archives

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'I have seen what I have seen'

Charles Wright's 'Tattoos' and the Problem of Autobiography

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1.

For good or ill, modern poetry is bound to the idea of personal utterance. For the ancients this was merely the characteristic that separated lyric from dramatic and narrative poetry. But over the past two hundred years significant shifts have taken place. Lyric no longer means simply the single voice singing in the first person, whether actual or merely assumed, but also autobiography. Moreover, very little poetry has been written in either of the other two main genres for generations. Most modern poetry is premised, then, on the belief that the proper subject of poetry, perhaps the only subject, is the poet's own life and experience Nonetheless, the connection between poetry and autobiography has not always been straightforward. There are considerable tensions between the demands of autobiography and the demands of the lyric. Such tensions can be found in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* just as they can be found in more recent successors to the tradition associated with those two monumental figures: Hart Crane's *The Bridge*; Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*; John Berryman's *Dream Songs*; even John Ashbery's *Flowchart* all bear marks of the strain. In American poetry, at least, the tensions have been highly pitched indeed. As such they have been productive of great personal achievements and laid a foundation for numerous poetic schools and cliques. This brings up the other subject of this article, American poet, Charles Wright.

Born in 1935, in East Tennessee, Wright began writing poems in the early sixties, when the 'confessional' movement was at its peak. He answers more sympathetically, it must be said, to other traditions, but has also been placed highly among a group of American poets who came to prominence in the nineteen seventies and early eighties; poets whose work has been called 'post-confessional'. [1] How well that tag fits him is not the first concern here. Rather, it is to ask how Wright's practice of the lyric stands with respect to autobiography. As the critic David Kalstone wrote when looking back over Wright's career in 1984:

> Charles Wright has been assembling an arresting verse autobiography out of radiant fragments. There is no pretence of narrative sequence or explanation in his extraordinary poems. Yet behind them one feels an unslakable appetite to know, if not to tell, his story. [2]

Kalstone begins by noting that Wright's autobiography doesn't follow the expected conventions of 'narrative', or 'explanation', and tells us the form which Wright's work takes instead: the 'radiant fragment'. What Kalstone does not go on to do is examine the extent to which such a form strains against autobiography, and vice versa. That tension is the prime concern of this paper—of Wright's work the twenty part sequence, 'Tattoos' is the one that most directly bears it.

In an audio interview from the 'Poets in Person' series, Jay Parini introduces Wright, who with characteristic irony goes on to describe the central 'subject' of his poems and at the same time reinforces the perception that this subject holds a central position in modern poetry, more generally:

> In the early seventies, after a decade of learning what poems were all about and experimenting, Wright realised he had finally found his subject: 'which is my own wonderful self. Basically that's what everyone writes about, is his own wonderful self. No matter how you camouflage it, that's what you're writing about.' [3]

'Tattoos' is one of the earliest products of Wright's realisation of his subject. It is one of the first few poems he wrote in

which he appears to address his own experiences. While the poem, and the book *Bloodlines* in which it was originally to be found—it is now more likely to be read in Wright's selection of poems from the nineteen seventies, *Country Music*—were the first works of the poet to receive more than passing critical attention, neither received universal admiration. The adjectives most often used to describe Wright's poems of this period were 'difficult', 'allusive', 'obscure', 'dense'—not always with pejorative implications, but for the most part. For some readers Wright's third book represented an unwelcome turn away from a plain, clear style although others, notably Helen Vendler, took the opposite course and suggested that with this book Wright had finally begun to come into his own as a poet: she saw 'singularity' where others saw only self-indulgence, solipsism.

The poem 'Tattoos', an exemplary poem of Wright's emerging style whether appreciated or not, is partly clarified but also complicated by various 'framing' devices: its title, as well as dates attached to the end of each fifteen line section and a series of end notes. Added to a second version of the poem, these notes state in a direct manner that which is treated allusively in the text of the poem. Both notes and dates appear to ground the poem in objective reality, the world of incidents, experiences, objects and persons and to do so without disrupting Wright's chosen style—in the broadest strokes, Wright follows in the imagistic tradition, treating the impression, the emotional effect, or the intuition of the event rather than the event itself. It might be suggested, accordingly, that the difficulty of 'Tattoos' is not simply a result of wilful obscurantism, but comes from a struggle to accommodate two opposed poetries. Wright's admiration of an indirect, imagistic and intuitive poetics is in conflict, one might say, with his desire (perhaps even a necessity) to treat his chosen subject, his own experiences, directly, narratively, and discursively. [4] It might be argued, then, that a proper fit between these two 'styles' was not, and never really could be, found. Nevertheless, it could also be argued that Wright's 'subject' justly calls for both treatments: neither approach has exclusive claim to propriety when it comes to the literary representation of the self.

