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The Inner Drama of James Wright

JAMES WRIGHT'S LETTERS HIDE NOTHING OF HIS INTERIOR CONFLICT between a hope for beauty and terror of disintegration. A new selection of them also dramatizes a problem in American poetry—the conflict between what had come to seem a stifling academic formalism and the “new poetry” propounded by the school of Bly, the so-called Deep Image poets of the 1960s.¹ Wright was tugged between these poles, often declaring that his two favorite poets were Edwin Arlington Robinson and Walt Whitman, the first a formal realist and the second an ecstatic free-verser. Like Bly he was an internationalist, by nature sympathetic to surrealism. He was also a man who resisted his own tendencies toward the romantic and the sentimental, and who loved both hard-bitten realism and traditional meter. He embodied the vital contradictions of American poetry in his day. Perhaps this is partly why he remains an important figure even when we cannot agree how he was (or is) important. As Donald Hall has observed, “It is difficult for people, even today, to love both sides of James Wright—Neruda and Robinson, Trakl and Hardy.”

But Wright was loved, and it is fair to say that something of his human story, the drama of these letters, transcends his accomplishments and survives his deficiencies as a poet. In “Lament for a Maker,” quoted above, Hall also asks, “. . . has any American poet been the subject of so many elegies?” And, I would add, from so many different poetic camps? Wright's greatest flaw as a writer—a loss of control over his own impulse to sentimentality—was the very vulnerability that made him so attractive to others. The letters help us understand this by showing us a man more self-aware, more dignified in his struggles, than we might otherwise have realized. This personal drama, climaxing in a kind of fulfillment, is perhaps best laid out in chronological order.

APPRENTICESHIP. Born in 1927 the son of working-class parents in Ohio, Wright early fell in love with poetry as a means of escape. He especially loved Byron and Keats and formed an early attachment to Catullus. Through translation from Latin in high school he began to compose his own poems. Even after enlisting in the Army in 1946 he corresponded with high school teachers and friends about his poetic aspirations. This apprenticeship intensified during his years at Kenyon College (1948–51), where he studied with John Crowe Ransom, among others,

¹ A WILD PERFECTION: The Selected Letters of James Wright. Ed. by *Anne Wright* and *Sandra Rose Maley*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$40.00.

and forged some of his longest-lasting literary friendships. He wrote a thesis on Thomas Hardy, married the Greek-American Eleuthera (Liberty) Kardules, then traveled to Vienna on a Fulbright Fellowship, where he translated Theodor Storm and Georg Trakl. At the University of Washington (1954–56) he began a dissertation on Dickens, but also studied poetry with Theodore Roethke and Stanley Kunitz. His friends there included Carolyn Kizer, David Wagoner and Richard Hugo.

You can already see a scattershot pattern in these friendships and influences, intense emotionalism combined with sophistication. At age nineteen he wrote a sentence that would haunt his lifelong practice: “I would rather sacrifice technical skill than sincerity.” He wrote this to a Professor McCreight, friend of his high school teacher, who sent him the poems of Catullus to study. But his declaration went against the ascendant New Criticism; he would often be an outsider in hidebound academic circles. A year later, he wrote to another friend, “If my letters savor of any undue unhappiness, it is surely a reflection of my reading and of my struggle against the romanticism toward which I tend. How I long for realism! On the other side of realism, somewhere, lies true Nirvana.” The dramatic tension that would make his best and his worst poetry was already in place. Throw in his study of poets in other languages, his voracious but unsystematic reading of fiction, and you begin to understand his literary character. Then add more volatile elements—incipient alcoholism and depression, massive self-doubts making him vulnerable to other powerful personalities.

Susan Lamb, the friend who received those sentences about realism, also opened a long, remarkable letter in 1949 from a twenty-one-year-old Wright who was thinking ahead to the “architecture” of a life’s work in poetry. He was familiar with Japanese literature (having been stationed briefly in Japan) and steeped in the Germans, including Rilke—in short, the sort of obsessive student clearly marked for poetry. He could ramble and pontificate with the worst of us (and, to tell the truth, his occasional self-pity in the letters strains a reader’s patience), but he was also capable of promising lyric flights and close observation. He was of two minds about “culture,” as he wrote to Robert Mezey from Vienna in 1953:

But now I am sick of Vienna and Europe. It is too heavy, too slow, too arty. I long for some of that glorious barbarism, that gratifying bleakness and loneliness which is so much of America to me.

