

Despair and Grace in the Poetry of Franz Wright

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Nietzsche, says in his essay “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” that “only by forgetting that he himself is an artistically creating subject does man live with any repose, security, and consistency. If but for an instant he could escape from the prison walls of this faith, his “self consciousness” would be immediately destroyed.”¹ This conflict has been exposed in the lives of many artists: Van Gogh, Bach, Blake, Woolf, and Plath are a few recognizable names of artists who sought “repose, security, and consistency” through their pursuit of art and who also wrestled with psychological consequences of an awakened self-consciousness. In a more contemporary context, the 2004 Pulitzer prize winner Franz Wright (1953-2015) can easily be placed among these figures as his poetry, and his quest to record moments of spiritual transcendence, document his protracted struggle with mental illness, drug addiction, and loneliness. In addition to the Pulitzer, Wright has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts grants, and numerous other awards and acknowledgements. His many collections of poetry include, *Walking to Martha's Vineyard* for which was awarded the Pulitzer prize, and translations of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke and René Char. Wright's poetry can be spare, painful, at times sardonic, but buried within are shards of brutal frankness, searching and elegant moments of understanding. But Wright delivers more than just confessions of hard times. His poems explore the uncertainties and certainties of his Christian faith, his fragile childhood, his father James Wright also a Pulitzer prize recipient, and his recurrent struggles with addiction and institutionalization. Mostly, however, they teach us about grace, gratitude, and the hopeful survival in world of isolation and occasional benevolence.

Harvard University's Department of English Professor Helen Vendler, reflected

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B Leitch et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 769.

that “poets invite us into their volumes by the titles they choose; and at the end of a poet’s life,” after they have regretfully passed.² Glancing over the titles of Franz Wright’s collection, much is revealed of his lifelong themes and values as a poet. His book titles include *The Earth Without You* (1980), *The One Whose Eyes Open When You Close Your Eyes* (1982), *Entry in an Unknown Hand* (1989), *The Night World and the Word Night* (1993), *Rorschach Test* (1995), *Ill Lit* (1998), *The Beforelife* (2001), *Walking to Marth’s Vineyard* (2003), *God’s Silence* (2006), *Wheeling Motel* (2009) *Kindertotenwald* (2011) and *F* (2016). From such a list, one can gather an impression that Wright’s poetry may be informed by inward reflection, isolation, and mental health. But when looking at the poems themselves a clearer understanding of Wright’s creative genesis begins to emerge as he struggles to say “the absolute unsayableness/ of the simplest thing in pain/ the way it was, exactly/as it was/ when [he] began.”³

Wright and his Christian Faith

Wright is never shy about his Christian faith and many of his poems possess fragments of his ontological universe. One does not find biblical quotations, but rather the principles of his faith. From one of Wright’s last collections, *F* (2016) the poem *Crumpled-up Note Blowing Away* exemplifies Wright’s profundity and terse narrative style. The poem is simultaneously about the impermanence of written note (and writing), and the poet’s belief in his earthly, transitory existence, if not verifying his absolute belief in an afterlife.

I’ve said all that
 I had to say.
 In writing.
 I signed my name.

2 Helen Vendler, *The Ocean, the Bird and the Scholar: Essays on Poets and Poetry*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 211.

3 Franz Wright, *Wheeling Motel*, “Circle Drawn in Water,” (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2011), 49.

It's death's move.

It can have mine, too.

It's a perfect June morning,
and I just turned eighteen;

I can't even believe
what I feel like today.

Here am I, Lord,
sitting on a suitcase,
waiting for my train.

The sun is shining.
I'm never coming back.

The last line "I'm never coming back" can be understood dualistically: he is leaving for a journey which excludes his return—a youthful Wright running away from home; or it can be understood as acceptance of his dying and inability to return to those from whom he is departing. Wright was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and died May 14, 2015 just before publication of the book, *F*. Yet even without this biographical insight, there is a sense of joy, or at the very least a sense of comfort, in knowing that he will not return.

