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**“THE IMAGING OF THE INVISIBLE”:
NARRATIVE, PILGRIMAGE AND “THE METAPHYSICS OF THE
QUOTIDIAN” IN CHARLES WRIGHT’S POETRY**

PhD Thesis

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Signed: Sarah Dowling

Date:

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Abstract

This dissertation presents an analysis of the whole body of poetry by contemporary American poet Charles Wright to date. Building on existing scholarship, I argue that his poetry can be read as having a single focus, which I label “the invisible” (a term from Wright’s poems) and which represents the object of Wright’s pilgrim’s metaphysical longings. The invisible names a multifaceted sense of something ultimate, ungraspable and often absent. It is commensurate with what Wright calls “the metaphysics of the quotidian”—the otherworldly quality of the mundane material world—and “the idea of God”, an agnostic sense of ultimate realities that remains half-begrudgingly reliant on religious terms. To reveal the centrality of the invisible to Wright’s poems I present an analysis of their recurrent symbols and metaphors, demonstrating that visions of the invisible are ubiquitous and consistent throughout his oeuvre.

I also argue that an implicit, repeating narrative of “pilgrimage” persists all the way through Wright’s body of work. This pilgrimage is an ongoing quest of spiritual aspiration towards the invisible. It amounts to the kind of concealed storyline that Wright calls “undernarrative”. As I make clear, the pilgrimage constitutes the paradigmatic pattern of Wright’s poetry, a sequence of drawing near and falling back that recurs in an almost fractal manner in every part of his oeuvre. I trace this undernarrative within Wright’s whole body of poetry, not just his famous “trilogy of trilogies”, to reveal how his recurrent themes produce an implicit, repeated movement towards and then away from transcendence. From a perspective informed by Derrida’s deconstruction of Western logocentrism, I focus on Wright’s many meditations on the past, contemplations of the present and speculations on death.

I consider the way that Wright entertains a particularly Southern, place-bound sense of origins, even while confounding that prioritisation of origins with a motif of rise-and-fall that destabilises “place”. The fluidity of memory reflected in tumultuous landscapes, as exemplified by the poem “The Southern Cross”, challenges the ideal of origins by revealing

them to be elusive, uncovering a lack of consistency between the past and the present and rendering the past irretrievable. I explore Wright's sense of being in time in relation to his poem *The Journal of the Year of the Ox*. This poem demonstrates two key patterns in Wright's poetry: the perpetual renewal embodied in the cycle of seasons and the tragic fact of decay and rising entropy evinced by the poet-figure's experience of ageing. Both concepts of time attest to the inapprehensible nature of the invisible, which is envisioned as an elusive eternal instant of time. Furthermore, the conflation of the idyllic origin with heaven in Wright's poetry means that his pilgrim's journey towards transcendence has a unique direction. Passing time both drags him away from paradise and conveys him back to his birthplace. Finally, I consider Wright's multiple visions of death, which are variously, I suggest, redemptive, entropic, decompositional and cyclical. I consider the implications of these different "ends" for the preceding life narrative and for narrative closure in general. As obvious fictions, Wright's endings draw attention to the fictiveness of all ideals of closure and completion. Ultimately, I argue that Wright's modernist undernarrative of seeking wholeness demonstrates the appeal of dominant narrative paradigms even while subverting them and bringing the ideal of fundamental truth into question.

List of Abbreviations

<i>AP</i>	<i>Appalachia</i> (1998)*
<i>BL</i>	<i>Bloodlines</i> (1975)*
<i>BY</i>	<i>Buffalo Yoga</i> (2004)
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Black Zodiac</i> (1997)
<i>CH</i>	<i>Chickamauga</i> (1995)*
<i>CT</i>	<i>China Trace</i> (1977)
<i>DA</i>	<i>The Dream Animal</i> (1968)
<i>GRH</i>	<i>The Grave of the Right Hand</i> (1970)
<i>HF</i>	<i>Hard Freight</i> (1973)
<i>HL</i>	<i>Halflife: Improvisations and Interviews, 1977-87</i> (1988)*
<i>LF</i>	<i>Littlefoot</i> (2007)*
<i>NB</i>	<i>Negative Blue: Selected Later Poems</i> (2000)
<i>OT</i>	<i>Outtakes / Sestets</i> (2010)**
<i>OSR</i>	<i>The Other Side of the River</i> (1984)
<i>QN</i>	<i>Quarter Notes: Improvisations and Interviews</i> (1995)
<i>SC</i>	<i>The Southern Cross</i> (1981)
<i>SHS</i>	<i>A Short History of the Shadow</i> (2002)
<i>SP</i>	<i>Six Poems</i> (1964)**
<i>SS</i>	<i>Sestets: Poems</i> (2009)**
<i>ST</i>	<i>Scar Tissue</i> (2006)
<i>VG</i>	<i>The Voyage</i> (1963)
<i>XA</i>	<i>Xionia</i> (1990)*
<i>ZJ</i>	<i>Zone Journals</i> (1988)

A Note on the Text

Many of the abbreviations listed here are borrowed from Robert Denham (see *The Early Poetry*; *Charles Wright In Conversation*; *Charles Wright: A Companion*). For the sake of clarity, I have elected to use abbreviations of two letters or more throughout; those of my abbreviations that differ from Denham's are marked with an asterisk (*). Those marked with a two asterisks (**) are books not cited by Denham, in which case the abbreviations are my own invention.

There is a convention in Charles Wright scholarship of citing excerpts of poems according to page number rather than the more typical line number. Because Wright's distinctive "broken" lines (QN 79)—also called "lowriders" and "dropped lines" (Wright, "Bar Giamaica" 208)—confuse the issue of lineation, I have chosen to follow this convention when citing his poems, deeming it the clearest way of locating the passages in question. Given that some of Wright's rarer works are unpaginated—the most substantial of which is *Outtakes / Sestets* (2010)—poems that have not been collected into any paginated volume will be identified by poem title as well as book title (for example, "Hemlock" OT).

When citing Wright's poems in-text I have followed the trend established by Calvin Bedient of using a tilde (~) to indicate occurrences of the "broken" line ("Tracing Charles Wright" 22), rather than the double virgule (/ /) Denham uses. The double virgule traditionally designates the beginning of a new stanza or verse paragraph (as it does in this thesis) and thus suggests a more profound discontinuity than is implied by a "dropped" line, which Wright maintains is still a single line, albeit one that incorporates "a rather pronounced caesura" (Interview by Spiegelman 108). In longer quotations of Wright's poetry, I have recreated Wright's original lineation.

The majority of Wright's poems have been published multiple times. They have often appeared first in short, limited-edition volumes, which are then incorporated into more substantial volumes, before being assembled in one of Wright's four major collections of poetry (see Table 1, below). Scholars most commonly cite these collections; however, given

that this study incorporates poems excluded from the major collections as well as very early and rare works, I have elected to cite Wright's poems according to their pagination in the stand-alone editions in which the poems appear. This has been the most consistent way of referencing the poems. I have, however, made an exception in the case of the poems of *North American Bear*. These are the only poems of Wright's to have appeared in an unpaginated stand-alone edition and then later in a paginated collection, so I have elected to cite those poems according to their pagination in the collection *Negative Blue*.

The spelling and punctuation in this thesis conform to standard Australian/British practice, but I have preserved the original American spelling and grammar of quotations.

Table 1:

A Guide to Wright's Publications

Short volumes		Stand-alone volumes (predominantly cited in this thesis)		Major Collections
<i>The Voyage</i> (1963) 25 copies	some poems reprinted in:			
<i>Six Poems</i> (1964): 20 copies		<i>The Grave of the Right Hand</i> (1970)	partially collected in:	
<i>The Dream Animal</i> (1968): chapbook	some poems reprinted in:			
<i>Private Madrigals</i> (1969): 200 copies	fully reprinted in:			<i>Country Music</i> (1982)
<i>The Venice Notebook</i> (1971): 500 copies	most poems reprinted in:	<i>Hard Freight</i> (1973)	collected in:	
<i>Backwater</i> (1973): chapbook	fully reprinted in:			
		<i>Bloodlines</i> (1975)	collected in:	
<i>Colophons</i> (1977): 200 copies	fully reprinted in:	<i>China Trace</i> (1977)	collected in:	
<i>Dead Color</i> (1980): 285 copies	fully republished in:	<i>The Southern Cross</i> (1981)	collected in:	
<i>Four Poems of Departure</i> (1983): 500 copies	most poems reprinted in:	<i>The Other Side of the River</i> (1984)	collected in:	
<i>Five Journals</i> (1986): 100 copies	fully reprinted in:	<i>Zone Journals</i> (1988)	collected in:	<i>The World of the Ten Thousand Things</i> (1990)
<i>A Journal of the Year of the Ox</i> (1988): 150 copies	fully reprinted in:			
		<i>Xionia</i> (1990): 250 copies	collected in:	
		<i>Chickamauga</i> (1995)	collected in:	
		<i>Black Zodiac</i> (1997)	collected in:	
		<i>Appalachia</i> (1998)	collected in:	<i>Negative Blue</i> (2000)
		<i>North American Bear</i> (1999): 136 copies	collected in:	
<i>Night Music</i> (2001): chapbook	fully reprinted in:	<i>A Short History of the Shadow</i> (2002)	collected in:	
<i>Snake Eyes</i> (2004): limited edition	some poems taken from: some poems taken from:	<i>Buffalo Yoga</i> (2004)	collected in:	<i>Bye and Bye</i> (2011)
<i>The Wrong End of the Rainbow</i> (2005): chapbook	fully reprinted in:	<i>Scar Tissue</i> (2006)	collected in:	
		<i>Littlefoot</i> (2007)	collected in:	
		<i>Sestets</i> (2009)	collected in:	
		<i>Outtakes/ Sestets</i> (2010)		

Belief in transcendence,
 belief in something beyond belief,

Is what the blossoms solidify

In their fall through the two worlds—

The imaging of the invisible, the slow dream of metaphor,

Sanction our going up and our going down, our days

And the lives we unfold inside them,

 our yes and yes.

—Charles Wright, “Lives of the Artists”

Introduction: “Pity the Poor Pilgrim”

Charles Wright has established himself over his fifty-year career as one of America's foremost contemporary poets. He has been the recipient of numerous major American and international awards for poetry and was recently named the twentieth Poet Laureate of the United States (Urschel). He is also the subject of an increasingly large body of literary scholarship and criticism. His poetry is alert to the landscape and alive with colourful imagery and often-fanciful metaphors, but it is also distinctively melancholic in tone and almost hermetically contemplative. It varies substantially in form, with the columnar prose poems, rhymed forms and free-verse sonnets of his earliest work contrasting strikingly with his later sprawling line. That long line has itself supported a range of approaches, from the self-imposed restrictions informing the poems of *The Southern Cross*¹ to the expansive journal poems in *Zone Journals*, from the book-length *Littlefoot: A Poem* (2007) to the studies in concision that are Wright's most recent sestets. Nonetheless, Wright has honed an easily recognisable style, in accordance with his express desire: he states, “I want people to be able to look at a poem of mine on the page, read it, and say, as though they had seen a painting on the wall, This is a Charles Wright” (“The Art of Poetry” 19). A Charles Wright can be identified by its generous, relaxed-metre lines with their visually striking “lowriders”: a form of stepped line ubiquitous in his poetry since the publication of *The Southern Cross* in 1981 but intermittently in evidence as early as 1970 in *The Grave of the Right Hand*. Recognisable, too, is the seeming disjointedness of his phrases and passages, for which his harshest critics have accused him of not having “written any *poems*, just bundles of lines, loose as kindling” (Logan 34), but which others agree string together according to a subtle logic.

¹ In an interview with Elizabeth McBride, Wright explains that the twenty poems that make up section III of *The Southern Cross* were written according to instructions that he set himself, such as “no verbs”, “write a poem at a single sitting” and “write a seasonal poem” (Interview by McBride 143; cf. Denham, *The Early Poetry* 97).

Wright maintains that he focuses on “the metaphysics of the quotidian”, whereby “physical experience” becomes “a little more than itself” (“Interview by Santos” 97), and his poetry supports this claim. The relatively mundane phenomena that dominate his poems—landscape, memory, death, time and language—point beyond themselves to intuited, intangible ideals: God, origins, the afterlife, transcendence and absolute truth. For example, in the poem “What Do You Write About, Where Do Your Ideas Come From?”, the “I”-figure of the poem answers the titular question with: “Landscape, of course, the idea of God and language / Itself, that pure grace ~ which is invisible and sure and clear” (*AP* 23). “Language, landscape and the idea of God” are themes Wright has repeatedly identified in his own poetry (“Prize-Winning Poetry”; “Language, Landscape” 123; “Virginia Poet”). The poem continues:

Fall equinox two hours old,
Pine cones dangling and doomed over peach tree and privet,
Clouds bulbous and buzzard-traced.
The Big Empty is also a subject of some note,
Dark dark and never again,
The missing word and there you have it,
heart and heart beat,
Never again and never again,
Backdrop of back yard and earth and sky
Jury-rigged carefully into place,
Wind from the west and then some,
Everything up and running hard,
everything under way,
Never again never again. (*AP* 23)

Here, as throughout Wright’s poetry, the manifest (if artfully composed) back yard stands in relief to the deific, blue “Big Empty” in which God, absence and sky are conflated. This

landscape is both setting for and subject to unseeable processes, forces and truths, which include the influence of past events (the “Never again and never again”), the passing of time (“everything under way”) and the spectre of the imminent “dark” (*AP* 23). The “grace” of certainty and accuracy that language seems to possess is falsified by the acknowledgement of the “missing word” (*AP* 23), which could mark the absence of the *Logos* or the inadequacy of language for addressing such profound realities.

In “What Do You Write About...”, the phrase “that pure grace” most obviously describes the transparency of “language itself”, but it is also possible to read “that pure grace ~ which is invisible and sure and clear” as summing up everything that precedes it: the idea of God, language and landscape together, delineating a single invisible focus. In that case, the seeming surety and clarity of all these realities, together with their intimations of grace, are undercut by markers of absence, such as the “dark dark”, “the missing word” and “never again” (*AP* 23). This suggests that whatever the sure, clear, invisible grace perceived in language, landscape and the idea of God might be, it is contested by what is wanting, merciless, unsure and unclear.

In this thesis, I demonstrate that together Wright’s familiar themes constitute a single concern with which his “I”-figure grapples throughout his whole oeuvre. “What Do You Write About...” exemplifies the cumulative effect of Wright’s common themes in creating a numinous sense of something meaningful beyond the visible world. I call this nebulous concept, which often manifests as a negation, “the invisible”, as Wright sometimes does.² This “invisible” is not a single or static thing; rather, it names the overarching object of the poems’ speaker’s metaphysical longings: a multifaceted and cumulative, ever-present sense of whatever is ultimate, ungraspable and often absent that imbues Wright’s poetry. As such, it names the metaphysical ideas in his poetry in their totality.

² The term “the invisible” appears as a noun in the poems “Looking Across Laguna Canyon at Dusk, West-by-Northwest” (*CH* 88), “Yard Work” (*CH* 92), “Lives of the Artists” (*BZ* 48-52), *Littlefoot*, part 23 (*LF* 51-53), “Charlottesville Nocturne” (*SHS* 17), “A Short History of the Shadow” (*SHS* 39) and the uncollected poem “Phantom Load”. I consider Wright’s various other terms for ultimate reality in detail in Chapter One of this thesis.

In her article “Charles Wright’s *Via Negativa*: Language, Landscape, and the Idea of God”, Bonnie Costello also uses the term “the invisible” to name the “intuitions of the other side” and of “the absolute” in Wright’s poetry (325), and she, too, detects that an “ultimate unity of ‘something infinite behind everything’ is Wright’s only subject” (“Charles Wright’s *Via Negativa*” 326). However, she states that Wright assigns no supernatural cause to his sense of the invisible and that the invisible in his poetry “is not a vague presence or ghostly absence, but a quality formed by our desire for absolutes, which in turn gives contour to the finite world we see and recall” (“Charles Wright’s *Via Negativa*” 325). She conceives the invisible as “a matter of sides and edges”, a principle of form-giving and definition that reifies what is not there in order to account for what is (“Charles Wright’s *Via Negativa*” 328). I disagree with her on these points. First, I suggest that Wright’s invisible is synonymous with a sense of a supernatural cause, and that the “idea of God” entertained in his poetry, however sceptically, is a crucial aspect of what Costello calls his “sounding of the absolute” (“Charles Wright’s *Via Negativa*” 325). I agree with Costello that the invisible is conjured by a desire for absolute coherence and wholeness, but I argue that the ongoing concern with the world’s “other side” in Wright’s poetry evokes both “a vague presence” and a “ghostly absence”, as I shall show through my analysis of Wright’s language for the invisible.

The consistency of style, tone and protagonist throughout Wright’s oeuvre means that, despite its shifting terms, his poetry lends itself to being read as cumulative—the singular obsession of a single mind with invisible realities, addressed by way of the visible world. As a result, each poem seems to contribute to one overarching body of experience, one varied apprehension of one great “invisible”. While this invisible may be “nothing more than an empty but almost sensual projection of our imaginations’ straining for meaning”, as Kevin Clark suggests (164), Wright’s poetry equally sustains the possibility that the invisible is something that really is there, a distinct if undetectable entity.

The “I”-figure in Wright’s poetry is characterised consistently, with similar habits of mind and consistent preoccupations, attitudes, emotions and memories from poem to poem.

As scholars have noted, this “I”-figure constitutes the “unified voice” of an “hermetic subjectivity” (Monacell 4); it is a “deliberately designed persona [with] scrupulously managed obsessions” (Young 186)—*i.e.* those that make up the invisible, including his past, his end and the Absolute—and it persists throughout Wright’s oeuvre. Moreover, the recollections of this “I”-figure together seem to constitute a relatively coherent personal history with recognisable defining events: a childhood in the American South, a posting in Italy with the U.S. army, the deaths of his parents, and a career as a poet living in California and then Virginia (events consistent with Wright’s autobiography). All of this creates the impression of a consistent “I”-figure, remembering a single past. On this basis, I treat the “I”-figure of Wright’s poems as one consistent subjective entity and protagonist.

Many of Wright’s poems incorporate autobiographical details such as those just listed, and critics read his poetry as largely autobiographical. Wright himself has encouraged this: as a regular interviewee and commentator on his own poetry, he has propagated a body of autobiographical stories that are well-known to his critics and tend to inform their interpretations of his work. I, too, have discerned that those of Wright’s poems that centre on remembrances of the past, which I call “memory poems”, often make reference to details and events from his autobiography. I have drawn on autobiographical sources outside the poetry in order to extrapolate the poems’ meaning more fully and in accordance with the existing scholarship. Wright has also frequently discussed in interviews the intended meaning of certain poems, but I have chosen not to draw heavily on this material in my reading of his work in order to bring to the forefront as much as possible the texts of the poems themselves, the meanings of which are not determined by authorial authority.³

Autobiography, as Paul de Man argues, is “a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all text” when the author and the “I”-figure or speaker

³ There are, however, certain pronouncements that Wright has made regarding the meaning of his poetry, such as his stating that he writes about “language, landscape and the idea of God” and that his poems contain an “undernarrative”, that have so informed scholars’ interpretations of his work that any study aspiring to be comprehensive must address those ideas.

mutually determine each other in the text (921).⁴ Any text “by” an author and deemed coherent as a result of that authorship is read as autobiographical, de Man claims, although the mutual determination of author and “I” is absolutely fundamental to those texts “in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding” (921-21). Wright’s poems are such texts. The styles of poem favoured by Wright, such as autobiographical memory poems, journal poems and self-portraits, implicitly position the “I”-figure in the poem as the writer of the poem. Furthermore, the “I”-figure is often presented in the posture of writing poetry, or of having written what the reader is reading. The “I”-figure is even apparently identified as Charles Wright in poems such as “Charles Wright and the 940 Locust Avenue Heraclitean Rhythm Band” (BY 54-55) and a “Self-Portrait” of “Charles” in *The Southern Cross* (15). The reader is thus directed to an interpretation of the fictional “I”-figure in the poetry as a representation of the poet. Moreover, the existence of a significant amount of readily available autobiographical information means that the reader is also inclined to interpret the poetic “I” as consistent with the “I” of Wright’s autobiography. Thus, to read Wright’s work as autobiographical means not only to read the “I”-figure as determined by and determining the author, but to read both “I”-figure and author as determined by and determining the autobiographical “I”. I will refer to the “I”-figure in Wright’s poetry as the “poet-figure” in the analyses that follow, in acknowledgement that this “I” is read as at once representative of the author in de Man’s sense, commensurate with the (constructed) autobiographical “I”, and a completely fictional construct. Nonetheless, my focus in this thesis is predominantly on Wright’s poetry and the poetic “I”, who is understood with reference to the autobiographical material outside the poetry, and not on any impression of “the real Charles Wright” behind either text, for the following reason.

The autobiography that underwrites Wright’s body of work should be understood as a constructed myth of self. For example, Wright’s story about his being first inspired to write

⁴ De Man’s own personal history and deceptions complicate his statements about the undecidability of autobiography and make him a somewhat unreliable authority. However, his argument that the “I” is always read as autobiographical, at least to some extent, is useful and illuminates the way I have read Wright’s texts.

poetry after reading an Ezra Pound poem at Lake Garda in Italy in 1959 has become something of an orthodoxy in Charles Wright scholarship and is referred to in the poem “A Journal of Southern Rivers” (XA 30) but is not entirely borne out by his letters to his family from that time. In particular, the life-changing effect of the visit—which Wright has depicted as a “thunderclap” realisation of his vocation as a lyric poet (“The Art of Poetry” 7)—is not reflected in his passing epistolary accounts of his visits to the lake (which make no mention, for example, of reading Pound), nor by evidence in his letters that he was reading and writing poetry before this day (see, for example, letters to Mary Winter Wright, 26 Jan. 1959 and 9 Mar. 1959) . This is not to say that the event did not take place as Wright describes it, but it may indicate some of the ways in which autobiography is often determined after the event and by the context in which it is recorded; it therefore constitutes a story or text comparable to the text of the poems rather than a textual authority or unquestionable ground of meaning. It cannot be known which text—the poetry or the autobiography—produces the other, as de Man informs us; rather both must be understood not as “referents” but as fictions that each exert “a degree of referential productivity” (de Man 920-21). This same uncertainty makes it impossible to reconstruct “real” events with any certainty from the poems or autobiography; hence, there will be no attempt in this thesis to recover the author’s life or personality from his poems.

This thesis defines the preoccupation with what is mysterious, other and absolute in Wright’s poetry, presenting an interpretation of his whole body of work as containing an implicit narrative that follows one man’s unvarying pattern of attentiveness to the invisible. My analysis, drawn from Wright’s entire body of work to date, identifies his persistent images and metaphors for the invisible. The underlying consistency of his various depictions of this apparently aggregate reality supports my argument that each poem contributes to one ongoing search. A “narrative” of repeatedly failing spiritual ambition is, I argue, fundamental to Wright’s portrayal of the invisible and contributes to his poetry’s modernist outlook. My argument develops out of much of the existing scholarship about Wright’s

work, and so it is necessary at this point to provide a brief overview of the dominant interpretations of his poetry.

Wright's oft-told story of being inspired to become a poet after reading Pound's poem "Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula" has led scholars to make much of his debt to Pound. Indeed, there is a tendency to attribute all of Wright's most characteristic tendencies to Pound's influence: his interest in Chinese poetry and ways of linking fragmentary images associatively rather than narratively (Lang 161), his starting poems with phrases rather than clauses (Spiegelman, "The Nineties" 229), his fixation on silences and poetic failures (Upton, *The Muse* 35), his intermittent "marginalization of the speaking subject" (Franzek 144), and even his signature broken line (Giannelli xviii). As Joe Moffett observes, "[i]t has become common for critics to define or dismiss Wright in relation to Pound" ("A Coin" 59). It is also true, as Sherod Santos writes, that the label "Poundian" "seems to have stuck long past the point Wright outgrew it" (157). It would be fair to say that, while Pound's early effect on the young poet is indubitable, Wright has long since reworked the Poundian traces in his poetry to the point of having made them his own.

Wright's grounding in the American poetic canon is well recognised, particularly in relation to Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, whose styles he has expressed a desire to merge in his poems ("Language, Landscape" 137). As a writer of long lines, Wright cannot avoid comparisons with Whitman, while scholars have noted that he shares Dickinson's spiritual disquietudes (Gardner 149; Hirsch 778). Yet from these influences Wright has crafted a voice that is as "distinct as a fingerprint" (Twichell 12)—indeed, his is one of the most recognisable voices in contemporary American poetry.

Critics have been almost unanimously alert to the spiritual sensitivity evident in Wright's poetry, something that has remained remarkably consistent throughout his experimentations with form and style. This attitude of enquiry into the spiritual and transcendental has been attributed variously to latent Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, Christian influences, Buddhism and New Age spirituality, but in fact it adopts shifting terms

and chafes against any single denominational affiliation. While Wright's poetry invariably confronts "language, landscape, and the idea of God", as he claims ("Prize-Winning Poetry"), the "idea of God" in Wright's poetry cannot be reduced to the Christian deity it implies, although it allegedly has its roots in his Episcopalian upbringing (see Wright, "Language, Landscape" 124). As Debra Allbery recognises, "'the idea of God' is Wright's shorthand for the spiritual questing that suffuses his work" ("Lives of the Artists"). The word "God" in his poetry also parodies religious ideas. It designates a sense of ultimate realities that remains half-begrudgingly reliant on religious terms (Upton, *The Muse* 25) as well as an awareness of the vacancy of such ideals insofar as God is reduced to an "idea". The "spirituality" in Wright's poems might best be described, using Phyllis Franzek's non-denominational definition, as a "persistent longing for connection with an always-absent, austere Other" (138). It reflects a common desire for wholeness: a beginning and an ending, a creator for the natural order, an eternity to counter transience and a fixed truth behind language. It is a transcendental urge, one not to be fulfilled by "proof of any particular doctrine, but rather", as Adam Kirsch states, by a "pre-theological affirmation that there is wholeness, beauty and meaning in the world and in our lives" (98).

Wright's "I"-figure expresses a personal and unorthodox sense of the invisible in tension with the doctrines of the existing institutional religions that influence him, including those of his past. This is in keeping with what is alternatively termed secularity or "post-secularity": the plurality of spiritual traditions present in contemporary Western society that sees the coexistence of orthodox belief, scepticism and various "mid-points". Wright's "I"-figure engages with belief from a standpoint of longing and incredulity that he calls "postbelief" (*SHS* 35). He internalises the erosion of premodern religious certainties and the newer possibility of choosing whether and what to believe, which Charles Taylor identifies as the defining characteristics of secularity (3, 12). He also embodies the broadening of the definition of religious belief apparent in so-called secular societies (Dawson 83-94), displaying an openness to a variety of non-Western, unorthodox, non-institutional and/or

personalised spiritualities including Zen Buddhism and Christian mysticism. This is representative of the trend in the U.S.A. that sees an increasing number of people who are “concerned with spiritual issues . . . choos[ing] to pursue them outside the context of a formal religious organization” (Fuller 4). Spirituality for these “unchurched” believers “has to do with private reflection and private experience”, explains Robert C. Fuller, who also observes a common tendency among such believers to draw on spiritual ideas from outside the major religions and to “view their lives as spiritual journeys” (4), just as Wright’s “I”-figure does.

Wright’s poetry can thus be understood as produced by and responding to Western “post-secularity”, whereby conventional markers of religiosity are in decline and yet the ongoing relevance and practice of religion and spirituality in secular society remain patent, albeit in new ways (Dawson 92). However, unlike the spiritual temperament of the unchurched “seekers” Fuller describes, the outlook expressed in Wright’s poetry frequently seems pessimistic and lacking in conviction. His poetry reads less as a reflection on a collective state of contemporary belief than as a personal response to the unique pressures that secular society raises for the spiritually minded *non*-believer. In particular, his poetry grapples with the loss of certainty that life in a secular society entails.

This absence of certainty manifests as a palpable sense of loss in Wright’s poetry, suggestive of what Jürgen Habermas calls “An Awareness of What is Missing”. According to Habermas, the eradication of religion from public life creates a need for new “redemptive formulations” (“An Awareness”). The U.S.A. is regularly identified as the most religious developed country in the world, yet recent studies indicate that Americans feel religion is losing its influence on public life (Pew Research). While this view might be more closely linked to a growth in religious conservatism—and the sense that religion should be more influential than it is—than any actual decline in religiosity, it indicates nonetheless the ways in which post-secularity might produce an impression of lost shared *certainties* quite distinct from any general decline in *belief*. The depiction of God as a haunting presence or ghost in

Wright's poetry evokes such a sense of the pastness of old certainties and the lingering absence of new ones. Ghostly imagery also alludes to the so-called "death of God". Most famously attributed to Nietzsche and often associated with post-World-War-II disillusionment (Merriman 86, 90), the death of God is metonymic and bespeaks the end of "'absolute Truth,' 'absolute Goodness,' 'absolute reality,' 'absolute reason,' [and] the origin and measure of all things" (Ward xxviii). While aspects of the idea of "the death of God" could be said to have been superseded by post-secular theories, the idea apparently persists in Wright's poetry and is part of what makes his poetry more modernist than postmodern. Wright's poetry seems to imply that deicide has taken place. It manifests a sense of God's absence while also depicting a world haunted by a residual presence.

In terms of how he responds to this absent presence, Wright's "I"-figure matches the description given by Charles Taylor of the "cross-pressured", "spiritualist" individual on whom belief and unbelief exert an equal pull (548). Such individuals, according to Taylor, have often rejected established religion, while remaining attracted to the narratives of meaningfulness that religions provide and sustaining their own "intimations of the transcendent" (595). He suggests that they

want to opt for the [scientifically] ordered, impersonal universe [but] feel the imminent loss of a world of beauty, meaning, warmth, as well as of the perspective of a self-transformation beyond the everyday. The attraction of these cherished goods is closely linked to the past, often to the childhood of the chooser. . . . Even after the die is cast, the force of these rejected aspirations recurs in the form of regret and nostalgia[.] (592)

This is an apt description of the driving conflict of Wright's poetry, which inhabits what Charles Taylor calls the "open space . . . where the winds blow, where one can feel the pull in both directions" (592). For one in this position, complacent atheism is no more an option than old-fashioned belief, and so spirituality is an ongoing process of negotiating between need and doubt. Wright's "I"-figure is stranded "on the border that both joins and separates

belief and unbelief”, the kind of seeker of meaning of whom Mark C. Taylor writes, “[t]hey look yet do not find, search but do not discover. This failure, however, need not necessarily end the quest” (5).

Andrew Johnson, after Kevin Hart, maintains that “the spiritual enquiry inherent in [Wright’s] work” (8) is driven by the question that forms the first line of Pound’s “Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula”: “What hast thou, O my soul, with Paradise?” (K. Hart 187; Johnson 13-14). This interpretation is supported by the poem “A Journal of Southern Rivers”:

What lasts is what you start with.

What hast thou, O my soul, with Paradise, for instance,

Is where I began, in March 1959—

my question has never changed (XA 30)

According to Johnson, this is a rhetorical question for Pound, one that assumes the sufficiency of the natural world for the soul’s satisfaction, while in Wright’s work it is a serious poetic question (36). Although it overstates Pound’s influence, this interpretation does encapsulate the ambivalence of Wright’s poetry, which incorporates both the dismissiveness of religious belief inherent in Pound’s poem and an admission of longing. Johnson also aptly characterises the poetry’s abiding tension between landscape and the spiritual, suggesting that the poetic “I” struggles to determine “whether a love for the sensual world (which[,] as Wright rarely forgets to remind us[,] is temporary, fleeting, mortal) is an adequate substitute for an authentic experience of the divine, transcendent and otherworldly” (38). Wright’s exploration of this problem throughout his oeuvre is attended by an elegiac tone born of the impossibility of achieving self-transcending wholeness—or paradise—via either route (Johnson 141, 246-47).

Yet landscape and the divine are not mutually exclusive in Wright’s poetry; rather, it is in the landscape that his “I”-figure detects traces of the invisible. The “I”-figure at times seems to project his “solipsistic mentalscape onto externality” (Monacell 57); at other times the natural world is the source of his metaphysical musings. Either way, he sees his spiritual

concerns and states reflected back at him from the landscape. The visible world constitutes the agnostic's consolation prize but nonetheless evokes, as Thomas Gardner notes, "the fleeting, borne-away traces of another world", which represent the influence of the unseen (152). The unseen includes such intangible things as the past, the dead and the (apparently dead) Christian God of Wright's past; it also includes time, things read, things remembered or known to have been forgotten, as well as suspected metaphysical agents such as the design, meaning and essence of things. All of these influences shape the speaker's life and the visible world and together represent the ultimate reality that is his object and focus.⁵

My preferred term for the sense of the Absolute at the heart of Wright's poetry is "the invisible", in place of the more commonly used phrase "the idea of God", although both terms designate a sense of the transcendent. As explained earlier, Wright's poetry presents an agnostic view that renders any "idea of God" always partly ironic, associated with an absence or anachronistic "idea". The term "the invisible" is one that Wright has used interchangeably with "the divine" in his prose writings,⁶ but, unlike "the idea of God", it does not imply religious orthodoxy. With its insistence on imperceptibility, "the invisible" better encapsulates the ineffable absent presence that permeates Wright's whole oeuvre.

There is a critical consensus that Wright's six hundred-plus individual poems, many of them very substantial, constitute a coherent body of work.⁷ This is due to the consistency

⁵ Critics' common perception that Wright's poetry is essentially spiritual is shared even by the poet himself: in response to J. D. McClatchy's observations that his poetry "seem[s] suffused with the stuff of religion" and the "contemplation of the divine", Wright agrees, "I *do* believe in the efficacy of things unseen. . . . The textures of the world *are* an outline of the infinite" [emphases in original] ("The Art of Poetry" 36-37).

⁶ For example, he writes in *Half-life*: "the true purpose and result of poetry is contemplation of the divine and its attendant mysteries" (HL 5); "Poetry is always transcribing from the invisible" (HL 23); "The longer you write, the diviner the inspiration gets" (HL 26); and (quoting Wallace Stevens), "The poet is the priest of the invisible" (HL 23).

⁷ See, for example, Michael Collier: "Wright's work . . . more than that of any other American poet writing today must be taken as a whole" (127); Dave Smith: "I am not the first person to recognize that Mr. Wright, like Whitman, has spent his entire career writing one poem" ("Afield" 141); Edward Hirsch: Wright's poems "should be understood as part of a profound spiritual dialectic and project [and] a singular body of work" (805); Willard Spiegelman: "the poems have become, over the last twenty years, one long poem" ("The Nineties" 226).

of persona and preoccupation in his poetry. It is also due in part to the way he has organised the publication of his work so as to present a deliberate progression, modelled on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. After the publication of *The World of the Ten Thousand Things* in 1990, Wright began to describe the bulk of his work as forming an overarching "project" that had its beginning in the collection *Country Music* (1982) and would culminate with *Negative Blue* in 2000 (see Interview by Suarez 76; "A Reading"; "Prize-Winning Poetry"). Robert Denham demonstrates that *Country Music* and *The World of the Ten Thousand Things* both have a shifting temporal focus, with each major volume of those collections dealing with the past, present and future respectively (*Charles Wright: A Companion* 11-12). The third trilogy, *Negative Blue*, is intended as an ersatz *Divine Comedy* (Wright, "Through Purgatory" 23): the *Inferno* of *Chickamauga* is followed by the *Purgatorio* of *Black Zodiac*, with the collection ending at a "small-time *Paradiso*" in *Appalachia* (Denham, *Charles Wright: A Companion* 12). Dubbed a "trilogy of trilogies" (Longenbach 94) or "triple trilogies" (Wright, "Dantino Mio" 261), the project was conceived as Wright's *Tennessee Waltz* (Wright, Interview by Suarez 76), although the title broadly adopted by critics has been *The Appalachian Book of the Dead* (Longenbach 97; *SHS* blurb; Giannelli xii).

The three "trilogies" in fact encompass eleven complete works between them, including two short codas, as well as a fragment of Wright's early book *The Grave of the Right Hand* (1970). Moreover, Wright's newest volume of collected poems, *Bye-and-Bye* (2011), contains the *five* volumes published since *Negative Blue* and, although not strictly belonging to *The Appalachian Book of the Dead* sequence, it is understood by certain scholars to constitute a "fourth trilogy" (Denham, *Charles Wright: A Companion* 12; Byrne). That the vast majority of Wright's work, including almost every major book in his oeuvre, has now been subsumed into this cumulative structure of "trilogies" indicates the poems' interconnectedness and locates their meaning in the context of a whole, bringing that whole to bear on the interpretation of the particular. This structure, together with the exceptional consistency of Wright's themes, encourages us to read much of his work as a single undertaking. I shall

demonstrate that in fact even those of Wright's works that fall outside the sequence of trilogies display this thematic consistency, as all are concerned, in various ways, with the invisible.

One idea that appears frequently in relation to Wright's project is that it represents "a continuous artistic journey" (Byrne) or, more specifically, a pilgrimage. "Pilgrim" is a recurring figure in Wright's poetry and synonymous with his "I"-figure, but critics appear to have been chiefly influenced by Wright's own statements about his poetry in this regard.⁸ For example, Wright has insisted that his work aspires towards the kind of "spiritual quest" modelled by Dante, stating that "Most of [his] work has centered around pilgrimages of one sort or another" (Interview by Francini 124, 123), and that his poems contain "a kind of searching[, a] kind of movement. . . in an ascending path" (Interview by Suarez 68). The connection has also been drawn between his poetry and spiritual autobiography (Johnson 96; Mulvania), a genre in which one's life *en route* to redemption is compared to various Biblical journeys—for example, from "a period of wandering in the wilderness, [to] an episode of being a prodigal son [and] entrance into a promised land" (Barbour).

Critics have gladly seized on this terminology, perhaps to conjure movement and sequence in Wright's outwardly static, meditative body of work, in which many poems begin and end on the porch in the same suburban back yard. Pilgrimage also implies an attitude of "searching" that reconciles the poems' insatiable religious yearning with their many statements of non-belief. As David St. John suggests, "Wright[']s 'I' often clearly does not believe, yet he feels called upon to continue the *search* that his spiritual yearnings have prompted" [emphasis added] (St. John xvi). Thus, Wright's poetry has been compared to the "spiritual journey" of a "Bunyanesque Pilgrim" (Guilford 8), "an agnostic quest" or "metaphysical search for spiritual meaning" (Hirsch 777), a "pilgrimage . . . variation on the quest romance" (Denham, *Charles Wright: A Companion* 10) and "a journey toward God" (H. Hart, "Charles Wright's *Via Mystica*" 326).

⁸ See, for example, Robert Denham's reconstruction of the narrative of pilgrimage in Wright's poetry from Wright's own statements (*Charles Wright: A Companion* 10-11).

Curiously, perhaps, considering this questing language would seem to indicate an underlying storyline, critics are ambivalent as to whether or not Wright's poetry can be understood as narrative. It seems that many scholars have taken at face value Wright's repeated assertions that his work is not narrative: he states, for example, that his "poems tend to be more accretional and juxtapositional, as opposed to . . . telling stories" ("Prize-Winning Poetry"); that his "basic structure pattern continues to be non-linear, imagistic, not narrative/rhetorical" (Wright, Lopez and Kingston 39); and that "[t]he absence of narrative in [his] work . . . is pervasive" (Interview by Gardner 96). Such comments, however, are always qualified by Wright's insistence that his poetry contains an alternative to narrative proper, a "story line [that] runs underneath the surface of the poem" ("Prize-Winning Poetry"). Accordingly, he describes "the progression of the story lines in [his] poems" as "central but intermittently in evidence. A submerged narrative, as it were" ("The Art of Poetry" 22). Most evocatively, he states:

Undernarrative, *sottonarrativa*, is about as close as I can get. The smaller current in a larger river. The story line that runs just under the surface. It's broken, interrupted, circuitous, even invisible at times, but always there. Which is to say, it's not a "logic of image," or a balancing of blocks or a "logic of the irrational" or whatever. It's a continuous story line by someone who can't tell a story. Subnarrative. Its logic is narrative but its effects are imagistic. ("The Art of Poetry" 34)

What seems to have divided critics is disagreement as to whether this so-called undernarrative *is* essentially a narrative, albeit one that is hard to detect, or whether it represents a primarily non-narrative form of connection. The spiritual quest or pilgrimage with which this undernarrative is typically associated, even by Wright himself (Interview by Cooperman 168), is vague enough to support both interpretations. For those critics who see Wright's poetry as decidedly non-narrative, it is the persistence of the pilgrim persona and his perceived *attitude* of attentiveness and seeking in each of the individual poems that unites the

whole body of work and constitutes the undernarrative of pilgrimage, as opposed to a storyline *per se*. This is the dominant interpretation of Wright's work. Helen Vendler, for example, claims that Wright's poems are not narrative but cumulative ("The Transcendent 'I'" 1) and that their spiritual aims—of "either obliteration or transcendence, blankness or mysticism"—are approached through contemplation, as opposed to any perceptible movement ("Charles Wright" 14). Similarly, for David Baker "[a]lmost nothing ever happens in a Charles Wright poem", but meditation provides "an alternative to action and to linear, dramatic finality" (76). Others of this view include Peter Stitt, who states that, "[r]ather than tell stories[,] the author or his speaker gradually circles in on the truth" (242), and David Kalstone, who calls Wright's poetry an "autobiography . . . of radiant fragments" with "no pretence of narrative sequence or explanation" (94). David Walker agrees that Wright's "poems are released from a 'story line,' from the pressure of narrative or any overt dramatic scenario", responding instead to "the apparently random sequence of memory and event" (68). For critics of this opinion, as Calvin Bedient puts it, "the plight of looking-at-nature-and-reminiscing-while-waiting-to-vanish-into-oneself" is all Wright can manage of a plot and "a congeries of preoccupations, appearing in staggered order", is his only storyline ("Slide-Wheeling" 45).

Some scholars, however, insist that Wright's imagistic poems conceal an underlying narrative. Edward Hirsch, for example, detects "narrative overtones rather than undertones" (789) in Wright's later poetry, but does not elaborate further. Similarly, Garrett Hongo has called Wright's work a "post-Romantic epic, albeit a sceptical one, of salvation and redemption" (71), without offering any insight into how Wright's disconnected lyrics square with narrative epic. For most, it seems that the "underlying 'harmonies and structures' that hold these poems together" remain "easier to feel than to discuss", as they are for Chuck Guilford, "seeming sometimes to reside in the 'something infinite behind everything' rather than the domain of rational discourse" (15).

Only a few Wright scholars have given consideration to how his cumulative, meditative poetry might be said to constitute a distinct narrative. J. D. McClatchy, although noting the lack of a “Homeric narrative line” (“Ars Longa” 106) in Wright’s trilogy of trilogies, still perceives an epic story:

A larger pattern is at work. . . . If there were a myth all these poems enacted it would be that of Eurydice, the tale of death and redemption and the second loss, the moment of the fatal backward glance at the beloved: how we save what’s lost in order then to lose what’s been saved. Like Proust, Wright would say that the only true paradise is a lost paradise. (“Ars Longa” 106)

Antonella Francini agrees that Wright’s undernarrative is “the myth of Orpheus, the poet who has failed, in spite of the magic of his music and poetry, to bring a shadow back to life” (91). The moments of loss and of mourning for what is lost are re-enacted repeatedly in Wright’s poems, she suggests, and this is “the meaning of Wright’s entire work, which should be regarded as a long poem about the doomed task of making the invisible visible” (91). For Brad Crenshaw, Wright is Sisyphus, rolling a stone up a hill over and over, or Tantalus, who cannot sate his hunger or thirst because satisfaction is always just out of his reach (3151).

It is perhaps the anticlimax of endless deferral and the repetitiveness of “death and redemption and the second loss” (McClatchy, “Ars Longa” 106) that disguise narrative in Wright’s work, if only because they eschew the narrative conventions of a beginning, middle and final end. As Benjamin Leubner has pointed out, Wright’s “I”-figure “foregoes enlightenment in favour of the pursuit of it” (148) and, as a result, never seems to make the final leap into transcendence. We can see how scholars such as Bedient might mistake his returning endlessly to the moment of attainment or transcendence, only to recoil again, for stasis (“Poetry and Silence”). Certainly, this repetition produces in Wright’s poetry a cumulative, rather than a linear, quality.

Henry Hart has provided an alternative analogy for Wright's undernarrative that foregrounds the "spiritual" as opposed to the Orphic "journeying" aspect of his poetry's spiritual journey. The "'one story and one story only' playing itself out in Wright's poetry", Hart contends, "harks back to the Biblical myth of Eden, Adam's fall, and Christ's redemption" ("Charles Wright's *Via Mystica*" 326). Hart, too, notes that Wright's telling of this story is repetitive, characterised "by a rhythm of emotional rises and falls" ("Charles Wright's *Via Mystica*" 326) that seems to imply that any "redemption" potentially invites another "fall". He maintains that, by rejecting the classical Aristotelian narrative with a beginning, middle and end and continuing to write after the completion of his (already inflated) trilogy of Dantesque trilogies, Wright follows in the footsteps of the modernists, who reimagined the traditional epic form through sequences of "disjunctive poetics" that followed "ongoing cycles of mind, body, culture, and nature" ("Charles Wright's *Via Mystica*" 325). His pilgrim's "journey toward God" does not end, because God does not constitute, for him, an ascertainable reality but rather (as Costello also recognises) the projection of a deeply doubtful wish for wholeness (H. Hart, "Charles Wright's *Via Mystica*" 326).

I contend that Wright's poetry should be understood as containing a distinct narrative. Building on Henry Hart's reading of Wright's oeuvre as a cyclical modernist "sequence epic" inspired by mystic writers ("Charles Wright's *Via Mystica*"), I argue that this narrative of pilgrimage encompasses Wright's whole body of work. This pilgrimage is self-consciously Dantesque: it emulates the upward struggle of the penitent towards perfection in its aspiration toward transcendence, God, Platonic knowledge or some other "higher" ideal. Yet, as McClatchy, Francini, Henry Hart, and other critics have noted, the dominant movement of Wright's poetry is repetitive or circular. Its journey narrative deviates from the form of a classical plot because it forgoes arrival, but it still generates sustained narrative tension by exploiting the expectations we have of narratives to deliver plot-like coherence.

Scholars agree that it is difficult to separate narrative and plot completely: readers have a tendency to perceive a plot even in the most basic narratives, and definitions of narrative and plot frequently overlap (Rimmon-Kenan 17-18; Herman and Vervaeck 12; Dannenberg 437-38). "Plot" tends to refer to an interconnected Aristotelian structure and to emphasise the roles of causality and *telos* (which Shlimoth Rimmon-Kenan characterises as a kind of "forward causality" [18]) in creating a sense of trajectory and ultimate completeness in narrative (Meuter 3.1). "Since narrative [plot] strives towards wholeness or totality", as Mark C. Taylor notes, "it does not tend to be open-ended or infinitely extendible" (64). This idea of plot is what Wright and his critics seem to be trying to reconcile with his poetry when they speak of the atypical "logic of narrative" or "story line" in his poems ("The Art of Poetry" 34). That a sequence of events takes place in each of his poems is clear; that this sequence constitutes a narrative, and that this narrative evokes but resists, even destabilises, expectations of plot and *telos*, is something that this thesis will explore.

Historiographer Hayden White has drawn attention to the ways in which the "endowment of a chronicle of events with a plot structure", or "the operation of emplotment" (*Figural Realism* 8), implies that "real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure" that a story displays ("The Value of Narrativity" 23). In other words, plot depicts a world in which events are causal, coherent and subject to design (whether intelligent design or a consistent impersonal order). In fact, the human propensity to read connection and meaningfulness into sequential events and to formalise intimations of design through narratives both grand and personal is the subject of Wright's own equivocal narrative, which is in equal parts an indulgence and a rejection of this propensity. In his poetry, "Narrative's narrative is seldom as slick as it purports to be" (BY 41); his fragmentary poetics assembles a distinctive narrative scheme of repeated spiritual searching that intimates "that the old religious narratives are in fragments; their wish-fulfilment plots of happy beginnings and apocalyptic ends have been shattered" (H. Hart, "Charles Wright: Language").

This dissertation presents a reading of Wright's whole oeuvre as embodying a narrative of pilgrimage towards the unattainable invisible. I demonstrate the centrality of the invisible to Wright's body of work through an analysis of his distinct, recurrent metaphorical language for intangible realities. I demonstrate that his "I"-figure's dealings with this invisible constitutes a repetitive and consistent pattern of drawing near and falling away that is fundamental to the meaning of his work. I elucidate this narrative in relation to the stages of a classical plot—beginning, middle and end—showing that the movement in Wright's poetry exists in tension with these stages, bespeaking a longing for and an inability to fulfil their promise of progress and wholeness.

Wright's undertaking, as Henry Hart recognises, has a close affinity with modernist poetics ("Charles Wright's *Via Mystica*" 325). His poetry is anachronistic insofar as it persists with a "tenacious [modernist] metaphysical quest for truth" in a postmodern milieu whose "thinkers and writers have abandoned the quest and its utopias" (Rosenthal and Gall 149). Beneath its incredulity toward meta-narratives and associated consciousness of the limitations of language, his poetry retains the assumption that ultimate truth is a valid, if unattainable, object. It incorporates both "the quest for full knowledge and the recognition of its impossibility" that, according to Pericles Lewis, are "crucial to the modernists", reflecting the particularly modernist impression that "life must have an ultimate meaning, but one that can never be made fully explicit" (120). In particular, Wright's poetry recalls the religious ambivalence characteristic of modernism, a predicament described by Charles I. Glicksberg as "the choice between . . . the sense of being spiritually lost, and the promise of a Christian salvation in which [the modernist poet] cannot get himself to believe", from which results various "defeated quest[s] for a God in whom [the poet] does not believe" (70, 9). Glicksberg's description of modernist poetry as grappling with religion even as it rejects belief in God applies to Wright's poetry, of which we can equally say, "God is dead but the 'religious' impulse persists [in] the quest for the Transcendent that is beyond all reason and beyond all proof" (Glicksberg 15).

As the modernists turned from overt narrative organisation in poetry in favour of long lyric sequences, narrative became “invisible”, suggests Brian McHale, “present nowhere in the text, [but] nevertheless ensur[ing] the text’s ideological (if not formal) coherence” (162). Like its modernist precedents, such as Pound’s *The Cantos* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Wright’s poetry submerges narrative through fragmentation and juxtaposition (Walpert), yet it differs from the modernist epic in that it portrays a relatively consistent subjectivity in the form of the poems’ “I”, who is central to the poetry’s implicit narrative. In this, Wright’s undernarrative more closely resembles aspects of the modernist novel.

Writing about his modernist contemporaries in 1920, Georg Lukács describes the novel as reflecting the ambiguity of a world in which “the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (56). The modern novel is, in other words, “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). Structures of meaning may have been eroded, but the self, although problematised, is still of central concern. The modernist novel embraces the modernist tension between irreconcilable opposites (including belief and unbelief) through a narrative arc Lukács defines as an “adventure of interiority”—a search for the self and one’s own essence (89). This search is circular: a “vain search [for self/essence] and then the resignation with which it is abandoned”, an experience not only of “the profound hopelessness of the struggle but also . . . the still more profound hopelessness of its abandonment” (Lukács 85, 86).

Lukács sees the novel as the literary form that coincides with this modern maturity of consciousness, which accepts the absence of meaning while understanding that a sense of meaning is crucial for a grasp of reality (88), yet the same conditions and mentality are also apparent in Wright’s poems. Wright’s poetry follows the internal “adventure” of a consistent “I”-figure even though, as Lee Upton notes, that figure’s own projects of remembrance problematise selfhood by revealing “identity [to be] discontinuous and in process” (“Charles Wright” 1). The “I”-figure’s pilgrimage amounts to a spiritual (auto)biography of sorts,

crucial to which is the “scrutinizing [of] one’s life for spiritual meaning” and the “artful construction of some version of the self” (Mulvania), to be completed by the attainment of some form of redemption and transcendence, which are felt to be impossible. Much like modernist narratives in Lukács characterisation, Wright’s poetry contains an agnostic attitude, fragmentation, juxtaposition, solipsism, and even impenetrable passages. His poems can be read as responding to the ambivalence and “incompletion of being” of a God-forsaken world in which the old, coherent narrative forms no longer serve (Johnson 282).

I have found it fruitful to consider Wright’s disruption of concrete and final meaning in the underlying narrative of his works from the perspective of Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction theory. This is not to say that I undertake to deconstruct Wright’s work. If anything, my demonstration of the ways in which Wright’s poetry constitutes a coherent whole is a structuralist interpretation that may well invite its own deconstruction. Nor do I suggest that Wright’s poetry is itself poststructuralist: as Bedient states, many of Wright’s poetic statements—for example, “Truth is the absence of falsehood, ~ beauty the absence of ugliness” (*ZJ* 76)—are “unregenerately ‘binary,’ defiantly un-Derrida’d” (“Slide-Wheeling” 47). Franzek, too, has noted that, in his poetry, “Wright speaks rather unselfconsciously with an outworn vocabulary and with perhaps limited understanding of current theoretical debates in philosophy” (141). For example, in “Language Journal”—perhaps in response to Derrida’s famous and often-misunderstood statement, “There is nothing outside of the text” (*Of Grammatology* 158)—we are told inaccurately that the “theorists” would have us believe that “everything comes from language” to the point that “the landscape is language / Itself” (*XA* 23).⁹ Nonetheless, I, like Franzek, detect certain poststructuralist tendencies in Wright’s work (147), and agree that, “[f]or all the retrograde motion evident in his sententiae, [Wright’s] poetic praxis is often consonant with some of the theories that his articulated stances resist” (Franzek 141).

⁹ See Chapter One, pages 85-86, for a more detailed reading of this poem as a critique of poststructuralism.

I propose that Wright's is an ostensibly modernist project that nonetheless reflects the contemporary postmodern milieu. His poetry seems to embody a sceptical commitment both to questions of truth and value and to the fact of their having been deconstructed. The self-conscious futility of his poetic pilgrimage is illuminated by Derrida's deconstruction of Western logocentrism. In particular, the perpetual pattern of non-arrival and non-transcendence that Wright's undernarrative depicts—a failure to realise an absolute truth—aligns with Derrida's assertion that signification is not grounded in a transcendental signified but in a perpetual movement of difference and deferral—*différance*—that belies the ideal of full presence (see *Of Grammatology* 23, 49-50).

Derrida writes against the logocentric epoch that equates being with presence (*Of Grammatology* 12). He challenges—as, I will argue, Wright's poetry does—the implicit assumption that the world, as *Logos*, is imbued with meaning and present to the human intellect through spoken language (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 13). Presence represents “[h]umankind's common desire . . . for a stable center, and for assurance of mastery—through knowing or possessing” (Spivak xi). However, Derrida argues, intelligibility rests not on a definitive presence but an absence of sorts. He likens all forms of signification, structuring and representation in Western metaphysics to writing, because all knowledge is founded on an “instituted trace” or the inscription of meaning within “a system of oppositions” (*Of Grammatology* 46, 216). Writing and all that it stands for reveal no transcendent presence but only an endless chain of discontinuities and differentiations between referents (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 49); it never presents but only ever repeats a representation of that which it designates and only through the infinite process of *différance* (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 203).

Wright's poetry frequently alludes to the kind of deferral and lack of foundational meaning that underlies knowledge as Derrida conceives it. The invisible incorporates whatever absolute foundation of meaning Wright's pilgrim seeks in any given context, and it repeatedly eludes him. Origin, threshold, essence and full self-presence—all, according to

Derrida, commensurate with the ideal of presence (*Of Grammatology* 309-10)—are commensurate in Wright’s poetry with the wholeness and realisation that his pilgrim pursues. His desired invisible thus corresponds with the foundation of meaning and mastery of the whole represented by presence (McCorkle 208).

According to Derrida, presence is always deferred by writing and no recovery of pure presence is ever possible, yet the “play of presence and absence” awakens an insatiable desire for proximity, for pure presence (*Of Grammatology* 244, see also 143). The satisfaction of that desire in the form of full presence—in nature, childhood or divinity, for example—would amount, Derrida suggests, to death: undifferentiated and thus oblivious selfhood (*Of Grammatology* 244). Transcendence in Wright’s poetry amounts to union with an ideal order that is often depicted as the ultimate language; this union is likened to the poet’s becoming perfectly “transparent”, with no discontinuity between himself, his language and reality. Such transparency represents direct presentation and knowing of the truth without the intervention of self or writing, yet such transcendence, the poet-figure intuit, would require a total, fatal sacrifice of selfhood to the overriding other, and so he cannot bring himself to embrace it.

The ways in which Wright’s “I”-figure seeks to apprehend a ground of truth and presence include not only writing but also memory and imagination. These means of representing an (ideally present) reality are also commensurate with Derrida’s writing as they, too, are “supplementary significations” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 309). Writing is supplementary because it is additional to speech and presence and draws attention to (by seeking to resolve) the absence of both speaker and the thing spoken (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 144-45). In Wright’s poetry, language, memory and imagination all recreate an absent ideal associated with full presence: memory supplements the irrecoverable origin; descriptive language supplements the real, meaningful presence of the physical world; imagination supplements the all-defining end. Wright participates in the idealisation of origins and ends as moments of completeness and full self-knowledge in keeping with the

logocentric conception of history as “a linear scheme of the unfolding of presence [that] relates the final presence to the originary presence” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 85). In fact, as I shall show, beginning and end overlap in Wright’s poetry, suggesting that both represent the one ideal state. Yet Wright also shows that beginnings and endings, and the wholeness they embody, are inapprehensible. Knowledge of these absolutes is always mediated by the pilgrim’s distance from them and his position of being in progress towards them; once attained, they cannot be known.

My identification of Wright’s work with a recognisable story is vulnerable to the accusation levelled by Derrida against structuralist critics in his essay “Force and Signification” (*Writing* 3-30). Derrida argues that, by simplifying the complexity of a work to a single, unifying line or figure (*Writing* 19), structuralists render the work’s effect “simultaneous” (*Writing* 24) and, in doing so, ignore its force, temporality and specificity—its life, beauty and meaning (*Writing* 5). After all, if every poem tells the same story, what is the value of Wright’s many iterations of it? One definitive version—*A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, perhaps—would surely suffice. Emily Taylor Merriman argues that to “make a synthesis of [Wright’s] work is in some way to do it an injustice, for . . . it resists grand explanatory narratives: it says ‘this. . . and this. . . but this. . . and also this’” (231). Yet, as McClatchy and Francini argue, the patterns in Wright’s works do amount to a distinctive movement, which we can understand as his poetry’s undernarrative: a distinct if repeatable undertaking towards a goal that the seeker then fails to grasp. It is true that in this thesis the distinctive traits of individual poems are at risk of being eclipsed by the consistencies and underlying structures of Wright’s whole oeuvre. With this in mind, I have dedicated close analysis to every long quotation included in my dissertation. Nonetheless, I consider the underlying structures to be an important object of investigation in their own right, and suggest that they are not reductive but rather that they multiply and proliferate, generating the very life, beauty and meaning of Wright’s work.

Wright's undernarrative of non-attainment is not a simple tragic plot but an ever-unfinished journey that gains power through repetition. The "I"-figure presents himself as an agnostic heir to the medieval mystics on a thwarted spiritual pilgrimage that either repeats a ubiquitous up-and-down movement endlessly or else reprises a futile circle. This paradigmatic pattern of drawing near and falling back recurs in an almost fractal manner on every level in Wright's work: on massive scales that span whole trilogies, over the course of individual books, within sequences and even in miniature, in the form of emblematic motifs of waves, intermittent wind, seasonal change and the waxing and waning of natural light evident in almost every poem. This repetition and replication, this rule of non-arrival evident everywhere in Wright's oeuvre, denies the attainment of a true origin or final end in which final meaning could be located, thus keeping the movement of the "search" alive. The static figure of the circle or wave may be emblematic of Wright's poetic project, but its true realisation is in its multiplicity, the repetition of its circling or rising-and-falling. Wright's work is wide-ranging and does resist grand explanatory narratives, just as Merriman states (231). We cannot talk of the beginning or end of his narrative, but only, as I do in this thesis, of its many provisional beginnings, its many hypothetical ends and its resistance to any true end. This approach preserves the life and openness of the poetry itself.

This thesis presents a synthesis of Wright's whole body of work. It differs from the existing scholarship in that it considers the coherence and narrativity of his oeuvre even beyond his trilogies. The fruitfulness of taking into account Wright's uncollected works in a study of this kind is evinced by the poem "What Do You Write About, Where Do Your Ideas Come From?" considered at the beginning of this Introduction. This is the only poem from the volume *Appalachia* excluded from the collection *Negative Blue*, yet it contains a patent statement of the artistic vision central to Wright's work. Wright's content and focus has not changed markedly in the six volumes published since the conclusion of his grand "project", and there is also a degree of consistency between his early published works, theoretically excluded from his *Appalachian Book of the Dead*, and the later included works.

The thematic consistency of other works—indeed, a whole new trilogy—with that project suggests that his whole oeuvre taken together constitutes a valid subject for analysis.

As several scholars have pointed out, Wright's poetry develops a "central and elemental vocabulary" of terms and symbols (Merriman 248). These "iconographic leitmotifs" (Parini 189), such as dogs, spiders, machines, music and the colour blue, recur throughout his oeuvre. As a result, images in poems often reverberate with other poems, so that other instances of an image shape the way we read *this particular* image (Guilford 16). The process of accretion and interconnection continues through each poem and volume. "The small, the separate, the partial, and the individual all fit within the ongoing rush of the large, the whole, and the collective", as Willard Spiegelman writes; "[j]ust as days strung together make a life, and as vignettes can cluster together into a geography, so the glittering pieces of Wright's crystalline observations yield a poetry" (*How Poets See* 98).

