



that the concrete, often sensuous images appear to emanate from and fade back into a remote source, at once personal and universal. To speak of symbolism in this sense is, of course, to focus on poetic imagination as mediator between the seen and the unseen, reality as it may exist independent of human observation, and as it is constructed and transformed by human awareness. Such tenuous beginnings and endings, then, occur not in the first or last line of any individual poem or even in the succession of sharply-etched images, but in the resonance evoked by a particular conjunction of subject with object, knower with known.

Using language to probe beyond surface impressions, the poems often, as in "The Night Watch," call the very substantiality of objective phenomena into question:

The Night Watch

Outdoors, like a false morning,  
 Fog washes the pine trees. It  
 Shoulders against the windows,  
 Spreading across their surface  
 On its way upward. In this  
 Moment between sleep and thought

This holding back, I can hear  
 The fog start to rise, the slow  
 Memory of an ocean,

And I, like a ship, begin  
 To stir, to lurch in its swell,  
 And to move outward, beyond

The steel jetty, the lighthouse,  
 The red-flagged channel buoys,  
 --Beyond, at last, sleep even--

Into a deeper water,  
 Pale, oracular, its waves  
 Motionless, seagulls absent.

The fog washing pine trees and spreading upward across the windows might be a precise, literal

description of something actually observed, but this impression is undercut because the scene is "like a false morning," in which the fog, outside and pressing against the window, stirs an inner awareness, a "moment between sleep and thought," a twilight of consciousness in which the speaker no longer merely *sees* but actually *bears* the fog, and along with it, *bears* the "memory of an ocean" and begins to move "like a ship . . . into a deeper water,/Pale, oracular," a water clearly symbolic, so that while "the steel jetty, the lighthouse,/The red-flagged channel buoys," maintain their sharp, imagist clarity, they are simultaneously immersed in this deeper imaginative context.

Fascination with this zone where perception begins and ends is especially apparent in "The Bolivar Letters," a sequence of ten poems addressed to Tennessee's state institution for the insane. Number Eight, an adaptation from the French poet, Eugene Guillevic, likens this poetic *Abgrund* to a wall that must be hugged and finally opened with words:

8.

There are those who must speak,  
 Speak on from the shadow in the corners  
 About wounds which knit with much pain  
 On the clearest of nights;

And of ponds which yawn  
 In the face of a wall  
 That keeps them down in their beds.

There are those who must hug  
 This wall, this same wall,

And try to open it  
 With words, with names yet to be found  
 For that which has no form  
 And has no name.

Words become a way of opening the wall of conventional appearance to a place where language is not at home, yet where our experience of the world has its origin. Because language is both the key

to opening this world and paradoxically an obstacle to entry, the poet must give a form and a name to the formless and nameless, all the while recognizing the presence of a something beyond, which remains formless and nameless. As Wright asks in "American Landscape":

What does one say? What can one say?  
That death is without a metric,  
That it has no metaphor?

That what will remain is what always remains:  
The snow; the dark pines, their boughs  
Heavy with moisture, and failing;

The clearings we might have crossed;  
The footprints we do not leave?

Even as the poem affirms the power of language, it stresses the limits of language, juxtaposing the immediacy and palpability of natural phenomena with an awareness of how incomplete and inadequate any statement about what lies beyond this wall must be.

*Hard Freight*, *Bloodlines*, and *China Trace* form a trilogy with a dominant theme of uniting Wright's deeply felt personal history with an emerging poetic sensibility that draws heavily upon Italian and Oriental influences. Familiar themes from *The Grave of the Right Hand* remain central, but Wright's scope is enlarged by a growing inclusiveness, an increased awareness of the difficult poetic journey he has undertaken.

