JAMES WRIGHT'S QUEST FOR VOICE AND REDEMPTION: WESTERN POETIC CONVENTIONS MEET GEORG TRAKL AND THE TAO TE CHING:

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ABSTRACT

During the course of his career, James Wright's poetry underwent two notable changes in style. Along with these changes in style, the poems of each of his three periods reveal a different voice and a unique notion of redemption. Some of these differences spring from the forms of poetry in which Wright works in a given period, others from the philosophies influencing his thinking at the time. Moreover, these changes in Wright's poetry occur in the midst of an ongoing quest to overcome estrangement. This quest most often takes the form of an accursed exile's struggle against his loneliness and isolation. In turn, this struggle represents, at times symbolically, at times literally, Wright's own.

In Wright's first two volumes, the poems' tight, controlled stanzas often convey artificial voices which present less intense emotions than might be expected from these exiles. Also, redemption is portrayed in this stage's poems as something these exiles have no hope of enjoying. That is, since this redemption is based on a Judeo-Christian perspective, being without hope of redemption means being hopelessly damned, both spiritually and socially. In the second period, the voice begins escaping from the artifice of traditional forms and struggles to speak in its own terms. Furthermore,
Wright's desire to create a more personal poetry and the ideas he found in the poetry of Eastern and mythical philosophies seem to have suggested to him that some redemption is possible, though not the sort normally envisioned by a Midwestern Judeo-Christianity. That is, Wright, as the speaker-poet, begins to find redemption through patient contemplation of nature and a belief in the universal oneness suggested by the Chinese Taoist poets whose works Wright studied and praised.
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INTRODUCTION

In "The Quest Motif in The Branch Will Not Break," Peter Stitt declares that this third volume of James Wright's poems takes the shape of an ongoing quest, a "search for happiness, for comfort, for consolation, and for sustenance" (145). Yet this motif is not the artificial result of imposed formulae, Stitt says:

In a sense, we see the poet’s actual quest taking place before us as we read the poems--his conclusions are sometimes tentative rather than firm, the stages in his progress are sometimes vague and inconclusive rather than clear and final. In short, the poems seem more nearly to reflect the pattern found in life than that found in well-made works of art. (147)

Robert S. Gerke’s identification of Wright’s unwritten "master text," the controlling idea behind the poet’s cumulative work, suggests that Wright’s quest motif is not limited to The Branch Will Not Break. This "master text," Gerke explains, is best viewed as an implicit myth out of which all of Wright’s poems are born (17). Gerke describes the basis of this myth as "that estrangement of loneliness and the desire of the speaker to transcend it, dependent upon the intensity of feeling brought to bear upon it" (18). In other words, the idea giving shape to all of Wright’s work is a quest to overcome estrangement.
In many of Wright's poems, this estrangement is embodied in individuals who have been cast out of the larger group, by characters or speakers who have been "exiled" from society or humanity and who ultimately seek to be restored. Anyone familiar with Wright's poetry will recognize this idea as a thread running through all his volumes. Anyone familiar with his biography will recognize it as a thematic variation on the course of his life, for Wright believed himself to be an estranged exile. Moreover, just as a study of Milton's biography helps to illuminate his works, so does a knowledge of Wright's aid in understanding his poetic quest.

Wright was born, as he says in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" (ATR 82-84), "In Martins Ferry, Ohio, where one slave / To Hazel-Atlas Glass became my father" (3-4). Having grown up in poverty in the shadows of Martins Ferry's factories and farms, Wright welcomed the opportunity to escape his boyhood home by serving in the post-World War II military and attending college on the GI bill (Doctorow 11). His poems, however, many of which have a significant autobiographical basis, reveal his life-long struggle against two lingering terrors: the constant fear that the Ohio Valley and its virtual anomie might reclaim him, and the related dread of never fully belonging to the academic and social strata into which he had escaped. Furthermore, this battle against estrangement brought along other demons: his failed first marriage, his struggle to succeed as a university professor, his bouts with drinking, his nervous breakdowns, and his occasional temptation to take his
life (Hall xxxii). All this contributed to "one continuous statement by a man . . . who seeks that pure self somehow beneath or beyond the taint of the culture's guilt" (Elkins 2).

Throughout this "continuous statement," Andrew Elkins notes further, several recurring sub-themes appear in Wright's work, including his "occasional antirationalism, his love for nature and the pastoral . . . his belief in the insight of dreams . . . his exaltation of the exiled individual" (2). Donald Hall, Wright's friend and a fellow critic and poet, emphasizes the importance of this "exile" in Wright's work:

If he reviled his Ohio, he understood that Ohio made him--and Ohio remained his vantage point; from exile we look back on the rejected, rejecting place--to make our poems out of it and against it. Wright's poems, alternatives to Ohio, are populated with people who never left the valley--factory workers and fullbacks, executed murderers, drunks, and down-and-outs. If some of his maudits derive from other milieux--from the Pacific Northwest, from Minneapolis, from New York--they live the life Jim intended to abandon leaving the Ohio valley. (xxvi)

In Wright's poetry, it is important to see this quest to overcome estrangement as more than an accursed, exiled character's struggle against loneliness and isolation. This struggle represents, at times symbolically, at times literally, Wright's own.
Of the struggle's various aspects, this study focuses on what shall be called Wright's poetic quest for voice and redemption, limiting itself to two stages of this quest: (1) charting Wright's early poetry and the forces that helped shape it, and (2) investigating what seem to be the most important influences leading to the first notable turn in this quest.

In the midst of this quest, however, the Ohio native's poetry underwent two notable revolutions in style, yielding three "stages" in his work. The poems in The Green Wall (1957) and Saint Judas (1959) are generally assigned to the first stage; those in The Branch Will Not Break (1963), Shall We Gather At The River (1968), and the "New Poems" in Collected Poems (1971) to the second; and those in Two Citizens (1973), To A Blossoming Pear Tree (1977), and the posthumous This Journey (1982) to the third.

Along with these changes in style, each stage's poems reveal a different voice and a unique notion of redemption. Some of these differences spring from the forms of poetry in Wright's works in a given period, others from the philosophies influencing his thinking at the time.

In Wright's first two volumes, as Victoria Harris explains, his use of traditional "poetic device[s] . . . to avoid direct confrontation with his perception" leads to "a sharp cleavage between consciousness and style" (62). In other words, the poems' tight, controlled stanzas often convey artificial voices which present less intense emotions than might be expected from these exiles.
Moreover, redemption as portrayed in this stage's poems is something these exiles have no hope of enjoying. That is, since this redemption is viewed from a Judeo-Christian perspective, being without hope of redemption means being hopelessly damned, spiritually as well as socially. Viewed from a slightly different angle, redemption and damnation in Wright's early poetry emerge in terms of a cultural system and are defined variously by the commerce and shopping malls of the Establishment, the law and order of civic authorities, or the decorum and rules of organized religion and its God. If an exile cannot conform to the rules of subsets--and it seems that no outsider could--he or she is beyond hope of being brought back into the fold.

In the second period's poems, the voice begins escaping from the artifice of traditional forms, and though it attempts to follow the examples of stronger voices, it struggles to speak in its own terms. Moreover, this emerging voice is best accepted as Wright's own. In this period, Dave Smith explains, "[Wright] demanded the right to speak not as persona or mask but as himself, a man in the midst of chaotic experience who means to achieve a cohesive view of the real" (Introduction xix). Wright's voice, however, though often bold and defiant, occasionally wavers as does that of any speaker more intent on expressing pure emotion than on communicating concrete ideas, especially when such a speaker is not accustomed to doing so.

These second two volumes and Wright's "New Poems" also point to a change in the poet's view of redemption. Wright's desire to create a more
personal poetry and the ideas he found in the poetry of Eastern and mythical philosophies seem to have suggested to him that some redemption is possible, though not the sort normally envisioned by a Midwestern Judeo-Christianity. That is, the "system" inhabiting the poems no longer seems a cultural one, but rather a mystical, spiritual one, and instead of being an impossibility for the various exiled personae in the poems, redemption is something now within Wright's reach as the speaker-poet. This speaker-poet begins to realize that he might be delivered from having to conceive of redemption and damnation, of good and evil, in Judeo-Christian terms at all.

In the third period, a more independent voice finally begins to develop its own timbre, no longer trying to shake off the cobwebs of artifice and recreate the tones modeled by other artists. The poet has finished, as he says in "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child" (ATR 210-16), "slicking into my own words / The beautiful language of my friends" (173-74). Instead, he is beginning to use his own voice to describe what he has learned during his journey, as Elkins suggests:

[Wright] achieves the synthesis his poetry has been leading him toward: he is the confident poet of the first two books, but without needing to feel superior; he uses any form . . . . appropriate to his rhetorical and aesthetic goals; his work is autobiographical, not distanced, as at first, or self conscious, as in the second two books. . . . He becomes, in short, the mature
poet who has come to realize that truth is not only beauty but ugliness as well, them as well as us, formality as well as informality, hate as well as love, and that all truth is cause for celebration. (7)

In this period, the system in Wright's work becomes a universal one, one in which the derelict can be on equal terms with the politician, the drunk with the socialite, and in which death is as valid a part of existence as life. Ultimately, exiles have not been redefined to fit into the kind of cultural system Wright described earlier; instead, they find a different place altogether in the universal system, a result of what Harris calls Wright's philosophical "Journey from Dualism to Incorporation." This more holistic system not only allows exiles the possibility of deliverance, but also accepts them as integral players in the universal drama.

This study, to note again, does not extend to the final stage in Wright's work and its more holistic view of reality. It does focus upon the changes between the poems of Wright's first period to those of the second. After the first chapter identifies the formal characteristics, the squelched voice, and the impossibility of redemption in Wright's early verse, Chapter II examines the propellants of both the changing speaker-poet's voice and the evolving sense of deliverance found in Wright's second period.
CHAPTER I

THE TRADITIONAL EARLY VERSE OF JAMES WRIGHT

On August 5, 1958, not long before the publication of *Saint Judas*, his second volume of poems, James Wright penned the following words in a letter to Theodore Roethke:

I have been depressed as hell. My stuff stinks, and you know it. . . . What makes this so ironically depressing, as I say, is that I am trapped by the very thing—the traditional technique—which I labored so hard to attain. . . . I work like hell, chipping away perhaps one tiny pebble per day from the ten-mile-thick granite wall of formal and facile "technique" which I myself erected, and which now stands ominously between me and whatever poetry may be in me. (qtd. in Elkins 80-81)

This abjection would eventually lead Wright, for a brief period during his young artistic career, to abdicate his vocation as a poet.

Just two years earlier, W.H. Auden had selected as winner of the 1956 Yale Series of Younger Poets competition a manuscript of poems submitted by Wright, then a doctoral student at the University of Washington in Seattle. Wright’s manuscript was published the next year as *The Green Wall*, and in
the same year he successfully defended his dissertation, "The Comic Imagination of Charles Dickens."

Auden himself wrote the introduction to The Green Wall, though he offers in it little critique of Wright's poems, including only a handful of passages with this simple qualification: "I will content myself with one or two quotations to illustrate his handling of imagery and rhythm and the variety of his concerns" (47). The passages he includes are constructed fairly tightly, such as the lines from "A Girl in a Window" (Above The River 12):

Behind us, where we sit by trees,
Blundering autos lurch and swerve
On gravel, crawling on their knees
Around the unfamiliar curve. (9-12)

Generally, the poems of The Green Wall and Saint Judas do seem to obey the formal rules of traditional poetry. As Edward Lense says, referring in part to the volume's consistent rhyme schemes, carefully worked meters, and traditional stanzaic forms, "These two books are generally conventional in subject matter and very conventional in their diction and regular verse-forms" (6); Peter Stitt, in "An Introduction to the Poet James Wright," notes moreover that the sonnet was one of Wright's preferred forms (39). All these traits are illustrated by The Green Wall's "To a Troubled Friend":

"To a Troubled Friend"
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.

