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Blyden Jackson

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Two Mississippi Writers: Wright and Faulkner

by *Blyden Jackson*

The book in which Richard Wright tells the story of his youth is called *Black Boy*. In it he provides an account of his experiences through the first nineteen years of his life, nineteen years which he spent growing up in the South, living from Natchez to Memphis on both sides of the big river. *Black Boy* ends with Wright's furtive departure from Memphis for Chicago.

The bulk of Wright's life was spent outside the South. He was born near Natchez in 1908. He went to Chicago in 1927. He never lived again in the South. In Chicago he supported himself and his family, when they were not on welfare, joined and withdrew from the Communist Party, and began to write for publication. He lived for nineteen years in Chicago and New York. He married twice in New York, on both occasions to white women. His first marriage was brief. Until recently it tended to escape the notice of Wright biographers. His second wife, by whom he had two daughters, survives him. It was with this second wife that he went to France. He was in France for most of 1946. With his family he settled in Paris in 1947, although he never relinquished his American citizenship. His second daughter, incidentally, was born in France. He died in Paris in 1960.

The picture, thus, that we have of Wright is the picture of a Mississippian who did not stay in Mississippi. That is different, of course, from the picture we have of William Faulkner. Faulkner, boy and man, lived in Mississippi. Moreover, Faulkner is buried in Mississippi, whereas Wright's ashes—he was cremated—repose in a tiny bin in the famed Parisian cemetery, Père Lachaise. In his literary reputation Faulkner is associated most with Yoknapatawpha, his mythical, but actually highly literal, county in Mississippi. Fame came to Richard Wright from his creation of the character Bigger Thomas, whose milieu is the Northern urban Negro ghetto. Of Wright's books, *Uncle Tom's Children* is a collection of short stories, all five of which are set in the Delta South. *Black Boy*, as we have seen,

never leaves the South. *The Long Dream*, a novel, is set in the Mississippi town, Clintonville, probably a close replica of Natchez. Two of the eight short stories in *Eight Men* are Southern. "Between the World and Me," which may be the most meritorious of the nineteen poems and the haiku that Wright put into print, concerns a lynching which occurs certainly in the South and probably in Mississippi. Of some fifty articles, essays, and lectures by Wright which were published, perhaps four by title can be connected with the South. And *Twelve Million Black Voices*, subtitled "A Folk History of the Negro in the United States," accompanies the American Negro folk from their old homes in the agrarian South to their new homes in the urban North. But not only is Chicago, which can be, of course, opposed to Mississippi, exclusively the scene for Wright's novel, *Native Son*, of which Bigger Thomas is the protagonist. Wright's novel, *The Outsider*, begins in Chicago and shifts to New York, where it remains until its conclusion. His novel, *Savage Holiday*, which has no Negro characters, is set in New York. His novel, *Lawd Today*, is set in Chicago. His book, *Black Power*, is substantially a thoughtful traveler's memoir of a visit to the country then the Gold Coast and now Ghana. His book, *Pagan Spain*, is a similar memoir of a visit to Spain. His book, *The Color Question*, deals with the conference at Bandung in Indonesia of third-world nations in 1955. His book, *White Man, Listen*, collects essays and lectures by him which do not, in the topics which they profess, classify him as a Mississippi author. Six of the short stories in his *Eight Men* are not Southern; by far most of his published articles are not. His contributions as a working reporter and journalist, principally in New York City for *The Daily Worker*, tend almost invariably to be concerned with Harlem and Communism. And even the letters of his presently available for scrutiny are hardly correspondence which apparently has much to do with Mississippi or the South.

It cannot be said, then, that Mississippi as a subject exercised the kind of a monopoly over Wright which it did over Faulkner. Once Faulkner created Yoknapatawpha he did become, with exceptions which only serve to prove the rule, a Mississippi writer who wrote about Mississippi. In a sense Wright was more volatile. Existentialism intrigued him in *The Outsider*. Freudianism intrigued him in *Savage Holiday*. There was a time when he was a Communist. There was a time, with all his enduring respect for Marx, when he became

