

# Annotations

Under the Supervision of Michael Collier

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# Memory and Landscape in the Work of James Wright

James Wright is a poet well-known for a dramatic change in style over his career, from a formal, rhymed metric verse to free verse. Wright himself felt he remained “formal” throughout his writing career, and in many of the senses that matter, he did. But from a reader’s point of view, his poetry became more open and written from a recognizable point of view with a clarity and concreteness that the earlier poems only rarely demonstrated.

In this essay we will look at Wright’s use of memory and landscape as it evolved over his writing career. In examining this evolution we will focus on the craft elements of form and point of view.

## 1. Introduction

In this essay the terms *memory*, *landscape*, *point of view*, and *form* are central and deserve some discussion. The essay is concerned primarily with issues of craft, but, as in any discussion of a subset of the complete aspects of a work, it pays to talk about the background on the use of terms and of the work as a whole. In particular, when a poet works toward achieving a particular effect with a poem, it is worth considering what that effect is so we can judge how well the effect is achieved by those facets that aim to achieve it.

### 1.1 Memory

Memory is that mental faculty which enables us to do almost every mental task there is, from recalling distant events and feelings, which is what we generally understand as the meaning of the term *memory*, to recalling the meanings of words and how to say them. That is, as we speak we are constantly referring to stored memories in order to choose appropriate words and to instruct our muscles to move in the particular ways that create sounds others, also using their memories, recognize as words, phrases, sentences, and eventually sense. When we look at memory this way it is impossible to imagine that any poem would be devoid of the effects of memory. However, in this essay we will look at memory mostly as the mechanism that takes in experiences, digests them, and thereby colors our view of life and new life experiences. In poems we see the effects of memory most clearly in narrative poetry in which events, either actual or imagined, are presented as the apparent topic of a poem. But even in pure lyric poetry the effects of exactly this sort of memory is surely at work and we can often observe those effects through cumulative word choice, parallel images, and the choice of detail.

Sandra M. Gilbert [**Poetry**, Vol 168, no 5, p. 281], in a review of a group of poetry collections, discusses one of many spectra involving memory: the memory-desire spectrum. At one end, she argues, is the *poetry of memory*, which is the retrospective memory of the so-called confessional poets. In this poetry we see events played out, sometimes abstractly, but with an evident reaction to it by the poet. The purpose of such a poem, if purpose there be to a poem, is to evoke a response from the reader which informs, possibly, how to live one’s life. Though Wright loathed confessional poetry and any attempt to characterize his work as confessional, much of his work seems firmly located in landscapes and events that recur, as places and events tend to do in some confessional poetry:

*Yes, it might be autobiographical in the sense that I suppose anybody’s poetry is autobiographical, but I don’t think it’s confessional. I think confessional poetry is a pain in the ass. Most of the things that confessional poets confess are not worth confessing. [Collected Prose, Interview with Bruce Henrickson, page 175]*

At the other end of the spectrum in Gilbert's view is the *poetry of desire*, which can be taken as the driving force behind the "experimentations and estrangements" of the so-called language poets. In such poetry, the poet's "desire" is used to create fantastic imaginings, flat language, odd or multiple voices, and the non-sequitars that characterize language poems.

The problem with such a spectrum is that there is the implied dichotomy of the poles: Do we really believe that desire and memory are orthogonal? Or is it more likely that memory (persistence) and desire (ephemera) interact over time and at the instant of creation to color memory and bend desire, especially when we consider that the act of writing requires the heavy use of memory to get anything that is other than pure noise on the page?

It is a common belief that memory records events and scenes as if in a photographic album or computer memory, and that any flaws in that memory are failures to fully and completely retrieve what is there. But the actual operation of human memory as understood by contemporary science reveals something else entirely, something which will aid in our examination of Wright's use of memory.

The process of encoding events and scenes into memory involves interacting with the events and context of the time. In some ways we can look at this as influencing or determining the indexing of the memory, that is, which cues will cause it to be retrieved and with what vividness. For example, in the year 1030, a Bavarian monk named Arnold made a trip during which he apparently observed for some time a large bird that he did not recognize. In writing an account of his trip, he pondered this strange large bird in the context of the prevailing religious beliefs, which included the existence of dragons. Therefore, his memoir speaks of his hours-long encounter with a carefully described dragon, thousands of feet long. If we were so fortunate as to interview Arnold, it is certain that his memories of this dragon would be precise, vivid, and as alive as his memory of what he was doing just before the interview.

