

# Making Acquaintance: Second Hand Notes On James Wright · *Martin D. Lammon*

*For if you could only listen,  
I would tell you something,  
Something human.  
—James Wright*

1.

I WAS TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD and a senior in college when James Wright died. At Wittenberg University, Ohio, the curriculum scarcely ventured beyond the Second World War, and when it did, at the insistence of some young faculty member, the syllabus generally turned to poets already dead: Lowell, Berryman, Plath, Jarrell, Sexton, Roethke. There was always some encouragement if one knew where to look, but it was peripheral and unsanctioned. As an aspiring writer, however, I knew a little of Wright's work, although I knew little about the man, which didn't much concern me.

It was likely that I was the first at my small school to hear of Wright's dying, an event whose untimeliness I could respect, but could not feel. But being acquainted with a man who had studied with Wright at Kenyon College, who had revoked an academic and literary career to make a more tolerable living as a technical writer, I was the first to tell him of Wright's death, many weeks after the fact. By his reaction—incredulous, despondent, nostalgic—I sensed for the first time what Wright had meant to many people.

Years have elapsed now, and at every turn it seems that I encounter another tribute to James Wright. Nearly every journal that ever published his work has devoted an issue to Wright's accomplishments. I have talked with poets, younger and older, who have either confessed or reiterated to me Wright's influence upon them. I have read elegies to Wright, I have watched his friends cry openly. In the spring of 1981, an annual celebration was begun in Wright's hometown of Martins Ferry. I attended the first of these, where Robert Bly was at times vexed, at times distraught. It was too soon for him, this public commemoration. Dave Smith read from the introduction to his new edition of essays on Wright, *The Pure Clear Word*. Two years later, Donald Hall came to Martins Ferry, spoke pas-

sionately, eloquently, quietly, and recalled how at his hospital bed Wright had handed over his final manuscripts; unable to speak, he began a note . . . “Don, I am dying,” paused, finished, “to eat ice cream from a tray.”

2.

In the summer of 1983, I had the opportunity to examine a handful of texts that Wright had used during his years at Macalester College (most of the books had been acquired between 1960 and 1964). The Ohio University Library’s Special Collections had purchased the texts in 1980—paperbacks mostly, many of which Wright had taught from, while others suggested a more private use—and I set out to study them, hoping to uncover useful information for Peter Stitt, Wright’s authorized biographer. After an investment of many hours and a fistful of rolled nickels with which to photocopy pertinent pages, I began preparing a document that would summarize Wright’s involvement with these books, quite a diverse group, ranging from the practical (Walter Allen’s *The English Novel*) to the idiosyncratic (Philip K. Hitti’s *The Arabs*). I finished the summary, mailed it off to Stitt, then set aside the work. Nearly a year would elapse before I could return to this study.

I remain ignorant of the fullness of Wright’s life, but I have a sense now of James Wright the man, a teacher and critic as well as a poet. These fourteen books represent only a small part of his life, but as I review the annotations and underlined passages, reread the sections indicated, I find a poet who is thoughtful and passionate, fallible and vulnerable: a romantic and a classicist, yet a man whose mind and heart do not insist perpetually upon extremes, but must experience extremity in order to effect an ordinary balance.

3.

“The thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say,” Wright underlines in “The Teacher,” from a tattered copy of *The Portable Sherwood Anderson*. Kate Swift’s advice to George Willard on becoming a writer is a climactic point in the evolution of George, the promising young story-teller and Sherwood Anderson’s romantic self-portrait in *Winesburg, Ohio*. It is easy to imagine Wright reading the advice, impelled by it to reach for his pen lying on the table beside his reading chair, and marking the passage in blue ink, reinforcing wisdom clearly evident in his own work:

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

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

from "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio"

Kate Swift's words are good advice to a writer, and Wright seeks what thoughts lie behind the faces of "Polacks, Negroes and night watchmen," the confusion of "proud fathers ashamed to go home." But it is equally good advice to the student of literature, especially at a time (the early sixties) when a teacher was becoming more often interested in clear and imaginative thinking than in a student's ability to recall facts and passages from a text. Wright's annotations in *The Portable Sherwood Anderson* suggests a teacher's preparation; they are often questions easily suited for classroom discussion, designed to make a student learn what characters (and by extension Anderson) are thinking. In "Hands," the story of the ever frightened and nervous Wing Biddlebaum, Wright notes "Fear of homosexuality," and then asks, "Who is twisted?" Wright asks his students to ponder a large question in order that they may understand for themselves the grotesque in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, that they may find themselves present in it. Further evidence that Wright used the text in the classroom is his underlining of characters' names, sometimes his only presence in a story, indicating a probable effort to help his students keep those characters straight, as they enter and exit George Willard's life.

