

## CHAPTER I

# *Paper or Plastic, Pepsi or Coke, Irony or Sincerity?*

That question. No, THE question. Invariably, it arises in the post-poetry-reading Q&A, its terms variable but its agenda strikingly consistent. Sandwiched between the usual queries about where I get my ideas, whether I write at night or in the morning, and what books I'd recommend, someone sheepishly asks, as if soliciting a chef's secret recipe, "What makes a good poem *good*—thinking or feeling?" Depending on the audience's sophistication, the polar terms framing the query might instead invoke intellect or emotion, rhetoric or sincerity, learning or inspiration, text or performance, even skill or mere luck. Posed with all due seriousness, the question looms like Zeus's thundercloud, the god ready to fling lightning bolts down upon the losing tribe too foolish to honor the Olympian truth, art's true god of gods. Tendered fervently and aching for aesthetic confirmation, the question admits of no namby-pamby ambiguity. It's one or the other, pal, in the same way there's paper or plastic, Pepsi or Coke.

The question is instructive for what it says about Americans' conception of poetic art. In all its countless (dis)guises, the question devolves to something like this: to be a great poet, must one be learned and mannerly, or instead, must one be intuitive and wild? These poets and readers have tapped into American poetry's longstanding AC/DC current. To them, it's either Door 1 or Door 2, either True or False. And the poets they read and the poetry they themselves write register their ardent aesthetic claims. True enough, since the time of Emerson, American poetry has enjoyed—or suffered—a rousing dialectical conversation between opposing aesthetic camps. In *Poetic Culture* Christopher Beach describes this conversation as a series

of revolutions and counter-revolutions forged by aesthetically combative adherents: "Poetic history over the past two centuries can in fact be characterized as a struggle for poetic legitimacy carried out either by individuals or by small and elite groups of writers who engage in a succession of successful or abortive revolutions."<sup>1</sup> These camps have been variously labeled, as we shall see, but the characteristics that define each polar group have remained fairly constant. One faction is said to advocate, and to practice in its writings, a sophisticated, intellectual, and often ironic response to the world. The opposing faction pursues an intuitive, sometimes purposely primitive, experimental, and emotional mode of writing.

### Camp A versus Camp B

A bevy of critics has exerted a great deal of energy analyzing and describing this bifurcation of American poetics that Emerson himself ruefully labeled a "schism." Just past the turn of the twentieth century, Van Wyck Brooks studied the scene and concluded American writing fell into two divergent cliques, the "Highbrow" and the "Lowbrow."<sup>2</sup> According to Brooks, the Highbrows mimicked the urbane and rational manners of the European upper classes. To the contrary, the Lowbrows wore their American primitivism too proudly, invoking a wildness and incivility attendant to their rebellious attitudes toward art in particular and life in general. Brooks feared the dialectic was a "deadlock" few American writers might successfully negotiate. Near the turn of the century, critic Philip Rahv identified what he believed were the fundamental "polar types" of American literature, to which he applied the now-indelicate terms "paleface" and "redskin."<sup>3</sup> The paleface country club boasted members such as T. S. Eliot and Henry James, writers who evidenced an intellectual, often ascetic, and refined "estrangement from reality." On the other hand, the redskins—the tribe of Whitman, Thoreau, and William Carlos Williams—shared an emotional, largely unrestrained immersion in their environment, even when "rebell[ing] against one or another of its manifestations."<sup>4</sup> The paleface, thus, stands apart from the proceedings of the world, reflecting intelligently even while experiencing a flow of events and attitudes. The redskin, though, rejects such Cartesian dualism and reacts intuitively, primarily emotively. In short, the paleface *imposes* order on what he experiences; the redskin *perceives* a preexistent order with which to align himself.

Rahv viewed this polarity as a "split personality" or a "blight of onesid-

edness” in the American mind. Others noticed a similar disjuncture. Roy Harvey Pearce labeled the two groups “mythic” and “Adamic,” while R. W. B. Lewis, using Emerson’s terms, tagged them “the party of memory” and the “party of hope.” D. H. Lawrence offered up the terms “genteel” and “Indian,” while poet Robert Lowell characterized a poet’s binary options as the choice to write either “cooked” or “raw” poetry.<sup>5</sup> In his book on Lowell, Stephen Gould Axelrod expanded Lowell’s remark, suggesting that the divergent manner in which American writers react to “myths of experience” allows for a tangible division in our literature “between writers who experience primarily with the head and those who experience with the blood.”<sup>6</sup> In the mid-1980s, Charles Altieri defined this conflict as that existing between poets following either “ideals of lucidity” or “ideals of lyricism.” Sipping a cocktail blended equally of revelation and resignation, Altieri called the dialogue “the longest running play in our cultural history.”<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, this dialectic has reasserted itself in the stark divisions between those poets labeled stodgily “academic” and those who adhere to a range of what Hank Lazer calls “oppositional poetics.” While academic poets tend to publish their work in hard copy largely via established journals and presses, “opposing” poets mostly reject those means of reaching the public. As the latter moniker implies, these poets set themselves in various modes of opposition to the work of poets connected to university-supported creative writing programs. In fact, the terms “academic” and “workshop” have become interchangeable as means to describe (and to dismiss) mainstream poets said to reject Modernism’s formal experimentation, to rely too easily on the straightforward lyric voice, and to decry the corrosive effects of literary theory and philosophy on American poetry.

Against the mainstream’s intellectual geezers, Lazer lassoes a wide range of poets within his “oppositional” camp, including “varieties of ethnopoetics, oral and performance poetics, and feminist poetics.” All these oppositional groups share, however, one intention: to “critique and contest assumptions and practices of more mainstream poetics.”<sup>8</sup> Chief among these poetics is Language writing, its practitioners a group of poets deeply influenced by philosophical and theoretical concerns and whose work thus “takes seriously those theories of the sign and those issues of representation that mainstream poetry repudiates.”<sup>9</sup> In volume 2 of *Opposing Poetics*, Lazer focuses on poets associated with the Language movement, writers such as Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Lynn Hejninian, Susan Howe, and Douglas Messerli.

Another cadre of these oppositional poetics is composed of performance, slam, and spoken word poets. Beach, in fact, devotes a chapter of his *Poetic Culture* to detailing the culture of slam and spoken word poets associated with New York's Nuyorican Café. Here, the hoary historical dialectic narrows to those who favor performance over text. These poets live in the realm of oral presentation, in the flux of evolving text, and in authorial dependence on audience participation. They often shun the page altogether in favor of live performance before an audience equally committed to an expressive outcome. Slam poets such as Paul Beatty, Dana Bryant, Lisa Busceni, Marc Smith, and Maggie Estep have already developed a national reputation based on the live performance of their poems. Others such as Henry Rollins have blended poetry/music crossover formats to much success. MTV's Affiliate Promotions Department sponsored the "Free Your Mind" spoken word tour, bringing these poets to college campuses across the nation. Some, such as Reg. E. Gaines, have recorded spoken word albums in an effort to reach audiences devoted to audio and disabused of the book.<sup>10</sup> It is instructive to remember that in ancient Rome one went about "publishing" one's poetry by reading it aloud before an assembled group. One could argue these contemporary spoken word poets have thus breathed fresh life into an ancient mode of delivering poetry to its audience. Even better, there's a movement to link performance and print poets in anthologies such as *The Spoken Word Revolution Redux*, which presents poems in both print and audio CD versions.<sup>11</sup> Poets as various as Billy Collins, Mark Strand, Lisa Busceni, Marc Smith, and Kevin Coval offer work on the page and in audio recitation.

Such oral poetics are attracting not only widespread public audiences but also devoted *academic* proponents. In fact, some surprising characters are attempting to unbrick the red-brick walls dividing "academic" and oral poets. In his *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*, Dana Gioia—ironically regarded by practitioners of "opposing" poetics as a mainstay advocate of genteel, workshop, NEA-supported, traditionalist poetry and thus as the enemy—has roundly praised the emergence of spoken word and performance poetry as a life-giving development. The National Endowment for the Arts, which Gioia until recently headed, has initiated Poetry Out Loud, a national poetry recitation competition for high school students. This dalliance into oral poetry performance has had the curious result of simultaneously disaffecting many academic poets (who fear anything but the page as zone of performance) and discomfiting oral poets (who fear this

incursion onto their turf beacons the establishment's eventual co-opting of their countermovement).

Oral poetry is suddenly the hot topic in university hallways known mostly for their hushed reverence for the printed page. What many academics have viewed as a sham of antipoetry is increasingly regarded as historically rooted in poetry's longstanding oral performativity across cultures and continents. For example, John Miles Foley's exhaustively researched *How to Read an Oral Poem* traces oral poetry as an "international medium" across four continents dating from 600 B.C.E., introducing scholarly examination of performance modes embodied by a Tibetan paper-singer, a North American Slam poet, a South African praise poet, and an ancient Greek bard. Foley's study demonstrates oral poetry's vital cultural roles in the ancient world as well as in our own moment and suggests, provocatively, that the historical prevalence of oral poetry worldwide actually dwarfs "written poetry in size and variety."<sup>12</sup>

Further complicating this bifurcation is the ascendancy of numerous video and new media poetics occasioned by the computer's technological innovations. Most of these electronic poetics place themselves in opposition to current print-based verse culture, so academic poetry now finds itself assailed not only by print- and oral-centered challengers but also by digital poets whose work has moved off the printed page and onto the computer screen. Digital poets such as Brian Kim Stefans, Loss Pequeno Glazier, and Jim Andrews fashion poetic expressions that decenter the authorial "I," favor alterable as opposed to fixed texts, and invite reader interaction with digital poems. Known by a variety of names—e-poetry, Cin(E-)Poetry, rich.lit. Web. art, and so on—these modes blend word, image, sound, and music into a new language of digital poetic expression. Digital poetic modes envision image and word as not merely complementary but interchangeable artistic elements. So consequential do I consider these digital poetics that I've devoted chapter 7 to an extended discussion of their theories and expressions.

In sum, the differences among various manifestations of these two opposed poetic groups are significant and expressive. While the phrasing used to describe this dialectic again has shown itself to be protean, the fundamental division has retained its essential character. One trendy version of the dialectic recently prompted a topical symposium in the literary journal *Boulevard*, which framed the question in this fashion: *Is contemporary poetry dominated more by irony, artifice, and indirection or by sincerity and direct emotional statement?*

## Again, the American Aesthetic Pendulum

See it swinging there, as one would in a clichéd horror film's laboratory climax, its huge shimmering blade slicing the dank air of the literary castle, the very dungeon perhaps. There in black and white is the poet as evildoer with hands on the machine's controls and the poet as innocent victim lashed to a metal table beneath the room's swinging doom. There's the poet as mad scientist relishing his own imminent destruction and the poet as buff hero bursting through the padlocked door to save himself from himself. The means of artists' destructions are always their own aesthetic choices—irony and artifice sharpening one half of the blade, sincerity and emotion honing the other. We poets murder ourselves with our choices—or rather, we re-create ourselves, redeem ourselves, remake ourselves (and our art).

This notion has gotten me to thinking about Donald Hall's circa-1962 complaint about the “eternal American tic of talking about art in terms of its techniques.”<sup>13</sup> He's right, of course, but what else do we poets have to discern why we like one thing and don't like another? We're doers and makers, evidenced by the Greek “*poësis*” glossing as “to make” and “*poesie*” serving as an exact Renaissance equivalent for “makers.” So we look to see how it's done as a way of saying why we like it, believe it, want to do it ourselves just like that. (Most poets wouldn't confess to that last part for fear of revealing envy as the basis of so much art.) Or we look to see how it's done in order to figure out why we hate that writing and why others should too. Technique, we figure, is portal to character—both the poet's and the poem's. Thus, judging character, another eternal American tic, seeps into our judgments about the purpose, goals, and limits of art.

Irony or emotion? A form of this question faced the American Moderns at the turn of the last century. They saw before them a vast nineteenth-century wasteland of dripping sentimentality, moral uplift, and general good manners among the main guard of American poetry and asked what had come of it. The Fireside Poets—Holmes, Whittier, and Longfellow—had endeared themselves to a book-reading public not yet tempted by the not-so-subtle diversions awaiting twentieth-century citizens. In the absence of radio, telephone, film, television, easy travel by auto and airplane, and more recent developments of the cell phone, the camera, and the Internet, these poets commanded public attention in ways unimaginable to contemporary poets.

The public literally read their works by the dim glow of fireside and oil lamp. They amounted to a cultural linchpin, united and uniting, defining for a developing country what American poetry could and might be. And they defined for Americans what they as citizens might become. These poets were beloved as much for their avuncular, bearded images as for their homespun messages. For instance, Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life" admonishes readers that "Life is real! Life is earnest!" and concludes with this call to action and sage advice: "Let us, then, be up and doing, / With a heart for any fate; / Still achieving, still pursuing, / Learn to labor and to wait." In this fashion, art seemed to offer an appealing twofor: it bettered one's character and delivered pleasure in the process. To read was to be edified. To be edified brought demure joy.

By the onset of World War I, a broad reading public had arisen, churned up by the notion that art's noblest purpose amounts to *prodesse et delectare*, "to teach and to delight." Righto. The Moderns surveyed the scene and posed unsettling questions about art's role in the supposed eternal upward spiral of societal evolution. They asked what to make of World War I's machine gun, lethal gas, tank, and other means of mass and anonymous death the great minds of our culture had conjured up under the influence of art that taught and delighted. Consider the airplane, the Wright brothers' darling and one of humanity's greatest achievements, giving wings to humans who suddenly seemed, if not godlike, then at least demigods gifted with means to escape earth for the seeable heavens. Roughly ten years old by the time of the Great War, the airplane, humanity's access to the clouds, had already been co-opted as a killing device. Goodbye Wright brothers, hello aerial bombardment.

No wonder those Moderns tossed aside the then-current mode of direct, emotional statement and sought newer ways to speak their poems. Speaking poems, after all, was a way of speaking their world. And that world, Pound's "botched civilization," needed fresh ways to be called up and held accountable, as did poets themselves. In Dada and Surrealism, poets discounted meaning-making altogether, opting out of nineteenth-century poetry's necessary function. Let's play, let's make baby-talk, let's desecrate the very notions that had given themselves over to scientific and artistic evolution, an evolution with such proven lethal results. Eliot's own Impersonal Theory of poetry was a flight away from personality and emotion in favor of universals, things that might bind not separate. It was a search for some means to gather the various pieces of shattered culture and glue them, staple them,

duct tape them into an albeit fragmented but still not unworthy whole—  
"these fragments I have shorn against my ruins."

The problem with such a notion was not that Eliot had urged irony over emotion and artifice over direct statement. That's one swing of the aesthetic pendulum. The problem was that there existed no aesthetic dialogue, no give and take, no lively quarrel among poets to keep their art alive. Deified, Eliot and his favored mob began to wear the robes of the gods. And this god indeed seemed all powerful. In his *Autobiography*, William Carlos Williams, adopting a metaphor of the atomic age, later described the advent of Eliot's aesthetic as having destroyed his world "like an atom bomb." Williams goes on to explain the effects on him in terms more suited to military not literary battle: "To me especially it struck like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years. . . . Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself."<sup>14</sup> Poetry in the American grain, innovative and forward-looking, as Williams conceived it, had given way to something else indeed, something refined and footnotable.

It's not hard to foresee the subsequent arrival of the New Critics, those hoping to protect the pure mysteries of poetry against the encroachment of scientific positivism. When the New Critics "fled Imagism and Chicago," as George Williamson describes it, "into the Metaphysical seventeenth-century," they escaped Modernist chaos and thus reasserted lines of social governance and religious belief seemingly severed by the dominant culture.<sup>15</sup> The New Criticism favored by poets such as John Crowe Ransom and by scores of university English Department scholars such as Cleanth Brooks leapt at Eliot's complex poetry as a way to undergird a system of reading and writing that could be defined, evaluated, and defended. And they used the "classroom," as Williams remarked, as setting and means to inculcate their way of reading poetry. Importantly, only certain poetry warranted and rewarded such close reading, so the effect was to silence other modes of writing via the blunt instrument of New Critical inattention. Hence, the New Critics became the curmudgeons (or saints) who ruled American poetry until the late fifties uprisings of Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Kerouac, Burroughs, and the rest of the Beats. Ginsberg's "Howl" lamented the woeful fate of "the best minds" of his generation in an era of buttoned-down uniformity that cast out those scandalous others who possessed alternative aesthetics or lifestyles. Ferlinghetti's poetry offered a carnivalesque *Coney Island of the Mind* that stood in riotous



contrast to the conservative poet's decorous *Elbow-Patched Tweed Sport Coat of the Mind*.

Surely, the so-called generation of '62, Wright, Bly, Merwin, Kinnell, Levertov, Stafford, and others, faced a version of this question, as had the Moderns before them. New Critical irony, paradox, and tension reigned supreme—that half of the aesthetic blade—so what was a poet to do? Rebel, of course, as the lot of them did in sundry ways that shared one principle. That notion is a renewed appreciation of intuition and the inner life of the self moving among a world of fellow beings and, more important, a yearning for epiphanies to be had through modes of emotion the New Critics had outlawed or roundly castigated as sophomoric.