A simpler example is the following thought experiment. If one is asked to remember the sentence

*The fish attacked the swimmer.*

It is more likely to be retrieved when given the cue *shark* than when given the cue *fish*, because our mental processing analyzed the meaning of the statement and concluded that it is more likely that a shark, which is like a fish, attacked the swimmer than a fish.

Therefore, the actual encoded memory is an amalgamation of what actually happened and was seen with other mental and belief-oriented contextual information.

Further, expertise and prior knowledge figure heavily into what is remembered. Consider the following event which would be related to subjects to test recall. It is the third inning in a baseball game, one out, runners at first and third. The batter drives a shot toward the gap between second and the shortstop, but the shortstop makes a great play and starts a double play. The runner at third scores.

Listeners vaguely familiar with baseball will remember these facts reasonably well, but many real baseball fans will believe the story included the fact that the batter was safe at first, and, in fact, will believe that such a statement was included in the telling. Of course, this is a conclusion drawn from a deeply felt intuitive knowledge of the game situation—if the double play had succeeded, there would have been three outs and no run could score by the rules of the game, and double plays in this situation are always started by going to second then first, which means that the batter, who is running to first, is almost surely safe if the double play failed (failing to get the runner going to second but getting the batter is almost unknown).

The situation is the same on the retrieval end (recollection) as at the processing end (remembering). Recollection is initiated by some set of cues. For example, someone might ask us what we ate for

lunch last thursday. This sparks a process that responds first to the cue directly—so-called *associative* recall—and later to a longer, more conscious effort—*effortful* or *strategic* recall. Associative recall was well-described by Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (**In Search of Lost Time**). In it Proust is visiting his mother who serves him tea and pastries known as *petites madeleines*. After dipping a madeleine into the tea and eating it, he is overcome by an unexpected and overwhelming sense of well-being. “Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? . . . I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature. Where did it come from? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it?” Each time he dips a madeleine and eats it, his experience is weaker; he concludes that the effect “lies not in the cup but in myself.”

The mystery is resolved:

*And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Leonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea. . . . But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised for a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting and hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. [Proust, Swann’s Way, pp 60–63; Schacter pp 26–27]*

In this case, the cue—the madeleine dipped in tea—had perhaps not occurred since the early, finally recalled event or only infrequently and not accompanied by the recollection. The association at this time, though, was quick and dramatic. We can assume that the original event was dramatic at least in an emotional way to Proust and was encoded in this somewhat specific way.

When asked what we had for lunch last thursday, unless there is something particularly spectacular about the day, we will engage in a partly conscious, partly unconscious process of generating cues: We look at the date, try to remember other things about the day, step backwards day-by-day from today until thursday, etc.

One particularly interesting bit of information developed by cognitive scientists, neurobiologists, and psychologists is that the recollection that comes out of such remembrances is actually a combination of the retrieval cue or cues and the bits of remembered information. That is, a recollection is like the reconstruction of a dinosaur from the bits of bones found at a dig. The Arnold dragon account is one such example. Other examples abound in the recovered memory arena where leading questions by therapists and law enforcement officials leads witnesses to “develop” vivid but false memories which are a combination of real memories and the retrieval cues provided during questioning.

Of similar interest are the other processing related artifacts of memory. Here is an example. Pay careful attention to the following list: candy, sugar, bitter, good, taste, tooth, nice, honey, soda, chocolate, heart, cake, eat, and pie. Turn away from the page and write down all the words you can remember from the list.

Without looking back at the list above consider the three words at the end of this sentence in italics and decide whether you saw each of them in that list: *taste*, *point*, *sweet*. Now consider how confident you are of your answers and, if you thought you saw a particular word in the list, consider how vivid your memory is of seeing the word.

Many people will feel confident that the word *sweet* was on the list, but it is not. The reason people have a vivid false memory of it being there is that while processing the list, the abstract category of

sweet things is recalled and because this category is repeated, there is an association implanted in the memory between the list and this category.

