

The Form of Concentration · *Eric Pankey*

I

ONE OF THE MORE TALKED ABOUT contemporary poems of this decade has been Robert Hass's "Meditation at Lagunitas." Hass in a single poem weaves "the luminous clarity of a general idea" with a childhood memory, with a primer on semiotics, with a tale of sexual love, with a densely musical catalog of particulars. These threads, clashing it would seem in content, create a tightly interlaced fabric. As the Hass poem exemplifies, the meditative poem is a hybrid of the lyric and the narrative, certainly taking the strengths of those two methods of speaking, but resembling itself more than either of its parents. The meditation is most easily recognized as a *form* by its marriage of dissociated contents toward the analysis of an idea. If we look at "Meditation at Lagunitas," we see that the meditation is not a form of ornamentation, structured by patterns of sound, but a form of concentration, structured by patterns of thought.

To call the meditation a form is, perhaps, a wrong step, considering the commerce in the term *formalism* these days. The shape I hope to discuss is not easily described or prescribed. There are no beats, syllables or lines to count. There is no predetermined pattern to fulfill. This *form* is not a vessel into which any fluid can be poured. Like the ode and the elegy, the shape we see of the meditation is the shape of that which fills it. If we look at the Hass poem we see that the shape is in the intertwinings of the rhetoric, the stories, and the images. The poem's machinery, its argument, works with a grace and subtlety. At its best a meditative poem attempts to confront intellectual, philosophical, or spiritual concerns. And, as T. S. Eliot says in his essay on *The Metaphysical Poets*, "our only condition is that . . . [the poet] . . . turn them into poetry, and not merely meditate upon them poetically."

II

In his last three collections, *The Southern Cross*, *The Other Side of the River* and the latest, *Zone Journals*, Charles Wright's meditations have become

Zone Journals, Charles Wright. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 101 pp., \$14.95; *In Favor of Lightning*, Barbara Molloy-Olund. Wesleyan University Press, 52 pp., no price listed (paper); *After the Lost War*, Andrew Hudgins. Houghton Mifflin, 134 pp., \$12.50.

more and more inclusive, allowing lush lyricism, confident statement, straightforward narrative, the distance of history, and a geography as large as the imagination to work within a single poem toward the argument of a particular idea. In “March Journal” Wright captures the sense of his poems’ form:

—Structure is binary, intent on resolution,
Its parts tight but the whole loose
and endlessly repetitious.

The poems in *Zone Journals* are full of so much information that, upon first reading, it is hard to believe that a structure could hold and sustain such difficult and various content. The shape of these poems is loose, the lines pushing out toward the right-hand side of the page, stair-stepping downward.

Eliot in that same essay goes on to say, “poets in our civilization as it exists at the present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends a great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity playing upon a refined sensibility must produce more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.” Wright’s poems are rich in their intricacy and are *difficult*. Their difficulty is not in their expansiveness, but in their absolute clarity. Wright charges each line with an equal energy. Each line is so lucid that it shines as brightly as the next. What keeps his poems from being merely poetic, a blinding light of beautiful language, is the line of thought that continually asserts itself in these poems:

—Exclusion’s the secret: what’s missing is what appears
Most visible to the eye:
the more luminous anything is,
The more it subtracts what’s around it,
Peeling away the burned skin of the world
making the unseen seen:
Body by new body they all rise into the light
Tactile and still damp,
That rhododendron and dogwood tree, that spruce,
An architecture of absence,

a landscape whose words
Are imprints, dissolving images after the eyelids close:
I take them away to keep them there—
that hedgehorn, for instance, that stalk.
(“Yard Journal,” pages 4 and 5)

The series of colons adds to the complexity and inclusiveness of the poem; each assertion, each image, each well-worked bit of language becomes a subset of the universal set of this collection.

A motive behind many of these meditations is an attempt to make sense of the insistence of paradox in our lives. And as the cited passages suggest, paradox is also the method of these poems:

For us, the earth is a turbulent rest,
a different bed
Altogether, and kinder than that—
After the first death is the second,
A little fire in the afterglow,
somewhere to warm your hands.
(“March Journal,” page 19)

Through attention, Wright distills the complexity of intellectual, carnal, and spiritual experience. Memory and history, the image and the rhetoric, the questions and the answers, the diurnal and the sublime are all turned into integers in the poems’ long equations. Paradox resolves because the attention he offers reveals the common traits, *the truth*, in all he sees.