While in graduate school in Seattle, he struck up a correspondence with Hall, ranging over such figures as Mezey, Merwin, Anthony and Roger Hecht, Auden vs. Bogan, J. V. Cunningham, Charles Gullans, etc. The letters are friendly, chatty, and full of charming self-deprecation: “I swear to God one of these days I’m going to give up poetry and go directly in for a life of crime.” He took a teaching job at the University of Minnesota and, while trying to support his family and complete his dissertation, finished the poems of his first book, *The Green Wall*, selected by Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets and published in 1957.

In Minnesota Wright lived the double life of the academic poet who was not involved in the creative writing industry. That is, his growing list of publications as a poet did him little professional good because he'd been hired as a Dickens scholar. Chafing against academic specialization and feeling trapped in the Midwest he had hoped to escape, he began drinking more heavily and may already have been missing some of his classes. Among his colleagues were legendary boozers Allen Tate and John Berryman, so one imagines "self-help" was not one of the university's strong suits at the time. Wright had soon suffered at least one of the nervous breakdowns that resulted in hospitalization and that become a recurring motif in this book.

Still, he experienced undeniable success. His first book was widely discussed. He was launched as a poet. Rereading *The Green Wall* at this distance, it seems very Robinsonian, not only in its meters and its narratives, but also in its occasional lack of finesse. A handful of these poems seems fully commanding and accomplished to me now: "A Poem About George Doty in the Death House," "A Song for the Middle of the Night," "A Fit Against the Country" (one line of which gave the book its title), and "Sappho." But it's a book of broad sympathies and real ambition. It made Wright a poet to watch.

A CRISIS OF IMAGINATION. Two literary friendships dominate the letters of the next decade—with James Dickey and Robert Bly. This was the decade of Dickey's best work as a poet and critic, and while it may be difficult for us to remember now, he looked hard to beat in the American poetry sweepstakes. Like Wright a fan of Robinson, he displayed both Dionysian violence and Apollonian judgment. He was a vital poet, and Wright's letters to him are richly textured, by turns apologetic and feisty, often musing on the nature of their acquaintance:

There is a decorum in a growing friendship that I believe in, because genuine friendship, like genuine anything (genuine poetry, for example) is often startling and disturbing—i.e., reviving and restoring to one's spirit; so the decorum is not a dull and trite form, but a necessity.

Their correspondence had begun with a strong disagreement, though Wright's emotional honesty at this point helped them form a close bond.

But it's the letters to Bly that form the real core of this collection. In 1958 Bly sent James Wright a copy of his new magazine, *The Fifties*. This was the year before Wright published his second volume, *Saint Judas*, which remained traditional in form, owing much again to Hardy and Robinson, but was also curiously less dominated by realism than the earlier book, as if he were groping for some ill-defined metaphysics. The encounter with Bly's magazine and its editor's charismatic (at times crackpot) proselytizing against academic poetry posed an immediate challenge to Wright. You can almost witness the chemical reaction when these two men meet on the page. He saw the validity of Bly's attack but also knew that much of what he loved (including iambic meter) needed

to be defended against this onslaught. Only too willing to dismiss his own accomplishments as “displays of all the current cute tricks of meter and rhyme,” Wright succumbed to Bly’s influence while secretly preserving his affections, which he would confess to more understanding friends like Dickey. Soon after reading Bly’s magazine, he wrote to Donald Hall,

. . . I found myself in a confusion that was not only intellectual—it was deeply and emotionally painful to me to discover that at the very depth of my consciousness I was divided—really divided, as on the blade of a sword—between my loyalty to those of my contemporaries who were trying to write with intellectual grace and to those, far more disturbing and ruthless, who were raising hell and demanding greatness.

If American poetry was becoming a struggle between advocates of the cooked and the raw, Wright felt medium rare.

Of course Bly’s rebellion was different from that of the Beats—less involved with Zen and mind-altering substances, less a matter of youthful romanticism, and more a matter of reconceiving genuineness under the influence of other poetries, particularly Hispanic and German. It was not a return to the internationalism of Pound and Eliot, which had confirmed an elite corps of professor critics, but a championing of popular surrealism, sometimes conveyed through hasty translations. Bly developed a poetics of omission, a paring down of the verbal apparatus of poetry in order to access the psychic liberation he understood in Jungian terms. He loved Yeats as an example, but apparently did so more for the vision than the rigor of his art. This profound suspicion of felicity—the sort of serious playfulness represented by Auden—created an unavoidable alternative tradition, especially in a time of great social upheaval, but Bly’s many besotted followers went a bit batty over it, abetted by his Messianic energy. Wright fell under the spell, yet the letters suggest that he compartmentalized his friendships, confessing to some what he dared not repeat to others. With Dickey he discussed Yvor Winters, with Bly Georg Trakl.