What can be said without qualification is that the strategy of 'Tattoos' did leave at least one reader with a sense that an unbridgeable gulf between figure and referent had been opened in the poem. For Peter Stitt, more problematically, the poem left the impression of an uncomfortable disjunction between genre (autobiography) and the text itself. On Wright's decision to add the notes, Stitt wrote:

> Now that is an odd thing to do, and Wright certainly would not have provided these guideposts if they weren't necessary. Unfortunately, they are necessary, for the poems can scarcely be comprehended without them. [5]

Stitt went on to argue that Wright had 'moved to a position of extreme solipsism' in *Bloodlines* and offered these sharp words in summary:

> The image I get from these poems is of a very intelligent, very articulate man, standing in a world of the mind, a world of his own creation, uttering in flawless verse poems which can be heard properly only by an audience of one, the man himself. [6]

Stitt's assertion that the poem is largely unreadable could only be supported by close attention to the poem's detail, which isn't the case in his brief review. Another reader could well see even the slightest implication of 'autobiography' as a justification if not a clarification of the poem's obscurity. However, the fact remains that there has been a lack of close attention to the poem, both from detractors and from admirers—the latter having perhaps internalised T.S. Eliot's claim that difficulty is a matter of necessity in Modern poetry.

So as not to write off 'Tattoos' as impenetrable, simply too 'modern' for most tastes, or to fall for the uncritical assumption that mere obscurity is a mark of distinction, one must examine much more closely the relation between the poem's 'genre' and its poetics. In doing so one may discover that it is not that the poem fails to fulfil some generic requirements it sets for itself, or that the poem fails to achieve a particular poetic ideal such as imagism. It is also not that 'autobiography' represents a key that will excuse or unlock the poem's more mysterious qualities. The difficulties of the poem can neither be resolved, rationalised, nor explained away by a claim that the poem is about Charles Wright's life experience because 'autobiography' is in fact one of *the* central problems of 'Tattoos'. This realisation comes partly from an understanding that autobiography, as a genre, is shaped by contradictory demands and impulses and encumbered by historical and philosophical assumptions. As such, it appears that the problems of 'Tattoos' are not failings particular to the poem, but a 'generic' inheritance, congenital flaws that Wright's work bears the moment it takes the self and experience as subjects. But the claim also arises out of a contention that the poem doesn't simply suffer these faults, or fails to negotiate the inherited problem successfully. What is distinctive about 'Tattoos', that is to say, is its explicit meditation on the complexities involved in writing poems about the self, about the troubled intersection between art and life—it puts the possibility, the purpose and the power of autobiography in question.

It should also be noted that 'Tattoos' is concerned in a striking way with questions of redemption, the possibility of self-transcendence and the power of poetry with respect to the salvation of the soul—religious and metaphysical concerns

that have sustained Wright's work from early to late. These aspects of the poem are not discussed at any further length in the following pages. That said, the questions that are touched upon with respect to autobiography in this reading of 'Tattoos' *are* closely related, even fundamental, to the wider questions that Wright has explored in his poems over the intervening 27 years.

2.

Despite offering what seems to be an astonishing range of possibilities for the poet (anything, indeed, that touches life itself) 'autobiography' also appears to make certain quite restrictive, even contradictory demands. The most obvious of these is *sincerity*, and like almost every poet worth the name in the last two hundred years Wright feels this keenly. One must, it is assumed, be accurate, factual, and truthful in representing one's own experience. At the same time, however, it is also necessary to be 'interesting', not to mention entertaining—if not in the living of the experience itself, at least in the re-telling of it. To write *an* autobiography it is assumed that one must have either had experiences worth relating, or a way of relating them that keeps the reader's attention in its own right. While there are doubtless many dull 'autobiographies' (and others that have lost their lustre over the years) one could hardly suppose that the authors of these works set out to make them dull, or even believed that they were.

From another point of view it could be argued that autobiography tends to be formally, or poetically static. For the most part, interest is generated by the events related or by the shock of revelation; the subject's experience must be particularly compelling, moving or extraordinary, his or her candour in crossing the boundary between private and public particularly bold—this is increasingly true in the twentieth century where the line has been crossed so often few are certain where it lies. At the same time, both kinds of excitement, or novelty, are difficult to sustain. At some level experience is monotonous for the adventurer and the libertine alike. As Wright said when telling an audience of college students about his life, 'we all went through more or less the same things'. (*H*, 60) Originality, uniqueness: these are generally thought to be the first and undeniable preserves of selfhood, and yet we know that our lives, our experiences are much the same as everyone else's.