4.

It would be plausible to suggest that Wright, too, was a participant in the theme of the grotesque, as well as its observer. Conflict and contrast, especially of the mind and soul, comprise in large part the subjects of Wright's poetry, anomalies that define, rather than distract, the human character. As a teacher, Wright's interest in "Who is twisted?" reflects his

own interests as a poet preeminently concerned with the twisted natures of others, as well as his own twisted experience, both internal and external. And as a teacher, Wright's preparation displays to some degree a mind in conflict, both intellectually and passionately motivated. A passionate intellect is an ideal description of Wright the critic.

In Walter Allen's *The English Novel*, Wright dutifully notes the acquisition — "Minneapolis/January 10, 1962" — then below, perhaps compelled by some sympathetic voice of the body, he includes the day's temperature: "31° below zero." Then on two scraps of paper, now yellowed by over twenty years, Wright carefully outlines subjects and page numbers in the text, even cross-referencing certain passages (evidence that Wright may have used the text in the classroom). But when Allen remarks that "George Eliot's prose has neither grace nor wit," Wright underlines the remark and simply notes "nonsense," dismissing Allen's conclusion the way someone might brush away an insect. When Allen discusses D. H. Lawrence's method of characterization, probing the minds of his characters rather than using actions to define emotions, Wright notes, quite formally and incisively: "L's method of characterizing the emotion which the character himself does not express thru external gesture." Wright's comment is intriguing as a teacher's note, but also because much of his own writing follows the same method. In "Autumn Begins In Martins Ferry, Ohio," Wright makes clear his own character, as well as the characters who inhabit Martins Ferry, by an act of his own mind: "I think of . . . gray faces of Negroes . . . the ruptured night watchman . . ." Yet Wright's response to Allen's criticism is more often passionate than formal. Allen writes of Thomas Hardy (whose *Jude the Obscure* is especially of interest to Wright):

Yet the true index of Hardy's stature is that he is almost the only tragic novelist in our literature and that when we consider him we have ultimately to do so in relation to Shakespeare and Webster and to the Greek dramatists.

Wright underlines and stars this passage, and writes below it: "Yes: and yet his tragic hero is a working-class man who dreams great dreams!" Wright must apply his own life to what he reads, to what he creates: the "ruptured night watchman" is "Dreaming of heroes."

In Allen's book, Wright is primarily interested in Charlotte Brontë, Thackeray, George Eliot, Hardy, and Lawrence. In *The Great Tradition*, by F. R. Leavis, a book of similar scope, Wright is again interested in Brontë, Eliot, and Hardy, but also in Henry James and Jane Austen. Although Wright did not date his acquisition of the book, his comments and interests reasonably suggest his contemporary use of the two critical texts. I also find it significant that Wright's preparations include such secondary materials; as much as some might want to perceive Wright as a spontaneous thinker, as an insightful, instinctive, and sympathetic writer, there is an academic side to him that we often choose not to consider. He was, of course, a Ph.D., who wrote a dissertation on Charles Dickens. As a teacher of literature, Wright obviously believed it was his responsibility to know what the criticism had to say about the literature, even if his response to that criticism is often personal and negative. Such a response, is glaringly apparent in the Leavis book. As *The Great Tradition* unfolds, Wright becomes increasingly intolerant, and finally incensed, with Leavis' remarks. Wright's belligerence rises steadily, incrementally, suggesting a reading of relatively short duration, yet a further indication of Wright's sense of discipline and responsibility, plodding through a book he surely despised.

