

The Inward and the Outward Ear

Who Speaks for the Negro?, by Robert Penn Warren (Random House, 454 pp. \$5.95), and *This Is My Country, Too*, by John A. Williams (World, 169 pp. \$4.50), reflect the apprehensions and ambivalence among colored people with respect to their identity and goals as Americans. Bruce Galphin, a Nieman Fellow in 1962-63, is an editorial writer and columnist for the Atlanta Constitution in Georgia.

By BRUCE GALPHIN

WHO SPEAKS for the Negro? Robert Penn Warren has interviewed more than a score of Negro leaders and dozens of lesser-known participants in the civil rights movement, and the only single answer is: no white man.

From the late Malcolm X's fiery anti-Caucasianisms to the somewhat pleading insistence of CORE's James Farmer that "I don't want any reporter to call me 'responsible,'" to a young Mississippian's resentment of Northern white volunteers, it is clear that Negroes have their own ideas and their own leadership. Beyond that point, and unanimity in believing that Negroes do not get a fair shake in America, there is little agreement.

There is even wide divergence of opinion about the ultimate goals of the movement. The Black Muslims preach separatism, and if they are not significant numerically, their doctrine of a separate culture may well have emotional appeal to at least a part of most Negroes. Mr. Warren indeed finds, half a century after W. E. B. Du Bois first wrote of it, an ambivalence: a conflict between the desire to find identity as an American and the desire to find it as a Negro. Some Negroes have achieved recognition on "white" terms, thus delighting the naive good will of white liberals who believed that all Negroes wanted was a key to the clubhouse.

But if any consensus emerges from Warren's interviews, at least among those who attempt to describe goals, it is that of pluralism or of a new culture that lies beyond black and white. The Negro "is now conceiving of integration more as a synthesis than as a complete dropping of all that is Negro," says the Urban

League's Whitney Young. Mississippi rights worker Robert Moses finds the "middle-class white culture in vital need of some kind of renewal." And author (*Invisible Man*) Ralph Ellison believes the thrust is "to achieve on the socio-political level something of the same pluralism which exists on the level of culture." Perhaps it is even more basic and more personal. In bitterness born of frustration, CORE lawyer Lolis Elie in New Orleans demands: "... when will it be possible for white people to look at black people as human beings?"

Even were there no argument over aims, though, there would be a crisis of leadership.

The fact that there are two distinct civil rights theaters of operation and two kinds of war has caused confusion among Negroes no less than whites. In the South, the struggle is clearcut and easily defined: It centers on legal equality, voting, and public accommodations. But winning these victories will only bring Southern Negroes up to a battlefield already occupied by their brothers elsewhere in the country. Bayard Rustin puts it well in Warren's book. In the South says Rustin, demonstrations can serve the dual purpose of calling attention to the evil of segregation and also of achieving the goal of desegregation. "In the North, however, dealing with jobs, schools, and housing, you cannot simultaneously prick the conscience and solve the problem."

This fact—that the last steps toward justice are more complex and time-consuming—is a source of enormous frustration for American Negroes. This frustration in turn is a temptation to and opportunity for demagoguery and, in extreme cases, aimless rioting. Thus there is danger that Negro leaders can no longer lead but rather must follow crowds stirred by a demagogue proposing dramatic, if pointless, protest. James Farmer, for instance, questions the value of the World's Fair stall-ins and then has to recoil from being called a moderating force. Roy Wilkins sensibly observes that racial integration *per se* is not the goal in education, and that ghetto schools must first be made good schools, only to find himself criticized for Uncle Tomism.

These questions of ends and means underlie the whole of Mr. Warren's book, but they never come sharply into focus. It is essentially a series of interviews, interlaced with some history, social psy-

chology, literary criticism, and observations by the author. Parts are brilliant, e.g., the critiques of James Baldwin as a writer who sees the world through the "I" and Ralph Ellison as a man able to recognize "the humanity of those who inflict injustice." And Warren's thumbnail sketches of his interview subjects are enormously perceptive—some of them brutally so. This observation on Martin Luther King, Jr., is almost poetic: "Even if it is a question that you know he has heard a hundred times before, there is a withdrawing inward, a slight veiling of the face as it were . . . for even that old stale question he must look inward to find a real answer, not just the answer he gave yesterday, which today may no longer be meaningful to him." Other parts, such as a rehashing of the effects of repression on personality development, are visits to well-explored territory.

But Mr. Warren's most annoying fault is failure to organize his material and to edit out the repetitious and the superfluous. He quotes Whitney Young but does not heed him: "One of the tragedies of the whole civil rights movement is the inability of the white person to distinguish significant leadership." He appears to give equal weight to each man. Instead of analyzing Malcolm X, for instance, Warren quotes his agonized reasoning.

Yet, just as the reader is growing impatient, he is suddenly aware of the great honesty in this approach. "One should not," Warren writes, ". . . be too ready to risk an *argumentum ad hominem* in dealing with even the most ambition-bit demagogue bidding for fame, or some pathologically compulsive headline-grabber. On any particular issue, they may be right."

This possibility clearly worries Warren. He recalls that while living in England in 1929-30 he had written a "cogent and humane defense of segregation." Now he rejects the opportunity to commit the moment's certitudes to print. In the end, this soul-searching, this honesty, this rejection of glibness make *Who Speaks for the Negro?* significant.

As Warren's ear is turned outward, John A. Williams's in *This Is My Country, Too* turns inward. In fact, the book is doubly introspective. The *Holiday* magazine assignment that led to the piece was in itself a first-person project: to see how a Negro would fare in a cross-country journey with a luxurious new car and a goodly supply of credit cards. But Mr. Williams's journey is less geographical than emotional. The motels, restaurants, and highways seem almost superfluous; the story is in his own reactions.

This is no muckraking job. As a matter of fact, Williams's overt difficulties are not so great as the title might lead one to expect: only a couple of outright

refusals of service, an insulting hotel clerk in Kansas, a bullying highway patrolman in Ohio. Williams's easy prose does not overcome the fact that the narrative lapses too often into the flavor of a perfunctorily kept diary.

What is interesting is not the events themselves but the author's perception of events. Though little unpleasant actually occurs, he is always on the raw edge of apprehension. When he kisses a white woman friend on the street, he

expects to have to do battle with the white man waiting for a bus nearby. He is keenly aware that people are looking at him. He believes that a Negro, traveling alone, is putting his "life on the line by asking for a single for the night." In a white man, this attitude might be considered paranoid. For a Negro, the threat is more real than any white man likes to think.

It is this internal journey, in the end, that gives impact to the book.