an ex-Communist. In *Black Power* the end of colonialism is on his mind. In *Pagan Spain* he muses about the Spanish soul. On the other side of the globe from Mississippi, Wright drafted *The Color Question* with his attention obviously focused on a new power—politics for the world. Back in Europe—back, that is, from far-off Asia—he was still, in *White Man, Listen*, no longer apparently a Mississippian talking about Mississippi. Instead, he expounded about Negro literature and the protest it represented, about the aspirations of people of color and the kind of noxious thinking, as in Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, which he once aptly aphorized, made it agreeable to whites to believe that it was right for them to treat Negroes wrong, and wrong for them to treat Negroes right. Wright, indeed, had come a long way from the humble, obscure sharecropper's cabin in the Mississippi Delta where he first saw the light of day. His artistic consciousness, then, may now have seemed as far removed, as distant, from his home state as his physical presence. And yet there is evidence that Mississippi possibly had a stronger hold on him than is often recognized. There is evidence that, no matter where he went, or what he did, or tried to do, Mississippi had set an everlasting seal on him. There is evidence that it may well be informed and true to think of both him and Faulkner as writers who were not only born in Mississippi, but who, until the ends of their days, were Mississippi writers.

I have suggested that Wright was more volatile than Faulkner. I thus intend, however, nothing pejorative to either man. Identified as closely as he was with Yoknapatawpha, Faulkner still had a wide range of interests in literature and society. Even so, he did not pursue as many disparate goals in his literary activity as Wright. It is understandable that Michel Fabre should have begun the name of his life of Wright with the words, "the unfinished quest." We have noted already both Wright's changes of residence and changes in the subjects which conspicuously engaged him as a writer and a thinker. He was in quest of something which, presumably, he never found. But that is not a rare condition among normal human beings. Nor does it preclude a seeker from having lasting ties to things he has already found. In Wright's case, for example, nothing which he did, or wanted to do, interfered with his constant concern for racial justice. I think, moreover, that nothing which he did, or wanted to do, disrupted a firm set of reflexes formed early in his consciousness.

I agree with James Baldwin. Baldwin had watched Wright in Paris with Sartre. He has compared Wright's never flagging competence to admit to himself the frequent obduracy and perversity of circumstance with the tendency of Sartre and most, if not all, of Sartre's disciples to nourish their speculations in philosophy with worlds made to order for the intellectual games they wished to play. And so Baldwin came to a conclusion. He said of Wright, "I always sensed in Richard Wright a Mississippi pickaninny, mischievous, cunning and tough. This seemed to be at the bottom of everything he did, like some fantastic jewel buried in high grass."¹

I shall return in only a moment to Baldwin's assertion of Wright as always at bottom a Mississippi pickaninny. It is essential to the picture of Wright I feel justified in trying to defend. Nevertheless, a word from Wright himself about what he thought Mississippi finally came to mean to him I believe should be injected here. It is a word derived from an episode which Wright presents in *Black Boy*. Richard Wright's father has been variously described as a sharecropper and a mill worker. He was certainly, when Wright was born, cultivating cotton as a tenant farmer in the vicinity of Natchez. But, when Wright was still a very small boy, in 1911, Wright's father took his family with him to Memphis, where he clearly hoped, as he surely would have said it, to do better than he was doing in Mississippi. Nothing went truly well for Wright's father in Memphis. Within two years or so he deserted his family. In 1915 Wright's mother, with her two now fatherless sons, retreated from Memphis. Eventually, her husband, who was never to be reunited with her, drifted back to Mississippi and back to manual labor on the land. Meanwhile, Wright grew up and went North. With the publication of *Native Son* in 1940 as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection he achieved almost instant fame and fortune. In the wake of this success he married his first wife and sojourned for a brief period in Mexico. Returning to the East from Mexico, without his wife, he sought and saw his father, near where Wright had been born, for the first time in twenty-five years. Wright speaks of his father, on that occasion, as "standing alone upon the red clay . . . a sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands."² And then Wright reports:

¹ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York, 1961), p. 184.

² Wright, *Black Boy* (New York, 1945), p. 30.