Early on in his text, Leavis enlists the aid of Henry James in order to deprecate Hardy's work. Wright, calm and thoughtful, makes the annotation, "the trouble is that James — + Leavis — reject Hardy for what he is not, and pay no attention to what he is." On the next page, Wright reinforces his observation, referring to "Trilling In A Gathering Of Fugitives" for further insight into "Leavis's hatred for the Bloomsbury circle . . ." Elsewhere, Leavis claims that Jane Austen is one of four major English novelists, and later notes Charlotte Brontë's disdain for Austen (in Allen's text, Wright had marked Brontë's famous assessment disparaging Austen). Leavis calls Brontë's response "significant," surreptitiously hinting at her ingenuousness, to which Wright replies: "oh, Goddamn it: cf. Ordeal by Parenthesis, [in] *Audit*, I, 3 (Spring, 1960)." Here Wright's anger is tempered by his intellect, his passion both checked and supported by his academic background. (The article not only offers another instance of Wright's critical awareness, but also helps to date his acquisition of Leavis' text, probably of the same general period — 1960–1964 — as most of the other books under discussion.) Wright's irritation mounts; Leavis

again attacks Hardy (“Hardy’s detriment, in ways already suggested . . .” to which Wright quips, “but not demonstrated”); on George Eliot, Leavis comments vacuously, “For us in these days, it seems to me, she is a peculiarly fortifying and wholesome author, and a suggestive one. . . .” Wright, frustrated, circles “wholesome” and notes, “Well, I be go to hell!” Wright’s climactic response occurs on the concluding page of Leavis’ chapter on Henry James. Leavis writes, “But what achievement in the art of fiction—fiction as a completely serious art addressed to the adult mind—can we point to in English as surpassing his?” Wright, probably recalling what Leavis had suggested about Brontë and Hardy, lashes out (more against Leavis than James, I believe): “I must say I’m getting awfully tired of being bullied by all the talk of James as the ‘greatest novelist’ for the ‘adult mind.’ It is simply oneupmanship. Question-begging is both dishonest and confusing.” Here is Wright sounding at first bitterly emotional, even physically frustrated (“awfully tired of being bullied”), and then intellectually controlled, incisive (“Question-begging is both dishonest and confusing”). We should know this ambivalence if we are to know James Wright.

5.

Wright the teacher, the academic, would seem very much interested in prose fiction. Earlier, I mentioned Wright’s doctoral dissertation on Dickens, an author who remained special to Wright throughout his life (see Dave Smith’s interview in *The Pure Clear Word*, in which Wright discusses his great fondness for prose; on the influence of prose upon his poetry, Wright says: “What I hope to write is a poetry that is consecutive and clear”). In a copy of Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, that Wright acquired in February of 1962, copious, formalistic annotations suggest a text that Wright taught. Early in the novel, however, one significant annotation reveals Wright’s relationship with Dickens’ prose as it influences his poetry. In a scene where a crowd pursues Oliver (mistaking him for the real culprit, the Artful Dodger), and cries out, intermittently, “Stop thief,” Wright remarks the passage and notes above it, “D’s prose poem on the cry ‘Stop Thief!’” An excerpt from the passage supports Wright’s observation:

“Stop thief! Stop thief!” There is a magic in the sound. The tradesman leaves his counter, and the car-man his wagon; the butcher throws down his tray; the baker his basket. . . . Away they run, pell-mell, helter-skelter, slap-dash: tearing, yelling, screaming, knocking down the passengers as they turn the corners, rousing up the dogs, and astonishing the fowls: and streets, squares, and courts, re-echo with the sound.

Although Wright certainly was aware of prose poems (no doubt influenced by Robert Bly), it is interesting that he does not have such a poem (or “prose pieces” as he preferred to call them—cf. Dave Smith’s interview) until much later in his published work. A prose quality, however, is often evident in poems from *The Branch Will Not Break* (Wright’s third book, published in 1963, on which I have relied most often here, as it is contemporary to Wright’s reading most of the texts I am discussing). The beginning of “Stages on a Journey Westward” offers a good example:

I began in Ohio.  
I still dream of home.  
Near Mansfield, enormous dobbins enter dark barns in autumn,  
Where they can be lazy, where they can munch little apples,  
Or sleep long.

