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Richard Wright, The Fifties and Savage Holiday

That Richard Wright has attained a permanent niche in the pantheon of American literary history is now incontrovertible. Indeed, an entry on the author as novelist, short-story writer and critic is invariably found in the standard reference volumes, such as The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature, Who's Who in Twentieth Century Literature, Literary History of the United States, et al. Generally speaking, however, the focal point of interest in such commentaries is the novel Native Son (1940); for it seems (with few exceptions) to be commonly accepted as the major literary and cultural achievement of its creator. Accordingly, the rave assessments of it have ranged all the way from Irving Howe's cataclysmal conclusion of two decades ago that "the day Native Son appeared, American culture changed forever"¹ to the recent subdued but nonetheless dogmatic assertion of Nathan Scott, Jr., that "it was not until the spring of 1940, when Harper and Brothers brought out Richard Wright's Native Son, that the work of a Negro writer made, by its appearance, a truly salient event."²

While the attention lavished on Native Son is admittedly appropriate, Savage Holiday (1954), a somewhat neglected novel, deserves closer observation and inspection than hitherto afforded it. Evidence for the slighting of this book abounds. John Reilly's volume entitled Richard Wright. The Critical Reception (1978) points out explicitly that there were no reviews of the novel following its appearance in 1954.³ Similarly, in his bibliographical essay on Richard Wright for the series Black American Writers (1978), Reilly treats in detail "the early verse," Lawd

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¹ Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," A World More Attractive (New York: Horizon Press, 1963), p.100.

² Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Black Literature," in Daniel Hoffman, et al., Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979), p. 323.

³ (: Burt Franklin, 1979).

Today, Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son, Black Boy, The Outsider, and "works from the exile period," but fails even to mention Savage Holiday⁴ Furthermore, the Richard Wright Reader (1978) includes as its shortest excerpt from the overall body of fiction that portion taken from Savage Holiday, a scant thirteen pages.⁵

Similarly, the book length critical studies of Wright have been only slightly more cognizant of the novel's existence. Two works completely disregard the book: Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel Victim by Katherine Fishburn (1977) and Rebels and Victims: The Fiction of Richard Wright and Bernard Malamud by Evelyn Gross Avery (1976).⁶ Robert Bone's monograph on Richard Wright (1969) in the series, Pamphlets on American Writers, places Savage Holiday among those works which are a "celebration of the rootlessness of modern man" and asserts that it "was written for the pulp market and need not detain us here."⁷ Keneth Kinnamon's The Emergence of Richard Wright (1972) is concerned with the author's career only through Native Son in 1940 but does posit that Savage Holiday is among those later works in which "Wright was to present convincing white characters in fiction."⁸ Richard Wright by David Bakish (1973) includes a brief plot summary of "a psychological study that avoids the racial problem" but ultimately contends "the novel does not succeed" because "its story is too labored, an abstractly conceived patchwork of Freudian symbols and dreams."⁹ Edward Margolies has ten pages in The Art of Richard Wright (1969) in which he advocates that Savage Holiday is a psychological novel whose "central issue" is "the moral and psychological pressures that society imposes on men"; nevertheless, in "the final analysis Savage Holiday must be accounted an artistic failure. One cannot escape the feeling that Wright suddenly discovered himself bored with the novel as a vehicle for his ideas—so he rushed his plot to an unnatural conclusion."¹⁰ Finally, Russell Carl Brignano also devotes ten pages to an exposition of the novel and Wright's having been "armed with Freud, Nietzsche and the existentialists to engage in battle against formal religions"; still he argues that "for the sake of Wright's literary reputation, Savage Holiday would best be left untouched between its sensational paperback covers,"

⁴ John M. Reilly, "Richard Wright," in M. Thomas Inge, et al., eds., Black American Writers. Bibliographical Essays (New York); St. Martin's Press, 1978), pp. 1-46.

⁵ Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre, eds., Richard Wright Reader (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 706-719.

⁶ Fishburn (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1977) and Avery (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1979).

⁷ (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), pp. 12,32.

⁸ (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 134.

⁹ (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), p. 75.