It is clear, nevertheless, that when the demand for sincerity comes into direct conflict with the demand for vividness one of the two must give way. This is not to suggest that the auto biographer is to be condemned for taking a little poetic license here and there. Rather, it is to indicate that for the artist or poet auto biographer—someone for whom imagination and originality, ever since the Romantics raised them to the highest throne over art, are inextricably bound up with lived experience, a person who by profession can neither afford to stagnate poetically nor to lose interest in the 'subject'—the conflict is acute.

A more accurate picture of the crisis would be that a desire for sincerity to one's artistic vision necessarily runs against the desire to be true to one's memory. And this tension is only increased, as seems to be the case for Wright when *art* demands a form of imagining that isn't straightforward, or 'clear', in which the intensity of perception overrides rational sense, and when at the same time the burden of the tradition (the weight of cultural expectation for the genre) falls on 'realism': a belief that this form of writing before all others, should make the individual's experience presentable, not to mention, sensible, legible, explicable and even legally or morally defensible.

It is in the light of this tension, understood as generic rather than particular, that the more problematic aspects of Wright's poem may be re-examined—I mean, the notes and dates purporting to illuminate each of these twenty, fifteen-line lyrics. The features which indicate and seem to confirm the genre of 'Tattoos', but which may also appear to compromise the 'artistic' integrity of the poem. On one occasion Wright declared that he would have 'given anything not to have to use the notes', but went on to add this acknowledgment of the dilemma he faced:

> I also wanted it to be very clear that each one of these was an actual situation, that it had not been made up but had actually happened, that it became a psychic tattoo in my life that would always be with me. (*H*, 67)

With those three central words, 'not made up', Wright invokes the distinction usually thought essential to autobiography, cleanly dividing fact from fiction, discovery or *recovery* from invention. The notes and dates thus insist on the actual, personal verity of the situations described in the poem against the sense (of which Wright was obviously aware) that the individual pieces of the poem cannot, on their own make this crucial distinction. But do the notes, as a 'necessary' supplement actually serve to fix the text? It could be argued that far from illuminating or certifying it, the notes can only disrupt its singularities as a poem. As soon as one has read the note corresponding to a particular section, convinced of the actuality of the event, one is set to looking for connections between figure and referent. The more one is told the text is autobiographical the more one *will* find in it references to the real world of events and lived experiences, no matter how encrypted they are. The hermeneutic energy drawn into the circuit between note and text easily shorts out any consideration of the poetic.

A further complication arises as far as the dates are concerned, given what is known of Wright's life from sources other than the poems. While functioning as a confirmation of events, the date on which the event happened to Wright, many of the attached dates could also be a confirmation another event, the date on which the poem was written. The practice is relatively common in poetry. While this remains uncertain the act of 'authentication' performed by the dates is not necessarily of the order required by autobiography. But is such indeterminacy an accident? Is it an indication that the poem is undermined by its own failure to manage the contradictory demands of the genre? Or does the poem, in fact, deliberately exploit the uncertainties of the genre?

A closer look at the title, and then the first section of the poem, suggests an answer. Titles, of course, operate as strong generic markers and this title is no exception. The 'tattoo', a mark or design inscribed on the skin, may first of all be taken as a first indication that the poem is autobiographical—literally, a tattoo is a work written on the self. The fact that the poem appeared initially in a book called *Bloodlines*, with its references to genealogy, generation, and genetics only confirms the point.

However, it could be argued that 'Tattoos can in fact be read two distinct ways: as an indication of *commemoration* and as a reference to *art*. As *commemoration*, the tattoo represents the inscription of sensible and psychological experience on the body or psyche: it is a form of scarring. As *art* a tattoo may have only a decorative, aesthetic role, but has also undeniable 'symbolic' force. Between art and commemoration, then, the tattoo incorporates notions of religious and social initiation, ritual, tribal identification, individuation, self expression and even in extreme cases, excoriation as erotic, or ascetic practice. Indeed, many of these associations resonate through the poem.