Later, in a piece such as “The Secret of Light (from *To A Blossoming Pear Tree*), Wright uses prose more openly. But here he realizes his “hope to write a poetry that is consecutive and clear.” The cohesion of the passage derives in part from its prose effects: the short, flat, prose sentences; the equally prosy but more languorous longer lines.

6.

The one hardbound text in this collection is Oscar Williams’ infamous anthology, *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*. Wright includes two inscriptions, the first, on the inside front cover, in blue ink: “James A. Wright/2414 Como Ave. S.E./Minneapolis 14, Minn./Sept., 1958.” Wright, however, acquired the book much earlier than this. On the first blank page, a much younger Wright recorded, in pencil: “Pvt. James A. Wright

152 392 00." Below, in blue ink, probably added at the time of the later inscription in order to distinguish it from the original acquisition, is the date, in parenthesis: "(1946)." Wright would have used the anthology, then, while stationed in Japan as part of the occupational forces there; he would have been 19 or 20. In the table of contents, Wright marked numerous poems (in pencil), and all indications are that these were poems and poets he admired. The list of poets is extensive and eclectic, ranging from the familiar (Hopkins, Housman, Hardy, Eliot, Frost, Auden, Crane, Yeats, and Stevens) to the less durable (Isaac Rosenberg, Alex Comfort, Gene Derwood, and John Betjeman), all of whom, however, no doubt appealed to the younger Wright. This appeal, more often than not, is sentimental. A good example is George Barker's "Epistle I," which Wright notes with a prominent checkmark, and stamps "marvelous" beside the final stanza. Here are the first and last stanzas of the poem:

Meeting a monster of mourning wherever I go  
Who crosses me at morning and evening also,  
For whom are you miserable I ask and he murmurs  
I am miserable for innumerable man: for him  
Who wanders through Woolworth's gazing at tin stars;  
I mourn the maternal future tense, Time's mother,  
Who has him in her lap, and I mourn also her,  
Time whose dial face flashes with scars.

\* \* \*

So close over the chapter of my birth,  
Blessed by distress, baptized by dearth.  
How I swung myself from the tree's bough  
Demonstrating death in my gay play:  
How the germ of the sperm of this ghost like a worm  
I caught from the cold comfort of never enough.  
How by being miserable for myself I began,  
And now am miserable for the mass of man.

Sentiment need not be romantic, romance need not be fitted with a happy ending. The language, images and the rhymes of Barker's poem appeal to the reader's sentimentality and must have impelled Private Wright's sym-

pathy. Sentiments can be honest, however, which Wright recognized. His prosy style mentioned above is one way he made effective poems out of sentiment, while avoiding verse as heavy-handed as Barker's. In another poem ("For the One Who Would Take Man's Life in His Hands," by Delmore Schwartz), Wright demonstrates a keener eye and ear. The poem is derivative, with a debt to Yeats, but lyrically it is fine:

You cannot sit on bayonets,  
Nor can you eat among the dead.  
When all are killed, you are alone,  
A vacuum comes where hate has fed.

(The underlining is Wright's.) Again, Private Wright encounters a poem that would appeal to his sentiment, but here he better recognizes a well-crafted line, more subtle in its sounds and syntax. In 1946 Japan, Wright confronted head-on the "vacuum . . . where hate has fed," a vacuum Wright would find throughout his adult life and would try to fill.

7.

The sentiment in Barker's poem that appealed to Wright—"How by being miserable for myself I began, / And now am miserable for the mass of man"—did not diminish over fifteen years; rather, it was refined. Social responsibility at a more personal level than "political involvement" or "good citizenship" is at the heart of much of Wright's thinking. Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses* reflects this thinking, and it must have influenced Wright's own work. Again the peculiar ambiguities of honesty are made available to us here by Wright's annotations in the text. Coming from a working-class background, Wright (commenting in Allen's *The English Novel*) does not surprise us when he notes that Hardy's hero is a "working-class man who dreams great dreams!" In *The Revolt of the Masses*, Wright presumably has this same "working-class man" in mind as he studies Ortega y Gasset's notion of "select man," and notes beside the text (which he underlines), "The Noble Life described":

This is life lived as a discipline—the noble life. Nobility is defined by the demands it makes on us—by obligations, not by rights. Noblesse Oblige. "to live as one likes is plebian; the noble man aspires to order and law (Goethe)."