Zone Journals is full of aesthetic proclamations:

Words, like all things, are caught in their finitude.
(“Night Journal,” page 34)

Nothing’s so beautiful as the memory of it
Gathering light as glass does . . .
(“A Journal of the Year of the Ox,” page 56)

Beauty is in the looking for it . . .
(“Light Journal,” page 87)

And all the fragments of lyric and narrative stand as proof of his argument. If Wright's meditations resemble any familiar mode of writing it would have to be the essay, but these meditations leave out all transition, all the connective material, all the normal gear-shifting of logic. We might be tempted, if the poems were not so well-wrought line by line, to read them as poems of process. Wright does manage the energy and semblance of improvisation by the sudden turns and silences the form of the meditation allows him. The whole of these poems is "loose / and endlessly repetitious" but not just anything can be placed in the catalog. The rich clarity of each image, story, and statement works to "dislocate" language into meaning. Each fragment takes on strength from the next, making the whole (the elastic structure of the meditations) "intent on resolution." That resolution can be made of the various stuff of the meditations, such as a question, an assertion, and an image:

What can anyone know of the sure machine that makes all things
work?
To find one word and use it correctly,
providing it is the right
word,
Is more than enough:
An inch of music is an inch and a half of dust.
("Chinese Journal," page 97)

All of Charles Wright's seven collections have sought to find that one word, and these meditations, these *journals*, gracefully document the seriousness of that quest.

III

The metaphor of the quest suggests narrative movement forward, but the movement in a meditation is not narrative. The contemplation of an idea is all the journey needed. Peter Stitt, in his essay "The Circle of the Meditative Moment" calls the meditation a "circular form." I see the meditation as circular in the way it takes its shape by a spiraling back and forth along the line of an idea or argument. Its journey is not through history and distance, but around the moment that contemplation takes. The language surrounds and holds thought still.

In Barbara Molloy-Olund's first collection of poems, *In Favor of Lightning*, the circular shape and timelessness of thought is stressed by how so many of the poems begin in the midst of thought, with syntax that suggests language and contemplation have preceded what appears before us; it is as if we have entered a room in the midst of an ongoing and compelling conversation:

So I began to listen to them,
the sparrows,
their wings a panic as they hovered
at our second-story window,
to see vanity as they dove
and then rose again . . .

(“The Proximity of Sparrows,” page 8)

Then, the answer must have been small
to be folded inside her habit.
On the blackboard it was the blank space
in an equation
where a number would soon line up
with dignity.

(“Sister David Will Not Ride in an Automobile,” page 9)

Years later, pain
slips over the roof
like a constellation, beyond
the disciplined trees . . .

(“Years Later,” page 10)

And I believe I saw reality, floating;
a houseboat coasting across a river
dragging its bouquet of shade . . .

(“Along the Mississippi,” page 12)

As in Charles Wright's work, a structure based on beginning, middle and end is given little importance. The shape of the poem is created by what the moment of thought pulls into its orbit.

Although Molloy-Olund allows a refreshing amount of wit into her poems, they are, for the most part, serious, if not solemn poems. Her language continually defines and qualifies, attempting to encircle, to capture particular ideas. The gravity of the meditations allows a density of images, narrative, and rhetoric to surround a single idea. The poems are full of detours, arrivals, and doubling-back. Molloy-Olund searches for just the right approach, and when she finds it, she communicates with an indirect logic that demands and deserves our faith. The poem “Blockstarken” takes as its point of departure the following epigraph: “On a visit to Germany, a woman reads the word ‘Blockstarken’ in the print of an old poster. She later learned that there is no such word in the German language.”

They must have taken our breath with them,
these words, now no more than the substance of feathers,
husks of decrepit objects, dust you find in the crack of a leaf.
Some, longer than was necessary, over the earth with their
 shadows
curved precisely and were never seen again.

I suppose this is why we sometimes stop, look at the ground
while talking, and why we’ll need to talk louder as we go on,
why the trees appear to hang there inhaling it all:
what we are saying, what we are not saying as the blocks darken.

The more she considers this word, which exists and does not exist, the more the poem becomes a philosophical proof. By making sense of a single word, she might make sense of the world:

I’m washing glasses and I get this word stuck inside my head
that was buried in Germany like the jaw of the last man

to say it, and now he could very well be singing
through the hollow wine glass as I let my finger slide
cryptically around the rim. Blocks darken. Blocks darken
but only in my own language. . . .

The spiral movement of “Blockstarken” accelerates downward. The orbit of the images narrow around that one word and charge it with meaning in much the way a current through a coil of wire can produce (magically, it seemed in childhood) magnetic pull:

. . . I find myself singing this word
immersed in its delicate nonsense. I find myself
lining the glasses up while singing
as if to keep my place in the universe in place.

When Molloy-Olund looks at the universe, the order she perceives is often peculiar and slightly skewed. It is the ordinary and “delicate nonsense” of dailiness that sets her meditations in motion:

Heaven was always a little to the north
of our lives, an invisible star
in transit above
our dinner table.

