, Whitman praised the slain president not as the type of boldly energetic, agenda-setting statesman that later figures like Teddy Roosevelt would popularize, but, in terms then widely used to praise presidential probity, as a leader distinguished for his “cautious hand.”<sup>40</sup> More generally, before the Civil War, Whitman like his contemporaries downplayed the significance of the presidency, casting the chief executive not only as the democratic equal of the citizens he was compelled to serve, but as only one of a whole panoply of comparably situated public servants: “President, Mayor, Governor and what not.” In “Song of the Answerer,” for example, the poet speaks equally to “the President at his levee” and to “Cudge that hoes in the sugar-field,” but he also “walks among the Congress, and one Representative says to another, Here is our equal appearing and new.”<sup>41</sup>

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the political culture that nurtured these perceptions had begun the slow decline that would reach a definitive point with the New Deal. With the expansion of the nation’s state apparatus, the presidency would accrue previously unanticipated governmental powers and begin a long term battle for leverage with Congress and state and local governments. Over the same period, the party and patronage systems came under growing criticism from intellectuals and Progressive reformers, who fostered institutional and cultural changes that increasingly undercut the power of party organizations. As they receded in prominence and effectiveness, and as their once primary role in binding voters emotionally and ideologically to the political process declined, a new political mode built around the charismatic personalities of presidential candidates came increasingly to the fore—a development further nurtured by the growth of the mass media and by constitutional and economic transformations that lessened the significance of regional differences and gave increasing primacy to the national political arena.<sup>42</sup> In Woodrow Wilson’s influential vision, the twentieth-century president was neither to be one governmental figure among others, nor one member of a party organization, but a uniquely positioned national leader burdened and distinguished by his “extraordinary isolation.”<sup>43</sup>

The first crucial moment in this transformation came with the Civil War and the Lincoln presidency. In his stewardship of the Union through the Civil War, Lincoln became for Progressive intellectuals a paragon of vigorous presidential leadership. “For a little while,” Woodrow Wilson enthused, “the executive seemed . . . to become by sheer stress of circumstances the whole government.”<sup>44</sup> But Lincoln was

in certain respects as influential on his presidential successors for what he symbolized, and for the eloquence of his rhetoric, as for his actions in office. In his own self-depictions, Lincoln rarely claimed to be either the nonpartisan voice of the popular will or the boldly extraconstitutional executive that later presidents would often invoke, and, in fact, he seems to have assumed a view of the presidency that more closely resembled the predominant attitudes of his contemporaries.<sup>45</sup>

For later admirers like Wilson and TR, however, Lincoln's presidency would seem a watershed both for the expanded scope for executive power his administration seemed to portend and still more for his role in inaugurating "a second American revolution" that would ultimately transform the United States from a union of sovereign states and conflicting regions to a continental nation.<sup>46</sup> Voicing a new sentiment that spread among Union supporters during the war, Emerson expressed satisfaction that, because of the conflict, "We are coming . . . to a nationality."<sup>47</sup> In the postbellum decades, and especially during the first years of the new century, Emerson's hope would become a watchword among Progressive reformers, who saw a still unconsolidated sense of national citizenship as the crucial ingredient for the achievement of meaningful democracy. For many, as for Emerson, Lincoln became the shining hero of that promise, but his significance in the role had importantly as much to do with the power of his rhetoric and the image of his person as with what later admirers called his "magnificent operationalism."<sup>48</sup> Particularly in the Gettysburg Address, but throughout much of his writing, Lincoln famously envisioned a "new birth of freedom" secured by the lives of the fallen soldiers whose sacrifice testified to the sovereign power they willingly served and whose martyrdom consecrated a new national compact. In Robert Lowell's acute description, Lincoln's rhetoric joined "Jefferson's ideals of freedom and equality . . . to the Christian sacrificial act of death and rebirth." Following his assassination, that language took on a fateful resonance with Lincoln's own example, so that for his mourners and celebrants, Lincoln could become a spiritual symbol for the refounding of American democracy—a martyr whose seemingly self-chosen death established the prepolitical ground for a new order. "The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church," a Philadelphia newspaper declared shortly after the assassination. "So the blood of the noble martyr to the cause of freedom will be the seed that will fructify to the great blessing of this nation."<sup>49</sup>

That sacrificial mythology would become a central element in the rhetoric of modern presidentialism, and it would prove enormously appealing to ambitious literary writers over the course of the twentieth century, particularly in two related implications. Invoking national identity as a profound origin underlying the confusion and fragmentation of liberal society, Lincoln's sacrificial symbolism envisioned national solidarity as the product of a complex drama of executive power—in which the president's power to command both evoked and was ultimately surpassed by his people's, or his own, willingness to suffer and die. Celebrating that sacrifice,

Lincoln similarly cast the nation as both the inspiration for and implicitly as the product of the president's distinctive capacity to speak (rather than, say, to act or legislate) for the American people. The combination not only made the presidency, nationality, and literary genius seem part of one inextricable package; by joining oratory to sacrifice, it suggested that the president transcended a political realm characterized at its most essential by conquest and force when, by assuming a willingness to suffer and die, he transcended the role of commander-in-chief to assume that of national poet. In this light, as Whitman contended, Lincoln's most important achievement could seem "neither military" nor "political," but ultimately "imaginative and artistic."<sup>50</sup>

In various ways, the appeal of that imaginative and artistic vision would exercise a powerful hold over both the political and literary imaginations of the twentieth-century United States, but perhaps because Lincoln's presidential example was so distinctly rhetorical, its influence during the latter decades of the twentieth century turned out to be notoriously insubstantial. After the Civil War, American politics returned to the regime of courts and parties. Indeed the prevailing constitutional orthodoxy, affirmed by the Supreme Court in *Texas v. White* (1869) reemphasized the understanding of the United States as a compact of sovereign states that the Civil War had supposedly begun to dispatch—"an indestructible Union, composed of indestructible states."<sup>51</sup> Beginning with the impeachment of Andrew Johnson (who among other crimes, was charged as a constitutional "usurper" for his effort to go over the heads of Congress and appeal directly to the American people), Congress entered into an extended period of institutional dominance, and both the power and prestige of the executive branch sunk to a historical nadir. The predominant understanding of the presidency during the era thus echoed Tocqueville's sense that the chief magistrate typically acted as little more than a feeble check on Congress. In the book that first brought him acclaim, Woodrow Wilson declared in 1885 that "unquestionably, the predominant and controlling force [in American politics], the center and source of all motive and of all regulative power, is Congress." Albert Bushnell Hart echoed the point and predicted that, "since the legislative department in every republic constantly tends to gain ground at the expense of the executive, the Speaker [of the House] is likely to become, and perhaps is already, more powerful, both for good and for evil, than the President of the United States."<sup>52</sup> So, too, did Henry Adams, whose 1880 satire *Democracy* envisioned an entirely corrupt federal government dominated by the "moral lunatic" of a senator—"the high-priest of American politics"—who placed party loyalty over a devotion to the public good. Viewing the president as a hopelessly impuissant party hack, Adams could find no alternative to the squalor of representative democracy apart from an air of resigned, aristocratic hauteur.<sup>53</sup>