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. (ATR 21)

Although he commented but little on Wright's poems, Auden did
acknowledge that a key focus in Wright's work is upon "social outsiders," a
focus Auden saw as most reasonable in contemporary poetry, since, as he says,
"To the poetic imagination of our time, it would seem that the authentically
human, the truly strong, is someone who to the outward eye is weak or a
failure" (46). Stitt, more specifically, points out some of the particular
embodiments this outsider takes in Wright's poetry:
[Wright's] emphasis is generally upon the downtrodden: failures, outcasts, lawbreakers. Wright seems always to empathize most strongly with those who are victims of large and seemingly impersonal forces--politics, economics, the dictates of society in general. ("Introduction" 36)

Some critics have tried to explain why this suffering outcast is treated in the formal constructions Wright preferred in much of his early poetry. Kevin Stein, for instance, in "The Rhetoric of Containment, Vulnerability, and Integration in the Work of James Wright," claims that the poems of Wright's first two books were dominated by a "rhetoric of containment" (117), with the poet "[fashioning] a highly wrought and intelligent verse in which formal excellence was not only a sign of poetic sensibility but a means of dealing with a disordered world of experience as well" (118). Writing a poem in a traditional form, in other words, may be the means of providing or imposing an order on the poem's subject, particularly when that subject may defy order or comprehension.

In struggling to impose this order, however, Wright creates in his early poetry a pattern of exclusion which operates on two levels. On the first, as the greater part of this chapter will seek to show, not only are social outsiders in The Green Wall and Saint Judas portrayed as exiles from a "system," kept apart from those who "belong," but this system furthermore is one to which no exile may return, into which no exile may be redeemed. In short, according to
a Judeo-Christian view, they are damned.

On a different level, the attempt to contain this concept of damnation via these formal poetic constructions often leads to another effect: the corruption of the speakers' voices in the poems. In other words, the traditional forms deny speakers the voices appropriate to their situations and messages. It is for such characteristics as this latter one that Richard Foster, reviewing *New Poets of England and America*, held Wright's poetry up as an example of what happens when over-attention to form obscures any message a poet might have to present.

Glancing through Wright's first two volumes reveals a number of instances in which speakers are perhaps less honest, or their voices at least less believable, than might be desired. In these cases, the poet seems to bind in tight, controlled poems both topics and speakers which may require more emotive responses and voices than these forms allow.

From *The Green Wall*, for example, "To a Defeated Saviour" (ATR 20) shows a boy who, unable to save him, watched his friend drown and remains haunted by dreams of the ordeal. This traumatic episode is subdued in a neatly crafted structure of four stanzas, each with eight lines rhyming ababcdcd:

Do you forget the shifting hole

Where the slow swimmer fell aground
And floundered for your fishing pole

Above the snarl of string and sound? (1-4)

This address, with its flagrant rhymes, creates an impersonal distance between the speaker and his subject, one which, given the horror of the experience, is nearly grotesque:

One feels the artist cleverly standing behind his work and manipulating it for mechanical effect. This not only separates the reader from the poem, but alienates the poet from his perception, rendering the experience finally artificial.

(Harris 61)

Another poem which shows the artist treating themes too emotionally charged to be conveyed by carefully structured stanzas and rhymed couplets, as Wright employs them, is the sonnet "To a Fugitive" from The Green Wall (ATR 26-27). Here, the speaker addresses a convict who is trying to outrun the authorities and possible death on the night of his escape:

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 corner bone,

Strip, run for it, break the last law, unfold,

Dart down the alley, race between the stars. (9-14)
These terse, piled, imperative phrases do add some urgency to the tone, with the enjambment linking lines 10 and 11 helping with the poem's flow. However, the topic's perilous theme seems diluted in this traditional rhymed form. This form blunts the passion of the episode as the rhyme scheme draws attention to itself, attention which might otherwise focus upon the fugitive's predicament.

It is much the same with poems in *Saint Judas*. "A Note Left in Jimmy Leonard's Shack" (*ATR* 53-54), for instance, is a message from a boy to a hardened river man telling him that his brother has drowned. This message is delivered in a stanzaic form that fails to convey a frightened boy's natural, believable voice:

Near the dry river's water-mark we found

Your brother Minnegan,

Flopped like a fish against the muddy ground.

Beany, the kid whose yellow hair turns green,

Told me to find you, even in the rain,

And tell you he was drowned. (1-6)

"Complaint" (*ATR* 49) provides a most notable instance of this characteristic. In this poem, a poor country farmer laments his wife's death, grieving for the various losses in her death. Presenting this mourning via rhymed couplets, however, renders the poem nearly unbelievable. Observe:
She's gone. She was my love, my moon or more.
She chased the chickens out and swept the floor,
Emptied the bones and nut-shells after feasts,
And smacked the kids for leaping up like beasts.
Now morbid boys have grown past awkwardness;
The girls let stitches out, dress after dress,
To free some swinging body's riding space
And form the new child's unimagined face.
Yet, while vague nephews, spitting on their curls,
Amble to pester winds and blowsy girls,
What arm will sweep the room, what hand will hold
New snow against the milk to keep it cold?
And who will dump the garbage, feed the hogs,
And pitch the chickens' heads to hungry dogs?
Not my lost hag who dumbly bore such pain:
Childbirth and midnight sassafras and rain.
New snow against her face and hands she bore,
And now lies down, who was my moon or more.

The failure to fully engage such tragic topics as these informs the theme of exclusion found in Wright's early poems. It is as if even Wright, in portraying his speakers in the metrics he does, is himself unable to pardon them, unable to grant them even the partial redemption that realistic voices would
Before investigating this system of exclusion more fully, however, discussing another matter may help illuminate the poems of Wright's first two volumes: specifically, that some of the influences upon Wright's early poetics may help account for his treating the suffering and the outcast in the established forms he chooses. These factors include his early predilection for highly structured poetry, the nature of his encounters with the New Critics at Kenyon College, and the influence the poet Theodore Roethke may have had on his craft.

Wright began writing poems in high school, some of which Stitt presents in "James Wright's Earliest Poems: A Selection." These poems reveal a preference for traditional forms and an awareness of classical ideas, as in the octave of "Sonnet: On my Violent Approval of Robert Service":

I have not wandered far away from home,

Nor watched the sun melt on the Delphic shrine,
Nor whipped the roughneck's liquor into foam,
Nor choked on Hellesponnt's bright azure brine.

And never has it been my lot to trudge

On equal plane with sages of deep thought,
So (I apologize) I am no judge

Of who is a great bard and who is not. (1-8)
Also evident in Wright’s early poetry is a defiance against criticism and more popular notions of poetry, which Stitt says Wright meets by "[defining] his own standards and commitments" ("Selection" 23), as evident in such poems as "To Critics, and to Hell with Them" and "Sonnet: Response," in which the young poet rails against an unidentified critic who: "made warm mention of some scummy gem / Of 'poetry' I puked, or sang, or wrote" (1-2).

This defiant air seems to carry over to a most significant period of Wright’s poetic development, his years at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, from which he received his B.A. in January of 1952. In retrospect, the conflicts he seems to have had with New Criticism at Kenyon may foreshadow Wright’s later dissatisfaction with his approach to poetry, conflicts which would lead him to change his views on the nature of poetic form. That is, Wright may have gained more from his years at Kenyon by resisting the New Critics than by following their example.

Kenyon was, at the time Wright attended, a powerstation of New Criticism and, perhaps consequently, of poetry in the United States, inhabited by the likes of John Crowe Ransom, Robert Lowell, Phil Rice, Peter Taylor, Randall Jarrell, Philip Timberlake, and Charles Coffin, who was Wright’s landlord during his senior year at Kenyon (Stitt, "Introduction" 37).

Novelist E.L. Doctorow, then one of Wright’s classmates, explains the rather roundabout tour which led Wright from a small mining and factory town in southeast Ohio to central Ohio and Kenyon College. He informs us:
Wright came from poor country people who'd lived for generations on the Ohio River. Only the GI bill made college a possibility for him. He'd served in the army of occupation in Japan, and it was there that another classmate of ours, Jack Furniss, who was serving in the same outfit and was planning to attend Kenyon, had persuaded Wright he might do the same. The selling point was poetry. John Crowe Ransom was on the Kenyon faculty and publishing The Kenyon Review from the basement of Ascension Hall. (11)

Ransom had come to Kenyon from Vanderbilt when Kenyon's president asked him to edit a quarterly journal. Ransom insisted, rather characteristically, that it "should concentrate on art and letters and leave public affairs alone" (Stewart 38). As a result of the publication's emphasis, Kenyon became an attraction for "New Critics," some of whom frequented the college and some of whom worked at the Review or on the college's faculty. Although Ransom was a refined, if not condescending, southern gentleman, "a man of dignity and reserve" (Lanning 211), some of these newcomers inspired more controversy by their criticism and lifestyles than Kenyon was accustomed to having. Lanning, Ransom's neighbor near Gambier, offers this account:

[Kenyon's president] was known to consider The Kenyon Review "sophomoric." More pertinent comments came from some members of the English department; they disliked the New Criticism
and, one rather suspected, the new Critics (who seemed, as one heard more about them, to lead lively and complicated sex lives that might reasonably make lesser men envious and hostile). The New Critics, it was said, were ill-educated; they made staggering points based on misquotations; their ignorance of history and biography led them into elementary errors of interpretation; they were arrogant; and often they seemed willfully obscure. (215)

In any case, the publication's notable characteristic was the preponderance of articles these critics wrote, which were in accord with the focus of Ransom's 1941 *The New Criticism*: that "the life and times of the poet" (40) and "the date and accuracy of the text" (Stewart 40)--common emphases in literature courses at the time--were less significant literary matters than what New Critics argued were most important. That is, they preferred to emphasize "an attention to those details of the medium and content which differentiated the poetic statement from all others" (Stewart 41).

Yet as Doctorow declares, although Wright was influenced by Ransom and others at Kenyon, where New Criticism was "something the rest of us practiced . . . the way at Ohio State they played football" (20-21), he nevertheless dissented from the New Critics, writing a somewhat different type of poetry. For although his poems were quite formal, they cannot be called the poems of a New Critic, as they generally do not exhibit the kinds of wit and irony the New Critics often favored in their poetry, which Robert Penn Warren
says bear this relation to one another:

This instrument of wit in Ransom's poetry, whether it is employed in incidental imagery, in a certain pedantry of rhetoric, or in the organization of the entire material, is usually directed to a specific and constant effect. This effect is irony. (32)

Wright appears not to have been at ease with this approach to poetry, and in "An Interview with Michael André," he proves reticent to discuss any influence Ransom had on his own work, offering only the vague suggestion that the value of what he learned from Ransom at Kenyon was received not through Ransom's poetry, but "indirectly through his teaching" (135). More directly, Wright may have indicated his suspicion of such a poetic when he later wrote on the dust jacket of The Green Wall, "I've wanted to make the poems say something humanly important instead of just showing off with language." To be sure, the distance is great between one of Wright's poems dealing with characters from antiquity, "Sappho" (ATR 33-35)--"And now it is said of me / That my love is nothing because I have borne no children, / Or because I have fathered none" (58-60)--and Ransom's "Philomela":

Procne, Philomela, and Itylus,

Your names are liquid, your improbable tale

Is recited in the classic numbers of the nightingale.