Here, Wright finds a definition for the poet's endeavor, characterized, for Wright, by the ascent of the "working-class man," which is the ascent Wright himself made. The passage from Goethe is particularly interesting when read beside lines from Wright's poem in *The Branch Will Not Break*, "Three Stanzas from Goethe":

Once despised, now a despiser,  
He kills his own life,  
The precious secret.  
The self-seeker finds nothing.

The sentiment is nearly the same as we trace it from Barker's poem, to Goethe's statement quoted by Ortega y Gasset and noted by Wright, and, finally, to Wright's application of the sentiment to the poetic line. We see the mingling of a romantically and classically motivated man who is able to balance his conflicting experience and sentiment, a man whose poetry has matured as he has matured.

The conflict in Wright, however, is not perfectly resolved, and it is this imperfection that makes his poetry especially valuable to us, especially human. Certainly we can discover this conflict in the poetry, in such a well-known, if perhaps a too often remarked poem as "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota." Wright's now unforgettable conclusion, "I have wasted my life," is made clearer in light of Ortega y Gasset's definitions of "Mass Man" and "Select Man," underlined by Wright:

[Mass Man]: But the man we are now analyzing accustoms himself not to appeal from his own to any authority outside him. He is satisfied with himself exactly as he is. Ingenuously, without any need of being vain, as the most natural thing in the world, he will tend to consider and affirm as good everything he finds within himself: opinions, appetites, preferences, tastes.

[Select Man]: On the contrary the select man, the excellent man is urged by interior necessity, to appeal from himself to some standard beyond himself, superior to himself, whose service he freely accepts.

Wright is constantly divided, wanting “to appeal from himself to some standard beyond himself,” even as he tends “to consider and affirm as good everything he finds within himself.” It is this conflict that surely prompts Wright, as he indulges in his idle observations from the hammock at William Duffy’s farm, to conclude, “I have wasted my life.” But these same observations (“the bronze butterfly,” “A field of sunlight between two pines,” “droppings of last year’s horses”), which Wright brings to life by his (ingenuous?) participation in them, become a touchstone for Wright’s own aspirations. Despite the conflict, despite Wright’s sense of wasted life, his experience in this hammock includes a vitality beneath the seeming laziness. In *The Revolt of the Masses*, Wright stars a passage particularly pertinent to this experience, scribbling beside the passage, “Vitalism + the alternative to pessimism”:

. . . the reality of history lies in biological power, in pure vitality, in what there is in man of cosmic energy, not identical with, but related to, the energy, which agitates the sea, fecundates the beast, causes the tree to flower and the star to shine.

Wright’s conclusion, “I have wasted my life,” is the pessimism against which his poetry labors, a pessimism that can never be completely overcome (thus its terminal position in the poem), but that the poet must always strive to check. “Vitalism + the alternative to pessimism,” then, is the compromise by which Wright balances his conflicting natures; it is the vital energy that compels the poet, despite his encroaching sense of failure, to make his poem, that “causes the tree to flower and the star to shine.”

8.

What I have just remarked, and what, I suppose, I have been seeking throughout these speculations, is the force that compels the poet to make his poem. Of course, no one may ascribe a single name to this force, just as Ortega y Gasset could not, instead reaching for generative images to identify “pure vitality.” This vitality, for James Wright, is very often sexual, not simply in a passionate sense, but in a procreative, mythic, integrative sense. The “biological power” is sexual, but its influence extends beyond simple sexual attraction and appetite (it “agitates the sea . . . causes . . . the star to shine.”). At the same time, however (again, ambivalence), the

power is precisely sexual attraction and appetite (it “fecundates the beast, causes the tree to flower”). Wright’s interest in these matters is evident in his poetry, and is again complemented by yet another text from his Minnesota years.

