The Poetry of Jay Wright

5/12/2015

0 COMMENTS

Goaded by the recent work in progress performance of "The Three Matadors" by Every House Has a Door, I have taken up the poetry of Jay Wright. As practice for my Performance Philosophy Poetry class that I'll be teaching in the Fall, I want to work through some of Wright's poetic expressions here in this blog.

In the next few months, I'd like to explore the three short performance texts embedded in *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* (one of which is the micro-play that Every House calls "The Three Matadors") as well as a phenomenon that I'm currently calling Wright's *slip*. This "slip" is an expression of temporality that I find in Wright's poetry, one that is bound to the act of writing poetry itself. The word slip carries several meanings and histories within it, some of which are relevant to my invocation of the term. Here are a few:

- An archaic term for potters' clay: in this mode, the word denotes a material to be molded by skill and craftsmanship
- As a verb, the word adheres to the act of escaping, moving softly and quickly. To write time, Wright creates a supple vocabulary capable of alighting upon the moving seconds
- Also as a verb, the word describes the loss of one's footing: one may fall when one slips, or one may as easily catch one's balance before falling. The automatic balancing act that occurs when one tries to stop from falling brings one in touch with an invisible instant that usually passes unnoticed

Additionally, I intend to pun on the word slip by linking to the Italian prosthetic "s" that, when affixed to the front of a word, negates or upends the word to which it attaches. In this case, the pun creates ***s***lip, or (s)lip, which negates the lip over which the words pour when spoken. With this pun, I want to magnify the moment of commitment in which one puts words to events, thus partaking in the ethically-complex action of naming and describing. When we take language for granted, we forget that the power of naming is inextricably bound up with the operations of writing history, producing meaning, an composing affects. In poetry specifically, the act of naming produces substance where previously one only found wisps of ideas of concepts. To commit to substantializing a concept is to hazard the burden of poetry and of the poet's labor.

The first stanza of *Reading Absence*, which is also the last stanza, provides me with a

moment of Wright's slip (in all of that word's permutations):

Here begins the revelation of a kiosk
beside the road: the white eggs
nestled there in straw
turn blue in the amber light.
Make of that what you will,
say, what you desire,
a pilgrimage,
a secular mourning,
a morning given over to meditation.
This is the place set aside
for creating the body,
a source of fluctuations, unmarked
by singularity.
Call this wandering along this road
a colonization.

Notice, first, how the experience that Wright describes—ambiguous as it is, perhaps a revelation *sparked by* a specific place (a kiosk), or maybe a hallucination *of* that same space—entwines with the experience of writing the poem itself. "Here" begins: here at the kiosk, here at this word that marks the beginning of a long poem. And then a few lines later, "This is the place set aside:" this place beside the road, this place here in this poem. The temporality that Wright names for us is dual (more on this later).

Next—and, again, this is a place holder for longer reflections in the coming weeks—Wright references the act of meditation. Indeed, the entirety of this poem may be an opportunity of naming the slip of thought that occurs during meditation. What precisely escapes when one meditates? The present moment simultaneously recedes as the blitz of the mind presses in on one's consciousness and "distracts" the meditator from the primary task while also showing itself negatively through the act of absconding beneath that same blitz of images. To meditate means to lose one's footing in this double movement, to let slip one's certainty of self.

I'll return to these thoughts soon.

Wright's slip (Part II)

5/13/2015

0 COMMENTS

The Presentable Art of Reading Absence begins with a slip into a meditation and a slip within that same meditation. The slip into the meditation commences the poem and acts as an entrance, one that smoothly but abruptly places the reader into the condition of revelation, specifically a mundane revelation of "secular mourning." The slip within the meditation is a dual movement that sends both reader and poet deeper into the revelation *and also* out of the pure meditative state. Present within the opening lines of this poem, then, one finds an effortless struggle to be precisely here, here at "the place set aside / for creating the body." Reader and poet alike enact the work of spectator and performer, and, all the while, time materializes as the viscosity that conditions these various slips.

