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Daddario
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PITCH AND REVELATION

*Reconfigurations
of
Reading,
Poetry,
and
Philosophy
through
the
Work
of
Jay
Wright*



PITCH AND REVELATION

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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*Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
legato con amore in un volume,
ci`o che per l'universo si squaderna.*

*[In its depth I saw contained,
by love into a single volume bound,
the pages scattered through the universe.]*

—Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 33.85–87

How to Read

A teacher requests of her students, "Tonight, read the first twelve poems in Jay Wright's *Boleros*."

A scholar asks a colleague (who shares a background in literature and the Humanities), "Have you read Jay Wright's *Boleros*?"

A dancer finds a copy of *Boleros* in a used bookstore, devours it, brings it to his fellow company members, and states, "You have to read this."

In how many directions does the verb "to read" lead in each of these imagined scenarios?

Does the teacher assume that each student will read these poems in the same way? In a specific way? In a way that resembles a treasure hunt? Is the teacher hoping that at least one of the students "finds" the treasure? But what if there is no one way to read? Might students return to the classroom with charts, maps, musical arrangements, and other artifacts discovered while traveling through Wright's world? By the end of the class on Wright, what will "reading" have meant?

For what does the scholar's voice search? Common ground? If the colleague answers "yes," would it be possible to move together in step? Or is the factual event of

“having read” merely an invitation to begin scratching out ground rules? “So, how precisely did you understand this passage?” “What did you make of the mathematical marks?” “Have you danced a bolero?” “What else of his have you read?” “What other dances do you know?”

And what of the dancer, for whom the connection between reading and moving seems so obvious? What precisely is the body’s role in the duet with the book? Given a particular aptitude for dancerly movement, does our dancer-reader believe that reading will lead the ensemble, without hesitation, to the dancefloor? What does the dancer sense that non-dancers might skip over? What does the dancer know that might benefit the teacher who assigns Wright in her classroom? What dancers ought the scholar consult before setting to publish a book on Wright?

Speaking of us, of we who are writing and you who are reading, how often do we trouble and reevaluate our readerly practice? Do we, too, when reading as students, seek a meaning in the pages of “great literature”? As teachers, do we assume that our students read like us? Do we ever consider the implausibility of “having also read something,” that is, of the possibility that no two people read any given work the same way? That any single person never reads a given work “again,” at least not in precisely the same way as they did upon first reading? How often do we, ignoring such a possibility, put too much weight on the author’s proper name, as if knowledge of that name equated directly with knowledge of what that author knows? And when we dance, if we dance, do we consider that reading? Why wouldn’t we? Where does our bodily intelligence focus itself when our mind sets to reading? If we decided, henceforth, to use the word “dancer” whenever we mean “reader” and embody the verb “to dance” when we endeavor “to read,” how would that change the way we relate to texts as students or teachers? If you’ve been dancing this whole time you thought you were read-

ing, what does that dancing look like? Do you know what you look like when you dance or read?

§

This book began as an exercise in reading Jay Wright. We felt the need for such an exercise due to the substantial stamina required for a journey through Wright's poetry. Any given book of his poems summons esoteric cosmogonical insights uncovered in cultures throughout the world, advanced mathematical calculations, flummoxing certainties from the realm of quantum mechanics, biographical information of well- and lesser-known poets spanning millennia, Cuban musical motifs, West African cosmologies, first-person synesthetic encounters with the material world, imagined third-person escapades, the flora and fauna of both the Northeast and Southwest United States, meditation, jokes, uncertainty, baseball. To put it mildly, the breadth of his references, cadence of his language, and facility with specialized discourse is astonishing. Yet, so few have read Jay Wright. Perhaps this is so because of the stamina required to read him. Wouldn't, then, an exercise in reading Wright help others to find astonishment?

As we wrote about reading Wright, we soon found ourselves attending to how Wright reads. The book transformed into a book about reading Wright reading. Too cumbersome. What, we wondered, was the true topic of our investigation? One sector would certainly be devoted to reading, reading as a polyformous enterprise, reading as equal parts deconstruction, meaning-making, dance, and song. To read Wright, one must move in many directions at once. Beyond that realization, however, there was more to explore. The entire practice of "knowing," it seemed to us, was reconfigured in the works of Jay Wright. The inherited dividing lines between poetry and

philosophy, philosophy and music, art and science: they simply didn't apply anymore. As such, after questioning what we mean when we say that we "read" Jay Wright, we set about illustrating Wright's signature method of re-configuration. Together, then, these two areas demarcate the territory of this book's subtitle: Reconfigurations of poetry, philosophy, and reading through the work of Jay Wright.

§

The book's primary title, *Pitch and Revelation*, speaks of the joy of reading the poetry, prose, and dramatic literature of the American poet Jay Wright (1934–). We will write more about the title, taken from Wright's 2019 book of poetry *The Prime Anniversary*, in the next chapter. For now, first, because it is more pressing, what of "joy"?

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) practiced joy as that affect without which there can be no intellectual love of God. And so he joyously diagrammed the geometry of Substance. Joy was, for him, truly a philosophical activity, one that generated a love of the most absolute knowledge. With Wright, however, joy leads not to an understanding of God, *per se*, but, rather, to a visceral sense of what we call the great weave of the world. In turn, this weave emits ἀρμονία (harmony), the sound of all things as they are συναρμόχθη (fitted together). In recent literature in Science and Technology Studies, such as the works of Karen Barad, we hear this harmony as entanglement, the entanglement of the always ongoing, mutually constitutive connections of all matter and intellectual processes. Joy abounds in the sensing of entanglement and the hearing of the harmony of the great weave of the world.

By exhibiting the joy of reading Wright, we intend to help others dance into the weave and explore the intel-

lectual, musical, and rhythmical territories of Wright's harmonies. Our exhibitions of meaning making are instructive, but they do not follow the "do as I do" or "do as I say" model of instructional texts. Instead, our readings invite the reader, paraphrasing Deleuze, to "do along with us" as we make meaning from selections across Wright's erudite, dense, rhythmically fascinating, and seemingly hermetic body of work.

We are dancing with others who have come before us. In 1983, Robert B. Stepto compelled readers of *Callaloo* to read Wright. In 1987, Vera M. Kutzinski compelled us to read Wright with William Carlos Williams and Nicolas Guillén. In 2001, Neil Ardití compelled readers of *Parnassus* to tangle with Wright's elective affinities. In 2004, Harold Bloom and a coterie of thinkers compelled still more. And now here we are in 2022, joyously compelling still others to read Wright. *Pitch and Revelation* pitches this repeated call as an ongoing, open invitation to take up the work of such reading, not, or not exclusively, through biography or historical contextualization of Wright within, say, the milieu of other Black writers in the United States from the late 1960s to the present. Instead, our dancing-reading doubles (triples?) as a kind of literary archaeology that parses the weave of the world discerned through Wright's many texts. The stratigraphy of the dig reveals the intercourse of mathematics, music theory and practice, Ancient philosophy, and theatrical sensibility that make up the ground of Wright's work, all strata upon which our dancing partners have remarked.

§

Perhaps some words on difficulty are in order. Is reading Wright difficult? Yes, but not in the sense that most people attribute to the word "difficult."

Wright's "difficulty" is part and parcel of his exuberant layering. A fictional illustration of this layering goes something like this. In Book IV of his narrative on the Persian Wars, the Greek historian Herodotus, indeed the first ever historian if we honor the Ancient Greek roots of the word, deliberates on the question of how many Scythians there are or have been. What, in other words, is their population? The answer takes the form of a vessel, a bronze bowl of sorts.

This vessel (so said the people of the country) was made out of arrowheads. For their king, whose name was Ariantas, desiring to know the numbers of the Scythians, commanded every Scythian to bring him the point from an arrow, threatening all who should not so do with death. So a vast number of arrow-heads was brought, and he resolved to make and leave a memorial out of them; and he made of these this bronze vessel, and set it up in this country Examphaeus. Thus much I heard concerning the number of the Scythians.¹

That is, Herodotus, the proto-historian, asks a seemingly plain question and receives a less-than-straightforward answer. He then includes this mysterious answer in his narrative, as though it provided answers. In fact, it preserves mystery and sustains the original question, answerless.