It wasn't long before Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, adapted her beloved forms of inherited English tradition, say, the ballad, to the subjects of Chicago's Bronzeville. She introduced into her work as well the language of street corner and tenement after a watershed moment at the Fisk Black Writers Conference in 1967, thereafter tapping into and giving life to the Black Arts Movement. This same "awakening" resulted in her refusal of major publishing houses in favor of smaller but exclusively black publishers, especially the Broadside Press. With the move, Brooks's work also changed aesthetic locales, abandoning the compressed imagery and forms of her earlier work for a mode influenced by the improvisations of jazz. With similar rebelliousness, Adrienne Rich, precocious Yale Series of Younger Poets Award winner and one of the few female darlings of modern poetry, set fire to her aesthetic bed. In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich admits her early style was steeped in the patriarchal mode of male poets such as "Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, MacNeice, Stevens, and Yeats."<sup>16</sup> Born, as she describes it, "white and middle class into a house full of books," Rich had redefined herself by 1970, she says, as "a radical feminist."<sup>17</sup> The transition was startling, and her edgy, socially conscious poetry shoveled fresh dirt upon the grave of New Critical propriety. Suddenly, the countermovement was THE movement.

## The Aesthetic Orphan

Here's where literary history gets problematic for most young poets, as indeed it was for me. Coming of age in the late seventies and early eighties, I saw the argument against the New Critics as abundantly obvious. Or rather, it

was not really an argument, but simply a conclusion. My poetic masters had overthrown the houses of their literary daddies and mommies, and they had struck out on their own. I did not. Instead I became their aesthetic's adopted orphan, happy to do the chores, take out the trash, and mind my manners. As with most of my peers, I inherited the then-current counteraesthetic without question. I did not view it as provisional, temporary, or historical—all the very things any aesthetic plants its roots in. I did not fathom its reaction to the previous aesthetic godhead as historically inscribed, determined by forces of culture and society larger than itself. Nor did I note its tendrils in poets' modes developed centuries earlier.

Like so many other poets of my generation, I failed to *contextualize* an aesthetic I instead naively regarded as outside the bounds of art's historical give and take. It was simply mine, inevitable and unchanging. I did not conceive of myself as inheriting an aesthetic that was challenged before my time and would be similarly disputed years later, after we two had grown tired together. There was no dialogue, only the deafening chants of my side, the *only* side.

The arguments of my poetic youth were always against the dead, or those soon to be. They seemed straw men and women, not flesh and blood and piss and vinegar like me. Every essay I wrote, every poem I scribbled, assumed the same aesthetic underpinnings. So many of my peers felt the same we hardly needed to argue over cheap beers at rented kitchen tables. We knew it with youth's pure artistic certainty, unsullied by doubt or experience. We knew it deep in our "dark, stone, earth, blood, bones"—as the Deep Imagists might have fashioned it. We simply knew emotion trumped artifice, that a "sincere" voice trumped the rhetorical, that the inner life trumped the outer, communal world. We didn't understand the "plain" voice was itself a form of rhetoric. We didn't understand it was impossible to avoid rhetoric if one speaks, if one utters a word and asks that it be heard. We never understood that to be purposefully unartful is to be purposefully artful. Just read Frank O'Hara, will you, and tell me that voice isn't crafted, isn't sanded and buffed and shined. His work may appear merely the instant's apt eruption, but much labor has been done to give it that disguise. In "Adam's Curse" Yeats laments that although a single line may well take "hours" to perfect, "Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught." The pen *is* a needle, stitching line by line the fabric of a poem we poets hold against our chests—and the world's—to check its fit.

In the quarter century that followed, we've seen Derrida, Foucault, and the Language poets. We've seen Wittengstein come back from the dead. We've seen the forceful emergence of feminist, lesbian, gay, Asian, Hispanic, and postcolonial poetry of all stripes. African American poets, one can argue, have moved from the margins to the mainstream, if not in content then in importance and ascendancy. From the fringes, cowboy poetry, slam poetry, flarf poetry, and electronic poetry have engaged capricious audiences growing with mitotic frenzy. As Marjorie Perloff suggests, "The map of twentieth-century poetry thus becomes an increasingly differentiated and complex space," replete with temblors and "ruptures" that rattle its unstable topography.<sup>18</sup> Each of these poets has faced the same question. Is it artifice or emotion? Is it irony or vulnerability? Is it theory or feeling? Which is the me I'm after? Or perhaps, which is the not-me I'm after?

What's the contemporary scene? Much of our present poetry, of course, reacts to the previous era's preference for direct lyrical or narrative statement, and thus the pendulum has swung again. We live in an era in which irony wields for its artistic practitioners a shield of protective hipness. If one cares about nothing, if one believes in nothing, then one can't be hurt. Irony's unassailable. It offers a means for the poet to comment on the current array of human frailties without need to venture any palliative words or any potentially embarrassing remedies. And there is a good bit of that poetry twinkling around in the magazines. Tony Hoagland aptly describes this as the era's "skittery poem," a mode in which "systematic development is out" and "obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity are in." Hoagland asserts the obvious—that among young poets especially there is a "widespread distrust of narrative forms" and a concurrent "pervasive sense of the inadequacy or exhaustion of all modes other than the associative."<sup>19</sup> Some of that poetry is shockingly fresh and good. Some, too, looms icy in its coolness, breathlessly ethereal in its aloofness. Sometimes surface masquerades as intellectual depth, as does an assumed theoretical superiority. If the reader doesn't get it, then the reader's at fault. She's either too dim to catch the philosophical drift, or she's so jejune in the first place as to believe poetry is about a poet composing and a reader understanding a conveyable meaning. Artifice without emotion?

Is this good for American poetry? Well, yes. But alone it is not. Look around, and you will find a counterswing's incipient motion. Narrative poetry, despite or perhaps because of its being decidedly out of fashion,

shows surprising pertinacity. You'll also find many poets who clothespin their emotions on the line for all to see. How else explain, say, the raft of new Confessional poets who are more than happy to describe their divorces, their sexual proclivities, or even the stunning resemblance of their pubic hair to a famous waterfall. How many poems do we encounter about Daddy's alcoholism, a messy divorce, or the night prayers of a child? Emotion without artifice?

### Life-Giving Dialogue

What interests me most is the way many poets and thinkers consider the dialogue's effects on American poetry to be destructive not generative. Some believe this blizzard of aesthetic dialogue freezes not perpetuates American poetry's continuing evolution. For instance, even the esteemed critic Perloff has portrayed the current state as both "chaotic" and "anarchic," an "odd kind of scramble" where competing definitions of the "new poetry" vie for attention and succession to power. The result, Perloff asserts, is that readers find it "impossible to keep up with even most prominent and highly praised poets."<sup>20</sup> In my view, however, it's not the existence but the *lack* of opposing aesthetic camps that stultifies art. When an all-powerful monolithic aesthetic rules the day, both poets and their poetry slip into unknowing self-parody. One does what one does because one always has, everyone following the same lemming-like slow-motion trundle over the cliff of the comfortable, the acceptable, the known and well received—aka bad art.

If American poetry indeed manifests polarization into opposing camps, the very argumentation between these camps promotes rather than extinguishes our poetry's vibrant future. To decry the lack of a ruling poetic Leviathan is to beg the aesthetic police to come lock one up so that Thomas Hobbesian order might be reestablished across the land. The view through those jail bars might well be placid, but it's unequivocally deadly for art and for the self. Art does not flourish in a dictatorship, whether political or aesthetic. In time, one clique may take temporary precedence over the other. As long as the opposition's voice is heard, as long as their means of conveying it to audiences is not silenced, then this dialogue vivifies American poetry.

*Poetry* magazine seems to have intuited just this point, as its editors have toyed with a rousing series of "Pure Products" interchanges between poets of opposing camps. Its May 2007 issue inaugurates the feature with Ange

Mlinko's glowing review of Language poet Charles Bernstein's *Girly Man* going toe-to-toe with David Yezzi's championing of the more conventional Morri Creech's *Field Knowledge*. Each critic then interrogates the other's critical, theoretical, and aesthetic judgments in a lively give and take that in the process outlines stark divisions in each camp's view of what makes for good poetry. Sarcasm and one-liners aside, the format bristles with an electric AC/DC aesthetic current that, admittedly, may not persuade either reviewer to change her/his poetic flag but does succeed in clarifying the issues at hand. At best, one learns from the other, as does the reader who's privy to a discussion that ought to take place in the classroom and in the coffeehouse *more* not less often than it does currently.

Just as surely as one group took power, its opposite camp will in time reassert aesthetic preeminence as human tastes, experiences, and desires evolve over time. This pendulum swing of power and taste muscles in poetry's possibilities not its extinction.

For poets, the nuts and bolts of this long-running esoteric argument matter in ways most readers and critics can't imagine or simply can't relate to. Every poet knows the following paradox. Sometimes cold artifice proffers surprisingly social or emotional rewards. Play around with a pantoum, work in syllabics, experiment with the prose poem, or try on for size the tight-jeaned, elliptical intelligence of America's smartest poet, and see what happens. Frequently, it goes like this. While fixated on surface matters such as the sonnet's thorny rhyme scheme, one falls into a raw emotional epiphany. And the reverse is as often true. One turns from the perfect crown of sonnets and breaks it willfully, shatters it audaciously, to say something outright for once, for chrissake, form be damned.

What I am saying is that the pendulum oscillates from extreme to extreme—and takes us with it—so we poets might slay and thus remake ourselves and our art.

What happens to a poet who wishes fervently to abjure membership in either of these feuding factions, instead cherry-picking from each as she sees fit along the path to something new just over the aesthetic horizon? What becomes of one who desires to be more than merely “academic” or “language” or “performance” poet? What befalls the poet who refuses the *brand* applied by all of these labels and rejects as well the implicit *marketing* that comes along with it? What if one wants to keep open all possibilities of art, not simply those approved by competing cadres of fascist rule-loving thugs

in literary disguise? That poet, in my view, may be the real aesthetic hero—and the rarest for it, as well.

How might poets such as this fare in a realm that worships these poles? Likely, these poets suffer because they're not affiliated with either camp and thus don't benefit from the privileges of membership accruing thereto. No editors, journals, presses, reviewers, coffeehouses, critics, or theorists sing these poets' praises simply as a result of their belonging to the club and knowing the received style's secret handshake. These poets risk the scorn of both camps for not being hip to either side's mode of writing, *the* mode as both camps contrarily proclaim it. In turn, these poets also wager losing the networking support offered by both sides—whether it's the university teaching job or the slam café gig. They're proverbial lone wolves whose quest for poetic possibility transcends the comfort afforded by the pack.

It's strikingly obvious that it's possible now for a poet to associate only with other poets who favor her same loyalty to, say, formalist, feminist, or spoken word poetics. Such is the ghettoizing of American poetry that allegiances formed by aesthetic inclination divide each from each in a manner not unlike the familiar high school scene where “jocks” steer away from the “stoners” and the “preppies” scorn the brainy “nerds.” Have we not evolved beyond such aesthetic sophomoric? This sort of balkanization of American poetry may well be inevitable in a pluralistic society. However, it need not be destructive if these groups seek interchange more fertile than the mere silent rebuke of the turned shoulder. That interchange is the seed ground for aesthetic evolution.

Poets share one common, dual obligation. Poets must know if not honor the rich feast of poetry's heritage, but they must also bring something new to the table. Whitman claimed the poet who does not bring forth new forms is not wanted. Searching for that something new can deliver poets to fresh, innovative technique or to epiphanic revelation. Whatever. This vital newness is what's necessary and redemptive, whatever its source. It resides in questing and not in slavish devotion to theories or modes of writing one inherits unconsciously like a sort of poetic DNA.

Art, genuine art, falls silent in a monologue. When only one mode carries the flag, the flag's blank.

## CHAPTER 2

### *“The Only Courage Is Joy!”*

#### Ecstasy and Doubt in James Wright’s Poetry

*More than thirty years ago I first pondered what made James Wright’s poems so otherworldly worldly, mulling what made them—and him—so much of this place and at once so foreign, exotic, unearthly. Bluejean-jacketed grad-student poets, Dean Young and I sat not ten feet from the very spot Hoagy Carmichael wrote his hallmark “Stardust” on a borrowed, after-hours piano. For two Hoosiers this was sacred ground. No matter it was then a dumpy pizza joint, its red bricks infused with tomato sauce and warm beer. Outside the low gray sky gave forth Midwestern winter. Inside I shook my head, the portal to Wright’s “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota” floating just beyond my reach, open and hauntingly taunting. Then the snow stopped. Of a sudden my face and the fireplace flames, reflected in window glass, floated disembodied in the gloaming. For an instant, I saw me beside me, there and yet not. One self sat blessedly flummoxed by Wright’s poem, while my other flushed with the ecstatic rush of understanding. Then the door slammed shut. Someone in jeans and boots walked across my face and the fire.*

1 / *“I have come a long way, to surrender my shadow /  
to the shadow of a horse.”*

More than any American poet of the recent past, James Wright seems at once attracted to both poles of the bifurcated American poetics detailed in our opening chapter. Wright appears simultaneously enamored and yet distrustful of a poem’s ability to embody the ecstatic moment. On one hand, Wright’s poems show his yearning for transcendent release, emotional if not

physical escape, and ecstatic reverie initiated by contact with the natural. On the other, a number of poems reveal intent to keep his feet on the ground and his head out of the clouds. Here, we find a poet fixated on human limitation and on the ultimately dangerous enticements of natural communion. Thus, while Wright's poems may indeed express ecstatic "states of knowledge" much like those described by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Wright also acknowledges the limits of these reveries. In my view, this give and take animates Wright's poetry throughout his career and affords his work its most meaningful tensions. This essential "dialogic relationship," as M. M. Bakhtin might describe it, illuminates the terrain of Wright's (and American poetry's) polar modes, offering a more satisfying view than that given by discussions of mere form and technique—my own included. In short, Wright struggles with poetry's thorniest issue. Ought poetry to "disenchant and disintoxicate," as Auden argues in *The Dyer's Hand*?<sup>1</sup> Or should poetry instead elevate and affirm, proffering Emerson's poet-Seer ecstatic glimpses beyond ordinary reality? This then, at root and wing, is a poet's argument with himself regarding the purpose and boundaries of poetic experience. Nothing more, nothing less.

In that regard, Wright's argument with himself is as much ontological as it is aesthetic. In facing the moment, Wright acknowledges the nastiness that exists and the resolute beauty that endures despite all odds. In the depths and heights of ecstatic experience, Wright seeks the nature of being human—and of being human in Nature. Wright is attracted to ecstatic forms of reverie not simply as means to euphoric joy but also as means to enhanced understanding. Growing up in Martins Ferry along the Ohio River, Wright encounters firsthand what havoc industrialized culture could wreak upon pastoral beauty—and observes as well the damage such labor could exact in the lives of people who toiled there.<sup>2</sup> The ecstatic doubly provides him with means of flight from and angles of perception into that world of jumbled ugliness and beauty.

I'll admit to feeling a little foolish talking of ecstatic inklings of natural union. I think of Brecht lamenting how he lived in an age when talking about beautiful trees meant being silent about considerable evil. I think of Elie Wiesel fretting justifiably how art can seem selfishly frivolous in the post-Holocaust world. I think of writers who fell silent after 9-11 and those who should've but didn't. What, then, is so compelling about a visionary poet ready and willing to "surrender" his inner life to the "shadow of a horse"?



2 / "... to keep one's eyes open"

Ecstasy. The word derives from the Greek *existanai*—"to displace." Thus, poets who undergo flights of ecstasy are displaced, moved beyond themselves to inhabit, if only briefly, an alternate reality. They stand beside themselves, as Edward Hirsch reminds us, paradoxically apart from and yet part of the unified field of being, a universal Oneness. (Likewise, when we readers say we are "moved" by a poem, we mean we are "displaced" or "transported" by it.)<sup>3</sup> Ecstasy's secondary meaning is "to drive one out of one's senses," implying the poet's being lifted out of one state into an altered reality. This suggests, one might well argue, the fundamental activity of lyric poetry: deep seeing. For Wright it is, as well, a characteristically conflicted aspect of the poetic experience. For this poet, "seeing" brings forth both its blessing and its curse.