As stated earlier in different terms, though, in autobiography the work of commemoration and the work of art are often at odds. So far as this is true, the title could be understood to highlight an instability within the genre itself: an irresolvable division between art—the inventiveness of the work—and commemoration—the sincere or accurate presentation of lived experience. Despite assurances the notes and dates give that the poem is simply a factual re-presentation of reality, the title doesn't simply indicate the poem's subject matter. The title also describes the poem as a poem. It tells us that these lyrics can be appreciated as works of art, as images, and that the way they are rendered is as, if not more important, than any real or verifiable event that they figure.

One might still wonder if this ambiguity is accidental, an unintended effect of signification? Does the title's indeterminate sense reveal something essential about the text? It may be that it creates fracture lines running through and unsettling the remainder of the poem. Here is the first part of 'Tattoos':

> Necklace of flame, little dropped hearts,
> Camellias: I crunch you under my foot.
> And here comes the wind again, bad breath
> Of thirty-odd years, and catching up. Still,
> I crunch you under my foot.
> Your white stalks sequester me,
> Their roots a remembered solitude.
> Their mouths of snow keep forming my name.
> Programmed incendiaries,
> Fused flesh, so light your flowering,
> So light the light that fires you
> —Petals of horn, scales of blood—,
> Where would you have me return?
> What songs would I sing,
> And the hymns . . . What garden of wax statues . . .
> (*CM*, 56)

The year, we are told, is 1973, the year in which 'Tattoos' was first published. [7] The note reads, 'Camellias; Mother's Day; St Paul's Episcopal Church, Kingsport, Tennessee.' Wright said in an interview that this section is a 'set-up for what comes after', which we may understand in both a formal and a thematic sense. The lines do establish the formal characteristics of what follows, though perhaps merely as a function of being opening lines. Thematically, the lines' overarching sense is of the pasts pressing return. The fact that the lines are written on or about 'mother's day' is also no incidental detail given that several sections of the poem are dedicated, as it were, to remembering the lives and deaths of the poet's parents. The detail plays at an intersection of public and private, general and particular, which is also a noted characteristic of autobiography. As a public, or 'general' holiday Mother's day celebrates, simultaneously, an intensely private, and particular relationship.

While more subtle hints of things to come can be found in this opening, it is the camellias over which the poet walks that

most 'set up' what the poem is going to be all about. Like Proust's *madeleine's*, or Wordsworth's rivers and lakes—the 'bad breath / of thirty-odd years' is doubtless a recasting of the central Wordworthian trope, the breath of inspiration and re-generation felt in the first book of *The Prelude*—one supposes that the flowers have sparked the poet's memory, setting off a chain of reminiscence that in turn inspires a poetic florescence. [8] In fact, three distinct roles for these flowers may be discerned within the poem. First of all, as the only directly named 'subject' of this opening section it appears they must symbolise or recall in some way, a major experience the poet has had. At the same time as they are, as such, the symbol of a *particular* memory, they can also be read as a figure for memory, or the past, in general. Finally, these flowers can be understood as an emblem for the poem as a poem: semantically linked with the 'tattoos' of the title the camellias do signify the work of commemoration, but also the work of art.

Inscribing a tattoo on one's body, laying flowers at a grave, giving flowers as a gift, even to have a flower tattooed in memory of a beloved are all commonplaces—all are means of commemorating an event, just as is the act of writing a poem. The twenty poems of 'Tattoos' thus may be called 'flowers of remembrance': each is a flower produced by remembering, but is also a flower *that* re-members, or brings one to remember and (most important to poetry) works at making something memorable, even if it is only the words of the poem themselves, the music that they make, that should be recalled. Some of the poem's cantos commemorate a loved one whose presence is missed, others recall the poet's childhood, and still others his experiences as an adult. As a whole what the poem remembers and would make *worth* remembering, is the poet's life. The poet's perceiving and remembering consciousness is, one could argue, the link between the disparate moments of the poem, as though each section of the poem begins and ends with a silent voice saying, 'I remember this...for good or ill it defines me, makes me what I am and will not be forgotten'. As Wright puts it, 'their mouths of snow keep forming my name.'

One has to pause, though, over Wright's figuring of the flowers as 'programmed incendiaries': time bombs. As with many of the poem's figures there may be a natural source for this image. Wright said that the camellia's buds are programmed to 'fall off as soon as they bloom', and that he called them 'incendiaries', for their colour—'red and white'. (*H*, 69) A further implication that he does not mention, however, is that each of the twenty 'events' recorded in the poem is 'timed'—as we may all attest the true psychological impact of any particular episode is not felt in the instant of experience but only over time through the operation of memory. But, again, it could also be that so far as the camellias are an emblem of the work of art what Wright emphasises in calling them incendiary is the explosive quality of each of the images presented. In other words, the camellias become instead a figure for the way each of the poem's pieces is a flash or revelation, a burst of light that pierces the dullness, the forgetfulness and invisibility of daily life.