Anne Carson takes up this bronze vessel in her exquisite elegy, *Nox*, assembled in the wake of her brother's death. In place of a specific number of Scythians, Herodotus can do nothing else than describe the bowl: "Six times as big as the one set by Pausanias at the entrance to the Black Sea. For anyone who hasn't seen that I'll say

1 Herodotus, *The Persian Wars, Books 3–4, Vol. 2*, trans. A.D. Godley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), 2:282–85.

this: you could easily pour 600 amphoras [maybe 5000 gallons] into the Skythian bowl [...]" Carson seems interested in the way the bowl replaces the number. It becomes a memory or a monument to the number. From this tale, Carson concludes:

History can be a storydog that roams around Asia Minor collecting bits of muteness like burrs in its hide. Note that the word "mute" (from Latin *mutus* and Greek *μύειν*) is regarded by linguists as an onomatopoeic formation referring not to silence but to a certain fundamental opacity of human being, which likes to show the truth by allowing it to be seen hiding.²

Now, if Wright were to treat the Herodotus episode, which he does not, he might superimpose Carson's elegiac uptake of the Scythian bowl with Herodotus's original telling in a manner much like Yves Klein and his team produced the famous image "Leap into the Void." The bowl could assume the prime position of the falling man, Carson could acquire a stage name such as "The Canadian," Ancient Greek words would be mobilized to support the mystery of the scene, and the entire composition would be sutured together with such fine stitching that all involved temporalities flatten into one *Jetztzeit* and corresponding now-space. A perfectly convincing picture of something that never happened but that most certainly produces a ripple in the fabric of time and space.

As readers, we arrive on the scene *in medias res* and decide how best to participate. Perhaps we shiver as the ripple runs over us. Perhaps, craving tangibility, we focus on the historical bowl. Perhaps we reflect on the juxtaposition of a 1960s Parisian cityscape and a Classical Greek populace. Perhaps we are intrigued by The Canadian and

2 Anne Carson, Robert Currie, and Gaius V. Catullus, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010), n.p.

attempt to deduce her true identity in order to tune ourselves to Wright's poetic partnerships. Perhaps we put the book down and dance away into a field. Perhaps we perceive the interconnection of fiction and historical narrative as if the poem were a porous assembly of artifacts, and we follow the impulse to read elsewhere, as a looping flight, through one of the discovered archival sources. Perhaps we do all of these things all at once.

Is any of this difficult? The answer to that question is like the thickness of the Scythian bowl: the metal has a thickness of six fingers.

§

More acutely (less obliquely):

Dante Micheaux writes that, "Wright is a difficult poet but [...] there are difficult pleasures to be had from his high song. Moreover, he would be less difficult if the teaching of history were more accurate and reflected Wright's range. [...] Our country [the U.S.A.] needs this poetry more than any other."³ This is true, we believe, because the emphasis of Micheaux's comment falls on the act of teaching instead of on the content of history classes. That is, it is not enough to assign diverse material. There must be a form of teaching that flocks together with the names and events that conspire together to knit the (w)hole of history since, after all, the act of teaching is, too, a part of this (w)hole.

If we may add one point to Micheaux's comment, it would be this. We need not wait for this form of teaching to materialize for the simple reason that Wright's

3 Dante Micheaux, "A Different Center," *The Best American Poetry*, September 4, 2010, https://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2010/09/a-different-center-by-dante-micheaux.html.

work is the teaching. Wright's work is both the teaching and the content, the how and the what. We go to school at Wright's word when we comport our reading and our emotional pitch to the rhythm of his weave. In other words, we may become our own teachers through the artistic act of reading Wright.

Methexical Reading: Forays into Wright's Wor(l)ds

§ Naive reading and the sound of names

Early winter
Eboussi-Boulaga waits
for the first
snow, the face
earth's cloud chamber will reveal.¹

How might a reader respond to these lines that begin the long poem "BANĀ NGOLO" in Wright's 2013 work *Disorientations: Groundings*, a reader unfamiliar with the person named Eboussi-Boulaga? How does a reader encounter the proper name (because it is unlikely that it would be a fictional character) before considering it a reference, a flag for some historical person to look up later? Can we pause for a moment to examine the set of valences according to which such an identifying label moves in poetry? First it points to the world outside of the poem; that is, it ruptures the modernist notion that the poem can be

1 Jay Wright, *Disorientations: Groundings* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2013), 77.

a closed universe, that one can “understand” it completely, without recourse to other texts. Yet modalities of naive understanding present themselves, naive in that they precede the informed biography of this figure. The reader understands a personage, historical, has been lodged in the world, patient, in a particular climate. We join this figure in the act of waiting. He waits, as does the reader, for some face to reveal itself – an identity as a nature, as knowledge, like the first precipitation in a change of season. In the meantime, and second, the concrete ring of that hyphenated name, with its particular, six-syllable music divided so neatly in two, presents itself as an artifact of language, like Emerson’s “fossil words” that carry with them vast cultural and historical narratives distilled and emblemized in solid form. One can imagine what those might be: not knowing what they are, only knowing that they are. “Proper names are also indexicals or designators, but they have special importance since they alone form properly material singularities,” wrote Gilles Deleuze, and also, “the name expresses an ‘intensity’ before designating or manifesting a person.”²

From the first appearance of a proper name in the title of the third poem, “Crispus Attucks,” in his first book, *The Homecoming Singer* (1971), Wright has deployed the name in this way, devoid of explanatory context. In that first case, the abolitionist icon and first casualty of the American Revolutionary War, killed in the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770, and specifically this historical figure’s *name*, became the seed of language generative of poetry. The stevedore of African and Native American descent whose blood inaugurates a country’s birth, receives this acknowledgement:

2 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 13, 40.

sometimes we forget you.
 Who asked you
 for that impulsive miracle?
 I form it now,
 with my own motives.³

That a poem can in this way narrate a moment in the imagined life of a historical figure renders the writing porous, in conversation in its own way with reality, an open system perhaps. It commences making a new shape of its found materials. It builds itself out of events distant enough to be, at this naive outset, mysterious, haunting in their very unfamiliarity, “a lure to feeling” (Whitehead) and a pointer. The name then acts as an invitation that a reader might accept and, in doing so, implicate oneself in, and draw oneself further into, the poet’s “own motives,” reforming the world according to this poem’s sense of how to understand it.

Pitch and Revelation considers the invitation of the name as the event horizon of an initiation. We understand “initiation” to comprehend at least two senses. First, a beginning, an entrance. Second, an awakening into one’s own finely woven “self,” which is to say a discovery of what one is as somehow more than the sum of its recognizable parts. “Reading” is what we call the slip between the event horizon and the initiated experience. To read Wright is to follow both senses of this initiation simultaneously.

§ Disorientations: groundings

We begin this initial chapter of *Pitch and Revelation* with an excerpt from the poet’s 2013 work *Disorientations*:

3 Jay Wright, *Transfigurations: Collected Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 9–10.

Groundings because the title feels appropriate. Reading Wright is disorientating, and the act of disorientation grounds the reader. To begin, the title punctuates the space between its two words with an already doubled mark, the colon, that does its relational work in two irreducible modes. As syntactic symbol, it separates with the distinction of defining the relation as of the second expanding or illustrating the first. Groundings constitute an illustration of, an inflection of, an unfolding of, disorientations. As mathematical symbol, it states a particular proportion, a ratio. How many groundings does each disorientation contain? Furthermore, disorientations are to groundings as X is to Y, a relationship transferrable to other quantities. This title of only two words with one punctuation mark between them, the most reduced and economical means, announces that language in the domain of this poetry will intertwine as qualitative and quantitative, and that reading will involve navigating the movement of shifting signifiers and changing relations. Such changes and shifts will disorient, if not reorient, and this poetry, by way of those destabilizations, will ground the receptive reader.

Let us consider the four stages of these acts of disorientation grounding as the following: 1) The embarkation (a commencement) into a profoundly disorienting state, one result of which is a new understanding of *being grounded*; 2) the discernment of language-as-laminate, an artificial and therefore fictional materiality pressed up against the material reality outside of language; 3) an attunement to the musical rhythms that accompany the journey, rhythms that, once their times are counted out, unfold acts of learning; 4) the construction of an edifice that might also be called "the world." We will add that this world, so-called, seems, at least at first, to resemble the realm of quantum mechanics more closely than it does that of classical physics.

In *Disorientations: Groundings*, and arguably in many other of Wright's works, these four stages align with the four stages of Dogon initiation. To be more precise, the image of the Dogon⁴ conjured by Wright relies on the borrowed light of Marcel Griaule, French Anthropologist, whose books *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* (originally published in French in 1948) and *The Pale Fox* (with Germaine Dieterlen, also published originally in French in 1965), clearly impacted the poet.⁵ By mentioning the "four stages of Dogon initiation," we are referring to the process of initiation into Dogon cosmology relayed through these particular books. The worldview revealed in those books' pages is awesome and complex. Later, in the chapter "Wright's rhythm, or 'x' marks the weave," we explore this worldview in depth, including the origin story of the Dogon supposedly relayed to Griaule by Ogotemmêli.

