

**C.D. Wright*****ShallCross***

***The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures, El Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All***

**Copper Canyon Press**

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C.D. Wright passed away unexpectedly on January 12, 2016. *ShallCross* and *The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures, El Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All*, both published by Copper Canyon Press, are her most recent books: *ShallCross* was released posthumously in 2016. It would be wrong to read these books as ‘last’ works: according to Wright’s publisher, one more book is forthcoming. But it’s also impossible not to read the fact of the poet’s death into this work, especially in the poems of this latest volume. *ShallCross* begins with a funeral scene, in a posthumous voice:

Just an unseasonable chill. For dying  
 this way is nothing. Is like losing  
 a sock. A photograph is being set up  
 by my friend, the wedding photographer,  
 in which everyone is touching  
 everyone else and then everyone drifts off  
 into separate cars trailing swirls of dust. (7)

This is an eerily prescient beginning, but the knowledge that both the living and the dead eventually end up in ‘swirls of dust’ has always been present in Wright’s work. At the beginning of Wright’s career is the death, in Arkansas in 1978, of the poet Frank Stanford. And unlike some of the poets who share her propensity for place-based observation, image, or documentary work, Wright’s scope has always bridged the mysteries of the here-and-now and those of the hereafter. This reaching-beyond is often cast as a kind of ‘folksy wisdom,’ although the way Wright evokes this ‘beyond’ runs the gamut, from philosophical utterance to material description of the funeral scene, as in the poem above. All of this, in other words, to say what Wright declares in *The Poet*: ‘poetry gestures toward silence as it speaks and casts its stillness about

us. There is, however, the threat of total, full-time, all-over silence. Death clings to poetry. It brings back the taste of ashes. [...] Poetry faces the end without obfuscation' (35-36).

Even so, it wouldn't be right to say that Wright—in *ShallCross*, as elsewhere—is really much invested in that abstraction, 'silence.' Instead, Wright writes death solidly from the side of the living, as in the poem 'Day-Old Widow':

she thought she heard a book  
drop to the floor he didn't answer  
in an instant she sensed it  
a tangible space across an opening  
she could neither enter nor fill  
as if his eye hit upon a passage  
elegant and cruel and true (22)

The gap is sudden, awful, and complete, but the space of death is 'tangible,' and the experience of it is like *reading*—an absolute and somehow transcendent reading, a final modulation of the ordinary scene into which death intrudes—which is, by extension, the scene of you, death-bound reader, reading the poem. The poem provides space for a strange and beautiful cross-worldly choreography, re-negotiating the terms of death on the terms of poetry, and synchronizing the living and the dead across the chasm between them.

There's some comfort after all in this re-working of death as mundanity; for even in a collection framed by death, Wright is above all—and as she always was—a poet of the worldly. Wright's is a poetry full of daily grit, quotidian beauty, and ordinary difficult love. She once wrote that her poems have the quality of 'succinct but otherwise orthodox novels': if this is true for *ShallCross*, it is because they present us with *scenes*. Brief and impressionistic, these poems give us the empty threshold of the front door after the death of a pet, a cold urban night in a crowd with someone else, people talking around tables, people walking across a parking lot. Some scenes are almost still lifes: 'Poem with a Dozen Cherries on a Ledge,' in its entirety, goes:

a woman sweeping moths from a corner  
straw coming out of the broom in handfuls  
the violently blue sky (36)

There are scenes of hard conversations and many scenes of writing, which happens *during* the difficult dailiness of it all. Against Agnes Martin's statement that her paintings are to be seen 'before daily care strikes,' Wright

counters in *The Poet*: ‘Suppose reading and writing do their best work *after daily care has struck* (and struck hard)’ (27). In a way that reminds me most of all of Adrienne Rich, Wright crafts everyday situations not in order to show them but in order to probe them, pulling out both beauty and pain calmly, without forcing or flinching.

One more thing: in *ShallCross*, as across Wright’s work, since both care and death are on the side of the living, they are also political. Wright is known for the documentary angle of her poetics; her collections *One Big Self* and *One With Others*, for example, incorporate the voices and images of Louisiana state prisoners (through the photographic work of Wright’s long-time collaborator Deborah Luster), and of civil rights activists, respectively. There would be one way of interpreting Wright’s concern in social justice as only the hallmark of a poetic regionalism. While Wright’s eye and tongue remain indelibly ‘southern,’ it is important to recognize that what she wants us to see is not what it’s like ‘down there’ but some of what makes a ‘down there’ in the first place. In an early essay about Stanford, she is unequivocal about this: ‘it was not regional it was systemic.’ The centerpiece of a long poem in *ShallCross*, ‘Breathtaken,’ focuses this point through the event of death: unlike the breath of the widower, which simply stops, or the breath of the widow which carries the rest of the poem, the breaths that make up this poem have been forcibly and literally *taken* from the bodies that remain. ‘Breathtaken’ is a patchwork of language from a New Orleans crime blog, details from the epidemic of violence in that city (again: not regional but systemic) down to the streetcorner, the weather, the clothing of or the groceries in the hands of the deceased:

on the steps of her Irish Channel home

in a blue Olds on S. Roman, on a porch, N. Roman

eating a raw potato

faceup

looking at the marbled clouds

(72)

This jump-cut from concrete detail to the sky is a favorite of Wright’s, paralleling the move in ‘Poem With a Dozen Cherries,’ from scene at hand to ‘violently blue sky’ (‘nowhere in poetry have I seen such skies,’ Ariana Reines writes in another joint review of these two books). As in the double-edged title—are we really supposed to hear it as both breath taken from murder victims and breath taken from us, readers of poetry, as aesthetic effect? What are the stakes of that closeness?—this visual pairing forces us to consider both

unmistakable similarity and structural difference, linking some version of domestic tranquility to some version of total public crisis. Wright's visual and titular punning yoke systemic violence and aesthetic effect in a way that is not entirely congruous, or comfortable. That discomfort is part of the point.