The image of the flowers is thus a potent figure of the tension in the poem between a desire simply to remember or to preserve the poet's experiences of the world as they happened but, from the other side, a desire not to re-present *what is or has been* but to imagine, to reveal a glimpse of the possible or even the impossible. At this point it is worth recalling something Wright said about his most powerful poetic influence, whose work he has translated, the giant of twentieth century Italian poetry, Eugenio Montale: Talking specifically of the 'Flashes and Inscriptions' section of *The Storm and Other Poems*, justly Montale's most famous collection, Wright says:

> What first drew me to these poems was their strong, and strange, religious overtones. This is rare in Montale's work and, even here, it is not 'religion' per se, but rather a peculiar sort of mysticism, little apocalypses, immense journeys in tight and loaded little packets.(*QN*, 34)

When he was writing 'Tattoos', and in particular, when he was imagining those incendiary, apocalyptic flowers, it is almost certain that Wright had the shadow of Montale over him. In the 'model' Wright followed, the tension between the notion of accurate representation (being true to life) and the notion of artistic verity is also powerfully drawn.

But this is not just to say, in different terms, that Wright has to choose between two distinct aesthetic programs: the apocalyptic and the realistic, the imagistic or the discursive. It is to say that Wright cannot choose: he cannot afford to write about something other than his own experience (the tradition in which he operates is not so easily evaded) nor can he risk too great an abstraction in his treatment of that subject. Formative influences on Wright's poetic practice included Ezra Pound, whose later work is arguably the best example of how to become remote from lived experience in poetry, and to distance your audience in the process. Wright, it can be said, has never pushed the formal boundaries of verse at the expense of touching the more basic human sympathies of his readers.

The question one asks of 'Tattoos', accordingly, concerns mimesis and context: is the poem defined, made sensible, by the poet's experience? Is it readable because it is a representation of his life? Or, is the poet's 'experience', his 'life' always and already bracketed by the poem? By an art that is not so much representation as presentation? To ask this is to put the whole project of self-representation into question for while it may be that the 'real, lived life' or 'self' links together the parts of the poem, making them sensible and legible, it may also be that art (apocalyptic and visionary) creatively re-members and thus *makes* the poets life memorable. Rather than the artist's self giving the work coherence, it would be the art that gives Wright's self coherence.

The uncertainty named here goes to the heart of the problems readers have had with the poem: an indeterminacy between arbitrary and necessary (whether the events told are essential or incidental to Wright's life); between substantial and artificial (whether the order in which the events are told, the form they are given is an order given by the events themselves or imposed upon them); the perceived gaps between figure and referent (a sense that what the individual cantos reveal doesn't necessarily accord with the events marked in the notes as reference points); and finally, the idea that the poems 'readability' or generality, the extent to which it makes sense as a text is challenged by its difficulty, obscurity, or singularity. To put it another way, a sense that the poem somehow fails to fulfil expectations of its projected genre or that its autobiographical concerns compromise its artistic achievement is persistent.

3.

In order to understand the unease that 'Tattoos' produces it is necessary to reconsider certain basic assumptions about the genre, and more generally, about subjectivity. A central idea upon which autobiography depends is that experience is coherent and sensible because it is grounded—indeed, is only possible as such—in an identity that exists prior to any particular experience. Thus, in autobiography it is said that the self grounds the text, makes its figures readable and meaningful, in the same way that the self is understood to be the ground of experience. The philosophical foundation for such a conception of autobiography is what Immanuel Kant called 'the transcendental unity of apperception': the recognition that there is an 'I perceive' or an 'I think'—or perhaps the silent 'I remember' I suggested was more pertinent with regard to 'Tattoos'—that attends, but is prior to each and every sense experience. Accordingly, Kant argues in the first critique that the self is transcendental, an *a priori* structure that makes experience possible. [9] However, a consequence of this idea of subjectivity is that the self it conceives is unknown and unknowable in itself. For Kant, and other philosophers, it may be satisfactory to describe the self as a structure without any content, but this notion of selfhood does seem to demand an 'autobiographical supplement'—a record of particular lived experiences that fills in or fleshes out the subject, giving body and life, or a content to the self. Precisely such a demand for this supplement can be held responsible for the extraordinary proliferation of 'autobiographies' in Romantic literature and the emphasis on subjective experience, or self-consciousness that is central to Romanticism. It appears that even as enlightenment epistemology placed the subject at the centre of thought (at the centre of the knowable universe, no less) it stripped it of any singularity. The self, in the Kantian scheme at least, is everybody, and anybody, but no one in particular. It is this lack which Romantic poets, consciously or unconsciously, have felt most keenly, and sought to redeem for the last two hundred odd years.