[when] I tried to talk to him I realized that, though ties of blood made us kin, though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there was an echo of my voice in his voice, *we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality* [italics mine].³

It is obvious that Wright's confrontation with his father emphasized, and dramatized, for Wright, the colossal extent to which he was no longer a folk Negro in Mississippi. His father had made an effort to leave Mississippi and failed. Thus, Memphis had been, for Wright's father, an end, a place where he had encountered a blank wall. It had taught him how limited his life would be. For Wright, on the other hand, Memphis had been a beginning which led on to constantly expanding achievements and constantly richer opportunities. Wright started in Memphis with reading. Posing as a Negro errand boy sent by a white patron, he borrowed books from the Memphis public library. In Chicago, he began to meet with, and talk to, people he would almost surely not have met and talked with in Mississippi. There were the intellectuals and ideologues in John Reed Clubs and the Communist Party. There were the scholars at the University of Chicago, with whom Wright's initial contact seems to have been arranged by Mary Wirth, not only at one time the caseworker for Wright's family, but also the wife of the distinguished sociologist, Louis Wirth. There were the writers and artists with whom he mingled largely as the result of his connections with Federal Theater projects during the Depression. Even before he left Chicago Wright knew that he had become immersed in worlds about which, or merely the semblance of which, his father had never dreamed. And, of course, after he got to New York, such kinds of worlds were accessible to him in even more profusion. That they were, moreover, says nothing of the fact that merely to live in Chicago and New York, without the added bonus of knowing intellectuals and artists, was to move in worlds beyond his father's ken. Wright would have been inconceivably insensate had he not felt that he had left his father. He had. He had made all the additions of which he was aware, and they were additions. But that is, of course, Baldwin's point. They were additions, superimpositions. It was underneath these additions, these superimpositions, Baldwin felt, that a basic Wright remained, a basic Wright who would never change, the Mississippi pickaninny, as Baldwin called him, the fantastic jewel

³*Ibid.*

buried in high grass, who had been made precisely what he was by the environment of his highly impressionable boyhood and youth in Mississippi.

What I have argued elsewhere about Wright, therefore, I want to argue here: that the homeland of Wright's creative imagination was Mississippi, that it, too, was a fantastic jewel buried in high grass, and that the further Wright got from that homeland, from the springs of his art as they had been shaped in Mississippi, the less proficient Wright became as an artist writing fiction. When Wright wrote *Native Son*, and especially when he wrote the first two books of the novel, before Boris Max, in his long courtroom speech, introduces his Marxist indictment of capitalism along with his condemnation of American racism, Wright is still a writer strongly affected by his roots in Mississippi. It is true that, as earlier noted here, the locale for *Native Son* is Chicago. And it is true, furthermore, that in *Native Son* the Chicago setting is neither incidental nor insignificant. But, by the time Wright addressed himself to the composition of *Native Son* he had become able to synthesize as no black writer before him, and possibly since, into one character, who would be Bigger Thomas, the whole history and plight of the Negro in America. Bigger Thomas and his family live in Chicago, but they had come from Mississippi. In Ernie's Chicken Shack in Chicago's black Southside, seated, ill at ease and anxious not to be seen, with his white employer's daughter and her lover, the Communist Jan, Bigger tells them of his father's death by violence at the hands of a Mississippi mob. Earlier in the day he has played a game with a member of his gang in which the two alternate at pretending to fill roles denied to Negroes by American society. He has engaged in petty theft. At a movie he watches, with ambivalent emotional reactions, whites living lives which he interprets as lives of ease, power, and excitement. Against the white roles he plays with the fellow members of his gang and the whites he watches at the movies, it is obvious that he correlates the petty theft—from blacks, it should be carefully observed, not whites—as the only thing America will let him do, as a black, from which he might extract something of a measure of the ease, power, and excitement America reserves for whites. His home is a broken home, headed by a woman who narcotizes her misery with the deceitful consolation of otherworldly religion. He is illiterate, poor, without skills in the job market, afraid of the whites he hates and crushed by