Ah, but our numbers are not felicitous,

It goes not liquidly for us. (1-5)
Doctorow further explains Wright’s encounter with the New Critics this way:

As a poet [Wright] felt a simple, instinctive aversion to the precisions of textual analysis and the culture of possibly self-satisfied intellectualism that [New Criticism] represented. But as a student he would need to lend himself to the dominating ideals of scrupulous critical speech, the way of talking about the poem that gave it its just due apart from who had written it and when it had been written and what aesthetic/historical principles it gave evidence of. (Doctorow 21)

Ultimately, however, as Dougherty says, Ransom’s preferences represented something Wright "would need to assimilate in order to discard. . . . [because] he sought a directness of address foreign to both the New Criticism and the kind of poem Ransom wrote and praised" (12).

Nevertheless, Wright's responses to poetry on other levels, Doctorow suggests, may also have revealed Wright's dissent with a New Critical approach. Since New Criticism advocates examining a poem almost exclusively in light of the printed page, historical or biographical matters, which some might consider when examining a poem, become moot. Consequently, even the input—or opinion—of a poem’s author, in some cases, could become equally irrelevant. So when the editor of Kenyon’s school newspaper told Wright there was no time to delete one of his poems from an upcoming issue, a poem with
which Wright felt he had come to disagree, Doctorow found it necessary to physically restrain the poet from assaulting the editor in the encounter. But Wright's taking offense was not so much at the editor's refusal to remove the poem from the newspaper's galleys as it was at the editor's suggestion that Wright, even though he had written the poem, was "not necessarily the best judge of the poem's quality" (Doctorow 21).

Yet another influence on Wright's poetry was the tutelage of Theodore Roethke during Wright's years at the University of Washington. Wright's description of his experience in a poetry writing class with Roethke suggests both the professor's emphasis on form and Wright's malleability under his instruction:

A course with Roethke was a course in very, very detailed and strenuous critical reading. Here was an assignment: he wanted us to go the the library and find ten or maybe even twenty iambic trimeter lines that had a caesurea after the first syllable. . . . For example, Robert Bridges' "Die, song, die like a breath." . . . [W]e knew Roethke was a very fine man, an intelligent and learned man, and when he asked us to do something we would do it. He was not trying to violate our psyches or something. (qtd. in Smith 13)

Dougherty points out, however, that during this period Roethke was writing two types of poetry with equal success, one more traditionally formal,
one organic, and that in Washington, "he [Wright] would be encouraged in the tightly controlled poetry he had already written and influenced toward the more open or organic form he would soon learn to write (13).

Yet as James Dickey suggests, Wright learned from Roethke primarily "the value of received form and discovered that this approach to poetry was astonishingly easy for him to assimilate and use" (430-31), which the contents of The Green Wall and Saint Judas seem to suggest. Moreover, these two volumes were written, William S. Saunders says, "during a period in American literary history when there was intense pressure to write poems of impersonal, abstract ideas cloaked in classical forms" (7).

Wright's success in meeting this challenge, however, may have been only partial. Wright charged these volumes, Saunders admits, with "fierce emotions and harsh subject matters, [but] his formal style kept these emotions and subjects at a safe distance" (7). Very often, these distanced emotions, which many have been quick to point out, stem from the redemption-damnation principle at work in these poems.

A prime example is Wright's "A Poem about George Doty in the Death House" (ATR 25-26). The rather stark subject of this poem--an exile who is beyond all hope of redemption--is treated in a form which, although less obtrusive and more effective than some others Wright employs, is still easily "traditional." About an imprisoned rapist-murderer who awaits execution, the poem is set in six stanzas of eight lines each, most lines possessing six
syllables each, some seven or eight, with an *abbacddc* rhyme scheme, as the second stanza illustrates:

Close to the wall inside,

Immured, empty of love,

A man I have wondered of

Lies patient, vacant-eyed.

A month and a day ago

He stopped his car and found

A girl on the darkening ground,

And killed her in the snow. (9-16)

In the first stanza, the poem's speaker approaches and describes the prison which houses Doty, then names the man's crime in the second (above). These two stanzas begin the portrayal of Doty's exclusion, for here the outside world is emphasized, the larger world where daylight is almost gone; Doty, however, is "close to the wall *inside*" (emphasis added, 9). Symbolic of a social wall and Doty's exile, this prison wall is, paradoxically, what keeps him out of mainstream society by holding him in. The speaker, a representative of this outside world, wonders about Doty's lot and scans the outside of the prison; Doty, on the other hand, "Lies patient and vacant-eyed" (12). On the outside, "Supper and silence [are] near" (8).

Also making the exile theme more prominent in the poem are the bums who, also inside the prison, conversely complain through the night about their
hunger and cold (20). Doty's exile is compounded further in that he is not only cut off from the world outside, but also from the rest of the prison population, for his lying "patient, vacant-eyed" (12) also contrasts sharply with the bums' complaints over hunger and cold instanza three. Doty's concerns, however, are likely over more penetrating concerns: life and death.

The next stanza takes the reader to the accused man, declaring that Doty, "The man who sits alone, / He is the one for wonder," (25-26). And the reason for this "wonder" is that Doty, the poem's exiled character, sees in a mirror what the speaker interprets to be not only Doty's reflection, but also an image of something haunting all humanity, a curse that is not exclusively Doty's own. Specifically, Doty is the one

Who sees, in the shaving mirror
Pinned to the barren wall,
The uprooted ghost of all:
The simple, easy terror. (29-32)

Stanza five suggests that the nature of this ghost and terror lies in silence and darkness, solitude and isolation:

Caught between sky and earth,
Poor stupid animal,
Stripped naked to the wall,
He saw the blundered birth
Of daemons beyond sound.
Sick of the dark, he rose
For love, and now he goes
Back to the broken ground. (33-40)

Doty's crime, the speaker suggests, was not one driven by malice, but by a misguided desire to overcome this terrible curse. Doty wished to endure isolation and lovelessness no longer. In addition to suggesting that Doty's motive was tied to a curse affecting us all, the poem's final stanza suggests that the penalty the accused man must bear is not only his own:

Now, as he grips the chair
And holds to the wall, to bear
What no man ever bore. . . . (41-43)

"To bear, / what no man ever bore" calls to mind the New Testament Christ who also is said to have borne what no other had or would: the penalty for the sins of the human race. Similarly, Doty may be seen here as another sacrifice for the race's afflictions. This affliction drove him to his crime, and as its exemplar, the manner of his death will typify it: he will die in isolation, completely ostracized by his fellow human beings.

Doty is further set apart by being the only one mourned, though the poem suggests he is not dying simply as a punishment for his particular crime; rather, he is a symbolic martyr who, because of the nature of that which he must die for--the race's curse of isolation--must die in isolation. In other words, the punishment must be suited to the curse, even though others are
also subject to it, as "He hears the bums complain" (44). Moreover, we certainly cannot overlook the sufferings of Doty's raped, murdered victim. Nevertheless, the speaker declares:

But I mourn no soul but his,

Not even the bums who die,

Nor the homely girl whose cry

Crumbled to his pleading kiss. (45-48)

Doty is not even allowed the partial redemption of a life sentence, for, as Stitt declares, "Doty is now being victimized by a society that wishes only to see him dead," ("Introduction" 36), which suggests that by killing Doty, this society hopes to defeat the isolation which threatens it as well.

Wright's decision to treat the subject of an outcast like George Doty in a formally constructed poem may justify locating him in a tradition of imitating forms exemplified by other poets, instead of imitating nature itself. Jerome Mazzaro, for instance, likens Wright's artistic theory to that of Sir Joshua Reynolds, as found in Reynold's 1797 Discourses (140). Although Mazzaro is careful to point out that "Reynolds and 'classicism' assuredly do not show the same interest in 'social outsiders' that Wright displays" (141), he does claim that, like Reynolds, "rather than approach experience directly and copy its irregularities and imperfections, a neoclassical artist like Wright perceives nature through rules provided by earlier artists" (140).
In this case, the earlier artist might be Edwin Arlington Robinson, as several characteristics of Wright's poetry in this first period parallel the earlier poet's. Furthermore, Wright attributed his early poems' formalism in part to his aspiration to follow the example of other poets who, like Robinson, observed such decorum, as Stitt points outs: "When asked about the influence of Robinson, Wright spoke about the compression that the older poet was able to achieve while writing in traditional forms" ("Introduction" 39).

But again, the Robinsonian tradition with which Wright aligns himself seems to involve more than just this "compression." George McMichael says that Robinson's life was often filled with "personal tragedy, poverty, and public disregard--all of which were reflected in his somber, often stoical poetry" (974). And this might provide some of the attraction which Robinson's poetry held for Wright, as his own roots and poetic concerns in many ways resembled Robinson's. And as Robert Hass further explains,

What has always been a remarkable, almost singular, fact about [Wright's] poetry is the way in which the suffering of other people, particularly the lost and the derelict, is actually a part of his own emotional life.

(qtd. in Stitt, "Introduction" 36).

Similarities, as might be expected, can also be identified in the poetry of the two men. In some respects, "A Poem about George Doty in the Death House" might be compared to Robinson's 1920 "Mr. Flood's Party." In this
poem of seven stanzas with eight lines each and an abcbdefe rhyme scheme, Eben Flood, like George Doty, is thoroughly cut off from other people. And while Doty sought solice in stolen love, Flood seeks it in a conversation, a bottle, and a song, all of which he shares with only himself on a deserted road which lay, the poem says,

Over the hill between the town below
And the forsaken upland hermitage
That held as much as he should ever know
On earth again of home. . . . (2-5)

Pausing on the road, Flood plays two parts in the conversation. Alternating roles, he first invites himself to a drink, then congenially accepts before beginning the series of courtesies again. Finally, in what suggests that the poem is occurring on New Year’s Eve, Flood sings "Auld Lang Syne" aloud before "He raised again the jug regretfully / And shook his head, and was again alone" (51-52), much as Doty is alone before and after his crime.

The last four lines of "Mr. Flood’s Party" suggest that Eben Flood is also subject to social ostracism. Apparently Flood’s has come after a time when he was not an outsider, when he was welcomed into various of the town’s homes. But like Doty, Flood seems to have no hope of being welcomed back from his exile:

There was not much that was ahead of him,
And there was nothing in the town below--
Where strangers would have shut the many doors
That many friends had opened long ago. (53-56)

Frank MacShane writes, "James Wright knew how restricted most American lives were" (131). This restriction is reflected in "A Poem about George Doty in the Death House" as "The uprooted ghost of all" (31). MacShane also notes that

his [Wright's] sympathy for those whose lives became unstrung extended even to rapists and murderers waiting for execution in death's row. . . . He had known many . . . who had been betrayed by life and who in turn betrayed themselves and others. He even felt sorry for Judas, after whom he named one of his books. (137)

In the title poem of his second volume of poetry, "Saint Judas," Wright investigates exile and damnation through the hypothetical post-betrayal experience of the disciple Judas, the man who may be Western civilization's most notorious and enigmatic outcast. Judas's predicament has been the object of speculation in various artistic works, from Dante's Inferno, with the 14th century poet condemning Judas to hell's worst fate, to composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyricist Tim Rice's 1970 rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar, in which Judas appears to have been the victim of an ambiguous, problematic "Catch-22."
Wright's "Saint Judas" (ATR 84) also displays a certain vacillation over the damnation a Christian-oriented culture assumes for Judas, perhaps similar to the one Rice had in mind in a 1971 Life Magazine interview when he said, "Judas is a cardboard figure. Every time he is mentioned there is a snide remark. I believe that Judas was the most intelligent of the Apostles and that is why he got into such a dilemma" (24).

