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WOMEN AND THE MIND OF THE SOUTH: THOMAS WOLFE'S *LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL* (1929), AND RICHARD WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY* (1945)

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> Proud, brave, honorable by its lights, courteous, personally generous, loyal, swift to act, often too swift, but signally effective, sometimes terrible, in its action —such was the South at its best. And such at its best it remains today, despite the great falling away in some of its virtues. Violence, intolerance, aversion and suspicion toward new ideas, an incapacity for analysis, an inclination to act from feeling rather than from thought, an exaggerated individualism and a too narrow concept of social responsibility, attachment to fictions and false values, above all too great attachment to racial values and a tendency to justify cruelty and injustice in the name of those values, sentimentality and a lack of realism—these have been its characteristic vices in the past. And, despite changes for the better, they remain its characteristic vices today. (Cash 428-29)

Look Homeward, Angel (1929) and *Black Boy* (1945) are written by Southerners and they "tell about the South." While both Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) and Richard Wright (1908-1960) portray the painful experience of becoming an artist in the South, they perceive the reality of that region in different ways. Although both writers might share a lot of things in common in their personal lives and in the above mentioned

works, the fact remains that Wolfe was a white Southerner and Wright a black Southerner. The purpose of this paper is to contrast Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* and Wright's *Black Boy* to show that race, and the women who were by their side, make each writer have a different South in his mind.

While Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (following the slave narrative tradition) is openly autobiographical, Thomas Wolfe has problems acknowledging this aspect of *Look Homeward, Angel*. According to Walser in *Thomas Wolfe: An Introduction and Interpretation*, Wolfe often complained that *LHA* was not "a piece of local history" and that it should not be read as "an almanac of personal gossip" (40). But Walser insists that the potential reader can always better understand *LHA* if he or she knows about Wolfe's life. While Thomas Wolfe insisted in *The Story of a Novel* that *LHA* was "more or less" based on his own life and written "with a certain naked intensity" (93), it was only weeks before dying in 1938 that Wolfe openly answered his *Carolina Magazine* interviewer in *Thomas Wolfe Interviewed, 1929-1938*: "A writer has to use what he has to use! Where else could he go for his material?" (125).

Because Wolfe and Wright "stay" in the South for their material they both were bitterly criticized. In *Thomas Wolfe: The Critical Reception*, Jonathan Davis wrote that "in *LHA*, North Carolina and the South are spat upon" (2-4). Thomas Wolfe himself was shocked and could not understand Ashville natives' negative reaction. Thus, in *The Story of a Novel*, he writes: "For months the town seethed with a fury of resentment which I had not believed possible" (93). Neither had Wright when (as his biographer Michel Fabre mentions in *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*) Bilbo, a Congressman, furiously attacked *BB* during one of the debates in Congress:

> It is a damnable lie from beginning to end. It is practically all fiction. There is just enough truth to enable him to build his fabulous lies about his experiences in the South . . . It is the dirtiest, filthiest, lousiest, most obscene piece of writing that I have ever seen in print . . . But it comes from a Negro and you cannot expect any better from a person of this type. (Fabre *Unfinished* 282)

If Bilbo's attack, contrary to that of Ashville's natives, is overtly racist, the fact remains that Southerners, both black and white, reacted very aggressively when the good old times seemed to be gone with the wind in both Wolfe's and Wright's South. It is Cash in his work *The Mind of the South* (1941), who better summarizes the reasons behind this violent and intolerant reaction on the part of some Southerners:

> The South read a good deal more now than in the past to be sure . . . And among those who read if a few greeted

> such writers as Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner, with tolerance and even sympathetic understanding, the prevailing attitude toward them was likely to be one of squeamish distaste and shock, of denial that they told the essential truth or any part of it—in many cases, of bitter resentment against them on the ground that they had libeled and misrepresented the South with malicious intent. (Cash 419)

Neither Wolfe nor Wright attempts to "misrepresent the South." Quite the contrary. Each one wants to tell the South he had experienced and feels sorry if, in doing so, he hurts Southern belles' sensitive feelings. Again, in Walser's *Thomas Wolfe: An Introduction and Interpretation*, Thomas Wolfe warned that the plays he was planning to write "may not be suited to the tender bellies of old maids, sweet young girls or Baptist Ministers but they will be true and honest and courageous and the rest doesn't matter" (29). By the same token, in "How Bigger Was Born," Wright threatened the Scarlet O'Hara-type:

> When the reviews of that book [*Uncle Tom's Children*] began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it. That it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without consolation of tears. (19)

Moreover, if both Wolfe and Wright avoid the rosy image of the plantation times, it is only Wolfe who uses what Holman calls a "wealth of humor" (17). It is Wolfe who shows a "pervasive comic spirit" (17) in *LHA*. Not Wright. In *BB*, according to Butterfield, "there is very little humor" and when "there are moments of humor... they shade quickly into curiosity, estrangement, or bitterness" (175). Bitterness is one word that is always present in Richard's life-story. Scarcity is the other. Although the outcast Eugene may feel bitter within himself, he is surrounded by humorous bombastic characters (as Gant and Eliza, in particular), and the word scarcity does not exist in this white Southerner's dictionary. Eugene's life in the South, contrary to Richard's, is defined by the word abundance.