One final general remark about memory: In general, when a memory or a part of it is probed or retrieved, that memory is made stronger. Therefore, when a number of events or objects of a similar nature are presented, the common elements are reinforced beyond the episodic memory of the actual events or objects. In a sense, what is common is relatively remembered while what is different is relatively forgotten. This process is nothing more (nor less) than abstraction, in which common elements are made into a sort of archetype.

We see that memory is a curious set of mechanisms in the brain, curiously fragile and subject to frequent failures. But what does this have to do with the work of James Wright? In our study, we will look at Wright's use of memory over his career by looking at representative and significant poems from different periods and particularly during periods where his style and approach to writing were changing, from formal to less strictly formal, from memory to desire, and from darkness to light. What we've seen of the physical (or, more properly, mental) characteristics of memory is that it is affected both at the storage and retrieval ends by the ongoing processes of the mind and by what the rememberer is trying to recall and in what context, who the rememberer is, and what he or she is up to. This implies that in looking at how Wright is using memory in his work we are also glimpsing how the poet is working to bring to bear all available material toward the effect he is trying to bring across to the reader. In a real sense, we should be relieved that memory is not a photographic mechanism that the poet simply refers to as if to a picture or a movie to derive what will appear on the page.

There are yet mysteries to memory that bear directly on poetry, and one such is exemplified by the case of a young English boy who suffered significant loss of cognitive function after lengthy chemotherapy. Among his symptoms was his inability to remember anything that happened to him since the apparent brain damage or anything he read, though he remained relatively lucid. Amazingly, his parents discovered that if they asked him write down what he did on a trip or what he had read, he was able to produce very accurate accounts of what happened and what he read. He was always startled to have what he wrote read back to him because he could not orally, as it seems, recall or present those facts.

This implies that the act of writing has a separate set of mechanisms for accessing memories that can serve to access material perhaps hidden from access intended for oral presentation. And vice versa. That is, to access as fully as possible the memories we have, both oral and written access must be made, and isn't this what we've known implicitly all along?

James Wright had no choice but to be subject to these realities of memory. If so, we can expect that what we learn from his work is what the protagonist, Maxwell Kosegarten, in Matthew Stadler's aptly named novel **Landscape: Memory** when he was painting a landscape he saw several years earlier. The painting develops slowly, over time, as Maxwell retrieves and explores his memory. As he paints, he confronts the discrepancy between the view of memory as a static reproduction and what his own experience is telling him. He writes:

*if my memory ought to be an accurate replica of the original experience, if that was so, my painting was hopelessly inaccurate. It was a bad painting of a fuzzy memory. But I preferred to think that memory is never frozen, nor should it be. My painting was a successful rendering of the dynamic memory that had simply begun with the original event. . . . My painting, I figured, was so very accurate in its depiction of this memory that it would inevitably look wrong when compared to the original model.[Stadler, 1990, p. 144]*

## 1.2 Landscape

Landscape provides the descriptive material of many poems. Though it may serve merely to set the scene in an almost cinematic sense in some poems, the choice of details to show, the use of the landscape to provide the image part of metaphors, the painting of tone and mood over a poem by the tone and mood of its description, and the tagging of specifics in a scene by mood, attitude, time, and desire provide strategies for the poet to evoke a particular response or set of responses from the reader. Of these strategies, only the last requires some comment for clarity. A poet can describe some detail in a scene in conjunction with, for example, a particular feeling or an attitude toward some key element. To pick a concrete example, a poet can describe a ripe peach on a branch in the context of presenting the beginning of a love affair. This tags the peach and its location with those feelings of fresh love. By referring later in the poem to the peach, the poet thereby recreates for the reader those fresh feelings. Later, if the poet describes the windfallen peach slightly rotting on the ground, the image becomes a metaphor—the image part of the metaphor—and the detail is used even more thoroughly as part of the strategy of the poem. However, the mere tagging of the detail by the emotion or whatever forms a referential device as it inches toward becoming a metaphor. Another way to look at what we mean is to think about sign language. When signing a person will describe something in a particular region of 3-dimensional space. By moving the place of signing—by, for example, stepping 3 feet to the left—the signer can then refer to the “discussion” that happened in that former place by pointing to it, sort of like using the typesetting device of drawing an arrow to a phrase or paragraph rather than trying to think of a linguistic way to refer to it.