§ Griot, prophet, chanter

Who was Ogotemmêli? Could we consider him a "griot," a title that would emphasize his position within Dogon society as historian and keeper of an oral tradition while also linking him to the class of "poet" that Wright develops in his 1983 conversation with Charles H. Rowell? Discoursing with Rowell, Wright identifies the griot as a poet insofar as his relation with language calls upon

- 4 The Dogon are a people, numbering upward of half of a million, who live in the plateau region of the country that maps now label as Mali. They speak a tonal language in which pitch is utilized to distinguish lexical and grammatical meaning.
- 5 The original volume of Wright's *Soothsayers and Omens* (New York: Seven Woods Press, 1976) includes the opening statement: "NOTE: The final section of this book is based on the tribal cosmology of the Dogon people of Africa as related in the publications of Marcel Griaule and the members of the staff of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris." The book's final section is titled *Second Conversations with Ogotemmêli*.

a certain play with polysemy that marks the poet as a producer of meaning. "I include in the speech community all those practitioners of verbal art who are not normally included: the griot, the old Testament prophet, the ritual chanter, the fabulist, the legist, the chronicler, the preacher, even the mathematician, among others."⁶ Thus, framed as griot and historian, Ogotemmêli would appear in Wright's work as both a sage of existing knowledge and as a world-maker engaged in a kind of jam session of ideas that Griaule was invited to sit in on. We think this way of approaching both Ogotemmêli and Griaule avoids the discourse of factual historicity that has skewered Griaule's fieldwork and depiction of Dogon beliefs as, basically, preposterous. The chief criticism from this ideological position comes from Walter E.A. van Beek in the 1991 publication "Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule [and Comments and Replies]."⁷ Our aversion to this line of critique is not an aversion to critical theory or even empiricism. There is, no doubt, a book-length study to be written concerning Wright's Dogonology, on his contribution to the grand image conjured by the name "Dogon." But, and this is the main point here, the act of reading Wright requires attending to his own reading forays. It is unlikely that

- 6 Charles H. Rowell, "'The Unraveling of The Egg': An Interview with Jay Wright," *Callaloo* 19, "Jay Wright: A Special Issue" (Autumn 1983): 3–15.
- 7 Walter E.A. van Beek et al., "Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule [and Comments and Replies]," *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (April 1991): 139–67. "Summing up, the Dogon ethnography produced by Griaule after World War II cannot be taken at face value. It is the product of a complex interaction between a strong-willed researcher, a colonial situation, an intelligent and creative body of informants, and a culture with a courtesy bias and a strong tendency to incorporate foreign elements" (157). The co-authors named in the citation offer in-depth critiques of van Beek's so-called "Restudy" of the Dogon, including his dismissal of Griaule's literary leanings.

Wright entered into Griaule as an unexperienced researcher keen to take all comments at face value. More likely, Wright finds something of epistemological and rhythmicological value in the act of “sitting in” on the jam session between Griaule and the Dogon griot. It is this “something” that we are interested in unearthing in this book.

When Wright makes an explicit connection to the initiation into Dogon knowledge practices in *Disorientations: Groundings*, he does so in a musical and playful way. In this particular book of poetry, the four stages of initiation named by Griaule appear as names for each of the book’s four parts⁸:

- *giri sō*, which equates roughly to “word at face value,” “front word,” or, perhaps, “fore-word”
- *benne sō*, or “word on the side”
- *bqlq sō*, or “word from behind”
- *sō dayi*, or “clear word”

Yoshitaka Miike, in the essay “Non-Western Theories of Communication: Indigenous Ideas and Insights,” helps us unpack these stages.⁹ *Giri sō* is akin to descriptive knowledge of visible things, hearable words, observable deeds. But this knowledge is an active mode of production, the act of seeing and sounding out proper names like “Eboussi-Boulaga.” *Benne sō*, also understood as action, crosses the threshold from description to interpretation. This

8 *bibliotecapleyades.net*, https://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/universo/siriusmystery/siriusmystery_appendix06.htm. This page includes a description of the Dogon system of graduated initiation into the mysteries of tribal religion, which, in turn, come from Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, *The Pale Fox*, trans. Stephen C. Infantino (Paris: French Institute of Ethnology, 1965).

9 Yoshitaka Miike, “Non-Western Theories of Communication: Indigenous Ideas and Insights,” in *Intercultural Communication*, ed. Ling Chen (Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton, 2017), 67–98.

is the act of analysis and contextualization where Eboussi-Boulaga transforms from glyphs and sounds into the African philosopher concerned with, among many other things, how language functions within the human being in the African condition (known as Muntu). *Bqlq s̄* enables comparative knowledge and frees individual references from their particular, spatio-temporal coordinates (their status as objects in, for example, a Euclidean world). Once free, the references yield glimpses of their quantum entanglement with other, seemingly unrelated objects. To understand the key concept of entanglement we look to the oft-cited first lines of Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway*:

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.¹⁰

We may say the same of the concepts and entities, entangled presences, at work in Wright's poetry. If we close *Disorientations: Groundings*, we find on the cover of the book, in the design by Flood Editions, *Saint Jerome Writing*, as rendered by Caravaggio (that is, the mythico-aesthetic-historical palimpsest of the real-life Saint Jerome). Through *bqlq s̄*, we learn that Eboussi-Boulaga, Caravaggio, and Saint Jerome are entangled. They are entangled with Wild West sheriff Elfego Baca, Argentinian poet Ricardo Molinari, Danish physicist Niels Bohr – referred to as The Dane, enfolding him, perhaps, with Shakespeare's Hamlet – and many other figures. Finally, *s̄ dayi* is the

¹⁰ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), ix.

act of communicating what you have learned through the first three stages. Taken together, the four stages lead to a crystalline clarity of knowledge.

We may observe here the interplay of the system, in this case the four-part Dogon initiation ritual, in relation to its application in poetry. We could say the same of any system and its application, and we could make two intertwined proposals accordingly: that a problem exists as a dimension of the system and that creativity lies at the heart of the actualization of a structure. The act of reading involves reading both the structure and its actualization *as if* such a distinction might be possible. The creative act, with its adventure of ideas, responsive to a problem, enacts a mutual transformation of the system and the structure that issues from it, as well as it conjures the pantheon of figures who populate that structure, drawn from the reservoir of history. Each shadowy shape, each boldly drawn personage, and every echo and resonance between them, increase as their mutual interplay reduces and amplifies them at once.

The culmination of the four-part sequence, the *sō dayi*, with its production of knowledge and clarity, encompasses a moral obligation to state with that clarity what one now knows. Or, rather, the four stages lead to *your* clarity of knowledge and a rising moral obligation to state clearly what *you* know. Not what Wright knows. We will say more about clarity. For now, this distinction leads to a crucial understanding of what “reading” means, one that Michel de Certeau outlined in the first half of the 1970s, roughly contemporaneous with the publication of Wright’s first chapbook, *Death as History* (1967), and subsequent book of poetry, *The Homecoming Singer* (1971).

§ The invention of reading

Michel de Certeau has doubts about the prevailing understanding of reading. We find a list of these doubts in his project titled *L'Invention du quotidien*, which has been translated into English as the two-volume collection *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In those pages, we see de Certeau doubt, and oppose, the ideology of “informing through books.” He also doubts, and opposes, the notion that there is a treasure buried at the heart of a given text, one that, once discovered, opens the “meaning” of the text to the reader. He doubts, along with many others, that the written word is the sum total of “the text,” opting instead to understand society itself as the text and the written word as a precipitate formed through some kind of chemical interaction between an author, a reader, and the society-text. He also doubts that the “consumer” of knowledge consumes passively. The opposite is more true; the reader actively “invents in texts something different from what they [i.e., the texts] ‘intended.’ He detaches them from their [i.e., the texts]’ (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings.”¹¹

If so, then some questions are in order. If readers are not informed through books, then what precisely happens to them when reading? If there is no treasure, then why do we often expect to find something there in the pages? If a text is open on all sides to the society from which it sprang, then in what way does this immanent, societal infringement influence the reader’s activity? What precisely is the reader inventing, and what are the contours of the space in which the reader does this in-

11 Michel de Certeau, “Reading as Poaching,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 169.

venting? Answering these questions helps to frame the precise activity of *Pitch and Revelation*, the activity of reading Wright – which, it turns out, is imbricated with the act of Wright’s reading.

Let us travel through de Certeau’s words, aimed at the ideology of “informing through books”:

[... I]nclined to believe that its own cultural models are necessary for the people in order to educate their minds and elevate their hearts, the elite upset about the “low level” of journalism or television always assumes that the public is moulded by the products imposed on it. To assume that is to misunderstand the act of “consumption.” This misunderstanding assumes that “assimilating” necessarily means “becoming similar to” what one absorbs, and not “making something similar” to what one is, making it one’s own, appropriating or reappropriating it. Between these two possible meanings, a choice must be made [...].¹²

De Certeau is speaking at a particular moment in time and space, in the wake of the 1968 student protests in France and the subsequent leftward cant of the political structure. He is speaking of the institutional strategy of dividing students from masters by means of an artificial and rigorously maintained moat between, ostensibly, those-who-have-already-learned and those-who-would-learn. This bifurcation of the cultural field allowed other neat, but also necessarily manmade, dichotomies, such as, most importantly in this case, producer and consumer. For de Certeau, the privatization of academic knowledge – what now would be called the closure of the (academic) commons – went hand-in-hand with the proliferation of new media that could reach, through form and content, the masses. For the academy to shore up its position as

¹² Ibid., 166.

producer of knowledge, it had to set itself apart from the producers of mere information, such as television programs and mainstream journalism. This act of differentiation necessitated the production not only of knowledge (i.e., Truth, Science, Fact, History), but also the production of a consuming public. To become a licensed consumer of academic knowledge, one had to submit to the course of training laid out by the academic institution, to read the texts, by which they still meant books and written works, and, by pledging one's allegiance in this way, to self-identify as an individual apart from the masses.