As though to underline both the expansion and the challenge, *Hard Freight* begins with an epigraph from Pound, the seminal and perhaps singly most important influence on Wright's poetry:

What is the use of talking, and there is no end of talking,  
There is no end of things in the heart.  
--EP/Rihaku

The quotation, from Pound's translation of Li Po's "Exile's Letter," offers a bridge between this book and the previous one. While continuing to focus on language as both necessary and

inadequate, it also foreshadows new directions the poetry will move in, for while each book in the trilogy is distinctly individual, the overall progression reveals an evolution of theme and technique that cannot be fully seen in any one book. Among the qualities that emerge, and are forecast by the epigraph, are an increased sense of belonging to an ongoing poetic tradition; an increased influence of Pound, especially his syncretism and lineation; and perhaps most significantly, the growing application of Oriental thought to the themes that dominate the poetry.

In *Hard Freight*, these tendencies, while evident, are less pronounced than in the next two books. Beyond the epigraph, the book contains poems dedicated to Pound, Rimbaud, and Oscar Wilde, as well as to Baron Corvo and Abraham von Werdt, this last foreshadowing numerous later self-portraits in which Wright will place himself in a variety of imaginative contexts. "Backtrack," with its "This is the death of water," echoes "The Waste Land," and Kafka's presence is invoked in "Homage to X" and "Entries." "Chinoiserie," the notes tell us, is based upon various lines culled from The Penguin Book of Chinese Verse. Nevertheless, these influences do not appear to have penetrated deeply into a book whose heart and soul remain in Hardin County, Tennessee. The voice of "Chinoiserie," for example, is both off-handed and self-conscious, "Why not? The mouths of the ginger blooms slide open, . . ." Nor has Pound's influence at this point been deeply integrated into Wright's own sensibility. Almost all of these poems, while written in free verse, are also divided into regular stanzas, and in only two places (once in "Firstborn" and once in "Congenital") does Wright break a line visually, certainly one of the trademarks of his later work. The book's strongest poems are not these excursions and experiments, however, but pieces like "One Two Three," "Dog Creek Mainline," "Blackwater Mountain," and especially "Northhanger Ridge," where sharp, clearly defined images sound the depths of memory and understanding in search of a center that can hold, a vision

that will not dissolve.

Largely because of its controlling vision, *Bloodlines* is, in almost every way, stronger and more convincing than *Hard Freight*. At once more conservative and more ambitious, the collection is an affirmation of Wright's poetic and personal bloodlines. Pound is present, yes, but in a more subtle and integrated way--the resonance of an occasional image or turn of phrase, as "the acorn of crystal" in "Bays Mountain Covenant," echoing "Canto CXVI." Other presences also make themselves felt--Auden in "Delta Traveller," where "All this you survive, and hold on,/A way of remembering, a pulse," echoes "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." Taken together, these moments suggest a growing sense of participation in a centuries-long conversation about being human, and a need on Wright's part to locate his voice, his experience, his vision, within that discussion. Seen in this way, the more subtle and more fully integrated poetic allusions contribute resonance without undermining authenticity. Instead, they give notice that we are traveling in a certain sort of imaginative terrain.

The presence of Roethke is especially strong in this way, from images of sod-lifting, bones, roots, and tendrils, to the metaphor of skin as shell of the self. To read the long poem "Skins" without Roethke's "Epidermal Macabre," "Open House," or "Snake" in mind, for instance, is to lose much of the poem, an exploration of the relationship between identity and essence. Number 6 is especially beautiful in its precise description of the metamorphosis of a mayfly, the emergence from water, the shedding of skin, the first experience of flight. All of this, I am assured by flyfishing and biologist friends, is a precise and accurate description of the mayfly's lifecycle, compressed into a few beautiful lines. And also an apt metaphor for self-transformation:

6.