Wright's oeuvre, while narrative, is not, as I have already stated, unilinear. His poems "speak to" each other across time and imposed boundaries, and it is not uncommon for one poem to answer a question raised in another more than a decade earlier. Wright is, as Johnson observes, always in "dialogue with his own earlier work through frequent allusions to, and revisions of[,] previously used images, lines and ideas" (197) and through his recycling of poem titles (274). Laura Kolbe notes that Wright's poems "aggregate, pil[e] up, jostl[e], [correct], and examin[e] one another" and so should be taken together ("Fresh Fire"). The context of any one of Wright's "glittering pieces" is not just the rest of the pieces that make up the poem but all the other pieces in his glittering career. In order to elucidate Wright's key symbols, then, I have interpreted various versions of each symbol so as to crystallise the underlying complex of ideas these symbols embody.

Wright's poetry constitutes a single entity of sorts because each of his poems presents part of the same truth, tells the same story, while constituting the context in which that story can be read. Each "part" of Wright's oeuvre contains the whole, but only because it is also contained within and shaped by that whole. This allows us to conceive of Wright's work as

whole without it being closed or “completed” in a way that, as Johnson correctly observes, would be antithetical to the “unreachable” subject of Wright’s poems (293). At the heart of this synecdochical body of work is the undernarrative I identify—the prevailing structure essential to an understanding of his work—that each of his individual poems recreates in miniature.

My contribution to the understanding of Charles Wright’s work is twofold. First, I have assembled the terms of the Wright’s unique vocabulary of terms for the invisible and defined the recurring attributes of this, the numinous subject of his work. In Chapter One I group these terms and symbols according to categories I have devised to clarify Wright’s sense of the invisible: “the invisible as Absolute”, “the invisible as underlying order” and “the invisible as absence”. Accepting, as most scholars do, that Wright’s ostensible landscape poetry points beyond the landscape, my aim is to articulate the ways in which he manages “the imaging of the invisible” (*BZ* 51) (to cite “Lives of the Artists” from the epigraph to this thesis) using natural and quotidian things. As in “Lives of the Artists”, something as worldly as “blossoms” in Wright’s poems can “solidify” intangible realities such as “transcendence” and “something beyond belief” (*BZ* 51). By systematically accounting for Wright’s persistent metaphors and symbols for his metaphysical subject, I demonstrate its coherence and its centrality to his work.

The second aspect of my original contribution is my analysis of Wright’s undernarrative and my charting of that narrative. This narrative always unfolds in and through the landscape; to cite “Lives of the Artists” once again, it is the natural and everyday landscape that “Sanction[s] our going up and our going down, our days / And the lives we unfold inside them, ~ our *yes* and *yes*” (*BZ* 51). Those two “yesses” are oppositional, representing a wholehearted affirmation of the sufficiency of the physical world and a self-betraying openness to the other world that might exist beyond it. My analysis focuses on the elements of plot that haunt Wright’s poems, that which St. John calls his pilgrim’s “grand passions”: “his desire to reclaim and redeem a personal past, to make a reckoning with his

present, and to conjure the terms by which we might face the future” (xix). These stages of beginning, middle and end imply sequentiality but are in fact enacted repeatedly throughout Wright’s poems, much as the trilogies into which his oeuvre has been arranged are not neatly contained but reduplicate in a Chinese-box-like fashion. This all attests to the repeatable and revisionary nature of these narrative markers. By collecting together Wright’s pilgrim’s many meditations on his past, contemplations of his present and speculations on his ends, I show that Wright’s undernarrative of seeking and never attaining the invisible defies plot and brings the possibility of wholeness and closure into question.

Chapter Two considers the way that Wright entertains a narrative sense of origins that conforms to a particularly Southern, place-bound understanding of the past, even as poems such as “The Southern Cross” confound that prioritisation of origins with a motif of rise-and-fall that destabilises “place”. Traditionally, securing an origin is crucial to the emplotment of events; narrative coherence requires a traceable development away from the unbroken first to the current or last. However, the fluidity of memory in “The Southern Cross”, reflected in tumultuous present and remembered landscapes, challenges this ideal of origins by revealing them to be elusive, uncovering a lack of consistency between the past and the present, and suggesting that the past is irretrievable. In Wright’s memory poems, the past is an abiding influence that represents wholeness but is belied by its perpetual elusiveness; it thus exemplifies the invisible. The pilgrim’s search for his origins both gestures toward the impossibility of narrative wholeness and constitutes a facet of his pilgrimage towards the (unattainable) invisible.

Chapter Three explores Wright’s sense of being in time, illustrated by his longest poem, *The Journal of the Year of the Ox*. In this poem we can identify distinct plots in the patterns of the natural world: the cyclical seasons speak to the Christian model of renewal that sees ostensible endings bringing about re-beginnings, while the poet-figure’s experience of ageing, likened to night falling and the year’s passing, evinces a tragic plot of decay and rising entropy that promises a dark end. In both models of time, the invisible fails to arrive. It

is envisioned as an elusive eternal instant of time, crystallised and lost at the very moment of epiphany. The endless turning of the seasons, occurring alongside evidence of the poet-figure's own inescapable decline, serves to emphasise the incompatibility of an invisible Absolute with the poet-figure's experience of being in time.

Chapter Four considers Wright's multiple visions of the end, which are variously, I suggest, redemptive, entropic, decompositional and cyclical. Endings promise to explain the preceding story. However, this explanatory potential is exploited over and over in Wright's poetry, until endings become too multiple and equivocal to resemble absolute truth. As obvious fictions, Wright's endings draw attention to the fictiveness of all ideals of closure and completion.

In light of the remarkable similarities between many of Wright's books, critics have generally been intent on defining—perhaps to the point of over-stating—their differences. If we accept the consistency of Wright's whole oeuvre and describe that, what emerges is the paradigmatic narrative of his poetic career. I propose that Wright's six hundred-plus non-narrative poems, with their risings and fallings and failed risings, constitute a plot-resisting narrative, and I undertake to reveal the significance of that pattern. Wright's epic of perpetual non-arrival sheds light on the fantasy of final meaning and reveals the inadequacies of the narrative framework. Both the moments of origin and end exist at the point of non-being and so must be continuously projected as a source of coherence without ever being able to consummate that role. The attainment of meaning and coherence is always pending; thus, Wright's pilgrim refers to himself as "someone . . . whose narrative goes nowhere" (*SS* 40). As this thesis will show, Wright's poetry of yearning for wholeness, of being haunted by a sense that there should be more, subverts dominant narrative paradigms. "Immanence"—Wright's persistent theme—"isn't a story / And can't be" (*LF* 59).

In spite of this, Wright's pilgrim persists with the activities that constitute his journey: memory, marking time, desire, doubt, anticipation, prayer. He is, as Tom Hurley tells us, "a believer without hope, but he's dogged". If, as it is too often said, doing the same thing

repeatedly expecting a different result shows you to be insane, then Wright demonstrates that repeating the same journey expecting the same result makes you a poet. His donning a pilgrim's cowl, despite the pilgrimage being futile and its only ending being death, defies the endemic postmodern condition of meaninglessness and alienation. After all, as we are asked in "Envoi" from *Black Zodiac*, "who wants a life like that, / No next and no before, no yesterday, no today, / Tomorrow a moment no one will ever live in?" (BZ 86). Persisting with narrative means refusing to accept that kind of futility. Wright's poetry is a modernist romance, a way of repeatedly reanimating an unsustainable faith in the face of deep-held doubts, of being both hopeful and hopeless, of going on living.

Chapter 1: “The Unsayable Has Its Say”: Wright’s Symbols and Metaphors for the Invisible

There are those 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.

—Charles Wright, “The Bolivar Letters”

Wright’s poetry evokes an overarching sense of something in excess of the vivid visible landscapes and memories his remarkable poems describe. This “other” is evoked in any number of different ways in different contexts, but these evocations work collectively. Ultimately, it is this other that constitutes the object of his poetry’s implicit narrative of pilgrimage and spiritual questioning. “The invisible” is the name I have given to this impression of something other. It represents ultimate reality with which Wright’s “I”-figure is preoccupied, the ideal principle of wholeness and order by which the world of experience would be made complete and comprehensible in accordance with human desires (Costello, “Charles Wright’s *Via Negativa*” 338).

The invisible is the counterpart of the visible and the tangible; it is the metaphysical aspect of the quotidian. It is precisely that which cannot be apprehended directly, yet it is encountered in familiar landscapes. As a result, the problem at the heart of Wright’s poetry is, as Hirsch states, “how the unseen, the invisible [sic] and abstract, can be attained by way of the visible and concrete” (803). This is a problem not only of how the invisible is

experienced, but of how that experience can be expressed. Vendler accounts for the problem in this way:

All ways of formulating the paradox of the unseen felt in the seen falsify the experience of that paradox, in which the reports of the senses are accompanied by some aura . . . of what is not there but makes its presence felt—eternity, death, transcendence, extension, rhythm: the unseen can go by many names. (“Charles Wright” 13)

Recreating this “aura” of “what is not there” (Vendler, “Charles Wright” 13)—the deep truth or unifying principle that exceeds the present material world—without falsifying its nature as both a presence and an absence is the poet’s particular challenge.

Confronted with such a challenge, Wright uses consistent metaphors to build a cumulative portrait of the invisible that emphasises the limitations of language. The perceptible things that allude to the invisible in his poetry are suggestive of something numinous but intangible, and together they demonstrate the inadequacy of any one image in representing that which resists representation. Wright claims to bring the “unseen . . . into view through the unemotional lens of the tactile present” [emphasis in original] (“The Art of Poetry” 25), but, as this chapter will make clear, it is precisely the emotional and associative effects of the familiar images and concepts he wields that conjure the sense of something more. This chapter will present an analysis of his persistent motifs of the invisible, considering what each in turn contributes to the overall sense of the ultimate reality in his poetry.

One way Wright depicts the invisible in terms of familiar experience, while indicating that it remains outside of familiar experience, is by describing it in apophatic terms: it appears as the “Nameless, invisible” force exuded by Christ’s resurrection (*BL* 25) in “Tattoos”, for example, and as the “things that cannot be written about” (*ST* 67) in “Hawksbane”, written some thirty years later. This apophatic entity is described in “Easter 1989”:

The definer of all things

cannot be spoken of.

It is not knowledge or truth.

We get no closer than next-to-it.

Beyond wisdom, beyond denial,

it asks us for nothing,

According to the Pseudo-Dionysius, which sounds good to me. (*CH* 11)

Frequently, the namelessness or ineffability of the invisible in Wright's poetry is preserved by its being addressed merely as a profound "something", as happens in "Sprung Narratives", where we are told that "Something surrounds us we can't exemplify, something / Mindless and motherless" (*CH* 33).¹⁰ "Something" is, William Shullenberger notes, "a linguistic cipher which makes meaning come into being even as it remains conceptually indeterminate" (111). For Merriman it is "a term that both identifies a presence and enacts wordlessness, ignorance or even dismissiveness" (279). Unanswered questions also point towards the invisible, implying the existence of an answer but leaving it undefined. For example, in "North American Bear" the speaker asks, "What is it about the stars we can't shake? ~ What pulse, what tide drop / Pulls us like vertigo upward[?]" (*NB* 196), describing the unknown answer as "something unwept, something unnameable, / Spinning its line out" (*NB* 197). Similarly, "Language Journal" leaves unanswered the paradoxical question, "what is it that we can never quite put our finger on[?]" (*XA* 24). Such ambiguity prevents the invisible from being defined in a conceptually limited way and maintains a posture of unknowing that preserves the otherness of the invisible. For this reason, it is reminiscent of the apophatic language often preferred over cataphatic (or affirmative) language by Christian

¹⁰ Other examples of this sense of "something" appear in "Night Rider" ("O Something, be with me") (*SHS* 28), "'So Long, It's Been Good to Know You'" ("something bigger"), "Equation" ("Something enormous, something too big to see") (*CT* 31), "Lost Bodies" ("Something's for sure") (*OSR* 3), "Black and Blue" ("something is always there") (*CH* 44) and "Against the American Grain" ("Something unordinary persists, / Something unstill, never-sleeping, just possible past reason") (*ST* 18).

mystics determined to preserve, as Wright seems to be, the ineffability of their experience of the divine.

Another advantage of apophatic language that Christian writers exploit is the fact that which is not nameable and that which transcends all earthly limitations is a slight one. The linguistic overlap between non-qualities and perfections allows the unnameable other to be represented in a way that also indicates its status as Absolute. Wright's poetry is often apophatic in the style of the Christian tradition of *via negativa* (H. Hart, "Charles Wright's *Via Mystica*" 329), which constitutes not a statement of unbelief or nonbeing but a testimony to "some hyperessentiality", "beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond Being" (Derrida, "How to" 7-8). Accordingly, we see in Wright's poetry that the invisible, defined in terms of negations, frequently amounts to something all-pervasive and almighty, embodying a kind of perfection and fullness of being akin to the Absolute or even God. For example, in the tellingly entitled "The Light at the Root of All Things", the invisible appears as the "Splendour [that] surrounds us ... ~ invisible and far away" and "Something inveterate, some thing indestructible" (*OT*). In this guise, the invisible appears elevated above and in excess of the perceptible world. Two symbols synonymous with the Absolute in Wright's poetry are natural light and the colour blue.

Other metaphors in Wright's poetry seemingly render the invisible "below" or fundamental to the visible world, although still ineffable and indicative of a "higher" power. In this capacity, the invisible sometimes resembles a deep order or reigning force that determines the visible world. The ordered functioning of the world often suggests the existence of a greater purpose at work. We see as much in "December Journal" (which is almost certainly a response to Wallace Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven", Canto III):

I keep coming back to the visible.

I keep coming back

To what it leads me into,

completive ideal. However, as something that can be perceived “in” the landscape, this non-existence is not complete either.

Three aspects of the invisible are considered in this chapter: “the invisible as Absolute”, “the invisible as underlying order” and “the invisible as absence”. Consideration of these three facets will establish the terms of Wright’s engagement with the invisible throughout his oeuvre and provide a basis for the understanding of his undernarrative in the remainder of this thesis.

The Invisible as Absolute

Within philosophical discourse, the term “the Absolute” means “the one independent reality of which all things are an expression” (Allard)—an apt description of the invisible as whole. I use the term specifically to signify the sense in which the invisible embodies supremacy, grandeur and ultimate good. We see it presented thus in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, which makes reference to Italian Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino:

—Ficino tells us the Absolute
Wakens the drowsy, lights the obscure,
revives the dead,
Gives form to the formless and finishes the incomplete.
What better good can be spoken of? (*ZJ* 51)

This passage is exceptional: the few references to the Absolute in Wright’s poetry are generally more ambiguous than this and almost never capitalised.¹¹ The Absolute is, in other words, far from being the esteemed and essential concept we might expect. The poem “Bicoastal Journal” describes “the absolute / Whose murmur retoggles me” as something distinct from “all [the] things” whose edges can be touched (*XA* 13). This depiction fits the broader sense of the invisible in Wright’s poetry as something immaterial and faintly

¹¹ I have capitalised the term throughout for the sake of consistency and in keeping with the conventions of philosophical discourse.

perceptible (a “murmur”). Yet this Absolute is of “this world” and counter to transcendence, as it grips the speaker like a toggle fastening, keeping him from freeing himself from his temporal body. This is in contrast with the kind of magnitude and paralysing awe we might associate with the term, which is conveyed in “Scar Tissue II”, although to negative effect:

One never gets used to this—
Immensity and its absolute,
December chill
Like fingernails on the skin—
That something from far away has cracked you,
ever so slightly,
And entered and gone, one never should. (ST 43)

This apparently sublime experience of the enormity and constancy of the winter night sky triggers a corresponding awareness of the speaker’s own vulnerability. The cold creates a physical sensation of “fingernails on the skin”, which is also indicative of feelings of apprehension regarding the apparently “cold” Absolute. This Absolute appears distant but insidious, capable of rupturing the self’s integrity. It is also experienced as something “gone” (ST 43). In the opening lines of *Appalachia* the “dregs of the absolute” are all that remain in a world in which even God’s “nothingness” is no longer around (AP 3). These dregs are the “sure accumulation of all that’s not revealed / [which] Rises like snow in my bare places” (AP 3), chilling the speaker with a disquiet similar to that in “Scar Tissue II”.

The Absolute and its intimations of immensity are in decline in Wright’s works, encountered as a chilling absence or subject to diminution. The Absolute is treated at times as a prospect that can be entertained or discarded at will. “We yo-yo the Absolute big time”, the “I”-figure notes with playful irreverence, qualifying one of his only references to a capital-A Absolute by describing it as a “Dark little spinning thing” (SHS 61). In “After Reading Wang Wei, I Go Outside to the Full Moon”, the Absolute is “small as a poker chip” (CH 9) and in retreat, while in *Littlefoot* the foreboding Absolute is remote and dulled, its “sharp edge

. . . snug in its loamy bed, / The template of its wings like shadows across the grass" (*LF* 26). The scarcity of the term "the Absolute" in a body of poetry so unswervingly concerned with the prospect of a complete ideal, and the depiction of the Absolute as forbidding, aloof and diminished when it does appear, is indicative of the shadowy quality of the invisible that, although sincerely sought by Wright's "I"-figure, does not resolve into a positive entity but remains deeply dubious.

God

More common than "the Absolute" in Wright's poetry but indicative of the same kind of reality is the word "God". Wright has repeatedly listed "the idea of God" as one of the three central themes of his poetry ("Prize-Winning Poetry"; "Language, Landscape" 123; *QN* 81; *AP* 23), apparently inspired by Wallace Stevens' statement that "The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God" (qtd. in *HL* 29). Yet "God" in Wright's poetry seems to be merely a kind of shorthand for ultimate reality or "the supreme and pervasive power", the existence of which cannot be taken for granted (Costello, "Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi"). Even when Wright holds up forms of deity as a desirable or necessary prospect in his poetry, he never allows it to be a wholly plausible one; thus, "the idea of God" denotes both the spectre of a Christian God and an abiding suspicion that God is *no more than* an idea. Wright's poet-figure seems to intimate as much when he tells us that "the idea of God" is "The ghost that over my little world / Hover[s], my mouthpiece for meaning" (*ST* 29); in other words, the idea of God is the still-useful apparition that provides a way of speaking about absolute realities.

While the allusions to God in Wright's poetry conform to no particular orthodoxy, they are laden with connotations (particularly negative ones) associated with the God of Christian belief. Like the Absolute, "God" is regularly deflated and treated as a dubious or discardable idea, and invocations of God tend to draw into question, or even condemn, the Christian God the poet-figure was taught to believe in as a child, whom he calls the "God of my fathers, but not of mine" in "Dio Ed Io" (*BY* 50). In this poem, he voices his apparent

contempt for God, whom he calls “a two-fingered sleight-of-hand man” (*BY* 50): a clumsy con. “You are part, it is said, an afterthought, a scattered one”, he goes on; “There is a disappearance between us as heavy as dirt” (*BY* 50). This post-secular perspective sees Christian faith decentralised and the divine dispersed throughout the world, in multiple roles, locations and guises, diminished and no longer wholly credible. The same idea is expressed in “Disjecta Membra”, where “God is a scattered part, ~ syllable after syllable, his name asunder” (*BZ* 77).

“Northanger Ridge”, published in 1973, is one of the first of Wright’s poems to deal with the idea of God, and it quite spectacularly sets the tone for his dealings with God throughout his oeuvre. The poem is an oblique memory poem about a religious school and summer camp in North Carolina, amounting to a scathing memoir of a place that Wright calls in his autobiography “a workshop for the hammering out of little souls into the white gold of righteousness, ready for the Lord’s work, or the Lord’s burden” (“Charles Wright: 1935-”). The poem depicts a preacher, mockingly called “Father Dog” (*HF* 51) (apparently the opposite of a god), spouting impressive but hollow evangelical catchwords at unquestioning, submissive children:

Bow-wow and arf, the Great Light;
O and the Great Yes, and the Great No;
Redemption, the cold kiss of release,
&c.; sentences, sentences. (*HF* 51)

The burden of compliance this teaching puts on the children is itself a kind of “sentence”, as we later see those same children caught up in onerous prayer to the God in whom they have been duped to believe. This God will never respond or return because—never having been born, let alone resurrected—this God is dead:

From 6 to 6, under the sick Christ,
The children talk to the nothingness,
.....

Salvation again declines,
And sleeps like a skull in the hard ground,
Nothing for ears, nothing for eyes;
It sleeps as it's always slept, without
Shadow, waiting for nothing. (*HF* 52)

This poem is perhaps all the more critical of religion for the fact that it is inflicted on children. However, in Wright's later poetry, his "I"-figure retains a semi-resentful, semi-fearful attitude towards an enforcer-God and a childlike sense that "the God Will Get You" ("If You Walk in His Golden Footsteps..." *OT*) substantiating the legacy of oppressive structures of obligation, guilt, fear and mis-education and their burden of inherited belief that he disparages here. In *Littlefoot*, for example, the poet-figure evokes the lasting oppressiveness of a religious upbringing: "The great wings shadowed my childhood, ~ and still do from time to time, / Darkening some. Then darkening more" (*LF* 58). The spectre of God lingers in habitual fears and superstitions long after belief is gone: God is named "Original Dread, Old Voodoo Wool" in "Skins" (*BL* 54), while in "Disjecta Membra" an awareness of God is a lucky charm or comfort object of which the speaker cannot rid himself:

Compulsive cameo, God's blue breath
So light on the skin, so infinite,

Why do I have to carry you, unutterable?
Why do you shine out,

lost penny, unspendable thing.

Irreversible, unappeasable, luminous,
.....
Insurmountable comforts.

And still I carry you. And still you continue to shine out. (*BZ* 76-77)

God, unlike other terms for the invisible, evokes a dominant intelligence. As the mastermind behind the harsh realities of the world, God is depicted as overtly predatory, the kind of God who “says, watch your back” (BZ 35) or “knees our necks to the ground” (AP 62). Images of the spider and the dog, in particular, appear repeatedly in Wright’s poetry as aliases of a ruthless God, especially in *The Southern Cross* and *The Other Side of the River*. God as “dog” is an irreverent inversion that intimates both a nagging presence and a threatening, predatory figure who is both divine judge and executioner. The dog embodies whatever will “hunt us down”, conflating the predatory God with “time, black dog” (SS 5), “reality, our piebald dog” (CH 79), and “Heaven, that stray dog [that] eats on the run and keeps moving” (CT 23). In “Called Back”,¹² “the Black Dog” and “Darkness” are alternative names for the inscrutable paternal figure, “Father of Charity”, to whom the speaker appeals from his deathbed, apparently without response (SC 23). The black dog is also often a euphemism for depression, further indicating the despair associated with this God-figure.

The spider, too, is paternal (Bedient, “Tracing Charles Wright” 24). It is an established figure for Calvinistic predetermination and the powers-that-be, particularly in American literature, made famous by Jonathan Edwards, Robert Frost and Robert Lowell among others (Dussol). Meticulous and merciless, spiders are loaded with connotations of pitiless judgement, death-dealing and design, and thus, rather than being diminutive, the spider is a monstrous image of God. For example, in “California Dreaming”, human fate is mirrored in the fate of a bee in the clutches of a spider:

We twitter and grieve, the spider twirls the honey bee,
 Who twitters and grieves, around in her net,
then draws it by one leg
 Up to the fishbone fern leaves inside the pepper tree
swaddled in silk
 And turns it again and again until it is shining (OSR 71)

¹² “Called Back” is a reference to Emily Dickinson’s death-bed letter to her cousins and her epitaph (Denham, *The Early Poetry* 96).

The spider's manoeuvring the bee until it is raised and "shining" is suggestive of divinely ordained trials—such as the endlessly turning circles of unfulfilled spiritual longing and seasonal change depicted in Wright's poetry—for the sake of a heavenly reward. Of course, the spider will devour the bee, which brings the motives behind these divine manipulations and their ostensibly glorious result into question. The same impression of a many-limbed manipulator is achieved in "Thinking of Georg Trakl" with the image of a giant hand ("Finger by finger, above Orion, God's blue hand unfolds" [CT 58]) and in "Tattoos" with an octopus rather than a spider:

The octopus on the reef's edge, who slides
His fat fingers among the cracks,
Can use you. You've prayed to him,
In fact, and don't know it.
You are him, and think yourself yourself (*BL* 38)

Both dog and spider represent the sinister face of the higher order figured in the stars. In "Spider Crystal Ascension", the spider is both a galaxy of stars and a threatening overseer: "The spider, juiced crystal and Milky Way, drifts on his web through the night sky / And looks down, waiting for us to ascend" (CT 59). The "Black Dog" (SC 23) frequently refers to the constellation Canis Major: "Above me, the big dog lies low in the southern sky and bides its time" (SC 36). "Composition in Grey and Pink" refers to "The dogstar", Sirius, "descending with its pestilent breath" (SC 27), to which the speaker responds by expressing a desire to be "Fatherless" and "Untied from God" (SC 27). "T'ang Notebook" conflates constellations Orion and Canis Major, the hunter and his dog, as a threat of pending retribution, which elicits urgent, conciliatory expressions of devotion: "The constellation, with its seven high stars, ~ is lifting its sword in the midnight. / I love you, dog, I love you" (OSR 54).

These astral images also associate God with night, although this darkness is not necessarily frightening. In "Thinking About the Poet Larry Levis One Afternoon in Late

May", "God, the gathering night, assumes" the sunlight, described as "suffused like a chest pain across the tree limbs" in reference to Levis' death by heart attack (*AP* 9). To "assume" can mean to take into heaven; alternatively, imagery of water pooling and blooming flesh-coloured flowers suggests that the darkness Levis has been assumed into is an ongoing natural cycle of decomposition and renewal, which is depicted as equally inviting. In "California Dreaming", God is associated not with the "Sunday prayer-light" in the east but with the coming night's darkness and stars: the "undercoating and slow sparks of the west, ~ which is our solitude and our joy" (*OSR* 70). As in the poem about Levis, the darkness is ambiguous, promising comfort in death-like sleep or sleep-like death. Even the dog can embody something mundane and homely. In "Laguna Dantesca", for example, "the big dog" in the sky—dark spectre of God-as-death—ultimately promises some form of respite for the soul's longings for peace (*SC* 36). The poem ends, "There's something I want to look on whose face ~ rises and falls like a flame. // I want to sit down there, the dog asleep at my feet" (*SC* 36), imagining encounter with God as a kind of fireside repose.

These poems demonstrate that a grim view of God does not eliminate the appeal of divine benevolence. They express both longing and doubt: longing for the "tame" God who would be in one's favour, and doubt that such an entity exists or would be favourably inclined. Wright's poems sustain both contempt and nostalgia for faith. In the first of five "Self Portrait" poems in *The Southern Cross*, for example, a prayer for deliverance conveys a desire to be returned to a state of unthinking belief in the God whom the speaker is now certain does not exist:

Hand that lifted me once, lift me again,
 Sort me and flesh me out, fix my eyes
 From the mulch and the undergrowth, protect me and pass me on.
 From my own words and my certainties,
 From the rose and the easy cheek, deliver me, pass me on. (*SC* 13)

The speaker longs to be convinced in spite of himself and given a reason to look up at the heavens with hope.

According to Jahan Ramazani, “Wright simultaneously deploys and dismantles prayer, earnestly embraces and sceptically interrogates it” (145). Even as his poems express a longing for effortless faith, Wright’s various epithets for God and mock-saints are frequently tongue-in-cheek or incredulous, often revealing a notion of the powers-that-be as ineffectual or distant to the point of callousness. “Lord of the Anchorite, wind-blown bird” (*BL* 74), for example, is ambiguous. The connotations of “anchorite” are concrete—suggesting religious asceticism, a state of being “anchored” and the homophonic “ankerite”, a type of crystal—but they are paired with the flimsy flailing of a bird buffeted in a gale. It seems questionable whether this figure is really steady enough to fulfil the poem’s prayer, “Dangle your strings and hook me”, “Take me up, and drop me where I belong” (*BL* 74). The “Mother of Thrushes, Our Lady of Crows” in “Dog Yoga” offers no deliverance from a mournful world of weeds, ash and “twenty-five years of sad news” (*SC* 34). Similarly, the “Mother of Darkness, Our Lady” addressed in “Winter-Worship” seems to be both an intercessor and the absence of an intercessor:

Suffer our supplications,
our hurts come unto you.
Hear us from absence your dwelling place,
Whose ear we plead for.
End us our outstay (*CH* 53).

Echoing the prayer *Salve Regina*, this poem is as much an admission of scepticism as a petition for deliverance from the exile or “outstay” of unbelief (*CH* 53).

Some of Wright’s epithets for the divine are diminutive or pagan. These names create an accord between the poems’ mundane concerns and the God/s the “I”-figure prays to: thus “Lord of the sunlight, ~ Lord of the leftover, Lord of the yet-to-do, / Handle my heaven-lack, hold my hand” (*LF* 53). However, in the process of locating God in the present world

these titles strip the deity of transcendental status and make the hope of salvation seem modest and bound to ordinary things. In “Black Zodiac”, the “Lords of the discontinuous, lords of the little gestures” are called on to “Succour my shift and save me” (*BZ* 66), while in “Disjecta Membra”, the speaker prays, “Lord of the broken oak branch, ~ Lord of the avenues, / Tweak and restartle me, guide my hand” (*BZ* 79). This demystification, even enfeeblement, of God is most extreme in Wright’s late sestet poems, where the address is especially casual. “Terrestrial Music”, for example, begins “What’s up, grand architect of the universe?” (*SS* 51). The speaker is similarly nonchalant in “Stone Canyon Nocturne”: “Ancient of Days, old friend, no one believes you’ll come back” (*CT* 47), he states, picking up the conversation more than thirty years later with, “Well, here we are again, old friend, Ancient of Days” in a sestet in which he audaciously places himself “eyeball to eyeball” with an Emersonian God (*SS* 61).

Arguably most irreverent of all is Wright’s “Little Prayer”:

Lord of the ugly chair and the broken sofa,
Lord
 Of mouse piss and pack rat shit.
 Lord of the badger bite and pine squirrel nest,
cleanse me and make me whole.

Shuttle my insecurity, hasten my diptych.

 Tell me that things will be all right, (that hell is no certainty). (*OT*)

The speaker holds God to account for the nature of the reality for which He is responsible by linking Him to its most unpleasant and banal details. Any desire for a compassionate response is rendered ironic by what the choice of epithet reveals about the deity. By begging the question, how could the “Lord / Of mouse piss” possibly “cleanse me?”, the poem implies the unlikelihood of any such merciful intervention in a world of harsh realities.

If Wright's "I"-figure prays for any reason other than to voice longing, it is to demonstrate the impotence of prayer. His line "doubles back on itself" (Ramazani 148), invoking and then quickly dispelling the divine or venerating "the place where God used to be [with] a form of post-Nietzschian piety" (Kirsch 99). The suppliant in "The Narrow Road to the Distant City", for example, paradoxically calls on God to concede God's nonexistence:

be unto us a hard wind
that understands nothing.
In fact, be yourself,
If that is what the nothing that is,
and the nothing that is to come, is called for. (*ST* 60)

Similarly, in a recent poem, "Shadow and Smoke" (2012), the divine is revealed to be an illusion and faith belated:

Disabuse them in their ignorance,
Lord,
tell them the shadows are already gone, the smoke
Already cleared,
tell them that light is never a metaphor.

Here, faith has shown to have departed as easily as the smoke, shadows and light in which intimations of divinity resided in a more innocent time. In "Confessions of a Song and Dance Man", prayer is knowingly hollow, a kind of denial of belief: "Are you there, Lord, I whisper, ~ knowing he's not around, / Mumble kyrie eleison, mumble O three-in-none" (*ST* 16). These poems suggest that prayer can be a way of dispelling one's own misconceptions and affirming God's absence to oneself.

The distant God of Wright's poetry is apparently unfeeling. "If God hurt the way we hurt", we are told in "Poem Half in the Manner of Li Ho", "he, too, would be heart-sore, / Disconsolate, unappeasable" (*BZ* 23). The implication is that God does not feel our pain:

“God’s not concerned for anything, and has no desire” (*BZ* 77). There seems to be no point in reaching out to a God like this one. Yet God remains a necessary fiction, if only to account for mysteries such as “the grace / That put me there and alive” (*OSR* 17) that the poet-figure perceives after a near-death experience in “Lonesome Pine Special”, or to embody a fantasy of order, the “master of What Is About to Be” who could “Step out of the Out, ~ uncover [his] tongue and give me the protocol” (*LF* 37). A dream of God and the comforts of belief thus persist.

The religious concepts that persist in Wright’s poems reveal the legacy of childhood belief that keeps his “I”-figure a “God-fearing agnostic” rather than an atheist (*ST* 16). Even to talk about the God in whom you do not believe invokes God, and so God persists as a negation. In “Stray Paragraphs in February, Year of the Rat”, we are told that “If God were still around, ~ he’d swallow our sighs in his nothingness” (*AP* 3): God is absent, and yet if he were present to abolish our sadness he would do so as a nothingness, because he is not real. Thus, God is both non-existent and an imposing spectre in the landscape, a nonentity that must be repeatedly addressed and dispelled. Dead but still around, “God’s ghost taps once on the world’s window, ~ then taps again / And drags his chains through the evergreens” (*BY* 9) in “Buffalo Yoga”; elsewhere he is described as a ghost, “like / St. Francis in his hair shirt, ~ naked, walking the winter woods” (*SS* 61). On other occasions, God is merely somewhere else (“God [is] wandering aimlessly elsewhere” [*AP* 30]) and the world appears abandoned.

God is associated with the sky in Wright’s poetry. He is irreverently called “Sky Guy” in the poem of the same name (*OT*), and the phrase also refers to the speaker’s pie-in-the-sky hopes as he bargains for an afterlife. In “Looking Around”, the “God of the late ~ Mediterranean Renaissance / Breaststrokes across the heavens” (*SHS* 4), a jokey take on Michelangelo’s painting of the so-called angry God on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The continuation of the stereotypical identification of God’s/the gods’ elevated status with physical elevation in the sky is itself tongue-in-cheek, highlighting the anachronism of the idea of a Biblical God, which is never allowed to sit comfortably in Wright’s oeuvre. The

connection between a distant God and the distant sky informs the symbolism of the colour blue in Wright's poetry.

Blue

Blue is the colour of divinity in some Christian iconography, and so it functions in Wright's poetry: thus we have "God's blue hand" in "Thinking of Georg Trakl" (CT 58) and "God's blue breath" in "Disjecta Membra" (BZ 76), both quoted earlier in this chapter. It becomes clear that blue and God are one and the same in *Appalachia*. In "The Appalachian Book of the Dead V", the pilgrim's transition into the afterlife ends with the exclamation, "here's the Overseer, blue, and O he is blue" (AP 54). In "Cicada Blue", the words "O blue, I love you, blue" conclude an extended meditation on the colour, which applies to revelation, God and the midday sky's "edged and endless / Expanse of nowhere and nothingness" (AP 17). In Wright's poetry, divinity is often conflated with the blue sky, which represents heaven or "the cosmic scheme of things" (Spiegelman, *How Poets See* 106) and constitutes a "transcendent backdrop" indicative of a "grander timeline" than human history (Miller 580).

However, the blue is also an infinite abyss. As in the phrase "out of the blue" (ZJ 4), blue stands for the unknown and unexpected. It is a colour typically associated with melancholy, sadness and the blues music that is echoed in the phrasing and spiritual concerns of Wright's poetry. His blue is thus a *Negative Blue*, as per the title of his third volume of collected poems. Indicative of an empty sky and absent deity, this negative blue is "an experience of nonbeing" (Turner 116), a visual apophysis (Moffett, *Understanding* 76-77) or "imageless iconography" (BZ 42). In "Lives of the Saints", the "blue abyss of everyday air" (BZ 41) is an "Endless, effortless nothingness" (BZ 42). In Wright's body of work, the blue is alternatively "indifferent" (BL 54), "inveterate" (BL 58), "ill-invested" (BY 47), "exitless" (LF 3), "unforgiving" (LF 37), "vacant" and "nameless" (SS 8).

The blue of divinity in Wright's poetry also incorporates the Native American symbolism of blue, which is alluded to in early poem "Cherokee". In a note on the poem, Wright explains, "Blue signified for the Cherokee distress, despair, despondency" (HF

endnotes). This formula was perpetuated by nineteenth-century ethnographer James Mooney, whose translation of the sacred Cherokee formula “To Destroy Life” Wright rewrites as the poem “Cherokee” (*HF* endnotes). Mooney wrote that Cherokee shamanism links colours and directions with symbolic meanings; according to Mooney, blue represents the north and defeat (342) and is “emblematic of failure, disappointment, or unsatisfied desire” (390), while the Cherokee phrase “to become blue” means to be “disconsolate and uneasy in mind” (379).

The colour blue appears a further twenty-six times in Wright’s first collection *Country Music* alone, designating, among other things, the sky and/or heaven (*BL* 53; *CT* 23; *CT* 51), water (*BL* 57), the wind (*CT* 62), the “warp and curve” of “sin” (*CT* 16), “my own ghost” (*CT* 18) and God (*CT* 58). Blue describes what is vast, incomprehensible, intangible and dynamic, and is associated with “the other side” and metaphysical reality: in “Northanger Ridge”, the “heat-waves, like consolation”, rising from a hellish “next life” (*HF* 51) are blue, while the poem “Fever Toy” describes the “Blue idiom, blue embrace” (*HF* 37) of death. Especially since the publication of “Homage to Paul Cézanne” in 1981, which contains the memorable declaration that “The dead are cadmium blue” (*SC* 6), blue things in Wright’s poetry, including God and the sky, are inexorably associated with mortality (Kimberly 104). Blue thus evokes, more than any other descriptor in Wright’s poetry, the invisible and the sublime, a connection made patent by the description of the sky as “Blue as a new translation of Longinus on the sublime” in “Autumn’s Sidereal, November’s a Ball and Chain” (*AP* 29).

The full effect of the colour blue in Wright’s poetry is exemplified by the poem “Cancer Rising”. In this poem, a visceral description of the cancer killing the mother-figure is announced by the musical singing of a Whitmanesque mockingbird. The trill of the bird builds, as does a sense of dread, until both are reconciled by the mother’s death, which is depicted as her assimilation into a universal pattern akin to music by way of her rising into heaven “Where all fall to the same riff” (*BL* 14). Her ashes and the bird’s song rise together into the blue:

The blue it rises into, the cobalt,
Proves an enduring flame: Persian death bowl,
The bead, crystal
And drowned Delta, Ephesian reed.
Blue of the twice bitten rose, blue of the dove. (*BL* 42)

The blue is both death in all its arcane and impenetrable mystery and the promise of heaven. It contains the full horror of the mother's deterioration, represented by the "twice bitten rose", as well as an implication of freedom and peace, symbolised by a dove. Blue combines despair, death, God and absence to represent the sublime experience of the unknowable Absolute.

Light

The poem "Negatives" asks of "milk light of midnight",
—Is this what awaits us, amorphous
Cobalt and zinc, a wide tide
Of brilliance we cannot define
Or use, and leafless, without guilt;
No guidelines or flutter, no
Cadence to pinpoint, no no?

Silence. (*HF* 35)

This "brilliance" is "Cobalt", which may be interpreted either as blue (like the pigment) or silver-white (like the metallic element). While the connotations of blueness just explored fit well with this depiction of something sublime and apophatic, other descriptors such as "milk light" and "zinc" suggest that this is a metallic white "brilliance" (*HF* 35). This passage exemplifies the use of light in Wright's poetry as a marker of the invisible.

It is impossible to define the symbolism of light adequately, as it is fundamental in any tradition. Some of the characteristic traits of light in Wright's poetry must be pointed out, however. The denial of God quoted earlier in this chapter, "light is never a metaphor" ("Shadow and Smoke"), is ironic precisely because light frequently does function as a metaphor for something commensurate with salvation or the divine throughout Wright's poetry (Moffett, *Understanding* 94; Slicer 171). Like the colour blue, natural light is associated with distant powers in or beyond the sky and bespeaks intangibility, splendour, elevation and pervasiveness. Light can evoke conventional Christian depictions of heaven as a state of nearness to God's divine radiance, typified by Dante's description of "the heaven of pure light, / light of the intellect, light filled with love / love of true good, love filled with happiness" (*Par.* 30.40). In Wright's poem "Arkansas Traveller", heaven is described as a place "Where life is not a breath, / Nor life's affections, transient fire . . . in heaven's light" (*OSR* 60). As Brenda Hillman points out, Wright's "'light' is also one of the most basic tropes of poetry: that of inner light and insight" (47); it recalls the light of the sun that represents comprehension of true reality in Plato's Allegory of the Cave.

There is a certain Dickinsonian slant of light that, in Wright's poems, conveys the full, painful burden of sensitivity to the divine, like the "slice of sunlight pulled / Through the bulge of the ash trees / Opening like a lanced ache in the front yard" in "A Journal of True Confessions" (*ZJ* 29). Just as the light in Dickinson's poem produces a feeling of "heft" and "heavenly hurt" (#258 line 3, 5), light in Wright's poems frequently arrives laden with the full affect of the invisible. For example, the light in the poem "In Praise of Thomas Hardy" is like an unbearable assault from the heavens:

Each second the earth is struck hard
by four and a half pounds of sunlight.
Each second.
Try to imagine that.

No wonder deep shade is what the soul longs for,

And not, as we always thought, the light.

No wonder the inner life is dark. (*SHS* 27)

The force of this light represents the weight of profound, ultimate truths, to which the “shade” of ignorance or reprieve may be preferred. According to Gardner, who helpfully elucidates the resonances between Emily Dickinson’s and Wright’s poems of longing for “something unknowable” (Gardner 149), “Dickinson’s slant of light, coming and going according to its own ‘imperial’ whims, gives Wright a way of imagining the seen world’s brushes with what’s beyond it” (154). A change in light can signal the sudden presence of something intangible or a change in the “I”-figure’s perception, producing a feeling of celebration or gravity in response to a renewed sensitivity to the unseen. In “Singing Lesson” a “hard light” establishes a state of dread: “This is the executioner’s hour, ~ deep noon, hard light, / Everything edged and horizon-honed, / Windless and hushed, as though a weight were about to fall” (*ST* 69). I will focus on the way that effects of light conjure such moments of paralysed intensity, a conceit I call “crystallised time”, in Chapter Three of this thesis. In the current section of my thesis, I will explore in more detail how light operates as a symbol for the invisible.

The light in Wright’s poems often seems to come “from outside” (Gardner 154). He depicts sources of natural light as openings or windows into the beyond. For example, “Dead Color” sees “star-pieces” in the sky become “Windows, rapturous windows!” (*SC* 41); likewise, in the later poem “Inland Sea”, the stars of Orion are imagined as “Little windows of gold paste” in “the furred horizon / Whose waters have many doors, / Whose sky is a thousand panes of glass” (*ST* 5). In “Charles Wright and the 940 Locust Avenue Heraclitean Rhythm Band”, “Light is a doorway” that leads home (*BY* 54). The implication of this imagery is that there exists beyond the boundary of the sky a vaster, more enduring light that surrounds the world and gets through cracks in what is visible. “Opus Posthumous III” sees light described as seeping “coppery blue, ~ out of the upper right-hand corner of things” (*AP*

64); elsewhere, the “I”-figure expresses a desire to “Lift up that far corner of the landscape, ~ there, toward the west” to “Let some of that deep light in, the arterial kind” (*AP* 3).

As Santos discerns, light is “the only element that crosses with ease between this world and the next” in Wright’s poetry (155). It thus represents the earthly extension of that other reality. It evokes the appealing prospect of a higher power or ultimate reality beyond the limits of, but intervening in, the material world. In “Yellow Wings”, for example, light represents a promise of transcendence:

there's always a whitish light

edging the earth's offerings.

This is the lost, impermanent light

The soul is pulled toward, and longs for, deep in its cave,

Little.

This is the light its wings dissolve in

if it ever gets out from the underground. (SS 35)

This Platonic light is easy to associate with a higher power, divine glory, wisdom, influence and goodness (Goran 114). As stated in “Appalachian Book of the Dead III”, “Light [is] mind-of-Godish” (*AP* 40).

Moreover, the extension of this light into the visible world appears to manifest divine intellect in the act of actualising this world. In “Buffalo Yoga Coda I”, we are told that “In the high house of oblivion, there are many windows. / Through one of them, a light like the light / Now sliding across the meadow slides, ~ burst and perpetual” (*BY* 26). This “high house of oblivion”, with its “perpetual” light, is presumably heaven, imagined as a state of all-consuming union with the divine. It is hinted to be the source of the moonlight, a “hard light / That does not illuminate, but outlines and silhouettes” the scene (*BY* 26-27). That moonlight manifests the presence of the higher power as it forms and animates the world: “Inside its panes the snow falls, ~ defining and flame colored snow. / Through all the rest, no light shines, / Silence breeds and recalibrates, no waters whiffle, no wind” (*BY* 27). By

making the world visible and therefore “real”, light resembles in Wright’s poetry the function of some abiding power in bringing into being all that is and holding it in existence. “All things that are are lights” (*HF* 32), the poet-figure confides to his infant son in “Firstborn”, quoting Pound’s *Cantos*, which quotes John Scotus Eriugena. “From Eriugena’s Neoplatonic perspective”, explains Feng Lan, “the world is a theophany of divine radiation, in which God is light and his creations are lights; divine creation is thus God’s act of manifesting himself in his creatures” (176). The world as light and bathed in light upholds a logocentric worldview that sees all things contained within and presented by the “infinite understanding of God” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 11).

Yet the light that reveals things just as they are can also give an impression of the “vacancy” that undermines this logocentric view. In “Scar Tissue II”, for example, the “sunlight [is] a grainy subtraction” (*ST* 42). “What the light brings with it is a sense of what’s missing, the ‘nowhere’ it has drifted down from”, notes Gardner; “[i]t seems to ‘subtract’ or ‘peel away’ some portion of the visible” (155). If light embodies the powers of an abiding force, it also manifests the aloofness or absence of such a force, as we see in “Snake Eyes”, where “There is no consolation, it seems, there’s only light” (*BY* 63). It can also seem to embody the mind or attention of an entity that is indifferent: in “Back Yard Boogie Woogie”, the “Late February sunlight [is] indifferent as water to all the objects in it” (*AP* 39), while in “Scar Tissue II” the moonlight “doesn’t care how old we are, or where our age will take us” (*ST* 44). “Hard Dreams” explores light’s pitilessness:

In Caravaggio, for instance, there is a hard light

In the Maltese painting, *Beheading of St. John*,

right to left,

Which shows us that suffering’s inexact, diffused, and without a sigh,

It goes on and it goes on

.....

Dark birds, we peck at the crumbs of light

Incessantly

scattered across the stones and hard yard.

An incandescence covers us like a sky, that will

Not comfort us, a brightness

Beyond belief, peck peck,

peck peck peck. (*SHS* 74-75)

The light in this picture reveals the coldness of the otherworldly reality with which this world is suffused: a reality that, apparently, is “suffering” and meagre sustenance. The Absolute manifested by light is thus typically ambivalent.

Given his statement in *Hard Freight* that “All things that are are lights” (*HF* 32), it seems strange for the poet-figure to claim in *Littlefoot* that it has taken him seventy years to realise “that everything’s light” (*LF* 40). Yet the latter statement is indicative of the increasingly atheistic shift taking place in Wright’s later work; it conveys a realisation that light—the visible world—is everything there is. Here, the impression that “all things come from splendor” (*LF* 40) reveals not the agency of some awe-inspiring outside force as it may have done formerly but now points to the splendour of the self-perpetuating visible world and the absence of any “higher” light. While light is typically associated with insight, often in Wright’s poetry this insight amounts to seeing what is around you and understanding that this is all there is.

Light represents the beauty and vividness of the physical world, suffused with a truth that is, at least in appearance, bright. Yet by subverting expectations of warmth, insight and comfort, light imagery in Wright’s poetry also reinforces the ambiguity or absence of the invisible.

In many ways, Wright’s poetic portrayal of the invisible aligns it with qualities traditionally associated with the Absolute or the divine, such as being “above” and “beyond” the physical world and intangible but pervasive. When identified as an intelligence or God, the invisible can be held personally accountable for the natural order that seems at times

haphazard or malicious and for burdensome religious obligations, including childhood indoctrination and the ingrained habits of belief and guilt. Denying the existence of the invisible is a way of retaliating against the arbitrary deity and freeing oneself from such onerous and unrewarding moral conventions. Naturalistic metaphors, such as light and the colour blue, present a similar picture of the invisible's inescapable presence, splendour and sublimity, as well as its distantness and inscrutability. As should already be apparent, the invisible is thus a fraught reality, and one with which Wright's "I"-figure has a complex relationship.

The Invisible as Underlying Order

The Centre

In a 1985 interview, Wright describes his poetry as a "search for the small, still center of everything": "I don't know whether it exists", he states, "[but] I do want to get to that still, small, pinpoint of light at the center of the universe, where all things come together and all things intersect" (Interview by McBride 128). This small, still centre is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's "still point of the turning world" (*Four Quartets* 1.64), "Where past and future are gathered" (*Four Quartets* 1.67); Wright acknowledges as much in a later interview: "it's a state of experience you try to get back to. . . . Eliot's center of silence in the garden" (Interview by Gardner 101). The centre encompasses hiddenness, fundamentality and unity and is tantamount to the invisible; being "at the heart of things", it constitutes the essential truth of the world we see. As Ben Crenshaw notes, the object of the search in Wright's poetry is often "the ineffable core of materiality" (3184). This is the spiritual journey described indirectly in "Body and Soul II":

Here is the story of Hsuan Tsang.

A Buddhist monk, he went from Xian to Southern India

.....

In search of the Truth,

the heart of the heart of Reality,
 The Law that would help him escape it,
 And all its attendant and inescapable suffering.
 And he found it.

 And so I have, so I have,
 the seasons curling around me like smoke,
 Gone to the end of the earth and back without a sound. (*SHS 77-79*)

The poem ends here with an anticlimax after apparently building towards a statement of discovery. It implies that, unlike Hsuan Tsang, who discovered the “heart of the heart of Reality”, the speaker is yet to have “found it” (*SHS 77*), but that he nonetheless seeks the same thing.

Wright depicts “that still, small, pinpoint of light” (Interview by McBride 128) at the centre as the crystallisation of being, something that resists variation; in “Looking Around III” it is the image “Inside the image inside the image . . . / Crystalline, pristine” (*SHS 10*), and in “Snake Eyes” it is “the untasteable, ~ the radiant root of all things, / The unimaginary part of what is unimaginable” (*BY 63*). This centre is immutable—the “still, unwavering point ~ under the world’s waves” (*BZ 5*). Once again, we see the invisible defined through negations because of its otherness: the “Essential stillness at the centre of things” is the “Stillness of all that we do not do, that we are not” (*BY 59*). Like the idea of God in Wright’s poetry, “The Light at the Root of All Things” (“The Light...” *OT*) alludes to the potential absence of an affirmative Absolute:

Such emptiness at the heart,
 such emptiness at the heart of being,
 Fills us in ways we can’t lay claim to,
 Ways immense and without names (*CH 17-18*)

This vacancy at the heart of reality is, by association, inherent in all things:

In all beauty there lies
Something inhuman, something you can't know
In the pith and marrow of every root
Of every bloom; in the blood-seam
Of every rock; in the black lung of every cloud
The seed, the infinitesimal seed
That dooms you, that makes you nothing,
Feeds on its self-containment and grows big (*BL* 52)

This poem depicts a centre that everything has in common, rather than the centre of reality as a whole. It takes the foreignness and otherness of the invisible and makes them fundamental to all things. This centre is something “inhuman” and unknowable, and predetermines destruction.

As the story of Hsuan Tsang in “Body and Soul II” makes clear, the centre is also “The Law” (*SHS* 77), the defining order of the world. Throughout his poetry, Wright alludes to a sense that “At the horned heart of the labyrinth, ~ the unsayable has its say” (*CH* 42): an impression that the invisible is inherent in the visible world and exerts its influence from deep within things. This is in contrast with the perspective on the invisible that renders it a kind of distant Absolute that controls the world of human life from afar. Yet the idea of the centre does not allude to an alternative reality to the one invoked by an Absolute; it constitutes an alternative perspective of that same reality. Although immanent in the world itself rather than ordained from above, the invisible as fundamental order remains ambiguous and potentially vacant. Moreover, as something essential to all things, this inescapable order implicates the poet-figure’s beloved landscapes in the ambivalence and possible cruelty of the powers-that-be.

“Form” in Wright’s poetry constitutes an independent reality akin to the prevailing order of things, which expresses itself through natural structures. The unvarying rules of

nature are also frequently imaged as the workings of some kind of machine. Formal artistic arrangements, such as music, painting and the written word, are also analogous in Wright's poems to the invisible's ordering of the visible world.

Form and Structure

"Form" and "structure" seem at times interchangeable in Wright's poetry, but there is a difference: form is Neoplatonic (though rarely capitalised in Wright's poetry) and tantamount to the invisible. Structure, on the other hand, denotes form's imperfect expression in the landscape and art. As Merriman discerns, Wright's "form" is at once deific (250) and "an impersonal, necessary, non-ontological phenomenon at the heart of everything"; it combines "a Platonic ideal", a rule of organisation and "a mysterious power" (233). This idea of form is related to Wright's theories of poetics, which he has expounded in interviews and prose writings since the mid-1980s (around the same time that the word began to appear in his poetry). These are essential sources for an understanding of the word "form" in his poems.

In Wright's terms, form can refer to established poetic forms, which he shies from, or to a more general sense of organisation and deliberate arrangement: "Form is how you organize it" (Interview by Ellis 154), he states. The latter is a condition of all good poetry according to Wright because form is "the transubstantiation of content" (*HL* 3). It is clear throughout *Half-life* that Wright sees the content of poetry as a given—"Poetry is always transcribing from the invisible" (*HL* 23)—with variations in form being the poet's only means of originality. Moreover, form is the proper expression of the poet's true subject, "the secret of the universe" (Interview by Ellis 153-54), which itself amounts to the "form" of things. Wright states as much in a 1986 interview:

[T]o me the most vital question in poetry is the question of form. Form lies at the heart of all poetical problems. . . . I mean Form. UFO—Ultimate Formal Organization, if you wish. That may be extrapoetical in some sense. . . . Form [means] Organization. The secret of the universe is Form, even if

poems are not the secret of the universe. They're only clues to the secret of the universe. (Interview by Ellis 153-54)

This capital-F Form here clearly alludes to Plato's Forms, although, as Stephen Cushman points out, Wright's "Ultimate Formal Organisation" is also suggestive of *Logos*, "the principle of order within the universe" (225). In relation to both poetry and the universe, form appears pre-existent. In "Meditation on Form and Measure", we are told that form and measure aspire to "become one", measure being a term for poetic metre while form denotes the "splendour" that lies behind such "verbal architecture" (BZ 26). Form thus names the invisible, that unifying principle of the world that the poet-figure ventures to approximate and expose through poetry. "I've talked about one thing for thirty years, ~ and said it time and again", he tells us in "Sky Diving", "I mean the still, small point where all things meet; / I mean the form that moves the sun and the other stars" (NB 201).

If form, as Costello puts it, is a "disembodied" "ideal", structure is "embodied form" ("Charles Wright's *Via Negativa*" 345). Outside of his poetry, Wright uses "structure" to refer to the arrangement of a specific poem or its parts. For example, he insists that "Form imposes, structure allows" (BZ 62; cf. "The Art of Poetry" 10), aligning form with the strict ideal and structure with freedom in realisation, or the adaptation of the rule to the particular. In Wright's poems, "structure" refers to earthly structures, "the landscape's harsh marks, ~ the structures of the everyday" (BZ 58) that approximate the overarching form. Costello sees Wright's statement, "Form is finite. Structure is infinite" (HL 6) as atypical, a reversal of the hierarchy of form and structure that sees earthly forms subjected to a higher Structure. However, this statement is not an exception but actually denotes the singularity of ultimate form in the face of the infinite diversity of structures it begets. While "March Journal" reiterates that "Form is finite", this finite form is now "an undestroyable hush over all things" (ZJ 21), evocative of one vast and pervasive influence. A certain amount of substitution of terms does take place in Wright's poetry; for example, when we are told in "Freezing Rain" that "There is an order beyond form" (NB 194), the lowercase-f "form" does

seem to describe something more akin to structure, such as appearances or forms (plural). Yet the metaphysics that underlies these terms—that endless natural variation, or structure/s, are produced by an overarching ideal order—persists throughout Wright’s poetry.

In “Scar Tissue” we are told that “The urge toward form is the urge toward God” (*ST* 37). Form suggests order and beauty, staves off chaos and is inherently satisfying and so evokes a higher good. In “Buffalo Yoga”, it is clear that form names the “counterpart” of the visible world that provides the wholeness sought by the spiritual pilgrim:

The itchings for ultimate form,
the braiding of this and that
Together in some abstract design
Is what we’re concerned about,
A certain inevitability, a certain redress.
.....
We wait for the consolation of the commonplace,
The belt of light to buckle us in.
We wait for the counterpart,
the secretive music
That only we can hear, or think that only we can hear. (*BY* 15)

It seems that the discovery of such an ultimate form would provide “consolation” by answering the seeker’s desire for the “inevitability” and “redress” of the “commonplace” world (*BY* 15)—a desire for coherence and rightness. The perception of necessary organisation makes something pleasing out of the world’s complexity. Thus, in “Night Rider”, “Everything order and form out back, everything in its place” is described as praiseworthy (*SHS* 24), while in “December Journal” we are told:

Abstraction, the highest form, is the highest good:
Everything’s beautiful that stays in its due order,
Every existing thing can be praised

when compared with nothingness. (*XA* 16)

Nonetheless, if the “urge toward form is the urge toward God”, the God represented by form is yet again an ambiguous and unforthcoming one:

The urge toward form is the urge toward God,
perfection of either
Unhinged, unutterable.
Hot wind in the high country, an east wind, prairie wind.
Unutterable in cathedral or synagogue.
Unhinged, like low wind in high places.
Wind urge and word urge,
last form and final thing, the O.

Great mouth. Toothless, untouched.
Into whose night sky we all descend.
Star-like we list there
Restructured, forms within forms.
Meanwhile, the morning’s sonogram
reveals us just as we are (*ST* 37)

Here in “Scar Tissue”, form is so ethereal and abstract it resembles inarticulate wind and open space. It is imagined as an “O”, a simple geometric form that signifies wholeness and perfection but also the Omega, or final thing: the wordless, toothless mouth of the void into which we fall. In this poem, form is dark like the night sky, invisible and unknowable: “blackness, the form of forms” (*CH* 76), it is called elsewhere. Union with this form, perhaps in death, seems to amount to an “unutterable” loss of self as one is “restructured” and detached from the reality of the physical world, in which actual structures are patently manifest in the morning light (*ST* 37). Thus, while “One longs for order and permanence, / An order as in the night sky just north of Mt. Caribou”, we are told in “Polaroids”, “There’s

been no cure . . . and no / Ecstasy in transcendent form” (*SHS* 34). The invisible as form, as in all its guises, is not apprehensible and does not deliver the satisfaction of human longings associated with it.

There is a possibility that this ultimate reality is imaginary. Costello describes structure in Wright’s poetry as “a mode of mental assertion and creation” (“Charles Wright’s *Via Negativa*” 345) and thus as a projection of the artist’s will for form on to natural chaos. This is true to an extent: the emphasis on landscape rather than nature in Wright’s poetry calls attention to the human gaze and artifice implicit in all art, implying that a certain degree of aesthetic arrangement and interpretation has taken place to “frame” the scene in question and make it meaningful in human terms (McClatchy, “*Ars Longa*” 106; Slicer 174). Insofar as form is a human projection, the apparently significant order of the landscape’s structures could be attributed to the imagination and/or language that frames the image (not to mention the tangible influence humans have on any populated landscape), as distinct from any pre-ontological reality or form that may be at work. Indeed, many of Wright’s dealings with the invisible imply that it may be illusory or at least unverifiable. Costello elsewhere suggests that “Wright[’s poetry] defers questions of whether the invisible exists outside of poetic enactment” (“Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi”). Yet the correspondence between poetic form and Ultimate Formal Organization, particularly within the poems themselves, means that there can be no distinction between the poet’s formal decisions and the presence of a pre-ontological form. There is a sense in which the poet-figure’s perceptive eye, by amalgamating the variety of natural phenomena, creates the order that it perceives. With no outside of the poem, no outside of subjectivity, there is no way to verify this impression. These limits contribute to his experience of being separated from and unable to know the underlying truth.

Mechanism

Wright often images “the form that moves the sun and the other stars” (*NB* 201) as something mechanical, quite distinct from “the Love which moves the sun and the other

stars” identified at the end of the *Paradiso* (*Par.* 33.145). This metaphor posits an impersonal ultimate reality: a “sure machine that makes all things work” (*ZJ* 96). “Saturday Afternoon”, for example, describes the “Creaking of wheels endemic under the earth, ~ slick pistil and piston, / Pulleys raising the platforms up, and pulling them down” (*BY* 57). The patterning of nature seems indicative of an underlying rule applied meticulously and unvaryingly. This in turn gives an impression that the functioning of the world is driven by something automatic, like “engines inside the roses” (*SC* 57) and “little engines of change at work / Unexpectedly in the atmosphere ~ as well as our lives” (*LF* 66). Such mechanistic metaphors evoke a prime mover that, although it is not deliberate and cruel like the spider, is equally unsympathetic and equally primed for our destruction. This is clear in “Well, the Cuckoo Is a Pretty Bird”:

And where’s [the clouds’] huge, invisible engine pulling them

This scattered, encroaching afternoon?

Like us, I guess, into dissolution,

like us, elsewhere, into the raven claws of the wind. (*OT*)

Mechanistic metaphor emphasises the cruel facts of entropy and mortality. The world ticks ominously like a “steady clock” (*BZ* 34) counting down to our death day: the shadows moving “Slowly, like hands on a massive clock, / . . . to bring us back / Tick-tock in their black sack, tick-tock in their soft black sack” (*LF* 53). Mechanistic metaphor depicts the invisible as an inflexible system that directs us towards our inevitable ruin.