In November of 1962, Wright acquired *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, a book of Russian origin, written in 1914 by Nicolas Berdyaev. Wright’s notes indicate even further his wide range of literary interests, remarking especially what Berdyaev has to say on Jakob Boehme, Franz von Baader, F. Spiegelberg’s *Spiritual Practices of India*, Nietzsche, Freud, and Dante. Wright records, at the beginning of the text, page references, presumably for his future investigations, and expresses his particular interests in the text: “p. 202: clearest explanation of androgynous union, between men + women in love”; “good on Nietzsche: pp. 86–87. p. 178: Franz von Baader on married love. Very fine”; “Consult library for anything by Franz von Baader—especially any commentaries on J. Boehme.” In Berdyaev’s text, two passages from chapter eight, “Creativity and Sex: Male and Female: Race and Personality,” are especially interesting. Wright underlines and annotates the first, which focuses upon the ideas of Jakob Boehme:

Jakob Boehme’s teaching of the androgynous and Sophia is very profound. “You are a youth or a maiden—but Adam was both in one person. Out of his lust Adam lost the virgin and in his lust he received the woman. But the virgin still awaits him, and if he only should desire to enter into a new birth, she would receive him again, with great honour.”

Wright places a question mark after the quote, and notes at the bottom of the page, “Would she, really? (I wonder.)?” Wright’s uncertainty can be traced to his ambivalent nature, for he finds both androgyny and sexual distinction equally prevalent. Two poems in *The Branch Will Not Break* express this dual prevalence:

Between trees, a slender woman lifts up the lovely shadow  
of her face, and now she steps into the air, now she is gone  
Wholly, into the air.  
I stand alone by an elder tree, I do not dare breathe

Or move.  
I listen.  
The wheat leans back toward its own darkness,  
And I lean toward mine.

from "Beginning"

She gropes for  
The past backward, to  
the pillows of the sea.

. . .

Now she is going to learn  
How it is that animals  
Can save time:  
They sleep a whole season  
Of lamentation and snow,  
Without bothering to weep.

from "American Wedding"

While "Beginning" would somewhat contradict Boehme, suggesting a distinct separateness between female and male prototypical natures, "American Wedding," by its title, suggests the union of male and female essences in the single pronoun, "she." The "virgin" does not await man, to "receive him again, with great honour," for she does not exist on earth, or if she appears, "now she is gone/Wholly, into the air." On the other hand, "Out of his lust" man did not lose the virgin and receive the woman, but retained both: "She gropes for/The past backwards, to/The pillows of the sea." The images are at once mystical and physical—again, Wright's effort to find a balance between conflicting natures—but always they are timeless (mythic), governed by a "history [that] lies in biological power," as Ortega y Gasset noted, rather than by a chronological history: "They sleep a whole season/Of lamentation and snow,/Without bothering to weep." Boehme's fundamentally Christian mysticism, although generally divergent from traditional Christian philosophy, retains the Christian sense of linear time: man falls from grace, is redeemed by Christ, is born again. Wright is no doubt in conflict over Boehme's generally Christian perspective, although he finds much value in Boehme's mysticism.

The second passage of interest continues to focus upon Boehme's interest in the "eternal Virgin." Again, Wright underlines the passage:

"But the wisdom of God is the eternal Virgin, rather than woman: she is immaculate purity and virtue and stands as an image of God and likeness to the Trinity."

Boehme's mystic doctrine of man as androgynous makes understandable why Jesus Christ, the absolute and perfect Man, never knew a woman and in his own life did not realize the sacrament of marriage.

(The reader may note the resemblance of "Jesus Christ, the absolute and perfect Man," to Ortega y Gasset's "Select Man.") Here again Wright is in conflict over Boehme's conclusions. Expressing more fully his earlier uncertainty, Wright notes: "And yet . . . Dante's Beatrice is not only 'purity and virtue.' She's also (perhaps first of all) Dante's beloved. Still . . . Boehme was a lover, a husband, + a father—devoted + kind. Ponder this." Indeed, Wright must have pondered this carefully (as he had the apparent paradox of "Mass Man" and "Select Man"), for very often is the female presence in his poetry an image of "immaculate purity and virtue," and yet Wright, a sensual man also, could not have such a rarefied presence inhabiting his poetry, his life. Perhaps his pondering contributed to his making of the poem, "A Blessing," also from *The Branch Will Not Break*, a poem that brings together both the sensuous and immaculate woman (but expresses these qualities in a metaphoric—but no less beautiful—creature: an Indian pony):

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

In these lines Wright is able to synthesize all the uncertainties he has expressed in relation to Boehme's philosophy. There is passion ("Her mane falls wild on her forehead") and there is purity ("her long ear/ . . . is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist"); she is "black and white," and her presence redeems both the sensual and spiritual man: "if I stepped out of my body I would break/ Into blossom."