A passage from *Polynomials and Pollen* offers another point of view onto the understanding of temporality made possible by Wright's poetic work:

Profound
fallacy, time breeds a small
notion to propound
an instrumental pulsing,
the pause
that courts the wish to install
itself as the thread
and perfect measure of trust. (14)

I revel in the geography of this passage. One needs to fashion a map first before traversing the stanza. The fallacy: time breeds a small notion... time, also understood as that pause that courts the wish to install itself... Once we understand what the fallacy is, we can set to interpreting the *consistency* of that fallacy (its "meaning"). Time compels beings to forward a practical notion, the probability that we are all progressing steadily via the pulse of time's push. Between the pulse's signals, each pause, a stillness between the beats, pretends to the status of the present. The present, in other words, is the pause between the breaths, neither inhale nor exhale but the hiatuses between the two. This claim, however, is false. The time of the present is not a pure rest, nor is time itself. Time itself does not breed anything, and, as such, beings should not feel compelled to subscribe to progressive movements regulated by steady pulses. Working back to the notion of Wright's

slip, I wonder if time act rather as the condition of moving from one breath to the next, from one rhythm to another. Time as limit of possibility for rhythm.

Wright's "instant": temporality as qualitative viscosity

5/23/2015

0 COMMENTS

Back to *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*:

On page 4, Wright offers this passage:

This instant
becomes the smallest unit of meaning
in the universe,
an aberration
that clarifies our contingency.

Almost as quickly as this instant comes into focus, however, sounds of the outside—bird calls, miscellaneous sonorities—call his/our attention away until, on page 7, he/we return:

There must be an inelastic
attention to this moment
or this flagged instant
[...]
that has suddenly appeared

Throughout this poem, Wright slips into and out of the instant (see the last two posts for more on this notion of the "slip"). In this stanza on page 7, he gives the ambi-valent term "flagged instant," which might signify an instant that is marked, as though dyed to mark its travels through the universe, or it might signify the slowing of the instant, a flagging that comes from fatigue. Taken all together—the slipping instant, the marked instant, and the fatigued instant—I'm motivated once more to name the temporality that Wright conjures through his art of reading absence. Time itself appears as qualitative viscosity. Not a quantitative measure of friction, but, rather, an event of slipping away: the instant slips. There is no noun for time. It is verb. Time does. Again, it slips. The instant is the location of the slip's root.

When one meditates or attempts to discipline thought's meandering, the possibility of planting the now presents itself. The instant, marking the place of the now's root system, shows us where to plant, but the act of planting requires a virtuosic performance of undoing the self. To understand this a bit more, I turn back to Wright:

Such is peace,
and such the motive and lie,
and we have not yet arrived.
One must learn not to pray

[...]

I resume:
such is peace,
and such is the inexact profession
of a pilgrim proceeding
toward the point of his own
erasure.

To plant the now means to erase oneself. This erasure will always contain traces of the labor, some detritus caught up in the flow of time, not unlike Rauschenberg's 1953 erasure of de Kooning's drawing.

Wright and the Magic Circle

10/20/2015

0 COMMENTS

My earlier posts on temporality in Jay Wright's poetry were, in a sense, practice for this particular post, which is all about space. After re-reading those earlier posts, I can say confidently that I still believe all of my (granted, hesitant) claims. I am, however, interested now in something different, something I'm calling "The Magic Circle," which appears to me in Wright's poetic language. This "Magic Circle" demarcates a space of conjuration that has two principle effects. First, the circle sidesteps the paradigm of diassociationism that shapes so much of the visual encounter in Modernist and Post-Modernist literature (more on this in a moment). Second, the circle facilitates truly stunning synesthetic events through which the usually divided sensorial apparatuses (eyes/sight, ears/hearing, skin/touch, etc.) merge in order to produce a "reading" of what Wright calls the "coherent grammar" of the world (and more on this, too, further down). The circle created through Wright's poetry makes me think of sorcery and witchcraft such as that running rampant in Medieval Europe and conspicuously present in the works of, for example, Christopher Marlowe (particularly *Faustus*). I have for many years studied the episteme of Medieval Europe that Michel Foucault refers to in *The Order of Things* as the similitude oriented system of knowledge. In Wright's poetry I sense an attempt to recuperate—if that's even the right verb—this episteme's worldview, perhaps because he values the vibrant interconnectedness of world systems at work then/there.