This assurance of a Christian afterlife is a noticeable recurrence throughout Wright's poetry. In fact, this cornerstone of faith has been alluded to by, Helen Vendler, while writing on Franz Wright in the *New York Review of Books*. The critic noted that as Wright "became an adult, he descended—via alcohol, drugs, and psychiatric hospitalization—to a condition of rage, despair, and inability to write. His guilt and remorse were profound, and his alienation and loneliness became unspeakable. Miraculously, he was then enabled—through marriage to his wife (a former student) and a conversion to Catholicism—to come back from catatonic depression to sobriety, sanity, work, and writing. This last state is understandably represented as a condition of intense grat-

itude and happiness.”⁴ This confidence and affirmation from recovery and in his beliefs can be seen in the opening poem “Year One” of *Walking to Martha’s Vineyard*.

I was still standing
on a northern corner.

Moonlit winter clouds the color of the desperation of wolves.

Proof
of Your existence? There is nothing
but.

The poem is briefer than other of Wright’s and extraneous details have been purposely cleared away, but this bare structure and truncated declarative assurance in something divine, accentuates his message: a forceful embrace of faith. In his own words, Wright has said “I believe that God works through other human beings. I see this all the time in drug addiction and alcoholism recovery. We are all the agents of this energy—love—that comes to one another, but sometimes in such a shockingly clear and overwhelming way that it can completely change your life.”⁵ Wright worked with addicts and grieving children after his own recovery.

There are other poems that possess this affirmation and the poet’s quest to exist in this state of beatitude. In Wright’s 2008 collection *God’s Silence* the poem “Why is the Winter Light” the poet writes:

Empty me of the bitterness and disappointment of being nothing but
myself

4 Helen Vendler, “From the Homicidal to the Ecstatic,” *The New York Review of Book*, October 11, 2007. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/10/11/from-the-homicidal-to-the-ecstatic/>

5 Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler, “A Conversation with Franz Wright,” *Image Journal*, Issue 51. <https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-franz-wright/>

Immerse me in the mystery of reality
Fill me with love for the truly afflicted
that hopeless love, if need be
make me one of them again —
Awaken me to the reality of this place
and from the longed-for or remembered place
And more than thus, behind each face
induct, oh introduce me in —
to the halting disturbed ungrammatical soundless
words of others' thoughts
not the drivel coming out of our mouths
Blot me out, fill me with nothing but consciousness
of the holiness, the meaning
of these unseeable, all
these unvisitable worlds which surround me:
others' actual thoughts — everything
I can't perceive yet
know

know it is there.

Wright's desire to be filled "with nothing but consciousness/of the holiness" so that he may know the "unseeable", "unvisitable", and the unperceivable is based on his belief that there is a force of life beyond what we are able to fully comprehend. In an interview with poet and writer Mary Karr, Wright explicates this consciousness in simpler terms. For the poet, becoming consciously aware is like: "being snatched out of the fire is simply to wake up to what was there all along. Like in Whitman. Whitman is the great poet of this: 'Who speaks of miracles?' I know nothing but miracles. Everything is a miracle."⁶ Moreover, resurrection, awakening, transcendence figure prominently in his work. From the prose poem "Peach Tree, the poet reminds us too, how we "wait

there alone with everyone else in the darkness before we were born. How did we ever drift into this chill state? I'm feeling kind of bent in half myself; and I see us both bound for the fire, lone peach tree, then nothing, then pure spirit again, even Lazarus has to die-what have I done, what have I been so afraid of all my life?"