This common assumption was put most forcefully, though, by the British observer James Bryce, whose widely read *American Commonwealth* (1888) fa-

mously considered “why great men are not chosen presidents.” “Since the heroes of the Revolution died out,” Bryce noted, “no President except Abraham Lincoln has displayed rare or striking qualities in the chair. Who now knows or cares to know anything about the personality of James K. Polk or Franklin Pierce?” In the course of his withering discussion Bryce both clarified the prevailing attitudes of American politics and, by implication, pointed as an alternative toward an emerging critical consensus that would recreate the image of executive power. Presidential mediocrity was a product of a nation that little valued statesmanship and of a political system that privileged party loyalty and regional competition, Bryce suggested, echoing Tocqueville. But still more serious was the influence of a constitutional order that limited executive power. So long as the president’s “main duties are to be prompt and firm in securing the due execution of the laws and maintaining the public peace,” Bryce noted, “eloquence, . . . imagination, profundity of thought or extent of knowledge” were “not necessary.”<sup>54</sup> While he wrote, a rising generation of intellectuals and politicians was already beginning to imagine a reversal of this state of affairs.

***His Position Takes the Imagination of the  
Country: Making a Modern Presidency***

In fact, Woodrow Wilson, who would become one leading actor in bringing it about, predicted that reversal. Surveying the consequences of the Spanish American War, Wilson declared that the United States was now “in the very presence of forces which must make the politics of the twentieth century radically unlike the politics of the nineteenth.”<sup>55</sup> To Wilson’s mind, a fundamental feature of that transition would be the tandem rise of presidential power and national citizenship whose combined significance the war had appeared to clarify. As a young academic and journalist in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Wilson had come to prominence especially for his celebrated complaint against a “Congressional government” that, like many reformers of the day, he saw as dominated by corrupt party machines, hidden power, and divisive self-interest. In response, he had worried about what he deplored as “leaderless government,” and pleaded with his fellow citizens to adopt something on the order of the British model of cabinet government, believing that the executive was too institutionally weak ever to rival the powers of Congress.<sup>56</sup> The presidency appeared to the young Wilson a hopelessly trivial office. It “call[ed] rather for training than for constructive genius.”<sup>57</sup> But then, impressed by Grover Cleveland and, more seriously still, by Roosevelt, Wilson reversed position and now looked to the presidency as the likely source of badly needed democratic leadership. “Power had somehow gone the length of the avenue,” Wilson remarked with approval, “and settled in one man.”<sup>58</sup>

Envisioning the possibilities for that newly concentrated power, Wilson would become, along with Teddy Roosevelt, one of the chief architects of an emerging model of presidential leadership. But, Wilson was just one of a cohort of Progressive intellectuals, activists, and politicians who shared his dissatisfaction with the prevailing system of federalized and divided government and who, looking in the decades around the turn of the century toward the expansion of executive power, outlined a political theory that would become the predominant account of American government over the whole course of the twentieth century.<sup>59</sup>

There were important political and philosophical differences among those various Progressives reformers, but nearly all of them shared a conviction that democratic politics in the United States had been disabled by the confluence of the new economic conditions of industrial concentration with an outmoded political system that encouraged fragmentation and venal partisanship rather than efficient collective action. Americans had been “denied a new order of statesmanship to suit the altered conditions” of modern society, Wilson complained. “The federal government lacks strength because its powers are divided, lacks promptness because its authorities are multiplied, . . . lacks efficiency because its responsibility is indistinct and its action without competent direction.” Dominated as it was by the “petty barons” of party politics, Congress showed “no thought of acting in concert,” no genuine debate, and no “real leadership.”<sup>60</sup> The federal government remained a mere “collection of men representing each his neighborhood, each his local interest; . . . at best only a limping compromise between the conflicting interests of the innumerable localities represented.”<sup>61</sup>

Against that factionalism, Wilson and his fellow Progressive reformers typically appealed to the power of executive leadership to discover the higher good of “national sentiment,” and they consistently objected to the political institutions and constitutional orthodoxy that interfered with its power to act.<sup>62</sup> Objecting to “the theory of checks and balances,” for example, Wilson dismissed the “Whig theory of political dynamics” that he perceived in the framer’s Constitution: “The trouble with the theory is that government is not a machine, but a living thing,” and “no living thing can have its organs offset against each other as checks, and live. On the contrary, its life is dependent on their quick cooperation, their ready response to the commands of instinct or intelligence.” Effective leadership needed to break therefore with “the trammels of governmental forms.”<sup>63</sup> Teddy Roosevelt was more direct. Identifying the president as the “steward of the public welfare,” Roosevelt explained that he had purposefully reversed the constitutional understanding summarized by Bryce—that, as Roosevelt dismissively phrased it, the president could act only with “some specific authorization”—and set out to expand the executive’s freedom of action: “It was not only his right but his duty to do anything that the needs of the Nation demanded unless such action was forbidden by the Constitution or the laws.”<sup>64</sup>

Implicit in such remarks, was a deep suspicion of constitutionalism and legalism, viewed by Progressives as effective guardians of reaction. But still more important was the tacit understanding that the president might evade such restrictions because he served as a vehicle of national sovereignty. It was common for Progressive thinkers to denounce the corruption of boss-driven political machines, the “selfishness” of party competition, and the disorganization and compromise of representative democracy. Against the seaminess of mundane politics, however, they frequently invoked the moments of Revolutionary and wartime history in which it seemed that national sovereignty was expressed, and they often pointed implicitly to the president as a leader who could reawaken and articulate its authority—who in effect could supercede or transform the Constitution by going directly to its sovereign origin in the people. In this manner, they proposed a significant reorientation of political doctrine. Since the Revolutionary era, the concept of popular sovereignty had been both central to American political thought and fundamentally contentious. Theoretically, whether the idea of sovereign rule should even apply to a democratic government was, as some anti-Federalists had emphasized, always questionable. Practically the Constitution rendered national sovereignty the origin of political institutions (“We the people . . .”), while simultaneously rendering its location problematic—making it, of course, a central element of the conflicts leading up the Civil War.<sup>65</sup>