In Wright's sonnet, Judas describes his coming upon "A pack of hoodlums beating up a man" (2) while on his way to hang himself after betraying Christ. Wright's sonnet form is particularly interesting here in that he combines characteristics of the Italian and English forms. As C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon point out, the division of a sonnet into an octave and a sestet is a traditionally Italian practice ("Sonnet" 476), which is the case in "Saint Judas." For this octave's rhyme scheme, however, Wright utilizes a pattern more traditionally found in the first two quatrains of English sonnets: abab cdcd. Yet in the sonnet's sestet, Wright maintains one of the rhyme schemes traditional in Italian sonnets, cdecde, which, since Wright utilizes four end-rhyme sounds in the octave, becomes efgef.

The presentation of such a volatile topic as appears in "Saint Judas," even in this modified, though still strict, poetic form, again calls into question the compatibility of these two elements of Wright's early poetry. On one hand, some might argue that the voice Judas possesses in this sonnet, given his topic, leads to a certain irony embodied in Judas's very situation: being moved
to do a good work while overshadowed by an impending and inevitable damnation. Many critics, however, suggest that traditional poetic forms "subvert," to use Harris's term, the necessary sentiments of the situations in many of Wright's poems. She declares of "Saint Judas":

Wright's particular intuitions of a fugitive's being a source of sympathy, and of a Judas being a saint, necessitate involvement and intense personal commitment. He seems to betray his own perceptual inclination by employing techniques requiring detachment. . . . ["Saint Judas"] is not a highly involved creation of the poet-perceiver, but is an embodiment of the rules compiled by the poetic conceptualizer. (62-63)

Wright's meter in "Saint Judas" is primarily iambic pentameter, though variations throughout the poem help to create some effective tensions, as in lines 3 and 4: "Running to spare his suffering, I forgot/My name, my number, how my day began." The iambic pentameter lines which surround such passages, though, keep the sonnet bound to a less-passionate effect, as in lines 1 and 2 ("When I went out to kill myself, I caught/A pack of hoodlums beating up a man") and lines 5 and 6 ("How soldiers milled around the garden stone/And sang amusing songs. . .").

"Saint Judas" is also an important example of the notion of the exile excluded from a system with no hope of reconciliation. Upon seeing the man attacked, Judas rushes to aid the victim as might a brave Good Samaritan, but
the memory of his particular crime calls him back to his predicament, as the sonnet’s sestet reveals:

Banished from heaven, I found this victim beaten,
Stripped, kneed, 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. Flayed without hope,
I held the man for nothing in my arms. (9-14)

This sestet is one of the most discussed passages of Wright’s early volumes, with particular attention being given to its ultimate line and the concept it seems to suggest. Dougherty reveals the broad range of interpretations this passage has received, from John Ditsky’s claim that Judas is "the alienated Christian existentialist 'acting out a preordained role of whose personal pointlessness he alone is aware, that of the Good Samaritan'" (43), to Paul Lacey’s suggestion that neither ethics nor philosophy is the point of the passage, but rather "the 'supreme riddle, the man who will do evil for pay, but good for nothing'" (43).

Reconsidering the passage in light of this study’s focus, however, suggests that the key to the sestet lies in what Judas realizes in lines 12 and 13: the fact of his irreversible damnation.

First, the sonnet’s octave provides a view of what Judas forgot for a moment, a view echoed in the sestet:
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.

The sestet then begins with Judas aware that he is "Banished from heaven"—that he is exiled to ultimate damnation. But upon encountering this victim, he tosses aside his rope, the reminder of his certain doom, and ignores the uniformed soldiers, a reminder of the great travesty his cooperation has made possible. Immediately, however, he does recall the "bread my flesh had eaten," which suggests the intimacy of the relationship he had enjoyed with Jesus, and "The kiss that ate my flesh," his own act in the garden of Gethsemane, the act of betrayal which sealed his damnation.

The next phrase, "Flayed without hope," even by its similar syntax, suggests a relationship with the "Banished from heaven" which began the sestet. Considering Judas's move to help the victim and the remembrance of his crime, which occurs in the poem between these phrases, another relationship between the two becomes apparent: Judas is "Flayed without hope" of ever being redeemed. He will never achieve heaven. He remembers that he
is now irrevocably cast out and therefore unable to perform any benevolent act to his credit; more succinctly, Judas is eternally exiled with no hope of redemption.

Wright's attempt to treat these tragic themes in the forms he did quickly led to the critiques like those offered by Dickey and Foster: that Wright's poems were virtually exercises in the mechanics of traditional form which obscured anything the poet might have had to say (Dickey, "Presence"; Foster, "Debauched"). As Saunders would later charge, since Wright's early work was "more suffused with other people's poems than with felt life," it was impossible for them "to come to grips with tragic suffering" (8).

Although Wright was often troubled by these critiques, at least one of them, Dickey's, would help lead to a breakthrough in his poetry. This breakthrough would be in terms of a speaker's voice finding clear expression, a voice which would be, much more than in any other poem in Wright's first two volumes, the most honest, perhaps because it may be his own. Dickey offers this account:

My own introduction to him was through a review I did in the late fifties of an anthology in which his [Wright's] work appeared, wherein I suggested that his sincerity was not truly earned: had not been "made fierce with dark keeping." He wrote me a highly abusive letter to which I replied in kind, somewhat in the manner of Allen Tate responding to William Barrett over the Ezra Pound
Bollingen Award. I told him that if he had these feelings he and I had better meet on some neutral ground and settle it as men rather than taking it out on each other in letters, or in the back pages of literary magazines. . . . He wrote "... and if you mean that you would really hit me, I would probably just sit on the ground and look at you in wonder." ("Give-Down" 433)

This exchange, however, led to a friendly dialogue and an eventual turn in Wright's poetry which is foreshadowed in his second poem on the subject of George Doty, "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," the penultimate poem in Saint Judas.

In the interview with Smith, Wright points out the influence Dickey had on this poem and how it was a "watershed" work for him; a previous version of the poem, Wright had decided, had been "very overblown and rhetorical" (Wright, "Pure Clear Word" 22). Since he and Dickey had reconciled their differences and begun a friendlier correspondence, Wright decided to seek Dickey's evaluation of the poem, which existed then in a remarkably different version. He told Smith:

It was a mess, full of mythological and biblical references and so on, very Victorian. He made comments all over it and sent the poem back. . . . On the way back [from defending his dissertation in Seattle], on the train, I didn't have his comments with me but I remembered them. I didn't have the poem either. So I sat
there and rewrote it without looking at the previous version... as straight and direct and Robinsonian as I could make it. That is the way it came out... I felt as if I had shed something. (22) As Dickey reveals, Wright eventually dedicated this final version of the poem to him ("Give-Down" 433).

This version, in Saint Judas, may reveal that honest voice of James Wright, as the first stanza suggests:

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.
He tried to teach me kindness. I return
Only in memory now, aloof, unhurried,
To dead Ohio, where I might lie buried,
Had I not run away before my time.
Ohio caught George Doty. Clean as lime,
His skull rots empty here. Dying’s the best
Of all the arts men learn in a dead place.
I walked here once. I made my loud display,
Leaning for language on a dead man’s voice.
Now sick of lies, I turn to face the past.
I add my easy grievance to the rest. (1-15)
This is, as Elkins points out, the first time Wright has named himself in his poems (59), though Saunders adds that "[the] voice sputters with the deep violence one might expect from a man suddenly releasing years of pent-up aggression and resentment" (10). This resentment may be over the formal style in which he had been writing, as many lines suggest, such as 12-15 above and 69: "Order be damned, I do not want to die."

Additionally, the catalog of specifics Wright includes about himself in the first stanza seems nearly a defiance of a reading of the poem which would draw a difference between the "James A. Wright" in the poem and the man who wrote the lines, a distinction which Dougherty says "Only the most dedicated new critic would claim" (46).

The new repetition of first-person pronouns also works to establish a believable voice in the poem, as the speaker-poet's "I" occurs 22 times in the poem; "me" and the possessive adjective "my" together occur 25 times. The poem, as the discussion below will suggest, is at least as much about "James A. Wright" as it is about the "Executed Murderer."

Also, while there are some established end rhymes in the poem, their arrangements suggest that they have been included when ideas allow, and not that Wright began with an ordered pattern already established into which he set out to force the ideas. Comparing the two stanzas with the most rhymes, we see that stanza one rhymes lines two and three (grave/slave), lines six and seven (unhurried/buried), lines eight and nine (time/lime), and ten and fifteen
(best/rest), whereas stanza seven rhymes lines four and seven (I/die), lines six and thirteen (face/face), lines nine and fourteen (grief/thief), and lines ten and fifteen (ground/underground). And even in cases where consecutive lines rhyme, the effect is much smoother than in paired rhymes such as occur in "Complaint": "And who will dump the garbage, feed the hogs/And pitch the chickens' heads to hungry dogs?" (13-14). In "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," enjambment and caesura also keep the lines from becoming too mechanical, as the brief sixth stanza illustrates:

Staring politely, they will not mark my face
From any murderer's, buried in this place.
Why should they? We are nothing but a man. (60-62)

Additionally, making the voice in this poem a less artificial one is the honesty conveyed by the speaker-poet's posing some questions directly, as opposed to only recognizing the existence of questions, as an earlier version of the poem appearing in Botteghe Oscura had done, further removing them by assigning them to some distant animals:

Slow hills away, the milch-cows pause and yawn,
Wondering when day will go, and man be gone:
That one man, angry at the heart's release,
This brutal pastoral, this unholy peace. (qtd. in Wright, "Pure Clear Word" 23)

In the later version, though, the speaker-poet asks straightforward questions
of himself, such as, "Doty, if I confess I do not love you, / Will you let me alone? (16-17) and "If Belmont County killed him, what of me? / His victims never loved him. Why should we?" (43-44)

Moreover, as Elkins proposes, the poem contains "one long, cathartic mea culpa and extended self-flagellation as the poet abuses himself for his former 'lies'" (58):

The ostensible object of this abuse is George Doty, the murderer we met in The Green Wall, but Doty is here Wright's dark double. . . . Both Wright and Doty are lovers--Wright of his poems and their subjects, Doty of [his victim]. Both lovers' touches are murderous--Doty raped and killed the young girl he stopped for; Wright has been metaphorically raping and killing, or so he implies, the subjects of his poems by speaking of them falsely in a false voice. . . . He both pities and hates Doty and himself for their frantic, blinding need to express their love. (58-59)

This poem does reveal the beginning of a change in voice, that of the speaker's working to express himself and not merely mould certain ideas into a traditional form. The "system" upon which this study focuses maintains, however, a formidable presence in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," though with a slightly different emphasis. In many other poems from Wright's early period, this system of irreversible exclusion has been treated at a distance, objectively, sometimes nearly indifferently; the poems' speakers often neither
recognize this system nor reflect emotionally upon it. In this poem, however, we encounter more than a regretful stoic acceptance of this system; we finally hear a real voice uttering an actual dread of it. This dread is not simply that the system exists, but that it might actually consume this speaker-poet and make him one of the damned, one of the exiled for whom there can be no salvation.

The first stanza introduces this theme by presenting a series of contrasts between Wright and Doty, between the living and the dead. First, Wright's life began "Twenty-five miles from this infected grave" (2), a place of death. He now returns "To dead Ohio, where [he] might lie buried, / Had [he] not run away before [his] time" (7-8). Conversely, however, "Ohio caught George Doty. Clean as lime, / His skull rots empty here" (9-10). Had circumstances not been different, the passage suggests, Wright too might be lying in a similar grave.

The second stanza begins Wright's efforts to distance himself from Doty, from this one who is damned to permanent exile: "Doty, if I confess I do not love you, / Will you let me alone?" (16-17). After comparing his mind to those in an asylum, Wright declares, "Doty, you make me sick. I am not dead. / I croon my tears at fifty cents a line" (24-25). "I am not a part of you," the lines seem to say, "and any sorrow expressed over your lot is contrived, is hired."