In narrative poetry, landscape and event provide the raw material. If we use James Wright as an example, the Ohio River Valley and Martins Ferry, Ohio, provide the landscape that Wright uses throughout his poems, from the earliest work in the late '50's through his last work in the late '70's. People and events from his childhood in Ohio form a persistent set of topics, and the landscape of that valley is constantly popping up, even in passing from his first collection to his last. With Wright we have an excellent opportunity to see how his work evolved by observing how his treatment of the landscape of the Ohio River Valley changed as his style and approach to poetry changed.

Landscape and place was very important to Wright; he said:

*D. H. Lawrence has a very beautiful essay about “The Spirit of Place.” He is talking in particular of American places but I think that what he says is true of all places. There is a spirit of place. Virgil was aware of this. I think that he uses the word imago, which isn't simply image but is also presence. We still speak of the genius of a place. I believe James Dickey, in a wonderful poem of his which is plainly the idea for his novel **Deliverance**, speaks of a man who appears, a country person, a redneck I guess you'd call him, by the side of the Coosawatee River; he suddenly appears when Dickey and some friends in their canoes have got into some trouble. One has hurt himself I think. They come over to the bank of the river and the man appears there. Dickey calls him the presiding genius of the place. There is such a genius of place, a presence, and because there is, people's feelings accumulate about it. You can share in that feeling when you become aware of particular historical events and the sign)ficance of monuments and so on.*

*The American Indians, the Sioux, had such a sense of place. Fred Manfred, a wonderful mid-western novelist, pointed this out to me, that the Sioux and other Indians as well had a sense that certain areas were holy ground. He said that more than once in writing his novels and in wandering around and doing research the way he does, not just reading old books but trying to get the feel of places he would write about, he realized that there was something special about certain areas of southern Minnesota. He later discovered the Indians considered it sacred ground. I think that this is, for some writers, an important way of participating in the life around them. I'm not saying ,that the value of poetry depends on writing about a place or not*

writing about a place, only that there is a kind of poetry which is a poetry of place. It appeals to me very much. There are so many different ways that language can come alive or be brought alive that it is silly to limit the kinds of poetry there could be. I think it is enough to say that there is, in our lives, a genius of place and so, appropriately, we sometimes value a poetry of place. [Collected Prose, pg. 194]

### 1.3 Point of View

<p>Outside Fargo, North Dakota</p> <p>Along the sprawled body of the derailed Great Northern freight car, I strike a match slowly and lift it slowly. No wind.</p> <p>Beyond town, three heavy white horses Wade all the way to their shoulders In a silo shadow.</p> <p>Suddenly the freight car lurches. The door slams back, a man with a flashlight Calls me good evening. I nod as I write good evening, lonely And sick for home.</p>
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Point of view is the position—metaphorical or literal—from which the speaker of the poem speaks. A point of view for a particular poem is defined in terms of the all the materials available in the poem and to some extent outside it. Therefore, a point of view takes into account who is apparently speaking, who is actually speaking, who is performing actions talked about and described, who is listening, who can hear, and what is being said by these speakers to these listeners. This sounds complex, and, surprisingly, it often is difficult to extricate the point of the view from a poem. As a simple example, consider the poem at the left, **Outside Fargo, North Dakota**.

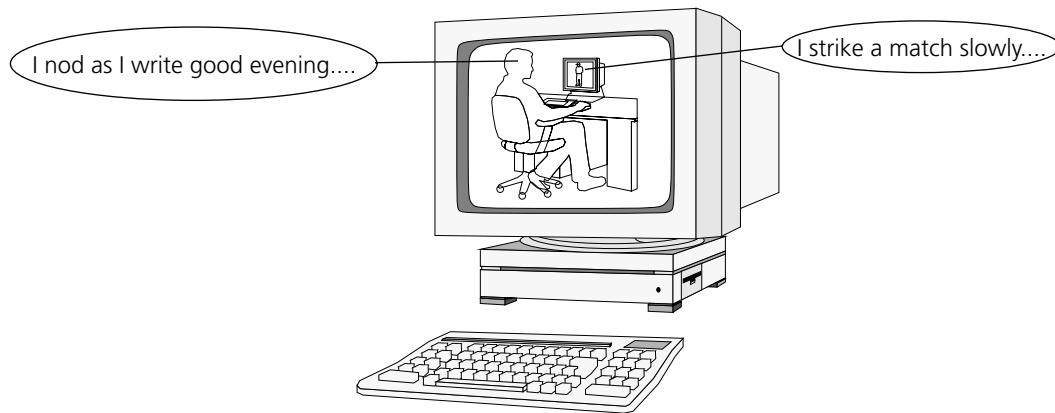
The poem begins simply enough by describing in present tense a simple scene with the speaker explicitly mentioned (*I*). There are two other actors in the scene: the railroad dick and the three horses *beyond town*. Then, just as suddenly as the railroad dick throws open the freight car door, the speaker transforms from an actor within the poem to the poet writing the poem. At this point we wonder not only who the speaker is, but how many speakers there are. Here are the speakers:

- The speaker who is recalling his actions (*I strike a match slowly and lift it slowly.*)
- The speaker who is writing the poem and talking about that process (*I nod as I write good evening, lonely and sick for home.*)
- Because Wright has pulled us out of the poem and gone meta, as it were, by transforming the speaker from a simple actor to the (a?) poet, we now wonder whether there is yet another speaker, normally hidden, which is the actual poet who is causing the apparent poet to speak. Therefore, the actual poet is the third speaker.

Given all this, it's clear that the point of view in this poem is greatly complex. It is from the point of view of a poet who is talking about being a poet writing this poem about a person, who may or may



not be the same person as the apparent poet (or the real poet). The possible speakers are illustrated



in the above diagram.

The outermost computer represents the palette that the real poet—James Wright—is using. On that palette is a poet who is writing about a particular person and scene, which we can see as the tiny man on the screen of the computer on the screen of the outermost computer. Without the framing of the poet as speaker, the second order poet as speaker would not be brought to light.

There is a parallel effect which is that the reader switches in point of view as the speaker does: Initially the reader is simply reading an account, with a certain set of expectations. When Wright pulls back the camera to reveal the writing scene, the reader's expectations change, and one could posit that the reader is therefore different from that which started the process. Finally, when the reader suspects that there is yet another speaker—the poet who is manipulating the reader (in the best sense)—the distance between the reader and the ultimate speaker is narrowed. Thus, by moving the point of view in this simple poem, the poet has engaged the reader in a kind of dance and thereby brought the reader into the poem, ensuring a certain sort of response, independent of whatever meaning the poem might have.

This illustrates the complexity of point of view that Wright brings to the table: Who is speaking, who is acting, what is the attitude of the speakers to that of which they speak? And further, there is the added complexity of whether any of the speakers—even the outermost apparently real speaker—is genuine or made up. When we look at Wright's oeuvre we can decipher some of these speakers because the landscape of Wright becomes familiar with each poem, and his use of memory is consistent at least in its trajectory of evolution.

#### 1.4 Form

When we think of form we first think of formal devices such as meter and rhyme. Early Wright (**The Green Wall** and **Saint Judas**) is largely written in a rhymed iambic, which labelled Wright a formal poet. As his career progressed, Wright loosened the grip of meter and rhyme to the extent that his transformation from formal to free verse was studied and celebrated. Each of the interviews with Wright in **Collected Prose** [Collected Prose] contain questions about his change of style. Nevertheless, Wright maintained that his attentiveness to form never wavered and that the so-called freedom of free verse required additional attention to form lest the work degenerate into

*bad prose hacked into arbitrary line lengths. It seems to me, as I look around whatever little magazines are sent to me, that we are practically inundated with bad prose hacked into such lines.* [Collected Prose, page 206]

Wright felt he never gave up writing formally. He said:

*I don't think I've dropped traditional forms. That is, I tried in some later poems to make further experiments in the formal possibilities of the American language. But I think that all poetry is formal. Images are always fairly sparing; I've never written a richly metaphorical poetry. My own ideal, which I've tried to accommodate to whatever abilities I have, is really a neo-classical one. I believe in the kind of poem which does have a single effect, and I try to subordinate whatever I know about language to one single effect, every time. [Collected Prose, page 134]*

When asked what form is, Wright answered as follows:

*I don't mean form in the abstract. I mean what anyone would mean when he talks about rhetoric. I mean the proper words in the proper places. That's all. We have mentioned Robert Creeley's idea that form is no more than an extension to content. I think I follow what Creeley is saying and as far as I follow it, I think it is sound. [Collected Prose, page 216]*

Wright's movement from strict formal devices to a looser formality—to accede to his own evaluation—seems accompanied by a movement closer to the person behind the poetry, as in **Outside Fargo**; we begin to see the poet more closely as the point of view becomes clearer and more clearly centered on a recognizable person. With this clarity of point of view, this better attunement of the words and form to the material supplied by memory, and a less heavy-handed use of landscape, we see Wright's poetry clarify to what he himself preferred to think of as clear, plain speech. On the topic of clarity, Wright said:

*I hope it does. What I hope to write is a poetry which is consecutive and clear. Sometimes I have written obscurely and sometimes I have written limply. But in these cases I know I have just written badly. That is not what I was trying to do or hoped to do. . . . Eliot . . . argued that poetry has been most vital when it has been closest to good prose and yet has been able somehow to retain its own character. I take it that its own character finally has something to do with rhythm, a regularity of rhythm or a clear variation on regularity. [Collected Prose, pg. 206]*

*I would like to write something that would be immediately and prosaically comprehensible to a reasonably intelligent reader. That is all. That is all I mean by being clear, but it is very difficult for me. This is a Horatian idea. It is the attempt to write, as one critic said once of the extraordinarily and beautifully strong writer Katherine Anne Porter, so that "every one of her effects is calculated but they never give the effect of calculation." We read a story like her **Noon Wine** and it is what we call seamless. It is almost impossible to pick that story apart and find her constructing a beginning, middle, and end. When you read the whole thing you do realize, and not just with your feelings but with your intelligence, that what you have just looked at is a living thing. It has a form. She hasn't written in bulk, never in such bulk as, say, Edward Bulwer-Lytton. And yet, her work has a certain largeness about it because it is so alive. I think that she has thought very clearly and carefully about the need to make things clear to a reasonably intelligent reader of good will. As for other kinds of readers, well there are fools in the world, and bastards. [Collected Prose, pp. 215–216]*

In striving for the clear, single effect, Wright uses rhyme, rhythm, parallel images, and rhetorical structure to lead the reader in a particular direction. Accused of being surrealistic, Wright's use of images can be confusing, but each contributes to at least an overall mood, which is sometimes the topic of Wright's poems. In responding to criticism of **Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota**, Wright said:

*[I] think that the poem is a description of a mood and this kind of poem is the kind of poem that has been written for thousands of years by the Chinese poets. . . . And that poem, although*

*I hope it is a description of my mood as I lay in that hammock, is clearly an imitation of that Chinese manner. It is not surrealistic. [Collected Prose, pg. 221]*

## 2. The Works

In this essay we look at a total of 7 poems—5 essential poems and two earlier versions of one of them. The poems are as follows:

- **A Poem about George Doty in the Death House**, from *The Green Wall*, 1957
- **At the Executed Murderer's Grave**, from *Saint Judas*, 1959, three versions
- **Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio**, from *The Branch Will Not Break*, 1963
- **The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio**, from *Two Citizens*, 1973
- **Above San Fermo**, from *This Journey*, 1982

These poems form a spine through Wright's work, serving to demonstrate his movement from metered rhymed verse written through the dark landscape of the Ohio River Valley to free verse written through the light landscape of Italy. Even the last poems, Wright keeps using the Ohio landscape, but his attitude toward it and his approach to poetry appear vastly different from beginning to end.

### 2.1 A Poem about George Doty in the Death House

In the 1950's, a (possibly) retarded taxi driver from Bellaire, Ohio, named George Doty picked up a young woman, made a pass at her which was rejected, then raped and murdered her. He was put on trial and eventually executed. Something about this man and these events caught Wright because he wrote this poem and three published versions of **At the Executed Murderer's Grave** about Doty and his fate. As Wright put it himself:

*I was preoccupied with that because it startled me for a while, the whole notion of how little we human beings understand one another. I was preoccupied with how, back in Ohio, a taxi driver named George Doty from Bellaire, drove a girl out in the country and made a pass at her, which she resisted, so he banged her in the head with a tree branch and killed her. I was convinced that he didn't really know what in the hell was happening. He had stumbled into something evil, a murder he had committed, but I don't think that he understood anything about the legal proceedings. Many people in that community thought he was terribly wicked, but he did not seem to me wicked. He was just a dumb guy who suddenly was thrust into the middle of the problem of evil and he was not able to handle it. I thought it was ridiculous to execute him and, further, I thought that murder is murder whether the state commits it or some stupid, retarded taxi driver. That is what I was trying to say. [Collected Prose, pg 211]*

Wright was concerned about the relationships between good and evil, living and dying, us and them, inside and outside, judge and judged, heaven and hell, and Martins Ferry and escape in these poems. He also seemed to be struggling to find how to write poems that used his memories of childhood in Martins Ferry without using them merely as props or fodder but to somehow get at the essential experiences he had

### A Poem about George Doty in the Death House

Lured by the wall and drawn  
To stare below the roof,  
Where pigeons nest aloof  
From prowling cats and men,  
I count the sash and bar  
Secured to granite stone,  
And note the daylight gone,  
Supper and silence near.

Close to the wall inside,  
Immured, empty of love,  
A man I have wondered of  
Lies patient, vacant-eyed.  
A month and a day ago  
He stopped his car and found  
A girl on the darkening ground  
And killed her in the snow.

Beside his cell, I am told,  
Hardy perennial bums  
Complain till twilight comes  
For hunger and for cold.  
They hardly know of a day  
That saw their hunger pass.  
Bred to the dark their flesh  
Peacefully withers away.

The man who sits alone,  
He is the one for wonder,  
Who sways his fingers under  
The cleanly shaven chin,  
Who sees, in the shaving mirror  
Pinned to the barren wall.  
The uprooted ghost of all:  
The simple, easy terror.

Caught between sky and earth,  
Poor stupid animal,  
Stripped naked to the wall,  
He saw the blunderd birth  
Of daemons beyond sound.  
Sick of the dark, he rose  
For love, and now he goes  
Back to the broken ground.

Now, as he grips the chain  
And holds the wall, to bear  
What no man ever bore,  
He in hears the bums complain;  
But I mourn no soul but his,  
Nor even the bum who die,  
Nor the homely girl whose cry  
Crumbled his pleading kiss.

The poem is reproduced at the left.

The first thing to notice is its shape, which stands out because its text box is outlined. The poem is tall and thin, like a wall, and like the wall that encloses Doty. Whether this is the primary effect Wright intended which led to the iambic trimeter lines or whether the primary effect was a sense of urgency that the short lines produce is not known. But, the word *wall* appears 5 times in the poem.

The poem comprises 6 8-line stanzas, each stanza is a pair of In-Memorium quatrains, all in iambic trimeter. The only major variation in the trimeter occurs in the 5<sup>th</sup> line of the last stanza (***But I mourn no soul but his***), though this scansion is itself subject to debate. Nevertheless, if this is the primary variant line, then the effect is to emphasize the only real surprise to the poem, while if one insists this is really a trimeter line then the effect of the poem as a somewhat predictable result of its form is all the more emphasized.

An In-Memorium quatrain (rhymed *abba*) forms an envelope or enclosure, which meshed well (perhaps a little too neatly) with the theme of the poem, which centers on the incarceration of Doty by those who would simply find the cancerous part of themselves and society and cut it off, forgetting that what is thus removed is as human as what remains.

The quatrains that best use the enclosed structure of the In-Memorium form are the first (***Lured by the wall and drawn*** . . .), the eighth (***Who sees, in the shaving mirror*** . . .), the ninth (***Caught between sky and earth*** . . .), and the last (***But I mourn no soul but his*** . . .). In each, the inner couplet is strong and is logically placed as a couplet rather than being an accidental or passing arrangement to merely fill out the form. The first such quatrain is, in some ways, the strongest: It demonstrates the connection between the purpose of the poem and the structure of the quatrains by showing that the pigeons aloof (alone at the top of the wall) are safe from the predation of ***cats and men*** while still being held captive by them—their safety requires them to roost in particular places, which shows that their predators control them.

Also in the In-Memorium form, the inner couplet has additional emphasis, and the second line of the couplet, the third line overall, receives additional strength. In only a few places is this natural

structural emphasis in conjunction with an emphasis from other elements. The end words aloof, gone, ground