Nineteenth-century constitutionalism, even after the Civil War, dealt with that problem by assuming the dual sovereignty of the states and the union and by emphasizing the Constitution, rather than the nation or the people, as the principle source of political authority. But, then as now, the fact that American political ideology simultaneously took the people to be ultimately sovereign and in practice ceded political authority to a diverse group of political institutions created an ever-present invitation for fruitful discontent. When combined with other sources of dissatisfaction, the fact that the people did not actually rule could always become a powerful motive for political transformation.<sup>66</sup> Much as Harold Laski would when he called on the president to return America to its people, the Progressive reformers who crafted a new vision of executive leadership went beyond calls for more efficient and organized government and effectively complained that economic transformation and a stagnant political system had combined to strip the citizenry of its rightful power. “While we have been shielding . . . [the Constitution] from criticism,” Wilson lamented, “it has slipped away from us.”<sup>67</sup> Proposing a sweeping new political theory, they cast the chief executive—in Wilson’s words “that part of the government which is in most direct communication with the nation itself”—as the heroic voice of an otherwise fragmented people and a figure who could thereby act to restore popular rule.<sup>68</sup> Teddy Roosevelt made the connection directly, emphasizing the link between the wide berth he wished to give presidential prerogative and his assumption that the president was the vehicle of popular sovereignty. He

acted, Roosevelt explained, on the conviction that “an inherent power rested in the nation, outside of the enumerated powers conferred upon . . . [government] by the Constitution.”<sup>69</sup>

It was TR who, making bold use of the emerging powers of the executive branch, pioneered the new styles of leadership that would come to be associated with the modern presidency. Roosevelt was the first president to forge an intimate connection between the office and the national media, eliciting the creation of the White House press corps and inventing the techniques of public relations (the press conference, the backgrounder, the trial balloon, the deliberate leak) that would become central to the popular influence of the executive office. He was the first to successfully explore the possibility of using those avenues to achieve policy goals by reaching above the heads of Congress to address the American public directly; the first to establish a programmatic legislative agenda styled for popular consumption (the square deal); and, in asserting more emphatically than any other holder of the office that it was the president’s role to call citizens to a national duty that surpassed their narrowly personal interests, he was the most influential figure in the creation of the belief that it was among the president’s chief responsibilities to be a moral leader, and a spectacular public performer, for his nation.<sup>70</sup> In his own view, wisely expressed in private, the president could aspire to be an “elective King.”<sup>71</sup>

But it was Woodrow Wilson who, inspired in part by his admiration for Roosevelt’s example, articulated the most influential theoretical vision of the modern presidency. The president’s “is the vital place of action in the system,” Wilson declared, in a remarkable paean to the possibilities of executive leadership:

The nation as a whole has chosen him, and is conscious that it has no other political spokesman. His is the only national voice in affairs. Let him once win the admiration and confidence of the country, and no other single force can withstand him, no combination of forces will easily overpower him. His position takes the imagination of the country. He is the representative of no constituency, but of the whole people. When he speaks in his true character, he speaks for no special interest. If he rightly interpret the national thought and boldly insist upon it, he is irresistible; and the country never feels the zest of action so much as when its president is of such insight and caliber. Its instinct is for unified action, and it craves a single leader.<sup>72</sup>

Though it would rarely be put in such enthusiastic language again, Wilson’s view of the president as a nonpartisan embodiment of the national will would become the predominant understanding of the presidency for much of the twentieth century, only strengthened as the institutional reforms (including the primary nomination system) advanced by the Progressives to limit the power of parties became part of the ordinary working mechanics of American democracy. Time and again, Wilson’s successors in office echoed his vision. Convinced that “the people of the Nation will have, more and more, a national point of view,” FDR frequently reiterated

his conviction that the chief executive “should speak as President of the whole people”—a mission that he emphasized, even more strongly than Wilson, contrasted to life on Capitol Hill, where “pests . . . swarm[ed] through the lobbies of the Congress.”<sup>73</sup> John F. Kennedy, echoing the language of moral exhortation that ran strongly through the rhetoric of the Progressive presidents, likewise followed Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt in assuming that “only the President represents the national interest.” So, too, did both LBJ, who defined the presidency as a “national and not partisan” office, and Jimmy Carter, who in his inaugural address informed the public of his “great responsibility—to stay close to you, to be worthy of you, and to exemplify what you are.”<sup>74</sup>

Like FDR’s scorn for lobbyists and congressmen, Carter’s elevated rhetoric here captured a central presumption of the modern presidency. Against the failures of inherently parochial representative institutions—which might aggregate, or betray, the interests and preferences of different groups of voters—the presidency was consistently seen, by Republicans nearly as often as by Democrats, as an office that could soar above institutional restraints to exemplify or embody the national will.<sup>75</sup> In this manner, the modern presidency was typically envisioned not solely as a technique of more effective government, but as a solution to a philosophical and nearly spiritual problem lying near the heart of American liberalism. In the adoption of representative democracy as the republic’s central political form, and in the creation of the system of federalized and divided powers, U.S. political philosophy historically had accepted a fundamental division between state and nation as the price for the restraint of governmental power.<sup>76</sup> In the twentieth century, that restraint often seemed to social democratic thinkers ever less valuable and ever more the obverse face of the powerlessness that individual citizens were fated to in their private lives as much as in their public status as citizens. In the vision of the modern presidency first advanced by Progressive reformers, however, that breach was to be healed by the person of the president, who not only in his actions or policies, but in his presence and voice was imagined as the suture that could bind together public opinion and political institutions and in so doing restore popular rule. The aim, Wilson later said, anticipating Laski, was to replace “organizations which do not represent the people,” which operated by means that were “private and selfish,” with a leader who, in “speak[ing] for that great voiceless multitude,” could “bring the government back to the people.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, if on the one hand, the theory of the modern presidency frequently imagined the chief executive as a figure who could return governmental institutions to popular control, on the other, presidential rhetoric also typically imagined the president as a prophet or pedagogue who called citizens to their better selves, urging them to transcend the constraints of their private interests just as he drove popular government to evade the trammels of law. “What we have to determine now,” Wilson wrote in his own campaign for the office, “is whether we are big enough, whether we are men enough, whether

we are free enough, to take possession again of the government which is our own. . . . Only the emancipation, the freeing and heartening of the vital energies of all the people will redeem us.”<sup>78</sup>