(“In Retrospect, the Sky,” page 3)

Nothing I’ve seen is like this
lightning as it drops to its hands
over a quiet barn
releasing its brief self in spasms.

(“In Favor of Lightning,” page 18)

Someone yells “fuck you,”
from a car window.
The car peels down the road,
its motor dragging behind.
Maybe this is how each month should
begin, with a conclusive “fuck you”
from an open window.

(“How It Begins,” page 45)

And from such odd beginnings, Molloy-Olund takes on questions of ethics, aesthetics, the existence of God. Hers are intellectual, if not

spiritual, meditations. Perhaps the best poem in the collection is “Force,” a subtle and powerful examination of cruelty. The various strands that make up this poem are so intertwined in their circling of the idea that it is hard to paraphrase without devaluing the uncompromising power of the whole. The poem is made up of such things as a spider capturing a June bug, a tale of child abuse, a group of friends drinking late into the night arguing the origin of force:

. . . No one seems to know

where our first orders come from. But in theory
we must hear our fathers in the drunk man next door
tossing a melon rind to the driveway and shouting
at the boy, “I thought I told you to pick up the garbage.”

There is no struggle but a tedium in the father’s long shadow
and the boy crouching there. No theory but one that stretches
to include the boy who takes the dirty, fly-stung rind
in his hand, holding it away from his body like a lantern.

In Molloy-Olund’s work, the first-person narrator is rarely the *subject* of the poems. That *I* works as a vehicle through which abstraction can be given form and empowered. By the end of “Force,” the speaker has not only made the reader feel the pathos of the situation, but the reader recognizes a wisdom whose source is compassion:

Someone opens another beer. No theory suggests

the light of a star recapitulates the first ugly and insulated
orders out of loneliness of darkness for light
but then, someone says, “How clear it is tonight”
and we all look and we agree.

Who wouldn’t want to be the first to say, “Let there
be light.” Who wouldn’t want to carry the boy
safely out of his life, saying “There, there, it is over.”
Even knowing it isn’t. Even knowing it goes on with the web

expanding and contracting, the legs of the June bug twitching
as they cling. Who can't see himself there, swaying,
being rocked to sleep by his father, who says, "There now,
I didn't mean it, there."

IV

If the parents of the meditation are the lyric poem and the narrative poem, the dominant traits in Wright's and Molloy-Olund's work would have to be from the lyric. Both poets allow the music of their lines to propel the poems. Their meditations take as their source lyrical moments. One cannot help but recall such forbears as Wordsworth, Dickinson, Stevens, and Roethke when reading the work of Wright and Molloy-Olund. And these two writers enrich that lineage.

The meditation has roots on the other side of the family tree as well in the lament, the soliloquy, the dramatic monologue, and the sermon. Reading Andrew Hudgins's second book of poems, *After The Lost War*, I was reminded of the best of those modes—*The Wanderer*, *The Book of Job*, Shakespeare, Browning, and Donne. The preface to this book, subtitled *A Narrative*, states, "This sequence of poems is based on the life of the Georgia-born poet and musician Sidney Lanier. Though the poems are all spoken by a character I call Sidney Lanier, the voice of these poems will be unfamiliar to anyone who knows the writings of this historical figure." Hudgins goes on to thank Lanier for the chance to live Lanier's life as if it has been his own, and concludes, "And, in too many ways, I suppose it has." *After The Lost War*, read cover to cover, is a narrative as the title page promises, but it is also a book full of meditative moments. The meditations further examine and investigate the themes and obsessions of Hudgins's first book, *Saints and Strangers*. By living another's life as if his own, Hudgins manages to confront issues of spirituality and mortality with a directness and drama beyond what he achieved in his first collection.

Lanier, besides his considerable talents as a poet and musician, was a soldier for the Confederacy in the Civil War. Such a persona, confronted with all the unfortunate truth of that war, can speak baldly about large subjects. The voice of meditation begins often in the midst of narrative, with contemplation slowly replacing the story with its argument. "Burial Detail" begins:

Between each layer of tattered, broken flesh
we spread, like frosting, a layer of lime,
and then we spread it extra thick on top
as though we were building a giant torte.

Over the length of its three pages the poem's line of narrative gives way to the coiling of meditation:

The thought that they might not decay
was enough to make my stomach heave.
Some men I've argued with seem to think
they'll stay perfect, whole and sweet,
beneath the ground. It makes me shudder:
dead bodies in no way different from my own
except mine moves, and shudders in its moving.
I take great comfort in knowing I will rot
and that the chest I once stood on
is indistinguishable from other soil
and I will be indistinguishable from it.