As a student of the 1968 uprisings, however, de Certeau was able to ascertain the mechanics of this bifurcated field of production. He recognized the construction of these different strata of "consumer" and set about revealing an altogether different understanding of such personae. As such, the "consumer" and "reader," whether one is talking about academic knowledge or television programs, ceases to be the one who molds him- or her- or theirself to the image of Truth, History, and so forth that one finds in the authorized texts and becomes, instead, the one who recognizes one's entanglement with texts of all sorts thereby making something new of oneself. The form and content of texts does not inform the reader. The reader forms his, her, or their self through prolonged engagement with texts.

§ The difficult and the open

In de Certeau's language, Wright appears as an exquisite instance of such a "consumer." He assimilated himself to the readings he encountered – Crane, Dante, Griaule, Stengers, Zermelo, and many, many more – which means that he found in those works something that enabled him to articulate his optic and haptic experiences of the world. In other words, assimilating himself to these texts

made him what he is, and did not necessarily push him into a set comprised of impenetrable or abstruse thinkers. As such, it is necessary to trouble the idea that Wright's works are "hard" and "elitist." We would benefit from recognizing how the notion of "difficulty" deters readers from discovering that reading might be done at whatever pace one likes – as a friend once reported after receiving his copy of *The Prime Anniversary*, a happy return to the condition of "spending two days thinking about the first page"¹³ – and with whatever assistance one needs, or with whatever tools might come in handy. Characterizing Wright's challenges as prohibitively difficult cedes too readily to the pre-existing notion of a pre-existing "meaning" settled within his works, and it subordinates reading to the excavation of this meaning. Such subordination reduces acts of reading to a singular method that neutralizes those necessary flights, bifurcations, and branching maneuvers "outside" of the initial realm of the text. The lie: you need to know x, y, and z in order to break the surface and enter into Wright's true meaning. Against this, consider that Wright's writings instigate a search, one that his reader has the opportunity to undertake under the guidance of his writing, more apprenticeship than quest. This opportunity is "worth the effort" (though, it would be wise to challenge the quantitative, capitalist verbiage wrapped up in this phrase) because it was Wright's own search through other readings that led to his insights and helped him grow as a thinker.

"By challenging 'consumption' as it is conceived and (of course) confirmed by these 'authorial' enterprises," de Certeau continues, "we may be able to discover a creative activity where it has been denied that any exists [...]"¹⁴ This "creative activity" is Wright's reading, which we would also like to posit as reading generally. Some crea-

13 The friend is Daniel Woody.

14 de Certeau, "Reading as Poaching," 167.

tive activity took place that enabled Wright to see the fine weave of threads connecting Niels Bohr and Elfego Baca and Eboussi-Boulaga, and then another creative activity takes place when we encounter these three words, names, or figures in their dance together across Wright's pages. To engage in this creative activity (i.e., to read) is to baffle the paradigm of author and reader ushered into the contemporary moment and, necessarily, to expose "[t]he fiction of the 'treasury' hidden in the work, a sort of strong-box full of meaning."¹⁵ If the text is permitted to appear as the container of this treasure, then all text becomes the private hunting reserve of a self-imposed elite.

This metaphor reveals the function of de Certeau's chapter title: "Reading as poaching." Given the continual existence of the "fiction of the treasury" hidden within a text, a tactical reader – one who purposefully moves through the text with the mission of assimilating the material to herself, of poetically constructing and revising herself – becomes a poacher. This reader does not poach from the author but, rather, from the invisible institutions that have already deployed their bifurcating strategy upon the act of reading (generally) in order to maintain the "consumer" in the posture of passivity, which, in turn, secures the "producer" as the forever-out-of-sight fabricator of meaning and truth.

Following from this thought, Wright's works are not "difficult," not in the typical sense of the term. They do not deploy an elaborate field of obstacles intended to test the mettle of the reader. It is not the case that only the most "well-educated" reader can overcome the ostensible difficulty of his texts. Wright's texts are, by contrast, so *radically wide open* that they can stun the reader. The experience is like walking into a house, the interior of which is infinitely larger than the exterior. But, the openness of this house of leaves is not the work of one who has re-

15 Ibid., 171.

moved traditional boundary lines and disciplinary silos. Wright's creative act has not been primarily one of pioneering an interdisciplinary mode of thinking. Rather, his creative act has been to demonstrate that no authentic boundaries or disciplinary lines actually exist. That is, there is no natural division between Ancient Greek philosophy, Pythagorean number fanaticism, Dogon astronomy, bullfighting, abstract set theory, and Isabelle Stengers. The artificial moats dredged to separate these various *topoi* can be artfully avoided by taking the road less-travelled.

To read Wright is to explore the more scenic route, which, though radically open, is so densely populated that fatigue will likely set in. Indeed, Wright's readers would do well to adjust their understanding of temporality as they read, to enact a phase shift that helps comport oneself to the open. Whatever one's particular reading tactic, the situation is now clearly laid bare. Reading Wright requires forgetting the fiction of the text as treasury, baffling the ideology of "informing through texts," and forging one's own creative activity.

The (strenuous and exhilarating and astonishing) exercise of reading Wright finds its way to us, then, not as a problem with Wright's so-called difficulty. Rather, we must contend with the roadblocks set in place by the institution of "reading." Most likely one acquires these blockages through the very act that would purport to equip readers with the knowledge necessary for deciphering an erudite text: the act of schooling. As such, we require a new type of learning, one that could borrow from the words of another poet, Theodore Roethke, who insists, "I learn by going where I have to go." Only while engaged in the creative activity of reading, à la de Certeau, does one undertake the learning required to read a given text – a creative activity that recognizes in reading a moment of *waking*, if we might borrow the title of Roethke's villanelle as a guide. This looping engagement,

undertaken with a certain spirit of play and enjoyment, becomes like one of Deligny's maps, a guide through a territory hewn from the experience of traversing that territory. In the case of Wright, the expanse of this territory revealed to the reader in this incarnation as surveyor is much larger than most people would expect. The entanglement of forms and images within that terrain will likely surprise. Reading Wright will in turn conjure a sense of Wright-as-Reader. One may glimpse Jay Wright poaching. But this glimpse does not explain what one reads. Rather, it remains but one phenomenon that may or may not transpire as you, the reader within Wright's texts, make something of yourself.

§ Methexical reading

Given the date of de Certeau's writing, the roughly coeval appearance of Wright's early poetry, and our emphasis on the act of creation undertaken through reading, it may seem as though we are embarking from the well-known landmark of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and its corresponding birth of the reader. We would like, however, to slip into a slightly different scheme. Writing on the historical and literary relationship between French theory of the late 1960s and Borges, who makes numerous appearances in Wright's poems, Michael Wood avers that what makes Borges and Barthes "precursors of each other" is their belief that "the reader creates the author."¹⁶ Our argument, by contrast, proposes not a vector, but a complex and branching network, a set of relations, on which the reader constitutes a node; that Wright's reader participates in uncovering the grand weave of Everything

16 Michael Wood, "Borges and Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Edwin Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 37.

and does so by engaging with Wright's own participation in what he reads. A reader will create or produce meanings within Wright's text, but the "meaning" is less important than this activity of participation. Given Wright's affinity for the Ancient Greeks, we might think of this participation through the theatrical and philosophical event of μέθεξις (*methexis*).

To explain this event, we can return to Charles H. Rowell's interview with Wright for the readers of *Callaloo* in 1983. Responding to the initial question – broadly, "what is a poem?" – Wright crafted his fascinatingly wide and deep answer that leads into the "we" of the poetic community. For Wright, the set "poets" comprehends (and we use this mathematical terminology on purpose, for reasons we will explain two paragraphs ahead) "the griot, the old Testament prophet, the ritual chanter, the fabulist, the legist, the chronicler, the preacher, even the mathematician, among others."¹⁷ To be a poet is to participate in the work undertaken by these other speech artists, and, as such, to assume similar social and historical responsibilities that these speakers themselves assumed. Citing Wilson Harris as a guide, Wright tells us that these responsibilities are various but all in service of "transformation, the radical creation, of experience, the making of a new body and new heart, the breathing of a new spirit."¹⁸ Poets, while distinguishing their craft through deployment of certain rhythms, syntax, and stylistic flair, are recognized as participants in this radical creation. We can assign to them the question, as Gilles Deleuze phrased it: "To what are we dedicated if not to those problems which demand the very transformation of our body and our language?"¹⁹

17 Rowell, "The Unraveling of The Egg," 4.

18 Ibid.

19 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 192.