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The collection of prose pieces, *The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures, El Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All*, appeared in 2016, just before Wright's death. It's a crazy title, impossible to remember and impossible for a review: what do you call it for short? To call it *The Poet*, leaving out all the wonderful rest, would be wrong. The title flags this problem of plenitude: as if Wright's list of ten very various things were not enough, she tacks on William Carlos Williams' sweeping '& All.' In part this is Wright's humor in action, but problems of inclusion and omission—profusion of detail, encroachment of silence—are central to Wright's work, and one of the themes of this collection. 'The goal,' as Wright puts it in the section 'The Book that Jane [Miller] Wrote, is not to make a story but to experience the whole mess' (7). She quotes Bernadette Mayer: 'Everywhere there is has everything there is to look at' (8). 'I love them all,' is how the book begins, referring to words.

Included in the book is, indeed, *a mess* of things—a 'mess' in the colloquial American sense of 'a whole bunch.' *The Poet* is a collection of primarily prose pieces, made up of several different long strands of essays, broken up and threaded back through smaller pieces, bits of musings on places, politics, capitalism, friends—and most of all, on poetry. These primary threads include, among other things, mediations on that love of words, on Robert Creeley immediately following his death, Jean Valentine, Brenda Hillman, Raúl Zurita, and Williams.

Because the texts are fragmented and then spliced together, moving in interrupted spurts and toggling back and forth between several pieces continuously, this book is not the collection of essays it might be. It does not traffic in the essay's concentration, the focused trajectory of argument that would take you from start to finish, telling you (for example) what C.D. Wright thinks about Williams' *Spring & All*, or about the vocation and value of a documentary poets. A reader encounters these things, but—back to the 'everything' problem—it would be wrong to separate out the texts that intervene between different parts of the same essay. What intervenes is part of the point: you can't read an essay about Creeley, for example, without also thinking about the prison industrial complex, Pinochet, degenerating fibroids, and Marvin Gaye.

Perhaps what is most manifest here is the impossibly multi-faceted nature of Wright's commitments. To twist Wallace Stevens significantly, she tries to show us that nothing and everything are *both* there: 'World. World. O World!' Made of everything and nothing' (122). As in *ShallCross*, or in her description of Williams, whose 'apostrophe was to the future' but who 'hankered for contact here and now' (45), Wright aims for a poetry that can hone in on one thing and simultaneously bring in the rest of the world, can look in every direction all the time, and can somehow keep and ear out for silence while hearing everything else.

There is also the question of the genre of this miscellaneous book. The jacket copy calls it a 'collection of prosimetrical essays.' Yet while the writing is prosimetrical, Wright's expansive bricolage works counter to the focus and purpose of the essay form. And while more capacious genres such as miscellany or commonplace book might fit with the sort of home-grown 'democratic' impulse with which Wright is often credited, these don't seem right either, especially if 'democratic' implies disinterestedness or dispassion, aesthetic or otherwise. *The Poet*. is anything but impartial: the pieces are, instead, fierce and loving in their friendships, brilliantly passionate in their commitments to people, literature, and ideas. 'The Book that Jane Wrote,' 'The Book that Brenda Wrote': Wright calls her friends by name, as if you knew them too. The repetition of poets' names throughout the book is a form of sociality that has nothing of the coterie about it: instead, these figures form a company kept in a kind of loyalty, a friendship that is part of the book's moral core.

This note of pragmatic morality carries through the work, and is maybe its upshot. With an echo of Rich's commitment to a poetry of everyday rectification, of social justice even at the level of the language, Wright is occasionally but firmly didactic—

That the poems we snatch from language must bear the habit of our thinking.

That their arrangement strengthens the authority on which each separate line is laid.

[...]

That they rectify the names.

That they draw not conclusions but further qualify doubt.

(39)

—and even prescriptive:

Poets will have to summon a fierceness equal to the current environment. We will have to meet irrational force with savage insight. We will have to bring our own rudimentary technology, our own order, to the common weal. Inasmuch as poetry is the mind's domain, it is the mind's defense. But poets will have to shed some of our mental armor. [...] Poets will have to stop bemoaning poetry's lost station, while continuing to press its perceptions. [...] Poets in our day will have to draw down against our latent subversiveness and punch through the dream hole to that opening wherein listening is possible and violence is not inevitable.

(94-95)

And I mean 'pragmatic,' finally, in its realest sense. I started this review before Donald Trump was elected president of the United States and finished it four days afterwards, in a heavily Trump-leaning South Carolina. Everything Wright lays out is profoundly important at a moment of looming irrational force, perverted technology, and missing subversion, when listening is made difficult and violence very inevitable. Wright's book of prose is a *poetics*: a handbook, a tool. It is good to have it as we make poems, and as we try to think about the world we read them in.

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