Wright's quest for poetry that might actually embody not merely describe the ecstatic gives his work an appealing emotional and intellectual vulnerability. It also leaves his work susceptible not only to the pendulum swings of aesthetic taste but also to the petty disputations of literary quarrels. Depending on one's critical camp, Wright is the poster child or the whipping boy of what in the sixties was hailed as the (next) "new poetry." This tired "story," as the late William Matthews stingingly labels it, often revolves around the supposed Svengali-like influence of Robert Bly.<sup>4</sup> These discussions ultimately devolve into glib distinctions between Wright's initial fondness for staid Neoclassical metrics and his conversion to more flexible Romantic forms. Most propose theories of how and why the Neoclassical master of *The Green Wall* (1957) and *Saint Judas* (1959) gave himself over to the Deep Image experimentation of *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963) and to his subsequent dabbling with the "flat voice" as well as the prose poem. In short, critics either heartily praise or sadly bemoan Wright's transition. Pick your side. David Baker fairly summarizes the choices: Wright is either "one of our age's great lyric poets" or a "sentimentalist and egoist, whose movements toward increased openness of form betray a poem's imperative for formal constraint and dignity."<sup>5</sup> In the sixties, Wright himself chafed under the insipid nattering issuing from both sides. He abhorred how the era's bifurcated poetic modes reduced poetry's vast possibilities simply to (a) poems with feeling and (b) poems without. At once frustrated with and bored by

these paired eenie-meenie choices, Wright openly shows his exasperation in this short, unpublished fragment:

*The boring, yapping schools  
of beat and slick.  
They make me sick.*<sup>6</sup>

Surely Wright felt trapped by the two sleeves of the then-current literary straitjacket, and he labored fervently to free his hand. "What I had hoped to do from the beginning," Wright once told an interviewer, "was to continue to grow in the sense that I might go on discovering for myself new possibilities of writing."<sup>7</sup> Happily, with the discovery of Wright's unpublished *Amenities of Stone* (1961–62), the volume meant to follow *Saint Judas* into print but that Wright chose to suppress, readers have a better appreciation for Wright's painstaking intellectual and aesthetic evolution. In fact, as if to give context to his own evolving poetic, Wright once considered using the fragment quoted earlier as an epigraph to *Amenities'* unpublished forerunner *Now I Am Awakened* (1960).<sup>8</sup>

Wright desires to be a poet who *perceives* instead of *imposes* order in the world; thus, for him, to perceive is to see in the broadest sense imaginable. Seeing is at once mysticism's fundamental act and its reward: enlightenment. In this light, Wright follows the notable American tradition that regards seeing as elemental to poetic revelation. Emerson's poet as Seer achieves understanding through the paradoxical act of looking outward as a way to see inward. Natural facts, Emerson reminds us in *Nature* (1836), are also "spiritual facts." Emerson's ecstatic (if not bizarre) longing to move through the world like some hypersensitive "transparent eyeball" betrays his yearning to be one on whom nothing is lost, one wholly in communion with the unseen become seen. In this fashion, it leaves Emerson, like Wright, vulnerable to being poked in the eye by petulant disbelievers. Hugo Von Hofmannsthal suggests that such a poet operates in the world anyway "as if his eyes had no lids." That poet might well be the fully awake person Thoreau himself searches for but is unable to find, the poet so bright with the blinding light of understanding that Thoreau would not dare "look him in the eyes." In *Ecstasy, Ritual, and Alternate Reality*, cultural anthropologist Felicitas Goodman gives an account of a small terra-cotta statue that virtually embodies these dual human roles of being in the world but seeing beyond it. Found in current-

day Tlalilco, the 3,300-year-old statue possesses two faces, two mouths, two noses, but curiously "three large eyes, for the faces share one eye." Goodman describes the character in this way: "She is one integrated person, but turning one way, she looks into ordinary reality; turning the other way, she contemplates its alternative aspect. That is what humans are about."<sup>9</sup>

Wright himself appreciates the polar (or complementary?) goals of seeing embodied by this ancient statue. In fact, Wright so esteems the act of seeing that he gauges one's humanity by how good one is at doing it: "Simply to *be* a man (instead of one more variety of automaton, of which we have some tens of thousands) means to keep one's eyes open."<sup>10</sup> Surely Wright means to keep one's eyes open to numinous relationships, to signs of spiritual communion immanent in the world. Just as likely Wright also has in mind the attentiveness necessary to keep one from being duped—from being the unwitting fool of advertisers, of politicians, and, yes, of one's own naive intimations of union with the natural. In his first collection, *The Green Wall*, Wright stakes this latter claim in "A Fit against the Country," a dialogic text in which two voices of the self argue the risks of ecstatic communion with the natural. "A Fit against the Country," in fact, pointedly refuses the ecstatic moment derived by looking into an "alternate reality." Rather, the poem posits a cautionary argument against this very reverie. Recalling the alluring beauty of hearing a sparrow's call, seeing a tanager's bright color, smelling "fallen" apples' odor, the speaker addresses in turn his five senses as if they were somehow isolated from his mind. Doing so, the speaker evinces a profound Cartesian dualism, an odd sort of body-mind dialogic. For instance, the speaker says, "Ear, you have heard that song," as if the ear alone experienced the bird's musical trill. Moreover, the speaker remains steadfastly detached from what the unvoiced speaker is most tempted by—the mystical act of becoming "ravished out of thought" by these sensual delights. Instead of giving himself over to ecstatic reverie, the speaker issues his pointed-finger warning in iambic trimeter, cautioning the body to

*. . . hold your humor away  
Away from the tempting tree,  
The grass, the luring summer,  
That summon the flesh to fall.  
Be glad of the green wall  
You climbed across one day*

*When winter stung with ice  
That vacant paradise.*<sup>11</sup>

Both the poem's postlapsarian, nearly Puritan theme and its curious delight in human separation from nature's "green wall" amount to decidedly New Critical gestures. Like black crepe, that mood hung in the air in the forties and fifties. Wright no doubt learned it at the feet of his early masters at Kenyon College—one of them, John Crowe Ransom, conceivably the New Criticism's major figure. No group of poets was less likely to embark happily on a flight of fancy unmitigated by an equal dose of damnable reality. Don't forget, there was paradox, irony, and tension, a recipe for retaining balance in a world fast spinning toward chaos. Always at hand there was control, something to answer scientific positivism's love of order with literary formulas through which *X* might dependably be solved. In such a view, the unknown resides only outside of the poem. In the tense, conflicted era of the Cold War, who'd not thus prefer poetry to life's indeterminacy?

For a working-class kid like James Wright, the New Critic's mantle of Neoclassical learning and erudition must have been enticing. Its sturdy broadcloth would hide the steel and coal dust Wright carried with him from Martins Ferry, and it would lend him legitimacy he was never privy to down home. Hence, Latin—years of Latin. Wright must have figured if he'd not be seated at this crowd's table, at least he'd be able to read the menu.

While at Kenyon, Wright drank deeply at the Neoclassical well. A bright and disciplined student, Wright was awarded his Kenyon College B.A. degree magna cum laude on June 9, 1952. Wright's transcript confirms that during his years there he studied Roman history, Greek history, Milton, Chaucer, Spenser and the English Renaissance, the English seventeenth-century lyric, English and American lyric poetry, and even Ransom's own "Poetic Analysis" course that one can wager practiced New Critical modes of interpretation. One anthropology course was devoted to "Primitive Literature," the phrase itself a telling indication of how *that* literature was valued compared to the courses listed earlier.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Wright's course of study demanded intellectual rigor few of us endured in our undergraduate years. For example, one eight-page fill-in-the-blank, identification, and short-answer exam in Professor Charles Coffin's English 29: Seventeenth-Century Lyric course asks Wright and his classmates for in-depth knowledge of selected poems by Donne, Herbert, Jonson, and Herrick.<sup>13</sup> A six-page section of the exam tests

students by providing poetic quotations ranging in length from one to eight lines. In response, students are expected to give forth on how these selections express "the poet's learning, religion, literary themes and influences, acquaintances with popular customs and 'ideas,' his social and devotional practices, and his private life." Only that. And what, by the way, is conjured up by "social and devotional practices"? Readers, try this one:

*The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it.*

To this, Wright correctly answered, "The disturbance of the Ptolemaic universe by the 'new philosophy.'" But who was "Sir Clipsby Crew"? (Correct: Herrick's friend.) And "Helen White"? (Correct: *The Metaphysical Poets*, New York, 1936). The *Epigrams*? (Wright's answer: "Jonson, Herrick—a verse form adapted from classics," earned him half a credit.) Later, the exam's final page lists seventeen words that compose, in Josephine Miles's phrase, these poets' "majority vocabulary"—in other terms, their favorite poetic words. (Ironically, some critics would later smack Wright's hand for his so-called Deep Imagist fondness for overusing words such as "dark," "rock," and "stone.") Now, like Coffin's students, let's identify which seventeenth-century lyric poet most favors each of these: "sun," "grow," "sweet." Wright's correct answers were, respectively: Donne, Jonson, and Herrick.

### 3 / "I want to be lifted up / By some great white bird . . ."

My point is that Wright was steeped in the Neoclassical tradition. Deciding to try something else surely brought him pangs of doubt as well as of guilt, literary and otherwise. In his conversation with Dave Smith, Wright speaks knowingly of William James's notion of the "conversion experience" put forth in James's *Varieties*. Although Wright claims never to have "wanted" such a conversion for himself and denies that he "calculated . . . to be born again," that transformation may well have occurred, bidden or not. In truth, Wright makes clear that he's pondered the matter: "Well, there is such a thing as a conversion experience surely. William James has written of it formally in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. That change is a reality. Let me say that to change one's poetry would be, in effect, to change one's life. I don't think that one can change one's life simply as an act of will."<sup>14</sup> This makes all the more

remarkable Wright's labors in *Amenities* and his stunning breakthroughs in *Branch*, a book whose most notable poems pursue the very ecstatic modes "A Fit against the Country" so contentiously counsels against.

In truth, the books' best-known poems fairly well manifest what James in *Varieties* identifies as the four keynotes of "mystical" experience.<sup>15</sup> First, "ineffability." The experience "defies expression" so frustratingly that "no adequate report of its contents can be given in words."<sup>16</sup> Yet the mystic persists in trying to do just that—convey his mystical experience to others—even though the experience must be "directly experienced" and cannot be "imported" to others. Second, a "noetic quality." Those who experience mystical flight regard its "states of feeling" rather as "states of knowledge," insights into "depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. . . . illuminations, revelations, full of significance."<sup>17</sup> Third, "transcency." Mystical states cannot be "sustained for long," and just as important, their "quality" is elusive as opposed to eidetic, meaning its images can only be "imperfectly reproduced in memory."<sup>18</sup> Last, "passivity." Once the "characteristic consciousness has set in," the mystic feels as if his "own will were in abeyance" to that of some higher power. This sense of unity and oneness lingers long after the individual's mystical state has ended, in effect modifying "the inner life of the subject."<sup>19</sup> James's own intense if infrequent encounters with mystical experience of this sort led him to "understand . . . what a poet is." Unlike James, who admits he "can't find a single word for all that significance," a poet is someone who can feel these immensely complex influences and "make some partial tracks in them for verbal statement."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps no two poems better illustrate these ecstatic tendencies in Wright's work than the well-known "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" and "A Blessing." The first poem is brief enough to quote in its entirety:

*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.*

In short, the poem records the process and the instant of ecstatic revelation. It therefore embodies the "noetic" quality James assigns to these encounters. The speaker—surely one is tempted to say Wright himself—contemplates his natural surroundings that appear both harmonious and capable of marvelous transformations that elude him. In the "shadow" world of mystical experience, a "bronze" butterfly can blow like a "leaf"; mere horse droppings may undergo a stunning alchemy and become "golden stones." Even a chicken hawk floats over looking not for supper but for home (not "a home" but simply "home," implying one awaits him). For a man lounging in a hammock at someone else's farm, a husband and father like Wright enduring the pains of marital separation and eventual divorce from his hometown girl, the word "home" carries immense implications. Who'd not envy the natural harmony? Who'd not wish for the chance to transform the refuse of one's life into gold? Who'd not suddenly realize the great waste of it and desire to put one's life in harmony with natural if not spiritual order? The poem, then, is both the speaker's celebration of numinous natural order and his statement of longing to align his life with it.

The difficulty in writing poetry of the ecstatic is overcoming what James calls the "ineffability" of the mystical experience. How to re-create within readers these "illuminations" when words seem inadequate to the task? Wright discovers one thing that keeps getting in his way: the Neoclassical "rhetoric" of his earlier mode. On a March 6, 1962, draft of an unpublished poem, "Two Images of One Place," Wright confesses: "It occurs to me that my first . . . letter to the Blys was a cry of longing: 'What must I do to be saved?' Answer: 'Cut the rhetoric.' Okay, I fight on." Here's that strategy enacted in an unpublished September 3, 1960, draft of what was then titled "Lying in a Hammock at Pine Island, Minnesota." The penciled-in strikethroughs actually appear in Wright's typescript draft.<sup>21</sup>

*The monarch butterfly sleeping against the pine branch  
Is changing to dark green bronze.  
At the end of the ravine behind Duffy's house*

*The droppings of last year's horses dry into golden stones.  
As evening comes a little closer home, suddenly I ~~can~~ hear  
The ~~quick sharp outcry of a rabbit~~ brief cry of a rabbit.  
I ~~seem to~~ have wasted my whole life.*

True enough, the elimination of extra verbiage, especially in the poem's last line, measurably accentuates the poem's revelation. Doing so also quickens the expression of ecstatic awareness—the act of “seeing” that elevates the poem beyond mere mimetic description. Still, Wright does not so much eliminate rhetoric altogether—which indeed is impossible—but rather replaces one form of rhetoric with another. Notice the way Wright's final version highlights an already achieved conversion. In the final version the butterfly is by now bronze, not merely in the process of “changing.” In addition, that version intensifies the horse droppings' transformational act by substituting “blaze up” for the draft's mundane “dry into.” In essence, Wright struggles his way toward a language of the ecstatic.

Nowhere is that more evident than in Wright's “A Blessing,” another poem closing with a natural pyrotechnic display of sudden epiphany. In the poem the speaker and a friend get off the “highway” to Rochester, Minnesota, and step over “barbed wire” to engage two Indian ponies in a pasture. Doing so, the friends cross between realms that religious historian Mercea Eliade describes elsewhere as the “profane” and “the sacred,” humanity's two existential “modes of being in the world.”<sup>22</sup> In Eliade's view, the profane addresses exclusively life's material dimensions, its focus on economics and politics, while the sacred realm acknowledges a holy reality that stands in stark contrast to the quotidian, commonsense world. Thus, in Eliade's view, the sacred domain is infused with numinous, mystical properties that appeal to one's aesthetic senses.

What's more, at the men's arrival these ponies' eyes “darken with kindness,” signaling a resolution of opposites characteristic of the mystical experience. William James, in fact, cites the appearance in mystical accounts of “self-contradictory phrases” such as “whispering silence” and “dazzling obscurity” as evidence that the mystic is overcoming the “usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute.”<sup>23</sup> In Wright's poem, a simple interchange between the human and the natural results in a similar startling revelation arriving via a “black and white” horse whose very colors signal a reconciling of opposites in one body:



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

In experiencing the throes of the ecstatic, in leaving the body to stand, "displaced," beside it, the speaker is indeed driven "out of one's senses." Keep in mind, however, that some would argue that allowing oneself to be lifted out of one's senses is actually unsophisticated and irresponsible, possibly even dangerous. This reverie is especially perilous if it distorts not discloses reality. In the words and tenor of "A Fit against the Country," this speaker might simply be "ravished out of thought," and shamefully so. What would Wright's Neoclassical masters think about that? In one regard, what's remarkable about Wright's "A Blessing" may be not so much that he wrote the poem but that he felt compelled to blunt its ecstatic moment. After the poem (under the title "The Blessing") had been accepted for publication by *Poetry*, he sent editor John Frederick Nims a revision that he hoped would replace the accepted version. Wright's revision deletes the two lines that describe the speaker's touching the horse's ear (and the subsequent awareness of mingled human and natural qualities). Most important, Wright enacts two fundamental alterations to the poem that deaden its vivifying ecstatic reverie. First, he retitles the poem "Just Off the Highway to Rochester, Minnesota" and thus strikes any mention of "blessing" from the title, excising the event's redemptive spiritual essence. He also recasts (and thus qualifies) the closing's invocation of revelation. In the revision, "Suddenly I realize" becomes a pitifully muted "Suddenly I *think*" (my italics), thereby inserting doubt amid the speaker's epiphanic knowledge.<sup>24</sup> All this, the late Nims squashed by dint of sufficient editorial vision—and poetic soul—to insist on printing the earlier version readers have since come to admire. In a note to me some years before his death, Nims remarked that he was glad he had "the good sense to prefer the first version," concluding that Wright's reworking the poem amounted to "a warning against the wrong kind of revision."

