EXILE'S HOME: THE POETRY OF JAMES WRIGHT

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

EXILE'S HOME: THE POETRY OF JAMES WRIGHT

By

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Chairman: Donald Justice
Major Department: English

This study examines the whole of James Wright's poetry, hoping to give readers a sense of its characteristic qualities and concerns. It has two parts of four chapters each. The first four survey Wright's aesthetics and ideas about language.

Chapter I reviews the large role silence comes to play in his poetry, a silence sometimes used as an aesthetic device. At times this silence is a pleasurable escape and at other times an imprisonment. In nearly every instance, nature itself and a suspicion of words spur Wright on toward silence, sometimes making the possibility of being silent a test of poetry's value.

Chapter II examines the major aesthetic statements in Wright's poems, showing how these pronouncements result from a number of basic assumptions about language and poetry.
Chapter III discusses Wright's styles, more with the idea of characterizing his writing and correcting mistaken notions about it than with pointing out disparities between his pronouncements and practice.

Chapter IV deals with the ways in which Wright uses allusions and his many elegies for poets to acknowledge his influences and to align himself with literary traditions.

The second grouping of four chapters investigates various aspects of exile in Wright's work, and how he partially overcomes exile by redefining its terms.

Chapter V examines his change from the role of one burdened by and estranged from American history to an inheritor of human history.

Chapter VI traces his transformation from one exiled among his own people and longing for home to one who sees home as a spiritual state discovered or created anywhere.

Chapter VII outlines his movement from cosmic loneliness exacerbated by the limits of the physical body to a consoling sense of solitude.

Finally, chapter VIII describes his dual attitude toward nature, characterized by "the green wall" and "the green places." Under the former term, man serves as the anguished consciousness of fallen nature. Under the latter, nature and man share a complex relationship which delights man and gives him solace.
INTRODUCTION

At present, the criticism of James Wright's poetry lives mainly in reviews and a few essays, several of which contain more than a nugget or two of insight. These writings deal with a poet still at work and, thus, are confined to discussions of his latest books, or to the relation of new work to previous work. The central purpose of my study is to provide readers with some feel for the whole of Wright's poetry. I make no pretense, however, regarding the scope and detail of the full-scale study that remains to be written. Instead, I have chosen to focus on those aspects of his poetry which continue to seem interesting and important after several years of reading. The following chapters, then, reflect the desire to examine essential characteristics of Wright's poetry, even though I sometimes note things of eccentric interest.

I have placed most of my attention on Wright's poems instead of on commentaries or theorizing. This is not to wave the tattered banner of New Criticism but to avoid territories that would concern only the specialist. In addition, the nature of my topics suggested that each chapter stand independently, and, except for a few moments
of overlap, they do. Ultimately, this study is a prolegomenon which builds by accumulation. In this gathering, it hopes to emulate the virtues of its subject.
CHAPTER I
POSSIBILITIES OF SILENCE

From the middle of James Wright's career onward, silence becomes a prominent theme in his poetry. Engendered by contact with nature and a wariness of words, the poet's silence establishes his spirituality. It sanctifies and enriches. It provides a retreat from distraction, asserting the need for privacy and allowing for a stronger connection with the imagination. Ultimately, this appeal to the spiritual calls into question the necessity of art, for it stems from the assumption that poetry is not a vehicle for but a material barrier to experience. If language only "gets in the way" of the poet's experience of nature, then words become impediments. In the most extreme case, this leads to the paradox of art becoming a roadblock that must be dismantled, and the poet becoming one who must abolish poetry. Wright never goes to these lengths because he also believes in words as experience and in their power to communicate. Instead, he speaks of the abolition of poetry while at the same time employing poetry to explore the aesthetic possibilities of silence.

Often these poems are preludes to silence or descriptions of it. Sometimes they assert the need to be
silent. A few poems seek to embody silence, such as those Wright attempts to make into natural objects. In nearly all cases, Wright's variations of silence alter the reader's relationship to the poem. The poet's silence may invite the reader's participation in one poem while excluding it in another; or it may seem to do both simultaneously. For example, "Depressed By a Book of Bad Poetry, I Walk Toward an Unused Pasture and Invite the Insects to Join Me":

Relieved, I let the book fall behind a stone.
I climb a slight rise of grass.
I do not want to disturb the ants
Who are walking single file up the fence post,
Carrying small white petals,
Casting shadows so frail that I can see through them.
I close my eyes for a moment, and listen.
The old grasshoppers
Are tired, they leap heavily now,
Their thighs are burdened.
I want to hear them, they have clear sounds to make.
Then lovely, far off, a dark cricket begins
In the maple trees.

(p. 125)¹

This attraction to nature and silence finds ancestry in Wordsworth's "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned," and in Emerson's "Nature." Wordsworth, establishing the Romantic tradition, abandons books to "read" nature. In a similar vein, Emerson asserts that

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me.²

Like Wordsworth and Emerson, Wright does not forsake writing ultimately. In the poem above, he declares that there is good and bad poetry and that one escapes bad poetry by
listening to nature. The reader may wonder what constitutes "bad poetry," and if this poet's depression and subsequent relief stem from happily evading bad art or from momentarily relinquishing the burden of making good art. But these questions need not be answered to see the main point of the poem. Wright seeks spiritual solace and "real" experience. He moves toward silence and gives a description of it. In nature, unlike the bad book, he finds sustenance for the senses and the imagination. And the reader finds himself invited and, at the same time, seemingly excluded from sharing in the process.

The poet moves from the predominant sense, sight, to the other senses and, finally, to a sensory world created by the imagination. After disposing of the book, he focuses on the minute, relentless energy of the departmentalized ants and, even further, their shadows. The image hints at the delicacy of nature, the observer, and the moment of observation. It is part of the poem's moral argument, which culminates in the "clear sounds" of nature. Slowing the poem with the simple statement "I close my eyes for a moment, and listen," Wright presents the fusion of sensation and engaged imagination. "Old," "tired," "burdened," "lovely"--the passage exalts personal perception rather than the pretense of objectivity, and it registers silence by the majesty of a faint sound.
Wright carefully blurs his implied claims for the "clear sounds" of nature and the imagination. As contemporary readers might expect, nature offers no Wordsworthian tutelage nor Emersonian ministry. Its sounds do not form the universal language Thoreau heard. Nor does it reveal the usual conflicts of Wright, the antipastoral nature poet: indifferent nature brutalized by man, yet somehow healing, consoling. The portentous grasshoppers are intimate symbols, as is the "dark" cricket. They inhabit the "unused pasture" of the individual psyche, a terrain Wright often explores. Thus these sounds are private, as are their meanings. Excluded from the poet's interpretation of the sounds, the reader is invited to step into his own unused pasture and listen.

This resolve toward quietism and privacy--solipsism when abused--is influenced by the mysticism of Wright's friend Robert Bly, with whom Wright lived at the time this poem was written. Silence and privacy, however, appear even in Wright's earliest poems. For example, "A Breath of Air":

I walked, when love was gone,
Out of the human town,
For an easy breath of air.
Beyond a break in the trees,
Beyond the hangdog lives
Of old men, beyond girls:
The tall stars held their peace.
Looking in vain for lies
I turned, like earth, to go.
An owl's wings hovered, bare
On the moon's hills of snow.

And things were as they were.

(p. 69)
An uninspired conclusion, to be sure, and only one cause of the poem's failure. Nonetheless, we find a situation similar to that in the previous poem. Though nature provides no clear sounds, the poet seeks it for counsel, even if that results in the lies of psychological projection. The silence here, however, derives not from an intimate correspondence, but a lack of contact. The poet is spiritually bereft. The reader is not encouraged to hear the voluptuousness of nothing.

Wright's movements toward silence take at least two other forms. In one, he attempts to make the poem into a natural object. In the other, he uses direct address to establish his emotional proximity to the reader and to emphasize the individuality of vision. The first is cousin to the quietist approach to nature. Consider "Late November in a Field," a poem published slightly later than our first example.

Today I am walking alone in a bare place,
And winter is here.
Two squirrels near a fence post
Are helping each other drag a branch
Toward a hiding place; it must be somewhere
Behind those ash trees.
They are still alive, they ought to save acorns
Against the cold.
Frail paws rifle the troughs between cornstalks when
the moon
Is looking away.
The earth is hard now,
The soles of my shoes need repairs.
I have nothing to ask a blessing for,
Except these words.
I wish they were
Grass.

(p. 152)
Rather than find the sermon in the stone or put it there to be found, Wright makes the sermon the stone--or a pair of ragged claws, or what you will from the natural world. The poem is a wish for human consciousness to alter unalterable conditions through language, in this case, to make the world warmer. It is also a wish for human artifacts such as words to gain the "holy" state of being part of nature's processes and for man to become a part of nature rather than apart from it. This appeal for unity seeks a silence which would make words, and art, superfluous.

A slightly different argument ensues in a later poem, "A Secret Gratitude," with some of Wright's baldest and most vitriolic writing.

We are men.
It doesn't even satisfy us
To kill one another.

(pt. 1 11. 39-41 p. 184-185)

*

We are men.
We are capable of anything.

(pt. 1 11. 50-51 p. 185)

*

We can kill anything.
We can kill our own bodies.

(pt. 1 11. 55-56 p. 185)

*

Man's heart is the rotten yolk of a blacksnake egg Corroding, as it is just born, in a pile of dead Horse dung.
I have no use for the human creature.
He subtly extracts pain awake in his own kind.
I am born one, out of an accidental hump of chemistry.
I have no use.

(pt. 1 11. 61-67 p. 185)
The poem condemns men in particular, while characteristically linking victimized nature with Woman, in this case represented by Edna St. Vincent Millay. After speculating on Millay's ability to make poetry of her marriage, Wright praises her art as a magical power linked to nature:

Think of that. Being alive with a girl
Who could turn into a laurel tree
Whenever she felt like it.

(pt. 4 11. 3-5 p. 186)

He then concludes the poem:

Outside my window just now
I can hear a small waterfall rippling antiphonally
down over
The stones of my poem.

(pt. 5 p. 186)

The catharsis is welcome after so much fury. Harmony declares itself, so the poet need not pray for unity. Wright allies himself in spirit with Millay, who built "her still house of song / Within sound of water." Art—presumably "good art"—momentarily subdues the tension between the sexes, and it belies humanity's potential for destruction. Poetry participates in the myth of the "holy," suggested by "antiphonally." Under such terms, the poem becomes a natural object, part of the silence underscored by the sound of rushing water.

As attractive and yet dissatisfying as this figure is, another variation of it plays a major part in one of Wright's more successful later poems. But first let us turn to the other form of Wright's aesthetic of silence: the control of the reader's distance from the poet through the device of direct address. In the poems we have seen thus
far, the reader is either a neutral witness or one obliquely invited to explore his own imagination. Yet Wright is famous, especially in his more "personal poems," for a slugged-mouth tone: sudden challenges to the reader which can be wrenching, silly, bumptious, or just the right thwack on the reader's consciousness. For example, "To a Dead Drunk":

God help me too, defeated poet.  
You walked with me one afternoon  
Of blind stone and Ohio soot,  
To visit a great lonely man.  
Never you mind.  .  .  .

(11. 17-21  p. 190)

Or this assault, from "Katy Did":

I was a good child,  
So I am  
A good man. Put that  
In your pipe.

(pt. 1  11. 1-4  p. 204)

Perhaps the most famous and substantial example from this period appears in "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child":

Oh, my secret and lovely place, up shore from the railroad,  
My bareass beach.  
This is not a poem.  
This is not an apology to the Muse.  
This is the cold-blooded plea of a homesick vampire  
To his brother and friend.  
If you do not care one way or another about  
The preceding lines,  
Please do not go on listening  
On any account of mine.  
Please leave the poem.  
Thank you.

(pt. 2  11. 18-29  p. 207)

As I have noted, Wright ultimately believes in art's ability to do more than communicate the difficulty of communication.
And as we have seen, he has even attempted to make poems into natural objects, to fit the mythology, of "unmediated experience." In the above passage, he seeks to distance and engage the reader simultaneously—if that is possible—with a challenge: one may damn melodrama in poems; one may call free verse formlessness; one may crave less personal poems; or one may choose otherwise. The reader must care about the poet's subject, if only to loathe it. Otherwise, he is as useless to the poet as the poet is to him. Thus, the traditional bargain of "Art"—that it carries value for all who are able to appreciate it—is revoked by the poet himself: if you hear nothing of interest, leave, which is an ultimatum covering all of Wright's poetry. The pretense of "interest" dissolves. The artist speaks and accepts not being heard.

Later in this poem, in the "grown man" section, Wright comments on another side of this issue. The poet

. . . works slowly day by long day.
He gets up in the morning and curses himself
Into black silence.
He has got his guts kicked in,
And he says
Nothing. (Reader, I am a liar. He says plenty.)
He shuts up.
He dies.
He grows.

(pt. 3 11. 17-25 p. 209)

The contradictions keep the reader continually off balance. Longing for "the long body of his dream," seeking to compose "the pure clear word," the poet struggles against the impediments of language. Yet he is his own adversary, "cursing himself / Into black silence." The passage suggests benefit
derived from such battering, part of Wright’s puritan strain. The poet has felt life’s punishments and says nothing in response to them, or nothing about them, or nothing of substance about them. The parentheses then complicate the issue. Is the poet a liar who tells "plenty" of lies, such as the whole poem? Or has the poet only just lied and now shows he is honest, his "plenty" being testimony to life’s pains? He is both, a "liar" and an honest man of course, and must be trusted as appearances must be--almost. The final contradiction, "he shuts up," is not so confusing and coy as it might first seem. Silence after damage can make the largest statement possible, silence calling attention to itself. We know that this poet, like all artists, is a liar (if his declarations are not lies ad infinitum). So we also know that he never really shuts up for good. The passage then draws on the myth of the poet silently regenerating his art, while it also deflates that myth since we know that the poet finally speaks of his travail. Here we see a difference from those artists who might actually dispense with art for "experience." Wright struggles to speak clearly about the kick in the gut and the burdensome dream. Finally, he does not mistrust words, only their misuse, which at times demands his own muteness.

Stephen Yenser, in a 1978 article "Open Secrets," contends that at times Wright purposely makes plain-speaking poems which revel in the information they withhold or obscure, poems which are "open secrets." For example, he
cites "On a Phrase from Southern Ohio" and "By the Ruins of a Gun Emplacement: Saint-Benoît." Then, recalling Wright's earlier poem, "The Jewel," he explains Wright's obliqueness.

Wright's poems seem to embody, in respect to "the pure clear word," what the psychologists call an approach-avoidance conflict—he wants to be open and direct, yet seems to fear that in doing so he will snuff out that "blossom of fire," lose his singular vision. Hence perhaps the withdrawals into shells, caves, and secrecy. The fainting strand of spiderweb, the moving jewel of the body, and so on—these images prove his isolation and validate it.

Loneliness and isolation are certainly Wright's most ravenous beasts. Perhaps fear of vision lost does account for his mystifications, at times coy, at times compelling. Opaqueness as a form of silence can resonate with the spiritual, the visionary, in the way mystery cults gain credence by exclusivity. Wright's drive toward protecting his privacy reminds one of Frost, and it colors some of his earliest poems—for example, "On Minding One's Own Business." But Yenser reads poems such as "By a Gun Emplacement: Saint-Benoît" with an excusing eye. Beautiful as these poems may be, one can argue that they are, as Wright might say, glib and unclear. The reader feels as ambivalent about their meanings as the poet in these instances, at least as ambivalent as Yenser claims the poet is.

Finally, I wish to turn to a poem which successfully combines several of these forms of silence: the poem as natural object, the inviting yet excluding address to the
reader, the emphasis on particularity and privacy of visions—all interwoven into a more complex aesthetic statement than those we have seen.

WITH THE GIFT OF A FRESH NEW NOTEBOOK  
I FOUND IN FLORENCE

On the other side of the bridge,  
Over the Arno,  
Across the Ponte Vecchio, across  
The street from the Pitti Palace, below the garden,  
Under the shadow of the fortress,  
I found this book,  
The secret field of the city down over the hill  
From Fiesole.

Nobody yet has walked across and sat down  
At the edge under a pear tree  
To savor the air of the natural blossoms and leave them  
Alone, and leave the heavy place alone.

The pages have a light spirit  
That will rise into blossom and harvest only  
After your hand touches them.  
Then the book will grow  
Light and lighter as the seasons pass.  
But, so far, this field is only  
A secret of snow.

Now this slender field lies only a little uphill  
From the river, and the pale water  
Seems to be turning everything  
It mirrors into snow.  
It is that snow before anyone  
Has walked across it  
Slowly as children walk on their way to school  
In the glittering Ohio morning,  
Or quickly as the breathless Ermine scamper upward through the light crust  
In one indeterminate spot and then stitch  
A threadwork across the whiteness and suddenly  
Vanish as though blown like flakes back upward.

Red and white flowers lie quietly all around  
The edges of the field,  
And it doesn’t matter that they don’t grow there now.  
For one time they grew there  
(No Stanza Break)
Long enough to make the air
Vivid when they vanished.

I suppose I could imagine
The trees that haven't yet grown here.
But I would rather leave them to find their way
Alone, like seedlings lost in a cloud of
snowflakes.
In my imagination, or, better still,
Leave them to you.

(pp. 83-84)

In the conceit of the notebook page as snowy field we find another "unused pasture," more open secrets. But the field is the creation of the poet. He makes no pretense toward transcendence of "mediated experience." Art and nature coalesce. In addition, the poet empowers the reader to a degree not seen in the previous examples. Wright articulates possibilities for his imagination, which need not include or correspond with those of the reader. But, finally, he asserts the reader's essential role in making the blank page "blossom and harvest." The reader inherits the artist's notebook and can imagine the "trees that have not yet grown" on the page or the "red and white flowers" that once blazed about its edges.

Though this position is akin to Wordsworth's view of the poet as a "man speaking to men," Wright does not equalize matters between reader and poet, since he bestows the notebook as a loving sire. Yet the notebook is also a gift to the poet, who found it, who is not its keeper by sacred right. "Art" is not an issue here, nor art objects as finished works ready to edify. The notebook page, like the snowy field, like the field of human experience,
characterizes the domain of ongoing process, not completion. Human consciousness creates and witnesses the interplay of imagination and perception. Since words shape part of experience, and poems may be redrafted, words need not seem artificial or treacherous. Thus Wright has his poem two ways. It is a finished object that suggests continuous revision. It wishes to "leave the heavy place alone" while also hypothesizing manipulations. It invites the reader's creative engagement while exercising that of the poet.

The notebook becomes everyone's personal ground, to be used in accordance with the powers of each imagination. To some degree, then, the poet's voice of authority is silenced. But Wright is less anxious here than in our previous examples, and less despondent. His silence assumes another aspect, for this poem is also a kind of elegy for himself. Wright died not long after completing the book in which this poem appears. The fate of the poet's work is in the hands of the living, as is nature. This poem hopes for good will and invention from readers of both nature and poetry, since neither is inherently more real or transparent or opaque.
Notes

1 Page numbers for poems from Wright's last three books (Two Citizens, To A Blossoming Pear Tree, and This Journey) refer to each of these books respectively. All page numbers for Wright's other poems refer to the Wesleyan Press edition of his Collected Poems. If a page number is given without accompanying line citation, the poem is quoted in its entirety.


CHAPTER II
TOWARD THE CLEAR WORD

Overt statements about art and language appear often in Wright's poems, and with greater frequency in his later books as his writing matures, and he is drawn to consider it. As one might expect, these pronouncements are not necessarily systematic, nor do they always correspond with his practice. Yet they represent working principles and assumptions which underlie much of his work. In effect, these statements are products of one of the following assumptions: 1) that between words and experience a congruency exists which is dynamically related to consciousness; 2) that the language of poetry must take into account the physical body; 3) that there is a language or idiom of one's native place which has limitations but which contributes to the creation of identity; 4) that confrontation with other languages--national or personal--expands one's sensibility; 5) that the "pure clear word" exists as an attainable ideal and that our knowledge of it can only be erotic.

We find the first of these assertions in "The Morality of Poetry," an elegant mishmash from Wright's second book, Saint Judas.
And, for the ear, under the wail and snarl
Of groping foghorns and the winds grown old,
A single human word for love of air
Gathers the tangled discords up to song.
Summon the rare word for the rare desire.

(11. 20-24 p. 60)

The poem first suggests that the world's discord can be harmonized by human utterance, "the word for love of air." This is a dynamic relationship: the rare word acknowledges the rare desire; the rare word may also summon that desire. But a few lines later Wright condemns this harmonizing as "careful rules of song," which collapse before the huge workings of nature with its own consciousness and language. The remainder of the poem contends with the problem of the poet's relationship to nature's speech. Does the poet fall silent? Does he emulate nature's speech, whatever that might be? After letting "all measures die," he says:

Where the sea moves the word moves, where the sea
Subsides, the slow word fades with lunar tides.

(11. 51-52 p. 61)

The simple injunction "Summon the rare word" is, by now, swept up in the more complicated motions of nature. The poet finally offers:

... echoes of my voice:
The dithyrambic gestures of the moon,
Sun-lost, the mind plumed, Dionysian,
A blue sea-poem, joy, moon-ripple on wave.

(11. 56-59 p. 61)

The connection of human utterance to nature is more tenuous and, paradoxically, more intense. The poet is not silenced by experience. All is merely an echo of the poet's voice in its fading. Yet, all is connected, all musical and resembling the human. In this second linking, this passage
aligns itself with Whitman's "The sea whisper'd me," though the sentiment here seems much more blurred and forced.

A clearer and perhaps richer statement of the congruency between word and experience appears in "Speak," written after Wright's celebrated shift to a flatter, more "personal" style.

To speak in a flat voice
Is all that I can do.
I have gone every place
Asking for you.
Wondering where to turn
And how the search would end
And the last streetlight spin
Above me blind.  

(11. 1-8  p. 149)

And then later:

And Jenny, oh my Jenny
Whom I love, rhyme be damned,
Has broken her spare beauty
In a whorehouse old.  

(11. 17-20  p. 149)

* 

I speak of flat defeat
In a flat voice.  

(11. 31-32  p. 150)

The music of these passages betrays the poet's assertions, yet it is far less ornate than in some of his earliest poems. Commanding Jehovah to speak, the poem ultimately seeks God-like speech for the poet, and the accompanying power. It draws on the Judeo-Christian tradition, as does much of Wright's work: Adam naming the animals, the fragile orders of mankind shattered by the confusion of tongues, the recognition of the disparity between word and thing. As a by-product, aesthetic questions blurred in "The Morality of Poetry" find some clarification. Jenny, Wright's muse
figure, personifies the wearied resident of the world whorehouse. To rhyme such a life would be to lie, to betray experience, to employ careful rules of song when they are inappropriate. Of course, much of this poem rhymes, though the break in rhyming and the cry "rhyme be damned" mark a point of peak emotion.

Thus a variation on the imitative fallacy seems at issue. Can one really speak of flat defeat in a flat voice, or make a poem that sings as the sea does? Conversely, do certain standard poetic forms accurately represent these experiences? Though "Speak" embodies a conflict between style and assertion, Wright believed that language and form had to more clearly reflect his experience. Like the poets of the 1960's, he attempted to cast off the dress of the preceding generation—a poetry of more traditional forms, given to irony, academic wit, and mythological allusion. Of course, Wright's personal style adheres to another set of conventions, some of which he formulates. In any event, he assumes some congruity between word and experience by using the diction assigned to God by humanity: "Why dost thou hide thy face?" This is the language of the empowered, turned against the deity.

While "flat defeat / In a flat voice" suggests language responding to experience, taking on a God-like language also dictates or modifies the experience. In a later poem, "She's Awake," words alter experience in a startling way.
Trying to bring himself and the reader to the level of awareness of his lover-muse, Wright says:

For God's sake, wake up, how in hell am I going to die?

It was easy. All I had to do was delete the words lonely and shadow, Dispose of the dactylic hexameters into amphibrachs

Gather your lovely life into my life, And love your life.

(11. 30-35 p. 57)

"Lonely" dominates Wright's work like no other word. As a poet of exile from native lands and customs, history, and the physical body, his sense of human loneliness becomes almost a metaphysic in itself. Yet here the word takes on an uncharacteristic stature. Deleting "lonely" alters the poet's perception and feeling. To put the matter too simply: erase the word and you erase the condition it signifies. But deletion leaves an emotional gap for Wright that must be filled. Thus, Wright replaces "lonely" and "shadow" with "love" and "gather." He does not highlight these words with quotation marks, perhaps because their emotional force comes not in isolation but in relation to other words through syntax. At any rate, the rare word and rare desire—or mundane ones for that matter—exist in a complicated relationship, each altering the other.