9.

It is impossible to say how much Wright was affected by these texts; it is possible to say that the texts, and Wright's comments in them, are reflective of his general thinking, as evidenced in his poetry. Wright's interests, like those of any thoughtful person, are various. Other texts in this collection include a chapbook of poems by Dannie Abse, which he inscribed to Wright ("To James Wright/ with good wishes. / Dannie Abse/ Dec 12th '63"); *The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain*; *Tobias Smollett*, a monograph by Laurence Brander; and a modern history of Russia, by Bernard Pares. Wright was a man of conflict, of ambivalent nature, of passionate intellect—qualities evident in his poetry, but less likely to be embellished when examined in these texts closer to the patient, private, quotidian efforts of a life. The poetry is public, and we the public have a right to read the poetry variously. But we also have a responsibility to preserve the human character of the man who gave us poems of such utterly human and personal dimensions. And if a younger generation of poets remembers James Wright the fallible, perturbable, passionate, sentimental, tender, and intellectual man, then we shall better preserve and respect his poetry.

Seeking enlightenment, Wright was as likely to fail as to succeed. In June of 1963, Wright bought an apparently interesting book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence (1611–1691), first published in 1692. The book would seem impressive. But it would also seem that Wright did not examine the book very carefully. Inside the book's covers he found the kind of historical testimony reprinted for zealous Christians anxious to have their faiths affirmed by ancient visions and acts of extreme piety and self-sacrifice. Wright's few remarks are incredulous: "p.14: What? What? Who/is this man?" Beside his inscription, Wright added an odd statement: "James A. Wright/Minneapolis (stranger than/ Brother Lawrence's kitchen, indeed.)" Wright's remark refers to brother Lawrence's homily on finding peace in the noisy kitchen where he was

employed as a young man; but what was “stranger” than this is beyond reasonable speculation. Perhaps Wright had in mind Minneapolis itself, a city of great beauty and diversity, a place touched everywhere by human industry, yet ineluctably connected to the weather, to nature. In February of 1963, Wright acquired *The Arabs*, by Philip K. Hitti, seeking perhaps the same enlightenment he would later hope to find in Brother Lawrence’s book. Wright adds to his inscription a note to himself that reveals a man deeply affected by place and climate: “This dark drizzling/ evening I must copy/ out the great lines on/ light from the Koran.” It had only been a year before, in his copy of *Oliver Twist*, that Wright had placed a note reminding him . . . “Last Sun. before Mar. 12 will be christening day for Mary Bly. Have the poem printed before then.” The date (1962) and the subject of the poem suggest that the message refers to “Mary Bly,” which appears in *The Branch Will Not Break*. The first lines of that poem are strangely prescient of Wright’s note in *The Arabs*:

I sit here, doing nothing, alone, worn out by long winter.  
I feel the light breath of the newborn child.

Wright feels the cold, is depressed by “long winter,” the same way all of us are. Ordinary notes, admittedly, but it is the ordinary man I sought out.

10.

In the winter of 1960, Wright bought *Writers on Writing*, a collection of passages on the act of writing, culled from the commentaries of many writers, past and present, compiled by Walter Allen. In Allen’s introduction, Wright places an exclamation point beside a single, simple sentence: “A creator is never really safe till he is dead.” It is a cliché, and it is true. We, however, must avoid making more or less of a poet who struggled all his life to be only human. I began my notes with lines from the first stanza of the title poem from Wright’s last book published in his lifetime, *To A Blossoming Pear Tree*. Wright “would tell” the Pear Tree “Something human,” as he would tell us, finally, what it means to be human. The poem concludes,

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