



THE AURIGNACIAN

YOKE OF WIND

Commentary by the Author

“Yoke of Wind” did not emerge literally or linearly from my mind--but rather more abstractly like some partially coherent dream--as ghostly characters struggling to be born, latent and smoldering feelings seeking expression and Shamanic and Christian metaphors struggling into form. Even though written by me, the book to this day can still reveal some of its meaning, as though I am only the observer of the story that flowed through me. But over several years of redrafting, these feelings, characters and metaphors came into fuller expressions and form, more sharply revealed--thus making the story accessible to others.

And the story did indeed come from my unconscious--from so much of my life that was both revealed and expressed and, also, latent and oppressed.

I was born in the deep south in Eufaula, Alabama into an aristocratic heritage. About two hundred years before my birth, my ancestor, John Fletcher Comer, was one of the first “planters” to migrate into Alabama after Andrew Jackson won his battles and his “treaties” with the Creek Indians, making much of Alabama open to whites; and Fletcher’s plantation, Spring Hill, was just about ten miles away from my birthplace.

Over the course of thirty years or so, Fletcher managed to create one of the largest, slave-driven cotton plantations in Alabama while one of his relatives became the framer of



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the Alabama Constitution. Though Fletcher died early, he nonetheless fathered four sons before the Civil war, including my lineal ancestor, Braxton Bragg.

After fighting in the Civil War, Braxton left the plantation for Birmingham to build one of the first and largest textile companies in Alabama while also later becoming governor and then senator of the state. As governor Braxton was initially described as progressive as he worked hard to provide public education for both blacks and whites while also building many railroads to spur greater industry; later in life he devoted himself to reducing child labor. Nonetheless, later more revisionist accounts described him as becoming Governor only to benefit his own textile company. The textile company he started, called Avondale, remained under family management and ownership for four generations--all the way to my father when they were spinning enormous amounts of carpet and denim for Levis and Wrangler. In the back of my mind, I always assumed that I too would follow this tradition--though from the looks of things, I was not well-suited for my impending occupation. In any case, the company was at last sold away when I was in my late teens.

Born as he was on the frontier, Braxton was adventuresome and apart from hunting big game in Colorado, he also liked to travel once per year to an obscure island off the coast of the Everglades in Florida which is called Comer Caye to this day



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(or Pelican Caye on some maps)--the same island, of course, as found in the novel. He went to the island to hunt and fish for about one month per year, bringing along with him family, friends and servants. As a child I frequently visited places in southern Florida with my grandfather who told me all about this mysterious island. When I was about ten years old, my family actually camped on the island for about one week. At that point it was like the island in the novel--that is, mostly white sand beaches with one long sandbar that extended eastward towards the mainland and, curiously enough, one enormous Banyan tree likely planted on the island by one its previous hermits, with thick and gnarled roots that seemed to hold the wispy and delicate island together amidst the onslaught of wind and swell.

On two occasions during my late teens, I travelled back again to the island on my own via canoe and camped there for several nights illegally, alone, hiding my gear from the rangers during the day. On more recent visits the island had succumbed to entropy like my heritage: due to the usual forces of erosion, global warming, and one enormous hurricane, the island finally did what one of the characters in the novel feared--that is, disintegrate into the forces of oblivion, so that little remained anymore except the sandbar exposed at low tide.

Despite my heritage, my life in Eufaula and later another town called Sylacauga was not at all isolated--as I was deep into



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all elements of my local culture. I was especially surrounded by African Americans, by our maid, Thelma, who was like having another mother, and her son Johnny, my personal hero and the star of the high school football team. They lived back in the woods in their simple but primitive house that may best be described as a shack and when we drove Thelma home, we sometimes glimpsed into her warm and woodsy life, with smoke always rising from the chimney and hunting rifles left on the front porch and the woods only steps away. They continued to eat traditionally and well: of porkfat, cornbread, greens and the meat the land provided: bream, catfish, squirrels, rabbits and deer.

During my summers and holidays, my family would frequently vacation at the x-plantation my grandfather owned called Hawkonville that was still presided over by woodsy African Americans, some of whom bore my last name. My whole family loved Bonnie, the chef, because of her amazing, “farm to table” soul-food as well as her kind and silent manner. We also loved Violet, the server; even though I was prepubescent at that time, I still found her sexy, especially as she drove away in her Trans-Am late at night. Meanwhile Jake, the caretaker, showed me and my brother how to hunt, fish, slaughter chickens and even chase piglets around in the mud for kicks. I and my best friend at Hawkonville, Jake’s son, Donale, explored the woods together and terrorized the white, sandy, oak-lined roads on our gocart while firing off our pellet guns like outlaws.



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Back at home, I attended public school in the projects--in what was probably the worst school system in the country, which suited me fine because I never cared much for school anyway. In sports I was always striving to stay competitive with African Americans; or otherwise trying to be as cool as them, even learning how to strut and talk like them and flirt with their women. They all knew that my father was the boss of the company for which their fathers worked and if their father was fired or slighted, they usually tracked me down. Fighting, of one sort or the other, was just part of life. And somehow or another, I had convinced myself that I knew kung-fu which seemed to help in my defense. My family did indeed live in the proverbial mansion on the hill, easily overseen by the town below, and it was rumored to be surrounded by a mote full of hungry alligators.