Everything is in excess among the members of the Gant family. For Eugene, there is an overwhelming wave of emotions (from Eliza), an outburst of words (from Gant), a nauseating surplus of food, a non-pedagogical and "non-practical" number of toys and, when Eugene awakes to his painful sexual life, there are "pure white virgin" women and "black pussies" alike opening their legs for him. Indeed, there were

women—mainly white—in Richard Wright's life but he is shyer in his autobiography than Wolfe. According to Leibowitz, this is so because "there is an ascetic strain in Wright, which views the body as an enemy to be held in check" (362). For Richard Wright, as for other black boys of his generation , growing up in the Jim Crow South was a terribly painful physical and emotional experience. For Christmas, while Gant could afford to buy Eugene "wagons, sleds, drums, horns [all in the plural] —best of all, a small fireman's ladder wagon" which was "the wonder . . . of the neighborhood" (82), Richard only got "one orange" (90) and he felt so hurt "that he would not go out to play with the neighborhood children who were blowing horns and shooting firecrackers" (90). Eugene would have easily fit into that group of noisy and lucky boys. For "black boys" like Richard *one orange* was a priceless Christmas gift, bearing in mind that since his father had left (when Richard was five) "the problem of food became an acute, daily agony" (36). Black boys like Richard would spend the whole day at home "with a loaf of bread and a pot of tea" (36) while the mothers worked in the kitchens of whites. On the other hand, although (on learning about Eugene's birth) Gant's first reaction is "Oh my God, my God! . . . Another mouth to feed!" (32), that does not turn out to be a real problem because, according to Wolfe, "they fed stupendously" (61). So "stupendously," that the fully detailed description of any of the three daily heavy meals is likely to make the reader throw up:

> In the morning they rose in a house pungent with breakfast cookery, and they sat at a smoking table loaded with brains and eggs, ham, hot biscuit, fried apples seething in their gummed syrups, honey, golden butter, fried steak, scalding coffee. (*LHA* 62)

Unlike Richard, Eugene surely was a physically and intellectually "well bred" (33) white Southerner. As with Richard, and despite this plenty, Eugene could sense that "there was a hunger and thirst in him that could not be fed" (463).

For some critics, women might be responsible for this unfulfilled spiritual hunger. Eugene's mother is a possessive woman who breastfed him until Eugene was three years old but who, in her business-oriented mind, "suddenly forgets" about him. Although Eugene "became conscious of a period of neglect" (39), especially after he "was entrusted almost completely to a young slovenly negress" (30), Eliza tries, unsuccessfully, to attract Eugene to her with a "Why son—you can't grow up yet. You're my baby" (81). Contrary to Eliza's, Mrs. Wright's relation with her son Richard is a healthier and less castrating one. There is affection for Richard but, at the same time, she tries to make her son understand the meaning of being a black boy in a white South. This particular *schooling* means that Richard's mother on the one hand encourages him to "stand up and fight for yourself" (25) when the enemy is black but, on the other hand, she personally beats Richard after his fighting gets him injured by a white gang:

> she rushed me to a doctor who stitched my scalp; but when she took me home she beat me, telling me I must never fight white boys again . . . that I might be killed by them. (*BB* 97)

If both Eliza and Ella differ in the way they approach their rebel sons' education, they do share some background. As were Wright's and Wolfe's real mothers, both were school teachers, "Penelope types" as Rubin mentions, who married Far-Wanderer men, "Ulysses types." Although Vance points out that in the South "the proportion of divorces is lower . . . than in other regions" and that "the family relationship in the South is more permanent" (341-42), the Gants in *LHA* and the Wrights in *BB* are part of that exceptional Southern behavior. When Eliza starts looking at Dixieland as "a good investment" (117) for a boarding house (which means that Eliza will, eventually, move there), both Gant and Eliza "felt their approaching separation instinctively" (117). Richard's father, on the other hand, gives his wife not even a short-notice warning. He just leaves with another woman, then, to go North. Both Eugene and Richard re-encounter their parents, either symbolically or physically, at some point after their actual estrangement, and in both cases the parents are literally or symbolically sick. For Eugene it was after going to the movies with Gant:

