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James Wright's poetry of intimacy

Terman, Philip S., Ph.D.
The Ohio State University, 1988

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JAMES WRIGHT'S POETRY OF INTIMACY

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of the Ohio State University

By

Philip S. Terman, B.A., M.A.

*****

The Ohio State University
1988

Dissertation Committee:

Anthony Libby
David Citino
Jeredith Merrin

Approved by

Anthony Libby
Adviser
Department of English
Upon Leaving Martins Ferry

The late November grass
holds onto its green,
layers the small hills
that rise and fall

like Indian mounds.
The sky is blue
as the eyes of Jesus
who hangs in Salvation Army

windows on every
main street along this
Bible belt. We watched you,
on video-tape, breathe

in deep and slowly release
the smoke, gray as the river
below your hometown.
Your hand twitched, the ash

lengthened as you lost
your self in your own words,
speaking of the state
I'm looking out into:

I still dream of home
We are in the same myth.
And we who want to die
an easy death will abandon

our bodies to the cancer
in a hospital far from home.
Everybody back in Columbus
is watching the game. If we win,

we'll bring down the goalposts,
spill out in one body
like a cult caught in a ritual,
in love with each other, briefly.
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VITA

November 4, 1957
B. A., Ohio University
Athens, Ohio

1976

1981-1983
M.A., Ohio University,
Teaching Associate

1984-1985
E.S.L Instructor, Migration
and Refugee Resettlement
Services

1983-1988
Ph.d., Ohio State University,
Columbus, Ohio, Teaching
Associate

1988
Instructor, Ohio Correctional
Institution

PUBLICATIONS

Gambit (1986) Poem: "Bless the Children
Who Pass Away"

The Journal (Spring/Summer 1987) Poems: "Upon Leaving
Martins Ferry," "Baube,"
"My Father's Jokes"

God," "My Father's Garage"

The Laurel Review (Autumn, 1988) Poem: "The Bris"

FIELDS OF STUDY

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CONCLUSION  
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James Wright said in an interview that "often, through poetry, [he] tried to find a way to restore that capacity [to feel], to keep it alive." What ways has Wright found, and what processes has he employed to discover them? Wright is considered by many readers and critics a major figure in the movement from modern to contemporary American poetry. It is significant, I think, that important contemporary poets have written admiringly of his work: Mary Oliver, Robert Hass, Dave Smith, Stanley Plumly, William Matthews, and, of course, Robert Bly, to name a few. The fact that so many current poets consider Wright to be a major influence on their own work illustrates concretely the significance he has had and continues to have on contemporary poetry in general.

This study traces his career from his first volume, *The Green Wall*, to his last, *This Journey*, published posthumously. In much of the Wright criticism, the tendency is to focus in general terms on his growth as a poet, particularly on the evolution of his form. It is generally agreed upon, for example, that Wright followed the New Critical mode in writing his first two works, and drastically altered his style once after he had exposed himself to the theories of Robert Bly and the poetry of foreign poets such as Lorca, Neruda, Vallejo, and Trakl. Studies, beginning with W.H Auden's introduction to *The Green Wall*, also inevitably discuss Wright's major themes, particularly his concern for social outcasts and nature.

American poetry can be seen as developing in two very different directions, and Wright's poetry moves from one to the other: his influences take him from Eliot and the New Critics to such poets as Whitman and Federico Garcia Lorca. Many critics have seen this movement as being one from a poetry of impersonality to one of
personality. This change, of course, is reflective of the larger social and historical changes from the late 50's to the early 60's. His development, as Peter Stitt has said, "could be said to parallel the development generally of our finest recent poets" (Stitt, "The Poetry of...," p. 13). While it is true that many of our "finest recent poets" moved from closed to open form, it is significant to note that not all of them made that move in the same way. Wright is representative of that generation of poets, but he also, like many of the others, developed his own unique voice and style.

More specifically, many critics focus on the emotional element of his poetry, and Wright's penchant for identifying with his subjects. Stanley Plumly goes so far as to say that "Wright is the great empathizer of our poetry, a master whose work as a whole has redefined the emotional life available to a poem" (p. 325). Crucial to what makes Wright's poetry different from that of other poets of his generation is the emotional relationship Wright's speaker establishes with other characters within the poems. Robert Hass, for example, states that 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 derelict, is actually a part of [Wright's] own emotional life" (pp. 200-201). Robert Bly agrees that what "sets Wright apart from other poets of his generation" is his "ferocity of emotion" ("The Work of..." pp. 78-79). What intrigues many critics and readers about Wright's work is his ability to speak directly and movingly about universal emotional concerns.

Though many critics speak of Wright's ability to create emotion, none of the studies goes far enough in thoroughly exploring the nature of that emotion. What, for example, constitutes his "ferocity"? Where and when does Wright's emotion succeed and fail? How does Wright produce an effective or ineffective emotional response? I would like to argue that Wright learns and applies different methods of expressing his emotional concerns. For example, in his first two volumes, his poetry is too controlled, too much under the dominance of traditional forms. However, we see an entirely different problem by the time of "New Poems" and Two Citizens, where Wright's lack of technical control produces poems that are too direct and, ultimately, sentimental.
In my dissertation, I will argue that what constitutes Wright's "ferocity of emotion" is, to a large degree, the relationship that he attempts to establish between the speaker and what I will call the "other" of the poem. The "other" is that person or animal or object with whom the speaker is attempting to identify. The ideal relationship in many of Wright's poems is the intimate one—when the speaker attempts to empathize and make a connection with the "other." Often, the achievement of intimacy can be possible through opposite means, either complete identification with the other or complete acceptance of separation. The poetry of "Intimacy" is an emotional poetry, but one that relies on the sense of the speaker attempting to communicate to, empathize with, and somehow understand or at least appreciate the object of his concern. One automatically thinks, of course, of "confessional" poetry, which I take to be more revelatory than communicative. In "confessional" poems, such as what we often find in Ginsberg, O'Hara, or the Lowell of *Life Studies*, the speaker seems to address not another character, but, rather, the reader in an attempt at what Alan Williamson calls a "disclosure or shock" (p. 7). In creating an intimate poetry, however, the poet is concerned with more than disclosure for its own sake; rather, he is concerned with whether what he will allow the speaker to reveal about the self is similar to or different from the "other" being addressed. The purpose is often to try to form relationships between the speaker and the other, or, as a result of observing, describing, and noticing connections between them, for the speaker to achieve a greater depth of understanding of self and other.

Many critics, of course, address the emotion of Wright's poetry but they do so either in the larger context of discussing his other concerns (usually in longer studies concerning Wright's growth as a poet, the best of which is Kevin Stein's soon-to-be published *The Pure Clear Word*) or in articles too short to be as inclusive as the subject warrants. Often they talk about the function of the speaker and the importance of the other, but rarely will these critics discuss them in terms of how they relate to each other. Leonard Nathan, for example, appropriately uses Wright as one of the best examples of the contemporary personal poet. His study is important for the way he places Wright's personal concerns in the context of a tradition, saying that "personal poetry is as convention-ridden, as stylized, as
Jonson's. He proceeds to analyze one of Wright's poems in order to reveal "how calculated, how consciously shaped, how artful the personal poem really is in the hands of a serious practitioner" (p. 94). Nathan's purpose is not, however, to discover whether the emotion is successful or unsuccessful; rather, his interest is merely to show that what he calls "modern Romanticism" is too limited in the way it expresses "human misery to the exclusion of all else" (p. 97). In another article, "The Tradition of Sadness and the American Metaphysic," Nathan claims that "James Wright is superb at eliciting human sympathy, that shared sense of another life lived intensely" (p. 174), but he only states this at the end of a discussion that, rather than actually analyzing how that "human sympathy" is created, again attempts to place Wright's "melancholy" and "pathos" in the tradition.

Robert Bly speaks of Wright's powerful emotional concerns, emphasizing Wright's tone of "goodwill toward others." He also praises the emotion of the poems in *The Branch Will Not Break*, which appeared soon after Wright and Bly became friends and translated foreign poets together. The value of Bly's article is in the way in which he compares Wright's poetry of the first two volumes with the poems of *The Branch Will Not Break* and *Shall We Gather at the River*, pointing out the convoluted diction of the former and comparing it with the natural, imagistic language of the latter. Though he does say that "Some emotion, rising very close to the surface, always seems to keep the words alive" (p. 97), Bly more frequently speaks in terms of "psychic energy" than "emotion," and one wonders just exactly how Wright's emotion "keeps the words alive." William Matthews is somewhat helpful when he states that Trakl's influence allowed Wright "to use images to refer directly to intense emotions, indeed to create those emotions in the reader rather than refer the reader to those emotions" (p. 106), but he is silent on where these images fall and where they succeed in producing "intense emotions."

James Seay also notes that "the sense of intense feeling...has always been at the heart of [Wright's] poetry" (p. 116). Seay presents good discussions on both the techniques and major themes and mentions Wright's "empathy" for murderers, blacks and Indians. Later, Seay talks about Wright's desire to merge the self with "another living being." Seay calls this merging "private experiences of communion," which seems to point toward
the nature of the emotion, but Seay fails to go beyond the identification. Further, to state that Wright’s speaker communes with the other is not to reach an understanding of the underlying ethos of Wright’s entire work: that, because we live in a fallen world, the self can never merge completely with the other. Many of Wright’s greatest poems express a tension between the desire for communion and the reality of separation. It is this tension, I will argue, that informs the desire for intimacy, or that state in which the speaker attempts to relate his situation with that of those whom he is addressing.

Perhaps the best discussion of how Wright’s emotion is created occurs in a short essay by Stanley Plumly, called "Sentimental Forms." Like Nathan, Plumly also attempts to put Wright’s emotional concerns in a tradition—that of the "sentimental in poetry." Beginning with the question of "how much emotion we are allowed to invest" (p. 322), Plumly painstakingly analyzes two of Wright’s poems in terms of the effectiveness of the emotion. The first, "The Prayer of the Sour Old Doctor of Philosophy in the Temple," is, for Plumly, an example of where "the poet has exceeded his emotional authority" (p. 324). The second, "By the Ruins of a Gun Emplacement: Saint-Benoit," succeeds because of the technical control Wright maintains over the poem’s form. My dissertation follows Plumly’s lead in trying to explore Wright’s "sources of emotion" and to evaluate how successful those sources are.

This dissertation, then, is an in-depth theoretic and stylistic analysis of how emotion is created and conveyed in Wright’s poems. I analyze the various techniques and strategies Wright employs in his attempt at creating intimate relationships: the nature of the subject matter, the role of the speaker and other, the function of the language, and others. How are the speaker and other involved in the emotional life of Wright’s poetry? In addressing this question, I explore Wright’s poetic development, focusing on the ways in which he assimilated his influences in establishing and refining his poetic voice. Wright continually changed and grew, and his constant experiments with different poetic forms were attempts to express the "intimate" concerns he had throughout.

In my first chapter, I analyze the way in which Wright’s early voice was shaped by New Criticism and his admiration for Horace. These early
poems are traditional in form and distant in voice, yet one can discover the "seeds" of Wright's unique concerns that eventually bloom in his later work. I hold the view that, though The Green Wall and Saint Judas are apprentice works, Wright's vision of man's relationship to nature and his attitude towards human responsibility are clear from the start. However, those concerns are expressed through what I call a "literary" language (what Bly would call "literary perfume"). What I mean is that often Wright will use an intensely "pretty" sounding language in order to express something quite realistic. This "pretty" language sometimes seems to stand between the speaker and the experience he is relating. This separation can distance the speaker and the other. Often this "literary" language sounds quite pleasing, and I do not wish to advocate that poetry should abandon it, but, in Wright's case, it will become more effective when he learns to balance it with a more direct, flat diction, closer to ordinary speech. In the first chapter, then, I try to show how theories of New Criticism, as expounded specifically by Wright's teacher, John Crowe Ransom, influenced Wright's work and where it seems that we can detect his more natural voice that will grow more fully in later works.

My second chapter is devoted to Wright's discovery of Lorca, his association with Robert Bly, his translations of foreign poets, and his third volume, The Branch Will Not Break. Wright's change of style from traditional to open verse has been documented thoroughly by now, but I am convinced that further treatment needs to be done. For example, In Defence Against This Exile, the recently published volume of Wright's letters to his dissertation advisor, Wayne Burns, makes clear that Wright's frustration with the traditional forms in which he had been writing began long before he stopped writing in them. The letters are particularly crucial in that they provide us with documents of the frustration Wright experienced in changing as an artist. Further, they reveal a highly significant influence on Wright's growth in form that has so far been little discussed, that of Federico Garcia Lorca. Too much has been made, I believe, of Bly's influence on Wright's development, and too little of Wright's own attempts at learning new ways to express himself. Perhaps the greatest influence on Wright's new style was Georg Trakl, a poet whom Wright discovered on his own six years before meeting Bly. Further, I think that too little has been made of Whitman's
influence on Wright's change of style. It is clear that part of Wright's attraction to the foreign poets he translated was that they reminded him of Whitman. Wright's (and others') translation of poets like Neruda, Jimenez, Trakl, and Vallejo was in some sense a significant part of American poetry's return to Whitman after Whitman had been rejected by Eliot and, later, the New Critics. With the re-introduction of Whitman and the intense emotionalism and surrealism of the foreign poets, American poetry cast off its New Critical straitjacket.

Also in my second chapter, I attempt to show how Bly and some of the foreign poets that Wright translated profoundly affected Wright's work, as evidenced in the poems of *The Branch Will Not Break*. Many critics find that *The Branch Will Not Break* is Wright's most successful volume. For example, Lensing and Moran, in their important *Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination*, state that, as of 1976, it is "his most impressive single volume" (p. 106). However, I am forced to disagree with this assessment; I believe that *The Branch* is in many ways an apprentice work for Wright because he is still under the influence of other poets and has not yet completely incorporated all that he has learned (the use of traditional and "deep-imagist" forms) in order to express his own unique vision. We get more of a sense of that vision in the poems of *The Branch* that are significantly different from Bly's; therefore, rather than repeating how Bly and Wright are similar, I try to demonstrate their very significant differences in order to focus on Wright's growing poetry of intimacy.

It is in *Shall We Gather at the River*, I argue in my fourth chapter, that Wright's poetry of intimacy breaks through. Here, Wright empathizes with his subjects, who, in this volume, are mostly victims. The strategy of the majority of these poems is for the poet to have the speaker participate fully in the sufferings of the other. In this volume, Wright is able to incorporate the best of what he learned from writing traditional and deep-image verse in order to create his own style. He also develops his use of the colloquial, flat language that will mark his own particular voice. In order to demonstrate how the poetry of intimacy is effective, I analyze many poems in terms of the strategies Wright employs. At the end of the chapter, I address two dangers of writing a heavily emotional poetry—overstatement and sentimentality. In the "New Poems" section of *Collected Poems*, Wright
often overstates his concerns or does not provide a proper tension between a direct and surrealistic type of language for the emotion to be successfully rendered.

In Chapter Four, I continue my discussion of the problems of writing a poetry of intimacy by focusing on *Two Citizens*. Though I agree with the many critics (Wright included) who considered the volume a "bust," I argue that it is significant in any understanding of Wright's growth. *Two Citizens* marks as important a step in his development as did *The Branch Will Not Break* in that he was working himself towards a more positive and expansive vision in moving from focusing on human suffering to joy. Once again, he needed to experiment with new forms in order to express his new concerns. The poems of *Two Citizens*, consequently, are sometimes confusing in attitude and too direct in form; Wright gives up technical control for bald statement. However, it appears in giving up one kind of technical control, Wright was struggling to find a new one, and *Two Citizens* is a document of transition. One notices in many of the poems Wright's movement toward the prose-piece, which comes into fruition in his final two volumes, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* and *This Journey*. In these last volumes, Wright's poetry of intimacy is expressed in two ways: sometimes the speaker will attempt to identify completely with the other, and sometimes the speaker will realize the difference between himself and the other, and express a desire to leave the other alone. It is a way for the speaker to show respect and devotion.

Finally, I hope to show how Wright's poetry of intimacy is a cultural critique. What can Wright's work teach us about ourselves and our country, about which he wrote so passionately? In the *Paris Review* interview, Wright said that "if [his] boyhood dreams were true, [his] country would stop dying." I want to focus on Wright as an American poet who both loved his country and lamented what he felt to be its tragic situation. Wright's poetry of intimacy is a cultural critique in that it often reflects lives lived in isolation and places caught in the midst of destruction. The poetry evokes a sense of loss and the speaker's attempt to salvage connections in the face of that loss. However, the expression of intimacy can provide an antidote to; empathizing with the other is a response to the alienation our society often produces.
Consequently, much of Wright's poetry offers us an anti-Whitmanian vision: "America is over and done with." Yet, Wright also manages to find joy in being alive: "Suddenly I realize/That if I stepped out of my body I would break/Into blossom." The tension between loneliness and an attempt at connection constitutes Wright's struggle, which he seeks to embody in a language that is emotionally direct. He creates in Martins Ferry, Ohio a microcosm of America in the manner of Faulkner, Williams, and Twain. Like those writers who transform provincial territory into myth, Wright's Martins Ferry is a complex setting where his characters live their lives full of pain and occasional humor. Though the landscape of the Midwest provides Wright with powerful occasions for his poems, he is primarily interested in the problem of an individual's ability or inability to share in the larger human community. He is drawn to characters who exist on the fringe of society--people who are trapped in the undercurrent of the American dream. What makes many of the poems successful, ultimately, is their ability to express a genuine sensibility that I call "intimate" because, while it is private, it is, at its best, at the same time universal. Hopefully, the term will help us to discover how and why Wright's poetry will remain valuable.
I. Chapter One: The Poet in the Gray Flannel Suit

Many readers distinguish the first two books from James Wright's later works because the poems are written in traditional forms, typical for the period, but surprising to readers arriving at them near the end of a backward journey through his poetry. Though the poems were generally considered to be successful in their time (The Green Wall was the 1957 winner of the Yale Younger Poets award, selected by W. H. Auden), many readers of Wright's verse find the early pieces to be emotionally distant mostly because, we can assume, their highly wrought, conventional forms often seem to distance the poet from his subject and, ultimately, from his reader. These readers discover that the early pieces rarely demonstrate (or, if they do, demonstrate in muffled form) those characteristics that make Wright's later poetry more accessible for them.

What is the significance of Wright's first two works and what relationship do they have with what I am calling the poetry of Intimacy? When asked in an interview how he felt about these poems, Wright responded that, after re-reading Collected Poems, "some of them I couldn't remember having written and some of them I didn't understand" (Smith, "The Pure Clear Word," pp. 208-209). In spite of Wright's own negative reaction toward his early work, Henry Taylor states that "almost anyone can avoid the absurdity of referring to The Green Wall and St. Judas as apprentice works, as if the poems in them were written with an eye toward To a Blossoming Pear Tree." But I would argue that the worth of the majority of the early poems lies mostly in the seeds they contain that eventually blossom into the works Wright achieves later. The fact that his first two works were reviewed favorably at the time they were published may suggest more about the critical perceptions of the late 1950's then it says about Wright's works.
Taylor goes on to say that "It seems harder to avoid the equally fallacious tendency to think of The Branch Will Not Break as the moment when Wright 'found his real voice,' as if the first two books constituted some sort of ventriloquism" (p. 49). Using hindsight to our advantage, we can see that Wright's first two books reflected his struggle to first work within and then break out of the non-voice of New Critical poetry into his "true," intimate, "native Ohioan" voice, one that we immediately recognize as belonging to James Wright. In this respect, Wright's first books do indeed "constitute some act of ventriloquism" and to recognize this is to suggest that the act was a product of a predominating poetics that advocated a poem as an aesthetic object removed from personality. As is well known by now, many poets and critics disparaged these dogmas of the New Critics. James Dickey, for example, was highly influential in his remark that the formalist American poets belonged to a "school of charm," and Robert Bly referred to the period as "a wrong turning in American poetry."

What, however, was Wright's reaction to New Criticism? In his first two books, Wright was an apprentice writer attempting to master the craft; certainly, it is not surprising that he would try to understand the tradition before he would discover his own voice. In his dissertation, Wright himself touched on this point of the importance of a poet's absorbing influence. He mentions in a footnote that Eliot was influenced by and then had to reject Milton. In doing so, Wright could have been speaking of his own relationship to New Criticism: "new writers must get older writers out of the way in order for them to proceed with their own imaginative vision" ("The Absorbing Eye of Dickens," p. 42). As a young poet, Wright was trying to discover his own voice by experimenting with the forms of the masters. Eventually, however, he found himself trapped by these traditional forms. He claimed in a letter to Roethke: "I work like hell clipping away perhaps one tiny pebble per day from the ten-mile-thick wall of formal and facile 'technique' which I myself have erected, and which stands ominously between me and whatever poetry may be in me" (Smith, "Pure Clear Word," p. 206). Wright needed to master the traditional forms, which, once mastered, he needed
to get beyond.

I would like to address what has been perceived as the limitations of New Criticism, and then explore Wright's response to New Criticism. Also, I'd like to explore how the poems of the first two works demonstrate in what ways writing in traditional British forms stifled what I will later call Wright's "mysterious imagination," and then show where Wright may have been attempting to develop his own unique voice within the dominance of those traditional forms.

What were the limitations of the New Criticism? Why did not only Wright but so many other poets turn away from traditional verse and begin to write a more "open" poetry? I would not like to indict all of New Criticism nor all of the poetry that came out of it, for most would agree that the New Criticism played an extremely important role in the way we read poetry. In fact, though I'd like to explore some of the New Critical theory, it is ultimately the poetry that arose out of the theory that must bear the responsibility for many readers' disenchantment with the period. Gerald Graff states that "the emphasis on Impersonality and on seeing the literary work as an 'object' represented only one impulse in the New Criticism. Balancing this impulse was a contrary tendency to see the work as a dynamic 'process,' a 'dramatic action,' an 'experience'—these action words are just as important in New Critical writing as words that imply a static view of literature like 'structure' and 'verbal construct'" (Literature Against Itself, p. 139). It is true, however, that the poetry of the late 1950's suffered much criticism and that many poets altered their styles away from traditional verse. Why?

In a review of the anthology New Poets of England and America, edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack and Louis Simpson and published in 1957, James Dickey refers to the poets included as generally "easy to like...but difficult to care about." For Dickey, the American poets included are for the most part "University-taught, New Criticism-oriented writers whom I am tempted to label collectively as
the 'school of charm'" (p. 41). The majority of the poems selected for the anthology (Wright's Included), Dickey claims, do not "reach us where we live."

Several poets agreed with Dickey's assessment that the kind of poetry they were writing was restrictive. Wright himself, in referring to both this anthology and The New American Poets, 1945-1960, edited by Donald M. Allen, claimed that "the two books are astonishingly similar in their vanity, in their general effect of dullness which they produce, and in their depressing clutter of anxious poetasters shrieking their immortality into the void" ("The Few Poets of England and America," p. 268). These words reflect a strong indictment of a kind of poetry that he himself had been writing. A glance at the table of contents of the Hall anthology reveals that, in the majority of cases, those poets whom we consider important throughout the sixties and seventies are those who, like Wright, felt that they needed to "overthrow" the prevailing poetics: Robert Bly, Donald Hall, W. S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, and Louis Simpson. Robert Bly faults the kind of poetry included in the anthology for not being "Intimate," but, rather, being "a poetry in which the poem is considered to be a construction independent of the poet." ("A Wrong Turning in American Poetry," p. 37). Thus, for these critics, the major fault of the "objective" verse anthologized in the late fifties seems to be that it is not intimate enough: it is distanced from, rather than being an extension of, the speaker.

According to James E.B. Breslin, poets writing in the mid-fifties were under the shadow of "a particular phase of modernism--that identified with Eliot and New Criticism in America--" that "had achieved a powerful hegemony which successfully domesticated modernism" (p. 13). This "particular phase of modernism" was characterized in part by a perception that a poem is an object separated from the poet. Wright's teacher at Kenyon College, John Crowe Ransom, focused on the distinction between the poet and the poem as the backbone of his critical theory. In his essay "A Poem Nearly Anonymous," for example, he writes that "the poet must suppress the man," a phrase that echoes Eliot's statement in his seminal essay "Tradition and Individual Talent." Here,
Eliot says that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (pp. 7-8). Rather than writing from his own experience, a poet should emphasize "art and playfulness, dramatic sense" and, most significantly, "detachment." The lack of these qualities "cuts [the poets] off from the practice of the art". Ransom's fear seems to be that a poet will become overly-emotional and that if the poet did write from his or her life, he or she would be in danger of having their "little poetic fountains drying up." It is not surprising whom Ransom cites as the source for this overly-personal brand of writing: "they write their autobiographies, following perhaps the example of Wordsworth" (Ransom, pp. 2-10).

Ransom's poetry of detachment, or what he terms "aesthetic distance," is in important ways antithetical to the poetry of Intimacy in that it advocates the formal, objectified relationship between the poet and his subjects (which often carries over to the distant relationship between the speaker and the other). This relationship is stressed by Ransom when he compares it to a "code of manners." Here, he neatly sums up the distinction between a poem of objectification and a poem of Intimacy: "when a consensus of taste lays down the ordinance that the artist shall express himself formally, the purpose is evidently to deter him from expressing himself immediately" (p. 32). Ransom goes so far as to use the analogy of a man courting a woman--the man must avoid the direct approach and not "seize her as quickly as possible" for that would be to act as a "savage"; rather, he should act as a "gentleman" and "approach her with ceremony, and pay her a fastidious courtship." In this manner, "the woman contemplated...under restraint, becomes a person and an aesthetic object; and therefore a richer object." This male theory of dominence carries over to poetry: the poet should maintain a strict, formal control over his material. The poem, then, arises from the conscious mind, and is a creation of the reason manipulated by the poet for the achievement of predetermined effects. What Ransom has to say about meter may be illuminating in this regard, as his comment focuses on the idea of dominence and control: "[meter] symbolizes the predatory method, like a sawmill which intends to reduce all the trees to fixed unit.
timbers" (pp. 130-131). It is not surprising that Ransom's theories predominated in the "tranquilized" fifties; American poetry, like the country in general, was lulled to sleep by its rigid formalities.

The New Critical dogma of returning to a metaphysical poetics led to idea-oriented poems. This "dissociation of sensibility" was, of course, Eliot's charge against all English poetry "between the time of Donne... and the time of Tennyson and Browning" (p. 247). Eliot's theory of dissociation influenced the New Critical way of thinking: It led in many respects to traditional, "Academic," poems that emphasized, in Brooks' words, "clever ingenuity," "exaggerated compliment," and "witty verbal ingenuity." This theory resulted in poems that skillfully employed language. The poet's emotional concerns were summed up by the word "sincerity," which "may be achieved by ingenuity as well as simplicity--by a sense of conscious artificial statement as well as by a sense of natural statement" (p. 22). It is precisely the advocacy of "artificial statement," it seems, that would lead to Dickey's charge that the poems in Hall's anthology do not "reach us where we live."

To get away from the "sentimental" poetry of Wordsworth, poets should employ irony and paradox, wit and pun. Both Ransom and Brooks turned to metaphysical poets like Donne as examples of the kind of poem a modern should be writing. These critics called for a complex poem, and took their cue from Eliot, whose call for a "difficult" poem led to a less experimental poem than he himself wrote. The poets of the 1950's wrote rationally controlled verse because, as Allen Tate put it, "Formal versification is the primary structure of poetic order, the assurance to the reader and to the poet himself that the poet is in control of the disorder both outside himself and within his own mind" (p. 228). His emphasis on "control" explains in part the lack of emotion in the poems produced by the poets who tried to incorporate these theories into their creative endeavors.

As was noted previously, the New Critics appropriated Eliot's statements that poetry be difficult, but they did not appropriate the experimental nature of Eliot's poetry. For many critics, this taking on of the form and not of the substance resulted in conservative and safe
verse. David Perkins says that "the New Critical style was cautious and traditional in comparison with the high Modernism it descended from, and, unlike high Modernism, it did not seem in the least disorienting, grand, or revolutionary" (p. 334). Robert Bly is more specific in his attack, directing his focus at Ransom and Tate, editors of *The Kenyon Review* and *The Sewanee Review* respectively: "the guiding impulse in both Ransom's and Tate's minds is fear of revolution" ("A Wrong Turning" p. 38).

But what was Wright's response to New Criticism? As has been mentioned previously, Wright was criticized along with the rest of the poets included in Hall's anthology. In Wright's case, Dickey claims that the poetry is "ploddingly sincere." Like the overwhelming majority of poems by other poets included, Wright's poetry was "academic--"metrical, rhymed, in every sense, crafted. At Kenyon, Wright received what he called "a very classical and disciplined kind of education." Wright pursued the same type of education at the University of Washington, under the tutelage of Theodore Roethke: "during the few years after I left Kenyon, I was trying to learn how to write in what I call a classical way" (Heyen and Mazzaro, CP, p. 154). However, Wright was also concerned with more than merely crafting the poem, as he says in his dissertation: "technique, taken alone, is trivial" ("The Mystery of Edwin Drood," p. 56).

In his early work, then, Wright attempted at least two things: to learn the tradition of his trade by molding the language into traditional forms, and to develop his imagination in order to somehow express his human concerns within the strict guidelines of traditional forms. Later, the forms will result more from the inside; the poems will discover their own, organic forms. Before that could happen, however, Wright felt that he needed to, in his words, consciously restrain himself "within particular forms" because he "felt so many energies in the language that [he] didn't want them swallowing [him] alive" (Heyen, et. al., CP, p. 158).
This comment is revealing. Before he could shape certain "energies in the language," he needed to work within predetermined forms. His use of academic forms was a cautious move on his part, implying that at that point he was still a student of the language and the tradition, and that he hadn't yet discovered his own voice.

Surprisingly, Wright considered his master to be not one of the New Critics, but, rather, Horace, whom he mentions often in his interviews. Wright always speaks of him in terms of his own artistic purpose, and claims that he strives in his poetry to achieve the "Horatian ideal," which is formulated in, among other places, *Ars Poetica*. *Ars Poetica* does not contain a coherent poetic theory, but, rather, Horace's views on certain laws which a poet should obey. Horace speaks often of "unity," "order," and "arrangement." "Unity," for Horace, is simple: just as a painter would not "couple a horse's neck with a man's head," a poet should not "try to be terse, and end by being obscure." He should, on the other hand, "say at once what ought at once to be said" (pp. 41-42). Technique is extremely important in the Horatian view, but it is significant for our purposes to point out that Horace considers theme and what the poem *says* of even higher significance, as several of his statements would seem to indicate. His assertion that "he who makes every effort to select his theme aright will be at no loss for choice of words or lucid arrangement" suggests that the theme is the primary force that shapes the poem.

But from where are the themes to arise? Horace stresses a strong ethos: a poet must be of "sound judgement" and have "learned his duty" in order to "assign to each character its fitting part." In the larger scope, a poet should "look to life and morals for his real model, and draw thence language true to life" (Blakeney, p. 53). Underneath this mimetic interpretation, for C. O Brink, is Horace's conviction "that poetry aims at the 'whole man', not only at 'aesthetic man', and therefore has a function in society" (p. 225). Rather than being merely a verbal construct to be isolated from society in a life of its own, a poem is integrally related to the society in which it is written. Brink labels the connection between the poet and his society as *Sapientia*, moral theory or wisdom, which is
"said to lie at the root of the poet’s education." Ultimately, there is an attempt at an ethical center that underlies Horace’s often-quoted definition of poetry’s function, which is to "charm his reader and at the same time [instruct] him" (Blakeney, p. 54). Horace’s principals are, finally, “rationalistic in character,” emphasizing the distinction between technique and content, and focusing on “clarity of statement” (Brink, p. 235).

When referring to Horace, Wright often does so in relationship to his own intended purpose in making poems. For example, when asked about Ransom’s influence, Wright responds that Ransom influenced him in terms of the Horatian ideal, “the attempt finally to write a poem that will be put together so carefully that it does produce a single unifying effect” (Smith, “The Pure Clear Word,” p. 201). Wright uses Horace’s theory of unity and wholeness, in fact, as aesthetic criteria for successful poetry, criticizing both Pound and the Beats for writing in incoherent fragments. These criticisms are not, however, merely aesthetic judgments, but also an “ethical comment” (Heyen, et. al., p. 173). Pound, rather than create wholes out of the past, as did Eliot and Joyce, “ransacked” the past; in other words, Pound had displayed a “fatal lack of wholeness most of the time” However, in his essay “The Delicacy of Walt Whitman,” Wright praises Whitman for his “restraint, clarity, and wholeness, all of which taken together embody that deep spiritual inwardness....” Later in the same essay, Wright contrasts these attributes with what he calls “the features of American poetry most in evidence.” Though he mentions them only vaguely and in passing, Wright is clearly directing his attack against the Beats, or those poets who have “claimed Whitman as an ancestor.” For Wright, much of the current American poetry has suffered a lack of wholeness: “recent American poetry has often been flaccid, obtuse, and muddled, and fragmentary, crippled almost.” Apparently, the problem with these poets is that they did not realize, as Whitman did, that “the past existed” (pp. 4, 18).

Perhaps what Wright interprets as the Horatian notion of “wholeness” is related to Horace’s idea that poetry should aim at the “whole man” as opposed to merely the “aesthetic man.” What Wright
derived from Horace, then, is twofold: a poet has to be conscious of his past (his tradition), and he has to say something that Wright would call "humanly important." Clearly, both were craftsmen who had strong ethical concerns. How strongly Wright felt about practicing the "Horatian ideal" is summed up by the following comment: "the person whom I would like to be my master is Horace" (Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," p. 38). In calling Horace his "master" Wright reveals the extent to which he agrees with, and departs from, New Criticism. Horace emphasizes the important role of form, but he also stresses the underlying significance of substance. If we can place Wright's phrase "humanly important" within the context of the Horatian concept of sapientia, Horace's influence on Wright, and Wright's relationship to New Criticism, becomes more focused in that, while craft is certainly important, it takes on a subsidiary role to the underlying ethos of the poem, which in turn is related to the culture out of which it stems.

The combination of technique and ethos creates a formal immediacy. I derive this notion from what Wright admires about the poem "Those Winter Sundays," by Robert Hayden. The poem ends with the haunting couplet: "what did I know, what did I know/of love's austere and lonely offices?" Wright quotes the poem and then comments: "The word 'offices' is the great word here. Office, they say in French. It is a religious service after dark. Its formality, its combination of distance and immediacy, is appropriate" (Smith, p. 200). It is the last phrase I want to focus on: distance and immediacy. These are the two qualities that Wright tries to balance throughout his career; the structures of the poems creating the distance, and the substance of the poems providing the immediacy. In fact, we can look at the body of his work as a constant struggle to achieve this balance. The problem with the traditional forms of the first two books, a problem that I believe Wright himself realized, was that they sacrificed the immediacy for the distance. Once the relationship between the speaker and the other (person, animal, or natural object) becomes more intimate, the poems become more emotional. This gesture requires an act of empathy. "It is not until the poet is able to see the entire earth and all its processes of fruition and
decay inside himself [my italics], contained by the arena of his own body...that he can stop separating, can stop alienating himself from...the ghosts and criminals and lunatics and perverts, the dispossessed who haunt him from the start" (Howard, p. 665). In many of the poems of the first two volumes, Wright's speaker remains outside.

The overall impression of the poems in *The Green Wall* is that they are distant rather than intimate, and that the speaker is sympathetic rather than empathic. Underlying these poems is an extremely rational intelligence. They often express a specific idea about the world, and the images are shaped to conform to that pre-determined idea. The speakers do not generally take any emotional risks in attempting to empathize with the subjects. Steve Orlen notes that many of the poems of *The Green Wall* "call...attention to their being composed as a poem, as artifice" (p. 9). The generally favorable reviews of *The Green Wall* soon after its publication also focus primarily on Wright's ability to manipulate the craft in order to create the "occasional" poem. For example, Louis Simpson praises Wright as a poet who has "learned his craft; he knows what can be done with a particular scene or mood" (p. 460). Howard Nemerov lauds the poems as "beatifully formed," focusing on the "developing figure of the poem" (p. 35) and J.E. Palmer commends a poet "who is entirely at ease in his craft" (p. 687). Therefore, it is not surprising that not only the critics of the period but many of the critics since have concentrated on the importance of the craft of Wright's early poetry. However, in focusing on this element, we miss the ways in which Wright found his true voice even within the boundaries of this craft. For example, one question we might ask is, how, in the confines of the traditional forms, is Wright's "mysterious imagination" operating? Given that the early poems are crafted in traditional forms, in what way can we attune ourselves to the qualities that are "humanly important"?

As was mentioned previously, the majority of the poems are idea-oriented, meant to present a certain perspective rather than to
elicit any emotional response. In fact, we can read the entire book from the perspective of its overall "idea," if we are to believe the poet himself. In speaking of *The Green Wall*, Wright had definite intentions concerning that central idea: "I tried to begin with the fall of man, and acknowledge that the fall of man was a good thing, the *felix culpa* the happy guilt. And then I tried to weave my way in and out through nature poems and people suffering in nature because they were conscious. That was the idea" (Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," pp. 52-53). The fact that the poems are so heavily idea-oriented means that in some of the poems the speaker's expression of an immediacy or a desire for an intimacy is almost non-existent or, at best, faint, and the speaker is a bodiless voice speaking from somewhere outside of the page. However, in spite of, or perhaps because of, their ideas, some poems may exhibit within their tightly constructed forms elements that might indicate the speaker's, and ultimately the poet's, desire to break through those forms in order to express his "mysterious imagination." Because of the rigidity of the academic verse in which the poems are composed, this underlying desire for immediacy and intimacy is expressed in different forms; nevertheless, we can notice it operating in several of the poems. In approaching some of the pieces from the perspective of discovering where the "mysterious imagination" is expressed, we may get a better insight into the ways in which the forces of formal verse and the expression of Wright's "mysterious imagination" operate at this stage of the poet's career, and the ways this tension influences his radical change of form after *Saint Judas*.

The tension can be seen in the volume's opening poem, "A Fit Against the Country" (7-8). This piece presents the thesis that it was better for man to fall, because the human world, though imperfect, is preferable to the "vacant" world of "paradise." This idea is introduced in the book's epigram, from the 15th century "Adam lay abounding," and is articulated by a speaker who is detached not only from the reader, but also from himself. In each stanza, for example, he speaks to a different sense--touching, hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting. In other words, the self speaks to other aspects of the self, or, perhaps more accurately,
the mind speaks to parts of the body: "Yet, body, hold your humor/Away from the tempting tree...." The speaker is involved in the experience only in a meditative sense: he reflects back on what the body physically experienced sometime in the past. Further, he generalizes the tone in order to make the experience universal rather than personal: "Under the side one sees...." [my italics].