Paralleling this relation of word, experience, and consciousness is Wright's belief that vital language depends on an awareness of bodily rhythm and experience. For example, "In a Viennese Cemetery":

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"Lonely" dominates Wright's work like no other word. As a poet of exile from native lands and customs, history, and the physical body, his sense of human loneliness becomes almost a metaphysic in itself. Yet here the word takes on an uncharacteristic stature. Deleting "lonely" alters the poet's perception and feeling. To put the matter too simply: erase the word and you erase the condition it signifies. But deletion leaves an emotional gap for Wright that must be filled. Thus, Wright replaces "lonely" and "shadow" with "love" and "gather." He does not highlight these words with quotation marks, perhaps because their emotional force comes not in isolation but in relation to other words through syntax. At any rate, the rare word and rare desire—or mundane ones for that matter—exist in a complicated relationship, each altering the other.
Bodiless yearnings make no music fall; 
Breath of the body bears the living sound.

(11. 19-20  p. 65)

The body is the major metaphor of Wright's poetry, often linked with other metaphors, particularly the "family" and the "face." Wright associates exile with the body as well as the body banished from home. Leonard Nathan finds this attachment to the body representative of the American materialist ideal, which glorifies physical evidence and experience in its longing for the authentic. Wright shares Whitman's desire to get the body into the poetry, yet this materialist impulse almost never results in a wholesale exaltation of the body. As early as "The Morality of Poetry," we find the metaphor of the body applied to the language of poetry. The rare word, Wright says:

... thrives on hunger, and it rises strong
To live above the blindness and the noise
Only as long as bones are clean and spare,
The spine exactly set, the muscles lean.

(11. 25-28  p. 61)

Thus the body provides a model for the well-chosen word and for the poem as a whole. When Wright diverges from the styles of his first two books, he returns to this metaphor to justify his aesthetic changes. In "Goodbye to the Poetry of Calcium," for example, he equates his past work with old bones, not the total living organism.

Even further, the experience of the body must be a part of the language which influences and is influenced by consciousness. Jenny's spiritual and emotional destruction in "Speak" manifests itself by physical degradation which, in
turn, exacts further destruction. We find this pattern over and over in the cripples, criminals, drunks, and other outcasts who populate Wright's work. Concerning the consciousness and language of the disenfranchised, William Gass writes:

... there is a dominance of cliché and verbal stereotype, an abundance of expletives and stammer words: you know, man, like wow! neat, fabulous, far out, sensaysh. I am firmly of the opinion that people who can't speak have nothing to say. It's one more thing we do to the poor, the deprived: cut out their tongues... allow them a language as lousy as their lives.²

Wright does not presume to give the outcasts a new language. But the empathy behind his writing insists on a language which bears witness to the cracked skull or empty purse. He does not really speak of flat defeat in a flat voice, for that might be just as impotent as the chattering silence Gass observes. Instead, he speaks of defeat in a language more colloquial than many poets before him.

These notions about language, consciousness, and the body also parallel Wright's implied assertion that language participates in the creation of identity and that the poet must make his own language for truly authentic speech. This belief underlies much of his work. In fact, the struggle to develop a personal poetic language comprises much of the "story" of his evolution as an artist. Wright's first two books demonstrate his skills with more traditional verse and idioms. In subsequent work, he formulates his
characteristic colloquial style. Yet, even in these later poems, he declares:

All this time I've been slicking into my own words
The beautiful language of my friends.
I have to use my own, now.
That's why this scattering poem sounds the way it does.

"Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child"
(pt. 7 11.13-16 p. 212)

This is more than a clever disclaimer for the "scattering" form of a particular poem. Wright knew his debt to literary culture and acknowledged it often. Yet the dangers of parroting past voices lie not in mindless mimicry, but in affection for the beauties of previous writers and the comradeship such affection engenders. They also lie in the poet's glibness. In articles and interviews, Wright states repeatedly that glibness encourages the poet to exploit his gifts while it may also undo him, for he might say beautiful things that are senseless and, hence, useless; or he might slickly mix into his words the cogent speech of others and claim it for his own. Under Wright's terms, both approaches are as morally questionable as telling of flat defeat in florid style. To correct matters, Wright proposes for himself a variation on Occam's Razor: distrust all rhetorical complication; strip away the gloss of poetical flourish to find the unvarnished substance of matters.

But the language of literary culture is not the only source of power for this poet. In a later poem, he says:
No, I ain't much.
The one tongue I can write in
Is my Ohioan.

"To the Creature of Creation"
(11. 20-22 p. 58)

Robert Hass wryly observes that "this is based, presumably, on the well-known Ohio habit of speaking in off-rhymed couplets." Indeed, we again find the poet's technique contradicting his aesthetic pronouncement. Yet regional idioms expand Wright's tonal range, especially when juxtaposed with more poetical language.

In this passage, then, Wright claims two resources: literary language and the language of his native region, both of which have limitations. Dave Smith suggests that Wright's drive for a personal language is fueled by a sense of exile.

To be exiled is to live in the strange truth of an alien language that is all sound and to be driven back into the most basic language of one's self, to the most basic understanding of one's own reality.

Wright's desire to strip his poetry of ornament-for-ornament's-sake seems an assertion of a "basic language of one's self," yet in view of what we have seen, this creation of authentic speech and identity is more complicated.

Writing on Wallace Stevens, R.P. Blackmur states:

Good poets gain their excellence by writing an existing language as if it were their own invention; and as a rule success in the effect or originality is best secured by fidelity, in an extreme sense, to the individual words as they appear in the dictionary.
Blackmur's immediate focus is Stevens' vocabulary; but his remarks are relevant here. A good poet's language is a rendition of the language he shares with his culture, not a wholly new invention. Wright was a man of letters and a child of the working class. Cosmopolitan and yet provincial, he admired the graces of the spoken and written word as well as the delicacy of decorum and the energy of rough manners. These predilections mark his work, in its contrasting idioms, tones, and extreme emotional pitches, and in his desire to strip his poems of needless ornament while avoiding the prosaic. The identity in these poems—the identity of Wright, the poet—derives from this unique configuration of tensions in his poems. In its uniqueness, this language is "basic," perhaps. The identity it renders is authentic insomuch as Wright uses his mixtures of idiom and diction as though they were his own and not inventions.

Smith's and Blackmur's remarks assume new aspects when we consider Wright's comments on foreign languages. A collaborator on translations from Spanish and German, Wright also studied in Europe and, later in his career, traveled extensively there. The issue of foreign languages arises in Two Citizens, a book which signals a major change in his later work. Until this time, Wright's poetry is a continual mapping of exile from self, from place, from history, even from language. Two Citizens signals a change in attitude toward this exile. Wright attempts to cast off his native land by going to Europe, but he cannot. In the process,
however, he discovers new territories of the self. He comes upon a twofold linguistic frontier: the language of a place not native to him, and the language of his lover, which requires another kind of learning and translation. *Two Citizens* is a book of breaking forth anew. Wright confronts new territories and this inevitably alters his sensibility. To modify Smith's observation, we can say that Wright finds himself the alien here, but that this does not drive him back to the "basic language of one's self," whatever that might be. Instead, he finds himself cast back upon the basic functions of language. For example:

I WISH I MAY NEVER HEAR OF THE UNITED STATES AGAIN

The ringing and sagging of blue flowers,  
And the spider shedding her diamond shadow down  
On the turtle's body,  
The old woman's hair lock golden spinning a web out of her clothes,  
And the girls who have no trouble worrying  
About the length of their dresses,  
As they stroll slowly, vanishing into their own twilight  
Beside the slim shoulders of donkeys:

I can be silent among these.

One afternoon in northern California,  
Which is a Jack London nut house,  
I almost found my own country.  
At the edge of a field  
I gathered the neck of a buckskin into  
My arms and whispered: Where were you  
All this time?

Alone all this time, and bored with being alone,  
I have been walking all afternoon at the edge  
Of a town where the language is only to me  
The music of mountain people.

In Yugoslavia I am learning the words  
For greeting and goodbye.  

(No Stanza Break)
Everything else is the language
Of the silent woman who walks beside me.

I want the mountains to be builded golden,
And my love wants the cathedrals to be builded
By time's love back to their gray, as the gray
Woman grows old, that gray woman who gave us
Some cheese and whispered her affectionate sound
To my love and me wandering silent in the breeze
Of a strange language, at home with each other.
Saying nothing, listening

To a new word for mountain, to a new
Word for cathedral, to a new word for
Cheese, to a word beyond words for
Cathedrals and homes.

(pp. 20-21)

We have heard Wright speak of silence before, but here the circumstances are different. This is a plea for silence about his native land. Angrily, Wright has left his homeland. Now, he wishes to hear nothing more about it since such talk would summon up old attachments and undercut or exacerbate his anger. But because few of the natives speak his language, it is unlikely that he could "hear" about the U.S. Thus, the voice he ultimately wishes to silence lies within himself. Witnessing the events around him, he declares "I can be silent among these," suggesting both an inner calm and peace with his new surroundings. Up to this point in the poem, however, his role as observer encourages his silence. The sounds of daily life surround him, as do those which are less obvious such as the mystical "ringing and sagging of blue flowers." But unlike "the alien language that is all sound" which Smith speaks of, these sounds do not drive Wright back to the language most
familiar to him. Instead, he eventually struggles to learn the meanings of the new sounds and the new words.

Yet Wright is not so quickly rid of America, nor his pestering past. After proclaiming his silence, he says:

I almost found my own country.
At the edge of a field
I gathered the neck of a buckskin into
My arms and whispered: Where were you
All this time?

(11. 12-16 p. 20)

This is the field from the numerous poems in *The Branch Will Not Break and Shall We Gather At The River*, books central to Wright's sense of place and historical consciousness. It is America, but more important, it is the field of the self, the area Wright insistently surveys. Yet much of this territory remains undiscovered and unmapped. Even when close to it, Wright remains only on its edge, asking questions. Now listening, he stands on the edge of a foreign town and on the fringe of its language.

Alone all this time, and bored with being alone,
I have been walking all afternoon at the edge
Of a town where the language is only to me
The music of mountain people.

(11. 17-20 p. 20)

Wanting to escape the fetters of his usual loneliness, the loneliness of America and the self, the poet steps into a world foreign to him. There, the language attracts him because it is musical and because he knows it carries meaning beyond its melody. Trying to comprehend it would be equivalent to venturing into the *terra incognita* of the self he has not really left behind. Thus, he attempts to learn words "for greeting and goodbye," the elemental aspects of
human relationship. He seeks contact, not avoidance, an
enlarged and renewed vocabulary, not quiescence.

In the remainder of the poem, the confrontation of
languages grows more elaborate.

Everything else is the language
Of the silent woman who walks beside me.
(11. 23-24  p. 20)

No longer the mournful loner, Wright must also learn the
language of his lover, and this opens new emotional
territory. Together, he and his lover listen to the
"affectionate sounds" of the old, gray woman who is Europe.
They also listen "in the breeze / Of a strange language"
which teaches them new words for complicated institutions
and concepts, in effect, creating for them the civilization
through its words. Wright and his lover are not passive,
however. They are joined together by their silent wit-
nessing, their wishes about the mountains and cathedrals,
and their feeling "at home with each other." No longer
purely exiles, they listen "to a word beyond words for /
Cathedrals and homes." The word, of course, is love.

The issues of individual language, love, translation,
and sensibility are more directly addressed in another poem
from this collection, "Afternoon and Evening at Ohrid." I
quote the first of its three sections.

I walked with a browned woman in a time that
grieved her,
The end of summer, above blue water, and the weeds
Came out wondering to her
About their names.

(Stanza Break)
There was no one there to tell her in Serbo-Croatian
The name of that small flower song, and so we had to keep
Our own words in the vastness of that place,
And the dimness of mountains across the huge water,
And my grieving love wondering about being alone in the world,
And my love's clear face.

How could I tell her about their clear names?
I did not know them. I had to hold her.
That was all I had.

So I began. This one is the sun-blooded eye
Of a man who drifted weeping
Downhill into water, gathering, gathering

The awake woman. How are young lovers going
To take their way, and talk together?

Well,
For the first time in my life,
I shut up and listened.

(pt. 1 p. 16)

We know from Wright's previous work, even from poems in this book, that this is not the first time he has listened. Yet he "shuts up" not because he seeks a spiritual state, nor because he despairs of the difficulties of his language and poetical composition. Rather, he now hears a world of many tongues simultaneously spoken, all needing translation.

At the center of these many languages he discovers the power of naming. First, nature speaks: "the weeds / Came out wondering to her / About their names." On one level, this poet's lover expresses curiosity about the names of the local flora; on another, the passage represents a wonderful variation on the myth of Adam naming the animals. Nature is a separate consciousness seeking its identity from a woman.
Like the musical, alien language of the mountain people in the previous poem, "that small flower song" of nature requires naming and, for the alien, translation. But "there was no one there to tell her in Serbo-Croatian" what the name is. The poet and his lover are beyond the sounds of the local human language, yet the knowledge of its existence imbues it with a strange presence. Both poet and lover would like to hear the Serbo-Croatian name for the weed, just as they listened to the names for cheese and cathedral. Instead, they must "keep / Our own words in the vastness of that place." They must recoup their common language as a hedge against the larger world.

But matters of naming and enlarging sensibility grow more complex with additional languages. Wright attempts to quell his lover's anxiety about the ominous "mountains across the huge water" and about the survival of their love. He believes the mountains have "clear names." Unfortunately, he doesn't know them, so he cannot sing them. This impediment is temporary, however. "I had to hold her," he says, "that was all I had." This gesture implies a fourth language: the poet turning to poetry to attest his love.

So I began. This one is the sun-blooded eye
Of a man who drifted weeping
Downhill into the water, gathering, gathering
The awake woman. (pt 1. 11. 14-17 p. 16)

But his poeticizing brings him up short:
How are young lovers going
To take their way, and talk together?

Wright answers his question by resolving to listen to the
many languages around him and to the all-important language
of his lover. He silences himself to listen to the language
of another's sensibility. Again, the gesture suggests
Wright's growing receptivity. To "talk together" would be
to come to an understanding, which would be the result of
successful translation. Here, Wright overcomes the exile of
the individual self, which is a rare event in his work to
this point.

Parts two and three of this poem extend the subject of
naming and translation and so require attention, if only
briefly. In part two, nature speaks again, this time in the
form of a bird whose singing is indecipherable to the
lovers. Conversely, the sound of the lovers is alien to
nature.

So our love for them is a silly
Love, a sooth gathering and ringing
In a coil of shells.

Both the lovers' affection for nature and for each other
remain incomprehensible to the natural world. In the rest
of the section, Wright compares woman--and his lover in
particular--to a spider. This ideal-spider is, of course, a
reflection of his own design.

Shy, marveling at the architecture
Of my own eyes, I found the best
Spider here. She spoke the best language.
And it spins her face.
Here language spins its web of perception, which is both a trap and a habitation. "Best" conveys the tone of child-like pleasure in the face created by words. Yet the significant question here is: who really controls the spinning of words, if anyone does?

As one might expect, part three attempts a synthesis of elements in parts one and two.

She wandered ahead of me, muttering to herself
That language of grief, the mountains and water
that are always
A strange face, browned at the end of summer.
Ahead of me on the mountain path, my browned love
told me clearly:
Come to me and love me clearly with the thinning
shadow of the turtle.
(pt. 3 11. 1-5 p. 17)

Before the "strange face" of the natural world, the poet's lover seeks unity with her beloved and with nature, both of which remind her of the isolation that grieves her. In this seeking, she becomes a life-giver. Though a part of the browned face of nature and, thus, mortal, she seeks to love him as one would love the only world we have. Wright translates her request command into "Come to me and love me clearly with the thinning shadow of the turtle," and his poeticizing reflects somewhat the "architecture" of his own eyes. He concludes:

I missed the turtle, the first time
I caught up with my love,
So we walked on.
Then we walked back. Oh, you should have seen her,
My love said to me, she was just going home
Between one road and another, and we don't even know
In Serbo-Croatian. What is your name,
(No Stanza Break)
I said.
I love you,
She said.

Again, we see the lovers as joyous wanderers with a new sense of home. Again, we see their coming together and their limitations in a world with more names for objects than anyone can know. Yet the final three lines are unlike any in Wright's work. Generally, Wright is a poet who finds man undeserving or incapable of love, yet seeking it. By taking the name "I love you," his lover takes on the identity of the "the one who loves me." She is the action of loving. His compliance with her request for love christens him with the same name, the same identity, in this circumstance, at least. Thus, he moves outward, beyond the confines of the isolated ego. Most of the confrontations in his poems are of the wordless, streetcorner variety. This is the first lingering contact with another person's language and sensibility, and the foreignness of the landscape intensifies the meeting. In the poems quoted, Wright becomes both the translator and the tutored. He learns to translate new words for "love," as if all languages led to such an utterance.

Just as exile and exile relieved are Wright's most important themes, his most constant aesthetic ideal remains the "pure clear word." In the last interview before his death, he says:

I would like to write something that would be immediately and prosaically comprehensible to a reasonably
intelligent reader. That is all. That is all I mean by being clear, but it is very difficult for me. This is a Horatian idea. It is the attempt to write, as one critic once said of the extraordinarily and beautifully strong writer Katherine Anne Porter, so that "every one of her effects is calculated but they never give the effect of calculation." We read a story like her "Noon Wine" and it is what we call seamless. . . . When you read the whole thing you do realize, and not just with your feelings but your intelligence, that what you have just looked at is a living thing. It has form . . . I think that she thought very clearly and carefully about the need to make things clear to a reasonably intelligent reader of good will.6

We cannot hold a poet to his extemporizings. Yet this sentiment underlies much of his best writing, and it sometimes becomes the subject of his poems. The most famous instance of this is parts three and four from "Many of Our Waters: Variations On a Poem by a Black Child."

The kind of poetry I want to write is the poetry of a grown man.
The young poets of New York come to me with Their mangled figures of speech,
But they have little pity
For the pure clear word.

(pt. 3 11. 1-5 p. 208)

Wright later declares that he knows "something about the pure clear word" and that this knowledge increases in relation to how much one becomes the "grown man" who "plows down" into the self, into "the long body of his dream." But the ideal of clarity assumes another aspect in section four.

This morning
My beloved rose, before I did,
And came back again.

(Stanza Break)
The kind of poetry I want is my love
Who comes back with the rain. Oh I
Would love to lie down long days long, the long
Down slipping the gown from her shoulders.

But
I got to go to work.

Work be damned, the kind
Of poetry I want
Is to lie down with my love.

All she is
Is a little ripple of rain
On a small waterfall.

What do you want from me?
(pt. 4 p. 209)

Here, the poetry of the grown man, the poetry of the pure clear word, exists in an erotic relationship with language. Just as Porter's stories are objects of calculation that take on life, so must poems be. For Wright, the poet, like the good lover, must know the graces of technique. He must know how not to mangle a figure of speech, but to caress it with all the calculation of one attempting to give pleasure to the writer as well as the reader. We have heard Wright indicate the need for language to connect with the properties of a living body. In the figure of poem as lover, language is the body loved and loving.

But such attention to language need not be confined to that which is rarefied or spectacular, for this is a predictable and, perhaps, attenuated passion. The poet must also have his eye on the mundane, the raw, the prosaic as sources of lexical energy, for example: "I got to go to work." But he must not participate in the abuses of language committed daily by the prosaic world. Wright
completes his amorous declaration with a characteristic turn to the reader, "What do you want from me?", which makes the reader both voyeur and intruder. Moreover, it suggests that the reader find his own erotic relationship with language, for love can never really be conducted by proxy.

Behind this calculation, of course, lies the desire to be clear, to be "prosaically comprehensible." This poem is Wright's most direct statement about the readers' and the poet's erotic relations with language. It is not, however, the only time he uses the figure of the lover. In "To the Muse," an earlier poem, he calls to the battered and sickly Jenny to rise from the dark suckhole of his own imagination. She is both the "Muse of black sand" and the woman whose breast was injured as much by the cure of the "three lady doctors in Wheeling" as by her unnamed malady. Thus she embodies the world of poetry and prose. Wright concludes with a lover's plea.

How can I live without you?
Come up to me, love,
Out of the river, or I will
Come down to you.

(11. 45-48 p. 169)
Notes


CHAPTER III
STYLES

Despite his popular reputation as a plain-spoken poet of personal experience, Wright has little in common with the raw free-aversers whose sincere lines are, as Randall Jarrell points out, unfortunately "neither the imitation of life nor a slice of life but life itself." As we have seen, Wright prized calculation and form in poetry as he admired the natural flow of speech. It is no surprise, then, that he is one of the more highly stylized poets of his time, one whose "voice" is easily recognizable and susceptible to parody, even self-parody. Like a Dickinson or a Pope, he sought variety within a narrow range of styles. Thus his best work has the rhetorical power of the familiar without being predictable. Well known for his free verse poems, he was also a graceful metrist who continued to practice his numbers long after he supposedly had abandoned them as a bankrupt form of expression. He underscored this duality himself by prefacing his Collected Poems with "The Quest" and "Sitting in a Small Screenhouse on a Summer Morning," the first an allusive poem in tetrameter and the latter a surrealist allegory in colloquial free verse.
To further illuminate this basic duality of expression, let us turn for a moment to Ortega Y Gasset's metaphor of the window. The work of art is a window opening upon a garden.

Looking at the garden we adjust our eyes in such a way that the ray of vision travels through the pane without delay and rests on the shrubs and flowers. Since we are focusing on the garden and our ray of vision is directed toward it, we do not see the window but look clear through it. The purer the glass, the less we see it. But we also deliberately disregard the garden and, withdrawing the ray of vision, detain it at the window. According to Gasset, the pane of glass, the overt form, appeals to the artistic sensibility. The vision of the garden appeals more to the human sensibility and is less artful. It is impossible, Gasset claims, to focus completely on either. Wright's poetry is particularly interesting in this case because for much of his career his subject matter changed little. It was always the same garden. Switching his formal emphasis from traditional meters to freer verses amounted to making the glass as transparent as possible, creating the artful illusion of artlessness.

Wright's metered verse generally falls into one of four types: tetrameter, pentameter, trimeter (all iambic), and variously metered lines repeated in sequence to create uniform stanzas. His free verse employs the so-called "deep image"; or it uses greatly varied line lengths or uniform line
lengths; or it seems to "collapse" his usual colloquial syntax by deleting connective words.

One of Wright's most successful and famous early poems in tetrameter is "An Offering for Mr. Bluehart":

That was a place, when I was young,
Where two or three good friends and I
Tested the fruit against the tongue
Or threw the withered windfalls by.
The sparrows, angry in the sky,
Denounced us from a broken bough.
They limp along the wind and die.
The apples all are eaten now.

Behind the orchard, past one hill
The lean satanic owner lay
And threatened us with murder till
We stole his riches all away.
He caught us in the act one day
And damned us to the laughing bone,
And fired his gun across the gray
Autumn where now his life is done.

Sorry for him, or any man
Who lost his labored wealth to thieves,
Today I mourn him, as I can,
By leaving in their golden leaves
Some luscious apples overhead.
Now may my abstinence restore
Peace to the orchard and the dead.
We shall not nag them any more.
(pp. 50-51)

With the exception of one slightly awkward enjambment (line 15) and a few bits of padding (i.e.: "past one hill"), this poem secures a pleasing shape in a spare language. One of its strengths lies in the willful, flat assertions in the final lines of each stanza. Wright's first book, The Green Wall, was chosen for the Yale Younger Poets series by W.H. Auden, suggesting that Wright was clearly among those poets practicing the poetic orthodoxy of the time, which Donald Hall succinctly describes as "the ability to shape an
analogy, to perceive and develop comparisons, to display etymological wit, and to pun six ways at once."3 In his essay on Wright’s styles, Robert Bly notes that Wright was accused of being a member of the "school of charm" and of relying on a "plodding sincerity,"4 and that eventually Wright adopted new styles because he agreed with these criticisms. This poem, though witty and allusive, acquits itself of those charges. It also contains the primary tension in Wright’s styles, between saying things prosaically and having such things embody the form we traditionally call a "poem."

Throughout his career Wright used tetrameters with variety. In a much later poem, for example, "To a Dead Drunk," he says of Pound and Eliot:

Oh, plenty will remember them.  
Maybe the Cyclades will not,  
Nor the frail Irishmen who scream  
Into our century and rot.  
But someone whose triumphant name  
Is Lyndon Pink Jane Adam Smith  
Will pounce on your forgotten name  
To write a dissertation with.  