Under the rock, in the sand and the gravel run:  
In muck bank and reed, at the heart of the river's edge:

Instar, and again instar,  
 The wingcases visible. Then  
 Emergence: leaf drift and detritus; skin split,  
 The image forced from the self.  
 And rests, wings drying, eyes compressed,  
 Legs compressed, constricted  
 Beneath the dun and the watershine--  
 Incipient spinner, set for the takeoff . . .  
 And does, in clean tear: imago rising out of herself  
 For the last time, slate-winged and many-eyed.  
 And joins, and drops to her destiny,  
 Flesh to the surface, wings on the slate film.

While the first few lines may recall Roethke, especially his *North American Sequence*, the language and imaginative perspectives have been internalized, even metamorphosed into Wright's unique way of seeing and speaking. The last line, for instance, with its four stresses, its strong medial caesura and balancing alliteration, calls up suggestions of Pound's adaptation of the Anglo Saxon line in "Canto I," but as with the Roethkean feel of the poem's opening, these overtones are subsumed by the poem's powerfully realized central image which controls the overall effect.

In the third book of the trilogy, *China Trace*, Wright moves further from Hardin County and seems almost to wish to divest himself of his past, to undergo a spiritual metamorphosis. As he says in "1975":

I open the book of What I Can Never Know  
 To Page 1, and start to read:  
 "The snow falls from the hills to the sea, from the cloud  
 to the cloud's body, water to water . . ."

At 40, the apricot  
 Seems raised to a higher power, the fire ant and the weed.  
 And I turn in the wind,  
 Not knowing what sign to make, or where I should kneel.

Epigraphs from Italo Calvino at the beginning of each book section imply that the world has

become a book of emblems--a vast, intricate web of metaphor and symbol, in which surfaces are "skins." If this is an "Oriental" way of looking at experience, it is also, in many ways, very Western, suggesting especially the Italian neo-Platonists and the French symbolists, hence perhaps, the book's name, *China Trace*--the hint of a trail or even bridge from the rich but somehow oppressive world of Kingsport, Tennessee, to a larger and more comprehensive sensibility. For this and other reasons, *China Trace* is a pivotal book. Marking the end of a trilogy, and in a larger sense of the first cycle of Wright's career, it ties together a number of threads that run through that early work, and at the same time suggests the direction his later work will take.

The dominant figure is a persona who is both Wright and not-Wright, a Bunyanesque Pilgrim on a spiritual journey from the known into the unknown. The overall flow of the book's movement can be easily seen by reading the first and last poems together. In "Childhood," Wright speaks in the first person, still very much a part of the life he sees himself leaving behind. His childhood is a dog that has followed him, and although its "beggar's lice" are still "bleaching to crystal along my britches leg," he's going away, "tongue loosened, tracks apparent." He's discovered "a window into Away-From-Here, a place/I'm headed for." Somewhat vague about where this place is, he does specify what he is leaving behind--a catalogue of personal associations and Christian images.

Both of these motifs are implied in the "locust husk," which speaks on one level of a simple cicada shell, perhaps stuck to the side of a tree, and also recalls the theme of "Skins," especially the precise metamorphic description of "6." It is as though both personal history and conventional Christianity become mere husks or shells to be shed in the continuing evolution of self.

"Him," the final poem, is written in the third person, as though Wright has at last become

dissociated not merely from his childhood, but from himself, or more precisely, has become both subject and object, observer and observed:

Him

His sorrow hangs like a heart in the star-flowered boundary  
tree.

It mirrors the endless wind.

He feeds on the lunar differences and flies up at dawn.

When he lies down, the waters will lie down with him,  
and all that walks and all that stands still, and sleep through  
the thunder.

It's for him the willow bleeds.

Look for him high in the flat black of the northern Pacific sky,  
Released in his suit of lights,  
lifted and laid clear.