Music

Music is another recurring analogy for the order of the world in Wright’s poetry. In “Language Journal”, that order is described as “the music of what’s real, / The plainsong of being [that] is happening all the while”, “Out of sight, out of earshot, along the vertical axis / Of meaning” (*XA* 23). Similarly, in “Buffalo Yoga” “the counterpart” of the material world is described as “the secretive music / That only we can hear, or we think that only we can hear” (*BY* 15). This music with which the whole of reality resonates is reminiscent of the

music of the spheres or *musica universalis*, an inherently beautiful order. Music casts the world's design as harmonious, both figuratively, in terms of being concordant and pleasant, and literally, in terms of being sweet-sounding.

Likening natural processes to music also emphasises their regularity. “‘Don’t play too long, don’t play too loud, and don’t play the melody.’ / Nature’s deaf to this beautiful injunction”, the speaker jokes in Wright’s recent poem “Everything Passes, But Is it Time?” (2012). The injunction comes from William Matthews’ poem “The Accompanist” (178) and the implication is that nature does not improvise in the way a jazz musician would. Thus, the metronomic movement of “Trees swaying to unknown music ~ that only they can hear” in “Basin Creek Sundown” measures the regulated “movement of all things” (SS 33). Music is analogous to the seeming blueprint that governs the landscape, the “Rhythm [that] comes from the roots of the world, ~ rehearsed and expandable” (ZJ 20).

The first instance of the musical metaphor appears in Wright’s early prose poem “Nocturne”, which sees mysterious music emanating from the trees like the echo of a lost golden era:

Occasional chords from a ghostly lute, it is true, will sometimes come down
the same Alpine wind that continues to herd the small waters into the shore;
or a strayed traveller, or some misguided pilgrim might, of a summer
evening, if he stands quite still and says nothing, imagine he hears the slight
offrhythm of some hexameter line deep in the olive grove, as the slither of
night birds moves toward the darker trees. But that is all. (GRH 28)

This motif repeats occasionally in Wright’s later poetry: in “The Southern Cross”, with “the faint notes of piano music back in the woods” (SC 64), for example, and much later in “Circumference Is Only the Half of It”, where “music comes from the trees, harmonica music, that breathy shadow” (OT). In the poem, “‘Send Not For Whom the Bell Tolls, It Tolls For Thee’”, no music but rather bells can be heard pealing in the woods:

No monastery bells in the high country,

but the woods ring.

It's bell time, and twilight, and far back in the forest,
The rhythmless chime of the night gong.

And one is drawn to it, as a penitent to the temple (*OT*)

Just as the lute music in “Nocturne” does not come from the ancient Bacchanalia that, we are told, have long since dispersed, these bell tones do not come from “monastery bells”, for there are none “in the high country” (“Send Not” *OT*). Such ghostly notes are the evocation of something sacred that is long gone or was never there at all, but that still elicits reverence from Wright’s “misguided pilgrim” (*GRH* 28) and exerts a pull on him. If the bells are funeral bells—as the allusion to John Donne’s sermon XVII suggests—their ringing also represents the inescapable law of mortality reverberating in nature.

Generally, a tune suggests a more auspicious order than the grinding of gears that attends mechanistic metaphors. This is particularly the case in Wright’s earlier volumes, up to and including *The Southern Cross*, in which the music of being is heavenly music. In “Cancer Rising”, “The music, like high water, rises inexorably . . . / Toward heaven . . . / Where all fall to the same riff” (*BL* 14), while in “Homage to Paul Cézanne”, “The music of everything” emanates from a source of brilliant light (*SC* 4). In “Holy Thursday”, a landscape that hints at, but cannot sustain, an impression of godliness is interspersed with traces of imagined or not-quite music: “the *ooo ooo* of a mourning dove”, “Canticles [that] rise in spate from the bleeding heart” of the landscape, “the flies['] drone”, the hum of a mosquito, “four crows / On a eucalyptus limb, speaking in tongues”, a “Splatter of mockingbird notes, a brief trill from the jay”, and “susurrations” of leaves (*SC* 16-7). This is a landscape that “doesn’t believe in God” (*SC* 16), yet the final impression of the poem is that “Angels / Are counting cadence, their skeletal songs / What the hymns say, the first page and the last” (*SC* 18). In other words, it seems that a pervasive, connective sacred order, represented as music, resounds in the garden landscape even after God’s death.

In “Delta Traveller”, the speaker rejects religious images, but the fundamental truths they convey resonate through the whole natural world nonetheless:

If the wafer of light offends me,
If the split tongue in the snake’s mouth offends me,
I am not listening. They make the sound,
Which is the same sound, of the ant hill,
The hollow trunk, the fruit of the tree.
It is the Echo, the one transmitter of things:
Transcendent and inescapable,
It is the cloud, the mosquito’s buzz,
The trickle of water across the leaf’s vein. (*BL* 47)

The sun depicted as a “wafer of light” evokes the Eucharist as the redemptive body of the Son, while the snake and “the fruit of the tree” evoke original sin (*BL* 47). It is thus the moral order of sin and salvation that sounds in the landscape and offends the poem’s speaker, who would rather not listen but cannot escape the traces of a religious law.

Music is not necessarily suggestive of a benevolent world order, however. It may be that “some dark musician chord[s] the sacred harp” (*SHS* 47). Alternatively, discordant music reveals a chilling dearth of artistry in the world or the absence of a player. In “Music for a Midsummer’s Eve”, time is likened to “an untuned harmonium / That Muzaks our nights and days” (*SS* 67). This cynically implies that time passes like irritating music of the kind played in elevators or by buskers on street corners, and that the world demonstrates no capacity for variation or surprise. Similarly, in *Littlefoot* the stars are likened to perforations on a piano roll for an automated “player piano” that can be operated with little effort and no musical skill:

Just east of midnight,
the north sky scrolls from right to left,
A dark player piano.

No stopping the music, east to west,

no stopping it. (*LF* 27)

This imagery speaks to a sense of the invisible as an unvarying, mechanical system rather than a thing of beauty and subtlety.

The music of nature is always one step removed from the musician or composer, who is implied but whose person remains unseen and whose apparent message or purpose must remain enigmatic. Thus, as is the case with other emblems of the invisible, music is frequently a marker or trace of some meaning that remains distant and unknowable. Perceiving the world's tune alone does not reveal its significance, which remains bright and vacant:

From the top . . . Beginning in ignorance, we stick to the melody—

Knowledge, however, is elsewhere,

a tune we've yet to turn to,

Its syllables scrubbed with light, its vestibules empty. (*CH* 59)

"Star Turn" begins, "Nothing is quite as secretive as the way the stars . . . whisper their little songs" about the origins of the world: "the alpha and beta ones, the ones from the great fire" (*AP* 7). Yet in the later poem "Charles Wright and the 940 Locust Avenue Heraclitean Rhythm Band" it is apparent that the stars "are not singing their watery songs to us" (*BY* 55); thus, humans are decentred as the world's audience and the meaning of the world becomes impersonal, while the music of reality plays, as it were, over our heads. It may be that the world's music is, in fact, meaningless: "The song of the north wind fills our ears with no meaning", we are told in "The Secret of Poetry" (*SHS* 24), as the speaker reflects that nothing profound emerges from the landscape. It may even be that the impression of musicality is itself a projection or illusion; as the speaker asks in "Hard Dreams", "who's to say / If the drumbeats we hear at night are real, ~ or merely those of our hearts?" (*SHS* 75).

The pleasing aural effect of poetry can be likened to music and, like form, musicality is a principle of poetics that conveys meaning and emphasises design. As critics have noted, the musicality of Wright's own primarily syllabic poetry¹³ lends it authority and makes it cohere (Muske-Dukes 83; Vendler, "The Transcendent 'I'" 9). In "Confessions of a Song and Dance Man", the poet-figure is presented as one attuned to reality's innate musicality:

The wind is my music, the west wind, and cold water
In constant motion.
I have an ear
For such things, and the sound of the goatsucker at night.
And the click of twenty-two cents in my pants pocket
That sets my feet to twitching,
that clears space in my heart. (*SHS* 15)

The implication is that, just as poetic form is crucial to the poet's depiction of the invisible as form, his verse mirrors the inherent melodiousness of the world. The influence of the poet's ear on his poetic composition is analogous to the ordering of the world (ostensibly by an outside composer) to reveal an intentional design, although this may just be a pleasing delusion:

A shallow thinker, I'm tuned
to the music of things,
The conversation of birds in the dusk-damaged trees,
The just-cut grass in its chalky moans,
The disputations of dogs, night traffic, I'm all ears
To all this and half again.

¹³ Wright states, "I count every syllable and every stress in every line I write, not to make them conform to each other, but to make sure they differ and that they get mixed up" (*HL* 49). He primarily writes lines with odd numbers of syllables and has a preference for seven-syllable lines because these approximate but avoid more traditional metres (Interview by Genoways 446).

And so I like it out here,
 Late spring, off-colors but firming up, at ease among half things.
 At ease because there is no overwhelming design
I'm sad heir to,
 At ease because the dark music of what surrounds me
 Plays to my misconceptions, and pricks me, and plays on. (*SHS* 50)

The musicality of a scene in Wright's poetry expresses mood, much as light does, and it is frequently sad: take, for example, the "Mournful cadences from the clouds" in "Dog Yoga" (*SC* 34) and the "melancholy music" of February, like the "grind of bone / On bone", in "Stray Paragraphs in February, Year of the Ox" (*AP* 3). Such music adds to the common impression in Wright's poetry that the world is subject to inevitable decline, leading towards death and undoing. This is the case in "Buffalo Yoga", where music marks the passing of time towards evening, which is further analogous to the passing of life:

A misericordia in the wind,
Summer's symphony
 Hustling the silence horizonward,
 Black keys from Rimbaud's piano in the Alps struck hard,
 Then high tinkles from the many white ones.
 Then all of it gone to another room of the sky.

 Thus do we pass our mornings,
or they pass us, waving,
 In dark-colored clothes and sad farewells,
 The music of melancholy short shrift on our tongues,
 Slow sift for the hourglass. (*BY* 15)

This is a musical order that propels everything "horizonward", or towards its end. It is a "misericordia", a merciful death-dealing dagger, and the landscape is depicted as though it is

attending our funerals. Thus, the passing of time is a “music of melancholy”—the enactment of our deaths—and allows only time enough for “short shrift”, or confession before execution (*BY* 15). Similarly, in “Nine Panel Yaak River Screen”, the music that carries us onward eases us into death:

The intermittent fugues of the creek,
saying yes, saying no,
Master music of sunlight
And black-green darkness under the spruce and tamaracks,
Lull us and take our breath away. (*SHS* 55)

The perception of music projects an impression of order and of a composer, and so can be hopeful—embodying the assumption that a world with a design has a purpose—or it can be melancholic if that order is perceived to be fatal and devised for our destruction. From the latter perspective, the world’s music is ominous, haunting us with reminders of our mortality: a “distant thunder chord ~ that shudders our lives. / Black notes. The black notes / That follow our footsteps like blood from a cut finger” (*BZ* 29). In this case, time is a “dark music / That scours us, that empties us out”, its notes are “Notes of astonishment, black notes to leave our lives by” (*CH* 90).

Painting

While musicality provides an aural analogy for the patterns, beauty and affect of the perceived underlying order, painting provides Wright’s poetry with a visual metaphor for the world’s organisation, particularly its interplay of material presence and suggestive absence. As Costello has noted, the tension between figures and negative space in a painting is comparable to the interplay of the visible and the invisible in Wright’s poetry (“Charles Wright’s *Via Negativa*” 325). Paintings illustrate the constant bearing of the invisible on what is seen. For example, in “Thinking of Winter at the Beginning of Summer”, Milton Avery’s and Wolf Kahn’s very different but equally vibrant landscapes—“Nightdreams and

daymares, ~ pastures and woods that burn our eyes” (*BZ* 54)—seem to capture the landscape’s momentousness, as though their intensity made visible the unearthly significance of landscape. In *Littlefoot* we are told that Renaissance painter Fra Angelico “gathered the form from the air, and gave it flesh” (*LF* 63), revealing in his paintings the eternal truths that govern reality in an almost divine act of creation. Painting is an example of artistry akin to the poet’s that reveals the invisible through the contours of the sensible world (Kimberly 87).

The poet-figure’s gaze in Wright’s work is unvaryingly aimed at the landscape, material objects and himself, mimicking the genres of modern painting: landscape, still-life, and self-portrait (Costello, “Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi”). He confronts the same challenge that certain painters faced, of capturing a sense of the physical world’s enigmatic other. Wright’s preferred painters are apparently those who emphasise negative space and incorporate ambiguous and/or white spaces into their pictures so as to evoke that which the picture cannot contain; they include artists Mark Rothko, Paul Cézanne, Giorgio Morandi and Piet Mondrian. Wright has compared himself to Paul Cézanne in that his artistic medium is able only to reveal the absence or inconceivability of ultimate truths:

he regarded the colors as numinous essences, beyond which he “knew”
nothing, and the “diamond zones of God” remained white. . . . Change
“colors” into “words” and “white” to “blank” and you have something I
believe. (*HL* 37)

Similarly, Wright is inspired by the sketches and landscapes of Italian artist Giorgio Morandi, which he describes as tentative outlines of “the unseen”—“maps, trail markings, sand sketches from an absolute”—in which “what is not there is at least as powerful and tactile as what is” (*HF* 9). In Wright’s poetry, it is clear that these painters draw attention to the world’s abiding negative principles of absence, darkness, Godlessness and emptiness:

Morandi’s line

Drawn on the unredemptive air, Picasso’s cut

Like a laser into the dark hard of the mystery,

Cézanne with his cross-tooth brush and hook,
And sad, immaculate Rothko,
whose line was no line at all,

His last light crusted and weighed down,
holes within holes,
This canvas filled with an emptiness, this one half full . . .
Like the sky over Locust Avenue. Like the grass. (*ZJ* 27-28)

The invisible, which is immaterial and makes its presence felt through intermediaries or absences, finds a unique counterpart in that which is literally left blank in (or left out of) visual art.

Morandi is the painter who appears most often in Wright's poetry. According to Costello, Morandi represents "an imagination akin to [Wright's] own, interested in 'the metaphysics of the quotidian' (*Halflife* 22) and drawn to the everyday for the sense of mystery it arouses" ("Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi"). Morandi's almost unbearably sparse and claustrophobic still-life paintings depict similar subjects repeatedly: bottles, jugs, bowls and vases crowded together on bare surfaces in front of blank walls. The objects are "markers of existence" (Kimberly 108), but, as Costello perceives, "what they suggest . . . is the form of an absence, the hollowed-out quality of the substantial world and its disembodied outline" ("Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi").

This effect is achieved in the poem "Still-life with Stick and Word", which is based on a Morandi painting that is predominantly white (*Natura Morta*). The poem's "I" focuses on simple everyday things—a stick and the word "white"—rather than the dark unknowable expanse of his future, yet these simple things, like Morandi's arrangement of pale objects, seem only to delineate an overarching absence and highlight the arbitrariness and emptiness of material structures: "light forms / Bottles arise, emptiness opens its corridors / Into the entrances and endless things that form bears" (*CH* 84). Objects like these reveal the negative

entity that is the invisible. Something similar happens in the poem “Morandi”, in which another still-life painting awakens an ache for fullness and an awareness of nothingness:

I’m talking about stillness, the hush
Of a porcelain center bowl, a tear vase, a jug.

I’m talking about space, which is one-sided,
Unanswered, and left to dry.

I’m talking about paint, about shape, about the void
These objects sentry for, and rise from. (*CT* 16)

Morandi’s objects seem to come from nothing, and their “sentry[ing] for” “the void” could be read as either their pointing it out or their preventing access to it. They are suggestive of an absent Absolute. The space of the painting is “one-sided, / Unanswered”: it demands filling or balancing out but suggests that the world has no Other Side (*CT* 16).

Morandi’s still-lives have plain backgrounds and reveal no details of a context outside the frame. As we are told in “Chinese Journal”, he lets the “presence of what surrounds” his compositions—a blank background—“increase the presence / Of what is missing, ~ keeping its distance and measure” (*ZJ* 96). In Wright’s poems, the blank negative space in these paintings reveals the persistence of the invisible as “what is not there”, giving shape to the things that constitute our lives but persisting as “the emptiness at the heart of being” (*CH* 17-18):

Our lives, it turns out, are still-lives, glass bottles and fruit,
Dead animals, flowers,
the edges of this and that
Which drop off, most often, to indeterminate vacancy. (*SHS* 72)

Morandi's paintings illustrate the way our lives, like the objects in a still-life painting, fall away into nothingness against a backdrop of the unknown, unsupported by a meaningful frame of reference. If his still-lives are understood as reductive models of the order of the universe, his pictures' austerity seems to represent the absence of any redeeming truth or ground of being; Morandi's is a "line / Drawn on unredemptive air" (ZJ 27). It seems that Morandi depicts the world much as Wright does: as formed and haunted by a negative principle.

As Bond points out, a fixation on physical objects that evokes a sense of the invisible can also be recognised in Cézanne's paintings. The investment of material things with supernatural significance appears to be the aspect of Cézanne's work that Wright memorialises in his "Homage to Paul Cézanne", wherein inanimate things make the dead present. Yet, although Cézanne's still-life paintings inspired Morandi's, in Wright's poetry the allegorical power of Cézanne's work comes not from his still-lives, so lush and lifelike in comparison with Morandi's, but from his vibrantly coloured landscapes. As James McCorkle notes, "Cézanne's method of the accumulation of moments (and perspectives) parallels Wright's poetic craft" (202). Wright's poems are cumulative rather than sequential, composed from disconnected impressions and incidents. His way of assembling a poem from "tonal blocks, in tonal units that work off one another" is consciously inspired by Cézanne's use of planes of colour to assemble a landscape (HL 20). One such landscape, "Bend in the Road", graces the cover of *The World of the Ten Thousand Things* (in which the "Homage" appears), white canvas clearly visible between brush strokes. When it comes to representing the invisible, Cézanne exemplifies the way that representation and representable things both point to and obstruct the negative or blank space of the invisible (Bond). This is clear in part four of the "Homage to Paul Cézanne":

The dead are cadmium blue.

We spread them with palette knives in broad blocks and planes.

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.

And so we are come between, and cry out,

And stare up at the sky and its cloudy planes (SC 6)

Here, the visualisation of what is absent sees details accumulate like patches of colour; these extend upward but are “terraced” like purgatory, constructing not a stairway to heaven but an arduous detour. Thus, “we” are brought no closer to the sky but are left to stare up at it. Once again, inclusion apparently misrepresents the invisible, whereas exclusion evokes it more accurately. The heavens’ “cloudy planes” are a blankness akin to the gaps in Cézanne’s landscapes, and this white space best represents the invisible Absolute, whose distant presence and pervasive absence are one and the same.

Focusing on the visible at the conspicuous cost of the invisible is Wright’s way, according to Spiegelman, “of both allowing the visible to stand in for the invisible and of reminding us of the unbridgeable gap between them” (*How Poets See* 102). We are told in “Yard Journal”:

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 body they all rise into the light (*ZJ* 4)

Exclusion is a form of representation that draws attention to what is beyond representation while reproducing the ways in which the invisible “appears” to us as the pervasive backdrop or foundation of all things. Such purposeful exclusions as Cézanne’s patches of black canvas and Morandi’s limited field and commonplace objects inform the composition of Wright’s poetry. For example, Emma Kimberly senses in the not-quite-metrical, odd syllable count of Wright’s lines “the echo of something we hardly realise has been left out” (69). Costello elucidates thoroughly how Wright’s “lowrider” line resembles Morandi’s painted line in that it “maximize[s] negative space” that “draws attention to the unseen” (“Charles Wright, Giorgio Morandi”), while for Brian Henry the same line creates “visual blocks in the manner of Cézanne” (“New Scaffolding” 103). Spread out across the page but replete with gaps, Wright’s line incorporates white space and a tension between presence and absence.

Two more painters that are described as attuned to the ineffable in Wright’s poetry are Mondrian and Rothko. Mondrian’s famous neoplasticist paintings, which seem to pursue pure form and cast off all particularity, represent in Wright’s poems not a honing of knowledge to a core truth but a departure from knowledge, the shedding of detail to a point of incomprehensible abstraction:

As Mondrian knew,

Art is the image of an image of an image,

More vacant, more transparent

With each repeat and slough:

one skin, two skins, it comes clear,

An old idea not that old. (*CH* 85)

Art is shown not to capture the invisible but to mark its disappearance and intangibility. Although Mondrian is described as someone who left nothing out, it seems that part of the everything that he included was “the destructive element”, the landscape’s

deviation from the ultimate form. His painting copies from the landscape, which copies from the invisible, losing something with each imitation. This obfuscation of ultimate truth sees the “gods and their names” disappear (*BZ 62*), to be replaced only by clouds. This is reiterated in “Sitting at Dusk in the Back Yard after the Mondrian Retrospective”:

Mondrian thought the destructive element in art

Much too neglected.

Landscape, of course, pursues it savagely.

And that’s what he meant:

You can’t reconstruct without the destruction being built in;

There is no essence unless

nothing has been left out. (*BZ 62*)

Wright’s poet-figure sees himself undertaking a similar project to Mondrian, namely “the slow destruction of form / So as to bring it back resheveled, reorganised” (*BZ 62*). The fanciful and ephemeral impressions in Wright’s poems serve to conceal form, much as Mondrian’s departure from recognisable objects does. The “destruction of form” in the structures of the landscape as in Wright’s poetry and Mondrian’s art brings it back in the authentic form of an absence.

If Mondrian’s “Black lines and white spaces” are “an emptiness primed with reds and blues” that resembles the landscape’s “architecture of withdrawal” (*BZ 63*), Rothko’s enigmatic “multiform” paintings are entirely apophatic, portraying the utter inexpressibility of the invisible:

Lonesomeness. Morandi, Cézanne, it’s all about lonesomeness.

And Rothko. Especially Rothko.

Separation from what heals us

beyond painting, beyond art.

Words and paint, black notes, white notes.

Music and landscape; music, landscape and sentences.

Gestures for which there is no balm, no intercession.

Two tone fields, horizon a line between abysses,

Generally white, always speechless. (BZ 6)

This passage from “Apologia Pro Vita Sua” suggests that Morandi’s and Cézanne’s works express the “loneliness” of life in a world in which the invisible is an absence, but in Rothko’s paintings this absence is absolute. The invisible exceeds painting and all forms of representation, including language, landscape and music, all of which are failed gestures towards an absent presence. Rothko’s paintings are thus a visual representation of “distance and wordlessness” (BY 39). With his refusal to signify, he points to the inadequacy of all signifiers. Even Wright’s favoured natural, artistic, religious, musical and linguistic metaphors are revealed to be “pretty tomfoolery” in “Homage to Mark Rothko”:

Form cannot be deconstructed or be annihilated, you said.

The communion of saints,

desire and its aftermath,

Chalice and chasuble, bread and wine—

Just sonar of purification, imprints,

pretty tomfoolery.

Whatever *it* is, it’s beyond all this, you said.

And painting and language and music.

Stars are the first pages, you said, in The Book of Unknowing.

Behind them are all the rest.

Form is eternal and exists unwreckable, past repair, you said. (BY 39)

There is no meaningful gesture available to the artist here, just muteness in the face of sheer being and its incomprehensible totality. “Whatever *it* is” is not present in any human artistry or in the daily landscape but perhaps in “all that’s missing in all of that” (BY 39), in the ways

that it exceeds these structures and all understanding. Rothko's paintings represent the unrepresentability of the invisible other that Wright's poetry takes as its major theme.

Text and Language

In Wright's poetry, writing constitutes a system of inscription akin to the underlying law of the invisible, although mere language is impotent in terms of articulating or providing access to that law. The motif of the world as a text or speech appears throughout Wright's body of work. It incorporates an inherent hierarchy of texts that resembles the hierarchy of form over structure. The poet's human language is inferior to the "language", or structures, of the everyday material world, which it mirrors crudely and aspires to recreate. Superior to both is the divine language, the inaccessible truth behind the world's text, which transcends all things. This hierarchy is set out in the sestet "The Ghost of Walter Benjamin Walks at Midnight", which reads in full:

The world's an untranslatable language
without words or parts of speech.
It's a language of objects
Our tongues can't master,
but which we are the ardent subjects of.
If tree is tree in English,
and *albero* in Italian,
That's as close as we can come
To divinity, the language that circles the earth
and which we'll never speak. (SS 41)

In Wright's poetry, language is a metaphor for the world that encompasses both an impression of meaningful order and a sense of the impotence of human description that cannot touch the underlying truth of reality. It is a complex metaphor that alludes to but also

problematizes the classical and Christian tradition of envisioning the world as a “book of nature”, in which one might read the coherent law of the world or God. In Wright’s poetry, the idea of the world as a text or utterance raises the question of whether it conveys a message and implies an author or speaker; it explores the notion of “naming”, challenging the correspondence between language and realities; and it grapples with issues of legibility and translatability that draw into question the intended audience of the world and the limits of human knowledge. Furthermore, Wright’s hierarchy of languages resonates with the hierarchy of the spoken word over the written word that sustains a logocentric worldview, as elucidated by Derrida, and reveals some of the same failings of that worldview. Each of these elements will be considered in the pages to follow.

Although Bedient accuses Wright of being “defiantly un-Derrida’d” (“Slide-Wheeling” 47), an oblique awareness of the implications of post-structuralism is evident in Wright’s poem “Language Journal”. In it, we are told:

Maybe the theorists are right:
everything comes from language,
The actual web of root and rain
Is just an afterimage
pressed on the flyleaf of a book,
This first, pale envelope of forsythia unglued
By the March heat
only a half-thought apostrophe
And not the flesh of experience:
Nothing means anything, the slip of phrase against phrase
Contains the real way our lives
Are graphed out and understood,
the transformation of the adverb
To morpheme and phoneme is all we need answer to.

But I don't think so today,
 unless the landscape is language
Itself, which it isn't. (*XA* 23)

The "theorists" referred to are the poststructuralists. Poststructuralism is heterogeneous, but as a rule it questions the accordance between human structures of meaning and any "objective" ground of truth (Waugh 15). As the poem presents them, poststructuralist theorists propose that we have no access to any "flesh of experience" outside of our own language for things (*XA* 23); we create our own reality and our own order of reality with our words, and there is no independent meaning to be uncovered. The "I"-figure takes issue with this, because, as he states, the landscape is not itself language. The landscape exists for him as an indisputable external reality that cannot be reduced to mere language (Bedient, "Slide-Wheeling" 49).

This poem modifies the insight of an earlier poem, Part 12 of "Tattoos", which recounts an epiphany during a childhood handwriting lesson that caused the poet-figure to perceive "words as 'things'" (*BL* 39):

Apple, arrival, the railroad, shoe.

The words, like bees in a sweet ink cluster and drone,
Indifferent, indelible,
A hum and a hum:
Back stairsteps to God, ropes to the glass eye:
Vineyard, informer, the chair, the throne.

Mojo and numberless, breaths
From the wet mountains and green mouths; rustlings,
Sure sleights of hand,

The news that arrives from nowhere:

Angel, omega, silence, silence . . . (*BL* 30)

Here, words seem to have an actuality and buzzing life of their own, promising direct access to God and perhaps even the power to turn his “glass eye” from below, as though to see as he sees and therefore see things are they really are. The words spell out an abridged version of the Bible, beginning with an “apple”; “Vineyard” and “informer” recall Jesus’ New Testament parables and betrayal respectively, “the throne” recalls the Book of Revelation, while “angel” (perhaps signifying the apocryphal pre-Genesis story of Lucifer’s fall) and “omega”, like the alpha and omega, represent beginning and end, bookending a sequence outside which there is only “silence” (*BL* 30). The naïve impression of “words as ‘things’” (*BL* 39) that have a direct correlation with objective realities thus apparently coincides with a certain religious fundamentalism, whereby the Bible, as the word of God, conveys accurately and fully the story of the world. World and Word overlap. These are misconceptions that the speaker has abandoned by the time he remembers the experience. His agnosticism and sense of the ungroundedness of language and religious myths are detectable in his suggestions that the words are without “Mojo”, “sleights of hand” and “news that arrives from nowhere” (*BL* 30).

In general, Wright’s poetry does not reduce the landscape to “language / Itself” (*XA* 23), with no objective reality distinct from the way we symbolise it, and nor does it suggest that words accurately encapsulate the fullness of being or the world’s meaning, as though giving voice to the earth’s own “wet mountains and green mouths” (*BL* 30). The world *is* represented as a text, however—a code of signs independent of humanity that we can perceive but not fully comprehend. We do not have direct access the meaning of this text, but nor do we exist completely detached from it. The poet’s reasonable aim, pursued with voluble gusto in “Language Journal”, is description: “The verb that waits for us in the trees ~ is reconstruct, not deconstruct” (*XA* 23). “Description is expiation”, we are told in “Description’s the Art of Something or Other”, responsible for creating a virtual world while

“keep[ing] it real” and “coming to terms with” what is (*SS* 31): it is “both invention and response to what’s given” (J. K. A. Smith).

We can reconcile the tension between the presentation of the landscape as linguistic in Wright's poetry and the implications that the landscape exceeds or is inaccessible to language by understanding that the world *is* language, but it is not *our* language. "This English is not the King's English, ~ it doesn't dissemble" (*XA* 25), we are told in "Language Journal": "Full moon in the sky / Like a golden period. ~ It doesn't dissemble" (*XA* 25). Landscapes are texts expressing a higher meaning, but neither are translatable into human language and understanding.

The poem “Body and Soul” explores the tension between the idea of the world as Word, in some way akin to the poet’s words, and the world’s ineffability:

I used to think the power of words was inexhaustible,
That how we said the world
 was how it was, and how it would be.
I used to imagine that word-sway and word-thunder
Would silence the Silence and all that,
That words were the Word,
That language would lead us inexplicably to grace,
As though it were geographical.
I used to think these things when I was young.

I still do. (*SHS* 71)

This passage presents an uncharacteristic view of the correspondence between the world and language, and it is clear from the structure of the passage that the reader is meant to be caught off-guard by this credulity. It is implied that the speaker stubbornly persists in his belief in language despite his knowing better.

Even more perplexing is the juxtaposition of this perspective with the section that immediately follows it:

Something weighs on our shoulders

And settles itself like black light

invisible in our hair . . . (CH 13)

The first “theory” refers to philosopher Richard Rorty’s reduction of reality to language and his denial of a “mind-independent, language-independent reality” to which we can appeal for a sense of “truth” (Grippe). Speaking about this poem, Wright suggests that Rorty represents the idea that “the world is made of language and not objects” (“Captain Dog”). The touching alternative is that there exists an invisible “something” independent of our language—in this case, something as unspeakable and incomprehensible as the immeasurable human suffering embodied in the falling darkness, which resembles the ash of a Jewish woman’s hair in Paul Celan’s Holocaust poem “Todesfugue” (Merriman 23-24). This something is evinced by the landscape, described as a “Cathedral unsentenced and plugged in / To what’s-not-there” (CH 14). In “Language Journal”, the landscape’s language is the “moan” of that which we “never can quite put our finger on” (XA 24). In other words, there are experiences and truths that surpass language but that may be encapsulated by the landscape.

The motif of world-as-text or, more rarely, world-as-utterance represents an ideal of pure language—*Logos*—that does not “dissemble” and “contains no referential negativity” but in fact actualises the thing itself (Bedient, “Poetry and Silence”). Wright often styles the world’s text as a kind of “book of nature”, an image that, Derrida explains, denotes “an eternal verity” (*Of Grammatology* 15), a “natural, divine, and living writing” tantamount to “the origin of value” and divine law, in contrast with “fallen” human writing (*Of Grammatology* 17). In “Buffalo Yoga” we are told that “The world is a magic book and we its sentences. / We read it and read ourselves” (BY 22), and in *Littlefoot* it appears that “We all have the same book, ~ identically inscribed. / We open it at the appointed day, and begin to read” (LF 70). “The idea of the book is the idea of a totality”, Derrida states, encompassing the whole of being and its significance (*Of Grammatology* 18).

The image of the world as a book makes of the landscape and human life a preordained totality. Humans “read” the world—*i.e.* comprehend or enact it over time—but do not “write” it. Both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures make reference to a so-called Book of Life inscribed by God. In Jewish tradition, the book records the deeds of all people as they are committed and thus determines their judgement (“Book of Life”); from a Christian perspective, the book contains the names of the saved (Kane). To be “written down” thus amounts to being eternalised and—in the Christian tradition, in which inscription in the book can be interpreted as preceding human action—predetermined (Hardon). To see the world as such a text is to interpret it as disclosing the intentions and total creation of a higher power. Yet the world proves an ambiguous text, likened to “the book of What I Can Never Know” in the poem “1975” (CT 27).

“The Appalachian Book of the Dead” is an imaginary text first referred to in Wright’s poem of the same name in 1997. It lends its name to the trilogy of Wright’s first three collections and constitutes the central motif of the volume *Appalachia*. While Wright has described his “Book of the Dead” as a secular American version of the Tibetan and Egyptian funerary texts intended to guide believers into the afterlife (Interview by Suarez 56), references to “The Appalachian Book of the Dead” in his poems seem at times not to refer to such a text but to the world itself. For example, “The Appalachian Book of the Dead III” begins, “Full moon illuminated large initial for letter M, / Appalachian Book of the Dead, 22 February 1997” (AP 40). It seems that, here, the illuminated “Book of the Dead” is the landscape, especially given that the moon lights up “Hieroglyphs on the lawn, supplicant whispers for the other side” (AP 40). This invites us to read the world itself as a text pointing towards or facilitating a passage into death.

The image of the book conveys a certain authority but also indicates the absence of the author and a ground of authority. In “Early Saturday Afternoon, Early Evening”, the opening of the book, ostensibly after death or at the end of time, recalls the opening of the books of judgement as described in the Biblical Book of Revelation (Rev 20:12):

Saturday. Early afternoon. High
Spring light through new green,
language, it seems, I have forgotten,
But which I'll remember soon enough
When the first pages are turned
in The Appalachian Book of the Dead.
The empty ones. The ones about the shining and stuff. (*AP* 50)

Here it seems that the language of light-play in the landscape is the same as, or is explained by, the writing in "Book of the Dead" (which is, paradoxically, blank). The "shining and stuff" (*AP* 50) appears to be a flippant reference to the moment that light was created, which is then recounted as if the speaker were reading from those "first pages":

Father darkness, mother abyss,
the shadow whispered,
Abolish me, make me light.
And so it happened. Rumor of luminous bodies.
The face on the face of the water became no face.
The words on the page of the book became a hush.
And luminous too. (*AP* 50)

The God who says "Let there be light" ceases to exist at the moment of light's creation, leaving the world parentless. God is here figured as a kind of double absence: the generative void that ceases to be upon the advent of something. The very act of creation erases the creator, and the creative word is silenced in the moment at which it actualises the thing it names. The speaker, word and the thing spoken apparently cannot all co-exist. Darkness, which recalls the black ink of the written word and the established law, is concealed by the new light, which is synonymous with the visible world. The radiant world eclipses its defining textual substructure or authority. Much like the books of deeds kept by God, the soon-to-be-opened, now-blank Book ostensibly contains the chronicle of the world and

humanity's fate, which is revealed to be a story of the disappearance of the world's textual authority and underlying truths. This Book also apparently initiates one into the darkness of the underlying law (which is now an absence).

"Silent Journal" gives a different perspective on the vacancy within the textual landscape. Visually, the poem captures the book-like quality of a snow-covered scene. Its broken lines evoke the snow's "fall" from above and the interplay of black and white in the snowy night-time landscape as they cascade down and across the page. A lack of punctuation brings the words into direct contact with the surrounding blankness, which emphasises the nothingness' hold on the words, as does the repetition of the word "nothing" within the poem:

Inaudible consonant inaudible vowel
The word continues to fall
in splendor around us
Window half shadow window half moon
back yard like a book of snow
That holds nothing and that nothing holds
Immaculate text
not too prescient not too true (XA 11)

The words of this world-book are inaudible, perhaps because they are written rather than spoken or perhaps because they are unknowable and say nothing. The dominant impression is of the silence and, ultimately, blankness of the "Immaculate text" of snow (XA 11). Text, like language in general, cannot convey presence. The world as written text displaces named realities by preferring a representation of them; it thus evokes an absence. This translates into a nothingness at the heart of the world's text, an incomprehensibility, hollowness or lack of fundamental meaning.

The world as language seems to necessitate an inhuman speaker or author, yet its not being familiar "King's English" also seems to imply that it is not God's Word. Nor is it

necessarily language *for* us; in “Language Journal” it is clear that the landscape’s book is not the Bible, with its familiar and anthropocentric narrative, but rather

a dark language
Of strokes and ideograms
That spells out a different story than we are used to,
A story with no beginning and no end,
a little one.
.....
I think it’s a happy story,
and not about us. (XA 25)

This depersonalised aspect of the world-text is also apparent in “Nine-Panel Yaak River Screen”, in which the world is more like a poem, rhythmic and neatly structured, than a book:

The length of vowel sounds, by nature and by position,
Count out the morning’s meters—
birdsong and squirrel bark, creek run,
The housefly’s langour and murmurous incantation.
I put on my lavish robes
And walk at random among the day’s
dactyls and anapests,
A widening caesura with each step.

I walk through my life as though I were a bookmark, a holder of place,
An overnight interruption
in somebody else’s narrative. (SHS 54)

This poem re-envisioning a scene from the earlier poem, “Apologia Pro Vita Sua”, which leaves little doubt as to whose poetic narrative the speaker is intruding on: “The Unknown

Master of the Pure Poem walks nightly among his roses, / The very garden his son laid out” (BZ 16). This vision would restore God to the paradisaal garden, the ideal order of which has been re-established by Christ. It is telling that the speaker feels like an “interruption” in this perfect order, which does not embrace him and seems to be “somebody else’s narrative” (SHS 54). This suggests that the world’s poem does not disclose an anthropocentric, meaningful order. Nor does it disclose a foundation of meaning in the form of an author, as God remains “The Unknown Master” (BZ 16).

While Wright regularly describes the landscape as arising from or constituting a text, he also, less frequently, depicts it as an utterance, which recalls the divine utterance that brings the world into being in the Book of Genesis. In Wright’s poetry, it is usually the wind that “voices” the world. In the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, wind is synonymous with spirit and breath and denotes divine activity. In Wright’s “Summer Mornings” (which alludes to Stevens’ poem “To the Roaring Wind”), the wind is the “Vocalissimo”, the principal or best voice:

What the river says isn’t enough.
The scars of unknowing are on our cheeks,
those blank pages.
I’ll let the wind speak my piece.
I’ll let the Vocalissimo lay me down,
and no one else. (SHS 58)

To be “laid down” here means not just to be put to rest or eased into death but to be decreed: *i.e.* laid down like a law. The Vocalissimo thus seems both to ordain and direct the “I”-figure by “speaking his piece”, in contrast with the chatter of the river, which represents the noise of the natural world and leaves the speaker ignorant and “blank” (SHS 58).

Yet wind, in Wright’s poetry, is not so much a voice of authority as an emblem of insubstantiality and absence, the sound of non-utterance or the hushing of speech. In “A Journal of One Significant Landscape”, for example, the “*Shh* of [the] noon wind mouth[s]

the last word” (ZJ 90). This is a recurrent theme throughout *Zone Journals*, and, to a lesser extent, *Xionia*. Together, these volumes subtly dispel the illusion of divine utterance characterised by the mystic John of Ruysbroeck, who is cited toward the end of *Zone Journals*:

For the Heavenly Father desires that we should see,

Ruysbroeck has told us,

and that is why

He’s ever saying to our innermost spirit one deep

Unfathomable word,

*and nothing else . . .*¹⁴ (ZJ 93)

Wright’s two “Night Journal” poems contradict this idea that the world is illuminated by God’s word. In the first “Night Journal”, the wind-like quality of the world actually signifies abstraction, confusion and disappearance:

Words the color of wind

Moving across the fields there

wind-addled and wind-sprung,

Abstracted as water glints,

The fields lion-colored and rope-colored,

As in a picture of Paradise,

the bodies languishing over the sky

Trailing their dark identities

That drift off and sieve away to the nothingness

Behind them

moving slowly across the fields there

As words move, slowly, trailing their dark identities. (ZJ 33)

¹⁴ The italicized lines paraphrase Jan van Ruysbroeck’s text, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*: “For our Heavenly Father wills that we should see; for He is the Father of Light, and this is why He utters eternally, without intermediary and without interruption, in the hiddenness of our spirit, one unique and abysmal word, and no other” (3.1).

In “Night Journal II” the wind is pneumatic and does seem to actualise the visible world, but it is also low to the earth or “Gone to the ground” (*ZJ* 98), listless and covert. It has a “drift” (*ZJ* 98), a general gist rather than a firm meaning, and a tendency to roam rather than follow a clear course:

The breath of What’s-Out-There sags
Like bad weather below the branches,
fog-sided, Venetian,
Trailing its phonemes along the ground.
It says what it has to say
Carefully, without sound, word
After word imploding into articulation
And wherewithal for the unbecome.
I catch its drift.

And if I could answer back,
If I had a cloudier tongue,
what would I say?
I’d say what it says: nothing, with all its verities
Gone to the ground and hiding:
I’d say what it says now,
Dangling its language like laundry between the dark limbs,
Just hushed in its cleanliness. (*ZJ* 98)

Much as in the first “Night Journal”, where the wind’s “abstracted” and “dark” words resemble “the bodies languishing over the sky”—the indolent, short-lived stars that melt into “the nothingness” (*ZJ* 33)—here, too, the wind has a negative quality. It says “nothing” (*ZJ* 98), being wordless but also, it is suggested, meaningless.

Zone Journals and *Xionia* stress the impotence or absence of God's speech in the landscape. This is perhaps indicative of a decline in belief, as divine inspiration apparently belongs to an earlier time of naïve credibility. There were "angels sending the message out // In those days. Not now" (*ZJ*91), we are told in "Journal of One Significant Landscape"; while "it's still here in its gilt script, ~ or there, speaking in tongues", the world's "codes" are now indecipherable (*ZJ*91). This difference is even more marked in "Georg Trakl Journal", where the landscape that spoke "Last year, and the year before" now "dwindles and whispers like rice through my dry fingers" and "says nothing" (*XA* 19-20).

"Scar Tissue", published more than fifteen years later in the book of the same name, epitomises the sense of the *pneuma* in Wright's poetry as signifying both utterance and non-utterance, speaker and absence, by identifying it with the saying of what cannot be said:

What must be said can't be said,
It looks like; nobody has a clue,
not even, it seems, the landscape.
One hears it in dreams, they say,
Or out of the mouths of oracles, or out of the whirlwind.

I thought I heard it, a whisper, once,
In the foothills of the Dolomites,
night and a starless sky,
But who can remember, a black night, a starless sky,
Blurred voice and a blurred conceit.

It takes a crack in the membrane,
a tiny crack, a stain,
To let it come through; a breath, a breath like a stopped sigh
From the land of foreign tongues.

It is what it has to say, sad stain of our fathers. (*ST* 33)

The voice of the unsayable, occurring as dream prophecy, is identified with the supernatural and the wind. The “I”-figure’s memory of having heard it once recalls Wright’s early prose poem “Nocturne”, even though that poem is situated in the Italian landscape of Sirmione, not the Dolomites. “Scar Tissue” does not entirely eliminate the possibility, nor the profundity, of such a disembodied truth being spoken in the landscape—here it suggestively comes from beyond as though through “a crack” in the aether (*ST* 33)—but the voice is diminished in potency. The divine “breath” is abortive, foreign and inherently “sad” (*ST* 33), and is again associated with non-speech—a “stopped sigh”—rather than vocalisation. Labelling it the “sad stain of our fathers” conveys the full pathos of inherited belief as well as an implicit rejection of belief (*ST* 33).

As all of this demonstrates, the imaging of the world as *Logos* lends it an air of divine authority and creates the expectation that it will communicate something meaningful. Yet these attributes are essentially negated by its reduction to a wordless breath, an unreadable book or an impersonal poem. The world as a text or utterance in Wright’s poems is actually silent, emptied of authority and alienating for the human subject.

In addition, the world as language is not easily comprehended. In *Littlefoot*, we are told that “The language of landscape is language, / Metaphor metaphor metaphor, ~ all down the line” (*LF* 30). The world communicates its truth indirectly in terms of the things of the world. In “May Journal”, while the “onion and rhododendron metaphor wildly”, we are told that “This is a message with no message ~ apart from its meaning, / The landscape awake in its first fire and finery” (*XA* 27). We can compare this to the later poem “Ars Poetica”:

The night sky is an ideogram,
a code card punched with holes.

It thinks it’s the word of what’s-to-come.

It thinks this, but it’s only The Library of Last Resort,

The reflected light of The Great Misunderstanding. (AP 16)

Both passages suggest that while the landscape apparently recalls the world's fiery origins, it cannot tell us anything about them; its significance is not a message and it does not explain anything. Ironically, in the latter poem, the world-text is called "The Library of Last Resort" as though to indicate the failure of all other prophetic texts, yet it, too, fails to reveal the desired "what's-to-come" (AP 16). Instead, just as the stars provide scientists with an outline of the forces at work in the Big Bang, this night sky reflects "The Great Misunderstanding" (AP 16); in other words, even the origins of this text are arbitrary and perhaps not as meaningful as we might think.

In Wright's poetry, whatever the text of the landscape means, its words are apparently things in themselves. This ideal language is encapsulated in the concept of naming, which represents in Wright's poetry the designation or accurate identification of the true essence of a thing. There is "a word, one word / For each of us" we are told in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* (ZJ 68). This recalls Adam's naming of the creatures of the world in the Book of Genesis, which Milton depicts in *Paradise Lost* as revealing a correspondence between Adam's language for things and his complete understanding of them (Milton 8.352-54; Rushworth). In the Christian tradition, names are what God writes down in his Book of Life, and a prayer in "Appalachian Farewell" associates this inscription of one's name with the preservation of one's identity and assurance of one's safety: "Goddess of Bad Roads and Inclement Weather, take down / Our names, remember us in the drip / And thaw of the wintry mix, remember us when the light cools" (ST 3). Alternatively, we are told in the poem "Next" that "The Great Scribe . . . remembers nothing, ~ not even your name the instant he writes it down" (SS 40). If your name is your identity, then for it to be forgotten by God suggests that reality is not attentive or loving but merely subject to impersonal book-keeping.

Central to Wright's use of language as a metaphor for the ultimate order is the question of whether this order is mirrored in human language, and whether our language can

recreate the underlying reality. The “I”-figure in the poem “The Writing Life” expresses a longing for “the names for things”: “just give me their real names, / Not what we call them, but what / They call themselves when no one’s listening” (*AP* 30). The implication is, however, that the poet-figure does not have the “real names” for things. The poem “The Light at the Root of All Things” addresses the question of how to grasp the “Splendor [that] surrounds us . . . invisible, and far away”, asking, “Will the right word reveal it? / Will the right name enter its ear and bring it forth like a sun?” (*OT*). Again, the implication is that the inconceivability of the invisible is partly due to a failure of naming on the part of the poet, whose business is words and proper description. In “Giorgio Morandi and the Talking Eternity Blues”, we are told that “There is an end to language. ~ There is an end to handing out the names of things” (*AP* 33). This statement is revised in the later poem “Charlottesville Nocturne”: “It has been said there is an end to the giving out of names. / It has been said that everything that’s written has grown hollow. / It has been said that scorpions dance where language falters and gives way” (*SHS* 17). These statements seem to imply that human naming is limited and can go only so far towards defining the world. Eventually, poetry faces its own limitations.

In the poem, “Words are the Diminution of All Things”, it seems that the words that diminish all things are “all the little names” that the poet wields, which “cluster like unattractive angels / Wherever a thing appears, / Crisp and unspoken, unspeakable ~ in their mute and glittering garb” (*BY* 45). These “unattractive” words that “cluster” around real things conceal those things’ pure expression of themselves. These visible things are laden with transcendent significance: they are called “brief secrets” and are “weighted with what is invisible”, yet “no one will utter them, no one will smooth their rumpled hair” (*BY* 45). Pure language is not humanly utterable, it seems, so as a result, the truest thing the poet-figure can say is indirect. He can describe the things of the world but cannot speak them or apprehend the underlying Word. His descriptive language, as in “Lives of the Artists”, lies like a residue over the world:

the true word

Is the word about the word.

Celestial gossip, celestial similes
 (Like, like, like, like)
 Powder the plum blossoms nervously, invisibly,

the word

In hiding, unstirred. (*BZ* 50)

“If there was once a Word (capitalised), a *Logos*”, speculates Ihab Hassan, this poem, “Lives of the Artists”, demonstrates that “it has dissolved now into mere words” (6). The poem describes the transcendent reality we are “drawn to” as an illegible text, best answered with silence:

We all rise, if we rise at all, to what we’re drawn by,
 Big Smoke, simplicity’s signature,
 Last untranslatable text—
 The faithful do not speak many words . . .

What’s there to say,

Little smoke, cloud-smoke, in the plum trees,
 Something’s name indecipherable

rechalked in the scrawled branches. (*BZ* 50)

It is evident that the poet-figure’s language and description are inadequate for grasping the invisible. Human language cannot touch the underlying Word in the way that the text of the landscape does; human language in fact conceals both realities. In “Thinking of Wallace Stevens at the Beginning of Spring”, we are told that the words we have for familiar things “disguise their identity” (*SHS* 47), while in “Reading Lao Tzu Again in the New Year” this is made even more explicit:

Words are wrong.

Structures are wrong.

Even the questions are compromise.

Desire discriminates and language discriminates:

They form no part of the essence of all things:

each word

Is a failure, each object

We name and place

leads us another step away from the light. (CH 6-7)

There is a difference between nature's language and human description; nature contains the truth silently, while the poet's careful description of things somehow misses the point. Unlike the *Logos*, human words "form no part of the essence of all things" (CH 7). It seems in this poem that it is the "discrimination" inherent to human language that is "wrong" (CH 6-7). This is suggestive of something akin to Derrida's *différance*: the identification of things through the infinite process of differentiation and deferral. Because human names do not present the thing itself, they gesture to its absence, creating meaning only through ungrounded play. This "[d]ifferentiated presence, which is always and inevitably differed and deferred" creates the desire for full presence (Belsey 406), but it also prevents the fulfilment of that desire (Belsey 407).

The emptiness at the heart of language, its lack of connection with anything, produces the sense of longing and absence in which the invisible is couched. Costello suggests that the "negative principle" in language, its difference from what it signifies, is the origin of our viewing the world as also symbolic and different or separated from what it signifies: "it is in this difference that 'the idea of God' takes shape" ("Charles Wright's *Via Negativa*" 329). We can therefore see the angst about language expressed in Wright's poetry not merely as expressing poetic failure but as enacting the human condition of desire for fullness, which in this case is represented by the *Logos*. The poet-figure longs, as McCorkle

notes, “for some form of transcendence that comes from the possibility of the fullness of words and discourse. . . . The possibility of a full language” (207).

In Wright’s poetry, “The country we live in’s illegible, impossible of access” (*NB* 199); it is “the land of the unutterable” (*SS* 47). Reminders of the untranslatability of whatever it is the world is saying are everywhere in Wright’s work: in the “silvery alphabet of the sea ~ increasingly difficult to transcribe” (*OSR* 25) and “The afternoon clouds . . . like a Xerox of the morning clouds, / An indecipherable transcript” (*BY* 63), in the “dead script of vines ~ [that] scrawls unintelligibly / Over the arbor vitae” (*CH* 4) and the “leaves of the maple tree, ~ scattered like Post-it notes / Across the lawn with messages we’ll never understand” (*LF* 5). Faced with this untranslatability, the poet-figure’s descriptions seem pointless. “What’s the use of words”, we are asked in “Poem Half in the Manner of Li Ho”, when “there are no words / For December’s chill redaction, ~ for the way it makes us feel” (*BZ* 24). It seems that apophatic statements that highlight language’s shortcomings and silence, like the world’s silence, may be the only adequate response to the ineffable other. Thus, in the modestly entitled “Poem Almost Wholly in My Own Manner”, we are told that “It’s all in the unwritten, it’s all in the unsaid . . . // And that’s a comfort . . . for our lack and inarticulation” (*BZ* 29-30). Silence expresses the invisible, which is, after all, so often experienced as an ache for something, an awareness of what is missing.

The negativity at the heart of language, and the essential negative quality of the invisible that it invokes, lead Wright’s “I”-figure to make statements seemingly in direct contradiction of the passages from “Language Journal” with which I began this section. Where in “Language Journal” we are told categorically that the landscape is not “language / Itself” (*XA* 23), and that “the slip of phrase against phrase” does not contain “the real way our lives / Are graphed out and understood” (*XA* 23), in the later poem “Tennessee Line” it seems that language *is*, in fact, all the world we have access to:

I remember the word and forget the word

although the word

Hovers in flame around me.

Summer hovers in flame around me.

.....

We *are* our final vocabulary,

and how we use it.

There is no secret contingency.

There's only the rearrangement, the redescription

Of little and mortal things. (*CH* 20)

"The word" is here equated with the summer landscape that "hovers in flame", but there is no "secret contingency" (*CH* 20), no possible outcome of significance. The world may be words, but there is no accessible Word, *per se*, a distinction possibly implicit in the speaker's two uses of "word": the one remembered and the one forgotten. "Whatever is written is written / After, not before", we are told in "Time and the Centipedes of Night" (2012), one of Wright's most recent poems; "Before is blank, and pure, and void / Of all our lives depend on" ("Time and the Centipedes"). Thus, any notion of a foundational text or Word is done away with, and we see that the landscape is textual after the fact. It is comprehended through language, but it is not, itself, revelatory language.

In Wright's poetry, the world is sometimes depicted as a textless text—a book without words or a blank page—which reflects the absence of the Word or transcendent meaning from the landscape's language. In the poem "Citronella", the moonlight is "blank newsprint" on the world's "empty notebook" (*SHS* 15), while "Poem Half in the Manner of Li Ho" calls the December landscape a "chill redaction" and a "T'ang blue blank page" (*BZ* 24). Elsewhere, we see the fundamental order of the world resembling language without content, mere structure and definition without meaning. In "North American Bear", the "Random geometry of stars" amounts to "random word-strings / As beautiful as the alphabet", "Stitching their syntax across the deep North Carolina sky" (*NB* 196). These stars

convey only “the inarticulate scroll / Of time” (*NB* 196), and thus constitute an organising system emptied of substance, like the alphabet or syntax. In “Chickamauga”:

Structure becomes an element of belief, syntax

And grammar a catechist,

Their words say what the beads say,

words thumbled to our discontent (*CH* 47)

If its message is unreadable, all we can make out of the underlying truth is its principle of organisation, which is a kind of syntax. This structure is likened to rosary beads, which are used to organise sequences of prayers. Like an unknown code or a set of rosary beads, the world reveals the shape of the rules that govern it but no coherent sense of what it all means.

Bedient suggests that Wright’s poetry is “divided between two possibilities of language: first, that the purity or nothingness of silence is inside words . . . and second, conversely, that silence is outside words like the sea surrounding a boat” (“Poetry and Silence”). Either the poet-figure’s words convey only the absence of the Truth they cannot present, or else there is no Truth, and it is reality that conveys nothing. Language as an emblem for the invisible ultimately emphasises its inherent vacancy, because, as Derrida claims, there is “nothing outside the text” (*Of Grammatology* 158): there is no transcendent presence behind this or any language (*Of Grammatology* 159).

The Invisible as Absence

Wright’s invisible is always on the verge of dissolving into an absence. Its otherness and the apophatic terms by which it is apprehended—invisible, intangible, unknowable, ineffable—render it, at times, more like a nothingness than an entity. The invisible as an absence embodies the death of God and the emptiness of all Absolutes, a recurrent theme throughout Wright’s poetry. It suggests that nothing answers the seeker’s desire for wholeness. Yet this absence is still an influence and perceived entity in Wright’s poetry. As

Mark Jarman discerns, Wright “invoke[s] nothingness and its synonyms so often in [his] poetry that absence takes on an actual presence” (“The Trace” 97).

Wright’s poetry is overflowing with instances of disappointed expectation, moments when the desired sacred or profound thing fails to arrive. The early poem that establishes the theme in relation to the invisible is “Skins”, Part 14:

They talk of a city, whose moon-colored battlements
Kneel to the traveller, whose
Windows, like after-burners, stream
Out their chemistry, applying their anodyne.
They talk of a river, its waters
A balm, an unguent unscrubbable. They talk. And they talk
Of the light that lights the stars
Through the five organs, like a wind
Spread by the rain. They talk of a medicine, a speck
—Omnipotent, omnipresent, clogged
With the heavy earth and the mind’s intractable screen—
To be shaken loose, dissolved, and blown
Through the veins, becoming celestial.
They talk, and nothing appears. They talk and it does not appear. (*BL* 64)

The “Skins” sequence catalogues the world’s elements, including imagined metaphysical agents such as “Black Magic”, “Metamorphosis” and “Truth” (*BL* 71), and maps out the failure of all imaginable available antidotes for the pilgrim’s existential ache. This part is themed “alchemy” (*BL* 71), and focuses on the failure of belief to bring about transmutation or actualise the articles of belief. The things that do not appear here are representative of the invisible—the shining city associated with heaven and the past (which I will discuss in detail in Chapter Two of this thesis), the river, which must be crossed to reach “the other side” or

ultimate reality (see Chapter Four of this thesis), original light, wind, and an “Omnipotent, omnipresent” (*BL* 64) substance obscured by ignorance and physical reality.

God’s relationship with humanity in Wright’s poetry is similarly characterised by longing and God’s failure to appear. This is evident in the poem “Clear Night”, which sees its speaker announcing, “I want to be bruised by God” (*CT* 61), expressing a desire to embrace the agony and ecstasy of religious fervour that recalls John Donne’s “Holy Sonnet”, “Batter my heart, three-person’d God” (line 1). Yet spiritual satisfaction is not proffered by the landscape:

And the wind says “What?” to me.

And the castor beans, with their little earrings of death, say “What?” to
me.

And the stars start out on their cold slide through the dark.

And the gears notch and the engines wheel. (*CT* 61)

The appearance of the mechanistic metaphor here marks the conspicuous absence of a Godlike benevolence or attention.

This pattern of anti-climax repeats again and again throughout Wright’s oeuvre, creating countless moments of dissatisfied longing. *The Southern Cross* alone provides a number of prime examples. In “Holy Thursday”, there is “No answer from anything” for the flies that drone “Reprieve, reprieve”, or for the “four crows / On a eucalyptus limb, speaking in tongues” (*SC* 16). In “Dead Color”, “no voice comes from the wind / And no voice drops from the cloud”, while, later, “no face appears on the face of the deep” (*SC* 41). In “Called Back” this failure to appear verges on becoming personified itself as a strange apparition, when “Nothing descends like snow or stiff wings / Out of the night” (*SC* 23). In Wright’s poems, “Emptiness happens” (*LF* 74): the absence of something comes to constitute an event and inhabit a presence of its own, an “idea of absence / Hard and bright as a dime” (*BZ* 42). We see this in “Nine-Panel Yaak River Screen” when the landscape conjures an “Illusion, like an empty coffin, that something is missing” (*SHS* 55) and in “Against the American

Grain” in the form of “The absence the two ~ horses have left on the bare slope, / The silence that grazes like two shapes where they have been” (*ST* 18). Similarly, in “A Journal of True Confessions”, “Something is added as the birds disappear, ~ something quite small / And indistinct and palpable as a stain ~ of saint light on a choir stall” (*ZJ* 23). That something, it is explained in “Hovercraft”, is “a little hole in the air” that remains after the departure of a hummingbird, a hole “that the air ~ doesn’t rush in to fill” (*SS* 69). “The world, and the other world, are full of” such “Empty pocket[s]” (*SS* 69) as these, we are told. They act as placeholders and markers of loss that embody in miniature the reality of God’s departure and ongoing absence, which in “Lives of the Artists” is called “*Posteriori Dei*”:

Posteriori Dei . . .

God’s back, love’s loss, light’s blank the eye can accommodate

And the heart shelve,

world’s ever-more-disappearing vacancy

Under the slow-drag clouds of heaven

The landscape absorbs then repents of (*BZ* 44)

The image of the “little hole in the air” (*SS* 69) acknowledges that the desire for something more is the experience of something lacking, as when the “stillness across morning” in the poem “Wednesday Morning” evokes the “sudden absence of something” (*BY* 58). The invisible represents satisfaction in absentia. “What isn’t available is always what’s longed for” we are told in “River Run”: “Thus Lost and Unknown, / Thus Master of the Undeciphered Parchment” (*SHS* 40). The unfulfilled desire for wholeness translates into an impression of the “world’s ever-more-disappearing vacancy” (*BZ* 44), an experience more profound than mere waiting; it is the chilling experience of meeting the void. The “I”-figure in *Littlefoot* muses, “One waits for a presence from the darkening woods, ~ one large and undiminished, / But only its absence appears, big as all get-out” (*LF* 73). Nonetheless, to encounter the object of desire in Wright’s poetry—to apprehend totality—is to lose yourself to the other in oblivion. “The absolute” in Wright’s poetry, Costello recognises, “consumes

and absorbs rather than radiates; its agent is death” (“Charles Wright’s *Via Negativa*” 329). Even union with the invisible is an experience of nothing.