In *The Theatre of Truth*, William Egginton assesses what he sees as the paradigmatic mode of spectatorship shaping the Modern world. He calls this paradigm "disassociationism," which allows (i.e., makes it possible for) individuals to create a clear, binary distinction between spectator and performer. This mode of viewing arises in tandem with seventeenth-century aesthetic creations—including, primarily, theatre—and quickly ascends to the realm of habit where it remains out of reach of critique or self-reflection. As Egginton sees it, once an individual identifies herself as a spectator she will subtract herself from the scene of the performance and begin to order to aesthetic event in terms of "on stage" and "off stage." One's off stage presence does not necessarily entail a passive mode of consumption, though it does frequently acquiesce to the "truth" of the world being constructed on stage. "The point to grasp," Egginton continues, "is that once entire populations became fluent in assuming and projecting this division in order to function correctly as theatre spectators, that fluency became a generalized spatial structure for conceptualizing the world as a whole" (14). He transitions from these comments into a conversation about Descartes' creation of "a *thinking* substance that looks out onto the world of *extended* substances" (14), and then he dedicates the rest of his pages to a

discussion of how baroque aesthetic offerings refute this binary distinction (by privileging, for example and a la Deleuze, a *folding* of interiority and exteriority instead of the smooth division of "on stage" and "off stage" or interior (subjectivity) / exterior (objectivity)).

I could quibble with Egginton on a number of points, but, in general, I think he's making an important claim; namely, that Modernity orders itself around a highly theatrical mode of viewing that distinguishes between spectators and performers (never to be merged) and requires a notion of subjectivity as a properly internal domain. In this discussion, I'd like to transition quickly (if not artlessly) to the tendency for Modern and even Post-Modern poetry to capitulate all too quickly to this disassociationism. Consider, briefly (if that's possible) the opening stanza of Eliot's *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question …
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.[1]

With the opening line, Eliot offers an invitation for me, the would-be spectator, to leave my position as passive reader in order to enter the scene of evening "spread out against the sky" and, through the embodied act of visitation, participate in the poem-world as a performer. While Eliot would like to activate me as the reader, his invitation is in fact conditioned by as assumed definition of my pre-poem state as interiorized subject preparing to consume the poetic fare as a spectator would imbibe a stage performance from the darkened auditorium. Eliot activates me but simultaneously relies upon the disassociationism that outfits me for such an invitation, thereby lending it credence and, in a sense, preserving its authority.

I could identify a similar capitulation in Wright:

Here begins the revelation of a kiosk,
beside the road: the white eggs
nestled there in straw
turn blue in amber light.
Make of that what you will,
Say, what you desire [...] (*Absence* 1)

Is Wright not setting up the traditional scene where I, reader, am welcomed into a scene outside of myself, perhaps the scene prepared by Wright's poetic body as it prepares its "colonization" of the road that stretches out beyond the roadside kiosk? Yes and no. Yes, insofar as I, the reader, have stumbled into this scene and might very well assume that "I" am the individual to whom Wright beckons with the phrase, "Make of that what *you* will." At the same time, no, because, it turns out, "I" am not necessarily welcomed here. If there is an "I" in this poem, it belongs more properly to Wright himself, and it belongs to him only insofar as he is going to demonstrate to himself that the "I" is neither a certain nor stable marker. As such, he, the poet, is going to demonstrate to himself the difficulty of attempting to demonstrate something when the act of demonstration relies on a seemingly stable "I" to pull it off. To hint at this identity crisis, Wright transitions to Spanish by the end of page 1: "Somos ese quimérico museo de formas / inconstantes."

Wright undoes himself in successive moves through *Reading Absence*. "I sit in error, or so would I stand." Neither sitting nor standing, but somehow both (and neither); neither indicative nor conditional tense, but somehow both (or neither). Wright slips in and out of himself only to discover that he himself is nothing that great, nothing so great as to merit more attention than a bowl of green chile, the bluest flower of Zapopan, a goshawk's exhilarated cry (7). He chooses to slip in this way so as to teach himself how "to release the sunlight / and to allow a magnetic dissonance / in a bird voice that enters the ear" (9). In other words, he's working hard to reveal the extent to which he is—at most and at least—a constitutive member of world of matter and energy.

As he teaches himself, he occasionally slips back into the disassociationism that, by habit, shapes our assessment of ourselves in the world. He identifies this moments in the text with parenthesis. Recall Adorno's caution against the reliance on the parenthesis, which, he says, serves only to imprison certain material within the flow of narrative. As it to signify the subjective-philosophical prison created by disassociationism, Wright uses parenthesis to stabilize fleeting theatrical scenes that interrupt his poem-lesson from time to time. The first usage appears on page 12: "The lights reveal the epitome of a wash, with yucca elata sitting sternly in place. A small man, wearing a white guayabera and white cotton trousers, swerves in an irresolute light." Notice how the poetic stanza gives way to prose at this point. The reliance on the typical on stage/off stage visual configuration somehow commandeers the poem.