(11. 9-16 pp. 189-190)

And of the dead drunk poet:

Still, in Minerva, he had still  
A white tree, a white miracle  
Beyond a little mound of coal  
(Listen, what rhymes with miracle?)  
We sang all afternoon, we tossed  
A willing honey under the tongue.  
I must have seemed a silly ghost.  
Pity me now. I was just young.  

(11. 25-32 p.190)

Despite slightly affected passages such as "he had still," this poem employs the same colloquial syntax as the previous
example but uses a looser meter and enjambment without syntactical pause. In addition, it displays wit in the aside "Listen, what rhymes with miracle?" and in its sarcasm, word play, allusions, and other learned jibes at pedantry and academic puffery.

Two more examples of Wright's tetrameters will suggest their range. Consider this passage from "So She Said," a poem from the same period as "To a Dead Drunk."

She knew me lonely so she took
My bare body into her bed,
Yet could not bear to let me look
Her over, naked. For she said
She did not know if she could bear
Two hundred pounds of the blind sky,
A man, a rock that breathes a woman's hair.
Neither did I.

(11. 9-16 p. 187)

While not really a successful piece, this poem arouses interest for two reasons. First, the treatment of woman is less overtly mythological than is usual for Wright, anticipating the unusual love poems of Two Citizens. Second, and more important for our present purposes, the poem blends Wright's free verse styles with more traditional forms. It contains stanzas of varied line lengths. Often enjambed, some of its lines have more than eight syllables and some fewer. A later poem, "With the Shell of a Hermit Crab," embodies another kind of mixture. I quote the whole of it.

This lovely little life whose toes
Touched the white sand from side to side,
How delicately no one knows,
Crept from his loneliness, and died.

(Stanza Break)
From deep waters long miles away
He wandered, looking for his name,
And all he found was you and me,
A quick life and a candle flame.

Today, you happen to be gone.
I sit here in the raging hell,
The city of the dead, alone,
Holding a little empty shell.

I peer into his tiny face.
It looms too huge for me to bear.
Two blocks away the sea gives place
To river. Both are everywhere.

I reach out and flick out the light.
Darkly I touch his fragile scars,
So far away, so delicate,
Stars in a wilderness of stars.

(p. 19)

The precious and the vicious counterbalance one another,
neither as extreme as we usually find in Wright's work.
This poem has a classical purity and carriage, relying much
less on vivid imagery than on felicitous phrasing for its
power. Though chock-full of Wright's code words--lovely,
delicately, loneliness, wandered, name, hell, alone, face,
darkly--these code words act almost as pointers toward the
shapeliness of the writing: what Wright oft thought but
rarely so well expressed, at least in this manner.

Some of Wright's successful poems in other meters show
characteristics similar to those we have seen. Wright was
not a practitioner of forms such as sestinas or villanelles.
He did, however, produce a number of fine sonnets. "St.
Judas" is probably the most famous. But consider the
sestets from two sonnets in his first book, The Green Wall,
and a complete sonnet from This Journey, his last book.
Give winter nothing; hold; and let the flake
Poise or dissolve along your upheld arms.
All flawless hexagons may melt and break;
While you must feel the summer's rage of fire,
Beyond this frigid season's empty storms,
Banished to bloom, and bear the birds' desire.
"To a Troubled Friend"
(11. 9-14  p. 21)

* * *

Hurry, Maguire, hammer the body down,
Crouch to the wall again, shackle the cold
Machine guns and the sheriff and the cars:
Divide the bright bars of the cornered bone,
Strip, run for it, break the last law, unfold,
Dart down the alley, race between the stars.
"To a Fugitive"
(11. 9-14  p. 27)

READING A 1979 INSCRIPTION ON BELLi'S MONUMENT

It is not only the Romans who are gone.
Belli, unhappy a century ago,
Won from the world his fashionable stone.
Where it stands now, he doesn't even know.
Across the Tiber, near Trastevere,
His top hat teetered on his head with care,
Brushed like a gentleman, he cannot see
The latest Romans who succeed him there.

One of them bravely climbed his pedestal
And sprayed a scarlet MERDA on his shawl.
This afternoon, I pray his hidden grave
Lies nameless somewhere in the hills, while rain
Fusses and frets to rinse away the stain.
Rain might erase when marble cannot save.
(p. 9)

The subject of the first two examples contrasts their
elevated phrasing, especially in "To a Fugitive." If one
spoke of flat defeat in a flat voice, as Wright once
asserted, such a contrast would hardly please, since the
language would lack conviction. Such judgments are matters
of taste and the prejudice of the age. With its sparse
figuration and lack of grand rhetoric, the "Belli" sonnet
has the more natural sound, appropriate to its subject, the regional poet who wrote in dialect.

Most of Wright's other verse in pentameter, trimeter, and in stanzas of uniform or varied line lengths can be found in his first two books. Most of it conforms to the manner of the early poems we have discussed. But some poems heighten the contrast between colloquial diction and traditional form. In an essay, on Wright's early poetry, Henry Taylor notes this elegant containment of willfully rough speech, calling it "flexible diction." He uses two examples to show how, at its extreme, this flexible diction could create "sounds increasingly like his later poems."

Beany went home, and I got sick and ran,
You old son of a bitch.
You better hurry down to Minnegan;
He's drunk or dying now, I don't know which,
Rolled in the roots and garbage like a fish,
The poor old man.

"A Note Left in Jimmy Leonard's Shack"
(11. 25-30 p. 54)

* 

You thought that was funny, didn't you, to mock a girl?
I loved her only in my dreams,
But my dreams meant something
And so did she,
You son of a bitch,
And if I ever see you again, so help me in the sight of God,
I'll kill you.

"Ohio Valley Swains"
(11. 37-43 p. 19)

Though the second poem here is far less successful because of its sentimentality, Taylor's point has substance. His further comments provide additional illumination.
What is notable here is not merely the shared epithet, but the continued inclusiveness of diction. Wright's later manner is sometimes said to be free of old-fashioned rhetoric, but it can still put in the right place a line like "I loved her only in my dreams."6

Thus, Wright creates tension in some of his early poems by using the rough diction that became a regular ingredient in his later style; in later work, he uses touches of his "charm school" diction to contrast with verbal roughhousing.

Wright's freer poems urge us to attend more to Gasset's "garden" than to the pane through which we view it, more to the sentiment of the poem than to its formal aspects. As such, these poems rely for their impact on an authoritative tone most often supported by sincerity or the testimony of personal experience. To a considerable extent, their lyric or narrative "arguments" influence their shapes on the page. Yet they also acquire much of their formal properties from typography--a conservative typography by contemporary standards: line lengths determined by phrase unit, breath pause, or simply the need to create interesting tensions.

Wright's shift to a predominantly free-verse style is famous enough that it need not be recounted in detail here. The poems after those in his first two books will receive most of our attention. But just as critics note that Wright continued to compose meters after he supposedly abandoned them, we can see him employing freer versification in these early "formal" poems. And in these instances, he creates
effects similar to those in *The Branch Will Not Break* and *Shall We Gather At The River*. Consider, for example, this passage from "Sappho," a dramatic monologue from *The Green Wall*.

> And now it is said of me  
> That my love is nothing because I have borne no children.  
> Or because I have fathered none;  
> That I twisted the twig in my hands  
> And cut the blossom free too soon from the seed;  
> That I lay across the fire,  
> And snuffed it dead sooner than draft or rain.  
> (11. 58-64 p. 34)

Few have counted this poem among Wright's early successes, though it is. It shows Wright's style in transition. In later poems, he would more than likely write "And now they say" rather than "And now it is said of me," despite the persona. The tone in this passage is slightly elevated but the diction unadorned and eloquent in its simplicity.

Evidence of this transitional style also appears in "A Prayer in My Sickness," from *Saint Judas*.

> You hear the long roll of the plunging ground,  
> The whistle of stones, the quail's cry in the grass.  
> I stammer like a bird, I rasp like stone,  
> I mutter, with gray hands upon my face.  
> The earth blurs, beyond me, into dark.  
> Spinning in such bewildered sleep, I need  
> To know you, whirring above me, when I wake.  
> Come down. Come down. I lie afraid.  
> I have lain alien in my self so long,  
> How can I understand love's angry tongue?  
> (p. 65)

This poem, too, clings to a loose syllable count, and its weakness results mostly from the quality of its imagery, generic within Wright's work. We have heard that "Come down. Come down" in our earlier discussion of "Speak." It
is also related to the "Come out, come out, I am dying" in "A Message Hidden in an Empty Wine Bottle That I Threw into a Gully of Maple Trees One Night at an Indecent Hour."

Moreover, phrasing and images like "the whistle of stones" and "I rasp like stone" are prototypes of those in the "deep image" poems which Wright developed for a time under the influence of his friend, Robert Bly.

By far Wright's largest single shift in styles came with his third book, The Branch Will Not Break, where he turned to free verse in earnest. Yet the sense of balance and restraint in the previous passages can often be found in these poems. For example, "Beginning":

The moon drops one or two feathers into the field.
The dark wheat listens.
Be still.
Now.
There they are, the moon's young, trying
Their wings.
Between trees, a slender woman lifts up the lovely shadow
Of her face, and now she steps into the air, now she is gone
Wholly, into the air.
I stand alone by an elder tree, I do not dare breathe
Or move.
I listen.
The wheat leans back toward its own darkness,
And I lean toward mine.

(p. 127)

Almost symmetrical, the lineation suggests an arrangement designed to please the eye. But the typography also supports the tripartite action: the vision of the moon, the vision of the woman, and the poet turning inward. The "argument" is not syllogistic, like that in "To His Coy Mistress," but its arrangement is calculated.
Most of the free verse poems in this book and later books maintain a semblance of typographical symmetry, or their stanzaic pattern is molded by the argument of the poems. Those that do not follow these principles of arrangement usually appear as one block of words with either uniform or highly varied line lengths. Of the styles we have seen, this "block" style is perhaps least used, though it gives shape to some of Wright's most successful poems, notably "A Blessing," "Willy Lyons," and "Northern Pike."

The other important aspect of Wright's shift toward freer forms is the appearance of the "deep image," which arises not from discursive reasoning but from subconscious processes. Influenced by the Spanish Surrealists and Jungian psychology, this approach to poetry represents a backlash against the poetic orthodoxy described a few pages back. The opening line of "Beginning" typifies the deep image:

The moon drops one or two of its feathers into the field.

Generally, the reader must trust the poet in these moments, for just as earlier Surrealist poems provide surprising juxtapositions, so, too, does this approach create beautiful, if often mysterious, associations. Wright did not consider this type of writing surrealism, however. Its calculation is of a different order: hermetic imagery meant to evoke the spirit as well as surprise the reader who expects rational associations. Often, Wright effectively
employs it amid prosaic declarations and imagery with more familiar associations. For example, "Twilights":

The big stones of the cistern behind the barn Are soaked in whitewash.  
My grandmother's face is a small maple leaf Pressed in a secret box.  
Locusts are climbing down into the dark green crevices Of my childhood. Latches click softly in the trees. Your hair is gray.

The arbors of the cities are withered.  
Far off, the shopping centers empty and darken.  
A red shadow of steel mills.  
(p. 124)

There is little desire here to be unpredictable merely to keep the reader off balance. Nearly all of the sentences and fragments are "prosaically comprehensible" on their own. Yet, the two small surprises, "Face is a small maple leaf / Pressed in a secret box" and "green crevices / Of my childhood," result from the larger series of associations created by the juxtaposed sentences. Although "Your hair is gray" seems an unremarkable line in itself, its climactic position in the poem makes it startling. One of the debates about poetry of this kind centers on how much of its associating is arbitrary. In the years since these poems were written, many deep image imitations have failed because of predictable associations, arbitrariness, or blurred emotional content. "Twilights" does not conceal wholly the artistic intellect which the deep image orthodoxy seems to deny.

Yet Wright himself was not always able to avoid opaqueness or predictable associations. "Lying in a Hammock
at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," "In Memory of a Spanish Poet," and "The Undermining of the Defense Economy" successfully employ the deep image. But consider a passage from "Goodbye to the Poetry of Calcium," the second poem in The Branch Will Not Break and one that might be viewed as an aesthetic manifesto.

Mother of roots, you have not seeded
The tall ashes of loneliness
For me. Therefore,
Now I go.
If I knew the name,
Your name, all trellises of vineyards and old fire
Would quicken to shake terribly my
Earth, mother of spiralling searches, terrible
Fable of calcium, girl... . . .
(11. 1-9 pp. 111-112)

We are allowed the pleasures of texture here but not of clarity. The same may be said of passages such as:

The moon is out hunting, everywhere,
Delivering fire,
And walking down hallways
Of a diamond.

"Having Lost My Sons, I Confront the Wreckage of the Moon: Christmas, 1960"
(11. 3-6 p. 131)

* 

Two athletes
Are dancing in the cathedral
Of the wind.

A butterfly lights on the branch
Of your green voice.

Small antelopes
Fall asleep in the ashes
Of the moon.

"Spring Images"
(p. 129)

These images are arguably as clear as some within the previous poems I've praised, but they fail for lack of an
anchoring context or because they seem merely the machinations of a strong fancy. On the other hand, Wright cannot afford to use plainer imagery which forges associations suddenly too familiar or too predictable. For example:

> I slept a few minutes ago,
> Even though the stove has been out for hours.
> I am growing old.
> A bird cries in bare elder trees.
> "In the Cold House"
> (p. 130)

Though this little poem gives pleasure by what it withholds from the reader, it succumbs to telegraphed observation.

The deep image gradually loses prominence in Wright's next two books, Shall We Gather at the River and the new work in Collected Poems, where Wright consolidates his Ohio River mythology and also explores urban landscapes. The former book is darker, perhaps his angriest and most melodramatic. The new work in Collected Poems has darker moments but is tonally more various: at times playful, acerbic, baleful, joyous. Some poems also foreshadow Wright's more affirmative tone in Two Citizens. Most important, poems from both books aim for a prosaic simplicity of expression. For example, from Shall We Gather at the River:

> The Chippewa young men
> Stab one another shrieking
> Jesus Christ.
> Split-lipped homosexuals limp in terror of assault.
> High school backfields search under benches
> Near the Post Office. Their faces are the rich Raw bacon without eyes.
> The Walker Art Center crowd stare
> At the Guthrie Theatre.
> "The Minneapolis Poem"
> (pt. 2 p. 140)
Surely the plainest thug who read them
Would cluck with the ancient pity.
Men have a right to thank God for their
loneliness.
The walls are hysterical with their dank messages.
"Inscription for the Tank"
(11. 9-12 p. 142)

I will grieve alone,
As I strolled alone, years ago, down along
The Ohio shore.
I hid in the hobo jungle weeds
Upstream from the sewer main,
Pondering, gazing.
"In Response to the Rumor that
the Oldest Whorehouse in
Wheeling, West Virginia, Has
Been Condemned"
(11. 1-6 p. 165)

And from Collected Poems:

I had nothing to do with it. I was not here.
I was not born.
In 1862, when your hotheads
Raised hell from here to South Dakota,
My own fathers scattered into West Virginia
And southern Ohio.
My family fought the Confederacy
And fought the Union.
None of them got killed.
But for all that, it was not my fathers
Who murdered you.
Not much.

"A Centenary Ode: Inscribed
to Little Crow, Leader of the
Sioux Rebellion in Minnesota,
1862"
(11. 1-12 p. 180)

I have a little time left, Jack.
I don't know what you want.
But I know what I want.
I want to live my life.
(Stanza Break)
And how can I live my life
Unless you live yours?
"Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child"
(pt. 7 11. 7-12 p. 212)

The river bank, the pasture, the street corner--these are Wright's characteristic settings, and their relentless recurrence parallels his use of colloquial diction and syntax. At its best, his work builds by accumulation, repetition, an obsessive return to a limited number of resources.

Wright's last three books, Two Citizens, To A Blossoming Pear Tree, and This Journey continue in this stylistic vein, though they differ from one another. Two Citizens signals a positive shift away from the angst and paranoia of earlier work, though critics such as Bonnie Costello argue that these poems disintegrate into sentimental mauderings. It is the most exuberant and obstreperous of Wright's books, and the poems show an expanded sensibility, covering subjects rarely approached before. For example, this address to a lover:

You and I could not have been simple married lovers. 
There are so many reasons I can't count them, 
But here are some few:
You are much more intelligent and learned than I am. 
I have a very quick felicity of tongue. 
Sooner or later I would have bitten your heart 
With some snide witty remark or other. 
And you wouldn't stand for it. 
Our lives being what we are, 
We didn't have a chance.  
(Stanza Break)
I wish we had had.  
I have written this poem to you before I die.    
And I don’t mean to die 
For some good time yet.    
"The Young Good Man"  
(pt. 3  p. 15)

The prosaic quality of this passage makes some of Wright’s work seem florid by comparison. Yet several pages later, he can write:

In this city broken on the wheel  
We went back to the warm caterpillar of our hotel.  
And the wings took.  
Oh lovely place,  
Oh tree.  
We climbed into the branches  
Of the lady’s tree.  
We birds sang.    
And the lemon light flew out over the river.  
"Hotel Lenox"  
(11. 14-22  p. 29)

The first passage succeeds because the two sections which precede it in "The Young Good Man" supply additional context and tension. Alone, it is skilled composition which never supersedes its prosaic sincerity. The latter passage succumbs to sentimentality: the lovers are happy as birds.

Yet the lines "In this city broken on the wheel / We went back to the warm caterpillar of our hotel" are a model of Wright’s sensibility and style at this time. Often, he juxtaposes degradation and sweetness. But when employed mechanically, these pairings constitute a form of sentimentality. This impulse toward polar opposites
parallels his inclination to pit colloquial against poetic language. Perhaps more than any of his books, Two Citizens relies on such pairings, successful when moderated. For example:

One good friend of mine, Bennie Capaletti, Told me how in a basketball game, one person Called him a dirty guinea, and Bennie Did not even slug him.

Quintus Horatius Flaccus, my good secret, Bennie Capaletti had the fastest Hands in that fast Ohio Valley. He could have killed him.

More than love, my father knew how to bear love, One quick woman a dark river of labor. He led me and my two good brothers To gather and swim there.

I still love the fine beauty of his body. He could pitch a very good Sunday baseball. One afternoon he shifted to left hand And struck out three men.

"Prayer to the Good Poet" (11. 13-28 pp. 10-11)

Though Capaletti’s fists and the "dark river of labor" offer a pleasing juxtaposition of the gritty and the plaintive, Wright further strengthens this passage through gradations of feeling, highlighted by the mock heroism in a son’s portrait of his father. This passage also contains two small stylistic features which seem exclusive to this book. The first, rare but noteworthy, is a "piled up" syntax which appears in lines like "One quick woman a dark river of labor" or this passage from "Names Scarred at the Entrance to Chartres":

Nameless builder of strawberry leaves, So true to me in my lonely praying, so common To the French builders who sing among lettuce (No Stanza Break)
And proud tongue singing the clearest
Stone song.

(11. 43-47 p. 46)

The other, more prominent stylistic feature involves the use
of abstract adjectives to dictate judgment as in "my two
good brothers." This technique seemingly inflates the
language while often making it sound colloquial. For
example:

By God, I know this much:
When a fine young man is true to his true love
And can face out a fine deep shock on his jaw
(That scar so low off, that true scar of love),
And when a man can stand up in the middle of
America
(That brutal and savage place whom I still love),

Never mind your harangues about religion.
"Paul"
(11. 30-36 p. 25)

One may not be charmed by the bellicose tone here, and such
inflation might only make for sloppy prose. But the wordy
speechifying stretches the range of Wright's plain style.
When it succeeds, it produces a grand rhetoric of the local
tongue, as in "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry,
Ohio" and "Names Scarred at the Entrance to Chartres." When
it fails, it is too much knee-slapping, too much ingratiating
quaintness.

While it is apparent from the above passages that
Two Citizens still contains many of Wright's darker themes,
its emerging, qualified optimism also gives rise to the
comic and the playful. Neither tone is exclusive to Two
Citizens, however. We have found simple humor before in
Wright's punning, and in early poems such as "A Song for the
Middle of the Night" and, later, "In Memory of the Horse David, Who Ate One of My Poems." Also, Wright's direct addresses to the reader, when arch, echo with Frostian snickers. In Two Citizens, there are more instances of the comic, more varieties in greater concentrations. The buffoonery in the inflated passages above is only one example. Consider this sarcastic burst from "The Streets Grow Young," which is a descendent of "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco: 1959" and "Confession to J. Edgar Hoover":

Okay. I accept your forgiveness. I started the Reichstag fire.

I invented the ball-point pen. I ate the British governor of Rhodesia.

(But that was a long time ago, And I thought he was assorted fruits and chicken sauce. Still, all the same.)

Okay now, hit the road, and leave me And my girl alone. "The Streets Grow Young" (pt. 3 11. 12-20 pp. 30-31)

Wright lampoons the confessional poem and the melodramatic aspect of his everyman role of victim and victimizer in the theatre of human brutality. The passage also indicts the reader.

Paul Carroll, writing on "The Poet as Emmett Kelly," has convincingly suggested that in poems such as "As I Step Over a Puddle at the End of Winter, I Think of an Ancient Chinese Governor," Wright interweaves his tragic vision with the comic. The humor, Carroll asserts, involves irony and the poet allowing himself to be the butt of the joke. "To
the Creature of Creation," which concludes Two Citizens, offers a variation on this blend.

No, I ain't much.
The one tongue I can write in
Is my Ohioan.
There, most people are poor.
I thought I could not stand it
To go home any more,
Yet I go home, every year,
To calm down my wild mother,
And talk long with my brother.

Some day I have to die,
As everyone must do
Alone, alone, alone,
Peaceful as peaceful stone.
You are the earth's body.
I will die on the wing.
To me, you are everything
That matters, chickadee.
You live so much in me.
Chickadees sing in the snow.
I will die on the wing,
I love you so.

Citing this poem as Wright's successful attempt to gather his new emotional discoveries into a spoken language of childhood, Robert Hass notes that "the way he has achieved this is . . . intensely artificial, even a little weird, and . . . meant to be."10 Indeed, eccentric good-old-boyism and momentary muggings as W.C. Fields counter the pathos. The poet is the wacky rhapsode, or the drunk on a sweet binge, aware that he is both player and plaything of essential loss, but willing to play on, to beat the bones, to smile through the grim tune.

To A Blossoming Pear Tree and This Journey, Wright's last books, move away from these mixtures of tone. The
former continues to explore European and American landscapes, appropriating them for the poet’s imagination. Stylistically, it returns to the main current of Wright’s later work, generally free verse (with occasional poems in meters), a small measure of dramatic framing, and continued sympathy with the degraded and the fragile. The title poem serves well as an example.

TO A BLOSSOMING PEAR TREE

Beautiful natural blossoms,
Pure delicate body,
You stand without trembling.
Little mist of fallen starlight,
Perfect, beyond my reach,
How I envy you.
For if you could only listen,
I would tell you something,
Something human.

An old man
Appeared to me once
In the unendurable snow.
He had a singe of white
Beard on his face.
He paused on a street in Minneapolis
And stroked my face.
Give it to me, he begged.
I’ll pay you anything.

I flinched. Both terrified,
We slunk away,
Each in his own way dodging
The cruel darts of the cold.

Beautiful natural blossoms,
How could you possibly
Worry or bother or care
About the ashamed, hopeless
Old man? He was so near death
He was willing to take
Any love he could get,
Even at the risk
Of some mocking policeman
Or some cute young wiseacre
Smashing his dentures,
Perhaps leading him on
(No Stanza Break)
To a dark place and there
Kicking him in his dead groin
Just for the fun of it.

Young tree, unburdened
By anything but your beautiful natural blossoms
And dew, the dark
Blood in my body drags me
Down with my brother.
(pp. 60-61)

To A Blossoming Pear Tree is also the first of Wright's books containing prose. Wright calls them prose pieces rather than prose poems, suggesting a distinction he never really explains. Yet these pieces are sometimes difficult to distinguish from the poems, save for their typography. Consider, "A Small Grove in Torri Del Benaco," on which I have perpetrated what might be called the heresy of lineation.

Outside our window
We have a small willow,
And a little beyond it
A fig tree, and then a stone shed.
Beyond the stone the separate trees
Suddenly become a grove: a lemon,
A mimosa, an oleander, a pine,
One of the tall slender cypresses
That a poet once called
Candles of darkness
That ought to be put out in winter,
Another willow, and a pine.