The situation of the poem is one that we will become more familiar with in Wright's work: the attractions of nature versus the responsibility to remain human. The green wall is what separates the speaker from a natural world that is unconscious and, as the image of the fourth stanza would suggest, beastial. However, the speaker was at one time connected with that natural world. Madeline De Frees sees this escape from the natural world as "an awareness of the cleavage between man and nature" and "the refusal to repent the choice made by the first man and, after him, by every thinking man who exercises the faculty of free will" ("Early Poetry," p. 247). The center of this and of many other poems in this volume is separation: the speaker is separated from himself (thought/human from body/nature), and the present is separated from the past: in the first stanza, for example, the stone is covered with moss; in the second stanza the "cracked song is lost"; in the third stanza the "tanagers" have floated away and "sparrows alone are left/To sound the dawn." Only in the past did the speaker have any connection with the natural world: the "hand...held that stone," and the "ear...heard that song." As De Frees suggests, the fourth stanza is certainly the climax. Here, the language is full of sensual overtones in which two people (we assume the speaker and a lover) engage in what sounds very much like a sexual experience:

Odor of fallen apple
Met you across the air,
The yellow globe lay purple
With bruises underfoot;
And, ravished out of thought,
Both of you had your share,
Sharp nose and watered mouth,
Of the dark tang of earth.
Though I agree with De Frees that the language is "heavily erotic," I cannot agree with her assessment that the stanza "suggests the violence of rape" and "the complete lack of tenderness...as if the experience were something crudely animal, crassly mechanized, or grossly vindictive" ("Early Poems," p. 247). First, a "rape" implies that one party violates the other; here, it is clear that "both" partake in the experience equally. The word "ravished" can connote an extreme emotion as well as "violence." But let us remember that this is the only place in the poem where the speaker is connected with himself, with another, and with the earth. The speaker himself in the last stanza admits that it is his "humor," his momentary temperament, to pursue that "temptation." Perhaps, then, because he is tightly confined within the restrictions of an imposed form, the only way he could express immediacy is through the opposite extreme: through uncontrolled sensuality. The fourth stanza is extremely immediate, in fact too much so; therefore, the speaker feels the need to hold back, to climb the wall into a safe world and restrict himself further. It is important to note that, once Wright alters his forms, he will begin to celebrate, rather than to attempt to escape, the body.

It seems that what separates the speaker from the world of the body and of the present, then, is "thought." This idea of separation ("thought" from the senses, the speaker from the earth) leads Auden to praise the book and this poem in particular for its expression of the modern sensibility: the poet's "typical feelings about nature, therefore are feelings of estrangement and nostalgía" (p. xii). In the Eliot tradition, Wright has effectively "escaped personality," his sense of an integrated self, in order to present modern consciousness, which is actually a split-consciousness. By taking on the tradition of Western, rational forms, Wright has also taken on its values. However, one senses the desire, or at least the "temptation," to break away from those values.

In "The Horse" (9-10), there is a separation between the human and natural worlds, the present and the past. The underlying idea of the separation has been marked off in advance, precluding any sense of
discovery. The epigram from the *Book of Job* reinforces the poem's place in the tradition, which is expressed in extremes: animal vs. human, primitive vs. civilized. The two forces cannot be integrated: all that remains is the "nostalgia" for what is lost. The separateness is the source of the speaker's non-identity: because the issue is modern, the voice becomes universal: "we have coddled the gods away." The horse becomes a mere symbol of what is lost, and the "theme" is driven home: "Yet earth contains/The horse as a remembrancer of wild/Arenas we avoid." As in "A Fit Against the Country," this poem suggests that we should separate ourselves from the primitive—even if the alternative is a kind of modern sickness:

> Run to the rocks where the horses cannot climb,  
> Stable the daemon back to the shaken earth;  
> Warm your hands at the comfortable fire,  
> Cough in a dish beside the wrinkled bed.

Unlike "A Fit Against the Country," however, where the characters of the speaker and the other are objectified, in "The Horse" the speaker and his wife take an active role in the poem. However, they are not introduced until the fourth stanza, after three long stanzas which first describe the horse and then articulate the poem's theme. The wife's falling off of a horse and the speaker's successful attempt at saving her sounds more like an example of the theme that has just been introduced. The personal experience is manipulated to illustrate the statement that modern civilization is cut off from the natural, primitive world as represented by the horse. At this point Wright cannot say, as he will be able to later, that "I feel like half a horse myself." Rather than making an identification with the natural world, this poem marks off the boundaries that separate the human from that world. Further, Wright's speaker here, in spite of the use of a personal "I" who has a wife, seems more true to the pronoun "we": he is impersonal, speaking for modern man.

What we have, then, in *The Green Wall* is a speaker alienated both from himself and the other, a self-consciously "fallen" speaker—no Whitman, the "cosmos," who incorporates into himself, and becomes the
objects of his visions. Rather, Wright asserts the "happy fall," happy not in the sense that it is blissful, but as knowledge and suffering and responsibility; in a word, it is human, and thus demands the separation of the self from the other lest the individual become "ravished out of thought." From this standpoint, connection is not possible, and intimacy remains only an unfulfilled desire. Our separation can allow us to sympathize with those who are truly separated, outcast from society, but it cannot allow us to empathize with them, for that would imply a loss of self, a giving up of thought, the very price we pay as a result of our fall from Eden. We "suffer in nature because [we] are conscious," but, because we are conscious, we cannot make the Whitmanian connection, we cannot say without reservation that "what I assume you shall assume." We try to overcome this separation through the attempt at an imaginative gesture, a negative capability, a negating of the self in order to become capable of entering into the consciousness of the other. Wright's poetry tests the limitations of that imaginative gesture. In several early poems we notice that the speakers may desire to make the imaginative connection, but they are stymied by the split-consciousness (as expressed through the poem's traditional forms) of the underlying value system that informs them.

Therefore, the speaker's alienation from himself and the world motivates him to identify with others who are also alienated, though in a more extreme way than the speaker himself. It is this desire that informs Wright's "mysterious imagination." Much has been said about Wright's penchant for social outsiders: many feel that the most identifiable aspect of Wright's poetry is his concern for those who are on the margins of society. Wright's development can be viewed in the way he treats this theme. In much of the early work, the distance of the forms forces him into a formal relationship with the subjects, and the poems are expressions of sympathy. Gradually, Wright identifies more and more with his characters, and, in many cases, becomes his characters, takes them into himself in an empathic relationship.

We can trace this movement as being one in which the speaker moves from sympathy to empathy with the other. Much of this
distinction is related to how Wright presents the speakers of his poems: generally, the more personalized the speaker's voice, the more intimate it will be with the other. The speakers of the early poems are distant and therefore impersonal: "In *The Green Wall*, the process of accommodation is tentative and slow; several of these poems, successful in many ways, sound like no one in particular" (Taylor p. 51). Yet, in a few of the pieces, one can identify a more personalized voice and, as in "A Fit Against the Country," a struggle for immediacy. What is fascinating about this identification is that, in relation to Wright's "mysterious imagination," we can clearly see the sketchy outline of what he will later detail in bold strokes.

I'd like to examine several of the many poems that relate to the "social outcast" theme in terms of the relationship between the speakers and the characters. In so doing, we may discover a gauge by which to measure the level of distance or intimacy that results from the quality of this relationship. For the most part, we will see that, because of the distance between speaker and subject, the most that the speaker can do is sympathize with the subject. In the early poems, Wright's "mysterious imagination" is expressed as sympathy rather than empathy as his speakers imagine from the outside what the subjects are thinking and sensing. Rather than actually becoming the victim of suffering, the speaker tries to imagine what he feels the subject to be undergoing: the speaker is engaged in an act of the intellect rather than of the emotions. Often, rather than depicting real, suffering human beings, which Wright clearly intends to depict, the result of the sympathetic response is a romantic world that calls attention not to the subject, but, rather, to the poet's ability to create a lyrical language. Interestingly, though Wright said that he did not want to merely "play with language," his lyricism often stifles (because it romanticizes) the full expression of what is "humanely important."

The idea-oriented nature of many of the poems keeps them at a safe emotional distance. For example, a poem that presents the separation between the present and the past and, more importantly, the "realistic" and the "lyrical" worlds is "The Seasonless." Here, the contrast is
between the greatness of the past and the emptiness of the present. Ultimately, "The Seasonless" is about how the human, who is suffering, has lost any reason even to recall whatever might have been beautiful in the past. What is lost is a world that existed somewhere in the imaginative, poetic past: the "snows" are contrasted with the "summer ghosts," the "blistered trellis" with the "root and rose," and "the empty fountain" with the "spray that spangled women's hair." This idealized past is finally contrasted with a homeless man who is so broken that he cannot even wish "to evade the cold," not being aware of "the day of girls blown green and gold."

"The Seasonless" (8-9) is a good example of how the speaker sympathizes with the other, or main character, but is too far removed from him to make us feel any real emotional response. In fact, he is only present as a symbol rather than as a developed character, and the poem remains an objective description. The man does not appear until the last stanza, after the piling up of images that manifest the underlying idea of the separation between the emptiness of the present and the beauty of the past. The presence of the man, therefore, is meant to suggest that the human can suffer so much that he does not even have the strength to remember a time when there was "delight." Therefore, he represents "the seasonless": his suffering precludes any sense of the poetic, romanticized past.

This romanticized past can be seen in the language itself, which is stilted in such a way as to create the sense of what William Matthews, in his discussion of this poem, calls "the emotional distance between the speaker and the poem" ("Continuity," p. 100). Ultimately, the poet wants us to sympathize with the man, but, because the man is described in only a general sense, we can see him only as a type rather than as a unique, suffering individual. The man is clearly used as part of the overall "idea" of the poem: he is the antithesis of the previous four stanzas, the force that defies the distinction between the romantic past and the realistic present. But, because he is a "force," an element of an overall idea meant to provide a message, we cannot respond to him emotionally because he is not particularized, and therefore has no character of his own. We do
not know whether he "looks for sleep" or longs "to evade the cold"; we have to take the poet at his word. Because we do not empathize with the subject, we cannot feel any sense of intimacy with him. However, we can clearly see that Wright's "mysterious imagination" is beginning to assert its force: he is on the way toward empathy and intimacy. The man in this piece is a sketch of one of the old men who "prowled the Mississippi shore" or the old man who appeared to the speaker "once/in the unendurable snow." Here, if we are attentive, we are able to hear the whisperings of a voice that will later find the proper forms through which it will assert itself.

Wright is fascinated by characters who are completely alone in their worlds. There are several poems in *The Green Wall* in which the speaker is an observer who attempts to imagine what the isolated subject may be experiencing. This sympathetic response implies a clear separation between the speaker and that subject. "She Hid In the Trees from the Nurses" (18-20), for example, is an objective description of another type of outcast, an outcast from outcasts, if you will. She is in a world of her own, separated not only from society, but from the patients, as well. This separateness fascinates Wright: What is the nature of her world? What constitutes her suffering? The speaker is the outsider looking in at the character and trying to imagine how that suffering presents itself. In this piece, we are introduced to a distinction that will prevail throughout Wright's whole body of poetry, that of oppressor from victim. Here, the oppressors are the "attendants," who will blow the whistles that will call the woman in, forcing her out of her self-created world. Often, Wright associates the isolated worlds of his characters with romantic ones. Thus, the subject of this piece, instead of going in with the other patients, must "dabble her feet in the damp grass,/And lean against a yielding stalk,/And spread her name in the dew across/The pebbles where the droplets walk." As in "The Seasonless," Wright creates an opposition between the realistic and the romantic, represented by the nurses and the patients:
But why must she desert the shade  
And sleep between the walls all night?  
Why must a lonely girl run mad  
To gain the simple, pure delight  

Of staying, when the others leave,  
To write a name or hold a stone?  
Of hearing bobwhites flute their love  
Though buildings loudly tumble down?

The woman is clearly a romanticized figure, however: we do not know anything about her; like the old man in "The Seasonless," we must take the poet at his word. It is a lovely piece; its music transports the reader in the same way that the patients are "...held for hours/By spiders skating over a pond." However, as De Frees points out, "Returning to the early poems after a long interval, I found myself again under their spell, through the diction occasionally struck me as slightly archaic and I had to make a real effort to attend to the sense." In other words, because Wright's music is so often "irresistible," we try hard to remember that this is a poem about "a lonely girl" who must "run mad/To gain the simple, pure delight/Of staying." While she is trying to hear "bobwhites flute their love...buildings loudly tumble down." It is easy to miss the terror underneath the music of this poem. Again, the "mysterious imagination" is attracted to the suffering of the lonely, but it is hard for us to see her as anything other than a romantic figure with whom the poet sympathizes.

Another poem in which the speaker is not present, but is, rather, an outside observer who attempts to imagine what the subject of the poem is imagining is "To a Defeated Savior" (20-21). Here, the speaker imagines a boy who failed in his attempt at saving someone who drowned in the river. It is interesting to note what Wright says about this poem:

That poem originated many years ago, when I was a boy. My brother had a small boat. He was fishing down on the Ohio River, and some kids were swimming right off-shore, and one of them caught got in what they call--a hideous Ohio phrase--a suck-hole. A whirlpool started where people had been dredging mud out the river. My brother was just about twelve years old and he wasn't a strong boy. I and the kids on the bank kept
yelling at him to jump in and save the boy who was drowning, and he didn't know what to do. He held his fishing pole out to the kid, and the kid tried to get hold of it but missed it, and sank.

(Heyen, et. al., p. 153)

What is interesting here is the information that Wright chooses not to include in the poem. Rather than describing a specific person or a specific river, as he certainly will when he writes in more open forms, Wright chooses to tell the story more objectively, more impersonally. He tries to imagine what the boy must be going through imaginatively as a result of not having saved "the kid." Also, Wright chooses for the most part not to call things by their names, and does not employ the language of a native place: "suck-hole" has become "shifting hole." Compare this with the language and personal tone of a poem like "To the Muse," from Shall We Gather at the River: "Out of the suckhole, the south face/Of the Powhatan pit." There is, however, evidence of a colloquial diction taking form in the word choice; for example, note the non-poetic qualities of the words "anyplace" and "kid." This poem lacks emotional immediacy because of the impersonality of the speaker: as in "She Hid in the Trees from the Nurses," the poet does not establish any relationship between the speaker and the other. Rather, the poem, like "The Horse" and "A Fit Against the Country" focuses more on its idea, its statement on the condition of modern man: "The circling tow, the shadowy pool/Shift underneath us everywhere." The poem suggests that man is lost within the confines of the self: because of our basic selfishness, a man, ultimately, cannot "save" another man. On the other hand, we can sympathize with this inability because we are all trapped within our human limitations. We will see how Wright later deals with this theme in a more intimate way later, especially in the poem "To a Blossoming Pear Tree." The idea, then, overwhelms the experience. Therefore, though this experience was an extremely personal one involving his brother and himself, the subject of the poem seems generic, an "anyboy:" "You stand all day and look at girls,/Or climb a tree, or change a tire...." At this
stage of his poetic development, Wright's "mysterious imagination" has not been able to break through the traditional form or the "literary" quality of the language.

Still another poem in which the speaker sympathizes with the subject in a "literary" rather than direct and realistic way, is "A Poem about George Doty in the Death House" (25-26). Here, the speaker leaves his objective stance only temporarily in order to "count the sash and bar/Secured to granite stone,/And note the daylight gone,/Supper and silence near." As in "To a Defeated Savior," Wright sympathizes with the failure, the one rejected from society, but here he deals with probably the most extreme version of the outcast theme. I want to stress the importance of the fact that the speaker does not identify himself with the murderer, as he will in Wright's later attempt to deal with this issue, "At the Executed Murderer's Grave." Rather, as we have seen in "The Seasonless," there is a clear "emotional distance between the speaker and the poem." That distance is revealed by the nature of the observation, which is manifested in the language. In the first stanza, for example, the speaker "[notes] the daylight gone, while in the second stanza he speaks of Doty as a man he "wondered of." In the fourth stanza, Doty is "the one for wonder" [my italics]. Rather than try to examine himself and recognize a connection between him and the other, as he will in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," the speaker here maintains a safe, impersonal distance from the subject. The relationship between speaker and other is a sympathetic, rather than empathetic, one.

The ending of the poem is, of course, a shock: how can the speaker sympathize with the rapist and murderer but not with the woman who was raped and murdered? The speaker maintains that Doty "rose/for love," but how can he know that? Rape is an expression of rage, not love. Wright says of this poem that he does "sympathize with the victim all right. I'm just saying that I sympathize with George Doty, too. I think what annoyed [the people of Martins Ferry, Ohio about the poem] is somehow that the person who committed this crime ought to be cut off from human fellowship; that is, they believed this and I did not believe it" (Smith, "The Pure Clear Word," p.212). Even so, Wright seems to be
exaggerating his sympathy for Doty in order to make the point that to sympathize with the rapist and murderer is to admit that the speaker is himself complicit in the crime. This identification will be confronted and explored in greater depth and honesty in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave." For now, however, the identification remains only an idea, and there is certainly cause to agree with those who "consider Wright's conclusion here insensitive to the girl's fate" (Seay, p. 118). It is interesting to note that, while Henry Taylor says that this piece "reveals Wright's early style at something close to his best," it also "consists of almost inappropriately delicate eight-line stanzas of rhymed iambic trimeter," (Taylor, p. 56) once again raising the issue that perhaps Wright's music distracts our attention from the underlying terror of the sense. In other words, the traditional forms Wright uses are inappropriate for the nature of the subject matter. It is not so much that one cannot write about rape in rhyme; rather, Wright is at his best when he combines his ability to create a lyrical language with the more direct, colloquial speech he will discover and master later.

This use of "literary" language is what helps separate the speaker from the immediacy that is characteristic of Wright's poetry once he drops the traditional forms. Wright was fond of showing to friends a critical review of his own work that claimed that the music of a Wright poem often captivated him, even when the poem itself wasn't about much (De Frees, "That Vacant Paradise," p. 18). Often in the early work, Wright will rely on literary language rather than on drawing from his own experience making many of the lines feel somewhat false. Images can sound forced: they are present, one sometimes feels, because they help create the overall effect or atmosphere of the piece, but they seem to derive more from a poet's "stock" of poetic images than from anything the poet may have actually discovered. A poem that achieves a level of intimacy is one in which either in actuality or at least imaginatively, the speaker reveals his personality in order to discover his relationship with who or what he claims he cares about. It is the concrete, rather than the abstract, expression of emotional concerns. Therefore, the language of the poem can either reveal or conceal the personality of the
speaker: if that speaker is speaking in a natural voice, then his personality will be revealed; if the speaker is speaking in a voice that seems false to the occasion of the poem (as Taylor suggested was the case in "A Poem About George Doty in the Death House"), then less of his personality will be revealed. Since we are dealing with a work heavily influenced by the theory of "escaping personality," it is not surprising to see that the language is more "literary" than "natural."

The majority of the poems in this book, then, employ this literary language. The poem "Eleutheria" (27-28), for example, relies heavily on its poetic associations. Once again, this is an idea-poem whose message is clearly stated: "Lovers' location is the first to fade." Women, for Wright, are generally romanticized figures, either muses or madonnas. In this poem the speaker celebrates his love and laments its passing, idealizing the beauty of his lover. Naturally, the "fields of love" are associated with "the fruits of summer," and "bewildered apples" will be "blown to mounds of shade." The images are particularly chosen to evoke certain stock poetic responses. Of course lovers will "wander back in winter" and that "musicians of the yellow weeds are dead." There is nothing very new or fresh about the images of this poem: it is, unfortunately, too overly literary.

Wright's early struggle to find a voice was very much indeed a struggle against his own love of the music of poetry. Wright's desire to utilize beautiful language is reflective of his reliance on the tradition. In "escaping personality," the New Critical poet speaks with the universal voice out a stock of universal images. The problem with this approach, however, is that many poems tend to sound the same and to be removed from what might be meaningful in our lives. To escape personality is in many ways to escape a cultural perspective, and the worlds of the individual poems become removed from a specific time and place. How are we to know that the poet who wrote *The Green Wall* was from Ohio? In "To a Defeated Savior," instead of the Ohio River, we get merely a "river." Instead of a woman named Jenny, we get a woman called Eleutheria. Instead of oaks or maples, we get "trees of boughs." In many ways, unfortunately, we are reading generic poetry.
There are, however, important occasions where Wright does have his speakers use a more natural voice which will develop into the intimate voice we will hear with greater resonance later. We noticed a few examples of this natural speech in "To a Defeated Savior." An intriguing poem is "Father" (15-16). This poem can be read as presenting the two worlds of the "literary" and the "natural," and the poet's struggle between them. The poem begins in the "literary" world, defined by the speaker as "paradise:"

In paradise I poised my foot above the boat and said:
Who prayed for me?

But only the dip of an oar
In water sounded; slowly fog from some cold shore
Circled in wreathes around my head.

This "paradise," however consists of "nothingness," and is lonely: "But who is waiting?" It is not until the speaker's "voice" grows "real" that he recognizes that there is "a place/Far, far below on earth." Perhaps the speaker realizes that he cannot make any human connection until he can communicate with someone with his "real" voice. The ending of the poem deserves comment. As opposed to the "poetic" opening in paradise, the poem's ending is extremely flat. The speaker's father draws him from the boat: "And we went home together." Once the speaker is united with his father, rescued from the "poetic" world of "nothingness," the speaker can use natural speech. Though the plain style is a time-honored poetic style, the turning away from the tradition of Whitman and Williams also saw a depreciation of that style; Wright's use is representative of the poets who returned to a more "Americanized," or natural, voice.

As we can see, there are also poems in The Green Wall which in small ways establish a relationship between the speaker and the other. Because the speaker is forced to reveal himself somewhat in order to establish his relationship with the other, the reader is better able to become acquainted with that speaker. One way that the speaker does this is by placing himself in the poem. Several of the poems in this volume, then, include the speaker as an active character rather than as a
passive observer. These poems display Wright's "mysterious imagination" more forcefully in that they express the beginnings of the personal voice that Wright will develop later. In some poems that voice is barely audible, in others more distinct, but we will discover that it is clearly the one that we recognize as belonging to the later James Wright.

The speaker takes on an active role in "The Ungathered Apples" (GW). This poem hasn't received much critical attention; in fact, Wright himself must have thought little of the piece: it is one of only five poems from *The Green Wall* that he chose not to include in his *Collected Poems*. Richard Taylor claims that, "...Fledged with deceptively simple language, mannered with alternating rhymes and natural rhythms of speech, the poem's merit lies more in its technical accomplishment than in any meaningful encounter with the world. It is less a reflection of reality than a gracefully wrought model" (p. 30). For the most part, Taylor's assessment is quite accurate: like the majority of Wright's early poems, its craft overpowers its content. It is laden with images that strikes one as even more literary than usual for this poet: "the nippled tips" of apples, a "blouse of woven leaves," the apple's "rose skin," and "gold/bosoms that milked the earth" all seem to be forced rather than discovered. With such personifications, it is hard to associate the perceptions behind the language with, as Taylor says, "any meaningful encounter with the world." However, in the second stanza, there comes a phrase that seems peculiarly different. This curious phrase sounds like something we will hear from the Wright of *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, published twenty years later. After describing, in the first stanza, the two apples "swinging," Wright opens the second stanza with the words "But I was still alive...." Listen to the similarity of this phrase with a phrase taken from that later volume: "Still/Alive in the friendly city/Of my body...." In a poem that could be considered as a good example of the kind of verse that he wanted to move away from, we discover the beginnings of his evolving authentic voice.

Two poems in which the speaker describes his subject in a sympathetic way yet makes an attempt to empathize with that subject are "To a Fugitive" (27) and "Lament for My Brother on a Hayrake" (18).
The former is an Italian sonnet in which, in contrast to many of the pieces in which the speaker sympathizes with social outcasts, the subject is spoken to rather than about. This direct address, combined with the poem's present tense, provides more emotional immediacy. Rather than "she hid in the trees," or "he rose for love," we hear the voice saying "You raise a hand." Giving the piece even more of a sense of immediacy is the speaker's gentle admonitions to someone whom he calls by name, whom he may even know personally: "Hurry, Maguire, hammer the body down." Wright, of course, will use direct address often in his later poetry, beginning in *The Branch will Not Break* "Po Chu-I, balding old politician,/What's the use?" All these signals certainly help bring the poem closer to a sense of intimacy, but it is important to note that the "I dreamed" in the first line indicates that the speaker does not really know what is happening with the fugitive, but, rather, imagines what he would like to be happening. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the speaker's dreaming about Maguire indicates that he is attempting to identify with the fugitive: though it is not mentioned specifically, somewhere deep in his consciousness he feels like a fugitive himself. This attempt at identity is a step towards empathy. However, even the name, "Maguire," sounds slightly false, indicating that the poem has a "made up" quality. We sense that Maguire is not a real person, but is, rather, a prisoner-type, an any-prisoner who is representative of all prisoners who the speaker would like to help escape. We get no specific details about him; rather, the poet chooses to focus on the stereotypical images we associate with escaping prisoners: "search lights," "machine guns," "the sheriff," the idea of stripping and running for it. In "To a Fugitive," Wright's attempt at intimacy is clear; however, the tightly confining Petrarchian sonnet form, instead of opening up, seems to close off his "mysterious imagination," and what we are left with is the idea, rather than the emotional richness, of an intimate relationship between speaker and the other.

"Lament for My Brother on a Hayrake" also relies on an idea. Here the assertion is that the speaker's brother is like the hay that he bales: "...The bright machine/Strips the revolving earth of more than grass."
However, more than in "To a Fugitive," we get the sense at the beginning of the poem that the speaker is consciously attempting to identify with the other:

Cool with the touch of autumn, waters break
Out of the pump at dawn to clear my eyes;
I leave the house, to face the sacrifice
Of hay, the drag of death.

The speaker forcefully wakes himself up by slapping water on his face in order to perform the same actions that he has watched his brother performing. Because these lines occur at the beginning of the poem, we must read the rest of the piece with them in mind. All that happens to his brother, we assume, will also happen to the speaker: his body will be hunched, his bones will be violated, and he will "lie mown/Out of the wasted fallows." The key word is "will": the speaker, the younger brother, realizes that he will "face the sacrifice," but has not as yet, and this time-differential distances slightly the speaker from his brother. Possibly because the speaker hasn't suffered as yet, but, rather, will suffer, he cannot refer to the brother's suffering in any terms other than abstract ones. Again, we get no sense of a specific person in the brother's character: he is a symbol for someone who is destroyed by his work. We don't get a detailed description of the him. Just as the subject in "To a Defeated Savior" is "everyboy," and the subject of "To a Fugitive" is "everyprisoner," the subject in this piece is "everybrother." The suffering is universalized but it is not made concrete. Because the speaker implies that he will suffer the same fate, however, we sense a greater empathic relationship between speaker and subject than in the more objective pieces.

A poem whose subject can be seen in the light of the conflict between the "literary" and "natural" voice is "A Presentation of Two Birds to My Son" (23-24). The poem exemplifies this distinction as it employs both literary and natural speech. As we have seen, Wright's poetry is a tension between these two poles. Wright's career, in fact, can be seen in terms of this struggle to maintain some kind of balance, which is reflected in "A Presentation of Two Birds to My Son." As in "To
a Fugitive," the speaker of this poem is a specific person, this time a father, who addresses another specific person, his son. Here, the father is attempting to explain something to his son and, in doing so, realizes that he himself is confused. The "literary" and the "natural" are reflected in the two birds: the swift and the chicken. The chicken, says the speaker, does not fly and therefore feels no ecstasy. Rather, it is a "dull fowl." The speaker reveals even more about himself—his character achieves a greater depth—when he shares the memory of his own father in order to provide an example of what he means to say about the chicken:

When your grandfather held it by the feet
And laid the skinny neck across
The ragged chopping block,
The flop of wings, the jerk of the red comb
Were a dumb agony,
Stupid and meaningless.

This passage is rare in the early Wright; we get some sense of a person behind the voice as he describes this memory. Further, the chicken becomes the "social outcast" of the poem—the real, the concrete, the non-poetic: "Chicken. The sound is plain." The language changes when the speaker talks about the swift: instead of the natural speech above, we hear the poetic music that Wright so often uses in this volume: "Pockets of air impale his hollow bones." However, the speaker sees a connection between the swift and the chicken. Even though the speaker admits that the swift feels "ecstasy,/a kind of fire/That beats the bones apart/And lets the fragile feathers close with air," the speaker also senses that "Flight too is agony,/Stupid and meaningless." Thus, though they are different, both the swift and the chicken are ultimately the same: "both are clods." As with the chicken, the speaker cannot understand the swift, because he cannot understand the "joy" in leaving behind "the body beaten underfoot." For him, the swift is too remote and distant. Note, again, the literary language in which its flight is described: "To mold the limbs against the wind, and joy/Those clean dark glides of Dionysian birds." Thus, "The flight is deeper than your father,
boy." The speaker cannot understand the flight because he is unable to relate it to his own experience. It appears that the speaker is rejecting both the realistic and the poetic in and of themselves: perhaps the reason why he is presenting both birds to his son is that he feels that both perspectives—the ethereal and the real, the poetic and the natural, the formal and the immediate—are necessary in order to achieve a balance.

Perhaps the most ambitious pieces in *The Green Wall* are its dramatic monologues that appear in section IV, "Stories and Voices." In the dramatic monologues, Wright is forced to take on the voice of a character, one who is involved in a dramatic, and therefore immediate, situation. The form allows the poet to identify with a character with whom he must empathize in order to create a fuller picture of that character. Often, the voice of the monologue is a shadow voice for the poet: the character reflects the poet's concerns. This is especially true in Wright's case. Of the traditional forms that Wright was using, the dramatic monologue allowed him to be formal and at the same time to take on other voices, in his case, the voice of the social outcast. Once again, the identification is an imaginative one rather than one that has been discovered through immediate experience. The dramatic monologues included here are highly important to Wright's development in that they force him a little more to identify with characters' emotional concerns from the inside. Here, those emotional concerns are spoken through various masks; in his later poetry they will be spoken from a voice that seems to be closer to the poet.

One poem in which Wright identifies with the social outcast through the form of the dramatic monologue is "Sappho" (33-35). We have seen how this is true in the poems discussed. I believe, however, that "Sappho," is a successful poem because it comes closest to the empathy that Wright had been pushing towards. However, the poem cannot sustain its emotional intensity and eventually falls back on its "idea." Sappho's status as an outcast resides in the fact that she is a lesbian. We empathize with her because her character is so fully realized, and we engage in her passion and suffering because the language is both lyrical
and immediate:

I only leaned above the hair,
Turned back the quilt, arranged the feet, the arms,
And kissed the sleeping shoulder, lightly, like the rain;
And when she woke to wear her weathered clothes;
I sent her home.
She floated, a blue blossom, over the street.

There are other specific details that allow us to sympathize more fully with Sappho than with many of the other characters in this volume. These details are especially prevalent in the first half of the poem, when Sappho expresses her passion: "It was not long before she turned to me,/And let her shawl slide down her neck and shoulder,/Let her hair fall." Consequently, we believe in Sappho's suffering because of the concrete ways in which she allows us to engage in her passion for her lover. It must be said, however, that the first half of the piece is more effective because of its concreteness; the second half becomes less so, when Sappho abstracts her suffering into metaphysical terms: "Love is a cliff...." Later, she claims that "I know that I am asked to hate myself/For their sweet sake/Who sow the world with child." These lines abstractly tell the reader what has already been described so beautifully earlier.

As we have seen, though most of The Green Wall is laden with literary language that distances the speaker from the characters, there are several examples of "what is to come" for Wright: a more direct language and a more intimate relationship between the speaker and the other. This sense of Wright's trying to break through traditional forms into a more immediate sensibility is even more apparent in his second volume, St. Judas, where he more intensely struggles within the poles of literary language and direct speech.
In *St. Judas*, the poems push the traditional forms even farther towards common speech and more immediate sensibilities. In other words, Wright takes the traditional forms about as far as they can go. Because of his desire to break through them, in many of the poems we get the sense that the poet has come to feel walled in by his forms: he has a desire to express himself more immediately, but the forms will not allow that expression. Wright himself, of course, repudiated his early poetry, claiming after finishing *St. Judas*: “Whatever I write from now on will be completely different. I don’t know what it will be, but I am finished with what I was doing in that book.” What we know about Wright’s emotional state at the time of writing the volume sheds further light on that comment. From the recently published *In Defence Against This Exile: Letters to Wayne Burns*, we now have a larger picture of the long struggle that Wright underwent during the process of changing his poetic style. In these letters, Wright reveals his intense frustration with traditional forms. Wright’s words are very significant in that, not only are they a commentary on his frustration with traditional poetry, but they provide us with an explanation as to why many poets turned away from traditional forms at this particular time:

You see, I am following something like this process: I begin at a certain period trying to say this thing with clarity and truth. But I immediately find that I have no way of saying it. So I begin to explore the ways—that is learning a technique. And after a long, long, long, endlessly long labor of search and self-discipline, I master a way of holding the language, of moving it, of molding it from the inside out until it will both embody and become whatever skinny and minor ‘difference’ or ‘vision’ I may possess. But then the ironic thing happens: whatever advance I’ve made in technique, instead of giving me a very long rest, pretty soon—too damned soon! it’s not fair!—won’t fit whatever new things I have to express. So what must I do? I must deliberately set about smashing, obliterating if possible, all the techniques that I took so long to learn, and then start all over again. Now, this inner blasting doesn’t happen too terribly often—my God, it completely kills me, it exhausts me, it makes me curse the day I became a neurotic poet, it makes me want to have a pre-frontal lobotomy, and I want to quit,
As these remarks demonstrate, *Saint Judas* was an excruciatingly painful book for Wright to create. Wright was stifled from expressing powerful emotions by the limitations of the only forms that he knew. Perhaps this explains why, later, Wright said that his "own favorite [book] is *Saint Judas.*" He goes on to explain: "...In *Saint Judas* I tried to face the fact that I am not a happy man by talent. Sometimes I have been very happy, but characteristically I'm a miserable son of a bitch. I tried to come to terms with that in the clearest and most ferociously perfect form that I could find and in all the traditional ways. That was partly a defensive action, because I hurt so much then. After I finished that book I had finished with poetry forever. I truly believed that I had said what I had to say as clearly and directly as I could, and that I had no more to do with this art" (Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," p. 47). In another interview, however, Wright admitted that, though *Saint Judas* is "very strict and careful in its form...It seemed to [him] that, after it was finished, it seemed to leave out so much life." Thus, Wright himself was aware of the problems with *Saint Judas*, but what is key here is that these very problems led him to "explore other possibilities" (Heyen, et. al., p.159). It is this exploration, of course, that led to the open forms of *The Branch Will Not Break*. *Saint Judas*, then, is a significant book for Wright, clearly a development from *The Green Wall*, in the sense that he is more comfortable with his voice and more uncomfortable with his forms.

Wright's "mysterious imagination" turns him even more toward social outcasts, a theme which is introduced by the book's epigram, taken from John 13. 34, a passage regarding the blind man whose sight was
restored. In this parable, the victim tells the truth, that he was cured by Jesus, but the Pharisees do not want to acknowledge Jesus as the son of God, so they "cast him out" of their community. For Wright, the outcast from the community always, in some way, tells the truth, usually by revealing something about the community. The community does not want to accept that truth, so it projects its sins onto that unfortunate victim. In Saint Judas, the speakers will try to confront themselves and, in so doing, become more personal and real; i.e., try to become more truthful. In attempting to express this "truth," Wright's speaker's tone is often more immediate than it is in the poems of The Green Wall.

A good example is "Old Man Drunk" (51-53). This is a good poem to compare with "The Seasonless" from the first book. In that poem, we noticed that the character of the old man actually has no personality; because he is described only in general terms, we cannot visualize him clearly and, therefore, can only see him as symbolic. That poem is an objective description; the poet makes no attempt to connect the speaker with the old man. Like "The Seasonless," "Old Man Drunk" is also heavily symbolic, and finally it rests on its central "idea" that old age and death are pitiful. The difference here, and what makes Saint Judas an extension and development of Wright's fundamental concerns, is that the speaker is clearly trying to suggest that he can sympathize with the old man because he, too, will grow old. The old man is first described as "reptilian, cold." He cannot do anything about his daughter, who "struck him in her grief." The speaker would like to make some kind of connection with the old man, to say something to relieve his burden, but all he can do really is to realize that he, too, will grow old: "I can say nothing. I will see him sit/Under the vacant clock, till I grow old." The speaker cannot actually empathize with the old man because he is not old himself: he can only recognize that the old man is suffering by offering a "vague alas." Certainly this piece sentimentalizes the old man; sentimentality is the risk that Wright takes by focusing on emotion, and I will explore this risk in future chapters. Also, the old man is not allowed to perform his own actions: the speaker assumes that the old man would act the way he does: "He curses his ineptitude of heart." We
as readers do not actually get to see the old man cursing; later, the poet tells us that the old man knows "the quivering eye of youth is blind" and "that even death cannot prolong/The quick hysteric angers of the young." How do we know that the old man is this wise? Perhaps he is, but, one suspects, not necessarily in this way. In "Old Man Drunk," like other poems in Saint Judas, the poet wants to impose his perceptions onto the character rather than allow them to arise out of the nature of the language itself. Also like other pieces, however, it presents a more honest speaker who tries as far as he can to understand his relationship with the subject. Here, the speaker, ultimately, "can say nothing." He has not here found the proper speech.

The majority of the poems in Saint Judas demonstrate that perhaps the most significant development in Wright's poetry from The Green Wall to Saint Judas is his increasing use of natural diction. Wright employs natural diction within the confines of iambic form. The poems become more accessible and immediate where the natural diction is most prevalent, giving life to the strict forms. Three poems that will serve as examples are all comic, an unusual tone for Wright. Perhaps the playfulness of the underlying themes of these poems freed Wright and allowed him to become more personal.

The opening piece, "Complaint" (49) is a dramatic monologue written in couplets, spoken by a kind of hick who has lost his wife. As in the otherwise very different poem, "Sappho," the personality of the character is allowed to penetrate the strict form. Here, he is both sentimental and humorous, a kind of loving tyrant:

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.

Rather than constrain the energy, the form seems to control it and give the poem its successful sing-song quality. "Complaint" is a good example
of the way in which Wright's form can seem to fit the content without losing the sense of a personal speaker.

Another poem in which natural speech seems to fit well within a traditional form is the piece "An Offering for Mr. Bluehart" (50-51). The poem presents a speaker who seems to be making fun of his own pretentiousness. The "literary" quality of the language is undercut by the non-seriousness of the event the poem describes. For Peter Stitt, the poem is "glib, overly-literary, too selfconscious. The voice is that of a man playing the role of the poet, feeling he has to write a poem but ending up with a verse exercise" (Stitt, "The Poetry of James Wright," p. 14). I would suggest, however, that the poet is aware that he is "playing the role of the poet," and this awareness informs the humor. The narrative, that of an owner of an orchard catching small boys stealing apples, seems lighthearted enough; lines like "He caught us in the act one day/And damned us to the laughing bone," marks the beginnings of Wright's attempts to reflect the colloquialism of his native place.

Certainly one of the most intimate poems in the volume is "A Note Left In Jimmy Leonard's Shack" (53-54), which, like "An Offering for Mr. Bluehart," relates a childhood experience. The speaker employs in a direct voice and refers to specific characters: Beany and Minnegan and Jimmy Leonard. The speaker is to deliver to Jimmy Leonard a message that his brother Minnegan has been found drowned and lying near the river. However, the speaker is fearful of waking up Jimmy, because Jimmy once told the speaker that "the waking up was hard." Though the poem is very strict in its iambics and rhyme scheme (many of the rhymes being off-rhymes), the characters' desperate situations are believable because of the straightforward and natural diction: "Beany went home, and I got sick and ran,/You old son of a bitch." The characters' suffering is revealed without the poet having to moralize: the speaker never loses the child's point of view. Rather than being an "idea" poem, the poem relies on the power of its description: "He's drunk or dying now, I don't know which,/Rolled in the roots and garbage like a fish,/The poor old man."

The central theme, almost obsession, of Saint Judas is the struggle
between the limitations of "literary" diction because of its inability to express what Wright would call the "truth." There are several poems in this volume that demonstrate that if the poet is to explore this truth he must confront himself, and to confront himself means that he must reveal himself. Perhaps this self-confrontation is what Wright means in saying that in *Saint Judas* he "tried to come to terms with...what [he] felt to be the truth of [his] own life." This comment raises perhaps one of the most significant issues in evaluating Wright's work, because it touches on the underlying premise of the poetry of intimacy. What is the relationship between the poet's life and the poet's work? Apparently, Wright felt that there is no separation, and another comment that he made sheds even more light on this problem: "Well, my own life is the only thing I have to begin with. It seems to me an aesthetically legitimate thing as well as a morally legitimate thing to try to figure out what one's own life really is" (Henrickson, p. 176). It seems as if Wright was on his way to making this realization in the writing of *Saint Judas*: in many ways it is a transitional book because, though he writes in the old, traditional style of his past, the themes are reaching towards the intimate poetry of his future. It is, we sense, an extremely painful work: we are listening to a voice that is aching to break out of his self-imposed prison, or as he claimed in a letter to De Frees: "I had come upon a wall of stone. So I blasted...." ("James Wright's Early Poems," p. 242) *Saint Judas* records the explosions.