The Ancient Greek term *methexis* provides more insight into this “participation” generally and in Wright’s case specifically. The word straddles two domains, the theatrical and the philosophical. (Though, *pace* Wright, we understand the separation of domains as artificial.) In the domain of theater, *methexis* seems to have referred to what historians call “group sharing,” whereby the audience took part in the ritual purpose served by theatrical festivals. While the author of the plays reworked history in lyric form and the performers onstage undertook the labor of singing the song composed by the playwright-poet, the audience members, perhaps acting like jurors in a trial or voting members of a democracy, expressed their enthusiasm and discontent with the action portrayed on the stage, either through applause or yelling or jeering or some combination of these actions. Together, all who participated in the theater event helped to carry off the ritual offering to, for example, Dionysos, as well as enacting the equally, if not more, important role of active citizen.

In the domain of philosophy, *methexis* presents a more daunting task for contemporary readers. To access the term, scholars turn frequently to its appearance in one of Plato’s most enigmatic dialogues, *Parmenides*, where Plato, via an imagined version of the historical figure Parmenides, considers the way in which particulars partake of, or participate in, its corresponding Form. The entire dialogue is a test of the theory of Forms, one that seems to show Plato scrutinizing gaps in his metaphysics from the earlier “middle-period” dialogues. As Samuel Rickless goes on to explain,

Plato considers two accounts of the partaking relation. According to the first “Pie Model” account, for X to partake of Y is for the whole or a part of Y to be in X (as a part of X). According to the second “Paradigmatistic” account, for X to partake of Y is for X to resemble Y. In

the first part of the dialogue, Plato sets out reasons for thinking that, on either of these accounts of partaking, the theory of forms is internally inconsistent.²⁰

The term we introduced earlier, “comprehending,” appears in this quotation in the phrase, “for the whole or a part of Y *to be in* X (as part of X)” (emphasis added). “Comprehension” here has no epistemological value but, rather, denotes the phenomenon of something being inside something else. If some Earthly thing is beautiful, it somehow exists within the form of Beauty, at least according to the “Pie Model.” As Rickless phrases it, “it is by virtue of being in some way related to (i.e., by participating in, or partaking of) the form of beauty that beautiful things (other than beauty) are beautiful.”

We need this brief tour through Plato in order to approach the work of Proclus. As exemplary of so-called Neoplatonist philosophy, Proclus works back through key thoughts about participation from *Parmenides* and, simultaneously, provides insight into the methexical reading that Wright undertakes through his poetry. Proclus’s geometric work in particular points the way to Wright’s methexis. To understand this, we can turn to Orna Harari, a reader of Proclus, whose essay “Methexis and Geometrical Reasoning in Proclus’ Commentary on Euclid’s ‘Elements’” unpacks the nested ideas within the philosophical tradition leading back from the Neoplatonists to Plato.

20 *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Plato’s *Parmenides*,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/plato-parmenides/>.

§ The aid of the imagination

Harari locks onto one of Proclus's many deft philosophical maneuvers that helped him to understand geometry as something more than the mimetic resemblance of Ideas or Forms. It would seem, for example, that a geometric diagram is at least one step removed from the Idea the diagram seeks to address. At the same time, however, Euclid and many Greek philosophers appear to work from the belief that geometry taps directly into the Idea and that, by extension, the geometric diagram is something more potent than a mimetic representation, more immediate to the Idea than a painting of a table is to a table. As Harari points out, Proclus goes as far as to suggest that geometry surpasses other modes of discursive reason because of the extent to which the geometric diagram draws on the imagination.

In Harari's words, "[a]ccording to Proclus, discursive reason needs the aid of the imagination, because it [discursive reason] is 'too weak to see the reason principles in their folded form.'"²¹ That is, human cognitive power cannot fully intuit the full range of Reason tucked within the Form, what in Proclus and elsewhere in Neoplatonic thought is called a "transcendent universal" – the univocity, or Parmenides's "being inside of," that Deleuze described as "a single 'voice' of Being which includes all its modes, including the most diverse, the most varied, the most differentiated."²² "[T]he weakness of discursive reason," Harari continues, "can be understood as an inability to apprehend the transcendental universal as the unitary cause of each of its manifestations."²³ Here, we return to

21 Orna Harari, "Methexis and Geometrical Reasoning in Proclus' Commentary on Euclid's *Elements*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 30 (2006): 381.

22 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 36.

23 Harari, "Methexis and Geometrical Reasoning in Proclus' Commentary on Euclid's *Elements*," 381.

the notion of methexis. To understand how precisely specific Earthly things partake of or participate in their Ideal Form, or, conversely, how a unitary Form can manifest multiple Earthly things, we need more than logical reasoning. For Proclus, “the productive power of the transcendent universal can be apprehended only through its imitation by its effects.”²⁴ And thus, geometric constructions enter the spotlight. At least for Proclus, geometric constructions (i.e., diagrams) “present in a conjunctive way the occult and unitary productive power of the transcendent universals.”²⁵

But not so fast, you say. How does Proclus square the power of imitation with Plato’s well-known dismissal of imitation as mimesis, as twice-removed shadows of the Ideal Form? The answer to this question lies in Plato’s *Parmenides*, which Proclus, it would seem, understands as Plato’s reworking of earlier ideas, such as the castigation of mimesis for which he advocates in the *Republic*. Of the many interpretations of the enigmatic *Parmenides*, Proclus appears to subscribe to the reading that places emphasis on the second half where, after first roundly critiquing the theory of Forms, *Parmenides* goes on to demonstrate methods by which the theory could ultimately be redeemed. To save the theory of Forms, philosophers must hone the dialectic, that specific *performance* of philosophy that leads to true knowledge. In this regard Proclus returned to the passage below from *The Republic*, profoundly commenting on it and treating it as an expression of the method of the *Parmenides*, and a clear illustration of the One as distributed among the hypotheses of the *Parmenides*.

[B]y the other section of the intelligible I mean that which the reason itself lays hold of by the power of

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

dialectic, treating its assumptions not as absolute beginnings but literally as hypotheses, underpinnings, footings and springboards so to speak, to enable it to rise to that which requires no assumption and is the starting point of all, and after attaining to that again taking hold of the first dependencies from it, so as to proceed downward to the conclusion [...].²⁶

Since many of the lines of thought spun out by (the character of) Parmenides in the second half of Plato's dialogue appear incomplete, readers have wondered whether (the character of) Parmenides and, by extension, Plato, actually save the theory of Forms or merely leave a map for future, more advanced philosophers to follow. One possible argument that cuts the binary of this quandary – either *Parmenides* does resolve the theory of Forms, or it doesn't – is that the *performance* of philosophizing holds the key. The *act* of philosophy incarnates a combination of λόγος (*logos*), μῆτις (*mētis*), φαντασία (*phantasia*), and other Ancient Greek forms of wisdom into an event.

In Proclus, the term that captures this incarnated act, this actualization of ideas, is “kinematic construction,” where “kinematic” comprehends the Greek word, κίνημα, for movement. For Proclus, “actual productions and constructions disclose the mode of generation of the geometric objects, thereby leading to a theoretical understanding of causes.”²⁷ That is, if the power of the Form comes from its ability to generate many things from its unity, then the best way to truly partake of this generative power is to imitate the act of genesis through, in Proclus's case, the diagramming of geometry. Harari offers a specific example: “[t]he attempt to establish essential relations through the kinematic construction of the

26 Cited in Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 325.

27 Harari, “*Methexis* and Geometrical Reasoning in Proclus' Commentary on Euclid's *Elements*,” 382.

triangle rests on the assumption that *the mode by which an object is generated constitutes its essence.*"²⁸ Proclus's geometry not only draws from the discussion of methexis in Plato's *Parmenides*; it also constitutes a mode of methexis whereby the act of generating geometry grants access to the generative essence of Ideal Forms.

We might pause here to consider Plato as a methexical reader of the so-called Presocratics, Proclus as a methexical reader of Plato, Harari as a methexical reader of Proclus, and Wright as a methexical reader of all these people and many others. It is not the case that Wright comprehends these ideas, in the mathematical sense; nor is it the case that Plato or Parmenides, or *Parmenides*, comprehends Wright. Rather, Wright, Harari, Proclus, Plato, and Parmenides all participate in the One. While we may very well participate in the One, too, simply by merit of Being, the act of reading enhances this participation and makes the affective and rational bonanza of the participation more palpable. Without participating in the performance, we won't fully understand the hugeness of what's going on behind the scenes.