In Wright's "A Blessing" and other poems of ecstatic experience, as in the vast majority of mystical accounts, animals serve as ambassadors of an alternate reality. Strange, how things *of* this world afford flight *from* it. In many of these poems, Wright seems either in transport or waiting expectantly for it; he remains, in Heidegger's phrase, "always underway" toward some greater understanding or larger merging. For Wright, even a brief list of these transcendent agents would include the "great white bird" that the speaker of "The Minneapolis Poem" wishes would both transport and hide the speaker among the "secrets of the wheat"; the horse "saddled, browsing in grass, [w]aiting" for the speaker of "A Dream of Burial"; and the "blue horse, dancing / Down a road, alone" of "Sitting in a Small Screenhouse on a Summer Morning," a poem in which the speaker surrenders his "shadow" to "the shadow of a horse." One poem from *Branch*, "Arriving in the Country Again," mingles all three ecstatic elements—horse, bird, and shadow. Here's the entire text of the poem:

*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.*

In "Arriving in the Country Again," Wright enters the community of joy. Yes, this "country" is, on one hand, pastoral and thus physical. On the other, it's an emotional and transcendent locale, a place intangible but real. Don't forget, this is the same "country" Wright had spat out his petulant "fit against" in the first poem of his first collection. Here, the speaker's setting off for this "country" again signals escape from what Eliade labels the "profane" world, and his arrival embodies his entrance into the intangible realm of the "sacred." This country is inhabited not only by the speaker's "friends" but also by creatures that express, merely by going about the business of being natural entities, the elemental oneness of all creation. Agents of the speaker's vision, the woodpecker and the horse are not mere Romantic scenery. Instead, they evoke a deep "seeing" through which the speaker finds comforting unity.

Time has little consequence in such a "country." In fact, the speaker's

ecstatic experience seems suspended entirely out of time; he has arrived but is still unheard by his friends. In that brief but mystically expanded instant, he turns "away from the sun" and looks into the shadow world in much the same fashion as the ancient terra-cotta figure Goodman describes. What he sees there is an intimation of the generative power of inner spiritual life. Not only does the speaker feed off his shadow's spiritual vigor, but so also does the horse. The speaker stands at once in the world and yet lifted by ecstasy to see beyond it.

Allow me to drop the ruse of "the speaker." Wright's own handwritten comments on a March 6, 1962, draft of the poem make abundantly clear that he is the poem's speaker and its location is the Minnesota farmhouse of Robert and Carol Bly. Furthermore, Wright's comments emphasize his wish for the poem itself to be the experience, not a mere after-the-fact-story about it. In truth, he craves for the poem to overcome James's supposed "ineffability" of the ecstatic and convey to readers his pure, unmitigated joy. Here are Wright's own scribbled comments on the poem's draft: "I like this. What I mean is that standing alone outside the Blys' house, I felt really happy. If that feeling is not embodied in the poem, then the poem is nothing."<sup>25</sup> For Wright, experiencing unadulterated joy is no small achievement. If the poem does not bear the full measure of this joy, if it cannot transport its reader as its writer was transported by ecstasy—then "the poem is nothing." Think of the standard Wright has implicitly set here. "Bah," Wright says, "to mystical ineffability." A poem, no, *his* poem must surmount this seemingly insurmountable barrier.

One might well ask to whom Wright is speaking in these brilliant and unguarded outbursts. To an imagined critic? To literary history? To Bly? (Why, then, not use "your" to refer to the Blys' house?) To himself as man and poet, or better, to the part of him that remains in the world while his poet's half turns its eyes toward alternate reality? Whatever the case, reading Wright's deeply personal, often emphatic, and wholly exposed commentaries on his own work, one gets the eerie feeling that Wright speaks directly to oneself. The communion is personal, conversational, and dialogic in the best sense of Bakhtin's notion. One feels privy to a conversation overheard as if through a thin scrim of motel wall, and yet one feels also part of the dialogue, as if spoken to directly by a passionate, trusting friend. It's impossible to read these dialogics without appreciating Wright's emotional nakedness and his equally serious discipline of craft.

On the same draft, Wright reveals his own awareness of risks attending poems of Romantic or mystical reverie. Pointedly, he underscores his disdain for using natural beings as mere props to evoke trumped-up gestures masquerading as poetic trance. Next to the lines about the flicker, Wright scrawls in his characteristic, tightly knotted penmanship: "He is not 'poetic'—I saw him. He was very fine, very deliberate & thoughtful. He was not 'Nature,' he was just getting bugs out of that beautifully clean tree." Later on the same page, Wright divulges what most informed readers already suspect—that the horse appearing at the poem's close is none other than the Blys' horse David: "Still—I like it, I like it. David browsed with wonderful quiet dignity, in my shadow." There's a delightful giddiness in Wright's repeating "I like it," something almost childlike in its exuberance. Significant as well is Wright's subtle comma separating the fact of David's browsing from its location, as if the sight had given Wright pause too—and a vision of the shadow world's redemptive powers. That this world resides within himself, Wright learns, if only he looks away from temporal reality.

4 / ". . . some of the truth is agony. The only courage is joy."

For Wright, joy was tenuous, beset always by bouts of depression and self-doubt. That self-doubt is familiar to most poets. Its very familiarity suggests one reason why so many poets love Wright's work, and also why so many fear it. On one end teeter-totters joy, on the other gloom. Worse yet, Wright's ecstatic flights do not always land him in the blissful country described earlier. Wright felt an obligation to be truthful about that discomfiting fact. In that regard, one other comment warrants noting, something scribbled on a draft of "In the Cold Chicken House," yet again on March 6, 1962.

Imagine what an electric late-winter day that must have been for Wright, secluded in the crudely furnished chicken house at the Blys' Minnesota farm. Reeling from his mystical encounter with the horse David, Wright sits at a rough desk surrounded by poems from his soon-to-be *Branch*. Surely he understands something is afoot with (or within) him, something aesthetic and yet personal. Something that would indelibly mark his writing as well as his private life. Some awareness, a Romantic might say "epiphany," so insistent he must write it down as if to give it body and thus reality. Here, he lays out his task in stark terms: "Okay, but I may as well tell the truth, and some of the truth is agony. The only courage is joy!"<sup>26</sup> For Wright, noth-

ing is harder won or more transient than joy. Smack dab in Auden's Age of Anxiety, in an era fitfully dismantling the last stones of the New Critical fortress, Wright, a poet not preternaturally given to abundance of happiness, labors on.

On October 5, 1962, just seven months after the joyful flight of "Arriving in the Country Again," Wright takes off for another "country." This time he travels by skiff not by horse. This time the bird is night, and it possesses only "one wing." This time he does not look away from the sun but has closed his eyes to it. Here's Wright's unpublished, handwritten draft of "Facing the Sun through Closed Eyelids," a breathtakingly moving poem that, until now, no one but Wright has seen:

*Long ago I let the oars fall  
And float off among the ripples.  
They beached us here blind.  
Then the night raised up  
One wing, for a moment.  
We can see, for a moment.  
Where've you gone?  
Whose country is this? I don't hear any trees.  
Pebbles scrape at the hull,  
Cold fingers  
Tap at the prow.  
All that time I lay dying,  
I did not care, and now I am afraid  
To lose you again.  
I think I would just as soon  
Ride the black skiff once more,  
And get this thing over with, I think  
I would just as soon.<sup>27</sup>*

Whether in death or in the throes of despondent death-in-life, the speaker finds himself interred by the darkness of his own eyelids. What "we"—the speaker's body and spirit—see in blindness is the strange "country" of his own inner nothingness. Its shadows are not the redemptive kind that feed ecstatic life, that elsewhere animate even a horse to embody mystical union. Instead, these shadows populate the bailiwick of the dead. "Where've

you gone?" the speaker asks plaintively of his body, of the vivifying world he once saw with his own eyes. This poem floats a skiff of loneliness across Stygian waters. It bears loss, oarless and blind, holding only the haunting promise of greater loss "soon" to come. Even the poem's abrupt close—its repeated syntax halted in midphrase—hints at death's arrival, implying that things are indeed "over with."

Looking back at the books that follow *Branch* into print, one notable aspect of Wright's unpublished "Facing the Sun through Closed Eyelids" is the speaker's curious singling out of one item apparently missing from its strange locale: "I don't hear any trees." For Wright, trees frequently function as agents of transcendence, as the means of ecstatic flight from a ravaged personal and earthly locale. They figure for Wright a way to "get out." Scarred by strip mines and polluted by industrial factories, Wright's Ohio River Valley offers physical images of the damage rapacious, industrialized culture exacts upon the land—and upon the people who work those sites. In trees, as with horses and birds discussed earlier, Wright invests qualities of mystical transformation. With their roots firmly planted in dirt and their branches arching toward sky, trees manifestly live in two realms at once. Though earthly, trees hold the promise of the ethereal—or at least a promise of access to it. To climb a tree is to rise with it, to see beyond the horizon we grounded ones tread upon. To confirm the manner in which Wright links trees and ecstatic release, one need simply to adduce the opening of "Son of Judas":

*The last time I prayed to escape from my body  
You threw me down into a tangle of roots.  
Out of them I clambered up to the elbows  
Of a sycamore tree, in Ohio  
.....  
All I wanted was to do  
Was get out.*

Later in the poem, Wright identifies this tree as "Jenny sycamore," as well as "the one wing." Here, Jenny, the transcendent muse who blesses (and bedevils) much of his poetry, again appears alluringly just out of his human reach. Her "one wing" of transcendent flight counters night's melancholy "one wing" of Wright's earlier "Facing the Sun through Closed Eyelids." The

speaker's release into the sycamore's "one wing" this time offers ecstatic rising that looms both transcendent and sexual:

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

Wright's "A Secret Gratitude" also blends woman and tree—and again lends them marvelous transformational powers:

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

Not surprisingly, in keeping with his temperament, Wright weighs down these ecstatic reveries with ballast of nagging doubt. Frequently, that doubt shows itself in Wright's assumption that readers will react with incredulity to his recitations of mystical experience. Wright understands that poems of mystical flight require a change in readers' capacity for perception. In fact, in his essay on René Char, Wright asserts that the best if not "the only way to read" is to experience the "discomfort of having one's consciousness driven forward to wider inclusiveness" by the encounter.<sup>28</sup> After all, for such a poem to engage its readers, not only must the poet learn to see more and to see deeper, but so must his readers. That very argument Bertrand Russell uses to discredit the validity of ecstasy as a reliable path to truth. In his famous essay "Critique of Mysticism," Russell suggests that visionaries cannot behave as scientists do when they wish others to see what they have seen. While scientists simply "arrange their microscope or telescope" and thereby make changes in the "external world" to enable others to achieve expanded vision, the mystic has no lens to adjust for his readers. The poet, like the mystic, has no choice but to demand "changes in the observer."<sup>29</sup> Simply put, it's not enough for the poem to embody the ecstatic experience; the poem must also enact the ecstatic within readers willing and capable of altering their capacity for perception in like fashion. As a result, often in the very text of the poems themselves, Wright acknowledges his being vexed by the notion that, as William James laments, "no adequate report" of these encounters can be

given in words. In "Blue Teal's Mother," for example, Wright's frustration emerges rather baldly:

*Why, look here, one night  
When I was drunk,  
A bulk tree got in my way.  
Never mind what I thought when dawn broke.  
In the dark, the night before,  
I knew perfectly well I could have knocked  
The bulk tree down.  
Well, cut it up, anyway  
.....*

*You may not believe this, but  
It turned into a slender woman.  
Stop nagging me. I know  
What I just said.  
It turned into a slender woman.<sup>30</sup>*

What's more, Wright elsewhere concedes the occasional failure of transcendent agents to effect his ecstatic release. For instance, the speaker of "Confession to J. Edgar Hoover," who "last evening" in the city "sneaked down / To pray with a sick tree," admits that occasionally even trees cannot provide his escape: "In the mountains of the blast furnaces, / The trees turn their backs on me." Burdened by the city's "blast furnaces," neither these "sick" trees nor the speaker seems apt to wax ecstatic. Both reside imprisoned in Eliade's realm of the "profane," an industrial locale where the goal of the blast furnace is economic not spiritual growth. No wonder the sacred turns its back on them both.

Sometimes, however, it is Wright who turns his back on trees and refuses ecstatic communion. In the apostrophe "To a Blossoming Pear Tree," the speaker addresses a young tree, "[p]erfect, beyond my reach," and longs to tell it "[s]omething human." His story is one of forlorn isolation:

*An old man  
Appeared to me once  
In the unendurable snow*



.....  
*He paused on a street in Minneapolis  
And stroked my face.  
Give it to me, he begged.  
I'll pay you anything.*

A Romantic visionary, say, the mystical Wright, might well conjure any number of sappy transcendent images to mollify the man's desolation. Perhaps the pear tree could lift and embrace the old man among its tender young blossoms, or replace his shabby clothes with its lovely petals. Or, by mere virtue of its "trembling" beauty, simply banish the speaker's despair at a world that allows desperate aloneness. No such Disney-esque redemption arrives. Instead, the speaker rebukes the tree for being incapable of human moral compassion. Thus, the tree cannot possibly "[w]orry or bother or care" about someone so desperate for love that he's willing to "risk" police arrest or beating at the hands of some "cute young wiseacre" who'd kick him in the crotch "for the fun of it." Here, Wright's speaker may well have experienced an epiphany, one equal in startling ways to his earlier transcendent visions. However, this time what he sees prompts him to refuse ecstatic flight into another realm. Despite human loneliness and his cynical portrait of both police and American youth, this speaker, unlike the speaker of "A Blessing," does not yearn "to break / Into blossom" and thus escape. He sides with the faulted lot of us, grounded down here:

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

Wright's annoyance with the supposed ineffability of mystical experience also accounts for his peculiar midpoem addresses to his readers. A poet who fears that the limits of language will ultimately fail him—that he will bang up against the cage walls of language Ludwig Wittgenstein bemoans—might well turn to his reader and curtly remark: "I was a good child, / So I am / A good man. Put that / In your pipe." Robert Hass calls this "boozy insistence," and the gesture indeed evokes that familiar bloodshot clamor-

ing.<sup>31</sup> Yet we all know what underlies the drunk's all-knowing and embalmed obstinacy—fear and uncertainty. This same lingering, irritable doubt figures in Wright's stunning abuse of the reader in "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child." Like the raucous, disruptive man who prances across the theater stage in Brecht's play, the irreverent one who breaks drama's spell by addressing the shocked audience, Wright's speaker, surely Wright himself, thumps his finger in the startled reader's chest:

*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.*

In daring readers to leave, Wright implicitly implores them not to. In breaking the poem's spell, Wright reveals not only his perilous desire to maintain its reverie but also the discomfiting reality that he can't. Perhaps this awareness undergirds Wright's notion of "the poetry of a grown man": poetry euphoric enough to seek the ecstatic and yet mature enough to admit its sobering limitations.

*5 / "I can / Scarcely believe it, and yet I have to, this is /  
The only life I have . . ."*

Wright's most memorable late poems demonstrate that "one wing" of joy and a ballast of doubt are sufficient to induce capricious but nonetheless exhilarating flight. In fact, dialogic argument with the self precedes a number of these poems onto the page. It's as if the poem itself represents the final flourish of a lively, sustained debate that we readers see only part of, merely the final yes/but. Many poems begin abruptly *in media res*, as if Wright draws a broad line across the page and starts his printed poem halfway into its spirited discussion. Here's the initial surge of "Northern Pike":

*All right. Try this,  
Then. Every body  
I know and care for,*

*And every body  
Else is going  
To die in a loneliness  
I can't imagine and a pain  
I don't know.*

However, the argument then twists like a curled fishhook. What ensues when the famished speaker and his friends eat the fish they've caught summons forth spiritual ecstasy:

*We paused among the dark cattails and prayed  
.....  
We ate the fish.  
There must be something very beautiful in my body,  
I am so happy.*

The poem inverts the Eucharistic gesture of "Arriving in the Country Again" in which the horse partakes of the speaker's "shadow." This time the speaker shares the fish's body and spiritual essence. The speaker becomes infused with the will-to-live and, more important, the will-to-live abundantly despite the certainty of death. In each case, the speaker discovers the ecstatic within him and internalizes its reverie, dramatically enriching, as James says, the "inner life." A similar revelation occurs in Wright's "Lightning Bugs Asleep in the Afternoon." Climbing up a railroad trestle, the speaker chances upon creatures who carry their own light brilliantly within them: "These long-suffering and affectionate shadows, / These fluttering jewels." Elevated by this encounter, the speaker comes down, literally and figuratively, from his intoxicated flight only to retain the radiance of ecstatic reverie within:

*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.*

In surprising ways, many late poems evince New Critical tension between opposing forces, a formidable struggle between competing notions. Blinded

by the otherworldly fireworks of Wright's ecstatic moments, readers often lose sight of this fundamental reality. Too often we remember the reverie of poems such as "Arriving in the Country Again" and conveniently forget the groundedness of, say, "To a Blossoming Pear Tree." If, as Wright himself contends, "The only courage is joy," he arrives in that "country" only through the dialogic interplay of reverie and insistent doubt. For Wright, to be joyful is courageous simply because so much in the world conspires against it.