However, an aporia undermines this definitive Romantic project from its inception: the medium of representation that holds the only hope of confirming the singularity of the self, in fact, only places that self further in doubt. Hoping to redeem, or save the self, the Romantic poet only puts himself in greater doubt. In his essay 'Autobiography as de-Facement' Paul de Man (ever the instructive commentator on both Romanticism and autobiography) elegantly outlines the fundamental assumptions about the genre that constitute the nub of the problem:

> Autobiography seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does. It seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation and of diegesis. It may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name. [10]

The passages in 'Tattoos' which might otherwise have seemed the most unreadable, the most hermetic, (Wright's 'visions' and 'dreams', for instance) *could* be unlocked by way of a belief in the 'incontestable' authority of the poet's proper name, but notably, not by the authority of his proper 'self'. Here, the authority of the genre slips from ontological to legal grounds. As de Man goes on to say, this ground, as far as it too depends on 'representation', is by no means solid:

> Are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model? We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined by all the resources of his medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way around: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity. [11]

As a 'proper name' whose authority is grounded in law, but is not an ontological foundation, 'Charles Wright' only appears outside the poem itself, on the covers of the various books in which 'Tattoos' has appeared, and with the copyright seal

on the reverse of their title pages. Nevertheless, the autobiographical element of the poem, as said earlier, is alluded to through titles, notes, and dates. It is also indicated—but in such a way that can only complicate matters further, it seems—by Wright's extra-curricular comments on the work in interviews and his prose. But while the idea that this text is 'autobiographical', that it is made sensible, meaningful and readable through the signature of its author, and that the 'I' who speaks in the poem refers to 'Charles Wright', can be implied or suggested by the text, it cannot be confirmed by it. As de Man argues, figure and referent do not operate in a fixed relation in texts purporting to be autobiographical, but circulate uncontrollably through them. The relation between figure and referent may be fixed only by supplementary claims that bolster the text, such as signatures, declarations of copyright, or, as in the case of 'Tattoos', the framing devices of notes and dates. In turn such devices have also to determine the exact border of the text, to make a clean division between inside and an outside. With his numerous indeterminate figures Wright frequently crosses, or interrupts this line of demarcation.

What's more, the many framing and supplementary devices available to the poet can only allude to a proper orientation of figure and referent. It is only a reader's desire to make sense of the poem that brings the relation between figure and referent into one alignment rather than another: the reader can accept or refuse the author's implication of factuality or sincerity, his or her assertion of legal authority over the text— though the reader's acceptance or refusal is also subject to the law, risking prosecution (in matters of copyright at least) no less than the author. Or as de Man puts it, autobiography,

> is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. [12]

This also suggests a revision of a comment made earlier regarding 'Tattoos'. It is not that the poem becomes readable only when one recognises it as autobiography, as authorised by a 'proper self', but that the hermeneutic activity compelled between note and text as it were, produces a powerful and attractive illusion of 'autobiography'. However, the poem puts this illusion under ever increasing pressure. It is worth noting, moreover, that the illusion of autobiography does seem to have become a necessary fiction upon which many readers, when faced with the allusiveness, the difficulty or singularity of modern poetry, have come to depend.

Caught in a double bind, autobiography seems nevertheless to be devilled by uncertainty. In 'Tattoos' this uncertainty occurs most patently in those parts of the poem where one is forced to call on a supplement (an author's comment, a note, or whatever) to decide whether a figure in question, like the camellias of the opening canto or like the 'Tattoos' of the title, indicates *art* or *commemoration*; the recovery of a lived experience or a piece of creative, even apocalyptic invention. These are parts of the text, moreover, where it becomes impossible to say whether the poet's self defines the poem or *vice versa,* where the poem defines, in some way, the self projected as its subject. The poem's opening makes it impossible to say with any certainty whether the life, the experience, the individuality and coherence of the self represented in the poem *produces* the writing, or, on the other hand, *that* the self represented is in fact a product of the work of writing itself. While what we generally expect, with regard to autobiography, is that *it is* the subject of lived experience, Wright's 'self', that surrounds, contextualises, grounds each of the episodes recounted in a verifiable reality, making them sensible, coherent, and readable, with 'Tattoos', we can assert with equal conviction that the *art* of the poem gives a boundary, a horizon within which 'experience' is made sensible (given order and sense) and within which a particular self can, at best, only be imagined as the subject of that experience.