The same inner turmoil allowed Wright to offer some rather sensible observations on the art:

But do I make myself clear about the two necessary steps of creation of great and original poetry? 1. Mastery of formal competence in one’s tradition (there is *always* tradition, and it’s as ruthlessly inescapable as breathing, hunger, and death. Those who deny the existence of the past, said Santayana in a line which makes me shudder with fear, are doomed endlessly to repeat its mistakes). 2. Then the *breaking through* this formal competence, in order to *create* a poetry which is unique and all one’s own: the truly shaped voice of one’s self.

Robert and Carol Bly were also important as loyal friends. They lived on a farm in southwestern Minnesota, which became Wright’s primary refuge as long as he lived in the area. At times they were joined by poets

like Hall and Dickey, Louis Simpson and Thomas McGrath. These must have been boozy, heady visits. When The Sixties Press published *Twenty Poems of César Vallejo*, which he translated with Robert Bly and John Knoepfle, Wright provided a short prose statement indicative of the moment:

Current poets in the United States seem to be perishing on either side of a grey division between century-old British formalism on the one hand and anti-poetry on the other. In Vallejo we may see a great poet who lives neither in formalism nor in violence, but in imagination.

But the dichotomy presented here is a false one, as Wright must have known, for the imagination thrives in many kinds of poetry. Bly's efforts to liberate consciousness led many poets into puritanical plainness and ultimately impoverished the art. Wright, in short, was wise to resist Bly even as he embraced him.

Saint Judas (1959) had contained two of his best poems: the title sonnet and "At the Executed Murderer's Grave." *A Wild Perfection* offers an appendix of poems in draft, including a version of the latter poem as it appeared in *Poetry*. It's a disheartening performance, as clotted and overwrought as the worst of the early Lowell, and turning to the version Wright eventually published in his second book, one can see how profoundly he improved the poem through revision (apparently at Dickey's suggestion). "I croon my tears at fifty cents per line," he writes in the final version, while the one from *Poetry* offers such doozies as this: "But my grammatical cries provide small time, / Small hope for naked victims dropped in lime."

The Branch Will Not Break (1963) shows Bly's influence particularly in the move away from iambic meter in such well-known poems as "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" (with its overreaching, Rilkean ending), "A Blessing" and "Two Hangovers." But some of Wright's strongest writing remains in meter, like the second part of his "Two Poems about President Harding":

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

Still a poet of American history and culture, Wright now also tended toward a dissolving self, a sympathy beyond words. But poetry is made of words, and his occasional attempts to transcend his medium can be maddeningly vague, as in "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.

Ultimately what I find here and in *Shall We Gather at the River* (1968) is evidence of a split personality. The Good James Wright wrote poems of sympathy and precision, while the Bad called up standard Deep Image tropes—shadows, moon, stone, trees (any trees would do)—in a vaporous profundity. The Good gave us “Two Postures Beside a Fire” and “In Response to the Rumor that the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia, Has Been Condemned.” The Bad opened a poem with “Today I am walking alone in a bare place, / And winter is here.” Finally, the Bad published *Two Citizens* (1973), which Wright quickly realized was his worst book.

The sixties were a decade when Wright nearly succumbed to his demons. His alcoholism and the catty atmosphere of the University of Minnesota were not a good mix. Divorced from Liberty in 1962 and denied tenure, he taught briefly at Moorhead State, across the Red River from Fargo, North Dakota. He subsequently taught at Macalester College in Saint Paul, then in 1966 took an appointment at Hunter College in New York, where he would work for the rest of his life. In 1967 he married Edith Anne Runk (familiarily known as Annie). He got sober with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous and, despite occasional hospitalizations for depression, was generally embarked on his happiest and most fulfilling years. His *Collected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize, and after the misstep of *Two Citizens* he produced more rigorous and surprising poetry.

The friendship with Bly survived their geographical separation, but Wright tried to outgrow the Deep Image aesthetic. He had always said he wanted his poems to be those of a “grown man,” and these letters are heartening evidence that a degree of personal happiness did not get in his way.

THE GROWN MAN. In 1978 Wright responded to a letter from Roger Jones, who had asked about Deep Image poetry:

As for my own work, I am almost certain that what some critics have called “deep imagery” and “surrealism” in it is actually just the confusion that results from bad writing. My intention has always been to be as clear as possible. For example, in the poem which you mention, “Written on a Bus in Central Ohio,” you say that the poem “seems a very good piece for the conveying of sensory impressions, but is somewhat confusing beyond that.” No wonder. There *is* nothing “beyond that.”