She stands among them
In her flowered green clothes. Her skin
Is darker gold
Than the olives in the morning sun.
Two hours ago we got up
And bathed in the lake.
It was like swimming in a vein.
Everything that can blossom
Is blossoming around her now.
She is the eye of the grove, the eye
Of mimosa and willow.
The cypress behind her
Catches fire.

(p. 40)
Though one of many possibilities, lineation indicates how close Wright's free verse can come to prose, and, perhaps, how arbitrary is typography. If one argues that each line must have its own integrity, that it must be, as Williams said, a "moment of attention," that it must extend or enlarge the "argument" of the poem, then lines like "Beard on his face" and "How could you possibly" in "To A Blossoming Pear Tree" certainly pass muster. Yet most of the lines in that poem function as discrete units, semantically and syntactically. In my version of "A Small Grove in Torri Del Benaco," many lines also fulfill this criterion, perhaps in ratios comparable to those of Wright's "real" poems. So what is the difference? Perhaps none, save that Wright uses lineation to control the reader's pace and attention, and that he foregoes this control in his prose pieces. In any event, these pieces give Wright's last books the seeming looseness of a notebook. They emphasize the explicit content rather than the poet's dexterity with forms, the garden rather than the windowpane in Gasset's metaphor of modern art.

This Journey, Wright's last book, is dominated by preoccupations with Time and Nature. Most important, some of its best poems show a tone and style best approximated by the word "pure." They are serious but not solemn, sincere but not maudlin, personal but not cloying. Ease of expression is their guiding principle. The book begins with
"Entering the Temple in Nîmes," a fine piece in this later style.

As long as this evening lasts,
I am going to walk all through and around
The temple of Diana.
I hope to pay my reverence to the goddess there
Whom the young Romans loved.
Though they learned her name from the dark rock
Among bearded Greeks,
It was here in the south of Gaul they found her true
To her own solitude.
For here surely the young woman of Gaul
Glanced back thoughtfully over their bare
White shoulders and hurried away
Out of sight and then rose, reappearing
As vines and the pale inner hands of sycamores
In the green places.
This evening, in winter,
I pray for the stone-eyed legions of the rain
To put off their armor.
Allow me to walk between the tall pillars
And find the beginning of one vine leaf there,
Though I arrive too late for the last spring
And the rain still mounts its guard.

Wright's stylistic successes lie in abandoning cumbersome techniques while seeking variety within those that proved his strengths. Ultimately, these strengths derived from the personality in his poems: the Wright who suspected habitual lyric lilts as well as the moribund pieties of a prose that remains prose, the Wright who established a recognizable voice which survives even the overindulgences of his talent. He is a poet of many failures and half-failures, nearly all of which generate interest because they are begotten of his continual search for his own true language. He is a poet whose best work convinces us that he has found it.
Notes


6 Taylor, p. 61.

7 A poem, "Against Surrealism," appears in This Journey, Wright's last book (p. 28). When asked about critics calling his poems surrealistic, Wright replied: "They are not surrealistic, they are Horatian and classical. When they sound surrealistic, all that means is that my attempt to be clear has failed. They are not surrealistic and I am not a surrealist. The crucial element of surrealism is not a structural and formal matter, but that it is funny." "Interview: The Art of Poetry XIX," Paris Review #62, 1975, p. 51.


CHAPTER IV
THE STONE BODY

All authors establish their relations with tradition, whether they wish to conform to the past, destroy it, or toy with it. Deeply read in past literatures, Wright sought to develop his own poetic language, adapting and inventing styles, as we have seen. But he established his relationship to artistic traditions in other ways. First, he wrote many elegies for poets and other artists with whom he has stylistic or thematic affinities, in effect, becoming the kin, soul-mate, or thankful student of these artists. He also alluded repeatedly to certain artists, sometimes as a way of conducting dialogues with their work. Finally, he established a connection to tradition in the few poems in his final book which speculate on the artist's "immortality" through the figure of the human form in statuary.

A prime example of Wright's elegizing strategy can be found in "In Memory of Leopardi," from Shall We Gather At the River.

I have gone past all those times when the poets
Were beautiful as only
The rich can be. The cold bangles
Of the moon grazed one of my shoulders,
And so to this day,
And beyond, I carry
(No Stanza Break)

69
The sliver of a white city, the barb of a jewel
In my left clavicle that hunches.
Tonight I sling
A scrambling sack of oblivions and lame prayers
On my right good arm. The Ohio River
Has flown by me twice, the dark jubilating
Isaiah of mill and smoke marrow. Blind son
Of a meadow of huge horses, lover of drowned islands
Above Steubenville, blind father
Of my halt gray wing:
Now I limp on, knowing
The moon strides behind me, swinging
The scimitar of the divinity that struck down
The hunchback in agony
When he saw her, naked, carrying away his last sheep
Through the Asian rocks.
(p. 160)

Here we find the metaphor of the family and of the double.
Wright portrays himself as the great, wounded Romantic poet,
and the details he chooses elucidate Leopardi's poetry and his own. Obsessed by the burden and degradation of the physical body, both struggle with their relationships to provincial homelands. Oppressed by essential sadness, both write of the exile, the wanderer, and the poor. Finally, both champion simple language and see the cruelty in nature (Leopardi consistently so). Alluding to Leopardi's crippling disease of the spine and to his "Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd of Asia," Wright memorializes Leopardi, becoming his contemporary artistic embodiment. Thus, he is Leopardi's elegizing "son." But he also becomes Leopardi's "blind father," since the poem gives birth to a new vision of Leopardi, in which he mirrors Wright. To paraphrase Eliot, the influence goes both ways.
The genealogy metaphor is even more the focus of "Echo for the Promise of Georg Trakl's Life."

Quiet voice,
In the midst of those blazing
Howitzers in blossom.
Their fire
Is a vacancy.

What do their stuttering machines
Have to do
With the solitude?

Guns make no sound.
Only the quiet voice
Speaks from the body of the deer
To the body of the woman.

My own body swims in a silent pool,
And I make silence.

They both hear me.
Hear me,
Father of my sound,
My poor son.

(pp. 179-180)

In his introduction to his translations of Trakl's poem, Wright asserts:

In the poems which we have translated, there are frequent references to silence and speechlessness. But even where Trakl does not mention these conditions of the spirit by name, they exist as the very nourishment without which one cannot even enter his poems, much less understand them.

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A single red maple leaf in a poem by Trakl is an inexhaustibly rich and wonderful thing, simply because he has had the patience to look at it and the bravery to resist all distraction from it.

*
[His poems] are, ultimately, attempts to enter and to recognize one's very self. To memorize quickly applicable rules is only one more escape into the clutter of the outside world.

Of course, this is a fair description of Wright's own work. Though Wright does not assume Trakl's role, as he did with Leopardi, the connections are clear. Here again is a poet broken by the chaotic "clutter of the outside world."

Drafted into World War I, Trakl committed suicide a month later. His poetry, like Wright's, fixes on the inner landscape of the self. His imagery has a gothic flavor and often functions by juxtapositions similar to those of a deep image poem. A few lines from Wright's translation of "De Profundis" may illustrate.

I am a shadow far from darkening villages.  
I drank the silence of God  
Out of the stream in the trees.  

Cold metal walks on my forehead.  
Spiders search for my heart.  
It is a light that goes out in my mouth.  

At night, I found myself in a pasture,  
Covered with rubbish and the dust of stars.  
In a hazel thicket  
Angels of crystal rang out once more.  

(11. 12-21  p. 98-99)

Wright plays both father and son because he is, again, the descendant, the echo, of Trakl's promise as an artist and because he gives us a vision of the poet through the reconception in translation. Wright further invokes the grieving, parental tone of "my poor son" because he is older than Trakl, who is eternally 27, a promise and nothing more.
The most literal connection by genealogy occurs in "Prayer to the Good Poet," where Wright recounts his relationship with his father while addressing the Roman poet, Horace.

Every time I go back home to Ohio,
He sits down and tells me he loves Italians.
How can I tell you why he loves you,
Quintus Horatius?

I worked once in the factory that he worked in.
Now I work in the factory that you live in.
Some people think poetry is easy,
But you two didn't.

(11. 29-36 p. 11)

And he concludes:

Now my son is another poet, fathers,
I can go on living. I was afraid once
Four loving fathers meeting together
Would be a cold day in hell.

Quintus Horatius Flaccus, my good father,
You were just the beginning, you quick and lonely
Metrical crystals of February.
It is just snow.

(11. 41-48 p. 11)

Wright admired Horatian tact. The portrait of his blood father as genial and sympathetic parallels that of the gentle poet, so Wright can claim Horatian ancestry. Poetry is a tough factory job, and a life lived artfully--given the above qualities--becomes itself a work of art. Wright complicates matters by noting that his son is also a poet, implying that part of the poet's responsibility involves assuming his ancestry. Though Wright subverts this soothing vision by asserting that it is as fleeting and blinding as snow, the impulse behind this poem and those we have discussed remains undisturbed by any anxiety of influence,
or what Christopher Ricks has called the "patricidal melodrama from New Haven."\(^2\)

Not all of Wright's elegiac poems assign strict father-son roles, however. A variation on the genealogical metaphor can be found in Wright's poem about Miguel Hernandez, "In Memory of a Spanish Poet."

I see you strangling
Under the black ripples of whitewashed walls.
Your hands turn yellow in the ruins of the sun.
I dream of your slow voice, flying,
Planting the dark waters of the spirit
With lutes and seeds.

Here, in the American Midwest,
Those seeds fly out of the field and across the strange heaven of my skull.
They scatter out of their wings a quiet farewell,
A greeting to my country.

Now twilight gathers,
A long sundown.
Silos creep away toward the west.

The seed of Hernandez's voice is broadcast into Wright's dream and, hence, into his poem, making Wright the medium for a "quiet farewell, a greeting to my country." Of course, he also issues that farewell himself.

This clutch of metaphors aside, Wright also establishes relations with previous poets by repeated allusion and by assuming the roles of student-teacher and portraitist. In part one of "At Thomas Hardy's Birthplace: 1953," he portrays the infant Hardy being carried upstairs for nursing. Yet the real subject is the landscape and, of course, the Hardy we know will grow up to be the famous author. During a violent rainstorm:
The ache and sorrow of darkened earth  
Left pathways soft and meadows sodden;  
The small Frome overflowed the firth,  
And lay hidden . . .  

(pt. 1 11. 9-12 pp. 54-55)

In part two of the poem, Wright recalls his previous night's sojourn in Hardy country.

Last night at Stinsford where his heart  
Is buried now, the rain came down.  
Cold to the hidden joy, the secret hurt,  
His heart is stone.

But over the dead leaves in the wet  
The mouse goes snooping, and the bird.  
Something the voiceless earth does not forget  
They come to guard,

Maybe, the heart who would not tell  
Whatever secret he learned from the ground,  
Who turned aside and heard the human wail,  
That other sound.  

(pt. 2 11. 1-12 pp. 54-55)

As such, this poem implies a cause-effect relationship between native country and the growth of artistic sensibility, something Wright claimed for himself. The bleak, stormy night of "fieldmouse, hedgehog, moth and hawk" is certainly Hardyesque, as is the poem's form. Thus the poem speaks as much of Wright's work as of the great poet of wind and rain. In his later work, Wright becomes far less pessimistic than Hardy. The kinship is respectful rather than total.

A second example of portraiture is "Neruda," from Wright's penultimate book, To A Blossoming Pear Tree.

Trees that are not trees easily,  
The little leaves  
That are trees in secret.  

(Stanza Break)
Under one bough,
One vein of one leaf,
One side of the sea
Sand for a thousand inches
Uphill, as though
The tree in the leaf
Were sorry for being human
And wanted to run back
Across a river
In the center of America
Into the arms of an old beard,
Architect of spiders
Climbing up the long
Hill to gain
The crumbling pinnacle and spin
One strand of his body to join
The earth to one star anyway,
And save it, maybe.

The leaves of the little
Secret trees are fallen,
And where the earth goes on spinning,
I don’t know.

(p. 20)

Here, as in the poem about Hardy, Wright attempts to echo
the style and sensibility of his subject. Neruda’s
surrealist imagery, his insistence on the impure in poetry,
his love of nature and the use of native landscapes—all
find places in Wright’s work. Thus, as homage and elegy,
this poem describes Wright in terms of his vision of Neruda,
who is “Trees that are not trees easily,” an essential
secret, as is the Wright of "The Jewel" and similar poems.
Both poets are linked to the sources of literary traditions,
the “arms of an old beard.” Though seriously flawed by
opaqueness, this poem makes some of the largest claims in all
Wright’s work for the unifying power of poetry: "One strand
of the body to join / The earth to one star, maybe." Also,
the humility in the final lines—the poet lost without his
fellow poet—maintains a hedge against the
self-congratulation possible when one has had a famous
comrade-mentor.

Assuming the role of humble, elegizing student, Wright
allows his relationship with his subject to range from the
formal to the personal. "Lighting a Candle for W.H. Auden"
is an example of the former.

The poet kept his promise
To the earth before he died.
He sleeps now in Kirchstetten
Some twenty miles from here.
I did not go to mourn him,
Although I could have gone
And found him among beeches.
Best to leave him alone.

(11. 1-8  p. 22)

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I happen now to be
Within his twenty miles.
Kindly as Thomas Hardy,
Whose dream the towpath fills,
The poet Auden lies down
His twenty miles from here.
His perfect love is limestone,
Maria on the shore.

What have I to do
With a kind poet's death?
One day he wrote to me
I had a book to give.
I gave my book, Maria,
While Auden was awake.
I give you my small candle
For the large master's sake.

(11. 25-40  p. 23)

Auden selected Wright's first book, The Green Wall, for the
Yale Younger Poets prize in 1957. But more than gratitude
connects them. Auden was a dominant influence on the forma-
tive years of Wright's generation. The comparison with
Thomas Hardy and the repeated reference to the nearness of
the grave suggest a longing for an intimacy that never existed between the two men and now cannot. Auden becomes not the lost friend or dead mentor, but the distant and profound hand that has demonstrated vast skills, that has opened a door or two for a young poet, and, thus, has encouraged talent. Wright's first book, then, becomes an offering not only to the public but to the master, this poem "the small candle" of continued affiliation.

Personal affiliation inspires another poem with Wright in the role of elegizing student: "In Memory of Charles Coffin."

... I would bring
the best of what I understand
In hand to you, were you alive.
(11. 3-5 p. 26)

*

In that black summer when I worked
At the Mount Vernon, Ohio, Bridge Company, I came damn near
Killing a man, and going blind.
All right, you said: Ben Jonson said
Give Salathiel Pavy one
More chance, and give yourself one more.
No, I have no idea where
You lie in Mary's ground alone.
I know, well, you would approve
Of this intricate sound I make.
It has three beats, though your heart break,

My loving teacher, whom I love,
It is almost too late to live.
(11. 11-23 p. 26)

But for the writer's acknowledgement, this private relationship between teacher and student involves influence we might never have known. Wright's twofold homage underscores Coffin's gifts as a man of letters and character, and
the portrait flatters (one prizing a gift rarely under-praises the giver). In this, it verges on sentimentality. Yet Coffin's gift of knowledge, and the character to care for it as for life, proves a more than worthy basis for the poet's profound affection, superseding what effusiveness may lie therein.

Wright's last technique for creating connections with tradition is allusion, which he uses to the point of building larger structures of meaning even by reference to previous poems of his own. Wright's allusions usually concern ideas or feelings rather than debates about style. Generally, they come in one of three varieties: reference to a place associated in some way with the poet; reference to the poet's statement as a basis for argument and clarification; reference to the poet's statement or concurrent sensibility as a point of departure.

The first of these strategies we find in the prose piece called "Piccolini" in To A Blossoming Pear Tree. At the Grotto di Catullo, Wright speculates on the poetry of Catullus and on the state of contemporary poetry, the latter compared to the tiny, swirling fish called Piccolini. Another example of linkage by place appears in "By the Ruins of A Gun Emplacement: Saint-Benôit." In this poem, Wright sees lovers in a haystack and imagines the moon rising. He recalls visiting Max Jacob's grave and seeing a snail there, acknowledging that he still doesn't know "the snail's secret," ultimately the secret of life and death. Whether
this type of allusion stems from both poets having been at
the same place or on Wright's imaginative fusions, it occurs
with greater frequency in Wright's later poems, particularly
those set in Europe, where each street corner has historical
significance. In this regard, one may see an American
analogue in Robert Lowell's Boston, where simply naming city
landmarks and family members recalls the history of the
republic.

"A Reply to Matthew Arnold on My Fifth Day in Fano"
features a typical example of allusion as a basis for
argument and speculation. Wright quotes Arnold in an
epigraph: "In Harmony with Nature? Restless fool . . .
Nature and man can never be fast friends." In his prose
rebuttal, he says:

I am not about to claim that the sea
does not care. It has its own way of
receiving seeds, and today the sea may
as well have a flowering one . . .
(p. 18)

The sentiment should not surprise those familiar with
Wright. What is most striking, however, is the personal
connection in the framing of the poem. It is as if Arnold
were alive and speaking to Wright, since his words demand
response.

We need not belabor Wright's third type of allusion--
the poet, quoted or not, as a point of departure or inform-
ing sensibility--since many instances of it may be found in
the practice of using epigraphs. However, the most fasci-
nating instance of allusion in Wright's work involves what
might be called the "intertextuality" of two poems. I quote the last stanza of "The Pretty Redhead" and all of "Three Stanzas from Goethe."

But laugh laugh at me
Men everywhere especially people from here
For there are so many things that I don't dare tell you
So many things that you would not let me say
Have pity on me

(11. 45-49 p. 179)

That man standing there, who is he?
His path lost in the thicket,
Behind him the bushes
Lash back together,
The grass rises again,
The waste devours him.

Oh, who will heal the sufferings
Of the man whose balm turned poison?
Who drank nothing
But hatred of men from love's abundance?
Once despised, now a despiser,
He kills his own life,
The precious secret.
The self-seeker finds nothing.

Oh Father of Love,
If your psaltery holds one tone
That his ear still might echo,
Then quicken his heart!
Open his eyes, shut off by clouds
From the thousand fountains
So near him, dying of thirst
In his own desert.

(p. 112-113)

Wright acknowledges that these poems are translations from the French of Apollonaire and the German of Goethe. Yet he places neither poem with his other translations in *Collected Poems*. Instead, we find these poems, with their touches of the original author's style and their obvious similarity to Wright's sensibility, included among Wright's "original"
poems. As translation, they are partially his composition; included as part of Wright's own books, they make their grandest allusion by context. They announce the interplay of sensibility and artistic skill, of influence and counter-influence. In a note with the Goethe poem, Wright extends the allusion by explaining that this piece is only three stanzas from Goethe's poem, "Harzreise im Winter," and that:

They are the stanzas which Brahms detached from the poem and employed as the text for his "Alto Rhapsody" of 1869.

(p. 113).

Thus two artists in addition to Wright affect the poem, and the poem is part of a text other than the original. Wright's poem forms part of several works by artists in two mediums, all of which allude to one another.

This bridging of mediums plays an important role in those of Wright's poems which adopt the image of statuary to speculate on the fate of art and the individual artist. In one sense, Wright views all artists, whatever the medium, as compatriots in a common pursuit. He writes an elegy for composer Hugo Wolf, "In A Viennese Cemetery," and speculates on the music of poetry as well. In "The Art of the Fugue: A Prayer," he calls Bach and Dante "the two great poets of God in the silence meeting together." In other poems, he refers to Giotto, Michelangelo, Pisanello and other painters with reverential respect. In his last book, This Journey, famous names appear in poems which consider the value and possible longevity of not only his art but all art. Not
surprisingly, the human figure in statuary pervades these poems, for it is the figure of the artist's "body," and the body of his work. Two such poems exemplify Wright's uses of this metaphor. The first is "The Vestal in the Forum."

This morning I do not despair
For the impersonal hatred that the cold
Wind seems to feel
When it slips fingers into the flaws
Of lovely things men made,
The shoulders of a stone girl
Pitted by winter.
Not a spring passes but the roses
Grow stronger in their support of the wind,
And now they are conquerors,
Not garlands any more,
Of this one face:
Dimming,
Clearer to me than most living faces.
The slow wind and the slow roses
Are ruining an eyebrow here, a mole there.
But in this little while
Before she is gone, her very haggardness
Amazes me. A dissolving
Stone, she seems to change from stone to something
Frail, to someone I can know, someone
I can almost name.

(p. 15)

In arguing that art, too, is a victim of time, this poem espouses the conventional alternative to the belief that great art endures and thereby gives its creators a portion of immortality. But most interesting, aside from the beauty of the writing, is the implied assertion that art's vulnerability increases its power. The statue is not an idealized representation (i.e., the mole), nor is it one of the "living faces." Instead, it has a life and death similar to ours but of its own kind. The forces of winter and rejuvenating spring prove the statue's presence in the world. Just as an "impersonal hatred" guides the cold wind of
destruction, so is the statue's demise impersonal. In its decaying state, it becomes something namable in human terms: its fatal flaws almost give it the quality of human life.

This Journey presents a world of monuments. In poems like "A Dark Moor Bird" Wright speaks of his "turning to stone" (one of several transformations in the book). To turn to stone is to die, but it also pertains to the poet's work. The growing body of poems he may now revise will become, upon his death, artifacts attached to his public personage and assigned to the preserve of tradition. Wright's "Wherever Home Is" directly confronts these issues.

Leonardo Da Vinci, haggard in basalt stone, Will soon be gone, A frivolous face lost in wisteria flowers. They are turning gray and dying All over his body. Subtlest of all wanderers Who live beautifully by living on other lives, They cannot find a warm vein In Leonardo, and Leonardo Himself will soon Be gone.

Good riddance a little while to the insane. Although the wisteria gets nowhere And the sea wind crumbles Leonardo down, A new lizard frolics in the cold sunlight Between Leonardo's thumb and his palette. One brief lizard Lavishes on Leonardo and on me The whole spring.

Goodbye to Leonardo, good riddance To decaying madmen who cannot keep alive The wanderers among the trees. I am going home with the lizard, Wherever home is, And lie beside him unguarded In the clear sunlight. We will lift our faces even if it rains. We will both turn green.

(p. 12)
Like "The Vestal in the Forum," this poem advises against seeking immortality in art. However, this statue is not "enlivened" by the directionless, thriving natural world. Leonardo the man is long gone, and the preservation and perpetuation of that identity through a statue reduces Leonardo's stone face to an endeavor as "frivolous" as creation. By calling the sculptor and Leonardo "insane," Wright indicta himself and art. It is mad to want to create something that will last, madder still to think that what one creates will sustain even the flowers. Why, then, should the artist worry about the fate of his work? Better to aspire to the power of "one brief lizard," which can "lavish" on the living and the dead "the whole spring." Better to desire the green face of the lizard lifted "even if it rains" than the human face in stone, which mocks its maker's desire for a seat in the collective memory.

As we have seen, many of Wright's other poems assert art's powers. But in the context of our discussion of his relations with literary influence and tradition, "The Vestal in the Forum" and "Wherever Home Is" offer additional perspectives. In the previous poems, we have seen that Wright seeks his own poetic voice while acknowledging his influences, often with respect and affection. By implication, these two poems once more underscore his sense of tradition and suggest that if artists must speculate about the future value of their work, let them hope it has life
enough to be of use even once and, if it doesn't, that the living know enough to seek that life elsewhere.

Notes


2 From a talk given by Christopher Ricks on the poetry of Richard Eberhart at the University of Florida, Gainesville, April 6, 1984.
CHAPTER V
HISTORY, HIS STORY

Wright's exile from history is typically American. At its core lies the disparity between the American promise and the facts of American life. "The land was ours before we were the land's," Robert Frost wrote, succinctly observing that America has always been an idea before a fact, a mythology before a history. Its people continue to confront the grand frustrations and improbable successes this legacy produces. In his "historical" poems, Wright does not merely mourn the failures of American idealism, since failure of a national dream does not necessarily produce a nightmare. Instead, he assumes that history is a myth-making process and plunges into the historical-mythological sources of his native land. Doing so, he establishes his responsibility for and to history and "locates" himself as a living agent of American history, while judging American historical consciousness. Wright's concern with history does not end there, however. In later poems set in European landscapes, he moves from these more local concerns to a larger historical consciousness. This is not another case of an American returning to the Old World with a colonist's self-consciousness, nor a fascination with decayed glories. It is another step in Wright's journey from the native son
burdened by local and national memory to an inheritor of human history.