> No, there was no return after this. Eugene saw now that Gant was dying very slowly. The vast resiliency, the illimitable power of former times had vanished. The big frame was breaking up before him like a beached ship. Gant was sick. He was old. (*LHA* 250)

The parallel *family reunion* is painfully unbearable for Richard. He meets his father twenty-five years after he deserted his family and (in an often-quoted scene in most essays on *BB*), Richard's father—as Eugene's—is a human wreck. Unlike Eugene, a bitter Richard blames whites (both Northerners and Southerners) for his father's hopeless life:

> A quarter of a century was to elapse between the time when I saw my father sitting with the strange woman and the time when I was to see him again, standing alone upon the red clay of a Mississippi plantation, a share-cropper, dad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands . . . a black peasant whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city, and who had at last fled the city—that same city which had lifted me in its burning arms and borne me towards

> alien undreamed of shores of knowing . . . From the white landowners above him there had not been handed to him a chance to learn the meaning of loyalty, of tradition, of sentiment. (*BB* 43-44)

If the father-son relation was non-existent in Richard's case and far from idyllic in Eugene's case, at least Gant is responsible for Eugene's precocious interest in the classics. Eugene remembers his father (as Thomas Wolfe himself does) reciting Shakespeare sonnets by heart and "ransacking Gant's shelves at home, reading translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*" (95). In contrast is Richard, who "began school at a later age than was usual" because his mother "had not been able to buy [him] the necessary clothes to make [him] presentable" (32). Eugene's father, though, took a personal interest in his son's early education and, as with everything else, there was plenty: "Eugene was three; they bought him alphabet books, and animal pictures, with rhymed fables below. Gant read them to him indefatigably: in six weeks he knew them all by memory" (46). For black Southern boys like Richard, and again following the slavery tradition, education was not only not taken for granted but also not encouraged as it was a means for blacks to be free from whites' oppression and humiliation. But for Richard, as with Eugene, it is a woman schoolteacher who "made the world around . . . throb, live" (48) through books. Despite the fact that Ella reads *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives* to Richard and Mrs. Margaret Leonard "fed [Eugene] on poetry" (277), both Richard and Eugene feel awkwardly attracted to these Pygmalion-like women. Shy Richard "was as much afraid of her [Ella] as [he] was attracted to her" (47). Eugene, who finds in Mrs. Leonard "his spiritual mother" (210), "would have been stricken with horror if she could have known the wild confusion of adolescence, the sexual nightmares of puberty, the grief, the fear, the shame in which a boy broods over the dark world of his desire" (277).

From the *dark wombs* and bodies of women—from the "Ella" women in particular—seems to come all that these young artists are looking for in life. Ella, Richard's mother, embodies painful love and tenderness; Ella, the black teacher, opens the "magical presence" of books to Richard and, finally, Ella Corpering, the black prostitute, sensually offers her "undulant body" to a shaking adolescent, Eugene, who hardly knows what the word "Jelly Roll" means. It is also significant that black women are, thus, prolific in more than only one sense. Through their dark tired wombs, love, the eagerness for books, and the sour-sweet awakening to sexual life see the light. Meanwhile, white Southerners, like the Gants, can not see anything out of the ordinary from the blacks who overpopulate Niggertown. From their privileged positions the Gants perceive blacks in denigrating and stereotyped images. For white Southerners, blacks "smell fetid." When Eugene gets the Niggertown route while working as a paper boy, he associates this black ghetto with the "strong smell, black and funky" of the black maid who nurtured him while a baby:

> he discovered . . . them . . . tossed like heavy sacks
> across one another, in the fetid dark of a tenement
> room, a half-dozen young men and women, in a snoring
> exhaustation of whisky-stupor and sexual depletion. (*LHA* 234)

Luke, on the other hand, sells "hair-oil guaranteed to straighten kinky hair" and "religious lithographs, peopled with flying angels, white and black . . . sailing about the knees of an impartial and crucified Saviour, and subtitled 'God loves them Both'" (*LHA* 232).

The Lord might love blacks and white alike, but Eliza does not. Apart from getting "along badly with the Negroes" (120), she was "constantly tortured by the thought that they were stealing her supplies and her furnishings" (120). When looking for a job from whites, a younger Richard had to answer questions which he considered "odd" such as "Do you steal?" (166).