Paralysis, fear, passivity are hallmarks of Wright's disengagement of life and as he writes through these challenges we begin to see how writing help to establish a medium for recovery. In a book review of "Wheeling Motel" for the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* by Daisy Fried, the critic points out that "Like many poets, Wright is interested in the human condition—we're all going to die. Unlike many poets, he doesn't have much truck with things that distract us from that condition. Politics, current events, sex, pop culture, food, social interaction and work other than poetry—writing are mostly absent... The poems' speakers are frequently alone at a desk, on a solitary walk or praying—that last act not always distinguishable from the act of writing."⁷

Other Sources of Inspiration

While Wright's Christian faithfulness is recorded frequently in his poems, there are other sources of spiritual comfort and awakening. Often poetry, other poets or the act of writing serve as sources of epiphany. Perhaps unsurprisingly Wright often turns to other poets and philosophers whose spiritual and psychological well runs deep: Basho, Rilke, Nietzsche, Christ, Whitman, Li Po, Rene Char, even his father.

Basho, the famous Japanese traveler of the soul is referenced often. In "Passing Scenes (While Reading Basho)" from *Wheeling Motel* (2009), Wright combines the solace of writing and reading through the act of reading Basho. The poem begins with a train journey to New York as the poet mentally writes a letter to himself.

6 Paul Contino, "Theology Descending: Franz Wright and Mary Karr in Conversation," *Christianity and Literature* Vol. 58 No. 4 (Summer 2009):709.

7 Daisy Fried, "Dark Glamour," Review of *Wheeling Motel* by Franz Wright. *The New York Times*, Sept. 17, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/20/books/review/Fried-t.html>

Meanwhile composing
a letter
to my inner no one.

There were hives at the
edge of a wood.

The mind shines
in the
window

The most beautiful house I ever died in.

Everything's imaginary.

When I hear the dawn gulls cry,
even in New York
I long for New York.

The slender poem is not a haiku, but the influence of the form and the aesthetic mood are evident. The longing one feels among a populated city echoes Basho's sense of detachment he sought in life.⁸ Detachment, isolation, loneliness are not the same but they constitute a sense of separation. There are other Basho references including translations "Three Basho Haibun" with the help of translator-poet Sam Hamill. With these examples, clearly Wright is seeking that thing which lies just beyond the cusp of understanding and articulation.

In Wright's prose poem collection *Kindertotenwald*, a made-up German word

8 Steve Odin, *Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West: Psychic Distance in Comparative Aesthetics*, (University of Hawaii Press. 2001), 269.

which translates roughly to “forest of dead children,”⁹ the poem “The Poet (1644-1694)” explicitly evoke Basho, the physical artifact of writing, and self-awakening. The poem begins: “To suddenly perceive the world as if it were something you had never seen before, and to grasp for an instant, mutely enduring the shock of total comprehension, the outrageous unlikelihood of being here to witness it, and of its being there at all-this is a matter of grace.” Again, Wright explores this heightened moment of realization, as if achieving *satori*, or “the sudden experience of illumination” when one perceives and understands the transitory nature of the world.¹⁰ This idea “to suddenly perceive the world remove the extra space ...is a matter of grace,” is quintessentially Wright. However, the poem also expounds the power of writing literature through a brief scene of a blind girl holding her mother’s hand and “sees” the cherry blossoms – presumably through the written description left by Basho. Wright continues “because someone spent his life watching for them [the blossoms], and preparing to endure once again a condition of illumination, then exercising the mastery that enabled him to store it in its purest form for the benefit of others most of whom were not born yet.” The power of writing not only serves the writer as means of understanding himself, but also as a vehicle of transmission from one generation to another, which as the reader reads and understands is a kind of grace in and of itself. Awakening the mind through poetry or writing it is not new. In “A Defence of Poetry” by Percy Bysshe Shelley, the poet tells us [poetry] awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.”¹¹ To stay in this state of awareness is a deeply sought after habit for Wright as he is often eluding to his desire to notice it, and when he does, records it as if to reaffirm his

9 Caitlin Mackenzie, “Review of Franz Wright’s *Kindertotentwald*” by Franz Wright, *The Center for Literary Publishing*, Colorado State University. <https://coloradoreview.colostate.edu/reviews/kindertotentwald/>

10 Earl Roy Miner, Hiroko Odagiri, and Robert E. Morrell, *The Princeton companion to classical Japanese literature*, (Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press, 1988), 296.