Now he flies, his sorrow left behind like a locust shell hanging on a "boundary tree." He appears to have undergone the metamorphosis, transcended the ordinary, become the enlightened one. And perhaps "he" has, but the poem's speaker, someone very much like Wright, takes a jaundiced view of "his" triumph. Although "he" feels at harmony with the rhythms of nature and is "released," "lifted and laid clear," his lights are just a suit--not even skin, but some sort of artificial garment--while below him "his sorrow hangs like a heart . . . for him the willow bleeds," reminders of a world much more central and vital, but left behind. Buddhism offers two very different models of the enlightened individual. One is the *Arhat*, who discovers the way to release from this world's endless cycle of suffering and pain, who orders his life so as to achieve that release, leaving behind the travail and heartache of other mortals. Another model is the *Bodhisattava*, who sees that same way but does not follow it, who chooses instead to remain *in* the world and *of* the world, to honor and

experience the tragedies and triumphs of everyday life, yet to remind us of larger rhythms and deeper places.

To point out this distinction and its relevance to *China Trace* is not to imply that Wright claims any special spiritual status for himself, but rather to suggest that the apparent turning away from the path of personal transcendence in "Him" need not be taken as a rejection of Eastern thought. In fact, *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*, which brings together the poems written since *China Trace*, takes its title from a Chinese expression that points to the paradoxical awareness that this world of everyday reality, for all its magnificeny complexity and diversity, is somehow limited, only a part of the bigger picture. If this bigger picture is fundamentally one of consciousness, that consciousness is not merely personal but universal and spiritual. What remains to be transcended, then, is not the physical world itself, but a certain limited way of being in that world, a way of seeing and of thinking. Thus, *The World of the Ten Thousand Things* affirms a commitment to the world of skins, mayflies, and locust shells, but also invokes a larger context that surrounds, embraces, and penetrates them.

The opening poem of *The Southern Cross*, "Homage to Paul Cezanne," is a tribute to Cezanne as a painter, and is at the same time an extended meditation on death, or more specifically on connections between the dead and the living. Wright speaks of the dead in lines that echo the epigraph from Li Po in *Bloodlines*:

Like us, they refract themselves. Like us,  
They keep on saying the same thing, trying to get it right.

Mindful that the dead are remote if not inaccessible to the living, Wright asks:

Whose unction can intercede for the dead?  
Whose tongue is toothless enough to speak their piece?

And replies:

What we are given in dreams we write as blue paint.  
Or messages to the clouds.

In this reply, which emphasizes the need to speak of "what we are given in dreams," something deeper and more remote than the dream itself, he recalls the poem's earlier imagery:

The dead are a cadmium blue.  
We spread them with a palette knife in broad blocks and panes.

We layer them stroke by stroke  
In steps and ascending mass, in verticals raised from the earth.

We choose and layer them in,  
Blue and a blue and a breath,

Circle and smudge, cross-beak and buttonhook,  
We layer them in. We squint hard and terrace them line by line.

While these lines speak to relations between the living and the dead, they also "layer in" a theory of composition--one that is associative, accumulative, and non-representational. The images are "smudged," "blurred," "layered," and "terraced." Squinting hard, "we choose and layer them in" "with palette knife in broad blocks and planes." If such images are representational at all, it is not in their photographic likeness to concrete, objective reality, but rather as mediators between "what we are given in dreams" and can only "write as blue paint." And precisely because "what we are given in dreams" is often refracted and hazy, we must keep on talking, "trying to get it right."

Other poems in *The Southern Cross* continue this layering and terracing of images. The visual, painterly orientation is apparent in numerous titles. Besides the five self-portraits, we find a "Portrait of the Artist with Hart Crane" and a "Portrait of the Artist with Li Po." We also find "Composition in Grey and Pink," "Spring Abstract," "Landscape with Seated Figure and Olive Trees," "Dead Color," and "Bar Giamaica," a poem inspired by a photograph. These titles, however,

are only suggestive of the ways in which "Homage to Paul Cezanne" sets the tone for this collection.

For instance, each self-portrait might be seen as a collage of images: at one moment the poet is "himself" looking out on the world, but he quickly jumps to an imagined "other" looking in on himself. Taken individually, each poem presents a complex but apparently complete and finished portrait, yet taken together, each poem is merely a glimpse--partial, fragmented, isolated--of the whole self, which remains elusive.