This New Critical mode, the usual story goes, Wright tosses in the ash heap of aesthetic history sometime around his conversion to the "new" poetry characterized by *Branch*: lyrical, hop-headed affirmations of natural transcendence. However, if one looks back and, as Wright suggests, learns "to keep one's eyes open," one notices that this balance of opposing forces inheres even in poems one considers most ecstatic, for instance, "A Blessing." After all, the "break" that embodies the poem's ecstatic gesture amounts equally to an escape from the body and yet to the death of all that is human about it. To be a blossom is to be mystically transformed, but then whose hand writes the poem? And the next?

Wright's posthumous *This Journey* (1980) richly exhibits this dialogic. Its most moving poems of ecstatic experience convey also the speaker's awareness of the utter improbability of such notions. Not only does the speaker anticipate readers' doubts, but he also acknowledges his own. Remember, Wright openly labels himself "a jaded pastoralist" in one poem of this collection ("Notes of a Pastoralist"). Among the most openly dialogic poems is "A Reply to Matthew Arnold on my Fifth Day in Fano," which is just that—Wright's response to Arnold's "In Harmony with Nature." In *The Dialogic Imagination*, M. M. Bakhtin lovingly describes the dialogic exchange that makes a conversation occur not just between two people but also between two modes of thinking and being in the world. In such an interchange, every "concrete act of understanding is active" precisely because its value as a conversation is "indissolubly merged with the response" of the listener. In Bakhtin's view, the "encounter" is as much between two "subjective belief system[s]" as between two people, for the speaker's words dialogically engage the listener's attitudes, values, and ideologies.<sup>32</sup> For Wright, the poem is but one part of a larger conversation, his recurrent ontological debate on what it means to be human in a natural world. Implicitly, Wright also addresses the prickly issue of poetry's role in expressing that relationship. In short, Wright takes on Arnold's distrust of human and natural communion—as well as his

own misgivings expressed in "A Fit against the Country." Via the epigraph to Wright's poem, Arnold gets his first (and only) word in: "In harmony with Nature? Restless fool. . . . Nature and man can never be fast friends. . . ." Soon after, Wright admits that what he is about to do carries with it implicit risks: "Briefly in harmony with nature before I die, I welcome the old curse."

No longer a "blessing" but now a "curse," Wright's intimation of harmony with nature, seductive and insistent, arrives again. Late in his career and late in his brief life, Wright welcomes the familiar "curse" of the mystical once again. Though Arnold and his own New Critical mentors may call him a "fool," Wright opens his eyes and again encounters the ecstatic:

A restless fool and fast friend to Fano, I have brought this wild chive flower down from a hill pasture. I offer it to the Adriatic. I am not about to claim that the sea does not care. It has its own way of receiving seeds, and today the sea may as well have a flowering one to float above it, and the Venetian navy underneath. Goodbye to the living place, and all I ask it to do is stay alive.

Through the simple ritual of tossing wild chive in the sea, Wright reconciles a world of apparent opposites and makes peace with them. What he does not understand, he can live with. What he cannot see (for example, the sunken Venetian navy), he trusts is there. What he cannot do—live forever—he asks this "living place" to do in his stead.

One can almost feel Wright casting aside the minister's black veil that had shielded him not so much from his readers' eyes but from his own. He looks himself in the face. He sees what he sees. Whom does he have to impress? Although Wright at this time does not know he has contracted cancer, he seems to have a prescience of his own death. In "A Winter Daybreak above Vence" the speaker, surely Wright himself, takes on this matter one last time. In the poem Wright assumes a passionate "dialogic relationship" with his "own utterance," something Bakhtin asserts is possible when a writer challenges his "own authorship" or divides it "in two."<sup>33</sup> With one "turn" of the head away from ordinary reality, Wright sees an ecstatic vision that his other, more doubting self enjoins him to refuse:

*I turn, and somehow  
Impossibly hovering in the air over everything.  
The Mediterranean, nearer to the moon*

*Than this mountain is,  
Shines. A voice clearly  
Tells me to snap out of it. Galway  
Mutters out of the house and up the stone stairs  
To start the motor. The moon and the stars  
Suddenly flicker out, and the whole mountain  
Appears, pale as a shell.*

The “flicker” returns here not as mystical bird but as the passing of one light to another. The ordinary world mystically inverts. Moon and stars exchange their light with the Mediterranean, which shines “impossibly hovering in the air.” Maybe it’s Matthew Arnold, maybe it’s Galway Kinnell, maybe it’s the dialogic speaker’s own disbelieving mind that cautions him to “snap out of it,” but no matter. No voice can sway Wright from this epiphany.

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

Up down, hot cold, body spirit, stone and air. Everything “strangely” reconciles and rises as one. Is this not the most emphatic wish of so many of Wright’s poems? Consider the body of work fleshed between Wright’s “A Fit against the Country,” the first poem in his first book, and his last collection’s last poem, “A Winter Daybreak above Vence.” The first poem’s urge is to “disenchant and disintoxicate,” to invite readers to be “glad” at being unceremoniously booted out of Edenic communion with nature. The second poem’s impulse is to proffer nearly unbelievable ecstatic flight, body and spirit “impossibly hovering” and transcendent. In that dialogic we see traced opposing notions about the purpose and boundaries of poetry itself. Is poetry the ballast that keeps us grounded and thus human, eyes open to potential deceits of foolish reverie? Or is poetry the wing to lift us beyond mundane reality and thereby open our eyes to greater seeing, granting an

ecstatic peek into alternate reality? Conceivably, Wright came to fathom that poetry's greatest gift is to fuel both urges, the essential contradiction whose ineffable mystery reflects our best (and most disconcerting) human qualities. Whatever the case, Wright's poetry implicitly offers an answer. He retains belief in the gift of ecstatic reverie while not denying all that conspires against it. Yes, it is both blessing and curse. Yes, it carries him fitfully aloft on "one wing" of transcendent joy and grounds him with pestering doubt. Yes, he crashes down as often as he rises up. By measure of this distrust, Wright avoids the cloying zeal of the recently converted, the fresh believer who wants more than anything to make one believe as means to allay his own troubling doubts. In the great American tradition of the skeptic with a soft heart, Wright, like that tiny terra-cotta figure, looks into this world and then into that other one deep in shadow. There, just beyond the browsing horse, beyond trees awash in sunlight.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Playing Favorites*

#### American Poetry's Top Ten-ism Fetish

America worships top ten lists. Competitive to a fault, we Americans love to rank and to be ranked. Doing so confirms the value of our taste and the good taste of our values. Over time, top ten-ism has become our unconscious paean to solipsism fetishized on the merit of individual opinion. David Letterman's late-night bit aside, each of us has his/her top ten favorite painters, musicians, baseball players, movie stars, vacation hot spots, and restaurants. Newspapers and slick magazines love to publish these lists, making good advertising profits off the venture into personal hierarchies. Of late, the mania has become so narrowly focused one can open up, say, *Ski* magazine to pour over an Olympian's "Top Ten favorite Colorado hidden virgin powder runs." (Irresistible, the allure of list-making beckons my response, beginning with A-Basin's "East Wall," Breckenridge's "Way Out," the chutes below Loveland's "Patrol Bowl," Vail's "Blue Sky Basin," and so on . . . ) A measure of one's sophistication and one's experience, such rankings are as seductive as they are intoxicating.

It should come as no big surprise, therefore, that the notion has spilled over into American poetry. Now poets give forth on the top ten books that "shaped" their art and perhaps catalyzed their lives. When I received an invitation to write about books "especially important" to my "development as a poet," the request seemed at first glance sensible and not the least bit thorny. Surely I could finger two hands' worth of books I loved and learned from. Even the coffee-table weekly *Newsweek* has initiated "A Life in Books" in its "Periscope" section, asking authors to name "My Five Most Important Books," thus edging halfway to a vaunted top ten. What's more, querying



writers for these lists is not at all uncommon. Like many, I've been asked to do so by students or friends eager to amass a list of must-read books. Riding the crest of this wave, there's now even a first book-length gathering of such poets' lists.<sup>1</sup> In palpable but also unsettling ways, that book's a good read.

That's precisely what pricked my attention when I was asked to offer up my own catalog. Pondering the ways such a list might be considered "a good read" became for me as important as composing the list itself. In the process, I learned something about writerly culture, as well as about what it means to be "shaped" by reading books.

## Who Cares?

The positive spin on such lists doubtless involves poets' revelations of books that matter to them as writers who read. Really matter. At best, there's an unguarded vulnerability in opening the literary trench coat and showing one's intimate, private obsessions: the books one holds dear beyond all others. In an era seduced by irony and detachment, how refreshing to witness poets owning up to what they love and believe in. Finally, one stands up for passion, a particularly human if literary passion, and its capability to sharpen one's view of the world. If poets make these choices purely on the basis of personal likes and dislikes—on the basis of *taste*, that old-fashioned nugget of judgment—bless their literary hearts. They have escaped the current trend of bean-counting, cubby-holing, and theoretical-Balkanizing of our literature. More power to them.

These lists also offer insight into a poet's peculiar aesthetic. One may discover a poet's mode is in fact not so *peculiar* but is rooted rather in the poet's reading of and affection for A and B, or not X-Y-Z but P-Q-R. Aha, we say, so there's where that comes from! Suddenly we readers connect the dots fleshing out Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence. Or we see revealed at once the hidden-picture-elephant of literary history and this, for once, without having to cross our eyes. We reconsider Eliot's notion of a book's necessary and inescapable historical perspective, his view that books gain their truest meanings through their relationships to other books. We mull over Henry Louis Gates's remark in *Signifying Monkey* that all "texts signify upon other texts, in motivated and unmotivated ways."<sup>2</sup> Who would deny the merit of pondering the nuanced permutations of authorial as well as textual influence?

Readers of such lists yearn for evidence of the poet's flashed epiphanic moment. Readers hanker for news of an epiphany engendered by encounters with a book, some ecstatic revelation catalyzed by the poet's dialogue with another writer's mind and heart, maybe even a dialogue with the soul they don't believe in but find themselves somehow wanting. Readers long for proof that such epiphanies are indeed possible, for this confirmation means ecstatic revelation awaits them in the next opened book. Honestly, most writers read only partly for pleasure. Instead, in the empty ore bucket of our hearts, we're mining for inspiration to purchase some higher plane for our own work. Might it be that hardbound by the bedside, patient but oh so potent, or that other, buried beneath back issues of *Sports Illustrated*? One's reading, and thus one's life, becomes rife with potential. It's the readerly version of Randall Jarrell's remark about writing poems being akin to standing around in the rain waiting to be hit by lightning. Readers, too, want to be hit by lightning. Readers turn the page, umbrella cinch-closed at their feet, awaiting the jagged crack-flash.

### Epiphanicity, Peeping Toms, and Intellectual White Lies

In sum, I admire these favorite book lists' best intentions. I'll put my shoulder to the wheel of any vehicle that encourages more folks to read more books more often. Still, the manufacturing as well as the marketing of these lists carries with it blooms that wither under the noonday sun. These lists have a way of devolving to an odd flavor of Pop-40 hit list, the literary version of Casey Kasem's AM radio show slogging through the countdown.<sup>3</sup> Think of the way individual poems have come to be ranked in our culture. Fifteen years ago, William Harmon, sharing Kasem's penchant for numerical hierarchy, compiled a volume of what he called, straight-faced, *The Top 500 Poems*. Think of what it takes to make that short list! Consider, as well, the editor's fetish for pecking order: he indexed selected poems in "order of popularity," determined by *The Columbia Granger's® Index to Poetry's* statistics on most-anthologized poems. The MPP (Most Popular Poem): William Blake's "The Tiger," followed by "Sir Patrick Spens" by Anonymous and Keats's "To Autumn." In addition to Harmon's *The Top 500 Poems*, there's also his own selection of *The Classic Hundred: All-Time Favorite Poems*, an even more exclusive A-list. Beyond Harmon's efforts, there's no shortage of anthologies keen to take on the task of selecting and rating our culture's "best" poems. See, for

example, Leslie Pockell's not-so-humbly-titled *The 100 Best Poems of All Time* (New York: Warner Books, 1992) or the estimable Harold Bloom's 1,008-page gathering, *The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer through Frost* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

Consider the manner in which our culture measures television shows' popularity, thus establishing their capitalistic value in advertising dollars. Poets' lists of favorite tomes amount to a Nielsen ratings system for the bookish. They offer means to graph authors' influences on others and thereby a way to establish their relative literary value.

That's one unwitting result of the aforementioned list book's editor having appended an indexed list of "The Most Frequently Listed Authors."<sup>4</sup> In short, this amounts to a way of quantifying, to coin a term, *epiphanicity*—an author's ability to "shape" another author's life and art. The uber-top ten list is, I suggest, a curiously American phenomenon, for it offers the essential mode to objectify the top ten of top ten listees. Yeah, Roethke may be good enough to have changed one poet's life and art, but look at the score O'Hara teleported to a new realm! In corollary fashion, readers scour these lists for names of authors and books they've already read, a way to confirm their fingers are on the pulse, their ears tuned to the right stations. Who doesn't yearn to confirm one's education, like that of Henry Adams, is on the right briared path? Who doesn't fancy this path leading, ineluctably, to some pristine meadow of pure knowledge?

Beyond that, it occurs to me such favorite-book lists sprawl deliciously before readers' eyes because they fulfill deep-seated voyeuristic tendencies. It's a bit like sneaking a furtive peep inside someone's underwear drawer. This time, the person's invited us in and propped open the drawer—thereby fueling the mind-blood rush even if there's no fear of getting caught in the act. Suddenly exposed to daylight's chill eye, all these so-privates can seem at once shabby and tired, surprisingly gothic, or tinsel enough to make us wish we'd see that one upon a body we'd never imagined being so electric. It's a form of intellectual window-peeping, a readerly peeping tom-ism made possible by our good sponsors. Please buy their products.

For the list-maker there's a concurrent and nearly insurmountable desire to fib. It's the intellectual's white lie. No doubt there's ego involved. One is tempted to cite a certain casserole of books simply because doing so guarantees one's good taste. One's book diet, of course, can make one look smart. And it's possible a book scanned if not wholly digested can still offer blazing

insight or inspiration. Who really knows how a book—like the cell's mitochondria—fuels the reader-writer's art? The writer's white lie might well be told in service of literary altruism. After all, submitting this list for public display means offering a cerebral model of what we might become if only we weren't so inclined to toss aside *Middlemarch* for the venal pleasures of *South Park*. Such lists become breathless tours akin to those of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, trotting out the hallowed books like so many gold-plated sinks and tubs. "Oh," the list-reader is meant to sigh, "if only I . . ."

### Aesthetic Fisticuffs, Red Wine, and LPs

Writers' usual discussions of their favorite books and authors invoke a vastly different scene. Its innocuous start involves dinner, a drink or two, and casual book chat. That calm discourse veers quickly into a chaos-symphony of screeching, table-banging, red-faced rants favoring one author over another held in abject, boundless disdain. It's a messy, bread-crumbed, wine-spilled, and refreshingly human interchange. And it reveals one's literary allegiances to be visceral. Yes, personal, rooted, and ultimately meaningful—but probably as peculiarly indefensible as one's devotion to the Cubs. What Cubs fan's ever accused of being rational?

Some of my most cherished graduate school memories revolve around these arguments in the beer-drenched kitchen, a gaggle of us hovering near the huge-bellied avocado refrigerator crammed with sale-priced, longneck Blatz. One poet pal argues spittingly for the preeminence of Wallace Stevens as America's Greatest Poet. Another puts forward his booted foot thumping William Carlos Williams as the Savior of American Verse. Part theater and part lecture hall, the scene drags on with no intermission or class bell to welcome-halt the vaudevillian action. Only one force is powerful enough to overcome such poetic bombast. Beneath the long night's coat, that force arrives in dribs and drabs, unnoticed amidst the stereo's blare and fluorescent's bent-back hum, creeping unseen like Poe's evil visitor in "The Masque of the Red Death." Then someone opens the refrigerator door, and out it leaps at the assembled debaters' dry throats. The refrigerator's empty. Then, a chorus of mumbling, handfuls of soggy chips, the pretzeled path to a screen door banging Bacchanalian detritus. Good nights, handshakes, sloppy kisses. Outside, the night sky reminds us how tiny our hands and our resumes.

Admittedly, mentioning the role of intoxicants in such scenes threatens to reduce them to mere middle-aged besottedness or to embarrassing juvenilia, a kind of writers' frat party aesthetic tussle. But my point is not what substance induces these interchanges, but rather the real substance of the interchanges.

These exchanges bleed raw and unguarded. These exchanges breathe writerly devotion to another's work, beliefs unchecked by ambition or reputation or even the likelihood of promotion to full professor. These are blue sky opinions, a storm having blown off the low-hanging gray. These opinions loom unclouded by calculation either careerist or egotistical.

