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on James Wright

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YOU WILL BELIEVE THIS

TWO CITIZENS
by James Wright
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973
$6.95

In each of James Wright's last several books he has refocused both intent and language. The Branch Will Not Break (1963) marked a shift from his early, more formal work to small, quieter poems in which the power of personal revelation in the world was again and again asserted. The loneliness and isolation in many of these poems becomes more severe in the following collection, Shall We Gather at the River (1968). Here Wright is less content to dwell on his own pain and turns outward to consider the suffering and humiliation the poor endure, as in "In Terror of Hospital Bills" or "The Minneapolis Poem" where he writes:

I wonder how many old men last winter
Hungry and frightened by namelessness prowled
The Mississippi shore
Lashed blind by the wind, dreaming
Of suicide in the river.

Both of these books are included in full in the Collected Poems (1970), along with a selection of translations and forty pages of new poems. It is no surprise that Wright has sought to translate, among others, the difficult Spanish poems of Cesar Vallejo. In the following lines from "Our Daily Bread," the closeness of at least one side of Wright's sensibility to Vallejo's speaks for itself:

Every bone in me belongs to others;
and maybe I robbed them.

and I start thinking that, if I had not been born,
another poor man could have drunk this coffee. . .

The "new poems" provide a bridge between the earlier work and Two Citizens (1973). The new poems do not comprise a book in the sense that the other collections clearly do. But here we find more tentative and various expressions of the human concerns that have always figured in his work. On the whole, the poems are longer and riskier than in the middle two books. Wright has become less self-effacing. His assertion of life over death, specifically the necessity of place in this process, is genuinely stronger. The
voice—the form—of the poems is more free-wheeling, more open to the embarrassments and unique possibilities that speech allows. These tendencies are most apparent in the long poem, “Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child” where in the section, to the Ohio, he writes:

This is not a poem.
This is not an apology to the Muse.
This is the cold-blooded plea of a homesick vampire
To his brother and friend.
If you do not care one way or another about
The preceding lines,
Please do not go on listening
On any account of mine.
Please leave the poem.
Thank you.

These new soundings are taken up in Two Citizens, a book that Wright claims is “an expression of my patriotism, of my love and discovery of my native place.” It is an uneven volume, but in some ways, a triumphant one. Because its risks are great, its rewards may be more significant than a more perfect book such as The Branch Will Not Break. If the book contains some of Wright’s worst published poems (“A Poem of Towers,” “The Last Pieta, in Florence” and “To You, Out There (Mars? Jupiter?)”), it is ultimately a small tariff.

The most stunning characteristic of the new work is an insistence of voice. It is the voice of a man who has lived a long time and written many poems; it cuts through to the quick of emotion. In “The Young Good Man,” he describes a time when he jumped a man’s fence to get at the wild crab apples that everyone warned him “taste so bitter you pucker / Two days at least.” He takes up an apple and licks it all over, without biting, and it is sweet. What is more important even than this tiny epiphany, what buoyed it up after so many years, is the refrain line: “You are going to believe this.” In another section of “Many of Our Waters...” Wright says: “The kind of poetry I want to write is / The poetry of a grown man.” This is that poetry: written with a knowledge of the “pure clear word”; possessed of a maturity capable of evaluating the myth of events and the emotional geography of one’s life, and finally, capable of bestowing compassion, perhaps the most difficult of all, on oneself. The final section of the poem tells why the poet and a woman “could not have been simple married lovers.” In the lines that follow there is an acceptance of what is, as the earlier sections were an acceptance of what is no longer. In a man of Wright’s passions, these are powerful utterances.
In Wright's work there has always been a sense that the poem is an act of survival; now, in lines like: “You will believe this...” there is a generosity seldom before expressed so directly. A critic of the book has called its mood “protestation”—a straining of the poetic voice. It seems more likely that this very quality is the book's life-force. There is a vast emotional distance between protest and insistence; the former is the outraged cry of an innocent man condemned, the latter is the voice of a man who has glimpsed a vision of life that is more enduring than innocence or guilt.

In the jacket-blurb, Wright talks about leaving America in order to find it—not a new notion in American writing. But it is more than the distance Europe can bestow on this country that triggers his remarkable feelings of patriotism. It is time and a woman who loves him. Wright goes on to call the book “most of all a book of love poems” which, in a way, it might be. But the strongest moments of Two Citizens come not in the more obvious love poems, but when Wright returns to his Ohio childhood, fortified by love. In these poems he has a sober eye in assigning value amidst pain and humiliation. As he writes in “Ohio Valley Swains,” a poem about rape: “It took me many years to understand / Just what happened to her that evening. . . . I loved her only in my dreams, / But my dreams meant something...”

It is clear that he does understand things he was unable to see as a younger, angrier man. In “Ars Poetica: Some Recent Criticism” he reappraises his Uncle Sherman and his Aunt Agnes, a pitiful wreck of a woman:

He must have been
One of the heroes
Of love, because he lay down
With my Aunt Agnes
Twice at least.
Listen, lay down there,
Even when she went crazy.

Later in the poem, he describes the one heroic act in the life of this Agnes “who stank and lied”: when a goat escapes from a circus nearby, Agnes saves it from a pack of boys intent on stoning it to death. Wright demands compassion of himself and of the reader but avoids the dangers of easy sentiment:

Reader,
We had a lovely language,
We would not listen.

I don't believe in your god.
I don't believe my Aunt Agnes is a saint.
I don't believe the little boys
Who stoned the poor
Son of a bitch goat
Are charming Tom Sawyers.

I don't believe in the goat either.

The most perfect example of Wright's new work is "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio," which begins, I believe, very honestly: "I am almost afraid to write down / This thing..." In telling the story of the pool Wright moves among images of this irretrievable past, a time of desperation:

When people don't have quite enough to eat
In August, and the river,
That is supposed to be some holiness,
Starts dying...

The men, his father and uncles and others, begin to dig. There is a passionate insistence to these lines that I find overwhelming:

Oh never mind, Jesus Christ, my father
And my uncles dug a hole in the ground,
No grave for once. It is going to be hard
For you to believe: when I rose from that water,

A little girl who belonged to somebody else,
A face thin and haunted appeared
Over my left shoulder, and whispered, Take care now,
Be patient, and live.

I have loved you all this time,
And I didn't even know
I am alive.

If Wright has abandoned some of the precision of language of his smaller poems, it is in favor of a broader poem, a poem of emotional luminance, in which the ambivalence of human feeling speaks for itself, as in the final poem, "To the Creature of My Creation":

No, I ain't much.
The one tongue I can write in
Is my Ohioan.
There, most people are poor.
I thought I could not stand it
To go home any more,
Yet I go home, every year...

—David Long