The poem manages to break free of the scene, but a second interruption occurs at page 41, again marked by parenthesis and prose: “Two small boats, each with a solitary figure standing erect within it, progress through a rapidly flowing basin. The figures gradually reveal themselves to be women […]” These women characters eventually speak (lines in the drama): “Do you known that she is pursuing you?” says one woman. “But I am pursuing her” replies the other. An entire scene plays out over two pages and eventually comes to a rest with these lines: “The women stand in the boats, and raise their arms in supplication. Their mouths open and shut; no words come.)” As soon as it ends, Wright returns to Spanish and signals the difficulty of returning to the poem with a backslash: “/mi corazón e un ofrenda y mis lágrimas / son piedras rituals.”

From this point, the poem really picks up steam. Wright’s slip manages to teach himself a lot (or so it seems) and my position as reader becomes one marked by uncertainty: should I be watching this? Am I watching anything, or is the poem inviting me to lose myself along with Wright, to suffer a particular loss of self that will reveal my entanglement in the Everything? There comes a moment when I (Will, actually I, as much as I can be I) find myself hoping for another interruption of prose, a moment to catch my breath. One finally comes, but something is different this time. The parenthesis-prison is still there, but this time an altogether different play erupts. Now, three *matadores* appear, marked as M1, M2, and M3 I the script, thus hinting at the possibility that Wright may have conjured a single matador split in 3.

Every House Has a Door is currently investigating what this is all about. If I can assist in the problem solving (or maybe it’s a matter of posing the problem correctly?), then I will do so by offering this thought: the 3 matadores enact a drawing of a magic circle within the poem so as to protect it from the interruption of disassociationism. That is to say, as Doctor Faustus and other magicians like him would draw a circle on the ground from which to call upon the spirits of the world to appear and make manifest their knowledge, so too do the matadores draw their arena around them thereby protecting them from the harm of spectator/performer binaries and allowing for the possibility that some spirits will come in for a closer look.

Spiraling motions abound in the matador scene:

M2 spins in a farol
The three figures write the circle “geographically” by naming points on the globe that encircle them: Sevilla, Lima, Madrid, Caracas, Puebla, Salamanca, Barcelona…
The series of passes, which amount to a series of semi-circular movements

Spells punctuate the matadores’ movements, italicized to indicate some kind of

communication between Wright and the three figures:

I do not hear the clock
at the far end of the room,
nor the bell that brought me
to this seat

But now, somehow, the spells in tandem with the matadores' movements work to re-position Wright within the world of matter or energy:

I am suddenly
a gossamer thread,
lifted from within,
sheared from this moment,
a process given substance
by a trinity
who will not speak to me.

Most fascinating to me: Wright provides no parenthesis with which to close this matador ritual. Once the matadores inscribe the magic circle within the poem, the poem itself is sucked into the scene and can forget any attempt to go back to its former state of autonomous poem because, perhaps, the poem realizes that no state ever existed.

[Pause…the next installation will look to *Music's Mask and Measure* to pursue the synesthesia made possible through conjuration within the magic circle]

Wright and the Magic Circle (Part II)

11/3/2015

0 COMMENTS

Whereas the last post focused on Wright's overcoming of the dissociative spatial paradigms found in Modernist poetry—a paradigm that bifurcates the performance experience and/or encounter into performers, on the one hand, and observers, on the other hand—this post will deal with the synesthetic events scattered throughout Wright's poetry. These events require a spatial reading since the unification of different sensing

apparatuses amounts to a synthesis of an individual's being in the (poem) world. Wright, for example, allocates sound to color and sight to skin in order, I would argue, to help us all learn to read what he calls the "coherent grammar" of our surroundings.