Alongside the rise in executive power that the theory helped justify, such attitudes would make the presidency the vastly predominant element of twentieth-century American politics. Over the course of the century, executive power would become the center of the most serious political struggles, the object of the most intense emotional and ideological investment, and the agent of the most consequential actions. Indeed both the sway of the presidency and the grandeur of its image would grow exponentially with increasing deference to the president’s least contested authority—the power to act as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the role of representing the United States in foreign relations. From the turn of the century, no observer failed to note that it was the United States’s increasing prominence as an international power, and the federal government’s growing tendency after World War II to assume a permanent war footing, that, as was first glimpsed during the Civil War, elevated the chief executive to unprecedented heights of power and prestige. From the Spanish American War, through the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, and, most recently, the War on Terror, the modern presidency has always been the war presidency and the ability to command the use of force has been viewed consistently as both the epitome of executive prerogative and the prime justification for its expansion.<sup>79</sup>

But, in keeping with Carter’s vision of the president as a figure who exemplifies his people and Woodrow Wilson’s emphasis on imagination and interpretation, with Teddy Roosevelt’s legendary invocation of the presidency as a bully pulpit, or his cousin Franklin’s claim that a statesman’s “greatest duty . . . is to educate,” it should be noted that mirroring the modern view of the president as unrivalled commander-in-chief has long been the vision of the president as supreme orator—the ideal exemplar, in Bryce’s terms, of eloquence, imagination, and profundity of thought.<sup>80</sup> During the nineteenth century, the American political order exercised strong constitutional and customary restraints on the ability of presidents either to command military action or to address the public. The modern presidency overturned both those conventions and rendered the president’s power to direct the use of force and his ability to speak rhetorically to or for the nation seem like complementary faces of sovereign power. Indeed, since the Revolution, political ideology had sought to preserve a distinction between government as popular self-rule and the exercise of state power as coercion or conquest—between, in Woodrow Wilson’s terms, the legitimate, and redemptive, expression of “sovereignty” and the illegitimate application of “physical force.”<sup>81</sup> As commander-in-chief and national orator, the modern president could be seen to dramatize the dynamic interrelation of these two core political images. As in the foundational example of Lincoln, the president’s power to command the use of

force raised the specter of state coercion, while his ability to speak on behalf of a sovereign people legitimized the use of force as a transformative expression of popular will. In this fashion, the modern presidency from its first conception became a symbolic as much as a political office—not merely because the creation of the national media and the decline of the parties made imagery and rhetoric increasingly central, but also because in its therapeutic promise to overcome the problems of representation and to exemplify the ideal harmony of a people and its state, the modern presidency has seemed as important for what its occupants are and for the qualities they display as for the actions that they take or the policies they endorse.

### ***The Imaginary Politician: Bigger and the Presidency***

That such a vision would be as appealing to literary artists as to political thinkers comes as little surprise. Indeed, while it's nearly impossible to imagine a twentieth-century writer equating himself, as Whitman had, to a congressman, invocations of the presidency in the literature of the era are legion. The vastly expanded powers of the twentieth-century executive, and the pseudomarchical stature with which they were invested, made presidents comparable to the tyrants and heroes that had long appealed, as Hazlitt famously noted, to the romantic imagination. Viewing the chief executive as a ruling figure whose democratic legitimacy was assured in his ability to interpret and articulate a latent popular will, Wilson and like-minded thinkers emphasized, beyond even managerial or political skills, a president's literary abilities. Casting the president as an embodiment of a people rather than as a representation of its wishes, they likewise echoed the late romantic critique of representation that would be central to the development of modernist and postmodernist literature.

More significantly perhaps, the theory of presidential government made the chief executive an extraordinarily resonant figure whose gifts might be seen not merely to resemble but to contend for the mission that modern artists often envisioned for themselves. In the rhetoric of its most devoted champions, the modern presidency appeared an invaluable supplement to representative democracy, able especially through the exercise of imagination and oratory, to cure the major ailments of liberal society and government—though crucially without requiring that liberal democracy itself be overthrown or abandoned. As a form of nearly pastoral care for the modern world, the idea of presidential government thus effectively competed with literature for a role that had long been near to the core of its modern self-definition. Whitman

made the analogy explicit in the years immediately after the Civil War, as he searched for reassurance that the new national compact, sacralized by the sacrifice of soldiers and the death of Lincoln, would last. "To hold men together by paper and seal or by compulsion is no account, / That only holds men together which aggregates all in a living principle . . . Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their / poets shall."<sup>82</sup> Poet and president are analogs and rivals here, as they are complements in Whitman's paeans to Lincoln, each aspiring to create a national solidarity independent of either legal form or political domination.

Though in more satiric tone, Allen Ginsberg echoed the point nearly a century later in the lines quoted as an epigraph above, explicitly invoking a Whitmanian mission overwhelmed amid the crass materialism of mid-century America. Casting himself as the embodiment of all those marginalized and excluded by a craven and repressive society, Ginsberg both mocked the trivial charade of democracy and gestured toward a new national compact to be formed around his person. Wilson and his Progressive contemporaries worried at the absence of popular sovereignty and at the powerlessness of a citizenry manipulated by parties, controlled by bosses, and deceived by a dominant, but dishonest press. Ginsberg ironically mimicked the complaint, envisioning a country of lost and alienated citizens and importuning, "America . . . I'm addressing you./ Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time magazine?" Though less directly than in Wilson's or in Whitman's case, the suggestion here too was that the United States was a nation that suffered under domination because it lacked genuine sovereignty. Indeed, in the prophetic denunciations of Moloch ("soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows") that he issued in the contemporaneous "Howl," Ginsberg performed an imaginative operation comparable to that engaged in by his Progressive predecessors. First, depicting a continent of the scattered and lost, Ginsberg then envisioned his people unified by their common submission to a system of abuse, perceived whole only by himself, going on finally in his lamentation for the martyred Carl Solomons to gesture toward a nation reborn through the poet's ability to articulate popular desire.<sup>83</sup> If he was not really to become the president, Ginsberg envisioned himself serving a parallel role.

As it happens, Richard Wright drew an analogy similar to Whitman's and Ginsberg's in a lecture explaining his literary principles composed during the period he was working on *Native Son*. Already beginning to distance himself from the authority of the Communist Party, Wright used this lecture, titled "On Literature," to complain about what he viewed as the limits of the committed leftist writing of the thirties (too doctrinaire, too confident of its superior understanding, too limited in subject matter and intended audience).<sup>84</sup> In response he demanded greater free-

dom for creative experiment—and its particular capacity to elude rules and legislation—and an ostensibly new style of fiction that, rather than objectifying or representing its characters would manage to identify with them. By absorbing and transforming the people he depicted, the artist could surpass mere doctrinal political statement, so that his fiction would speak to the concerns not solely of workers, but of all people. Tellingly, however, the example Wright came up with to illuminate how such literary work should, and shouldn't, be done came in the figure of an imagined politician. Envisioning a novel that would follow an ambitious hack from local office all the way to the White House, Wright cast this character both as an object of literary sympathy and, by the same token, as a figure who demonstrated the achievement of fiction by counterexample. The writer must envision exchanging places with the politician, Wright explained. When the politician engages in campaign rhetoric, he should speak the words the writer once wished to hear from political leaders. His rhetoric should move the public and inspire the nation with the optimism and grand idealism that the writer dreamed of before he became disgusted with politics. Only by envisioning a figure who would act as he himself would wish to lead, Wright contended, could the artist create a politician who was not merely a thug.