In many of these poems, Wright is actually using traditional forms to repudiate traditional literary language in favor of a natural speech that expresses the "truth" of his self-confrontations. In this sense, it is almost as if Wright is struggling to free himself from poetic language by arguing against it. "At the Slackening of the Tide" (62-63) reflects this struggle. The speaker sees a woman on the beach cursing the sea because her child has drowned. What provides this poem's tension is the conflict between what the poet originally sought to discover by going to the sea and what he actually found. In the second stanza, the speaker seems to be making a reference to his own kind of poetry. Placed earlier in the volume is a piece called "Evening," which is literary thematically:
the speaker describes his son turning into a supernatural figure. Evening is a very poetic time, filled with literary resonances. In the first two lines of the second stanza of "At the Slackening of the Tide," however, something unexpected happens: "The cold simplicity of evening falls/Dead on my mind." In a sense, one could read this as a comment on the poet's poetic intentions: no more will he be deceived with the ethereal; the world in its human reality has forced him to ask himself important questions. Wright uses the word "human" twice in the next two stanzas, the first time being in the very important final two lines of the third verse: "Obliterate naiads weeping underground/Where Homer's tongue thickens with human howls." Here, finally, it is the human, as opposed to the naiad, voice on which the poet focuses. Rather than face the truth of human suffering, the speaker would "drown, almost." The speaker's being carried away by human suffering instead of the poetic beauty that he originally intended to find is reinforced when, against what he actually discovers, he relates his original intentions: "Warm in the pleasure of the dawn I came/To sing my song/And look for mollusks in the shallows,/The whorl and coil that pretty up the earth...." It is clear, however, that the poet cannot continue to look for that beauty in the face of a human death, and this realization is the catalyst for his self-confrontation:

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

The speaker's question is a self-mockery: the poet is admiring his own ability to craft verse, to sound pretty, while "the woman ranted in the cold" because her child drowned. The speaker is trying to question his own relationship to the experience, to the suffering woman. Here, the only response he can make is to posit the indifference of nature, as he "heard the sea far off/washing its hands." The speaker feels that he
cannot empathize with the woman: he can only "bow his head" and try to question his own role. This self-examination creates a much deeper probing into the relationship between speaker and other than occurs in any poem of *The Green Wall*. Though the poem is metrical, it does not conform to a set rhyme pattern and the language ("Go drown, almost") tries to adhere to a more natural diction and rhythm. One can see the poet trying to break out of strict metrics and still be "truthful" to his own experience.

Contrast "At the Slackening of the Tide" with "All the Beautiful Are Blameless" (63-64), another poem about drowning. Here, Wright weaves between poetic and natural speech in order to have the form reflect the poem's content. He calls the men who were with the drowned woman "stupid harly-charlies," which sounds a lot like the later Wright. He compares these people, however, with "unmythological sylphs" who must have "beckoned the woman into the water." In the third stanza, the speaker uses a literary reference to coin the word "orphidean" to describe his own state of mind, which is lost in poetic illusion: "If I, being lightly sane, may carve a mouth/Out of the air to kiss, the drowned girl surely/Listened to lute-song where the sylphs are gone." Thus the speaker wants to somehow understand the woman's drowning by trying to relate her state to his: if he can become lost in the supernatural world, then so could the woman. The speaker does not want to give up his perceptions and believe in an indifferent drowning as he could in "At the Slackening of the Tide," however; the speaker cannot shake his hold on the poetic. In the third stanza, he compares "the ugly" who "curse the world" with his own looking "for hungry swans/To plunder the lake and bear the girl away." The speaker ultimately wants to find redemption in the poetic: he will not accept it that "The girl flopped in the water like a pig/And drowned dead drunk." Rather, he must believe that "all the beautiful are blameless," which would seem to imply a view that the victim is "always right." On this score, Robert Hass is extremely perceptive when he criticizes Wright for sympathizing with the victim completely; the speaker calls the woman "beautiful" because he feels that she has a poetic reason for drowning. Hass calls this extreme view
"puritanical": "The puritan can't tell [what distinguishes victims from each other] and knows they are all bad; the poet can't tell either, only he knows they belong to the dark and are good. When he agrees to disagree with the puritan on his own terms, he gives away will, force, power, weight, because they are bad American qualities and he settles for passivity and darkness" (p. 200).

The poem that most intensely details Wright's struggle to break through literary language and the old style in general in order to create a complete empathy between the speaker and the subject is, of course, "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" (82-85). Throughout Saint Judas, Wright had been trying to become as personal as he could within the confines of the forms, to try to assert his natural voice in order to be true to his own experience and sense of truth. This desire, as has been touched on, is again and again applying pressure to the forms. In "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," he applies this pressure with a vengeance:

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.

Robert Bly claims that this piece "is a final attempt to wield a savagery and intensity to the old literary iambic line, and it has an air of foredoomed failure" ("The Work of James Wright," p. 82). What Bly means by this last phrase, I think, is that the poem, in a sense, is a failure from the start because of its dependence upon the iambic line. In this poem, Wright leans as hard as he can on the traditional form in order to be as direct as he can. The poem is a result of the poet's holding back for so long, and this is his most explosive attempt to "blast" the "wall of stone." Therefore, the poem is a violent one, an unflinching confrontation with the self.

Certainly this is the most intimate poem of the volume. In the first four lines we are given the poet's real name, his hometown (the first time it is mentioned in either of the first two volumes), and we are
Introduced to the poet's father. It is significant that this poem is dedicated to Dickey, because soon after Dickey's comments about Hall's anthology were published, Wright responded to him scathingly. Their exchange of letters ended, significantly, with Wright's admission that Dickey was right.

The personal quality of the poem, of course, does not end with the first four lines. Wright senses that his previous verse did not go far enough in merely sympathizing with outcasts; here, he tries to break through that sympathetic distance by making a connection with the subject of the poem, George Doty, and forming an empathetic relationship. In "A Poem About George Doty in the Death House," the speaker could see the subject only as being outside himself; in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," the speaker tries to uncover his own "crimes," to see himself as being being complicit in society's executing Doty. Wright himself admits as much about this poem in a letter to Burns: "I mean that every man who kills another man kills himself too, and every man who lets another man be murdered kills another man, and has actually let himself be killed--for nothing, nothing" (p. 57).

With this poem also, Wright's struggle between literary and natural verse has found a balance: throughout, there is no "poetry" in the sense of pretty sounding images that are removed from experience; rather, we have the straightforward speech that seems closer to the reality of Martins Ferry, Ohio: "Doty, you make me sick. I am not dead./ I croon my tears at fifty cents per line." Often the language even becomes flat: "...nobody had to kill him either." Later, we find out why: "Nature lovers are gone. To hell with them./ I kick the clods away, and speak my name." Here, Wright seems to be repudiating his own poetry. Eventually, the speaker's recognition that he is the same as the murderer leads him into a final apocalyptic vision:

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 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.

The poet is at last able to connect the speaker with the other, and the personal with the universal. The phrase “my bodies” reflects a desire to integrate everyone in the tragic condition that informs the poet’s vision of an America that is Whitmanian in its inclusiveness, focusing, however, on those who are defeated and suffering.

In spite of the intensity of the personal voice of “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave,” Wright himself was still dissatisfied with his poetry: “Now, I got hold of a great theme. But does it make you weep, does it make you want to strip off your clothes and run out into the street and gash your own skin to bleeding with your finger-nails? Does it, in Lorca’s words...’lash your eyes open’” (Letters to Burns, p. 89) Wright, in fact, was more dissatisfied with his poetry than ever. Later, he was to say that he didn’t think, as Robert Bly did, that “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave” was a failure (Smith, “The Pure Clear Word,” p. 214), but, soon after it was written, his feelings about it were significantly different. In the letter to Burns, he goes on to answer his own question about whether the poem can “lash your eyes open.” His own answer is very important for what comes next, his radical change of style from traditional to open verse:

No, it doesn’t. At best, it makes you think that that it’s rather academically interesting that a second-rate punk American poet in a grey flannel suit should try to write an ode to dejection so many years after Coleridge’s ‘France: An Ode.’ Wayne, this feeling is hell, it’s like dying. I read my competent stuff, and then I look at any of the poems of, say, Pablo Neruda (ten times the stature of any other living poet), and I want to quit.

(Letters to Burns, p. 89)

Wright’s dissatisfaction with his poetry, as his own remarks
demonstrate, led him, of course, to make radical changes in his whole approach. In *The Green Wall* and *Saint Judas*, Wright was spending time as an apprentice; he was learning the "tricks" of the trade. Eventually, however, Wright needed to get beyond those tricks, as he stated in a letter to Madaline De Drees: "Glibness...was happening to me. So I started to fight it—I did so by leaping out of every technical trick I had learned" ("That Vacant Paradise," p. 18). "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" is one step in the direction of trying to overcome "glibness." The "technical tricks" of *The Green Wall*, influenced heavily by the New Critical perspective of poetry, that the language be complex, the ideas predominant, and the voices distant, controlled the direction of the poems and, in many cases, stifled the emotional content. With *Saint Judas*, Wright confronted this problem and created speakers who tried to identify more directly with others. Because the poems were still predominately traditional, however, these speakers' voices seemed muted; thus, Wright's frustration. He realized that his poetry could not be as emotionally direct as he felt it needed to be within the forms in which he was working. In many ways, Wright needed to confront himself--to explore his own reactions to the situations the poems set up. In what way, he seems to be asking, is he like the social outcast he is writing about? With "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," he discovered that he was actually writing about himself, and that the key to connecting with the other is through establishing an empathic relationship. This required a more personal kind of poetry, one that appears to arise out of the speaker's own life and experiences. As we have seen, Wright is already starting to write in this direction--he is establishing a more natural voice and more intimate relationships. It is clear, however, that this new intimacy required new forms.
II. Chapter Two: Of Silence and the Image

As critics have pointed out, Wright's change of style was part of a dissatisfaction many poets had with the predominant poetics. The New Critical aesthetic was being called into question because, these poets felt, it was a reflection of a conservative mentality that, since the innovations of Eliot, had moved towards a rigidity of form. For many, poetry of the New Critical mode was merely a reflection of the culture—non-political and anti-emotional: "the well-made autotelic poem was simply the literary version of the fifties idea of order" (Breslin, p. 51). The revolution in American poetry that occurred in the late fifties and early sixties has been well documented, and several reactions against the "well-made autotelic poem" arose. The work of the Beat poets, particularly Ginsberg's poem "Howl," Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse," which influenced Robert Creeley and the Black Mountain poets, and Robert Bly's essays and translations that he published in The Fifties and The Sixties are among the most important. Clearly, the predominant poetic style of the New Critics was breaking down.

We have already seen that Wright became tired of the poetry that he was writing. As his letters to Burns make apparent, he felt that he was walling himself in with all of the "technical tricks" that he had learned, and that he needed somehow to break free of those tricks. This sense of entrapment became so severe that Wright claimed that he would stop writing poetry if he had to continue to write in the traditional manner. Fortunately, at the same time that Wright became frustrated with the limitations of the forms of poetry under which he had been brought up, he began to discover wholly new forms that presented him with
alternatives. As Wright describes it, he received "the artistic shock of years": the discovery of Lorca's *Poet in New York*. In Wright's letter of August 13, 1958, he claims that his new verse does not, as Lorca claims poetry should, "lash your eyes open"; rather, he states flatly that his "new poems are terrible." In the same letter he expresses a very strong enthusiasm for Lorca and his book *Poet in New York*, saying that "it's possibly the greatest human book of the twentieth century" (p. 89). Even if we keep Wright's reputation for hyperbole in mind, the statement is revealing in the light of his attitude towards his own verse. Here are the beginnings of Wright's shift in style.

What was it about Lorca's poetry that shocked Wright out of his frustration? Robert Bly provides some interesting answers in his seminal article, "A Wrong Turning In American Poetry." This document is significant because, for the first time, a clear distinction is made between what Bly sees as two kinds of poetry: an "outward" poetry that is a product of the Eliot tradition, and an "inward" poetry of the kind being written by foreign poets. Bly's polemics are unmistakable: he prefers the inward to the outward poetry because the latter is concerned merely with "objects": "In searching for the proper 'object,' the impulse to the poem is broken. True freshness and surprises are impossible. The poet's eyes are not on the impulse but are constantly looking over the public world for reliable sets of objects" (p. 33). What does Bly mean by the "impulse"? He distinguishes between the rational and the intuitive. American poetry has focused primarily on the rational, conscious mind and poets have relied too heavily on traditional forms in order to control their material. In contrast, Bly speaks of modern Spanish poetry, which "denies Eliot's thesis of the relevance of the objectivizing process"; rather, "Guillaume de Torre, the greatest contemporary Spanish critic, holds up the personal, even the intimate poem" (pp. 33-34). Rather than being "Impersonal," then, Spanish poetry, according to Bly, is personal in profound ways. By way of example, Bly cites Lorca, who "conveys his emotion not by any 'formula' but by means which do not occur to Eliot--by passion" (p. 34).

Apparently, Wright felt the same way, for his discovery of Lorca
was part of a general reevaluation of his own writing. In doing so, he saw more clearly that his work was unemotional—"academically interesting"—a realization that led him to portray himself as a "second-rate American poet in a grey flannel suit" (Letters to Burns, p. 89). The problem with "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," according to Wright, was that it does not "make you weep...make you want to strip off your clothes and run out into the street and gash your own skin to bleeding with your finger-nails" (Letters, p. 89). Clearly, Wright's frustration with his poetry arose because he now realized that it lacked the passion and illumination that he admired in Lorca's work.

Both Wright and Bly saw in Lorca's work something very different from the academic verse that most American poets were writing, and these differences lie in both substance and style. While American poets were writing traditional, intellectual verse, Lorca's was emotionally direct and imagistic. Lorca's differences from poets like Wilbur or Ransom are obvious, but one would suspect that he would have similarities with a poet like William Carlos Williams, given Williams' emphasis on the image. However, as Bly points out, Lorca's concept of the image was very different from the Imagists': "The point in contrasting Lorca's language with Williams' is not that Lorca's poems are richer but that Lorca approaches his poetry with entirely different artistic principles—among them the absolute essentiality of the image. These ideas bear fruit in the poems. Lorca's poems have many things in them...but they also have images, also passion, wild leaps, huge arsenic lobsters falling out of the sky" (Bly, WT, p. 36). The difference, according to Bly, lies in the source of the image: whereas Williams' images are pictoral, Lorca's are not a product of conscious perception, but, rather, of the unconscious mind. In Williams, an object from the external world can be removed and then inserted back into that world, whereas in Lorca, this cannot be done; Lorca's images are surrealist rather than realistic. Compare, for example, "a red wheel/barrow/glazed with rain/water/beside the white/chickens" with the surrealism of "Roses fled on the blades/of the last loops of air/and on hummocks of saffron/the little boys smashed little squirrels/in the
flush of a soiled exaltation." The guiding principles of composition for Lorca, then, are an authentic emotional intensity and the strangeness of the image—with the former injecting the latter with unique possibilities.

But what had Lorca to do with Wright? Given the fact that Lorca's poetry was about as far removed from the academic style in which Wright was working as a poetry can get, was there any connection between what Wright was trying to do and what he actually admired in Lorca? Is there anything in Wright's sensibility that would lead him to Lorca? I believe that there is, and that Lorca provides us with an unusual kind of bridge in understanding Wright's radical change of style from *Saint Judas* to *The Branch Will Not Break*.

Though they were writing out of two wholly different traditions—Lorca experimenting with Spanish surrealism and Wright experimenting with traditional British forms—Wright's first two volumes are similar to Lorca's *Poet in New York* in several important ways. First, they are both concerned with the idea of the Fall—their visions arise out of the Judeo-Christian concept of a separation between man and nature. This separation produces loneliness and alienation, and their visions portray characters as being isolated in their worlds. For Wright, that means that the individual is not only separated from nature, but from the larger society, as well. Almost all of his characters are social outcasts, from the dead woman in "The Assignation," whose lover never arrives, to Sappho, whose love is brutalized, to the "fugitives" Caryle Chessman and George Dotty, who must pay the price for social hypocrisy.

Wright's obsession with what Robert Hass calls "the business of loneliness" is part of an obsession with death. This thematic concern is also Lorca's. Though they are in many ways very different, for both Wright and Lorca death is a result of isolation from society. It is a living death of the spirit, a state that Lorca calls "hueco," hollowness or emptiness. It can be felt in Wright's "The Seasonless" (the poem about the man who "looks for sleep"), or in "The Ghost" (the first line of which is "I cannot live nor die") or in "The Accusation." Each of Wright's characters in these first two books is like the narrator in "A Prayer In
My Sickness," who says "I have lain alien in my self so long,/How can I understand love's angry tongue?"

Lorca's poetry in *Poet in New York* also confronts isolation. In imagery that is often chaotic, Lorca expresses profound separation from the world about which he writes. New York provides the metaphor of a destructive force that itself is chaotic and oppressive. The only way in which Lorca can deal with this oppressiveness is to respond with passion; to be a "poet" (a sensate creature), in "New York" (a mechanistic world without values or pity). The surrealistic nature of the imagery is a result of the intensity of the emotions. Further, like Wright, Lorca is concerned with "outcasts," though in Lorca's case that term is too mild. For Lorca, everyone is an "outcast," because everyone, especially the narrator (or "poet") is reduced to powerlessness in the face of the oppressive "city." In the first poem, for example, the poet is "back from a walk" through what amounts to a horrific, nightmarish world:

Heaven-murdered one,
among shapes turning serpent
and shapes seeking crystal,
I'll let my hair grow long.

With the tree-stump now tuneless
And the egg-white face of a child

With all crack-brained creatures
and the tatter of dry-footed water

With the deafmutes of torpor,
and the butterfly drowned in the Inkwell

Shambling each day with my different face
Ah, heaven-murdered one!
(Lorca, p. 3)

Lorca does address specific outcasts as well: in particular, American blacks. The second section of the book is, in fact, entitled "The Negroes," the most powerful poem of which is "The King of Harlem." As Wright does in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," Lorca indicts all of society for the condition of the blacks. This poem must be an example of what Wright meant by lashing one's eyes out, for it is almost violent in
its revolutionary passion against the overall insanity that created the condition of Harlem in the first place. Wright recognizes correctly that his poem is "second-rate" because it is still trapped within iambic form, while Lorca's piece is vibrant, even Whitmanian, in emotional intensity:

...for the king and his hosts must come singing from Harlem,
the crocodiles sleep in the great enfilades,
in a moon of asbestos,
so that none may discredit the infinite beauty
of the dusters, the graters, the kitchenware coppers
and casseroles.

You Harlem! You Harlem! You Harlem!
No anguish to equal your thwarted vermilion,
your blood-shaken, darkened eclipses,
your garnet ferocity, deaf and dumb in the shadows,
your hobbled, great king in the janitor's suit.

(Lorca, pp. 19-20)

Another aspect that Wright has in common with Lorca—indeed, may have picked up from Lorca—is his sense of apocalypse. Both poets seem to see apocalypse as a possible solution to oppression. This vision may also be related to the Judeo-Christian nature of their overall cosmos. The answer to separation, for these two poets, can only lie in apocalypse. This sense of impending revelation is constantly referred to in Poet in New York; for example, we find it in the middle of "Unsleeping City." Though the poems are clearly different in the sense that Lorca's language is surrealistic and Wright's is Biblical, note the similarity in tone between what follows and the fifth section of "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," quoted at the end of Chapter One.

On a day,
the horses will thrive in the taverns,
the ravening ant
will assail yellow heavens withheld in the eyes of a cow.

On a time
we shall see, rearisen, the anatomized butterflies,
And walking the ways of gray sponge and a stillness of boats,
behold our rings glisten and the roses gush forth from our tongues.

(Lorca, p. 53)
Ultimately, Wright's turning to Lorca was also a turning to another poet whose poetry was in many ways the antithesis of the New Critical Ideology: Walt Whitman. Lorca very much admired Whitman and was influenced by him; we see this influence in his poem "Ode to Walt Whitman" and also in his poetic style in general. Whitman, the great American democratic poet, was left behind when the poets of the thirties, forties and fifties moved closer and closer to English verse. For Wright and others of his generation, the discovery of foreign poets (most of them writing in Spanish) was actually a move away from "British" poetry and towards Whitman's American poem.

Therefore, we can notice a line of development from Whitman to Lorca (and other foreign poets to be discussed) to Wright and his generation. This connection is made explicit in two homages, Lorca's to Whitman, and Wright's to Lorca. In Lorca's piece, the poet-narrator laments the fact that nobody in New York is capable of living out Whitman's vision: "nobody slept/or wished to be: river." Though Whitman's vision may seem frustrated by the callousness of contemporary New York, the poet will not forget Whitman's "beard full of butterflies." Listen to what Lorca says of Whitman:

You looked for a nude that could be like a river,  
the bull and the dream that could merge, like seaweed and wheel,  
sire of your agony, your mortality's camellia,  
to cry in the flames of your secret equator.  
(Lorca, p. 123)

How much Wright absorbed Lorca's vision, as Lorca absorbed Whitman's, is evidenced in Wright's poem "To the Poets of New York," in _Shall We Gather at the River_. Here, Wright weaves Lorca's language into his own:

You went searching gently for the father of your own agony,
The camellia of your death,
The voice that would call out to you clearly and name the fires
Of your hidden equator.

In the above example, Wright shows that he has absorbed Lorca in the same way that Lorca has absorbed Whitman. Wright's use of Lorca's diction within the context of his own poem seems natural. The movement to this kind of poem was clearly a result of Wright's reading and translating of Lorca and other foreign poets. Wright recognized in Lorca an energy and passion that brought him back to Whitman. It was his first step toward helping to create a new kind of American poetry.

Wright felt that American poets needed to return to Whitman as an alternative to much of the poetry that was being written: "recent American poetry has often been flaccid, obtuse and muddled, and fragmentary, crippled almost" ("The Delicacy of Walt Whitman," p. 4). In rebelling against the "autotelic" poem, many poets, particularly the Beats, turned to Whitman's sense of individualism and organic form. Ginsberg's poem "Howl" was a raging indictment of American society, with all the expansiveness one might find in Whitman: "In 'Howl' Ginsberg stepped outside the formalism of the fifties...and turned back to the then-obscure poet of Leaves of Grass" (Breslin, p. 96). However, it seems clear that Wright did not follow the line of the Beats; in fact, he initially reacted against it. He seems to have associated Beat poetry with an anti-civilization and anti-intellectualism that he abhorred. In "The Delicacy of Walt Whitman," he expresses his distaste for Beat poetry. Wright claims that Whitman should be freed "from the tone of pretentious ignorance that has been associated with his mere name, from time to time, by fools" (p. 5). Later, Wright claims that "Every scholar and every Beat who mentions Whitman" should be familiar with Whitman's notion of what a poem means: that, though it is natural, it should not be wild or frantic. Apparently, Wright felt that the Beats were appropriating Whitman's image but not the essence of his poetry.

For Wright, those poets who were writing in the true spirit of
Whitman were those writing in the Spanish language: Lorca, Jimenez, Neruda, Vallejo. By translating these poets, one could also absorb their spirit in order to incorporate that spirit into one's own verse. Their poetry was emotional rather than intellectual, and imagistic rather than discursive. Again, Wright connects these poets to Whitman:

"the spirit of Whitman is everywhere present among Spanish and South American poets: in the form which rejects external rhetoric in order to discover and reveal a principal of growth; in the modesty and simplicity of diction; in the enormously courageous willingness to leap from one image into the unknown, in sheer faith that the next image will appear in the imagination; in the sensitive wholeness of the single poems which result from such imaginative courage, and above all, in the belief in the imagination as the highest flowering of human life, not just a rhetorical ornament."

(p. 18)

Wright translated many Spanish-speaking poets, but the first foreign poet whom he encountered was the German, Georg Trakl. This introduction occurred by accident, at the University of Vienna in 1952, when Wright was there on scholarship. As he tells the story, he wandered into the wrong classroom, where a Professor Susini was reading from a poet Wright did not recognize. Then, after the publication of St Judas, just when Wright became frustrated with his poetry, the first issue of The Fifties appeared, after which Wright wrote Bly a sixteen page letter. Bly responded that Wright should "come out to the farm." What resulted, of course, are their well-known collaborative translations. These translation experiences changed the course of Wright's poetry; their importance cannot be minimized. Wright gave much credit to Bly's influence during this change:

A few years ago when I met Robert Bly, I felt that, for myself, a certain kind of poetry had come to an end, and I thought that I would stop writing poetry completely. Poetry has to be a possibility. Or we're dead, I think. Robert Bly suggested to me
that there is a kind of poetry that can be written. People have written it in some other languages. He said it might be possible to come back to our own language through reading them and translating them, and I think that in one sense this has been the value of translations. It lead[sic] me into some areas of thought, and of rhythm also, that I hadn’t tried to work out before. 

(Andre, p. 133)

What “areas of thought” did these translations lead Wright into? It is significant that the section after Saint Judas in Wright’s Collected Poems is called “Some Translations,” indicating the importance that Wright placed on them in terms of his own sense of development. Here are thirty poems by seven poets, of whom I want to focus on four: Georg Trakl, Juan Ramon Jimenez, Jorge Guillen, and Cesar Vallejo. I would like to explore the ways in which these poets affected Wright’s change of style from “traditional” to “open” verse. I hope to show that Wright was influenced by certain characteristics these poems share. These similarities include a content that is emotional and a technique that is imagistic. These poets also have significant differences in terms of their overall visions, all of them influencing the immediate direction of Wright’s poetry, from Trakl’s very dark vision to Jimenez’ and Guillen’s celebratory poems to Vallejo’s humanistic perspective that encompasses the previous two. I hope to demonstrate how Wright incorporated these sensibilities in attempting to write new kinds of poems that eventually find their way into his third volume, The Branch Will Not Break

Trakl, the one non-Spanish writing poet of the group, is the first that Wright translated. Trakl wrote before and during the first World War. He served in the war, and eventually committed suicide at the age of twenty-seven. Wright was attracted to all of the above poets, and especially to Trakl, because they were doing things Wright was not. Wright always felt that his major weakness was “glibness”—a talkiness that gets in the way of the essential experience of the poem. Trakl is anything but talky: his poems resonate with silence, solitude, and what Wright calls “patience.” Rather than being cluttered with convoluted syntax or intellectual discursiveness, Trakl’s poems are sparse,
expressing only the necessary images that will contribute to the desired effect. Rather than appealing to the intellect, Trakl's poetry appeals to the senses in the form of the overall mood it conveys. Further, Trakl consistently uses nature imagery, another device that appealed to Wright. There are fewer humans in Trakl's poems, but the nature imagery reflects human moods that resonate emotionally. In Trakl, natural objects take on a form of life in a kind of surreal strangeness. The poet has to "pay attention" to nature in order to create this effect.

Trakl allows his poems to arise organically so they can "reveal their own natural laws." As Wright says, "A single red maple leaf in a poem by Trakl is an inexhaustibly rich and wonderful thing, simply because he has had the patience to look at it and the bravery to resist all distraction from it. To memorize quickly applicable rules is only one more escape into the clutter of the outside world" ("A Note on Trakl," pp. 83-84). Though Trakl's poems are "organic," they are shaped into a form that came to influence Wright's future poetry: parallelism, wherein each image is parallel to every other and furthers the emotional effect of the whole piece. Though Trakl's innovative shaping of a poem certainly influenced Wright, there was something else about Trakl's poetry that appealed to and broadened his sensibilities. Wright says of Trakl that "he felt a war coming. I'm sure many people did, but he understood what it would be like. He understood that war in this century was not going to be like any other war, that there was going to be a kind of war that had no redeeming qualities at all. The machine guns and the bombs and so on" (Henrickson, p. 170). In every sense of the word, Trakl is a very dark poet. He consistently portrays the individual suffering in his solitude, and a humanity that has lost its connection with its "golden age." His poems remind one of Nietzsche's tragic vision of humanity's separation from God and loss of spiritual values. In that sense, Trakl's vision is similar to Wright's—both perceive a disharmony between man and nature, and this disharmony implies a sickness. Wright's "cough in a dish beside the wrinkled bed" is the image we are left with after recognizing the unfavorable distinction between modern and primal man. In "The Fisherman," for example, Wright contrasts "Cro-Magnon mothers..."
beating/Their wheat to mash" with the fishermen, their "blood gone
dumb." Wright seems to lament a loss of vitality. In "Song of the
Western Countries," man is described as a "[herder] of sheep once,"
sitting "in his room...thinking Justice." Now, however, we are in the
"bitter hour of defeat/When we behold a stony face in the black waters."
Our innocence has somehow become turbulent.

Trakl's language and mood are much softer than Lorca's in that he
expresses his vision of man's loss of innocence with silence--each image
is meant to evoke a range of possibilities. This sense, as was mentioned
previously, is reflected in the mood that the accumulation of those
images create. We notice this technique in a poem translation included
in Wright's Collected Poems, "De Profundis" (98-99). Here, a similar
theme of the loss of innocence is operating, as the piece moves from
simple to surreal description. In the first stanza, each description
focuses on a different natural element:

It is a stubble field, where a black rain is falling.
It is a brown tree, that stands alone.
It is a hissing wind, that encircles empty houses.
How melancholy the evening is.

Already the mood of loneliness and desolation is created. Trakl's
simplicity can be seen in his employment of adjectives. In almost all of
his poems, adjectives are the indicators that direct us to the emotional
content, for they concretize that content: a "stubble" field, a "black"
rain, a "hissing" wind, "empty" houses all accumulate into the
"melancholy" of the last line. Once the natural setting is established, we
are introduced to the human figure:

Beyond the village,
The soft orphan garners the sparse ears of corn.
Her eyes graze, round and golden, in the twilight.
And her womb waits the heavenly bridegroom.

What figure could be more innocent? Again, her innocence is
established through the accumulation of adjectives: "soft," "round and golden," "heavenly." That innocence is violated, however, in the next stanza, when a Christ-like figure discovers her "sweet body/Decayed in a bush of thorns." Suddenly, the images shift from being simple to being surrealistic, as if the rape produces a disharmony of perception:

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

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

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

Bly says of Trakl's imagistic technique that "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" ("The Work of James Wright," p. 86). The poet as individual responds to the situation emotionally and sensually, the only way the individual can deal with the violence of the reality. After such a catastrophic event, the spirit of the individual becomes disfigured. A fragmentation occurs, and anything can happen, such as "cold metal" walking on his forehead, or "spiders" searching for his heart. We feel, rather than intellectualize, the power of the images.

Trakl's influence on Wright can be seen when we look at poems by each. As we have shown in the first chapter, Wright's poems in his first two volumes are primarily rhetorical in the sense that they are rational and moralistic. The poems in The Branch Will Not Break, however, are shorter, less cluttered. They are sustained primarily by images, and this change can be attributed to a large degree by Trakl's influence. Perhaps Robert Bly expresses this influence best by suggesting that Wright "came to the conclusion that his own work was not actually poetry; it had not
helped anyone else to solitude, and had not helped him toward solitude" (pp. 83-84). What does it mean for a poem to lead us "toward solitude"? I suggest that the solitude Bly and Wright have in mind has more to do with the poetry of intimacy than does the discursive nature of Wright's first two volumes. For a poem to lead the reader into solitude, it must appeal to the reader at the level of emotional silence: the poem must create the space which poet, poem, and reader inhabit.

Trakl's, and, as we shall see, Wright's, use of images are dissimilar from the imagists' in that these images attempt to make what Bly would term to be "leaps" from one image to the next--the connections are not necessarily logical. Their poems necessarily will contain a certain kind of mystery at their heart, and this mystery must be felt by the reader if the poem is to be successful. Here are two simple poems by both poets. Both are objective descriptions which leap from one image into the next. First, Trakl's "My Heart at Evening":

Toward evening you hear the cry of the bats.
Two black horses bound in the pasture,
The red maple rustles,
The walker along the road sees ahead the small tavern.
Nuts and young wine taste delicious,
Delicious: to stagger drunk into the darkening woods.
Village bells, painful to hear, echo through the black fir branches,
Dew forms on the face.

Now, here is a poem by Wright, "Arriving in the Country Again":

The white house is silent.
My friends can't hear me yet.
The flicker who lives in the bare tree at the field's edge
Pecks once and is still for a long time.
I stand still in the late afternoon.
My face is turned away from the sun.
A horse grazes in my long shadow.

Note how each is composed mainly of end-stopped lines that are self-contained images describing the poets' perceptions of nature. In both, twilight is the "poetic" time; here, Trakl's "toward evening" and
Wright's "late afternoon." This time element helps establish the solitary mood. In both poems, the main character is separated from other people: the walker (who is probably the narrator) in "My Heart at Evening" stays at the small tavern, but leaves for the "darkening woods" where the bells are "painful to hear." Wright's narrator is also separated, as his "friends can't hear [him] yet." The ending of both poems focuses on the face, the attention, again, on the solitariness of the main characters. After reading Wright's first two books, it would be hard to imagine his having written "Arriving in the Country Again" without having read Trakl.

What distinguishes Wright's work from Trakl's is what brings Wright's closer to the poets writing in Spanish, for though Wright's work contains much darkness, *The Branch Will Not Break* is primarily a celebratory and affirmative work. Wright explained to Peter Stitt that "at the center of" *The Branch Will Not Break* "is my rediscovery of the abounding delight of the body" (Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," p. 49). One cannot imagine Trakl entitling a poem "Today I Was So Happy, So I Made This Poem," or "The Blessing." In fact, one would be hard pressed to find the roots of such affirmation in *The Green Wall* or *Saint Judas*. Certainly, though Wright denies that his change of style was akin to any kind of "conversion experience" (Smith, "The Pure Clear Word," p. 209), there is a sense of "re-birth" in reading these poems, or, perhaps a better way of expressing it is that the new poems contain the "depth of life" that Wright discovered in Trakl. If the poems in *Saint Judas* "seemed to leave out so much life," the poems of *The Branch* attempt to incorporate "life" into them and, for this volume at least, that means primarily joy and affirmation.

Two poets whom Wright translated who reflect that joy and affirmation in much of their work are Juan Ramon Jimenez and, more especially, Jorge Guillen. Bly sees Jimenez as differing from Trakl in that "the heavy poems of Trakl lie brooding in alleys or on mountain tops, and when the reader walks up to them they hardly notice him: they feel a great sorrow. Jimenez' poems on the other hand are nervous and alert, and when we come near, they see us, they are more interested in us than in themselves--they try to show us the road back to the original ecstasy"
Jimenez' poetry is spiritual and lyrical and it struggles more with the question of being than with human suffering. Louis Simpson, a poet of Wright's generation who was also caught up in the poetic revolution at the beginning of the 60s, says of Jimenez that he "speaks for a higher level of consciousness" and that, even stronger, "religions were originally created on the ground of feelings such as Jimenez utters" (p. xlv). Yet the simple happiness and joy (without the sense of guilt that we find so often in Wright's early work) that occur in several short lyrical pieces in The Branch Will Not Break seem very similar if not in the style, than to the underlying spirit, that we find in some of the pieces of Jimenez that Wright translated. Look, for example, at a Jimenez poem Wright translated, called "Life":

What I used to regard as a glory shut in my face,
Was a door, opening
toward this clarity:
Country without a name:

Nothing can destroy it, this road
Of doors, opening, one after another,
Always toward reality:
Life without calculation!

(98)

Compare the above with Wright's "Today I was So Happy, So I Made This Poem":

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

(133)

Certainly we can attribute much of this new, affirmative tone to the kind of poetry Wright had been translating in Jimenez, but mostly in
another poet, Jorge Guillen. Guillen said of his work *Cantico* that it is "a song in praise of the oneness of all being. Whoever experiences this oneness can never feel isolated. One must cherish and advance this privilege of being among all things that have being, of sharing in their fullness. Man affirms himself in affirming creation" (p. 8). Guillen, like Whitman, celebrates the ordinary. In one of the poems Wright translated and included in his *Collected Poems* "Nature Alive," the narrator celebrates a "panel board of the table," which "remains/Always, always wild!" This sense of vibrancy in all things appealed to Wright; the silent quality of his new poems allowed him to pay more attention to what is "wild" or alive in what he observed, as he does in "Trying to Pray": "It is the good darkness/Of women's hands that touch loaves./The spirit of a tree begins to move."

Trakl appealed to Wright's dark side, and Jimenez and Guillen reinforced his sense of affirmation; Cesar Vallejo encompassed both of these perspectives in intimate poems that offer, for Wright, "reverence" and "strength in order to confront and to overcome the most cruel difficulties of the twentieth century" ("A Note on Cesar Vallejo," p. 85). Of all the poets Wright translated, Vallejo is closest to his own sensibilities because he focuses on human misery and guilt and the longing to make connections. Reading the following passage from "Our Daily Bread," it is not hard to see why Wright was drawn to Vallejo:

> Every bone in me belongs to others;  
> and maybe I robbed them.  
> I came to take something for myself that maybe  
> was meant for some other man;  
> And I start thinking that, if I had not been born,  
> another poor man could have drunk this coffee.  
> I feel like a dirty thief...where will I end?

> And in this frigid hour, when the earth  
> has the odor of human dust and is so sad,  
> I wish I could beat on all the doors  
> and beg pardon from someone,  
> and make bits of fresh bread for him  
> here, in the oven of my heart...!

(103)
Vallejo here expresses directly what is basically Wright's primary thematic concern—the feeling of an enormous guilt for the suffering of others. Wright's narrator of "At the Slackening of the Tide," from *St. Judas*, senses his own guilt in much the same manner upon witnessing the drowning of a child: "I would do anything to drag myself/Out of this place:/Root up a seaweed from the water,/To stuff it in my mouth, or deafen me,/Free me from all the force of human speech;/Go drown, almost." Coinciding with Vallejo's sense of guilt is his longing for intimacy. Vallejo's poems are emotional in the human sense; he often writes about his childhood or his present relationships, always in very personal ways. He fits our definition of an "intimate" poet: often, his tone is direct, speaking from a voice that has intimate acquaintance with the characters and elements involved in the poem. In another piece Wright translated, "The Big People," the speaker is a child addressing his brother and sisters:

Aguedita, Nativa, Miguel?
I am calling, I am feeling around for you in the darkness.
Don't leave me behind by myself,
to be locked in all alone.

(105)

Wright felt such close affinity with Vallejo that in one poem, Wright virtually imitates his own translation of a Vallejo poem, which demonstrates that Wright incorporated Vallejo's style to the point at which it operates on an unconscious level. Here is the passage by Vallejo, from his poem "Have You Anything to Say in Your Defense":

There is this cave
In the air behind my body

( Twenty Poems, p. 45)

Compare Vallejo's stanza with Wright's poem, "The Jewel":

There is this cave
In the air behind my body
That nobody is going to touch:
A cloister, a silence
Closing around a blossom of fire.
When I stand upright in the wind,
My bones turn to dark emeralds.