The opening line from the book's title poem, "The Southern Cross," makes the point as clearly and directly as we are likely to find it, "Things that divine us we never touch." Although the word "things" calls to mind the title of this larger collection, *The World of Ten Thousand Things*, the word "divine" is more interesting in its ambiguity and thematic implications. Because "divine" functions as a verb, we are most likely to read it as meaning "discover," "locate," or "find out." How do "things" discover us, locate us, find us out? And who can read "divine" in the overall context of Wright's poetry without sensing the possible wordplay--not "discover," but "make holy" or "sanctify"? Can "things" discover us, make us holy, sanctify us? If so, how is it that we never "touch" them? How can mere "things" know us so intimately, define us and consecrate us, yet remain so elusive? This, finally, is the question that the book asks, as it tries to bridge the gulf between the seen and unseen worlds. As Wright says in "Virginia Reel":

It's worth my sighs  
To walk here, on the wrong road, tracking a picture back  
To its bricks and its point of view.  
It's worth my while to be here, crumbling this dirt through my bare  
hands.

I've come back for the first time in twenty years,  
Sand in my shoes, pockets full of the same wind  
That brought me before, my flesh  
Remiss in the promises it made then, the absolutes it's heir to.

This is the road they drove on. And this the rise  
 Their blood repaired to, removing its gloves.  
 And this is the dirt their lives were made of, the dirt the world is,  
 Immeasurable emptiness of all things.

If the world is dirt, if lives are dirt, this is a dirt that the speaker's bare hands like to crumble, perhaps as a part of the process of "tracking a picture back / To its bricks and its point of view." And if "things" themselves are finally empty, this emptiness is immeasurable--infinite, beyond comprehension.

That everyday, quotidian reality is both mundane and ethereal, dirt-solid and spiritually elusive, is a central paradox of *The Southern Cross*, and indeed of this larger collection. In many ways, this refusal of transcendence, this commitment to the here and now, might be taken as the dominant theme of *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*. Even so, Wright's "here and now" is no longer just a narrow, shallow little place on the outskirts of Nirvanah. In its mystery, simplicity, complexity--reality and illusion--any place, any moment, can become a distorted two way mirror, doubling and reduplicating a dream, fracturing and extending an idea, throwing it back on its creator. Yet who is this watching from the other side--observing, judging, laughing, mocking, crying? Increasingly, the poetry focuses on the present, but at the same time, the present becomes more elusive, more fragmented, more numinous.

The title poem of *The Other Side of the River*, as though to continue this interpenetration of past with present, immediate with distant, opens at Easter among California palm trees but soon becomes a meditation on "the meta-weather of April." Besides recalling the rebirth archetype with all its Christian and pagan associations (including Eliot's *The Waste Land*), the poem fuses these with the Buddhist myth of the far shore, in which a pilgrim seeks passage from one side of the river, the world of daily reality, to the far shore--Nirvanah. Upon reaching this far shore, the pilgrim discovers

a long line of people waiting for the ferry to take them to Nirvanah, which they conceive to lie on the far shore, the land the pilgrim has just escaped. The point, of course, is that there is no "far shore," at least in the sense the pilgrim has imagined it. In connecting these Christian and Buddhist associations, Wright reaffirms his commitment to both traditions. With characteristic modesty, he lays no claim to special spiritual insight. Quite the contrary, he looks back twenty five years to another time when "anything I could think of was mine because it was there/in front of me, numinously everywhere." Then in a mood reminiscent of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," he contrasts that time with the present, "There comes a point when everything starts to dust away/More quickly than it appears,/when what we have to comfort the dark/Is just that dust, and just its going away." Or, in the poem's final stanza, "So to have come to this . . ./Is a short life of trouble." Whatever river he has crossed, the Savannah River or a more symbolic one, he finds himself still the person he has always been. Is this his rebirth, then--his metamorphosis? To come at last to an acceptance of his place on this earth? It would seem so, and yet the acceptance is accompanied by an enlarged vision that pays homage both to the numinosity of the everyday world and to the evocative power of the human imagination:

It's linkage I'm talking about,  
   and harmonies and structures  
 And all the various things that lock our wrists to the past.