“Nothing” appears as a designative term in “Italian Days”, which describes the kind of eschatological vision typical in Wright’s poetry, replete with wordlessness, darkness and a hungry dog. In it, “nothing appears in the mirror, ~ or has turned to water / Where nothing walks or lies down” (*OSR* 38). This “nothing”, much like the night that “comes walking across the lake on its hands” in the same poem (*OSR* 38), seems personified: a dark figure that haunts our ends, embodying our own looming death and absence. Poems such as those cited above set a precedent for reading “nothing” in Wright’s poetry in two ways simultaneously: as meaning “not anything” and as a name for an entity. In Wright’s poetry, “the negative principle can have content” in this way, as Costello observes: “Something happens in the process of articulation and erasure so that we are not merely where we started but have built in a space” (“Charles Wright’s *Via Negativa*” 334, 342). In lines such as “Nothing forgives” (*SC* 35) and “nothing to answer to” (*XA* 31), it becomes possible to read nothing as equivalent to God or the powers that be—we might recall that the prayer in “The Narrow Road to the Distant City” suggests that God, like the landscape in Stevens’ “The Snow Man” (line 15), is “the nothing that is” (*ST* 60). It appears in these cases that it is the nothing—a spooky presence of absence—that we must seek forgiveness from and answer to; likewise, it is the nothing that “becomes clear” and is “brought to bear” in “Scar Tissue II” (*ST* 43), or that we must “answer back to” and that will “dress us down” in “Looking Around” (*SHS* 5); it is the “Nothing in nature [that] says no” (*BY* 13). As “Sitting Outside at the End of Autumn” demonstrates, we might hope “for anything / Resplendent”, but what is revealed is only that “one and one make nothing . . . endless and everywhere, / The shadow that everything casts” (*CH* 3). Like the emptiness contained in the snail shell the speaker holds in his hand, it seems that that nothingness is the invisible other that inhabits the physical world. Paradoxically, while “God” in Wright’s poetry is frequently a hollow term, marking the departure of objects of belief (Costello *Via Negativa* 334), the “nothing” that

replaces God is referential and has agency. The invisible in Wright's poetry thus conflates the absent God with an omnipresent nothingness, and makes of this the ultimate truth of the world.

This absence is also frequently portrayed as darkness, as in *Littlefoot*, where "the evening prepares for the invisible, ~ the absence of itself" (*LF* 52). The "dark" face of the invisible contains the promise of destruction. For example, in "Night Rider", the "something [that] is calling us" is "something not unlike unbeing"; it is also, in this poem, "the lure of the incidental" and "immensity" (*SHS* 28): something imagined to account for impressions of causality and grandeur. This negativity often operates in the poetry as a critique of belief, implying that the impression of the existence of something else may simply be an illusion created by the kind of dialectical thinking that conjures up a counterpart for everything: a nothingness counter to all materiality, a deity in conflict with the speaker's atheistic leanings, and death as the flipside of life. The threat of non-being and the grim possibility that nothing else exists beyond the natural world are comprehended in the absences that haunt Wright's poems.

In Wright's poetry, the "perpetual presence of absence" (*LF* 51) is often at least as palpable and enduring as the things of the material world. It seems that "What disappears is what stays" (*ZJ* 28); that "The emptiness of nonbeing [is] that which endures through all change" (*LF* 82). The persistence and essentiality of absence is expressed through artistic "exclusion". This is a principle Wright's poet-figure pursues in "Yard Journal":

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 body they all rise into the light

.....

The invisible is here depicted as a kind of negative burned into the eye, the inverse of the visible landscape. This is an effect the poet imitates by “tak[ing] them away to keep them there” (*ZJ* 5): in other words, by focusing on the details of the visible world in order to preserve the insistent presence of the invisible. The vivid, beloved material world evokes “the unseen” both in the form of an “architecture” to account for its beautiful forms and as some desired higher “light” to redeem and preserve it (*ZJ* 4-5). Yet the invisible is manifest as the abiding presence of what is not there and so apparently embodies only the pressing fact of mortality and the inescapable law of disappearance. The negative principle of the invisible in Wright’s poetry chillingly suggests that these are the only enduring, underlying truths to be found in the world.

“Like a Narrative for *Whatever Comes*”

Wright's sense of the invisible is not static and cannot be crystallised in a single metaphor or symbol. It is simultaneously an eternal truth and a dynamic process, both ultimate thing and nothing at once. For this reason, his many rich images for the invisible are only part of the "story". Although Wright's poetic mode is ostensibly contemplative, he in fact engages with the invisible in a narrative way. This narrative is one of desire—unsatisfied desire for the origin, repeatedly disappointed desire for transcendence—and of indeterminate endings coloured with hope, doubt and dread, in which these desires might be realised.

Ultimately, by framing his poetic enterprise around a narrative of desire for some unattainable Absolute, Wright ensures narrative failure. In doing so, he attests to the impossibility of any such grand narrative succeeding in a contemporary agnostic context and

implies the inadequacy of closed narrative linearity as a framework through which to view experience. Natural rhythms of alternation and cyclicity are presented as more authentic forms of narrative. The following chapters will explore each stage of plot—beginnings, middles and ends respectively—as they speak to and are undone by Wright’s unending, agnostic pilgrimage towards the invisible.

Chapter 2: “The Southern Cross” and the Search for Places of Origin

Voices from long ago floating across the water.

How to account for

my single obsession about the past?

—Charles Wright, *Littlefoot*

The influence of the invisible “definer of all things” (*CH* 11) is closely associated with the past in Wright’s poetry. In recreating the past, his memory poems pursue the same kind of absolute foundation as all of his poems. Wright’s poetry displays a particularly rich, typically Southern appreciation of the past and its “infinite rectitude” (*HF* 55). That past is tantamount to a sense of “home”, which constitutes, as E. Relph puts it, “the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling-place of being”, “an irreplaceable centre of significance” (39) and “the point of departure from which we orient ourselves and take possession of the world” (40). The past in Wright’s poems is thus more than just what has gone before; it represents family, ancestry, inheritance and identity and so can be best understood as synonymous with *origins*. Origins are defined in hindsight, in association with whatever it is that they originate. They embody not only beginnings but an awareness of outcomes; origins thus imply a link between the past and the present and a consciousness of the ongoing importance of past events. The past’s influence is omnipresent in Wright’s poetry, with the past inhabiting present-day landscapes.

Looking backwards is a significant part of the pilgrimage towards the invisible in Wright’s poetry insofar as it seeks to grasp a hidden and persistent influence in the form of the past. Such an “attitude of obligation, of piety, of something like a sacred respect” towards the past is, according to Southern poet Dave Smith, a distinctive trait of Southern poetry (“Speculations” 148). This fascination with origins is evident in poems such as “Arkansas Traveller”, which tells of Wright’s great-grandfather’s putting down roots in America (*OSR* 59-62), and “Virginia Reel” (*SC* 20-21), in which the poet-figure returns to the countryside

that was home to his forebears so as to locate himself within the “reel” of generations. These poems demonstrate that identity is shaped not only by past experiences but by past locales (Gitzen 177): the past and the narrative of self are closely tied to places. Indeed, it is the *place* of the past—the spaces of the material world as they are “felt” and “humanized” (Buell 667)—more than, say, the people or the times, that defines the sense of origins in Wright’s work. Allowing places to stand for origins is another typically Southern conceit, according to Wyatt Prunty:

In the southern imagination, place is not just a name on a map but where something took place. . . . Something happened, and where it happened evokes both the event and its consequence, even when the event is not public, as with Dallas or Shiloh, but private.

The interconnection of identity, past and place has been overt in Wright’s poetry since *Hard Freight* (1973), with its many references to formative places. Set half in Italy, half in the American South, the volume is littered with place-names from Wright’s past: Venice (*HF* 14-15), Verona (*HF* 33), San Miniato (*HF* 39-40), Dog Creek (*HF* 33-34), Sky Valley (*HF* 36-37), Blackwater Mountain (*HF* 49), Northanger Ridge (*HF* 51-52), Kingsport (*HF* 56) and Clinchfield Station (*HF* 59). Wright’s treatment of the past is epitomised by the poem “Dog Creek Mainline”, in which the boundaries between the remembered heartland and bodily self dissolve:

Nightweed; frog spit and floating heart,
Backwash and snag pool: Dog Creek

Starts in the leaf reach and shoal run of the blood;
Starts in the falling light just back
Of the fingertips (*HF* 43)

This poem's "locality is intimately felt", as Michael Chitwood observes: "so much so that it is part of the speaker's body. . . . [T]he place is one with the speaker" (243). The significance of Dog Creek to the speaker is implied through the enigmatic and evocative depiction of the place as something internal rather than an account of events or people, to which the poem alludes only briefly. Dog Creek is equally a place remembered and a landmark of memory, marking a stopover on the heavy-burdened trek into the past:

Hard freight. It's hard freight
From Ducktown to Copper Hill, from Six
To Piled High: Dog Creek is on this line,
Indigent spur; cross-tie by cross-tie it takes
You back (*HF* 44)

It is as though these places persist as a dreamlike landscape between the speaker's present and his past, with the railway line marking out and providing a vocabulary for the passage of memory. "Hard freight" evokes the difficulty of remembering, or perhaps its emotional weight, while the "spur" track suggests a secondary route off the main line that "takes you back" to a personal or unrecorded place (*HF* 44). Dog Creek takes the speaker back both by conjuring his past and by embracing him back into a landscape that formed him.

Significant remembered places in Wright's poetry become shrines to aspects of identity. Not only is the past bound to place, but memory itself is depicted as spatial, conjuring a past that is unusually place-like (Franzek 145), less a linear history than a map of experience. Recalling one's origins thus amounts to uncovering a reference point from which to chart one's progress, and remembering becomes a process of recreating a landscape in which to locate oneself. This sense of time as spatial and of the period between past and present as distance to be traversed is integral to the metaphor of pilgrimage that is implicit in Wright's essentially stationary poems: "Camus said that life is the search for the way back / To the few great simple truths / We knew at the beginning", we are told in *Littlefoot*, the speaker affirming, "that seems about right" (*LF* 34).

Respect for the past and a sense of its bearing on the present underlies a preoccupation with “the dead” in Wright’s poetry, exemplified by the following uncanny exchange in the poem “Rosso Venexiano”:

Write, the voice said. *For whom?* came the response.

For the dead, whom thou didst love, came the instant reply.

And will they read me?

Aye, for they return as posterity, the voice answered one last time. (BY 44)¹⁵

Writing for the dead recognises that they remain influential, makes them present again and acknowledges their return. Here, it seems that their genius lives on in the poet’s work and cements his future fame. Furthermore, the dead return as future generations, which is indicative of the way in which the influential past also constitutes the desired future in Wright’s poetry—something I will explore in depth in this chapter.

Wright has made it clear that he intends the dead in his poetry to represent the influence of the other world:

When you say you write for angels, for the dead, for that which is beyond you, you write for . . . all those things that are in this imaginary, mythical, still, brightly lit center of attention at the heart of the universe. (Interview by McBride 128-29)

In particular, the dead lingering in the landscape typify the ongoing influence of the past, which is synonymous with the invisible. The significant locations and events in the American South that constitute the landscape of childhood in Wright’s poetry are overlain with the landscape of the poet-figure’s development, in which favourite writers are the landmarks and

¹⁵ Wright takes this exchange from an interview by poet John Berryman, who claims to have taken it “from Haman, quoted by Kierkegaard” (qtd. in BY endnotes [79]). The genealogy of the quotation is itself an example of the return of the (words of the) dead in subsequent generations.

Italy is the central place that represents his birthplace. In turn, both of these places inhabit his present-day landscapes in the forms of the metamorphosed dead and traces of memory.

While Wright's poetry conveys a strong sense of place insofar as it invests places with great significance, that significance tends to be personal and sometimes inscrutable. As a result, his places, for all their intricate detail, also create an uncanny sense of "placelessness": of lacking recognisable features, cultural significance and public history (Relph 82). Wright's transformation of known places into what Daniel Cross Turner calls an "evanescent space of reimagined southern geographies" (109) tends to obscure their distinctiveness (West). Many of Wright's significant Southern places—Appalachia, Chickamauga, the Long Island of the Holston—are colonised places that represent histories of violence, conflict, racial division and disadvantage in addition to their pre-colonial significance, but this is rarely apparent from his poems (West).¹⁶ Vendler notes, for example, that the poem "Chickamauga" from the book of the same name makes no reference to the important Civil War battle that took place there, and that "this it is typical of Wright's practice" ("The Nothing That Is" 68). Turner agrees, adding that Wright's "simulation" of the site Chickamauga is a "dehistoricized cartography" from which "contemporary Georgia, Civil War history, and the Native American past have all disappeared" (111). What remains is the affect of the place and its past:

The poem climbs to a vantage point where the anonymity of history has blanked out the details. What is left is the distillate: that something happened in this place, that its legacy of uneasiness inhabits the collective psyche . . . , that it will not let us go and demands a response. (Vendler, "The Nothing That Is" 68)

Wright's Italy also appears, as Robert Hahn says, "other-worldly" and non-specific ("Versions" 57). Despite his relative familiarity with the regions about which he writes, it is a

¹⁶ The one notable exception to this rule is the poem *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, which engages openly with the violent colonial history of the Long Island of the Holston. This poem is analysed in detail in Chapter Three of this thesis.

typical American vision of the Mediterranean stripped of specificity and real local knowledge (Hahn, “Versions” 57), composed instead “of painterly, sometimes nostalgic responses to conventional materials” (Hahn, “Not So Distant” 154) such as “Mediterranean light, . . . weather and sun, sea and sky, landscape and figure [and] imaginative states such as reverie or swoon” (Hahn, “Versions” 57). What these unreal landscapes communicate is the apparent unreality of the past: its intangibility and irrecoverable significance:

The particularities of a remembered landscape become nearly irrelevant: one scenic backdrop will do as well as any other, for the past is incommunicable precisely in its imprecision, its abstract and unlasting specularity. These poetic geographies produce a series of disjunct tableaux without lasting coherence, impressionistic flashpoints that resist absorption into linear causality (Turner 109).

An emphasis on the “metaphysics of the quotidian” in Wright’s poetry (“Interview by Santos” 97) also contributes to the placelessness of landscapes both remembered and observed. Wright’s physical landscapes always point toward metaphysical realities, and so they are frequently less realistic than suggestive. As Derrick Hill observes, Wright’s poetry “points to place, but almost avoids it at the same time—as if place is only a bridge that connects [one] to some deeper notion or thought” (Wright, Interview with Hill). Yet a deep sense of nostalgia and the meticulous detailing of specific features of the landscape, albeit in fantastical ways that would be hard to locate on any map, suggest that these places, however interchangeable and untied from history for the reader, are distinct and meaningful for the poet-figure. In particular, the personal memories and deceased loved ones that persist in the landscape lend it an otherworldly quality.

Turner suggests that Wright “invokes [place] names purposefully in vain” in order to critique the Southern tendency to memorialise the past, including the “continuing devotion to the legacy of the Lost Cause” and “the southern proclivity for ancestor worship and Civil War monumentalism” (Turner 110-11). I would argue that, on the contrary, Wright’s

emptying places of their public history facilitates his reclamation of them for private memories and personal ancestor worship. The poem “My Own Little Civil War”, for example, does not pretend to be “an allegory about modern man’s alienation from antebellum traditions and the Civil War”; it is evidently a purely personal memoir (H. Hart, “For the Confederate” 224). The poem reveals both an attachment to the names of significant places and forefathers and ambivalence towards their public Civil War history:

I come from the only county in Tennessee that did not secede
Throughout the entire Civil War,
Sullivan County,
Rock-ribbed, recalcitrant, Appalachian cornerstone.
My kinfolk were otherwise,
Arkansans and Mississippians,
Virginians and Tarheels.
Still, I was born just a half mile from Shiloh churchyard,
And had a relative, the family story goes, who served there,
Confederate quartermaster,
who took the occasion, that first day,
To liberate many bills
From Union coffers as the Johnnys swept through to the river,
And never replaced them when the Bluebellies swept back
And through the following afternoon. (BY 64)

Later in the poem, that relative, Wright’s great-grandfather and namesake Charles Penzel, is described as “slaveless, no stake in it” and a long way from home (BY 65). The speaker seems content to lay claim to the hardiness implied by the county’s Civil War history and Appalachian landscape, as well as the cunning of his forefather. However, his portraying his great-grandfather as something of a loveable rogue of family legend and neither a slave-owner nor an American seems to be an attempt to detach his personal and anecdotal interest

in these places from their larger historical significance. This is further pronounced in the fact that Wright's depiction of Sullivan County as determined not to side with the South is erroneous: Sullivan County was actually one of seven counties in East Tennessee to vote *for* secession in the Tennessee referendum of 1861 (Davidson 321). This mistake, which might be an inherited inaccuracy in a family legend, highlights the unreliability of memory, especially in the case of memories of fraught events such as these.

Wright's "I"-figure exploits the pathos of the Lost Cause—lamenting, "too little, boys, too late" (*BY* 65)—while distancing himself from its ramifications through an impartial attitude of pity and a sense of history's unknowable details:

That's it, my own little Civil War—
a lock of hair,
A dozen unreadable letters,
An obit or two,
And half the weight and half-life
of a half-healed and hurting world. (*BY* 66)

This selective history of place and self reveals the flimsiness of the past as a foundation of identity, given that interpretations and emphases are revisable and details are readily lost. The fragmentation of the past is linked to the uprootedness of the Wright family in this poem, which testifies to a pattern of immigration and relocation that denies any single sense of home. Wright also had a transient Southern childhood, allegedly living in "ten different places from birth until the age of ten" (Wright, Interview by Clark 51). This is reflected in his poetry, in which many of those places appear, including Hiwassee Dam, Kingsport, and Pickwick. The interchangeability of Southern places in his poetry reflects the rise in the U.S.A. of cultures of transience and uniformity identified by Turner, which bring about the disintegration of the idealised Southern connection to place and erode the distinctiveness of places themselves (110). Home, identity and origins are associated with the past in Wright's poetry, the implication being that such stable foundations are no more. Yet the spatialised

past preserves such lost things “elsewhere”, while nostalgia for the more authentic experience motivates attempts to return through memory.

Wright’s place-bound poetry thus conveys a strong sense of the influence of things unseen, including the past, on what can be seen, but at the same time it testifies to the dissolution of the specificity of places and their recoverable history. The underlying truth is further obscured by the unreliability of memory.

“The Southern Cross”, a long poem from Wright’s 1981 book of the same name, typifies his memory poems. The pilgrimage in this poem is towards Wright’s literal and ideal birthplaces: Pickwick in Tennessee, and Venice. The poem illustrates the ideal of a past that is pristine and whole in comparison with later states of dissolution, a kind of lost paradise. Its sequence is choppy and seemingly haphazard, comprising twenty-five semi-disconnected sections of varying lengths that see memories appear non-chronologically as though emerging from and retreating back into the physical landscape. Present-day ruminations mingle with formative memories of the speaker’s past, chiefly his time in Italy as a young man, and this creates a sense of the past in conversation with the present rather than a clear chronology, “a process rather than a result” (Miller 570), which obscures the sought-after origin event. Even the poem’s division and spacing on the page suggests a spatial rather than temporal organisation. Such narrative as exists is not a linear history but an exploration of history’s disintegration. The poem presents a kind of unfinished journey through the fragmentary landscapes of the past in an attempt to reconstruct history from the perspective of the present and to understand the present in relation to the past. However, memory is shown to be unreliable and the past’s influence on the present day is inscrutable. These limitations are represented by the volatile waterscapes throughout “The Southern Cross”.

Assumptions of causality are regularly undone in Wright’s memory poems. For example, there often appears to be a disconnection between the past and the present, while recollections of the past are often fragmentary, invented and unreliable. As a result, the absolute moment of origin is unrecoverable. As Upton observes, reality in Wright’s poems

“seems to evade any vision of a founding moment or . . . source of meaning” (*The Muse* 41).

The rest of this chapter will explore the way in which Wright’s modernist and place-like experience of history challenges narrative ideals of chronology, coherence and origin, with particular reference to “The Southern Cross”.

“That Irreconcilable City”: The Ideal Past and the Diminished Present

The definitive moment of origin that the poet-figure seeks in “The Southern Cross” is a hidden cause or influence, and precisely that which cannot be recalled, as he makes clear with his opening declaration: “Things that divine us we never touch” (*SC* 49). “Divine” means to predict or detect supernaturally, or perhaps “sanctify” (Guilford 12); it suggests the assonant “define”—to give meaning or set limits—and “the Divine”. The first line of the poem thus introduces the spectre of the invisible, suggesting that “the forces that make us what we are, remain in some sense unattainable, unknowable, remote” (Johnson 195). These untouchable “[t]hings that divine us” include “The black sounds of the night music” ¹⁷(*SC* 49)—the camouflaged, harmonious order of the universe that recalls the music of the

¹⁷ The role of music as a metaphor for the invisible is considered in detail in Chapter One of this thesis. However, it seems necessary to note the possible racial connotations implicit in the phrase “black music”, which stands out, given the overwhelming “whiteness” of the music Wright more commonly alludes to in his work (namely “white soul” [Wright, *HL* 53]). It may be that this “black music” is freeform jazz, blues or soul music and therefore indicative of some force less constrained to a recognisable form than Wright’s preferred “white soul”. Or it may simply be the case that the music is dark in the sense that it is inscrutable and hidden in the night-time landscape.

Such racial implications are arguably more conspicuous for Wright’s Southernness. Wright does incorporate aspects of the South’s history of racial tension and violence into his poetry in an explicit way on rare occasions, as in the retelling of the mistreatment of the Cherokee on the Long Island of the Holston in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* (considered at length in Chapter Three of this thesis). Generally, however, race does not seem to constitute a consistent theme or interest of Wright’s. It seems that, although Wright’s poetry evokes broad historical resonances, including racial resonances, he explores only select connotations; these are generally those significant to his own family history, beginning with the arrival of his great-grandfather in America immediately prior to the Civil War. As Merriman explains, “Although race relations are such an important part of Southern history, and Wright dwells often on color and on metaphysical contrasts between black and white, social issues are scarcely discoverable anywhere on the surface of his poems” (58). Merriman’s justifications for this, however, are inadequate. She suggests that the absence of such “social issues” is determined by [footnote cont. over page]

spheres—and “The Southern Cross”, which, “like a kite at the end of its string” (*SC* 49), marks an uppermost boundary.

The Southern Cross of the poem’s title is particularly evocative of higher powers; as early reviewer Floyd Collins notes, it suggests a “secular mysticism, an odd conflation of astronomy and Christian iconography” (467). A symbol both of fate and faith, it is also an elevated focal point and destination: a cross-hair, or the “X” that marks the spot. It resonates with the four stars representing the four cardinal virtues that shine over Dante’s purgatory (McClatchy, *White* 26) and so establishes the search for origins that ensues as a form of Dantesque journey (perhaps highlighting its futility in comparison). The Southern Cross also represents the Confederate Flag and the burden or “cross” of memory and Southern heritage that the poet-figure must bear. In Wright’s work, this is most apparently the burdensome inheritance of Christian belief, rather than the legacy of slavery and the Civil War (Turner viii). Finally, as a constellation not visible in North America it embodies “the elusiveness of the past” (Bedient, “Tracing Charles Wright” 25). McCorkle writes that “what is lost or past converges with what is mysterious, primitive, and unseen” (202) in Wright’s works, and in this poem in particular the definitive past that eludes the speaker is a crucial aspect of the invisible, or the “[t]hings that divine us [that] we never touch” (*SC* 49). Indeed, in the fourteenth section of the poem the thing we “never touch, ~ no matter how far down our hands reach” (*SC* 57) is identified as the past.

The untouchable, influential past in “The Southern Cross” is held up as an article of ultimate but elusive truth, in contrast with the shifting landscapes of memory and the present day. There is a tension throughout the poem between perpetual instability and revision and the ideal, unassailable origin. For example, when the “I”-figure says, “All day I’ve

Wright’s focus on salvation rather than suffering (58) and demonstrates his “suspicion of memory” (59). However, history and suffering, albeit usually his own, are actually central to Wright’s pilgrim’s concern for salvation; moreover a total mistrust of collective memory, if that is what Wright’s poetry enacts, is objectionable because it risks becoming grounds for an apologetics or denial of local atrocities. Insofar as his poetry is solipsistic and somewhat historically and racially indifferent, Wright is certainly answerable for writing from an ethnocentric perspective of self-perpetuating white privilege.

remembered a lake and a sudsy shoreline” (SC 49), his remembering encompasses both the lake—suggestive of deep, undisturbed, unreachable things, like the objects Henry David Thoreau describes as visible at the bottom of Walden Pond (9A.6)—and the churned shore that constitutes what can be touched and tousled by memory’s waves. These waters highlight the contrast between the ideal “blank / Unruffled waters of memory” (SC 60)—timeless, still, reflective surfaces—and the speaker’s experience of time and memory in the poem as endlessly moving and uncontained.

In Wright’s poems remembering is an expression of the works’ central desire to transcend the confusion of the material world and everyday life in pursuit of “deeper” truths. An allegory for this longing appears in the ninth section of “The Southern Cross”. While birds and an aeroplane ride the waves and wind, the island that represents a stationary point of view is half concealed by smog and beyond reach (SC 53). An inability to rise above the immediate world and get a glimpse of its complete design is also demonstrated in the eighth section. “Thinking of Dante” gives the speaker an impression of being suspended for a moment between an elevated viewpoint, implied by the “wings beginning to push out from my shoulder blades”, and “the firm pull of water under my feet” (SC 52). From here, he is able to perceive Dante’s cosmology, structured around hell, purgatory and paradise. However, “thinking about the other side” antithetically evokes its converse, “the other side of the other side”, and deposits the speaker back in the here and now, “the noon noise and daily light” (SC 53). Thinking of Dante reveals his absence, which is the absence of the kind of static and comprehensible supreme order evident in his *Divine Comedy* (Merriman 303).

Seeking to recall one’s own beginnings is, in Wright’s poetry, tantamount to seeking to understand the root cause of all things. Personal and cosmic origin myths coincide throughout his oeuvre. For example, the poem “California Dreaming” begins:

We are not born yet, and everything’s crystal under our feet.

We are not brethren, we are not underlings.

We are another nation,

living by voices that you will never hear,
Caught in the net of splendor
of time-to-come on the earth.
We shine in our distant chambers, we are golden. (*OSR* 70)

This beginning is both personal and pre-historical. Imagining pre-material souls before birth, it posits an ideal original state before all subsequent dispersals. The unborn are neither “brethren” nor “underlings”, existing prior to all earthly relationships and hierarchies. Moreover, instructed by inaudible voices, these primal selves in their “net of splendour ~ of time-to-come” appear to be in immediate contact with the underlying web of existence. Their existence is characterised by heavenly elevation, timelessness and the overarching scheme of determinism implied by the shining, distant stars in which they apparently reside. In direct contrast, the poem ends with an image of almost cosmic dissolution:

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 (*OSR* 73)

The narrative is a tragic one, in which mutability, represented by the scattering wind, wins out over the original ideal.

In contrast, in the much earlier poem “Delta Traveller” the disruptive circumstances of the speaker’s birth give way to a final vision of resurrection, reassembly and resumed order. The poem begins:

Born in the quarter-night, brash
Tongue on the tongueless ward, the moon down,
The lake rising on schedule and Dr Hurt
Already across the water, and headed home—
And so I came sailing out, first child (*BL* 45).

In a similar way, a depiction of a personal moment of origin in “Meditation on Song and Structure” evokes the first verses of Genesis, with bird-song acting as a conduit of memory that leads the “I”-figure back “to silence, sound of the first voice” (*BZ* 60):

In North Carolina, half a century ago,
Bird song over black water,
Lake Llewellyn Bibled and night-colored,
mockingbird
Soul-throated, like light, a little light in great darkness¹⁸ (*BZ* 60).

The mockingbird in this poem also recalls Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", which recounts a young boy's receiving his vocation as a poet and comprehending mortality. Fittingly, it is not a birth that is depicted in Wright's poem but an event in his life, perhaps a religious epiphany, that occurred when he was twelve years old and a student at Sky Valley School, North Carolina (Denham, *Charles Wright: A Companion* 87). Yet the allusion to the Book of Genesis elevates the event, implying that it begins a significant story. Awakenings or rebirths constitute alternative origin moments in Wright's poetry, the most notable of which is his artistic awakening in Italy. That moment is depicted in "All Landscape is Abstract, and Tends to Repeat Itself": "I came to my senses with a pencil in my

¹⁸ This line comes from Pound's last completed canto "Canto CXVI", which refers to "A little light ~ in great darkness", which is "A little light, like a rushlight / to lead back to splendor" ("Canto CXVI"). Johnson, who interprets Pound's light as the promise of a thread of coherence in his formidable *Cantos*, reads an echo of the latter line in Wright's "Opus Posthumous III" (Johnson 308-10): "All my life I've looked for this slow light, this smallish light / Starting to seep, coppery blue, ~ out of the upper right-hand corner of things" (AP 64). The light Wright looks for, which represents the "end" of the poet's efforts, apparently has its origin here with the poet-figure's birth, or rebirth, and so contains the possibility of connection and completion, as it did for Pound. The "I"-figure hopes, in other words, to recapture through poetry the profound something beyond the material world of which he had intimations during his religious youth: to be lead, like Pound, "back to splendour".

hand / And a piece of paper in front of me”, we are told; “To the years / Before the pencil, O, I was the resurrection” (*AP* 19). This reference to Christ’s resurrection magnifies the importance of the “I”-figure’s rebirth as a poet, while the words “O, I”, which resemble a zero followed by a one, suggests an absolute beginning, the moment of coming into being.

This awakening is also represented in the poem “A Short History of My Life”, where it supersedes an unexceptional biological birth and redeems an unregenerate life:

I was born on a Sunday morning,
untouched by the heavens,
Some hair, no teeth, the shadows of twilight on my heart,
And a long way from the way.
.....
Like Dionysus, I was born for a second time.
From the flesh of Italy’s left thigh, I emerged one January
Into a different world.
It made a lot of sense,
Hidden away, as I had been, for almost a life.
And I entered it open-eyed, the wind in my ears,
The slake of honey and slow wine awake on my tongue. (*ST* 11)

The Italian epiphany introduces the poet-figure to “the way” and the influence of the heavens, which apparently make him more attuned to the world. This rebirth is again associated with an epic mythology—not Biblical this time but Greek—through connection with the god Dionysus.¹⁹

Aligning one’s birth and rebirth with the Christian Bible and other religious stories addresses the human need not just for a fitting beginning for one’s own story but an allegory for the beginning of the whole story. Creation myths and autobiographies may be understood

¹⁹ Dionysus was transplanted into and then born from the thigh of his father, Zeus, after his mother’s death during pregnancy (Denham, *Charles Wright: A Companion* 192).

as serving the same function, which is to see the self narrated: to locate a present-day self within a scheme of connected events that conform to a recognisable plot, defining the significance of a subject's current state in relation to the whole. Memory plays an important role in locating the self in relation to a larger context.

In Wright's poetry, the strong bearing of history on the present and future demands a continual exploration of one's origins: thus, as St. John suggests, a "reclamation of [Wright's] past [is] necessary before he [can] begin to look toward the yearnings and desirings of the '*beyond*'" (xiv-xv). There is an element of self-understanding, even self-creation, inherent in this process of mapping the past. According to Costello, "By mining his origins, [the poet-figure] seeks a transcendental identity" ("Charles Wright's *Via Negativa*" 326): full self-knowledge. The point of origin that the poet-figure seeks in "The Southern Cross", one of the untouchable and ultimate "things that divine" him (SC 49), is Pickwick, Tennessee, the place of Wright's birth (Denham, *The Early Poetry* 14). Unlike his "windblown" memories, we are told that "Pickwick was never the wind"; rather, it represents concrete truth and is depicted as a timeless city that "stays in the same place" (SC 65). However, "To know what's departed, in order to know what's to come" (BZ 13) repeatedly proves difficult, the connection between past, present and future often seeming chaotic because both the cartography and the narrative leading back to one's origins are disrupted by the vagaries of memory.

From the beginning of "The Southern Cross", the origin the poet-figure seeks proves elusive. The first and earliest memory in the poem is of himself as a small child: "It's 1936, in Tennessee. I'm one / And spraying the dead grass with a hose" (SC 49). The words "I'm one" are lent emphasis by the line break that follows, setting the memory apart as something exemplary, singular, whole and primary. Certainly, this "I" is young and singular in comparison with the increasingly diffuse figure he becomes as he ages. However, this memory is not the sought-after origin. Rather, this is an arbitrary snapshot interchangeable with other memories or times: "Or it's 1941 in a brown suit", the poem continues, "or '53 in

its white shoes" (*SC* 49). Like every memory in the poem, this vision is just another "overlay tumbled and brought back, / As meaningless as the sea would be, ~ if the sea could remember its waves" (*SC* 49).

This element of randomness and restlessness is apparent from the beginning of the poem, in which there is "No trace of a storyline" (*SC* 49). Instead, the motion of the ever-present ocean and wind contribute to a persistent, seemingly non-narrative motif of rising and falling throughout "The Southern Cross", reinforced by the recurrence of what can be called "doublet" phrases (Rank 45), such as "ebb and flow" (*SC* 51), "in and out" and "fall, and then not to fall" (*SC* 49). Franzek interprets these as signs of "a sensibility that takes no sequences for granted" and undermines "assumptions of causality", testifying to a world of change and juxtaposition rather than underlying order (148). Undulating movement characterises the reminiscences in the poem, with the "Gauze curtains blowing in and out of open windows all over the South" (*SC* 49) constituting an allegory for memory as it sweeps indiscriminately through the rooms of the "I"-figure's past.

The wind and waters in their various guises, including several rivers in Italy, are figures for memory in "The Southern Cross". Memory, like moving waters, stirs up, disperses and submerges the past, causing past events to emerge at random as though disturbed by moving waters. In "The Southern Cross", "Places swim up and sink back, and days do" (*SC* 59), while in a later poem, "Nostalgia", a memory comes "like a wave", which "Breaks up and re-forms, breaks up, re-forms / And all the attendant retinue of loss foams out / Brilliant and sea-white, then sinks away" (*SHS* 36). In particular, the constant movement of water is linked to the difficulty of remembering. This is most evident in the eleventh section of "The Southern Cross"—the first of several sections to address what cannot be remembered specifically—which focuses entirely on the ever-moving Venetian canal:

After twelve years it's hard to recall

That defining sound the canal made at sundown, slap

Of tide swill on the church steps,
 Little runnels of boat wash slipping back from the granite slabs
 In front of Toio's, undulant ripples
 Flattening out in small hisses, the oily rainbows regaining their loose
 shapes
 Silently

 What's hard to remember is how the wind moved and the reeds clicked
 Behind Torcello,
 little bundles of wind in the marsh grass
 Chasing their own tails, and skidding across the water.
 What's hard to remember is how the electric lights
 Were played back, and rose and fell on the black canal
 Like swamp flowers,
 shrinking and stretching,
 Yellow and pale and iron-blue from the oil. (SC 54, 56)

The varied, dynamic, fluid wind and waters are themselves hard to recall accurately. They are also emblematic of the way memory provides multiple, fragmentary and distorted reflections of the past. Earlier in the poem, the river is described as a "River of sighs and forgetfulness . . . of slivers and broken blades from the moon / In an always-going-away of glints" (SC 51). Throughout "The Southern Cross", the speaker presents himself as trying to piece together a coherent picture from such "glints" of insight. Later in the poem we find him staring out into the night, lighting "match after match in the black air" (SC 58).

In contrast with the fragmentary view of the past available to him in the present, Wright's "I"-figure imagines the "real" past perfect, unchanging and aglow. As Julian Gitzen elaborates:

Whatever the limitations of memory, and however inadequately it may encompass the past, Wright contends that the past itself endures and stands in a fixed and unalterable, intangible form. Like other presences of which he is conscious, the past lacks palpable texture and substance, but for him as for his predecessor Pound, whatever has happened survives entire. (174)

In “The Southern Cross”, Pickwick appears as a city saturated with light and promise, waiting to be rediscovered. Origins in Wright’s poems are often imagined as beautiful cities. The bright city represents the centre of the landscape of history, the origin point around which all other places are located. In “Italian Days”, for example, we are told that Venice lies “at the unbitten center of things” (*OSR* 37). Like Yeats’ Byzantium or the Biblical New Jerusalem, a city represents the prized, lost paradise to be regained.

This ideal, ultimate past exists on the cusp of what can be known. The coherence of self-contained, classic narratives depends on a beginning that triggers and is consistent with all subsequent events, and it is generally this level of primacy and coherence that elevates events from being simply “what happened in the past” to the status of origins. Yet the origin is “neither properly inside nor outside the historical process” (M. C. Taylor 155). It cannot belong purely to the existing order as, to account for that order’s coming into being, it must explain the break with what came before. It must encompass, paradoxically, both the first event and its prior cause. The concept of an origin is thus a mythical concept which cannot be arrived at purely from within a history (because it exceeds that history). Therefore, it cannot provide a ground of meaning (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 258-59). Without a meaningful beginning, the story as a whole is unknowable. Similarly, full self-knowledge transcends the self. The origin that the poet-figure seeks—the moment of his birth—both begins his story and precedes it: it represents a foundation for his identity but it also takes place before his selfhood and outside of his recallable past. The insubstantiality of the origin reveals an openness and groundlessness at the foundation of the structure of understanding (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 266).

According to Mark C. Taylor, the ““time outside of time”” that is the origin “is usually imagined in terms of fullness, plenitude, and perfection. This implies that the beginning of time marks the loss of original perfection and initiates a period of exile” (64). In Wright’s poetry, the dreamlike quality of the ideal past distinguishes those perfect times from the unexceptional present, but it also indicates that these defining moments exist half in myth. As Mary Kinzie recognises, Wright’s depictions of origins are often characterised by “the hazy, the milky, the upper-atmospheric” and resemble a state of transcendent infancy or even the “almost fetal state just prior to birth” (40). An example is in “Cloud River”:

The unborn children are rowing out to the far edge of the sky,
Looking for warm beds to appear in. How lucky they are, dressed
In their lake-colored gowns, the oars in their oily locks
Taking them stroke by stroke to circumference and artery . . . (CT 56)

Much as in “California Dreaming” (qtd. on pg. 123 of this dissertation), the unborn souls seem elevated above the world and disembodied. Such imagery recalls Sigmund Freud’s account of expansive, non-self-differentiating “primary ego-feeling” of infancy (3). Yet it also makes for an ethereal, unconvincing first condition.

The symbolic city imagery is equally mythic, even as its apparent solidity evokes a stable foundation. Such cities, glowing with unnatural light, embody both cities once seen and known and now fondly remembered, and a state of unearthly perfection, infinitely prior and new. Sometimes American, often Italian, but inevitably aglow on a river, the image of a bright city—such as the “Unnatural city, monastic transparency” (HF 40) of San Miniato, or “Florence, abyss of enfolding light” (HF 41)—represents a crucial moment preserved whole and immaculate on the edge of memory and time. It is a nod towards the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation, described as having “the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal” (Rev. 21: 11). The motif is also allegedly modelled on the unfinished city of Dioce in Pound’s *Cantos*, “whose terraces are the color of stars” (451; see Wright HL 16). Furthermore, the city emblem resonates with Italo Calvino’s novel *Invisible*

Cities, which provides the epigraph to Wright's *China Trace*. Kublai Khan's desire, stated in the epigraph, to know and possess all the cities in his empire is, according to McCorkle, the "desire for the other that is always alienated as well as being both *telos* and origin" (184). City imagery thus signifies a longing for wholeness.

A city is, of course, an especially place-like representation of the past. It presents what has passed as though it were a location existing “somewhere else”. Kimberly draws attention to the way Wright’s poetry implies that things past continue to exist in or alongside the present world, “simultaneous, almost with us just on the other side of some invisible divide” (84). This reading is supported by “Light Journal”, where the “I”-figure envisions his younger self still lingering in the streets of a remembered Venice:

It's odd what persists
slip grained in the memory,
Candescent and held fast,
Odd how for twenty-six years the someone I was once has stayed
Stopped in the columns of light
Through S. Zeno's doors,
trying to take the next step and break clear . . . (*ZJ*88)

In Wright's poetry the ideal past, unlike the present, does not change but remains as it was, as does the past self. The poet-figure states in one of Wright's "Self-Portraits", "I still walk there, a shimmer across the bridge on hot days" (SC 22). Memory would seem to resurrect the younger self (Kimberly 77), but at the same time it accentuates an absence: the young poet is not "here" but remains stuck "there". The "place" of the past in fact emphasises one's distance from it and from the self that resides in it. The poet-figure's seeing himself as though from the outside or as a separate person in these poems creates a sense of disconnection between the young man that was and the speaker in the present. Wright's memory poems are "an elegy for the self" (203), as McCorkle discerns, in which memory

supplies an “unfulfilled reconstitution of [the] lost self [in which] absence and a provisional presence coexist” (204).

Another of Wright’s “Self-Portraits” depicts young Charles dwelling in the Venice of the past, while also betraying the relentless movement of time that will eventually undo him:

Charles on the Trevisan, night bridge
To the crystal, infinite alphabet of his past.
Charles on the San Trovaso, earmarked,
Holding the pages of a thrown-away book, dinghy the color of honey
Under the pine boughs, the water east-flowing.

The wind will edit him soon enough,
And squander his broken chords
in tiny striations above the air.

No slatch in the undertow. (*SC* 15)

Charles and Venice remain as they were in memory, but the canals running through this city constitute a Styx-like divide between the present day and the paradisaical past. These canals and other shifting waterscapes in “The Southern Cross” represent the effects of time, change and forgetfulness in making the past unattainable. As topographies that thwart the speaker’s cartographic efforts to locate and orient himself in relation to his starting point, the waters and wind are destabilising, indicating that all memories and stories are built upon an irrecoverable foundational moment (McCorkle 201). The presence of waters in Wright’s memory poems and, even more significantly, his likening of memory to water reveal the impossibility of ever truly plotting one’s origins. Origins appear as “places” on the riverbank, cut off from us by uncertainty and unmappable forces, which prevent them from becoming the definitive centre of identity that we might like them to be.

In “The Southern Cross”, the poet-figure again remembers himself young and carefree on the waters of Venice:

Behind the photographer's back,

at ease and pulling its ghost gloves on. (*CH* 37)

In this poem, the poet-figure, by taking a photograph that preserves his friends forever, foreshadows their preservation by an undertaker, who will one day make up their oblivious faces and lock them in their coffins to fade and disintegrate.

Another poem, "Photographs", asks, "What good are these now? / They do not answer What next? Or What was I trying to prove? / They do not explain us" (*GRH* 49). There is a lack of continuity between the perfectly preserved past self and the reminiscing present-day self, with the past failing to make sense of one's life or identity. In "Lost Souls" we see that what the past promised—an easy transition into a future equally bright—has not eventuated:

I never dreamed of anything as a child.

I just assumed it was all next door,

or day-after-tomorrow at least,

A different shirt I'd put on when the time was right.

It hasn't worked out that way. (*OSR* 7)

Observing that Wright's poetry "registers foreboding, but not linearity", Franzek notes that time in his poetry is, counterintuitively, a "temporally fragmenting force that looms, awaiting us with its pasts and futures", imminent and inexplicable (146). Both the radiant past and the bright future it promised seem to exist alongside but separated from the much-diminished present, with no retraceable transition from one to the other evident. Rather than consecutively, these times seem to co-exist simultaneously but separated by an ineradicable break. While photographs depict a world we "never left, if truth be told", it is "a world never to return", so distinct from the now that the speaker asks in *Littlefoot*, "Who could imagine it would ever become like this?" (*LF* 81).

The disparity between past and present is palpable in “The Southern Cross”. The seventh section represents the past as a time when human action had fabulous outcomes: “When my father went soldiering, apes dropped from the trees. / When my mother wrote home from bed, the stars asked for a pardon” (SC 52). These “parents” are in fact Whitman and Dickinson, Wright’s American literary forebears. The exoticism of their lives and the peculiar consequences of their actions stand in contrast with the world at present, which in Wright’s poetry tends towards deterioration. Similarly, in “Driving Through Tennessee”, also from *The Southern Cross*, the speaker notes “how ardently” one’s parents “still loom” “In the brief and flushed / Fleshtones of memory, one foot in front of the next / Even in retrospect, and so unimpeachable” (SC 31). The potent, irreproachable parents of memory contrast with their ineffectual, ghostly presence in death. For example, in “The Southern Cross”, they are reduced to insubstantial “voices . . . like smoke”, “Haunting the chairs and the sugar chest” (SC 52).

The deceased parents resemble the poet’s poetic forebears, who haunt the banks of the river Adige with their absence in the previous section: “Dante and Can Grande once stood here”, we are told, “Before that, in his marble tier, / Catullus once sat through the afternoons. / Before that, God spoke in the rocks . . .” (SC 52). The “I”-figure depicts himself as the latest and least spectacular member in a line of poets dotted alongside the river of time that leads right back to divine utterance in the Biblical past. An unfallen relationship between the poet, nature and God’s language is a significant aspect of Wright’s Edenic depiction of the past. In the poem “Mildly Depressed, Far From Home, I Go Outside For a While”, the title of which contains a sense of distance from the “home” of the past, the speaker reminisces, “How wide the world was, / How sweet the Orphean song, / How close the trees were then to the eddies of heaven” (SHS 22). Orpheus’ song, which could control creatures and inanimate objects, plays in the landscape of an idyllic epoch, a recurrent sign of supreme poetic ability to which the poem’s speaker aspires.

In “Time Will Tell”, the “I”-figure recalls his own prolificacy in youth, his potent words resembling God’s creative *Logos*:

Time was when time was not,
and the world an uncut lawn
Ready for sizing. We looked, and took the job in hand.
Birds burst from our fingers, cities appeared, and small towns
In the interim.
We loved them all.
In distant countries, tides nibbled our two feet on pebbly shores
With their soft teeth and languorous tongues.
Words formed and flew from our fingers.
We listened and loved them all. (*ST* 66)

“Sizing” the raw materials of the world apparently involves writing them into being. The words that fly from the poet’s fingers *are* the birds, towns and cities, and *vice versa*. Moreover, the world itself is a mouth here, perhaps about to speak: the “uncut lawn” is suggestive of the “so many uttering tongues” of grass in Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (6.119) , and the tide mouths the speaker’s toes with “soft teeth and languorous tongues” (*ST* 63).

The potency of language and human action in the past contrasts strikingly with the diminished present day, in which the *Logos* is absent, poetry is not so creative or influential and such magical poetic genius is lost; language no longer actualises things as they are spoken. In “Mondo Orpheo”, in contrast to Orpheus’ song, “Our song resettles no rocks, it makes no trees move, it / Has come to nothing, this sour song, but it’s all we’ve got” (*SHS* 23). The Miltonic fall of language typifies a general trend in Wright’s poetry whereby the original, ideal state appears to have been inexplicably lost, leaving behind a world that tends always towards corruption. Even more ominously, the ineffectuality of poetic language accentuates the perceptible absence of God or, rather, the inaccessibility of the invisible order to which the landscape attests and to which language is meant to provide access. Once again,

the loss of the past does not seem contained within a causal chain of history tracing back to an earlier time, but implies a catastrophic break. We see as much in “Two Stories”:

It's not age,
nor time with its gold eyelid and blink,
Nor dissolution in all its mimicry
That lifts us and sorts us out.
It's discontinuity
and all its spangled coming between
That sends us apart and keeps us there in dread.
It's what's in the rearview mirror,
smaller and out of sight. (OSR 21)

Time, here, seems consonant with Heidegger's *Augenblick*, unifying past, present and future (Critchley). Yet time in its wholeness cannot explain the transition between the present and the past, nor can the sad realities of ageing and “dissolution”. The view of the past “in the rearview mirror” throws the present into stark and terrifying relief and decisively isolates the speaker from his past.

The bright past in “The Southern Cross”, “with its good looks and *Anytime, Anywhere . . .*” (SC 57), is attractive and imbued with infinite possibility, unlike the realised present. This disparity is profound and inexplicable: “Nothing had told me that my days were marked for a doom”, the speaker laments; “Nothing had told me that woe would buzz at my side like a fly” (SC 50). The past is imagined as perfectly preserved elsewhere, but its “otherness” (SC 57) in comparison with the present day makes it seem irrevocably disconnected from the now.

Chaos and the Irretrievable Origin

In “The Southern Cross”, the inconsistency of the past and the present is due to a kind of disturbance analogous to chaos. Chaos theory describes the non-linearity and

“The Southern Cross” challenges the aims of narrative and history, because it depicts origins determining events in a way that is untraceable and seemingly incoherent. Time and memory are unsettled like water by overwhelming and unknown variables, and origins become something we can “never touch” (*SC* 49). This link between water imagery and the unknowable past is made clear in *Littlefoot*:

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and memory too (*LF* 25)

The waters of time, like the heart (or self) and memory itself, have ungraspable beginnings, middles and ends and so resist narrativisation.

The ninth section of “The Southern Cross” contains a parody of divination that mocks the ideal of predictability: “Here is the truth. The wind rose, the sea / Shuffled its blue deck and dealt you a hand: / Blank, blank, blank, blank, blank” (*SC* 53). The movements of the wind and water here reveal nothing of the past or future while at the same time suggesting that the future holds nothing—or promises nothingness—for the speaker. In the tenth section, even the seemingly constant stars, arbiters of fate, are inscrutable and waterborne:

The Big Dipper has followed me all the days of my life.
Under its tin stars my past has come and gone.
Tonight, in the April glaze
and scrimshaw of the sky,
It blesses me once again
With its black water, and sends me on. (*SC* 53-54).

Although the echo of Psalm 23 (Ps 23: 6) in the first line of this section lends the constellation a benevolent air, its waterborne “tin stars” seem a flimsy counterweight to the overruling uncertainty.

The penultimate section of the poem is a clear statement of the unpredictability of this universe:

The life of this world is wind.
Windblown we come, and windblown we go away.
All that we look on is windfall.
All we remember is wind. (*SC* 65)

The repetition in this passage lends it the “evangelical tone and cadence” that Henry identifies in many of Wright’s phrasings (“New Scaffolding” 99); it is a tone that hovers somewhere between incantatory wisdom and self-parody. This passage takes the chaotic aspects of this wind- and wave-driven world to the extreme, which Denham reads as evidence of a pervasive godly influence at work in the world (*The Early Poetry* 14). However, given the recurrence of the troublesome wind in Wright’s poetry as something elusive and unpredictable, the passage also undoes any notion of benevolent divine influence and represents not a fundamental but “a decentred force” (Franzek 150). The word “windfall” encapsulates this ambiguity: meaning good fortune and unexpectedness, it is also the wind’s “Fall”; evocatively, the term applies to ripe fruit blown down by the wind.

The implication that the world in Wright’s poetry is, like a chaotic system, determined but invisibly and inexplicably so is reinforced by insects’ movements, which contribute to a motif of haphazard determination throughout his works. In “The Southern Cross”, the speaker describes the impression that the small creatures he watches from his cabin porch act according to some unseen, unpredictable order into which he has no insight. Likewise, in the twenty-second section, an industrious bumblebee, inhabiting a garden that seems to be enacting its own obscure liturgy, contributes to the impression that “Everything has its work, ~ everything written down” (*SC* 63), while, one page earlier, a spider has a similar effect:

I’ve been sitting here tracking the floor plan
of a tiny, mottled log spider
 Across the front porch of the cabin,
 And now she’s under my chair,
off to her own devices

Behind my back, the spider has got her instructions
 And carries them out.

Flies drone, wind back-combs the marsh grass, swallows bank and climb.
Everything I can see knows just what to do,

Even the dragonfly, hanging like lapis lazuli in the sun . . . (SC 62)

As outlined in Chapter One of this dissertation, the spider is a symbol for predestination and design associated with an inscrutable God. Here, the spider, like other bugs in Wright's poetry, reveals the influence of an unfathomable force or order. The recurrent focus on the paths of insects throughout Wright's oeuvre suggests an expectation that they might reveal the contours of the invisible law that moves them. Thus, in various poems the speaker describes "A fly, a smaller than normal fly / . . . mapping his way through sunstrikes across my window" (SS 34), identifies the "singular pathway" of a cricket (CH 4), sees a "[d]un-colored moth" move as though "[p]ulled by invisible strings toward light wherever it is" (SS 16), and tracks the "white trail" of "An almost unseeable winged insect" "Across the blue-veined, dune-flattened, intimate blank of the page" (AP 62). It is as though these tiny scribes follow a predetermined route and might spell out the world's secret. In "Thinking of Georg Trakl", we are told that "the creatures and small wings" know "what we will know when the time comes" (CT 58), while in "The Killing", the speaker, watching "The night bugs pivot and turn", wonders, "How is it that they know?" (GRH 58).

Most telling of all is this revelation in "A Journal of Southern Rivers":

How admirable are the insects that understand the ways of heaven,
The selva illuminata
that jacklights us now and then,
The nearness of nothingness,
The single spirit that lies at the root of all things. (XA 32)

The "illuminated forest", the inverse of the "*selva oscura*" Dante encounters in the first canto of the *Inferno* (Inf. 1.2), represents the bright "heaven" or "nothingness" "at the root of all

things" (XA 32)—read "the invisible"—that has the ability to attract us as a hunter's or fisherman's jacklight does animals and fish. Although "[t]he insect world has no tongue to let loose, and no tongue to curb", in "Scar Tissue" it nonetheless "cries out" "all day and night" (ST 33), expressing some great truth. At the same time, however, whatever order is at work in the wind, water and other inextricable forces that move small creatures challenges comprehension and defies narrativisation.

The remembered self who is swept by floodwaters "all the way / Through the front doors and down to the back half / Of *da Montin*"²³ (SC 55) in "The Southern Cross" is not so different from the "Leaves and insects drifting by" (SC 59) on reality's choppy surface. This experience of being "windblown" (SC 65) is a magnified version of the insects' apparently haphazard determination. As is clear in "Black and Blue", variable outside forces determine our lives: "Dark cloud, bright cloud, sunlight, rain. / Great wind keeps carrying us ~ where we don't want, where we don't know" (CH 46). The poem "If I'm Here, Who's That Out There?" suggests that the endeavour upwards towards heaven—the paradigmatic movement of Wright's whole oeuvre—itself reveals the tide-like pull of something unknown:

Trust in God, and always swim towards shore.

The rain keeps piling up,

from the 5th to the 7th ply of heaven.

Left arm, breathe, right arm, breathe, breast stroke, back stroke,

then dead-man's float.

How long ago that all seems.

Who was to know we sat on the hard rocks of Purgatory,

Watching ourselves be pulled in,

watching ourselves reeled out? (OT)

²³ A Venetian hotel, the Antica Locanda Montin, or its restaurant (Denham, *The Early Poetry* 112).

Although this poem seems to intimate that we should take charge of our own fates rather than relying only on Divine Providence—“Trust in God, and always swim towards shore”—ultimately, it seems, the pilgrim’s progress skyward on rising waters has always been determined by an insurmountable, wave-like pattern of in-and-out, back-and-forth controlled by someone “Out There” (“If I’m Here” *OT*).

Endless repetitive movement, rather than a finite sequence of approach and arrival, is evident everywhere throughout Wright’s works, not only in land- and sea-scapes but in the works’ signature movement of spiritual “ebb and flow”. As McClatchy describes it, the “upward urging of the beautiful toward the sublime [is] counterbalance[d by] the lure back and downward of the elegiac note sounded everywhere in [Wright’s] poem[s]” (*White* 37), so that, according to Upton, images of ascent are almost always met with “images of falls, dissipations and dissolves” (*The Muse* 31-32). These traces of the pattern that constitute Wright’s undernarrative exist on every scale in the fabric of the poems. This undernarrative depicts a world in which inescapable rise and fall, both natural and spiritual, make any headway towards one’s transcendent ideal an ongoing and impossible task.

The sense that one is merely wind-carried and water-washed, unable to expect closure and exercising little control over the directions in which time and memory take one, is a cause for hopelessness: the speaker in “A Journal of English Days” tells himself, “Step back and let your story, like water, go where it will, / Cut down your desires” (*ZJ* 15). Moreover, while finding no principle of order in his past by which he might have predicted his present, the poet-figure perceives in the chaos of his present the promise of further inescapable decline in the future. The third and fourth sections of “The Southern Cross”, coming directly after the bewildered cry of “Nothing had told me” (*SC* 50), portend death and toothless infirmity: “early blooms on the honeysuckle shine like maggots after the rain. / The purple mouths of the passion blossoms open their white gums to the wind” (*SC* 50). Shortly afterwards, the “wisteria tendrils” seem to extend their necks beneath the sword of the hunter Orion (*SC* 50), portending death. The nineteenth section reads,

Time is the villain in most tales,
and here too,
Lowering its stiff body into the water.
Its landscape is the resurrection of the word,
No end of it,
the petals of wreckage in everything. (SC 61)

Time creates ripples that represent unpredictability, but its “stiff body” is evocative of old age and corpses. (SC 61). The moving waters in “The Southern Cross” are threatening: like the ocean in Walt Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”, which whispers the “low and delicious word DEATH” (line 68) , the “voice of the waters” in “The Southern Cross” speak a “ghostly litany” (SC 51), and “The huge page of the sea” contains the “one word *despair*” (SC 57).

The loss of the past may be comparable to the Fall, but the mutability of the present day in Wright's poetry does not seem to promise divine intervention or the restoration of the lost paradisaal state at some point in the future. The pilgrim's circular search represents a futile attempt to fight the loss of his past. This much is implied in the poem "Archaeology":

The older we get, the deeper we dig into our childhoods,
Hoping to find the radiant cell
That washed us, and caused our lives
to glow in the dark like clock hands
Endlessly turning towards the future
Tomorrow, day after tomorrow, the day after that,
all golden, all in good time. (ST 51)

In this poem, the irrecoverable beginning that the speaker intuits—a lost first “cell”, the original unit, space or DNA from which his future results, imbued with bright promise—is in fact an energy “cell” propelling him forward into old age. His “endless turning” nonetheless

takes him “towards the future” (*ST* 51). This “Archaeology”—one of the ways in which Wright figures his pilgrim’s search for the hidden, irrecoverable past—does not follow a linear narrative of search and discovery (or even search and disappointment) but is rather caught in a vacillating pattern of failed but ongoing searching. In the poem, the speaker complains, “I can’t get down deep enough”, and then later adds, “I still can’t go deep enough” (*ST* 51). “I can’t remember my own youth”, he writes elsewhere, “That seam of red silt I try so anxiously to unearth” (*ZJ* 69). A sense of things getting worse introduces the fact of mortality into this exercise in Beckettian futility, and with it a feeling of dread; it creates a sense that the seeker who attempts, and fails, repeatedly, to reach transcendence may be running out of time.

In other poems, Wright figures the recovery of one’s past not in terms of digging but as a delicate process of re-assembly or tracking, dependent on fragmentary evidence. The “I”-figure tells of “Trying to piece together / The way it must have been for someone in 1908” (*ZJ* 6), of “Tracking a picture back / To its bricks and its point of view” (*SC* 20), and elsewhere of being “unwilling to trace my steps back” (*ZJ* 11). Calvin Bedient sees “The Southern Cross” as one of these attempts to “push it all, every dispossession and dispersal of the soul, back to the beginning” (“Tracing Charles Wright” 27), as though the speaker were recovering the past from the scattered pieces and worn artefacts that are his memories. In these cases, it seems that the chaos of the present not only promises death in the future but also serves to obscure the past. In the eighteenth section of “The Southern Cross” we are told that the speaker’s memories of the past are “Larger and less distinct each year, / As we are, ~ and lolling about in the same redress” (*SC* 59). The implication is that as the present unravels into chaos and decay, so, too, does one’s grasp of the past. The pilgrim’s fading memory causes the past to become lost to him as he ages. “Each year I remember less” (*ZJ* 37), he tells us in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, while in the fourteenth section of “The Southern Cross” he laments of the past, “Our prayers go out to it, our arms go out to it / Year after

year / But who can ever remember enough?" (*SC* 57). The twenty-first section is framed with the declarations "I can't remember enough" and "I'll never be able to" (*SC* 63).

Why "The Past is Never the Past"

Jarman describes forgetfulness in Wright's poetry as a figure for negated meaning, "darkness, emptiness and nothingness" ("The Trace" 102): for, in other words, the negative principle in Wright's works that obstructs the formation of a cohesive narrative line and the recovery of a core presence. The past in his poetry is "a hiding place / Beyond recall or recovery, no matter our wants or our diligence" (*BY* 41), not only because too much of what happened has already been forgotten, but also because events never cohered to begin with; "It's not possible to read the then in the now" (*ZJ* 92).

In fact, attempts to grasp the past seem to alter, even damage, what is recalled. In the memory poem "Two Stories", it is suggested that we try to "break" into our past, damaging it in the process: "The whorls of our fingerprints ~ embedded along [the past's] walls / Like fossils the sea has left behind" (*OSR* 19). In "Chickamauga" we are told that "History handles our past like spoiled fruit. / . . . / Fingers us here. Fingers us here and here" (*CH* 47). This suggests that the manipulation of events into a linear history damages the "real" past. "The past is never the past" (*ZJ* 3) in Wright's poems because the poet-figure's "lack of ability to remember it right" (*OSR* 36) means that whatever is recalled is suspect and likely to be different from how things actually were.

The poet-figure insists upon the role of invention in recollection: for example, he confides that "To speak of the dead is to make them live again: ~ we invent what we need" (*OSR* 62). Elsewhere, memory is shown "Erasing and reinventing itself while the world / Stands beside it just so" (*LF* 9). In the poem, "Who Knows What Lurks in the Hearts of Men", we find the following passage:

December, the twelfth month, and public exercise, the chopping of ice
Last month, we hunted badgers.

Next month, we'll bring the ice to the storage bin,
or else the propane freezer.

True, I'm making this all up.

Given the limited evidence of memory and artefacts, salvaging the past necessarily involves imagination to fill the gaps. The past is "lolling about in . . . redress", "Larger and less distinct" (*SC* 59) in "The Southern Cross" perhaps as a result of the speaker's own intervention, including his making the past seem always "sweet . . . no matter how wrong or how sad" (*SC* 50), while "what really happened" (*SC* 59) is eventually erased entirely. "Memory's like that", we are told in "Looking Again at What I Looked At for Seventeen Years": "Instinct fill[s] the edges in, resplendent with holes. // We have it for text and narrative . . . / The connection of everything with everything else" (*CH* 87). Memory both "constructs" and "deconstructs" the past by inventing connections and continuities where none exist; we are told in this poem that "black / Instinct [fills] the edges in, resplendent with holes" (*CH* 87).