Perhaps no other example could better demonstrate the influence that translation made upon Wright: his incorporation of the models he read and translated on his way to altering his poetic style. In *The Branch Will Not Break*, Wright is becoming more of an intimate poet as a result of opening himself up more to the present moment—both his own body and the world at large—and he has allowed himself to become more emotional. In each of the poems that he translated, the speaker has been intimately involved in the experience of the poem, and perhaps this is the most important lesson Wright will carry over to his own work. For that reason, we as readers are better able to enter into the poet's concerns. The speaker establishes a personality that is more consistent from poem to poem, and that will force the poet to shift his focus from the abstract to the concrete. *The Branch Will Not Break* is Wright's breakthrough into open verse and a more intimate kind of poem, but it must also be remembered that in that work he is still under the influence of his readings of foreign models and his association with Robert Bly. In what follows, I will suggest how Wright's *The Branch Will Not Break* is an extension of his translations with Bly, and to try to show how Wright broke away from Bly's influence on his way to establishing his own, independent voice.

The poems in *The Branch Will Not Break* are Wright's first experiments with what has been called, "open form," the "deep image," and the poetry of the "emotive imagination." Robert Bly, in his magazine, *The Fifties* (later *The Sixties* and then *The Seventies*) was perhaps the
most vocal proponent of this "new style," and devoted his journal to what he considered to be the best foreign and domestic poetry. The overall purpose of the magazine was to provide a service by "publishing some of these poets in translation." Bly states that he "felt avenues opening into kinds of imagination that I sort of dimly sensed somewhere off on the horizon, but I had never actually seen in English...wonderful imagery, exuberance and enthusiasm" (Talking All Morning, p. 49). What these translations helped lead to, ultimately, at the end of what Robert Lowell called "the tranquilized fifties," was a poetic revolution in America. As poets like Wright and Bly became disillusioned with writing "nineteenth century poetry" (Wright, "American Contributors," The Fifties, volume 2), they were more and more willing to be receptive to foreign voices. For many of them, these foreign voices helped them to discover their own.

At every opportunity, Bly criticized the "current poetry in America," comparing it unfavorably with the poetry of the "new imagination." His publishing of translations of Spanish, French, and German poets helped influence a wave of younger poets to change their entire approach to their work. Suddenly we find the "new imagination" living in America. Donald Hall, in his important introduction to the anthology Contemporary American Poetry, attempted to identify what he called "a new kind of imagination:"

The vocabulary is mostly colloquial but the special quality of the lines has nothing to do with an area of diction...This imagination is irrational yet the poem is usually quiet and the language simple...There is an inwardness to these images, a profound subjectivity. This new imagination reveals through images a subjective life which is general, and which corresponds to an old objective life of shared experience and knowledge.

(p. 24)

George S. Lensing and Ronald Moran label this new kind of poetry the "emotive imagination," and identify its central practitioners as Robert Bly, James Wright, Louis Simpson, and William Stafford. Lensing and
Moran lists qualities common to these four poets, including, among others, the use of the "muted shock," colloquial language, personification, a general human compassion, concern for the American frontier, and opposition to the Vietnam War. In exploring how the emotive imagination operates in the four poets, they focus on similarities rather than differences, pointing out, for example, where each uses the method of personification, or where the "muted shock effect" is employed. They claim "The poetry of James Wright and Robert Bly is similar stylistically: that is the poems in Wright's *The Branch Will Not Break* resemble Bly's in *Silence in the Snowy Fields* and to a lesser degree there are likenesses between their poems from the mid-1960's on" (p. 116). In order to isolate the crucial importance of a poet, however, it is important also to focus on how each poet is different. We will find that much of an individual poet's originality can be seen in the quality of that poet's voice.

Leonard Nathan points out the importance of the personal voice in contemporary poetry in his article "The Private 'I' in Contemporary Poetry." With the diminishing belief in reason in the Nineteenth Century, Nathan states, "the personality was becoming the source of all real authority in matters concerning the human condition" (p. 86). This idea of course goes back to Wordsworth's notion that the poet must be a "man speaking to other men." As a result, the personality of the poet becomes the speaking voice of the poem, and the the images and insights that a poem may contain must be "connected by the point of view of one observer" (p. 89). That "point of view" can be identified with a consciousness, a perspective, a quality of mind, that is infused within the language of the poem. What is fascinating about the poetry of the "new imagination," theoretically, is that it implies something far removed from the "generic" poem; it opens up a multitude of possibilities depending upon the consciousness, as seen in the voice, of each individual poet. To ask how poets are different from each other, then, is to examine these voices more intensively. The danger of this "personal" poetry, of course, lies in the risk of the poet's describing a solipsistic world in a voice that fails to communicate larger universal concerns beyond the
desires and perceptions of that individual poet. Perhaps it is this very
danger that should provide a measure of evaluation: what makes a
"personal" poem successful or not successful? Before that evaluation
can be done, however, it is important to show how Wright's "voice" is
unique among his peers. I wish to examine *The Branch Will Not Break* as
a work that pushes his unique voice forward, but yet is still to some
extent, as are his first two volumes, under the dominance of other
voices, most particularly, those of the foreign poets he translated and
Robert Bly's. I would like to show where Wright is under these influences
and where he expresses his unique voice.

Bly's ideas and poetry had an important influence on Wright's work
in *The Branch Will Not Break*. Many critics attribute Wright's change of
style to his association with Bly, especially their collaborated
translations. These critics see Bly at the forefront of the movement
towards the new style: "Robert Bly is the single individual who has been
essential to the evolvement of the Emotive Imagination" (Lensing and
Moran, p. 67). Wright and Bly are often associated, and it is rare when
Wright's third volume is not discussed in the context of his association
with Bly: "Since Wright was teaching at this time at the University of
Minnesota it was easy for him to visit Bly's farm near Madison,
Minnesota, on weekends, and what he found there...and heard about poetry
from Bly resulted in the remarkable lyrics of what remains Wright's
finest single volume, *The Branch Will Not Break"* (Perkins, p. 571). One
critic credits both poets with furthering this "new imagination": "...Bly's
poetry depends on the conceptions of the 'deep image,' a concept
developed by Bly and James Wright" (Libby p. 155). However, it is also
important to remember that Wright said that "I do not operate according
to a set of principles or manifestos" (Smith, "The Pure Clear Word," p.
227). Wright came to Trakl on his own, as early as in 1952. As was
noted in the last chapter, Wright also was becoming interested in
Spanish poetry, particularly Lorca's work, and he realized that his own
work was no longer adequate; thus, he was ready for a change and Bly provided
support and a forum for Wright's new experiments. In just what ways
was Wright influenced by Bly's poetry and to what extent did Wright
interpret the "new imagination" in his own voice?

Bly's solitude, which is so evident in *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, is generally celebratory, and the speaker voices a pre-lapsarian joy in response to a connection with nature, which explicitly excludes other specific human beings. In fact, the joy, reminiscent of what we might find in Emerson or Thoreau, depends to a large extent on the absence of the other. The speaker retreats from the human community into the self's communion with nature. This retreat is a common one in poems of the deep image: "The successful deep image strikes with the force of a newly discovered archetype, minor or major, coming from the depths of the poet's subjectivity, with a paradoxically universal force, his private revelation made ours" (Libby, p. 155). The key words here, I think, are "subjectivity" and "private." These concepts are integral to Bly's perspective: "When our privacy starts over again,/How beautiful the things are we did not notice before!" Bly, like Whitman, celebrates the self, which is often compared to animals or vegetation in its completeness: "I am wrapped in my joyful flesh,/As the grass is wrapped in its clouds of green." Bly's speaker will often discover connections between himself and nature, as in "Hunting Pheasants in a Cornfield," in which the speaker is like a tree whose leaves are "scattered around its trunk." The speaker's mind also "has shed leaves alone for years./It stands apart with small creatures near its roots." The speaker turns away from the human community in order to discover his primal being, which is wild, animistic, and often non-human. The speaker is happiest alone, as in "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter":

It is a cold and snowy night. The main street is deserted.  
The only things moving are swirls of snow.  
As I lift the mailbox door, I feel its cold iron.  
There is a privacy I love in this snowy night.  
Driving around, I will waste more time.  

When Bly's speaker does mention other people, it is frequently in the context of the universal "we." This, of course, is the other half of Libby's
definition of the "deep image," the "private revelation made ours." Sometimes the "we" occurs in the last section or stanza, after the introduction of the "I." With this change in pronoun, Bly means for the individual experience to be universalized; a transformation occurs when the singular suddenly becomes a plural. "Poem In Three Parts" provides an example. In both the first two sections, the speaker compares himself to grass, and that connection produces in him a sense of joy. The speaker in the middle section describes a dream, during which he "Bathed in dark water, like any blade of grass." The verb "bathed" is important here, as it suggests a baptism, or renewal. In the third section, then, the speaker can say that it is possible for all of "us" to "sit at the foot of a plant,/And live forever, like the dust." These lines echo and universalize the first line in the poem, where the speaker focuses on himself: "I think I shall live forever!" His personal experience becomes general—he has traveled into his unconscious and discovered an experience that we must all be able to have. It is important that Bly's unconscious is Jungian. Bly makes the same gesture in "After Drinking All Night With a Friend We Go Out In a Boat At Dawn To See Who Can Write the Best Poem." Here, although the speaker is with a "friend," he focuses on himself in the first three stanzas: "I sense my hands, and my shoes, and this ink." The last stanza gives him an opportunity to reflect on the passage of time, which is a truth that all of us experience: "So we drift toward shore, over cold waters,/No longer caring if we drift or go straight" (SP, p. 28).

Bly seldom establishes relationships between his speakers and subjects; rather, attention is focused on the speaker's interior journeys. For the most part, that speaker wants to convey a mood, or a moment of attention and experience that stems from deep within his psyche. A successful poem would convey that experience. The surreal images are meant to communicate the experience directly because of their freshness and "shock" quality:

\[
\text{After Working} \\
\text{I} \\
\text{After many strange thoughts,}
\]
Thoughts of distant harbors, and new life,
I came in and found the moonlight lying in the room.

II
Outside it covers the trees like pure sound,
The sound of tower bells, or water moving under ice,
The sound of the deaf hearing through the bones of their heads.

III
We know the road; as the moonlight
Lifts everything, so in a night like this
The road goes on ahead, it is all clear.

(SP., p.37)

Bly's intent is to convey the sense of the moonlight; there are no other characters in the poem because none are needed. In order to experience the moonlight fully, in fact, the speaker must be by himself. The voice does not identify with an other; it is expressing his perceptions. When other characters do appear, they often serve only to reflect the speaker's mood, which is similar to what we found in Trakl's work. For example, in "Depression," the "old Tibetans" appear in the speaker's dream at the appropriate hour, when his body is "sour" and his life "dishonest." Their purpose is to act as teachers; we are not meant to see them as beings with whom the speaker relates or identifies. Again, the only thing we know about "Great-Aunt Mary" of the poem "At the Funeral of Great-Aunt Mary" is that she was "born in Bellingham." Her actual presence (or, in this case, absence) is not relevant to the point that Bly wants to make: death exists in the here and now and in the natural world rather than in the "mansions prepared/From the foundations of the world." Again, there is no actual relationship. In "Poem Against the Rich," the rich man is an abstraction, someone who "Cannot hear/The weeping in the pueblos of the lily." It is not Bly's intention to establish a relationship between the speaker and the characters; rather his poems are mostly lyrics that attempt to universalize a private mood.

I would like to show how Wright both follows Bly's lead in creating typical "deep image" poems and moves away from Bly in furthering concerns he has been interested in since The Green Wall. It is these
concerns, newly shaped by his experiments with open form, that influence the direction of Wright's future work. First, however, it is necessary to provide a background to *The Branch Will Not Break*.

*The Branch Will Not Break* is often seen as Wright's primary contribution to the poems of the "deep image." The reviews of the volume were for the most part very favorable, focusing mostly on its "contact with life" (Weeks, p. 143). This assessment is much different than those that were made in the previous chapter about Wright's first two books. After introducing himself in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" ("My name is James A. Wright..."), Wright seems to break through the "wall" that had separated him from his own, personalized voice. His association with Robert Bly facilitated this breakthrough. Many of the poems of this new volume do indeed supply the "life" that Wright felt to be lacking in his previous work.

Four years elapsed between the publications of *St. Judas* and *The Branch*. Even before *Saint Judas* was published, however, two poems that were later to be included in *The Branch* four years later appeared in the second issue of *The Fifties*: "In the Hard Sun" (revised to "Goodbye to the Poetry of Calcium") and "In Fear of Harvests." In a letter to his dissertation advisor Burns, Wright shows excitement about the new discoveries he was making, both with his translation and in his own work: "I'm loaded with Chinese, and Japanese, and Spanish, and German, and French. I feel like a misguided Dago in Munich, burrowing thru [sic] the alimentary canal of Peru with nothing on but my underwear. Did you ever hear of Cesar Vallejo? Ah, poetry! WAIT TILL YOU SEE THE SECOND ISSUE OF *The Fifties*. It's Beat!" (*Letters*, p. 118). Interestingly, in the same letter Wright refers to a draft of *Saint Judas* that he had just sent to his publisher. It seems that Wright experimented with his new style while he was still composing poems in the formal mode.
In point of fact, Wright did not actually stop writing traditional verse once he started what he called his "experimental" poems. As Nicholas Gattuccio has documented, the recent discovery of the manuscript *Amenities of Stone* at the bottom of a cardboard box soon after Wright's death makes it apparent that Wright went through a long and painful struggle in changing his style, and that is primarily the reason for the delay between volumes. In fact, Wright had completed no less than four manuscripts (or four versions of a single manuscript) before *The Branch* was finally put to press. *Amenities of Stone* provides a fascinating study of the poetry of the new imagination, in that it is deliberately divided into three sections, the first called "Academic Pieces," the second called "Dramatic Voices," (a series of monologues), and the third section "Explorations." As one would expect, the first section consists of poems in the traditional manner--extensions of what we find in *Saint Judas*. The last section, however, includes eighteen poems that eventually found their way into *The Branch*. As Gattuccio describes it, "Wright's problem at that time, in early 1961...was how to straddle the so-called gap between the 'old' and the 'new' voices, between the 'formal' and the 'free' verses, how to include poems of both variety in the same book without appearing poetically polygamous, so to speak" (Gattuccio, p. 64).

It took up to three years for Wright to finally "give his 'new' voice reign" and to publish a manuscript that included only poems written in the 'new' style (with one and a half exceptions). During that time, Wright continually abandoned one "formal" poem after another. As Gattuccio relates the story, Wright was to have a selection of his formal poems published in England simultaneously with the publication of his *Amenities*, the title of which was changed to *New Poems*. However, in a letter to his English publisher, Wright states: "...I have decided to withdraw my new book...from publication...the book was in two sections, and I realized finally that they were so different from each other in style and tone as to break the book in half...I suddenly realized that the second section...was actually the basis of a new book in itself" (Wright, letter to Mr. Hamburger, 22, August 1961 as reprinted in Gattuccio, p.
On the very same day, Wright wrote another letter, this one to his publisher at Wesleyan Press, which was to publish *New Poems*, to tell him also of his decision to recall the manuscript. Wright says that this decision "must have sounded like an irresponsibility of the most idiotic sort." However, Wright's move was not without artistic rationale: "[the manuscript] is actually re-shaping itself--and doing so with such energy that I am astounded. When I work on the manuscript, I have the feeling one gets on horseback: I just give the book its head; and it is cantering off into very strange places that I hadn't seen before" (Gattuccio, p. 68).

As was noted, Wright struggled with form during his change of style, and did not abandon his traditional verse lightly, and, as we shall see later, never left it entirely. In the last poem from the "Academic Pieces" section of *Amenities of Stone*, called "His Farewell to Old Poetry," Wright expresses his moving away from his old style in terms of lament. This poem is Wright's first homage to the muse that he names "Jenny." In this piece, the speaker must leave Jenny, who represents the embodiment of traditional poetry: "Jenny, Sir Walter Raleigh and John Donne/Brood in the trees, but they say nothing now." The poet can no longer hear the voices that so moved him: "Now that I cannot hear your voice/I lose all the old echoes..." Though Wright was excited by the new poetry he was writing, he also was greatly attached to the traditional style, and did not allow its "echoes" to fade easily.

Wright says of *The Branch* that "at the center of that book is my rediscovery of the abounding delight of the body." (Stitt, p. 49). The emphasis on "body" reminds us of Bly, and, indeed, as has been pointed out numerous times, there are striking similarities between the two poets in volumes that were published a year apart from each other. I'd like to explore those poems that are reminiscent of Bly's work, and also examine the way in which Wright continues the themes he introduced in his earlier works. We shall see that it is the continuity with his own work, rather than his experiments with Bly's version of the deep image, that establishes the direction of his future poetry.

Predictably, the poems that sound most like Bly are the ones that
are short and lyrical and in which Wright's speaker is alone in nature, as in "A Prayer to Escape from the Market Place."

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{I renounce the blindness of the magazines.} \\
&\text{I want to lie down under a tree.} \\
&\text{This is the only duty that is not death.} \\
&\text{That is the everlasting happiness} \\
&\text{Of small winds.} \\
&\text{Suddenly,} \\
&\text{A pheasant flutters, and I turn} \\
&\text{Only to see him vanishing at the damp edge} \\
&\text{Of the road.}
\end{align*}
\]

(132-133)

The speaker reminds us of Bly's in his wish to escape the "market place," the human community, in order to discover a connection with nature. There are several of these short lyrics in the volume, poems that express, like Bly's, a simple happiness in being alive. In "Trying to Pray," the speaker claims that "there are good things in this world" and he is aware of a tree's spirit "beginning to move." The "discovery of the body" is meditative and silent, a quiet joy. Another poem, "I Was Afraid of Dying" speaks of a rejuvenation that may reflect Wright's change in poetic style. Though once the speaker "was afraid of dying/In a field of dry weeds," he is now listening "To insects that move patiently." The last lines in the poem seem to echo Bly's voice. In Wright's poem, the insects are "sampling the fresh dew that gathers slowly/In empty snail shells/And in the secret shelters of sparrow feathers fallen on the earth." Now listen to Bly, from a poem called "Silence": "...Surf crashing on unchristened shores,/And the wash of tiny snail shells in the wandering gravel." There is a similar gesture in both of these poems to end the stanzas on a long line that pushes the reader into a more meditative silence.

Bly and Wright's poetry share other gestures, not surprising in poets who have translated together and are writing in the same mode. To a large degree many of their poems share similar characteristics because, though they present images that are irrational (or products of
unconscious association), their poems are very formally constructed. Wright is more ready than Bly to admit this fact, which should come as no surprise given Wright’s denial that he ever stopped writing “formal” poetry. Further, Wright has stated emphatically in almost every interview he has ever given that he does not write surrealist poetry, and that surrealism in general is “dangerous for me and I think for everyone. I don’t think that I’m intelligent enough to manage a genuinely surrealist style.” His poem, “Miners,” Wright further stated, is “influenced by surrealism...I think it’s extremely formal, very traditional. The images are all parallel to one another. It’s as formal as the end of Lincoln’s Gettysburg address. I don’t mean it’s as good” (Henrickson, p. 181).

Though their poems employ the deep, or what some call the “surreal” image, then, these images are crafted into a pattern in order to produce intended effects, one of which is the “muted shock” that Lensing and Moran have identified. This “shock” often comes at the end of the poem. The most famous muted shock in Wright’s work, of course, is the line that closes “Lying in a Hammock on William Duffy’s Farm on Pine Island, Minnesota”: “I have wasted my life.” Bly employs the muted expression at the end of the poem almost as a general rule, as in the lovely line that ends “Surprised by Evening”: “And our skin shall see far off, as it does under water.”

Both poets are often accused of a tendency to overuse certain grammatical structures, images, and words, and therefore risk predictability, and, because of their brevity, these can be seen as problems with the “deep image” poem in general. Both poets are guilty of ending a number of their poems with the same grammatical construction; in Bly’s case, it is the coordinating conjunction “and,” while in Wright’s it is the preposition, usually “of.” In Silence in the Snowy Fields, nine poems end with a line the first word of which is “and”; in The Branch Will Not Break, ten poems (almost one fourth of the volume) end with the “of” preposition. This repetition of phrasing indicates that the poets found for themselves a convenient way of supplying the “muted shock.” Also, because of the lyrical quality of the poetry, both poets tended to overuse
the same words that make their use sound too automatic. An often cited example is their use of the word "dark." This word contributes to an overall mysterious atmosphere and reflects a sense of the unconscious and unknowable worlds. In the dark surprising things happen and discoveries are made. The dark is usually positive: "it is the good darkness/Of woman's hands that touch loaves" for Wright or, for Bly, "the darkness" that "drifts down like snow on the picked cornfields/in Wisconsin." However, when used too frequently, the reader comes to expect it. The significant thing about both poets, as revealed by their use of the word "dark," is that many of their poems arise out of the same source: inwardness.

The state of inwardness that informs so many of the poems in these two volumes is intrinsically related to the mood of solitude arising out of silence. The brevity of many of the poems encourages what is not said, the silence that the images direct their energy towards. Wright has said often that his main fault is "glibness." The reason why Mozart, for Wright, is "angelic" is because "he knows exactly when to stop. He knows when to shut up. And in doing that he gives you your own song" (Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," p. 53). Silence is perhaps the spirit behind many of Bly's and Wright's short lyrics. In "Depressed By a Book of Bad Poetry, I Walk Toward An Unused Pasture and Invite the Insects to Join Me," the speaker turns away from what might be the "glib" sounds of the poetry he is reading. The speaker instead chooses to listen to what is immediately around him. What he hears are "old grasshoppers." The speaker discovers that he wants to listen, for "they have clear sounds to make." Perhaps the dramatic move toward brevity, solitude, and silence was for Wright a refreshing change from the long, rhetorically convoluted verse he had been creating. It allowed him to "slow down and pay attention to the things that were right in front of [his] eyes more closely than [he] had ever done before when [he] was trying to write in more traditional ways" (Henrickson, p. 180). Clearly, Bly's rigorous devotion to translation and to publishing poets who were writing in the new imagination provided an invaluable service to American poetry and poets, especially James Wright.
Given the fact that Bly's poetry was very influential on Wright's when he was experimenting with his new style, we should not forget that by the time Wright met Bly he was already an established poet, one who had devoted himself to his own obsessions. In the first chapter, it was pointed out that in his early work we find hints of the intimate voice, the emotional speaker who establishes relationships with his subjects and sometimes with his readers. That relationship, it was said, was closed off by the use of traditional forms, and the relationship between the speaker and the characters was, as a result, more sympathetic than empathetic. The traditional forms closed off the intimacy. *The Branch Will Not Break* can be seen as Wright's attempt to put forth another kind of form, the deep image, to lessen the gap between speaker, subject, and reader. I would like to suggest that in many poems, Wright's speaker is more personal than Bly's; the speaker is starting to develop as a character whom we can know. This "character" is not yet fully developed; he will become more so in later volumes, but we can be sure that it is the same person who introduced himself to us in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" as "James A. Wright" from "Martins Ferry, Ohio." One obvious reason for this is that, while Bly rarely includes other human beings, Wright is often concerned with the other, especially in the form of the social outcast. Further, it was pointed out in the first chapter that the first two books presented a fallen speaker, a post-lapsarian knowledge. Wright's response to this knowledge is to be aware of human suffering and responsibility. In some poems in *The Branch* Wright's speaker is, like Bly's, joyful in his connection with nature. Wright himself felt that the book had an "intense love for nature" (Andre, p. 137). It is significant, however, that in many other poems in that same volume the speaker has an awareness of his separation from nature, a consciousness that he is human. This consciousness in the
earl poetry provided the speaker's motivation to attempt to identify himself with other humans, those that were "fallen" from innocence. In Wright's case, these characters are not only fallen but are victims of a corrupt social system, corrupt perhaps because it is fallen. In *The Branch*, also, we find poems that present relationships between the speaker and the characters. It is a speaker who is reaching out, desiring for a connection. Because Wright's speaker is more personal in the third book as a result of the dropping of traditional forms, the emotional affect is more immediately engaging.

We have already shown how Wright's voice responds more to the immediate moment, and this quality is associated with Bly's influence and his translations of Trakl. This is especially true in the short lyrics. But in other poems we find a more distinct difference between Wright and Bly. In them, we find that there is more of a relationship between the speaker and the other. In the early work, the nature of that relationship was sympathetic. In *The Branch*, however, that sympathy moves closer to empathy as the speaker begins to identify more and more with the other. In the discussion that follows, I would like to explore the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the subjects (including characters and Images) in order to determine how it affects our reading of the poems. How do various formal techniques allow or not allow the poet to better express the emotion? It has been said before that Wright's academic techniques distanced the speaker from the poem; how do the techniques of open verse allow for a closer relationship between speaker and subject and thus produce a greater emotional response?

Often in *The Branch* the speaker's identification with the other occurs in subtle ways, perhaps with a word or a line, as in the case of the well known "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio." The speaker's presence in the landscape is significant "in the Shreve High Football Stadium, // I think" [my italics]. The speaker's presence in the landscape is the opposite of what we saw in many of Wright's early poetry, where the speaker was often an "objective" voice off stage. This new voice gives us a greater assurance that he knows of what he speaks, because he is a
member of the community of Martins Ferry, (which implies that he, like
his characters, is a victim of its sociological conditions). However, the
speaker is also separated from the characters in the sense that he can
"think" of them: he both knows them and is separated from them. The
speaker's presence in the landscape informs his knowledge of the
character's sufferings:

I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,
And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnaces at Benwood,
And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling steel,
Dreaming of heroes.

The structure of the lines is parallelism; each line is end-stopped and
deals with a different aspect of the poem's guiding sensibility. The
difference between this and what we saw in Trakl or Bly is that the
images deal with people (which isn't necessarily always true with
Wright, but much more so than with Bly). The speaker's presence in the
stadium contributes to our feeling that the people he writes about are
real, not, as we saw in the early poetry, allegorical figures. The names
of towns specify them, as does the small descriptions of their actions.
We believe in them more because the speaker has gained more credibility
by placing himself in their landscape. Their reality increases our
emotional response. The characters are defeated by a system that
perpetuates that defeat. The father's, former heroes, understand that
their sons, present heroes, will one day in turn become fathers "ashamed
to go home." The women, meanwhile, are "Dying for love." The tragedy
arises when the reader realizes that this system is ritualized: it
happens every fall. There's no way out of the cycle of frustration and
depression: they are eternalized into a tragic myth that attempts to
touch on the dark side of the human condition. It becomes more
immediately poignant when the speaker is himself involved in that dark
side--commits himself to it. In Wright's "Old Man Drunk," from Saint
Judas, the speaker could only sympathize with the old man, raise his
glass in a "vague alas," while in these newer poems he is discovering
that he is becoming a drunk himself. Wright's placing his speaker in the
Shreve football stadium forces that speaker to recognize his similarity
to the characters he observes.

Wright's territory is by now established: usually Ohio, occasionally Minnesota, and always (for the next couple of volumes, at least) the "American Midwest." Wright's territory is a reflection of his personality, without which he can never establish a relationship with the other. His speaker reaches towards a person or object out of his own personhood in order to establish an identification, and, therefore, empathetic relationship. Often Wright will try to relate his own speaker's troubles to someone else's in order to better understand them (just as one friend with a problem would do with a friend who might identify with that problem). His poems will express the idea that the speaker shares the moods of the other characters. This identification, when successful, produces a more emotional response than did the academic pieces because the more personalized voice better reveals the speaker's compassionate recognition of and complicity with human suffering.

"In Memory of a Spanish Poet" (122-23) provides a good short example. The difference in the relationship between the speaker and the other in this poem and that relationship in a poem looked at in the first chapter, "To a Fugitive," demonstrates how his new form reflects a greater intimacy. In the earlier poem, Wright creates an archetypal prisoner named "Maguire," who has no real identity other than the fact that he is a fugitive. The speaker imagines Maguire escaping and, though the speaker uses direct address, he doesn't really involve himself in the action—he simply describes what he dreamed. In the first chapter, it was said that, because the speaker dreamed of Maguire, "somewhere deep in his consciousness [the speaker] feels like a fugitive himself" and that his attempt at identification was a "step toward empathy." In "In Memory of a Spanish Poet," however, Wright does not address a generic "fugitive," but speaks of Miguel Hernandez, the Spanish poet who wrote in the 30's and 40's, who, as a shepherd, came to Madrid in 1934 and wound up in prison as a result of his fighting against the Franco regime. He eventually died in prison of tuberculosis. Wright translated several of his poems which appeared in a special issue of *The Fifties* devoted to
the work of Hernandez. The epigram, "Take leave of the sun, and of the
wheat, for me" was written by Hernandez in prison. As in "To a Fugitive,"
Wright speaks directly to Hernandez:

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

In the next stanza, Wright shifts the focus to his persona: "Here, in the
American Midwest." The speaker's calling attention to himself suggests
that he has internalized Hernandez' suffering. Note the repetition of
"seeds:" "Those seeds fly out of the field and across the strange heaven
of my skull." The seeds planted by Hernandez' voice have taken root
inside the speaker and his world. This sharing of suffering is more
explicit here than it was in the earlier poem because the speaker more
directly empathizes with it. The formal devices that Wright employs to
emphasize the speaker's connection with Hernandez include, then, the use
of the real person, the repetition of words, and, as in "Autumn Begins..."
the use of specific place names. These are all incorporated in a poem
that also contains the deep image.

Perhaps the best demonstration of the speaker's empathetic
relationship with the other occurs in the volume's opening piece, "As I
Step Over a Puddle, I Think of an Ancient Chinese governor" (111). This
poem is an excellent example of the way in which Wright employs natural
speech and in the way speaker addresses character. Here, the persona is
addressing Po Chu-i, the great Chinese poet who was also a governor of
the Hangcho district district in China in the early 800's. The poem begins
with the informal address, as if the two of them, separated by more than
a thousand years, were old friends: "Po Chu-i, balding old
politician,/What's the use?" For Wright, the distance between himself
and Po Chu-i is irrelevent; Chu-i, in fact, is not dead, because, as Wright
explains, "time and eternity are not the same. Sometimes they intersect,
and when they intersect, we get poetry rising out of them.” Apparently, time and eternity intersect when communication is reached and a relationship established, for time is

...not necessarily linear. It’s expansive too. We know this...Now, this is a theological argument, but it’s also a logical argument and a psychological argument. Hence, why not bring these people together? Where is Yuan Chen?

I ask that because Po Chul, whom I love, cared about that, and if he cared about it, I care.

(Andre, pp. 147-148)

Paul Carroll, in *The Poem in its Skin*, identifies the tone as one of friendship: “With a friend one can be perfectly blunt. If you’re fed up or depressed, you can say so without worrying about the effect. Friendship offers possibilities of candor and directness often impossibly or severely restricted between husbands and wives or lovers” (p. 193). He elaborates, calling Wright’s tone “bantering and affectionate,” beginning with the second line—“what’s the use?” This question implies, also, that the speaker is intimately aware of Po Chu-i’s condition, which is in some ways a projection of the speaker’s own but in other ways the product of a conclusion that the speaker arrived at based on what he knows about Po Chu-i. That knowledge allows Wright’s speaker to imagine that Chu-i is unhappy in his role as a politician. Chu-i must be frustrated in that role, Wright’s speaker assumes, because in fact the real Po Chu-i was one of the greatest Chinese poets, a profession that would seem far removed from that of the politician. Thus, Po Chu-i is being “towed up the rapids/Toward some political job or other.” The narrator assumes that Chi-i arrived, “By dark.” Chu-i’s darkness reminds the speaker of his own condition, the condition that made him “think of” Po Chu-i in the first place:

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.

The first word, "but" is key: we must remember that it is not Po Chu-i who is at the center of the poem, but, rather, the speaker's identification with him, inasmuch as Chu-i's condition brings him back to his own. This identification is expressed formally by the combinations of images. Po Chi-i is being towed to the city of "Chungshou"; Wright's speaker is trapped in "Minneapolis." Chu-i is in the "dark"; the narrator is surrounded by his "own black twilight." Whereas the former is trapped physically, both by his role as a politician and in the fact that he's being towed, the speaker is trapped internally, as his own twilight consists "Of bamboo ropes and waters." Thus, "the subtle fusing of images relevant to both men draws them into a deeper intimacy as the poem develops" (Carroll, p. 194). The connection between these two men separated by a thousand years is their loneliness--it is "the composite figure of the eternally lonely man" (Carroll, p. 195). Po Chu-i is lonely for "Yuan Chen, the friend [he] loved." The narrator, too, is lonely, for he can "see nothing/But the great terrible oak tree darkening with winter." Further, his private mood of loneliness is enlarged: the whole "Midwest" is lonely, for it has been distanced from the sea. A union forms between speaker and character, but Wright cannot leave it at that, because they are in fact not in the same situation. Chu-i may not be dead in the place where time and eternity meet, but he still cannot ultimately solve the speaker's immediate problem: they are friends, not the same person. The speaker throughout the poem appeals to Chu-i not only as to a friend, but also as to an older man who has shared the speaker's loneliness and therefore might help to resolve it:

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?

When successful, Wright's persona is, by speaking through a personalized voice, speaking for the culture as well: the personal is metaphorical of the cultural, and in order to understand the later, one
must understand the former. It is like Whitman's "self"—he sings of the self, but he also sings of the "cosmos." This relationship is made explicit in the longest poem in the volume, "Stages on a Journey Westward" (1165-117), in which the speaker parallels his own personal journey with the American westward expansion. The poem is divided into four sections, and each of these deals with the speaker's relationship with other characters, and these relationships, just as in "In Memory of a Spanish Poet," affect him profoundly and shape the underlying mood. It should come as no surprise that each of the characters is in some way an outcast—someone on the other side of the American dream.

The first section presents the speaker at his youngest, and the character who is trapped is the one closest to him, his father. The quality of the speaker's feelings for his father influences his feelings for the other characters later. The section moves back and forth from present to past tense as the speaker searches for his father "in the bread lines," where

\[
\text{my father}
\]
\[
\text{Prowls, I cannot find him: So far off,}
\]
\[
\text{1500 miles or so away, and yet}
\]
\[
\text{I can hardly sleep.}
\]

This agitation resulting from not being able to find his father heightens the speaker's memory of the time when he was a boy, and his father "sang me/A lullaby of a goosegirl." The intimacy of the experience draws us into the relationship, so we must feel that the father is closed-in by tragedy when we learn that "outside the house, the slag heaps waited." The speaker's compassion for his father's miserable existence is informed by his love and understanding for him. The personal voice of this section, however, opens into a larger, more mythical voice in the next three. In the second, the speaker is the white man whom the "old Indians" want to kill, while in the third he is "drunk," listening to snow in the "abandoned prairies." The snow "sounds like the voices of bums and gamblers,/Rattling through the bare nineteenth-century whorehouses/In Nevada." Wright's speaker is trying
to summon up the lost who have paid the price of the "journey westward." He is trying to hear their voices. Fundamentally, the culture, for Wright, is actually dead in that it has paid the price of expansion by forcing some to suffer. In the last section, miners continue to journey "up to Alaska." It is no wonder, then, that, at the end, "America is over and done with." The speaker himself is also through, has had enough of the journey on which he has witnessed slag heaps, Indians, bums, gamblers, whores, miners, and their wives: "I lie down between tombstones." Like the country, the speaker is for all practical purposes dead as a result of identifying with those who paid the price.

This identification does not always happen with humans. In "A Message Hidden..." (115-116), the speaker performs the same act as does "unwashed shadows/Of blast furnaces," implying they are both "alone" and in need of some kind of deliverance:

I am alone here,  
And I reach for the moon that dangles  
Cold on a dark vine.  
The unwashed shadows  
Of blast furnaces from Moundsville, West Virginia,  
Are sneaking across the pits of strip mines  
To steal grapes  
In heaven.

Both speaker and shadows desire some kind of beauty--"the moon" or "grapes." The speaker introduces the theme of the lack of beauty (or poetic imagination) in the economically depressed area of the gully in the opening lines: "Women are dancing around a fire/By a pond of creosote and waste water from the river/In the dank fog of Ohio./They are dead." The death of beauty that surrounds the speaker is paralleled with the death of the beauty inside the speaker: he is alone and reaching out. His moment of self-discovery arises when he realizes that, alone, he is like those "unwashed shadows" that are being destroyed by the creosote: "I am growing old." Perhaps the tragedy here is the lack of a human relationship, and the poem is a "message" the speaker hopes someone will read as a way out of his loneliness. He even begs for some kind of communication: "Come out, come out, I am dying." This plea
seems a hopeless gesture in the wasteland of Moundsville: the human being lives a life without beauty or friendship in the land of blast furnaces.

In "Beginning" (127), the identification is with wheat. Personification is an important technique in the poems of the new imagination: "The dark wheat listens." Later, the speaker, who is "alone by an elder tree" sees a woman disappearing "into the air." That experience of seeing the woman produces a darkness both in the wheat and in the speaker: "The wheat leans back toward its own darkness,/And I lean toward mine." The poet recognizes that both have a life of their own. This recognition implies that the speaker does not wish to disturb the darkness of the wheat, and, further, that each living thing has its own secret life. This respect recognizes the limitations of the individual's power to escape the self and know the other. In Wright's world, the self is alone, and a relationship can transform that loneliness only briefly. As we have seen in "As I Step Over a Puddle..." the intimate connection between the speaker and Po Chu-i is made temporarily, but in the end the speaker is thrust upon himself, still wondering if his loneliness has an end. Even after a transforming experience, the self, ultimately, folds back into its own "darkness."

Love and loneliness: neither of these two states can exist without the other. In combination, they provide us with Wright's struggle between the quest for love and the separation between the self and other. The inability to escape the self is nowhere better expressed than in "A Blessing" (135), one of the poems in which the other takes the form of an animal (Wright was particularly fond of horses), and perhaps the best expression of the "delight" Wright said he felt in writing The Branch Will Not Break. Two friends step over some barbed wire in order to look at two Indian ponies. In a sense, the relationship between the two ponies is metaphorical of any kind of relationship the speaker can establish with anyone: "They love each other./There is no loneliness like theirs." We are not at one with nature, or the other, but, ultimately, are separated. This loneliness motivates our desire to attempt to connect with the other:
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.

The speaker's sense of joy is at its height, as he loses himself in the sensual experience of the spring day and the touch of the animal. Then the speaker remembers himself: "Suddenly I realize/That if I stepped out of my body I would break/Into blossom." The speaker realizes he would merge with nature, become transformed out of his human frame, if he were able to escape the limitations of the self. Here is the key difference between Bly and Wright: Bly can say "I am a ship" or "The mind has shed leaves alone for years." Wright is not a tree that can shed leaves or blossom—he is a human being who suffers. Thus, he can experience the connection, but ultimately cannot "step out of [his] body." It is the combination of love and loneliness that informs the relationship. Wright consistently recognizes that he is a conscious creature who can only momentarily return to the world of nature. This knowledge informs his attitude towards the other, whether be it human being, animal, or wheat.

Wright makes a similar identification with a horse in "Two Horses Playing in the Orchard" (126), one of the poems in The Branch that is written in traditional verse, with its iambic tetrameter and aabb rhyme. Wright depicts the idyllic freedom of the horses in the first two stanzas, describing them as they reach for apples. In the third and last stanza, the idyllic mood is interrupted: "Too soon, a man will scatter them...." The man will, as was revealed in the opening lines, "lock the gate, and drive them home." Wright enters the poem in the third stanza in the key lines: "I let those horses in to steal/On principle, because I feel/Like half a horse myself, although/Too soon, too soon, already. Now." Feeling like half a horse means he can understand their natural desire to eat the apples: Wright is recognizing that half, and only half, of his nature can empathize. The other half understands, unlike the horses, that the gate
will eventually be locked.