§ The language of pure form

We come back around to Wright, whose poems both enact his own participation in the One, which in this book we elaborate as "the great weave," and also transform us into methexical readers. A striking and typically erudite example of Wright's methexis comes in his 2019 book *The Prime Anniversary*. There we encounter mathematical equations, spaced at intervals through the book and rendered in the lower margins like markers, that seem to summarize subgroups of the poems that preceded them, named as levels, as in a countdown or descent:

28 Ibid., 385, emphasis added.

Third level (a): $2 \times 5 \times 7 = 70$

Third level (b): $2 \times 5 \times 7 = 70$

Second level (a): $5 \times 7 = 35$

Second level (b): $7 \times 5 = 35$

First, we can note Wright's participation in the set of speech artists that comprehend both mathematicians and poets, two identities typically not united in contemporary discourse on either poetry or math. The equations alert us to some calculations that Wright's poems undertake. Through reading, we learn that the elements of the first equation correspond to the two (2) stanzas that appear on each of the first five (5) pages, and that each stanza contains seven (7) lines. The product of this multiplication, 70, seems to indicate the total number of lines in that set of poems, that "third level." The elements of the second equation correspond thusly: seven (7) pages each contain one poem comprised of ten lines in the form of two (2) sets of five (5) lines, another permutation with a total of 70 lines. As such, the second equation expresses an internal geometry belonging to these stanzas that require a form of reading that deconstructs the apparent smooth flow of seven ten-line poems into seven internally divided ten-line poems, or seven poems portioned each into two equal halves. The third equation, in turn, follows a clear change in the shape of the poems on the page: twelve individual poems are split into two groups of five (5) poems and seven (7) poems, a split marked by a straight, horizontal line following after the fifth poem. The poems of the first group of this "second level" each contain five (5) lines. Internally, the lines of those poems count out a specific number of syllables: 5, 7, 5, 7, 7. The poems of the second group, however, each contain three lines that count syllables in this way: 5, 7, 5. The fourth equation mirrors the third and registers the inclusion, in the fourth subgroup of poems, of twelve poems broken

into two groups containing, respectively, seven (7) poems and five (5) poems.

As for syllables, the first group of seven poems count each line, again, as follows: 5, 7, 5, 7, 7. The second group of five poems: 5, 7, 5. In the equations corresponding to both of these second sets, second level (a) and second level (b), the resulting product number of 35 does not indicate the total lines as it seems to in the two sets of the first level. Rather it suggests the possibility of multiplying the poems as quantities; first 5×7 , then 7×5 . What then does the product 35 describe but some dimension beyond the limits of the page? Appearing as they do at the end of each set of poems, these equations act as summations, dividing the text. They restate the lyricism that one has just encountered in a language of pure form. They render the skeletal construction visible, reframing it as potential in number. Yet instead of a clinical abstraction, the numbers sing with their own perplexing poetry. We recognize again the movement across domains and writing as the actualization of a structure. We may note the echoic resonance between this four-part plan, with its two doubled levels, and the four stages of the Dogon initiation that formed *Disorientations: Groundings*. We encounter here, in sum, in *The Prime Anniversary*, Wright performing a specific geometrical, kinematic construction.

But why and what for? Two fragments of the book's synopsis offered on the front, inside jacket flap put us in the know:

Drawing from Pythagorean sources [...] Jay Wright examines arithmetical proportions and the limits of intonation that define harmony. Invoking Empedocles' philosophy of love and strife [...] Wright resurrects the pre-Socratic practice of exploring thought through verse.

We understand, therefore, that the equations offered by Wright in *The Prime Anniversary* showcase prime numbers that appear within the first ten integers, a set of numbers that carried significant spiritual and cosmological weight to the Pythagoreans. When, in the poems comprehended by the second equation, in Third level (b), we encounter ten lines per poem, we participate in the harmony of 10 as understood by the Pythagoreans for whom “[t]he holiest number of all was ‘tetractys’ or ten, a triangular number composed of the sum of one, two, three and four.”²⁹ We could read Wright’s splitting of the ten (into two groups of five (5)) as a covert commentary on the unity brought about through marriage, since 5 for the Pythagoreans equated to the marriage of the masculine (3) and feminine (2). The chapter in this book devoted to reading the poems in *The Prime Anniversary* will pursue this line of reasoning in more detail. For now, it is perhaps sufficient to point out that Wright is doing something with Number, similar to the way that the Pythagoreans did something with Number. Specifically, Wright’s play of resemblances in method reveals, first, the extent to which the internal rhythm and the geometry of poetic stanzas reverberate with ideas. Second, it keeps in play the way those ideas can harmonize with the more Earthly meanings carried by words. To *hear* all the parts here, it is necessary to read aloud.

We note that in *Attic Nights*, a commonplace book of sorts published circa 177 CE, documenting life and practices in ancient Greece and Rome, Aulus Gellius recorded “the order and method followed by Pythagoras, and afterwards by his school and his successors.”³⁰ Gellius notes Pythagoreans as “‘students of science,’ [...] for the ancient Greeks called geometry, gnomonics (the science of dial-

29 “Pythagoras of Samos,” *The Story of Mathematics*, https://www.story-of-mathematics.com/greek_pythagoras.html.

30 Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights, Book I*, trans. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 68.

ling, concerned with the making and testing of sun-dials), music and other higher studies 'sciences.'"³¹

§ Everything in everything

Wright participates in Pythagorean numerology, "sciences," and in the poetic exploration of philosophical concepts, as did Presocratic philosophers such as Empedocles. Though the jacket blurb specifically mentions Empedocles's philosophy of Love and Strife as a main theme in *The Prime Anniversary*, it makes sense to cite here another Presocratic in whose work the theme of participation arises, the philosopher Anaxagoras: "All things were together, unlimited both in amount and in smallness, for the small, too, was unlimited. And because all things were together, nothing was evident."³² This was the philosopher's explanation of the genesis of the universe. As Patricia Curd goes on to explain, "not only *were* all things together, they are *even now* all together, in a different way, despite the differentiations now achieved. Everything is in everything." The poetic form of philosophizing among the Presocratics like Anaxagoras and Empedocles may have been an attempt to participate directly in the unity of all things since poetry, which combines discursive reason, meter and rhythm and therefore order, imagination, and harmony of the voice, enables a performance akin to Proclus's kinematic construction. Instead of geometrical diagrams, however, poetic philosophy participates in the unity of things through the art of well-constructed speech.

All of this is to say, Wright's *The Prime Anniversary* showcases the way in which Wright participates in the

³¹ Ibid., 49.

³² *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Presocratic Philosophy," <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/presocratics/>.

unity of all things. Quantum mechanics, Spanish Modernist poetry, science studies, African American history, Neobaroque aesthetics, music theory, Dogon cosmology: these terms do not name distinctly different universes of thought or intellectual production. They are all modalities of the One. To understand that, one must participate in both the form and content of those ideas. Wright does this throughout his poetic career, and thus we, as readers, must participate with him. Our methexical reading of Wright will ensure that we tune in to the grand harmony Wright himself has heard and continues to voice through his work.

We will venture one more brief note on this topic, a note that hints at the role of theater in Wright's work. The second half of the volume *The Prime Anniversary* is a play, "The Geometry of Rhythm." Wright has written many plays over the years, though only a few have been published in various journals or tucked within long poems.³³ It is clear from those plays and from the way that Wright plays his notes in the style of Pythagoras, Empedocles, Lorca, and others, that mimesis matters. There is something about the mimetic faculty that enables a chorus to emerge, a group of individuals all united through the imitation of one another's rhythmical movements. As such the methexis that we have outlined here is not opposed to mimesis. In fact, simply through the math included in *The Prime Anniversary*, we have already begun to sense the way Wright participates in a wild diversity of artists and thinkers by mimicking pre-existing forms. Mimesis and methexis inform each other in Wright's work.

Along these lines, the work of Jean-Luc Nancy provides helpful commentary, specifically his essay "The

33 This was true at the time we wrote it but, thankfully, things have changed. Several of Wright's plays will soon be published in *Selected Plays of Jay Wright, Vols. 1 and 2* (Chicago: Kenning Editions and *Every house has a door*, forthcoming 2022).

Image: Mimesis and Methexis,” translated by Adrienne Janus in the anthology dedicated to *Nancy and Visual Culture*.³⁴ There, Nancy writes of the mutual implication of the two phenomena. “Imitation presupposes the abandonment of an inimitable, *mimesis* on the contrary expresses the desire for it.”³⁵ More properly, *mimesis* expresses the desire to participate in human finitude, in our disappearance into death. “[F]rom the moment of its moulding[,] *mimesis* modulates *methexis* by which the living share the death of the dead. It is this sharing of death – of its rending, hallucinatory force – this *methexis* of disappearance that properly serves as a model for *mimesis*.”³⁶ Nancy refers here to the *mimesis* and *methexis* broadcast by and embodied within the image (the *imago*); nevertheless, his argument appears relevant to our discussion because the underlying impulse of the mutual implication of *mimesis* and *methexis* is desire. Desire, as a motive force, propels Wright into his performance of poetry. By extension, through reading Wright, we are compelled to participate, too. There is no passive reading possible. By reading, we act along with Wright and his wider community.