Wright's focus on American history really begins in middle career, in *The Branch Will Not Break*, *Shall We Gather At The River*, and the new work in *Collected Poems*. One of his finest poems of this period, "Stages On A Journey Westward," richly illustrates many of his uses of American history and myth. In four sections, it traces an American dreamer's movement toward disillusionment and despair, becoming a miniature four-act play of American national consciousness.

I began in Ohio.
I still dream of home.
Near Mansfield, enormous dobbins enter dark barns in autumn,
Where they can be lazy, where they can munch little apples,
Or sleep long.
But by night now, in the bread lines my father Prowls, I cannot find him: So far off, 1500 miles or so away, and yet I can hardly sleep.
In a blue rag the old man limps to my bed,
Leading a blind horse Of gentleness.
In 1932, grimy with machinery, he sang me A lullaby of a goosegirl.
Outside the house, the slag heaps waited.

( pt. 1 p. 116)

Two strategies bear noting here. First, Wright strikes the tone of an everyman to underscore how typically American is this journey. Second, he blurs time distinctions.

These "stages" exist in the past and present, in a blend of a national daydream vision and waking biography. Despite the search here for security, for the father and the paradisal home, despite the gripping nostalgia for the blind
and invariably doomed tenderness of childhood, Wright carefully selects his historical material. For example, the long bread lines of the Depression offer an ironic version of democracy. Family history and tribal history amalgamate into a vision of the American not as the upright pilgrim, scalawag, or heroic loner, but as the distraught wanderer whose claim to identification rests with his name on the unemployment rolls. Still, Wright is stoic enough to "hardy sleep," and this helps him continue, even if the desired peace of the "dark barns" lies beyond.

Section two gives another version of American "dreams," again with the fusion of past and present, again employing historical material unrelated to specific events.

In western Minnesota, just now,
I slept again.
In my dream, I crouched over a fire.
The only human beings between me and the Pacific Ocean
Were old Indians, who wanted to kill me.
They squat and stare for hours into small fires
Far off in the mountains.
The blades of their hatchets are dirty with the grease
Of huge, silent buffaloes.

(pt. 2 pp. 116-117)

With the grand paranoia which fuels genocide, Wright becomes the white pioneer for whom the Indians are a malignant, natural barrier. Yet he undercuts this view by noting that the Indians are "human beings" and by choosing to portray them in a stereotypical and, hence, comic way. In this, Wright uncovers one of the schisms in the American psyche, between the xenophobe and the democratic man of reason. He also underscores the similarity between the speaker and his
imagined adversaries. Both dreamer-pioneer and Indian pass the night by a campfire. Both exploit the buffalo for their purposes, though the white man's corporate mentality eventually transforms the beast into a plentiful, then scarce commodity. The dreamer's insistence on the "greasy" hatchets emphasizes the unity of the red man's life; white invader and buffalo are confronted with the same weapon. The image illustrates scapegoat psychology: the white man's need to justify a deep but unsubstantiated fear and his own destructive actions arrogated by it. In addition, Wright links the fury inspired by this fear to the present dreamer's need to move westward and find the Pacific. The way toward this peace so pathetically sought in section one is now blocked, resulting in the viciousness of frustrated longing.

After two sections composed of dreams, section three brings the dawn and the dreamer's awakening.

It is dawn,
I am shivering,
Even beneath a huge eiderdown.
I came in last night, drunk,
And left the oil stove cold.
I listen a long time, now, to the flurries.
Snow howls all around me, out of the abandoned prairies.
It sounds like the voices of bums and gamblers,
Rattling through the bare nineteenth-century whorehouses
In Nevada.

(pt. 3  p. 117)

In this cold, queasy sunrise of cynicism, the beauty of these images stems from the way they subvert the common notion that a failure of American "dreams" produces a
national "nightmare." Here, America's reckoning with reality is as common and inevitable as a drunk's hangover. America abandons itself in its own abandon. The bums ramble toward better handouts and warmer weather. The gamblers follow their luck or run from it. The whores seek the best markets for their wares. History is the echo of a forsaken prospect, a lonely comeuppance. Unlike a Thoreauvian winter, which tests the spirit and eventually gives way to spring, these wind-driven flurries suggest endless pain. Of all the sections, this is the most single-minded and least complex, hence the least satisfying. From another perspective, it provides the sparseness called for by the seasonal framework of the poem.

Section four, however, delivers no rescue from the obsessive drive to despair, a movement with the inexorableness of a Greek tragedy.

Defeated for re-election,
The half-educated sheriff of Mukilteo, Washington,
Has been drinking again.
He leads me up the cliff, tottering.
Both drunk, we stand among the graves.
Miners paused here on the way up to Alaska.
Angry, they spaded their broken women's bodies
Into ditches of crab grass.
I lie down between tombstones.
At the bottom of the cliff
America is over and done with.
America,

Plunged into the dark furrows
Of the sea again.

(pt. 4 p. 117)

Ultimately, history is the graveyard visited by the living. In this one, we find the "half-educated" and defunct peacekeeper-bureaucrat, and the drunken poet who testifies
to the tragic obsession of America. These are the graves of the broken, those inadvertently sacrificed to the pursuit of gold, home, whatever one deems the paradisal standard. Unlike Sophoclean tragedy, however, there is no enlightenment among the suffering actors, not even an ironic flicker save for the poet's vision guided by the sheriff. The idea of America lingers now with dreamers panning for gold in Alaska or hitting golf balls on the moon. But the land has run out, giving over to subsuming ocean. The inner desolation is epic.

Through most of this poem Wright acts as a witness, observing and testifying. Responsibility and sympathetic participation are the main bonding agents for his connection with a national past that is always memorialized in terms of the individual. Another example of this strategy can be found in "A Centenary Ode: Inscribed to Little Crow, Leader of the Sioux Rebellion in Minnesota, 1862," a poem which undertakes closer examination of the conflict between red and white man.

I had nothing to do with it. I was not here. I was not born.
In 1862, when your hotheads Raised hell from here to South Dakota, My own fathers scattered into West Virginia And southern Ohio. My family fought the Confederacy And fought the Union. None of them got killed. But for all that, it was not my fathers Who murdered you. Not much.

(11. 1-12 p. 180)
History involves family, or tribes, or whatever social group the individual is attached to by blood, emotion, or necessity. In turn, groups may find themselves rent by larger, conflicting allegiances, such as the Civil War or Sioux Rebellion. Under these terms, the individual finds himself "related" to the past. This gives no cause for luxuriating under the burden of recorded atrocities. To do so would be as naive as claiming "I had nothing to do with it. I was not there. / I was not born." The problem is further complicated and clarified by Wright's redefinition of family. He enlarges it, not into the fatuous "family of man," but into any group where human action rather than specific namesake determines the familial grounds. Thus Wright, like Little Crow, has many fathers, and he can also call that warrior the "true father / Of my dark America."

As we have seen, history resides in the cemetery. But Wright's ode also focuses on history lost, in this case, Little Crow's grave. This, in turn, reflects on the poet himself.

If only I knew where to mourn you,
I would surely mourn.

But I don't know.

I did not come here only to grieve
For my people's defeat.
The troops of the Union, who won,
Still outnumber us.
Old Paddy Beck, my great-uncle, is dead
At the old soldier's home near Tiffen, Ohio.
He got away with every last stitch
Of his uniform, save only
The dress trousers.

(Stanza Break)
Oh all around us,
The hobo jungles of America grow wild again.
The pick handles bloom like your skinned spine.
I don't even know where
My own grave is.

(11. 30-46 p. 181)

Wright identifies with the victims and losers in history, all who lie among the outnumbered and unnumbered. The direct address to Little Crow and the reference to "us" in the final stanza underscore the living relationship with the past. The final, grotesque image of the "skinned spine" and the anonymity of his own fate also emphasize this connection. This looking-toward-the-future-by-looking-into-the-past is typical of Wright.

Wright also connects with history by choosing figures who personify major aspects of American mytho-history and whom Wright uses as a pretext for examining American consciousness. Three figures will illustrate his methods and purposes. The first, Warren G. Harding, is the subject of a poem that also deals with death and the grave.

How many honey locusts have fallen,
Pitched rootlong into the open graves of strip mines,
Since the First World War ended
And Wilson the gaunt deacon jogged sullenly
Into silence?
Tonight,
The cancerous ghosts of old con men
Shed their leaves.
For a proud man,
Lost between the turnpike near Cleveland
And the chiropractors' signs looming among dead mulberry trees,
There is no place to left go
But home.

"Warren lacks mentality," one of his friends said.
(Stanza Break)
Yet he was beautiful, he was the snowfall
Turned to white stallions standing still
Under dark elm trees.

He died in public. He claimed the secret right
To be ashamed.

"Two Poems About President Harding"
(pt. 1 11. 13-31 p. 120)

One of Wright's Ohio brethren, Harding is also typically American. It has been said that the only American art besides jazz is the art of packaging. Harding rose to power not so much by his ability as by his appeal, substantially based on handsomeness. Largely the product of "old con men" creating, then fulfilling public demand, he was also laid low in typically American fashion. His incompetence allowed his manipulators to package him for success and later dupe him. Moreover, his original popularity seems to have exacerbated public furor over the scandal. Wright amplifies the matter somewhat, since Harding died among damaging rumors, before the full scandal came to light. Thus, the extent of Harding's personal shame remains questionable. Nonetheless, his reputation suffered considerably and his death became public property, as have the deaths of fallen heroes, sensational victims, and poltroons. Ultimately, Wright sees him as another of the ostracized, another "man alone." In part two of this poem, Wright uses the "non-graveside graveside elegy" to link himself to Harding's story and the larger national life. Some of the images should be familiar by now.
A hundred slag piles north of us,
At the mercy of the moon and rain,
He lies in his ridiculous
Tomb, our fellow citizen.
No, I have never seen that place,
Where many shadows of faceless thieves
Chuckles and stumble and embrace
On beer cans, stogie butts, and graves.

He concludes:

America goes on, goes on
Laughing, and Harding was a fool.
Even his big pretentious stone
Lays him bare to ridicule.
I know it. But don't look at me.
By God, I didn't start this mess.
Whatever moon and rain may be
The hearts of men are merciless.

Wright's final disclaimer seems a hearty attempt to avoid mawkish claims on the memory of Harding. Yet it lacks the force of the concluding sentiments of "A Centenary Ode" because it relies on a judgment which remains true only in the most vague or reductive ways; its severity is disproportionate to the evidence on which it is based. It is also a less characteristic sentiment for Wright because it veers from his usual forceful paradoxes: that we are separate from the past yet participate in it; and that we are reasonably indifferent to the past, unable to brandish its guilt or glory, yet we must take responsibility for it.

Two other representative-figure poems reverse the relationship of the past-living-in-the-present. In "Eisenhower's Visit to France, 1959," present events animate the past. In the poems about Harding and Little Crow, the past encourages the reader to consider the present; it
enlightens the past. Ultimately, all of these poems fuse past and present, illuminating both. The Eisenhower poem begins:

The American hero must triumph over  
The forces of darkness.  
He has flown through the very light of heaven  
And come down in the slow dusk  
Of Spain.

Franco stands in a shining circle of police.  
His arms open in welcome.  
He promises all dark things  
Will be hunted down.  

(11. 1-9  pp. 121-122)

This is more mythology and cultural criticism than a recounting of historical detail. The reader knows that Eisenhower and Franco are both generals and that one is head of the world's leading industrial democracy, the other a military dictator. The reader must also know much more of their relationship to the history of the century. In this regard, the poem may encourage the reader's historical awareness, and even more so as the years pass and these leaders disappear from the contemporary scene. Because the poem was composed when Eisenhower and Franco were both well known, its political immediacy must have had a potency which has waned, though it regains power as the famous meeting becomes mythological.

Essentially, this is another poem which attacks complacent notions of American innocence, brotherhood, and moral righteousness. The sarcasm in the opening lines hammers home the inherent childishness of such reductive views and the danger that looms when they impel a culture of
America's stature. To define all things as light and dark—has that not been the sanction for mass slaughter in the twentieth century? This meeting becomes America's participation in that history. Wright concludes the poem:

State police yawn in the prisons.
Antonio Machado follows the moon
Down a road of white dust,
To a cave of silent children
Under the Pyrenees.
Wine darkens in stone jars in villages.
Wine sleeps in the mouths of old men, it is a dark red color.

Smiles glitter in Madrid.
Eisenhower has touched hands with Franco,
embracing
In a glare of photographers.
Clean new bombers from America muffle their engines
And glide down now.
Their wings shine in the searchlights
Of bare fields,
In Spain.

(11. 10-24 p. 122)

Publicity scenes and media events are part of the garishness that infuses modern history. The meeting of the leaders implies the histories of the peasant, the persecuted poet, the children and the timeless countryside. Thus, while Franco and Eisenhower represent the duplicitous and the duped, the persecuted poets and the suppressed peasantry play the historical role of the victim and, perhaps, the survivor.

The least successful of these representative-figure poems, "A Mad Fight Song for William S. Carpenter, 1966," shows how Wright's sensibility draws him to certain historical incidents. In a footnote, Wright gives the background to the poem:
Carpenter, a West Pointer, called for his own troops to be napalmed rather than have them surrender. General Westmoreland called him "hero" and made him his aide, and President Johnson awarded him a Silver Star for courage.

(p. 177)

The "song" is as follows:

Quick on my feet in those Novembers of my loneliness, 
I tossed a short pass, 
Almost the instant I got the ball, right over the head 
Of Barrel Terry before he knocked me cold.

When I woke, I found myself crying out 
Latin conjugations, and the new snow falling 
At the edge of a green field.

Lemoyne Crone had caught the pass, while I lay 
Unconscious and raging 
Alone with the fire ghost of Catullus, the 
contemptuous graces tossing 
Garlands and hendecasyllabics over the head 
Of Cornelius Nepos the mastodon, 
The huge volume.

At the edges of southeast Asia this afternoon 
The quarterbacks and the lines are beginning to fall, 
A spring snow,

And terrified young men 
Quick on their feet 
Lob one another's skulls across 
Wings of strange birds that are burning 
Themselves alive.

(p. 177)

Several things bear noting here. First, Carpenter never enters the poem proper, remaining a distant god with middle-management mentality and inhuman ambition, an aspirant more concerned with protecting his position in the bureaucracy than on the battlefield. "The pure products of America go crazy," Williams wrote, and Carpenter is a pure American product. He also exemplifies the mad protagonist rewarded
for his madness, a figure energetically applied to the military in American literature and film of the 1960's and 1970's. Thus, Wright reveals another grim dimension of traditional heroism. The forces that compelled Carpenter are as pernicious as his action. They beget apocalypse.

Wright also makes these atrocities personal, and so makes analogies which place them in a cultural context. Though not in the role of victim, Wright uses the figure of the football game to ally himself with the napalmed soldiers. Equating the football field with the battlefield and the commanding officer with the coach has now become a commonplace among weekend social critics. Yet the figure regains power when juxtaposed with the football imagery in Wright's "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio." There it embodies ritualized anguish. In this parody of the fight song and fraternity song, art, learning, and reason appear absurd. The young men who once turned "suicidally beautiful" and "galloped terribly against each other's bodies" in Martins Ferry now suffer the terrors of a field for which they could not prepare themselves--no rules, no games. This disparity between the rhetoric of cultural values and actual practice exacerbates the poet's madness born of grief and outrage.

These poems indicate how forcefully Wright confronts American mytho-history and some of its persistent themes. In his later books, European landscapes gain prominence, and with this comes a new historical consciousness. Yet he does
not abandon American culture for Europe. Many later poems show a native son who has confronted his national and tribal past, and who more and more views himself as an inheritor of human history. This attitude surfaces in some of Wright's earlier poetry, such as "To the August Fallen," but it seems to become more visible only after he settles some issues about America. His journey beyond local history somewhat soothes his gnawing estrangement from the American past. The logic is simple: a larger awareness of history makes one's own personal and cultural legacy, however unbearable, less self-important and imparts a new perspective.

This new perspective, however, bears some resemblance to other poems in the way Wright incorporates European history into the poem. First, he consistently uses representative figures to personify historical background. Second, he maps onto European landscapes emblematic characters and situations common to his earlier poems about America. Thus, he maintains the roles of wanderer and pilgrim and, occasionally, tourist, which allow him fewer pretentious affiliations with European people and history. Finally, he probes the mythological dimension of history rather than the factual. Figures and events from European history generally act as backgrounding or as a point of departure for the poet. In fact, the more notorious the piece of history, the more tangential Wright makes it to the action of the poem. This technique often heightens such historical references.
A poem typical in many of these respects is "By the Ruins of a Gun Emplacement: Saint Benôit" from To A Blossoming Pear Tree, Wright's penultimate book.

Behind us, the haystack rustles
Into the summer dusk, and the limber girl's knees
Alone are barely visible among the rust
Of grape leaves. We are one face
Gazing into another, dim.

What shall we do if the round moon comes down
The river alone,
And strolls up out of the Loire
To make once more his command of these pastures,
Orchards, and the many bypaths for wandering,
Takes them for his own once more, his own
Paternal fields?

As the lovers scuffle
In the drying coins of the dewfall behind us,
I can close my eyes and see the tall young
Noble the moon, pausing
A mile or so down the river, inland
Maybe three quarters of a mile
By the sandpit pond. There, no one at nightfall
Pauses alone with his wine. There, no one
At dewrise but only the moon
Lifting deliberately, between the long slim
Fingers, the startling faces
Of night creatures. Who are they?

I met a snail on a stone at Fleury,
Where, now, Max Jacob walks happily among the candles
Of his brothers, but I still do not know
The snail's secret.
I do not even know
What we shall do if the round moon comes down
The river and strolls up
Out of the Loire
To take once more your startling face up
Among his drowsed swans,
All three, whose names,
Dewfall and Nightrise and Basilica,
Napoleon stole from Spanish horses
A dusk long ago, before the last time

Somebody gouged a trench along the Loire.

(pp. 12-13)
On the timeless "paternal fields," Wright juxtaposes the vulnerability and muted violence of lovers in a haystack with a magical, commanding moonrise. The scene parallels "A dusk long ago, before the last time / Somebody gouged a trench along the Loire," suggesting that history will repeat itself in some form as surely as lovers scuffle in the hay and the moon rises. The rhetorical power in withholding then concluding with an image of war emphasizes the comparison. Because wars have been fought here in the days since Napoleon, there is little reason to believe war is finally past, though the poem portrays potential victims rather than aggressors. Both the American and the local lovers are progeny of the "paternal fields" and capable of anything. The choice of an archetypal situation and the limited use of historical detail reduces the emphasis on the local. This is a scene from human history.

Another poem which departs from the local is "With a Sliver of Marble from Carrara," from the same book. It begins:

Old men beneath the mountain
Stand in its shadow, unemployed.
They do not talk much about
Michelangelo.

They know
A man's hand worked the face.

(11. 1-6 p. 56)

Carrara, the most famous source of white marble in Italy, is the point of association between the unemployed workers and Michelangelo. Wright continues:
You are out of work
At ten o’clock in the morning
At Carrara, a working town
North of Florence, where

The holiest human face
Among all Christ’s mothers
Knew very well it dreamed:
Why did I wake? Whose
Face is this, weeping
Suddenly awake out of my coarse
And distant body
Behind Carrara that only
A lonely God made?

And a lonely man there
Wept for the faces of the prisoners in Florence.
Even he could not finish.
Even he
Could not live long enough.

(11. 7-25 pp. 56-57)

Wright knows the frustration of the mortal striving to
create the immortal, the frustration of so little time and
so much to be done. He knows the life of the "working man."
The unemployed standing in the mountain’s shadow have
appeared, in one dress or another, on the street corners of
his previous poems. To the degree this poem deals with
history, we find a familiar theme: both the anonymous and
the famous, the drone and the genius, contribute to history;
or, behind the notorious of history stands the quotidian.
Every Florence, with its legacy of art, politics, and
conspiracy, needs many Carraras subsidizing it with raw
materials.

Unlike poems where Wright seeks the past to locate
himself by assuming some form of responsibility, here he
becomes one more witness to the struggles for survival and
for the human creation of beauty. Again, the scene acquires a timelessness because Europe has a longer history than America, but also because Wright is not on "home" ground. He cannot assume an immediate connection to a situation like this without first giving the impression that all of us are wanderers in a wanderer's world: alive, and thereby allusions to the past.

Two other poems illustrate Wright perfecting this rhetorical strategy. They also show how the scope of his journeys into the past have been enlarged to fit this new landscape. The first of these is "Down Near an Old Battlefield, in a Time of Peace."

Along the water the small invisible owls
Have fallen asleep in the poplars.
Standing alone here downshore on the river Yonne,
I can see only one young man pausing

Halfway over the stone bridge,
At peace with Auxerre.

How can he call to mind now
The thing he has never known:
One owl wing
Splayed in the morning wheat?
This young man
Sees only ripples on the Yonne.

How can he call to mind now,
And how can I,
His fathers, my fathers, crawling
Blind into the grain,
Scrambling among the scorched owls
And rats' wings for food?

All the young fathers
Are gone now. Mercy
On the young man
Who cannot call to mind now
The torn faces in the field.

(Stanza Break)
Mercy on the pure Yonne washing his face in the water.

Mercy on me.

(p. 59)

Whether familial, tribal, national, or world history, how can one really know what has gone before him? For Wright and the young man staring into the water, the terms of the struggle to know are the same. The metaphor of genealogy joins past to present by blood ties, if not by the similarity of experience. Yet the past does not remain a total mystery. On a battlefield in a time of peace, one imagines individual starvation, order disintegrating quickly, and men becoming pathetic rodents. Whether war rumbles in France or Ohio, "All the young fathers / Are gone now." The poem is "unhistorical" in the sense that it distrusts the "mere" facts of history. A prayer for mercy, for the river and the poet, it suggests that chaos will again arise, perhaps loosed by the likes of this young man, men who will be victims.

"The Journey" demonstrates even more Wright's change in sensibility. It begins:

Anghiari is medieval, a sleeve sloping down
A steep hill, suddenly sweeping out
To the edge of a cliff, and dwindling.
But far up the mountain, behind the town,
We too were swept out, out by the wind,
Alone with the Tuscan grass.

(11. 1-6  p. 30)

Not suffering the climactic despair of "Stages On A Journey Westward," the poet finds a city on the edge of a cliff, not cast over. Life empowers the journey, not a desire to escape...
life by finding paradise. Wright tells us that, quite by
accident, he finds along the road a spider web which:

Reeled heavily and crazily with the dust,
Whole mounds and cemeteries of it, sagging
And scattering shadows among shells and wings.
(11. 15-17  p. 30)

A moment later, he comes face to face with its inhabitant,
its creator, caretaker, center.

Many men
Have searched all over Tuscany and never found
What I found there, the heart of the light
Itself shelled and leaved, balancing
On filaments themselves falling. The secret
Of this journey is to let the wind
Blow its dust all over your body,
To let it go on blowing, to step lightly, lightly
All the way through your ruins, and not to lose
Any sleep over the dead, who surely
Will bury their own, don’t worry.
(11. 26-36  pp. 30-31)

Thus, each life, like each nation, has its ruins, and exile
or estrangement derive from impossible ideals or
expectations, from trying to avoid the ruins and stop the
dusty winds. In poems such as this, Wright no longer tries
to criticize or atone for a local or national legacy.
History becomes a part of the larger web of existence,
inescapable but containing beauties.
CHAPTER VI
THE PART NEAREST HOME

As we have seen, Wright uses history to make individual responsibility and helplessness significant and thereby to locate the individual life on the stage of human action. His estrangement from history and his continual need to confront it parallel his exile from community. Home is Wright's central image for this latter exile, a separation from community, from self, from the self that once existed. As he says at the beginning of "Stages On a Journey Westward," "I began in Ohio. / I still dream of home." Such exile is not uncommon, however. Dave Smith notes that:

This story is not different, really, from the lament of the Seafarer or the journeys of Huckleberry Finn, Gawain, or Nick Adams. Home is the light and tranquility and ease and beauty of those horses [mentioned in the poem], who have at least a barn and apples.

Smith also points to the father in this section of that poem, who prowls bread lines and who once sang the poet a lullaby in the shadow of the ominous slag heaps. These, too, are part of home.

Wright is headed for those slag heaps, as we all are, with scarce comfort but song. This is Wright's portrait of destiny, that grand and seemingly dead
abstraction which has led to so much suffering.