It’s refreshing to find Wright so openly critical of his own failures—

utterly undefensive, willing to take responsibility for them. More than once he writes of his appreciation of critical reviews from which he can actually learn through engagement with another mind, rather than hatchet jobs in which the critic's only purpose is to exalt himself: "Some fellow (I've forgotten his name) in *The Hudson Review* sounded as if he were quivering all over like Lionel Barrymore. His review might have given him a hernia."²

Another sign of Wright's maturity was his devotion to teaching. He took pride in not being part of the creative writing world, but "a real teacher with a real subject matter." In 1968, he wrote to his own teacher, John Crowe Ransom,

I can't say that I am concentrating on the book right now. I am rather trying to teach well, for I care about teaching as passionately as I've cared about poetry. You undoubtedly know how I failed as a teacher at the University of Minnesota. True enough, but now I have shown myself to be a good teacher at Hunter.

These letters convince me that Wright was indeed a good teacher at this point in his life. Young people wrote to him, and he wrote back, taking them seriously as individuals interested in poetry but also opening up to them emotionally. This book contains a few of his well-known letters to Leslie Marmon Silko (the bulk of them published in *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace*). There are also wonderful letters to a teenager named Janice Thurn who elicits Wright's warmth and good humor. Furthermore, in the years after his divorce from Liberty, Wright maintained a good, fatherly tone with his sons, Franz and Marshall. When Franz determined to become a poet (like his father a depressive who went on to win a Pulitzer), James Wright was characteristically generous with advice and encouragement.

There are gaps in the letters, to be sure. While a note on the back of this book maintains that Wright corresponded with Dickey until the end of his life, this volume produces no letter to Dickey later than 1965, causing me to wonder if they had a falling out. And while there are letters to Roger Hecht, we get none to his older brother, Anthony, who would later write an elegy for Wright. Were Anthony Hecht's papers examined for letters? I ask only because Wright would have written differently to Hecht than to Bly, and this difference might have been illuminating.

One of my favorite comic passages in the present selection occurs in a letter written to Richard Hugo from Taranto, Italy, in 1979, Wright's last year. He had been trying to nap in a Naples hotel:

. . . somebody upstairs was playing a radio loud with rock music. I lay there a while, cursing my fate at being born a contemporary of Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, The Rhythm Method, The Motherfuckers, and Meatloaf, when suddenly I heard something so loud that it

² I should add that this was a response to the "Bad" James Wright of *Two Citizens*. His best work was favorably received in this magazine, which has published him and quite a few of his friends.

required a complete reorientation of my nervous system. Maybe it's the way Vesuvius sounded back in the good old days when the whole top half of the mountain blew off.

It turned out to be a wedding party who were having a reception in the restaurant upstairs. They brought their own orchestra with them, including an electric organ. Dear God, I heard speeches, community renderings of old Neapolitan songs, raucous laughter, and what sounded like Wilt Chamberlin dribbling Truman Capote's head down court for a dunk-shot.

But I did not hear rock music. The Neapolitan wedding party had destroyed it.

The man in these later letters is less inclined to whine and wring his hands, more often moved to love the world, as if anticipating his early departure from it. I still find his poetry a mixed bag, but the mixture is perhaps more assured and less mannered. Starting with *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* (1977) and continuing in the final poems of *This Journey* (1982), Wright alternated prose vignettes with his verses. The letters tell us that he did not believe in the prose poem (a term he called "idiotically confused"), but among aficionados of the form Wright is considered a master. Poems like "With the Shell of a Hermit Crab" and "Lighting a Candle for W. H. Auden" demonstrate his continued facility with rhyme and meter, while "The Best Days," "Hook" and "To a Blossoming Pear Tree" offer free verse realism and sympathy for beings other than himself. *This Journey* begins with a free verse poem, followed by a rhymed one, followed by prose, as if to announce that, whatever else you can say about James Wright, he was never reduced by the "poetry wars." I rather like the prose bits called "Against Surrealism," "In Memory of the Ottomans" and "Honey," as well as his truncated ballade, "Between Wars."

At his best, Wright balanced his sympathy with more determined artistry, lucidity with an openness to what cannot be fully understood. The letters give us a sometimes painful evolution, arriving at a maturity visible in his strongest late poems. Here, as a closing example, is the final stanza of "The Journey":

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.