Stanza three further seeks this distance between the two men, including Wright's declaration that "I waste no pity on the dead that stink;" (32), nor does he have any regard for other drunks who die, though "Christ may restore
them whole, for all of me" (36). In any case, they are no concern of his, for, as he says, "I do not pity the dead, I pity the dying (41).

Next, in the beginning of the fourth stanza, Wright's dread of exile becomes clearest, for he aligns the dying he pities in stanza three with himself and his possible fate: "I pity myself, because a man is dead. / If Belmont County killed him, what of me? / His victims never loved him. Why should we?" (42-44). And could not this same fate, the passage implies, have overtaken the speaker-poet?

Stanza five suggests that perhaps Doty's guilt will seem less poignant when the guilt of all, including Wright's for the wounds he has inflicted upon others, is made known:

This grave's gash festers. Maybe it will heal,
When all are caught with what they had to do
In fear of love, when every man stands still
By the last sea,
And the princes of the sea come down
To lay away their robes, to judge the earth
And its dead, and we dead stand undefended everywhere,
And my bodies--father and child and unskilled criminal--
Ridiculously kneel to bare my scars,
My sneaking crimes, to God's unpitying stars. (51-59)

At that point, stanza six suggests, Wright will be indistinguishable from Doty
and no less guilty than a killer, since all share in the curse of humanity:

Staring politely, they will not mark my face
From any murderer's, buried in this place.
Why should they? We are nothing but a man. (60-62)

In the final stanza, Wright's attempt to defy such a possibility is grounded also in his dread of meeting with a fate like Doty's, though such an end may be impending:

Order be damned, I do not want to die,
Even to keep Belaire, Ohio, safe.
The hackles on my neck are fear, not grief.
(Open, dungeon! Open, roof of the ground!)
I hear the last sea in the Ohio grass,
Heaving a tide of gray disastrousness. (69-74)

Ultimately, despite Wright's efforts early in the poem to distance himself from Doty, he is unable to maintain this separation, combining in the final line echoes both of Adam's designation of Eve in Genesis as "flesh of my flesh" and of the graveside lamentation, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust":

Wrinkles of winter ditch the rotted face
Of Doty, killer, imbecile, and thief:
Dirt of my flesh, defeated, underground. (75-77)

Thus, Doty and Wright do remain connected. They share origins. Their guilt may ultimately be reckoned to be the same. And they may eventually share
the same final fate: to be without hope of redemption, "defeated, underground."

Peter Serchuk offers an account of Wright's defense of "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" which suggests further a dread of the ultimate system of exclusion: death and damnation. According to Serchuk, in a 1973 poetry workshop at the University of Illinois, Wright told of a letter-writer's complaint over what seemed a sympathetic view of Doty in the poem. This woman felt, as Wright explains, that "George Doty was a disgusting human being who got exactly what he deserved" (88). Wright, however, explained his position to the workshop gathering:

I told her that as far as I was concerned there was no doubt that Doty, as she had put it, had gotten 'exactly what he deserved.' I was not trying to defend or excuse him. What the poem tries to say is simply this: I pray to God that I don't get exactly what I deserve." (qtd. in Serchuk 89)

Nevertheless, soon after his second volume was published, Wright declared that his poetry would now develop in other new ways besides developing the freer voice that "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" begins to find.

Soon thereafter, however, came Wright's declaration that he was finished as a poet, that he would have "no more to do with this art" (qtd. in Graziano and Stitt 91). As Wright explains, it was not until he read a copy of Robert Bly's The Fifties that his reëntry to the world of poetry was made
At that time I had come, for personal reasons but also for artistic reasons, to something like a dead end. I was in despair at that time, and what usually has consoled me is words. . . . But suddenly, it seemed to me that the words themselves had gone dead, I mean dead in me, and I didn't know what to do. It was at that time that Robert Bly's magazine, which was then called The Fifties, appeared. . . . But the interesting thing is that when I read Robert Bly's magazine, I wrote him a letter. It was sixteen pages long and single-spaced, and all he said in reply was, "Come on out to the farm." I made my way out to that farm, and almost as soon as we met each other we started to work on our translation of Trakl. (qtd. in Graziano and Stitt 91-92)

Wright's friendship and collaboration with Bly led to his undertaking translations of several Latin American and European poets and his efforts, under Bly's guidance, to write poems which find their forms not in traditional rules of construction, but in archetypal images which may be reached through the poet's subconscious. As Chapter II will argue, the influences of this approach and of the non-Western philosophies to which Wright began appealing led to both a different idea of what Wright believed a poem to be and a crucial step in the quest for voice and redemption which runs through his poetry.
CHAPTER II
THE INFLUENCE OF GEORG TRAKL AND THE TAO TE CHING

There is, in Chinese poetry, a sense of the permanence of the world so great that we remember it even when the poet breaks out in lamentations, even when he sees the bleached bones on the frontiers. (Payne vii)

Wright's association with Robert Bly came at a crucial point in his life, the period after he had given up on poetry and was struggling against his tendency toward alcoholism (Dougherty 8), after he had seen his first marriage fail and was becoming discontent with his new teaching position at the University of Minnesota (Stitt, "Introduction" 41). The time he spent on the Blys' farm, seems to have encouraged him in both his personal and professional lives. As Dougherty says,

At Bly's farm, Wright passed many pleasant after-noons discussing poetry, Latin American poets, the translation process, and the revolution Bly was leading through his small press the Fifties. . . . Wright was able to communicate with nature and the many domesticated animals the Blys kept, in ways that refreshed his sagging spirits. (8)
More particularly, Bly set out during their collaboration to expose Wright to different forms of poetry which Wright hadn't yet fully investigated. These forms were ones Bly was emphasizing in the poetic revolution he waged in the pages of his magazine.

He argued that the dominant emphasis on traditional English forms (like iambic pentameter) and on intellectual complexity was cutting poets off from their deeper, more archetypal feeling. To get back to those unconscious wellsprings, Bly urged the rejection of all discursive modes and the use of images. (Saunders 11)

In this work with Wright, Bly encouraged the Ohio native both to translate the works of various poets who worked with images in these different modes and to read existing translations of others. In his Paris Review interview with Stitt, Wright explains the results of these assignments:

He made it clear to me that the tradition of poetry which I had tried to master, and in which I’d come to a dead end, was not the only one. He reminded me that poetry is a possibility, that, although all poetry is formal, there are many forms, just as there are many forms of feeling. (Graziano and Stitt, Profile 92)

What Wright gained in these undertakings seems to have led, in The Branch Will Not Break, Shall We Gather At The River, and his "New Poems," to the beginning of an escape from the isolation and damnation haunting his
first two books of poetry. In other words, these later volumes reveal the first step in the quest for voice and redemption found throughout Wright's poetry.

Critics have offered various explanations of the remarkable changes between *Saint Judas* and *Branch*. Walter Kalaidjian sees them as the direct result of Bly's personal input. He says that Bly's criticism of Wright's heavy reliance on iambic meter and "elaborate syntax' helped to inform the new technique which came to rely . . . on free verse, natural speech rhythms, colloquial diction, and the unconscious contents of the 'deep image'" (105).

Much more has been said about the apparent influences on Wright's poetry from his own reading and translating the works of certain non-Anglo-American poets such as Austria's Georg Trakl, Germany's Hermann Hesse, Peru's César Vallejo, and Chile's Pablo Neruda. Elkins suggests, for instance, that when Wright's 1971 *Collected Poems* came out with some of his translations between the poems of *Saint Judas* and *The Branch Will Not Break*, "the continuity between his early work and *Branch* became clearer" (81). James Seay, a little more specifically, says that the poems Wright translated influenced him to begin in his own work

concentrating on simplifying the individual line, sharpening the imagery within a given line, making it more obviously receptive to the irrational, and reducing exposition to a minimum. (114)

Perhaps it is better to say, however, that the combination of all these influences encouraged Wright to pen a different type of poetry. Stein's study
of Wright's notes, poems, and manuscripts from this interim period leads him to conclude, in fact, that the various causes to which others have pointed combine in

a redefinition which involves the search for a true lyric voice free of rhetorical niceties, the reevaluation of the relationship between the poet and a world of natural objects, and the acceptance of the intuitive mind as a source of meaning and order. (Grown Man 44)

One aspect of this program into which Bly at least inducted Wright—that of translating, from Spanish and German, poems which exhibited these new forms—seems to have led to a few identifiable changes in Wright's own poetry. One of these is a new preference for free verse:

Always an avid translator, Bly was convinced that the future of American poetry depended on immediate assimilation of these influences. The best way to absorb these would be to translate—in the manner prescribed years before by Ezra Pound—the originals into English: to interact creatively with the poems and to value capturing the spirit of the original over fidelity to the prose sense of the poem. (Dougherty 14)

For Wright, rendering a poem in free verse apparently provided the best means of capturing "the spirit of the original," and what Dougherty considers true of Wright's own poetry was, in general, first true of his translations; that
is, a poetry based on "the rhythms of speech, with colloquialism, sudden shifts of meaning, and occasional crudities of language" took the place of one dependent upon strict metrical lines and stanzas (50).

These choices reveal Wright's new preference for free verse over rhyme schemes similar to ones he encountered in the original poems. From Wright’s Poems by Hermann Hesse, the first stanza of Hesse's "An eine chinesische Sängerin" (24) reads:

Auf dem still Flusse sind wir am Abend gefahren.
Rosig stand und beglänzt der Akazienbaum.
Rosig strahlten die Wolken. Ich aber sah sie kaum,
Sah nur die Pflaumenblüte in deinen Haaren. (1-4)

Whereas this stanza has an abba rhyme scheme, Wright renders the translation, "To a Chinese Girl Singing" (25) without in free verse without end-rhymes:

We traveled down the still river in the evening,
The acacia stood in the color of rose, casting its light,
The clouds cast down the rose light. But I scarcely saw them,
All I saw were the plum blossoms in your hair. (1-5)

Also, in the original first line a prepositional phrase comes first, giving the line a more formal sound which could be translated as "Down the still river we traveled in the evening." Wright's beginning the free verse sentence with the
subject and verb gives the line a more natural, almost colloquial ease which Hesse's original does not have. Wright's choices for the second line's translation also indicate a desire to recreate the more natural rhythms of speech. In the original, this line is a rather precisely metered formal one, consisting, in a two level scansion, of four anapestic feet:

\[ \text{Rosig stand un beglänzt der Akazienbaum.} \]

Read Wright's version aloud, however, to hear how it resembles a more natural speech:

The acacia stood in the color of rose, casting its light.

Finally, some of Wright's vocabulary and syntax choices also support this reading of his translation. First, notice that this second line is constructed in the inverted German syntax, in this case "object/intransitive verb/intransitive verb/subject." Next, the subject, «Akazienbaum» is literally the "acacia tree"; the first verb «stand» is the imperfect narrative past tense equivalent of "stood." This tense, used almost exclusively for formal prose and poetry, conveys in German anything but a colloquial ease. The second verb, «beglänzt» is an archaic form meaning "shone," "glittered," or "sparkled" (modern German has dropped the prefix «be-» from the infinitive «glänzen»). Thus, the sentence translates, in the German syntactical order, "Rose-colored stood and glittered the acacia tree." From this, the first logical--though mechanical--English sentence would read: "The acacia tree glittered and stood rose-colored." On
this count as well, Wright’s version, with its modifying dependent clause, reflects his ambition to write in a freer, more natural form:

The acacia stood in the color of rose, casting its light.