There may have been in these words a subtle dig at the Communist Party with whose operatives Wright by this point was ever more frustrated. For, not only did Wright dismiss the protest fiction of the thirties—suggesting in particular that his audience shared with the American public deep national sentiments it preferred to disavow—he also implicitly cast the bad rhetorician as a figure whose promises were made false by his devotion to merely partisan purposes. Failing at what the good writer should do, the president becomes for Wright a negative to the writer to the same degree that he is the prisoner of a party machine. Like Whitman and Ginsberg, Wright effectively implied that the writer should aspire to the task envisioned by the theorists of presidential government, but traduced by actual politicians.

Wright himself suggested a possible reason for that similarity by referring to national characteristics that lay beneath even consciously held political differences. The symbols of conventional patriotism lay deep rooted in the psychology of all Americans, he contended. But to some degree, a more direct genealogy can be traced as well. The aesthetic theories Wright expressed in this lecture were influenced by his admiration for the unorthodox French Marxist Henri Barbusse, whose attitudes in turn were partly indebted to Whitman's 1872 jeremiad *Democratic Vistas*.<sup>85</sup> Whitman's essay, it is interesting to note, is itself an anguished vision of the way the failures of American democracy might be redeemed in a national "solidarity" expressed especially through executive power. Objecting to the corruption and divisiveness of the postbellum United States, and expressing outrage at "the alarming spectacle of parties usurping the government," Whitman imagined

an alternative in the national “compaction” betokened by the fallen soldiers of the Civil War (“the People, of their own choice, fighting, dying for their own idea”) and exemplified by the exercise of sovereign power: “Over those politicians . . . looms a power, too sluggish maybe, but ever holding decisions and decrees in hand, ready, with stern process, to execute them as soon as plainly needed—and at times, indeed, summarily crushing to atoms the mightiest parties.” Though Whitman’s essay envisions that power being expressed by “some great literatus” in particular, both in its definition of the problems bedeviling American democracy during the Gilded Age (crass materialism, urban squalor, “the depravity of the business classes,” the insufficiency of an avowedly democratic political system controlled by “corrupt rings and electioneering”) and in the solution it imagines (a “national literature” that would “permeat[e] the whole mass of American mentality, . . . giving it decision, affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage”), Whitman’s essay anticipates the visions of executive leadership then in the midst of germination.<sup>86</sup> When he invoked a “modern, image-making creation” as the solution to the crisis of democracy, Whitman in effect imagined just what his political successors would discover in the presidency.<sup>87</sup>

Wright may never have read *Democratic Vistas*, but, like Ginsberg he cited Whitman as a significant precursor, and it’s striking to note how closely his concerns resembled his predecessor’s. In particular, Wright’s debt to Whitman highlights a rarely noted, yet central feature of his work—the frequency with which he, too, viewed national solidarity as the sine qua non of meaningful democracy and the degree to which he imagined that national identity being evoked by the exercise of executive power. Especially during the period of his most committed radicalism, Wright often made references to political struggles that cut across “racial *and* national lines of demarcation.”<sup>88</sup> But frequently he indicated a nearly obsessive longing for the very kinds of national solidarity for which Whitman had yearned. Recalling his early attempts to become a writer in Chicago, Wright made this desire explicit in his memoir *Black Boy*: “I wanted a life in which there was a constant oneness of feeling with others, in which the basic emotions of life were shared, in which common memory formed a common past, in which collective hope reflected a national future.”<sup>89</sup> But the theme runs all through his work, where, among other things, it provides the most consistent framework for his understanding of racism—typically cast most significantly as a failure of national sovereignty. “The oppression of the Negro” cast “a shadow athwart our national life.”<sup>90</sup> Were it to be genuinely resolved, “we would all simply be Americans, and the nation would be the better for it. . . . But the contrary is true: The nation is split. White America dominates black America.”<sup>91</sup>

With increasing directness Wright reacted to that injustice in much the fashion that Ginsberg later would. He didn’t seek a flight from national identity so much as its redemption or full realization. “I criticize America,” he told Gertrude Stein in

1946, “as an American.”<sup>92</sup> Fittingly, then, his complaints against the racial division of the United States adopted a classic tenet of American racist discourse—that democracy cannot exist in a racially divided society—and, turning it against its traditional use, also accepted its fundamental concern, the emphasis on national cohesion. The problem with racism, in other words, was not merely that it was unjust, or cruel, or exploitative, but that, obviating the possibility of national community, it also rendered impossible the expression of the sovereign national will without which democracy appeared impossible. Perhaps not surprisingly in this context, Wright connected the problem of racism to the division between an ineffectual state and an ungoverned nation that exercised the proponents of presidential government. America and the United States were actually two separate nations, Wright complained. Though Congress theoretically represented the abstract localities of the United States, the owners of capital, who controlled the true sources of economic and political power, lived in the real world of America.<sup>93</sup> Much like the proponents of presidential government, in short, Wright traced the intractability of racism and injustice to the division of powers and the separation between formal democracy and genuine power it appeared to entail.