Wright's memory poems convey the modernist desire for the true past that represents an unquestionable, foundational reality, as well as an abiding scepticism that such a thing exists. If the past cannot be known, then all versions of the past are necessarily fantasies. Imagination provides access to what is forgotten by recreating it as something else, perhaps more vivid, immense and coherent than it actually was, so that memory is increasingly detached from "real" history:

Memories never lie still.

They circle the landscape

Like hawks on the wind,

Turning and widening, their centers cut loose and disappearing. (*CH* 37)

This imagery, which recalls Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" ("Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" [lines 1-3]), aligns the poet-figure's disconnection from the past with a more general condition of ruin that perhaps even invites eschatological despair. The "I"-figure seems to take a negative view of his chances of ever recovering the true past, admitting in "Language Journal", "What I remember is how ~ I remember it" (XA 24).

For this reason, the unsettled waters in "The Southern Cross" that embody the speaker's never-ending reminiscence also create a sense of disconsolateness. The "caprices of the weather" constitute, as Christopher Miller notes, "emblems of [the speaker's] consciousness" (575). For example, "the ocean" that "nervously grinds its teeth" (SC 57) and clears "its throat, brooding and self-absorbed" is "like regret", and analogous to the speaker's uneasy state of mind and nostalgia for a past that always seems "sweet" (SC 50). Later, the poet-figure displays a clear affinity with the "flat voice of the waters" that retells "their story, again and again, as though to unburden itself // Of an unforgotten guilt" (SC 51). He, too, revisits periods he has described before, as though to alleviate the guilt of not being able to get them right. The speaker's "guilt" is an abiding sense of loss and poetic inadequacy, both allayed and compounded by his incessant memorialising and revision, as is palpable in the poem "Buffalo Yoga":

There's no erasing the false-front calligraphy of the past.

There's no expunging the way the land lies, and its windfall glare.

I never did get it right.

When the great spider of light unspools her links and chains,

May the past be merciful,

the landscape have pity on me—

Forgive me my words, forgive me my utterances. (BY 13)

Notably, the speaker is answerable to the past, and it is the past's constant but inimitable landscape that he is constrained to misrepresent.

The connection between fond reminiscence and inadvertent fabrication is evident in the seventeenth section of "The Southern Cross", where the speaker distinguishes between what he recalls and "what really happened", which "we'll never remember / No matter how hard we stare back at the past" (SC 59). The eighteenth section emphasises this distinction again: what is recalled is undulating and increasingly indistinct, whereas the real "Rome was never like that, ~ and the Tiber was never like that" (SC 60). The speaker states ironically, "I can't remember the colors I said I'd never forget", before vividly describing the "ochres and glazes and bright hennas of each house" (SC 60). The implication is that the real colours were different, maybe not as vibrant, and now unknowable: "It's so ridiculous, and full of self-love, / The way we remember ourselves" (SC 45), the speaker exclaims in "Gate City Breakdown". The tendency to exaggerate and romanticise is as unavoidable as the tendency to forget.

"Nothing's so beautiful as the memory of it" (ZJ 56), Wright's protagonist acknowledges, because memory tells us "just those things ~ she thinks we want to hear" (ST 9). For example, in "The Southern Cross", the Venice of the poet's dreams from a year he has difficulty recalling has the quality of something eternally pristine; he calls it "Flawless and Byzantine, / . . . like glass" (SC 54). Moreover, in direct contrast with the previous section dedicated to partial recall and the noisy, never-still canal, we are told that "Venice will lie like silk ~ at the edge of the sea and the night sky, / Albescent under the moon", and that "silence will have the last word" (SC 56). The imagined city of Venice stands for all that survives untarnished due to the fact that it cannot be remembered.

Just as the invisible is what remains out of reach, the truth corresponds in Wright's poetry with what is inaccessible to memory, while what is recalled is deemed distorted purely because it *is* recalled. The ideal origin intuited in Wright's poetry is untouched by memory and imagination, and the past as it is presented is self-evidently mythicised, a stand-in or

supplement for the unknowable origin. The true past is that “otherness inside us / We never touch, ~ no matter how far down our hands reach” (*SC* 57)—the origin moment buried or submerged at the centre of things that cannot be grasped and re-imagined. Like the dead, removed from the flow of time, who are portrayed in “The Southern Cross” as steadfast and omnipresent, “their marble breath and their marble names, / . . . / . . . at the edge of everywhere” (*SC* 61), the unremembered past is also permanent and ubiquitous. The way in which Wright depicts the past as a flawless city announces this ideal past as a blatant myth, while revealing the enhancing effect of imagination.

“You Can’t Go Back”

In “The Southern Cross”, “It’s what we forget that defines us, and stays in the same place, / And waits to be rediscovered” (*SC* 65). That “what we forget . . . defines us” echoes the poem’s central conceit, “Things that divine us we never touch” (*SC* 49), aligning forgotten things with all that is at once enduring, inaccessible and definitive. The things the speaker claims to have forgotten in “Apologia Pro Vita Sua” seem to be vital truths related to the world’s meaning: “[w]ho the Illuminator is, and what he illuminates; / Who will have pity on what needs have pity on it” (*BZ* 15). The hard-to-recall Venice of “The Southern Cross” is described as “webbed” and likened to “a great spider” (*SC* 54), which links it with the untouchable invisible order of the world, while in the poem “Photographs” it is the poses that were never caught on camera that alone “explain us”:

They lurk like money just
Out of reach, shining
And unredeemed:
And we hold such poses forever. (*GRH* 49)

At the end of the “The Southern Cross”, the speaker encounters his place of origin, Wright’s real-life birthplace, Pickwick, Tennessee. Pickwick is the ultimate forgotten thing, something that can never be directly remembered because it represents the moment of birth:

A city I'll never remember,
its walls the color of pure light,
Lies in the August heat of 1935,
In Tennessee, the bottomland slowly becoming a lake.
It lies in the landscape that keeps my imprint
Forever,
and stays unchanged, and waits to be filled back in. (SC 65)

This sense of Pickwick's unattainability is prefigured in an early poem called "Birthplace":

A land out of reach,
unadjustable,
recalled whenever,

by means of snapshots
discovered once
in a book; it is
underwater now,
forever. (*DA* 15)

Submerged deep below the current of time, beyond the reaches of memory, the birthplace lasts “forever” precisely because the poet cannot remember anything about it to colour the reality with biased memory. The flooding implied in both passages alludes to the building of Pickwick Landing Dam, with which Wright’s father was involved as an engineer (this being the reason for his family’s residence in the town at the time of Wright’s birth) (Denham, *The Early Poetry* 114). During the dam’s construction, the Alabama communities of Riverton and Waterloo were indeed submerged (Ezzell 22), but in these poems the rising waters represent the intrusion of time and unpredictable forces, which isolate the origin point from the present day.

The inaccessibility of the past and the possibility that it exists only in his imagination are things that grieve Wright's pilgrim. The book-length poem *Littlefoot* begins:

You can't go back,
you can't repeat the unrepeatable.

No matter how fast you drive, or how hard the slide show
Of memory flicks and releases,
It's always some other place. (*LF* 3)

The poem later adds, “I can’t go back there, / No matter how juicy the stories are, ~ no matter how true, or untrue” (*LF* 39). In “Sprung Narratives”, the speaker laments:

How impossible now to reach it,
No matter how close we come
driving by in the car—
That childhood,
That landscape we pictured ourselves a no-cut part of
For good—
each time we revisit it. (*CH* 28)

That the past is “unrepeatable” and “always some other place” (*LF* 3) makes the speaker’s attempts to repossess it futile. The emphasis in these passages is on the place-like nature of the past and its association with youth and belonging. It is a home that the pilgrim cannot truly “go back” to (*LF* 3) or “revisit” (*CH* 28), even if the geographical place is accessible by car.

The glowing cities of the immemorial origin are the brightest points in history for Wright's speaker, the only things protected from encroaching darkness, old age and loss. The bright past is an embodiment of the transcendent ideal that the pilgrim seeks; the beginning is thus his destination. Counterintuitively, while it is impossible to "go back" to the past, it might nonetheless be regained by going forward. The speaker is portrayed as "on [his] way

for a long time ~ back to the past, / That irreconcilable city” (“Road Warriors”). The past thus becomes synonymous with heaven, as in the poem “Scar Tissue”:

It is impossible to say goodbye to the past.

Whose images are they anyway,

whose inability to spell them out?

Such destitution of words.

What hand was seen to wave in the all-absorbing light?

Better to leave it alone.

Better to let it drift there,

at the end edge of sight,

Replete with its angel bands and its handful of golden hair,

Just out of earshot, just out of reach.

But someday that hand will reappear

Out of the awful blear-light.

Someday that hand, white hand in the white light,

will wave again, and not stop.

No reason to look around then, it will be waving to you. (*ST* 35-36)

Here, the “all-absorbing light” and “angel bands” of the past clearly identify it with heaven; the gesturing hand may belong to a dead loved one with whom the speaker hopes to be reunited in death.

According to Henry Hart, the “rituals of remembrance” in Wright’s poems are attempts to “return to ‘proto’ or ‘crypto’ dream homes” modelled on the “transcendent Eden” espoused by mystics; the “I”-figure is thus styled as a “‘homeless’ pilgrim, always looking over his shoulder longingly at an illusory paradise as he moves through the world” (“Charles Wright’s *Via Mystica*” 331). In his poems the past looks like paradise and,

inversely, the heavenly city on “the other side of the river” that he imagines awaiting his pilgrim after death resembles his places of origin, Pickwick and Venice.

This conflation of origin and afterlife means that Wright frequently depicts life as having a towards/away-from direction, with the past “Returning ahead of us” (*SC* 31) as time conveys us *back* to our graves. This is evident in the final lines of “The Southern Cross”, where we are told that Pickwick “lies in the landscape that keeps my imprint” and “waits to be filled back in” (*SC* 65), suggesting that the birthplace is also the place of burial. It is as though the poet-figure’s grave is the body-shaped impression his pilgrim left when he first emerged from the earth in an autochthonous birth that he will reassume in death: “Someday I’ll find it out / And enter my old outline as though for the first time, // And lie down, and tell no one” (*SC* 65).

Perhaps this goes some way toward explaining why Wright’s poetry often expresses resignation towards ageing and even what seems at times to be a longing for death. In *Littlefoot*, the speaker tells us, “It’s not tomorrow I’m looking forward to, it’s yesterday, / Or better yet, the day before that” (*LF* 39), as though looking forward to the past. Gitzen suggests that Wright’s “I”-figure “looks forward to death in part because he imagines that it will unite him with his unknown or forgotten past, making him complete or allowing him full knowledge of himself” (176). Furthermore, if “emptiness is the beginning of all things” (*OSR* 46), then the passing of time, as it draws us all unrelentingly towards oblivion, also transports us once more to the state of ultimate priority and potential: “formlessness, / Beginning of all things” (*BZ* 68), the nothingness on the cusp of our coming into being. The ubiquitous moment of origin—“The emptiness of non-being, that which endures through all change”—is, in Wright’s poetry, “Something to shoot for, for sure, / Something to seek out and walk on, ~ one footprint after the next” (*LF* 82). In one sense, arriving prior to his own appearance would complete the pilgrim’s journey, allowing him to lay claim both to his origin and pre-origin. On the other hand, this would complete a loop, delivering the pilgrim

back to his starting place and condemning him to repeat the pattern of virtual rise and fall that prevents him from ever making any progress towards his transcendent goal.

Wright idealises a pristine, undiminished past and a point of origin consistent with the story or journey of one's life. Yet, as "The Southern Cross" demonstrates, it is impossible to recover a point of origin or create a reliable map of the past in his poetry, because the past is elusive, fluid, re-invented and severed from the present. From a Derridean perspective, as elucidated by Mark C. Taylor, "the 'fullness' of the 'origin' can be present only as *absent* [and so] primal plenitude is always already lost" (71). The pilgrim cannot penetrate the rift between his past and his "now" because no such original, unbroken moment was ever present. Rather, the break is original, and the search for full-presence "testifies to the absence of [that] presence" (M. C. Taylor 72). Nonetheless, the past remains an object of desire associated with narrative wholeness, and efforts to reclaim it are never conclusively ended, but persist, repeating with the same limitations, frustrations and longing in poem after poem. Turner observes that, in Wright's poems,

even though we can never reach the bottom of the past's profundity, its weight of influence on the present, we know enough to know that the accumulated presence of the past is there, irrevocably at bottom of all present constructions of the self. As nature continues to cycle . . . landscape and memory tend toward a stoic dissolution. . . . The weightless and unrepentant excessiveness of memory creates an eschatological desire without end. As much as he wants his remembered moments to cohere into a redemptive narrative, his past lives to progress toward some apocalyptic moment of wholeness, this cohesiveness, personal and cultural, never arrives (118).

It is not only Wright's memory poems that enact this thwarted search and ceaseless yearning. His equally common contemplative poems—*i.e.* those that focus predominantly on observed rather than remembered landscapes—display a comparable questing attitude. These include the journal poems from *Zone Journals* and *Xionia*, and in particular *A Journal of the*

Year of the Ox, in which the poet-figure's "pilgrimage" in the present day resembles on a grand scale the rising and falling motions he detects everywhere in "The Southern Cross". While the poems' speaker finds himself dragged forward ruthlessly towards decrepitude and death, he also finds himself caught in a spiritual cycle of rise and fall and imagines being circled back to his beginning, inspired by endlessly repetitive seasons. Meanwhile, the definitive and transcendent reality he purports to seek is hard to pin down, regularly eluding him but sometimes glimpsed in crystalline moments of epiphany that quickly depart, attesting to but never yielding that host of "Things that divine us we never touch" (SC 49).

Chapter 3: Pilgrimage and Time in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*

Dante and John Chrysostom
Might find this afternoon a sidereal roadmap,
A pilgrim's way . . .
You might too
Under the prejaundiced outline of the quarter moon,
Clouds sculling downsky like a narrative for *whatever comes*,
What *hasn't happened to happen yet*
Still lurking behind the stars

—Charles Wright, “Black Zodiac”

Wright's contemplative poems, including his journal poems, present a pilgrimage of simply “being in time” that takes place between the defining moments of beginning and end but is given shape and meaning only with reference to these. As we shall see in Chapter Four of this thesis, the pilgrimage can be directed towards a definitive end, or it can be directed towards the formative point of origin, as demonstrated in Chapter Two. Ultimately, these points represent the same ideal state of wholeness. Miller rightly notes that the journal form Wright adopts throughout *Zone Journals* and *Xionia* builds on the earlier memory poems such as “The Southern Cross” (579). He suggests that recording the present compensates for the pilgrim's inability to recapture the past (579), but actually the pilgrimage in the present day is equally stymied. “The Southern Cross” navigates the contours of memory in pursuit of the elusive past and the journal poems traverse time in pursuit of the epiphanic present moment, but the goal of both is essentially the same: to apprehend the invisible. In both cases, the sought-after thing is approached in non-linear ways; in both cases, the site of contact with the invisible is depicted as shining and detached. In the end, in the journal poems and other contemplative poems, as in the memory poems, the invisible escapes apprehension.

Time passing is a dominant concern in Wright's contemplative poems. My focus in this chapter is on time as a manifestation of the invisible. Time is the underlying force that governs one's life and the natural world, an aspect of the world's order. Time is also synonymous with the totality and *telos* of things insofar as time as a whole encompasses all of reality and its complete narrative. The pilgrimage is subject to the influence of the invisible in the form of time, but the pilgrim aspires to transcend time and perceive the whole and the invisible truth that is at work.

A Journal of the Year of the Ox,²⁴ Wright's longest continuous poem, demonstrates better than any other single poem the pilgrimage in time in Wright's poetry, as well as his three contrasting manifestations of time's influence. The overarching circularity of the poem is an example of the towards/away-from movement that leads forwards to the beginning. This sees patterns of change repeat, with ostensible endings bringing about re-beginnings so that the pilgrimage, like nature, is ongoing. *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* also creates a sense of time's linearity, expressed by directional metaphors such as the river and the road. Linear time manifests itself as a process of personal decay or rising entropy, whereby the only end to pilgrimage is death. Finally, the poem contains instances of Wright's distinctive "crystallised time" conceit. This term, which is my own, was inspired by a number of passages in Wright's oeuvre in which forms of the word "crystal" invoke something brilliant or pristine, both totalising and strikingly sudden or short-lived.²⁵ Crystal thus aptly captures the qualities of this particular motif in Wright's poetry, which uses effects of shining and stillness to depict transitory encounters with the eternal Absolute, creating an impression of a brief moment of epiphany that is encapsulated as though sealed in amber or under glass. This chapter will

²⁴ Originally published as a limited edition volume of 150 copies (Iowa: Windhover P, 1988). The citations given in this thesis are taken from the stand-alone volume *Zone Journals* (1988), in accordance with the referencing approach outlined in the Note on the Text.

²⁵ See, for example, this passage from "May Journal": "The crystal a simile the landscape half shines through, / Image within the image, the word as world as well / As note of music" (XA 27). This suggests the realisation of essential truth in a word or note of chiming brevity. See also "Spider Crystal Ascension" (CT 59); "A Journal of English Days" (ZJ 6-18); "Buffalo Yoga Coda I" (BY 25-7); "Crystal Declension" ("Crystal Declension").

present three readings of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, focusing in each on the sections of this lengthy poem that convey a particular impression of time. Each model of time contributes to an understanding of the futility of Wright's undernarrative, a different way of conceiving his failed pursuit of the invisible.

A Journal of the Year of the Ox charts the passage of the year 1985, the Year of the Ox according to the Chinese calendar,²⁶ in journal form. Composed of thirty-three dated entries subdivided into fifty-four sections, the poem encompasses not only the span of the year but also events in North American history and numerous locations in the United States and Italy, thus mapping a vast historical and geographical scheme. The poem is structured around what Wright has called "sacred places" ("The Art of Poetry" 32): the homes of poets Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, Petrarch and Dante (whom Wright has called the "two great American medieval writers . . . and the two great Italian ones" ["The Art of Poetry" 32]); the Long Island of the Holston, sacred ground of the dispossessed Cherokee; and Italy, Wright's own "sacred place". The poet-figure's travelling to sacred places in this poem represents a kind of pilgrimage, and he is accordingly identified as a pilgrim at the beginning of the poem: "Pity the poor pilgrim, the setter-forth, / Under the sweep so sure, ~ pity his going up and his going down" (*ZJ* 37). Yet the poem also, like all of Wright's works, is held together and linked to the other works in his oeuvre by an undernarrative of failed endeavour towards the Absolute. This, too, is a kind of pilgrimage, and the inclusive pronouns in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* suggest that it characterises the human condition (Gardner 161-62).

That pilgrimage resembles the kind of mystic's quest referred to by Evelyn Underhill as the Mystic Way (3-4) or a spiritual autobiography in that it charts a similar course between states of alienation from and nearness to its transcendent goal. In Wright's poetry, however, the invisible emerges not as the object of a concerted effort, to be realised in gradations until

²⁶ The title may also be a veiled, ironic reference to the Gospel of Luke; Luke being traditionally depicted with or as an Ox. Luke's is the only gospel (in its original version) to conclude with Jesus ascending into heaven before his disciples' eyes (Lk 24.51), just as, ironically, Wright's pilgrim fails to do by the end of the poem.

it is bestowed in full in a narrative culmination, as per the spiritual autobiography or Mystic Way. Rather, it appears through the partial insights and momentary epiphanies of a would-be mystic who is repeatedly diverted from his goal by his own agnosticism and enchantment with the physical world, which is itself embroiled in the vagaries of passing time. “Although he continually anticipates some kind of breakthrough”, as Gardner notes, the pilgrim’s “search seems never ending”; his “circuitous path” is “process itself” (158, 159).

The undernarrative in Wright’s poetry mimics the invisible within the landscape, in that both represent something continuous and connective but largely unseen. The elusiveness of the invisible means that it cannot be directly confronted as it has no singular and concrete identity; rather, it is something intuited. In the journal poems both narrative and the invisible are indistinguishable from time: it is passing time that connects the different entries in Wright’s journals, passing time that reveals the underlying order of the landscape. In the forty-second section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, time is a “one-eyed jack ~ whose other face I can’t see / Hustling me on O hustling me on” (ZJ 72). A one-eyed jack is often a wildcard in games of poker—a card that can represent any value. In Wright’s poem it symbolises the mysteriousness of time, which, half-hidden, propels us all towards our unknown destination. Narrative, time and the invisible are different manifestations of the same experience of being subject to a dominant pattern, which implies the existence of a hidden, causal truth or *telos*. As in “The Southern Cross”, the pilgrim is subject to this pattern even as he aspires to know its invisible source.

The object of pilgrimage in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* is most clearly identified in the second to fourth sections of the poem. The second section reads, in total:

What sifts us down through a blade-change
stays hidden from us,
 But sifts us just the same,
 Scores us and alters us utterly:
 From somewhere inside and somewhere outside, it smooths us

down. (*ZJ* 37)

This hidden, sieve-like instrument of change and erosion becomes the implicit focus of the poem. It is in fact “Time”, we are told in the poem “Summer Mornings”, “like a swallow’s shadow cutting across the grass, / Faint, darker, then faint again”, that “scores us” (*SHS* 59). Here, as always in Wright’s poetry, time has the quality of something under- or overlying, akin to the invisible forces that drive the world.

The fourth section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* reads:

Form comes from form, it’s said:

nothing is ever ended,

A spilling like shook glass in the air,

Water over water,

flame out of flame,

Whatever we can’t see, whatever we can’t touch,

unfixed and shining . . . (*ZJ* 39-40)

Form, here, is something generative and abiding. The Genesis-like “water over water” and the resonances with the Nicene Creed in “flame out of flame” (*ZJ* 40) combine with echoes of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ characterisation of the “grandeur of God” as “shining from shook foil” (“God’s Grandeur” lines 1-2) to imbue this “form” with Christian connotations. Additionally, the line “Form comes from form” invokes the Platonic idea of the eternal Forms that are the prototypes of all mutable forms. Both implications suggest that the particular is begotten of the Absolute, which is, as in the second section, “hidden from us” (*ZJ* 37), although the “spilling like shook glass in the air” also revives the association between the invisible and dazzling light-play.

Framed by these twin four-line sections is the much longer third section, which recalls “The Southern Cross” with its memories of the poet-figure’s army service in Italy and

emphasis on things forgotten and remembered. The aspect of the past these memories recall is the poet-figure's youthful artistic idealism:

Such small failures, such sleeveless oblivions
We passed through
trying to get our lives to fit right
In what was available from day to day,
And art,
and then the obvious end of art, that grace
Beyond its reach
I'd see each night as I thumbed the Berensons²⁷
And argued with Hobart and Schneeman
that what's outside
The picture is more important than what's in.
They didn't agree any more than Indaco had,
All of us hungering after righteousness
Like Paul Cézanne, we thought, in his constancy.
Or Aeneas with the golden bough
sweeping through Hell.
O we were luminous in our ignorance O we were true. (ZJ 39)

This section introduces the notion of life's passage being shaped by outside forces. The shape things take reveals something about the "shape" of those forces, but the ultimate form remains distinct from the lowly forms of nature, life and art. Specifically, the circular shape of the pilgrimage narrative in this poem, apparently bound to the seasons, suggests much about the nature of the invisible order, yet the emphasis on "what's outside / The picture"

²⁷ This likely refers to one of the many books written by Renaissance art expert Bernard Berenson.

(ZJ 39) and on the “grace beyond the reach of art” (from Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* [line 152]) evokes an ultimate agent or truth that is not contained in the spheres of art or life. Reference to Aeneas’ journey through the underworld anticipates the pilgrim’s own descent in coming sections, which can now be understood as the first leg in a journey towards the invisible: luminous, hidden and beyond reach.

The Circular Pilgrimage

“Everything tends towards circumference”, states the poet-figure in “Buffalo Yoga”: “the world, / This life, and no doubt the next” (BY 12). He adds, “As for me, / I’m ringed like a tree, stealthily, year by year, moving outward” (BY 12). His life’s work is, indeed, circular. *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* enacts a typical circumnavigation, revealing the spiritual life of the “I”-figure to be a pilgrimage around the “circumference”, which is, as in the Dickinsonian sense, the “outer boundary”²⁸ (Wright, “The Art of Poetry” 32). This circular movement in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* is produced by the synergy between natural cycles and the pilgrim’s own cyclical thought patterns. Time, in nature, is circular and the pilgrim seems to be caught up in the same repetitious pattern as the seasons, his life subject to the same invisible law. The pilgrim’s implicit circular course initially mimics

²⁸ Emily Dickinson wrote “My business is circumference” in a letter in July 1862 (Higginson).

Appearing in a total seventeen of her poems, Dickinson’s use of the word “Circumference”, suggests Laura Gribbin, subverts the typically Transcendental image of the eternal circle by emphasising its “necessary boundary or perimeter without which it has neither shape nor meaning” (1). As such, “circumference” constitutes the limits of transcendence. Perhaps most noteworthy is Dickinson’s poem #853, which maps a similar upward route to *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* and *China Trace*:

She staked Her Feathers—Gained an Arc—
Debated—Rose again—
This time—beyond the estimate
Of Envy, or of Men—

And now, among Circumference—
Her steady Boat be seen—
At home—among the Billows—As
The Bough where she was born— (#853)

Here, Dickinson’s “She”, like Wright’s “Him” in *China Trace* (65), manages to ascend no higher than an elevated but still observable place ostensibly in the sky.

Dante's route in *The Divine Comedy*, proceeding into the subterranean and then upwards to a point of elevation, before it deviates by returning the pilgrim to "the purgatorial strip" of earth where he began (ZJ 78).

This circular pilgrimage has its roots in the book *China Trace*, one of the first instances of the thwarted search motif that is central to most of Wright's poetry. If read as a single poem (as Wright suggests it should be), the book constitutes "a type of contemporary pilgrim's progress" (Hirsch 794-95), following a single "ghostly character" ("Interview by Santos" 103). It traces the vicissitudes of that character's spiritual attitude, which alternates, sometimes rapidly, between aspiration towards transcendence, coupled with an impression of being drawn upward, and a downward movement of relinquishing self and agency to the material landscape to which he resigns himself. This pattern amounts to waves on a larger arc, an abortive vertical journey that Wright describes thus:

The "character" going from religious release (childhood) through an attempted ascent, ends up stuck in the heaven of the Fixed Stars (in the Dantescan cosmology), a man-made heaven. Divine guidance and intervention is missing. It is a willed assumption, and he can go no higher, as he only believes what he can see. But there he is, after forty-six chapters in his own book-length poem, pasted onto the sky, a day late and a dollar short.
(HL 29-30)

In *China Trace*, Wright's pilgrim lacks the belief to go beyond the limits of earthly reality into the empyrean, the highest reaches of heaven beyond the fixed stars (Giannelli xvi). The underlying narrative of journeying and thwarted ascension typifies the undernarrative in all of Wright's work.

In *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, the down-then-up voyage of the pilgrim is contained within and delineates the "impediment" of the sky (ZJ 37), which constitutes the circumferential boundary around earthly experience. The first section of *A Journal of the Year*

of the Ox signals both the beginning of the poem's arcing pilgrimage and the beginning of the year:

—January,
the dragon maple sunk in its bones,
The sky grey gouache and impediment.
Pity the poor pilgrim, the setter-forth,
Under the sweep so sure,
pity his going up and his going down. (*ZJ* 37)

The pilgrimage takes place “under the sweep so sure” (*ZJ* 37), aligning it with unswerving natural rhythms such as the circling of the sun and stars overhead. The pilgrim locates himself in purgatory in this first section of the poem: “Thursday, purgatorial Thursday” (*ZJ* 37). This is not Dante's starting point in *The Divine Comedy*, but in Wright's poetry the material world is purgatorial, because it is the site of his pilgrim's almost penitential circling as he tries to make his way upwards to heaven. While *China Trace* sees the pilgrim coming up against the perimeter of the world, unable to transcend it, *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* goes further: it depicts the inevitable turning back that follows, completing the circular pattern implicit in so much of Wright's poetry of drawing near to and falling back from what lies beyond the visible world.

There are echoes in this first section of the equivocating phrases that underscore the searching restlessness of “The Southern Cross”, in “There, then not there” and “his going up and his going down” (*ZJ* 37). In Wright's poetry, this “up and down” movement that follows natural and divine rhythms is characteristic of human life. In “Lives of the Artists”, the seasonal falling plum blossoms “Sanction our going up and our going down, our days / And the lives we unfold inside them” (*BZ* 51), while in “The Appalachian Book of the Dead” our life's pattern is divinely ordained: “God's breath reconstitutes our walking up and walking down” (*BZ* 35). “The Silent Generation” echoes Job 1:7, lending this “up and down” motion a mournful quality:

We're arm and arm with regret, now left foot, now right foot.

We give the devil his due.

We walk up and down in the earth,

we take our flesh in our teeth.

When we die, we die. The wind blows away our footprints. (CH 54)

All this perhaps suggests that human lives and movements are constrained to the kinds of patterns and undulating movements exemplified in "The Southern Cross", which betray the inexplicable influence of a hidden mover. In "Scar Tissue II", the tension between the human ideal of linear, narrative development and this dominant circularity is made explicit:

Time, for us, is a straight line,

on which we hang our narratives.

For landscape, however, is all a circling

From season to season, the snake's tail in the snake's mouth

No line for a storyline

In its vast wheel, in its endless turning,

no lives count, no one. (ST 40)

It seems that the linear development of human life, which aspires towards some form of completion, is insignificant within the endless flow of circular time wherein endings and beginnings overlap. The perpetuity of the natural landscape is indifferent to human desires and individuals' mortality.

The ubiquitous pattern of drawing near and dropping back is reiterated in the first section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* with the poet-figure's dismayed reflection that "everything bright falls away" (ZJ 37), while "what's past remains what's past / And unredeemed, the crystal / And wavering co-efficient of what's ahead" (ZJ 37). This revisits the towards/away-from paradox that ends "The Southern Cross", in that the past retreats only to return enriched in the future. It is "crystal / And wavering", both adamant and

uncertain, reminiscent of the dreamlike, paradisaical cities of the past and heaven in Wright's poems. The past, being the "co-efficient" of the future (the amount by which it is multiplied), determines the shape of that future. Similarly, in "Sky Valley Rider" the past is characterised as a "wrecked accordion [that] plays on, its one tune / My song, its one breath my breath, / The square root, the indivisible cipher" (*HF* 47). The mathematical metaphors in these poems represent the past as the irreducible foundation, always in evidence at the "root" of things and returning as what comes later.

The direction of the pilgrimage in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* is linked to the passage of the seasons: first, winter recalls Dante's frozen ninth circle of hell and is characterised by disappearance and descent; then, Wright's Roethkean depiction of spring unites fecundity and putrescence to suggest unholy emergence from the ground. Later in the poem, summer promises elevation, as exemplified by the overseeing eye of the sun. Finally, autumn reintroduces images of falling, decline and return to the earth's surface. The "west wind that seem[s] to blow constantly" (*ZJ* 37) is ever-present in the poem, recalling Shelley's "destroyer and preserver" "moving everywhere" (lines 13-14). Much like the moving waters in "The Southern Cross", the wind is another vehicle for the pilgrim's rising and falling in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*.

The pattern of rise and fall in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* renders falling sublime, as something imbued with pathos but also suggesting completion, even triumph, through its necessary association with elevation. The poet-figure observes of the "ghost of Dragging Canoe", a Cherokee brave whose fall in the Battle of Island Flats is recounted later in the poem, "Everyone wants to touch its hem / Now that it's fallen, everyone wants to see its face" (*ZJ* 38). The "fallen" ghost inverts the figure of the risen Christ, sought and clung to by the overjoyed disciples. Here, the resurrection is figured as a fall back to earth rather than a rising from the dead, but it is a heroic return nonetheless, as it proves that an ascension has taken place. In the fifth section, the poet-figure admits that "Nobody touches my face / Or hand", distinguishing himself from the resurrected Christ under scrutiny from the doubter

Thomas (Jn 20:27). In this section, the pilgrim confronts a recalcitrant and cold winter landscape from which nobody rises or descends:

Nobody rises out of the ground in a gold mist.
Nobody slides like an acrobat
out of the endless atmosphere.
Nobody touches my face
Or hand.
Not a word is said that reminds me of anything

And O it is cold now by the fake Etruscan urn
And six miniature box bushes
nobody stands beside
In the real wind tightening its scarf
Around the white throats
of everyone who is not here. (ZJ 40)

Just as whatever rises in Wright's poems must fall, one must first die in order to rise, and so the circumnavigation in this poem begins with an imitation of death. The invisible is manifest in this landscape as a compound absence—"nobody", "nothing", "no meanings", "not here"—which resembles an inescapable presence that "lips at the edge of understanding" (ZJ 41). This absence, like the cold, is something "we die of" and that "wears us away" (ZJ 41), and its threat is compounded by the wind that tightens "its scarf / Around the white throats" (ZJ 40) like a hangman's noose. Here, the "nothing" performs a vacant funeral: the "fake Etruscan urn" does *not* hold cremated remains, while the six "box bushes" that are *not* a six-sided coffin are attended by no pall-bearers or mourners. The sense of enclosure inherent in the "Etruscan urn", "box" shrubs, the "O", both portal-like and circumferential, and the "almost solid" cold (ZJ 40) that lies like a snowy lid over the yard

give the scene the appearance of a sealed vessel or grave.²⁹ This creates a hypothetical space to be entered, setting the scene for the pilgrim poet's turning inward in subsequent sections, which resembles a subterranean descent or interment.

In the sixth section, the trees resemble lifeless dendrites; their branches, "Snatched up and sparkless against the sky" (*ZJ* 42), are elevated but inert, like the central character of *China Trace*. The birds that fly "Out of the picture" (*ZJ* 41) re-emphasise the pilgrim's upward urge, recalling the invisible figured as "what's outside / The picture" (*ZJ* 39) and beyond the reach of art. However, the "Rising and settling back" (*ZJ* 42) of things on the wind acts as a reminder that rising is linked to falling and that something is "always falling away" (*ZJ* 42), while the grass, "stunned in its lockjaw bed" (*ZJ* 42), continues the death and burial imagery of the previous section. This directs the pilgrimage downwards towards things hidden beneath the earth.

The pilgrim thus arrives at the first of what can be read as "threshold" moments in this circular pilgrimage: points in the poem at which his transition between spiritual attitudes or points in his circle is imminent. Here, we find him poised between the "blank sky of the page . . . / That backgrounds our lives" and the "green gates" of the grass (*ZJ* 42), both of which apparently stand between him and the overarching and underlying invisible. The invisible is persistent in this scene: we are told that "substitutes for the unseen / Ris[e] like water inside our bodies, / Stand-ins against the invisible", imagery that evokes building desire for the hidden reality and that seems to position the speaker part-way to attaining it, "Stand-in[g] against the invisible" (*ZJ* 42). A few lines later, we are told that "The unknown repeats us, and quickens our in-between" (*ZJ* 42). Repetition and in-between-ness are characteristic of Wright's depiction of life as a circular pilgrimage, and so the line alerts us to the influence of the invisible over the course of human life; it also highlights the "quickening" produced by three successive colons without an intervening period, which create a run-on

²⁹ This funereal scene is foreshadowed by a much earlier poem, "Quotidiana", in which "midwinter", with its "necktie of ice [and] salt shoes", "bear[s] up" the speaker within a landscape characterised by closure and withdrawal, eulogy-like "address" and memorialising (*CT* 21).

effect from line to line and contribute to the sense of mounting anticipation in this section. The pilgrim is torn between two facets of the outer limit associated with two versions of the invisible: above him, “music, ~ high notes and a thin line strung / For us to cleave to” (*ZJ* 42); below him, “the stillness of form [at] the center of everything” (*ZJ* 43). This latter image combines the dynamic, “shining”, ultimate “form” from which form comes (*ZJ* 39-40) with a deathly calm, “Inalterable, always at ease” (*ZJ* 43).

On the one hand is the more typical upward impulse towards transcendence, on the other is the dark allure of death: the funereal imagery continues in subsequent sections with references to a “new suit” (*ZJ* 42) and the wind’s bearing the rain on its shoulders like a casket, suggesting that “the disappearance we all dreamed of when young” is death (*ZJ* 43). Yet, given that the origin and end overlap in Wright’s poetry, and that falling begets rising just as rising begets falling, both the upward impulse and the death instinct should be understood as the same desire, which is for unification with the Absolute. This much is suggested in Wright’s early poem “Clinchfield Station”, in which we are told that “Descent is . . . / A question of need” (*HF* 59): it encompasses morbidity, grief and longing, here in response to the death of parents. “Dante explained it, how // It bottoms out, becoming a threshold” (*HF* 59), the speaker states; this is likely in reference to the first canto of the *Inferno*, in which the lowest point of the valley into which Dante wanders, lost, is also the foot of the slope that leads upwards to paradise, which, furthermore, cannot be reached except by descending further and passing through the *Inferno*. In “Clinchfield Station” as in the *Inferno* and *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, the poet’s descent into despair and loss brings him to a limit and threshold, beyond which ostensibly lies satisfaction.

The wind that emblematises the pilgrim’s own rising and falling now drops the rain it has “carried . . . all this way for nothing” (*ZJ* 43), prefiguring the pilgrim’s own inability to achieve permanent elevation later in the poem. A motif of descent builds until the ninth section, in which the pilgrim tumbles into the ground like Alice chasing the white rabbit:

Up in the air, the sweet air.
Hardened around the woodpecker's hole, under his down,
We all slip into the landscape, one, one and by one. (ZJ 44)

Frequently, in Wright's poetry, it is the dead who return and speak, often unheeded, in the landscape. In "Homage to Paul Cézanne", for example, the dead murmur, "*Remember me, speak my name*" (SC 4) and "Each year . . . grow less dead, and nudge / Close to the surface of all things" (SC 5). The pilgrim's absorption into the landscape in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* thus seems to be a rehearsal for his death or a foretaste of his decomposition. The occurrence of this stage so early in the pilgrimage suggests that death is part of a seasonal, unending cycle. The poet-figure's cyclic pilgrimage represents his life and, at fifty years of age (the poet-figure's fiftieth birthday takes place in section forty-one), it seems that he feels he is in the winter of his life and his death is close at hand.³⁰ Yet this is not, crucially, a final stage of being.

The tenth section is another threshold moment, signalling the pilgrim's emergence from the depths:

Winter grows great with spring: March:
already something has let loose
Deep in the hidden undersprings
Of the year, looking for some way out: moss sings
At the threshold, tongues wag
down the secret valleys and dark draws
Under the sun-stunned grass:
What can't stop comes on, mewling like blood-rush in the ear,
Balancing over the sunken world:
fever and ooze, fever and ooze. (ZJ 44-45)

³⁰ This rather pessimistic view is consistent with much of Wright's later poetry, in which the poet-figure sees himself as living through the end-stage of his life. See, for example, "After Tu Fu, I Go Outside to the Dwarf Orchard" (CH 15), "China Trace" (BZ 68), "Sinology" (BY 70), and "No Direction Home" (SS 68).

This section unites fecundity, pregnancy and a sense of impending birth with allusions to pathology and decomposition: “fever and ooze” (*ZJ* 45). New plant growth represents a kind of resurrection, uniting death and new life: in the poem “Looking Around” we are told that each year in March, “Something dead comes back and lifts up its arms, ~ puts down its luggage / And says . . . / I bring you good news from the other world” (*SHS* 4). The passage from *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* quoted above again echoes Hopkins’ “God’s Grandeur”, specifically its image of “the Holy Ghost” brooding “over the bent / World” (lines 13-14), confirmation that “nature is never spent” (“God’s Grandeur” line 9).

This passage is followed in the eleventh section by the first of a number of thwarted, upward-looking “threshold” moments. In this instance the poet-figure is unable to assume Catullus’ elevated viewpoint even when sitting in his seat at the Roman theatre in Verona, and he settles as usual for coming “as close to it as I could get”, under “An iron-spiked and barbed-wire jut-out and overhang” that embodies the obstruction he inevitably meets (*ZJ* 45). He remembers a woman who marked out the threshold for him with her successful crossing. She is rendered saint-like by the early sunlight, becoming an incarnation of the season’s epiphanic buoyancy in one of the poem’s most vivid and memorable passages:

I remember a woman I saw there once,
in March,
 The daylight starting to shake its hair out like torch flames
 Across the river,
the season poised like a veiled bride,
 White foot in its golden shoe
 Beating the ground, full of desire, white foot at the white threshold.
 She stared at the conched hillside
as though the season became her,
 As though a threshold were opening
 Somewhere inside her, no woman more beautiful than she was,

No song more insistent than the beat of that white foot,
As she stepped over,
full of desire
Her golden shoe like the sun in the day's deep chamber.
I remember the way she looked as she stood there,
that look on her face. (*ZJ* 45-46)

This section builds a connection between virtuous female fervour and daylight, setting up a later conflation of the summer sun with the Madonna. The woman in white is a Beatrice-like figure, but she leaves the Dantesque pilgrim behind when she ascends. The wing-like beating of her foot as she “steps over” is juxtaposed with the Roman theatre, which is compared to “lapped wings / On some seabird across the water / Unable to rise, half folded, half turned”, drawing attention to the “I”-figure’s own groundedness. Proving that the sky is a tougher threshold to breach than the earth, the newly unburied pilgrim is unable to replicate the woman’s spontaneous ascension. Thus begins a prolonged interlude of waiting and obstructed rising, which encompasses a large part of the poem.

Another threshold moment takes place in section twenty-three, in which the pilgrim verges on transcendence but recoils. He knows:

That anything I could feel,
 anything I could put my hand on—
The damasked mimosa leaf,
The stone ball on the gate post, the snail shell in its still turning—
Would burst into brilliance at my touch
But I sat still, and I touched nothing,
 afraid that something might change
And change me beyond my knowing,
That everything I had hoped for, all I had ever wanted,
Might actually happen.

So I sat still and touched nothing. (*ZJ* 56-57)

It is unclear, here, whether the speaker does not touch anything, or whether he in fact touches nothingness, encountering that same ubiquitous spectre of absence encountered in the funereal fifth section (“And O it is cold now by the fake Etruscan urn” [*ZJ* 40]). Either way, the moment is already “Lapping away” (*ZJ* 56), and it is clear that he shies away from enacting the powerful change that the moment portends, fearful of the realisation of his desires. We might wonder whether this reveals a certain cowardice: perhaps he fears that fully glimpsing what he seeks would legitimate his desire, bringing with it a burden of belief and attainment that he is unwilling to accept. More likely, he turns away, as he always does, because he intuits that fulfilment of his desires would take him “beyond [his] knowing” (*ZJ* 57): full attainment of the invisible always amounts to unknowing oblivion in Wright’s poetry. As Spiegelman notes, Wright’s “I”-figure “resist[s] his own enthusiasms”: “[h]e approaches ecstasy and then turns away from it” because the things of beauty that mesmerise him also threaten to overpower him (“Landscape” 184).

With the exception of the swallows that “feint / And rise”, sustained on the invisible (*ZJ* 57), images of frustrated ascent persist in the following sections: trucks descending a mountain in section twenty-eight are “A weight that keeps us pressed to our chairs / And pushes our heads down, and slows our feet”; the same mountains are, in section twenty-nine, like a vision of “Purgatory” (*ZJ* 60), the ordeal that postpones the final heavenly destination. Section thirty-two reiterates the separation between “the intense blue of the under-heaven” (*ZJ* 63), and a landscape that displays the same reluctance to be transfigured as the speaker:

Today, it’s that same blue again, blue of redemption
Against which, in the vine rows,
the green hugs the ground hard.
Not yet, it seems to say, O not yet. (*ZJ* 63)

Heavy Italian afternoon: heat drives like a nail
Through the countryside,

 everything squirms
Or lies pinned and still in its shining. (*ZJ* 63)

.....

 a visitation, or some event
The afternoon's about to become the reoccasion of:
St. Catherine catching the martyr's head

 in her white hands;
St. Catherine urging the blades on
As the wheel dazzles and turns,
Feeling the first nick like the first rung of Paradise;
St. Catherine climbing, step by step,
The shattering ladder up

 to the small, bright hurt of the saved. (*ZJ* 64)

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surrender. The nail imagery recalls Christ's crucifixion. It is implied again that what destroys us is what raises us up. St Catherine's gory but successful ascent contrasts with the pilgrim's own reluctance to embrace his annihilation and hence his failure to climb higher than the scorched Purgatorial landscape.

The rising anticipation of elevation finally breaks with a storm in section thirty-eight. Here, the lightning is likened to "Dog-fire" (read "God" for "Dog") and depicted as "Madonna" gathering up the stars in an apocalyptic vision of eternity and unification. The lightning forges a link between the sky and the ground and, in doing so, provides access to "The great river of language that circles the universe" (*ZJ* 67). The poet-figure is momentarily caught up in the surge of "bodiless, glittering currents / That wash us and seek us all out" (*ZJ* 67-68), apprehending that:

there is a word, one word
For each of us, circling and holding fast
In all that cascade and light.
Said once, or said twice,
it gathers and waits its time to come back
To its true work (*ZJ* 68)

He is flooded by a sense of the world's all-encompassing, *Logos*-like order and *telos*, which is contained in the higher light that has both threatened and beckoned him in previous sections. In the poem "The Ghost of Walter Benjamin Walks at Midnight" we are told that "the language that circles the earth" is "divinity" (*SS* 41).

However, this elevation is short-lived. By the following section the speaker is:

back in the night garden,
the lower yard, between
The three dead fig trees,
Under the skeletal comb-leaves of the fanned mimosa branch,
Gazing at the Madonna (*ZJ* 68)

It is night; the all-embracing light is gone. The “three dead fig trees” are reminiscent of the three crosses on Golgotha and the fig tree that Christ kills with a curse for being fruitless (Matt. 21:18-9). They form a diorama of spiritual impotence and unfulfilled redemption. The poet-figure is once again embedded in the scenery but aware of a higher, unattainable viewpoint: for example, in the next section, he describes the landscape as “resetled / Immeasurably closer, focused / And held still under the ground lens of heaven” (*ZJ* 69). The silent landscape is “Opened . . . like a rare book” that the poet cannot read, but he says, “I keep on turning, however: ~ somewhere in here, I know, is my word” (*ZJ* 69). This vain turning (of pages) is emblematic of the pilgrim’s circling in search of the invisible, imaged as the Word.

In the forty-seventh section the pilgrim acknowledges a boundary beyond which he is unable to progress:

It is as though, sitting out here in the dwarf orchard,
The soul had come to rest at the edge of the body,
A vacancy, a small ache,
the soul had come to rest
After a long passage over the wasteland and damp season. (*ZJ* 77)

This section reminds us that, for all his travelling within the poem—to the past in memory, to Italy and to various poets’ homes—the most important pilgrimage in this poem is purely allegorical. It is a journey implied in the earlier, Whitmanesque twenty-fifth section:

I find myself in my own image, and am neither and both.
I come and go in myself
as though from room to room,
As though the smooth incarnation of some medieval spirit
Escaping my own mouth and reswallowed at leisure,
Dissembling and at my ease. (*ZJ* 57)

Comparing himself to the dove “hidden inside the dead pine tree” and the wasp that “drills through the air”—things that delve inward or force their way upward—the poet says again, “I am neither, I am both” (*ZJ* 57). Here, the outer boundary he encounters is the edge of himself, and the extent of his navigable world is only the size of his own imagination or belief, making him the source of his own soul’s captivity.

With nowhere left to go, the pilgrim sinks back down like the rain, which inverts the connection between sky and earth formed by the lightning in the thirty-eighth section:

Tomorrow the rain will come with its lucid elastic threads

Binding the earth and sky.

Tomorrow the rain will come

And the soul will retrace its passage, marking itself

back to the center of things. (*ZJ* 77)

The centre in Dante’s cosmology is the Ninth Circle of Hell (*Inf.* 11.64-66). The pilgrim’s soul’s retreat back to “the center of things” (*ZJ* 77) perhaps signals a new descent into the Inferno-like subterranean, with the possibility that the pilgrimage will repeat with the coming year. But it is purgatory that dominates the following section, which also emphasises repetition: the turn of autumn is described as the season’s “repeating its catechism inside the leaves” (*ZJ* 78), and the everyday world is depicted in terms of routine that recall the acts of atonement performed by Dante’s penitents:

We harry our sins

and expiations around the purgatorial strip

We’re subject to, eyes sewn shut,

Rocks on our backs,

escaping smoke or rising out of flame,

Hoping the angel’s sword

unsullied our ashen foreheads,³¹

Hoping the way up is not the way down (*ZJ* 78)

The pilgrim hopes that the angel's sword has erased one of the sins marked on his forehead, releasing him to the next terrace, rather than marking him with some new sin to be expiated. In other words, he hopes to make progress towards his goal. His desiring that the "way up is not the way down" (*ZJ* 78) expresses his reluctance to repeat his futile trip, while alluding to the fact that to ascend like Dante one must begin by passing through the earth. The line echoes Heraclitus' statement that "the way upward and the way down is one and the same" (B60), which is the epigraph of Eliot's *Four Quartets* and is reiterated in the line "the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back" (*Four Quartets* 3.6). Eliot associates this paradox with "the still point of the turning world" (*Four Quartets* 1.64), which is "Neither ascent nor decline" (*Four Quartets* 1.68), and "Where past and future are gathered" (*Four Quartets* 1.67). This is an image of the centre as an eternal, totalising reality. Although seeking an Eliotic "stillness of form [at] the center of everything" (*ZJ* 43), Wright's pilgrim simultaneously hopes, like any soul in purgatory, that time continues to pass towards his future escape and redemption and that time is neither circular nor still because, as Eliot writes, "If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable" (*Four Quartets* 1.4-5).

Nonetheless, the final three sections of the poem hint that the poet may, indeed, be set to repeat his circumnavigational pilgrimage in the coming year. In the fifty-second section he finds himself on the Long Island of the Holston, which, as a wasteland accessible by a river crossing, is suggestive of the underworld. In the fifty-third section, with his observation that "Nothing else moves toward us out of the stars" (*ZJ* 83), the speaker seems to turn away from sky gazing, although in the final section he expresses a renewed desire for epiphany:

³¹ In Dante's *Purgatorio*, souls guilty of pride learn humility on the first terrace of purgatory by carrying heavy rocks on their backs (*Purg.* 11.25-30); on the second terrace, envious souls huddle together and weep with their eyes sewn shut (*Purg.* 13.60-74). Seven Ps, symbolic of the seven sins that must be atoned before entering paradise, are engraved on each soul's forehead with a sword by the angel that guards the gates of purgatory; these are erased one by one as sufficient penance is completed on each terrace and the soul is allowed to climb up to the next (*Purg.* 12.90-136).

I am poured out like water.

Who wouldn't ask for that *lightning strike*,

the dog's breath on your knee

Seductive and unrehearsed,

The heart resoftened and made apt for illumination,

The body then taken up and its ghostly eyes dried?

Who wouldn't ask for that light,

that liquefaction and entry? (ZJ 83)

As fleeting and partial as the pilgrim's one moment of transcendence was, it seems that the promise of another lightning-storm like the one in the thirty-eighth section is enough to inspire him to repeat his journey. The "dog's breath on your knee" is an image of heaven as a homecoming drawn from Wright's earlier poem "Laguna Dantesca" (SC 36). The line "I am poured out like water" suggests that the speaker has been left desolate by a painful ordeal. It comes from Psalm 22, which expresses God-forsakenness and a desire for deliverance; this is the Psalm Jesus quotes from the cross in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark (Matt. 27:46; Mk 15:34) and it is traditionally read as prophesying his crucifixion. Here, the phrase resonates with the poem's motif of falling rain representing a spiritual fall, but these words also put the speaker in the posture of Christ and create the possibility of an impending resurrection. It seems the ordeal of descent and impediment may be the purgatorial trial required to "resoften" (ZJ 83) a heart hardened against the invisible. The "liquefaction and entry" (ZJ 83) to which the poet refers evoke both the putrefaction of a dead body and entry into heaven, suggesting that he must now repeat his winter interment in order to achieve another mid-year glimpse of paradise.

Wright's motif of undulating motion in "The Southern Cross" embodies time's unfathomable fluidity and obstructs the pilgrim from reaching the invisible in the form of his past. In *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, this undulation becomes circular but is again suggestive of the uncertainty and change that govern the pilgrim's life and prevent him from achieving

any lasting transcendence. Yet it also suggests perpetual renewal *and* perpetual falling. It is a pattern that is evident in the pilgrim's inability to forgo his habit of reaching after the unseen, however futile the gesture. He muses in the forty-first section:

What makes us leave what we love best?

What is it inside us that keeps erasing itself

When we need it most,

That sends us into uncertainty for its own sake

And holds us flush there

until we begin to love it

And have to begin again?

What is it in our own lives we decline to live

Whenever we find it,

making our days unendurable,

And nights almost visionless?

I still don't know yet, but I do it. (ZJ 70-71)

Whatever the cause of this searching, Wright's pilgrim does indeed "do it" (ZJ 71). Every one of his poems enacts, in part or in full, the pattern apparent in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, passing through the stages of loving attentiveness to the material world, contemplation of the higher reality the landscape evokes, disbelief or rejection of the higher reality, morbidness, and then renewed acceptance and attention to the visible world.

What the pilgrim “decline[s] to live” is, in this poem and elsewhere, union with the Absolute (*ZJ* 70). Nonetheless, he is unable to stop searching and be content with the material world he evidently loves so much. As he says in the fifty-first section, “All my life I’ve stood in desire” (*ZJ* 81). This is because the very things of the immediate world consistently allude to the invisible world he inevitably desires but cannot embrace. For example, the “I”-figure resolves to devote himself to the simple and concrete things of the world whose graspable actuality defies imagining, saying “Better to choose for your love

what you can't think, ~ better / To love what may be gotten and held, / And step above what can be cast out and covered up" (ZJ 81). However, natural and everyday colours still evoke for him "Byzantium" and "Calvary" (ZJ 79), and a suburban scene bathed "in mid-November's ochre afternoon light" appears "otherworldly" (ZJ 80). As Spiegelman notes, "in the visible [Wright's pilgrim] encounters things [as] themselves and as promises, portents, even symbols of something like salvation in an undoctinal but thoroughly spiritual realm" (*How Poets See* 94).

The poem ends with the poet-figure renewing his attention to things hidden "beneath" the visible world—"The pentimento" "behind the vanished overpaint" (ZJ 83)—and to questions that might motivate another subterranean expedition: "What is a life of contemplation worth in this world? / How far can you go if you concentrate, ~ how far down?" (ZJ 83-84). The final section repeats an image of decline from the first section—"The dragon maple sunk in its bones" (ZJ 37, 84)—a sure indicator that the landscape, at least, is about to repeat the seasonal cycle.

Set to circle, perhaps endlessly, with the seasons, the poet-figure's pilgrimage could be seen as the epitome of futility: potentially infinite recurrence with the same outcome. Accordingly, the speaker in *Littlefoot* describes himself as a bird whose "song is not more than three feet off the ground, and singular, / And goes nowhere" (LF 42). Caught in the rise and fall of time, the pilgrim traces the boundaries of what he can perceive, but he cannot transcend them to comprehend what lies beyond. Yet circling need not be futile. Often in Wright's poetry a sense that "nothing is ever ended" (ZJ 39) corroborates his pilgrim's recourse to Christian hopefulness by upholding a model of time in which restoration and perpetuity are always possible. As he writes in *Littlefoot*,

Outside the cycle of seasons,
our lives appear meaningless,
 No lilacs, no horse in the field, no heart-hurt, no sleeve:
 Where time is constant and circular, all ends must meet. (LF 43)

Here, it seems that, without the world's endless turning, life would be stripped of the things that make it meaningful. Nonetheless, the natural cycle that promises closure also imposes *enclosure*; it suggests that in human lives, too, "all ends must meet" (*LF* 43). By coming full circle, the pilgrim achieves some form of completion, but he is also faced with the circumference of his life, which separates him from whatever lies "outside" and precludes his ever getting beyond where he began.

"Time, the Engenderer of Entropy and Decay"

Wright's evocation of a pilgrimage that parallels the circling seasons suggests that one's life and efforts to achieve transcendence are, like nature, locked into a pattern of perpetual, repeated motion: "Everything on the move, everything flowing and folding back / And starting again" (*SC* 14). This model of time sometimes finds expression in wheel-like metaphors: for example, in *Littlefoot* time passes with the circling stars, as "Leo and Virgo slow as a cylinder turn overhead" (*LF* 21), while in "North American Bear" the turning stars embody the "inarticulate scroll / Of time ~ pricked on its dark, celestial cylinder" (*NB* 196). This repetitive motion is not, however, contrary to a sense of *forward* motion. In "Poem Almost Wholly in My Own Manner" we see time likened to "a burning wheel, scorching along by the highway side" (*BZ* 28). The road is a recurrent metaphor for forward-moving time in Wright's poetry that is distinct from the cyclical model just explored, but, as the above quotation demonstrates, the two models are complementary: time's own inherent circling apparently generates a linear direction just as a wheel's turning propels it forward. The main circular structure of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* is thus held in tension with an undeniable sense of time as having a forward direction.

This tension is implicit in the span of the poem's structure. *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* plots the pilgrim's curved path within the repetitive seasonal cycle, but its division into dated sections represents a linear, chronological progression. While the seasonal cycle has no intrinsic beginning or end, the year does. The poem's ending in winter, the same season in

which it began, signals repetition, but that its final section takes place in December suggests an ending.

Moreover, from the beginning, the poem's pilgrimage takes place in a context in which inertia, forgetfulness, the wind and the demise of great poets and the Cherokee nation contribute to a sense of gradual human ruin:

Each year I remember less.
This past year it's been
the Long Island of the Holston
And all its keening wires
in a west wind that seemed to blow constantly,
Lisping the sins of the Cherokee. (*ZJ* 37)

The apparent fact of life's inevitable deterioration towards a gloomy end, with no prospect of salvific intervention, is one of the major enduring themes of Wright's oeuvre. I refer to it as "entropy".³² Entropy stands alongside circularity as the second pervasive pattern of time, life, nature and the influence of the invisible evident in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* and Wright's poetry in general. According to the entropic model, as we are told in "Portrait of the Artist with Hart Crane", "One day more is one day less" (*SC* 38).

This sense of time running out that I term "entropy" is a form of the prevalent literary trope of mutability. Mutability in this context signifies a consciousness of the world's transience and the inevitability of loss and death. Wright's poetry contains motifs common to the trope of mutability, including the use of natural events such as nightfall and the coming of winter as emblems for mortality. However, I have used the term entropy in this thesis to designate specifically a law of human, and possibly universal, decline towards a final end not compatible with any restoration, in contrast with the kinds of downturn inherent to natural and spiritual cycles, which in Wright's poetry seem capable of repeating without end.

³² The oppression and displacement of the Cherokee is not, of course, an effect of entropy in the typical sense. It is, however, presented in Wright's poetry as evidence of the same kind of inevitable decline that I call "entropy" in this thesis. I discuss the issues with this portrayal later in this chapter.

Entropy designates a predominantly human condition—the natural world seems capable of dying back and regenerating itself eternally in Wright’s poetry—but the fate of humanity is indicative of the ultimate fate or purposiveness of the universe, which is either impervious to our demise or is likewise doomed. Entropy manifests the negative principle—the aloof, subtractive or even destructive facet of the invisible. This ubiquitous pattern of steady annihilation renders God ambivalent or absent.

Associations between the scientific concept of entropy and literary trope of mutability are not new (see Sefusatti, Morse and Hamann 82). The scientific term entropy itself subsumes a number of distinct scientific usages, giving it the quality of a general theme rather than a strictly defined concept (Hayles 38). Entropy refers to “the heat lost for useful purposes” during any exchange of heat (Hayles 38) but has come to be more generally defined as “a measure of the randomness or disorder in a closed system” (Hayles 40). The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that, “on average, the entropy of a physical system will tend to rise from any given moment” (Greene 540), dictating that complex systems ultimately become more disordered with time (Greene 157-58). Through the dissipation of heat, entropy will eventually bring about universal “heat death”, that is, “a final state of equilibrium in which the temperature stabilizes at about -270 degrees centigrade and there is no longer any heat differential to do work or sustain life” (Hayles 39). Hence, entropy represents decline and the inevitable and irreversible passage of time towards various disasters, including disorder, dissipation, exhaustion and inert uniformity.

Wright uses the term entropy In “Apologia Pro Vita Sua”, where time is

the source of all good,

time the engenderer

Of entropy and decay.

Time the destroyer, our only-begetter and advocate. (*BZ* 6-7)

Time in this passage is both destructive and generative and constitutes the invisible force that determines our being, direction and eventual destruction. Entropy describes Wright’s sense

of “time’s corruption” (*ST* 23), the “damage of history” (*ZJ* 65) and the observable law in his poetry that “form tends towards its own dissolution” (*XA* 4). The motif of gradual deterioration and exhaustion in Wright’s work bestows life and time with a distinct direction that, as in science, points from an original state of wholeness, order and potential towards a perceived end state that represents just the opposite. “[E]ven the brightest angel is darkened by time”, we are told in “Opus Posthumous”, “Even the sharpest machine ~ dulled and distanced by death” (*AP* 20). Markers of entropy in Wright’s poetry include cooling, devouring, darkening, erosion and descent. These signs arrive from nature but seem to have special relevance for the human onlooker. Each contributes to the growing distance between the pilgrim and his bright, pristine origins, a distinction identified in the early poem “Good-Bye to Perugia” between:

life

As once it must have been,
 As today it has come to be,
 And [. . .]
 As the light recedes
 Just what, in the days to come,
 From a slower damage,
 Must also come down,
 Must go on falling. (*SP*)

The closest parallels with scientific entropy in Wright’s poetry are the depictions of ageing as a cooling, as when time “nudges our lives toward the coming ash” (*SHS* 64), signalling distance from one’s vivid and fiery beginnings. “How bright the fire of the world was”, the speaker recalls elsewhere, “Before white hair and the ash of days” (*NB* 198). The extreme conditions of the world’s beginnings are an apt metaphor for hot-blooded youth, which lapses into weariness or dread in old age:

Fire, we think, marvellous fire, everything starts in fire.