Smith concludes that Wright believes that the "language of poetry holds out the possibility of the home-journey as much as it reveals human limits."3

While "the part nearest home" includes such matters, it also involves more. Wright's exile is an unavoidable loss imposed by time, but it is also a willed separation. Home represents all that is loved and hated about one's place of beginnings, whether that point be geographical, spiritual, or intellectual. For Wright, home is that place which is longed for but also that state of mind that must be questioned. Yet this willed exile involves the search for a place where the inner and outer being may exist without estrangement. He never finds such a place, of course. But as his career progresses, his attitudes about home and exile shift remarkably, resulting in an enlargement of citizenship. Just as he expands his historical consciousness, so does he become a world citizen. This change partially relieves his sense of exile, for it changes the conditions for "home," in turn affecting his unwilling exile. No longer a lost, desired edenic realm, nor the place one must continually escape to survive, home becomes more and more either the peaceful domain of death, or a sustaining spiritual realm discovered or created wherever one may be.

From his earliest work, Wright is an exile among his own people. His estrangement is primarily spiritual, and he underscores this by sympathizing with the abused, the de-
feated, the disenfranchised. But perhaps the largest indication of this alienation lies in his poems about criminals, such as "To A Fugitive," "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," "Saint Judas," and "American Twilights, 1957." In these, Wright identifies with the criminal whose misery the community ignores in its preoccupation with ceremonies for atonement. Those aware of this blindness understand criminal desolation. Thus Wright can conclude about the murderer:

Haunted by gallows, peering in dark,
I conjure prisons out of wet
And strangling pillows where I mark
The misery man must not forget,
Though I have found no prison yet.

Lo now, the desolation man
Has tossed away like a gnawed bone
Will hunt him where the sea began,
Summon him out of tree and stone,
Damn him, before his dream be gone:--

Seek him behind his bars, to crack
Out the dried kernel of his heart.
God, God have pity if he wake,
Have mercy on man who dreamed apart.
God, God have mercy on man apart.

"American Twilights, 1957"
(pt. 2. 11. 16-30 p. 80)

But Wright knows this position is not entirely defensible, especially for a poet. In "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," he grapples with being both part of the judging community and alienated from it. Addressing the murderer George Doty, he says:

... if I confess I do not love you,
Will you let me alone? I burn for my own lies.
The nights electrocute my fugitive,
My mind. I run like the bewildered mad
At St. Clair Sanitorium, who lurk,
(No Stanza Break)
Arch and cunning, under the maple trees,  
Pleased to be playing guilty after dark.  
Staring to bed, they croon self-lullabies.  
Doty, you make me sick. I am not dead.  
I croon my tears at fifty cents per line.  
(pt. 2 pp. 82-83)

"My fugitive, / My mind" forms the basis of Wright's  
"criminality." Just as his estrangement from American  
history is typical, so is this alienation of consciousness.  
Robert Hass observes that:

Over and over in American writing,  
[there is] this theme of discovery, that  
the inner life has no place, that it  
makes outlaws of us . . . [T]here is  
always this sense of a radical division  
between the inner and outer worlds and  
the hunger for a magic that will heal  
it, a sanctification or election. It  
gives a kind of drama to Wright's search  
for a style, but it also gives me the  
uneasy feeling that the way of posing  
the problem is the problem.  

Indeed, Wright eventually poses the problem of his art and  
exile in various ways. But during much of his career no  
figure so embodies his position as that of "Saint  
Judas."

When I went out to kill myself, I caught  
A pack of hoodlums beating up a man.  
Running to spare his suffering, I forgot  
My name, my number, how my day began,  
How soldiers milled around the garden stone  
And sang amusing songs; how all that day  
Their javelins measured crowds; how I alone  
Bargained the proper coins, and slipped away.

Banished from heaven, I found the victim beaten,  
Stripped, knee'd, and left to cry. Dropping my  
rope  
Aside, I ran, ignored the uniforms:  
Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,  
The kiss that ate my flesh. Played without hope,  
I held the man for nothing in my arms.  
(pp. 84-85)
Judas: victim of historical caricature, outcast, savvy capitalist, and necessary villain in the Christian redemption play. Now away from the man he betrayed, he is drawn beyond the anguish of his own life by the suffering of another. Condemned, without hope for heaven, he holds another beaten man "for nothing," performing a true act of grace.

Wright's second book takes its title from this poem, and the poem also concludes "The Part Nearest Home," the final section of that book. The Judas figure literally returns much later, in Two Citizens, but it broods over much of the work from the middle period of Wright's career, when he focuses on the problems of American and interior exile. In these poems, he generally takes on one of three roles: witness, victim, or a combination of both. In the previous chapter, we saw one of the more successful instances of this in "Stages On A Journey Westward." A more direct treatment of his estrangement appears in "The Minneapolis Poem."

The Chippewa young men
Stab one another shrieking
Jesus Christ.
Split-lipped homosexuals limp in terror of assault.
High school backfields search under benches
Near the Post Office. Their faces are the rich
Raw bacon without eyes.
The Walker Art Center crowd stare
At the Guthrie Theater.

(pt. 2 p. 140)

*

All over the walls of comb cells
Automobiles perfumed and blinded
(No Stanza Break)
Consent with a mutter of high good humor
To take their two naps a day.
Without sound windows glide back
Into dusk.
The sockets of a thousand blind bee graves tier
upon tier
Tower not quite toppling.
There are men in this city who labor dawn after
dawn
To sell me my death.

(pt. 5  p. 141)

*

I want to be lifted up
By some great white bird unknown to the police,
And soar for a thousand miles and be carefully
hidden
Modest and golden as one last corn grain,
Stored with the secrets of the wheat and the
mysterious lives
Of the unnamed poor.

( pt. 7  p. 141)

This is Wright's unreal city. In Minneapolis, one can
review the parade of suffering, sometimes melodramatic,
essentially grim and ironic. The poem catalogues the pains
of those who do not "fit in" to the mainstream of American
society. Yet their sufferings are not merely inflicted by
the dominant groups of football players and police. The
oppressed also oppress each other. Even the privileged and
presumably cultured feud with one another. Furthermore,
those who conform to the ideal of citizenship and the ways
of the city are victims of another sort. Workers and
drones, they spiritlessly, sacrificially support the fragile
hive-mausoleum. Their cosmology is commerce, their purpose
production.

Wright concludes the poem with a wish to escape and
salvage the lives of the "unnamed poor." As the "one last
corn grain," he becomes a repository of those lives. Like Judas, he stands out from the mob to which he is inextricably linked. Beyond the usual hopes, the common heavens, he holds the broken and abused. For Wright, this final gesture is the act of poetry.

Wright's love-hate relationship with his homeland engenders a variety of tensions real or illusory, as another poem from this period, "Fear Is What Quickens Me," illustrates.

1.

Many animals that our fathers killed in America
Had quick eyes.
They stared about wildly,
When the moon went dark.
The new moon falls into the freight yards
Of cities in the south,
But the loss of the moon to the dark hands of
Chicago
Does not matter to the deer
In this northern field.

2.

What is that tall woman doing
There, in the trees?
I can hear rabbits and mourning doves whispering
together
In the dark grass, there
Under the trees.

3.

I look about wildly.

(p. 115)

Criminal or not, the poet finds himself among the hunted. He has the animal's dexterity, but also human consciousness. Knowing the distances danger can traverse, he has the power to imagine, to see the woman in the tree and to hear the
animals whisper, a power feared by the American materialist
culture. Thus he struggles to be the faster animal, his
fear of spiritual extinction quickening him to escape his
fearful pursuers. On a purely personal level this sentiment
leans toward paranoia. From the point of view of the artist
or outsider in America, the threat has substance.

Another aspect of the poet's interior exile appears in
"Outside Fargo, North Dakota."

Along the sprawled body of the derailed Great
Northern freight car,
I strike a match slowly and lift it slowly.
No wind.

Beyond town, three heavy white horses
Wade all the way to their shoulders
In a silo shadow.

Suddenly the freight car lurches.
The door slams back, a man with a flashlight
Calls me good evening.
I nod as I write good evening, lonely
And sick for home.

(p. 150)

Robert Hass argues that the final lines reveal:

the aboriginal loneliness of being . . .
and that man, the man who wrote
those lines, is not lonely. At least
that is not quite the word for it.

There is little doubt that the poem evokes loneliness,
though it seems difficult to prove how lonely the writer may
be, especially since the distinction between the emotions of
the man in the freight car and those of the poet are
purposely blurred. Just as Wright witnesses the degradation
and violence of Minneapolis, he witnesses the jacklighted
fate of the hobo soul discovered in a freight car. In both
cases, he nods agreement as he writes the words, the man
with the gift and opportunity to record the experiences. As Hass states:

... his poetry is the way in which the suffering of other people... is actually a part of his own emotional life. It is what he writes from, not what he writes about.6

The man "sick for home" is not really different from the man who "look[s] about wildly," only quieter.

We see Wright's other variations on attachment to and estrangement from home in poems like "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," "A Prayer to Escape the Market Place," and "The Undermining of the Defense Economy," even in the longing for silence in his lyrics about nature. The previous three examples show the tonal range of Wright's anguish, from the shriek in a city street to the quiet irony in a railroad track's sarcasm. One final example from Wright's middle period will show another kind of tone and rhetoric.

THE RIVER DOWN HOME

Under the enormous pier-shadow,
Hobie Johnson drowned in a suckhole.
I cannot even remember
His obliterated face.
Outside my window, now, Minneapolis
Drowns, dark.
It is dark.
I have no life.

What is left of all of it?
Blind hoboes sell American flags
And bad poems of patriotism
On Saturday evenings forever in the rain,
Between the cat houses and the slag heaps
And the river, down home.
Oh Jesus Christ, the Czechoslovakians
Are drunk again, clambering
(No Stanza Break)
Down the sand-pitted walls
Of the grave.

(pp. 164-165)

Those losses which may be self-imposed by one estranged from his homeland merge with those over which one has little or no choice. Hobie Johnson, the faceless memory, is one of many personages from Wright's Ohio River childhood. With Jimmy Leonard, Emerson Buchanan, Willy Lyons, Joe Shank, Aunt Agnes, the Helslop Brothers, Bennie Capaletti, Uncle Sherman, Old Man Bluehart, and others more or less "obliterated" by the undertow of time, Hobie will not vanish from Wright's consciousness. Though forever absent, he haunts the poet looking toward his own fate. Minneapolis, the city of nightmares on the journey home, offers nothing but spiritual darkness as an analogue to the poet's drowning spirit. And what are the remains of such a death? The beggarly slogans of patriotism and bad poetry, drunkenness, cat houses, slag heaps, and the river "down home" whose emotional current draws all to the grave.

This is Wright's nadir, the "cold-blooded plea of a home-sick vampire," as he says in a slightly later poem, "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child." This sickness can only be aided by art, and part of Wright's struggle during this period involves recouping his native place through poems. Thus, he recreates his Ohio River childhood in poem after poem, and he returns there in his final books, though less frequently. Of all those from
home who haunt Wright, his muse-figure, Jenny, provides his most essential connection. As he says in "To The Muse":

I would lie to you
If I could.
But the only way I can get you to come up
Out of the suckhole, the south face
Of the Powhatan pit, is to tell you
What you know:

You come up after dark, you poise alone
With me on the shore.
I lead you back to this world.
        (11. 11-19 p. 168)

* 

I don't blame you, I know
The place where you lie.
I admit everything. But look at me.
How can I live without you?
Come up to me, love,
Out of the river, or I will
Come down to you.
        (11. 42-48 p. 169)

Like Judas, Jenny appears again in Wright's later work, for the two emotional currents they represent remain strong in his final books.

In these last three books, he confronts his self-imposed exile and the unavoidable loss of home in a new way. He changes the conditions for "home" by redefining his emotional and geographical citizenship. Though this redefinition never completely ameliorates his exile, in his most successful moments Wright becomes, in effect, a world citizen.

Two Citizens marks this dramatic shift in two ways. First, a successful love relationship becomes prominent in his poems. Second, he turns his internal exile into a literal one by moving away from America. In this regard,
Two Citizens might be called "Two Citizenships." Wright leaves his homeland, damning it at every opportunity. Yet his emotional connection forces him to look back at every turn. The book, then, contains some of Wright's most diverse tones. "Ars Poetica: Some Recent Criticism" begins "When I was a boy / I loved my country," and concludes, telling the readers:

Ense petit placidam
Sub liberatate quietem.

Hell, I ain't got nothing.
Ah, you bastards,

How I hate you.

(pt. 7 11. 3-7 p. 7)

The impulse to leave the old bonds behind pushes to similar extremes poems such as "I Wish I May Never Hear Of The United States Again" and "Ohio Valley Swains." "Son of Judas," the second poem in the book, connects Wright genealogically to his previous poems, but only in the hope of jettisoning their burdens. Wright addresses not capricious readers or river bank rapists from Ohio but God himself, becoming the betrayer's son and legatee of the damned. He declares:

I was perfectly willing to accept your world,
Where Mark Hanna and every other plant
Gatherer of the grain and gouging son
Of a God whonks his doodle in the
United States government of his hand.

(11. 17-21 p. 8)

*

Here's your money.
I didn't even count it.

(Stanza Break)
Damn your own son,  
And leave us go.  
(11. 47-50 p. 9)

Many of the poems which resound with hope for his new love also seek to break free of it, for Wright seeks to be alone with his lover as much as he wishes to leave America behind.

Some poems in the book, however, already show signs of Wright’s attempt to fuse his dual citizenship and enlarge it. The most successful of these is "Names Scarred At The Entrance to Chartres":

This cracking blossom is my second America.  
And though my first  
Shatters itself cold with hatred, though  
I might have given my leaves here  
A long time ago,  
P. Dolan and A. Doyle are the faint names  
I enter with.

We have no home in the local strawberry leaves,  
The wild peas’ reverence, the living faces of men.  
I have no way to go in  
Except only  
In the company of two vulgars,  
Furies too dumb to remember  
Death, our bodies’ mother, whose genius it is  
To remember our death on the wet  
Roads of Chartres, America, and to forget  
Our names. The wild strawberry leaf  
Does not need to bother with remembering  
Its own name, and Doyle, Dolan, and me.

All three Americans, drunk on our lonely women.  
(11. 17-36 pp. 45-46)

Perhaps Dolan and Doyle are American, perhaps not. Nonetheless, the names gouged into the medieval monument invoke Wright’s sense of American vulgarity. America and the cathedral are disfigured beauties. Yet neither can offer the ease of home, an ease expressed in Wright’s later poem "Entering the Temple in Nîmes."
Bonnie Costello, in an article on *Two Citizens*, asserts that in Wright's later books:

[He] tried to return to that optimistic, rooted wholesomeness. But he finds his patriotism in Europe, and such transplants do not really enrich an American soil.7

*Two Citizens* remains one of Wright's most optimistic books. In it, his crushing loneliness abates somewhat under the influence of love and a lover. Yet to claim that he discovers patriotism in Europe seems an overstatement. More accurately, perhaps, he looks longingly to Europe to find the life America could not give; and Europe provides a qualified hope, as we see in his final books. When this occurs, however, it is not for the purposes of praising one place over another, but in the service of knowing that all places have their beauties and their beauties disfigured. In *Two Citizens*, Wright cannot leave American behind, cannot forsake the America within himself. He is not so much one exiled as one discovering the larger world from which all are estranged and to which all belong, though customs, laws, language, history and individual human flaws often make it dangerous, incomprehensible, and lonely.

*To A Blossoming Pear Tree* has little of the strident rejection of America or the lover's bravado. Nor is Wright willfully optimistic. He easily moves between America and Europe, the present and the past, the unbearable and the beatific; the dual emotional and geographical citizenship suggested in *Two Citizens* becomes prevalent, showing signs
of fusing into a single sense of place. A passage from "One Last Look at the Adige: Verona in the Rain" illustrates this fusion.

The Ohio must have looked
Something like this
To the people who loved it
Long before I was born.
They called the three
Slim islands of willow and poplar
Above Steubenville,
They, they, they
Called
The three slim islands
Our Sisters.

Steubenville is a black crust, America is
A shallow hell where evil
Is an easy joke, forgotten
In a week.

Oh, stay with me a little longer in the rain,
Adige.

Now, Adige, flow on.
Adige, river on earth,
Only you can hear
A half-witted angeldrawling Ohioan
In the warm Italian rain.

(11. 12-33 pp. 5-6)

Every land has its river, as does every life in Wright's cosmology. The Adige stimulates the longing for the pristine waters he imagines existed before his birth, before the river was polluted and life clouded with the wastes of experience.

The bare-knuckled damnation of Steubenville, Ohio and America underscores Wright's bitterness, as does the invocation to the Adige. But this scorn and nostalgia cannot support unqualified admiration of this river. Wright says:
The unrighteous heathen,
Valerio Catullo,
Was born in Verona,
And you held him in the curve of your arm.
He couldn't stand it.
He left home and went straight
To hell in Rome.

(11. 42-48 p. 6)

As America is a hell, so is Rome. The very next poem in the book, "Hell," describes that emotional state. The word also appears in poems set in America and Europe, implying that emotional and physical hell lies not just in Minneapolis. Wright allies himself with the poet, Catullus, who left his home and river for Rome. In this, Wright finds precedent for moving toward a larger sense of citizenship: Rome was the world for Catullus. Also, this passage shrewdly associates the Ohio and the Adige in a new way. All rivers are home for someone, and those rivers must be escaped if one is to grow, just as one must escape the power of parents. In "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child," Wright longingly refers to the "rinsing arms" of the Ohio River. Here, we see the "curve of your arm" that must be left behind, perhaps continuously. Thus the Adige is not really paradisal. As a "river on earth," it has known degradation. It has symbolized another's necessary exile.

This poem indicates how much less strident is To A Blossoming Pear Tree than its predecessor, than several of its predecessors. Yet Wright remains adamant about the "black crust" of America, and many anguished moments underlie the book. For example:
Today, you happen to be gone.  
I sit here in the raging hell,  
The city of the dead, alone,  
Holding a little empty shell.  

"With the Shell of A Hermit Crab"  
(11. 9-12 p. 19)

This book deals more with a clear-eyed vision of all the world than the forsaking of one place for another. Poems like "To A Blossoming Pear Tree" and "Hook" relate incidents in a style which implies the archetypal aspect of human relations. "With a Sliver of Marble from Carrara" proceeds from a scene typical of Wright's poems set in America: men out of work, not likely to get any, and powerless to change these conditions. "Written on a Big Cheap Postcard from Verona" tells of sending "vulgarity home" via a garish postcard of Romeo and Juliet; but it ultimately speaks of the inclination of all cultures to camouflage with romantic sentimentalism a viciousness toward the true lovers of the world. Indeed, the book concludes with Wright's poem of least-qualified praise for his homeland, "Beautiful Ohio," where he says that he has finally "... found a way / To sit on a railroad tie / Above the sewer main" in his home town of Martins Ferry.

I know what we call it [the sewage]  
Most of the time.  
But I have my own song for it,  
And sometimes, even today,  
I call it beauty.  
(11. 16-20 p. 62)

This is the result of gaining distance from the home that must be left and the home stripped away by time.
Perhaps the most acute indication of Wright's enlarging sense of citizenship involves his changing attitudes toward the grave. For Wright, the graveyard warehouses the past. The location of the individual grave also symbolizes defeat, or hope, in life. Where one dies and then lies eternally tells something of how one lived. In "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," Wright puts the matter in characteristic terms when he speaks of "dead Ohio, where I might lie buried, / Had I not run away before my time." The terror of eternal entrapment in the entropic hell of Ohio compels him to leave home. But in Two Citizens and To A Blossoming Pear Tree he adopts another tone. For example, "At the Grave," an elegy for a former teacher buried in Ohio:

And you loved me. Steubenville,
Ohio, is a hell of a place to be buried.  
But there are some lovely places to be buried.  
Like Rome. Listen. So help me sweet leaping Christ, it is going to be a cold day  
In hell when any Johnny Bull knows  
What I am saying to you:  
I have found a woman who lives, and so  
I am going to Rome with her  
For a long time yet.  

(11. 28-37 pp. 27-28)

At first glance this poem seems to fall into the yawning sentimentalism which Costello observes. Yet the roughneck rhetoric lays down a powerful proposition: Look for a better place to die if you are to find a better place to live, physically and emotionally. Thus, in another piece, "Names in Monterchi: To Rachel," Wright can declare:

I hurried you and my beloved  
(Both you beloved)  
To a secret place.  

(Stanza Break)
In the little graveyard there,
We are buried, Rachel, Annie, Leopoldo, Marshall,
The spider, the dust, the brilliant, the wind.
The tiny grapes
Glazed themselves so softly in the soft tuft
Of butterflies, it was hard to name
Which vine, which insect, which wing,
Which of you, which of me.

(11. 17-27 pp. 53-54)

This is one of the "lovely" places Wright spoke of in the previous passage. The fusion of human identities with each other and with nature suggests the sense of home that previously remained beyond him in the strawberry fields of "Names Scarred At the Entrance to Chartres." The sense of home seems doubly affirmed here by the musing, serene tone, which is rare when Wright treats the subject of graves.

Perhaps as rare is the sentiment expressed in "The Best Days," from the same book. Watching men lift a stone block partially sunken in earth, Wright says:

I look beneath.
It does not look like a grave
Of anybody, anybody at all,
Not even a Roman
Legionary or slave.
It is just under the stone.
The earth smells fresh, like the breath
Of a calf just born in Ohio
With me.

(11. 29-37 p. 51)

In his earlier work, the block would immediately suggest a headstone. Here the soil reminds him of birth and, thus, brings to life a past place and time through the present rebirth of the senses. He concludes:

The best days are the first to flee,
And the underside of the stone
Is pink marble
From Verona. The poet found, in Verona,

(No Stanza Break)
The friendship of daylight,  
And a little peace.  

(11. 43-48 p. 51)

Again, Wright makes the same connection between himself and Catullus, linking this poem to "One Last Look at the Adige: Verona in the Rain." Though Wright has "run away" from Ohio, the earth of Verona nonetheless binds him to it. For the moment, he stands secured, a citizen of far more territory than the six feet of earth that will someday be his only claim in Europe or America.

Bearing these changes in mind, then, the continuing resolutions of the problem of exile, home, and citizenship in his final book are logical extensions of earlier terms. This Journey is a dying man's elegy for the life remaining to him. In some ways it is Wright's least anguished work, and his most poised. Ever more acutely he becomes the wanderer. But, as he says in the title poem:

... The secret  
Of this journey is to let the wind  
Blow its dust all over your body,  
To let it go on blowing, to step lightly, lightly  
All the way through your ruins ...  

(11. 30-34 pp. 30-31)

One may choose nostalgic delusion or a going forth. Choosing the latter, Wright becomes a world citizen and partially relieves his exile by changing the conditions for home. One changes these conditions by removing the aura from those places where one was born and raised. Later, one does the same with those places that grow special, at the expense of satisfaction with new surroundings. It is a strategy with a long history. For example, Hugo of St.
Victor outlines a program of enlargement and divestment for a man in the twelfth century.

The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.

Though Wright's articulation is more secular, Hugo's prescription might serve well as a précis of Wright's movement over the course of his career. In his final poems he lies somewhere between the "strong man" and the "perfect man." Too attached to the things of this world to extinguish emotional connections with them, he nonetheless contemplates a relationship to the world beyond his human life. In his own terms, we may say that his position perhaps approaches his ideal of the "grown man." The journey itself becomes "home."

Though the whole of This Journey exudes these sentiments, three poems will serve as illustrations. The first, "Entering the Temple in Nîmes," begins the volume and immediately establishes Wright's enlarged citizenship.

As long as this evening lasts, I am going to walk all through and around The Temple of Diana. I hope to pay my reverence to the goddess there Whom the young Romans loved. Though they learned her name from the dark rock Among bearded Greeks, It was here in the south of Gaul they found her true To her own solitude. (No Stanza Break)
For here surely the young women of Gaul
Glanced back thoughtfully over their bare
White shoulders and hurried away
Out of sight and then rose, reappearing
As vines and the pale inner hands of sycamores
In the green places.
This evening, in winter,
I pray for the stone-eyed legions of the rain
To put off their armor.
Allow me to walk between the tall pillars
And find the beginning of one vine leaf there,
Though I arrive too late for the last spring
And the rain still mounts its guard.
(p. 3)

There is nothing of the tourist's travesty in this
supplication, for the temple is not a ruin to be acquired as
"experience" and later tendered in trumping conversations.
Nor does the poet use the ruin as an excuse to pine for past
ages. It is as much an inner place as an outer one.
Wright, the wanderer-pilgrim, aspires to the spirit of
"reverence" and by that to the discovery of new hope, "the
beginning of one leaf" in the middle of his personal winter.
This desire supersedes local boundaries, personal and
national histories; yet it links them, no matter the
changing forms in which it manifests itself. Wright enters
this place not as an exile driven by the hunger for
recuperation but as a dweller in possibility seeking a
little more time.