When Hudgins veers from the narrative, his attention is turned to the burden of the body, and the burden of the soul balanced precariously within that body. These poems are spoken in the voice of a Christian, a Christian whose faith is both questioning and sincere, a Christian who cannot help lamenting the shortness of his earthly stay. At times he feels much more at ease with the certainty with which the body will fail and fall away than he is with the fate of the soul:

In May, I can't see dogwood bloom
without thinking how it was once
as huge as a hickory—till Christ
was nailed to one. Since then, dogwoods
are twisted and small. A legend. A lie.
But I can't get it from my mind.
That's not the only lie I've seized:
I've heard a preacher say the dead,
in heaven, watch our every move.

It's dumb. But I think I believe it.
You'd think they'd find a better way
to waste eternity. What do they *feel*
as they look down from heaven and judge
the part of me that isn't earth?

Hudgins's line of thought asserts itself much more directly than Wright's or Molloy-Olund's. In their lyrical meditations, the connective material between idea and evidence is often missing. Part of the pleasure in their poems is the resonance of that absence, which takes its shape as white space and silence spanning the logical leaps. In Hudgins's poems, all the work of the argument occurs before our eyes. The pleasure in his poems is not only the function of their architecture but the ornament of it as well. On the page, the poems are, for the most part, long, thick rectangles. They appear firmly founded, well-built, if not a little imposing. The intelligence of the voice speaking the poems, however, draws us inside the dense surface into the richness within.

The immense knowledge of the persona and the historical context of the book allow Hudgins a range of language that is alive and unexpected. Although *After the Lost War* catalogs the losses and sorrows of both an individual and a nation, the attitude of the speaker is often witty, ironic, if not down-right funny. Hudgins is at his best when he is discursive and reflective and when he textures his poems with surprising diction.

Today I'm thinking of St. Paul—St. Paul,
who orders us, *Be perfect*. He could have said,
Touch your elbow to your ears, except
that if you broke your arm, then snapped your neck,
you might could manage it. The death inside
the flawed hard currency of what we touch
bamboozles us, existing only for that flaw,
that deathward plunge that's locked inside all form,
till what seems solid floats away, dissolves,
and these poor bastard things, no longer things,
drift back to pure idea. . . .

("What Light Destroys," page 117)

The iambic nature of the lines, and the conclusiveness of such regularity, is pleasingly agitated by the varying dictions Hudgins twists into his poems.

As this book-length narrative moves towards its end, the method of the individual poems becomes more and more contemplative and introspective. The insistence of story gives way to a concentric consideration. The book's final section, "Under Canvas," concerns Lanier's failing health and death. A difficulty with the first-person is that once the narrator is dead it is hard to keep the story going. Hudgins relies on the meditative mode to extend the moments left to Lanier. In "The Hereafter" the persona considers the possibilities after death:

I've even met a man who says the soul
will come back in another skin—the way
a renter moves from house to house. Myself,
I'd like to come back as my father's hound.
Or something fast: a deer, a rust-red fox.

For so long I have thought of us as nails
God drives into the oak floor of this world,
it's hard to comprehend the hammer turned
to claw me out. I'm joking mostly. I love
the possibilities. . . .

The persona gets taken up in the circularity of meditation as if avoiding the end of the narrative line, as if to hold the days, the hours, the moments before death—before language is lost—still.

V

In a strange, eclogue-like poem, "The House of the Lord Forever," a wandering preacher asks Lanier, "*Don't you trust in the world beyond / these shadows?*" In their meditations, Hudgins, Molloy-Olund, and Wright attempt to confront, if not answer that question. It is the focus of their concentration. Wright might answer the wandering preacher this way:

What did I think I meant then, Greece, 1959:
Beauty is in the looking for it,

*The light here filtered through silk,
The water moving like breathing,
Moving in turn to the tide's turn,
 black threads through the water weave.*

Whatever it was, I still mean it.

(“Light Journal,” page 87)

Molloy-Olund’s response might be:

I felt to view that ancient moment
was to fall inside it. History
is not unlike this:

a window, a bird. Eventually
I’m looking in on
my own primitive likeness.

(“The Proximity of Sparrows,” page 7)

Hudgins’s persona says in “The House of the Lord Forever,” “I won’t /
debate my soul with strangers . . .” and yet that is exactly what he does.

The narrative urge is to place trust in the moment that comes next. The
lyrical urge is to hold the present moment still. But the meditative poem
attempts to envelop the moment and understand it (intellectually, philo-
sophically, spiritually?) through circumspection and concentration. Each
of these poets is faced with the attainable and the unattainable, accord and
discord. Each longs to decipher the shadows toward some understanding,
some faith, in the world beyond the shadows.