Back in the day, as the kids say of old folks' nostalgia, nothing delighted us more than to wear the bombastic's cloak. It fit around my poet's neck as snugly as my high school football shoulder pads. Fitted with it and the plastic helmet of surety, I toted knowledge's pigskin into and through the arms of hulking dead figures named Jonson, Keats, Whitman, and Eliot. I'd trample the then-new Bly, Kinnell, Stafford, Merwin, even Wright, my own favorite All-American. It did not matter that Emily would not open her white house's front door or that Marianne would count my missteps as she would her line's syllabics. I wore the blustery uniform of the wrong-who-would-be-right. Who *must* be right or must retake the eight-hour qualifying exam. Sure, it was great fun, but those entering the fray were honing their chops for the boss's cocktail hour, for the classroom, for the essays we'd write, for the poems we'd pen in (sometimes unconscious) homage to our momentary favorites. Yes, often and unavoidably, momentary.

You see, looking over the published list of that poet pal who'd argued so eloquently and vehemently in favor of Stevens, on occasions numbering greater than my fingers and toes, I don't find Stevens.

That's the key limitation of such lists. They ask writers to imprison within an airless time capsule notions necessarily restless and changeling. This smacks of a fool's task. Nothing about one's art and one's relationship to other artists thrives for long if it's hermetically sealed.

Think of the times you've bought a new 45 at the record store, unsheathed a fresh LP, de-shrink-wrapped the brand-spanking compact disk, or downloaded cool tunes to your iPod. For you and those tunes, what a heady day, or week, or maybe a month. You played them incessantly, obsessively, and with full capitalist appreciation of the selfish value of consumption. For you, I, we are consumed by the music as much as we consume it. We eat and are eaten.

We're made full and made empty at once. Then, abruptly and without even casual warning, those beloved tunes strike the single, bland note Nothing Happens. Oh, the tunes play their beguiling songs outside us, but Nothing Happens inside us. We've tired of it, or so we complain. This lover's kiss no longer moves us. It is unworthy of us. Or is it we, the stark and suddenly insecure, who are unworthy of it? Are we incapable of hearing what once thrilled us in the needling, vein-lightning way a junkie needs his fix?

### Past Tense and the Hardening of Literary Arteries

My favorite books are like that. Their junkie-high is fleeting, transitory, and fickle. Once I hungered for the book's next poem the way a cocaine addict craves his next line while snorting the super highway below his red nose. But wait, you may retort, our old favorites never really die, never fade away like the irrelevant old general Truman made of MacArthur. Those books hang with us, stores whose gifts we may no longer use but whose boxes still clutter the mental attic, waiting for us to need a Teflon-coated fondue fork to round out a dinner party or a poem.

Yes, like favorite musical albums, old favorite books remain with us and resurface in unexpected moments—flipping radio stations on a cross-country drive, gazing on a snowy moonlit night from the empty bedroom's window, holding one's firstborn in trembling, hospital-gowned arms. And it was good, as the Lord is said to have said after surveying creation, the Big Thing supposedly done. But as the world changed in ways even the Divine may not have imagined, so do we change. And with us, so change our tastes. What thrills us at this moment may have roots in some dendrite circuitry we long ago thickened and lengthened by dint of much rereading, much relistening. Still, what tickles that long thread, what bristles its wires and thus sprouts new branches, comes to us afresh. Is this not part, if not all, of what makes life achingly tragic and yet beautiful?

Likely, the fundamental problem attending the notion of "books that shaped one's art" lies in that phrase's moribund past tense. In sum, it's the exhaustion and finality inherent in the word "shaped." The implication here is that the evolution of one's art exhausts itself in one final death throes. It's as if the path of one's art should and must reach completion akin to a dead end. Kaput. From this point forward, there's no surprise, no discovery, no interrogation of one's impulses or anxieties. From this point on there's only

unknowing self-parody. One's *now* morphs into one's *always*, a curious state of suspended animation. The result is a poet-zombie, doomed to wander stiff-legged to and from the writer's desk, trapped in the most unpoetic death-in-life one might imagine (or justifiably fear). One's a star, all right, having earned the lead role in a B-feature, "Long Night of the Living-Dead Poet."

This observation lies at the core of F. Scott Fitzgerald's complaint about his once-pal and always-literary-competitor Ernest Hemingway. Fitzgerald, fresh from a string of his risky and oft-failed literary ventures, is said to have grumbled that Hemingway had found a good thing and never left it. Old Ernest, Scotty protested, had calcified rather than continued to stretch, to reach, to risk. Who wishes to be the writer known for the hardening of one's literary arteries? To accept one's art as fully "shaped" is to pitifully wither, not unlike the aged of our population who grow smaller with time and gravity. Perhaps, like aging itself, that process is intractable and fundamentally unavoidable. Still, the struggle to escape the stultification of one's body of work—like the labor of running 5Ks, pumping iron, grunting one's sit-ups—infuses energy and verve. Perhaps doing so, thus keeping oneself open to aesthetic possibilities, delays the inevitable.

At best, the notion of cataloging books that "shaped" one's art can finger a single, definitive point in time when a handful of books underwrote—both figuratively and literally—what one was doing then. A particular *then*. Don't be misled. That sort of favorite-books list warrants updating at regular intervals, if not every year then every five years, every ten. In fact, that might be the most meaningful and revelatory list to keep: a *List of Lists*. Its constancies and its changes might well map one's evolution as poet and person, as citizen of art and society. Surely a few books and authors would reappear in list after list, perhaps with years of absence intervening. Those living authors themselves would likely have undergone personal aesthetic evolutions, and the metamorphosis of their art would just as likely reflect the list-keeper's own transformations via the texture of choices. What beauty simply did not look so good to one at age twenty may indeed appear wholly appealing at age sixty-five, a corollary notion applying as well to one's beloved, as my father confided to me on his seventieth birthday. As we change so change the eyes with which we come to see Seeing. Equally, some authors, like forgotten rock bands, we come to see as bookshelf one-hit wonders. Is not one's art, as well as one's taste for others' art, the product of a similar Cuisinarting of beauty and experience?

Such notion gives credence to the belief that both one's life in art and the life in one's art reside perpetually in Heraclitean flux. It is the change-ling's face that is our face, no matter what the mirror shows. It's the idea embodied in one's art and life, in the tug of war between constancy and transition, that typifies one's body of work. What's more, this necessary fluidity is something James Wright himself was keenly aware of, so much he could proclaim a poet's highest obligation as the duty to seek a "furious and unceasing growth."

What poet-zombie would court the hardening of literary arteries? Ah, but there's the rub. Can writers really map their own evolutions? Doesn't doing so risk the native mystery of a life in art? Doesn't it tempt the fates we superstitious writers kneel to? Doesn't it make public one's private, guarded, half-voiced, and often timorous dialogues with the self—the *mélange* of bluster and doubt we see in Robert Frost's recently released notebooks, musings that this contriving, "least innocent" American poet knew enough to keep to himself?<sup>5</sup> Should one air such folly in the fresh soy ink of print?

No matter. As a writer, it's likely beyond one's abilities and moreover beyond one's consciousness to assess reliably how one's work has evolved, or failed to, over time. It may well be no one's task. If not, it's more properly the province of the critic, whose literary eye and ear ought to aspire to objectivity not privy the artist, even the most self-conscious artist. Where are you, critic of goodwill?

## My List of Lists

If one can neither reliably nor objectively evaluate one's own work, perhaps one can, using an expanded version of the "poet's bookshelf" method, map out the avenue of one's literary tastes. The real source of my unease with the notion of a favorite-books list is not that one might reasonably compile such a list, but rather that a *single* list can be assumed to have "shaped" one's aesthetic once and forever. Why not, then, compose a series of lists over time? In the process, one can examine just how stable has been one's own stable of top ten favorite books over the years. Having hypothesized a life-giving, regenerative force inherent in Wright's notion of "furious and unceasing growth," I ought to scrutinize how my favorites reflect or dispute this assumption. In that spirit, I humbly offer my own List of Lists, a summary of the top ten books that "shaped" my art at the milestone ages of thirty, forty, and fifty.



FAVORITES @ AGE THIRTY

James Wright, *The Branch Will Not Break* and *Amenities of Stone*  
(the latter his 1961–62 volume Wright himself suppressed  
from Wesleyan UP publication)  
Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*  
Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*  
William Stafford, *Traveling through the Dark*  
Galway Kinnell, *The Book of Nightmares*  
Ed Dorn, *Gunslinger*  
Cesar Vallejo, *Twenty Poems of Cesar Vallejo*, trans. John Knoepfle,  
James Wright, and Robert Bly  
William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*  
Richard Hugo, *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir*  
Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*

This widely various list shows that I, like many young poets, was beset by aesthetic schizophrenia. A poet afflicted with multiple personalities, I some days wore the lyric poet's feathered boa, other days the storyteller's weathered trench coat. At first, I wished to be Rilke. Like prewashed jeans, Rilke's rich lyricism and philosophical musings I tried on for size during long afternoons in the library, bookstore, coffeehouse, and forest. Each time, they looked better on him than on me. I bought them anyway, slowly accumulating a closet full of ambitious but failed lyrics. From Rilke, I learned what I could not do. And I discovered as well that one learns much from what one finally refuses.

That was the way it was for me and Olson's poems, his esoteric projective verse, his splaying poems around the page and laboring to strangle what he called the "lyrical interference of the I." What I loved of Olson was what, in the end, he worked to silence—say, just the sort of personal invocation that opens "Maximus, to himself":

*I have had to learn the simplest things  
last. Which made for difficulties.*<sup>6</sup>

Still, what Olson, Ed Dorn, and even Paul Metcalf offered was a hip insistence on others' history—and a way to effect within their poems what current hip-hop artists do so well. Back then, these guys sampled texts, not

songs, stealing from nearly forgotten historical sources and layering their own musings within the multitrack mix their poems became.

In real ways, these guys sprang from Williams. There was insistence on the American idiom and on the physical thing, the image unaccompanied by the filigree of high-falutin' rhetoric. A poet of the flowerpot, a wheelbarrow, a ball game crowd. A way to say most with least.

Some of the major figures of the day—Hugo, Stafford, Kinnell, and Wright—proffered an alternative to the fifties mainstream's staid, constipated, New Critical poetry. And Wright offered a Midwestern voice whose subjects were both worldly and otherworldly, scenes situated both in the fields and factories I recognized from my Midwestern youth and also in the hazy, beguiling alternate reality of Deep Image poetics. The latter Wright had gleaned from Cesar Vallejo and a score of others he'd translated or read in translation: Georg Trakl, Neruda, Juan Ramon Jimenez, Goethe, and more. Wright fashioned natural beings as emissaries of the other world, an alternate reality abounding with redemptive possibility sadly ravaged by the era's industrial betrayal. In many of these poems there seemed to be no identifiable speaker, some, such as "In Fear of Harvests," lacking personal pronouns in their headlong dash to expanded consciousness:

*It has happened  
Before: nearby,  
The nostrils of slow horses  
Breathe evenly,  
And the brown bees drag their high garlands,  
Heavily,  
Toward hives of snow.<sup>7</sup>*

One can hear Wright tossing aside—momentarily, as we've already seen—the mantle of erudition and classical control he'd struggled to achieve in his first two collections. By dint of turmoil and self-interrogation, Wright made his home in the hurricane eye of the self-same "furious and unceasing growth" he admired in other writers.

#### FAVORITES @ AGE FORTY

Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems*  
Philip Levine, *A Walk with Tom Jefferson*

Robert Lowell, *History*  
Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*  
M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*  
Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*  
Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*  
C. K. Williams, *Selected Poems*  
Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons*  
Anne Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*  
James Wright, *The Branch Will Not Break*

How lucky I was to come to O'Hara relatively late, say, in my mid-thirties. If I'd drunk from his cup as a wayward youth, I might never have sipped from any other. O'Hara's intoxicating mixture of iconoclasm and reverence, his hipness, the tight-jeans quality of his syntax, that spring of surprise and giddiness makes him an American original. Poke an eenie-meanie finger just about anywhere in O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, say, "The Day Lady Died," and ask how many poets of the 1950s could get away with this?

*I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun  
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy  
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets  
in Ghana are doing these days.*<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, O'Hara's awareness of the intersection of private and public history animates his verse in unexpected ways. It's one reason his pop-cultural references resonant beyond his personal milieu while retaining their essential, life-giving private value.

*Private value.* It's here that O'Hara and Bradstreet serve as useful counterpoints on this, my midlife list of poets for whom public history butters their bread. Bradstreet felt herself wholly outside of large-scale history, a woman relegated to home and hearth, husband and family. And a woman subject to the rulings of men, both churchly and worldly. She never imagined her writing worthy of anything other than scorn. At least that's the party line she spewed in verse and in public, using that stick to subtly skewer the patriarchal order she supposedly acknowledged as her betters. To come to readers' attention, Bradstreet the poet essentially had to be outed. Without her knowledge, Bradstreet's brother-in-law snuck her manuscript away to England to

be printed. Once in print, Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse* became the first book published by a citizen of the New World, an auspicious if wholly unforeseen dawn for American poetry. Of Bradstreet I love most her choice of subjects, how the narrow circumference of her realm still admits of great emotional expansiveness. I love her affection for homespun metaphors, those things she knows as well as her own hands' blisters, the likelihood of death in child-birth, the tall one's freckles and the dark-haired youngest. I love her veiled admission of religious doubt in an era brooking only surety.

Likewise, Levine speaks for those who have no voice, Lowell finally finds a subject larger than himself, and Warren conflates poetic and historical truth into one. C. K. Williams lurches sometimes in anger and other times in bliss into confrontations with what should not be said in the polite company of bowdlerized history, his poems' long lines embracing the minutiae and the iconic with equal relish. His fondness for detail risks his readers' patience—a big writerly risk—and rewards them for staying the course. I tried my hand at nearly all the politically risky and sexually provocative modes one finds in these poets' works, especially those found in Williams's collection *Tar*.

In Bakhtin, Gadamer, and White one finds ways to configure as well as to express the fundamental dialogue between the individual utterance and the historical voice. Their best gifts? That what we say now remains in essential dialogic relationship to all preceding similar utterances. That one's historical horizon both limits and empowers one's understanding of historicity. That history is a made thing, constructed with plot and narrative and dialogue as one would scaffold any novel.

Against the dark night of the soul, Heidegger gives forth on the role of the poet in a desperate time like this one. And Wright, again, offering up his book that pockets my heart. Or is it my head?

#### FAVORITES @ AGE FIFTY

- James Wright, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*
- Frank O'Hara, *Collected Poems*
- William Carlos Williams, *Journey to Love*
- Vassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*
- Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*
- Stephen Crane, *The Poems of Stephen Crane*
- Kenneth Koch, *New Addresses*
- M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*  
A Score of My Contemporaries' Books

Perhaps because I am getting old wearing the slow motion self-denial and dread most baby boomers afflict upon themselves and their world, I've become fond of poems written toward the end of a poet's life. William Carlos Williams's late poems offer a seldom-found maturity of mind given voice. The Modernist pyrotechnics have long since faded. There's only a man dealing with the night's coming end, nothing ablaze but a mind fired by what glows dimly beneath the dark shawl of midnight. Here is a thinking man reflecting on the nature of emotion, on the role of love and marriage, on his place among artists here and gone. The allure is not what I loved earlier, *Spring and All's* terse rhetoric leaving me to intuit a carrot leaf's or wheelbarrow's imagistic import. Here, instead, Williams gives the careful, syntactical pitch needed to sing thought outright, as in "The Ivy Crown," "The Sparrow," "Tribute to Painters," "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower," and here in the brilliant but overlooked "The Pink Locust":

*I'm persistent as the pink locust,  
once admitted  
to the garden,  
you will not easily get rid of it.  
Tear it from the ground,  
if one hair-thin rootlet  
remain  
it will come again.  
It is  
flattering to think of myself  
so. It is also  
laughable.  
A modest flower,  
resembling a pink sweet-pea,  
you cannot help  
but admire it  
until its habits  
become known.  
Are we not most of us  
like that?*

Likely it's that quality of thought I'm drawn to in others on this list. James, for instance, poses an admirable figure for his classic study of ecstatic experience in cultures and religions across the globe. What makes this study even more remarkable is James's own confession that he himself was "incapable" of such ecstatic flights, whether pagan or Christian. Still, James yearned to learn more of others' experiences with an alternate reality that stubbornly would not admit him. Earlier, Kandinsky's venerable book examines in meticulous detail the evocative powers of color, line, and shape. In each, Kandinsky points to art's ascendant qualities and its hand in freeing what he calls an artist's devotion to an "inner necessity."<sup>10</sup> Just two years before the start of World War I, facing the coming horror that exposed humans' capability for mass and anonymous destruction of their fellows, Kandinsky spoke out in favor of the spirit, an unchurched and apolitical spirit artists both discover within themselves and enliven within others: "The spirit, like the body, can be strengthened and developed by frequent exercise: just as the body, if neglected, grows weak and finally impotent, so the spirit perishes if untended."<sup>11</sup> What great human if not artistic despair Kandinsky must have felt witnessing World War I and then again, years later, fleeing the closing of the Bauhaus and the coming Nazi tempest. Likewise, to Benjamin one turns to think about thinking about art, to risk the foolish and the sacred in the same deliberation. One thinks about art not simply in an "age of mechanical reproduction," as Benjamin saw it in his day, but now in our blessedly cursed era of digital reproduction.

