

accounted for, of one thing we may be sure, that this feeling is no cheat: for there is no cheating in nature and the simple unsought feelings of the soul. There must be a truth involved in it, though we may but in part lay hold of the meaning. Even the memories of past pain are delightful; and past delights, though beheld only through clefts in the grey clouds of sorrow, are lovely as Fairy Land... The moon, which is the lovelier memory or reflex of the down-gone sun, the joyous day seen in the faint mirror of the brooding night, had rapt me away.

The moon, glowing with borrowed light, is the prototypical symbol of Faerie Land. And Faerie itself is like the reflex image of the human imagination.

Peter Kocan's compassionate objectivity says 'here is a young person living in a fantasy world; here are his own lucid reflections on how imagination works in his life.' But MacDonald throws us directly into that world; we enter it sensuously, and the experience is rather like being cast into a Pre-Raphaelite painting.

But Anodos has his own moments of lucidity and his own psychological journey. It involves encountering his shadow, a literal shadow in the terms of the book, which perhaps shouldn't be equated too easily with Jungian ideas of the dark side of the self. Anodos' shadow has the effect of spoiling the beauty around him, disenchanting Fairy Land. He complains of being 'a man beside himself', a self-conscious spectator: the loss of the innocence that allows a child to enter wholeheartedly into the imaginative state. Perhaps this is meant to indicate a pseudo-sophisticated stage of life, in which Faerie is rejected as childish and unreal. Anodos has to suffer and achieve in order to expiate his pride and cynicism. For MacDonald, authenticity is directly linked to the imagination. This may seem counterintuitive, but isn't it true that the effect of reading fairy tales is to re-awaken a sense of wonder in the natural world, and to sensitise us to archetypal presences and processes in our inner lives?

It was more bearable to do without tenderness for himself than to see that his own tenderness could make no amends for the lack of other things to her.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

More Than the Losses of My Life on Earth The Poetry of James Wright

Ann Stapleton

Yes, we need one another in deep, strange ways.
James Wright

James Wright was born in 1927, in the industrial river town of Martins Ferry, Ohio, to a working-class family he described as 'very unpredictable, and rather wildly kind.' His father worked for fifty years at the Hazel-Atlas Glass Company, a fate that Wright, who loved and respected him, was nevertheless desperate to avoid. The poet Donald Hall, a longtime friend of Wright's, wrote that 'For no one more than James Wright was literature so much a choice of life over death: Thomas Hardy and Beethoven on the one hand; on the other hand Martins Ferry and Hazel-Atlas Glass [... Moreover, for Wright] poetry expressed and enacted compassion over the world's suffering.'

Wright was plagued by bipolar disorder, and at the age of sixteen lost a year of school to the first of many breakdowns he would endure throughout his life, involving electroshock treatments, extended hospitalizations, and at least one suicide attempt. In a letter to his ex-wife, he wrote, "There's a place in E. A. Robinson that suggests how I felt for months: where he speaks of "some poor devil on a battlefield / Left undiscovered, and without the strength / To drag a maggot from his clotted mouth." But if Wright's life was to a great degree shaped by his illness, even by the contours of its abeyance, he understood that, in order to survive, he would need to befriend it, that even though its repeated approaches would terrorize and deplete him, his madness would always come bearing powerful, strange gifts. If the chief work of Wright's poems is absolution, he extends it even to the impersonal energies of this world: a lightning storm in the sky (or a glitch in a poet's brain) does not intend the harm it can cause, and thereby is innocent, sometimes even exquisite, and so must be forgiven. He wrote to the poet Galway Kinnell

that 'the truth is there is something terrible, almost unspeakably terrible, in our lives, and it demands respect, and, for some reason that seems to me quite insane, it doesn't hate us.' And he sent this hard-won encouragement to a former student struggling with her own illness: 'You'll have to find a way to be true to the depression, too, because it has a place in our lives, somewhere.' A lesson not lost on his son Franz, who has endured a similar struggle to survive mental illness and the tendency toward self-medication that often comes with it, while at the same time trying to keep the creative spirit alive. Like his father, Franz received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, making the Wrights the only father and son winners in the award's history.