11 Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company., 2010), 596.

existence.

Another frequently visited source for Wright is the poet Rainer Maria Rilke whom Wright has translated and uses as a source of creative and spiritual sustainability. Anyone who has read Rilke knows of the passionate, soulful tone his prose and poetry, and Wright's affinity for Rilke's as a spiritual guide is complementary to his own experiences. In the poem "The New Jerusalem" Wright again emphasizes his awareness of divine guidance as he cites Rilke. He writes:

And I knew again, for the millionth time, knew—
lying all alone there in the dark—you
can shut both eyes
 (you can pluck out your eyes), the light
will still be there

Rilke in one of his letters said Christ
is a pointing,
a finger pointing
at something, we are like dogs
who keep barking and lunging
at the hand

Our failure to comprehend life, to appreciate its ephemeral nature, and to acknowledge our illusions of it keep Wright focused on his poetry of discovery.

However, there are other dimensions to Wright's poetry and often his observations of self and life's ephemeral moments arise from more distressing human experiences. Not unlike Keats who understood poetry's utility "to be a friend / to soothe the cares and lift the thoughts of man," Wright uses poetry to ameliorate his mental suffering, or to address the suffering of others. Take for instance the poem "Antipsychotic" with its eerie image of a girl blowing a dandelion in the dark of her room while listening to "some nice cut-your-wrists music." Wright again returns to the moment of awareness

when reality begins to alter, this time not as a spiritual epiphany, but rather as a psychological episode.

And look everything is turning
into something else
(and its true)
Risperdal whisperdoll

all alone in the dark
garden
blowing out a dandelion

The lines starkly depict the drugs progression and culminate in something like an anti-sublime—there is an unsettle beauty in the final image. Awareness is measured by changes in her surroundings, induced by the pharmacological anti-depressant Risperdal, but Wright frequently mixes these psychological moments of awareness with his spiritual epiphanies. The lone image of the girl in a dark garden (her room) provides no resolution other than consequentially accepting her fate to remain in psychosis. There are several Wright poems that explore these private, desperate moments, often with Wright himself as the subject. For example, “Fathers”, a recollection of homelessness and of his father death, encapsulates much of the desperation and mental brinkmanship that accompanies hopelessness. With delicate artistry, Wright simultaneously directly asks for an opportunity to be remade, i.e. a second chance at life, and admits to how closely he came to acting on his suicidal thoughts. Below is an excerpt from “Fathers”.

You

who created the stars and the seas
come down, come down

in spirit, fashion
a new heart

in me, create
me again—

Homeless in Manhattan
the winter of your dying

I didn't have a lot of time
to think about it, trying

to stay alive

To me
it was just the next interesting thing you would do—
that is how cold it was

and how often I walked to the edge of the actual
river to join you

Wright explains in an interview with Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler in *Image Journal*, of a series of childhood events that had a lasting effect on him and his younger brother. Wright says "I had problems partly due to my upbringing and my father's absence. My mother married a man who was very brutal and who abused us physically. He beat up me and my brother. We were shattered from our parents' divorce. I was about eleven or twelve when I got this stepfather, and that kind of finished me off. By the time I was eighteen, I felt like a broken person. I was terrified of the world."¹² These childhood memories serve Wright not as anchor of the past, but rather ways of accessing his unguarded reflections.

Abuse: To My Brother

Just what the world needs, another world.

Just what the world needed, another

sad child-

another tortured mind.

(No one is born sad.)

There's a gladness in everything

when it's first breathing, a

bright naïveté

and a will to be well—

They'll kill it and then go have breakfast.

Separation from divorce and later the impact of the death of his father, James who died from cancer, are sources of much grief for Wright. “I loved my father very much and never stopped grieving the loss of him—” Wright has said when speaking of his father, and his empathy for him can be seen in the poem “Bumming a Cigarette” from *Wheeling Motel*.