Against that ponderous pondering, again there's O'Hara, but now the full range of his work, the spots where silliness overwhelms the despair of modern living's "Jumble Shop" and discovers something momentarily rich. Kenneth Koch's wonderful *New Addresses* appears for its similar blend of whimsy and reflection. That's what animates his collection of apostrophes addressed to things as various as piano lessons, marijuana, the decade of his twenties, and his old street "addresses." Koch takes the venerable if shop-worn form and refurbishes it with postmodern irony and his characteristic joyfulness. This joyfulness one is not likely to find in Stephen Crane, the first real Modern American poet, a poet both symbolist and philosophical. Much like Rilke, Crane reminds me of what I'm not good at, a lesson in itself. And batting clean-up, there's Wright, this time without the Deep Imagist sleight of hand. In *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, Wright returns to his emblematic quest for the ecstatic but chooses to keep his feet on the ground. Time and again

he refuses the pull of the other world in favor of this flawed one. Here's the closer of Wright's "Hook," a poem plangent with knowledge of both human loneliness and communion:

*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.<sup>12</sup>*

Poets turn to writing poetry and readers to reading it for reasons similar to Wright's speaker. It's certainly not for the money. It's something closer to solace and communion, joy and revelation, some sustaining reason to click off the TV. That's why, last among my Favorites @ Age Fifty, comes a score of contemporaries whose works have sustained me as we've gotten older. They number a dozen or so, poets whose voices have both delighted and instructed me as we've set out upon the writers' sea alone and yet together. To name them is impossibly fraught with peril, not the least of which is having enough space to do them all justice. Suffice it to say most poets of the same generation have a cadre of peers they feel communion with, a sense of being in the same leaky boat gifted with splintered paddle and bailing bucket. The magic comes from seeing what various things each has made of these shared circumstances and tools. Now I await their new books with the same feverish heat I once anticipated my favorite band's new album.

## Reading the Remains upon a Shelf

If this is what it means to be "shaped" by reading books, then call me wet clay. Whatever strange figure these books make of us, whatever garish creature we become when fired in the kiln of reading and ruminating, we are not finished product. Each day brings new clay, malleable in these books' hands and in our clumsy own. More books and more daybreaks will make of us

something similar but different come next week, come next year, and come, with fanfare whose acronym we can't predict, yet another decade. In time, among the paperbacks and clothbounds, our poet's bookshelf accumulates a motley assortment of figures we became, once were, and will always partly be. There's the curve of flushed cheek, the lopsided ears, an oft-broken super-glued nose—these constancies amidst all the goings and fallings away. If we are, as the saying goes, what we eat, we are equally what we read. And reread. And thus rewrite as we write, writing anew. Look at your own writer's bookshelf. Study your own face and all the disguises you've forged by reading and writing, forged by living a life reading and writing. Who will give pause when that inevitable black-robed and -hooded figure scythes the shelf clean of these figures, our assorted temporal selves? When only books—our best portrait—linger in the silent chorus of dust?



## CHAPTER 4

### *“When the Frost Is on the Punkin”*

#### Newspaper Poetry’s History and Decline

*It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.*

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS,  
from “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower”

Once upon a time in America, dear reader, the blissful coupling of one’s breakfast coffee and newspaper offered as well the complementary pleasures of poetry. There, among the political bickering, assorted heinous crimes, and our great-great-grandparents’ obituaries, appeared a poem in nearly every American newspaper. Many poets used this forum to establish their poetic credentials. Typical of them, the Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley forged his literary career by publishing poems in nineteenth-century country-bumpkin newspapers, over time attracting local, state, and eventual national attention for his homespun verses.

To our jaded postmodern sensibilities, the fabled partnership of poetry and the newspapers perhaps smacks as quaint as television’s Big Three networks’ nightly news. Both reflect past-tense modes of delivery and reception. Newspapers’ not-so-loyal readership continues to spiral precipitously downward. Now, in fact, less than half of American households receive a daily newspaper, with weekday circulation at several hundred newspapers reporting to the Audit Bureau of Circulations free-falling 10.6 percent for the six months ending September 30, 2009, when compared with the year-earlier

period. Sunday circulation plummeted 7.5 percent.<sup>1</sup> The newspapers' public allure has lost its gloss.

Despite this daunting reality, a movement is presently afoot to reintegrate poetry into our nation's newspapers. The push is partly funded by a well-heeled poetry foundation and energized by a small cadre of well-meaning newspaper journalists. Ted Kooser, former U.S. poet laureate, is also involved in the venture. To the skeptical, however, this movement would appear foredoomed. After all, in the midst of the digital age, these folks aspire to blend an arguably overlooked art form with an apparently outdated mode of delivery. Because this renewed effort is nascent, it's thorny to predict what will come of the movement in the long run. What's most helpful now is to offer some context for the sheer audacity of their current effort. To do so, let's examine historical factors supporting the newspaper-poetry partnership and reasons underlying its eventual decline.

## 1 / Back in the Day

Post-Civil War America enjoyed a bounty of frenetic activity altering the nation's industrial and social fabric in ways unexpected but largely unstoppable. Samuel Clemens opined that the Civil War "uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of the people, transformed the social life of half the country, and wrought so profoundly the national character that the influence cannot be measured." Undeniably, the war's industrial engine accelerated the development of new and life-changing innovations. Within a few years, the nation saw the 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad, easing travel among the country's distant and distinct regions. Between 1872 and 1874, whites decimated the Great Plains bison herds, depriving many Native American tribes of life-giving material and ritual support. That annihilation, and a flurry of subsequent violent confrontations between natives and whites, ended with the establishment of the reservation system to isolate Native Americans in unwanted areas, clearing the Plains for Europeans moving west across vast flatlands to the Rockies. In 1876 Bell invented the telephone, and three years later Edison introduced the lightbulb—means to communicate among as well as to (en) lighten our cities and their citizens. The haughty—and for Native Americans, often fatal—notion of Manifest Destiny experienced surprising renewal of its prewar status, feeding an escalating sense of nationhood.

With this awareness of nationhood came a corollary interest in the manners and customs of our nation's disparate locales. The Civil War had fostered this interest in our unity-through-diversity, as the war had mingled soldiers from all parts of the country and thus had increased recognition of peculiar dialects, traditions, and affectations. From this awareness sprang *Local Color*, an offshoot of regional realism focusing on the speech, attitudes, and values of various parts of the country. Clemens himself got his start as a newspaperman offering local-color glimpses of Western gold rush towns and his later studies of the Mississippi River states. In addition, Joel Chandler Harris and George Washington Cable offered Southern vignettes, Sarah Orne Jewett portrayed the rural Northeast, Bret Harte struck portraits of California gamblers and miners, and in Indiana James Whitcomb Riley conjured up picturesque Hoosier legends as well as rollicking verse.

This content fueled the Great Age of Newspapers and Magazines. In fact, these mediums possessed monopolistic control of the reading public, exacting their reign well before radio broadcasting, television, cell phones, and the Internet. Adding to their domination of the public's attention, these venues were not forced to compete with the sports mania currently aflutter in America, as the first professional baseball team, the Cincinnati Reds, had just begun play in 1869. A broad reading public, particularly among educated Easterners, hankered for sketches portraying the hinterland's rube's theater. And those in the hinterlands wished to see themselves reflected in verse and commentary, if only to validate their own humble ways. Consequently, big-city newspapers sent correspondents to scour the land for what was then deemed exotic, and local newspapers hired poets to versify the homely customs of the rabble. As much of the readership was female, a common theme developed to satisfy the delicate sensibilities of this burgeoning audience. Based on the notion that art ought to provide readers with a feeling of moral uplift, literature was viewed equally as entertainment and as means of ethical betterment.

Into this lackluster realm trod James Whitcomb Riley, a figure who serves as my Every-Poet-of-the-Newspaper-Age. An itinerant sign painter and performer in Dr. S. B. McCrillus's medicine show, Riley had his roots firmly in performativity. In McCrillus's traveling medicine show, Riley performed as part of a trio touting the benefits of "McCrillus European Balsam." He sang, penned a few sharp verses, and painted the good doctor's advertising signs until he tired of this peripatetic life. In 1877 Riley landed in Anderson, Indiana,

my hometown. It seemed a decent place to ply his newly chosen newspaperman's trade for the *Anderson Democrat*. Introducing himself to readers, Riley described his new role as poet "constantly on hand" to do whatever versifying the editors might see fit for him. He earned forty dollars a month in return for, Riley said, "making my salaam to the Anderson public."

Riley's verses sparked immediate public interest in the backwater town along the White River northeast of Indianapolis. Within a month, the blond poet had breathed a veritable poetic hurricane among the citizenry, so much so the circulation of the *Democrat* doubled in that time span. As a result, his salary was promptly raised to the kingly sum of sixty dollars per month. What kind of verse, one may ask, occasioned such poetic fervor among the masses? Of Riley's thirty-nine poems published in the 1877 pages of the *Democrat* and seventeen more appearing there in 1878, his topics included the usual elegy for a dead child; various character studies of local types such as "Maud Muller" and "Wash Lowry"; his salute to a sovereign frog; and a weirdly Kiplingesque poem that chimes its way through an impenetrable tale recounting the mythical land of "Crankadox," "Gryxabodill," and the "Queen of the Wunks." Seeding locals' affection for Riley's writing was his focus on dialect and place, his version of Local Color Indiana-style, as evidenced by this excerpt from the long narrative monologue "George Mullen's Confession":

*And the cutest little baby—little Grace—I see her now  
A-standin' on the pig-pen as her mother milked the cow—  
And I can hear her shouting—as I stood unloading straw,—  
"I'm ain't as big as papa, but I'm biggerest'n ma."*

Despite his regional success and his feverish writing while holed up in a tiny apartment on Anderson's Main Street, Riley couldn't crack the gates of the East Coast editors, portals to national fame. William Dean Howell's *Atlantic Monthly* and also *Scribner's* repeatedly turned a three-piece-suited cold shoulder to the Hoosier poet. Desperate, Riley resorted to sending poems to the day's poetic Apollo, William Wadsworth Longfellow, who responded with a brief but favorable note saying Riley's work showed "the true poetic faculty and insight."<sup>2</sup> Emboldened, Riley sent new work to *Scribner's*, quoting Longfellow's letter in a marketing ploy reminiscent of Whitman's baldly quoting Emerson's note on *Leaves of Grass*. Not surprisingly, that piece—

accompanied by Riley's own sketchings—shuttled back unwanted. Word of his failures with the East Coast crowd spread to rival editors in Anderson. Relentlessly, one newspaper editor, a gentleman named Kinnard, goaded Riley that he simply lacked talent. On a humid July evening, amid the typical Midwestern sauna when one's wet shirt clings bodily like a second layer of skin, a heated argument ensued between the two outside the Anderson Hotel. Riley argued vociferously that reputation not talent nudged open the literary door among the East Coast dandies. In response, Kinnard accused Riley of being, among other niceties, a sore-headed loser. The next day Riley came up with an idea to prove his point.



*James Whitcomb Riley's writerly start arrived via the Anderson Democrat, which over the years morphed into the Anderson Daily Bulletin. During summer months my schoolmate Jerry Lippmann attended Boy Scout Camp. In his place I carried the neighborhood's Bulletin route, a newspaper of the old days before afternoon papers deathbed-printed their last words. Though I didn't know, carrying the Bulletin linked me to Riley, the Hoosier poet. In 1882, just years after a drunken and dejected Riley departed Anderson, the house I lived in as a child was built on West Fifth Street. Solid if unpretentious, the house stood literally on the wrong side of the railroad tracks, surrounded by the dilapidated houses of the working class who cared not much for yard work or home upkeep. With a dollar in pocket, I'd ride my gold Schwinn three blocks to Eighth and Morton to the corner barbershop. A bronze plaque on the side of the building indicated the spot once held the home of Riley's good friend Will Ethell (one of the fellows who'd helped to perpetrate the hoax Riley plotted in 1878). Riley had spent many summer evenings lounging with pals on the very spot I got my fresh buzz cut, leaving some bangs for effect. Once I asked my parents who the heck James Whitcomb Riley was. In response, my father recited from memory a verse of two from "When the Frost Is on the Punkin," a literary feat that left me meagerly impressed. Later, I was genuinely awed when my father, unaware I was in the adjacent room, recited for my mother a ribald version of Riley's poem, beginning with, "When the frost is on the punkin, it's time for dickie dunkin."*



The plan was as simple as it was daring. Riley would fashion a knock-off of Edgar Allan Poe and pawn it to the reading public as a recently found, unpub-

lished work by the dead poet. When the piece received critical praise, Riley's case would be made. Riley's "Leonainie" appeared on August 2, 1877, in the *Dispatch*, a Kokomo, Indiana, newspaper edited by a man in on the hoax. It was printed under the heading: "A Hitherto Unpublished Poem of the Late Lamented Edgar Allan Poe." To provide cover, one of Riley's ex-medicine-show-local-sign-painter pals, Will Ethell, found a facsimile of Poe's "The Bells" and, approximating Poe's handwriting as best he could, set out to copy Riley's "Leonainie" onto the flyleaf of an old Ainsworth dictionary. If anyone asked to see the original, the Ainsworth would then be trotted out as evidence. Here's Riley's faux-Poe:

*Leonainie—Angels named her;  
And they took the light  
Of the laughing stars and framed her  
In a smile of white;  
And they made her hair of gloomy  
Midnight, and her eyes of bloomy  
Moonshine, and they brought her to me  
In the solemn night.—*

*In a solemn night of summer,  
When my heart of gloom  
Blossomed up to greet the comer  
Like a rose in bloom;  
All forebodings that distressed me  
I forgot as Joy caressed me—  
(Lying Joy! that caught and pressed me  
In the arms of doom!).*

*Only spake the little lisper  
In the Angel-tongue;  
Yet I, listening, heard her whisper,—  
"Songs are only sung  
Here below that they may grieve you—  
Tales but told to deceive you,—  
So must Leonainie leave you  
While her love is young."*

*Then God smiled and it was morning.*

*Matchless and supreme*

*Heaven's glory seemed adorning*

*Earth with its esteem:*

*Every heart but mine seemed gifted*

*With the voice of prayer, and lifted*

*Where my Leonainie drifted*

*From me like a dream.*<sup>3</sup>

Riley's Poe knockoff fairly bristles with Poe's peculiar affectations. There's a deluge of dripping melancholy, a tub-thumping rhyme scheme, a gaggle of angels delivering their beautiful gift in the night, and a beloved bestowed but just as quickly stolen away. Oh, both poet and reader lament, earthly songs merely grieve us and tales deceive us to no end! The latter may well have been Riley's hidden clue, for his concocted "tale" of Poe's lost poem deceived the citizenry both far and wide. Assuredly, the scheme hoodwinked editor Kinnard, who with great fanfare reprinted "Leonainie" in his *Anderson Herald* and with puffed chest declared, "We look for an exhausting and damning criticism from Riley, who will doubtless fail to see 'Leonainie's' apocryphal merit, and discover its obvious faults."

Kinnard did not wait long for Riley's printed assessment of his own faux-Poe. That, of course, was part of the scam. Riley praised the poem for exhibiting Poe's "peculiar bent of thought" and his ability to blend the "beautiful" and the "repulsive," but he also poked fun at (his own disguised) lines for showing bland diction and "mediocre" versification. In the end, Riley concluded he lacked the "temerity" to claim Poe as author and yet could not deny that possibility, cautioning Kinnard that the editor is not "wholly impervious to the wiles of deception." Indeed. Kinnard was not the only one seduced by the hoax. A slew of national newspapers swept up the story, notably including the *New York World*, *Tribune*, and *Post*. Some were enticed, others merely wary. But the poem instigated enough literary ruckus to arouse well-known Poe biographer William F. Gill of Boston, who petitioned to review the original and verify its authenticity. Gill suggested his depositing a large sum at a Boston bank as security so the Ainsworth containing the poem—a forgery just completed by Riley's pal Ethell—might be shipped to him for study.