Though Wright was a distinctly American poet, some of his most cherished 'imaginative resources' were products of the English soil. He wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on Charles Dickens, whom he especially loved for capturing 'better than anyone else [...] the complete nuttiness of people,' both delightful and horrifying; paraphrasing, he concurred with Santayana's thought that 'people who think Dickens exaggerated are people who just don't know how to pay attention.' Wright was particularly admiring of the novelist's ability to convey a clear-eyed view of society's lunacy through the innocence of a child's perception (Oliver Twist's perfectly natural desire for more) or the psychosis of a madman (Wright considered *Barnaby Rudge* 'a great and neglected novel'. For him, Barnaby's madness – in much the same way a poet's does – actually reflects the world's reality). 'Dickens has shaken me to the very bottom of myself,' Wright confided to his doctoral advisor. 'I've had so many poems begin after reading Dickens that I ought to send part of the payment to his Estate.'

Wright also delighted in the works of Thomas Hardy, and prized him for his tender awareness 'of the seriousness of life to those who live it, and of the strangeness in which they have a share whether they know it or not.' In a letter to the poet Richard Eberhart, Wright, for the sheer joy of it, copied out a two-page description of *The Woodlanders* 'mysterious, green, unutterably beautiful character' Giles Winterbourne, 'standing confused on a town street-corner with his arm around an apple-tree that he's carrying along with him.' A 'miracle' Wright believed 'must have occurred to Hardy's imagination as helplessly and overwhelmingly as a blossom occurs to a branch.' He believed Hardy 'one of the most truly devout authors in English.'

And the loyal Wright's 'favorite poet in the world' was Edward Thomas: 'A holy man, I believe, a saintly man' wrote Wright, calling the Englishman 'one of the secret spirits who help keep us alive.' In a letter to the American confessional poet Anne Sexton, he spoke of

a time of grief and self-hatred when he destroyed a very old, beloved copy of Whitman, tearing it to pieces and thrusting it

down into the rankest mucky bottom sludge of an old garbage can near a dirty railroad track in Minneapolis; then I burned my manuscripts. Years of them. A symbolic suicide, if there ever was one.

And yet – even when I planned, as often I did, to ignore 'symbols' and just get the job over and done with, I never even thought of destroying this book by Edward Thomas. It was always the book I loved best, and I read it only when I was true and real. And I guess that it has preserved my best self when nothing else was preserved by anyone, in any way, anywhere.

In a moving letter to the poet Robert Mezey, Wright, exhausted from another bruising round with his illness ('It was day and night of authentic nightmare'), describes his halting, openhearted attempt to make a poem out of his fear and sorrow (poetry was, at times, quite literally lifesaving):

Well, here's my sonnet. It may not be much (I can't tell... I am in a hell of a shape, really); but it gave me another touch of secret joy which I needed very badly; because I love the art of the sonnet very much. It is about itself... i.e., the attempt to write a sonnet after long having lost touch with this noble form.

Midway through his career, Wright switched to free verse, but here, in his madness, he cleaves to his 'native rocks,' listening very hard for a song he has always known, one that is old and sacred, and might yet have the power to restore his life:

To Build a Sonnet

I had not gone back there, because to go
Meant pouring moonlight of a skinny kind
On slag heap, that my mother used to know:
Slow smoldering hell, shrunken, and hard to find.
Now I have gone back there, it is no dream;
It is broad waking; I have leave to go,
But not of anybody's goodness now.
It is my native rocks I go back to,

And build a sonnet. Laboring as I hide
Behind the shadow of this great hinge flung wide
Where Clare, John Ransom, Robinson stepped forth,

I lift my slight wall, yawing to one side,
My spine a splinter between winds, yet worth
More than the losses of my life on earth.

The following poem is among Wright's most famous, and perhaps infamous, as well, as so many English professors have debated the last line (some infuriated by it) and the nature of the moral Wright wished it to impart. But in fact, the poem is most remarkable for its ability to clear away the mind's usual apparatus of meaning (this stands for that, and that is really this) to make way for an interlude of pure being in that peaceful hour before the night returns, a little time in which to experience fully the serenity of needing nothing more than what you already have, and wanting to be no place on earth but where you are. The word 'wasted' in the last line refers to all the chances for such happiness the speaker, like each of us, has let go by.