giant institutions organized, he believes, for the express purpose of crushing him. That is Bigger Thomas in Chicago. But we must retrace our steps. It is also Bigger Thomas in Mississippi. Indeed, both in the novel and in the article, "How 'Bigger' Was Born,"⁴ which Wright wrote as his analysis of the genesis of *Native Son* and in which he describes Bigger Thomas as a composite of five bitter and rebellious young blacks whom he had known, all in Mississippi, Bigger Thomas represents both the Southern and the Northern components in a continuum in Wright's mind that indivisibly blended Mississippi and Chicago. Wright was very aware of the phenomenon of migration in the history of black America. He wrote about it at length in *Twelve Million Black Voices*. And so he could see and feel Mississippi as a part of black Chicago, but also, more importantly for the present context, black Chicago as a part of Mississippi. Although his novel, *Lawd Today*, was published after his death, he wrote it in the 1930s, at about the same time he wrote the short stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*. All of the stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*, it will be remembered, are set in Mississippi. *Lawd Today* seems to rely wholly on Wright's experience of Chicago. It is an experiment that does not benefit from the continuum, that does not blend Mississippi with Chicago. Its protagonist, Jake Jackson, is a Negro postal clerk, a little man with monumental personal problems in the wasteland of a contemporary urban culture. It is possible to theorize that *Native Son*, written precisely when it was, just after *Lawd Today* and *Uncle Tom's Children*, synthesizes *Uncle Tom's Children*, with its Mississippi settings, and *Lawd Today*, set in Chicago, just as it synthesizes the Southern and Northern Negro folk. It is possible also to theorize that what *Lawd Today*, a story with no hint of Mississippi in it, lacks, in comparison with *Native Son*, may be defined in terms of lack of excellence as art. There is art, I shall argue in a moment, in *Uncle Tom's Children*, but there is nothing, as art, in *Lawd Today* like scene after scene in *Native Son*. I instance, for example, the opening scene of *Native Son* when Bigger kills the rat; or his colloquy on the street, already mentioned, with the fellow member of his gang; or his interview with rich Mr. Dalton, who will become his white employer, where every tense, apprehensive move of his is right; or the moment in the night when he carries, fearfully, Mary Dalton in a drunken stupor to her room and looks at her, lying comatose on her

⁴*Black Boy*.

bed, aware in erotic anguish that desire is welling up in him; or at the end of a long night and day, the conclusion of his flight after Mary Dalton's murder has been discovered when he is finally brought to bay on the rooftop of a ghetto tenement in a subfreezing wintry landscape full of snow and ice and everywhere, it seems, the hostile presence of his white pursuers. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, quite to the contrary, there is art which does equal the art in *Native Son*. Indeed, there may be in *Native Son* no artistic accomplishment quite so fine as the total effect of the story in *Uncle Tom's Children*, "Big Boy Leaves Home," and the proposition is at least worth considering that Wright never again wrote a scene so full of accumulated power as well as of intrinsic superb magic as the scene in "Big Boy" when Big Boy, only an adolescent, having started his day joyously truant in the woods outside his home town and having escaped death at white Ol' Man Harvey's pond, where two of his three best friends are slain, by a white adult, for only a boyish prank, observes, at night from his place of concealment on one hill, the burning at the stake by a mob of whites of his third, and last, best friend on another hill directly across the highway from him.

Lawd Today, I believe, did not have the advantage of proceeding from the same complex of creative impulses as those which generated the stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*. That, I believe, is the big difference between *Lawd Today* and *Uncle Tom's Children*. In the conception of *Native Son*, it seems to me, Wright, with *Lawd Today* to remind him of Chicago, but composing from a train of association harking back, most immediately through *Uncle Tom's Children*, to his Mississippi background, did use resources in his imagination of which Mississippi was an integral part. I find *The Outsider* a novel lost in talk, and relatively a dead one. Wright wrote it with his intellect in charge. In that intellect Mississippi, the Mississippi of *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*, played little, if any, part. He suffers from a similar disadvantage in *Savage Holiday*. This novel, we are told by Michael Fabre, was largely inspired by an actual psychiatric case and by the psychiatrist Frederic Wertham's book, *Dark Legend*. Wright was a close friend of Dr. Wertham. He had acquired an interest, an intellectual interest, in psychiatry, as he later acquired an interest, an intellectual interest, in Existentialism. Whether he ever assimilated either of these interests to the best uses of his art seems to me highly