Furthermore, in *Look Homeward, Angel*, white Southerners think of blacks—both male and female—in terms of sexual animals: because black women are less than human, white males exploit them as outlets for the many sexual fantasies they would not even dare to mention to their delicate white Southern belles. Because black male sexuality is a threat to whites', they mutilate black Southern males' sexual organs, either before or after lynching them. However, Eugene, as many other white Southerners, is initiated into the wonders of black Jelly Roll by friends: "Boy, there ain't nothing better" (270). For black Southern boys, though, a sexual predilection for white women (even white prostitutes) means finding castration and death in the hands of the *respectable* members of the Ku-Klux-Klan. That is exactly what happens to the brother of one of Richard's friends, who "was fooling with a white prostitute" (196). Eugene, like his friends, is one of those white Southerners who goes to Niggertown for sex and who "fools around" with black women. Notice also that the white women portrayed in *Look Homeward, Angel* are in a much better position than the black women in *Black Boy*. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, the mother figure is financially independent (business becomes "theother"); the teacher figure has access to a college level education which includes the Greek and Roman classics (we just have to check the "reading list"); and the female lover (Petrarchan-like figure) is momentarily touchable, but nevertheless unreacheable.

By contrast, in *Black Boy*, the black mother figure abandoned by husband and exploited at her unrewarding domestic job, has to endure whites' supremacy. The black woman's mind can reach only a school teacher status, and is made an almost irrelevant character who disappears from the text. Furthermore, the black woman's body does not inspire love, tenderness, and affection, but it is fragmented into explicit sexual organs such as breasts, butt, and "Jelly Roll." It is also significant that white Southern women belong and stay in the South while black women are denied any growth and are forced to leave that region.

Richard, a black boy and an innocent victim of much worse Eugenes, wonders "what was it that made the hate of whites for blacks so steady" (187). Although a nine-year-old Richard "had never been abused by whites" (87) yet, he "became as conditioned to their existence as though he had been the victim of a thousand lynchings" (87). Richard, a black boy who declines to adopt the "wagging-dog/Uncle-Tom" attitude, did later suffer so much abuse from Southern whites that he decided to leave for the North (as did Eugene, but for different reasons). The white South was "the culture from which [he] sprang" and "the terror from which [he] fled" (*BB* 291).

Look Homeward, Angel covers the first twenty years (1900- 1920) in the life of a white Southerner, Eugene/Thomas, born in North Carolina in Altamont/Ashville, who attends Pulpit Hill/Chapel Hill University and who leaves for the North to pursue his graduate studies. Richard is the *Black Boy* who was born in 1908, near Natchez, Mississippi and who grew up in the Jim Crow South (constantly moving), until he finally left from Memphis in 1925, trying to escape from a violence that, according to Cash, "has always been part of the pattern of the South" (414). In both *LHA* and *BB* the two picaresque heroes undertake a geographical and spiritual journey which leads them (on different paths, though), to the magic world of knowledge through books. If, as young artists, Eugene and Richard share what Wright calls "an organic loneliness" (199), Thomas Wolfe and Richard Wright also experienced that sensation of exile when Southern readers (black and white alike) rejected their respective works. Neither of them told about the South in the way it was expected from two loyal-gentlemen-like-Southerners. Theirs is a different South, though. "Exuberance" is the word that defines Eugene's world. On the contrary, Richard—as many other black boys—"lived on the borders of actual starvation" (144). A state of starvation that was only spiritual for Eugene but both physical and intellectual for Richard. Because there might be nothing funny in growing up in a racist society, and contrary to what happens in *LHA*, there is nothing humorous in *BB*.

Richard's is a self-taught literacy and Eugene's a more sophisticated one; to borrow from Fabre in *The World of Richard Wright*, they seem to become writers *out of* instead *of* (77) the South where, as Mencken points out, "a poet is now almost as rare as an oboe-player" (136). The reasons for leaving the South are different too. Eugene, who enjoys a more privileged position, is more ego-spirit-intellect-oriented and leaves for the North knowing that "the terrible and obscure hunger that hunts and hurts Americans" (382) would make of him an "exile" and a "stranger" because "there is no happy land. There is no end to hunger" (581). Hatred and racism are the reasons why Richard left, also becoming a Far-Wanderer as Thomas Wolfe was. Although there are faint resonances of Quentin's "I dont hate it" in *BB*' s ending "I knew that I could never really leave the South" (294), Richard (physically, at least) leaves the South because he is terrorified by the lynching mania, he is unable to wear the mask of Uncle Tom subservience and, far from keeping his place assigned by whites, he wants to move ahead and write.

If Thomas Wolfe always saw beauty in the mountains of Ashville, Richard Wright could never discover "magnificent magnolias" in the landscape of an overtly "white racist South."

While the "mind of the South" allows its white women to grow and reach those mountains, it is crystal clear that black women are not able to bloom into magnolias.

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