When thinking about what to call the gesture of invitation tucked within the synesthetic realm of Wright's poetry, an invitation that provides an opportunity to read the entire world all at once and, ultimately, to know what love is, I return time and again to the magic circle. Let's briefly visit the world of Christopher Marlowe and *Dr. Faustus* where he famously writes:

Within this circle is Jehovah's name
Forward and backward anagrammatized,
Th'abbreviated names of holy saints,
Figures of every adjunct to the heavens,
And characters of signs and evening stars,
By which the spirits are enforced to rise.
Then fear not, Faustus, be resolute
And try the utmost magic can perform. (1.3.8-15)

Offering a user-friendly history of the magic circle, Jon Kaneko-James reminds us that the magic circle served two purposes. First, it protected the magician from whatever he or she conjured. The space within the circle offered sanctuary from the demons without. Second, the circle produced a field of energy and functioned as a conductive space, "the magical words and symbols filter[ed] specific kinds of mystical power into the circle to be used by the magician." In fact, the second attribute of the magic circle leads us to question whether or not the inner space within the circles' arcs are indeed safe or whether, instead, the energy conducted to the magician from the signs and symbols inscribed around the circle actually empowered the magician to stop whatever force attempted to assail him/her.

Without attempting to resolve that dispute here, I would suggest that both are true. The space of the inner circle is an ancient form of *critical distance*, something that allows the magician to be, simultaneously, near and far to the action transpiring in the scene. At the same time, the space within the circle, buttressed and enhanced by magical symbols gathered around it, transmits powers to the magician. Transposing this formula to Wright and his poetry, I propose that we think of his poetic equations—as he calls them in *Music's Mask and Measure*—as the symbols that form the magic circle around Wright and produce the powerful critical distance necessary for conjuring into being a *reading* of the world's coherent grammar, a reading that leads to a necessary naming.

Look at this excerpt from Equation 2 (which I've reproduced here in such a way as to mimic the page layout of the book itself):

The red roof tiles slip into the morning fog. There is a red silence all around us. It will take years to learn this coherent grammar.	The oriole has established an evasive coherence, infinite, exact, with its place, there where the day seems set to honor the bird's expressive deceit.

In the stanza on the left, Wright's equation rewires the sensorium of things surrounding us such that the redness of the present but muted visual tile-field enacts an audible silence, not dissimilar (in my mind) to the sound of the Summer Sun at its zenith. From within the circle of his poetry, Wright enters into the rewired scene and, perhaps because it is foreign and new, declares that it will take years to learn the coherent grammar of what surrounds him. His poetry, in other words, doesn't reveal everything at all once. His poetry, instead, offers a glimpse and a bodily sense of all that hides behind daily appearances. This "coherent grammar" amounts to the order of the world presented by and present within each individual thing. I find it interesting that an etymological definition of grammar traces the word back to the late 14th-century: "'Latin grammar, rules of Latin,' from Old French *gramaire* 'grammar; learning,' especially Latin and philology, also '(magic) incantation, spells, mumbo-jumbo.'" It will take years to learn these rules, to attune ourselves to the incantations of things that sound like mumbo-jumbo upon first encounter but soon, once appraised with care, speak clearly of hidden (occult) truths.

While it will take Wright years to attune himself to this grammar—not to mention you, me, humans generally—it takes no time for the oriole who, being of this grammar, speaks it fluently. The "oriole has established an evasive coherence." Either its being-in-the-world requires evasiveness, or its apparent evasiveness actually masks the coherence of the grammar. I'm not sure which it is – maybe both. But I do know that the oriole's participation in the world's grammar comes not only from its song, which, note, Wright doesn't mention here, but also from its correspondence with world's colors, sounds, and other senses. Wright conjures the bird "there where the day seems set to honor the bird's expressive deceit," which to me means there, in front of the setting sun, whose evening coloration mimics the oriole's orange, that is, the bird's expressive outwardness that, despite its seeming ostentation, serves to camouflage it and keep it safe. Oriole, setting sun, red roof tiles :: (silent) song bird, thronging light and distant heat, red silence all

around us. The continuum of color, sound, and silence, indeed the continuum of music's mask and measure, indexes Wright's brief foray into the world normally hidden by inattentive business.

He lingers on another bird—to be precise, the Carolina wren—before revealing the aim of this conjuration, this poetical work:

Love is ancient
evidence, an instrument
constrained, jealous of its
utility,
in awe of its own death;
every name embraces it.

The purpose behind Wright's poetry is the desire to conjure love. Love: perhaps another way of saying "this coherent grammar." Every name embraces it, he says. Is poetry not the daring attempt to name that which either cannot be named or that which wishes to remain unnamable? Each name bracketed, deduced, possibly discerned from within life's belligerent symphony brings love closer to the caller, the poet. The purpose of all this magic is to call love close, and the space produced by the poem is that which provides the means for embracing love. The word-equations summon; the space of the magic circle conducts the orchestra into the embrace.