

Review · Lynn Emanuel

This Journey. By James Wright. New York: Random House, 1982. \$10.50. cloth. \$5.95. paper.

This is a book of both the near and far. Like Breughel, Wright might be called a master of “miniature within immensity.” Although the book’s landscapes are not (nor were they meant to be) immense in the way that Romantic or Miltonic landscapes are, what is immense is the emotion or occasion in which the landscape is grounded.² Dying is always the background for the miniatures of these poems. Again and again the titles announce the poems’ preoccupation with what is small: “A Dark Moor Bird,” “The Limpet in Otranto,” “Chilblain,” “To the Cicada,” “Lightning Bugs Asleep in the Afternoon.” Even more interesting, many of the titles describe little things inside bigger things, a kind of nesting of perspectives—like Chinese boxes—one inside another: “Entering the Temple in Nîmes,” “The Sumac in Ohio,” “Small Wild Crabs Delighting on Black Sand,” “Sheep in the Rain,” “Dawn Near an Old Battlefield, in a Time of Peace.” Sometimes the titles describe the most prosaic landscapes: “The Sumac in Ohio.” Often, however, they suggest something more subtle and elusive. “Jerome in Solitude,” for instance, describes a man in relation to something—solitude—that is both emotional, physical, and large. Solitude is Jerome’s nimbus. It is the manifestation of a spiritual state. It is the impalpable made palpable. Solitude is both a condition and a symbol. The landscapes in these poems are both settings and aspects of character. In fact, the landscapes *are* characters, personalities in their own right. Solitude, here, has to do with mysticism, and as Milan Kundera says, “mysticism and exaggeration go together.”³ In many of these poems there is a fierce exaggeration of perspective. Death seems large, partly because the world teems with detail. Whatever can dwarf this “infinity of details” must be huge. This is what Bert O. States has to say about Breughel:

1. Bert O. States, “Standing on the Extreme Verge in *King Lear* and Other High Places,” *The Georgia Review*, Summer 1982, p. 422.

2. States, p. 420.

3. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 57.

What he exemplifies in painting is a technique of articulating distant detail more clearly than the eye would actually see it. It is not exactly a distortion (as in certain late medieval styles) but a slight enhancement of optics—a trick, in part, of figure ground manipulation—whereby each thing is endowed with a particularity of its own within the whole. On one hand, there is the wonder of the expanse; on the other, the persistence of definition within it. For instance, the Tower of Babel becomes such a preternaturally large structure rising out of the earth not only because its mass dwarfs the city beneath it but because it is an infinity of details. . . .⁴

Here is a title—“Contemplating the Front Steps of the Cathedral in Florence As the Century Dies”—in which there is particularity within expanse. There are the steps, small in relation to the cathedral behind them, and the cathedral contained within the city of Florence, and Florence small within the context of the century. Effortlessly, the perspective lengthens from what is close to what is far, and from place to time. Even the century is contained within a larger thing—“dying.” A reader stands at the outer range of what can be imagined as large, but Wright’s vision is larger even than that. After all, the “snaggle of infected meat,” the steps, the cathedral, the city, the century, and dying are all contained within (framed by) Wright’s contemplating (viewing and considering) gaze. The range of his sight moves beyond the literal to the metaphorical. But there is more. Paradoxically, Wright himself is dwarfed by yet another landscape—tucked in at the top of the poem—in which he is small enough to fit under the wing-shadows of the hawk. He can take in the whole landscape and still fit in under the hawk’s wing. The poem’s change in perspective is an act of the mind not just a literal stacking of shapes. The poet’s gaze can accommodate the dying century or “A mass of slick green beetles” and find a kinship with either: “Nearsighted, I feel a kinship/With these clear shadows.”

Wright’s visions, therefore, aren’t merely a series of lenses through which he examines the world. His visions don’t record as much as they create. “Anghiari is medieval, a sleeve sloping down.” By the end of this line, the reader knows that this is not a realistic setting. How are “medieval” and “a sleeve sloping down” connected? The comparison is left out: “Anghiari is medieval, (as graceful, quaint, pleasing) as a

4. States, p. 422.

sleeve sloping down.” The connection between “medieval” and “sleeve” is not stated directly but is oddly accurate; (you couldn’t say “Anghiari is a Victorian town, a sleeve sloping down”). There is only one context in which such an assertion makes sense. In medieval painting it is often the clothing—the slope of drapery, sleeves or dresses—that is the real landscape, the miniature world in which the eye travels. Such landscapes are immense miniatures, as this one is.