The attempted relationship between the speaker and the other is not always successful. Often it fails if the poet doesn’t sufficiently create a similar mood in each, or if one or the other does not seem well-rounded. Perhaps Eliot’s objective correlative applies in this case: we must believe that the emotion the two share is sufficiently embodied by the formal techniques the poet uses to communicate that emotion; the poet cannot simply state that the connection exists and have us believe it. In “Fear is What Quickens Me,” the speaker identifies with the “animals that our fathers killed in America.” Again, formally, the identification is made with the use of parallel structure: while the animals “stared about wildly” in the first section, the speaker “[looks] about wildly” in the third. This poem does not seem to be as successful in that it appears that the speaker makes his identification too easily, an identification that has to have more reasons for being made than the mere stating of it. In the other poems that we explored that exhibit this identification, Wright took pains to re-create the landscape in order to shape the speaker’s mood and reasons for identification; in “Fear is What Quickens Me” (115), the images present a confusing landscape. We wonder where the reader is situated, in “cities in the south, or in “Chicago,” or with “the deer/in this northern field.” The mentioning of the “tall women” and the “rabbits and mourning doves” in the second section seems to force the reader’s sympathies; we get the sense, then, that the contrast between these creatures and the “fathers” in the first section is contrived. In order for the identification to work, the speaker must earn the right to make that identification and this is achieved in the presentation of believable characters that do not seem a product of “artificial” construction and in the creation of a speaker’s mood that seems plausible given the circumstances of his situation. The problems with artificial construction (sentimentalizing) in order to force the reader’s sympathies were noticed in the examination of Wright’s early work, and do not automatically disappear as a result of the change in form. The danger of attempting to be emotional is that the poet risks being sentimental.
Finally, it was obvious to everyone when *The Branch* first appeared that Wright had taken pains to compose in a much more natural speech, which contributes greatly to the poems’ personal quality. We noticed where natural speech came up in the early work, but here, it is more prevalent. We saw, for example, how the phrase “what’s the use?” contributes to the sense of friendship that Wright’s speaker assumes with Po Chu-i. For the most part, the language in these poems is very casual, as if the speaker were in a more comfortable relation with the reader, and can reveal more of himself. The use of specific names of people and towns correlate with a colloquial language in the poet’s creation of his world: the Midwest, mostly Ohio. An Ohiolan (or even a Californian, for that matter!) would not talk in strict iambics, but would prefer to say: "It’s no use complaining, the economy is going to hell with all these radical/Changes...", or “Drunk, mumbling Hungarian,/The sun staggers in,/And his big stupid face pitches/Into the stove." Certainly one of the reasons why "A Blessing" is such a popular poem is its casual tone, the sense that it is being told as a story from one friend to another: "Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota....." Of course, it’s not just a story, but a poem, and so the next line: "Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass" elevates the speech just a little. We will explore how Wright extends this formal device of natural speech in his future volumes, and how it is a mark of his mature style.

In fact, *The Branch Will Not Break* is Wright’s initial experiment in many areas of poetry, including how his speaker communicates his emotion. This emotion will often become the primary focus in Wright’s poems in future volumes as the speaker finds various ways of revealing the self’s moods and longings for connections. As we have seen, Wright’s frustration with his early poems led him to experiment with different traditions (Spanish, German, French etc.) in order to discover other possibilities of form. For him, as we have seen, it is never a question of dropping traditional forms, because “all poetry is formal,” (Andre, p. 134) but he wants at the same time “to listen to as many kinds of music in our language as he [can]” (Heyen, et. al., p. 157). Though his change of style was not a “conversion experience,” it was nevertheless an extremely
significant development in the direction he himself felt his writing needed to take. The poems are more personal and the poet is able to take more emotional risks in revealing his moods and feelings about the other. Wright's translations and the influence of Robert Bly in general enabled him to cut out the "glibness" in order to make surprising discoveries out of his own experiences and perceptions. More significantly, Wright was able to incorporate these new perceptions into his old themes, introduced in his early work, of identifying with the social outcast. By revealing more of himself, Wright is better able to deepen his relationship with those outcasts. Thus, *The Branch Will Not Break* consists of a combination of surrealistic image pieces influenced by Bly and the foreign poets (mostly Trakl) in which the solitary speaker communes with nature, and pieces that further extend Wright's obsessions in that, while using the same imagistic techniques, they employ them for the purposes of deepening the relationship between the speaker and the other. We shall see the nature of this relationship and the forms Wright uses to express it in future volumes, beginning with his next work, *Shall We Gather at The River*, the first volume in which we see a full maturation of Wright's unique style.
In *Shall We Gather at the River*, Wright applies his "new imagination" to his old preoccupations of loneliness, alienation, and death. By now, Wright had absorbed Bly's and the foreign poets' influences and could incorporate them into the vision that began with *The Green Wall* and culminates with this volume. As William Matthews has suggested in a review of the book, Wright "shows he has converted Trakl and the Surrealists to his own uses" (Matthews, "Entering the World," p. 86). Here, the focus is not on short pieces that reflect the speaker's solitude in nature, as it was in *The Branch Will Not Break*. Rather, the majority of the poems in *Shall We Gather at the River* deal with human suffering. Loneliness and thoughts of suicide replace the joy and affirmation that was at the center of Wright's previous book.

In this volume, the speaker's relationship to the other is significantly more developed: whereas before Wright's speaker is more of a "normal" person who suffers and as a result enters into a sympathetic relationship with the victim, here that speaker becomes more and more of a victim himself, which forms the basis of an empathetic relationship with the other. Wright achieves this sense of the speaker-as-victim by creating a more personalized voice, and the reader gets the sense that the poet is more emotionally committed to that voice than he was in his earlier work. The poet's emotional commitment---our sense that Wright is actually writing out of his own life rather than creating an artificial "persona,"---works against our expectations of what a speaker is. In the early work, Wright's speaker appears detached from the subject of the poems, which, as we saw, resulted in an emotional distance between the speaker and the other. New Criticism would not allow Wright to
become involved in the situation of the poem. Wright's experiments in open forms, however, put him in a different relationship with what he was writing about; in a sense, he was forced to look inward by exploring how his situation is similar to or different from the people or animals or objects of nature he is writing about. This self-exploration in turn forces him to see the other more clearly and specifically. After New Criticism, the speaker can become more personalized and therefore can better identify with the other. How does the nature of this relationship produce a successfully emotional poem?

The risk of creating an emotional context for the intimate relationship between speaker and other is that the poem will ultimately be sentimental and fail to universalize the speaker's private concerns. Edward Butscher, in "The Rise and Fall of James Wright," claims that "Wright's penchant for the sentimental finally overwhelmed his very real, if limited, talent." Butcher's comment raises difficult questions: how does one evaluate a poetry that concerns itself primarily with emotional response? At what point does the emotion cease to interest the reader and become bathetic? Stanley Plumly, in his important article, "Sentimental Forms," phrases the question in the following manner: "At what point does the empathetic contract become pathetic; at what point does identification become indulgence" (p. 130)? To put it simply, the evaluation of emotional response is often difficult to articulate. Plumly suggests that we can evaluate the success or failure of a Wright poem by looking at the formal ways in which the source of the emotion operates: "If sentimentality, as an act of tenderness, is an attempt to confer significance, to place a value, form is as much a tenderness as the 'content' it sustains" (p. 322). For example, in the last chapter, I argued that "Fear is What Quicksens Me" fails because the situation created by the poet is not adequate to the emotion expressed by the speaker. In Wright's case, the problem relates to the poet's failure to convey adequately that emotion. It would be fruitful, then, to explore what makes Wright's emotion believable.
In the pages that follow, I would like to investigate the development of Wright's voice, and show how Wright's speaker is both similar to and different from Whitman's—similar in that he tries to encompass the other into the self, yet different in that he realizes that the self and the other are fundamentally different. Many of the poems in \textit{Shall We Gather at the River} are successful because the emotion is grounded in formal techniques that help sustain, rather than trivialize, that emotion. I will argue that Butscher's comments regarding the sentimentality of the collection are misdirected. I hope to show that it is to some of the poems written directly \textit{afterward} in the "New Poems" section of \textit{Collected Poems} and in the next complete volume, \textit{Two Citizens} that Butscher's criticisms apply.

2

The speaker in \textit{Shall We Gather at the River} is for the most part consistent: there is a "personality" that binds the poems together. This consistency gives rise to an important distinction between this type of speaker and the speaker employed in a New Critical poem, and that is that the "speaker" seems less of a "device." It seems as if the poet has let down his mask and involved himself in the "action" of each piece, much as a first person narrator does in a work of fiction. I would not like to make the argument that Wright is the speaker; only that there seems to be less distance between poet and speaker then there was in his earlier work. The speaker has more of what Leonard Nathan calls a "personal character." Nathan is specifically referring to "Gambling in Stateline, Nevada," but his remarks are meant to reflect all of Wright's poems of this period:

\begin{quote}
[the poet] creates an artifice, the character James Wright, the hero of the poem, a sad, luckless, defeated and compassionate spokesman for the sad, luckless and defeated things of this world. James Wright is no doubt like this sometimes, but would probably cut his throat if he were like this every minute of the day...Wright is
considerably more than what he represents himself as in isolated poems...James Wright, the poet, has created James Wright, the wandering unfortunate, out of a large field of possibilities: for instance, traditional poetic models for melancholy, as well as the actual melancholy he himself has no doubt experienced. The James Wright in the poem is a fiction, an artful and persuasive illusion of reality, and we accept him partly because we know he is a work of art, as well as part of reality.

("The Private 'I' in Contemporary Poetry," pp. 94-95)

Ultimately, it does not matter whether the speaker of Wright's poems is Wright or an artificially created speaker; all that matters is that the speaker sounds personal and has convinced the reader that he is sincere and honest. How does the poet achieve an emotional honesty that does not spill over into indulgence? In general, the speaker is the character who tries to understand the suffering of the other by relating that suffering to his own, which seems to universalize individual misery. This misery is ultimately a product of a cold and indifferent culture. By focusing on the victims of this indifference, Wright is criticizing America and suggesting through his speaker's actions that the act of empathy is not only a recognition of this indifference, but is the only moral response that an individual can take. The expression of emotion, then, the act of intimacy, is a political act—a response to a system that produces those characters who are the subjects of Wright's poems.

The introductory piece, "A Christmas Greeting" (139) is a prologue written in italics that introduces the speaker and greets the character "Charlie." As in "As I Step Over a Puddle, I think of an Ancient Chinese Governor," Wright uses the technique of direct address, this time to a man whom the speaker knew in his youth and who has been dead a long time. The speaker implores Charlie to remain dead, for that would be preferable to a life of suffering. The poem's emotion arises out of its graphic description. Whereas in his early poems Wright employed a literary language to describe a miserable situation ("He saw the blundered birth/Of daemons beyond sound"), now the poet in decidedly anti-romantic ways describes Charlie's physical condition. Intriguing
about this poem is that its language is direct yet at the same time very formal: one may have to read it more than once in order to realize that it is written in iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets. The direct address is thus controlled by the "traditional" form. controlled, but not confined. Traditional forms do not, of course, necessarily get in the way of emotion; they could, rather, open up that emotion, depending upon the nature of the speaker's voice. Wright's informal speech combined with the direct address creates a subtleness of detail that carries the weight of the emotion. Also, the anti-romanticism is a more honest response to Charlie's pain:

...A child, I saw you hunch your spine,  
Wrench your left elbow round, to hold in line  
The left-hand hollow of your back, as though  
The kidney prayed for mercy. Years ago.  
The kidneys do not pray, the kidneys drip.

To negate the fantasy of the kidney praying "for mercy" by asserting that they "do not pray, the kidneys drip" is a sudden recognition of the pain Charlie must have been feeling. That recognition undercuts (or negates) the metaphor the "poet" created a moment earlier ("as though/The kidney prayed for mercy"), and the speaker's shock is conveyed. Wright enlarges Charlie's situation by finding correspondances elsewhere:

Charlie, the moon drips slowly in the dark,  
The mill smoke stains the snow, the gray whores walk,  
The left-hand hollow fills up, like the tide  
Drowning the moon, skillful with suicide.

The speaker learns something about the nature of suffering and is trying to find ways to comfort Charlie by telling him directly that he is not alone in his suffering: it is everywhere one looks. The pathos arises when the speaker and reader realize that the recognition of other forms
of suffering does not provide an antidote to one's own

The direct address helps to create a sense of the intimacy between
the speaker and Charlie; however, we must also look at the substance of
that directness, for what the speaker says to Charlie reveals what the
speaker knows about him. In an intimate situation, much is assumed:
two people share a whole universe of experiences that can be recalled by
a single phrase or gesture. The difficulty of writing a poetry of intimacy
lies in the poet's creating just that amount of subtlety of language that
will reveal the closeness without sounding as if he is trying too hard.
Wright does this with the informal quality of his diction, rhythm and
tone; they are casual enough to give the reader the sense that the speaker
and the other share that universe: "Good evening, Charlie. Yes, I know."
Only a very good friend would presume to "know" the other's problems.
The speaker maintains that sense of direct address throughout: "Charlie,
don't ask me. Charlie go away/, I feel my own spine hunching." Several
other things are happening in these two lines. First, much is assumed:
the speaker assumes that, if Charlie were alive, he would be asking him
something, which probably has to do with the misery of growing old,
hunchbacked, and committing suicide. The speaker assumes that Charlie
would ask these questions because they are the questions the speaker
himself would ask if he were Charlie. In fact, the speaker fears how
similar he and Charlie are: "I feel my own spine hunching." Here the
identification between speaker and other is explicit: both are growing
old. The speaker continues to address Charlie, knowing all about his
problems because they are actually the speaker's own:

You died because you could not bear to live,
Pitched off the bridge in Brookside, God knows why.
It hurts to die, although the lucky do.
Charlie, I don't know what to say to you
Except Good Evening, Greetings, and Good Night,
God Bless Us Every One. Your grave is white.
What are you doing here?

Though the speaker would like to comfort Charlie, he realizes that
all he can do is offer him meaningless phrases, which are heavily ironic
in the light of Charlie's tragic suicide. The question at the end is meant to suggest that the speaker is still wrestling with that "universal misery," especially his own; he is left to confront it and somehow deal with it. Why is Charlie, the suffering suicide, preoccupying the speaker? This question seems to propel the speaker into exploring the nature of his relationship with other characters who suffer.

Another aspect of the tone that contributes to its intimate nature is the tension between how the speaker feels about Charlie and how he actually speaks to him. One of the ways the poem resists sentimentality (besides the traditional iambic rhythm and aabb rhyme scheme that operates to contain the emotion) is Wright's use of a distancing technique. By pretending to reject Charlie, the speaker is really accepting Charlie's problems without actually stating that acceptance. When he says, for example, "Yes, I know," it is as if there is a silent communication between them; if Wright would have the speaker elaborate Charlie's problems then the emotion would be deflated. In part, the emotion depends on what is not said. Another example is when the speaker says "Charlie go away," implying that Charlie's presence is too much for the speaker to bear: the rejection is actually an extremely painful acceptance. It is no surprise that the next phrase makes their identification complete: "I feel my own spine hunching." In pretending not to identify with the other, then, the speaker's identification becomes even more serious. Because sentimentality is inherent in the identification process, Wright is able to resist it, to play off against it by his use of a pretended rejection. The tension between the speaker's real emotion and his awareness that he has to control the full expression of that emotion helps communicate the intimacy.

Another important formal device that extends from the last book is Wright's combination of two kinds of speech: the colloquial and the surreal. One of the ways to get a sense of Wright's poetic development is to trace the way in which he uses the surreal image within the context of the overall poem. In *The Branch,* the image, in many cases, was its own vehicle; often the poem would only be a series of such images
similar to what we might find in Trakl or an early Bly poem. "Spring Images" and "By a Lake in Minnesota" provide good examples; these are poems that want to express particular moods, and rely upon their silence to help create their overall effects. What happens to the surreal image in succeeding works is that it becomes more incorporated into a larger context. The surreal image as used to convey narrative ends can best be seen in the volume's real "first" poem, "The Minneapolis Poem," which expands on the theme of despair and suicide as it was introduced in the prologue poem and which sets the tone for the rest of the volume by expressing the speaker's intention for the entire work.

If in "A Christmas Greeting" the speaker is afraid of his physical and psychological similarities with Charlie, in "The Minneapolis Poem" (139-141) the speaker goes a step farther by actually contemplating what before he only feared. The Charlie of the last poem here becomes just another anonymous citizen, and the speaker's thoughts of Charlie in that piece provoke him to consider others who are in similar situations:

I wonder how many old men last winter
Hungry and frightened by namelessness prowled
The Mississippi shore
Lashed blind by the wind, dreaming
Of suicide in the river.

The speaker demonstrates compassion for all the "Charlies," again, not excepting himself: "By Nicollet Island I gaze down at the dark water/So beautifully slow." It is strongly implied that the speaker himself may be contemplating suicide, and we can read the poem as a process through which he recognizes his identification with the "old men." Ultimately, however, he rejects suicide in favor of becoming the poet who will record their misery. The balance of surreal and real language is a formal way of allowing the speaker to both understand with and empathize with the characters he is observing.

Wright structures the poem so that it moves from the speaker's contemplation of suicide to his realization of a vision that will speak of what people suffer, from his desire to join the old men in the river to his
need to be their voice. This realization occurs as a result of the speaker's moving from one situation of suffering to another. He expresses these situations through a series of surrealistic images that are meant to present a disoriented world not unlike the one Lorca creates in *Poet in New York*. That world underlies the volume in general, and it focuses exclusively on society's victims. They are ignored in the materialism of an indifferent culture, a culture that kills their spiritual will. Presenting them in surrealistic images is an attempt to communicate their condition directly without at the same time sentimentalizing that condition. Wright incorporates a Lorca-like surrealism into a larger narrative structure that is also informed by direct, colloquial speech. This narrative form avoids the chaotic effect of Lorca's poetry. At the same time, Wright wants to shock the reader into an emotional response that reflects the disorientation of the speaker and the world he is attempting to express. The basic strategy of the images in "The Minneapolis Poem" is to reflect a series of losers with whom the speaker identifies. Thus we have "The Chippewa young men/Stab one another shrieking/Jesus Christ" and the faces of "high school backfields...are the rich/Raw bacon without eyes." The surrealism implies an imaginative identification that is irrational as a result of the nature of that world. The poet can only express the horror of his perceptions through impressionistic means that convey, if not the "reality," then the sensibility of what he is experiencing. In the four middle sections, Wright's images become more and more surrealistic as he gazes down at the water. Presumably, his perceptions are the growing reasons why he should kill himself:

The Artificial Limbs Exchange is gutted
And sown with lime.
The whalebone crutches and hand-me-down trusses
Huddle together dreaming in a desolation
Of dry groins.
I think of poor men astonished to waken
Exposed in broad daylight by the blade
Of a strange plow.
The last section before the narrative returns is the most surrealistic, ending with "The sockets of a thousand blind bee graves tier upon tier/Tower not quite toppling." Perhaps this is the symbol of Minneapolis, a chaotic confusion ready to crumble. It is at this moment, on the edge of complete confusion, that Wright returns to the narrative: "There are men in this city who labor dawn after dawn/To sell me my death." It is only when the speaker returns to thoughts of his own death that he rejects death as an option. The surrealism ends, and the speaker goes back to the tone of the first section, explaining that he will not succumb to the nightmare he has just described. Rather, he will fulfill his responsibility as a poet:

6
But I could not bear
To allow my poor brother my body to die
In Minneapolis.
The old man Walt Whitman our countryman
Is now in America our country
Dead.
But he was not buried in Minneapolis
At least.
And no more may I be
Please god.

7
I want to be lifted up
By some great white bird unknown to the police,
And soar for a thousand miles and be carefully hidden
Modest and golden as one last corn grain,
Stored with the secrets of the wheat and the mysterious lives
Of the unnamed poor.

We move from Charlie to the "old men" who "prowled/The Mississippi shore" to "the old man Walt Whitman." They are all dead and need to be lamented. Wright's naming Whitman is crucial in that the speaker of Shall We Gather at the River will attempt what Whitman attempted--to encompass everyone into his spirit in order to save them, but will realize that all he can do is recognize their suffering. This poem is a
statement of intention, a document of what the speaker hopes to do in the poems that follow; that is, to sing out the agony of "the mysterious lives/Of the unnamed poor." This expression of affection for those characters who are marginalized is the speaker's attempt to provide an antidote.

The balancing of surreal and direct speech helps to both express and contain the emotion; each intensifies but also defamiliarizes the other. The direct speech expresses while the surreal speech distances the emotion--too much of the former would lead to sentimentality, while too much of the latter would lead to the obscurity of which the French and Spanish surrealists are accused. When Wright's poems are successful, there is a delicate balance between these kinds of speech; when they fail, it is usually because one overwhelms the other. A large part of Wright's originality, I would argue, comes about because he is able to create so successfully a balance between these two types of language. Bonnie Costello identifies how two types of language operate to create a tension that informs the emotion, though what she calls the "high lyricism of his earlier work" I would label the surrealism of his Branch Will Not Break period: "The beauty of Wright's middle books is indeed in their effort to present a direct speech of the heart without lapsing into mere pathos. But they avoid pathos precisely through a constant struggle in the line between competing kinds of language" (p. 227)

"The Poor Washed Up By Chicago Winter" (145) is similar to "The Minneapolis Poem" in that it asks questions about what happens to the forsaken, and it combines surreal and direct speech in order to both convey and contain the speaker's horror about the condition of the poor. As in the previous poems, the speaker identifies with their condition by examining his own in terms of its similarities and differences. Like "The Minneapolis Poem," this piece begins and ends with direct speech, while the middle section presents surreal images. Note the surreal quality of the imagery that is incorporated into the narrative: "The sixth day remained evening, deepening further down, Further and further down, into night, a wounded black angel/Forgotten by Genesis." The
combination of this kind of imagery encompassed by a personal voice creates the direct, unconscious transference of emotion, as we saw in "The Minneapolis Poem," while also personalizing the speaker through his use of direct speech, which immediately follows the last quote: "the sea can stand anything./I can't." The flatness of this speech is developed in the second and last stanza, especially at the end of the poem, where the speaker says that "I can either move into the McCormick Theological Seminary/And get a night's sleep,/Or else get hauled back to Minneapolis." It seems that Wright uses a direct speech when he has the speaker refer to himself, and a surreal speech when the speaker describes other characters. The flatness of the direct speech undercuts the surrealism, and allows the speaker to respond to his observations of those characters and to his own situation. The direct speech personalizes the grief. Again, the speaker recognizes his own suffering as a result of observing others'; in the second stanza he realizes that he has no place to go, just like the other "poor." Wright would prefer that his speaker empathize with the poor by being poor himself. The poem, like the others, is a response to a culture that would condone the misery of "unimaginably beautiful blind men." The poet opts to identify with those poor, suggesting that the act of empathy by having an intimate knowledge of their situation is crucial in at least affirming that marginalized people exist.

The majority of the poems in Shall We Gather at the River are about the speaker's attempts at identifying with those who are marginalized. In "Gambling in Stateline, Nevada" (144), he is another loser in a series of losers; the characters have their frustration in common. In this piece the speaker does not attempt to directly identify with the other characters; rather, he associates his condition with theirs by the formal device of parallel structure. A tone of desolation and oppression is established by the first two lines, which are surrealistic: "The great cracked shadow of the Sierra Nevada/Hoods over the last road." These lines give an all-encompassing sense of doom, entrapment, and near paranoia. Each of the succeeding stanzas is devoted
to a different character, first Rachel, then an old woman, and, finally, the poet. They are each examples of losers: Rachel "died of bad luck," the old woman is "beating a strange machine/in its face all day," and the speaker is fingering "a worthless agate." The speaker is left alone in the dark with a worthless token.

There is no redemption for these characters; in "Gambling in Stateside, Nevada," there is only despair and the expression of that despair. It is this observation, in fact, that forces the speaker to face his own situation. Though the speaker is aware of the failure of the other two characters, he is able to "step outside," implying that, though he is a victim of a value system that is based on "luck," he at least will not be trapped in that world. Unlike Rachel, who died, and the old woman, who is unable to escape from the machine, the speaker can walk away, can separate himself from their tragedy and see it from the outside. The speaker, as in "A Christmas Greeting" and "The Minneapolis Poem" is both inside and outside the suffering of the other. He could not record their "secrets" if he did not experience their suffering, but, on the other hand, he could not do so if he were unable to get outside of that suffering.

Self-referentiality is important in Wright's poetry in both reflecting a consistency of voice and in helping to connect the poems to each other. Wright will explore the associations of a word or idea and these explorations will help unify a volume. The self-reference fails when it becomes merely repetitious, such as when Wright overuses the word "dark," but we must not confuse repetition with totemic recurrence. This recurrence can help anchor the emotions. An important example in *Shall We Gather at the River* is the leitmotif of water. Water is meant to reflect the ambiguous nature of the speaker's attitude towards, among other things, death. Sometimes water is the place suicides congregate: Charlie is "pitched off the bridge in Brookside," while the old men of Minneapolis dream "Of suicide in the river." Water is shown to be a place of desolation where "the police remove their cadavers by daybreak." It is referred to by the speaker as "a warm grave." As perhaps an ironic parallel, "The black caterpillar" in "I am a
Sioux Brave..." "crawls... across/The wet road." It is often important, also, when water does not appear; for example, in "Gambling in Stateline, Nevada," where the characters are all entrapped in the desert of the "Sierra Nevada." The situation here is similar to the one in "As I Step Over a Puddle...," where the speaker bemoans the loss of the sea that "once solved the whole loneliness/of the Midwest." And, of course, water is the central place where the poet would have everyone, the saved and the damned, meet, where we all "gather." In the above examples, water appears to be the place that accepts what the individual has rejected. The river is dear to Wright, and its powers to both reflect human misery and present the possibility for the transcendence of that misery make it one of his most powerful symbols.

As well as reflecting despair, then, water can also be redemptive, as it is shown to be in "An Elegy for Morgan Blum" (145-147) and "Old Age Compensation" (147-148). These poems are similar in that the speaker considers in both his relationship to the dying, or already dead, characters, as he does in "A Christmas Greeting" and "The Minneapolis Poem." The speaker's attempt to relate to the dead is a major theme. These poems seem to be refutations of the thesis asserted earlier in the book, in the closing lines of "Inscription for the Tank:" "Let the dead pray for their own dead/What is their pity to me?" Implying that it would be better for the speaker to allow the dead to rest in peace, the couplet is refuted by these two poems and the volume in general: the dead continually haunt him to the extent that he defines his own situation in the light of his relationship to them. The intimacy of this volume is reflected extensively in the speakers' relationships with the dead. In both poems, water separates this world from the next; they seem to be companion pieces in the way the second enlarges on the theme of death that is treated in the first. "An Elegy for Morgan Blum" is more personal in that it presents an intimate relationship between the speaker and Blum, while the second seems to want to see the speaker's response to death from a more universal, but no less emotional, perspective.

"In Memory of the Poet Morgan Blum" is about the speaker trying to
see the poet as he lay dying in the hospital. Morgan Blum represents a “vast/Desolotation” into which the speaker feels himself initiated. In fact, the speaker wants to join Morgan in his dying and make the journey with him: “I tried to blossom/Into the boat beside him,/But I had no money.” The older poets, (among whom is Theodore Roethke) who surround Blum’s death bed claim that their only king resides “Where the dead rise/On the other shore,” which is, presumably, where Blum’s boat will take him. Ostensibly, the poet’s poverty keeps him from joining Blum, but it is also his loneliness: “And now I am so lonely/For the air I want to breathe.” The disorientation of his consciousness as a result of his loneliness can be seen in the next line: “Come breathe me, dark prince,” and in the form of the poem in general, which is divided into six stanzas, ranging from three lines to twelve lines each. The inconsistency of the stanzaic pattern is consistent with the haphazard quality of the rhyme, which breaks down in the beginning: “Morgan the lonely,/Morgan the dead,/Has followed his only/Child Into a vast/Desolation.” It is as if Wright wanted to set up a kind of nursery-rhyme like pattern only to undercut it when the seriousness begins. Also, the repetition of the diction contributes to that song-like quality. Note the use of a refrain in the following lines:

They looked me over,
More or less alive.
They looked at me, more
Or less out of place.
They said, get out,
Morgan is dying.
They said, get out,
Leave him alone.

It is as if the younger poet is seeing his future in the hospital room, seeing himself in Blum, and that recognition intensifies his misery. Water in this poem may be redemptive, but only because death is seen by the speaker to be a release from that misery. In other words, it is redemptive in the painful sense. Central to the poem is the fact that it is an elegy. The emotion the speaker feels towards Blum is fundamental
to the speaker's state of mind and informs his disoriented consciousness: a friend he loves is dying. What, he seems to be asking, is he to do now? The speaker's response is to long for death himself—to "blossom 'nto the boat beside him." The poem tries to record that sense of despair one feels over the loss of a friend. Therefore, the intimate emotion the speaker feels for his friend informs his desperate state of mind, which in turn is reflected in the gestures the poem makes.

The speaker furthers the theme of death-as-release in the next poem, "Old Age Compensation." Here, death is the "compensation" for "old age." The world of the poem is even more bleak than what we have so far been exposed to, as if the speaker has descended further into a kind of nothingness:

There are no roads but the frost.
And the pumpkins look haggard.
The ants have gone down to the grave, crying
God spare them one green blade.
Failing the grass, they have abandoned the grass.

Again, the dead are journeying to the "other shore." The speaker has followed the "creatures who have died," as he "slogged behind" them, "praying for one more candle,/Only one." In his world, all he can see is "one last night nurse shining in one last window/In the Home for Senior citizens." Once that light "flickers out," all is in darkness. The speaker then contrasts his situation with that of the dead: they at least have a place to go, provided they can "get one of those lazy birds awake long enough/To guide them across the water." Therefore, the dead do not need the speaker's "candle," because they can see by the light of the "blue wing." The speaker, however, does need it, because he is still in perpetual darkness. That death is seen to be a seductive escape from the misery of living seems to be the price the speaker pays for knowing "the secrets of the wheat and the mysterious Ives/Of the unnamed poor." The speaker's life has joined those other lives, and one thing he is learning is that death is preferable to living that life. Whereas before he at least had his "precious secret, [his] life" to combat the coldness of the outer
world, now it seems that even that will not allow him any sense of hope. The speaker sees both his similarity with and difference from the creatures who have died of "old age." On the one hand, he too is growing old, but on the other hand he is still alive, and must somehow try to live his life. The idea that the speaker must still live his life while allowing for others to live their lives is becoming more significant in Wright's poetry, as we shall explore in further detail later. Basically, it emphasizes the distinction, the fundamental difference, once the identification is made, between the speaker and the other.

In order to help convey the emotion of the speaker's despair, the poet uses a very natural diction that has its own informal music. Note the colloquial quality, for example, of "God spare them," "Fair enough," and "what's the use?" The musicality arises out of the internal rhyme inherent in the speaker's natural voice, as in the alliteration of the soft vowel sound in the lines "Their boats are moored there, among the cattails/And the night-herons' nests." Also, there is an incantatory quality in the repetition of "Failing the grass, they have abandoned the grass," or "...And dreamed of them praying for one candle,/Only one."

The movement of *Shall We Gather at the River*, so far, has gone from a hope of transcendence to the recognition of utter despair. "So this/Is what it feels like" the speaker says at the end of the next poem, "Before a Cashier's Window in a Department Store" (148-149). Wright wants to capture that moment of embarrassment during which the individual is exposed to complete isolation and at the mercy of those who would show none. During that moment, the speaker feels completely erased: "Beneath her terrible blaze, my skeleton/Glitters out. I am the dark. I am the dark/Bone I was born to be." This moment is perhaps one of the most bleak in the volume, where the speaker knows "what it feels like" to be completely exposed to the outside world, as represented by the beautiful cashier and her young manager, to be the social outcast. Wright puts his speaker squarely in the position of the social deviant, someone who cannot fulfill his obligation to society. In "The Minneapolis Poem," the speaker thinks "of poor men astonished to waken/Exposed in
broad daylight by the blade/Of a strange plow," which seems to suggest that the unwanted will be conveniently scraped away. Here, the speaker is that deviant, as he expresses a bleaker version of that vision: “The bulldozers will scrape me up/After dark.”

Only when he has reached his worst, then, can Wright’s speaker acquire the experience necessary to form empathic connections to other victims, and, rather than imply that he knows their “secrets,” as he does in “The Minneapolis Poem,” truly speak out their concerns from the inside. If “The Minneapolis Poem” is a statement of intention, “Speak” (149-50), the last of this (my designated) first series of poems, is a document of what the speaker has already attempted and will continue to do. Now that we have seen the speaker-as-victim, we can believe that he has earned the right to speak for all victims, and this is what he tries to do in “Speak.” It is important for Wright’s purposes, however, to notice that the speaker does not claim, as Whitman would, that “what I assume what you shall assume,/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” It was pointed out that Wright ultimately can’t make that association; there is a disconnection between the self and the other, though there may be for a time an identification that enriches them both. Realizing this, the speaker can still concern himself with the others, as he has done throughout the volume, and can therefore identify with them.

The poem is hymn-like in structure, consisting of eight line stanzas and rhyme, mostly off-rhyme. Its insistence on speaking for all outcasts elevates the speaker’s role to that of a preacher in addressing God, indicting rather than praising Him. God has forsaken his creations and left them in the dark:

To speak in a flat voice
Is all I can do.
I have gone every place
Asking for you.
Wondering where to turn
And how the search would end
And the last streetlight spin
Above me blind.
In speaking as the victim, he exhibits the disorientation of the victim--poor, lonely, exposed to society's embarassing glare, suicidal. When he says that he is the "dark/Bone I was born to be," he reaches the ultimate in personal despair, and he knows "what it feels like" to be at the bottom. Now, the speaker can "speak" out for those in similar situations, but in order to do so it must be in a "flat voice." His speaking in a "flat voice" represents a complete shift in tone from the early work, where the rhyme was usually complete, the lines of equal measure, and the diction elaborate. In using a more natural voice, Wright has created a speaker whose speech is more compatible with the situations he is speaking about. Wright, after a brief encounter with happiness in *The Branch Will Not Break*, has returned to his primary theme, human suffering, which has been his concern as far back as *The Green Wall*. Perhaps Wright states it best when he says, in speaking of the book *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, "I am committed to the beauty of nature which I love very much, but that commitment in me anyway always more and more has to be qualified by my returning to my own responsibility as a human being. And the life of a human being is more complicated than the blossoming of a pear tree. It's full of pain" (Henrickson, p. 186).