This book becomes the pilgrim's attempt to "walk all
through and around" the temple of the world and the inner
life. The penultimate poem of the collection, "Leaving the
Temple in Nîmes," tells us that Wright somehow manages to
come "face to face with the spring" that had earlier seemed
impossibly distant. Between these points, the problems of
exile and home find some resolution in one of two ways. The first appears in "Coming Home to Maui."

It took her an hour to climb the green cliff here. She rose as the light rose. Now, On this small pinnacle, the long-legged brown girl, American from Chicago, places One glittering opihi shell, Bony with light, Into my pale hand.

One afternoon in the dark howling Of ice off Lake Michigan, She blundered into a bewildered young man, A Hawaiian lost on State Street. So she brought him home.

Now, as we stand here, the young man searches Below us, down, into the ocean. He is hunting for shellfish Among the strange trees. He brings the opihi home in the evening, And she shines them.

He makes a living Grounging under water before sunrise and after. He turns home toward the woman, He turns the dark creatures of his ocean Over to the woman, And soon they shine.

Years ago, far from home, I came to these islands. I had rolled, puking in a dark shell, A troopship, all of two nights. Then, when I woke, It was hard to believe the earth Could be lived on at all, much less the beautiful Home of this woman's hands, home of this light. And yet here it is, this green cliff where she rose, The home of this light. (pp. 26-27)

Home is an emotional state discovered or created. Here it arises in human relationship. The woman supplies the stability and routine which keep her lover from regressing into the vagrant he was before she found him, a vagrant
typical of the desperate ones in Wright's earlier work. The poet, too, receives her grace, seeing the two work together to make the luminous shells of their love.

But he discovers more. Remembering his lost past in these once war-savaged islands, he again experiences his wonder at finding the place beautiful despite that danger and destruction. Moreover, he eventually realizes that the lovely, though ravaged, earth has produced this woman. It also bestows the light, the green hills, the opihi shells. It is home for the man who can see this "light." Searching and making are the keys to such vision. Wright relentlessly repeats the word "home" as if he believes that repetition will make home more palpable. Of course, the power to create home lies with him, as it does with the couple. Wright chooses to come home, and to do so involves a return, but not necessarily to his place of birth and rearing. He returns to the place where he "woke" to the extremes of the world's beauty and danger.

Wright's second vision of home faces in an almost opposite direction, toward death and the life beyond it. The most complete example of this view appears in "Wherever Home Is." Meditating on an eroding statue of Leonardo da Vinci, Wright speculates on the madness of the artistic enterprise. In view of the destruction wrought by time, he says:

Good riddance a little while to the insane.  
Although the wisteria gets nowhere  
And the sea wind crumbles Leonardo down,  
(No Stanza Break)
A new lizard frolics in the cold sunlight
Between Leonardo's thumb and his palette.
One brief lizard
Lavishes on Leonardo and on me
The whole spring.

Goodbye to Leonardo, good riddance
To decaying madmen who cannot keep alive
The wanderers among trees.
I am going home with the lizard,
Wherever home is,
And lie beside him unguarded
In the clear sunlight.
We will lift our faces even if it rains.
We will both turn green.

(11. 12-28 p. 12)

The attraction to death is implied often in Wright's work,
most notably as a frenzied, subterranean impulse like that
in "Stages on a Journey Westward." In the passage above, he
is more easeful, though he offers no certainty. With just
the flick of the lizard's tongue, the energy of nature
outstrips art's greatest efforts. Yet that tongue is a
gift. Wright temporarily switches allegiances, from the
human world of artistic struggle and decay to the fleeting
but rejuvenating company of the lizard. Home is death,
wherever that leads. Home lies in the cycle of
ever-returning spring. Home is where one lies "unguarded."
Home is transformation. More comforting than Wright's usual
view of death, this partially mystical vision allows him the
choice of offering himself to the world beyond human con-
sciousness. In one sense, the vision becomes an escape from
humanity couched in the rhetoric of repudiation. In an-
other, it represents an exchange of human life for the life
of nature, which is the only God, really, in Wright's
cosmology.
Of course, neither of these "solutions" to the problem of exile and home pertains to all of This Journey. Both are temporary. Wright will return to his art's madness, if time gives him opportunity. The light of Maui cannot remain fixed. Yet the impulse toward a fusion with nature through death dominates many of these poems, as does the impulse to wander in the human world. Wright's calm tone suggests mercy for himself and for the world. It is the final tone of his journey "lightly" through his own ruins. But for the poet, for us, this journey does not end with ruins. The Wright of This Journey is no longer a man of only one place, nor one headed toward a single place, emotionally or physically. His former sympathy with the homeless now makes each place a home, not one more than any other.
Notes


2 Smith, p. XXIV.

3 Smith, p. XXV.


5 Hass, p. 197.

6 Hass, p. 201.


CHAPTER VII
THE METAPHYSIC OF LONELINESS

Not surprisingly, Wright's estrangement from history and home parallels the relentless loneliness pervading his work. As he undergoes changes in his orientation toward history and home, so does he transcend this loneliness. But this change involves much more. For Wright, loneliness is the basic fact of things, of being. The limitations of the physical body exacerbate this condition. Though a source of delight, the body ultimately separates one human spirit from another. It reminds one of mortality and cosmic aloneness. Thus Wright moves between a dedication to the facts of the physical body and a desire to transcend the body. He also vacillates between the need for a personal, almost confessional, relationship with the reader and the opposing wish to withdraw and have both writer and reader "mind [their] own business." Though Wright never resolves these conflicts, he comes to praise the intractable uniqueness of each life. His metaphysical loneliness eventually wanes under the influence of a happy love relationship; in his final book, a consoling aura of "solitude" supplants his loneliness.
One need not look far into Wright's poetry to find examples of loneliness and the limitations of the body. "Sappho," a fine dramatic monologue from Wright's first book, vividly articulates the problem. Bereft of her lover, damned for her desire, Sappho keeps house and speculates on her sorrow.

I light the fire and see the blossom dance
On air alone; I will not douse that flame,
That searing flower; I will burn in it.
I will not banish love to empty rain.

For I know that I am asked to hate myself
For their sweet sake
Who sow the world with child.
I am given to burn on the dark fire they make
With their sly voices.

But I have burned already down to bone.
There is a fire that burns beyond the names
Of sludge and filth of which this world is made.
Agony sears the dark flesh of the body,
And lifts me higher than the smoke, to rise
Above the earth, above the sacrifice;
Until my soul flares outward like a blue
Blossom of gas fire dancing in mid-air:
Free of the body's work of twisted iron.

(11. 79-96 p. 35)

Social convention constrains desire and, to some extent, the body itself. Sappho suffers like so many of Wright's outcasts, though she does not respond as they often do, inflicting physical damage on themselves in response to their anguish. Sappho attempts the heroic. Scored by a passion she will not betray, she offers herself to the flames of her pain to transcend somehow the mutilated hopes of the "body's work of twisted iron."

"Sappho" implies the essential loneliness of being in a human body, whatever its gender or erotic preferences. We
find this explicitly stated in another early piece, "Eve-
ning," about the poet and his son. Wright says:

He stood on the hard earth,
Like one who understands
Fairy and ghost--but less
Our human loneliness.

(11. 45-48 p. 56)

Many of Wright's later poems proceed from an implied
loneliness, but some explicitly make loneliness their
subject. For example:

Where is the sea, that once solved the whole
loneliness
Of the Midwest? Where is Minneapolis? I can see
nothing
But the great terrible oak tree darkening with
winter.

"As I Step Over a Puddle at the
End of Winter, I Think of an
Ancient Chinese Governor"
(11. 15-17 p. 111)

* 

Mother of roots, you have not seeded
The tall ashes of loneliness
For me. Therefore,
Now I go.

"Goodbye to the Poetry of
Calcium"
(11. 1-4 pp. 111-112)

* 

I am sick
Of it, and I go on,
Living, alone, alone,
Past the charred silos, past the hidden graves
Of Chippewas and Norwegians.

"Having Lost My Sons, I
Confront the Wreckage of the
Moon: Christmas, 1960"
(11. 15-19 p. 131)
Men have a right to thank God for their loneliness.
The walls are hysterical with their dank messages.  
"Inscription for the Tank"  
(11. 11-12 p. 142)  

*  

I have gone forward with  
Some, a few lonely some.  
They have fallen to death.  
I die with them.  

"Speak"  
(11. 33-36 p. 150)  

*  

We Americans, loneliness of body,  
Puritans, sick at the beauty of the body,  
Men and women we leave each other, lonely.  
"The Offense"  
(11. 13-15 p. 200)  

Loneliness in relation to place, the past, death, God, and culture.  No doubt this suggests an oppressive poetic vision.  Were Wright’s concerns to extend no further he would indeed be the graveyard poet some readers see.  

But for Wright, the life of the body does not always result in despair and loneliness.  Of The Branch Will Not Break, Wright says:  

At the center of that book is my rediscovery of the abounding delight of the body that I had forgotten about.  

Every Friday afternoon I used to go out to Bly’s farm, and there were so many animals out there.  There was Simon, who was an Airedale, but about the size of a Great Dane.  There was David, the horse, my beautiful, beloved David, the swaybacked palomino . . . David would stand there looking out over the corn fields that lead onto the prairies of South Dakota, and Simon would sit down beside him, and they would stay there for hours . . . sometimes I went and sat down beside Simon.  Neither Simon nor David looked at me, and I felt
blessed. They allowed me to join them. They liked me. I can't get over it— they liked me... All I was thinking was, I can be happy sometimes. And I'd forgotten that. And with those animals I remembered then. And that is what that book is about, the rediscovery."

As we shall see in the next chapter, nature supplies the grounds for solace, for sensory pleasure, and for a sense of unity in an exile's world. We have already seen the desire to transcend the body in "Sappho." It appears again in "Trying to Pray."

This time, I have left my body behind me, crying In its dark thorns. Still,
There are good things in this world.
It is dusk.
It is the good darkness
Of women's hands that touch loaves. The spirit of a tree begins to move.
I touch leaves.
I close my eyes, and think of water. (pp. 128-129)

The poem implies that poets, among others, too often emphasize bodily torment. Wright wills that there be "good things in this world." Some of those things--dusk, touch, and the odor of loaves--reveal themselves through the senses. Others, like the "good darkness" and the "spirit" of the tree, reside in the imagination. In the final line, Wright attempts to integrate these overlapping domains. The image of water evokes an ideal state of being. Endlessly mutable, indestructible, it flows with all degrees of intensity or stands still. Here, human consciousness finds respite from the "dark thorns" of bodily experience. Water
represents desired grace and, imagined, it becomes a vehicle for attempted prayer.

Though not one of Wright's most successful poems, "Trying to Pray" indicates Wright's dual attitude. He leaves the body behind but also says, "Still, / There are good things in this world." Although a source of pain, the body is good because it offers the potential for sensual delight and it sustains the imagination.

A more complex treatment of this matter appears in "A Blessing," also from The Branch Will Not Break. Rather than moving inward toward prayer, the poet proceeds outward toward contact with the world. Yet his movement describes limitations. Wright and an anonymous friend cross barbed wire into a field and observe two ponies. "There is no loneliness like theirs," the poet says. Then:

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

(11. 15-24  p. 135)

The erotic attachment to nature culminates in the desire to become part of nature, to relinquish human consciousness and form--to die. "If I stepped out of my body," Wright says, "I would break / Into blossom." The new form would shatter the old. Yet he remains within human limits, imagining the ecstasy of going beyond them, of blossoming. This
circumscribed ecstasy, this peak of joy and frustration, is his blessing. No loneliness resembles that of the poet and his friend, but for this moment, contact with nature overcomes it.

"A Winter Daybreak Above Vence," the final poem in his last book, addresses these same issues. Watching a Mediterranean dawn, Wright notes how the sea appears oddly closer to the fading moon than to the mountain. A friend's voice shakes him from this reverie and the poem ends:

Look, the sea has not fallen and broken
Our heads. How can I feel so warm
Here in the dead center of January? I can
Scarcely believe it, and yet I have to, this is
The only life I have. I get up from the stone.
My body mumbles something unseemly
And follows me. Now we are all sitting here strangely
On top of the sunlight.

(11. 38-45 p. 88)

This "half-transcendence" characterizes the relations of body and spirit in Wright's work. Again, the body cannot be left behind. It becomes a charming, sensuous follower of consciousness. Perhaps this is the only viable relationship available to the modern Romantic sensibility. In any event, these are among Wright's grandest instances of the delight in the body or the possibility of superseding the body's limitations.

Despite these poems of joy, however, many others evoke not just Wright's loneliness but the loneliness of those around him: the drunk afloat like a note in a bottle, the criminal penned or pursued, the man begging for love on a street corner, even the walking dead of Ohio. With Wright's
dual attitude toward transcending the body, two other paradoxes stem from the problem of loneliness. At times, he seeks to draw the reader close; at other times, he declares that this closeness is impossible or that the reader should stay away. The first of these impulses arises in his attempts to make his poems plain or personal. For example, "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" opens with a raging testimonial.

My name is James A. Wright, and I was born Twenty-five miles from this infected grave, In Martins Ferry, Ohio, where one slave To Hazel-Atlas Glass became my father. (pt. 1 11. 1-4 p. 82)

Or a much later poem, "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio," begins more intimately.

I am almost afraid to write down This thing. I must have been, Say, seven years old. That afternoon . . . (11. 1-3 p. 22)

Wright also addresses the reader directly, challenging him, attempting to repel him. For example, "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child":

If you do not care one way or another about The preceding lines, Please do not go on listening On any account of mine. Please leave the poem. Thank you. (pt. 2 11. 24-29 p. 207)

Perhaps the most extreme case of Wright's withdrawing bitterly comes in "The Jewel."

There is this cave In the air behind my body That nobody is going to touch: A cloister, a silence (No Stanza Break)
Closing around a blossom of fire.  
When I stand upright in the wind,  
My bones turn to dark emeralds.  
(p. 114)

Stephen Yenser sees this as Wright's wish to protect his flame of inspiration.² Others may see it as melodrama. Considering the loneliness which Wright perceives, and considering that his poetry inhabits the inner realm, his withdrawal seems more a symptom than a cause.

The second paradox relating to loneliness arises when Wright declares the unique integrity of the individual life. This sentiment materializes at the time his sense of exile becomes most intense, in the portraits of lonely degradation at the beginning of Shall We Gather At The River. For example, "Inscription for the Tank," a lament for anonymous suffering:

My life was never so precious  
To me as now.  
I gape unbelieving at those two lines  
Of my words, caught and frisked naked.  
(11. 1-4 p. 142)

The very next poem, "In Terror of Hospital Bills," reiterates this with ardent resolve.

But my life was never so precious  
To me as now.  
I will have to beg coins  
After dark.  

I will learn to scent the police,  
And sit or go blind, stay mute, be taken for dead  
For your sake, oh my secret, My life.  
(11. 21-28 p. 143)

These are hardly easy affirmations. Yet, keeping in mind the passage from "A Winter Daybreak Above Vence," they point
toward the intractable value of the individual life. Here, he imagines his way into drunk tanks, hospitals, and the like, places of greatest loneliness, abuse, and danger--institutions housing failing lives and bodies--as if to "bottom out" and thereby discover some prime value. His life is one secret among all the lives that are secrets. Its fragility is its test. Its uniqueness is its frustration and ultimate worth.

This kind of idealizing has its limits, of course, and Wright quickly recognizes them. In "Northern Pike," a slightly later poem, he declares:

. . . Every body
I know and care for,
And every body
Else is going
To die in a loneliness
I can't imagine and a pain
I don't know. We had
To go on living . . .

(11. 2-9 p. 213)

Just as the precious secret life must be preserved despite any humiliation, any danger, the collective life must go on. In this instance, the fish dies so that human life may continue. In the human realm, where "big fish" often seem to devour "little fish," this scene characterizes Wright's sense of the interconnectedness and separateness of human lives. In "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child," this theme recurs. To his brother, Wright says:

I have a little time left, Jack.
I don't know what you want.

(No Stanza Break)
But I know what I want.  
I want to live my life.  

And how can I live my life  
Unless you live yours?  

(pt. 7 11. 7-12 p. 212)

Man is connected to his fellows. Yet his separateness is to be encouraged and praised since the individual life is all one really has.

This sentiment infuses Wright’s later work, which shifts from the sufferings of loneliness to a consoling solitude. Several things may account for this shift. First, his attitudes toward home and history change in his later work. He defines the conditions for "home" and the terms of exile; he expands his historical consciousness. Second, he enjoys the happy influence of a successful love relationship, and for the first time in his work we find love poems to a living woman rather than to a muse or to the female impulse within. Third, Wright comes to terms with death in his last book where his growing solitude becomes perhaps the logical-emotional end for a writer concerned with individual human dignity as well as the rhetorical dignity of his art.

Two Citizens marks the beginning of these changes. Many of the poems, such as "Afternoon and Evening at Ohrid," "Voices Between Waking and Sleeping in the Mountains," and "I Wish I May Never Hear of the United States Again," exalt the possibilities of love, or they declare the simple boredom of loneliness (though Wright remains careful to preserve the notion that even in love relationships
loneliness is unavoidable and aloneness desirable). To illustrate these changes, I offer a poem from Wright's earlier work about love, loneliness, and inwardness, and three passages from Two Citizens which characterize his later attitudes. First, "Three Stanzas From Goethe," from The Branch Will Not Break.

The man standing there, who is he?
His path lost in the thicket,
Behind him the bushes
Lash back together,
The grass rises again,
The waste devours him.

Oh, who will heal the sufferings
Of the man whose balm turned poison?
Who drank nothing
But hatred of men from love's abundance?
Once despised, now a despiser,
He kills his own life,
The precious secret.
The self-seeker finds nothing.

Oh Father of Love,
If your psaltery holds one tone
That his ear still might echo,
Then quicken his heart!
Open his eyes, shut off by clouds
From the thousand fountains
So near him, dying of thirst
In his own desert.

(p. 112-113)

Here is the man lost in the desert of the self. In "October Ghosts," however, he has quenched his thirst at "the thousand fountains" and now reexamines his quest:

Jenny, fat blossoming grandmother of the dead,
We were both young, and I nearly found you, young.
I could not find you. I prowled into my head,
The cold ghost of October that is my skull.
There is a god's plenty of lovers there,
The dead, the dying, and the beautiful.

But where are we,
Jenny darkness, Jenny cold?
(No Stanza Break)
Are we so old?
We came so early, we thought to stay so long.
But it is already midnight, and we are gone.
I have nothing at all against the song,
That minor bird I hear from the great frost,
My robin's song, the ancient nothingness.

Friends, I have stolen this line from Robinson,
From Jenny, and from springtime, and from bone,
And from the quick nuthatch, the blooming of wing
upon the sky.

Now I know nothing, I can die alone.

(11. 27-44  pp. 54-55)

Though a grim and sometimes grimly comic passage, the final
statement begs no grief. After stripping away, if only for
a moment, personal history, literary convention, and
cultural knowledge, Wright arrives at the basic fact of
death, and the agony of aloneness in death despite all that
binds one to his fellows. But while he does not celebrate
aloneness, he does not lament it either. The second piece,
"She's Awake," offers an even more surprising treatment of
this subject. Wright imagines his lover-muse as a restless
nightwalker. He says:

Wound after wound, I look for
The tree by the waters where
She lay somehow naked,
Somehow still alive.

Lying myself awake,
I imagine everything terrible in my own life,
The hitchhiking drunk, the shame of knowing
My self a fool.
Bad friend to me.

(11. 8-16  p. 56)

And he concludes:

For God's sake, wake up, how in hell am I going to
die?

(Stanza Break)
It was easy.  
All I had to do was delete the words lonely and shadow, 
Dispose of the dactylic hexameters into amphibrachs 
Gather your lovely life into my life, 
And love your life. 

(11. 30-35  p. 57)

To end loneliness by deleting the word from one's poem attests to Wright's belief in the power of language to alter consciousness. It is often said that art, if it teaches, teaches us to live with dying. This seems the case here. Not only does the poet propose to delete loneliness from human existence but also "shadow," which is the darkness rendered by physical objects, such as the body. If Wright addresses his love, who is an actual woman, then the optimism of this passage gathers its force from a reaching out which is not an appropriation, but a bonding of the "precious secret" of two distinct lives. If we read this as an address to the muse, to the Jenny within him, then Wright seeks a unity with the "lovely life" of the art within himself, a better self who would be a better "friend to me," and a love. Either reading—and there is no reason to choose one over the other—embodies a rare attitude toward loneliness in his work up to this point. The bond the poet seeks here differs from the one between strangers on the street corners of his poems, and from the one forged by his sympathetic imaginings of the lost, lonely, and remote.

To A Blossoming Pear Tree generally returns to a more characteristic rhetoric of loneliness and physical
limitation, though poems like "The Best Days," "The First Days," "In Exile," and "The Fruits of the Season" evoke harmony and peace. In This Journey, however, "lonely" rarely appears; in its place we find "solitude," or "alone," or an aura of an aloneness which gives no consolation or anguish. Quoting another poet, Bill Knott, in a 1976 article, Wright lays down the terms which illuminate this shift in attitude. Knott declares:

I'm so lonely I can't stand it.
Solitude is all right. It's not the same thing. Loneliness rots the soul.  

While the loneliness that rots the soul continues elsewhere, Wright concerns himself with other matters. Faced with the reality of death, he turns to nature and the labor of making aloneness count for something more than a fact of existence. Thus we find declarations of solitude in the same circumstances as those poems of loneliness which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. For example:

These long-suffering and affectionate shadows,
These fluttering jewels, are trying to get
Some sleep in a dry shade beneath the cement joists of the railroad trestle.

I did not climb up here to find them.
It was only my ordinary solitude
I was following up here this afternoon.
Last evening I sat here with a girl.

"Lightning Bugs Asleep in the Afternoon"
(11. 1-8 p. 37)
Solitary,  
Nearly naked, now,  
I move in up to my knees.

"Entering the Kingdom of the Moray Eel"  
(ll. 12-14 p. 50)

In pieces like these, solitude is "ordinary," or a privileged metaphysical position.

There are also poems which deal more directly with solitude, or in which solitude or "ordinary" aloneness provide the medium for the action of the poem. Aside from those already mentioned, the most striking of the former is "Jerome in Solitude."

To see the lizard there,  
I was amazed I did not have to beat  
My breast with a stone.

If a lion lounged nearby,  
He must have curled in a shadow of cypress,  
For nobody shook a snarled mane and stretched out  
To lie at my feet.

And, for a moment,  
I did not see Christ retching in pain, longing  
To clutch his cold abdomen,  
Sagging, unable to rise or fall, the human  
Flesh torn between air and air.

I was not even  
Praying, unless: no,  
I was not praying.

A rust branch fell suddenly  
Down from a dead cypress  
And blazing gold. I leaned close.  
The deep place in the lizard's eye  
Looked back into me.

Delicate green sheaths  
Folded into one another.  
The lizard was alive,  
Happy to move.  

(Stanza Break)
But he did not move.
Neither did I.
I did not dare to.

(p. 72)

As a scholar in seclusion, theologian in exile, translator of the Bible into the vulgate, and observer of nature and human suffering, Jerome characterizes the Wright of "This Journey. No longer flagellating himself for some poetic vision as he has in the past, he disclaims any magic connection with nature, and he briefly stops dwelling on the primacy of human agony. Yet, with the appearance of the lizard, the bond with nature and the dreaded image of sacrifice arise again. It is a moment suspended between life and death, arising inexplicably, not in answer to any prayer.

In solitude, Wright watches, speculates, discovers, declares, and sometimes jokes. These are often poems of a notebook keeper—which is not to say they are fragments, but rather that they have a privacy about them without a rake-hell self-consciousness. Yet despite this solitude, Wright still sees the body as a vehicle of pain and death as well as delight. He completed this book just before he died, but he mentions the body directly less often than in his previous work. He does, however, address the subject through the repeated image of the human form in statuary. As we have seen in an earlier chapter, such poems as "The Vestal in the Forum" and "Wherever Home Is" articulate the vulnerability not only of the physical body but of beautiful, man-made things. Earlier in this chapter, we also saw delight in the body and a partial transcendence of it in "A
Winter Daybreak Above Vence," the final poem in *This Journey*. One last example, "Above San Fermo," illustrates both tendencies.