¹⁰ (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), p. 134.

for it is "a poorly constructed, too seriously articulated, overstated work, purposely employing Freudian devices and a few ideas from Nietzsche. It neatly fits the pattern of Wright's attitudes toward Christianity, and it may be linked to the rationalist impulses behind the type of humanism he seems to have been formulating sometime after he had left the United States."¹¹

Within the context of the foregoing evidence, a new point of entree for reconsidering Savage Holiday in the literary career of Wright would seem helpful at this time. This is not to deny or disparage the aesthetic, psychological, or philosophical dimensions of the novel or of comments about facets of the book as advanced by others. Rather it is to propose a slightly different emphasis as a prologomenon for examining and interpreting the importance of the novel.

Nathan Scott has intimated quite recently in his essay on "Black Literature" for the Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing that Wright was "always impatient with the 'proving disciplines' of art. For him the greatest uses of literature were not those by which we distance ourselves from the world in order to contemplate more strenuously its pattern and meaning: they were, rather, those by which we seek a more direct entry into the world for the sake of redeeming it from the brutality and the indecencies by which it must otherwise be overwhelmed."¹² With that perspective as a base, Savage Holiday can be viewed as an assault on the religiosity of post-World War II American society, especially that religious sensibility manifested in the decade, 1945-1955, immediately following the war. Savage Holiday, with its epigraph from Totem and Taboo to the effect that "in the very nature of a holiday there is excess . . .", became the instrument of an indictment of a narrowly conceived view of religious motivation, behavior and institutions during a decade characterized by "the surge of piety in America," a phrase borrowed from the title of an appraisal of the era by A. Roy Eckardt (1958).¹³ By creating a white protagonist, Erskine Fowler, who attempts to shape his personal and social consciousness within the milieu of his Christian religious beliefs and community but whose life crashes into a befuddled irrationality with the orgiastic and psychopathic murder of his neighbor, Mabel Blake. Wright presents a character who becomes emblematic of the indictment of the religious sensibility permeating the structures of society. In retrospect a peculiar feature of the religious spirit of the time was the growing recognition that "the three major religious communities are viewed as distinguishable representations of such 'spiritual values' as the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and

¹¹ (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), pp. 133, 143.

¹² Scott, p. 290.

¹³ A. Roy Eckardt, The Surge of Piety in America (New York: Association Press, 1958).

the dignity of the individual for which American democracy is supposed to stand. The three faiths attain equal footing as 'the religions of democracy' . . . as the holy trinity of American popular piety—Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism."¹⁴ Thus, religion presumably functioned in the decade in a way that "provided people with self-identity and social location in the particular historical situation"¹⁵ which was post-war modern America, an era dominated by such religious literature as Rabbi Joshua Liebmann's Peace of Mind (1946), Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's Peace of Soul (1949), Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's The Power of Positive Thinking (1952), and Rev. Billy Graham's Peace with God (1953).

In Pagan Spain (1957), which appeared shortly after Savage Holiday, Wright declared, "I have no religion in the formal sense of the word. I have no race except that which is forced upon me. I have no country except that to which I am obliged to belong. I have no traditions. I'm free."¹⁶ While that confession may be true, it is also accurate to say that he had a clearly conceived and developed antipathy to "religion in the formal sense of the word," an antipathy whose childhood roots have been explicated in the biographies by Constance Webb (Richard Wright. A Biography, 1968), Michel Fabre (The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, 1973), and Addison Gayle (Richard Wright. Ordeal of a Native Son, 1980). What is lacking thus far in Wright critical studies, however, is a coherent and comprehensive overview of the nuances and ramifications of that anti-religious perspective, including his extensive use of biblical and religious imagery, allusions, ideas and traditions and how they interrelate with his views of existentialism, determinism, communism, humanism, and racism to inform the various pieces of his literary corpus, ranging from "Man, God Ain't Like That," to Black Boy, to Savage Holiday, and others.

The rudimentary outlines of those early oppressive religious experiences were recounted by Wright in scattered fragments and together form a kind of gestalt within which to see in more vivid form an underlying dimension of Wright's art. For example, Wright chronicles with clarity the familial religious impact in his unpublished "Memories of My Grandmother."