The speaker reiterates his association with those lost, feeling that he can do so because he has been there himself, knowing "Jacksontown" where he "got picked up/A few shrunk years ago/By a good cop." Now that the speaker has included himself in his list of losers, he is able to speak as Job:

```
I have gone forward with
Some, a few lonely some.
They have fallen to their death.
I die with them.
Lord, I have loved Thy cursed,
The beauty of Thy house:
Come down. Come down. Why dost
Thou hide thy face?
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In speaking for all the "cursed," the speaker reminds us of
Whitman's desire to sing for all men, and, in "Song of Myself," of his attempt to encompass the outcast of America into his generous "self." Is Wright attempting the same all-embracing love? Does he successfully "speak" for all Americans and, if so, does that make him a modern Whitman? Edward Butscher thinks that Wright is making this attempt but has failed:

The dramatic climax dons the mask of a complete, inconsolable doubter, with poor God reduced to a small role in the last line. Such a negative stance certainly complements the poem's general design, and the whole collection's questioning pose toward Christian revivalism, but it has a hollow ring. The melodramatic incidents, however real, the deliberate use of a hymn structure, the Spartan language and paucity of metaphors, the arrogant humility and sentimental stereotypes, all contribute to an aura of insincerity. There is a smug heart inside the poem that vitiated its popular-ballad formula. As is clear from the references in 'The Minneapolis Poem' and 'Inscription for the Tank,' Wright has come to regard himself as another Walt Whitman, singer of the common man. Alas, he possesses neither Whitman's eloquence nor his gigantic soul, and his particular perception is as narrow as his limited characters'.

(pp.131-132)

One wonders about Butscher's rhetoric. First, it is not unusual, in contemporary poetry especially, to not capitalize the word "God" or any of the pronouns that might refer to that Being. One wonders, also, what a "negative stance" is. Does this mean that the speaker is "negative" about life or the notion that everyone is happy and content? Wright's speaker is certainly taking a positive attitude when he identifies with the "lonely some," who "have fallen to their death," or with those with whom we have become acquainted not only in this poem but in the poems previous to it: the suicidal, the poor, and the lonely. To address God about the "cursed" of the world is not a "negative stance," but, rather, is a sincere concern. One wonders also why the "incidents" are
"melodramatic." It seems that the speaker is choosing, for the most part, to use characters he has used or will use in order to provide his work with continuity: Doty and Jenny. I am not sure that being drunk is melodramatic, and the fact that the speaker says that Doty's "in hell again" merely contributes to the colloquial quality of Wright's style. Jenny's action of leaving "her new baby/in a bus station can" is admittedly more shocking--effectively so, however, by the casual, off-handed way the speaker relates this incident. Her "sprightly" dancing "away/Through Jacksontown" intensifies the shock, especially because we are aware that the speaker is in love with her. His intimacy with Jenny and Jacksontown informs the context of the emotion. Wright's speaker is using a "flat voice" in order to contain the emotion inherent in the situations, just as do the hymn-like rhythm, the off-rhyme, and the Biblical allusions.

Finally, it is hard to see why the "deliberate use of a hymn structure," and "the Spartan language...and paucity of metaphors" would "contribute to an aura of insincerity." One can be insincere when using excessive language and elaborate metaphors: a quantity of language and metaphors does not directly correspond with their emotional effectiveness. William Matthews claims that for Wright to use elaborate speech would be to betray the speaker's intention, which is to express human misery and "defeat:"

So that a round voice, or a fancy style, is for the lies a man may tell himself if he should hope for victory, or justification. It is the voice a man uses to cheer himself, to tell himself that there is earthly justice...But in this poem there is no earthly justice, no consolation, and what fancy writing there is consists in taking on the accents and rhythms of religious dialogue, because the language of prayer and the language of the King James Bible are plain and formal.

(p. 108)

I would insist that the poems in this volume are almost as connected as the arrangement of the sections of "Song of Myself," and for
nearly the same reasons. Whitman’s poem begins with the speaker isolated from society and distinguishing his external personality from his internal soul. It is not until section five that he communes with his soul and he is able thereby to realize “the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth.” Only after recognizing his own soul can he incorporate others into his “self.” The poem moves from the personal to the mythic. Wright’s fourth volume moves in much the same way, from his statement of intent in “The Minneapolis Poem” to the recognition of his own sense of being a victim to his ability to speak out for “some” victims in “Speak” and in several later pieces I will soon examine. Butscher’s wanting to compare Wright with Whitman in terms of who was the better poet misses the point. We can see Wright’s attempt to identify with those who suffer as being Whitmanian without being forced to evaluate who was the more “eloquent.” The point is that they both attempt to speak for their times by expressing what they feel to be the concerns of the common man. Whereas Whitman, in “Song of Myself,” mostly celebrates, Wright grieves, and this contrast could tell us something the culture out of which they both write.

Wright’s speaker continues to empathize with other victims in the rest of the volume. Significantly, in the later half of the second part the other takes on more specific characteristics; in some poems the other is someone particular (rather than the general “old men,” or “the poor”), and in other pieces, the most intimate, the other is someone whom the speaker has known all of his life, like the “Charlie” of the introductory poem. The emotional connection often intensifies the speaker’s sense of his own isolation, as he detects similarities between himself and the desolate people he witnesses, as he does in “Outside Fargo, North Dakota,” “To Flood Stage Again,” and “Late November in a Field.”

In “Outside Fargo, North Dakota” (150), as in many of the previously discussed poems, the speaker inhabits a wasteland, alone “along the sprawled body of the derailed Great Northern freight car.” The desolation of the surroundings is described in two words: “No wind.” The surrealism of the middle stanza gives the provincial landscape a mythic
quality: "Beyond town, three heavy white horses/Wade all the way to/their shoulders/In a silo shadow." The timelessness only increases his loneliness, which is reflected in his casual encounter with another human being:

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

Robert Hass says about the last two lines that

They were not written by the poet who is
lonely and sick for home, they were written
by the man who noticed that the poet, sitting
in his room alone, recalling a scene outside
Fargo, North Dakota, nods when he writes down
the greeting of his imagined yardman, and catches
in that moment not the poet's loneliness but a
gesture that reveals the aboriginal loneliness of
being--of the being of the freight cars, silos,
horses, shadows, matches, poets, flashlights.
(p. 196)

The poem is somewhat similar to poems in *The Branch Will Not Break* that have been influenced by Trakl and Bly in its focus on silence, the surreal image in the middle stanza, and the sense that the mood is dominant. The difference here is that Wright chooses more than the image to reflect that mood--he is prepared to make statements like "lonely/And sick for home." Whereas before the middle stanza would be the focus of the poem, here it does not do justice to the human loneliness that Wright wants to emphasize. The speaker is in some sense lonely because he imagines the loneliness of the "man with a flashlight." Here, the speaker confronts his own loneliness in response to recognizing it in the man with the flashlight. Again, the colloquialness of the phrase "calls me good evening" balances the surrealism of the second stanza, and releases the emotion by appealing to what we can recognize as an
everyday occurrence expressed in everyday language. The use of surrealism and direct speech makes strange what is familiar and visa versa. The scene of Fargo, North Dakota, by a freight car, may be somewhat familiar to us, but the sense that "white horses" are wading "all the way to their shoulders/In a silo shadow" is somewhat strange. We are located and captivated, and the human connection between the speaker and the other draws us in even more. Finally, we have all been "lonely/And sick for home"--it touches an "aboriginal" chord that we nevertheless need to be adequately prepared for by what precedes it. The first stanza situates us, the second stanza defamiliarizes the "reality," and therefore captivates us, and the third stanza presents the full expression of the emotion.

A similar connection happens in "To Flood Stage Again" (151), in which a girl's unhappiness influences the speaker's own. This poem returns us to "The Minneapolis Poem" through the repetition of the line "I...gaze down at the dark water." Like "Outside Fargo, North Dakota," there is a correspondence among the images--the speaker, the river, the girl, and the sparrows:

In Fargo, North Dakota, a man
Warned me the river might rise
To flood stage again.
On the bridge, a girl hurries past me, alone,
Unhappy face.
Will she pause in wet grass somewhere?
Behind my eyes she stands tiptoe, yearning
for confused sparrows
To fetch a bit of string and dried wheatbeard
To line her outstretched hand.
I open my eyes and gaze down
At the dark water.

Just as the girl is alone, so is the speaker; just as she is unhappy, so the speaker contemplates the "dark water." The river is rising and the sparrows are confused, and it seems as if the whole landscape is sharing a common misery. It appears that the small redemption offered in "Old
Age Compensation" has disappeared entirely as these two poems make no attempt at transformation. Rather, the speaker's mood is confirmed by his connection with the other. That connection is communicated effectively by the poet's formal strategy of fashioning each image to correspond with the others. It seems as if the speaker's looking "at the dark water" could imply either suicide, redemption or both; the speaker's action, however, clearly arises out of the context of the situation—he does not impose his mood onto the events, rather, he merely responds to them.

The same type of connection occurs in "Late November in a Field" (152). This time the speaker's connection is with squirrels. Once again the speaker states that he is "alone in a bare place." The poem focuses on two squirrels, who are together building a home near a "hiding place." The poet sympathizes with their condition: "They are still alive, they ought to save acorns/Against the cold." At this point, however, being alive is not enough; the environmental conditions overpower our ability to struggle against them. Wright is naturalistic in his depiction of almost deterministic forces that shape our misery. The speaker realizes that he can not help the situation of the squirrels. In fact, he is caught up in the same deterministic conditions: "The earth is hard now,/The soles of my shoes need repairs," reflects a movement from sympathy to empathy. Here, even the act of speaking of the suffering is useless. It seems as if the speaker has lost whatever hope he had in the ability of his "precious" life to combat his agony. Also, whereas before the speaker desired to express the secrets of the poor, now he is learning that merely to speak out will not alleviate their suffering:

I have nothing to ask a blessing for,  
Except these words.  
I wish they were  
Grass.

Perhaps the attitude that they are "all in this together," if it does not redeem the situation, at least makes it a little more bearable. The
speaker connects the squirrel's struggle for survival, the hard earth, and his own worn shoes. The emotion arises, as in other of Wright's poems, when the speaker realizes, once again, that there is nothing he can really do to help the situation; even his poetry is not enough. His poem makes "nothing happen." The poem is a straight narrative except for a slightly surreal image slipped in half way through the description: "Frail paws rifle the troughs between cornstalks when the moon/Is looking away." This mysterious image, with its half rhyme of "paws" and "troughs," intensifies the plain descriptions that follow: "The earth is hard now/The soles of my shoes need repairs."

The speaker attempts to bring the suffering characters with whom he has associated himself with together in the next two pieces, "The Frontier" (153) and "Listening to the Mourners" (153). These poems stand approximately in the center of the book, and the voice enlarges into mythical proportions. Wright does not do so in the sweeping sense by stating that he is a "cosmos;" rather, with a few gestures, he tries to infuse the personal suffering of those individuals with whom the speaker empathizes with a cultural significance. Whereas in "Speak" he sang for those who are "cursed," the speaker, as a result of being a victim himself, is now ready to incorporate their suffering into his. The speaker is that cultural suffering, just as Whitman, in his song, can say that he is "absorbing all to myself."

How many scrawny children
Lie dead and half-hidden among frozen ruts
In my body, along my dark roads.

The speaker's grief has widened to be able to take in grief suffered by others; there is an incredible desolation in that knowledge, and in speaking of the others' agony, he must also feel that agony, as he does in "Listening to the Mourners."

Crouched down by a roadside windbreak
At the edge of the prairie,
I flinch under the baleful jangling of wind
Through the telephone wires, a wilderness of voices
Blown for a thousand miles, for a hundred years.
They all have the same name, and the name is lost.
So: it is not me, it is not my love
Alone lost.
The grief that I hear is my life somewhere.
Now I am speaking with the voice
Of a scarecrow that stands up
And suddenly turns into a bird.
The field is the beginning of my native land,
This place of skull where I hear myself weeping.

In saying "it is not my love/Alone lost" the speaker understands there is
a larger grief that, while it is connected to the self, goes beyond that
self. He hears "the grief," and associates it with his "life," which is
"lost" among "a wilderness of voices." This vision implies an
understanding that resists self-pity. The speaker's attempting to
identify with so many disenfranchised characters leads him into seeing
misery from a cultural perspective.

3

The tone of some of the later poems in the volume is intimate in
part because they are about the speaker's childhood in Ohio. Wright's
particular intimacy is bound up with his sense of place. In The Green
Wall, there are no references to Ohio; it is not until Saint Judas, where
Wright starts to create more out of his own experience, that references
to Ohio appear. It is not just Ohio, of course, to which Wright is
attached; in these more intimate poems, Wright is specific in locating
the situations, either in Minneapolis, or Nevada, or Chicago, or Fargo,
North Dakota. None of the poems before "Listening to the Mourners" is
set in Ohio; all nine poems in which Ohio appears are in the second half
of the volume. One reason for this grouping may be that Wright's Ohio
poems are often more associated with loss (childhood, beauty, people he
knew) and therefore more painfully intimate. While Wright could never be buried in Minneapolis, he could never return to live in Ohio. His feelings about Ohio are, as he says, "complicated": "I have a peculiar kind of devotion to Martins Ferry, although I haven't gone back there in at least twenty-five years...I feel I am stuck with it. It is my place, after all" (Smith, "The Pure Clear Word" p. 5). Some of the later poems set in Ohio are the most intimate in the volume because they are addressed to someone specific, someone the speaker knows and is intimately familiar with. In the first half of the book--with two exceptions--the speaker's identification was general, i.e the "old men," "the poor," "a man with a flashlight," "a girl." I would like to focus particularly on two poems that reflect that more personal intimacy, "Youth" and "To the Muse."

As in "Father" and "Stages on a Journey Westward" in earlier volumes, the speaker associates his childhood to a great degree with his father, as we can see in "Youth" (154). It is a poem written in admiration for a man who "worked too hard to read books." The speaker is trying to understand and to express love for his father. The success of this poem resides in a language that combines both the harshness of the father's employment with the tenderness of his resurrection as imagined by the speaker, capturing the essence of the father's spirit in a timeless setting. The speaker also laments the distinction between himself and his father, who "never heard how Sherwood Anderson/Got out of it, and fled to Chicago, furious to free himself/From his hatred of factories." This difference is overcome in the speaker's imagination:

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He will be getting dark, soon,
And loom through new snow.
I know his ghost will drift home
To the Ohio River, and sit down, alone,
Whittling a root.
He will say nothing.
The waters flow past, older, younger,
Than he is, or I am.
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The "waters," of course, bring us back to the dominant motif, which
seems to tie the characters together in one big "gathering"—though we are all suffering, there is a force, represented by water, that binds our lives together, our shared misery. We may be unconscious of this connection, but it is what allows us to feel love and compassion for each other. Though the poem is to a large extent about the difference between the speaker and the father, the waters bind them together in an eternal moment. This transcendence of the speaker's father's misery is an antidote to that misery, an attempt to get beyond the pathos of his life.

The intimacy of this poem arises out of how the poet's love for the other can be communicated to the reader without sentimentalizing that love. The speaker is able to make his description resonate the emotion. In other words, Wright manages to make his description of the speaker's father both identifiable and unique. He is like a father we can recognize, but he is also his own man. "He worked too hard to read books" is striking because it is true for many working class men who were trapped in small towns. What makes the line even more emotional, however, is the way it indirectly reflects the fact that the speaker painfully senses the difference between himself and his father. The speaker clearly reads a lot of books, and the line implies that he feels sorry for his father, a man who did not have the opportunities as the speaker. Also, perhaps the speaker pays respect to a life that was so much harder than his own. The emotion is successfully communicated because the language is straightforward and intrinsically intriguing: "Caught among girders that smash the kneecaps/Of dumb honyaks" is painful; "He came home as quiet as the evening" is tender; "Whittling a root" is strange. All of these descriptions are specific enough to allow the father to come alive; we sense he is deserving of the emotion the speaker invests in him.

A description that reflects the emotion, then, is very important in Wright's achievement of a successful intimate poem. Charlie wrenches his "left elbow round, to hold in line/The left-hand hollow of [his] back," while Morgan Blum "lay there/Clean shaved like a baby." Like the sense of place, a sense of detail better enables the speaker to speak from inside the experience. Also, when a poet has a speaker talk about a specific
town or specific people that he knows, the poet is drawing from the wellspring of an already existing emotion, since they are already part of the speaker's life. When Wright's speaker mentions Martins Ferry, for example, it is like listening to a friend begin a story about his childhood. As with friendship, longevity is significant in intensifying the sense of intimacy. When Ohio comes up in poem after poem, we are not surprised, and we will usually find out more about the speaker's feelings about that particular place, the way we appreciate Monet's "Waterlillies" if we are familiar with more than just one version.

Perhaps the "ghost" whom the speaker addresses most intimately is "Jenny." Because she appears in several poems, Jenny has been called Wright's "muse" by certain critics and by Wright himself in the volume's last poem, "To the Muse" (168-169). Shall We Gather at the River is dedicated to her, Wright intending for her presence to provide a focus for the work. I would like to spend some time discussing Jenny's relation to Wright's poetry because, as his muse, she serves a special function, especially in terms of how Wright attempts to create a poetry of intimacy.

Important characteristics of this kind of poetry are, as I have suggested previously, its personal style and natural voice, which are most apparent in Shall We Gather at the River. However, one predominant formal "device" that Wright employs in his poetry is the use of literary allusion, surprising for someone who strives to write in such an informal style. Indeed, one would expect this "literariness" from a poet like Eliot or Pound, but certainly not from a poet of personality like Wright. By bringing his knowledge of literature to bear, Wright can focus on the emotion while placing it within the context of the literary tradition. Wright's drawing from tradition in this way helps to keep the poems from being merely "private."

Wright's muse actually goes through several transformations, but what I am concerned with here is the way in which Jenny is used in Shall We Gather at the River. Overall, she is one of the most "significant others" in his work, appearing in five poems: "Speak" and "To the Muse" in
Shall We Gather at the River, "The Idea of the Good" from the "New Poems" section of Collected Poems, and "Son of Judas" and "October Ghosts" from Two Citizens. As was said previously, Wright also dedicates the entire Shall We Gather at the River to her memory.

Several critics have already pointed out Jenny's importance in Wright's work. William Saunders, who sees Wright dividing humanity into "devils and saints," says that Jenny is "the most saintly of all Wright's figures" and that she was "a thin girl whom Wright loved in his youth." But she is more than a personal memory: "In all her forms, Wright experiences her as a kind of Muse, the most profound source of his tragic sense of life, of his fear that even the good cannot avoid being destroyed. One feels that Wright finds it almost too painful even to mention her; she is a shadow cast over his whole life" (pp. 1-2). Leonard Nathan also suggests that Jenny is "real." "Who is Jenny? Readers of Shall We Gather at the River will recognize her as the dedicatee of the book and subject of 'To the Muse,' its last poem, in which Wright describes the sufferings of a real girl whom he early loved and who apparently committed suicide." But, like Saunders, Nathan quickly gives up the biographical reference and agrees that Jenny is "still his muse" (pp. 162-163). No doubt these critics were influenced to think of Jenny as a real person by Wright himself. In the Paris Review interview, Wright responds to the question of what he was attempting in Shall We Gather at the River: "Well, if I must tell you, I was trying to write about a girl I was in love with who had been dead for a long time. I tried to sing with her in that book" (Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," p. 52)

Though Wright identifies Jenny as "a girl [he] was in love with," and it is easy to identify the speaker of Wright's poems with Wright himself, it is a mistake to ignore the artistic devices he employs. Rather than being content with the identification of Jenny as someone in Wright's personal life, I want to explore how she also emerged from Wright's knowledge of literature. It is my view that Wright shaped his personal experience out of the literary tradition.

That Wright is a traditional poet has been pointed out by critics
when speaking of his metrics, but his traditionalism in other areas has been overlooked. I refer especially to the period from The Branch Will Not Break to Two Citizens. A significant element of this period's plainer style is that, in spite of its use of colloquialisms and everyday speech patterns, it is extremely "literary." Wright often incorporates quotes from other writers into his poems. A good example of where Wright incorporates other writers comes in The Branch Will Not Break, where Wright repeats the line "I am growing old" in two poems, "A Message Hidden in an Empty Wine Bottle That I Threw Into a Gully of Maple Leaves One Night at an Indecent Hour" and "In the Cold House." The line is a direct quote from Wright's favorite Chinese poet, Po Chu-i (the subject of the book's first poem), as it appears in Arthur Waley's translation, a translation which Wright quotes in his interview with Michael Andre (p. 148). Wright echoes the Tenth Psalm ("Why dost thou hide Thyself in times of trouble?") in the last line of "Speak:" "Why dost/Thou hide thy face?" I have already pointed out Wright's "borrowing" from Vallejo for his poem "The Jewel" and from Lorca for "To the Poets of New York." Also, there is the well-known last line of "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," "I have wasted my life," which echoes the last line of Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," translated "You must change your life." Though there are other echoes, the last I'd like to mention is a reference to a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a poet whom Wright greatly admired. In "Inscription for the Tank," Wright implores us to "let the dead pray for their own dead;" Longfellow's version appears in his famous "A Psalm of Life," in which he commands: "Let the dead past bury its dead."

But Wright did not allude only to poets. For him, prose was as important a medium as poetry. He taught the History of the Novel, and wrote his dissertation on the early work of Charles Dickens. In his interview with Peter Stitt, Wright claimed that "there's plenty of poetry in the novel" (p. 43). Since Wright was a self-consciously literary poet, in spite of his plain style, it comes as no surprise that one of the most significant characters in his poetry, "the most saintly of all Wright's
figures," "the secret inside the word secret which appears so often in Shall We Gather at the River" (Hass, p. 213), his dear Jenny, his muse, has not only a personal history, but also a literary one.

We find her in Laurence Sterne's very "modern" Eighteenth Century novel, *Tristram Shandy*. There, Jenny is Tristram's addressee, perhaps wife, perhaps mistress, perhaps friend: certainly she is a beloved figure for Tristram, for he refers or speaks directly to her no less than six times in the course of the novel, as early as in Volume I and as late as in Volume IX. We know Jenny is special to the narrator because of the way he keeps her identity mysterious: "...but who my Jenny is—and which is the right and wrong end of a woman, is the thing to be concealed" (Sterne, p. 237). Clearly, Tristram's relationship to Jenny is an intimate one.

That Wright used Sterne's "Jenny" seems likely for several reasons. First, we know that Wright loved Sterne's novel, and, in many respects, shared Sterne's vision of the suffering involved in human existence. In the *Paris Review* interview, Wright quotes from the novel as an example of how prose can be poetic, a subject I hope to return to in the next chapter regarding Wright's own prose. It is surely significant for my purposes that Wright quotes the powerful passage in the novel where Tristram, sensing painfully the swift passage of time, "breaks through his own narrator" and speaks to Jenny directly. Here is the passage that Wright cites:

> I will not argue the matter: time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity life follows from my pen; the days and hours of it, more precious, my dear Jenny! then the rubies of thy neck, are flying over our heads like light clouds of a windy day never to return more—everything presses on—whilst thou are twisting that lock—see, it goes grey; and everytime I kiss thy hand to bid adieu, and every absence which follows it, are preludes to that eternal separation which we are shortly to make—Heaven have mercy on us both!

(Sterne, quoted in Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," p. 44)
Wright goes on to say the following: "And the whole of Chapter Nine is 'now for what the world thinks of that ejaculation, I would not give a groat.' And then a little later he interrupts himself again and says; 'You wonder who Jenny is, don't you? Well, you pay attention to your own business and get back to the story.'" Following in the tradition of Sterne, Wright speaks to Jenny in a mysteriously personal way, and at the same time indicates that who she is or what he has to say to her (and to her alone) is none of our business. What Wright's speaker tells Jenny in "The Idea of the Good" is strikingly similar to Tristram's aside: "Nobody else will follow/This poem but you,/But I don't care."

Behind the comedy of *Tristram Shandy* looms a very large tragedy: "What Tristram tells us of his life...is first and foremost the story of a failure, a great frustration" (Fluchere, p. 381). For Henry Fluchere, Sterne's Jenny is "a romantic figure, feminine but unsubstantial, unsuitable idealized vision to oppose the concrete incidents of Shandeism..she remains the focal mystery, the indefinable symbol of femininity" (p. 382). I would say that Jenny is for Sterne a muse, the source of inspiration and life in a world that he labels early on as "This scurvy and disastrous world" (Sterne, p. 5).

These last two adjectives are significant for they are the very words the speaker of "To the Muse," Wright's elegy for Jenny, uses: "I wish to God I had made this world, this scurvy/And disastrous place." For Sterne, Jenny is Tristram's living lover; for Wright, Jenny is dead. For Sterne she is an escape from the world; for Wright, she has been destroyed by that world. Wright has taken Sterne's muse and shown us what has happened to her: she is among the suffering and the lost, and the speaker must elegize her in order to bear his own tortures.

In "Speak," Jenny is very much like Sterne's Jenny, who desired the fancy silk and would spit in the face of those who are cosily prude. Wright's Jenny, as Shandy's is alluded to be, is a whore, and, like Sterne, Wright was sensitive to the sources of their discomfiture:

And Jenny, oh my Jenny,
Whom I love, rhyme be damned,
Has broken her spare beauty
In a whorehouse old.
She left her new baby
In a bus-station can,
And sprightly danced away
Through Jackstown.

The last poem in *Shall We Gather at the River*, "To the Muse," is one of Wright's most intimate. Addressing Jenny in powerfully direct language, the speaker voices the pain of loneliness and death that Jenny has experienced, for he is himself alone and desperate without her. The poem is the culmination of the volume, and completes the cycle started at the dedication, where the speaker contemplates suicide. Wright follows Sterne in seemingly avoiding the reader by addressing Jenny directly:

It is all right. All they do
Is go in by dividing
One rib from another. I wouldn't
Lie to you. It hurts
Like nothing I know. All they do
Is burn their way in with a wire.
It forks in and out a little like the tongue
Of that frightened garter snake we caught
At Cloverfield, you and me, Jenny
So long ago.

To recall at the most intense hour of pain the experience they shared together is to create a sense of longing that is increased by the union of the speaker and Jenny in a Southeastern Ohio version of I and Thou: "You and me." Wright's expression of the emotion is effective in part because of the connection his relationship to Jenny has with Sterne's relationship to his Jenny. Also, the directness of the speech and the specificity of the location--"Cloverfield," which later will move to "the Powhatan Pit," and "Wheeling" provide the detailed descriptions of what Robert Hass calls the "hospital nightmare," and contribute to the "objective correlative" of the speaker's emotion and the sincerity of his voice:
I would lie to you
If I could.
But the only way I can get you to come up
Out of the suckhole, the south face
Of the Powhatan pit, is to tell you
What you know:

You come up after dark, you poise alone
With me on the shore.
I lead you back to this world.

What ultimately makes the poem one of Wright's best, however, is his ability to communicate the extreme love the speaker has for the other, which is so intense that he would kill himself in order to be with her. At bottom, he cannot stand to see her dead, and his empathic stance puts him in the position of feeling great compassion while at the same time wanting to kill himself so that he will no longer have to bear the weight of that sadness. As in “Youth,” the descriptions carry the weight of the emotion—they are "strange" in that they are unique to Jenny's situation. They shock us into caring for her as the speaker does:

But they only have to put the knife once
Under your breast.
Then they hang their contraption.
And you bear it.

It's awkward a while. Still, it lets you
Walk around on tiptoe if you don't
Jiggle the needle.
It might stab your heart, you see.
The blade hangs in your lung and the tube
Keeps it draining.
That way they only have to stab you
Once. Oh Jenny,
I wish to God I had made this world, this scurvy
And disastrous place. I
Didn't. I can't bear it.
Either, I don't blame you, sleeping down there
Face down in the unbelievable silk of spring,
Muse of black sand,
Alone.

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

Notice again the extreme flatness of the speech; Wright is depending upon the nature of the description to effectively convey the emotion. Whereas in the earlier poems we looked at how Wright distanced the emotion somewhat by combining surreal language with direct speech, in these later poems he wants the realism of the situation to stand on its own. In order for that to work, however, the situation must itself be interesting (or "strange") enough to carry the emotional weight. I believe that in "To the Muse," it is. Also, notice the importance of the direct address. The context of the intimacy is stated in the last part of the first stanza, and it informs the rest of the poem. Comparing the wire with the "tongue/Of that frightened garter snake we caught/At Cloverfield" creates the tension between the closeness the speaker feels for Jenny and his realization of her intense suffering. What we love, he seems to be saying, is a lot like what is killing us.

Sterne's "indefinable symbol of femininity in which dreams and unexpressed voluptuousness meet" turns into the "Muse of black sand." And this is where Shall We Gather at the River ends: the speaker "at the river" threatening to perform the act he has been contemplating all along, gazing down at the dark water, which is, we remember, the same place the speaker was in the beginning of the volume, in "The Minneapolis Poem." That the volume begins and ends at a river implies the ironic stance the speaker has towards the title of the volume. We want to answer, yes, we shall gather at the river, but most of us will be dead, and some of us will be lonely.

Many of the poems in Shall We Gather at the River, then, seem to be patterned and arranged in terms of an underlying single vision of the speaker's attempt to empathize with people who suffer. Their emotional content is often communicated successfully as a result of the formal strategies Wright uses to convey that emotion. In referring to a specific
poem, Plumly states that "the repetition of phrase and image, the free verse rhythms at ease with the speaking voice, the details, the actual names of things all help suggest the dimensions of the motif while clarifying the emotion" (p. 327). This assessment applies to most of the work, and I would like to add that Wright's employment of direct address, his combination of surreal and colloquial language, the intrinsically captivating quality of the incidents he relates in "flat speech," and his occasional literary references also "[clarify] the emotion." Most significantly, Wright creates a character who attempts honestly to express his relationship to those who are marginalized. While recognizing fundamental differences, he is able to incorporate the misery of others in order to "speak" for them from the inside of their (and his own) experience. In so doing, the speaker is suggesting that to empathize is the appropriate response to the conditions under which that misery is created.

However, there are poems that fail in their attempt at conveying their emotion, basically because that emotion is conveyed over-dramatically, or the images are too disoriented to be comprehensible, or it seems as if the speaker is trying to "tell" us what to feel rather than allowing his shaping of the language to communicate that feeling. One reason Wright's emotion is conveyed so powerfully is that he risks the sentimentality that results when the communication fails. Often, his poems walk the fine line between being empathetic and being pathetic; it is important to notice where that empathy fails in order to better understand when and why it succeeds.

Two poems that fail to convey their seemingly intended emotion are "The Life" (155) and "The Lights in the Hallway" (157). Whereas in other poems the speaker roots his desolation and suffering in a social context (either he was poor, or hungry, or he feared growing old and dying), in "The Life," it is hard to tell what motivates his emotional state. Instead of creating a situation out of which his agony is given voice, it seems as if he simply voices it. This poem, like the others, combines surreal and direct language, but both seem extreme examples of those forms. "It is
the trillium of darkness" is surreal but Baroque, while "It is hell" is colloquial but seems as extreme a use of direct language as the "trillium of darkness" is of surrealism. The poem is somewhat confusing. We don't know specifically what the "it" refers to, though we could guess that it is the despair and suffering the speaker expresses throughout the volume, only here, "it" does not have an objective correlative; there is no situation adequately created to make us believe that the speaker is suffering.

So too, "The Lights in the Hallway" seems over-burdened by surreal images not rooted in an underlying narrative. The speaker writes about his love for a woman, but we get no clear picture of the woman and do not feel the love he is trying to express. Instead, the surrealism gets in the way:

Her knee feels like the face
Of a surprised lioness
Nursing the lost children
Of a gazelle by pure accident.

How do I know what color her hair is? I float among
Lonely animals, longing
For the red spider who is God.

It is hard to imagine that a woman's knee can feel the way the speaker says it does. It seems that in this poem the speaker has spent too much time with the "Gabon poets" who "gaze for hours/Between boughs toward heaven" and has gotten lost among the surreal images he sees there. In "The Lights in the Hallway," the surrealism has simply made the content confusing.

Unfortunately, these failures carry over into Wright's next two works, the "New Poems" section of Collected Poems, published in 1971, and his next complete volume, Two Citizens, published in 1973. I would like to examine the failure of some of these poems to achieve a sense of
genuine emotion, and to try to place these works within the overall context of Wright's continually developing style. We will see that he has come to the opposite extreme from where he started in *The Green Wall* and *Saint Judas*. Just as the early work suffered from too much form, these later poems will suffer from lack of form. Wright will discover that neither extreme is acceptable.

Both the "New Poems" section of *Collected Poems* and *Two Citizens* represent for Wright a long transition in both attitude and expression. They are necessary works for Wright's development, and he could not have made the important changes that he did without first having gone through this period. As Wright said about Robert Penn Warren in reference to Warren's book, *Promises*: "...a major writer has chosen not to write his good poem over and over again, but to break his own rules, to shatter his words and try to recreate them, to fight through and beyond his own craftsmanship in order to revitalize his language" ("The Stiff Smile of Mr. Warren," p. 240). Wright perhaps did not want to "break his own rules" so much as to shift them to a different context and mood. I would like to explore briefly "New Poems" here and *Two Citizens* in the beginning of the next chapter to see how the failures of some of the poems are important in Wright's overall development.

Wright himself was aware of the problems of many of the poems included in the discussion that follows. Of the "New Poems" Wright said that "...at that particular time I was trying to reach outside, rather, reach deliberately beyond the range of a certain way that I had been trying to write before. And I had to take some risks. And not many of the poems are successful. That's all right. I would gladly try it again if I had it to do over" (Henrickson, p. 182). Perhaps Wright titled the last section of his *Collected Poems* "New Poems" because he knew that he had no vision that tied them together. They are, by the author's tacit
admission, some poems that happen to be arranged in a particular fashion. The poems often suffer from a privacy that excludes the reader, a confusion of syntax and meaning, a needless repetition of themes and words, an unsuccessful fusion of extreme forms of surrealism and direct language, as well as contrived connections and relationships, and overdramatization. In other words, where the formal strategies Wright employs in *Shall We Gather at the River* enhance the emotion, here these techniques fail him because he takes them too far, and we get the sense that the sincerity of the speaker has become a mere posturing.

Some of Wright's formal problems in "New Poems," overlap. "The Idea of the Good," for example, suffers from a confusion of theme, repetition, and a privacy of tone that excludes the reader without adequate reason. Wright best described this poem's problem: "The Idea of the Good' is a very, very confused poem. I don't have the faintest idea what it means. I can't imagine how anyone could find a meaning in it. It is just badly written. I forget what I was thinking of at the time" (Smith, "The Pure Clear Word," p. 222). Perhaps we can see reasons for this judgment. First, like other poems in this section, it repeats a word that represents a theme that was explored with great seriousness in his previous volume: "I dream of my poor Judas walking alone and alone/And alone and alone and alone...." The repetition of the word "alone" serves no useful function nor does the repetition of the word "lonely" elsewhere in this section. Here are some examples:

One afternoon I lonely found  
Home when a lonely  
Girl slipped her quick  
Shelter down.  

She said, give me my own lonely  
heart...  

Long ago the poor lonely  
Brontosaurus lay down...  
('To Harvey, Who Traced the Circulation," 203)  

Shorty the lonely is  
Dead...
I thought I was lonely, I thought I was lonely...
("Katy Did," 204)

...where we are all
Lonely together

Not my loneliness, which I cannot share.
("To a Friendly Dun," 201)

Dave Smith, in his important article, "That Haltering, Stammering, Movement," suggests that Wright's use of the word "lonely" is "a code word [used] to trigger a reader's sense of the greater decay of the citizenry. Such code words inform Wright's personal and poetic vocabulary and are so employed that they do not always mean the same thing, nor even what we expect them to mean. They are an attempt to redeem language, to make it clear" (p. 184). We must, however, be able to evaluate when the use of a certain word is artistically effective and when it is used merely to "trigger" a certain response. The word "lonely" is already suspect because of its abstraction and inherent pathos; if used at all, it must be used with care. Its use at the end of "Outside Fargo, North Dakota"—"I nod as I write good evening, lonely/And sick for home"—comes as a surprise and unites both the speaker's and the railroad man's mood into what Hass calls an "aboriginal loneliness." When used, however, four or five times in the same poem, in the same way (as demonstrated in the examples above), it loses its ability to surprise and thus elicit an emotional response. Rather, it becomes predictable and sentimental.

Perhaps another reason for the failure of so many of these poems is the speaker's posturing antagonistic attitude toward the reader, an attitude that would be defensible only if that antagonism were carefully situated within a context that would make it more believable. As it is, however, it seems overdramatized, and ends up by being merely private rather than communicating a universal anger: "Nobody else will follow
this poem, /But I don't care.” It seems as if the speaker himself realizes
the confusion of what he is saying, but there does not seem to be a
purpose for that confusion other than the exclusionary privacy of the
speaker's relationship with Jenny. "To the Muse" uses the private
address, but Wright is careful to describe Jenny's situation in detail so
that the reader along with the speaker can empathize with her. The
allusion to Sterne also contributes to enlargening the subject; "The Idea
of the Good" seems too private to engage the reader.

This belligerent attitude is expressed again in "To a Friendly Dun,"
where the speaker becomes didactic about the experience he has just
related concerning his loaning someone some money. In section six, the
speaker moralizes that "A man who charges his brother money to save his
brother's soul/Is scum." Then he directs his attack at the reader: "You
are scum./I paid you.” Apparently, the speaker wishes to say that we are
all "scum" because we are all guilty of wanting our money back, but that
"truth" should be inherent within the descriptions of the poem. This
didactism mars many of the poems in this section, and it is again
combined with an antagonistic stance towards the reader in "Many of Our
Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child" (206-212). This poem,
like "The Minneapolis Poem" and "Speak" in Shall We Gather at the River,
seems a document of the speaker's intention, which in this case is to go
beyond the formality of art and state his concerns directly:

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.
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Perhaps one reason why it is hard to respond to that passion is that it seems insincere because it is overdramatized. It is hard to believe, for example, that the speaker feels like a "homesick vampire." Another example comes in "A Secret Gratitude" (183-86), where the speaker expresses his extreme attitude about himself and mankind in general:

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

Overstatement occurs again in "Many of Our Waters" with the lines "The long body of his dream is the beginning of a dark/Hair under an illiterate/Girl's ear." Robert Hass' comments on these lines are perceptive in describing Wright's overall problem both here and elsewhere: his distrust of thought and reliance on certain words or images to carry the weight of a believable emotion:

What bothers me, finally, is the familiar celebration of what is not mind, of everything unformed, unconscious, and suffused, therefore, with yearning. The important thing about the image is scale; it has the scale of body knowledge. It is as sharply focused as the body is in lovemaking or in pain. It is also predictable. The hair is dark, not light. The person is a girl, not a woman or a man. And just to make sure we are in the dark of sex or dark of nature or the spirit's darkness, the girl is illiterate.

(p. 198)

One problem relating to relying on predictable words is a habit that is a carryover from Shall We Gather at the River, and that is Wright's overuse of the two forms of language that he can often combine so effectively: surrealistic and direct speech. Most of the time in "New Poems," the surrealism leads to awkward syntax and confusing content.
Even Wright seems to acknowledge the problem. Referring to Steven Spender's critique of "to the Moon" in *The New York Review of Books*, Wright says "I had said something about a panther's footprints in the snow. The moonlight throwing things like that. He said, that doesn't sound like a person who had been looking at the moonlight...He's just been reading Spanish poetry. I think it was a fair statement" (Henrickson, p. 182). "A Secret Gratitude" is an example of how Wright tries to bring together surrealism and direct speech, but it is hard to see how they work effectively:

...An aphid which is one of the angels whose wings toss
    the black pears
Of tears down the secret shores
Of the seas in the corner
Of a poet's closed eye.
Why should five deer
Gaze back at us?
They gazed back at us.
Afraid, and yet they stood there,
More alive than we four, in their terror
In their good time.

Often the surrealism leads to awkward emotions, such as "I would like to sleep with deer" or "I have stepped across its rock./The three wings coiling out of that black stone in my breast/Jut up slashing the other two/Sides of the sky" from "A Moral Poem Freely Accepted from Sappho."

Ultimately, the inability to balance these two modes of language leads to the didacticism we saw earlier. This is nowhere more apparent than at the end of "Many of Our Waters," where the speaker ultimately sentimentalizes his emotion with the repetition of the word "pity": "Pity so old and alone, it is not alone, yours, or mine,/The pity of rivers and children, the pity of brothers, the pity/Of our country, which is our lives." The problem here is that "pity" needs to be demonstrated in the poem that proceeds these last lines; it is not, and the emotion is thus unearned. All we really get in the previous six sections are fragments of "real" speech as recorded by the poet and glib statements about the
poet's wanting to write "the pure clear word." It is interesting to note that, in the section of *Collected Poems* in which Wright makes the statement about wanting to write the "pure clear word" as opposed to "mangled figures of speech," he composes so many poems that are indeed "mangled" rather than "pure."

It is important to recognize, however, that Wright is experimenting with new forms; he is trying to stretch the "direct speech" of *Shall We Gather at the River* into a language that is even more direct and "transparent." In his future works, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* and *This Journey*, he will learn how better to formalize that direct speech while mostly avoiding the pitfalls. There are several poems, of course, in "New Poems" that succeed in expressing the "pure clear word" with emotional force. In these poems, Wright seems able to attain a direct speech by avoiding overstatement and a confusing surrealism and focusing primarily on the "objective correlative" of the speaker's perception--clear descriptions transfigured by a language that is fresh and direct. This happens in "A Summer Memory in the Crowded City" and "Northern Pike."

In "A Summer Memory in the Crowded City" (192-94), the speaker narrates an experience of a "mere barn swift." He and some friends are forking dung out of a barn in which live the barn swift's newborn. Wright manages to convey the plight of both the barn swift and the speaker, but while the latter can empathize with the former, he has his job to do. Notice how the fusion of the speaker's and the barn swift's sufferings occur in a language that is fresh and surprising in the way it undercuts what it sets up:

She came crying down to me  
Out of the dim heaven  
That I had been praying  
Against all afternoon.  
And I loved the earth much  
With its hay dust  
That swaled my eyes closed.  
And her voice did not have  
The clear sweetness
In the books of our childhood.