Or so they say. We like to think so
Ourselves, feeling the cold
glacier in the bloodstream
A bit more each year (*CH* 55)

Entropy is also implicit in the poet-figure's preoccupation with the world's beautiful but inescapable tendency towards "disappearance":

The bitten edges of things,
the gradual sliding away
Into tissue and memory,
the uncertainty
And dazzling impermanence of days we beg our meanings from
And their frayed loveliness. (*OSR* 15)

Here, as elsewhere, the speaker describes diminution not only in terms of "impermanence" and forgetfulness, but also in terms of physical changes directly associated with entropy, such as the increasing disorder signified by fraying, which here sees life and memory likened to an unravelling woven pattern. Likewise, the "I"-figure in "Lives of the Saints" laments,

A loose knot in a short rope,
My life keeps sliding out from under me, intact but
Diminishing,
its pattern becoming patternless. (*BZ* 41)

The knot is an emblem of closure in Wright's poetry, so its unravelling in this passage represents not only the deterioration of life over time but the disappointment of expectations of plot-like satisfaction.

Another metaphor that evokes entropy in Wright's poetry is erosion. In *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, the invisible is represented as something that "sifts us . . . / Scores us and

alters us utterly” and “smooths us down” (*ZJ* 37), seeing to our undoing. Ageing and loss are likened to being worn away. “[T]ime, the true dissolver, eats away at our fingertips” (*NB* 193), for example, and

Time wears us down and away
Like bootheels, like water on glass,
like footfalls on marble stairs,
Step by slow step until we are edgeless and smoothed out. (*BY* 13)

This metaphor speaks to an impression of a gradual loss of self, with the wearing away of material things and details being analogous to the gradual loss of faculties and the impending destruction of the physical body following death. In “Disjecta Membra”, ageing is likened to being pared back and altered beyond recognition. A peaceful, flowing river on which the poet-figure meditates becomes indistinguishable from the flow of time with his reflection that “What nurtures us denatures us and will strip us down. / . . . Denatures us to a nub. / And sends us twisting out of our back yards into history” (*BZ* 73). In “Still-life With Spring and Time to Burn”, our apparent erosion by “the winds from under the earth ~ that grind us to a grain-out” presages our death, represented by empty coats.

In “Nine-Panel Yaak River Screen”, the attrition of time is associated with the vicious “dog” that brings about our undoing: “Time gnaws on our necks like a dog ~ gnaws on a stew bone. / It whittles us down with its white teeth” (*SHS* 54). Entropy reveals the predatory face of God. Thus, time is depicted as a “dog . . . hungry for food” (*ST* 22)—“Time Is a Child-Biting Dog” is the title of one of Wright’s sestets (*SS* 70)—that waits, as we weaken, to devour us: “time, black dog, will sniff you out, ~ and lick your lean cheeks, / And lie down beside you—warm, real close—and will not move” (*SS* 5). In the same vein, time is represented as “the great engulfer . . . ~ with its louche mouth and lisping tongue” (“Kingsport Harmony”); thus “our years are fanged and omnivorous” (*OSR* 63) and the “future we’re all engendered for [has] sharp teeth, Lord, such sharp teeth” (“Heaven’s Eel”). This imagery of devouring acts as a reminder of our ultimate reduction to mere matter:

“Sweet meat for the wet earth” (*HF* 57). It also speaks to the apparent rapaciousness and cruelty of time’s destruction. “Time is the villain” (*SC* 61) in “The Southern Cross”, “Time is the Adversary” in “Apologia Pro Vita Sua” (*BZ* 13), and “Time is your enemy” in “Everything Passes, But Is It Time?”. In “Looking at Pictures”, time is the “devil” who “eats us”: “everything slides away / Into him stealthily” (*OSR* 69). Time is thus the Satan of Dante’s *Inferno*, who is eternally in the act of devouring the sinners Judas, Brutus and Cassius.

In *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, it is the cold wind that frequently embodies the erosive effects of time and the invisible: “the cold with its quartz teeth / And fingernails . . . wears us away, wears us away” (ZJ 41). The poem “January II” makes clear the connection between the wind and the destructiveness of time when, in an allusion to Shelley’s “Ozymandias”, a “cold draft” makes the speaker “think of monuments in the high desert, ~ and what dissembles them” (BY 49).

In the seventeenth section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, the poet-figure reflects:

It's hard to imagine the north wind
wishing us ill,
Revealing nothing at all and wishing us ill
In God's third face. (*ZJ51*)

Wright has stated that “God’s third face is the one we can’t see, the one that is turned away from us. The two we *can* see are the benign one and the malevolent one” (Interview responses). This third face, then, represents God’s inscrutable intentions, like the “one-eyed jack” in the forty-second section of the poem whose other eye is hidden from view. The “third face” of God also evokes the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, frequently portrayed as breath or wind. This fits with the speaker’s subsequent reflection that the wind “weathers” things “on their way, / . . . to that point ~ where all things meet” (*ZJ* 51), which casts the wind as a benevolent force conducting the world towards its rightful end. At the same time, the three-faced God recalls the three-headed Satan in the pit of Dante’s *Inferno*. If

this is the case, it seems that the wind does wish us ill, and that time conveys us not towards unification but undoing.

The threat of the wind and all it represents is amplified in ensuing sections: in the twentieth section the wind both “scour[s]” and “nibbles” the poet-figure’s “cheeks and hands” (*ZJ* 55) and the twenty-first section repeats the three-headed imagery, suggesting that we are indeed being gradually eaten by the devil:

Inside the self is another self like a black hole
Constantly dying, pulling parts of our lives
Always into its fluttery light,
anxious as Augustine
For redemption and explanation
.....
Grief sits like a toad with its cheeks puffed,
Immovable, motionless, its tongue like a trick whip
Picking our sorrows off, our days and our happiness;

Despair, with its three mouths full,
Dangles our good occasions, such as they are, in its grey hands,
Feeding them in,
medieval and naked in their ecstasy;
And Death, a tiny o of blackness,
Waits like an eye for us to fall through its retina,
A minor irritation,
so it can blink us back. (*ZJ* 55-56).

Grief and despair swallow us into darkness just as death will, and the fact of our mortality, for which there is no explanation or reprieve, is given as the reason for the poet-figure’s consuming anguish and hopelessness.

In the sixth section, the poet-figure asks, “How does one deal with what is always falling away, / Returning diminished with each turn?” (*ZJ* 42). Ostensibly asked of the rising and falling wind and leaves, this question indicates that even within the cycles invoked throughout *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* things are subject to deterioration, at least for the human onlooker. The cyclicity that governs the pilgrimage, which apparently makes endless rising and falling possible so that “nothing is ever ended” (*ZJ* 39), coexists with the fact of the pilgrim’s own, human entropic decline.

In *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, as throughout Wright’s poems, “the past’s richness jar[s] against the present’s impoverished commemorations” (Miller 580). This is especially the case in the group of passages that refer to the Cherokee nation’s devastation at the hands of white colonisers and the desecration of their traditional sacred land. The four sections of the poem that deal with the colonial history of the Cherokee and the Long Island of the Holston contrast with the overall circularity of the poem.

In the first section, we discover that the Long Island of the Holston, once a “sacred refuge ground / Of the Cherokee Nation” (*ZJ* 38), is no longer treated as a place of significance but is merely part of the route to the poet-figure’s golf course, a garishly artificial landscape emblematic of white affluence. This transition is elaborated in the later sections, where it is intimated that this place of sanctuary was witness to the violent colonisation of the Cherokee, beginning in the thirteenth section with the arrival of John Donelson’s convoy of settlers in 1779:

Intended by God’s Permission, his journal said,
Through Indian ambush, death by drowning, death by fire,
Privation and frostbite,
their clothes much cut by bullets,
Over thirty miles of Muscle Shoals,
Loss of the pox-carrying boat and its twenty-eight people
Which followed behind in quarantine and was cut off,

Intercepted, and all its occupants

butchered or taken prisoner

Their cries distinctly heard by those boats in the rear,

Passage beyond the Whirl,

the suckpool by Cumberland Mountain,

Slaughter of swans, slaughter of buffalo,

Intended by God's Permission . . . (ZJ 48)

Wright's italics identify quotations from Donelson's own journal (197-200), which emphasise the conflict between the colonists and Cherokee from the perspective of the new arrivals. Hardship and bloodshed render Donelson's expression of belief in Manifest Destiny—"Intended by God's permission" (ZJ 48)—ironic. This account of "one of the singular achievements / In opening the West" (ZJ 47) is notable for its omission of Cherokee voices and events, such as the epidemic of smallpox that likely struck the Cherokee following this encounter (Rozema 67-68). This silence is itself indicative of oppression.

The passage then relates a different kind of violence perpetrated against the Cherokee: their having to "give away / What wasn't assignable" by agreeing to a peace treaty, "Ending, the first time, the Cherokee Nation" (ZJ 48). The Cherokee officially relinquished "all right, title, interest and claim, which they or their nation have or ever had" to their land (Dearborn). Wright's account echoes one of Dickinson's poems, suggesting that this land exceeded the "portion" of the human self and its possessions that is "Assignable" in life (#591 ["I heard a Fly buzz"] lines 10-11). The implication is that this place was vital to the Cherokee, and that the treaty was an attack on their identity rather than merely their ownership.

The forty-third section of the poem resumes the story of the Cherokee with the Battle of Island Flats between the frontiersmen and the vastly outnumbered Cherokee braves. The braves' defeat "ended for all time / The Cherokee's mystic Nation ~ *with streams of blood every way*" (ZJ 72), paving the way for their forced exodus (Denham, *The Early Poetry* 159).

Quoting from the senior officer Captain John Thompson's enthusiastic account of the battle (154), the speaker inserts his own interpretation:

Never so much execution in so short a time

On the frontier.

Our spies really deserve the greatest applause.

We took a great deal of plunder and many guns.

We have a great reason to believe

They are pouring in greatest numbers upon us

and beg assistance of our friends.

Exaggeration and rhetoric:

Nothing was pouring on them, of course,

but history and its disaffection,

Stripping the vacuum of the Cherokee (ZJ 73)

This section draws attention to the colonial mentality that saw the New World as a "vacuum" and devalued the existing inhabitants and structures by implying that, like primordial chaos, these needed to be stripped away in preparation for a true moment of origin.

The fifty-second section presents a bleak, partitioned landscape of junk and detritus that reveals not only the complete departure of the Cherokee but also the utter defilement of their sacred place. A plaque stands in tribute to what is evidently a pitifully meagre and belated gesture of reconciliation, inscribed:

Long Island of the Holston

Sacred Cherokee Ground Relinquished by Treaty

Jan. 7, 1806.

3.61 Acres Returned

To the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians by

The City of Kingsport on July 16, 1976:

Wolf Clan, Blue Clan, Deer Clan, Paint Clan, Wild Potato Clan,

Long Hair Clan, Bird Clan (ZJ 82)

Each of the sections that deals with the Cherokee introduces a new violence that contributes to the erosion of their way of life. The degradation of their culture is most palpable in this last section, where the island's former spiritual significance and diversity of peoples, as noted on the plaque, is juxtaposed painfully with its current state, in which "the burial sites ~ have been bulldozed and slash-stacked" and "a television set [is] / Caught in the junk-jam of timber and plastic against the bank" (ZJ 82). The return of a mere 3.61 acres of the 840-acre Island as late as 1976 is representative of the ongoing indignity borne by the Cherokee peoples.

The narrative about the Cherokee punctuates the cyclical pilgrimage narrative of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, qualifying the cyclical model of time with one in which things deteriorate and are not restored. It functions like other markers of entropy in this and other poems by Wright. Human mutability, in juxtaposition with nature's self-renewal, highlights the urgency and poignancy of the pilgrimage towards transcendence. However, the disappearance of the Cherokee from the Long Island of the Holston is not evidence of inevitable decline equivalent to the gloomy reality of ageing. Rather, it is the consequence of deliberate and violent acts. This distinction is arguably not clear enough in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*. For example, the river on which the colonists arrive aggressively in the thirteenth section is depicted (as throughout Wright's poetry) as an indiscriminate vehicle of time simply ferrying the superior past away. The account of the Battle of Island Flats is prefaced in the forty-first section by the poet-figure's fiftieth birthday, spent driving away from his mother's family's country from which all his relatives have now vanished. This implies a correspondence between the poet-figure's experience of a lost homeland and road-like time "Hustling me on O hustling me on" (ZJ 72), and the "Trail of Tears" (ZJ 73) mentioned in the forty-third section, which alludes to the forced removal of the Cherokee

from their homeland in 1838 during which about a quarter of their population died from disease, malnourishment and exposure (Hill). The “I”-figure refers to the latter as an “inevitable exodus”, and he ultimately holds only “history and its disaffection” responsible for “Stripping the vacuum of the Cherokee”, thus treating Cherokee history as merely another instance of unavoidable decline with time. Although ironic and largely sympathetic, Wright’s narrative fails to acknowledge adequately the human agency responsible for these wrongs.

The tragic history of the Cherokee takes place beside the Holston River, the symbolism of which is conveyed in this long passage from *Littlefoot*:

Wherever I’ve gone, the Holston River has stayed next to me

Like a dream escaping

some time-flattened orifice

Once open in childhood, migrating now like a road

I’ve walked on unknowingly,

pink and oblivious

.....

The river is negative time,

always undoing itself,

Always behind where it once had been

.....

There’s no uncertainty about it, negative time.

No numbering.

Like wind when it stops, like clouds that are here then not here,

It is the pure presence of absence.

November’s last leaves fall down to it,

The angels, their wings remodeled beneath their raincoats,³³
Live in it,
our lives repeat it, skipped heartbeats, clocks with one hand.

Out of the shallows and slick traces of Southwest Virginia,
From Saltville and Gate City, from Church Hill and New Hope,
The river remainders itself
and rises again
Out of its own depletion.
How little we know it, how little we really remember it.
How like our own blood it powers on,
out of sight, out of mind. (*LF* 8-9)

The Holston River in particular is linked to the poet-figure's Southern youth and acts as a poignant reminder of the lost, superior past: for example, the youthful, heart-pounding encounter described in the poem "Sex" takes place in the back seat of a car on the banks of the Holston (*HF* 48). The river is also a common metaphor for time and change, in accordance with the Heraclitean proverb paraphrased "you can never step in the same river twice" (B12). In the thirteenth section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, the poet-figure states:

All of my childhood was spent on rivers,
The Tennessee and Hiwassee, the Little Pigeon,
The Watauga and Holston.
There's something about a river
No ocean can answer to:
Leonardo da Vinci,
in one of his notebooks,

³³ The angels in "raincoats" with "remodeled wings" are fish. This appears to be in reference to earlier poem "Mondo Angelico", in which fish are likened to "aquatic angels" (*CH* 57).

Says that the water you touch is the last of what has passed by
And the first of what's to come. (ZJ 47)

The river moves steadily like time in one direction, embodying the passing of the fleeting present moment and the continual retreat of what went before into the distance, as well as the relentless approach of “what’s to come” (ZJ 47). As is clear in the section of *Littlefoot* quoted above, the river is what takes the pilgrim away from his childhood just “like a road” leading away from a place. As “negative time”, the river represents growing distance from the past rather than time elapsing to bring one closer to the future. If the “dream” of childhood is the intended destination, then time drags us further from it (LF 8).

Throughout Wright’s poetry, the river is a symbol that captures something of the fluidity of “Time’s sluice and time’s undertow” (BY 29) and its ability to carry the pilgrim along like a passive vessel: “We are all leaves in the current”, we are told elsewhere in *Littlefoot* (LF 35). Rivers thus serve to emphasise the pilgrim’s lack of control over his passage through time towards this final destination. As stated in *Littlefoot*, above, the river takes us “unknowingly” from “here” to “not here”; it embodies the negative principle that amounts to the “presence of absence” and “depletion” (LF 8-9). Its “pink” road in *Littlefoot* resembles a tongue, indicating that it leads not back to the “orifice” of childhood (which time has “flattened”, allowing for no return) but into the consuming mouth of the future (LF 8). “Negative time”, or entropy, represents the shape of our lives, which are haunted by a palpable absence as they tick on repetitively but towards a definite end nonetheless. The river metaphor also captures time’s erosiveness:

Time’s sluice and the summer rains erode our hearts
and carry our lives away.
We hold what we can in our two hands,
Sinking, each year, another inch into the earth . . . (SC 40).

The entropy evident in our erosion by “time, the true dissolver” (*NB* 193), is, in this passage, further embodied in “sinking . . . into the earth” (*SC* 40)—an image both of descent and of approaching death and burial.

These are aspects of time also evoked by the wind: in the twentieth section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, for example, the north wind is like “water, ~ a clear constancy” flowing through the landscape (*ZJ* 54). Similarly, in the revealingly titled poem “Time Will Tell”, the wind’s flow evokes the unidirectionality of time: “It’s never the same wind in the same spot, but it’s still the wind, / And blows in the one direction, ~ northeast to southwest” (*ST* 66). In “Black and Blue”, a “Great wind keeps carrying us ~ where we don’t want, where we don’t know” (*CH* 46). The wind is recognisable as an agent of time and the invisible in Wright’s poetry precisely because of its resemblance to water and especially to the river that is more typically associated with directional time.

In “Summer Mornings”,

The river slides on its flaming wheel

And sings on summer mornings,

as though to croon itself to sleep.

And mumbles a kind of nothingness,

River that flows everywhere, north and south, like the wind

And never closes its eye. (*SHS* 59)

The river’s eye in this passage is “the eye of the underworld” (*SHS* 59), a reminder of where time is taking us. The river often resembles a Styx-like boundary between life and death in Wright’s poetry. It “mumbles a kind of nothingness” (*SHS* 59), expressing no meaning, or perhaps whispering of the oblivion towards which all things are headed. Unlike Stevens’ “river that flows nowhere, like a sea” (“River” line 18), Wright’s river is the flow of all things, everywhere, and it points towards the final destination dictated by entropy.

Another great river of time in Wright's poetry is the sky, or the "River of Heaven" (*ST* 10). Wright often depicts the night sky as dark water on which the stars float (see *XA* 32; *CH* 21; *ST* 58). The ever-present stars are great overseers, observing and governing events on earth. Although the "River of Heaven" flows in a circle, it seems to direct time onwards towards an ending. For example, in the poem "Looking West from Laguna Beach at Night" the zodiac contains "the mythic history of Western civilization" and spells out the machinations of destiny—"what's what and how who got where"—as well as the secrets of the evolution and end of the cosmos: "the physics of metamorphosis and its endgame" (*CH* 86).

Wright's other dominant metaphor for directional time is the road, which complements the depiction of life as a pilgrimage in his poetry. In "Appalachian Lullaby" time is likened to "a black highway in front of me" (*SHS* 41), while in "Via Negativa" the road constitutes the extent of one's life: "Long journey, short road, the saying goes, / Meaning our lives" (*SHS* 63). In the poem "In the Beginning Was the Word, in the End was the Word", our transition from "Episiotomy" to "Eschatology" is "a slick highway" leading "home" (*OT*). The road metaphor is a spatialisation of time that arranges the past behind us, likening hours or days passed to miles travelled (Costello, *Shifting Ground* 4) while positioning future events like locations on a map, such that the poet-figure can say, "Well, that's a couple of miles down the road" (*SHS* 15), or describe an "afternoon starting to bulk up in the west / A couple of hours down the road" (*ZJ* 3).

Road trips in Wright's poems never seem to have a stated destination and so are potentially endless (Turner 106). The pilgrim is often, apparently, going nowhere, but this is in keeping with the direction and end implicit in the road metaphor for life, which embodies entropic decline towards nothingness, death and darkness. For example, "Apologia Pro Vita Sua" begins with the exclamation, "How soon we come to road's end"; the poem depicts an apparently night-time landscape haunted by crucifixion imagery and the poet-figure's dead mother, in which he has descended so far that there is "Nowhere to go but up" (*BZ* 3).

Similarly, in “Two Stories” the poet-figure relates what it is like to “live at the end of the road where the sky starts its dark decline” (*OSR* 22) and events appear “in the rearview mirror, ~ smaller and out of sight” (*OSR* 21). The road is thus a descending path with death at its end: much like a river, the road of one’s “life slid[es] downhill” towards “the murmur of old ghosts”, “Down there, at the bowl of the bottom” (“WKPT, Kingsport”).

As with the aforementioned rivers, many of the roads that feature in Wright’s poetry are ones the poet-figure remembers from his youth. He recalls, for example, “The roads we went back and forth on / Returning ahead of us like rime” (*SC* 31). Roads are travelled freely, allowing destinations to be revisited in a way they cannot be when one is beholden to the pull of a river. The road metaphor thus allows for the counter-intuitive looping of seemingly forward-moving time back to the beginning. For example, the “I”-figure tells of being “on my way for a long time ~ back to the past, / That irreconcilable city”—although he admits to approaching death sooner than “immortality” (“Road Warriors”)—and of finding “At the end of every road, / First faces starting to swim up” (*ZJ* 5).

In the forty-first section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, the poet-figure spends his fiftieth birthday driving from Winchester, VA, presumably to Charlottesville, VA (Wright’s home at that time) along the Lee Highway (US Route 11), which, named after the Confederate General Robert E. Lee, is suggestive of defeat. For much of the journey he drives alongside the North Fork of the Shenandoah River. Both river and road also point in the same direction figuratively, towards old age and death and away from the beloved past. Turner reads the vanishing of the regional roadways such as the Lee Highway (now largely replaced by I-81 [Turner 106]) as indicative of the decline of local U.S. cultures and identities and the spread of a generic, standardised, capitalist geography without borders or regional distinctions (94). According to Turner, driving also produces future forgetfulness, with the fleeting and detached impression of the landscape gained from a car rendering the landscape a simulacrum that will be difficult to remember (95). The “amnesia-like quality of automobility compresses the landscape of the South, clouding distinctions between

cartographically demarcated southern states as well as between different regions”, he suggests (96), so that the landscapes of childhood undergoing transformation in the present are also being lost to memory. This homogeneity is itself indicative of a kind of entropy; “[t]he highway culture”, Turner muses, “may be the symbolic death of us all” (105). In *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, the appearance of a road leading to a golf course—itsself a homogenous, standardised landscape—in a place that was the Cherokee’s “sacred refuge ground” emblematises the departure of the Cherokee people and the erasure of their culture and identity (ZJ 38).

The forty-first section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* links the poet-figure’s driving away from his mother’s family’s country to the gradual loss of his antecedents to death and forgetfulness. Elapsing time and growing entropy are captured in the river and road imagery:

In my fiftieth year, with a bad back and a worried mind,
Going down the Lee Highway,
the farms and villages
Rising like fog behind me,
Between the dream and the disappearance the abiding earth
Affords us each for an instant.
However we choose to use it
We use it and then it’s gone:
Like the glint of the Shenandoah
at Castleman’s Ferry,
Like license plates on cars we follow and then pass by,
Like what we hold and let go,
Like this country we’ve all come down,
and where it’s led us,
Like what we forgot to say, each time we forget it. (ZJ 71)

In this passage, the road is an entropic descent in that this highway is one the poet-figure travels “down”, leading from “the dream”—the original ideal or the dreamlike state of the pre-incarnate self—to his “disappearance” (*ZJ* 71). His existence in time is likened to a released thing falling. The destination is forgetfulness and perhaps, as the inclusion of the Shenandoah River and mention of a ferry suggest, Hades. For Spiegelman, this passage exemplifies the direction of time in Wright’s poetry: “Repetition—automobile-travel down an old country highway or a string of similes—leads in one direction only: toward our disappearance” (*How Poets See* 111). Amidst the fog of mounting entropy, the traveller is afforded an “instant” of life and a “glint” of insight (*ZJ* 71): small reward for his tireless pilgrimage, but, as he suggests in the penultimate section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, this inevitably futile journey is worthwhile nonetheless: “An ordered and measured affection is virtuous / In its clean cause ~ however close it comes in this life” (*ZJ* 83).

Crystallised Time: “That Point Where All Things Meet”

The pilgrimage in Wright’s work is the “ordered and measured affection” by which his pilgrim “comes close” (*ZJ* 83). It is a characteristic of Wright’s poetry that moments of epiphany, during which “The heart of the world lies open . . . / For just a minute or so” (*SS* 25) and the invisible is apprehended, are compelling but ephemeral and hard to predict. Wright’s depiction of such moments frequently makes reference to light and reflective surfaces to give them the impression of being separated from time’s flow, as though they were suspended in crystal. Much like the photographs and self-portraits that appear frequently in Wright’s poetry,³⁴ his crystallised time motif mimics the assembly of a lasting visual composition to preserve the fleeting instant even as it is immediately lost. I call this motif “crystallised time”.

³⁴ Wright’s ekphrastic poems about photographs include “Photographs” (*GRH* 48-49), “Landscape with Seated Figure and Olive Trees” (*SC* 33), “Bar Giamaica, 1959-60” (*SC* 44), “Lines on Seeing a Photograph for the First Time in Thirty Years” (*CH* 36-37), and “Rosso Venexio” (*BY* 43-4) and “Dio Ed Io” (*BY* 50-51). A sequence of five poems entitled “Self-Portrait” appears in *The Southern Cross* and a number of “Portrait of the Artist” poems appear in *The Southern Cross* and *Buffalo Yoga*.

According to Denham, Wright's crystal imagery is inspired by Pound's *Cantos*, in which crystal is a recurring symbol signifying pure form (*The Early Poetry* 69). The symbol also, according to Wright, brings together Pound's themes of "light, order and beauty" and suggests "paradisaal clarity" (*HL* 16). The invisible and its attendant mysteries are often depicted as shining like crystal in Wright's poems. This was demonstrated in relation to the definitive past in Chapter Two of this thesis; it is also evident in the description of form as a "spilling like shook glass in the air", and the likening of "the absences who [lip] at the edge of understanding" to a "glint" and a "pursed and glittering . . . kiss" (*ZJ* 40) in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*. The crystallised time motif expresses the extraordinariness of certain moments of insight by making them seem to shine and by rendering them apparently discrete and distinct, like precious artefacts scrutinised from many angles.

Moments are crystallised in Wright's poems when the poet-figure has an experience of such lucidity, apprehension and concentration that time seems to become massively compressed and to stand still for an instant. In *Littlefoot*, for example, the landscape appears "enfrescoed in stop-time" (*LF* 21) for a short spell, while in "High Country Spring" the world is described as "a tiny object, a drop of pine sap, / Amber of robin's beak . . . backlit by sunlight, / Pulling the glow deep inside" (*ST* 54). In "Yard Journal", it is "as though the seen world / Quavered inside a water bead ~ swung from a grass blade" (*ZJ* 3). The image of the bead of water or amber aptly conveys the impression of a totality whereby everything is present and simultaneously apprehensible: "The world reflected and windless, full of grace, tiny, tiny" (*SS* 15). These instants see the Absolute suddenly manifest itself in the light-play, while at the same time isolating itself from the observer.

Instances of crystallised time reaffirm the outer boundary implicit in Wright's poetic universe between the visible world and the invisible. Touched by something beyond the world, these moments retain an impression of being hard-edged and separate from the rest of the world, self-contained, unalterable and pristine. Crystallised time "painfully brings us up against what is sealed off from us" (Gardner 151). Hirsch suggests that

Such moments, fleeting and atemporal, rupture narrative and loosen bonds of continuity and consequence. . . . They are inchoate and asocial—defying language, destroying time. Thus they have to be seized and contained, described and dramatized in words, reintegrated back into temporal experience. (789)

Reintegrating the moment back into the flow of time by journalising and poeticising it brings the moment to an end and releases its totalising hold. Union with the Absolute amounts to oblivious stasis in Wright's poetry, so knowing it at all necessitates such separation from it.

As a result, crystalline imagery promises eternity, but in fact these bright moments prove fleeting. Gardner attributes the motif to the influence of Dickinson:

A slant of light "comes", heralding the possibility of a world other than the unbroken gray of a winter afternoon, and then it "goes", an experience Wright repeatedly refers to. . . . When it comes, the landscape it touches and those who view it come alive, listening and holding their breaths in intense concentration on that other world the slant seems to dart out from and invite entrance into. When it goes, that possibility goes with it. (150)

However, unlike Dickinson's slant of light, Wright's crystallised moments are not necessarily an "imperial affliction" (#320 line 11); they can be enticing. The crystallised time motif is thus one of unsustainable insight and belief. Many of the upward threshold moments in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* are unfulfilled or short-lived moments of revelation or transcendence and, accordingly, manifest crystalline imagery. For example, an emphatic sense of light and imminence attends the ascending woman of the eleventh section, a sense of impending brilliance threatens the pilgrim in the twenty-third section and the landscape is depicted "pinned and still in its shining" upon the "reoccasion" of St Catherine's martyrdom in the thirty-third section (ZJ 63-64).

Another such experience in *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* coincides with the poet-figure's visit to the home of Emily Dickinson. He sits in Dickinson's chair and assumes her

viewpoint—something he cannot do at Catullus’ seat in Verona in the eleventh section. He is motionless himself but surrounded by reminders of the world’s forward movement, including a river, railway and roads. Although he waits and waits, Dickinson fails to materialise. The poet-figure is haunted instead by an acute awareness of her nonappearance:

And nothing came up through my feet like electric fire.

And no one appeared in a white dress

with white flowers

Clutched in her tiny white hands:

No voice from nowhere said anything

about living and dying in 1862. (*ZJ* 50)

The moment is a fittingly Dickinsonian “Stillness in the Air – / Between the Heaves of Storm” (#465, lines 3-4), with the “nothing . . . electric fire” foreshadowing the “Dog-fire” lightning (*ZJ* 67) of the thunderstorm in the thirty-eighth section. This moment of intense concentration produces a fleeting “noiseless noise” (*ZJ* 50), and it appears that Emily is embodied in the sunlight that lies “like a shirtwaist over the window seat” and forms a “slick bodice of sunlight ~ smoothed out on the floorboards” (*ZJ* 50). Like Dickinson’s “certain Slant of light” (#320 line 1), this fleeting apparition seems to promise but withhold access to something profound (Gardner 50). It dissolves quickly, as does the poet-figure’s moment of perfect clarity and motionlessness: “The crystal [he’d] turned inside of / Dissembl[es] to shine and a glaze somewhere near the windowpanes” (*ZJ* 51) at the sound of a real voice calling him away.

This section contrasts with three subsequent experiences of “visit[ing] and visitation” (Hawkins and Jacoff 21), in which the ready availability of the ghosts ruin the visionary moment. In the first, the eighteenth section, the poet-figure remembers visiting what was once Edgar Allan Poe’s student room at the University of Virginia. This house is forthcoming with its spirits, which respond at once to his knocking “twice on the doorjamb” (*ZJ* 53). The “I”-figure’s “skin sings” (*ZJ* 53), but his impassive commentary, “I don’t know

why, but I think it's alright, and I like it" (ZJ 53), suggests that the encounter is not entirely profound.

In the twenty-seventh section, in the midst of his extended interlude at the threshold of elevation, the pilgrim is visited by Dante Alighieri, whose advice to "concentrate, listen hard, / Look to the nature of all things" (ZJ 58) he considers "not exactly transplendent" (ZJ 59). Dante is indicating that the world still conforms to his Christian cosmology: "Penitents terrace the mountainside, the stars hang in their bright courses / And darkness is still the dark" (ZJ 58). The poet-figure has already told us that he "sat very still, and listened hard" (ZJ 50) at Dickinson's house with some success, indicating that intense meditation can indeed produce moments of vision. On this occasion, however, his attempt to follow the great poet's counsel reveals nothing out of the ordinary. The speaker notices that "A motor scooter whines up the hill road, toward the Madonna" (ZJ 59) like a modern-day Dante climbing purgatory, but he does not follow. Instead, he is left behind amidst impressions of purgatorial circling, such as the children's play-chants, "centrifugal in their extantsy", which echo the "Circle of voices" of penitent souls that trail in the spectral Dante's wake (ZJ 59). Similarly, imitating Dante's pilgrimage throughout *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* does not allow the pilgrim to replicate that great poet's ascent into the highest circle of heaven at the end of the *Paradiso*. Later in the poem, however, the pilgrim concedes that Dante may have been trying to draw his attention to "paracletic nature of all things"—the intercession of the physical world between ourselves and the invisible—which is a revelation "transplendent enough / . . . for our needs" (ZJ 67).

Lastly, the poet-figure pays homage to Petrarch, whose works are sealed "under glass in the fourteenth century stone rooms / The poet last occupied" (ZJ 64). He finds the measures taken to freeze time and recreate Petrarch's presence tasteless, intrusive and inconsistent with the enduring theme of mutability in his poems; rather than recreating his genius, these details obscure the real man and instead bear witness to the toll taken by time and forgetfulness:

intrusion, the timeless ideal is something that exists alongside or outside the visible world of human endeavour and remains beyond reach. It is not attainable so long as time—and life—persist.

This is the underlying theme of Wright's long poem, which ties together a linear narrative of decline that incorporates the dispossession of the Cherokee, the circular pilgrimage, and fleeting moments of lapsed epiphany. It is a narrative of being separated from the sacred. This is made evident in the thirty-first section, which falls right in the middle of the poem. This is fitting because the passage embodies the poem's Eliotic sense of the "stillness of form [at] the center of everything" (ZJ 43) and the "point ~ where all things meet" (ZJ 51). In this section, the poet-figure describes the frescoes of the Palazzo del Schifanoia in Ferrara, Italy, with their tripartite depiction of reality. The frescos illustrate a contrast between "a struck eternity / Painted and paralysed ~ at this end and the other" and the "*liquid glory*" of the "physical world" (XA 30), in which movement, change and, perhaps, redemption, are possible.

In the frescos, the earthly realm comprises a "narrow, meaningful strip" busy with the rise and fall of human life, which, in Wright's description, resembles a snakes-and-ladders game board full of "arrows and snakes. / Circles and . . . questing pilgrims" (ZJ 61). The middle layer contains the moving dome of the zodiac, while the top layer consists of the eternal realm of the gods, a place "Of pure Abstraction and pure Word", "all Concept and finery" (ZJ 62). The speaker terms the layers "Reality, symbol and ideal" (ZJ 61). They constitute a cosmology in which the flux of human life is separated from the immutable order of the gods by the starry sphere, which intervenes between the two by governing the months, seasons and fates. The sun is depicted as a "goddess [burning] in her golden car" (ZJ 61), recalling its link with the post-Assumption Madonna of earlier sections of the poem. Her circling overhead presages the "great river of language that circles the universe" that the pilgrim is soon to encounter. The frescos visualise the medieval structure of the world in Wright's poems (Vendler, "Charles Wright" 17), in which the perpetual natural cycle is the

constant order that governs the “scenes of everyday life” taking place below, while revealing the influence of the Absolute that resides in the “white light of eternity” above (*ZJ* 61).

The frescos themselves are akin to the eternal uppermost realm, which is clearly tantamount to the invisible. The painted figures appear “Suspended and settled upon as though under glass” (*ZJ* 61), while the city that “floats in its marbled tear of light” (*ZJ* 62) resembles the perfectly preserved, paradisal cities of the past in “The Southern Cross”: Venice, “webbed like glass in its clear zinc” (*SC* 54), and Pickwick, “its walls the color of pure light” (*SC* 65). The frescos represent a picture of the whole of reality, including the unseen forces at work in it. They also embody the paradoxical nature of the invisible as both fundamental to and detached from the visible world—coming “From somewhere inside and somewhere outside” (*ZJ* 37)—by reproducing the reality that lies beyond the reach of art at the poem’s very centre. As we are told in “Sky Diving”, the poet-figure’s focus in all his poetry, “the still, small point where all things meet”, is the Dantesque “form that moves the sun and the other stars” (*NB* 201), and this is what the frescos represent: they show how the eternal forms are translated into worldly flux and embody themselves the highest order, in its totality, embedded at the centre of everything.

Nevertheless, the world of the frescoes, so immaculate and whole, perplexes the poet-figure. He asks:

Is this the progression of our lives,
or merely a comment on them?
Is this both the picture and what’s outside the picture,
Or decoration opposing boredom
For court ladies to glance up at
crossing a tiled floor? (*ZJ* 62-63)

Like the observations of Eliot’s women who “come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (“The Love Song” lines 13-14), the attention of these courtly ladies seems to constitute an

uninformed and inattentive look at the significant image.³⁶ The whole, utterly contained and motionless, stands in contrast with the movement of human life below and receives only the occasional glance. The fresco's survey of the visible and invisible aspects of the world affirms the ascendancy of the invisible reality the poet-figure loves both to seek and to disparage. It suggests that the endless change of life on earth is indeed a manifestation of eternal realities, translated through the unalterable rhythms represented by the zodiac. Unfortunately, the perfect realisation of the order that drives the world lies beyond the zodiac: that is, the circumferential sky the pilgrim cannot rise above. It constitutes the kind of transcendent knowledge the pilgrim finds it impossible to sustain. Even presented in its entire medieval array, the invisible remains untouchable and something the pilgrim cannot embrace.

Faced with these limitations, the poet-figure takes refuge in his customary reserve, implicit in the insinuation that this is “*merely* a comment on” our lives [italics mine], something to distract us from them for an instant and easily dismissed (*ZJ* 62). Once again, confronted with the Absolute, the pilgrim turns away and continues on, guilty of merely “glancing” up and not being taken in wholeheartedly.

Mark C. Taylor frames the dilemma of the seeker who tries to find fulfilment in narrative thus:

Always exiled between beginning and end, the unhappy person nostalgically remembers the fulfilment he believes once was and expectantly awaits the satisfaction he hopes will be. Anticipated satisfaction, however, never becomes fully present. It repeatedly escapes one's grasp. . . . [T]he divine Other is eternally *beyond*, always *elsewhere*, and absolutely *transcendent*. (72)

³⁶ There is something about Eliot's women's restless comings and goings and the seemingly dismissive “glance” given by Wright's courtly ladies on their way to somewhere else (*ZJ* 63) that suggests thoughtlessness—certainly this is the common interpretation of the lines of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” that Wright echoes. See Ricks (12-19) on the misogyny inherent in Eliot's phrasing and, more blatantly, most critics' interpretations of it.

Yet Wright's pilgrim persists with his pilgrimage in the remainder of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* and throughout Wright's oeuvre. In the concluding poems of Wright's "Skins" sequence, written in 1975, thirteen years before *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, the speaker asks himself questions that illuminate why he does this:

You thought you climbed, and all the while you descended.

Go up and go down; what other work is there

For you to do, what other work in this world?

.....

And what does it come to, Pilgrim

This walking to and fro on the earth, knowing

That nothing changes, or everything;

And only, to tell it, these sad marks,

Phrases half-parsed, ellipses and scratches across the dirt?

It comes to a point. It comes and it goes. (*BL* 69, 70)

One answer to these questions regarding the object of his pilgrimage—that Eliotic, central point “where everything comes to one” (*ZJ* 72), which is the “point” that “comes and goes” (*BL* 70)—is expressed in the forty-sixth section from *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*:

The disillusioned and twice-lapsed, the fallen away,

Become my constituency:

those who would die back

To splendour and rise again

From hurt and unwillingness,

their own ash on their own tongues,

Are those I would be among,

The called, the bruised by God, their old ways forsaken

And startled on, the shorn and weakened.

.....

The poem is written on glass
I look through to calibrate
the azimuth of sun and Blue Ridge,
Angle of rise and fall the season reconstitutes.
My name is written on glass,
The emptiness that form takes, the form of emptiness
The body can never signify,
yellow of ash leaves on the grass,
Three birds on the dead oak limb.
The heart is a spondee. (*ZJ*)

The poet-figure counts himself among those caught in the ebb and flow of spiritual despair and redemption, his life a loop whereby he repeatedly “die[s] back” and “rise[s] again” (*ZJ* 76). Although “disillusioned”, “fallen-away”, “shorn and weakened”, although “bruised” by the disappointment of his own aspirations (*ZJ* 76) and surrounded by further evidence of entropy (“yellow of ash leaves on the grass” and “the dead oak limb” [*ZJ* 77]), the pilgrim is prepared to be re-elevated. He carries with him the awareness of his own decline: the taste of ash on his tongue is “the ash of days” (*NB* 198). The natural cycle, that “rise and fall the season reconstitutes” (*ZJ* 77), is his own fate, echoed by his own heartbeat; that cycle is also curiously metronomic here, repeating the prolonged rise and equivalent fall “tick-tock” of “a spondee” (*ZJ* 77) as a reminder that it also counts down towards his death.

In the face of the world's mutability, the poet-figure inscribes his name and poetry "on glass" (*ZJ* 77). In "Via Negativa", he describes *prayers* as "like wet-wrung pieces of glass, / Surf-spun, unedged and indestructible and shining" (*SHS* 62) that outlast the poet and rise "without us / Into an everlasting, ~ which goes on without us, / Blue into blue into blue" (*SHS* 62). It seems, then, that poetry is the pilgrim's prayer. In the forty-fourth section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* he quotes philosopher Malebranche, "Attention is the natural prayer of the soul" (*ZJ* 73), suggesting that his journalised attentiveness to his surroundings is

his instinctive way of appealing to that which exceeds them. His poem-prayers shine, hard-edged, like the crystalline moments of lucidity and transcendence that they record. St. John suggests that Wright's poems "are each secular prayers begging to break into a realm far beyond their own seclusion of privacy" (xx). The poet-figure demonstrates more faith in poetry's endurance than Keats, to whose famous epitaph, "Here lies one whose name was writ in water", he alludes. He clutches at literature as a means of transcendence (Upton, *The Muse* 37). Although it seems that his poems will be no more successful at transgressing the boundary of the visible world than the pilgrim himself, the wrought-glass artifice of poetry at least elevates his meagre life's work—words that are "dust" (*SHS* 62) in "Via Negativa", "ellipses and scratches across the dirt" in "Skins" (*BL* 70)—making it "a scratch on the sky" (*SHS* 63): a mere trace of his futile scrabbling against the impenetrable dome of the world's circumference, but an indelible reminder of his highest aspirations and nearest misses nonetheless.

Moreover, poetry is the lens for the poet-figure's prayerful attentiveness: the "glass / I look through to calibrate ~ the azimuth of sun and Blue Ridge, / Angle of rise and fall the season reconstitutes" (*ZJ* 76-7). It reveals "The emptiness that form takes, the form of emptiness / The body can never signify" (*ZJ* 77). Herein lies the implied role of art: poetry makes visible the invisible—the emptinesses and absences that stay hidden. Distilling, in a way that the physical world does not, "the stillness of form [at] the center of everything" (*ZJ* 43), poetry is the pilgrim's surest hope of transcending the flux in which his contemplative soul finds itself caught by laying hold of a few brief and crystalline moments of true insight. By imagining his poems rising into the sky, the poet-figure envisions not only his partial triumph over the world but his absence from it, implicit in the writing that will go on existing without him (Upton, *The Muse* 37). "Writing is our trace and our afterlife", says McCorkle: its endurance is indicative of the author's death (210).

Embedded in the flux of the daily landscape, with its endless seasonal turning and confirmation of one's own inescapable decline, Wright's depictions of momentary eternities

serve to emphasise the invisible's inaccessibility and incompatibility with both flowing and circling time. Any prospect of lasting union with the invisible lies in death, but death is just as likely to herald a new beginning, or even nothingness. The search for the invisible is a search for an answer to the question of what awaits us at the end: is entropic destruction our fate, or are things merely weathered "to that point ~ where all things meet" (ZJ 51) and in fact eroded and killed only in preparation for restoration in a benign cycle? Do we fade away into darkness or, as in a dream about falling recounted in the fiftieth section of *A Journal of the Year of the Ox*, do we fall only to be overwhelmed by light? Wright's poet-figure grapples with these possibilities as he attempts to imagine his future and end. The tension between the two outcomes is the tension between his residual Christian longing and his doubting pragmatism. Ends in Wright's poetry are the topic of Chapter Four.

Chapter 4: “The End or Non-end”: Salvation, Annihilation, Transformation and Return in Wright’s *Appalachian Book of the Dead*

The sacred is frightening to the astral body,
As is its absence.

We have to decide which fear is our consolation.

Everything comes *ex alto*,
We’d like to believe, the origin and the end, or
Non-origin and non-end,
each distant and inaccessible.

—Charles Wright, “All Landscape is Abstract and Tends to Repeat Itself”

Like all narratives, Wright’s undernarrative is predicated on the expectation of an ending. The search for the invisible in Wright’s poetry bespeaks a desire for *telos*, an answer to the questions of “how things really are” and “how things will be” (St. John xvi). The world as a whole and the world at its end coincide in Wright’s poetry as the ground of meaning, completeness and coherence. Thus, we are told in “Four Dog Nights”, “The bright, shining mirage our hearts are bedevilled to” is “eschatology”: a dream of a meaningful end that proves everything is progressing in a coherent direction towards a state of fullness or at least “making sense”.

This concept of ends originates with Aristotle’s definition of plot, which describes endings as following necessarily from the preceding events but allowing for nothing else to come after (13-14), providing a sense of wholeness and closure and safeguarding against impressions of arbitrariness (Heath xxiii). Frank Kermode defines the satisfactions of those fictions “whose ends are consonant with origins, and in concord . . . with their precedents” (5) by suggesting that they answer a human need to “belong” to the span of history (4) and

“make sense” of life by finding in it structure, coherence and significance (7). An ending makes the rest of the “story” meaningful: initial events become “origins” in relation to a destined result; similarly, the passage of time in the “middle” obtains a direction in relation to a final destination. Accordingly, in “Appalachian Farewell” the “I”-figure describes himself “headed for” the “country of Narrative, that dark territory / Which spells out our stories in sentences, which gives them an end and a beginning” (*ST* 3). This expectation that we will arrive at a point that completes the meaningful plot of our lives, is implicit in the pilgrimage that haunts Wright’s poetry, which is essentially a sense of heading *towards* something. This is what Donald H. Askins describes in his poetic tribute to Wright as “A stillness. An expectancy. As if something / Long awaited crept silently toward an end” (2-3).

In Wright’s poetry, the end in question is inevitably death and what (if anything) comes after. This is because death is inescapable in his entropic world; it is also because the satisfaction of the pilgrim’s quest through full knowledge of the invisible, whether in the form of reunion with the past in a heavenly afterlife or the consummation of his abortive gestures towards transcendence, is synonymous with death, as I will explore in more detail later in this chapter. The poet-figure tells us, “Out of any two thoughts I have, one is devoted to death” (*BZ* 25). So persistent is the preoccupation with death in Wright’s poetry that his trilogy of trilogies has been described as an *Appalachian Book of the Dead* (*SHS* blurb). As Kermode points out, every imagined ending, particularly the apocalypse, is “a figure for [our] own deaths” (7), a means of anticipating, understanding and accepting the reality of our own, small human span. Accordingly, events with cosmic significance—such as the ordering and fate of the world—are metonymic in Wright’s poetry for his pilgrim’s own destiny. Inversely, his pilgrim’s fate is indicative of the larger natural order. In typical solipsistic fashion, the future in his work, as St. John indicates, “takes as its horizon Wright’s own death” (xv). Different fates after death in Wright’s poetry have significantly different implications, because each has the potential to redefine entirely the narrative—of the world and of life—that precedes it.

Although it is apparently “better to roam without design”, we are also told in “Disjecta Membra” that “A lifetime’s a solitary thread, . . . ~ and needs its knot tied” (*BZ* 74): needs, in other words, a clear shape and ending. The knot image first appears in “Bays Mountain Covenant” in reference to the speaker’s “knot of life and its one string” (*BL* 76). If life is a linear thread—“The thread that dangles us ~ between a dark and a darker dark” (*ST* 37)—then a knot represents a neat conclusion in the form of loose ends tied, or even no loose ends if we picture an endless knot such as those common in Celtic and Buddhist symbolism. The knot is also a symbol for the soul: in “October”, for example, the poet-figure imagines rising “from this tired body, a blood-knot of light” during the “transfiguration” (*SC* 29). In “Buffalo Yoga”, it is as though the final shape of one’s soul is the distillation of the forces that shape one’s life:

The soul, as Mallarmé says, is a rhythmical knot.

That form unties. Or reties.

Each is its own music,

The dark spider that chords and frets, unstringing and stringing,

Instrument, shadowy air-walker,

A long lamentation,

poem whose siren song we’re rocked by. (*BY* 10)

This passage sees the “knot” of one’s soul fashioned by the invisible in the guises of form, the spider, music and poetry. The knot reveals the course of one’s life, with the untied or retied knot corresponding with the two traditional forms of plot: a tragic “undoing” or comedic tying up of loose ends. The subsequent state of one’s soul thus emerges as the distillation of one’s “plot”, revealing the manipulations and “shape” of the invisible that made it thus.

Hence, the idea of the soul as a knot corresponds with a sense of life as a complete narrative, with a final state from which can be determined its ultimate meaning and success. In “Hawaii Dantesca” the poet-figure imagines his life being judged according to whether “the knot I tie is the wrong knot” (*SC* 42). The “correct” knot suggests not just the triumph of

comedic order, but what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls “closure”: a “sense of stable conclusiveness, finality, or ‘clinch’” that validates the preceding sequence (25). The wrong knot, on the other hand, might be prone to coming untied, suggesting a life is tragic or does not amount to anything. In “Stone Canyon Nocturne”, it seems that our lives are recorded on “tally-strings” (*CT* 47), knotted strings traditionally used for counting or keeping track of the calendar in parts of Africa (Lagercrantz 115); this is another image of life as a linear thread whose value is determined by its knot/s.

Wright depicts endings as precipitated by origins. The two are mutually dependent within a context of narrative inevitability. For example, the speaker concludes in “Buffalo Yoga Coda II” that the “ending . . . presupposes the source / Of story and story line, / Which cannot be doubted, and so the period snaps in place” (*BY* 28). This clever exploration of time’s paradoxes merges two racing parables: Zeno’s Second Paradox of Motion³⁷ and a reflection by Kafka on predestination: “The hunting dogs are playing in the courtyard, but the hare will not escape them, no matter how fast it may be flying already through the woods”(170):

If, as Kafka says, the hunting dogs,
 At play in the stone courtyard,
 Will catch the hare no matter,
regardless of how it may be flying
 Already now through the dark forest,
 Then it must stay itself with just these trees,
and their bright passage,
 Those marks and punctuations before the sentence ends,

³⁷ To illustrate his theory that motion is an illusion, Zeno told the story of the famously fast runner Achilles being unable to overtake a tortoise in a race. Provided the tortoise was allowed a head start, Zeno reasoned, Achilles would face the impossible task of closing the distance between them an infinite number of times before he could overtake his slower competitor. By the time he reached the tortoise’s position, the tortoise would have moved ahead, however slightly, leaving Achilles with another gap to close, and so the process would repeat endlessly (Huggett).

Before, in short, and black as the bible,
the period closes in.

If, on the other hand, the hunting dogs,
now at play

In the stone courtyard,
Never arrive, the story becomes less classical.
The hare, however fast, will always be slow enough
To outlast an ending, which presupposes the source
Of story and storyline,
Which cannot be doubted, and so the period snaps in place. (*BY 28*)

The hare, by fleeing the threat of the dogs, is pelting through time towards its predetermined end. In order to avoid death, it must be both swift enough to outrun the dogs and, like Zeno's Achilles, "slow enough / To outlast the ending" (*BY 28*)—to postpone the end forever, in other words. The trees in Wright's poem, which constitute the "marks and punctuations" with which the hare tries to "stay itself" (*BY 28*), recall the endless divisions of the distance between Achilles and the tortoise that seem to delay endlessly the chaser's arrival. It is also an image of the passing of time as the reading of a text and a clever pun on "life sentence", with the hare's flight like the sweep of a gaze across the "marks and punctuations" on a page. The reader advances the events of the story toward the conclusion much as the dogs hound the hare onward. Time catches up with us as the end closes in on us and we are powerless to avoid our fate. Zeno's never-ending race and the prospect of eternity are disproven: the end arrives inevitably by virtue of there being a beginning, no matter how one punctuates the time between.

Given that the end will arrive eventually, reluctance and fatalism permeate Wright's poetry. Sometimes it is as though a collusion of unfortunate circumstances deliberately chased us down and sniffed—or snuffed—us out, like "The hunter, history's dog [that] will

sniff us, ~ sure as hell” (*CH* 43). At other times it seems that the inevitable end already exists “out there” somewhere, like the dogs at play in the courtyard, waiting to be encountered. In the poem “Reunion”, for example, the speaker tells us that the day of his death has “detached itself from all the rest up ahead. / It has my photograph in its soft pocket” (*CT* 49). It is a future that “has it in for us”, as Spiegelman puts it: “Time traps us coming and going; there is no escape” (*How Poets See* 91).

Zbigniew Lewicki contends that American literature is dominated by two distinct tropes of “The End”: the apocalyptic and the entropic. One literary trope is grounded in Christian myths of the end, the other in a scientific understanding; “[o]ne is physical, the other metaphysical; one is based on moral distinctions, the other on indifferent scientific laws; one promises violent destruction and regeneration, the other slow but irreversible decay; one leaves room for hope, the other does not” (Lewicki xv-xvi). These types of endings are both entertained in Wright’s poetry, corresponding respectively with the belief that life is ongoing and the belief that life ends in death, and upholding, on the one hand, a teleological, hopeful universe and, on the other, a grimmer alternative. Wright’s poetry, as Upton writes, “takes its tensions from opposing pressures . . . between, on the one hand, salvific yearning seemingly foreordained by the depth of his early religious instruction and, on the other, by empirical rationalism” (*The Muse* 26). The desire to settle the matter of his destiny drives Wright’s pilgrim in his preoccupation with the invisible. However, in Wright’s poetry, purely entropic or apocalyptic ends are not the only possibility. Rather, I identify four distinct models of the end in his poems. These endings are distinguishable according to two variables: whether or not one continues after one’s death and whether or not the world persists after one’s end. These distinctions are mapped out in Table 2, below.

One common form of ending in Wright’s poetry is identifiable with entropy in that it predicts the cessation of the individual self and the loss or end of the material world. This version of the end essentially amounts to a denial of the invisible insofar as it belies any teleological purposiveness. Instead, the world is shown to be unidirectional and, at least for

humans, hopeless and impersonal. Another model is recognisably salvific, seeing the individual self continue in a new, often heavenly context after death. That kind of end promises complete reconciliation with the invisible good. Two other alternatives explore the ramifications for the human speaker of the eternal, cyclic patterns of rise-and-fall evident everywhere in Wright's poetry. On the one hand is a model with numerous literary precedents, in which the decomposition of the body in the natural world amounts to one's induction, albeit silent and unknowing, into the invisible order. On the other hand is a model that sees the "I"-figure repeat his life within an unchanged context, which is less an ending than a re-beginning. Like the salvific ends, this fantasy sees the pilgrim fulfil his dream of regaining his past, but it also brings into question the ultimate value of this cycle. While not totally unredemptive, this vision renders the operations of the invisible deeply ambiguous.

Table 2

Four Versions of the End in Charles Wright's Poetry

	World is left or lost (The End)	World is ongoing (The Non-end)
Self is lost	Entropy: invisible is unsympathetic or non-existent	Absorption: invisible is unknowable and/or unspeakable
Self is preserved	Afterlife: invisible is benevolent and attainable	Eternal recurrence of the same: invisible is ambivalent

With so many versions of the end, none can be definitive. The ubiquitous repetition and revision in Wright's poetry creates a Derridean sense of perpetual non-arrival as the would-be ground of meaning eludes the speaker. After all, the story of one's life can never be completed while alive. As Johnson discerns, the speaker's death in Wright's poetry is often depicted through prolepsis: "a projection forward to a point beyond the speaker's death,

which is then regarded as an event in the past” (213). This strategy satisfies a desire to “impose closure on an existence” by allowing the speaker to “‘look back’ on the end of life, to know death from the other side” (Johnson 181, 214). Yet the gesture also points to the fact that no autobiography can ever be finished except by way of fantasy (Johnson 181). Poetry can be read as stalwart proof-of-life in contrast with death’s silent oblivion; the poet-figure cannot poeticise his death without also affirming its non-arrival. The end, like the origin, is a fantasy on which sense-making is based, mistakenly imagined to be actual but deferred, as presence is by writing. In fact, as is evident in Wright’s poems, we are suspended between unknowables: our “one string” of life “goes from this man’s rumor to that one’s promise” (*BL* 76); ours is a “floating life [with] no anchor at either end” (*BY* 70). An ending is crucial for determining the meaning and significance of a narrative and achieving the sense of coherence and wholeness that narratives undertake to provide, but the truth of the story being told—about Wright’s pilgrim and about the possibly purposive universe—is always as-yet undetermined. The always yet-to-arrive end is the absent ground of truth that consigns such narratives to—and keeps them alive through—ongoing play. Once completed, the pilgrim’s narrative would be, as Jarman recognises, “a structure of death”, and Wright’s pilgrim chooses “life, bittersweet as it may be” (“Soul Journals” 170).

Part One of this chapter will consider visions of a final end that are redemptive and those that are hopeless, which imply that the meaning of the world is either salvific or spiritually defunct and render the pilgrim’s transcendent endeavours either triumphant or pointless. Part Two will deal with non-final “endings”, which do not answer any desire to see the world explained or completed. The ambiguity in these ends has repercussions for Wright’s entire undernarrative of aspiring towards the invisible and renders his poetry’s invisible object uncertain.

Part One: The End

“Through the Red Sea, Toward the Promised Land”: Crossing Over and the Afterlife

Perhaps the most conventionally optimistic of the eschatological visions in Wright’s poetry are those in which he depicts death being followed by a rewarding afterlife. These frequently incorporate familiar themes of judgement, transfiguration, resurrection and eternity and sometimes draw on recognisably religious imagery. As Sean Pryor points out, “the typology of paradise allows different myths to be compared and conflated” (4); paradise is a recognisable concept in Wright’s poetry that combines elements of various traditions without conforming to any particular religious doctrine. Nonetheless, paradisaical endings confirm the essentially religious hope that the world conforms to a benevolent order that will see all things, including human endeavour, fulfilled and redeemed in an eternal final state.

In Wright’s poetry, these imaginings of the end also frequently have in common a penultimate stage of “crossing over”, a process of transition familiar to many traditions. This motif suggests that death facilitates entry into an afterlife in a new place or level of reality; this is typically figured as “the other side”, a clichéd term that evokes the abode of the dead. “Crossing over” in Wright’s poetry is usually figured as ascension, as into an upper “heaven”, or as passage to the other side of the river. The river is a mythical marker of the boundary between our world and the next and also, as explored throughout this thesis, a symbol of time and change; to cross the river is thus to step beyond the flow of time and enter a distinct state of timeless being, which is presented as the final “destination” of one’s life “journey”.

Endings, like beginnings, are paradoxical in that they exist on the outer edge of a narrative, providing the final element required for its completion but also extending outside what it contains. The moment of “crossing over” is a liminal moment marking the end of what came before while providing a view from the outside that affirms the success and completion of what preceded. This is implicit in the poem “The Other Side of the River”,

which paraphrases the folksy sentiment of a gospel song:³⁸ “I want to sit by the river, ~ in the shade of the evergreen tree, / And look in the face of whatever, ~ the whatever that’s waiting for me” (*OSR* 25). Being at the point of crossing over like this allows one to “look in the face of” whatever lies beyond one’s life and also to survey one’s life in full, making it possible to appreciate both life’s completion and its meaningfulness. The crossing thus seems to be necessary for narrative closure, in that it contains both an ending and a sense of continuity in the gesture of “going somewhere else”. The transition is not always depicted spatially, but references to “crossing over”, the river or journeying are prevalent in Wright’s paradisaical ends.

Myths of crossing over provide a means of overcoming the fearful implications of death. Darkness, cessation and the unknown are imagined not as the end but as a threshold that can be crossed. This allows for happier alternatives to be imagined lying beyond them, including even joyous transfiguration. Thus, in “Negatives” Wright’s “I”-figure looks forward to dressing himself in the darkness on the day the ferry arrives, “Ready to take us across, / —Remembering now, unwatermarked— / The blackout like scarves in our new hair” (*HF* 35). Hopeful ends in Wright’s poetry tend to incorporate religious themes of homecoming, redemption and fulfilment in unorthodox ways. An example is the vision of passage and hospitality presented in “Little Ending”, the final poem of *Sestets*:

Bowls will receive us,
and sprinkle black scratch in our eyes.
 Later, at the great fork on the untouchable road,
 It won’t matter where we have become.
 Unburdened by prayer, unburdened by any supplication,

³⁸ *Littlefoot* part 32 refers to a “fugitive last verse” of the Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs song “Reunion in Heaven” that “wasn’t included when they recorded it”:

*I am longing to sit by the banks of the river
 There’s rest for the ones by the evergreen trees
 I am longing to look on the face of my Saviour
 And my loved ones who have gone, they are waiting for me (LF 77)*

Someone will take our hand,
 someone will give us refuge,
 Circling left or circling right. (*SS* 72)

The proffered “bowls” promise sustenance and charity, while the gritty-sounding “black scratch” suggests slight wounds but also healing in that it recalls the mud Jesus daubs on the eyes of the blind man (Jn 9:6). “Scratch” is also slang for “money”, and so this is also an allusion to the difficult-to-authenticate ancient tradition of placing coins over the deceased’s eyes, a practice often associated with the Greek custom of putting an obol in a corpse’s mouth as payment to Charon for their passage across the Styx.

In this poem, it is implied that the welcome waiting at the end of the journey is unconditional, not dependent on successful entreaty or correct choices: “It won’t matter where we have become” or whether we turn left or right (*SS* 72). The archaic associations of right and left with auspiciousness and ominousness respectively seem to imply that this fork in the road allows for a right or a wrong turn, but that the potential for error is ultimately overridden by a reigning benevolence. This forked road is also possibly an allusion to Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken”, discounting the knowingly self-deceiving assertion of the “I”-figure in that poem that his choice of path “has made all the difference” (line 20).

An ambiguous crossing takes place in a poem entitled “The Other Side” (*HF* 38). Here, the crossing over is depicted in mysterious terms that recall Virginia Woolf’s suicide by drowning, which she achieved by placing stones in her pockets and walking into the River Ouse (Rose 246).