Wright’s translation of Vallejo’s "Los Dados Eternos," appearing in Bly’s Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems (204), also reveals the choice to translate into free-verse. Stanza one of Vallejo’s poem, with an abab rhyme scheme, reads:

Dios mío, estoy llorando el ser que vivo:
me pesa haber tomádote tu pan:
p ero este pobre barro pensativo
no es costra fermentada en tu costado:
tú no tienes Marías que se van! (1-5)

In his translation "The Eternal Dice" (205), Wright pens the first stanza this way:

God of mine, I am weeping for the life that I live;
I am sorry to have stolen your bread;
but this wretched, thinking piece of clay
is not a crust formed in your side:
you have no Marys that abandon you! (1-5)

The free verse principles by which Wright translated also carried over into his own poems, giving them less mechanical meters, leaving behind the artificial tones and occasionally vague meanings of his early poetry. As
Mazzaro says, Wright was able to create an honest voice in the poems "by jettisoning this [metrical] syntax and its 'discursive reasoning'" (151). "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" (ATR 121) serves as an example of this new honest voice. According to Saunders, this is the best poem in the volume; in it, he says, "Wright compacts a widespread, representative American tragedy into twelve plain lines" (13-14):

In the Shreve High football stadium,
I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,
And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,
And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel,
Dreaming of heroes.

All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home.
Their women cluck like starved pullets,
Dying for love.

Therefore,
Their sons grow suicidally beautiful
At the beginning of October,
And gallop terribly against each other's bodies.

With their simple language, such poems are able, relying on the permissiveness of free verse, to embody a great deal of clear meaning in a brief
space and avoid the "cotton-wool" that not only made lines seem 'literary' but also clouded images" (Mazzaro 151). Observing the effect of the free verse form in "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," Dougherty notes that

Open form serves Wright well here. The isolation of "therefore" introduces a causal sequence, one that indicts and at the same time celebrates modern industrial life. The youths train and sacrifice to live out the frustrated dreams of their fathers, and the ritual of harvest is replaced by a gladitorial contest. . . . (58)

Elkins, after a two page discussion of the poem, concludes that the individual experience narrated in the poem is best taken as a representative one, since "Football is the phenomenon that ties the general loss of love to our specific American culture" (92):

The individual experience . . . exists for itself but also does service to a larger cause. . . . the poem becomes a testament . . . to the poet's imagination, which reveals, rather than imposes, a meaning. (92)

Yet critics were not the only ones, nor necessarily the first, to recognize the poetic achievements made possible by the free verse forms Wright had begun to employ successfully. In fact, besides marking a turn in Wright's own poetic development, The Branch Will Not Break (1963) may be one of the volumes that helped inspire a free-verse revolution of poetry in the 1960s. Garrett Kaoru Hongo argues that this volume, along with others like William
Carlos Williams’ 1962 *Pictures from Brueghel* and Roethke’s 1964 *The Far Field*, helped spark "the free verse revival of the sixties. . . . [making free verse] the normative practice of our day" (83).

In addition to a preference for free verse, Wright’s poetic redefinition incorporated another aspect of the "new" poetry which Bly encouraged him to pursue. This poetry, Dougherty says, for which "Bly argued, often stridently . . . would take its energy from unconscious or archetypal imagery" (13). That is, Bly helped convince Wright that "archetypal images," not rules of traditional form, are the best shapers of poems:

Rather than following the linear path of Cartesian logic, Bly counseled Wright to follow a more spontaneous and instinctive way of thinking, one that would give full weight to images freely accepted from the unconscious mind. Wright’s new poems thus took their structures (and their meanings) not from meter and rhyme but from patterns of imagery. (Stitt, "Introduction" 42)

In "James Wright and the Slender Woman," Bly reveals a particular feminine archetypal image he attempted to help Wright find, one he would name years later as central to Wright’s poetry, though he points out that "We never discussed this 'woman' in the terms I am using now" (120). He describes her accessibility, however, this way:

A feminine being whom I will call the Mysterious Hidden Woman began to rise from the earth around [1950]. . . . She belongs to no
particular culture, and rises and falls in the human psyche as she wishes. ... Whatever we call her she is helpful to poetry. 118

Wright's imagist poetry is not to be confused with the imagism found in earlier Twentieth Century poetry. As Saunders says, Wright's are "not the sharp, hard, visual images of early Ezra Pound and of William Carlos Williams, but 'dark,' strange, irrational, emotion-laden 'deep images'" (11).

Bly, however, argues that it is illegitimate to label his and Wright's poetry as "deep image." Dougherty agrees, but he suggests that examining "some attitudes associated with this school . . . [help reveal] how Wright developed his unique imagery" (14).

The poetry Bly did advocate, Dougherty says, is one that succeeds in "its use of imagery to bear the exclusive burden of meaning in a poem" (15), adding that deep imagists, somewhat as did Wright,

sought through poetry a direct access to the unconscious rather than an impressionistic rendering of surface phenomena. The image gathers force within the unconscious and connects with the reader on equally unconscious levels. (15)

Bly's objection to the "deep image" label is based on his contention that to see the Mysterious Hidden Woman as a type of deep image is merely to see her as part of a technique or "a literary movement involving a formula" ("Woman" 129). The Woman is not simply an idea, he suggests, but rather an entity with an individual will who brings the poet a mystic new vision, a
transcendent "new way of seeing the soul. . . . [while] she comes and goes as she wishes" (129).

Yet in addition to this truly mysterious Woman, Bly suggests elsewhere other sources of Wright's penchant for images. In "The Work of James Wright," originally published under Bly's pseudonym "Crunk" in his magazine The Sixties, Bly points to Trakl's poetry:

In Trakl a series of images makes a series of events. Because these events appear out of their "natural" order, without the connectives we have learned to expect from reading newspapers, doors silently open into unused parts of the brain. (85-86)

Wright himself offers a related explanation of this force in Trakl's work. In "A Note on Trakl" he declares that patience is the key to understanding the Austrian's poems, which "are not objects which he constructed, but quiet places at the edge of a dark forest where one has to sit still for a long time and listen very carefully" (83). Wright suggests that understanding this poetry requires a receptive, nearly passive contemplation, as a reader must allow "the worlds of [Trakl's] poems to reveal their own natural laws" (83). This difficult task, Wright adds, amounts to an attempt "to enter and recognize one's very self" (84). This ability to involve a reader's unconscious mind is a trait Bly finds in the poems of Wright's third and fourth volumes. A comparison of one of Robert Fimarge's translations from Trakl's German and a poem by Wright may provide an example of what Bly and Wright suggest. From Trakl's
"Untergang" Firmage offers in *Songs of the West* the translation "Decline" (69):

Above the white pond
The wild birds have flown away.
An icy wind blows from our stars at evening.

Above our graves
The shattered brow of night is bowed.
We rock beneath the oaktrees in a silver skiff.

The white walls of the city ring forever.
Beneath thorn arches,
O my brother, we blind hands climb toward midnight.

"Rain" (ATR 141) is a poem Bly has pointed to as a good illustration of the imagistic influence Trakl's work had on Wright's. Like "Untergang", "Rain" presents a series of images without either connectives or a clearly identifiable natural order:

It is the sinking of things.

Flashlights drift over dark trees,
Girls kneel,
An owl's eyelids fall.
The sad bones of my hands descend into a valley

Of strange rocks.

Also, both poems have certain abstract images which may be intended to appeal to the subconscious, such as Trakl's bowed "shattered brow of night" and Wright's "sad bones of my hand." However, if the uninitiated reader follows Bly and Wright in this approach of patient contemplation recommended for imagist poems, he or she will stumble when trying to discuss this poetry, or even when trying to realize an exact series of events and the "natural laws" which the poems possess.

Harris, however, provides an explanation that at least makes clearer this theory of participating in and understanding poems. Without the logical connections, she says, the poem appeals to the reader's unconscious mind, since the poetry exists primarily "between the lines" (70). The writer's task is not to point out the connections; instead, the reader's role is to perceive them unconsciously by "first passively recording surrounding images, then intuiting the sense of their formulation through the tone, then actively joining the images to the final line" (70).

Dougherty, however, provides a different premise for examining such a poem. After declaring that the images in Wright's poetry generally "do not control the central meaning or organization of the poem" (16), Dougherty does say,
It is true that, like the deep imagists, Wright uses images that have apparently arbitrary significance and transrational association. . . . These depend in large measure on a tension between the nonrational or imperfectly understood object and the alienated speaker. (16)

In "Rain" we find immediately such an "imperfectly understood object" via the vague reference of the pronoun "It" in the first line: "It is the sinking of things." The alienated speaker also follows in the final stanza: "The sad bones of my hands descend into a valley / Of strange rocks" (5-6). Yet if the first line is taken to contain a controlling idea--sinking--and the basis of a "transrational association," then one might say that some parallel exists between the descent of the speaker's hand's sad bones and the second stanza's drifting flashlights, kneeling girls, and falling eyelids of an owl. At best, we can say all these fall in the way rain does, as the title suggests.

In the Introduction to Georg Trakl: A Profile, Graziano approaches Trakl's work from a slightly different angle, however, one that ultimately may help shed a clearer light on some of Wright's work. Trakl's poems, Graziano suggests, gain their meanings largely from what they lack, from the hollows created by "a nucleus of absence often signalled by the break in the tone of a moaner's voice. . . . Meaning in the Trakl poem . . . as in the penance prayer, is most often secondary to doing" (9-10). Trakl's poetry, Graziano implies, must be understood as writer-based: to understand his poems is to understand
them from the writer's perspective, to enter into the great moment of "lack" from which they come, especially since drawing in the reader this way may well be the poet's goal.

Graziano's suggestion is that Trakl's poetry is nearly confessional, for he calls Trakl a "poet-as-penitent" who, like any penitent, "[begs] pardon from a silent god who bestows grace only upon those who convince themselves that a deity is listening; it is the assumption of audience that affords a measure of absolution" ("Introduction" 10). He adds, however, that "Trakl's poems invite the reader in . . . but never ask that he make himself at home" (10).

Stemming from this, there is a related peculiar affinity to note between Trakl's and Wright's temperaments which may also effect a similarity in their poems. This is the tendency to engage listeners in sometimes incoherent and one-sided conversations which, as the poems above might do, assume the sympathetic attention of an audience. In the introduction to Songs of the West, Firmage points to Trakl's "tendency to sit unspeaking in their [acquaintances'] presence for hours at a time, then suddenly to launch into a monologue as cryptic as his silence" (xv), while Graziano observes that "Trakl was even known to pay a dilapidated whore her fee to hear out his oracular harangues" (10).

Hall reveals a few occasions when Wright spoke his own "oracular harangues"--always during periods of serious emotional stress. One weekend, having arrived at Hall's home in Ann Arbor after a harrowing car ride from
Minneapolis, Hall says, Wright began to talk ceaselessly, reciting what amounted to pages of verse and prose, even reciting, at a party during the weekend, twenty minutes of German poetry "to an astonished assembly of mathematicians" (xxxii). This monologue continued at a football game the men attended that weekend.

Jim and I sat at the football game for perhaps four hours . . . but I'm not sure I spoke at all. Jim talked about free verse, iambic, wit, images, Dickens, Dickinson, Pope, James Stephens, football, Robert Bly, James Dickey, Ted Roethke, boxing, Liberty, Franz, Marshall, basketball . . . His voice was like the sea, when you stand at the rail of a ship watching the waves all day. (Hall xxxi)

The source of Wright's compulsive verbosity may have been similar to Trakl's, for as Hall notes, soon after that weekend, "he entered a mental institution, where he received electroshock for depression" (xxxii). Wright, Hall says, was never freed from his bouts with depression, the tendency toward alcoholism, and the temptation to take his own life, though he never lost to them completely in his "day-to-day struggle" (xxxii).