Something infinite behind everything appears,  
   and then disappears.

It's all a matter of how  
   you narrow the surfaces.  
 It's all a matter of how you fit in the sky.

The ambiguity of the last line above is especially interesting in the way that it calls to mind two earlier poems. If "in" is read as shorthand for "into," the line offers an ironic reminder of "Him"

from *China Trace*, in his "suit of lights." However, if the line is read to mean, "how you fit the sky in," it is more reminiscent of "Homage to Paul Cezanne," with its emphasis upon the terracing and layering of images. Either way, and both ways, it affirms a commitment to this world, a commitment made even more explicit in the last line of "Italian Days": "What gifts there are all here in this world."

Poems of *The Other Side of the River* range and intertwine among Wright's characteristic subjects--country music, Italy, China, visual art. Much more than in *The Southern Cross*, the forms are open-ended and organic. The experiments with lineation, begun in *Hard Freight* and continued in subsequent books, are no longer merely experiments. In combining the longer, but dropped or broken lines with his collage-like layering of images, Wright has evolved a style that is both fragmented and fluent, syncretistic but connected. The underlying "harmonies and structures" that hold these poems together are easier to feel than to discuss, seeming sometimes to reside in the "something infinite behind everything" rather than the domain of rational discourse. The world of these poems is a world both known and unknown, a world of pieces and wholes, always present yet always, as in the last few lines of "California Dreaming," falling away:

Piece by small piece the world falls away from us like spores  
 From a milkweed pod,  
           and everything we have known,  
 And everyone we have known,  
 Is taken away by the wind to forgetfulness,  
 Somebody always humming,  
           California dreaming . . .

Given Wright's emphasis upon quotidian immediacy, it is perhaps not surprising that he would turn in *Zone Journals* and *Xionia*, the last two works comprising this collection, to the journal as a poetic vehicle. With its off-handed, spontaneous feel and its improvisational juxtapositions, the





Cold Mountain (Han Shan), Paul of Thebes, and Buddha. Here, too, he shows an increasing, almost metalinguistic concern for the materials of poetic construction--parts of speech, morphemes, phonemes, individual letters. "Inaudible consonant inaudible vowel/The word continues to fall/in splendor around us," he says in "Silent Journal." "How can we trust the sure, true words/written in blue ink?" he asks in "A Journal of Southern Rivers." And in "Language Journal" he wonders, "What is it we can never quite put our fingers on/Inside the centricity of surface/that foregrounds and drains/the abstracts we balance our lives by?/Whatever it is, the language is only its moan."

For all of this hungering for a "something beyond," however, there is always a counterbalancing affirmation of this world's richness and complexity, a deep and abiding love for the people and places that have meant so much to him, an almost overwhelming sadness, sometimes, at their inevitable passing. In "A Journal of Southern Rivers," for instance, he recalls a Montana summer:

Overcast, south wind,  
 Montana early July,  
                   fire in the barrel stove,  
 Bull thistle, yarrow and red clover  
 Adamant on the old trail.  
 Two jacksnipe scurry in single file across the yard.  
 One calls from the marsh.

Cold, rainy Thursday.  
 If being is Being, as Martin Heidegger says,  
 There is no other question,  
                   nothing to answer to,  
 That's worth the trouble.  
 In awe and astonishment we regain ourselves in this world.  
 There is no other.

Set against this affirmation, however, neither canceling it nor being absorbed by it, is an awareness spoken of in "Last Journal":