To the mind of the sensitive liberal, I suppose my comments could be construed as prejudice, since I am referring to blacks and whites as distinct groups of people--and even appreciating what could be seen as the residue of the old slave culture. I can respect that. However my intention is not to be necessarily sensitive, certainly not political, but merely to report, as I should as a literary writer, my experience of my childhood in relationship to African Americans. Ultimately I was not raised with either prejudicial or "liberal" attitudes about race relations. I merely just experienced what was happening at that time. In my youth we perceived African Americans



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as different, as they also perceived us, and we did not attend the same parties or clubs or sleepovers but I was nonetheless surrounded by them and I loved many of them as caretakers, friend, uncles and heroes. Perhaps I thought blacks were cooler than whites--feelings that lace the pages of my novel.

In my early teens my family moved into a wealthy, white suburb in Birmingham and at the same time, I was sent off to an all-white, all-boy prep school in Tennessee which I soon learned to despise. During some of those years, interestingly enough, I was obsessed with African American literature, with the writings of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Martin Luther King and many others, I suppose, because I also felt horribly oppressed myself. But perhaps I also just missed African Americans--and felt stifled by preppy, Anglo culture as I still feel these days.

When attending Oberlin College later in life at the apex of the politically correct movement, I was naturally exposed to the idea that my heritage--and perhaps I myself--was cruel and immoral. I did indeed wrestle deeply with political correctness, as I have always loved to hear the differing viewpoints and experiences of other people. And I even specialized for one year in the study of the Antebellum South--which helped me years later lay some of the historical foundation for this novel. But while seeing the value of political correctness, I nonetheless found it oppressive and neurotic and I have never



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been much on codified ways of feeling and thinking anyway. But I nonetheless experienced some shame about my heritage and after some time decided to keep my mouth shut, instead of dealing with daily harangues or estrangement.

Ultimately, I think my free and natural upbringing ruled the day as I have always had the same attitude: the races, even though we share our basic humanity, still have some differences, even as individuals within races have differences. But I do not see any reason to belittle those differences, but celebrate them instead as part of the diversity of life. Some of us have suffered greater and lesser amounts of cultural oppression, some less; but clearly nobody is immune from the pain and pleasure of the human condition.

Soon after college, I worked leading thirty-day, therapeutic wilderness courses for adjudicated teenagers from Philadelphia--teenagers, black and white, and male and female, who had skipped school, sold drugs, stolen cars--colorful, amazing and sometimes disturbed characters. Curiously enough, those courses years later helped me, if inadvertently, to structure "Yoke of Wind." More specifically, I worked with around ten people on those courses; and the front story of this novel has about ten characters--all of whom are psychologically developed to some degree. Also both the course and the novel lasted around one month. But even more interestingly, both took place in the wilderness where the structures, labels,



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oppressions and illusions of society were stripped away-- therefore allowing for human transformation, generally towards more noble, brave and caring selves.

Finally I think its fair to admit that my family of origin also influenced my creation of the white family in the novel, as in both the book and in my life, the father did not bond well with his children due to childhood traumas, and the husband and wife were quite estranged and uncommunicative.

To see in even greater clarity the connection between my life and my novel, you could say that nearly every major character in "Yoke of Wind" reflects some aspect of myself. Jonah is the troubled young man caught between wanting to conform to his heritage and wanting to flee to find his own identity. Shaka is the rebel undermining the establishment while also pursuing mystical insight and experiences. Jake is the eternal fool with paradoxically the clearest of visions, seeing the reoccurring patterns of cruelty and idiocy handed down from one generation to another while believing, until the end, that there was nothing to do about it but "sip the whisky, suck on the melons and shout at the Lawd" (even though he did not believe in the Lord). Eloise is the manager, always using her intelligence and compassion to try to fix situations and make everyone happy. Whiteoak is the survivalists, the outcast from society who instead of whining about his lot, glorifies the hardship of his life and otherwise refuses to succumb to the



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ideas that he believes just hide men's cruelty from themselves and make them even crueler. In his character, too, you can see my love of evolutionary thought, as his philosophy was molded on Social Darwinism with its narrow and eclipsed view of the actual workings of Evolution. Finally, Osprey is the mystic who had stopped caring for the affairs of this world while preferring to drift on the eternal and sensual tides, more identified with birds than with mankind, as I have done from time to time in my life usually on extended sailing and canoeing trips, including three solo trips through the Everglades.

Throughout these pages are other parts of me: my appreciation of ideas and philosophies but my devotion to none of them; my love of people, especially the more eccentric and creative of this earth, without having necessarily much attachment to any type of person. Oddly enough, "Yoke of Wind" was perhaps my coming of age story, but hidden away in another time and in other characters and enmeshed in layers of metaphor and allegory, but nonetheless about my own life. However, in telling my own story, I do believe that I transcended to create a sort of parable about American history showing the conflicts between our peoples, red, white and black, as well as our systems of thought: capitalism versus humanity; Christianity versus Shamanism. Even more, I see this book as an allegory about the nature of freedom versus oppression, and illusion versus reality.



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When deciding to write this novel, all these forces from my past were seething around inside of me unresolved and seeping upwards from my semi-conscious, in emotional paroxysms and visual poems--indeed, like ghosts clamoring and hollering back into this existence. But through the multiple drafts of this book, I did indeed do what the psychotherapists say you are supposed to do--that is, make the unconscious conscious, to expose shadow to light, so that you can know and tame it. In that sense all these ghosts and, I believe, many more did indeed holler themselves back into existence.