I think of my father, the arrow aimed thousands of year ago

striking, abruptly, from behind—

how he struggled to his feet and staggered on awhile,

unendurable pain lodged in his throat for six months,

one more time: of my father who died

a middle-aged man, and of my brother

a middle-aged man who died as a child

12 Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler, “A Conversation with Franz Wright,” *Image Journal*, Issue 51. <https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-franz-wright/><https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-franz-wright/>

and last, myself, died Evert, Mass.
in nineteen ninety-seven
and resurrected by force of love for this brief time.

Wright combined the loss of his father and the figurative deaths of he and his brother, partly from abuse, but also he gives readers his true understanding of death and the power of writing to be “resurrected by force of love for this brief time.” For Wright resurrection is always a possibility. To help reader sympathizes with the people “Jesus just never got around to,” Wright simulates the experience of being admitted to a mental institution. Speaking about the poem “Intake Interview,” Wright explains how he tried “to reproduce [his] 3 a.m. admission to a mental hospital and the sensation of having an obviously indifferent and jaded psychiatrist fall asleep in the middle of asking ...a series of rather idiotic questions.”¹³

What is today's date?
Who is the President?
How great a danger do you pose, on a scale of one to ten?
What does “people who live in glass houses” mean?
Every symphony is a suicide postponed, true or false?
Should each individual snowflake be held accountable for the avalanche?
Name five rivers.
What do you see yourself doing in ten minutes?
If you could have half an hour with your father, what would you say to him?

The lost, the homeless, and the sick serve as vehicles to deliver Wright's aesthetic. In the poem “Pediatric Suicide,” Wright provides a series of declarative statements about the absolution of a child suffering and ultimate submission to metal pain.

13 Anis Shavani, “Poetry: ‘Wheeling Motel’ by Franz Wright,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 4, 2009. <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/book-reviews/2009/10/04/Poetry-Wheeling-Motel-by-Franz-Wright/stories/200910040141>

Being who you are is not a disorder.

Being unloved is not a psychiatric disorder.

I can't find being born in the diagnostic manual.

I can't find being born to a mother incapable of touching you.

The poem continues in this way to its crushing end.

Abandoned naked and thrown to the world is not a disease.

She was unhappy just as I was only not as lucky.

The delicate gratitude found in this poem should not be characterized as cavalier—Wright is keenly aware that his survival was not guaranteed. His struggles required endurance as much as luck, and his will to keep on is interwoven with his poetry. He comments on his limitations to seek perfection, “I had to go, I’m a human being. I’m like everyone else. I’m a human being. It’s OK for me to make mistakes and it doesn’t mean that I’ve lost everything.”¹⁴

It’s important to remember what remains of Wright’s poetry is more than a record of personal struggles. Artistry, sincerity, and trust in love underscore Wright’s poetry as much as his survival and recovery do. However, in a *New Yorker* interview with Alice Quinn, Wright explains the balance he has discovered about poetry and faith, “Art is not a religion. That other human beings are more important than poems would seem obvious to other people. But for me, who depended so terribly on this other activity, this realization came as a surprise.”¹⁵ Wright says in the poem “Publication Date” from *God’s Silence* that as a writer “One of the few pleasures of writing/ is the thought of one’s book in the hands of a kindhearted/ intelligent person somewhere.” As the poem ends, Wright’s wry wit reveals just where his trust lies: Not with literature, but with

14 Ernest Hilbert, “From the Vault: The Secret Glory” an interview with Franz Wright, *Contemporary Poetry Review*, 2005. <https://www.cprw.com/the-secret-glory-ernest-hilbert-interviews-franz-wright>

15 Alice Quinn, “In the Beforelife: Franz Wright”, *The New Yorker*, July 9, 2001.

something much larger beyond our understanding.

I'm in the cemetery now
at the edge of town, how did I get here?

A sparrow limps past on its little bone crutch saying
I am Federico García Lorca
risen from the dead —
literature will lose, sunlight will win, don't worry.

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