The language works against our expectations by calling the ceiling a "dim heaven" that the speaker has been "praying/against." This image opens the poem up and gives the barn swift a kind of ironic otherworldliness. The last three lines work in the same way: "In the books of our childhood" works against the expectations the language has given us. This negation of an ironic "heaven" with an ironic "sweetness" re-inforces the connection between the speaker and the barn swift; they are both in the same boat. Also, the speaker both makes a connection and sees the difference between himself and the barn swift--they are both somewhat trapped. The poem seems to go beyond the speaker's private concerns by referring to everyone: "our childhood." Later, he uses a colloquial speech that seems real because the emotional situation has already been established; the "Ohioan" is slipped into the narrative with such ease that it becomes part of the poem's rhythm and driving force:

Did you see that bird, Dave?
Yes. Never mind. Look here,
Look at these pups.
They don't eat anything but milk foam.
And look how fat they keep.

Note the interdependence of direct speech and imagery:

We didn't look at each other.
What the hell are we supposed to do with these birds?
They clutter the whole barn,
They spend their days flailing the pinnacles of heaven
Where the angels do nothing
But pray and sing. Faugh!
We stabbed our forks
into the cold cow pies
And shoveled them out.

Part of the beauty of "Northern Pike" (213-14) is its self-consciousness of failure. The last poem in Collected Poems, it demonstrates that the poet is aware of the failures of the "New Poems," but feels driven to continue trying. He attempts to redeem himself by
admitting those failures and then stating in no uncertain terms that there is an underlying truth that in part accounts for them:

All right. Try this,
Then. Everybody
I know and care for,
And everybody
Else is going
To die in a loneliness
I can’t imagine and a pain
I don’t know.

This truth would be banal if the speaker did not complicate it with a moving account of an experience that is related in “pure, clear” language which expresses a simple joy. The tension between that joy and the underlying tragedy of “loneliness” and “pain” and death informs the emotion of this poem:

We had
To go on living. We
Untangled the net, we slit
The body of this fish
Open from the hinge of the tail
To a place beneath the chin
I wish I could sing of.
I would just as soon we let
The living go on living.
An old poet whom we believe in
Said the same thing, and so
We paused among the dark cattails and prayed
For the Muskrats,
For the ripples below their tails,
For the little movements that we knew the crawdads
were making under water,

For the right-hand wrist of my cousin who is a policeman.
We prayed for the game warden’s blindness.
We prayed for the road home.
We ate the fish.
There must be something very beautiful in my body.
I am so happy.
The power of this poem resides in its movement. Wright follows the Muskrats and the crawdads in such fine detail that we know his prayer is sincere. The poem once again moves outward from the speaker's original joy ("To a place beneath the chin / I wish I could sing of") to his caring for the small creatures of the earth, which includes his "cousin who is a poolceman," to ingesting that joy into his own body. The emotional associations with which the speaker describes the creatures he cares about allows him to earn his happiness in the last line.

"New Poems" is inconsistent because, once again, Wright is experimenting with new forms. He is stretching surrealism and direct speech as far as he can in order to try to reflect the beginnings of a new attitude and sensibility. In fact, one can make the claim that Wright's change from *Shall We Gather at the River* to *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* is as radical as the change from *Saint Judas* to *The Branch Will Not Break* "New Poems" is an important transitional stage in Wright's noble attempt to go beyond a style that he had already mastered, for he is too consummate an artist to be content with repeating himself.

Significantly, parallel with Wright's change of style is his change of attitude. Rather than focusing primarily on human suffering, Wright, in the majority of his last poems, will again become a poet of light.

Though Wright experiments with some of these new attitudes in "New Poems," the more important transitional work is his next full length volume, *Two Citizens*. In this work, Wright makes more experiments with the form of direct and informal speech. These experiments culminate in Wright's use of the prose-piece. Wright's movement into prose seems like a natural extension of the development of his art. Two important factors help to influence Wright's change of attitude and style: the first is his marriage, and the second is his travel in Europe. In my next chapter, I hope to show how Wright becomes a poet of light, a poet who accepts and affirms. The expanding relationship between the speaker and the other takes on new dimensions, and I want to examine how Wright's evolving experiments in form embody those new kinds of relationships.
Chapter 4: The Poetry of the Present Moment

Many critics, including Wright himself, considered *Two Citizens* to be a failure. Wright was so adamant in his condemnation of the work that he claimed he would "never republish it." In fact, he never did have it republished, though a shortened version has recently appeared, seven years after the poet's death. In spite of Wright's criticism, *Two Citizens* is an important book in the study of his canon, primarily because it helps us to better understand the kinds of changes that occur in the relationships between the speaker and the other and in the forms in which these changes are represented in *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* and *This Journey*. Though Wright was at the height of his "fame" (he had recently received the Pulitzer prize for his *Collected Poems*), it is clear that he was continually experimenting with both form and subject matter. *Two Citizens* is Wright's attempt at trying to "recreate" forms. Like many transitionary works, it fails mostly because Wright is suffering the pangs of his birth into new sensibilities. Looking at *Two Citizens* as a natural stage in the development of Wright's poetry, I would like to modify Butscher's comment on *Two Citizens*. He says that Wright's "whine is replaced by sobs of pleasure, and the woman, of course, is Annie, his new wife, who has rescued him from desolation--and in so doing has unconsciously contributed to his art's downfall. Without the despair and horror that pulsed in his earlier poems, Wright has nothing left to restrain his inordinate taste for sentimental resolutions of difficult problems" (p. 133). As I will try to make clear, while I would agree that many of the poems in *Two Citizens*
are unrestrained, I would suggest that it is this very lack of restraint that allows Wright to discover new forms in order to express new sentiments. *Two Citizens,* like many of the "New Poems," often fails in successfully communicating its emotional concerns. Perhaps Wright himself is his own best critic:

The book is just a bust. I will never reprint it. Let me put it this way, I ought not to have published that book the way it stands. I should have taken possibly six poems in it and tried to wait a year, to see if I couldn't revise them and see what else I had. That is what I ought to have done and I didn't. I made an ass of myself. It seems to me a bad book because most of it is badly written. Obscure and self indulgent, it talks around subjects rather than coming to terms with them. It is impossibly ragged. It is just unfinished.

(Stanley, "The Pure Clear Word," p. 222)

I would like to examine the ways in which Wright's criticism speaks to the volume's problems, many of which are carry-overs from "New Poems." Particularly, what is the nature of the intimate emotion in these poems? It will be shown that the emotion Wright controlled so successfully in *Shall We Gather at the River* is now at times too private and unrealized to be communicated to the reader. He fails, in the majority of these poems, to create an adequate "objective correlative" to the emotion, and the reader is left outside of the experience. It will be seen that the poems fail to communicate their emotion when Wright abandons technical control.

In *Two Citizens* Wright is testing how far he can take the direct speech that we saw bud in the early work and blossom in *Shall We Gather at the River.* For Dave Smith, this speech reflects Wright's desire to truthfully express his emotional concerns and is therefore appropriate:

...Wright works to stimulate a conversational idiom
which is, nevertheless, an illusion of greatly shortened distance. It remains a system of organized symbols on a page, inert and closely manipulated, but with an identifiable human voice speaking urgently of urgent matters. As Dickens had, Wright's language croons, curses, sings, whines, giggles, fawns, shouts, demands, coos, and drones as is strategic...poetry as a parlor game, however skillful, will not suffice for Wright's intention, which is a gathering and an embrace

(Smith, "That Haltering, Stammering, Moment," pp. 180-181)

However, often this "human voice" is too "urgent." It is too direct, too reliant on the emotion to speak for itself without resonating beyond the immediate feeling. "A gathering" or "an embrace" has to be earned because the context of the poem has made it believable. Unfortunately, in many of these pieces, it simply happens without being adequately prepared for and becomes, rather than communicative, self-indulgent. Self-indulgence occurs especially in some of the pieces directed at a lover or a friend. The problem with these pieces is that we are not presented with the source of the speaker's emotion through detailed description and specific language. Take, for example, "Love in a Warm Room in Winter":

The trouble with you is
You think all I want to do
Is get you into bed
And make love with you.

And that's not true!

I was just trying to make friends.
All I wanted to do
Was get into bed
With you and make

Love with you.

Who was that little bird we saw towering upside down
This afternoon on that pine cone, on the edge of a cliff,
In the snow? Wasn't he charming? Yes, he was, now, Now, now,
Just take it easy.
The poem is too private; the bird may have been charming to the speaker and his lover, but he can not be charming to us because of the generality of the description, and the experience that seems to underlie the speaker's memory is lost on the reader. It is hard to see where the "system of organized symbols...inert and closely manipulated" occurs here other than in the simplistic end-rhyme. I suppose one could say that here Wright's language "fawns" in the last line, but it seems simplistic rather than strategic. One notices, however, how different the sensibility of love and affection is than the loneliness and desolation that characterized *Shall We Gather at the River*. In that volume, most of those whom the speaker loved were dead: Charlie, Willy Lyons, Jenny. Here, the speaker loves someone who lives and who, as we shall see, loves him in return.

"Hotel Lenox" is another example of Wright's failing to express the emotion that informs the poem. Here, a transformation is said to take place, but it is not adequately earned:

We went back to the warm caterpillar of our hotel.
And the wings took.
Oh lovely place,
Oh tree.
We climbed into the branches
Of the lady's tree.
We birds sang.

The poet allows his feelings to control the language to such an extent that he fails to provide a context for the transformation. The images seem too simplistic: "wings," a "tree," the lovers like "birds" singing. The apostrophes help to exaggerate the emotion: "Oh lovely place, Oh
"tree" sounds more like a parody than a sincere gesture. Ultimately, there is a privacy rather than an intimacy that the reader can share.

Another example of a love poem that is communicated too privately to the reader is "On the Liberation of Woman." Here, the speaker states that "no body was ever so kind to me/As one woman, and begins spring/In the secret of winter, and that is why/I love you best." Like "The Idea of the Good," which was directed specifically to Jenny (to the exclusion of the reader) this poem is directed specifically to his beloved, whom he asks to "Forgive and gather/[his] man's broken arms/Beneath them." Though we can guess at the speaker's pain, we do not know it for sure, and thus his need to ask for forgiveness rings hollow. The last two lines reassert the privacy: "What is going to happen when we both die?/I love you best."

As Wright overuses the word "lonely" in "New Poems," he overuses "wing" in Two Citizens. His obsession with this word is, as Smith states, related to the speaker's desire to gather and embrace, but often the images in which this word appears are confusing because they are hard to visualize. The emotion is lost: "What gathers beneath the cold wing, the west/Shoulder of heaven?" Again, in "Son of Judas," a tree is miraculously transformed into a wing, but only because the poet says so: "In the Jenny sycamore that is now the one wing,/The only wing." Wright's penchant for romanticizing his emotions, rather than communicating them directly in clear and surprising language, still plagues him. Wright's intention clearly is a gathering and an embrace, but, unfortunately, the poet imposes this communion upon the situation rather than allowing it to arise out of the language itself. Robert Hass states that rise and gather are "the most important active verbs in Wright's work. A dream of transcendence and a dream of community." Later, however, Hass claims that "having no language to explain rising, illumination, in the ordinary world, he invents" (pp. 202-203). Wright is often accused of having "poetic" words handy that trigger certain emotional responses, such as "dark" in The Branch Will Not Break or "lonely" in Shall We Gather at the River. Hass' term "invents" is key
here; often, rather than create a mood or emotion through specific detail and description, Wright will draw from his stock of "poetic" words; he will "invent" from ready made materials rather than create. That kind of writing can lead to a poetry that does not "describe anything but tell[s] you that someone is feeling something." As Hass says, however, "Wright knows this most of the time, that the 'one wing' of beauty won't take him very far" (p. 205).

In *Two Citizens*, Wright wanted to make the transformation into an affirmative stance of love, and he wanted to gather and embrace so badly that he often simply *did* Wright's ability to formally control his sensibility of affirmation needed to catch up with that sensibility. He needed time for his new perspective to incubate. As we saw, this slow change of form in order to reflect a new sensibility also explained the long transition between *Saint Judas* and *The Branch Will Not Break*. One of the frustrations with an experimental work is that the language often misses its mark. The positive side of Wright's experiments, of course, is that he is learning to stretch and strain his language so that it will match the new things he wants to say, which eventually will lead him to experiment with the prose piece.

On the back of the book, Wright states that "*Two Citizens* is an expression of my patriotism, of my love and discovery of my native place. I never knew or loved my America so well, and I begin the book with a savage attack upon it. Then I discovered it. It took the shape of a beautiful woman who loved me and who led me through France and Italy. I discovered my America there. That is why this is most of all a book of love poems. The two citizens are Annie and I." There are several poems that reflect successfully this new sense of discovering both his love for his wife and new places of inspiration. Correspondingly, Wright's growing discovery of love and his new explorations in Europe are seen in the light of his rejection, often in anger, of his Ohio past.

In "A Poem of Towers," the speaker's love for his wife is adequately contained through the use of sharp, distinct images. Also, the subject matter moves outward rather than remaining merely private;
associations extend naturally from the context of the situation:

I am becoming one
Of the old men.
I wonder about them,
And how they became
So happy. Tonight
The trees in the Carl Schurz
Park by the East River
Had no need of electricity
To light their boughs, for the moon
And my love were enough.
More than enough the garbage
Scow plunging, the front hoof
Of a mule gone so wild through the water,
No need to flee. Who pities
You tonight, white-haired
Lu Yu? Wise and foolish
Both are gone, and my love
Leans on my shoulder precise
As the flute notes
Of the snow, with songs
And poems scattered
Over Shu, over the East River
That loves them and drowns them.

In this poem, which I have quoted entire, Wright returns to the device of parallel structure: the experience intensifies when the poet parallels Lu Yu and the Shu river with the speaker and the East River. We are reminded of “As I Step Over a Puddle, I think of an Ancient Chinese Governor,” in which the speaker’s situation is enriched when we see it against the situation of Po Chu-i’s. “White-haired/Lu Yu” is an appropriate double for the speaker, who is learning wisdom, love and acceptance, and, in his final volumes, will try to express that acceptance.

“I Wish I May Never Hear of the United States Again” perfectly reflects Wright’s new sensibility. It is a poem about being in love and discovering new places. In it, he is trying to repudiate and go beyond the loneliness that informed Shall We Gather at the River. Here, he is “Alone all this time, and bored with being alone.” The poem is literally about
learning a new language in Yugoslavia, and it has the mood of the speaker's wanting to shed his "old" language. His acquisition of this new language corresponds with his walking with his new love, who is also a kind of "language" the speaker is learning:

In Yugoslavia I am learning the words
For greeting and goodbye.
Everything else is the language
Of the silent woman who walks beside me.

Wright's learning of a new language is metaphorical of the larger change from desolation to acceptance. Much of that acceptance has to do with his learning silence, to value his life, and to affirm love as an antidote to the suffering that was so prevalent in *Shall We Gather at the River*.

Wright is learning how to love the other to the extent that he can observe and describe it in a language that re-creates it. Also, he is learning to "shut up and listen," which, for Wright, means opening himself to the new sights and sounds around him. Wright gets farther outside of himself and discovers more of the world and the other in his last volumes. In *Two Citizens* he attempts to focus less on the speaker's misery and more on the sacredness of the other. In "Afternoon and Evening at Ohrld," for example, the speaker, talking about a walk with his lover, says "Well, /For the first time in my life,/ I shut up and listened." This sense of respect for the life of the other is expressed directly in "Voices Between Waking and Sleeping in the Mountains":

Annie, it has taken me a long time to live.
And to take a long time to live is to take a long time
To understand that your life is your own life.
What you found on that long rise of mountain in the snow
Is your secret.

Getting outside of himself allows him to take in new things, as in learning a new language and learning to respect the life of the other. The speaker seems to prepare himself for new experiences by trying to shut out the "noise" of his old life; perhaps that is why Wright mentions
silence so often in this and succeeding volumes. Silence, we remember, was also important in *The Branch Will Not Break*, where the speaker was trying to open himself up to nature.

At the same time Wright's speaker is opening himself up to an entirely new set of experiences, he also looks back ambivalently upon his past. In his final books, Wright will learn to accept Ohio with more love than anger. *Two Citizens*, however, is a working toward that acceptance. Here, the tone is sometimes one of anger, an anger that could only arise out of such an intimate poet. In fact, I would claim that the anger is a response to the corruption of the intimacy that the speaker feels for the characters involved. It is an indignation born of love.

"Son of Judas," for example, is a poem in which the speaker rails against those who would corrupt the natural beauty of Ohio. When the speaker tries to visit a sycamore tree, he "got within maybe a hundred and fifty yards/Of a strip mine." In this poem, the speaker presents the opposition between Mark Hanna and the tree. Hanna is associated with masturbation:

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

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I rose out of my body so high into
That sycamore tree that it became
The only tree that ever loved me.
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Mark Hanna's world becomes the whole corrupt culture that would strip-mine beauty, and the speaker is angry that he himself is complicit in that world, because he has been "sucked into" making money he did not want. In the end, he curses that world, saying "Damn your own son,/And leave us go." As we can see, Wright is much more direct in *Two Citizens* in condemning society for its corruptive force than he was in *Shall We*
Gather at the River. There, the speaker's identification with the suffering victim was an indirect condemnation of a culture that would sanction the existence of those victims. Here, the speaker specifically identifies the oppressor, which is characteristic of the less restrained emotional tone and directness of speech of the entire volume. I would say, however, that "Son of Judas," like many other poems in this collection, is only partially successful. The raw language either hits or misses, and in his description of Mark Hanna, he hits the mark with a wonderfully pointed, colloquial diction that seems realistic to the native place. It is harder to imagine, however, how a tree could love the speaker, the idea of which becomes even more extreme when the speaker says "Now hovering between the dead sycamore,/That tree I made my secret love to." The anger of the tone carries with it an exaggeration, and sometimes the emotion seems forced.

Another poem that is an expression of the speaker's hatred is "Ars Poetica: Some Recent Criticism." This piece is representative of the majority of the others in the volume in that it contains extreme expressions of both tenderness and horror. Because of its willingness to experiment with an even more natural and direct speech, and the risks it takes in trying to express intense love and intense anger, the poem, while containing some of the worst of Wright, is one of his most ambitious.

Like the poems we noticed in Shall We Gather at the River, "Ars Poetica" tries to identify human suffering, but here the speaker is much more indignant and prepared to point fingers. Aunt Agnes is an example of those who suffer because of the cruelty of others, and her situation becomes symbolic of the speaker's disenchantment with his country, as he repeats the theme: "I loved my country./When I was a boy." Wright unfortunately drops into the sentimentality which marks this volume; his presentation of Aunt Agnes is at times too pitiful. A "homely woman," Aunt Agnes is also simple and, as we learn later, mentally unbalanced. She is not the kind of person one could immediately love: "She stank./Her house stank." It is hard to care for a woman when we are
told in such direct terms that we should care for her, as in the lines: "I think she was too lonely/To weep for herself." It seems that Wright wants us to care about Agnes so much that he abandons the creation of character that is necessary to allow us to see her and, instead, pleads with us in too direct a manner. Again, his feelings for Agnes are expressed in terms of "gathering":

I gather Aunt Agnes
Into my veins.
I could tell you,
If you have read this far,
That the nut house in Cambridge
Where Agnes is dying
Is no more Harvard
Than you could ever be.
And I want to gather you back to my Ohio.
You could understand Aunt Agnes,
Sick, her eyes blackened,
Her one love dead.

Whatever one feels about the sentimentality and the antagonistic attitude toward the reader, however, one must admire the emotional intensity that drives the language. The speaker reveals that he cares about Agnes because, even though she is "crazy," she is able to save a goat from some boys who were stoning it; she (once again) gathers the goat "Into her sloppy arms." The speaker's indignation gathers force when he claims that he does not "believe" in the reader's god, or in Aunt Agnes, nor does he believe that "the little boys/Who stoned the poor/Son of a bitch goat/Are charming Tom Sawyers." Nor, apparently, does he "believe in the goat, either." It seems as if the speaker is faulting the readers for being representatives of the kind of world that would stone a helpless goat:

When I was a boy
I loved my country.

Ense petit placidam
Sub libertate quietem.
As with the expression of his love for Agnes, that of the speaker's hatred for the reader and America in general is extreme. The final outburst catches us by surprise; it seems unprepared for and jumps out at us. We get the sense that the speaker really doesn't hate the readers so much as that part of us and himself that would participate in an act of cruelty. The belligerent tone reminds us of several of the poems we looked at in "New Poems" (during one of which he asked us to leave his poem if we didn't like it). Here, he treats us with the same kind of condescension: "...Which is my country, / If you haven't noticed." We believe that he is sincere in that he does love Aunt Agnes and hates his country, but, it seems, he wants to claim that the former leads to the latter when we know that it is much more complicated. Can the speaker actually hate his country and the people who he is addressing because some boys who are not "charming Tom Sawyers" stoned a runaway goat? Again, Wright's Puritanism is seeping through and not allowing him to make rational distinctions; rather, he settles for a simple dichotomy of the good, Aunt Agnes, and the bad, the boys. Wright himself felt that this poem was unfinished: "[the poem] has some strong possibilities in it, but it is still confused. I am not sure what it means. That can be a glib answer, an evasion of responsibility, but I mean that when I go back and look at it I can't quite figure out what it is about" (Smith, "The Pure Clear Word," p. 222). Perhaps Wright was trying to come to some kind conclusion about his feelings about his "native country" as he was making the change from suffering to love and from America to Europe. It seems that his unresolved anger is a necessary stage to the final acceptance he learns in the poems of his next two volumes.

A poem that begins to reflect an acceptance of Wright's native country is "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio." One reason why it is one of the best poems in Two Citizens is that it is able to balance the tension between the miserable lives that the men of...
Martins Ferry normally lead with the unexpected pleasure and joy they experience after having dug a swimming hole. The poem is about a dying time, and this last burst of "life" comes as a complete surprise and temporary rejuvenation in the face of the destruction that will inevitably occur. Also, like other poems in the volume, the poem exhibits a colloquial directness of speech that works because it is formally controlled by the narrative. We empathize because the poet has authority over the experience; he has his finger on the pulse of the speech of his native place. As in several other of Wright's poems, there is a sense of intimacy between the speaker and the reader, as the former addresses the latter directly. Wright uses this directness of speech, we remember, in "Ars Poetica," only here it is much more intimate, as the speaker assumes that we know him, especially when he says, for example, that "I had seen by that time two or three/Holes in the ground,/And you know what they were." The opening lines convey the personal tone of someone telling a story to a trusted friend: "I am almost afraid to write down/This thing. I must have been,/Say, six or seven years old."

The speaker's father and uncles help to build a "hole in the ground" that turns out to be, surprisingly, not a grave, but a swimming pool. What seems to inform the speaker's growing affirmation toward his own life and the world is an encounter with a girl:

It is going to be hard
For you to believe: when I rose from that water,

A little girl who belonged to somebody else,
A face thin and haunted appeared
Over my left shoulder, and whispered, Take care now,
Be patient, and live.

I have loved you all this time,
And didn't even know
I am alive.

It is the intimacy of one interaction, Wright implies, that motivates the speaker to attempt to survive the misery surrounding him. This is horror mixed with beauty in a place where the river is dying and the
"people don't have quite enough to eat." In the midst of poverty, he discovers that love is the means of survival.

Wright makes further experiments in the form of direct speech and a conversational style. In *Two Citizens*, two formal techniques would seem to anticipate Wright's move into the prose piece: the longer line and the section and, in some cases, the stanza, as a more self-contained entity. The longer lines give the poems a more prosy feel; they almost give us the sense that they don't want to break themselves, for example: "One first summer evening in Paris my love and I strolled among/The young students...." It seems, also, that the stanza is becoming more self-contained and more loosely connected to the poem as a whole. Wright's flatness of speech ("The one tongue I can write in/Is my Ohioan") and growing use of colloquialisms give the language a more direct quality.

*Two Citizens* looks toward *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* in many ways, including the new sense of affirmation and acceptance, the opening up to the spirit of new places, and the new forms. Wright was able to get out of his system his uncontrolled anger about his native place, and to make his first attempts at expressing the tenderness he feels toward one woman. Wright experiments with what his style would allow him to do, stretching the direct speech sometimes beyond its limits, occasionally posturing and overstating his emotion, and often not providing the poem with the adequate specific detail and description it needs in order for the reader to care about what the speaker cares about. Perhaps *Two Citizens* is often a "bust" because many of the poems simply lack technical control. Whereas his early work was too constrained by their academic forms, these poems sometimes seem to be reaching beyond form, and are, not, as Smith says, "an illusion of greatly shortened distance" but are, in reality, "greatly shortened distance"--too shortened, in fact, to allow the emotion to be fully communicated. William Matthews sums it up when he claims that we should look at this book as a stepping stone to the poet's last works in which he will "expand the range and complexity of what he will say in his restored
language” (p. 112). Given the growth of form, maturity of style, and depth of vision that these final books contain, Matthews was prophetic when he further stated that “it will be our privilege to watch him continue.”

After its publication, Wright felt *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* to be his best book: “I feel that *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* is the best book I have ever published. It is the best written and, whatever it says, whatever the value of the book, it is the book that I wanted to write” (Smith, “The Pure Clear Word,” p. 232). Though the correctness of Wright’s self-evaluation is debatable, of course, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* is in many ways a highly successful book. If *Two Citizens* was an exploratory groping at new sensibilities and styles, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* presents a poetry that is much more comfortable with itself. The book is Wright’s most varied in subject matter and his poetry of intimacy has matured in more personal ways. In “Many of Our Waters,” the speaker said “All this time I’ve been slicking into my own words/The beautiful language of my friends./I have to use my own, now.” In *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, Wright feels comfortable with his own words. Whereas *Shall We Gather at the River* reflects Wright’s maturity of despair, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* is often able to confront that despair with wisdom, acceptance and love.

Further, the volume marks significant changes in Wright’s form, culminating in that of the prose-piece. These changes in form reflect more diversity in subject matter; Wright is able to speak about America and Europe, his past and his present, his parents and his new love. Rather than despair over incidents of his past, the speaker is learning to place them within the larger context of his more affirmative present. America is often seen in the perspective of Europe. Overall, Wright incorporates both old and new concerns. He often sharpens the tones of his colloquial
voice in order to express a natural style successfully controlled. The majority of the volume is made up of poems of the "present moment." The poems express in clear language what the speaker is witnessing in front of him, or as Wright says "I've tried to slow down and pay attention to the things that were right in front of my eyes more closely than I had ever done before when I was trying to write in more traditional ways. This has led me to write some prose pieces" (Henrickson, p. 180). Before discussing how prose has helped Wright expand his emotional concerns, I would like to look at the ways in which Wright's old themes are handled in the "poetry of a grown man."

A major theme of *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* is reflected in the two epigraphs. They seem to express a similar notion from two perspectives, which touches what Wright has tried to convey elsewhere in his poetry: in the face of destruction or loneliness, there is still something in the spirit that cannot be destroyed. This theme offers an answer to the despair that was so prevalent in *Shall We Gather at the River*. *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* is the other side of that despair, in which, in the face of suffering, Wright's speaker is finally able to begin to accept and affirm life. The first epigraph is taken from Richard Aldington's *A Wreath for San Gemignano*. It addresses the horrible destruction of that city during World War II: its buildings, art works, landscape and human life. However, in the face of that destruction, the author concludes: "Still, not everything that came out of San Gemignano was destroyed by the brutal guns," implying that there was still some "beautiful things" to be found there. The second epigraph is taken from Sherwood Anderson's "American Spring Song." Here, the speaker is alone "beneath the bridge/in the city of Chicago" where "soft sunlight came through the cracks of the bridge." He concludes "I had been long alone in a strange place where no gods came." This last line implies that, in the face of his loneliness, he can still accept spring, can still feel the "soft sunlight."

For David Dougherty, "*To a Blossoming Pear Tree* is superior to *Two Citizens* because Wright comes to terms with his bitterness and adopts
a tone of tolerance rather than condemnation" (p. 113). It is also apparent, however, that the poems are more successful because Wright has found new ways to formally control his emotional concerns. Unlike the often uncontrolled and therefore sentimental work of "New Poems" and Two Citizens, these poems are much more restrained. One way that Wright has achieved this restraint is, of course, in his experimenting with and mastering of the prose-piece, which I will address later. In the poems, the emotion is expressed but is also controlled by the specificity of description, the nature of the subject matter (including the development of believable characters), the colloquial diction, and, once again, in the expression of the relationship between the speaker and the other. In respect to the last of these, Wright has by now matured into, in the words of Stanley Plumly, "the great empathizer of our poetry, a master whose work as a whole has redefined the emotional life available to a poem" (p. 325). Wright expands the poetry of intimacy in the sense that he can establish emotional connections with a more diverse group of others.

We can see how Wright's intimacy is successfully restrained in several of the poems, some taking place in America, and others in Europe. "Redwings," the volume's opening piece, is about a subject that will recur often in Wright's last two volumes, that of the relationship between humans and animals. We learn it has been scientifically proven that, if we wish, we can exterminate redwings. Wright expands this theme by associating humans with redwings--there are people who are contemplating ways of getting rid of us, too. This identification is not made automatically, as we saw in "New Poems" and Two Citizens, where humans magically transform into trees; rather, Wright's speaker, through a leaping movement of images, makes the connection believable. Also, the speaker has an intimate relationship not only with the redwings, but also with the reader. Contrary to previous poems in which the relationship between speaker and reader was often antagonistic, here that relationship is more friendly, as if the speaker assumes he and the reader are old friends. This assumption is a further development of what
we saw in "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio." Kevin Stein offers a compelling discussion of the development of the relationship between the speaker and the reader, concluding that in Wright's last two volumes, "When Wright addresses his reader as 'you,' he now embraces rather than shuns that reader. Here, the speaker ends his isolation from both his poem and his reader" (p. 176). Part of the way in which Wright's speaker successfully relates to the reader is, as has been said, his use of natural speech. We saw the germ of such language use in Wright's earliest volumes, and here he is able to weave colloquial diction in and out of a more lyrical language, in much the same way he combined the colloquial and the surreal in Shall We Gather at the River. Again, the poems are more successful when he is able to balance these two competing types of language. "Redwings" begins in the colloquial, the tone with which Wright chooses to begin the entire volume:

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It turns out
You can kill them.
It turns out
You can make the earth absolutely clean.
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The casual, off-handed tone of "It turns out" is meant to offset the underlying horror of what it is saying.

As was touched on earlier, Wright seems now to want each stanza to add another layer or dimension to the poem. Wright's style has evolved to the point at which the stanza becomes the unit of measure. Each stanza is a little story in itself; also, the language and rhythm seem to be one breath, depending upon the enjambments of one line into the next to create a conversational rhythm. Each stanza presents the subject of the poem--extinction--from a slightly different perspective. The first stanza introduces the notion that all redwings can be killed, and the second stanza is meant to support it with evidence, though quickly moving from that evidence to the identification between humans and redwings that is at the heart of the poem.

The intimacy between the speaker and the subject of redwings begins with the speaker's asking the reader "Can you hear me?" and
deepens in the fifth stanza. Here, in the knowledge that mankind can wipe out all of the redwings, the speaker remembers his own personal relationship with them. He recalls their beauty in the face of the larger destruction of the landscape in which he knew them:

It was only in the evening I saw a few redwings
Come out and dip their brilliant yellow
Bills in their scarlet shoulders.
Ohio was already going to hell.
But sometimes they would sit down on the creosote
Soaked pasture fence posts.
They used to be few, they used to be willowy and thin.

The speaker associates his memory of redwings, “willowy and thin,” with the “skinny girl” he “fell in love with.” This connection is believable because of the movement of the poem; the memory is made by indirect association rather than the speaker’s forcing an identification. Here, he does it through parallel images:

One afternoon, along the Ohio, where the sewer
Poured out, I found a nest,
The way they build their nests in the reeds,
So beautiful,
Redwings and solitaries.
The skinny girl I fell in love with down home
In late autumn married
A strip miner in late autumn.
Her five children are still alive,
Floating near the river.

The poem now opens up: not only are redwings in danger of extinction, but so is the landscape and so are the human beings living in that landscape. Note how the speaker parallels beauty with loss (as we saw in the two epigraphs) by placing the nests of the redwings next to “where the sewer/Poured out,” and the “skinny girl” with the “strip miner.” The speaker reinforces the identification between redwings and humans in the next two stanzas:

Somebody is on the wing, somebody
Is wondering right at this moment
How to get rid of us, while we sleep.

Together among the dead gorges
Of highway construction, we flare
Across highways and drive
Motorists crazy, we fly
Down home to the river.

Here, of course, Wright is reiterating his old theme of the social outcast. The image of the redwings flaring "Across highways" is more powerful than the raw expression of anger and bitterness of *Two Citizens*.

The poem would be more successful if it had ended here, with the image of the redwings flying crazily home to the river, but, unfortunately, the speaker feels the need, in the last stanza, to push the connection even further, beyond its emotional barrier. The last stanza says that "There, one summer evening, a dirty man/Gave me a nickle and a potato/And fell asleep by the fire." The man appears out of nowhere, and the reader feels that his act of kindness is artificially created by the poet as an answer to the threat of extinction so well developed throughout the piece. The speaker feels he must find some hope in the midst of the destruction and death. In other poems in this volume, rather than forcing that hope, he will discover it within the larger context of the situation established by the poem.

For the most part, the poems that are set in America are concentrated at the beginning and the end of the volume, and the poems centered in Europe appear in the middle section. The most successful poems that relate exclusively to American experiences are the last three: "Hook," "To a Blossoming Pear Tree," and "Beautiful Ohio." The first two of these reach all the way back to Wright's Minneapolis days, and are perhaps two of his most intimate poems; they can be considered anthems of one of Wright's most basic aesthetic and ethical concerns: in a world of suffering, an empathic identification with the outcast is the appropriate human response.

"Hook" is one of Wright's most successful poems because it is almost one of his most sentimental. In other words, the poem tests the
limits of how far Wright can express his speaker's emotion, and how well he can restrain his direct, personal speech. The poem walks the fine line between sentiment and sentimentality, and manages to stay balanced, finally, because the reader is forced to care about the speaker and the other with whom the speaker identifies (though in this case, it is the other that identifies with the speaker). This character is an outcast not only because he has a hook instead of a hand, but also because he is a Sioux Indian, somebody already doomed. The Sioux's offering to the speaker is the ultimate form of generosity from one human being to another, and expresses Wright's primary theme that the expression of compassion and kindness is the only way out of our common misery.

The poem achieves its emotional intensity in part because of its ability to create the sense of intimacy between speaker and other without overdramatization; also, the colloquial, spare speech gives the characters authenticity. Finally, as with "Redwings," and "The Old WPA Swimming Pool..." the poem is spoken to us, a story between speaker and reader that sounds like it is told from one friend to another:

I was only a young man
In those days. On that evening
The cold was so God damned
Bitter there was nothing.
Nothing. I was in trouble
With a woman, and there was nothing
There but me and dead snow.

I stood on the street corner
In Minneapolis, lashed
This way and that.
Wind rose from some pit,
Hunting me.
Another bus to Saint Paul
Would arrive in three hours,
If I was lucky.

Then the young Sioux
Loomed beside me, his scars
Were just my age.

Ain't got no bus here
A long time, he said.
You got enough money
To get home on?

What did they do
To your hand? I answered.
He raised up his hook into the terrible starlight
And slashed the wind.

Oh, that? he said.
I had a bad time with a woman. Here,
You take this.

Did you ever feel a man hold
Sixty-five cents
In a hook,
And place it
Gently
In your freezing hand?

I took it.
It wasn't the money I needed.
But I took it.

The parallel misery between the speaker and the Sioux as expressed by the speaker's lashing in anger and the Indian's slashing the wind with his hook, along with the dialogue between the speaker and the Indian, help unify this piece into a coherent whole. What is ironic is that it is not the Indian who requires empathy, but the speaker, who "needed" something. Clearly, however, what is implied is that the Indian does, also. Because he is used to his condition, however, he is able to recognize suffering in others. The speaker's question of "What did they do/To your hand?" [my italics] implies the understanding that the condition under which the Indian is suffering is imposed from the outside, from the larger society, and thus the private misery becomes cultural. The climax of the emotion occurs in the second last stanza, where, in wonderfully pruned language, the speaker asks the readers whether they have experienced the kind of sensation he is trying to express. Again, the readers are drawn into the experience and must react to the question of what the placing of sixty-five cents from a hook into one's "freezing hand" might feel like. The poem is a brilliant display of intimacy between speaker, character, and reader.
The title poem of the collection, "To a Blossoming Pear Tree," is perhaps one of Wright's most seminal. Whereas "Hook" demonstrates Wright's empathic concerns, this poem is both demonstration and manifesto. Of this piece, Wright has said:

I think that the kind of thing that a person writes will depend partly on his own interests as a human being. Those things will come out in his poems inevitably. In the poem called 'To a Blossoming Pear Tree' I am talking about addressing the beauty of nature, which is non-human. It suggests to me sometimes the perfection of things and I envy this perfection of things, or at least this nonhumanity, precisely because it is not involved in the sometimes very painful mess of being human. Yet I say at the end of the poem that this is what I have to be, human. Human life is a mess. This is something I wanted to say, and I said it.

(Smith, "The Pure Clear Word," pp. 229-230)

Wright's analysis of the poem is a telling statement of what we have seen to be his concerns throughout his career since *The Green Wall*: the choice to be human is to accept suffering and the responsibility for that suffering. The poem presents a dialectic between the beauty and perfection of nature and the "mess" of being human. In depicting nature's perfection, the speaker addresses the blossoming pear tree:

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

The speaker proceeds to tell the tree a story from his own experience that happened "on a street in Minneapolis." There, an old man made
sexual advances at him, claiming that he would pay the speaker "anything." Both of them "slunk away,/Each in his own way dodging/The cruel darts of the cold." The speaker next acknowledges to the pear tree that it can not "possibly/Worry or bother or care/About the ashamed, hopeless/Old man." There is no sympathy between nature and humanity—the tree is "beyond [the speaker's] reach." The speaker reflects that the old man was "so near death/He was willing to take/Any love he could get." Humans need love, even in the face of desperation and suffering, in this case "some cute young wiseacre/Smashing his dentures." In the last stanza, perhaps as a result of his reflection, the speaker concludes by making a choice:

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

The repetition of "beautiful natural blossoms" is enhanced considerably by the addition of "And dew" in the next line, giving further evidence of the tree's beauty and perfection and thus sharpening its contrast with "the dark/Blood in my body." The poem in a way is an apology for being human, for walking away from a lonely man who needed love, and for the potential for cruelty that exists in human beings. Perhaps the speaker is saying at the end that, in the face of that rejection and cruelty, he will make attempts to care about his fellow man.

While "Hook" and "To a Blossoming Pear Tree" look back on Wright's American experiences by focusing on human suffering, "Beautiful Ohio" looks back by focusing on human joy—but not without at least recognizing that suffering. The poem is a celebration of the speaker's youth and native place. As in "Redwings," there is a mixture of beauty and loss, but whereas in the first poem in the volume the speaker focuses on loss, in the last poem in the volume he focuses on beauty:
Those old Winnebago men
Knew what they were singing.
All summer long and all alone,
I had found a way
To sit on a railroad tie
Above the sewer main.
It spilled a shining waterfall out of a pipe
Somebody had gouged through the slanted earth.
Sixteen thousand and five hundred more or less people
In Martins Ferry, my home, my native country,
Quickened the river
With the speed of light.
And the light caught there
the solid speed of their lives
In the instant of that waterfall.
I know what we call it
Most of the time.
But I have my own song for it,
And sometimes, even today,
I call it beauty.

Here, the speaker identifies with the old Indians (who named the river "Ohio," which means "beautiful river") in that he is recognizing, as if for the first time, the river's name. The river becomes even more beautiful with the realization of the loss of that beauty, as the boy sat "above the sewer main." The speaker is learning to affirm the "Sixteen thousand and five hundred more or less people" who try to live their lives between the loss and the light. It is, after all, their "lives" that are caught by the light "in the instant of that waterfall," lives that Wright's speaker tries so hard to understand through mourning and celebration. Earlier in the volume, in the poem "A Lament for the Shadows in the Ditches," the Ohio river is called "that black ditch of horror." Here, it is combined with the rest of the landscape and the people and becomes the "beauty." Once again we are presented with Wright's ongoing dialectic.

"Beautiful Ohio" is significant in that it offers a slightly different view from "Hook" and "To a Blossoming Pear Tree." While those poems concern themselves with human suffering and the necessity to empathize and attempt to alleviate that suffering, "Beautiful Ohio" offers a kind of benediction upon whatever was or is beautiful: the "old Winnegabo men," the "more or less people," and "Martins Ferry." Wright's comment on his
relationship with dark and light is significant here. He was asked in an interview to comment on his frequent use of the word "dark." After attempting an explanation, he quickly gave up and said: "But again, I'm getting sort of tired of darkness." His next comment is even more provocative: "I don't think that I would want to eliminate the darkness from human experience entirely. But there is something to be said for the light also, after all. Again, it's the danger we fall into in America, of perhaps wallowing in pain too much" (Heyen, et. al., pp. 158-159). Without giving up the darkness, Wright's new poetry shows that there is something to be said for the light as well.

3