Not surprisingly, then, like many of his contemporaries, Wright consistently turned to executive power for a solution to the problem of national fragmentation. As Carla Capetti notes, throughout his career, Wright returned to a perception he had first formulated by way of Chicago sociology—a view of “modern social reality as the site of relentless conflicts between the individual and the group.”<sup>94</sup> But just as significantly, he typically sought, as in “On Literature,” for a resolution to this problem in the act of imaginative identification that could be achieved especially via executive power. Describing own goals, Wright made himself resemble both Whitman’s “literatus” and Wilson’s “constructive genius”—a personality able through his gifts of imagination and rhetorical power to bond with people in way that surpassed not just political institutions and personal conflict, but representation itself, thereby eliciting both identification and grandeur from his audience. In a lecture he gave after winning the Springarn medal, for example, Wright described himself as a leader of his people who alone might inspire them to put aside the caution of ordinary life and told his audience that he wished not merely to argue with or persuade them, but to literally enter their persons and through their sheer force of his rhetoric chemically transform their bodies.<sup>95</sup>

Similar comments run all through Wright’s critical reflections, in each case emphasizing the pursuit of an imaginative identification that would evade conventional attitudes and forge a connection so profound as to approach corporeal identity. “My purpose,” he wrote in *Black Boy*, “was to capture a physical state or movement that carried strong subjective impressions . . . [t]o fasten the mind of the reader upon words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response” (280). It was fitting that Wright should find an analogue for that project

in the, albeit falsely, inspiring rhetoric of presidential politicians. For, both in its tone and more seriously in its implicit theory of communication, Wright's call for imaginative identification resembled the visions of rhetorical leadership shared by the models of executive government prominent at the time. The artist "must be led by the sovereignty of his own impressions and perceptions; must be guided by the tyranny of what troubles and concerns him personally," Wright told his friend Antonio Frasconi.<sup>96</sup> But implicit in his theory of identification lay the suggestion that, if he were successful, the artist might articulate a sovereign power that spoke for his audience as well.

Wright's devotion to that possibility is most evident in his notorious lifelong attraction to tyrannical power. Defending *Native Son* from the tepid reaction of the Communist Party, for example, he asked whether left writers were "to be confined merely to the political and economic spheres of reality," leaving "the dark and hidden places of the human personality to the Hitlers and Goebbels."<sup>97</sup> Like his letter to Frasconi, that comment suggested that, in its need to break with "well-established lines of perception and feeling" (lines defended, Wright suggested, by party orthodoxy) and to plunge instead into the psychic terrain of demagogic power, the literary imagination was a close relative of tyrannical power. It also established an evident connection between the writer and his most famous creation. Like nearly all of Wright's protagonists, Bigger Thomas is depicted as not only drawn to dictatorial power, but as an incipient tyrant himself. Having killed Mary Dalton, Bigger comes to a sudden admiration for Hitler and Mussolini and begins to imagine himself as a black dictator: "Looking at the black people on the sidewalks, he felt that one way to end fear and shame was to make all those black people act together, rule them, tell them what to do, and make them do it. Dimly, he felt that there should be one direction in which he and all other black people could go wholeheartedly. . . . But he felt that such would never happen to him and his black people, and he hated them and wanted to wave his hand and blot them out" (130).

As Wright himself consistently stressed, what *Native Son* depicts in this context is not solely the evil of racism and the anger it produces, but a story that Wright suggested had still broader application. If Bigger Thomas is to be seen as a representative modern citizen—one of "a vast, muddied pool of human life in America"—what his suffering and anger reveal more generally is the attraction to dictatorial power that arises in the absence of genuine sovereignty—when one is faced by "a world which one did not make or own" (HBWB 514, 518). The first two books of *Native Son* confront Bigger Thomas with that disenfranchised condition in panoramic detail. Hounded by an oppressive legal system, solicited and abused by a manipulative media, badgered and ignored by a nonresponsive elite, and annoyed by the social customs of a minority culture, Bigger is confronted at every step by the unavoidable evidence of his powerlessness and, by the same token, with the absence of a "culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith"

(HBWB 520). His response is to dream of virtually totalitarian power. “He felt that some day there would be a black man who would whip the black people into a tight band and together they would act and end fear and shame” (130).

In this respect, Bigger represents not solely the black rage with which he is usually associated, but a more general longing for tyrannical power that Wright suggested was a constitutive feature of the modern world. But, while Wright returned to that longing often, the appeal of dictatorial power was always implicitly paralleled in his work by a less evident alternative. In a radio address he gave while working on *Native Son*, Wright argued that, in the chaos and desperation of the thirties, the U.S. devotion to “rugged individualism” threatened to culminate in what he suggested was its natural outcome, the “ruthless tide of fascism.” But, anticipating the words spoken by Max in the concluding sections of his novel in progress, Wright also suggested that this dangerous individualism could be supplanted by an alternative model of civic identity—“rugged personality”—which would be less committed to inviolable liberty and more open to the collective guarantee of freedom and equality. Against the Nazi, the extreme face of the rugged individual, Wright therefore proposed as the ideal type of personality “a man in America”—Abraham Lincoln.<sup>98</sup>

References to Lincoln were, of course, commonplace in the culture of the Popular Front during the latter thirties. But the particular contrast between two forms of executive power that Wright draws here—between the compulsion exercised by the dictator and the solidarity evoked by legitimate democratic leadership—was also a central feature of the New Deal’s effort to institutionalize presidential government. As Charles Merriam, one of the three leaders of the Brownlow commission, explained the year before *Native Son* was published, the conditions of industrial concentration had created a world in which either “a new despotism” or “a new democracy” appeared inevitable. In the development of “superior forms of public administration,” Merriam perceived hopeful signs that the latter could be achieved. By drawing on the work of “scientists, educators, engineers, doctors, technical workers, [and] managers,” executive leadership could “blend the elements of effective popular responsibility with those of unification of action, both in peace and in war.” The result would be “a form of association where leaders no longer scream and curse and threaten, and where men no longer shuffle, cringe, and fear, but stand erect in dignity and liberty and speak with calm voices of what clear eyes may see.”<sup>99</sup>

That contrast between two models of executive leadership and two forms of political association was a prominent feature of American culture in the thirties. It was central, for example, to Sinclair Lewis’s sensational warning against the dangers of Fascism *It Can’t Happen Here*, which managed to combine an attack on executive tyranny and the “Corporate State,” with a simultaneous defense of the

presidential leadership needed to create “a universal partnership, in which the State must own all resources so large that they affect all members of the State.”<sup>100</sup> Despite his apparent political differences with Lewis and Merriam, Wright placed an analogous contrast between state tyranny and legitimate executive leadership at the core of his own political and aesthetic vision. If Merriam and Lewis each hoped that new administrative powers would enable a strengthened presidency to avoid the ordinary channels of representative government and forge a more democratic society, Wright suggested similarly that the gifted artist’s ability to create sympathetic community—beyond parties, doctrines, and social conventions—might overcome the alienation and powerlessness he thought typical of the modern world. In both cases, the action of executive power would evoke a sovereign people who in turn would legitimate that power. Not coincidentally, therefore, the contrast between the tyrant and the leader—between, in Wright’s terms, individualism and personality—provides the narrative framework for Wright’s novel. For, in its most basic features, *Native Son* takes us from a world in which screaming, cursing, and threatening coexists with fear and cringing and replaces it with the vision of a world where dignity and liberty might prevail.