I come to the great noose of water;
Like stone gods, the succorers wait,
Dressed in their tiny garments. All day
They stare from the opposite shore.

The boughs of the Manchineel

Let fall their blindness and black apples.

Gratefully I undress. The first stone

Rises like light to my hand. (*HF* 38)

The stones that facilitate the crossing resemble the unidentifiable “succorers” waiting on the other side: the source of death may also be a source of relief. It is clear that these weights, seemingly intended to aid a drowning, are in fact buoyant, suggesting that the speaker may succeed in crossing the river, may even ascend “like light” himself. The Manchineel is a tropical tree with poisonous fruit and sap that causes skin irritation and blindness (Pitts et al. 284). It recalls here the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, although it is not clear on which shore of the river the tree grows—on this one, in the world tainted by Adam and Eve’s sin, or in the Edenic other. The “I”-figure in this poem is buoyed by light and the ambiguous promise of “succor” even as he prepares to sink himself in the river.

The strangeness of these crossings, particularly their opacity of language (reflected in the tension between topoi of darkness/blindness and light/vision), lends them an air of mystical insight while preserving the profundity and unknowability of death. The anticipatory “someone will” in “Little Ending” (*SS* 72) and the figure’s being poised on the edge of river in “The Other Side” locate these poems on *this* side of the beyond. They are examples of the pilgrim’s aspiring beyond the here-and-now from a place firmly grounded in the here-and-now. In contrast, poems that presume to complete the crossing bespeak a spiritual certitude uncommon in Wright’s poetry, although the imagery with which they convey the wonder of actually being in paradise is typically fantastical, idyllic and blatantly sentimental, indicative of wishful thinking.

In Wright’s poetry fulfilment in death—or heaven—amounts to reunion with loved ones and the reattainment of the past and home. In “Virginia Reel”, this fulfilment is represented by the amiable picnic that the poet-figure remembers as he visits his ancestral hometown and surveys the graveyard in which his forebears are buried:

In the new shadows, memory starts to shake out its dark cloth.
Everyone settles down, transparent and animate,
Under the oak trees.
Hampton passes the wine around, Jaq toasts to our health.

And when, from the blear and glittering air,
A hand touches my shoulder,
I want to fall to my knees, and keep falling, here,
Laid down by the articles that bear my names,
The limestone and marble and locust wood.
But that's for another life. (SC 21)

The poet-figure apparently mistakes a friendly hand that bids him to come away for a heavenly summons and longs to be among his dead kinfolk in the graveyard as he was in the picnic memory. The afterlife will, it is hoped, furnish just such a reunion. The poem "Little Apokatastasis" alludes to a Christian doctrine that holds that all souls—even sinners'—will ultimately be reconciled to God (Batiffol). In the poem, this apocatastasis is represented by the sudden appearance of "hundreds of headlights, ~ everyone coming home" (BY 73).

In "Arkansas Traveller" (OSR 59-62), Wright's "I"-figure envisions the "other side" in terms of his Southern heritage and church-going youth, recalling the Elysium of Yeats' "News for the Delphic Oracle":

On the far side of the water, high on a sandbar,
Grandfathers are lolling above the Arkansas River,
Guitars in their laps, cloth caps like Cagney down over their eyes.

A woman is strumming a banjo.³⁹

³⁹ Although the banjo is more commonly associated with male musicians in the South and is apparently presented here as an aspect of the women's music hall-style cross-dressing, women in fact played a significant role

Another adjusts her bow tie
 And boiled shirtwaist.
 And in the half-light the frogs begin from their sleep
 To ascend into darkness,
 Vespers recalibrate though the underbrush,
the insect choir
 Offering its clear soprano
 Out of the vaulted gum trees into the stained glass of the sky. (OSR 59)

This is a deliberately theatrical version of Southern life of old. The curiously attired musicians and invocations of a choir and actor James Cagney present this scene as staged or fabricated. The scene actually describes a photograph of Wright's grandfather (Denham, *The Early Poetry* 132). Thus, it represents an imaginative recreation, rather than a memory, of the sentimental past, and so arguably delegitimises the ideal and marks the degradation of authentic reality into performance and pastiche. However, the frog music, although satirical as prayer, effectively signals a shift from the vaudevillian sensibility of Chaplinesque attire, folk-music and cross-dressing to a churchlike landscape, sublime and ambiguous in its beauty and darkness. It conflates the idealised past with a heavenly future: the twilight that bathes this nostalgic Southern diorama is both the sepia tint of a fondly recalled history and the poignant awareness of inhabiting one's ends.

An earlier poem that foreshadows this imagery is "Nightdream", in which nightfall and falling asleep anticipate and illuminate dying. Although without a clear example of the crossing-over motif, this poem does distinguish between the moment of death or sleep and the transitional phase that precedes it to which "crossing over" is analogous. The in-between stage is characterised by the reappearance of the dead, ascensions and the slipping away of the physical world. Places from the speaker's Southern past stretch out before him: "in one

in the way "banjo music in Appalachia [was] promulgated and preserved" in the nineteenth century (Eacker and Eacker).

file, Bob's Valley, Bald Knob . . . Ouachita, / Ocoee, the slow slide of the Arkansas" (*HF* 55).

The poem ends with a glimpse of quaint Southern folk apparently risen from the dead and at leisure while dirt effigies take their place in their coffins:

(In Kingsport, beneath the trees,
A Captain is singing Dixie; sons
Dance in their gold suits, clapping their hands;
And mothers and fathers, each
In a soft hat, fill
With dust-dolls their long boxes). (*HF* 56)

Here, parentheses serve to mark the boundary between the still this-world process of falling asleep or dying and the scene taking place on the other side in Kingsport, the town where Wright grew up (Interview by Spiegelman 115). Reference to "singing Dixie" implies that the dreamer is "whistling Dixie": that is, indulging rosy fantasies.

The figures on the other side of the river represent affectionately recalled loved ones and past generations resurrected in the afterlife. As is revealed in other poems, this is where "Grandfathers" are (*OSR* 59); it is where the poet-figure's father is, waiting on "the far bank / Of Blood Creek" (*BL* 20). Death, the "country which lies beyond the thunder", promises reunion with "those we are waiting for, / Those who are waiting for us. . . in the lush province of joy" (*SS* 6). That this is envisioned in terms of a deeply sentimental American South reflects the pilgrim's idealisation of the home and past he hopes to regain. The "river bank"—presumably on the other side of the river—is "where I take back my life", he tells us ("Early One Morning"). This homesickness for one's childhood or a lost past is, Johnson suggests, an expression of the pilgrim's "'Platonic homesickness', *anamnesis*—the longing for an 'eternal' home, an origin beyond the immediate, changeable and deceitful world of appearances" (205-06). Old-fashioned and idealised "home" imagery gives form to the poet-figure's longing for a transcendent reality, described in "A Journal of English Days" as a

“sickness of spirit like homesickness / When what you are sick for ~ has never been seen or heard / In this world, or even remembered ~ except as a smear of bleached light” (*ZJ* 14-15).

That both “Nightdream” and “Arkansas Traveller” feature music—“singing Dixie”, a choir, and banjo playing—reveals the connection between old-time music, including country songs, gospel music and spirituals, and the concepts of the South, home and heaven in Wright’s poetry. Wright’s collection *Country Music* is named for these Southern country songs, which also lend their titles to poems in *Sestets*⁴⁰ and resound throughout *Littlefoot*.⁴¹ His poetry as a whole perpetuates what he calls the “‘lifelike/deathly/after-deathly’ themes inherent in the songs” (“Wright: A Profile” 12). He also recreates the songs’ “sense of phrasing—the long, swelling strophes, the punched out refrains” (McClatchy, *White* 30)—and echoes the “heartache and sorrow” of blues music (Ferguson-Avery 2136) and “the high lonesome” of Appalachian country music (Chitwood 245), that distinctive tone that bespeaks the ache of both longing for and despairing of salvation (Johnson 200). The music is associated with the spiritual saturation of the South of the poet-figure’s childhood.

Southern gospel songs are not only the music of home, they also perpetuate a particular sense of home. “Above all”, Bill Malone explains, “the nostalgic evocation of home as a bastion of virtue and security in a world of ceaseless change is almost the central theme of southern gospel music” (13). In this genre the embattled Christian is likened to “a pilgrim in an unfriendly world” seeking a home in heaven (Malone 12-13).

⁴⁰ “Well, Get Up, Rounder, Let a Working Man Lay Down” (*SS* 19) is a line from the Carter Family’s song “Hello Stranger”; “This World is Not My Home, I’m Only Passing Through” (*SS* 28) is the first line of the gospel hymn “This World is Not My Home”; “I Shall Be Released” (*SS* 30) is a Bob Dylan song; “It’s Sweet to Be Remembered” (*SS* 32) is a song by bluegrass singer Mac Wiseman; “On the Trail of the Lonesome Pine” (*SS* 66) is a popular country song set in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

⁴¹ The lyrics of a Carter Family song “Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone” constitute the entire text of part 35 of *Littlefoot: A Poem*. They also appears in part 5, along with a line from another Carter Family song, “Wildwood Flower”. Part 7 of *Littlefoot* (*LF* 14-6) ends with the refrain of bluegrass gospel song “Precious Memories”. Part 17 (*LF* 36-8) begins with a misheard line from gospel song “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” and contains a verse from the bluegrass staple “Maple on the Hill”, while a “fugitive last verse” of the Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs song “Reunion in Heaven” is included in part 32 (*LF* 77-9). In addition to these traces of country music, part 15 (*LF* 32) contains lines from Elvis Presley’s “All Shook Up” and the often-covered popular song “You Belong to Me”, written by Pee Wee King, Chilton Price and Redd Stewart.

The suggestion that “This World is Not My Home, I’m Just Passing Through” (SS 28), taken from a country song, reflects Wright’s pilgrim’s intention of “passing through” the physical world to a higher state of spiritual fulfilment, as well as the peculiarly inverted sense of direction created by the particularly Southern emphasis on home, belonging and origins in Wright’s poetry. Heaven is one’s destination and therefore where one belongs, but if one’s sense of belonging is rooted in the concept of home as where one is “from”, then heaven becomes one’s home and one’s origin. The pilgrim’s direction is thus curiously circular and leads “onward to the beginning” as his death reunites him with his bright past. This is made clear in “Appalachian Lullaby” with the speaker’s intimation that “the promised land” on the other side of the Red Sea is “some place I’ve never been, but will be from” (SHS 41).

Paradise and salvation are imagined in terms of the past in Wright’s poetry because the past is always remembered as having been brighter than the present and so, as explained at the end of Chapter Two of this thesis, the pilgrim’s fondest hope is that time’s relentless forward movement might in fact lead him back to his origins. In “Hawaii Dantesca”, the afterlife apparently represents just such a return to childhood and the past:

Soon it will be time for the long walk under the earth toward the sea.

And time to retrieve the yellow sunsuit and little shoes

they took my picture in

In Knoxville, in 1938.

Time to gather the fire in its quartz bowl.

I hope the one with the white wings will come.

I hope the island of reeds is as far away as I think it is. (SC 42)

The afterlife is shown to be heavenly in that it is ostensibly distant, on the other side of a body of water and populated by angels. There is an implied crossing in “the long walk under

the earth”, which is also an allusion to burial. The “yellow sunsuit and little shoes” are toddlers’ clothes (*SC* 42), so retrieving them as part of the crossing into the other life implies a return to childhood.

The shining city imagery in Wright’s poetry is another version of heaven as home. It plays on the Christian conceit of heaven as the New Jerusalem, the return of the lost ideal. Pickwick in “The Southern Cross”, for example, seems to have been modelled on the bejewelled New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation, which is wrought from gold and precious jewels. That these cities are invariably located beside the water conflates the Christian heaven with the Ancient Greek realms of the afterlife in Hades or Elysium: as Bonnie Costello so succinctly puts it, Wright’s “ideal abides in crystal, on the other side of the river Styx” (“The Soil” 414). In “Lost Language” the speaker longs to be “Where the river falls on hard rocks, ~ where no one can cross”, which is “Where the star-shadowed, star-coloured city lies, just out of reach” (*SHS* 20), while we are told in “Buffalo Yoga” that “on the other side / . . . the road tumbles down, ~ curving into the invisible city” (*BY* 17). To reach the past again we must reach the end of the road and cross the river: must die, in other words. Thus, “The soul that desires to return *home*” to “Jerusalem” in “The Appalachian Book of the Dead II” “desires its own destruction” (*AP* 26).

An interesting variation on the theme of the afterlife as a homecoming takes place in “Virgo Descending”, the subterranean journey that begins *Bloodlines*. This poem re-imagines a passage from John’s gospel, “In my Father’s house are many rooms. . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you” (Jn 14:2), with a nod to Emily Dickinson’s poem “Because I could not stop for Death” in which a mausoleum is “a House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground” (#479 lines 17-18). The house of the afterlife is transported deep below-ground in this poem, where it is conflated with the poet-figure’s tomb. Upon arriving there and “feeling / At home” (*BL* 10), he discovers his own father painstakingly preparing rooms for each of his family members. It is implied that these rooms are completed in time for the death and arrival of each loved one. This homecoming in death represents a return to family

roots and family wholeness as well as a return to place, with the “I”-figure physically taking up his place in the landscape via his burial: “Home is what you lie in, or hang above, the house / Your father made, or keeps on making, / The dirt you moisten, the sap you push up and nourish” (*BL* 11). Nonetheless, the underground house opens onto “a radiance / I can’t begin to imagine”, apparently frustrating the father’s plans for a cosy, contained home: “That light, he mutters, that damned light. / We can’t keep it out. It keeps on filling your room” (*BL* 11).

The “I”-figure’s room is not finished—this is apparently a dream, and he is not dead yet. The light keeps it open to something beyond, preventing him from inhabiting this comfortable vision of life after death. This blinding light manifests divinity and the promise of salvation, a prospect he cannot exorcise, domesticate or control because, it seems, divinity is implicated in any model of redeeming afterlife. Thus, the light bursts in and the desired reunion with his father is hijacked by reunion with the Father.

We are told in “Buffalo Yoga” that:

The formalist implications of the afterlife
Seem to reveal, so far

 one star and a black voyage

To rediscover our names

Our real names, imperishably inscribed on the registry of light,
From which all letters befall. (*BY* 22)

This voyage, another version of crossing over, recalls the journey of the Magi to find the infant Christ, while the original naming (the verbal articulation of one's being) with which the speaker anticipates reunion is suggestive of the *Logos*. The ideal implications of life after death thus apparently include a crossing and the discovery of a divine light. If this prospect is a "damned light" (*BL* 11), it is because its promise is dubious and unwanted but unshakeable, appearing too good to be true and triggering the cynicism and fear that belies such hope. This kind of happy ending constructs a narrative of redemption, whereby the rule of the invisible

sees everything that falls rise again and everything that is lost restored, inevitably implying the existence of an overarching, benevolent order. However, such endings bring the agnosticism that haunts Wright's poetry into stark relief, as it is at this point that the poet-figure's attraction to a fulfilling afterlife clashes with his reluctance to submit to the deific entity and design that such an ending implies. Upton proposes that a consummation of belief in Wright's poetry would "evaporate the limiting boundaries of selfhood" (*The Muse* 24), resulting in oblivion. This is a desirable prospect but, even more so, a frightening one (Upton, *The Muse* 28). Union with the paternal other would require, as Franzek states, total self-purgation of passions, subjectivity and embodiment (138). However, while Franzek and Upton see Wright's "I"-figure as eager for such terrible self-renunciation, in fact neither fear nor acquiescence characterise his response to "what 'lies beyond'" (St. John xviii). Rather, his scepticism and resistance toward transcendence is evident in his unwilling desire to believe, his black humour, and his inability either to embrace or banish entirely the ghosts of religious observance that haunt him. The "I"-figure remains always unconvinced by and apart from all cut-and-dried options of faith (Franzek 139).

This conflict plays out in the poem "Snow" (*CT* 14), the language and imagery of which seem deliberately reminiscent of Christian texts and liturgies. Composed of a single enjambed line, it begins, "If we, as we are, are dust, and dust, as it will, rises, / Then we will rise, and recongregate / In the wind" (*CT* 14). The assertion that "we are . . . dust" echoes Christian burial rites and God's admonition of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis, "for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19). The insistence that we are made from dust is a reminder of the crucial role of God in creating humanity and an assurance that "we will rise and recongregate / In the wind" (*CT* 14)—returning, reformed, to the life-giving breath of God that first animated the dust—even as we are destined to return to the earth and be scattered.

However, this promise of ascension is immediately qualified in the poem and absorbed into the overriding motif of natural rise and fall, so that by re-joining “the wind [and] the cloud”, we become “their issue”, snow:

Things in a fall in a world of fall [that] slip
Through the spiked branches and snapped joints of the evergreens,
White ants, white ants and the little ribs. (CT 14)

Returned to earth thus, the dust of the human body is reacquainted with a natural, rather than divinely ordained, fate of degradation and resurrection. We become the “white ants” on “little ribs” that the snowflakes on tree branches resemble, an image that testifies to death—bones picked clean by insects—and birth, in an allusion to Adam’s rib, the raw material of Eve’s creation. The poem confirms that ours is “a world of fall” (CT 14), meaning, according to McClatchy, a world “of process, of becoming and unbecoming” (White 33), as well as a fallen world in which divine reanimation after death seems unlikely.

In fact, Wright’s ready blending of Christian motifs with maudlin dreams, ambiguous natural symbols and elements adopted from other traditions, along with an apparent unwillingness to name or attribute anything outright to the key actors in the Christian tradition—God or Christ—make his appropriation of Christian mythology and liturgy appear tongue-in-cheek. This mix of different influences does not privilege any one set of beliefs and so avoids any sense of religious conviction.

The poet-figure’s reluctance to embrace the implications of his own religious afterlife imagery is explored in Wright’s *Hard Freight* Homage poems. The four light-dominated portraits of deceased writers, each presented at the point of their crossing over, speak each to an aspect of the “I”-figure’s attitude towards transcendence. In the first, “Homage to Arthur Rimbaud”, we see devotees being drawn to Rimbaud’s reputation, which is, like his dead body, a discarded shell that marks the point of his departure. The famously visionary poet’s spirit has broken free in death like a butterfly and is suffused in a “light / Which buoys [him] like a flame”:

you were risen, your flight
Pneumatic and pure, invisible as a fever;
And [we] knew the flight was forever,
Leaving us what we deserve:

Syllables, flowers, black ice,
The exit, the split cocoon . . . (*HF* 13)

Light is conventionally associated with heaven, representing a state of nearness to God's radiance. It also signals transfiguration. One becomes ethereal in death, as in Part 2 of the "Tattoos" sequence (about the death of Wright's father):

Along the far bank
Of Blood Creek, I watch you turn
In that light, and turn, and turn,
Feeling it change on your changing hands,
Feeling it take. Feeling it. (*BL* 20)

The father turns and changes in light, an image that mirrors the cocoon imagery in the poem and recalls the honey bee caught by the spider in "California Dreaming" (see pg. 44 of this thesis) and turned "again and again until it is shining" (*OSR* 71). Rimbaud leaves behind words and objects and his need for his ruined body when he enters into the light of some higher state. He emblematises the poet-figure's religious hopefulness; the poem is patently celebratory, even envious, of Rimbaud's transformation, although there is also evidence that the speaker is reluctant to follow where Rimbaud leads. While the words "risen" and "pneumatic" evoke resurrection and the *pneuma* or Spirit, "flame", also a symbol for the Holy Spirit, is consuming, as is "fever", and the poet-figure describes being "afraid / Of what such brilliance affords" (*HF* 13), referring both to Rimbaud's genius and to the purifying glare of his transformation.

In “Homage to Baron Corvo” the so-called Baron, eccentric novelist Frederick William Rolfe, is captured mid-river-crossing in his decadent private gondola, in the guise of a pope that he adopted in his most famous novel, *Hadrian the Seventh*:

you pass

On the canal, your pope’s robes

Aflame in a secret light, the four

Oars of your gondola white

As moth wings in the broken dark (*HF* 14)

Rolfe was a Catholic convert and would-be priest, but his homosexuality and eccentricity meant his ambition was met with resistance by Church leaders and never realised (“Frederick William Rolfe”). He remains, in death, non-conformist and impossible to pin down. While he is illuminated by unearthly brightness, his boat is “like a coffin” (*HF* 14) and his passage to the other side is dubious, ending perhaps with mere burial, perhaps damnation or disappearance. Meanwhile, the trappings of Christian piety in which he is clothed are intimated to be a sham:

you hide

Where the dust hides now.

Your con with its last trick turned,

Stone nightmare come round again—

Fadeout: your boat, Baron, edges

Toward the horizon, a sky where toads,

Their eyes new fire,

Alone at the landings blink and blink. (*HF* 15)

Corvo, who is likened to a moth in the first verse stanza, is apparently doomed to be devoured by hungry toads in a hellish afterlife. He thus illustrates the perceived fallibility of religious promise. The possibility of being mistaken about or even deceived by one’s prospects of salvation renders whole-hearted belief like Corvo’s tragically ironic.

In contrast, “Homage to Ezra Pound” presents that poet lingering like a haunting ghost in Venice, diminished but proud, as he was when Wright saw him in 1969 a few years before Pound’s death (Moffett, *Understanding* 21). Pound’s refusal to die or cross over expresses a preference for earthly beauty over any heavenly prospect, which is the sentiment of his poem “Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula”. Pound merely crosses a “tiered bridge” over a real river to the “cul-de-sac” where he lives. Pound represents the poet-figure’s attachment to the physical world and dismissal of religious compensations. Nonetheless, the poet-figure imagines Pound being dragged away from the shore of this world against his will, even entreating Pound to embrace his restoration:

he has survived,
 Or refused to follow, and now
 Walks in the slow strobe of the sunlight,
 Or sits in his muffled rooms

 Awash in the wrong life,
 Cut loose upon the lagoon (the wind
 Off-shore, and gaining), the tide going out . . .
 Here is your caul and caustic,
 Here is your garment,
 Cold-blooded father of light—
 Rise and be whole again. (*HF* 11-2)

Much like the “I”-figure in “The Southern Cross”, Pound finds himself “Awash in the wrong life, / Cut loose” amidst the wind- and water-like flux of the present day. The speaker envisions for him the same kind of light-saturated restoration in death that he wants for himself. This restoration is proffered in the words Pound’s estranged friend Robert Frost (Frost’s poem “Directive” ends, “Drink and be whole again beyond confusion” [line 62]), who pushed for Pound’s release from St. Elizabeth’s psychiatric hospital in 1957-58

(Wilhelm 307-10). By imagining these words being directed towards Pound, Wright imagines healing, reconciliation and perhaps even redemption for his disgraced poetic master.

The ambiguous appeal of death played out in Wright's Homage poems finds its final expression in "Homage to X", which is addressed to Franz Kafka (Denham, *The Early Poetry* 23). The "crossing" and "other side" imagery here is familiar: a watery "transit" and then a dream city "Foreign and repetitious, / The plants unspeakably green" (*HF* 16). However, the speaker also tells Kafka emphatically,

That is of no concern; your job

Is the dust, the belly-relinquishing dust.

*

It's the day before yesterday,

It's the other side of the sky:

The body that bears your number

Will not be new, will not be your own

And will not remember your name. (*HF* 16)

This suggests that there is no retention of selfhood in death. Kafka, as the anonymous "X", thus represents the loss of self in death that the poet-figure resists. It also seems that what the paradisaical city represents—the perfection and reattainment of all that is most valued, including "yesterday", perpetuity, "loved ones" and "angels" (*HF* 16)—may not be attainable for the speaker, trapped as he is in his body by his poet's commitment to earthly realities. "There is no body like the body of light", we are told in *Littlefoot*, "But who will attain it? / Not us in our body bags" (*LF* 19). Here, as throughout the Homage sequence, the "I"-figure hints at his aversion to self-relinquishment in the brilliance of the Absolute.

In Wright's poetry, as Tom Andrews recognises, "one's identity is perpetually on the verge of dissolving into a mystical transcendence even as that transcendence is feared by the finite self"; there is a "human desire to pull back from the absolute, to remain 'distinct'"

(“Improvisations” 219). The poem “Vespers” quotes mystic Hildegard of Bingen’s depiction of an incendiary God, exposing the questionable appeal of union with the divine:

Who wouldn’t wish to become
The fiery life of divine substance
blazing above the fields,
Shining above the waters,
The rain like dust through his fingerbones,
All our yearning like flames in his feathery footsteps?
Who, indeed?

And still . . . (ST 59)

As is customary, the Absolute is envisioned in terms of intense light. However, it is plain that this brightness is all-consuming and promises to burn up not only “our yearning” but also our selfhood, like flesh stripped from bones, and to reduce physical sensations to dust. The remainder of the poem explores the speaker’s lack of enthusiasm for such transcendence:

The world in its rags and ghostly raiment calls to us
With grinding and green gristle
Wherever we turn,
and we are its grist, and we are its groan.
.....
We are the children of the underlife,
at least for a time,
Flannel shirt on a peg, curled
Postcards from years past
thumbtacked along the window frames.
Outside, deer pause on the just-cut grass,
The generator echoes our spirit’s humdrum,
and gnats drone high soprano . . .

Not much of a life, but I'll take it. (*ST* 59)

The world, impoverished and “ghostly” in comparison with the “divine substance”, nonetheless has a hold on the poet-figure. The “underlife”—our life under heaven, which is a kind of underworld life of shades when compared to the eternal life of the divine—is “humdrum”, encompassing commonplace things and evidence of passing time. We are this world’s “grist and its groan”—both what it grinds down and the product of its labour. The spirit is caught in its own monotonous drone, and yet, the speaker implies, this at least is a life, if a small one, unlike whatever is proffered by the skeletal Grim Reaper God, for whom the “rain is dust” (*ST* 59).

The aversion in Wright’s poetry towards the oblivion of transcendence can be illustrated in detail with reference to twin poems “Drone and Ostinato” (*AP* 35) and “Ostinato and Drone” (*AP* 36-37). In the former, the union with the Absolute sought by the spiritual pilgrim is represented by medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, who is cited in the text. The landscape apparently demonstrates how things really are. Specifically, it reveals that mystical union amounts to being swept away like birds in an overpowering wind or fading like stars in the daylight:

Our lives are like birds’ lives, flying around, blown away.

We’re bandied and bucked on and carried across the sky,

Drowned in the blue of the infinite,

blur-white and drift.

We disappear as stars do, soundless, without a trace. (*AP* 35)

The sky is an image of God in Wright’s poetry: both are immense, overarching, impossibly distant and unfathomable; both are symbolised by the colour of divinity, blue. Tellingly, it is this sky, the transcendently-minded pilgrim’s intended destination, that threatens to overwhelm him. As the speaker puts it in “Black and Blue”, “Like blue balloons, we disappear in the sky” (*CH* 45). The wind-blown birds are yet another example of the small

creatures described in Chapter Two of this thesis, whose movements indicate the thrall of an all-powerful force. The small lights of the stars, emerging triumphantly from the darkness only to be drowned out in the overpowering “blur-white” of the rising sun, are analogous to the mystic’s soul, emerging from its “Dark Night” of God-forsakenness to be absorbed into divine Oneness (see Underhill 169-70). As he regards the garden tableau before him, the “I”-figure suspects that contact with the Absolute may amount to annihilation of the individual will or identity.

The landscape speaks not only of our insignificance and coming disappearance, it also testifies to our wordlessness: “We disappear as stars do, *soundless*, without a trace” into the “*Silence* of sunlight and ice dazzle” [emphases added] (*AP* 35). According to Henry Hart, mystical union involves “a revelation of God’s magisterial otherness, His utter mystery”, which results in “cognitive blindness and linguistic silence” (“Charles Wright’s *Via Mystica*” 332). The poet-figure tries to persuade himself, in the words of Eckhart, that “Wordless is what the soul wants” (*AP* 35), yet his descriptions of the natural landscape, including his extensive vocabulary of metaphors, bespeak a deep delight in words. Consequently, the poet-figure seems deterred more than anything else by the prospect of relinquishing language.

An inability to describe the landscape might amount to an inability to perceive it. Furthermore, the speaker’s description of reality distinguishes him from the unknowing landscape in which things are silently present. As Derrida argues, all meaning is akin to writing, which is the institution of “spacing” between signifiers and within meaning; within the unified, absolute presence of the transcendental signified that language is imagined to convey there is no “sign”, no spacing between the being of the thing and its concept (*Of Grammatology* 69-71). Although the goal of language is presence, it actually introduces distance; it is this distance and possibility of self-differentiation that language affords that the poet-figure is apparently most reluctant to surrender to a state of union with the Absolute. As Leubner recognises, Wright’s pilgrim “often tries to go beyond significant language or

beyond the world (and thus, beyond his knowing)[,] he insists on doing so *via* language and *via* the world (and thus via his knowing)” (149).

The same concerns resurface in the sequel poem “Ostinato and Drone”, which opens with an epigraph taken from Paul Mendes-Flohr’s introduction to Eckhart’s *Ecstatic Confessions* (xv): “The mystic’s vision is beyond the world of individuation, it is beyond speech and thus incommunicable” (*AP* 36). It is the de-individuated and unsayable nature of the mystic’s experience of God that troubles the “I”-figure:

Undoing the self is a hard road.

Somewhere alongside a tenderness that’s infinite,

I gather, and loneliness that’s infinite.

No finitude.

There’s nothing that bulks up in between.

Radiance. Unending brilliance of light

like drops of fire through the world.

Speechless. Incommunicable. At one with the one.

Some dead end—no one to tell it to,

nothing to say it with. (*AP* 36)

The “hard road” of the mystic is one of “Undoing the self”, which involves sublimation of human passions and surrender to the infinite Godhead. The pilgrim is isolated because his is a path of self-denial, but also because, paradoxically, it seems that to be “one with the one” is to become just one: the individual dissolves and we are left with “no one to tell it to, ~ nothing to say it with”. The problem is that there is “nothing that bulks up in between” (*AP* 36). We can read this line in a number of ways: it may be that the world is the “nothing” that comes between us and the Absolute, or that at the point of union there is no such barrier between the self and the Absolute. It may even be that the “Radiance[,] Unending brilliance of light ~ like drops of fire through the world” is the “nothing that bulks up in between” (*AP*

36), a looming threat of oblivion precisely because it allows for nothing to come between it and the subject to keep them separate.

Having thus questioned the appeal of transcendent oneness, the poet-figure turns to the particular:

That being the case, I'd like to point out this quince bush,
Quiescent and incommunicado in winter shutdown.
I'd like you to notice its long nails
And skeletal underglow.

I'd like you to look at its lush
Day-dazzle, noon light and shower shine. (*AP* 36)

The modest quince bush has striking religious connotations: as a tree with “long nails” it recalls the crucifix, its brilliance associates it with the burning bush of the Book of Exodus and its “shower shine” seems to be a manifestation of the Pentecostal “drops of fire through the world” that the “I”-figure detects (*AP* 36). All this suggests that the quince bush is a site for the appearance of the divine, but the following line—“It’s reasonable to represent anything that really exists ~ by doing that thing which doesn’t exist” (*AP* 36)—suggests this is not the case. The quince bush, which exists, does not represent the presence of God, who apparently does not exist; rather, the speaker invokes the burning bush as an analogy for the brilliant and revelatory nature of the actual quince bush. Like Stevens’ “palm at the end of the mind” (“Of Mere Being” line 1) with its shining, fiery bird, this glowing bush speaks “of mere being” and apparently reveals no underlying “reason” (“Of Mere Being” line 12).

We are told in this poem that “what we’re talking about” is “the difference between the voice and the word, / The voice continuing to come back to splendour, ~ the word still not forthcoming” (*AP* 36). This concept and the image of the glowing quince bush are illuminated by the earlier poem “Absence inside an Absence”:

We live in the world of the voice,

not in the world of the word,

According to John the Solitary—
Our lives are language, our desires apophatic,
The bush in flame is the bush in flame,
Imageless heart, imageless absence between the hearts. (CH 64)

For John the Solitary, the world of the voice is the material world, which can be spoken of, but to “become word” is to be “raised up to silence”, “in an awareness of hidden things” and initiated into the “invisible world [in which] there is no voice, for not even voice can utter its mystery” (qtd. in Brock 87). For Wright, the desired invisible is unrepresentable: it is the emptiness at the heart of images such as the burning bush, and the “absence between the hearts”—between ourselves and God—which is God’s being absent to us (CH 64). In the terms of “Ostinato and Drone”, “the voice continuing to come back to splendour” is what “really exists”, while “the word still not forthcoming” merely indicates that grand ideal that does not exist or, at least, is not present, by which we apprehend the visible world of the voice. In these poems, the voice conveys self-presence (something Derrida disputes), but it is also secondary, as it is constrained to re-present visible things (true to Derrida’s deconstruction of the primacy of speech). The fundamental word, on the other hand, is a negation: the silent surrender of the intellect to the Absolute in what is described in mysticism as “unknowing”. This word is *Logos*, divine foundation of meaning, but it also recalls Derrida’s anti-logocentric concept of writing or arche-trace: the erasure of a transcendental signified (*Of Grammatology* 61) or, rather, the unbreachable difference or not-ness that is the absolute foundation of meaning (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 66-67). Moreover, “Ostinato and Drone” suggests that a notion of the invisible only serves our understanding of the visible world and not *vice versa*. It seems that the things of the world do not point towards some greater reality unless it is the absence of such a reality: “The bush in flame is [simply] the bush in flame” (CH 64). Rather, it is we who turn to allegory and analogy—imagined realities such as a burning bush—to comprehend the things of the world.

What is ineffable, Wright suggests with these poems, is this reality, the being of the natural world. What is really “incomprehensible”, as we are told in “Night Rider”, is “Everything we look at. / Much easier, I think, to imagine the abyss, just there, / The other side of the hedge, ~ than to conjure the hedge” (*SHS* 30). The fictional invisible allows us to put the world into words in order to come back to the splendour of it, and our words maintain our separation from the world as well as our individual identity. The wish to be united with the One is a wish to cease to be, to lose the standpoint from which we can articulate the landscape we perceive, and herein lies the source of the pilgrim’s ambivalence towards redemptive ends, full knowledge or mystical transcendence. While our mere expressions may be unable to touch the invisible, truly to grasp the presence and meaning of things would be to be absorbed into them—to become them also—which would render one silent, undifferentiated and, ultimately, unknowing.

Wright’s “Appalachian Book of the Dead” poems (*BZ* 34-35; *AP* 26, 40, 47-48, 53-54, 61) grapple explicitly with the pilgrim’s failure to cross over into the afterlife. This sequence mimics the so-called Tibetan and Egyptian Books of the Dead (Wright, Interview by Suarez 78), entitled “The Liberation Through Hearing During The Intermediate State” and “Book of Coming Forth by Day” respectively. Wright’s sequence is a non-believer’s take on what might be whispered in the ear of the recently deceased to aid their passage into the afterlife, including the commemoration and tallying of their life:

The Appalachian Book of the Dead exists,
In part, to ease an exit, praise the present and praise the past,
To click the abacus beads, to sum their cloudy count.
(Though sometimes subtraction seems the thing,
A little less of this, a little less of that.) (*AP* 59)

The passage into death facilitated by a Book of the Dead is akin to crossing over insofar as it represents a navigation of a liminal state between life and the afterlife. The process of crossing over and emerging into a bright afterlife described by “The Egyptian

Book of the Dead” is elaborate but meticulously guided. The Book is designed to assist the deceased soul as it navigates *Tuat*, the abode of the dead (*Egyptian cxxxv*), where it must make the appropriate declarations and pass certain tests (*Egyptian 346-47*). This is described in the fifth poem of the sequence, which refers to the tests described in the Egyptian funerary text:

When your answers have satisfied the forty-two gods,
When your heart’s in balance with the weight of a feather,
When your soul is released like a sibyl from its cage,
Like a wind you’ll cross over (*AP 53*)

This initiation is clearly styled as a type of crossing in Wright’s poems: the poem “Celestial Waters”, for example, depicts the Egyptian god of the underworld guiding passage through the river-like darkness: “Osiris has shown us the way to cross the coming night sky, / The route, the currents, the necessary magic words” (*SS 15*). Ideas of crossing over and the other side recur throughout the “Appalachian Book of the Dead” poems. However, the image of the soul crossing over “Like a wind” (*AP 53*) seems to be purely Wright’s own addition, as in the Egyptian text the soul is already housed in the great halls of the underworld.

While the conventional and very literal archetypes of paradise that appear in Wright’s poetry seem at times to overinflate and collapse religious hopes, the equally literal formulae for judgement that he borrows from ancient traditions emphasise the esotericism and allure of ritual fairness, which provides reassurance and closure. With reference to the ancient Egyptian belief that one’s conscience is judged by being weighed against a feather representing the law, we are told that “The ancients knew to expect balance at the end of things, / The burning heart against the burning feather of truth” (*AP 64*). Nonetheless, Wright’s “I”-figure seems unable to complete the crossing. Wright’s typically quotidian take on the ancient funerary texts describes junctures in his pilgrim’s progress towards an afterlife but stops short of detailing the actual moment of crossing over or of affirming the existence of something after death. The suburban setting of the poems jars against their “religious

semantic” to create pathos and irony (Monacell 58), while transcendence is stymied, as always, by the pilgrim’s reluctance and doubts.

In “The Appalachian Book of the Dead IV”, for example, Mac Wiseman’s “Let’s All Go Down to the River”, a traditional song calling believers to baptism, evokes Biblical water-crossing miracles—Jesus’ walking on water and the Israelites’ passage “dry-shod” through the Red Sea (*AP* 47). Yet the speaker rejects the offer of transfiguration and miraculous passage to the other side. “They’ll have to sing louder than that. ~ They’ll have to dig deeper into the earbone / For this one to get across”, he tells us; “They’ll have to whisper a lot about the radiant body. . . . Good luck was all we could think of to say” (*AP* 47). This poem conflates the crossing of the river between this and the other world with the Christian rite of baptism, implying that the adoption of Christian belief may be a prerequisite for entry into heaven. This possibly empty assurance has mixed appeal for the “I”-figure. For example, in a later poem, “I’ll Plant My Feet on Higher Ground”, faced with the fact that it is getting “late in the day” and “the end . . . is waiting for us”, he suggests, “Let’s all go down to the river. ~ Let’s all, just one time. / Let’s all go down to the damn river, and see what they’re talking about” (*OT*). However, in the slightly earlier poem “Born Again II” the speaker surrenders to the appeal of baptism only to find that he has come too late, and the redemptive power of such sacraments has departed like a travelling revivalist:

Take me down to the river,

the ugly, reseasoned river.

Add on me a sin or two,

Then cleanse me, and wash me, O white-shirted Pardonier.

Suerte, old friend.

The caravan’s come and gone, the dogs have stopped barking,

And nothing remains but the sound of the water monotonous,

and the wind. (*SS* 13)

That “damn river” (“I’ll Plant my Feet”, *OT*) may be a dammed river—going nowhere—or even a river of the underworld. Here, it embodies the monotony and entropy of the material world from which God is absent.

In “The Appalachian Book of the Dead IV”, the speaker chooses the natural world over any heavenly prospect. The visible world is inhabited by an everyday, fleeting holiness that the true believers miss, because they are too caught up in their obsession with “narrative, narrative, narrative” (*AP* 47): in other words, with the narrative satisfactions of healing, redemption and salvation that sanction their lives. The “Dogwood electrified and lit from within by April afternoon late light” (*AP* 47) suggests a small-time crucifixion. A resurrection of sorts is also promised: “Tomorrow the sun comes back” (*AP* 48), we are told, which suggests the return of the homophonic “Son”. There is further allusion to victory and salvation in the “mountain laurel and jack-in-heaven” and the “tailings and slush piles [turning] to gold” (*AP* 48). The “I”-figure is enchanted by these daily things, all of which go unnoticed by everyone down at the river.

The sixth and final “Book of the Dead” poem, in which the speaker attempts to imagine his own death and crossing (Davis 262), exemplifies the lack of spiritual transcendence in this sequence and sees the speaker fall back to earth instead:

Last page, The Appalachian Book of the Dead,
full moon,
No one in anyone’s arms, no lip to ear, cloud bank
And boyish soprano out of the east edge of things.
Ball-whomp and rig-grind stage right,
Expectancy, quivering needle, at north-northwest. (*AP* 61)

Despite the absence of a welcome or guide—“No one in anyone’s arms, no lip to ear”—it seems at first as though a way may be opening up for the pilgrim to cross over. Sounds signalling a change of scene mingle with heavenly choirs and then the noisy approach of an “angel with her drum and wings” (*AP* 61). However, a beam of light that reaches down

promisingly turns out not to be a ladder but a “slick chute and long slide” that lands the speaker back in the everyday (*AP* 61).

He reflects,

I hear that the verb is facilitate. To facilitate.

Azure. To rise. To rise through the azure. Illegible joy.

No second heaven. No first.

I think I'll lie here like this awhile, my back flat on the floor.

I hear that days bleed.

I hear the right word will take your breath away. (*AP* 61)

In this poem, we sense the beginnings of an ascension as language cracks under the strain of revelation and the “Azure” beckons. However, the words that should “facilitate” the crossing over fail in the face of “Illegible joy”, which is the speechless unknowing that repels the pilgrim (*AP* 61). The final line of the poem is ironic. To take someone’s breath away is to render them amazed and wordless; in this context we also understand that the right words are those that can guide you through death, easing you out of your breathing body and safely over to the other side. “I hear the right word” brings us back to the speaker in the posture of a corpse, awaiting instruction from the reader of the Book of the Dead that will transport his soul (*AP* 61). But *Wright’s* words are in fact not the right words, as they deliberately fall short of transcendence by refusing to transport his pilgrim.

The poet-figure’s “sin is [his] lack of transparency” (*BZ* 75). Being transparent means revealing the world’s presence by erasing yourself. He elsewhere calls this sin “affection” (*CH* 89). This is because his being incapable of perfect representation is synonymous with his fixation on and love for the visible world, which demands that he maintain an observer’s distance from things rather than entering unknowing union with them. Affection for the material world keeps him from embracing belief and obstructs his attempts at transcendence. Thus, the pilgrim poet is “held by affection” (*CH* 7), held back from union with the Absolute by his “wasting affection for this world” (*XA* 16). “A love of landscape’s a true affection for

regret, I've found", he tells us in "Stray Paragraphs in April, Year of the Rat" (*AP* 4); it ensures that the object of his desire remains "Forever joined, forever apart, ~ outside us, yet ourselves", while "Ecstasy" is to be had only by way of "Renunciation" (*AP* 4), including self-renunciation: "renounce this, / Renounce that, and all is a shining" (*SS* 24). The poet-figure's reluctance to renounce his language and selfhood results in his inability to apprehend the truth of the world and the invisible perfectly. "I try to look at landscape as though I weren't there", he tells us, "but [I] know, wherever I am, / I disturb that place by breathing, by my heart's beating" (*AP* 39). This "sin" is the cause of his trepidation about the judgement of his soul, which contributes to his ambivalence towards religious visions of eternal life.

In the poem "Guilt", the speaker is also guilt-ridden because he is "faithless and fatherless" (*CT* 54) and frightened of the repercussions. "We believe in belief but don't believe, ~ for which we shall be judged", he tells us in "Lives of the Saints" (*BZ* 43). Specifically, he imagines being answerable for his professed failings as a poet and his inability to give himself over wholly to the Absolute, which together constitute his "one sin" (*CT* 15):

—Words, like all things, are caught in their finitude.

They start here, they finish here

No matter how high they rise—

my judgement is that I know this

And never love anything hard enough

That would stamp me

and sink me suddenly into bliss. (*ZJ* 34)

The poet-figure knows that his words are finite, not transcendent. He expects to be judged because he continues to write regardless rather than succumbing to all-consuming love for an other. With his inadequate earthly language and a dogged resistance to, or incapacity for, divine union, which he asserts through language, the poet-figure distinguishes himself from the world instead of being transparent to it (and disappearing in the process).

"Each time I said it, I got it wrong", he admits, "If I could do what I thought I could do, I

would leave no trace” (*SHS* 31). Thus in “Buffalo Yoga” he prays to be forgiven by the past and the landscape—both represented as textual—for his own inadequate texts:

There’s no erasing the false-front calligraphy of the past.
There’s no expunging the way the land lies, and its windfall glare.
I never did get it right.

When the great spider of light unspools her links and chains,
May the past be merciful,
the landscape have pity on me—
Forgive me my words, forgive me my utterances. (*BY* 13)

It is unclear what being forgiven would involve: perhaps a correction of the poet-figure’s former failings and complete transparency towards the things he misrepresented. As “Ostinato and Drone” intimates (and Part Two of this chapter will explore further), the consummation of that wish would amount to self-erasure. The speaker of Wright’s poetry is torn between the prospect of being embraced by the underlying order in silent oblivion and retaining his individuality, specifically his words, in alienation from it. So he entreats, contradictorily, imagining himself dead, “Darkness, erase these lines, forget these words. / Spider recite his one sin” (*CT* 15). The spider here and above represents the creator, un-doer and judge. The speaker desires both the “darkness” that would relieve his futile poetic imperative and to see his words remembered, even as they embody his failings, limitations and guilt.

“Disjecta Membra” presents three distinct visions of the afterlife drawn from the second-century hermetic texts known collectively as the *Nag Hammadi Library*:

When death completes the number of the body, its food
Is weeping and much groaning,
and stranglers come, who roll
Souls down on the dirt . . .

And thus it is written, and thus believed,
Though others have found it otherwise.

*The restoration of the ones who are good
Takes place in a time that never had a beginning.*

Well, yes, no doubt about that.
One comes to rest in whatever is at rest, and eats
The food he has hungered for.
The light that shines forth there, on that body, does not sink. (BZ 74-75)

The first and second verse paragraphs are taken from the fragmentary text *Asclepius* 21-29, in which Asclepius is taught that each soul that is judged unfavourably is punished at the hands of “daimons” called “stranglers”, while the alternative is the “restoration of the nature of the pious ones who are good [that] will take place in a period of time that never had a beginning” (*Asclepius*). The final vision of death comes from another Gnostic text from the *Nag Hammadi Library*, entitled *Authoritative Teaching*. It describes the destiny of “the rational soul who wearied herself in seeking” and as a result “learned about God”:

She found her rising. She came to rest in him who is at rest. She reclined in the bride-chamber. She ate of the banquet for which she had hungered. She partook of the immortal food. She found what she had sought after. She received rest from her labors, while the light that shines forth upon her does not sink. (*Authoritative*)

The arrangement of the verse paragraphs in the poem implies a dialogue, with the italicised middle stanza constituting a different voice to the other two. The problems of the non-universality of beliefs and scriptures relating to the afterlife (“others have found it otherwise” [BZ 75]) and the horror of damnation are silenced by a reminder of the reward

available for the good. However, the seeming assurance of “no doubt about that” is qualified by the apparent reservation of “Well, yes” (*BZ* 76), suggesting that reasons for scepticism raised in the first stanza have been suppressed but not resolved in the third. This passage of “Disjecta Membra” sums up a familiar formula for existence after death, whereby the soul faces judgement, the unworthy are punished and worthy souls are restored in some way before finally achieving a state of unparalleled splendour and transcendence. This formula has undeniable appeal, but the poem’s speaker also admits other possibilities as to what death will hold, and he seems dissatisfied, as an earnest agnostic and would-be believer, with such seemingly merciless judgement and punishment of all except “the ones who are good” (*BZ* 75).

The poet-figure’s doubts and anxieties in the face of the afterlife resonate with the myth of Orpheus crossing the Styx to retrieve the deceased Eurydice, perhaps the most recognisable tradition of “crossing over” to which Wright alludes in his poems. Orpheus is a recurrent figure: an exemplar of poetic mastery but also, given his failed rescue of Eurydice, an emblem of the finality of death. *Littlefoot* Part 24 retells the Orpheus story, the moral of his attempt to thwart death being simply, “it won’t work” (*LF* 55). The spectre of Orpheus’ failure hangs over the river-crossing motif in Wright’s poetry, introducing the prospect of disappointment. For example, in *Littlefoot* the “I”-figure is unable to see or get to the other side:

I’m early, no one in the boat on the dark river.

It drifts across by itself

Below me.

Offended, I turn back up the damp steps. (*LF* 78)

Seemingly hoping to sight-see, the “I”-figure is rebuffed by death’s impenetrability. The absence of a boatman or guide may even undermine the promise of hospitality in the afterlife. This is the polar opposite of the blatantly optimistic visions of heaven in Wright’s poetry: the possibility that no heaven, judgement or even hell, but rather nothing, awaits us

on the other side. In stark contrast with the promise that “Someone will take our hand, ~ someone will give us refuge” (SS 72) (see pg. 229-30 of this thesis), the poem “American Twilight” predicts that the one “putting his first foot, then the second, / Down on the other side” will find “no hand to help him, no tongue to wedge its weal” (AP 60).

Religious traditions surrounding death portray the end as a source of meaningfulness, completion, justice and reward. Wright undermines the conclusiveness of such endings with twee visions of the afterlife that reveal it to be mere wish fulfilment, and by conveying an abiding disquiet about such beliefs. An alternative is that the end will not affirm the existence of an invisible order but will testify instead to our aloneness in the universe and the illusiveness of final order and wholeness. This prospect is described in “Bees Are the Terrace Builders of the Stars”, where “The Bible draws the darkness around it” and there is “No footbridge or boat over Lethe, / No staircase or stepping-stone ~ up into the Into” (SS 42).

Throughout Wright’s poetry, visions of a bright end are too multiple and equivocal to confirm an absolute truth. If anything, Wright’s “happy endings”, composed of polyglot myths and fictions, draw attention to the fictiveness of all ending myths, and the “I”-figure seems conscious, at times, of his own invention:

We lay out our own dark end,
guilt, and the happiness of guilt.
God never enters into it, nor
Do his pale hands and pale wings,
angel of time he has become.

The wind doesn’t blow in the soul,
so no boat there for passage. (SS 46)

As an angel, God is displaced from the position of ultimate power. Moreover, God as the “angel of time” in this poem recalls Walter Benjamin’s description of the “Angel of History” (based on the print *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee):

His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm. (ix)

“God doesn’t enter into” our ends because he lies always before us, out of reach and unable to intervene to bring about a redemptive ending (SS 46). This means that any sense of narrative “progress”—that is, a sequence of events towards a meaningful end that will repair, maybe even justify, all our preceding losses and our slow decline—is purely a human fiction, something that God or the ultimate order does not perceive and can or will not institute.

“Just That Dust, and Just Its Going Away”: Entropy, Old Age and the Irrevocable End from *The Voyage to the Sestets*

The experience of growing older and confronting mortality is a common theme in Wright’s poetry and the dominant form of the trope of entropy. As Spiegelman notes, “time tends toward lateness” in Wright’s poetry (“The Nineties” 222), and old age is a cause for almost constant disquiet. In the absence of a redemptive religious structure, his pilgrim must contend with a life and a universe that can seem to be determined purely by a law of deterioration and inevitable oblivion. He faces the prospect of irreversible loss: the “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” (OSR 25).

Images associated with entropy, particularly waning light and subsequent darkness, are analogous in Wright’s poetry to this view of the end of life: the darkening landscape “recapitulates the death process” (Parini 184) and the end of the day symbolises the human

end: “night is our last address” (*ST* 3). In “Night Music”, for example, “the way the night comes on” is “the way it all ends” (*SHS* 43). In addition to darkening, other versions of entropy, including dispersal, descent and lateness (in a day or year) consistently attend the poet-figure’s concerns with ageing. Nature’s recurring endings and darknesses replay and advance his own perceived downward slide (Longenbach 96): “I’m winding down. The daylight is winding down” (*SS* 49), he tells us; “the season’s decrease diminishes me” (*CH* 8).

This preoccupation with death and old age has been apparent in Wright’s work since his very first published volume. In *The Other Side of the River* (1984), with Wright himself in middle or old age, the “I”-figure’s antipathy towards ageing becomes personal (Henry, “Southern Cross” 199). In Wright’s earlier works, on the other hand, depictions of the elderly are somewhat unkind. Nonetheless, the early works anticipate aspects of the poet-figure’s own experience of ageing in Wright’s later poetry, including his heightened awareness of the natural world and a fixation on memory. For example, in “Jackson Square, New Orleans”, from Wright’s first published volume *The Voyage*, we are asked of the old men gathering in the titular Square:

Do they hear the patter of bird calls? Do memories
 Insist and tease? Meanwhile they nod their heads,
 And doze, as grim as rose stalks,
 Their lives a deep and long-abandoned garden. (*VG* 10)

Very similar is his 1963 poem “Midwestern Sill Life”:

on incidental

Blue-ribbed benches, pensioners
 In shaggy overcoats are sitting.

 They are waiting for something to happen.

Last week is uppermost in their minds.

Indoors, something is lacking in their rooms,
 Inherent, perhaps, in the bed and stiff-back chair;
 Here on the street the winds afflict their words.
 And so they graze, anonymous as cattle,
 On the tall stalks of their memories

The sense that the pensioners are anonymous, lacking and “waiting for something” and that the old men in Jackson Square have already “abandoned” their lives is mirrored in the way the ageing “Daughters of Blum” are described in another of his early poems, as they ineffectually seek

the lives they
 Must have left somewhere
 Once on a dresser—
 Gloves waiting for hands. (*DA* 3)

This is the first example of a motif of empty gloves and severed hands that recurs in Wright’s early volumes as a marker of relinquished agency. Developed especially in *The Grave of the Right Hand*, this motif becomes a sign of poetic impotence, which stunts one’s prospects of artistic immortality and prefigures death. A case in point is the titular “Right Hand” (alluding to Wright’s hand and the writing hand) ensconced in an unmarked and forgotten grave (*GRH* 45). The “marble hand” and empty, nailed-down gloves that make up Wright’s first “Self Portrait” (*GRH* 57); the glove of Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Encased in glass, / Predictable, disconnected” (*GRH* 47); the “Offering” of a glass-sculpted hand that is artistically perfect but incapable of artistry (*GRH* 60); the “White glove” with “immaculate touch” of which the speaker exclaims, “How cold you are how quiet” (*HF* 33); the “stump of a hand” (*AP* 30) that embodies his failure to grasp the “real names” of things in the course of his “Writing Life” (*AP* 30): all of these speak to the poet’s fear of wordlessness while pre-empting the wordlessness of the corpse. Disembodied hands and empty gloves “suggest

traces of a past presence and the presence of a mysterious absence” (McCorkle 176). Like writing itself, they indicate the death or disappearance of the writer.

In another of Wright’s very early poems, “The Lover”, anticipation of coming impotence and death is palpable in depictions of waning sexual prowess. Two bedroom scenes reveal the grim disparity between the romanticised past and a diminished present in which further decay is already immanent. The first, a vision of a youthful European tryst, parodies an ideal of masculine sexual prowess while the second—marital, suburban, American—is grim:

in a suburb. . . . Some Dubuque,⁴²
It’s after television. Each night, less astute,
He prods his wife and, under a feeble cover,
Lumbers above into a proper hover,
Waves, as a cypress in the wind might wave,
Then lowers like a coffin to his grave. (VG 11)

There are echoes here of Robert Lowell’s “To Speak of the Woe that Is in Marriage” in the poem’s iambic pentameter rhyme scheme and imagery. While the “lover” in Wright’s poem is relatively benign in comparison with the brutal husband Lowell imagines, whose wife is “Gored by the climacteric of his want / [until] He stalls above [her] like an elephant” (lines 13-14), both evoke the disillusionment and diminishment of middle-age through their portraits of habitual, ungainly and insensitive love-making.

Wright’s later poetry is essentially sex-free—it features very few encounters with living others at all—but the trope of sexual climax as *le petit mort* or “the little death” functions similarly to other prefigurations of mortality in his poetry. In the early poem “Sex”, for example, the aftermath of a clumsy encounter, which sees the lovers withdraw from each other physically and emotionally, constitutes a withdrawal of transcendent potential from the world in a typical anti-epiphany of “Nothing” and “the long, long waters of What’s Left”

⁴² Dubuque is a city in Iowa.

(*HF* 48). The revelation of “nothing” bears witness to a non-redemptive world-scheme and represents the entropy and falling-away from transcendence that is enacted throughout Wright’s poetry.

A similar revelation occurs in his early poem “Similarities”, in which the relative diminution of old age is revealed through comparison with the young:

On porches, half in bitter sunlight, old men
Will listen to the sound of the wind, a moving
High in the pines, lean back, recalling when
They, too, might lie awake, imagining
Just what it was—before they knew, before

The nothing came (*SP*)

Children’s ignorance fuels their imaginations, whereas old age produces nostalgia and resignation. Unlike the children, the old men know what the wind is: not the salvific “hiss / Of wings” (*SP*) but an embodiment of invisible time come to erode their lives into a nothingness.

Although they are strikingly brutal and describe figures other than the speaker himself, these meditations on old age from Wright’s early career are otherwise consistent with his poet-figure’s later attitude towards ageing. The poet-figure ages as Wright does. He begins chronicling his increasing age in *Chickamauga* (1995):

What do I have to look forward to at fifty-four?

Tomorrow is dark.

Day-after-tomorrow is darker still. (*CH* 15)

Early November in the soul,

a hard rain, and dusky gold

From the trees, late afternoon

Squint-light and heavy heart-weight.

It's always down-leaf and dim.

A sixty-two-year-old, fallow-voiced, night-leaning man (*NB* 196)

At seventy, it's always evening,

light diluted,

Breeze like a limp hand

Just stirring the long-haired grasses, then letting them be.

The dark decade, beginning its long descent

out over the blank Atlantic,

Against the wind, inexorable,

The light dissolving like a distance in the evergreens.

Even the clouds find a place to rest. (*LF* 46)

Ageing is illustrated by the fading of the light, descent and lateness: "Where I am, it seems, it's always just before sunset. / At least nowadays" (*LF* 48), the poet-figure acknowledges wryly. It is not surprising that Wright's "I"-figure depicts his passage towards old age and the end as a down-turn and descent, given that, for him, the peak of life is its beginning. In old age, entropic dispersal is already evident—"At my age, memories scatter like rain" (*LF* 46), he tells us, and "At my age, I regret I'm not able to master my own body" ("Hemlock" *OT*)—and it will only get worse, as evinced by the plight of those of his friends who "lie in nursing homes, ~ their bones broken, their hearts askew" (*LF* 4). Wright's emphasis is always on what is lost or altered with age and never on what might be gained, such as maturity or self-assurance. In this mode of thinking, ageing is a cumulative damage that runs toward total loss: "After the twilight, darkness. / After the darkness, darkness, and then what follows that" (*SHS* 55).

When focusing on entropy, the "I"-figure perceives a Godless reality that promises a hopeless end and affords us no afterlife, no kind of continuity after the death of the

individual, just a mysterious, endless sameness or nothingness. “Of immortality, there’s nothing but old age and its aftermath” (*BZ* 68), he tells us, and that aftermath represents complete undoing. This absolute ending begets repetitions that reveal a lack of redemptive transformation and the impossibility of clarification: “Whatever is dead stays dead” (*CT* 23); “When it’s over it’s over” (*SHS* 15); “When we die, we die. The wind blows away our footprints” (*CH* 54). Far from being a narrative conclusion that connects and validates preceding events, death here is meaningless and irrevocable: death means simply death, “dead”, “die”, “over”. Even the concept is ungenerative. Meanwhile, the “I”-figure states, “There is no light for us at the end of the light. / No one redeems the grass our shadows lie on” (*CT* 48): it seems that the mark we leave on the world is as transient as a shadow cast by the sun and, after our deaths, as unremembered.

The question of who, if anyone, will remember the poet-figure when he is dead haunts Wright’s later work. In “Posterity” he wonders, “who will remember us when our days are short-armed?” (*OT*); in *Littlefoot*, he asks, “who will remember us and our enterprise, / Whose fingers will sift our dust?” (*LF* 66), and quotes the lyrics of a country song, “Will you miss me when I’m gone?” (*LF* 86). He also interrogates the likelihood and dubious appeal of fame. “Fame for a hundred years ~ is merely an afterlife, / And no friend of ours”, the poet-figure insists in *Littlefoot* Part 14 (29), paraphrasing the last lines of Chinese poet Tu Fu’s poem “Dreaming of Li Po, #2”: “An imperishable fame of a thousand years / Is but a paltry, after-life affair” (lines 16-17). This is a sentiment he returns to in “Who Said the Chinese Didn’t Know What They Were Talking About?” where he declares, “an imperishable fame for a thousand years is a paltry after-life affair” (*OT*). In the poem immediately following this one, however, the poet-figure seems more partial to the prospect of fame, however unlikely: referring to another poem by Tu Fu (“At Horizon’s End” line 5), he muses “someone once said that writers abhor a worldly success. ~ Hmmm . . .” (“Lesson From Long Ago” *OT*).

Regardless of the appeal of fame, the poet-figure seems sure of his artistic disappearance as well as his physical and spiritual one. In “It’s Sweet to be Remembered”, he suggests that “No one’s remembered much longer than a rock ~ is remembered beside the road” (*SS* 32). If everything is ultimately destroyed and forgotten, then there can be no hope of immortality through art as even fame is fleeting—a mere “mist of grief on the river waves” (*OSR* 54)—and “all those books, those half-baked books” are just “sweet yeast for the yellow dust” (*SS* 22). Answering to his self-professed desire in earlier poem “Laguna Dantesca” to return “like a scrap of charred paper” to the place where “the big dog lies low in the southern sky and bides its time” (*SC* 36), the poet-figure asserts in “Lost Bodies” that “When you die, you fall down, ~ you don’t rise up / Like a scrap of burnt paper into the everlasting” (*OSR* 5).