§ Pitch and revelation – a speculative poetics

In one opening passage of his 1994 book *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Stanley Cavell lends the key word from his title a notably “concentrated, polysemous” explanatory sentence. “[W]hen the idea of philosophy’s pitch presented itself to me, I had to keep it. Quite apart from taking on music and baseball and vending, it speaks, not darkly, of a determined but temporary habitation and of an unsettling

34 Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Image: Mimesis and Methexis,” trans. Adrienne Janus, in *Nancy and Visual Culture*, eds. Carrie Giunta and Adrienne Janus (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 73–92.

35 *Ibid.*, 75.

36 *Ibid.*, 76.

motion that befits the state of philosophy as a cultural fact always somewhat at odds with philosophy on its institutional guard.”³⁷ We hear a resonant echo in the similarly opening lines of the second stanza of Jay Wright’s 2019 sequence *The Prime Anniversary*.

μὲν βάσις ἀγλαΐας ἀρχά a perfect pitch
and revelation, a neutralino on its
haunch [...].³⁸

In our chosen phrase for the title of this study, we recognize Cavell’s oppositional incline, between philosophy as fact and philosophy as guarded institution, in Wright’s poetry similarly resolutely pitched, always in complex, if not conflictual, relation to the institutional and the professional. We will regard these lines in more detail in the section devoted to *The Prime Anniversary*, in particular how they follow the Greek extract from the first sentence of Pindar’s First Pythian Ode: *an instigator of festivity*.³⁹ For now, as we begin, we consider how the qualifier “perfect” heightens the pitch’s currency as both baseball *and* music, appropriate to the poet who both plays the bass and once played second base. We must note the addendum, the revelation that follows, and the all-important “and” conjuncting the activation’s two parts. Consider revelation an effect of the pitch’s opening. A metaphor further refines this two-tiered process of a theoretical subatomic particle, the neutralino, on its haunch, as if ready to spring.

We may consider here the regular recurrence of Wright’s opposition to “the bifurcation of nature,” Alfred North Whitehead’s famous phrase characterizing one

37 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), ix.

38 Jay Wright, *The Prime Anniversary* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2019), 3.

39 Pindar, *The Odes*, trans. Andrew M. Miller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 105.

persistent problem of the cosmology of the moderns, as summarized in *The Concept of Nature*.

What I am essentially protesting against is the bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality, which, in so far as they are real, are real in different senses. One reality would be the entities such as electrons which are the study of speculative physics. This would be the reality which is there for knowledge; although on this theory it is never known. For what is known is the other sort of reality, which is the byplay of the mind. Thus there would be two natures, one is the conjecture and the other is the dream.

Another way of phrasing this theory which I am arguing against is to bifurcate nature into two divisions, namely into the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of awareness. The nature which is the fact apprehended in awareness holds within it the greenness of the trees, the song of the birds, the warmth of the sun, the hardness of the chairs, and the feel of the velvet. The nature which is the cause of awareness is the conjectured system of molecules and electrons which so affects the mind as to produce the awareness of apparent nature. The meeting point of these two natures is the mind, the causal nature being influent and the apparent nature being effluent.⁴⁰

The modern operation of bifurcation invents a faulty concept of nature. Didier Debaise states the problem as follows.

The operation of bifurcation only repeats, permanently, the separation of the qualities of bodies into various

40 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 30–31.

registers – that of physics, the biological and social. But this separation continually leads back to a series of questions that receive no adequate response: What is a body when it is separated from its secondary qualities? How can we make sense of such a body, since we only have access to secondary qualities? What kind of knowledge would allow us to penetrate into the interior of these nonobservable qualities?⁴¹

Consider these questions generative for Wright, with his signature statement quoted above, “the whole process of making leads to transformation, the radical creation, of experience, the making of a new body and a new heart [...]” In particular, the problem of bifurcation informs one insistent lyrical strand of Wright’s poetry, drawing as it does from nature for its imagery. Line by line, resistance to nature’s bifurcation remains always near, as tactic and as poetic. Subtracting nothing from the event of experience, he continually uncovers resonance between the realms of nature as apprehension and nature as cause, whether, as in the case above, endowing the neutralino with a haunch, or in so many other passages with an emotional undertow, such as this signature moment from *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* (2008).

Say that my mind claims the journey as its own;
say that my spirit has learned to live
on the other side of desire.

Imagine now
the quantum superposition of desire,
and a body at rest,
moving with magnetic force
aslant of every desire.⁴²

41 Didier Debaise, *Nature as Event: The Lure of the Possible*, trans. Michael Halewood (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 15.

42 Jay Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* (Chicago: Dalkey Archives, 2008), 65–66.

For Wright, the work of imagination unfolds in part as the continual threading of the observable – that which one may sense or experience – with the imperceptible – that of which we may theorize. What we call an image often operates as a link between the two realms. We must examine the effect of these perceptual strivings on subjectivity, the complexity they introduce into the organization of the self and the impetus of the I, as evident in these lines from *The Guide Signs: Book One* (2007).

I thought of myself, invisible, twinned
to a magnetic wave, to the higher
intent of being nothing could rescind,
to a braid of compassion set afire.⁴³

The I knows itself doubly twinned, first to what we might call an imperceptible object, “a magnetic wave,” and second to the process that this initial twinning uncovers, “to a braid of compassion set afire.” We note this braid, this resistance to nature’s bifurcation, as an inflection of a broader concern in Wright’s poetry, a concern we characterize as philosophical in its speculation. This is the process by which the mind “claims the journey as its own,” and the play of affirming the connectivity of incompatibles.

We turn once more to Whitehead, his general theme of speculative advancement, articulated in *Process and Reality*.

The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of the imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation. The reason for the success of this method of imagina-

43 Jay Wright, *The Guide Signs: Book One and Book Two* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 10.

tive rationalization is that, when the method of difference fails, factors which are constantly present may yet be observed under the influence of imaginative thought. Such thought supplies the differences which the direct observation lacks. It can even play with inconsistency; and can thus throw light on the consistent, and persistent, elements in experience by comparison with what in imagination is inconsistent with them. [...] The success of the imaginative experiment is always to be tested by the applicability of its results beyond the restricted locus from which it originated. In default of such extended application, a generalization started from physics, for example, remains merely an alternative expression of notions applicable to physics. The partially successful philosophic generalization will, if derived from physics, find applications in fields of experience beyond physics. [...] The test of some success is application beyond the immediate origin. In other words, some synoptic vision has been gained.⁴⁴

Synoptic: seeing together – as Susan Howe wrote, “[a] poem is a glass, through which light is conveyed to us.”⁴⁵ The success of speculation’s advancement rests on the imagination’s ability to apply notions beyond the narrow field of experience from which it began. We understand the superposition principle, for example, as it derives from physics and engineering. It defines the quality of linearity of physical systems, such that the net response caused by two or more stimuli equals the sum of the responses that would have been caused by each stimulus individually. Drop a stone in still water and circular ripples emanate concentrically from its position. Drop two

44 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1978), 5.

45 Susan Howe, “Vagrancy in the Park,” in *The Quarry* (New York: New Directions, 2015), 7.

stones, and observe the superposition zone of two overlapping rings of ripples in a loose rounded grid. Apply the superposition principle to quantum physics, and the wave becomes a wave function, in a mathematical language of probability. Here we arrive at Wright's metaphor for desire above. He takes on the speculative experiment as a primary task of poetry: the transfer of image. Might the generalization return to ground in some terrain other than that of its origin? This aspect of the poetry finds its expression in abstraction. Wright, the poet, understands the necessity of abstractions, and Wright the philosopher understands the continual need to interrogate, revise, and reform abstractions. All of which is to say he understands abstractions as constructions.

You cannot think without abstractions; accordingly, it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your *modes* of abstraction. It is here that philosophy finds its niche as essential to the healthy progress of society. It is the critic of abstractions. A civilization which cannot burst through its current abstractions is doomed to sterility after a very limited period of progress.⁴⁶

Wright accepts poetry as the pragmatic ground of the test: to discover an image and to extend and advance its life beyond the circumstance of its origin. What do we mean by image? In this instance, does image become interchangeable with generalization, or does it become a rendering of generalization in the language of poetry? Maurice Blanchot has written, "[t]he images must cease to be second in relation to a supposedly prior object and must demand a certain primacy, just as the original and then the origin will lose their initial privileges. [...] There

46 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 73.

is no longer any original but an eternal twinkling in which the absence of any origin is dispersed in the flash of detour and return." In the phrase "detour and return" we hear "the flight of an aeroplane." Of image, as Derrida states after Blanchot, "[i]t is a non-origin which becomes originary."⁴⁷

To grasp image, as we said of reading in general, the response may range from the most naive, as attuning to the sounds and textures of language, to the most informed, as understanding the derivations of formula and diagram. The poet accepts the test of accuracy, of appositeness – to borrow a word from another poet, Wallace Stevens – of image in its role as application and as the activation of language, like a bell's ring less of recognition than of thought as an act of advancement.