Somehow I have never lost
That feeling of astonished flight,
When the breath of my body suddenly
Becomes visible.

I might be standing beside a black snowdrift
In Ohio, where the railroad gravel
And the mill smoke that gets everything in the end
Reveal the true colors
Of a bewildered winter.
When I lit a match and breathed there,
A solitary batwing sailed out of my mouth
And hovered, fluttering,
All the way over to West Virginia
And beyond.

Even now,
Abandoned beside the abandoned battlements
Above the Adige, above
San Fermo, a hand waves over my lungs.
The demon leaps out
And takes off his hand-me-down jacket.
He strolls downhill
In the warm Italian sunlight, as though
He didn't care to choose between winter and
spring.
But spring will do him all right,
For the time being.  
(p. 17)

The solitary breath sheds the "hand-me-down jacket" of the body and returns to its element. As a batwing or demon it suggests the darker aspects of being human; but as the body's tenuous product, it comprises beauty and spurs the "feeling of astonished flight." It chooses the pleasures of spring, as does the poet, "for the time being" because that is the only time there is in a world where the mill smoke of destruction "gets everything in the end." Here we find joy in the face of limitations, and, as such, it is compelling.
The solitary breath, like the solitary life, becomes a source of amazement. In light of his shift from loneliness, exile, and estrangement, it becomes a sign of an acceptance which is neither resignation nor agony, but wonder. Thus we leave Wright no longer only pitying the man apart but astonished at the remaining force of his life.

Notes


We need only look to the titles of some of Wright's books—The Green Wall, The Branch Will Not Break, Shall We Gather At The River, To A Blossoming Pear Tree—to discover how prominently nature figures in his writing. Yet he is essentially an antipastoralist. As he says:

I've worked on farms and I would never work on another one. I've got up at four o'clock in the morning and shoveled the cow manure out of the barn and bailed away the horse urine. The hell with it."

This bluntness reminds one of "Nature-lovers are gone. / To hell with them" from his poem, "At The Executed Murderer's Grave." It also suggests Wright's tendency toward polar opposites. For Wright, nature represents the "green wall" or the "green places." Under the former term, nature reminds man of the human consciousness which sets him apart in anguish. Often indifferent to human suffering and morality, it is the fallen world of Judeo-Christian mythology, "immeasurably alive and good, / Though bare as rifted paradise." Under the latter term, nature is a complex, beautiful, consoling, healing, engendering, infinite source of life. Like most oppositions in Wright's poetry, these
views of nature intertwine throughout his work. If there is
exile from nature in his poetry, it lies within his poems of
the green wall. If there is relief from this exile, it lies
within those poems of the green places, which come to
dominate his last works and are among his most compelling.

Nature is local, populated, and, if wild, never exotic.
The river, the field, the spider, and the animate leaf
typify his nature imagery. Yet nature is always in extremis
because Wright feels strongly about it. In his poems of the
green wall, prairies and fields lie abandoned and polluted
rivers run with secret undertows. Childhood hills gape,
strip-mined, and blustery weather bears down on society’s
losers and outcasts. Images of fallen nature recur
frequently in his first books. For example, "A Fit Against
the Country," the first poem in The Green Wall:

Odor of fallen apple
Met you across the air,
The yellow globe lay purple
With bruises underfoot;
And, ravished out of thought,
Both of you had your share,
Sharp nose and watered mouth,
Of the dark tang of earth.

Yet, body, hold your humor
Away from the tempting tree,
The grass, the luring summer
That summon the flesh to fall.
Be glad of the green wall
You climbed across one day,
When winter stung with ice
That vacant paradise.

(11. 25-40 pp. 7-8)

Though always a source of sensual experience for Wright,
nature often remains indifferent to human action, or it is
ironically juxtaposed to human action. In this passage,
however, the earth in full bloom lures the poet to forget inevitable winter and, consequently, to fall again. But Wright cannot forget, and so he must content himself with visions of escaping a defunct paradise.

Another poem typical of the green-wall sensibility is "At the Slackening of the Tide," one of Wright's finest early pieces.

The cold simplicity of evening falls
Dead on my mind,
And underneath the piles the water
Leaps up, leaps up, and sags down slowly, farther
Than seagulls disembodied in the drag
Of oil and foam.

(11. 7-12 p. 62)

* 

What did I do to kill my time today,
After the woman ranted in the cold,
The mellow sea, the sound blown dark as wine?
After the lifeguard rose up from the waves
Like a sea-lizard with the scales washed off?
Sit there, admiring sunlight on a shell?

Abstract with terror of the shell, I stared
Over the waters where
God brooded for the living all one day.
Lonely for weeping, starved for a sound of mourning,
I bowed my head, and heard the sea far off
Washing its hands.

(11. 31-42 pp. 62-63)

Here, nature stands purposefully indifferent, yet it cannot remain unaffected. The images of oil and dead seagulls reveal a world out of balance, abused and abusing. The empty seashell and the lifeguard rising from the waves like a sea-lizard terrorize the poet. Yet he treats these images differently in his poems of the green places, especially the lizard, which comes to symbolize the vitality of nature.
Generally, the poems from Wright's middle period—The Branch Will Not Break, Shall We Gather At The River, and the new work in Collected Poems—are less overtly bookish. More than in earlier poems, Wright blurs the distinction between the inner and outer landscape. The natural world purports to be neither wholly subjective nor objective. More important, he writes less often about a generic lake or seashore. Instead nature becomes named and local—a river near Fargo, North Dakota, or a field in Minnesota. Bonnie Costello asserts that Wright changed his style in these books to rid himself of "the pastoral dream of a heartland, in order to portray the true anemia of the Midwest." But from the poems we've already seen, it seems unlikely Wright could have long acceded to mawkish portraits of rural life, no matter what his style. A characteristic poem from this period is "A Message Hidden in an Empty Wine Bottle that I Threw into a Gully of Maple Trees One Night at an Indecent Hour."

Women are dancing around a fire
By a pond of creosote and waste water from the river
In the dank fog of Ohio.
They are dead.
I am alone here,
And I reach for the moon that dangles
Cold on a dark vine.
The unwashed shadows
Of blast furnaces from Moundsville, West Virginia,
Are sneaking across the pits of strip mines
To steal grapes
In heaven.
Nobody else knows I am here.
All right.
Come out, come out, I am dying.
I am growing old.

(No Stanza Break)
An owl rises
From the cutter bar
Of a hayrake.

(pp. 115-116)

Though as much an inner landscape as an outer one, it still represents the degraded paradise of the earlier poems. In "Eclogue at Nash's Grove," the land is degraded in another way. Finding a tiny country cemetery, Wright observes:

It looks virgin, a sigh
Of maple and box-elder leaves so long held back
and now mourning,
And the sun seeming kindly to the nibbling of rats
at last,
As though by a change of heart.

I walked down this path, believing it.
No doubt the name belonged to some soft-eyed, sympathetic
Son of a bitch banker who stamped a Norwegian
Out of his money, this green place.

Virgin America, all right.
I wonder how much they cost, these cheap
Stones blackened in a short century.
No need to worry about standing on the dead.

(11. 5-16 p. 195)

Once more Wright plays against the pastoral literary tradition and against the conventional idealizations of America the beautiful. In this instance, however, his antipastoral stance is itself conventional.

In later books, Wright continues to associate nature with mental states and the corruption of the physical body. Consider "Son of Judas," from Two Citizens:

I rose out of my body so high into
That sycamore tree that it became
The only tree that ever loved me.

And when I came back into my own body
Some Hanna among the angels
Strip-mined it.

(Stanza Break)
Now hovering between the dead sycamore,
That I made my secret love to,
And the edge of a wound I paid for by God,

I have bought your world.
I don't want it.
And I don't want all your money
I got sucked into making
Either.

(11. 24-37 pp. 8-9)

This passage offers plenty of mystical implications, and it employs gestures not seen in Wright's early work. Yet the title of the poem alludes to Christian cosmology and his early poems such as "Saint Judas." These allusions reappear in "The Young Good Man," where the poet hears of a wild crabapple tree, but is advised by friends and relatives not to eat its fruit. Nonetheless, the young man goes out walking, rapt with primal curiosity. He says:

When I got to that hill,
Which now, I hear, Bluehart has sold to the Hanna Strip Mine Company, it was no trouble at all to me.
Within fifteen yards of his charged fence I found me
A wild crab apple.

I licked it all over.
You are going to believe this.
It tasted sweet.

I know what would have happened to my tongue
If I had bitten. The people who love me
Are sure as hell no fools.

(pt. 2 11. 6-16 p. 15)

Of course, these apples grow in the orchard of "An Offering for Mr. Bluehart." More important, they give scent to all of Wright's chaotic gardens. This time the poet chooses sweetness. But from the samples we have seen, Wright has bitten through to the core more than once.
Wright's final book, *This Journey*, deals more with the poet's relations to the natural world than any other, and, in this regard, it is his finest. For the most part, these poems diverge far from the work we have discussed, yet poems like "Ohioan Pastoral" arise from the sensibility of the green wall.

On the other side
Of Salt Creek, along the road, the barns topple
And snag among orange rinds,
Oil cans, cold balloons of lovers.
One barn there
Sags, sags, and oozes
Down one side of the copperous gulley.
The limp whip of a sumac dangles
Gently against the body of a lost
Bathtub, while high in the flint-cracks
And the wild grimed trees, on the hill,
A buried gas main
Long ago tore a black gutter into the mines.
And now it hisses among the green rings
On fingers in coffins.

(p. 46)

Until the concluding lines, this has the savor of a self-parody by one who knows he has said these things before in great seriousness. Those familiar with Wright would know that his Ohio is an industrial wasteland sometimes offering delights. The final images, however, resolve any confusion about the poet's sentiments.

On the other hand, "Notes of a Pastoralist" maintains a mildly sardonic tone. It also underscores Wright's role as an antipastoralist.

In a field outside of Pisa, I saw a shepherd
Keeping warm from a late autumn day.
Blown a little
To one side by the cooling sunlight,
He leaned as though a good tree were holding
His body upright.

(No Stanza Break)
But the nearest cypresses
Were standing a long way off,
And it seemed that only his green umbrella
Held him there.
His sheep did not flock together
As they do in Spenser and Theocritus.
They ambled all over the slope
Too old to care
Or too young to know they were posing
For the notes
Of a jaded pastoralist.
If the shepherd had a tune,
I stood too far away to hear it.
I hope he sang to himself. I didn’t feel
Like paying him to sing.
(p. 14)

Though this poem directly criticizes the pastoral tradition, almost for the fun of doing so, nature poses no serious, immediate threat. Wright merely points out how artists sometimes idealize nature. The stakes are not so high as in some of the previous passages, but the poem reiterates a familiar attitude.

Wright’s poems of the green places are likewise antipastoral. They, too, look into the grave or examine human suffering. But they do not focus on nature degraded, indifferent, or antagonistic. Nor do they idealize nature (except when they decline into sentimentality). Rather, they connect with or delight in nature, despite the bitter problems of human existence. Often pagan or secular in impulse, they portray nature as a reprieve from the pains of human life, as a source of solace, solitude, and sometimes ecstasy. A repository of life beyond the individual ego, nature sometimes offers mysteries which reflect on human identity. In this, it also offers solace and a sense of integration, though no answers to essential questions.
Wright explores the complexities of his relationship with nature, and in his final poems this partially relieves his sense of exile.

Though this sensibility blossoms fully in the three books of Wright's middle period, we find it already in The Green Wall and Saint Judas, particularly in poems about spirits rising from the natural world, as in "My Grandmother's Ghost." Most of the positive sentiments about nature, however, derive from the image of nature as a refuge. In "She Hid in the Trees from the Nurses," for instance, a mental patient sneaks away before lights-out and watches the nightly degradation of her fellows.

And through the windows, washing hands,
The patients have the mattress made,
Their trousers felt for colored stones,
The pleasures of the noon recalled:

For some were caught and held for hours
By spiders skating over a pond,
Some parted veils of hollyhocks
And looked for rabbit holes beyond.

(11. 9-16 p. 19)

And later:

She too must answer summons now,
And play the chimes inside her brain
When whistles of attendants blow;
Yet, for a while, she would remain,

And dabble her feet in damp grass,
And lean against a yielding stalk,
And spread her name in dew across
The pebbles where the droplets walk.

(11. 21-28 p. 19)

The patient-outcast possesses an affinity with nature beyond the institutional mentality of the larger society, a relationship which is intuitive, imaginative, and, to the
scientized mind, unsophisticated. Wright undercuts the possible preciousness here by the unavoidable inference that the woman has a child-like naiveté. Yet this fragile bond with nature appears again and again in his poetry. Pervasive, too, is nature personified—in this instance that which "yields" or "walks" while furnishing delicate sensual pleasures.

In "To A Troubled Friend," Wright sees nature as an exemplar of strength. It begins:

Weep, and weep long, but do not weep for me,
Nor, long lamenting, raise, for any word
Of mine that beats above you like a bird,
Your voice, or hand. But shaken clear, and free,
Be the bare maple, bough where nests are made
Snug in the season's wrinkled cloth of frost;
Be leaf, by hardwood knots, by tendrils crossed
On tendrils, stripped, uncaring; give no shade.

(11. 1-8  p. 21)

The power to survive, to find life energy in the face of adversity, becomes a major motif for Wright. Nature spins out new life, though it lives by death. One early example of the force of nature appears in "Evening," an unusual piece, where, despite the dormant and dead season, the poet's son is imaginatively transformed into a vision of vital nature.

Then, struck beyond belief
By the child's voice I heard,
I saw his hair turn leaf,
His dancing toes divide
To hooves on either side,
One hand become a bird.
Startled, I held my tongue
To hear what note he sang.

(11. 17-24  p. 56)
This momentary transformation forecasts some of Wright's late elegiac poems which deal with transformation. More important, it harkens to those later poems of interpenetration with nature.

Perhaps none of Wright's poems portray this process as famously as "A Blessing." Wright and a friend enter a field which contains two ponies. He says:

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,  
For she has walked over to me  
And nuzzled my left hand.  
She is black and white,  
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,  
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear  
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.  
Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.  

Wright has been criticized for sentimentalizing animals, for making them too poetical, and such may be the case in some of the work we've seen. But consider "Northern Pike," another poem of emotional and physical transformation. After declaring that all of us will die alone, and that the survival of life depends upon death--in this case, the death of a fish--Wright concludes:

I would just as soon we let  
The living go on living.  
An old poet whom we believe in  
Said the same thing, and so  
We paused among the dark cattails and prayed . . .  

We ate the fish.  
There must be something very beautiful in my body,  
I am so happy.
This blend of strong emotion tempered by physical reality saves Wright from effusiveness. In "A Blessing," he would blossom if he could step from his body, but he cannot. In the above passage, he and the fish are one, literally.

We also find this process of interpenetration and transformation in "To the Saguaro Cactus Tree in the Desert Rain," a poem notable for its successful use of direct address, and for employing the metaphor of family, which is perhaps implied in all of Wright's poems of the green places.

I have torn myself out of many bitter places
In America, that seemed
Tall and green-rooted in mid-noon.
I wish I were the spare shadow
Of the roadrunner, I wish I were
The honest lover of the diamondback
And the tear the tarantula weeps.

I had no idea you were so tall
And blond in moonlight.

(11. 4-12 p. 24)

* 

Saguaro,
You are not one of the gods.
Your green arms lower and gather me.
I am an elf owl's shadow, a secret
Member of your family.

(11. 22-26 p. 25)

One need only look at "To A Blossoming Pear Tree," another fine poem from the same book, to see the divergence in this line of sentiment from that of Wright's fallen world. In that other poem, nature is beautiful and fragile but outside of human consciousness and beyond contact with it. Here, with the metaphor of the family, Wright expands his relationship to nature. As we've seen in previous chapters,
this metaphor becomes central to Wright's view of history and human relations. It is the metaphor which offers the possibility of recognizing common bonds in a seemingly divided world.

Wright's last book, *This Journey*, contains poems characteristic of these last passages. Yet it also covers new ground because it is more a book of solitude, contemplation and unexpected pleasures in nature than of loneliness, pained observation, and human estrangement. Thus more than Wright's other books it explores the nature of the green places. We see this most explicitly in the elegiac poems of *This Journey*. Wright's earliest elegies portray the earth as comfortless; decay sums up the fate of the dead. In the elegiac mode of the green places, Wright does not offer the consolation of the pastoral elegy, but he does offer his variation on it, which amounts to a vision of afterlife in nature. He touches on such notions in earlier poems like "Milkweed," where the seeds drifting in air become "delicate creatures / From the other world." In these late poems, death becomes the ultimate transformation into new forms, and the lizard comes to symbolize the mysterious life force of nature. In "Wherever Home Is," for example, Wright declares:

I am going home with the lizard,  
Wherever home is,  
And lie beside him unguarded  
In the clear sunlight.  
We will lift our faces even if it rains.  
We will both turn green.  

(11. 23-28  p. 12)
As we have seen, home is the central image in all of Wright’s work. It is the symbol of exile and exile ended. He tempers the assertion of a pleasant afterlife with the word "wherever," indicating that the great unknown is still just that. Yet in another poem, "Yes, But," he again envisions an afterlife among the lizards.

We are not exhausted. We are not angry, or lonely,
Or sick at heart.
We are in love lightly, lightly. We know we are shining,
Though we cannot see one another.
The wind doesn’t scatter us,
Because our very lungs have fallen and drifted away like the leaves down the Adige,
Long ago.

We breathe light.  
(11. 19-27 p. 79)

To breathe the ultimate form of energy would be a heavenly lightness. It is the life beyond the breaking into blossom in "A Blessing."

In this book, Wright also probes the complexities of involvement with nature that derive from man’s powers and lack of powers over nature. "A Finch Sitting Out a Windstorm" offers one illustration. Buffeted like Hardy’s darkling thrush, the bird clings to its branch. Wright says:

. . . the damned fool
Squats there as if he owned
The earth, bought and paid for.
Oh, I could advise him plenty
About his wings. Give up, drift,
Get out.

But his face is as battered
As Carmen Basilio’s.

(No Stanza Break)
He never listens
To me.

(11. 14-23  p. 62)

Of course, this bird suggests that one who several books
previously had hopped up and down madly on a frail branch,
knowing it would not break. Because it also reminds Wright
of a stubborn man, the poem evokes the greater complexities
of sympathy between people and nature, and among people.
The poet has a powerful imaginative sympathy with the bird,
but it is finally limited in ways he does not acknowledge in
earlier poems such as "Katy Did" or "To A Brown Cricket."
Contact exists between man and man, and man and bird. But
each does as he pleases with his wings.

At the same time that these involvements are limited,
they are also unavoidable and uncontrollable. For example,
"A Dark Moor Bird":

A dark moor bird has come down from the mountains
To test the season.
He flies low across the Adige and seines
The brilliant web of his shadow behind him.
Slender and sure,
His wings give him the nobility
Of a small swan.
But his voice
Ruins it, he has seen me and he can’t
Shut up about it.
He sounds
Like a plump chicken nagging a raccoon
Who is trying to get out of the henhouse
With a little dignity.

I wonder why the beautiful moor bird
Won’t leave me alone.
All I am doing is standing here,
Turning to stone,
Believing he will build a strong nest
Along the Adige, hoping
He will never die.

(p. 13)
Again separate worlds come into contact, join, yet remain separate, and this separation provides no grounds for mourning. Not only does the man have his awareness of nature, but nature has its awareness of man. Here, man is perceived as a potential enemy, though he is not. Also, his presence alters the situation. The bird's voice becomes rougher in the face of a perceived threat. The irony is that Wright observes the bird for its beauty, hoping to make it a sign of life beyond the individual life, though this bird is no more eternal than any man. Wright is only wishing the human wish. The bird is being.

Wright enlarges these issues into the problem of knowledge in "Small Wild Crabs Delighting on Black Sand."

Why do these creatures come out to be
Family to me?
I am not in the water yet.
I wait a little.

Do they want to know me?
I have no more faces to give them
Than the moon has,
Scattering the eight fastidious feet of its light

Around the mountain behind my shoulder,
And now those small shoulders
And faces that seem
Not afraid of me.

Maybe they like to feel
Some warm voice
Singing out of my skin.
Why else would they touch me?

I don't know any language either.
But I hope
They can hear me, singing,
They owe me nothing.  

(11. 9-28  p. 44)
Delighted by sensual contact with nature, Wright speculates on the whys and wherefores of this experience. But nearly all of his observation is conjecture, and he frames it so that we see it as such. To his questions we can only reply "who knows?" It is a world interconnected, yet most connecting threads remain invisible, not for the sake of poetical mystery but because they are unknown. Again, this situation causes no alarm, just as the lack of a "real" language causes no anguish. The sense provides the only verifiable knowledge here. Yet just as Wright and the dark moor bird affect one another, so do Wright and the crabs. The hows, whats, and whys are less important than the care in a statement like "they owe me nothing."

The treatment of nature in these poems perhaps can best be described as a light-handedness, both emotionally, physically, and most of all poetically. Wright often endows nature with a kind of consciousness or identity, but here it is less poetical, less simply a product of poetic imaginings --or so we have the illusion. His lighthandedness is at work in this matter also. While we have seen poems dramatizing a variety of relationships between man and nature, there is also a desire in some of these final poems to be still and leave nature and the self at peace. We have seen this impulse earlier in Wright's poems about silence. The concluding lines of "To the Cicada" eloquently express this sentiment.
You, lightness,
How were you born in this place, this heavy stone
Plummeting into the stars?
And still you are here. One morning
I found you asleep on a locust root, and carefully
I breathed on your silver body speckled with brown
And held you in my palm
And let you sleep.
You, lightness, kindlier than my human body,
Yet somehow friendly to the music in my body,
I let you sleep, one of the gods who will rise
Without being screamed at.

(11. 68-79  p. 36)

In the poems of the green places, we find a range of
emotions and situations that depict nature as the larger
life source. But the ultimate refinement of this
sensibility comes with learning to withhold, to let alone,
or to strive when possible for a lighthanded touch in a
world of broken stones, exile, fangs, and tears. In these
moments, Wright pays his reverence by concentration and
attention, and they are his most durable homage.

Notes

1 James Wright, "James Wright: The Pure Clear Word, an
Interview," in The Pure Clear Word: Essays on the Poetry
of James Wright, ed. Dave Smith (Urbana, Chicago, London:

2 Bonnie Costello, "James Wright: Returning to the
of James Wright, ed. Dave Smith (Urbana, Chicago, London:
CONCLUSION

Five years after his death, James Wright's reputation remains deservedly high, though the tingle of the nerve he struck in the readership of our time slowly subsides, leaving us with the strengths of the figure he struck in his writing. A prayerful poet burdened by exile but searching in his art for a truth beyond the pathos of that condition, he acted as elegist, exorcist, critic, criminal, lover, supplicant, and visionary. He also embodied a number of apparent contradictions: though a self-styled Horatian classicist, he mastered the lyric of personal experience; he sought a close relationship with the reader but championed the privacy of the inner life; a hot and cold pastoralist, he made highly literary poems which favored plain language over "glibness" and pedantry.

"Personality" unifies these various roles and poses. Wright is a poet with diverse influences, among them Hardy, Frost, Whitman, Emerson, Wordsworth, Bryant, Catullus, Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, Williams, Dr. Johnson, Dickens, the Spanish Surrealists, the German Expressionists, and Oriental poetry. But like Eliot's ideal good poet, he "steals" from them all in the way one emulates what one
finds useful in those he admires. Even Wright's penchant for sentimentality--easily his great flaw--derives from "personality" and contributes to its consistency.

As he is no longer imitated in poetry workshops, and as "personality" becomes an epithet in reviews by poets seeking their own principle of expression, Wright's star may dim somewhat. But his place among the best of America's World War II generation is secure. In addition to his finest anthology pieces--"Willy Lyons," "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," and "A Blessing"--we may count "To A Blossoming Pear Tree," "Wherever Home Is," and "The Journey" among the best lyrics in a time of lyric poetry. These poems are arguably those by which Wright will be remembered. They are examples of what Emerson called the poet speaking "with the flower of the mind," and we are made fortunate by its bloom.

Note

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Donald Morrill was born in 1955 in Des Moines, Iowa. He received his BA and MA degrees from Drake University. He has accepted a teaching appointment for the 1985-86 academic year from Jilin University in Changchun, People's Republic of China.
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