Another way to describe this situation is to say that the two frames, *self* and *art,* intersect, each interrupting the other, neither being a complete, or continuous horizon for the poem. It is along these lines that it can be argued that the poem *explicitly* indicates the aporia of autobiography. Autobiography, in short, is not the 'answer' to this poem (an idea that finally settles the poem's indeterminacy) but its problem. The poem asks, 'is autobiography an art of the self 're-presented' or an art of 'self presentation?' the presentation of a self that has no coherence, does not exist except in and through the act of inscription? But if autobiography is only a question how do we continue to speak about it? De Man's suggestion is that we consider autobiography a 'moment' of instability that can occur in any text: precisely, that point where one can no longer be certain if what one is writing or reading is an accurate representation of one person's lived experience or just the production of a fiction, an inventive trope, to meet the desire of selfhood. Just such a moment, in other words, as we face with the figure of the memorial (or is it) apocalyptic camellias. It is a moment where one would like to call on supplementary material to help fix, even judge the text, but where both self and text persist, resolutely in being questionable.

How, then, might a sense of 'Tattoos' persistent indeterminacy, understood as an implicit theme of the poem rather than an accident or a failing, cast light on the remaining nineteen cantos? On a first reading the fourth canto may well have seemed to many to be rather off the point; a vague, veiled and elusive piece, exemplary only of exactly the worst kind of obscurity noted by reviewers. To the contrary, with the problems of autobiography in the forefront of one's mind this canto begins to appear to be a kind of axis around which the whole poem turns—an autobiographical moment par excellence:

Silt fingers, silt stump and bone.
And twice now, in the drugged sky,
White moons, black moons.
And twice now, in the gardens,
The great seed of affection.
Liplap of Zuan's canal, blear
Footfalls of Tintoretto; the rest
Is brilliance: Turner at 3am.; moth lamps
Along the casements. O blue
Feathers, this clear cathedral…
And now these stanchions of joy,
Radiant underpinning:
Old scaffolding, old arrangements,
All fall in a rain of light.
I have seen what I have seen.
(*CM*, 59)

The date given is 1968; the note gives only a location, 'Venice, Italy'. These fifteen lines represent one of the more difficult passages of the poem; its figures are even less 'anchored to incident', its movement less discursive. At first reading, then, one only has questions for the canto: How is this segment to be understood in the wider context of the poem? Is the experience it records definitive of the poet's self? Or is it definitive, in some other way, of his art? How much less essential is the episode it recounts than, say, the deaths of his parents (the reference point of cantos 2, 15 and 19); how much more essential than the episode with a side-show stripper (canto 16) or the handwriting class, when the poet was just ten years old, as described in the twelfth canto? Of course, these are also just versions of the questions that one has about the poem more generally—questions about how Wright's work negotiates arbitrary and essential, substantial and imposed, part and whole and so on. Further questions arise that are more specific to these lines though: for instance, one might ask in what way the real city of Venice, Italy (as opposed to an imagined landscape) matters to the poem? Is there more to this account than mere description of the city? If simply an ode to the city's haunting beauty —which, however legendary, is also cliché material for a poem, hence not particularly convincing as autobiography—is one to stop reading, stop querying at the point where one says, 'yes, I can see how the lines capture the feel of the moment, the feel of the locale'? And how much of the poem has to be ignored if one does stop at this point?

Doubtless a rough literal reading of the lines is possible. Indeed, once under-way (with the help of the note) such a reading can quickly gather momentum. But it might also begin to raise more questions than it answers. However one proceeds, it seems beyond question that a kind of apocalypse (a revelation, and perhaps also an 'end' to figuration) is presented in the third stanza, culminating in a line at once less 'allusive' than those which precede it, but no less enigmatic: 'I have seen what I have seen'.

The line is a declaration, but what exactly does it declare? It could be a conclusion that the vision described in the first two stanzas persists in some way beyond obliteration in the 'rain' of light. The poem would then read as a confirmation of the power of memory. The line could also be an exclamation—the poet's somewhat muted emphasis made through repetition, 'I have seen'/'I have seen'.