The prospect of artistic immortality that was explored in Chapter Three of this dissertation, whereby the remnants of one’s poems or prayers transcend one’s own limited sphere, may also be invalidated by such a harsh view of reality. We “want our poems to be clouds ~ upholding the sour light of heaven” (*SS* 70), but this is apparently a futile wish, as heaven is “sour” and poetry, we are told in “Via Negativa”, cannot rise “like char-scrap . . . without us / Into an everlasting” (*SHS* 62). The “I”-figure states in “Night Journal”,

—Our words, like blown kisses, are swallowed by ghosts

Along the way,

their destinations bereft

In a rub of brightness unending (*ZJ* 33)

If heaven is shown to be no more than a trick of the light, as it were, then the souls of the dead are displaced, becoming ghosts, and prayer is useless. In “To Giacomo Leopardi in the Sky”, the poet-figure states, “Not one word has ever melted into glory not one. / We keep on sending them up, however”; it seems that these mere words, “rising like smoke signals into the infinite” (*OSR* 66), will suffer the same fate as the pair of snagged kites that “scrape their voices like fingernails / Against the windowpane of air” (*OSR* 65). Dismissing the prospect

of transcendence through art, the “I”-figure revises the Latin phrase, *ars longa, vita brevis* (art is long, life is short) in the poem “If You Walk in His Golden Footsteps, the God Will Get You”, stating, “*Ars brevis, vita brevis* / As well, no way out” (OT).

In Wright's poetry, however, the kind of outright end that results from entropic decline motivates the "I"-figure to identify other sources of meaningfulness in the world. In a rare upbeat turn for Wright's recent sestets, the poem "Well, I Still Have My Teeth, and That's Not Nothing" expresses wonderment at the emergence of life, however fragile and fleeting:

Autumn. We're still like foxfire,
Flitting and flailing, on and off,
pinpoints of light, and the night is deep.
At seventy, this life is rare, and has been since time began.

In these late years, I'm only drawn to the stillness. (OT)

Despite his qualms about old age, Wright's "I"-figure can appreciate that life is rare, an improbable flicker of autoluminescence in a dark universe. Although he finds himself "drawn to the stillness", suggesting that his own light is waning, the darkness and rest that wait to envelop him are shown to be welcoming by "the birds [that] return to the privet hedge", for whom the "darkness . . . is their living room": a far more restful fate than that of the clouds, who "drift on and drift on" ("Well, I Still Have My Teeth" *OT*).

Being accepting of death as a final end is thus a mark of acceptance towards life and the world as it is. We see as much in the earlier poem “Indian Summer”:

If something is due me still
—Firedogs, ashes, the soap of another life—
I give it back. And this hive

Of sheveled combs, my wax in its little box. (*CT* 19)

The “I”-figure in this poem, dazzled by the natural world, proclaims his willingness to relinquish his entitlement to a cleansing afterlife, encounter with God and even his body. In “Bays Mountain Covenant” the seeker tells of having unsuccessfully “praised for 10 years” and apparently dedicating himself to transcendence, living “For the sky my eye sees and the one that it cannot find / For the raising up and the setting down / For the light for the light for the light” (*BL* 76). Jaded, he now

turns

To the leaf to the fire in the swamp log to the rain
 The acorn of crystal at the creek’s edge which prove
 Nothing expect nothing and offer nothing
 Desire no entrance and harbor no hope of change
 Foxglove that seeks no answer nightshade that seeks no answer
 Not to arrive at and be part of but to take
 As the water accepts the whirlpool the earth the storm (*BL* 76)

He gives himself over, in other words, to material things without ulterior motive, allowing himself to be moved willy-nilly by natural forces and relinquishing hope of a totalising “answer” (*BL* 76).

Readiness to renounce the afterlife characterises the poet-figure’s endeavour to locate beauty and value—even paradise itself—in a directionless here-and-now that is inherently good and meaningful, rather than a narrative geared toward a future fulfilment: “What gifts there are are all here, in this world” (*OSR* 40), he insists; “One life is all we are entitled to, but it’s enough” (*CH* 71). As we have seen in Chapter Three of this thesis, his intention to sacrifice spiritual aspirations, and dedicate himself to earthly realities is usually short-lived. However, there seems to be a moral imperative in the statement, “When we live, we live for the last time . . . one *the* in a world of *a*” (*CH* 41), as though, in the absence of a redemptive ending, a well-considered life is all that orients and gives meaning to an otherwise arbitrary

existence amidst ephemeral things. Wright's "I"-figure suspects that a life is too singular a thing to be wasted on flimsy hopes and metaphysical concerns. He says in *Littlefoot*,

I think I'm going to take my time,
 life is too short
For immortality and all its attendant disregards.

I have enough memories now for any weather,

Either here or there.

I'll take my time.

Tomorrow's not what I'm looking forward to, or the next day.

My home isn't here, but I doubt it's there either—

Empty and full have the same glass,

though neither shows you the way. (*LF* 34)

While the speaker acknowledges that he cannot reside here in the physical world forever, he does not indulge the sense that “This World is Not My Home, I’m Just Passing Through” seen elsewhere in his poetry (*SS* 28). Instead, he commits himself to the here-and-now, determined to “take [his] time”—both in the sense of slowing down to enjoy himself and of embracing the time he has been given—while refusing to pin hope on things that misdirect his focus from the glorious, temporary physical world. He acknowledges that, regardless of whether the landscape is a vessel for an ultimate truth or for an absence, it contributes no direction or coherence to life.

In this, the poet-figure takes guidance from the things of the natural world, which model for him a way of being spiritually self-sufficient. In “Sentences”, for example, “The trees take care of their own salvation, and rocks / Swell with their business”, and nature contains its own redemption in the form of the reflection of the sun on the river, which is like “a Host . . . floating without end” (CT 23). In “Signature”, the speaker tells himself not to wait for anything from “the dogwood tree” (the crucifix, representative of a redeeming God) but rather to “Live like a huge rock covered with moss, / Rooted half under the earth ~ and

anxious for no one" (*CT* 52). Similarly, he observes in "Buffalo Yoga Coda I" that violets do not send up "intercessionary prayers to Purgatory" as he does: "You don't hear a peep from them, / Intent, as they are, on doing whatever it is they're here to do" (*BY* 26).

It is not easy to be so at home in the world; the "human position", we are told in "Disjecta Membra", is between the "what-if and what-was-not, / The blown and sour dust of just after or just before, / The metaquotidian landscape ~ of soft edge and abyss" (*BZ* 82). Being so caught up in our past and destiny, we find it hard "to take the hard day and ease it into our hearts" (*BZ* 82). Nonetheless, the speaker is adamant that "the life we long for [is] to be at ease in the natural world" (*BZ* 83) and that "Paradise ~ is what we live in / And not a goal to yearn for" (*XA* 28). He reiterates this view in *Littlefoot*: if life in the visible world is all there is and is its own fulfilment and reward, then poetry should be directed not towards otherworldly hopes but towards this world's present perfection:

It's not such a poverty, we think,
to live in a metaphysical world.
Thus we become poor, and spurn the riches of the earth.
Such nonsense.
The crow flies with his beak open,
emitting a raucous cry.
The yearling horses stand in the field,
up to their knees in the new grass.
This is the first world we live in, there is no second. (*LF* 54)

Apparently agreeing with Wallace Stevens that "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world" ("Esthétique" (15.1-2) and so dismissing metaphysical concerns, the speaker allows the simple, familiar "riches of the earth" to speak for themselves (*LF* 54). While his state of contentment lasts, the things of the material world seem to make up for the absence of an afterlife.

Occasionally, the rejection of metaphysical concerns in Wright's poetry conveys a deep contempt for religion and its demands, as is particularly evident in "Lives of the Artists":

How is it that no one remembers this?

Time's ashes, *I lie alone*.

So simple, so simple, so unlike the plastic ticking Christ

Who preyed on us we prayed to— (*BZ* 49)

The speaker admits to the difficulty of resigning himself to time's damage and his ultimate death. On the other hand, the Christ who "preys" on us recalls the impression of God as a dog in Wright's poems, the unsympathetic embodiment of old age and impending destruction that is an unlikely source of mercy. More and more frequently in his later poetry, as the pitilessness of time and old age impresses itself on him, the "I"-figure seems to take this unsentimental attitude towards death. Ultimately, it amounts to a complete rejection of any version of the invisible other than natural processes and a denial of any benevolent absolute that might offer a reprieve from the finality of death:

How sweet to think that nature is solvency

that something empirically true

Lies just under the dead leaves

That will make us anchorites in the dark

Chambers of celestial perpetuity—

nice to think that,

Given the bleak alternative,

Though it hasn't proved so before,

and won't now

No matter what we scrape aside—

God is an abstract noun. (*ZJ* 17)

In this poem, “A Journal of English Days”, an unimagined source of amnesty behind the natural world—something “solvent” and thus capable of resolving all of the perceived gaps and debts in a life’s narrative—is a pleasant fantasy. The word “anchorite” suggests embeddedness and solidity; to be “anchorites in the dark / Chambers of celestial perpetuity” is to be granted in heaven the traditional cell and religious conviction of a monastic, or to become the crystal-like stars anchored in the firmament. But it cannot be so: God is immaterial and not to be found lurking below the surface of reality.

By *Sestets* (2009) and the rarer *Outtakes / Sestets* (2010), Wright’s most recent stand-alone volumes, his poet-figure’s shedding of Christian expectations and his resignation toward the limits of life in a physical world appear conclusive. Answering Wallace Stevens’ declaration, “Death is the mother of beauty, hence from her / Alone shall come fulfilment to our dreams / And our desires” (“Sunday” lines 63-65), he states,

Death is the mother of nothing.

This is a fact of life,

And exponentially sad.

All these years—a lifetime, really—thinking it might be otherwise. (SS 36)

With these lines, the poet-figure characterises his whole career and life as the pursuit of a mistaken hope for fulfilment in death. Soon after in the same volume, he expresses the pragmatic view that his beloved landscape is apathetic towards us. We should expect no better, he suggests, from death:

Empathy’s only a one-way street

And that’s all right, I’ve come to believe.

It sets us up for ultimate things,

and penultimate ones as well.

It’s a good lesson to have in your pocket when the Call comes to call. (SS 44)

Similarly, in a poem entitled “The Secret of What’s Happening” from *Outtakes*, he deduces that “we all grow emaciated in vain” but counsels that there is no point crying about this fact, as we can expect no sympathy:

Nobody gives a damn.

Grief, and the side arms of grief,

Are cold, but nobody gives a damn.

.....

There’s water enough in the weather,

don’t add to it, nobody gives a damn. (OS)

Sestets and its addendum *Outtakes* represent a conclusion, having been positioned as a “full stop” of sorts despite the possibility that they will be succeeded in Wright’s oeuvre by future works. *Sestets* constitutes the final volume in Wright’s most recent volume of collected works, the title of which, *Bye-and-Bye* (2011), implies both farewell and futurity. Although Joe Moffett insists that Wright’s “trilogy of trilogies” ends with *Negative Blue* and is not intended as a tetralogy (*Understanding* 6), others do read *Bye-and-Bye* as a fourth and final volume in Wright’s sequence (Denham, *Charles Wright: A Companion* 135; Byrne). By collecting his post-*Negative Blue* works together, Wright does invite us to see them as part of the sequence of collected works and a new conclusion to the (already curiously non-tripartite) trilogies that now encompasses the vast majority of his poetry. It is tempting, therefore, to read the unequivocal statements of unbelief in *Sestets* and *Outtakes* as definitive in the context of the trilogy, framed as they are as the final word on the matter and apparently superseding “all those years [spent] thinking it might be otherwise” (SS 36). These denunciations of metaphysical hopes seem to discount Wright’s pilgrim’s more sentimental declarations of Christian anticipation, revealing them to have been fanciful. However, things are not quite so simple. As the poet-figure muses in “Last Supper”, “I seem to have come to the end of something, but don’t know what, / . . . Perhaps it’s a sentimentality about such fey things, / But I don’t think so” (ST 4).

McCorkle identifies Wright's trilogy of trilogies as a "symmetrically balanced collection [that] indicates a desire for an ideal form and a hope for a salvational closure" (198). The sequence gestures towards wholeness and completion, but, as is always the case in his poetry, that state is not finalised. As well as providing a final word, the publication of new work after the completion of Wright's *Appalachian Book of the Dead* can be read as belying the completion of that project. *Bye-and-Bye* is a coda to Wright's meta-trilogy akin to the codas *Xionia* and *North American Bear* in two of his individual "trilogies", *The World of the Ten Thousand Things* and *Negative Blue* respectively. As a coda, it stands outside the work to comment on it and affirm its completion and meaning, while revealing the incompleteness of the preceding order insofar as it needs to be supplemented. Thus, it is counter to closure, defying the symmetry, coherence and conclusiveness of the structure (Kirby 67-68).

The structure that the supplementary collection *Bye-and-Bye* undermines is an implied narrative of pilgrimage with a triumphant ending. Its twin pilgrimages from past to future and from hell to paradise form the one movement, ubiquitous throughout Wright's poetry. Wright's pilgrim's life's quest aims both upwards towards heaven and towards the future. As demonstrated in Chapter Two of this thesis, the past is, for the pilgrim, uncovered through processes of retracing, uncovering and delving, sometimes through delicate exhumation, as in the poem "Archaeology" (ST 51), and sometimes through self-interment, as in the conclusion of "The Southern Cross" (SC 65). *A Journal of the Year of the Ox* in Chapter Three of this dissertation shows that the pilgrim's existence in the present time and present-in-time is a purgatorial process of repetition that takes place predominantly at ground level, mirrored in the landscape and seasons. The final stage of his journey, his future, is envisioned in terms of ascension to a "higher" state that he may or may not reach.

The most significant aspect of the intertwined down-then-up and backward-then-forward patterns that weave through Wright's trilogies is that they are constantly stymied, and this is the function *Bye-and-Bye* enacts. Just as James Longenbach notes of the book *Appalachia*, Wright's whole tripartite structure implies a plot-like arc—"a foretelling that our

lives will be made meaningful by the end towards which they move”—that contrasts with endless ups-and-downs recorded by the poems themselves (94). The addition of *Bye-and-Bye* reveals Wright’s largest narrative arc to be itself anti-climactic and open-ended. The ascent/future is never, indeed can never be, definitively attained by the pilgrim in Wright’s poetry: his “quest for the divine”, as Edward Hirsch puts it, is “permanently impaired” (790). Much as the pilgrim tends to fall short in his repeated endeavours to rise above the material world towards paradise, so too does he display an inability to determine his future afterlife. “I wish I had the capacity ~ to see through my own death” (“Together” *OT*) he laments, despite claiming in an earlier poem, “I find it much simpler now to see ~ the other side of my own death. / . . . when the mouth closes, ~ the wind goes out of everything” (*LF* 29). His uncertainty regarding his end extends even to the apparent fact of mortality and is symptomatic of his uncertainty and doubt regarding the invisible.

While *Bye-and-Bye* is a departure from the dubious *Paradiso* represented by *Negative Blue*, this “fall from grace” is really a return to earth through renewed attention and commitment to the landscape. This promises a continuation of the cycle of seeking, coming near and falling back, something already implicit within *Negative Blue*. The final poem of that volume, “Sky Diving”, sees the poet-figure admit to his unceasing yearning after the invisible—“I mean the still small point at the point where all things meet; / I mean the form that moves the sun and the other stars. // What a sidereal jones we have!” (*NB* 201)—only to stretch out passively beneath the sky that embodies his goal: “Let’s lie down together. Let’s open our mouths” (*NB* 201). In this, he commits to taking it all in in wonderment and at the same time, by affecting the posture of a corpse, resigns himself to being earthbound and to death, which may be the only way of obtaining what he longs for. However, this fall back to earth is not akin to an entropic descent after which there can be nothing, but is rather, in this context, a re-commitment to the existing, ongoing scheme. As Fred Dings notes, *Sestets* concludes with an image of circling and confidence in salvation—“someone will give us refuge, / Circling left or circling right” (*SS* 72)—which sees the pilgrim’s turning away

from hope come full circle (75). Bedient is right to call Wright “the poet of an always-suspended salvation” (“Poetry and Silence”) and Upton to note that non-consummated longing “practically achieves paradigmatic status in his work” (*The Muse* 27), because his pilgrim’s desire for transcendence wrestles with his disbelief, limitation and love for the material world, which continually land him back in the purgatorial world, which, in turn, reignites his longing for paradise.

This kind of equivocation, along with an openness to revision, addition and revisitation, is characteristic of the ambivalence towards all apparent ends and Absolutes in Wright’s poetry. This paradigmatic pattern renders inconclusive even the apparent inevitability of entropy. In Wright’s poetry, even God-forsakenness allows for the possibility of a new (equally provisional) revelation or resurrection of hope.

Part Two: The Non-end

“Your Body Becoming a Foreign Tongue”: (After)Life After Entropy

Wright’s “March Journal” depicts life and the world going on after the end:

—After the Rapture comes, and everyone goes away

Quicker than cream in a cat’s mouth,

all of them gone

In an endless slipknot down the sky

and its pink tongue

Into the black hole of Somewhere Else,

What will we do, left with the empty spaces of our lives

Intact,

the radio frequencies still unchanged,

The same houses up for sale,

Same books unread,

all comfort gone and its comforting . . .

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. (*ZJ* 19)

It is clear that the speaker counts himself among the nonbelievers and the unsaved:

“Immortality’s for others, always for others” he sighs in “Looking Out the West-Facing Window” (*OT*). The question of what happens after the Rapture could be treated comically or with a doomsayer’s flair, but it is not treated that way here. Wright’s vision is muted and

mixed with pathos. The “I”-figure is excluded not only from salvation but also the finality afforded by entropic decline and disappearance: not for him the devouring “pink tongue” or the erasure afforded by the “black hole” of nothingness (*ZJ* 19). Rather, he finds himself left behind amidst the terrible sameness and persistence of the world, which, with the departure of religious hopes, is seemingly without comfort, promising only a modest “little fire” (*ZJ* 19) and “turbulent rest” in the earth after death. This poem captures the ambivalence and humility characteristic of Wright’s non-final “endings”, which do not assume that human experience exemplifies or determines the world’s direction. Rather, the landscape’s patterns outlast us and supersede our human meanings: “Landscape’s a local affliction that has no beginning and no end, / Here when we come and here when we go” (*BY* 4).

Non-final endings constitute an alternative to the opposite prospects of sheer destruction through entropy on the one hand and, on the other, restoration or transcendence. Most non-endings in Wright’s poetry show the deceased being absorbed into the landscape after death. Such endings explore the implications of becoming transparent to the world by becoming one with its indifferent, endless cycle. Through the purely natural process of decomposition, the “vessel of life [is] brought to naught, / Then gathered back to what’s visible” (*BZ* 4), physically becoming the landscape the poet-figure formerly sought to capture in words. As Vendler observes, “without the ability to assert, at least in any conventional dogma, the intuitions of faith, he is left with the biological conservation of matter as the only resurrection that he can count on” (“Charles Wright” 20). Material transformation goes some way towards compensating for the prospect of salvation that the “I”-figure relinquishes by turning away from transcendence and toward the natural world. It also accords with his suspicion that the natural order is all the truth there is, and that nothing higher exists. The “I”-figure implies as much in *Littlefoot*: “Outside of the church, no salvation, / St. Cyprian says. / Outside of nature no transformation, I say, ~ no hope of return” (*LF* 9). Thus, in Wright’s poetry, biodegradation is not merely a function of entropy: *i.e.* the decay of the human body and redistribution of energies until all are spent. Rather, decomposition points

toward the regeneration of life and so is elevated to a form of non-religious salvation in that it promises an ambiguous sort of resurrection and perpetuity (St. John xvi; Huskey 49). The loss of the self to the mute landscape also perfects the poet's descriptive art.

This materialistic picture of what happens after death also diverges sharply from a Christian notion of eternal life in that it decentralises the human self and identity. An emphasis on the processes of nature in Wright's poetry, including the gruesome promise of decomposition, highlights the apparent ignobility of our biological fate: for example, the speaker reminds himself graphically of his future as "Worm-waste" (*CT* 15), stating that his "meat [is] ash, / Which, don't worry, is set to be served at the next course" (*ST* 60) and that he is like "Rolfe, Stravinsky, Diaghilev, Pound: / Sweet meat for the wet earth" (*HF* 57). In "Tattoos" Part 2, which is, we are told in the notes to the poem, about the death of Wright's father (*BL* 39), the earth is shown greedily devouring the newly buried corpse:

The pin oak has found new meat,
The linkworm a bone to pick.
Lolling its head, slicking its blue tongue,
The nightflower blooms on its one stem;
The crabgrass hones down its knives (*BL* 20)

From one perspective, the tragedy of death is heightened by an awareness of the beloved body's reduction to mere meat or compostable matter, which erases indiscriminately all identity and achievements. Even the great Chinese poet Li Po, we are told in "Portrait of the Artist with Li Po", is now reduced to soil: "The 'high heavenly priest of the White Lake' is now / A small mound in an endless plain of grass" (*SC* 39).

In "Portrait of the Artist in 2035", the poet-figure imagines himself one hundred years after his (and Wright's) birth, now dead and buried:

The root becomes him, the road ruts
That are sift and grain in the powderlight
Recast him, sink bone in him,

Blanket and creep up, fine, fine:

Worm-waste and pillow-tick; hair

Prickly and dust dangled, his arms and black shoes

Unlinked and laceless, his face false

In the wood rot, and past pause . . . (*CT 15*)

It is important to note that, although the disjointed images in this poem emphasise the disintegration of the speaker's body, as a self-portrait it still depicts "him" as a self of sorts, albeit a permeable entity in transition and almost without discernible outline. The expunging processes of sifting, sinking and blanketing are balanced by transformations that "recast" and "become" the dead poet-figure (*CT 15*). In this depiction of death, the deceased is both erased and sustained by the natural processes that decay his body. It fits with a wider poetic tradition dealing with burial and decomposition as an ambiguous answer to the human desire to endure.

This tradition treats disintegration as a kind of afterlife, as, in the earth, otherwise spent human matter is embraced into an ongoing motion or purpose: thus, "the earth is a turbulent rest" (*ZJ 19*). Nonetheless, disintegration in nature remains a troubling form of immortality. The subterranean second womb is frequently cold in a way that is all the more affecting for the fact that something of the human subject remains discernible as a "him", "her" or "you" (and thus conceivably susceptible to human feeling). An iconic exemplar of this is Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal", in which a loved one is transported beyond "The touch of earthly years" (line 4) only to be roughly "Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks, and stones, and trees" (lines 7-8) like so much inanimate matter. Wordsworth's poem is exemplary because, unlike the poems of his forerunners the graveyard poets, his meditation gives no assurance of salvation. The focus of his poem is restricted to the physical situation of the deceased loved one, which allows for her unending material

existence but admits no resurrection, rather condemning her to an eternity of insensible anonymity.

In “Childhood”, the leave-taking poem that begins *China Trace*, the central character farewells the lost figures of his past with a similar image. They are now merely

the clothes

That circle beneath the earth, the names

Falling into the darkness, face

After face, like beads from a broken rosary . . . (CT 13)

This vision is as ambivalent as Wordsworth’s, conveying a certain impression of the abundance of the dead as well as a grim impression of their lost bodily integrity and humanity and even the horror of potential spiritual desertion. In Wright’s poem, the image of the “broken rosary” implies the redundancy of religious observances and prayers for the dead, and also a sense of the dead being clung to, and now relinquished, as a source of comfort and commemoration. The dead thus fall into the darkness of divine absence and forgottenness, although traces of them endure, hidden, altered and unrecognisable.

The American tradition of decomposition in poetry is most readily associated with Walt Whitman, whose influence can be felt whenever poets engage with death from neither a typically elegiac nor Christian perspective but instead focus on the fate of the buried body in nature. Even prior to Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (1885), poems including William Cullen Bryant’s “Thanatopsis” (1821) and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Hamatreya” (1847) emphasised the darkness of the earth over the light of heaven and focused on the human insignificance and disappearance burial entails. In the poetry of decomposition, death reveals nature to be an ongoing, non-teleological, process in which humans are an element, not the focus. The relinquishment of the body to the ground signals one’s absorption into an all-embracing whole; it amounts to giving over one’s own energies to the earth’s greater movement: “Smoot and Runyan and August Binder / Still in the black pulse of the earth” (SC 14). In this sense, death is also the universal equaliser. “Losing oneself [in death] in the

unpopulated wilderness”, Max Cavitch suggests, means, for certain American poets, “finding oneself in the midst of an ongoing communal project” (126). In Wright’s poem “Rural Route”, “The dead squeeze close together, / Strung out like a seam of coal through the raw earth” (*BL* 77).

The poetry of decomposition answers to human aspirations beyond the constraints of mortality by casting death not just as a limit but also as “a condition of freedom” (Cavitch 110). In *Littlefoot* Part 1, for example, the speaker calls the dead and decomposed “the arisen”, likening their re-materialisation in nature to a resurrection of sorts, the emergence of a butterfly:

no one has the right box

To fit the arisen in.

Out of the sopped earth, out of dank bones,

They seep in their watery strings

wherever the water goes.

Who knows when their wings will dry out, who knows their next

knot? (*LF* 5)

The ongoing existence of the dead is here depicted as much more fluid and uncontainable than that of a corpse in a coffin or “box”. Moreover, that the dead form new “knots” is indicative of their meaningful, directed existence in renewed narratives. Given that the dead embody the past, the reunion of the dead in the earth even indicates a return to the true ground of our being: our past and origins. At the same time, however, the repetition of “who knows” emphasises the mysteriousness of this state of being (*LF* 5), implying that it might be unpredictable or even unconscious for the dead themselves, swept up as they are in larger natural processes such as the movements of water. It is a condition of this immortality that all personal agency is lost.

In “Skins” Part 9, the salivating earth is described as something “to walk on [and] to lie down in”; it is “what follows you / Tracing your footsteps, counting your teeth” (*BL* 59).

Seeing the earth as an all-consuming system and a great receptacle for the dead implies, if anything, that humans exist to fulfil the earth's purposes rather than the other way around. It seems, then, that humanity exists to die, as in death we contribute to the earth's fecundity in a way that is more than reciprocal as it surpasses and outlasts nature's contribution to human wellbeing. "Death's still the secret of life, the garden reminds us" in "Disjecta Membra" (*BZ* 73). In other words, humanity "participat[es] in a universal cycle" and nature is the "ultimate power" (Altieri 50). The earth in such poems is a "necrotopia", Cavitch suggests (126), while in Wright's *Littlefoot* it is "our destination, ~ our Compostela" (*LF* 56): at best, our shared ultimate home and, at worst, a mass grave. It is also, disconcertingly, figured as motherly, in keeping with the almost universal, ancient concept of Mother Earth. In Wright's poem "If Life Is a Negative, We Are Its Photographers", for example, the earth "we walk on" that "ruins our lives" also "takes us in in our little boxes, ~ and soothes us" (*OT*). The earth is motherly because the dissolving of our bodies and identity in the ground as "we gradually seep away and pool up in the dark" ("If Life is a Negative" *OT*) reinstitutes a state of "speechless infancy" (Bedient, "Poetry and Silence"). The earth also restores the speaker to and enacts the "natural hug, the quick kiss" of his dead parents (*CT* 46). It is precisely because the earth is still frequently depicted as motherly that this vision of existence after death is most unsettling, subverting, as it does, established expectations of motherhood as privileging the needs of the child/human and re-emphasising the overruling interests and integrity of the mother/earth as the original source of life. As Costello observes, faced with this tradition, Wright's poetic urge towards transcendence must contend with "a prodigal humility toward the earth, as the locus of significance and the proper source of moral and aesthetic order" ("The Soil" 413).

Wright's early prose poem "Cherokee" is an adaptation of a sacred formula of the Cherokee, "To Destroy Life". Wright's version resembles an announcement by the voice of nature to the soon-to-be-decimated Cherokee nation:

listen, I've come to tumble your juices into the earth, to settle your

bones in the earth; listen, I've come to cover your eyes with black leaves, to
load them down with black stones; listen, you're going to where it is
nothing, black coffin under the hill; listen, the black clay will enter your
mouth (*HF* 65)

That the earth should speak "death" recalls the "still voice" of Nature in Bryant's "Thanatopsis" (line 17), the "Earth-song" in Emerson's "Hamatreya" that reminds each farmer that "Death . . . adds / Him to his land, a lump of mould the more" (lines 25-26) and the sea in Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" that lisps only the "low and delicious word DEATH" (line 68). Ironically, the dead, clogged with soil and de-autonomised, are unable to detect or respond to the earth's ritual call. As Cavitch points out, the embrace of death may "entail potentially disturbing requirements for self-renunciation" including "self-sublimation" (128). Accordingly, Wright's poetry, as Costello notes, conveys "the struggle of imagination to attach itself to soil without submitting to it" ("The Soil" 415), a struggle emblematised by the ambiguous appeal of empty mouths being filled with cold earth.

Open, silent mouths recur in Wright's poetry: the speaker tells us, "I always imagine a mouth / Starting to open its blue lips / Inside me" (*SC* 65). Like the aforementioned severed hands and empty gloves, the blue-lipped or gaping mouth evokes death. It is aligned with the devouring mouth imagery that represents entropic decline and its final end in Wright's poetry. However, the open mouth on the verge of speech but unable to speak also embodies the poet-figure's living torment, what he calls "word urge" (*ST* 37) or "the verbal hunger" (*SHS* 63) and describes as a "darkness above the tongue, / Its shorting of words, its mad silence and lack of breath" (*CH* 64). This is the poet-figure's insatiable desire to tell the world exactly as it is and, in doing so, speak the ineffable Absolute, a desire silenced by an awareness of the insurmountable distance "Between the thing itself and the naming of the thing" that "waits to be filled" (*SHS* 63):

The mouth inside me with its gold teeth

Begins to open.

No words appear on its lips,

no syllables bubble along its tongue.

Night mouth, silent mouth. (*SHS* 56)

This distance is overcome and the unappeasable need to write and speak ceases only in death, when the mouth itself is closed or filled and hands are laid to rest. The poet-figure's dead mother, for example, is in "Delta Traveller" "a closed mouth" who now expresses nothing but "bloom[s] in [her] own throat" (*BL* 45), a reference both to the throat cancer that killed Wright's mother and to the plant stalks that subsequently grow through and appropriate her remains.

When one's life is characterised by the compulsion to describe a world that can never be adequately described, as the poet-figure's is, this silence could be welcome. He claims that he would "gladly close [his] mouth and whisper to no one" (*BY* 14). At the same time, this state represents the kind of silent oblivion that we see Wright's "I"-figure turn from more often than embrace. Just as the successful pilgrim must relinquish selfhood upon salvific union with the divine, the dead self is lost through union with the underlying order of the earth. Once again, the completion of knowledge turns out to be muteness, sublimation, even annihilation.

In "Disjecta Membra", we are told that, in death:

Nothing regenerates us, or shapes us again from the dust.

Nothing whispers our name in the night.

Still we must praise you, nothing,

still we must call to you.

Our sin is our lack of transparency. (*BZ* 75)

Here, as elsewhere in Wright's poetry, "nothing" has a definite identity and is an active subject. What appears initially to be a denunciation of restitution in death is actually a

statement of agency; it is not that we are *not* “shape[d] again from the dust” (*BZ* 75): it is rather that we are regenerated, reshaped and remembered specifically by the negative quality of the invisible. We persist in or as “nothing”. This “nothing” corrects the speaker’s “sin” or “lack of transparency” (*BZ* 75), the source of his “verbal hunger” (*SHS* 63). Similarly, in “Homage to Cesare Pavese” (a reimagining of Pavese’s poem “Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi” [“Death will come and will have your eyes”]) we are told that death, in which “You say nothing, ~ and nobody speaks to you”, “will be like stopping the sin” (*OSR* 47). In other words, the poet’s inability to articulate the world he loves, symbolised by a mouth open and groping for words, is remedied in death when the natural world—the thing that can never be adequately spoken—is finally able to be taken in and grasped directly.

Biodegradation surpasses the satisfactions of language by removing the separation between the speaker and the world. The truly “great writer doesn’t write”, we are told in the poem “I Know It Sounds Strange, but It Seems Right to Me” (*OT*). Instead, the perfect writer takes on the meanings of physical things just as the soil infiltrates the dead body so that, both figuratively and literally, “What we see outside ourselves we’ll . . . see inside ourselves” (*CH* 76), “the earth will be dark syllables in our mouths” (*CH* 64). The poet-figure’s “sin” is rectified in death when “nothing himself”, like Stevens’ “Snow Man” (line 14), he becomes perfectly but, it would seem, unknowingly privy to the landscape, capable at last of the poet’s ultimate ideal of “becom[ing] transparent to nature and to God” (Bedient, “Poetry and Silence”). Although this ideal does represent continuity and fulfilment for the poet-figure, it also amounts to complete personal annihilation. As David Garrison notes, “To know everything, Wright suggests, is to know nothing . . . to *know* nothing” (45).

This speechless, oblivious state has interesting implications for Wright’s pilgrim’s relationship with the ever-present dead. Cavitch suggests that one function of elegy in American poetry, including the poetry of decomposition described above, is to supply “American settings for and emplotments of . . . the culturally and psychologically tenacious sensation of being haunted by the dead” (110). This sense of haunting is perpetual in

Wright's poetry; the dead remain an ongoing (albeit aphasic and altered) presence in significant landscapes. The elegiac imagining of the dead provides closure (Crenshaw 3154), but it also sees them go on, still subject to nature and time. In particular, biological transformation returns the dead to the living in the form of natural things, their traces perceptible everywhere. The material amalgamation of the dead into nature allows for their ongoing availability to, and care for, living loved ones. The definitive (and also, perhaps, the most Whitmanesque) moment of haunting in Wright's oeuvre is his "Homage to Paul Cézanne" sequence:

The dead are with us to stay.

Their shadows rock in the back yard, so pure, so black,

Between the oak tree and the porch.

Over our heads they're huge in the night sky.

In the tall grass they turn with the zodiac.

Under our feet they're white with the snow of a thousand years.

.....

The dead fall around us like rain.

They come down from the last cloud in the late light for the last time

And slip through the sod.

They lean uphill and face north.

Like grass,

They bed toward the sea, they break toward the setting sun. (*SC* 7, 9)

Belying the poem's title, this is not after all an homage to a particular person (Kinzie 40). Rather, the metamorphosis of the dead in the landscape has erased their individual identities while magnifying the impression of their omnipresence. The abiding dead, who are both

absent and present, embody the all-pervading past and all else that is “lost, invisible and untouchable but essential” (Johnson 225).

In Wright’s poetry, death is also treated as an initiation into the ultimate order and truth (or meaninglessness) of things. If the ultimate order is implicit in the landscape, the dead, by entering the landscape, enter into its truth. Thus, in “Scar Tissue” it seems that the dead perceive the eternal Absolute in nature: “Whatever the root sees in the dark is infinite. / Whatever the dead see is the same” (*ST* 33-34). In the poem “Anniversary”, which marks the anniversary of someone’s death, the speaker tells the deceased, “There’s only one secret in this life that’s worth knowing, / And you found it. ~ I’ll find it too” (*CT* 33).

The landscape seems pregnant with meaning that it strives to express, unsuccessfully extending itself or its message towards humanity. For example, in “The Monastery at Vršac”, “Little signals of dust rise uninterpreted from the road. / The grass drones in its puddle of solitude” (*SC* 40); in “Star Turn”, the stars “whisper their little songs” as “Nightly they give us their dumb show, nightly they flash us / Their message and melody” (*AP* 7), while in “Little Apocalypse” “The clouds assemble and mumble their messages” (*BY* 62). At times, it seems that the landscape conveys what lies beyond or on “the other side” precisely because it is infused with the dead, who constitute an aspect of that reality and, presumably, have access to it. At other times, it seems that the dead, by way of their assimilation into the landscape, have simply been appropriated into its signifying. It is not always clear whether the dead *are* what the landscape communicates, or whether they merely become the substance it communicates *through*.

For example, the landscape’s expressiveness is frequently described in Wright’s poems as textual or inscribed; natural elements in the poems, as St. John notes, “often appear in the act of ‘writing’ themselves across the face of the earth or the sky” (xviii). The dead become part of the landscape’s text, which, as in “Ostinato and Drone”, is the absent *Logos* that is encountered only through silent unknowing. In “Black Zodiac”, the dead become the

landscape's words and alphabet, saying whatever it is that the landscape "says" in
unknowing silence:

We go to our graves with secondary affections,
Second-hand satisfaction, half-souled,
star charts demagnetized.
We go in our best suits. The birds are flying. Clouds pass.
Sure we're cold and untouchable,
but we harbor no ill will.
No tooth tuned to resentment's fork,
we're out of here, and sweet meat.
Calligraphers of the disembodied, God's word-wards,
What letters will we illuminate?
Above us, the atmosphere,
The nothing that's nowhere, signs on, and waits for our beck and call.
Above us, the great constellations sidle and wince,
The letters undarken and come forth,
Your X and my X.

The letters undarken and they come forth. (BZ 66)

The "second-hand" reality of the living—translated, as it is, through things and
language—is replaced by the cold and unfeeling signifying of the dead, who become written
letters illuminating the world, God and the nothing (which may be one and the same).
"[R]eturned / Through the dry thread of the leaf, the acorn's root", the dead speak the same
"other language" wielded by God (CT 20). They are in a new proximity to language, having
gained a perspective that makes them privy to the essence of reality in a unique way:

Their glasses let loose, and grain by grain return to the riverbank.
They point to their favorite words
Growing around them, revealed as themselves for the first time:

They stand close to the meanings and take them in. (SC 4)

Garrison suggests that, for these dead, words have “thingness”: “Language itself is explicitly imaged as physical, not cognitive” (44). In “The Ghost of Walter Benjamin Walks at Midnight” we are told that the world is indeed “an untranslatable language ~ without words or parts of speech. / It’s a language of objects / Our tongues can’t master” (SS 41). In death, however, having relinquished our own voices to the voiceless signifying of the landscape, we become the objects that constitute the “words” of the world’s language, able at last to take their meanings into ourselves once the landscape has engulfed the decomposed body. “The dead, translated as they are into rocks, and stones, and trees, do ‘take in’, or perhaps take on, the ‘meanings’ about them, grain by grain” Garrison writes; “in short, they become (the meaning of) the world” (44).

Becoming the landscape, becoming an unspeakable language, thus represents becoming one with the invisible. It is similar to union with the divine except that this Absolute is imagined as impersonal and not housed in some heavenly realm but inherent in the earth itself. In “The Fever Toy”, for example, which describes an act of suicide (Denham, *The Early Poetry* 29), we see that in death there is a loss of the self to the “blue [read “divine”] embrace” of an unfamiliar “true” language (HF 37):

And this is how it begins.
This is the way your true name
Returns and returns again,
Your sorrow becoming a foreign tongue,
Your body becoming a foreign tongue,
Blue idiom, blue embrace. (HF 37)

In their emphatic silence, the dead seem especially sympathetic toward the plight of the tongue-tied poet. In the fourth section of “Homage to Paul Cézanne”—the section that is most recognisably a tribute to the great painter—the poet-figure depicts his poetry as an

abstract painting. Daubing the dead—who embody both the landscape and that which lies beyond the landscape—onto the canvas, he actually obstructs his own sight and transcendent capability with heavy-handed, opaque slabs of colour:

The dead are a cadmium blue.

We spread them with palette knives in broad blocks and planes.

We layer them stroke by stroke

In steps and ascending mass, in verticals raised from the earth.

.....

And so we are come between, and cry out,

And stare up at the sky and its cloudy planes (*SC* 6)

Later restating that “The dead are a cadmium blue, and they understand” (*SC* 6), the speaker here demonstrates that even one simple aspect of the invisible reality that the dead comprehend and stand in for—the colour blue—is clouded by his best-intentioned representation, which ultimately comes between the artist and the thing itself. Not unfamiliar with this predicament, the dead provide comfort in the promise that it will be surmounted by wordless unknowing union after death. For the poet-figure, Vendler suggests, there is reassurance in imagining a “voice that cannot be stilled by death or the passage of time” in the form of loved ones and artistic masters that linger like ghosts in names, houses, graves and significant dates (“Charles Wright” 14-15).

The landscape is seen to be populated by the dead and rich with their gestures and messages; they appear attentive and affectionate and available for attention and affection, an inviting prospect. However, the dead remain elusive in that the message they have received and become is illegible to the living. Subject to the same untranslatability as the rest of the landscape, the dead contribute to the sense of the invisible as an inaccessible meaning or a truth withheld. They seem stubbornly uncommunicative at times. For example, speaking of

an impression of the invisible, a “sudden absence of something”, in the poem “Wednesday Morning” the “I”-figure notes that

The strict vocabulary of the dead has a word for it,
This stillness, that still escapes us
like breath, like grain through our fingers.
But like the birds, they are mum.
And like the horses, and like the wind,
they stay that way. (BY 58)

Similarly, in the poem “Like the New Moon, My Mother Drifts Through the Night Sky”, the ghostly mother both embodies and withholds the longed-for knowledge: “She knows what I’m looking for, / Partially her, ~ partially what she comes back not to tell me” (SS 60).

In “Homage to Paul Cézanne”, the dead’s perfectly transparent language communicates their absence:

At night, in the fish-light of the moon, the dead wear our white shirts
To stay warm, and litter the fields.
We pick them up in the mornings, dewy pieces of paper and scraps of cloth.
Like us, they refract themselves. Like us,
They keep on saying the same thing, trying to get it right.
Like us, the water unsettles their names.
.....
They reach up from the ice plant.
They shuttle their messengers through the oat grass.
Their answers rise like rust on the stalks and the spidery leaves.

We rub them off our hands. (SC 3)

The dead are “refracted” and “unsettled” by the water-like forces of change, which see them transformed into something else. They express themselves in the form of leaves and oat grass,

reminiscent of Whitman's "so many uttering tongues" of grass ("Song of Myself" 6.119), yet these untranslated vegetational gestures are incomprehensible to us and we, perhaps unwittingly, discard them, "rub[bing] them off our hands" (*SC* 3). The dead "point to their favourite words / Growing around them, revealed as themselves for the first time: / They stand close to the meanings and take them in" (*SC* 4) but, as Bruce Bond points out, it is unclear whether it is the dead or the words that are "revealed as themselves" in this passage. What is revealed of both is "their absence": "[l]ike the dead, language [is] something half-there, its meanings withdrawn into an otherworld of deferral and loss" (Bond, "Metaphysics of the Image"). Whereas human language defers the things it names, never actualising them, the perfect language reclaimed by the dead defers the speakers and their words because both are absented by the actualisation of the signified itself. For this reason, flawless translation between the two languages is impossible: pure language erases the speaker, whereas the poet-figure's descriptions only represent the things described and so introduce a profound absence, the spectre of a final ground of meaning that is the invisible.

The landscape's repetitiveness can be read as the dead's struggle to communicate themselves to the living. That they "keep on saying the same thing, trying to get it right" (*SC* 3), for example, makes them "like us" or, more specifically, like the poet-figure who claims he "never did get it right" (*BY* 13). However, what the dead cannot articulate is their self (which they have relinquished), whereas what the poet cannot express is the true language of nature (which the dead have become). They are alike in that both lose their meanings to language, something Garrison elucidates:

How we make the self present to the self, how we come to the world and say it, how we articulate feeling through form, are acts of neither reflection nor translucence, but of refraction. . . . And the words themselves are the cause of this refraction (42-43)

The ineffable remains ineffable because knowledge of the truth cannot co-exist with a self that could speak it. For Bond, this "refraction" points to the fact that language, even perfect

language, “never gets to the bottom of anything”, so that all we can “know of eternity is an eternal desire to know” (“Metaphysics of the Image”).

The profusion and reiteration of natural forms may even be a part of the dead’s message, the way in which they “get it right”: they repeat themselves because that is what the landscape does, perpetuating the inescapable pattern of return and of repeating rise and fall that is the only reliable rule in Wright’s poetic universe. Thus, the dead “repeat to themselves” the syllables of “the music of everything” with which they have contact (SC 4), which is the cycle of days and seasons and the superfluity of natural forms. This abundance and self-same multiplicity *is* their truth: from their privileged place at the heart of being, the dead show that the world is essentially profuse, cyclical, turbulent and arbitrary.

The dead that haunt the landscape, flickering between presence and absence, provide a glimpse of the invisible. They exist at, and provide a window into, the intersection of language, the landscape and the other, from which the invisible emerges. In this respect, Bond is right to identify the dead as “emissaries of the unseen, . . . unnervingly tangible, if only to make us increasingly aware of their unbridgeable distance” (“Metaphysics of the Image”). The dead provide a humanly-recognisable form for what is a ubiquitous emptiness in Wright’s landscapes, acting as addressees for the speaker’s ongoing prayer to a broader, compound absence. The dead’s reconstitution as the language at the heart of being reveals it to be a foundation more akin to *différance* than *Logos*. They illustrate, by becoming the text of the landscape (which points beyond itself, perhaps to nothing), the ongoing deferral that underlies our sense of real things and evokes grand unseen truths. It even seems at times that the underlying order into which they are initiated is simply the landscape’s propensity to imply the existence of an underlying order while actually saying nothing. Death thus implicates the dead in (or reconciles them to) a cosmic farce. Either way, the “larger story” that they illuminate is the undernarrative of Wright’s whole body of work: a pattern of postponement and deflection, of endless repetition and non-arrival out of which some kind of meaning—just not final meaning—is born. The dead are also markers of the longing for a

lost past, presence and fullness, and the promise of (re)attainment keeps the circle turning, keeps the search going in pursuit of an ideal ending.

It appears in *Littlefoot* that the landscape constitutes an ineffable language containing the truth of all things that “we’ll come to know” in the silent unknowing of death (*LF* 60); it is a language and a truth that is ongoing and eternally present rather than geared towards some coming and final fulfilment or redemption. It is also a language that “says nothing” (*LF* 60), a language rooted in *différance*, in the endless movement of “towards” and not in some past or future realisation. That movement constitutes the pilgrim’s spiritual journey and, the landscape suggests, is his eternal fate.

“There Comes Another End”: Repetition and Return

Return is inescapable in Wright’s poetry. It is also a crucial motive, whether return to the earth, return to the past, the return to or of loved ones or the “return to formlessness, / Beginning of all things” (*BZ* 68). The hope that “Whatever has been will be again, ~ in the mind, in the world’s flow” (*LF* 26)—that “Whatever has been will be again, ~ unaltered, ever-returning” (*AP* 51)—provides an antidote to the speaker’s suspicion that “Whatever has given you comfort, / Whatever has rested you, / Whatever untwisted your heart ~ is what you will leave behind” (“October, Mon Amour”). Some of the “endings” in Wright’s poetry, however, seem to enact not simply a return or reattainment but a re-beginning: the opportunity to live one’s life all over again from the start. In one sense, this is a form of resolution that befits the reality his poetry propounds, in which cycles inevitably repeat, perhaps endlessly. On the other hand, such a repetitious “ending” can be seen not only to fall short of the triumphant closure of a paradigmatic “Paradise Regained” but to subvert the value of all paradisaic ideals by introducing the possibility of a Nietzschean cycle of eternal return, a sort of “Paradise Regained . . . for now”. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, in imagining ends Wright answers the questions implied by his pilgrim’s narrative of seeking: the question of what it all means, which is also the question of whether or where it is going. Imagining his pilgrim starting all over again after his death arguably negates this question.

In *Littlefoot* Part 28 we see evidence of the world's patterns of repetition in new growth—"The stiff new bristles of the spruce tree"—and in a passing "rain shower" that returns as a "thunderstorm" (*LF* 66). The speaker also captures the underlying sense of decline implied by the coming of winter: "The overheated vocabulary of the sun / Has sunk to just a few syllables, ~ fewer than yesterday. / And fewer still tomorrow" (*LF* 67). This cooling corresponds with the machinations of entropy: "the little engines of change at work / Unexpectedly in the atmosphere ~ as well as our lives . . . / Pulling toward the meridian, then over the hill" (*LF* 66). Yet the poem is dominated by the impression of circling, like that of the Yeatsian "yellow-tail hawk" that "circle[s] and telescope[s], / Eventually to noose back down / And crumble, ~ only to rise" (*LF* 68) and the reappearance of "Ghosts from our former lives, ~ ghosts who could carry us still", who "brought us here" and who will one day, we are told, "take us far away" (*LF* 67). The poem ends with the revelation that

After the end of something, there comes another end,
This one behind you, and far away.
Only a lifetime can get you to it,

and then just barely. (*LF* 69)

This passage fits with the motif of heading forwards to the beginning described in Chapter Two of this thesis. This towards/away-from movement sees the pilgrim's footprints as graves "dogging [his] footsteps" (*BL* 38), coming to get him from behind as he returns to his birthplace. In "Looking at Pictures", he says of his backward-looking life,

We stare at the backs of our own heads continually
Walking in cadence into the past,
Great-grandfathers before their suicides,

Venice in sunshine, Venice in rain (*OSR* 69)

This movement renders both the beginning and the end "ends" of sorts, depending on the direction from which you approach them: "The start of things, and the end of things, / Two

unmarked graves" (*LF* 82). If your end signals the reattainment of your lost beginning, then the beginning becomes the end "behind you" (*LF* 69), exactly a lifetime's distance in the past. The moments of coming from nothing or going into nothing overlap or are interchangeable, perhaps because, as equally impassable boundary-points, they rebound the traveller back in the direction he came from to retrace the same path over and over. Or perhaps the journey is circular, in which case "time's double-door" constitutes both the beginning and the end, so that "The only way out is the way in" ("Time and the Centipedes").

Life is presented as reversible and re-liveable in "Mount Caribou at Night", which presents "everything flowing and folding back / And starting again" (*SC* 14). The poem begins with the imagined moment of birth from the grave, when "one man sits bolt upright, / A little bonnet of dirt and bunch grass above his head" (*SC* 14). It ends with the reunion of all the generations in a past-future that is both heaven and a state of pre-incarnation, in which the newborn's caul is also the risen saint's monastic hood:

taking it back

To the future we once occupied, and will wake to again, ourselves

And our children's children snug in our monk's robes,

Pushing the cauly hoods back, ready to walk out

Into the same night and the meadow grass, in step and on time. (*SC* 14)

Coming from and returning to this state, perhaps endlessly, the deceased/unborn are depicted as gathering like actors backstage, waiting for the curtain to rise so they can reprise their roles in a play.

Endings that see Wright's pilgrim starting life again are essentially hopeful. If this is what the afterlife holds, there is the possibility of getting things "right" the second time around or eventually. The speaker asks in "A Journal of Southern Rivers", "How many lives must one have, / How many chances, before the right one is played out?" (*XA* 33). It is

questionable what getting it right would entail outside the context of a salvific design or *telos*; perhaps, as he states in the same poem, “to face all and not shirk” (*XA* 33).

An alternative perspective is presented in “Yard Journal”, where we are told that,

The past is never the past:

it lies like a long tongue

We walk down into the moist mouth of the future, where new teeth

Nod like stars around us,

And winds that itch us, and plague our ears,

sound curiously like the old songs. (*ZJ* 3)

Here, the past is not the future destination but merely continuous, perhaps interchangeable, with it. The future promises destruction, heralded by the familiar agents of entropic decay and destruction that are the erosive wind and the devouring mouth of time. The speaker recognises that his preoccupation with the past paves his way towards his end and that he mistakes his future disappearance for a return to his past. His obsession with regaining his past is a futile attempt to circumvent mortality: “We’re all born with a one-way ticket, of course”, he acknowledges in “January II”; “Thus do we take our deaths up on our shoulders and walk and walk, / Trying to get back” (*BY* 49). This suggests that the backward-looking orientation in Wright’s poetry is a mark of aversion that points to the pilgrim’s inability to face his death.

Given that an element of return to the beginning is common to all of Wright’s ends, what ultimately distinguishes the ends in his poetry is whether they suggest that a “way out” exists. On the one hand, there may be a “somewhere-else” or final destination, be it non-existence or heavenly redemption, that retroactively defines life’s meaning. On the other, it may be that there is no attainable outside or end perspective from which the world’s churning can be perceived as directional or purposive, and that instead we find ourselves eternally carried along in its rise and fall, either reliving our lives over endlessly or being absorbed into the earth’s unceasing natural order of rise and fall.

In Wright's poem, "Circumference Is Only the Half of It", the other half of it is, apparently, linear: "everyone's growing older" and death approaches, at which point we seek to reconcile the world's comings and goings with a sense of completion ("Circumference" *OT*). To see our lives as meaningful we must be able to perceive the linear whole, it seems. One of the theses from Walter Benjamin's essay "On the Concept of History", to which this poem seems to allude, states:

the past would fully befall only a resurrected humanity. Said another way: only for a resurrected humanity would its past, in each of its moments, be citable. Each of its lived moments becomes a citation *à l'ordre du jour* [in the order of the day]—whose day is precisely that of the Last Judgement. (iii)

Benjamin suggests that only from a perspective after the end, in the afterlife—"a resurrected humanity"—does life make sense (iii). Thus, in Wright's poem,

The past puts the here and now to shame,
and vice versa.

Only the future sees them both for what they are,
nobody noticing, people coming and going. ("Circumference" *OT*)

While the past vastly outshines the present day, and the present day fails to do justice to the great promise of the past, an objective standpoint from the end would reveal the order of our days. However, in Wright's poetry it seems that the only order is one of repetitive motion—the same pattern or "circumference" that prevents him from ever achieving an outside perspective. There is, it is suggested, no validation for our linear lives in the world's mighty turning, which is directionless and minded by no great overseer.

What such a pattern of repetition might mean, if it can be said to mean anything at all, remains ambiguous: do we read in it a rule of continual loss or one of perpetual return? This is the question that Wright negotiates endlessly in his poetry, coming always back to the prospect of transcendence, back to the cruel facts of entropy, back to the landscape, home of the beloved dead. His endings, which are his answers to the question, are only ever

provisional, which is all the churning world allows. Hence the restless circling of his pilgrim
“I”, who directs his gaze and his longing upwards, then downward, then to the world around
him, over and over again, never to arrive anywhere once and for all.

Conclusion: “And What Does It Come To, Pilgrim?”

To appreciate and understand Wright’s poetry fully, it is necessary to recognise its interconnectedness as one impressive body of work and to appreciate the centrality of pilgrimage to Wright’s whole oeuvre. This is what I have established in the course of this thesis. Wright’s poems present an ongoing intellectual and spiritual search or pilgrimage, tracing a course between belief and unbelief, epiphany and disillusionment, attainment and loss, hope and despair, sky-gazing and fixation on the natural landscape, and then back again. The search mirrors and is shaped by ever-present patterns of wave-like motion and circling; these mutually reinforcing sequences of rise-and-fall together participate in a model of the nature of things as vacillating, non-linear and unending. This is the perspective that underpins Wright’s work and shapes his undernarrative of thwarted pilgrimage. As I have made clear, the object of the pilgrimage is always the numinous and elusive other that promises wholeness and completion, whether it is associated with the untouchable origin, an underlying or overarching order and deity, or the definitive end. This other, in its many guises, I have called “the invisible”. It represents the consistent, motivating concern of Wright’s body of work.

As an example of plot, Wright’s undernarrative parodies emplotment, eschewing linear development in favour of an endlessly repeatable cycle of spiritual sensitivity and seeking, thereby challenging the model of teleological existence progressing towards completion that classical emplotment presents. Wright’s poetry engages with a modern-day worldview characterised by agnosticism, an awareness of the limitations of language and an apparent dearth of absolutes. It suggests that experience resists emplotment, that language cannot provide access to unquestionable truths and that the landscape perhaps contains no ground of final meaning. Instead, the invisible gives form to an absence at the heart of the narrative, appearing at moments in which the gap is felt between what a sense of narrative completion would require and what is actually available. On the other hand, as a modernist portrait of scepticism and futility after the death of God, Wright’s undernarrative is haunted

by a still-potent spectre of the Absolute, demonstrating the tenacity of expectations of wholeness, narrative closure and design in our contemporary modes of understanding and meaning-making. The invisible marks the outline of and longing for the wholeness and presence that a conclusive plot would provide; these things continue to exert an influence on the “I”-figure and motivate his pilgrimage, regardless of its perceived futility. Thus, Wright’s narrative of endless ups-and-downs of epiphany and doubt does not preclude the possibility of narrative completion in the form of a future union with the desired Absolute. The invisible is experienced as elusive precisely because it continues to be expected.

In Wright’s poetry, as long as the movement continues, life endures, and with it a capacity for meaning—even potentially final meaning—of some sort. Finality and stasis, whether in the form of union with the invisible or the completion of entropic decline, always equal annihilation. We can understand the world in Wright’s poetry as having the condition of writing, in a Derridean sense, rather than *Logos*. Perceiving the world as *Logos* means understanding it as having an inherent intelligibility, meaning and presence by virtue of its being the perfectly expressed thoughts of a divine intellect (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 13). As divine speech, in other words, the world’s meaning and its being are ideally the same, are present to the human onlooker and are available to be conveyed, without transformation or loss of presence, into human thought and corresponding speech (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 11-12). Yet in Wright’s poetry the world is frequently likened to a written text that, at its heart, expresses not a definitive presence but an absence. Moreover, the poet-figure’s own language prevents him from being “transparent” to the true meaning and presence of the material and invisible worlds.

We might understand all this with reference to Derrida’s position that writing encompasses all forms of signification, structuring and representation in Western metaphysics, even in the mind, including the prior discontinuities (*e.g.* between self and world, between one word or referent and another) that make this possible; encompasses, that is to say, all that we experience and know within the prevailing system of knowledge and the

conditions of our knowing it (*Of Grammatology* 9). Yet there is no transcendent presence behind writing (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 49); writing instead embodies *différance*: the “disappearance of presence” in the difference between words and referents, which is their only identity and which is grasped only in relation to other referents in an endless process of deferral and play of meaning (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 159). Derrida’s deconstruction thus reveals writing to be ungrounded in any transcendental or irreducible reality and, by equating the whole of Western metaphysics to writing, effectively denies the idea of any real, final and definitive sense or presence on which our metaphysics might rest (*Of Grammatology* 10). Signification rests instead on an abyss (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 163).

Similarly, in Wright’s poetry, achieving wholeness or encountering the invisible and the meaning of all things means confronting the “emptiness at the heart of being” (*CH* 17). The ramification of this post-structuralist worldview is that the Absolute becomes the invisible—a mere spectre of meaning, marking simultaneously the motivating influence and the absence of a final ground of meaning. This fundamental meaning sustains the pilgrimage, but it is not an attainable end-point as it is not a presence or positive entity. Nonetheless, the pilgrimage is ongoing, embodying what Derrida calls “play”: the movement opened up by the absence of a final meaning, which generates meaning without being grounded in or ever arriving at an absolute meaning (*Of Grammatology* 50). The world is always experienced in relation to an absence or lack, but this is the space in which life and movement becomes possible. Re/union, wholeness, the absolute presence of all reality—visible and invisible—would all equal death.

In Chapter One of this thesis I explicated comprehensively, as no other scholar has done, the recurrent symbols and terms for the invisible in Wright’s poetry. I illuminated the cumulative identity of this reality in his poems as something at once other, absolute, fundamental and absent. I suggested that the invisible constitutes the ideal principle of wholeness and order required for a sense of completion in a given context, as well as the noticeable absence of such a principle. Among other things, the invisible is synonymous with

the “idea of God” in Wright’s poetry, representing the appeal of religious belief and the emptiness that remains upon the departure of belief.

As I demonstrated in subsequent chapters, the presence of this invisible—which would be tantamount to the ideal “full presence” Derrida sees Western metaphysics striving to uphold—resides in the past, in the future end, and in transcending time and change through a revelation of, or union with, the Absolute. The undernarrative in Wright’s poetry traces his pilgrim’s inability to grasp his origins or death or transcend the visible world, thus revealing the impossibility of ever identifying a fundamental truth or grasping a causal presence. In Chapter Two, I discussed “The Southern Cross” to illustrate the instability of conceptual origins in Wright’s poetry. His memory poems present the foundation of being as an elusive and ethereal ideal. Furthermore, the conflation of the idyllic origin with heaven in Wright’s poetry means that his pilgrim’s journey towards transcendence has a unique direction insofar as passing time drags him away from paradise, while at the same time conveying him back to his birthplace/s. In Chapter Three, I explored the inapprehensible nature of the invisible with reference to Wright’s long poem, *The Journal of the Year of the Ox*. In this poem, life in time is shown to be dominated by patterns of repetition and decline, while the invisible object is depicted as a crystalline constancy incompatible with the very movement of life and time within which the seeker is able to seek it. The pilgrim also sabotages his own attempts at transcendence, demonstrating a reluctance to enter into union with the Absolute despite his repeated attempts to do so. In Chapter Four, I categorised the ends depicted in Wright’s poetry, which variously see the pilgrim united with the Absolute in heaven, consign him to decomposition in the earth or suggest that life has no closure or significance other than death. All forms of conclusive end amount to the sublimation or erasure of the pilgrim, so that completion of his narrative becomes a troubling prospect and one that he defers. His removing ends from the equation by imagining an eternal repetition of the same is equally problematic with regards to establishing the meaning and *telos* of his

world. The plurality of ends in Wright's poetry indicates the uncertainty and supplementarity of all sources of completion.

Both narrative and the invisible in Wright's poetry represent a design conveying a stable and final truth. Emplotment upholds coherence, wholeness and closure in contriving to establish the full significance of events, while ideas of the Absolute represent the full presence and significance of reality. The pilgrimage towards the invisible thus typifies the human desire for wholeness both in terms of the completeness of a plot and the total intelligible presence of the world. Yet Wright's open-ended undernarrative of seeking but never attaining the invisible brings the possibility of wholeness and closure into question. Beginning, middle and end, which represent progress towards or possession of the object of pilgrimage, are never definitively realised. Origins and ends act as loci of fulfilment that are never reached. Instead, Wright's narrative mirrors natural patterns of repetition. Any apprehension of the invisible is unsustainable, as it is always undone by the continuation of time and life, yet the alternative finality of possession and complete being represents death.

Wright's fame is assured, but articulating comprehensively the meanings of his ongoing, self-defeating narrative—as I have done here—allows us to appreciate better his major contribution to modernist poetry and its ongoing relevance to the tensions and attitudes that inform the contemporary milieu.

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