doubtful. It may be instructive in this regard to compare *The Outsider* and *Savage Holiday* with *The Long Dream*, written after both and long after Wright had left Mississippi. One of the comments made, probably with ample warrant, about *The Long Dream* is that it depicts a Mississippi which no longer existed when the book was written. And it should be emphasized that *The Long Dream* does not reach the level of art as art reached by Wright both in the stories of *Uncle Tom's Children* or *Native Son*. That it does not, incidentally, could be cited as evidence in keeping with the anachronism of the novel's Mississippi scene, evidence, that is, that Wright, here in the sense of having strayed too far from the source of his finest artistic impulses, when he wrote *The Long Dream*, had been away from Mississippi too long. Yet in *The Long Dream* Wright, at least back in Mississippi, and in Mississippi as he remembered it, is able to do some things which he does not do in either *The Outsider* or in *Savage Holiday*. In neither book does he create a person or a scene or a flow of incident, or anything else, which conveys both the criticism of life which he wants to utter and the illusion of a genuine reality. But Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* is both a character who comes to life and a symbol of America's abuse of Negroes. He is both a criticism of life and a convincing illusion of reality. Big Boy in "Big Boy Leaves Home" is a boy who seems to the reader actually a boy, the boy he is supposed to be, and the witness he was forced to be at a lynching. Through his eyes, moreover, the eyes of an adolescent undergoing an initiation, the reader sees this lynching as a castration, a fitting symbol for what American color caste possibly has done to the personalities of male Negroes. Again, that is, in "Big Boy Leaves Home," a work of art criticizes life by means of the same maneuver through which it simultaneously makes a fictive fake into a credible illusion. Comparably, in the climactic episode of *The Long Dream*, when Tyree Tucker begs to have Negroes on the jury which will try him for his complicity in the violations of laws responsible for the holocaust of death at the night club owned partially by him, Tyree, like Bigger Thomas and Big Boy, seems a living person, yet through his speech and movements, with the speech and movement in the scene around him, the abstract doctrine of civil rights for Negroes is transmuted into a symbolic incident no longer abstract, but now a way for the long dream which is the title of the novel, the dream that some day

Negroes will be treated like other Americans, to live in the reader's consciousness through the actions, and the implications of the actions, of Tyree.

It is in a sense, then, which encompasses much more than an accident of birth that both Faulkner and Wright are Mississippi writers. Take from either of them what the state contributes to them and you have taken significantly from their art. That art won wide recognition. If one thinks only of Negro writers, Wright's position may well be unique. It is agreed without dissent that Harry Ames in John A. Williams's novel, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, represents Richard Wright. A character in that novel, another Negro novelist, confesses to Harry Ames, "You are the father of us all." And well he might. No other Negro writer has had so great an influence on his fellow Negro writers as Richard Wright. Faulkner's esteem in America and the world places him where few, if any, may look down upon him. Neither Wright nor Faulkner finished college. Both set foot on every continent except Australia. Both wrote poetry as well as prose. Both worked in the movies. Faulkner wrote in Hollywood. Wright acted in Argentina. Both, although from different perspectives and often in different terms, spoke out against the mistreatment of Negroes. Both owned farms. Faulkner's was in Mississippi; Wright's, at Ailly in Normandy. They were born eleven years and over two hundred miles apart. One was white. One was black. That fact alone did make it difficult for them to know each other. It, beyond reasonable doubt, largely accounted also for the dissimilar patterns of their external lives. It does not follow that, had Wright been white, he would surely have been as closely tied in residence to Mississippi as Faulkner, yet we know that since he was black, he thought of his departure from the state as an escape, a step he had to take even to live and certainly to write. And we, likewise, know that Wright and Faulkner did not write in the same way or quite about the same things. Wright was angry, perhaps as angry as David Walker. Faulkner was more pensive, more comic, and more the lyric poet. Wright wrote of present ills and future hopes. It is always today or tomorrow in his fictive world. Yoknapatawpha's past plays an important role in Faulkner's literary kingdom. The voice of Rosa Coldfield, the eyes of Ike McCaslin probing through old books, bring back vanished days, summon from what was people whom Faulkner clearly trusts will illuminate for us what is. Even so, surely no one would contend that

personal qualities alone, such as temperament and original talent, separate Wright and Faulkner. Every black writer worthy of his salt has written protest. Wright was a black writer worthy of his salt. Many white writers have been able to do as Faulkner did, write protest as they are writing other things, so that the protest is not as bitter, direct, and perhaps indigestible to many readers, as Wright's protest. For, in justice to both Wright and Faulkner, it should be observed again that both write protest, racial protest, in which neither justifies a South, or North, that clings to a feudal *ancien regime*. There are differences between them in their attitudes toward reality and especially in their prescriptions for social change. There is no substantial difference between them in their rejection of the veils which Wright fled when he left the South while he was still young. And as artists, as the strange creatures driven, as Keats would have it, to gather samphire, a dreadful trade, they differ not at all in the ultimate source of their creative imagination. That is Mississippi, Mississippi as each knew it in his ardent youth. For better or for worse, Mississippi bore them both and reared them both to maturity. For better or for worse, Mississippi must accept them both. And why not? What other American state, if it only had the chance, would not swap two of its native writers for Faulkner and Wright? I am from Kentucky. I know, were I its governor, we surely would.