My mother being an invalid, I lived in my grandmother's house and ate her bread and automatically this dependence obligated me to worship her God. My grandmother practised the Seventh Day Adventist religion, a ritual of worship that reaches down and regulates every moment of living. (I sometimes wonder—even though I have abandoned that faith—if some of my present day actions are not derived, in whole or in part, from the profound and extreme effects of the emotional conditioning which I

¹⁴ Eckardt, p. 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Bone, p. 44.

under went at that period.)¹⁷

Additionally, he became acutely aware of the manner in which personal concern and social relationship became divorced from each other in religious thought and behavior while the believer yet espoused a "love for humanity."

The first and foremost thing that puzzled me about my grandmother's religion was her callous disregard for the personal feelings of others and her inability to understand—and her refusal to even try—anything of social relationships. Yet this callousness towards others, this stern disregard of things relating to the life of society as a whole was related with an abstract, all embracing love for humanity.¹⁸

And likewise, he came to realize the inevitable foolishness of the religious stress upon an otherworldliness that denies or ignores the existential necessity for contending, in the words of St. Paul, "against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:13).

Their teachings and their religion, by encouraging me to live beyond the world, to have nothing to do with the world, to be in the world, but not of the world, . . . implanted the germs of such notions in me. . . . These events which create fear and enchantment in a young mind are the ones whose impressions last longest; perhaps the neural paths of response made in the young form the streets, tracks and roadways over which the vehicles of later experience run. Perhaps a man goes through life seeking, blindly and unconsciously, for the repetition of those dim webs of conditioning which he learned at an age when he could make no choice.¹⁹

Thus far little has been said about the novel per se, for the basic purpose here has been to stress that an examination of Savage Holiday within the personal and social milieu of the author and his society may enable us to ascertain the significance of the work as a cultural document designed as "a more direct entry into the world for the sake of redeeming it from the brutalities and indecencies by which it must otherwise be overwhelmed." In spite of its sometimes imprecise symbolism, its limitations in use of the tri-partite structure, its admittedly hurried conclusion, its seemingly baffling connections among Freudian, Christian, and Nietzschean concepts, Savage Holiday, as the narrative of Erskine Fowler, a businessman, club member, evangelical Christian, moral majority member, and psychopathic killer, deserves reevaluation for two reasons. First, the novel embodies the major strands of "the larger concerns around which Wright had built so much of his other fiction and

¹⁷ Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright (New York: William Morrow, 1973), p. 33.

¹⁸ Fabre, pp. 35-36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

nonfiction,"²⁰ a point which has been alleged though not analyzed. Second, having appeared in 1954 in the hey-day of a post-war religious boom characterized by an increasing acculturation of religious feeling cutting across traditional and formal religious groupings and known as "the American way of life," and characterized by an inordinate need for a religious serenity, known variously as "the cult of reassurance," "the turn to religion," "healthy-mindedness" and "peace of mind,"²¹ Savage Holiday indicted a society and an era. By revealing the intensity of passion, the ambiguity of motivation, the complexity of conflicting emotions, the inner struggles over joy, guilt, pain and love, Wright derided and derogated those, both black and white, who would oversimplify the need for an authentic and effective mode of relating the individual to society; and he revealed that taking refuge in an otherworldly religious orientation rationalized by a conception of God, whether held by whites or blacks, is an illusion, and therefore, damnation. By so doing, Wright was in the company of other men of letters of that decade, 1945-1955, who labored to change society by affecting the underlying religious sensibility of its people, notably Robert Penn Warren in All the King's Men (1945), J. D. Salinger in The Catcher in the Rye (1951), and James Baldwin in Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953), to mention only a few. In Savage Holiday, Richard Wright was, then, as Houston Baker, Jr., says in his latest book, The Journey Back. "too aware of the large, ungraceful failings of the West—having felt them dramatically in his own life—to translate the predictions of White Man, Listen! into utopian creative scenes where race, class, and religion no longer mattered."²²

²⁰ Brignano, p. 134.

²¹ Eckardt, pp. 28-29, 42, 51, 73.

²² Houston Baker, Jr., The Journey Back. Issues in Black Literature and Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 68.