The crucial element in this transition—much as in the examples of Lincoln, Whitman, and Ginsberg—is martyrdom. In the first two books of *Native Son*, Bigger not only lives in a state of constant anger and fear, even before he murders Mary he resembles the tyrant envisioned by Wright as well as by Merriam. Killing the rat in the novel’s legendary opening scene, ruthlessly bullying his friends (who “hate and fear” Bigger “as much as he hated and feared himself”) dreaming of blotting out his antagonists with a wave of his hand, Bigger is at once the victim and the abuser of tyrannical power (31). He longs “to take life into his hands and dispose of it as he pleased” (170). But, importantly, he seeks more than to dominate his personal acquaintances, longing as well for a version of the rhetorical power that Wright envisioned novelists and politicians alike seeking. Having killed Mary, Bigger dreams of himself not solely as a commander, but as an unavoidable imaginative presence in the life of a mass public. “He wished he could be an idea in their minds; that his black face and the image of his smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning here could hover before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and feel and yet not destroy” (147).

Of course, neither Bigger’s ability to dominate others, nor his fantasies of rhetorical power possess any substance or stability. Controlling others by fear, he is driven by fear himself. Establishing himself as a terrifying image in the collective imagination of white Chicago, he becomes for that very reason, vulnerable to its rage and superstition. The volatile exchangeability of tyrannical power and powerlessness is made especially apparent in the way that Bigger, who “all his life . . . had felt” that the newspapers should carry “*his* story,” discovers that once they do, he be-

comes not the dictator, but the helpless scapegoat of an enraged people (256, emphasis in original). But the point is still more subtly indicated when, encountering the brutal private detective Britten, Bigger sees “in the very look of the man’s eyes . . . his own personality reflected in narrow, restricted terms” (176). A cruel parody of “the response of recognition” that Bigger desperately seeks in the novel’s final book, Britten’s reflection points to a world characterized from top to bottom by cruelty and coercion—in which, Wright implies, the power to dominate, shadowed always by the knowledge of its own impermanence, can only sustain itself through the constant exercise of violence and fear (420).

But then, having established that panorama of domination, Wright seeks to reverse it in the novel’s final book. Bigger, who has dreamed of himself as a dictatorial commander, now imagines himself not as the master of a subservient people, but as one member of a consensual public. “He was standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, and the sun’s rays melted away the many differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good upward toward the sun” (420). As in the era’s visions of presidential government, and Wright’s critical reflections on the work of fiction, this passage envisions a collective solidarity that transcends social difference, political conflict, and the various inadequate institutions of government and civil society. That the crowd includes no women is not a small detail, considering that throughout Wright’s work it is women who most represent the constraints and confusions of civil society and who must be literally killed off so that the abstract public envisioned here can be imagined. But, the process is not complete, Wright implies, until Bigger’s determination to create his freedom by force is displaced by his willingness to suffer and die to sustain it. Almost literally, the unified public Bigger envisions cannot be conceived without the catalyzing event of his own imminent execution. “He looked out upon the world and the people about him with a double vision: one vision pictured death, an image of him, alone, sitting strapped in the electric chair . . . ; and the other pictured life, an image of himself standing amid throngs of men, lost in the welter of their lives” (422). Without the former vision, it would appear, the latter is impossible.

We can understand Bigger’s double vision in one way by noting how closely it accords with the analysis proposed by a theorist of the modern state like Giorgio Agamben. For Agamben, all avowedly democratic states are constrained to imagine their citizenry in a particular, bifurcated fashion. Despite their other differences in ideology or political culture, all may be best understood therefore in the terms proposed by a radically authoritarian philosopher like Carl Schmitt. To the extent any state claims sovereignty over the nation it claims to serve and represent, Agamben contends, it tends to imagine the people as a spiritual source of authority, transcendent and eternal. To the same extent, however, it tends also to con-

ceive the individual persons who make up that collective entity as the merely material bodies it cares for and manages and—in the limit case that proves its authority—whose lives it may legitimately demand. Each tendency is exacerbated as the power of the state is extended and as it vanquishes alternative sources of authority, so that in extreme conditions the grandest aspirations of the state to democratic legitimacy are matched by equally naked coercion (especially, in Agamben's view, through the definitive institution of the concentration camp). On Agamben's account, then, it is not too much to say that the dehumanizing technologies of state control are not merely the complement, but the necessary condition for the creation of the spiritual body of the people. More simply, in Agamben's view, the deaths of individual people are needed to secure the life of the nation.<sup>101</sup>

Bigger's electric chair and his vision of the abstract crowd anticipate Agamben's terms with striking exactitude. Though less evidently, so, too, do Merriam's tyrant and leader or Lewis's "corporate state" and "Holy America." Each writer acknowledges the coercive power of government, only to ultimately dismiss its dangers with an ideal image of the democratic people a new state might yet call into being. But if this pattern suggests that at some level Merriam, Lewis, and Wright may all have shared more in common with Carl Schmitt than they wished to acknowledge, we might also note that each probably drew more directly on the native tradition of political thought that had been implicitly used to justify the development of a distinctly American form of the administrative government. If Wright anticipates Agamben, in other words, he also more directly echoes the rhetoric of national leadership and martyrdom that had descended by way of Whitman and the Progressive theorists of presidential government.

What we see in the last book of *Native Son*, in short, is a variation on the symbolic drama that Wright tacitly invoked when he called on Lincoln as an emblem of personality. As in the rhetoric that Lincoln himself proposed, and that was intensified on his death, the final passages of Wright's novel envision an executive power characterized by conquest and command displaced, through an act of martyrdom, by a mystically bound people. If, in postbellum popular rhetoric, Lincoln and the fallen soldiers of the Civil War were to be the martyrs on which a new nationality was founded, Wright recreates that story, seeking to replace the unified white nation that was in fact a prime legacy of the Civil War, with a nonracial America. As with the Civil War, too, Wright suggests that such a new nationality can only be established by a destructive act of power that wipes away the prevailing institutions of a divided and unequal society—"a sudden and violent rent in the veil" (456). But, just as the power of Lincoln and of his soldiers to conquer and kill was seen to be redeemed by their willingness to die for the cause they served, so, too, does Bigger become, in Whitman's words, an emblem of "the People, of their own choice, fighting, dying for their own idea." In both

cases, martyrdom gives substance to the thought that the violent exercise of power is not merely arbitrary or abusive, but legitimized by a tacit popular will. In both cases, that is, the killer ceases to be a tyrant and becomes, in effect, a democratic executive when his death legitimizes the impression that he acts not solely for his own gratification but on behalf of a nation whose unknown wishes he articulates and serves.