Reflecting on the poem's autobiographical difficulties, however, different interpretations emerge. The line could be a version of the claim Wright makes for the poem elsewhere—a further declaration of its factuality—another way of saying 'this is exactly what I experienced'. More interesting though, is the possibility that the line has the power to exact contractual force, almost as though by reading it one is compelled to accommodate, if not accept, the vision presented. The last line functions, in this case, as the author's *de facto* signature which enacts a promise—'I haven't lied'—but also appropriates through a kind of declaration of copyright: a claim that these lines (as well as the vision they contain) are the exclusive 'property' of the poet. The act of signing concerns the way in which a subject's authority is 're-presented' as well as the way a subject, or self is in a sense *produced* only through the act of writing. The claim of copyright, through the function of a signature, *de facto* or *de jure*, remains one of the most problematic areas of autobiographical theory.

What is at stake here is authority. As such it has to be noted that the line is a version of Pilate's '*quod scripsi scripsi*'. As it is told in The Gospel of St. John, when the high priests said: 'write not that he is the King of the Jews; but that he said I am King of the Jews. Pilate answered, What I have written I have written.' (*KJV*) Pilate's words are charged with multiple implications that Wright's revision, in a way, appropriates: does Pilate simply declare that he will stand by his words, no matter what? (and on whose authority does he come to write what he wrote?) or is this a statement of resignation, a parallel to his washing of his hands—as if Pilate means to say merely, 'what's done is done, it can't be changed'?

A related issue of 'originality' also troubles 'Tattoos'. Wright's line may be a claim for the singularity, not only of what has

been seen, but also for the singularity of the seer—the poet who presents this original vision, and does so before any other. The implications of borrowing a line to make such a claim are troubling indeed.

That said, what of the possibility that this line is an exemplary, autobiographical moment in de Man's sense? It is, after all, the only time in the poem that the implicit claim of autobiography, is made explicit—it is as if the silent 'I remember', which it was suggested began and ended each episode of the poem, here, is said aloud. In saying it, however, the characteristic indeterminacy of the poem is not dissolved but re-affirmed. The line is *only* an unambiguous declaration of the problems in which autobiography dwells; a rephrasing of the questions that are not, and perhaps cannot be answered in the text itself. For all its declarative power the line provides no straight way to answer the many questions that persist in the poem. It keeps the poem in a flux between representation and presentation; between art and commemoration—between apocalypse and memory.

As such, the line is a timely reminder that for the poet of 'Tattoos', life and work are knotted together. It is precisely this tangle of life and art that Wright's poems have sought to ravel and unravel for more than thirty years. Indeed, it appears that almost as soon as Wright had discovered that the proper subject of his work was his own life and experience he seems to have realised that the representation of the self is deeply problematic. 'Tattoos' is, among other things, an explicit record of the latter realisation. 'The choice' W.B. Yeats said 'man' was forced to make, between perfection 'of the life' and perfection 'of the work', turns out for Wright to be no choice at all. [13]

Page numbers for citations of Charles Wright's poems in this article refer to the volume *Country Music: Selected Early Poems* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1991) henceforth *CM*. For prose citations references are to *Halflife* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988) henceforth *H*; and *Quarter Notes* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995) henceforth *QN*.

[1] See Earl G. Ingersoll (ed) *The Post-Confessionals: Conversations with American Poets of the Eighties*. (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989).

[2] David Kalstone, 'Lives in a Rear-View Mirror' in Tom Andrews (ed) *The Point Where All Things Meet: Essays on Charles Wright*. (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1995), 94.

[3] Jay Parini, Interview with Charles Wright. *Poets in Person / Charles Wright*. <http://www.poetrymagazine.org>

[4] See A. Alvarez, *The Shaping Spirit: Studies in Modern English and American Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958). I refer here to Alvarez' distinction between an intuitive and a discursive poetics.

[5] Peter Stitt, Five Reviews, in Tom Andrews (ed) *The Point Where All Things Meet: Essays on Charles Wright*. (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1995), 53.

[6] Stitt, 54.

[7] The poem first appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, Nov – Dec. 1973, 34 – 36.

[8] I discuss the implications of Wright's reversal of Wordsworth's image, and Wright's relation to Wordsworth more generally in other chapters of my dissertation, *To Lead Back to Splendour: Charles Wright and the Question of Poetry*.

[9] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan, 1933)

[10] Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 68.

[11] de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', 69.

[12] de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', 70.

[13] W.B. Yeats, 'The Choice', *Collected Poems* (London: Picador Classics, 1950), 278.

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