**Lying in a Hammock
at William Duffy's Farm
in Pine Island, Minnesota**

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

Dylan Thomas wrote that "The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps [...] so that something that is not in the poem can creep, crawl, flash or thunder in," and Wright's instinctive humility before the power of language, the magnanimity with which he accepts its continual refusal to yield up all of life's secrets to even the most ardent human study, is one of his great strengths as a poet. His stunning nature poems are really metaphysical pieces that make use of a very idiosyncratic animal imagery and sensory descriptions of life along the ground to access complicated, all but indescribable states of awareness. Consider 'Milkweed,' a poem that begins by

describing an intensely personal retrospection that is almost mystical, yet which somehow, as a direct result of the poem's quiet refusal to explain itself, achieves a deep intimacy with the reader:

Milkweed

While I stood here, in the open, lost in myself,
I must have looked a long time
Down the corn rows, beyond grass,
The small house,
White walls, animals lumbering toward the barn.
I look down now. It is all changed.
Whatever it was I lost, whatever I wept for
Was a wild, gentle thing, the small dark eyes
Loving me in secret.
It is here. At a touch of my hand,
The air fills with delicate creatures
From the other world.

'Whatever it was' the speaker lost, the thing he 'wept for,' is a being Wright is content to describe, but leave nameless. Our sense is of an entity that somehow wished him well, that wanted him to live, but his not being able to say for certain what it was is one of the bright 'holes' or 'gaps' to which Thomas refers, and what creeps shyly through it into the poem is the reader's own sense of loss.

W.H. Auden, who in 1954 selected Wright's *The Green Wall* as winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, wrote that 'Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table,' and this recognition of kinship with the transgressor, including the one that dwells within each of us, is a preoccupation of Wright's. His poems speak for the wretched figure standing alone on the gallows of his own mistakes, mourning his lost best self, already dead and buried long ago. In 'At the Executed Murderer's Grave,' if the tone is strident, it is meant to be. Wright does not offer us a prayer for the killer George Doty, but 'a lament – a cursing lament, the only real kind, the kind Heathcliff speaks to Cathy Linton on her deathbed – for the real murderer, which is of course society and – since I belong to society, since I didn't defend the human being in the grave – a cursing lament for myself':

I pity myself because a man is dead.
If Belmont County killed him, what of me?
His victims never loved him. Why should we?
And yet, nobody had to kill him either.
It does no good to woo the grass, to veil
The quicklime hole of man's defeat and shame.

Nature-lovers are gone. To hell with them.
I kick the clods away, and speak my name.

The last line emphasizes that it is Wright's, the speaker's, everyone's grave we look down on, and that the poor, deluded face peering out of it is our own.

The poem includes this epigraph from Sigmund Freud: 'Why should we do this? What good is it to us? Above all, how can we do such a thing? How can it possibly be done?' But rather than being the commentary on capital punishment most readers assume this to be, the questions are, in fact, Freud's attempt to puzzle out the (to him, 'staggering' and incomprehensible) idea of The Golden Rule: knowing what he knew of human psychology, the idea that we would attempt to do unto others as we would have them do unto us was astonishing to him.

In 'Saint Judas,' Wright combines these two ideas – sympathy for the one cast out of all human fellowship, and wonder at the true miracle of any man's pity for another. Judas, he writes:

placed himself beyond the moral pale, and he realized this. I've always been strongly moved by his hanging himself. Why did he do it? You would think he'd be a completely cold person. And yet, he couldn't have been to experience such complete despair. I tried to imagine what Judas was like.

Saint Judas

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

Banished from heaven, I found this victim beaten,
Stripped, kneed, and left to cry. Dropping my rope
Aside, I ran, ignored the uniforms:
Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,
The kiss that ate my flesh. Flayed without hope,
I held the man for nothing in my arms.

The 'for nothing' in the last line is ambiguous, meaning for no payment, and also for no reason, as mercy cannot be bought or explained; it

simply is or is not, and it is always in our (damaged) hands.

In the poem 'Hook,' the dejected speaker, standing on a windy winter street corner in St. Paul, Minnesota, no bus expected for hours, is approached by a stranger:

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?

The rescuer, his hand revealed in 'the terrible starlight' to be only a silver hook, offers the speaker all he can spare:

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.

And this is the blood money of Wright's Judas, those wages of a betrayal that always necessarily includes the self, returning now to the sinner's hand, but this time, they are transformed by human love in one of its many odd disguises. They bring with them the power to cleanse and to redeem, another kind of Judas kiss altogether, with the meaning of the word 'conviction' altered from 'a finding of guilt' to its other incarnation: 'a belief held firmly.'