Trakl, however, did. Also punctuated by such fits--emotional instability, suicidal tendencies (Graziano "Introductiton" 13), and his alleged psychosis which army doctors believed to be "dementia praecox" (Firmage xii-xiii)--Trakl's life ended at the age of 27 from a self-induced overdose of cocaine (Graziano, "Introduction" 15).
In this may lie another reason why it is difficult at times to discuss Trakl’s poetry objectively, as Graziano suggests:

Georg Trakl was a poetic genius precisely because he was insane enough to unwittingly author texts too elusive to accommodate systematic exegeses or compact formulae, texts that, more than anything, attempt to rectify the absence that bore them. ("Introduction" 9)

This is not to imply that Wright’s poems, nor Trakl’s, necessarily, find origin in mental illness. Rather, despite the different ends to their battles, certain impulses the two men shared may have affected their poems in similar ways, keeping some readers from understanding the messages being delivered in the works. In Trakl’s work, for instance, Graziano sees this phenomena as a frequent "bombast of . . . oral soliloquies . . . [which deny] the passive reader . . . any dialogue or dialectic, any access" ("Introduction" 10).

Similarly, after reading Wright’s poems in Branch, Louis D. Rubin concluded that

He has completely abdicated the job of giving meanings to what he describes, and is trying to show off things as things, after the manner of pictorial art. . . . Why Mr. Wright has chosen to back off from attempting to show relationships, I don’t know. But given his past work, I hope that he soon returns to the business of trying to make things add up in verse. (157-58)
Stitt contends, however, that the inability to find meaning in the poems is due to a reader's laziness or inattentiveness ("Quest Motif" 145). In Branch, Stitt maintains, "the speaker of the poems is the poet himself--not some persona he has created--and the poems are based on his own life" (145-46). Yet while Trakl's condition tended to result in cryptic monologues, the combination of Wright's possessing a temperament which sometimes led to verbose soliloquies and his attempting to speak in his own voice seems to have led to another change in terms of the "voice" found in his poems.

First, beginning with "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," Wright's poems sometimes contain defiant, angry tirades against offences committed in some of his earlier poems and their results. In "Goodbye to the Poetry of Calcium" (ATR 119-20), on one level a sort of declaration of poetic independence, the speaker-poet points to the lack of inheritance which that other mode of poetry left him. After having written in traditional forms for so long, the poet declares, "Look: I am nothing. / I do not even have ashes to rub into my eyes" (17-18). Similarly, Wright would later speak more defiantly in "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child" (ATR 210-16). Nearly as a digression in the midst of the poem's second section, after having dedicated the poem to his brother Jack, Wright records these lines:

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. (45-54)

Later in the poem, that observation which may help define the poetry of Wright’s second period appears: "All this time I’ve been slicking into my own words / The beautiful language of my friends. / I have to use my own, now" (173-75). By this point in his career, it would seem, Wright is renouncing various poetic influences and traditions, searching for what he identifies in the poem’s third section as "the pure clear word" (77): "The kind of poetry I want to write is / The poetry of a grown man" (72-73).

Furthermore, Wright’s "Confession to J. Edgar Hoover" (ATR 171) closes with a prayer pointing to the speaker-poet’s sense that his prior poetic sins stem from not writing in "pure clear words": "And I am afraid of my own prayers. / Father, forgive me. / I did not know what I was doing" (18-20).

This poem, however, also provides a clear study of another new characteristic of Wright’s poems: the speaker’s more immediate sense of "I." In early poems like "A Fit against the Country" (ATR 7-8), the poem opening The Green Wall, a tentative, almost invisible speaker nearly stands apart from
himself and acts as an observer of what "I" does or will do. "The opening stanza," Stein claims, "illustrates the rhetoric of detachment that controls the speaker's encounter in the world of experience" ("Rhetoric" 119):

   The stone turns over slowly,
   Under the side one sees
   The pale flint covered wholly
   With whorls and prints of leaf.
   After the moss rubs off
   It gleams beneath the trees,
   Till all the birds lie down.

   Hand, you have held that stone. (1-8)

Mazzaro claims that Wright's presenting the poem's events in terms of the senses instead of providing an interpretation of the event is in line with his early neoclassicism, though the poem's "division and partition convey an almost medieval division of man and nature" (148).

   In later poems a clear and present "I" is one who experiences, thinks, and feels in the midst of the poem, sometimes in the course of charged abstractions, though not from a distance as in earlier works, as the second and third stanzas of "Confessions to J. Edgar Hoover" show:

      Our father,
      Last evening I devoured the wing
      Of a cloud.
And, in the city, I sneaked down  
To pray with a sick tree.

I labor to die, father,  
I ride the great stones,  
I hide under stars and maples,  
And yet I cannot find my own face.  
In the mountains of blast furnaces,  
The trees turn their backs on me. (5-15)

Also, as this comparison suggests, the scope in Wright's poetry is beginning to change, perhaps from the physical to the metaphysical, from, in this case, contemplating a stone and addressing a hand to contemplating one's own place in the universe and addressing a presence who has already crossed death's threshold.

At this point, turning to the metaphysical paves the way for an additional discussion, for as significant as all the factors discussed to this point are, a further investigation of the range of Wright's poetic redefinition reveals a influence above and beyond those coming from Wright's translations and studies of poets like Trakl.

To begin, we note that Bly points out, though only in passing, that Wright's poetry also came under the influence of "the Taoist poems he found in The White Pony" ("Woman" 123). More importantly, however, Wright's own
declaration of the stronger attraction Chinese poetry held for him in "Some Notes on Chinese Poetry" suggests this to be a major link worth investigating, since Wright's description of what he found in Chinese poems and poets reads like a cure for the ills he and so many others had diagnosed in the poetry of his first two books:

[T]he deeper appeal of the Chinese poets rests on . . . the capacity to feel--to experience human emotion. . . . [T]hey share an abiding radiance, a tenderness for places and persons and for other living creatures. They seem to have saved their souls in the most violent circumstances. Our need to do the same is literally a matter of life and death. ("Some Notes on Chinese Poetry," 123-24).

Considering the predicament he found himself in when he appealed to Bly to help him resurrect his poetic quest, Wright's referring to this "matter of life and death" should draw our attention.

Also, the characteristics Bly assigns to Wright's poems in this period are similar to those he assigns to foreign "image" poets, the Chinese particularly: "delicacy . . . lightly touching language, and absence of the closure given by the couplet, and a childlike syntax" ("Woman" 121).

Beyond these characteristics, the poems in The Branch Will Not Break, Shall We Gather at the River, and "New Poems" display even deeper affinities with Chinese and Taoist poetry. Therefore, to say that the poetry of Wright's
second period reveals non-Anglo-American influences may be insufficient. It would be better to say that among those influences, those from Chinese and Taoist origins had a most profound impact. This is so since, beyond the developments in form and voice in Wright's poetry, the characteristics and ideas from the Eastern systems Wright encountered seem to provide the chief impetus for the first step in the quest for redemption in Wright's work.

Wright's poem "Spring Images" (ATR 37) is an accessible starting point for this discussion. As Bly suggests, this poem appears to have been influenced by the Taoist poems in The White Pony:

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. (1-8)

One reading of the poem might suggest that these images, which reveal varied actions of athletes, a butterfly, and antelopes, are disparate, or even "surrealistic," as some have named Wright's poetry. Yet when Stitt asked
Wright during the course of their interview how he reacted to hearing the poems in Branch described this way, Wright replied: "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" (Excerpts 93).

First, on one level, "Spring Images" delivers a structural correlation among the stanzas in the poem in their identical grammatical progressions: "subject-verb-prepositional phrase-prepositional phrase."

More significantly, however, from editor Robert Payne's discussion of the Chinese poet Tu Fu's "Autumn Night," a simple and typical four line poem, we may begin to identify certain Taoist principles at work in "Spring Images". "Autumn Night" reads:

Silver candles, autumn night, a cool screen,
Soft silks, a tiny fan to catch the fireflies.
On the stone stairs the night breathes cool as water.
I sit and watch the Herd Boy and the Weaving Girl.

First, Payne's explanation of the poem, taking into account that the "Herd Boy" and the "Weaving Girl" are constellations, might be adapted to the stanzas of "Spring Images":

the concrete images of the first line are whirled away among the stars in the last. . . . the concrete, immediate things slowly [disappear] across the horizon, fading into ghostliness. The peach blossom follows the moving water, the white birds fade into the
faint emerald of the hills, nothing is lasting, all disappears, and yet . . . how delightful to watch the progress of the world. (xiii)

The principle Payne sees in "Autumn Night"--concrete to abstract--seems to be at work in each stanza of "Spring Images." Here the concrete subjects--two athletes, a butterfly, small antelopes--yield at first to fairly concrete verbs: "are dancing", "lights", "fall asleep". Then the first object in each pair of prepositional phrases seems concrete enough--a cathedral, a branch, and some ashes--until each final phrase places its entire stanza into the realm of the abstract and invites the description Payne offers for "Autumn Night": "the concrete immediate things slowly disappearing across the horizon, fading into ghostliness" (xiii). In "Spring Images," this "ghostliness" is found in Wright's abstract "cathedral of the wind," "branch of your green voice," and "ashes of the moon".

Next, if we are to understand how Taoist imagery affected the portrayal of redemption and the exile in the poems of Wright's third and fourth volumes, we must investigate more fully the meaning of this "fading" principle as one of the keys of Taoist philosophy.

It may be useful here to reiterate this point: In "Spring Images," the image giving stanza one its "fading" structure is the same one giving form to stanzas two and three.

From one angle in Taoist thought, this image is to be understood as a universal principle which Payne's "Autumn Night" commentary hints at: the
concrete fading into the ghostly. Perhaps we may call this "birth giving way to death," or better, "birth giving way to death giving way to birth," since, as Archie J. Bahm's translation of one passage reads, the Tao conceives of the "progression of the universe" this way: "Ultimate reality involves initiation of growth, initiation of growth involves completion of growth, and completion of growth involves returning to that whence it came" (30). Thus, after the "fade" in the first stanza in "Spring Images," a new concrete image appears, and, significantly, the cycle continues through a third section.

On this point, "Spring Images" is illuminated by looking at other tenets of Eastern philosophy which Wright encountered in the poems of the "Tao Te Ching," the "classic of the Way of Virtue" (Payne 67). In Payne's The White Pony, Poem XXV (76) of the "Tao Te Ching" reads:

Tao gives birth to One,

One gives birth to Two,

Two gives birth to Three:

Three gives birth to all things.

All things are dark on one side and bright on the other:

Their breaths when blended together make a harmony. (1-6)

Bahm, translating the term "Tao" as "Nature," offers this translation of the above passage:

Nature first begets one thing. Then one thing begets another.

The two produce a third. In this way, all things are begotten.
Why? Because all things are impregnated by the two alternating tendencies, the tendency toward completion, and the tendency toward initiation, which, acting together, complement each other.

(76)

In other words, completion is as natural as initiation, death is as natural as birth, bad is as natural as good. Both sides are part of one progression, a progression illustrated by "Spring Images."

Christian Joachim explains this Taoist progression-principle as part of the "the 'microcosmic-macrocosmic' nature of the relation between human individuals and the universe" (9). In other words, universal principles are repeated in individual creatures; those in the ranks of the "many" replicate the rules of the "one." The New Encyclopedia Britanica, explaining this concept, says that in Taoism,

the universe is viewed as a hierarchically organized mechanism in which every part reproduces the whole. Man is a microcosm . . . corresponding rigorously to this macrocosm. . . . his body reproduces the plan of the cosmos. ("Taoism" 397)

In short, according to Taoist thought, there is but one principle operating in the universe. It operates as well within every unit within the universe. To understand the universe is to understand the individual, and vice verse.