Affirmation informs Wright's exploration of new kinds of intimacy, expressed in new kinds of forms, one of which is the prose piece. I would like to quote again Wright's remark concerning his change of form from traditional to deep-imagist poetry: "Poetry has to be a possibility. Or we're dead, I think" (Andre, p. 133). Wright has found many possibilities in his poetry, from academic verse to deep imagist, to a combination of colloquial and surreal language, in order to forge a style all his own. Without abandoning closed verse entirely, (Pear Tree contains three poems that are rhymed and metered in more traditional ways), Wright has incorporated many styles while at the same time gone beyond them to try to say new things in new ways. Dougherty is correct when he states that Wright's "impulse toward open forms, which dominates every book since Saint Judas reaches its logical limit in prose" (p. 121).

Of the value of prose, Wright has much to say. We already have seen that Wright wrote his dissertation on Charles Dickens and taught the History of the Novel. "There's plenty of poetry" in the novel, he said, and, in other interviews, he speaks of his love of prose (Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," p. 43). When asked, at about the time To a Blossoming Pear Tree
was published, what writers he felt closest to, Wright replied that "The authors that I feel closest to and feel most devoted to are not poets at all." He speaks of reading Ortega y Gasset, George Orwell, and the novelist Larry Wolwoode, whom he praised for having "the power of imagining his own life." When questioned about "what kind of changes have gone on" in his own writing, Wright replied that he "tried to slow down and pay attention to the things that were right in front of [his] eyes more closely than [he] had ever done before when [he] was trying to write in more traditional ways. This has led [him] to write some prose pieces" (Henrickson, pp. 174, 175, 180). Paying attention to the "poetry of the present moment" is perhaps the essence in Wright's prose pieces, and I would like to return to this notion later. Clearly, Wright's desire to write the prose piece arises from several sources: his readings, his new experiences with his wife Anne in Europe, and his desire to establish intimacy with different kinds of others.

Perhaps the first question that should be clarified is whether what I have been calling the "prose piece" is a poem or not. Many poets and critics refer to short prose pieces written by poets as "prose poems." Michael Benedickt, in fact, edited an important international anthology of prose poems in which he included writers from seven countries. In the introduction, Benedickt points out that, far from being a new form discovered by American poets, the prose poem "is an international form that has been explored by major poets abroad for almost two centuries" (p. 40). Benedickt identifies Eliot and New Criticism as the primary reasons why Americans did not write the prose poem until the early sixties, when American poetry became, as we have seen, more imagistic: "With the image-oriented poetry of the 1960's, the breakthrough towards the prose poem occurred. By establishing the principle of psychic energy as chief value...it is a relatively short step to bringing in other possibilities, other organizing principles, than verse itself" (p. 42). Prose poems by foreign poets were beginning to be translated and published in American journals, and American poets like Russell Edson, David Ignatow, Karl Shapiro, Robert Bly and W. S. Merwin were beginning to
write prose poems themselves. By the seventies, the prose poem was a standard "poetic" form. Robert Bly attempts a definition, comparing the prose poem to what he calls a "through composition," "in that the focus is not on an unchanging element--meter, for example, or stanza form--but on the changes the mind goes through as it observes" ("The Prose Poem..." p.201). Benedikt claims that the properties of the prose poem include the exploration of the unconscious, ordinary speech, a "visionary thrust," and humor (p. 48). Both poets agree that the prose poem seems to be a form for the already matured poet. Benedikt says, for example, that "many of the pioneering writers in the form [by whom he means Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarme and Valery] 'discovered' prose poetry towards the ends of their careers, when their command of poetry and their sense of its possiblities were presumably at their most practiced and acute" (p. 47). Bly says simply that the prose poem "is not a genre for beginners" ("The Prose Poem..." p. 204). Certainly when James Wright attempts the prose poem he is not a beginner, and, though he had only just begun to experiment with the form when Benedikt and Bly wrote their essays, they both single him out as one of its best practitioners.

While many poets and critics are content with the term "prose poem," Wright was not. He felt that "prose piece" was more accurate:

I have written a good many prose pieces now and I did this because I like prose and I wanted to express myself that way. I put some prose pieces in my last books and sometimes these have been called poems. They are not poems. They are prose pieces...

The trouble with it all in the United States is that sure as hell somebody's going to say, now which is it, prose or poetry?

Yvor Winters said a valuable thing in this respect. He said, poetry is written in verse whereas prose is written in prose. That is a help because I think it allows us to drop the nitpicking and then go on and try to see what the writing in question is. Then we can determine whether or not there is a way to understand it and, finally, to undertake the extremely difficult task of determining whether it is any good or not.

(Smith, "the Pure Clear Word," pp. 209-210)
Deferring to Wright's preference, I refer to the form as "prose piece," and "undertake the extremely difficult task of determining whether [they are] any good or not." In doing so, we will see that Wright's prose is extremely versatile in expressing his intimate concerns. While Benedickt claims that the prose piece makes use of ordinary speech, "which is understandably anathema not only to a merely lyrical view of poetry, but to traditionalist critics attached to it" (p. 48), we will see that Wright's diverse background in writing traditional "poetic" verse and surrealism is instrumental in allowing him to combine his already mastered colloquial voice with a wonderfully evocative lyrical density. We will also see how writing in prose allows Wright to expand his concerns into a whole range of subject matter, drawing from his observations of the present moment (animals, nature, humans), memories of his past life and America, and his new explorations in France and Italy. More than in the poems, the prose form allows Wright to wander, muse, and meditate—to both draw connections from his vast reading and to focus more intensly on the object of observation. Ultimately, the prose piece gave Wright new ways of looking at and expressing the world, and it opened his poetry up into a wealth of possibilities.

Bly has said that "the prose poem helps to balance that abstraction, and encourages the speaker to stay close to the body, to touch, hearing, color, texture, moisture, dryness, smell. Its strength lies in its intimacy" ("The Prose Poem..." p. 202). Wright's prose-pieces are intimate because their subjects stay "close to the body" in many diverse ways. *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* contains fourteen prose pieces, three of which are set in Ohio, and the rest in Europe. Of the ones about Ohio, two are similar to "Hook" and "To a Blossoming Pear Tree" in that they refer to events of the speaker's distant past, one when the speaker was a child, and the other before he was born.

As we noticed in poems like "Ars Poetica," the speaker is expressing a profound anger and hatred about his native place. "Beautiful Ohio," however, seems to be an attempt at reconciliation and the recognition of
a tragic beauty of *The Branch Will Not Break*. This recognition is also expressed in "The Wheeling Gospel Tabernacle" and "The Flying Eagles of Troop 62." The prose-pieces are similar in that they focus on a character in order to express that tragic beauty. Also, they are both narrative and reminiscent in a tone which is also humorous. As we shall see, prose allows Wright the freedom and space to display his considerable comic talent, an aspect that has been noticeably missing throughout much of his previous poetry. Naturally, there is a relationship between Wright's turning towards humor and his new, more affirmative and accepting, sensibility.

In "The Wheeling Gospel Tabernacle," the speaker relates a story he heard from his parents that occurred in 1925, and one of the primary reasons that it sticks with the speaker is that the incident "made both of my parents almost ecstatic with happiness all the rest of their lives, until they died within a few months of each other in 1973." The poem is intimate in the way it uses the humorous story of Homer Rhodeheaver, the paternalist, as a way of furthering the speaker's understanding of his parents and the world that informs their lives. Wright does this in a style that pokes fun at its own characters:

> Just as the Reverend Doctor Sunday was admonishing the congregation in congress assembled with his customary warning that they warn't no virtue in the clinking of shekels, a wicked sound; just as the Reverend Doctor was in full oratorical blossoming cry in praise of each silken soft certain rustle of one twenty-dollar bill against another in the wicker plate; just as the former semi-professional baseball player of the Lord God Almighty Lord of Hosts was advising how as 'Bruthern, a twenty don't take up no more room in that there plate than a wun'--it happened.

The poem proceeds to explain how it was made known that Homer, who was Reverend Sunday's "psalmodist and shill at the offeratory," was "wanted in Pittsburgh on a paternity charge," and that the police were on their way. When they arrived, however, the Tabernacle "was as empty and dark as the waiting room of a speakeasy." But the point of the tale is
its affect on the speaker's parents: "The year was 1925. My mother and father got one of their chances to laugh like hell for the sheer joy of laughter before the Great Depression began." Homer's story made the speaker's parents happy in the same way that the men's digging the hole in the ground made the town happy in "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio." These poems exemplify the beauty and worth of the people Wright's speaker intimately knows from his native place, and sometimes even the thought of them makes the speaker feel happy and accepting: "Little I know. I can pitch a pretty fair tune myself, for all I know."

Wright's sense of the tragic beauty of his native place is also the theme of what is certainly one of his finest prose pieces, "The Flying Eagles of Troop 62," an homage to the speaker's old Scoutmaster, Ralph Neal. It gives Wright the opportunity to lament not without humor and love the misery that seems intrinsic to the Ohio River Valley. Wright's prose style allows him to be expansive by bringing in other characters who, unlike the speaker, did not "get out," or escape, the Valley. Contrary to William Saunder's remark that Wright's composing in prose reflects "a loss of energy and rigor" (p. 20), the prose can invigorate the intimacy established between the speaker and the other because it is open and rambling enough to connect different kinds of language and diverse aspects of experience. Also, prose is especially suited to "The Flying Eagles of Troop 62" because it contains many types of language, humorous and lyrical, colloquial and literary, in order to paint a picture of one man and, ultimately, one response to America.

The success of this poem depends partly upon its two-fold intimacy: Ralph Neal's intimacy with the scouts, and the speaker's intimacy with Ralph Neal (and, in turn, the scouts past and present). Saunders feels that this poem fails because "instead of communicating empathy with those in pain, as in 'A Christmas Greeting,' Wright expresses and extolls pity, another more distanced feeling." By way of example, Saun der quotes the lines: "I think Ralph Neal loved us for our scrawniness, our acne, our fear; but mostly for his knowledge of what
would probably become of us." Saunders continues: "Loving someone for his fear and acne is loving what that person cannot love in himself and is thus perhaps sympathetic, not empathetic" (p. 22) Certainly Saunders misses the point. How can anyone in a suffering situation, whether it be from acne or thoughts of suicide, love that situation? When the speaker empathizes with Charlie in "A Christmas Greeting," he is empathizing with Charlie's growing old and dying; the speaker feels himself growing old and, in turn, fears his own death. In that way, the speaker participates in Charlie's suffering, but certainly Charlie would not "love" that suffering "in himself." To say that Ralph Neal can only sympathize with the scout's acne and fear is to suggest that Neal has never experienced acne and fear or cannot even imagine what that experience might be like, and that would make for an ineffective scoutmaster, which, because of Wright's ability to characterize Neal so well, we know that he was not.

Informing "The Flying Eagles of Troop 62" are its different tones of language and the general movements it makes as the speaker meditates on the poem's subject and its associations. Wright's prose pieces often begin with a tone that is casual and flat only to shift and change and become more concentrated as the pieces progress. Note how this first section moves from simple facts to colloquialisms to a humorous lyricism:

Ralph Neal was a Scoutmaster. He was still a young man. He liked us.
I have no doubt he knew perfectly well we were each of us masturbating unhappily in secret caves and shores. The soul of patience, he waited while we smirked behind each other's backs, mocking and parodying the Scout Law, trying to imitate the oratorical rotundities of Winston Churchill in a Southern Ohio accent:
'AY scout is trusswortha, loll, hailful, frenly, curt-chuss, kand, abaydent, chairful, thrifta, dapraved, clane, and letcherass.'

Ralph Neal knew all about the pain of the aching stones in our twelve-year-old groins, the lava swollen half-way between our peckers and our nuts that were still green and sour and half-ripe apples two full months before
the football season began.

The speaker then parallels Ralph Neal with a saint as described by the Vedantas, who refused Nirvana because his rabid dog could not accompany him. What saves this piece is that its lighthearted nature is juxtaposed to a profound seriousness. Immediately after the story of the saint, the speaker, as if to justify that story with hard evidence, abruptly moves to what becomes of the scouts, or the "scruffy" dogs, of which, as we have already learned, Ralph Neal was already aware:

Some of us wanted to get out, and some of us wanted to and didn't.

The last I heard, Dickey Beck, a three-time loser at housebreaking, was doing life at the State Pen in Columbus.
The last I heard, Dale Headley was driving one of those milk trucks where the driver has to stand up all day and rattle his spine over the jagged street-bricks.
The last I heard from my brother-in-law, Hub Snodgrass was still dragging himself home every evening down by the river to shine, shower, shave, and spend a good hour still trying to scrape the Laughlin steel dust out of his pale skin. He never tanned much, he just burned or stayed out of the river.
The last I heard, Mike Kottelos was making book in Wheeling.

The repetition of the colloquialism "The last I heard" is meant to strike us over the head again and again, as if denying us access to Nirvana while certainly these people would not be able to accompany us. Again, we are back to Wright’s perennial theme of empathy and responsibility: like the saint, Ralph Neal chooses to stay with the outcasts and, in a rather different way, the speaker chooses to return, at least for the time of this poem, to Ralph Neal:

When I think of Ralph Neal’s name, I feel some kind of ice breaking open in me. I feel a garfish escaping into a hill spring where the crawdads burrow down to the pure
bottom in hot weather to get the cool. I feel a rush of long fondness for that good man Ralph Neal, that good man who knew us dreadful and utterly vulnerable little bastards better than we knew ourselves, who took care of us better than we took care of ourselves, and who loved us, I reckon, because he knew damned well what would become of most of us, and it sure did, and he knew it, and he loved us anyway. The very name of America often makes me sick, and yet Ralph Neal was an American. The country is enough to drive you crazy.

What began with mere facts ends in a metaphorical flight which finishes, finally, beyond the immediate subject of the poem, in the ambiguous land of America, which produces men like the "three-time loser" Dickey Beck and "that good man" Ralph Neal.

The two prose-pieces discussed above are examples of Wright's longer, narrative attempts that are more remarkable for their stories than their language. It is interesting to note that Robert Bly called James Wright one of the masters of the "thing" or "object" poem, which "centers itself not on story or image but on the object, and it holds onto its fur, so to speak." Bly takes as an example the poet Francis Ponge, who "offers language in archaeological layers, drawing some words from science, others from reservoirs of words used in earlier centuries, in order to come close to the object and participate in its complication ("The Prose Poem..." pp. 199-200). Certainly the most prevalent of Wright's prose-pieces are the "object poems," or those that meditate on a single object. What makes these pieces so fascinating is the poet's powers of association. They are like little spaces of water through which small stones are skipped, and it is our pleasure to watch the reverberations. In these pieces, Wright combines a very flat, prosaic language with flights of lyricism. A passage he wrote in his journals is descriptive of his method: "The way to proceed is to note as many of the sordid and peculiar details as I can, as they come back. It occurs to me that a single wild flight right in the middle of the most prosaic account is the best. It doesn't hurt to lift the reader about a thousand feet in the air for a moment, and then ease him--don't drop him, he's no good to me
dead—back to earth again" (*A Secret Field*, p. 10).

Object pieces also present us with intriguing forms of intimacy. Because they are so concentrated upon a particular object, another, they often present opportunities for the speaker to explore his relationship with that subject. In this sense, the prose pieces are quite similar to Wright's poems: in many of them, Wright's speaker attempts to empathize with the other, while at the same time recognizing his distinction from the other. The general strategy of these pieces is that the speaker plays the role of observer, notes characteristics of the object under observation in a language that is sometimes flat and sometimes intensely lyrical (the "archaeological layers" of which Bly was referring) in order to create some kind of realization or epiphany. It should be noted that, just as in many of Wright's poems, Wright's speaker does not always attempt to discover his relationship with the object. Sometimes he observes without responding, allowing the description of the object to carry the emotional weight. I would like to explore some of the prose from *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* that exemplify Wright's exploration of an object.

Several new sensibilities occur in Wright's prose pieces. First, they seem to want to go beyond the misery that is expressed in so many poems of *Shall We Gather at the River*. While not abandoning the dark entirely, Wright focuses more on the light within the darkness, or, as the fiction writer Milan Kundera express it, "Happiness [fills] the space of sadness" (p. 314). An important characteristic of these prose pieces is that they are further developments of Wright's social outcast theme, but instead of focusing deliberately on the theme directly, he evokes it through objective description. Wright's prose pieces are about nature, both outer and what Wright called "Inner nature." But they also have a political sensibility as a kind of underlayer to the description. Wright's prose pieces, in fact, attempt what Wright thought Bly was attempting in his nature, as opposed to political, poems: "In Robert Bly's poems about nature he is at his best and most beautiful. Many of his ideas, political or religious or whatever, are absorbed into the attention that he is
paying visually and spiritually to the things he writes about. The ideas are all there in the poems about nature” (Smith, “The Pure Clear Word,” p. 230). In Wright’s prose, the speaker attempts to express “the poetry of the present moment.” In so doing, his “ideas...are absorbed into the attention that he is paying.”

“The Moorhen and Her Eight Young” provides a good example:

They are little balls of charcoal-gray mallow among drifting lily stems, as though the flower had escaped from the garden of the waters behind the hangman’s cottage and chosen to blossom at night. Yet here they drift in the daylight behind their mother. Herself so dark, she almost threatens to blaze into another color entirely. She stays in whatever leaf shadow she can find. Only her beak reveals her sometimes. It is red as a valerian rising from a night lily.

In this short prose-piece, the almost insignificantly small moorhens are made even more so when the speaker compares them with the mallow. Just as Wright is drawn to social outcasts, he is also drawn to particularly delicate creatures, those we often, not surprisingly, ignore. In choosing the “Insignificant” among the creatures, Wright is already absorbing his political ideas into his observations. Here, the language connotes the notion of living in fear, as the mallow are “drifting,” and the flower has “escaped from the garden of the waters behind the hangman’s cottage and chosen to blossom at night.” There is an atmosphere of oppression and caution as the mother “stays in whatever leaf shadow she can find.” Yet, in spite of the caution, there is beauty in the form of transcendence, which is here manifested in the mother’s beak, “red as valerian rising from a night lily.” The piece lyrically manipulates metaphor and shifts images into new contexts. The young, for example, are compared to mallow among drifting lily stems, which, in turn, are associated with a lily (still within the metaphor). Later, the lily that blossoms at night reappears in the last metaphor, when valerian rising from it is used as a comparison to the mother’s beak. There are also parallel images in the herb “mallow” as it is compared to the young:
the moorhens have lobed feet, the mallow lobed leaves. Wright's prose pieces allow him to wander and associate; they are full of delightful surprises.

Another piece that expresses Wright's concern for delicate creatures is "Piccolini." Here, those creatures are referred to as "diminutives." Associations brought together by the speaker unify this piece. The "summer villa of the poet, the Grotte di Catullo" is a backdrop to where the speaker is situated, but, though he is aware of the villa, he cares "more about the poetry of the present moment." In the poem he creates a fusion between the past of the villa and the present moment when he discovers the piccolini: "They tickle the skin of my ankles, smaller than Latin diminutives." The Latin makes the speaker think naturally of Catullus, and the piccolini make him think of the death of Lesbia's sparrow. Catullus wrote numerous poems about that death, and the speaker recalls how Catullus "turned misere from the harsh wretched into miselle," which the speaker interprets to mean "poor and little and lovely and gone, all in one word." Thus, Catullus' response is fused with the speaker's perception of the piccolini. The piece combines colloquial and lyrical language effectively. Note the alliteration of "An easy thousand of silver, almost transparent piccolini are skimming the surface of the long slab of volcanic stone. They swim through a very tiny channel at the very rim of the lake. They tickle the skin of my ankles, smaller than Latin diminutives." The "s" sound slides along like the swimming fish, then changes to a predominant "i" sound when the speaker's ankles are being tickled. The language sustains its lyricism all the way through until the last paragraph when, out of nowhere, the speaker employs a colloquialism: "I reckon that is why he never wrote of them by name...." Also important is the speaker's relationship with the piccolini. In the end, he decides, like Catullus, to leave them "tiny and happy in their lives in the waters, where they still have their lives and seem to enjoy the skin of my ankles." The theme of leaving others alone, which we noticed in Two Citizens, becomes even more predominant in Wright's last two volumes. In this case, he knows that if he or Catullus
touched the piccolini, "they would have dissolved altogether into
droplets of mist."

In these newer poems, there is a sense that Wright wants to focus
his attention away from the speaker and onto the object of observation.
Often, in the poems of Shall We Gather at the River, the speaker wants to
bring the focus back to himself, as in "lonely and sick for home." Here,
the speaker is focused on the beauty of the object. Much of this has to do
with Wright's view of nature poetry: "...In the poetry of nature there is
the willingness to approach the living creatures with a kind of
attentiveness that is almost a reverence" (Smith, "The Pure Clear Word,"
p. 230). Thus, the speaker is better able to leave the other alone. This is
the general theme of "The Secret of Light," in which the speaker observes
a "startling woman." Wright plays with the word "secret," imaginatively
following the woman as she travels Verona, until, when she "is sitting or
walking or standing still upright," two stranger's hands will "measure
the invisible idea of the secret vein in her hair." The speaker then
confesses that he has no idea what that stranger's "face will look like."
It is "no business" of the speakers; he can be happy not knowing. Then,
the epiphany occurs: "It is all right with me to know that my life is only
one life. I feel like the light of the river Adige." There is an intimate
connection between these last two sentences: the speaker is able to
accept that his life is "only one life" because he feels "like the light."
Being able to affirm the other, he is able to affirm himself. Wright's
speaker is realizing Robert Hass' fine last line to his poem "Meditation at
Lagunitas": "There are limits to the imagination." He is happy within
those limits because he can accept his own life, or as he says elsewhere:
"I would rather live my life than not live it."

Living his life—that is the important expression of acceptance that
fills Wright's new poems. He has come a long way from Shall We Gather
at the River, where he stared into the Mississippi or the Ohio rivers and
contemplated joining his unhappy fellow creatures. The operative words
"dark" and "lonely" have now transformed into the words "light" and
"love." Whereas in Two Citizens the speaker's expression of love was
often sentimental, here that expression is earned. In "The Fruits of the Season," for example, the expression "I have just eaten the fruits of the season, and I am in love," does not come until the final sentence, after he has set it up by describing other "fruits," the fruits that will "soon fill this vast square" and the "huge exhibit of paintings, the enduring fruits of five hundred years." Wright's paralleling images create the mood that progresses until the end, where "I have eaten the first fruit of the season, and I am in love" comes as a wonderful discovery and inevitable conclusion to the scene he has witnessed.

Wright's new discoveries—the prose piece, Europe, leaving things alone, life, light, and love, are further expanded and developed in his final volume, *This Journey*, published posthumously two years after his untimely death in 1980. In this volume, Wright continually attempts the art of "negative capability" in order to show reverence towards the other. Wright's desire to observe and explore an "object," or other, that began with *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* dominates this book. There is, throughout the volume, the sense of the speaker's wanting to show respect for the other, sometimes by leaving it alone, and sometimes by desiring to merge into it, as he wanted to do in "A Blessing." The speaker is trying to become intimate with the other by carefully detailing his observations, by trying to truly see and, through seeing, know. *This Journey* demonstrates a remarkable growth in Wright's development as a poet because he is able to create poems that are wise in their understanding of the delicacy of creatures and life's frailty. One gets the sense that Wright has finally come to terms with his own mortality, and that leads him to an understanding and acceptance of the life around him. There is an underlying spirituality about these poems, a visionary quality that goes beyond the immediacy of the situation. Ultimately, Wright's speaker is able to become another creature in a world full of creatures.

Two pieces in which the speaker does not appear but is clearly a
participant because of his intimate knowledge of the situations he describes are the prose pieces "Old Bud" and "The Sumac in Ohio." Both are set in Ohio and describe the other with tenderness, understanding, and love. Once again, the others are "outcasts" yet have a determination to survive in the face of despair, demonstrating Wright's view that life "is tragic" and "intensely precious" (Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," p. 46). Throughout the poems in This Journey, in fact, we get the sense that life is precious because it is tragic.

"Old Bud" is about a three hundred pound man who swings on his porch swing in Martins Ferry, Ohio. Clearly the speaker knows him intimately, knows that his "two tiny grandchildren, hilarious and hellish little boys, scampered just out of reach and yelled hideously, 'Hell on you, Grandpa,'" knows that old Bud feels the pain of being mocked and alone, singing "his God Damns in despair." Sustaining this poem is the tender mood depicted by the speaker. One of the strengths of Wright's prose is that it can evoke the mood of a particular moment through lyrical description:

Old Bud Romick has fallen asleep as the twilight comes down Pearl Street in Martins Ferry, Ohio. The window shutters close here and there, and the flowing streetcars glow past into silence, their wicker seats empty, for the factory whistles have all blown down, and the widows all gone home. Empty, too, are the cinder alleys, smelling of warm summer asphalt. The streetlight columns, faintly golden, fill the cracked mirrors of June bugs' wings. Old Bud Romick sags still on the porch swing. The rusty chains do their best for his body in the dark.

The speaker then realizes to what extent he can know old Bud. He comes to the realization, as he will elsewhere, that he can only know what he can see. He knows, for example, that the two grandchildren have gone to sleep, and that Bud is "talking lightly in his sleep." The speaker has observed that closely. However, there are things about Bud that he can not know, and these things relate to Bud's inner life:
Whether or not he is aware of leaves, I don't know. I don't know whether or not he is aware of anything touching his face. Whether or not he dreams of how slender sycamores are, how slender young women are when the walk beneath the trees without caring how green they are, how lucky a plum might be if it dies without being eaten, I don't know.

The speaker associates Bud with the "plum" in that both are bruised, and both would be lucky if they die "without being eaten." Wright does not romanticize old Bud's life; rather, he celebrates it simply because of what it is, the almost insignificant--a person talking to himself on a porch swing as evening comes on. Clearly the speaker wants old Bud to have an inner, poetic life, wants him to dream of slender sycamores and young women, wants him to know how lucky he is if he dies without being consumed by the life that he leads. But the speaker will not impose his dreams or his knowledge onto old Bud: he will leave him alone. Here we see a more controlled version of the sensibility that Wright discovered and first attempted in Two Citizens, particularly in the poem "Voices Between Waking and Sleeping in the Mountains." This sensibility seems like the opposite one from his early work, where the speaker attempted sympathy/empathy through identification. Here, the speaker attempts understanding through not making that identification, through the awareness of the differences between self and other.

Also alone is the sumac in Ohio. In the sumac's case, the bruise comes from the pollution from the coal mines. The piece is really an indictment on how the land has been, as the speaker says in another poem, "raped to death in Ohio," and how the sumac stays stubbornly alive in the face of that destruction. Even though the old fathers "tore the earth open," there is a preciousness about the sumac that will not allow itself to be destroyed, as "the tough leaf branches turn a bewildering scarlet just at the place where they join the bough." The piece achieves its effect in part because it has adequately set up the opposition between the old fathers raping the land and the strength of the sumac to stay "rooted." The emotional climax, or epiphany, occurs in the last
paragraph, reinforced, as it often is in Wright's poems, by a colloquialism placed just at the right moment:

Before June begins, the sap and coal smoke and soot from Wheeling steel, wafted down the Ohio by some curious gentleness in the Appalachians, will gather all over the trunk. The skin will turn aside hatchets and knife blades. You cannot even carve a girl's name on the sumac. It is viciously determined to live and die alone, and you can go straight to hell.

A major theme of This Journey is the speaker's response to the other. Ultimately, the speaker wants the other to stay alive, and he often offers it a benediction or a prayer that it remain so. In "A Reply to Matthew Arnold on My Fifth Day in Fano," the speaker feels that he is "Briefly in harmony with nature," and offers the sea a "wild chive flower." Though he knows that the sea may not care about his offering, there is still a chance that it might: "It has its own way of receiving seeds...." The speaker wants to affirm the life of the sea and the town of Fano, and wishes that they will "stay alive." He feels the same way about "A Dark Moor Bird," whom he hopes "will build a strong nest/Along the Adige" so that "He will never die." All the speaker, it seems, wants to do is to stay alive and desire others to stay alive, if only for a little while. Wright is expressing his understanding of the impermanence of life. He celebrates a mouse who is taking a nap, because "the cats are all gone for a little while." This is symbolic of the speaker's attitude in general. Whereas in Shall We Gather at the River the speaker chose to focus on the larger tragedy of creatures' lives, now he is focusing on those "mean time" moments in which the creatures reveal their preciousness. It is a shift in focus; the speaker is looking for what he calls in "Among Sunflowers" "The indifferent god of brief life, the/Small mercy." The book is filled with small mercies, brief moments in which "Any creature would be a fool to take the sun lightly." In "The Turtle Overnight" the speaker celebrates the beauty of a turtle who bathes
almost "in his natural altogether." This prose piece is perhaps one of the best examples of how Wright can transform the object of observation into an epiphany that arises organically from the description. The speaker describes the turtle, and gives the creature, the object of the present moment, another dimension by comparing it with something the speaker knows from his past. Note the particularity and care Wright uses to describe the turtle and the way in which the metaphor springs from association:

Along his throat there are small folds, dark yellow as pollen shaken across a field of camomila. The lines on his face suggest only a relaxation, a delicacy in the understanding of the grass, like the careful tenderness I saw once on the face of a hobo in Ohio as he waved greeting to an empty wheat field from the flatcar of a freight train.

The parallelism allows the turtle and the Hobo to reflect each other: both are creatures who momentarily "bathe" in the joy of being alone. However, there is a sense of tragedy in the brevity of their preciousness. When the speaker returns from the memory of the hobo into the present moment, he sees that the turtle is no longer there: "So much air left, so much sunlight, and still he is gone." The line resonates: it is tragic that there is so much to enjoy, yet we are only there momentarily to enjoy it.

As was noted before, this reference to the brevity life is associated with the motif of "light." What began in To a Blossoming Pear Tree radiates here. "Yes, But" is a wonderful example of Wright's new sensibility in associating the celebration of small creatures with the light. In the poem, the speaker claims that, even if he were dead, he would want to come out and see the "plump lizards along the Adige." The poem embodies the theme of the speaker's wanting to leave things alone, and to gather a greater awareness and understanding through the act of observation and celebration:
I would sit among them and join them in leaving
The golden mosquitoes alone.
Why should we sit by the Adige and destroy
Anything, even our enemies, even the prey
God caused to glitter for us
Defenseless in the sun?
We are not exhausted. We are not angry, or lonely,
Or sick at heart.
We are in love lightly, lightly. We know we are shining,
Though we cannot see one another.
The wind doesn't scatter us,
Because our very lungs have fallen and drifted
Away like leaves down the Adige
Long ago.

We breathe light.

The act of observation also inspires the speaker to merge with the other,
and to want to transcend the self, as he desired to do in "The Blessing."

Similar to that poem is "Lightning Bugs in the Afternoon," in which
Wright uses the motif of light in order to create in the speaker a desire
to transform himself and become like the lightning bugs. Again, Wright
is choosing as the other an almost insignificant creature, "Common as
soot." Parallel with the lightning bugs is the speaker's mood, which is
informed by the experience he had the night before with a girl. Returning
alone the next day, he reflects on the joy of that experience:

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

It was a dangerous place to be a girl
And young. But she simply folded her silent
Skirt over bare knees, printed with the flowered cotton
Of a meal sack her mother had stitched for her.

The speaker tries to connect his mood with the lightning bugs, who
"Signaled to one another under the bridge." Like them, the speaker and
the girl were "Together with their warm secrets," and that leads the
speaker to desire to merge with them:
I think I am going to leave them folded
And sleeping in their slight gray wings.
I think I am going to climb back down
And open my eyes and shine.

The poem is successful because it adequately parallels the “affectionate” lightning bugs with the speaker’s mood; in his solitude, he thinks of the special moment he spent with the girl while they hover and cluster around him. It is natural that he would spontaneously want to join them, just as at the end of “A Blessing” he would want to “break/Into blossom.” Note, also, the ease with which Wright re-creates a natural speaking voice, especially in the lines “Last evening I sat here with a girl” and “Neither of us said anything to speak of.” The speaker and the girl are, in a sense, also “Common as soot.” Combined with that colloquial voice is a lyrical sense. Note the alliteration and rhythm (as emphasized by the enjambment) of the lines: “But she simply folded her silent/Skirt over bare knees, printed with the flowered cotton/Of a meal sack her mother had stitched for her.” Natural in diction, the lines still please with the repetition of the “s,” “r,” and “e” sounds. The poem is a perfect merging of the colloquial and lyrical.

A more ambitious poem that demonstrates the speaker’s response to his observations is “The Journey.” Descriptive and didactic at once, the poem expresses Wright’s new sense of intimacy. Here, Wright observes a spider in Anghiari, and from his observation he learns a lesson about living. He conveys this connection through using the same words in different contexts, words that also re-appear in other poems in the volume. The poem conveys the emotion of intimacy in the particularity of the speaker’s description of the spider and the believability of his response to that description, which results in the message he carries from it. This message is significant in that it expresses Wright’s new desire to celebrate life in the face of death. The speaker sees the spider step out of its web, “the golden hair/Of daylight along her shoulders, she poised there,/While ruins crumbled on every side of her.” He watches until the spider “stepped/Away in her own good
"time." Here again we have an expression of the preciousness of life within the larger tragedy: we will live as long as we poise in "the center of air," and we will remain alive until we step away. Wright arrives at this affirmation as a result of shutting up and taking into himself the world he steps lightly through. Here is what he learns, and here is what he offers by way of small advice:

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

What the speaker finds is that he must confront death and suffering in order to be able to discover any light, or, as Stanley Kunitz said once to Wright, to "'get down into the pit of the self, the real pit, and then you have to find your own way to climb up out of it. And it can't be anybody else's way. It has to be yours'" (Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," p. 43). The light appears after the journey through the ruins, letting the dust of human misery blow "all over your body." You must, ultimately, be intimate with that light, knowing its "heart," where it is balanced and where it falls.

*This Journey* is a culmination of Wright's work in many ways. Within the volume, there are poems written in the traditional, metrical style of his early years and prose pieces of his last period. On his way to becoming a major figure in American poetry, Wright has demonstrated that he can change and grow and incorporate many styles and moods. As he says at the end of the poem "Regret for a Spider Web," "I have to move, or die." Throughout his career, Wright has kept moving, and has found success at every stage because of his willingness to take risks and experiment with other forms. Highly successful at writing the academic
poems of the late fifties, he risked experimenting with the "deep image" in order to bring more life and relevance into his work. This change allowed him to better express his intense emotional concerns. These emotional concerns are at the heart of the poetry of James Wright: his continuing desire to empathize with the condition of others, from executed murderers to spiders. As Wright has claimed, "Poetry can keep life itself alive. You can endure almost anything as long as you can sing about it" (Stitt, "The Art of Poetry," p. 40).

Wright's poetry has attempted to keep alive a consideration for the creatures with whom we share the earth. In attempting these connections, Wright has always striven to keep emotion in the forefront. Continually risking and sometimes falling into sentimentality, Wright knew that it was only through taking those risks that he would be able to express the emotion that he felt. He was willing to write a book like Two Citizens because he was aware of its possibilities, and he knew that he had to fail in order to succeed. With To a Blossoming Pear Tree and This Journey, Wright proved that he was correct; always moving outward, his last two volumes include some of his most memorable poetry. He was a master of the prose-piece just as he mastered the traditional and deep imagist forms. The books are significant developments because he shows that he can express affirmation as successfully as he earlier expressed despair. James Wright is a master American poet because, in whatever form he was writing, traditional verse or prose, he attempted to express in clear language those elements of life that we tend to ignore. In so many of his poems, he is able to help us to understand and to love them.
Conclusion

An intimate poem can be achieved through any form. It is important to remember, however, that James Wright began publishing poems in 1957, when America was making important social, political, and artistic changes. The problem with much of the poetry at that time was not necessarily that the poems rhymed and were metrical, but rather that their voices seemed distant. The poets "controlled" their emotions: "...in the fifties artists and intellectuals, while professing eclecticism and pluralism, drew rigid boundaries marking what was acceptable discourse" (Breslin, p. 48). To create poetry was not necessarily what Lorca would call a "struggle with the Duende" (p. 156).

For Wright, a poet's own life can be a legitimate source for his poetry. By committing himself to his poems, by actively participating in their experiences in order to try to understand the speaker's relationship with the other, the poet is trying to identify his response and responsibility to that other and, ultimately, the larger world. In order to fully attempt this connection, Wright has to have his speaker use a more natural voice, has to speak out of a more authentic personhood. The relationship between the I and the Thou must be direct: As Buber says: "The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one's whole being."

Wright's early poems are focused more on their ideas and their "literary" language—a language which is influenced more by the tradition of "poetry" than Wright's own life. This language does not allow Wright to discover connections between speaker and other and create a sense of empathy; rather, the poems impose their sensibilities. The other seems to be more of a fabrication created by the poet in order
to convey the overall idea of the poem. Thus the other is an "It" as opposed to a "Thou": "The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being" (Buber, p. 54). Because the speaker does not write out of his own life, he cannot discover what is unique in the other. The other is a type, a generic "brother" or "old man" or "fisherman" who has no being. In *The Green Wall* and *Saint Judas*, Wright was an apprentice learning traditional forms. His love and gift for traditional uses of the language sometimes distracted our attention from the underlying pathos of the poems, and there seemed to be a disconnection between subject and form. The language concealed, rather than revealed, the speaker's emotions. However, there are important moments in the early poems where the whisperings of Wright's "true voice" asserts itself.

Later, when Wright discovers his own voice, the others become specific by taking on their own identities. They are released from their confinement as types: "Whoever says You does not have something for his object. For wherever there is something there is also another something, every it borders on other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others. But where You is said there is no something. You has no borders" (Buber, p. 55). We see this beginning to happen in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," where the speaker's identification with the murderer Doty opens up into the poet's ability to make an empathic identification.

Wright's self-discovery in his poetry occurs as a result of switching traditions from Eliot to Whitman. By reading, translating, and integrating foreign poets such as Lorca, Trakl, Neruda, Jimenez, and Guillen, Wright moves closer to his own *Duende*—that mysterious spirit that "is a power and not a construct, is a struggle and not a concept" (Lorca, p. 154). What informs Wright's *Duende* is his desire to understand the similarities and differences between himself and social outsiders. How can his love for the other help him transcend his own and others' loneliness? In *Shall We Gather at the River*, Wright continually struggles between that loneliness and his responsibility as a poet to, like Whitman, "speak" for others. In order to "speak" for the "unnamed poor," however, Wright discovers that he must be one with the poor, and
must understand how he himself is a social outsider and victim. Wright continually attempts to make connections with those who are marginalized, but also realizes that he can only do so momentarily. Since *The Green Wall* Wright has realized that he is a conscious creature, and thus is fundamentally separated from the other. To connect with the other is a continual process, a never-ending struggle. Love and loneliness are interdependent aspects of Wright's dialectic.

The nature of intimacy is important in Feminist criticism. Alicia Ostriker, in her work *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America,* offers an entire chapter entitled "The Imperative of Intimacy: Female Erotics, Female Poetics." She distinguishes female from male poetry in the sense that, as opposed to power and dominance, women poets write about "Mutuality, continuity, connection, identification, touch" (p. 165-66). She continues that "this motif constitutes the imperative of intimacy in women's writing." For the women poets she studies, "Relationship is a central term in female identity in contrast to the independence and autonomy associated with maleness" (p. 168). In her study, Ostriker focuses on how women poets attempt to be intimate with other women. It is not surprising that women poets would want to make the gesture of intimacy: in this dissertation, I have tried to make clear how, in a culture that marginalizes and alienates, Wright's desire for intimate connections is an important response to that marginalization.

I have also tried to show how an intimate poem succeeds or fails to convey its emotion. First, it is clear that in Wright's more intimate poems there seems to be less of a distance between the poet and the speaker. Throughout this project, I have been careful to distinguish the two, taking the view that the speaker is not the poet himself. The speaker is, rather, a fictional device created by James Wright. Wright, like many writers, draws on his own life and experiences, but we cannot make the claim that he puts himself into every poem. Wright's poems since *The Branch Will Not Break* sound as if there is at least a consistent speaker who has a life of his own. He draws from his past
experiences, and is more in touch with the language of particular places. The speaker becomes a character with identifiable characteristics. The first of these characteristics is that he is concerned with identifying his situation with the situations of others. When Wright succeeds in this identification, he does so by combining a natural, direct speech with a surreal lyricism. The combination of these competing types of language, when effective, creates a surprise and immediacy. Also, whereas in the first two works Wright was content to give general descriptions of his characters, in further works he described those characters with much greater detail. By so doing, we as readers are able to better imagine the worlds of the poems. Along with more detail, Wright attempted to connect the situations of the speaker and the other through the use of direct speech and parallel images. The emotion, though at bottom mysterious, becomes believable when the poet's response arises out of particularized description. A key question is whether the emotion has what Eliot would term an "objective correlative." Does the object of the emotion correlate to the poet's emotional investment? I have tried to show where and why the speaker's emotion does or does not correlate with the poet's description of the object of that emotion.

We will continue to read James Arlington Wright's poetry because of his particular "mysterious imagination." How is the reader drawn into his poetry of intimacy? It is by Wright's knowing when to identify himself with and when to recognize his difference from the other. To desire to connect with the other is an act of love and a small attempt at saving those whom one loves. James Wright's poetry makes us more aware of the importance of the on-going struggle to discover the identification that is possible between the self and the other.
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