Brush Fire

In this field,
Where the small animals ran from a brush fire,
It is a voice
In the burned weeds, saying
I love you.
Still, when I go there,
I find only two gray stones,
And, lying between them,
A dead bird the color of slate.
It lies askew in its wings,

Its throat bent back as if at the height of some joy too great
 To bear to give.
 And the lights are going out
 In a farmhouse, evening
 Stands, in a gray frock, silent, at the far side
 Of a raccoon's grave.

The 'small animals' running from death, the voice 'saying I love you' 'in the burned weeds,' the 'dead bird the color of slate' are all images of a human grief that has come true in the animal world. It is the killed creature, the lost flight, of a deep love; the 'slate' of its body and the 'gray' of the evening's frock are the colors of a long day, a lost time, that is ended. These are the realities of ash, of a deeply, irrevocably altered (emotional) landscape, so changed that it is hardly recognizable. Still, 'to bear' and 'to give' stand bravely, next to each other, as the equals they always mean to be: we must somehow manage to do both, and we must try to live. 'The lights' of something rare and beautiful and never to come again 'are going out' (one of Wright's gaps – you say what the something is; the farmhouse is only a stand-in for what you loved that is going dark now as you watch). So much is happening here, away from the light, where the pity of the houses cannot reach. The evening's frock (daring throwback word to an olden time before this ruined now) is gray and all is silent – not at all the perfect peace of Duffy's farm in its radiant hour of gold, but the quiet of no words at all, ending distantly 'at the far side of a raccoon's grave.' Of course, there's no such thing as that, and yet, in those last four words, so impractical that you can receive them in nothing but utter seriousness, you look around you at all the strange burials in life that go unseen and unremarked, and unmemorialized by anything but night falling, and you are made to mourn, for its brightness, the whole burned world.

In 'The Lambs on the Boulder,' a luminous short prose piece, Wright takes as his starting point an exhibition of masterpieces – from Giotto, 'the master of angels,' to Mantegna, whose dead Christ 'looks exactly like a skidroad bum fished by the cops out of the Mississippi in autumn just before daylight and hurried off in a tarpaulin-shrouded garbage truck and deposited in another tangle of suicides and befuddled drunkards at the rear entrance to the University of Minnesota medical school.' This is the true Christ of the Ohio River, the failed saviour whose loneliness draws Wright to him. But of even greater interest to Wright than the exhibition is what Wright calls 'a littler glory that I love best. It is a story, which so intensely ought to be real that it is real,' the tale of the medieval master painter Cimabue who, while walking in the country, pauses

to observe the young shepherd boy Giotto using a pebble 'to scratch sketches of his lambs on a boulder at the edge of the field.' Wright reveals that one of his 'idle wishes [as ever, he is modest; the wish is a devout one] is to find that field where Cimabue stood in the shade and watched the boy Giotto scratching his stone with his pebble':

I would not be so foolish as to prefer the faces of the boy's lambs to the faces of his angels. One has to act his age sooner or later.

Still, this little planet of rocks and grass is all we have to start with. How pretty it would be, the sweet faces of the boy Giotto's lambs gouged, with infinite and still uncertain and painful care, on the side of a boulder at the edge of a country field. [...]

I wonder where that boulder is. I wonder if the sweet faces of the lambs are still scratched on its sunlit side. [...]

In one of the mature Giotto's greatest glories, a huge choir of his unutterably beautiful angels are lifting their faces and are becoming the sons of the morning, singing out of pure happiness the praises of God.

Far back in the angelic choir, a slightly smaller angel has folded his wings. He has turned slightly away from the light and lifted his hands. You cannot even see his face. I don't know why he is weeping. But I love him best.

I think he must be wondering how long it will take Giotto to remember him, give him a drink of water, and take him back home to the fold before it gets dark and shepherd and sheep alike lose their way in the darkness of the countryside.

In the Wright cosmology, with belief turned upside down, with the dead skidroad Christ so badly in need of our forgiveness, and the task of love placed squarely on the shoulders of the human beasts, it is the boy Giotto who bears responsibility for the angel arisen from his need; it is the grieving angel who must wait forever for a mortal's slow return. And it is because of the terrible darkness propping up that sunward boulder wherever we left it so long ago ('I wonder where the stone is. I will never live to see it'), the lambs' faces still looking after us with such love in their eyes, that we seem sometimes, in all our tarnish, halfway golden, and love limps homeward, in all its lostness, to be found.