*Riley Grade School was built in Anderson, Indiana, in 1915. At a cost of forty thousand dollars, the brick school raised on the corner of Eighth and Madison Streets housed 245 pupils. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, many of my boyhood pals attended Riley School, about ten blocks from my home. Instead, I endured the metal-edged rulers wielded by Sisters of the Holy Cross at St. Mary's School. My own brush with Riley School, impelled by a few inflammatory photographs, incited some flames of its own—neither of which would've pleased the genteel poet. Once, walking home from my girlfriend's house tethered to the high hills of the upper crust, I stumbled on a Catholic schoolmate and his freckled brother. With hushed voices, they conveyed a plan for action they sold as necessary and good. Their thumbing of girly mags had fed a need for primordial release. Theirs was not the usual masturbation. They aspired instead to something hotter: to heave Molotov cocktails into the Seventh Day Adventist church's empty parking lot, getting off on the fire, the sirens, and the fire engine's red bulk. Tossing the Molotovs carried not an ounce of religious or political import, Catholic though we were. Our statement shouted boredom—dumb guys made dumber by pictured naked girls. Something had to explode. When I lit and tossed the Molotov, I stood flat-footed to relish the fireball erupt on black asphalt. The view rose flushed and pleasurable, though brief as sex. Then I sprinted through the Riley School playground, past the building's brick facade made orange in the fiery glow. It was October, and kids' paper pumpkins adorned schoolroom windows, beneath a banner quoting Riley's "When the Frost Is on the Punkin." Flames reflected in the window glass rose from their cut-out eyes and toothless grins. The pumpkins appeared cute in a kidsy way. I seemed suddenly too old for that. My feet skid-kissed loose gravel as I ran serpentine through wet alleys, certain I was headed first to jail, then to hell.*



Gill never got his chance. The ruse unraveled like a cheap wool sweater, and Riley was out in the cold. His moment of national fame—both cloaked and sullied by deception—ended bitterly with Riley's confession in the *Indianapolis Journal*. His admission of being the perpetrator prompted a torrent of complaints against Riley from both state and big-city newspapers across the country. He was depicted as a criminal, unscrupulous forger. It's said one Detroit newspaper even doubted the existence of Kokomo itself, suggesting the obviously invented (and thoroughly goofy) town name should have been a clue to the deceit. Not known for exuding confidence, Riley was stricken by the bad press. The national papers sprung into low-parody mode,



enjoying a good joke at Riley's—and the spoofed editors'—expenses. Some claimed to have found a Bret Harte poem in an abandoned schoolhouse in Effingham, Illinois. Others supposedly stumbled on a Poe poem etched in chalk on a barn door in Virginia. Still others pondered mysterious symbols scrawled on the back of a turtle hauled up from the dark waters of Hoosierland's Wabash River. To top it off, Riley returned to Anderson only to discover the *Democrat* had summarily fired him. In stereotypical writerly fashion, Riley responded by bending the elbow. He haunted Anderson's courthouse square, drunk and tottering. Later, secluded back home in Greenfield, Indiana, Riley emptied many a bottle to its dregs, depending on his thirteen-year-old sister Mary to shoulder him up the steps to bed.<sup>4</sup>

With the help of friends, Riley slowly righted himself. Surprisingly, he found his skullduggery had actually heightened his literary cachet across the state, where by 1879 he was encountering enthusiastic crowds at his performances of poetry, music, and storytelling. In the fashion of Artemis Ward and Clemens (who'd used newspaper experience to sprout his lecture career), Riley found the East Coast audience appreciated his talent as a writer and impersonator. In relatively short order, Riley had risen from scoundrel to national literary figure. By 1883, Riley had captivated Boston audiences with Hoosier-isms such as "The Old Swimming Hole" and his beloved "When the Frost Is on the Punkin." An excerpt from the latter poem gives a taste of what crowds went gaga over back in the day. Naturally, it's one of Riley's poems that appeared in a newspaper, the *Indianapolis Journal* of August 5, 1882:

*When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock,  
And you hear the kyouck and gobble of the struttin' turkey cock,  
And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the hens,  
And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence;  
O, it's then's the times a feller is a-feelin' at his best,  
With the risin' sun to greet him from a night of peaceful rest,  
As he leaves the house, bareheaded, and goes out to feed the stock,  
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.*<sup>5</sup>

By 1890 he had conquered Boston, Philadelphia, and New York—sharing the stage with James Russell Lowell, Clemens, William Dean Howells, George Washington Cable, and others. Later, at an event honoring assassinated President McKinley, President Theodore Roosevelt invited Riley to

read verse in praise of McKinley. The front page of the *Anderson Herald*, formerly edited by Riley's nemesis Kinnard, declared Riley the "great American poet of the day." That was October 1, 1907. Not to be outdone in laying claim to the once-exiled Riley, the city of Anderson six years later hosted a "Riley Day" celebration. Schoolkids, freed from classes for the event, tossed flowers in Riley's path as the town's parade wended down Eighth Street. "This is," Riley is quoted as gushing that evening, "the happiest day of my life." His rehabilitation was now complete. As a medium, the newspaper had offered the portal to East Coast editors and audiences Riley had looked for. And with him, the age of newspaper poetry had reached its zenith.



*In Anderson, Indiana, on the spot James Whitcomb Riley School once stood, there now rules a Village Pantry convenience store. Pumpkin orange and green. Twenty-four-hour-bad-neighborhood-gas-and-milk. One hundred years after the 1913 "happiest day" of his life, Riley lies victim of quickie-mart commerce—his own commerce with the nation, like his poetry, forgotten.*

## 2 / Modernism and the Lingering Demise of Newspaper Poetry

Riley might well have laid claim to being *the* great American poet in 1907, when the *Anderson Herald* declared him such. American poetry's beloved figures had toppled one by one into their graves, or they were then chin deep in their dotage. The country's reading public still embraced the Fireside Poets, and the nation's schools taught these poets' work as the pinnacle of American verse. Our country's verse was homely and welcoming, inspirational in all the ways meant to induce good citizenry. Schoolkids memorized and recited verse as a sign of edification and moral fiber; doing so was exercise for mind and soul. Riley suited this bill perfectly. In fact, William J. Long's 1913 widely admired survey volume, *American Literature*, labeled Riley "our present poet laureate of democracy," whose work captured the "hearts of all simple people, at work in the 'old town' or on 'the old farm.'"<sup>6</sup>

This volume also indicates how radically American literary tastes and judgments evolved over the past century. There, Sidney Lanier, for instance, is hailed as a major poet of "haunting lyrics." Whitman, to the contrary, is personified as a "wild apple tree that has never known the virtue of a prun-

ing knife." More to the point, Whitman's "effusions" are said to "indicate a lack of the fine moral sense that distinguishes nearly all American poets. . . . Good taste need not and will not read what only bad taste could have written or published."<sup>7</sup> That comment may as well have issued from the women's sewing circle as from a proper literary scholar. Whitman's "barbaric yawp" insulted the public's and the academy's starved sensibilities.

World War I brought a violent and sweeping curtain-drop to this soporific scene, the social order shoved off-stage and trampled into past-tense dust. Centuries of Western culture, science, religion, government, monarchy, and social institutions tumbled against the horrific backdrop of world war. Not surprisingly, many indicted these institutions as culpable underpinnings of the war's conflagration. Artists of all stripes asked why one should put faith in the old values and social foundations when, after all, these very social forces had produced trench warfare, the machine gun, the tank, gas attacks, and various means of mass and anonymous killing. Romantic poetry—like the sword fight and the cavalry charge—appeared hopelessly outmoded in a culture exercising such destructive wrath.

In came Modernism. Artists and writers railed against just the sort of "decadent" art Riley labored his lifetime to perfect. Many painters, musicians, poets, and fiction writers tossed quaint nineteenth-century aesthetic values onto the ash heap of history. In art, the famous 1913 Armory art show introduced audiences to a gaggle of radically fresh if shockingly disjointed aesthetics, the same year Long ensconced Riley as democracy's poet laureate. Impressionists, Cubists, and Dadaists blasted history, order, and genteel decorum to smithereens. Stravinsky and others captained music into uncharted waters. Discontinuity and fragmentation—both as artistic principles and as human emotions—ruled the day. Science came to be rejected, subjectivity championed, social progress derided, and existentialism promoted. This became the formula for dealing with the modern human condition, a state of being Irving Howe characterized as suffused with an inescapable sense of isolation. Virginia Woolf succinctly describes the wrenching nature of this transition: "Human nature changed. . . . All human relations . . . shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children, and when human relations change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature."<sup>8</sup>

Particularly in the crosshairs was Riley's "bourgeois" poetic sensibility, a mode fraught with sentimentality so prevalent in the newspapers. Now,

T. S. Eliot preached in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," poetry was not "a release of emotion but an escape from it." Ezra Pound proclaimed loudly the "public was stupid." Even the local appreciation Riley favored and editor Long had praised him for—"the old town" and "the old farm"—suddenly was interrogated with a hard eye. An entire literary movement—labeled "The Revolt from the Village"—sprang up to suggest that small-town American life offered no pastoral enclave unassailable by the era's pervasive loneliness. Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* made the point in fiction. Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) did the same in scandalous free verse. These writers' works embodied a "revolt" that deflated Americans' comfortable notions of old town life.

Partly by poets' choices and partly as a result of the newfangled aesthetic these poets ushered in, a schism developed between them and the polite reading public. Poets looking for a modern mode of distributing their verse turned away from the newspapers and slick magazines, for those venues seemed complicit in promoting and sustaining the bankrupt values that had led the modern world astray. If, as Pound suggested, the public *was* stupid, many poets sought a way to reach readers not implicated in that folly. A veritable cornucopia of little magazines, journals free of decadent nineteenth-century aesthetics, launched novel programs of their own making. Representative of this surge is Harriet Monroe's venerable *Poetry*, begun in Chicago in 1912. One circular distributed by Monroe courts Modernist poets, lays out the terms of her journal's rebellion, and heralds the possibilities for this new poetry: "First, a chance to be heard in their own place, without the limitations imposed by the popular magazines. In other words, while the ordinary magazines must minister to a large public little interested in poetry, this magazine will appeal to, and it may be hoped, will develop a public primarily interested in poetry as an art, as the highest, most complete expression of truth and beauty." While Monroe's closing terms may echo the nineteenth century, her aesthetic preferences most assuredly did not.

Monroe's notion of "truth and beauty" favored poets whose work was often experimental and edgy. Although Monroe's own poetry would eventually take on aspects of the emerging modes, her work had to that point stayed the course of the conventional, say, her long ode "The Columbian." Her editorial tastes, however, ran far ahead and off the foot-worn path. The work appearing in her *Poetry* was not always accessible to readers familiar with the civil manners of old verse. It was discontinuous, elliptical, innova-

tive, and often intellectually challenging. Much of it was allusive to other literatures as well as to other literary eras; thus, it was confoundingly *elusive* to many readers.

To illustrate the rapidity of this profound shift in aesthetics and social outlook, compare Robert Frost's 1913 pre-World War I poem "The Pasture" with T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a 1915 wartime piece appearing in *Poetry*, the sort of literary venue beginning to challenge the newspapers as a home for verse. First, here's the Frost:

*I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;  
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may);  
I shan't be gone long.—You come too.  
I'm going out to fetch the little calf  
That's standing by the mother. It's so young  
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.  
I shan't be gone long.—You come too.*

The rural scene, of course, harkens back to Riley's subject matter, and the poem's determinate metrics and rhyme scheme express traditional verse. What's striking, however, is the speaker's optimism and sense of possibility, an air of American can-do assuredness in the face of small trials. In his world, things can be made right—the clotted spring can be made to flow freely again. In his locale, things are lovingly cared for—witness the mother cow's nurturing attentiveness. Even the cow's tending to her young calf signals a literal clean start for springtime nature. What's more, the poem implies that humans can effect in others and undergo within themselves a similar fresh dawn. The individual speaker, both confident and inviting, extends the hand of community, summoning his reader to amble amid the bucolic scenery and help him put right all things wrong—"You come too."

Now, contrast the tonal spell of Eliot's "Prufrock." Although the piece also welcomes the reader to share the speaker's perambulations—"Let us go then, you and I"—it quickly descends into a not-so-cheerful jaunt across decidedly less hospitable grounds. Eliot's scene is urban not rural, a "half-deserted" locale "muttering" and "insidious" in its invocation of human despair. More important, above these streets the very sky itself lies in dire need of repair, spread "etherized" and suffering upon a gurney. Nothing

in the scene prompts one to believe the procedure will result in anything resembling a happy ending for the heavens or for the earth. No nurturing clean start seems forthcoming for either. What remains is not the material to make things right, but rather the “sawdust” of failed efforts. Even the poem’s dollops of chiming end rhymes sink the poem into the empty desolation of “cheap hotels” and “oyster-shells.” This scene taunts speaker and reader with an “overwhelming” question that might well be anything for which there is no ready answer: Who am I, what am I doing, what does this life mean? It is the ultimate modern question, askable mostly for its assured unanswerability.

It was Eliot himself who laid out the terms of the new aesthetic, declaring poetry must be “difficult” because the age is difficult. Pound offered his own take in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”: “The age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace.” The new literary journals offered beguilingly unsullied beginnings for poetry of this élan. Unlike the newspapers, which seemed part and parcel of the threadbare social fabric, the little magazines offered venues not implicated in the shoddy collapse of bankrupt culture. Both sides were aware of the aesthetic stakes. The newspapers, believing they held the higher ground, enjoyed trumpeting their kingdom’s airy reign. In a 1922 *Poetry* editorial, Monroe responded with sharp-witted vitriol to two such newspaper editorials taunting literary magazines. The *Washington Herald* had harangued: “Literary editors of newspapers know that some of the best verse brought out in America first sees the light of day in the columns of the press. Morocco binding and hand-drawn initials don’t insure excellence.” Not to be outdone, the *Atlanta Constitution* had poked this pointed jab: “The literary magazines have never had a monopoly of it—and they never will.”<sup>9</sup>

In response, Monroe’s editorial set out to examine whether “some of the best verse” indeed appeared in newspapers. She concluded that newspapers could justifiably lay claim to “the best light verse” but that those same papers fell embarrassingly short when it came to “the more serious verse.”<sup>10</sup> With acid pen, Monroe dismissed this Edgar Guestian sort of newspaper verse as “sermonizing twaddle,” asking who might “discover beauty in this cheap rattle of foot-rule rhymes, emotion in this sickish slobber of easy virtue.”<sup>11</sup> Monroe pronounced that newspaper and popular magazine poets had sold out to the almighty dollar, pandering their art upon the altar of the capitalist buck. In particular, she castigated the purveyors of poetic drivel, including the exceedingly popular and immensely profitable Guest: “These syndicated rhymers, like the movie-producers, are learning that ‘it pays to be good,’ that

one 'gets by by giving the emotions of virtue, simplicity, and goodness, with this program paying at the box-office."<sup>12</sup> Monroe had drawn her line in proverbial red ink, marking off the domain of the little magazines' serious artists from the newspapers' poets who cared as much for making money as for making art.

In contrast to this bald profiteering, Monroe's *Poetry* and Margaret Anderson's *Little Review* attracted the sort of poetry newspapers would be reluctant to publish and newspaper readers would be baffled if not also offended by. One could hardly imagine newspapers then publishing, say, Pound's lines inveighing against the catastrophe of World War I and the ultimate uselessness of brave soldiers' deaths. For that matter, one can't imagine our current newspapers printing a poem as condemnatory of the Iraq War as Pound's poem "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" was of World War I. There, Pound says, "myriad" of the "best" young men died "[f]or an old bitch gone in the teeth / For a botched civilization" whose supposedly timeless gifts amount to nothing more than "broken statues" and "battered books."

Pound's poem lacked the "fine moral sense" William J. Long and his ilk had found missing in Whitman before him. If this represented the "new" poetry Pound had in mind when cajoling artists to "[m]ake it new," then the newspaper could not serve as a welcome home for that verse. The little magazines must become the favored venues for Modernist poetry. But the revolution struggled to sustain itself. Always underfunded, edited by individuals known more for their passion than for their dependability, these little magazines floated like soap bubbles supported by nothing more substantial than the breeze. Many thus popped to nothingness in any ill wind. By the 1930s calamity of the Great Depression, other little mags fell beneath the wheels of the barely chugging economic steam engine that could not carry both itself and them down the tracks, including the *Little Review* and the *Egoist*. Ephemeral, the life span of the little magazine, then and now, resembles that of a garden's morning glory blooms: alluring for a day, then gone.

The rush to publish verse in little magazines was never a full-fledged revolt, for poets unaligned with Modernist tendencies—Monroe's contemptible "syndicated rhymers"—peddled their wares to the newspapers. In fact, many American newspapers still carried a single, safely bowdlerized poem per day until beyond the World War II years, an era when the country, bloodied by global conflagration, stood less enraptured by irony than it is now. The *New York Times* serves as prime example. In 1945, the year World

War II closed, the *Times* printed roughly a poem a day, as its yearly *Index's* four columns of printed verse amply display. Among them were two timely poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay, "For My Brother Han and My Sisters, in Holland" and "To the Leaders of the Allied Nations." By 1948, though, the *Times* printed only a smattering of poems. By 1950, none at all. For half a century newspaper poetry seemed extinct; then came the new millennium and a few adventurous souls seeking to resuscitate this aesthetic dodo. Now, let's see how that bird fares in our brave new digital world.