Again, the purpose of the preceding discussion is to suggest what effect these Taoist principles had on Wright's poetry: a microcosm-macrocosm
correspondence—the notion that individuals and phenomena all embody this same universal principle—provides the rationale for identifying one image, or universal principle, behind each of the stanzas in "Spring Images" and for arguing against its being surrealist. But furthermore, this principle implies a unique relationship among individuals and phenomena, since universal images are recreated in them all. Ultimately, therefore, since this "image" inhabits all, nothing and no one can be said to exist in complete isolation—not even exiles and suffering outcasts, for the suffering or fading they encounter is but part of an endless cycle.

In addition to Wright's new interest in Chinese poetry, the opening poem in Branch illustrates an early step in the journey to overcome the cultural system of exclusion. In "As I Step Over a Puddle at the End of Winter, I Think of an Ancient Chinese Governor," the speaker-poet labors to draw some parallel between his situation and the situation of Po-Chu-i, the poem's Chinese Governor. This desired parallel may be the same sort Wright drew among the images in "Spring Images." But while Wright is able to incorporate Taoist principles into a poem not dealing with the exile theme, his first attempts to do so in "exile" poems only partially succeed. Yet since, as Wright has pointed out, "writing The Branch Will Not Break involved not just the search for a new poetic idiom but a personal process of spiritual healing and regeneration" (Martone 65), this partial success is best viewed as the speaker-poet's first attempt, in this volume's segment of the quest, to realize his place in a
universal unity. Poems toward the end of the volume, as we will see, show the speaker-poet realizing something closer to the "oneness" suggested in Chinese poetry and philosophy. In the case of "As I Step," however, the speaker-poet still experiences that familiar solitude, and he falls short of the goal of becoming connected to or finding affinity with others. Wright presents the politician's situation and his own reflection upon it this way:

    Po-Chu-i, balding old politician,

    What's the use?

    I think of you entering the gorges of the Yang-Tze,

    When you were being towed up the rapids

    Toward some political job or other

    In the city of Chungshou.

    You made it, I guess,

    By dark.

    But it is 1960, it is almost spring again,

    And the tall rocks of Minneapolis

    Build me my own black twilight

    Of bamboo ropes and waters.

    Where is Yuan Chen, the friend you loved?

    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.
Did you find the city of isolated men beyond mountains?
Or have you been holding the end of a frayed rope
For a thousand years?

James Breslin, in his focus on questions like "What's the use?" in the midst of a "black twilight," James Breslin says of this and other poems appearing early in *Branch*: "the attitude is one of panicked and sterile self-regard; Wright is typically alone in a cold, dark, or barren field, feeling frightened, empty, and worthless" (42). Slightly less pessimistically, Saunders declares that "it seems that happiness was his wish more than his actual dominant state" (11).

But even wishing for happiness or belonging, however, is a more positive state than was possible in some of Wright's earliest poems, like "To A Defeated Saviour" and "Complaint." While it seems the speakers in such poems could not even fathom the possibility of finding redemption or consolation, the speaker-poet in "As I Step," though he does not achieve it yet, believes in the possibility of some deliverance, some escape from his complete exclusion--at least enough to justify seeking it.

In the second stanza, the speaker is attempting to draw some parallel between the two men by aligning their surroundings. It is the end of winter, 1960, the stanza says, "And the tall rocks of Minneapolis / Build me my own black twilight / Of bamboo ropes and waters" (11-13). Here the speaker strains to break through the barriers of time and make his surroundings, the urban
sprawl of Minneapolis, concomitant with Po's, the river and gorges of the coastal Yangtze plain, a fertile agricultural region filled with innumerable waterways, according to Hsiao-Tung Fei (10-12).

One key to understanding the attempt of the isolated speaker to connect does lie in the second line's interrogative, "What's the use?" Elkins claims that this line "is not only a statement but also an attitude throughout the poem," suggesting that to find out what became of Po-Chu-i would be pointless--"One's fate is an indifferent matter, for success seems out of the question" (69). This interpretation, however, may be too extreme.

The poem does ask Po-Chu-i what the use of contemplating him might be, whether or not there is any consolation to be found in that contemplation. Also, however much he yearns to know, the speaker finds himself at an impasse, unable to locate in his situation elements comparable to Po's, eventually becoming uncertain of his own: "Where is Yuan Chen, the friend you loved? / Where is the sea, that once solved the whole loneliness / Of the Midwest? . ." (14-16). The speaker cannot locate a friend like Yuan Chen, who was, Palandri reveals, Po's childhood friend, political colleague, fellow poet, and life-long correspondent. He finds no sea, which could provide the solution to the estrangement problem. In the midst of this attempt to make a connection, i.e. to find redemption, he finds none: "I can see nothing / But the great terrible oak tree darkening with winter" (16-17).

Nevertheless, the clue that the speaker-poet is not "indifferent" to his
fate, as Elkins suggests him to be (69), comes in the poem's final three lines. That is, if the poem ended with just the speaker's declaration that he can see only the darkening oak tree, the poem would rest on a sense of futility and an attitude of hopelessness. Yet after cautiously admitting in the second stanza that he does feel separated from Po-Chu-i, the speaker cannot resist inquiring further about the Governor's ultimate fate: "Did you find the city of isolated men beyond the mountains? / Or have you been holding the end of a frayed rope / For a thousand years?" (18-20). Here the speaker seems to wonder if Po reached the distant "city of isolated men," or if he was forever left alone, "holding the frayed end of a rope."

These questions reveal a resilience and a stubborn refusal to abandon the search for a connection simply because it is difficult. Furthermore, taking cue from Stitt's proposal that The Branch Will Not Break is organized around a "Quest Motif" (145) and from Gerke's that all of Wright's work is infused with a struggle to overcome estrangement and loneliness (18), this resilience does not go unrewarded. Moving past "As I Step" through the volume's other poems reveals the poet making progress toward a goal of redemption. Yet it is not that he is attempting to find some Christian-based salvation for various personae; rather, the quest is to find for himself a place in the universe and a deliverance from Western conceptions of damnation and redemption. This move, this renouncing the ideas of the past, appears first in the next poem, "Goodbye to the Poetry of Calcium," and in later poems in the volume. No
longer straining to establish connections, the speaker-poet has been freed to accept them. That is, as Stein says, "Instead of imposing order on a chaotic world from an intellectual distance, the speaker, now aware of his place in a universe of other objects, begins to perceive order where he had previously seen only the 'cold divinities of death and change'" ("Rhetoric" 121). This perceived order begins to appear in poems like "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" (ATR 122). After describing what he hears and sees from this hammock--a butterfly, cowbells, pine trees, horse droppings, and a chickenhawk--the speaker-poet says, "I have wasted my life." Critics have offered various interpretations of this final line (e.g., Henricksen, Spendal, and Jauss 162-66), but Wright offers this assessment:

the poem is a description of a mood and this kind of poem is the kind . . . written for thousands of years by the Chinese poets. . . . And that poem, although I hope it is a description of my mood as I lay in that hammock, is clearly an imitation of that Chinese manner. (Wright, "Pure Clear Word" 29)

This "mood" is characteristic not of one who labors to understand how the various phenomena he observes are related, but of one who, like the Chinese poets, merely observe and record what they see. "Lying in a Hammock" reveals the mood of passive contemplation.

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,

Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.

Down the ravine behind the empty house,

The cowbells follow one another

Into the distances of the afternoon.

To my right,

In a field of sunlight between two pines,

The droppings of last year's horses

Blaze up into golden stones.

I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.

A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.

I have wasted my life.

Assuredly, this and other poems in Branch suggest not only a mood, but also a belief in, a perception of, the harmony in nature, a oneness suggested by the Chinese poets Wright praised. "Today I Was Happy, So I Made This Poem" provides another example:

As the plump squirrel scampers

Across the roof of the corncrib,

The moon suddenly stands up in the darkness,

And I see that it is impossible to die.

Each moment of time is a mountain.

An eagle rejoices in the oak trees of heaven,

Crying
This is what I wanted.

Here, the poet perceives through a scampering squirrel and a standing moon something about his own immortality, and the report of the eagle's cry is ultimately therefore an echo of his own. He has begun to recognize the continuity of universal life and the permanence of universal principles as embodied in particular creatures. "Each moment of time is a mountain" seems to echo also this idea of permanence, which Wright elsewhere describes this way:

[T]ime and eternity are not the same. Sometimes they intersect, and when they intersect, we get poetry rising out of them. . . . When you talk about the length of life, the length of life is just the assumption that life is linear. It's not necessarily linear. It's expansive too. . . . It's possible for a man to live forever in a split second. It's possible for someone to live eighty-five years and not get a prayer of what it's about. (Excerpts 147-48)

Wright's idea of "what it's about" at this stage in his quest seems to find clear expression in all the closing poems of Branch. In "A Blessing" (ATR 143), after describing the experience of observing two ponies in a field "Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota" (1), the speaker-poet offers, with a delightful use of enjambment, this realization: "Suddenly I realize / That if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom" (22-24). Similarly, in "Milkweed" (ATR 143-44), the speaker-poet first declares that whatever he once thought
he had lost was a loving "wild, gentle thing" inside him all along. Then he
finds it: "It is here. At a touch of my hand, / The air fills with delicate
creatures / From the other world" (10-12).

"A Dream of Burial" (ATR 144), the last poem in Branch, provides the
best example of the speaker-poet's beginning to find deliverance and belonging.
It also calls to mind Wright's alluding to Robert Frost's comment that "if there
are twenty-five poems in a book, the book itself ought to be the twenty-sixth
poem. That is . . . one ought to be aware of a relation between the poems as
well as of inner relations that exist in the individual poems" ("Pure Clear
Word" 16). "A Dream of Burial" seems to reflect the poetic quest leading up
to it. The first stanza suggests the weakness and the fragility resulting from
Wright's coming to a frustrated "dead end" after Saint Judas:

Nothing was left of me
But my right foot
And my left shoulder.
They lay white as the skein of a spider floating
In a field of snow toward a dark building
Tilted and stained by wind.
Inside the dream, I dreamed on. (1-7)

The second stanza seems to call for patience: "A parade of old women / Sang
softly above me, / Faint mosquitoes near still water" (8-10). The speaker's
response to this singing is to wait for a summons, confidently believing his
presence is welcomed and expected:

So I waited, in my corridor.

I listened for the sea

To call me.

I knew that, somewhere outside, the horse

Stood saddled, browsing in grass,

Waiting for me. (11-16)

This is no longer the desperate longing for identification found in "As I Step." The speaker is not distressed over his inability to establish connections. More aware of the universal unity suggested by Taoist thought, he realizes that this unity is not the result of an effort to create it. This unity, and each individual's place in it, already is. In other words, as the final stanza reveals, to find one's place, one must patiently listen for it to be revealed, knowing that it, like the saddled, browsing horse, is "waiting outside."

Breslin points out that this final poem in Branch brings Wright to the end of a trek begun in the first.

The book begins in a tone of anxious futility . . . but it ends in a tone of patient assurance. . . . The Branch Will Not Break . . . records an evolution from fear to acceptance, from enclosure to openness, from self-absorption to self-transcendence—a movement that is paralleled by the seasonal progression from autumn/winter to spring. (41)
In one sense, Wright has come to the end of a quest at the close of *Branch*. He has found that the key to finding one's place lies in the power of patient contemplation and acceptance. Yet just as spring will eventually give way to summer and autumn, so is Wright's journey not yet at an end, as the final stanza of "A Dream of Burial" suggests. As he knows, a saddled horse awaits him, ready to carry him on the next leg of the journey. He now recognizes that his life mirrors the progression of the universe and the birth-death-birth principle found in Taoist thought. Even as end always gives way to new beginning, as illustrated in "Spring Images," so does the end of the quest in *Branch* reveal the stage for a new pilgrimage.
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