Seeing *Native Son* in this context may help to clarify one of its more powerful and elusive features—the dramatic final scene in which Bigger famously rejects the pleas of his lawyer and declares, in the book’s most memorable line, “what I killed for I am!” (501). Bigger’s ultimate difference with his lawyer has long been something of a critical puzzle because there is little obvious reason for the two to disagree. Not only is it Max who has awakened Bigger’s longing for recognition and “given him faith that at bottom all men lived as he lived and felt as he felt”; in his renowned closing statement to the jury, Max articulates a political vision, built on the importance of “personality and security,” that closely matches ideas Wright himself expressed elsewhere (493, 472). Though some critics plausibly have read the ultimate rejection of the lawyer as a sign of Wright’s growing alienation from the Communist Party, by giving Max ideas to voice that were themselves out of keeping with orthodox Marxism, Wright appears to go out of his way to ensure that the split does not appear ideological.<sup>102</sup> There is no obvious political or personal conflict between Max and Bigger, but nevertheless Wright concludes his novel with a confrontation in which they dramatically reverse place. Bigger, who throughout the last book of the novel has stammered futilely in his “impulsion to try to tell,” suddenly speaks with an unprecedented clarity and force, while Max, who has up to this point been Bigger’s eloquent spokesman, is reduced to inarticulate fear: “No; no; no . . . Bigger, not that . . . Max’s eyes were full of terror. Several times his body moved nervously, as though he were about to go to Bigger; but he stood still” (501).

Part of the justification for the apparent rebuke dealt out to Max here may be, as a number of readers have suggested, that despite his dedication to Bigger’s cause and despite his theoretical explanation of Wright’s own principles, Max rarely perceives Bigger as an individual personality, preferring to view him as a specimen of a larger social injustice. By his account, Bigger is a “test symbol” of “the complex forces of society” (444). But, if we see the novel as I have been suggesting—as a book that attempts to imagine social injustice redressed by an act of transcendent national sovereignty—this accurate observation might be extended still further. Counseling Bigger on the eve of his execution, Max seeks to comfort Bigger with a developmental model of political change that views social justice as the product of general processes of “grow[ing] and unfold[ing]” (498). “It’s too late now for you,” Max tells Bigger, but not too late for him to see his issue in the fate of “millions of

men desiring and longing” and restrained only by the fact that “a few men are squeezing those buildings tightly in their hands” (499, 498). In keeping with that incremental view of social progress, Max is strikingly unreceptive to the two facts of Bigger’s life that Bigger himself takes to be paramount—that he has killed and that he must die. As Bigger faces the execution chamber, Max must be forced by his client to speak the words, “You’re going to die, Bigger” (497). And even in this ultimate conversation he reminds Bigger, “you killed. That was wrong” (499).

What Max seeks to deny, in other words, are the two central elements in the symbolic drama of executive leadership—coercive power and martyrdom. Acting as Bigger’s advocate, Max has no trouble perceiving their importance to the historical establishment of American sovereignty. “Did we not build a nation,” Max asks the court, “did we not wage war and conquer in the name of a dream to realize our personalities?” (465) But, as a party intellectual, Max would have little commitment to the lasting significance of national sovereignty. Confronted, then, with Bigger’s effective desire to refound the nation, he hesitates and offers instead what Wright portrays as a feeble promise that Bigger’s “balked longing for some kind of fulfillment and exultation” will someday be realized by others.<sup>103</sup> In effect, Max is not only unable to identify with Bigger, by the same token, as a Communist Party intellectual he remains confined to those “merely . . . political and economic spheres of reality” that Wright described as the limitations of the left. Bigger, by contrast, taps into and, through his death, redeems “the dark and hidden places of the human personality” that Wright suggested were the wellsprings of mass power.

In Wright’s final scene, then, we witness the stupefaction of the party operative before the profound mystery of the national martyr. In Wright’s telling, even the Marxist radical shares the limitations that the devotees of presidential leadership perceived in the ordinary workings of government. Devoted to the maintenance of laws, theories, institutions, processes, Max is reluctant to acknowledge the actual exercise of executive power and dumbfounded by the expression of a transformative popular will. Precisely in his readiness to both exert and suffer violence, by contrast, Bigger becomes a version of just that figure that Wright suggested mirrored the presidency—able to speak the words the writer once hoped to hear from national leaders. The connection is virtually explicit. Earlier in the novel, Bigger muses on his frustrating inarticulacy. “Many times, when alone after Max had left him, he wondered wistfully if there was not a set of words which he had in common with others, words which would evoke in others a sense of the same fire that smoldered in him.” But “the moment he tried to put his feelings into words, his tongue would not move” (422). That frustration is at last resolved, in the same scene where Max’s theoretical wisdom is rendered mute. Bigger is finally able to speak—and, by implication, thus able to speak for others—when he expresses a

vision of violent self-creation. “What I killed for, I am!” In both roles, now finally come together, we might say, Bigger becomes the man to whom the imprisoned madman wished to speak—the leader who embodies his nation.

Wright’s colleagues on the left, then, were perhaps not wrong to follow Max and hesitate before approving *Native Son*. As one of Wright’s closest friends realized, the novel owed little to “the Theory of the Proletarian Revolution.”<sup>104</sup> By contrast, it shared a good deal of ground with the idea of presidential government so important to the developing New Deal. As he worked on *Native Son*, Wright referred to that political context and, not unlike Charles Merriam or the other members of the Brownlow commission, demanded the expansion of the powers of “liberal government.” “If the heritage of our culture is to be preserved, extended, and enriched,” Wright declared, “new instrumentalities of social and political action must be found.”<sup>105</sup> As things stood, Wright later added, “some may escape the general plights and grow up, but it is a matter of luck and I think it should be a matter of plan. It should be a matter of saving the citizens of our country for our country.”<sup>106</sup> Though he did not specify just what instrumentalities he conceived, in the context of the day’s most heated political battles, it would have been clear that like the proponents of executive reorganization he referred to the development of administrative capacities to be directed by executive power.

The fiction that Wright wrote during the same period is but one example of a literary endeavor whose most basic terms were shaped by the rising theory of presidential government—a literary mission that drew on, imitated, and adapted that political theory, even as it sought to articulate such ideas for a rival agenda. The elements of national mythology are in all of us, Wright claimed. So, too, did many twentieth-century writers share the underlying premise that drove the expansion of presidential government in the twentieth-century United States—the view that popular sovereignty, which was constantly frustrated by the restraints of law and the institutions of government, might come to redemptive expression through the power of charismatic leadership. The remaining chapters of this book will consider the way that variations on that assumption informed the work of a number of major writers whose careers track the course of the twentieth century and the rising and then falling expectations that many American thinkers expressed for the prospects of presidential power.