In “The Journey” we are not coaxed into the miniature as we are in “Contemplating the Front Steps of the Cathedral in Florence As the Century Dies.” We are put there from the beginning, immediately, almost ruthlessly. We are in a magical place, a beautiful dead end. We are going to go into the miniature landscape within this miniature landscape, into the small shelled core of the light, and suddenly we are there where the angel and spider are one.

I found the spider web there, whose hinges
Reeled heavily and crazily with the dust
Whole mounds and cemeteries of it, sagging
And scattering shadows among shells and wings.
And then she stepped into the center of air
Slender and fastidious, the golden hair
Of daylight along her shoulders, she poised there,
While ruins crumbled on every side of her.
Free of the dust, as though a moment before
She had stepped inside the earth, to bathe herself.

I gazed, close to her, till at last she stepped
Away in her own good time.

This is a landscape in which the small engulfs the I/eye the way the view through an electron microscope can. It is in “Small Wild Crabs Delighting on Black Sand” that Wright says “Nearsighted, I feel a kinship/With these clear shadows.” Here, however, he gazes, “close to her,” and finds “. . . the heart of the light/Itself shelled and leaved.” It is not just that this web is big as a cemetery, but that the landscape is so detailed. We can see everything, even the “shadows among shells and wings,” even the “golden hair/Of daylight along her shoulders.” Normally, the spider is taken to be at the heart of darkness, but here, gazing at all this, Wright is eye to eye with the “heart of light.” It and Wright

exist in a special dimension—like the angels in medieval paintings—between the small and the large. They are of their own size, “balancing.”

This spider is angelic and beautiful, but she also will inherit the body at the end. What is most remarkable is the delight Wright takes in her and the Gothic mounds and cemeteries of dust, the ruins crumbling on every side of her. Either these are love poems, or they balance halfway between love and a deflection from love. The remarkable little landscape of the web is full of detail but not enough detail to shift the balance from the Gothic to the morose. Death is palpable without being made to seem gruesome. This is not a book of Romantic vistas, but of medieval miniatures framed by a sense of eternity. In “Regret for a Spider Web,” Wright is specific about the ways of coming and going (avenues, back alleys, boulevards, paths, and “one frail towpath”) but not too specific—there are few modifying adverbs or adjectives.⁵ There is nothing hysterical about this view of death. Too rich a language, too lavish detail would show an excess of emotion. These little landscapes are fine but not overly fine.

In *The Hour of Our Death* Philippe Ariès talks about the way two different views of death coexisted until late in the middle ages.⁶ On the evidence of the designs of tombs he shows how the upper classes believed in a migration of the soul and saw death as a dramatic passage from this life to either heaven or hell. Death was a transformation, complete and absolute, a new species of being, a second life. On the tombs of the lower class the statuary shows a different kind of belief. On these tombs there is often a figure who is neither living nor dead. The figure shows no sign of activity, but neither does it show any sign of decay. It appears to exhibit a kind of life-in-death, a state of prolonged and dreamless sleep from which—so Ariès explains—the sleeper could awake. There was a calm acceptance of dying as there is in this book. Although there are occasions for sadness and disbelief, there is no horror. *This Journey* is an examination of the process of dying. Lovingly, Wright catalogues the insects and creatures that will inherit and outlast his flesh. There are so many. The whole world seems to tremble and move with them. The air is full of birds, the water with fish, the earth with insects. There is, finally, a sense of overwhelming gentleness about these poems. Hell is still Ohio and Ohio will be left behind:

5. States, p. 424.

6. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), Book One, Part II.

. . . even beyond

The Ohio River twenty-five miles away
Where the Holy Rollers raze all afternoon
And all evening among the mud creeks,
The polluted shore, their voices splintering
Like beetles' wings in a hobo jungle fire,
Their voices heavy as blast furnace fumes, their brutal
Jesus risen but dumb.

Unlike Jesus, the cicada is "light flesh singing lightly . . . in perfect balance." The small things of this world are plentiful and will survive more gracefully than the large, singular figure of Christ rising only when screamed at. In "Regret for a Spider Web," Wright says, ". . . now all the long distances are gone." The world is growing close, small, intimate—a back alley of webs. He is sorry not to belong to the landscapes of those long distances: the "magnificent frozen snows," "the tall cypresses," "the mountain," but he recognizes his kinship with the small and quick. "I have to move, or die," he says, suggesting, "I have to live *and* die."