We return to pitch and revelation to describe this two-part process, speculation's flight and landing, the detour and return of image. With pitch as proposal, and immanent revelation as that wonder of extension beyond initial instance, we comprehend Wright's primary poetic of inquiry. A two-part activation of thought as an act less of recognition and more of encounter.⁴⁸ The writing, the reading, from and for consciousness that "moves endlessly from science to dream and back again."⁴⁹ The pitched image reveals some uncovered weave of existence. Thus, although secondary in process, it becomes originary in its role as activating perception. In this way no subject pre-exists the performance of thought, actualized here as poetry.

47 Blanchot and Derrida, cited in Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 319.

48 *Ibid.*, 139.

49 *Ibid.*, 220.

§ Constellation as conclusion

We end this introductory foray into Wright's wor(l)ds with a look back over the names and materials invoked to map the terrain of the creative act of reading that we propose in this book. The look back doubles as a look up at the night sky where names and ideas twinkle like stars:

Jay Wright
 Eboussi-Boulaga
 Alfred North Whitehead
 Karen Barad
 Ritual initiation
 Dogon
 Ogotemmêli
 Marcel Grialue
 griots
 Michel de Certeau
 Gilles Deleuze
 Plato
 Parmenides
 Orna Harari
 Proclus
 Methexis
 Empedocles
 Anaxagoras
Attic Nights
 Mimesis
 Jean-Luc Nancy
 Stanley Cavell
 Susan Howe

Countless other stars twinkle, too, and their light will strike us more directly in the subsequent chapters. For now, we conclude this chapter with the words of Walter Benjamin, "ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars." Building the analogy in logical terms, we could re-

phrase this comment in the following way: ideas:objects :: constellations:stars. Parsing the equation, we hear something unsaid in Benjamin's reflections on the excesses of the baroque. Namely, we are able to make meaning of the stars in the sky, but our meanings do not exhaust the light. Objects may inspire or goad us to thought, but there is a greater thought of us all embedded in each object, one that we will never fully know. So, too, in poetry is there a motivating silence, a quiet that compels speech but also absorbs it. Reading Wright requires honoring the construction of the constellations, their navigational uses, their mythological inheritance, their material and dying light, while at the same time remaining open to the excess of the object that defies language. Our readings of Wright are not exhaustive. Rather, they are tales from the forays into Wright's wor(l)ds, tales that will hopefully inspire your own journeys and entice your participation.

Études: *Boleros*

5(I):

All names are invocations, or curses.
 One must imagine the fictive event that leads to
 He-Who-Shoots-Porcupines-By-Night,
 Or Andrew Golightly, or Theodore, or Sally.
 In the breath of stars, names rain upon us;
 we seem never to be worthy.
 Or, having learned the trick of being worthy,
 we seem never to be prepared for the rein of names
 [...]¹

5(III):

[...]
 What is love's form when the body fails,
 or fails to appear? What is love's habitation
 but a fable of boundaries, lovers passing
 athwart all limits toward a crux ansata?
 I have carried your name on velvet,

1 Jay Wright, *Boleros*, in *Transfigurations: Collected Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 498.

knowing you are free, having never suffered
 the heartache of patience that love and naming
 that this our divided world requires.²

As the etymology attests, a bolero is a dance that originated in eighteenth-century Spain, unfurled in a 3/4 time signature, and, some have suggested, transposed the physical and mythopoetic movements of love to the dancefloor. A seam unites this act of love with the passion of the bullfight, and thus we might also read the male and female dancers as engaged in an aesthetic modulation of the “dance of death” undertaken between the *toro* and *toreador*. So too may we recognize the motif of *vani-tas* – a favorite of seventeenth-century Dutch painters, including Rembrandt, that expresses their moral inclinations, although one finds it as early as 1560 in *Children’s Games* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder – as the *homo bulla*, the “man is a bubble” iconography, of a baby, or Cupid, or a skeleton, blowing soap bubbles from a straw. Present, too, in the word “Bolero,” are official edicts, seals, and various words associated with bumps and blisters.

The bolero, the dance and name alike, migrated to Cuba where it underwent at least two crucial transformations. First, Cuban musicians changed the time of the dance to 2/4. Second, the dance compelled a style of song, thereby giving voice to the movements, or, to put it another way, incorporating vocal cadence into the dance. Either way, the dance began to sing.

These few details of the bolero’s history help us begin to understand how the dance draws Wright in. The complex, fleeting dance of both lovemaking and bullfighting undergoes cultural and material transformation through geographical migration and acquires new inflection within a *mestizaje* culture, including a new temporality. It opens itself to further metamorphoses as it glides west-

2 Ibid., 500.

ward across the Americas. Other poets, too, such as Federico Garcia Lorca, who makes an appearance in Wright's *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* and elsewhere, have expressed their affinity for the distinctly Cuban rhythm known as the *son*. This rhythm helped to mature the Cuban bolero into a new form, the bolero-son, which hit the height of popularity in the 1930s. This is all to say, the weave of the bolero speaks to Wright of the Great Meshwork of the All woven into the particularity of music, dance, and song.

Wright's 1991 book of poetry entitled *Boleros* seems to present itself as a group of pairs. For example, part one contains twelve poems and part two contains nine. Each part faces the other, like partners preparing to dance. Whereas the poems of part one have only numbers for titles, numbers that correspond to each poem's ordered position within the sequence (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5(I), 5(II), 5(III), etc.), the nine poems of part two each reside under a number and an enigmatic subtitle:

(ERATO ↔ KHAT)
 (CALLIOPE ↔ SAḤU)
 (EUTERPE ↔ AB)
 (THALIA ↔ KA)
 (MELPOMENE ↔ BA)
 (POLYHYMNIA ↔ KHAIBIT)
 (CLIO ↔ KHU)³
 (TERPSICHORE ↔ SEKHEM)
 (URANIA ↔ REN)

Before excavating the many meanings of these subtitles – what we could call the poetry of the title in Wright's work – an initial realization offers itself. The two figures in each subtitle are each engaged in their own dance. And “dance” does not necessarily signify a metaphor. We

3 This one contains a second subtitle: “(Art Tatum).”

might understand the dances of these poems as in some way extending the embodied experience of the bolero. Wright's poetry *becomes* dance. It *becomes* the bolero and extends it into philosophical, poetic literature. We can further observe the possibility that the poems incarnate the khaibit of the bolero, its shadow. Before mapping that possibility, however, we require some initial footwork.

The movement of dancing in *Boleros* finds a twin force – somewhat opposite, somewhat complementary – in the act of naming. Naming functions in Wright's work generally as an ethical act, inseparable from the work of the poet. As the excerpts from poems 5(I) and 5(III) above indicate, this act of naming is fraught with difficulties, paradoxes, and pitfalls. Names, Wright suggests, are reins that put a check on us. These reins do not indicate a one-way power relationship, as the image of a rider on horseback might suggest. These reins, rather, evoke a material connection that summons two parties together, not unlike the gravity that compels rain down to earth. Rain resists gravity when it participates in the hydrologic cycle, only to fall to earth again. Gravity creates the playing space of the cycle's dance.

The act of naming opens and defines the ballroom across which Wright's dancers will perform and even the time and season of the dance. A sequence of twelve poems titled *Saints' Days* follows after the *Boleros* dual series in the original 1988 publication of the volume. It presents one poem and name for each month of the calendar year in sequence. The narrator of *San Anselmo (April 21st)* attests:

I carried, in a goat hide pouch,
The secret day of my naming.⁴

4 Wright, *Boleros*, 531.

The poetics of naming, distinct in all its complexity, has decoupled itself from identity, linking, instead, to time as a treasure, a secret repetition.

Here, then, the presiding twin thematic of *Boleros* reveals itself to us when we read it in a certain way: the freedom of the dance and the compulsion and bounding of the name (where “bound” signifies both “to leap” and “to fasten”). This “certain way” of reading is rhizomatic, a reading that drifts horizontally through the poems and raises vertical chutes of interest when elements of either Wright’s modified bolero dance or his poetic act of naming show their colors. Our horizontal movements chart the cartographical boundaries (i.e., bound-as-fastened limit) of Wright’s travels (i.e., his leaps-in-place that transpire on the printed page). Throughout the poems, he leads us through specific geographies, from locations in Mexico – “On Hidalgo, in Guadalajara, / the blue flowers, in their persistence”⁵ – to locations in England – “And so it dawns at Gatwick”⁶ – and Scotland – “Tough old Glasgow tucks itself / under a leg of the Firth of Clyde”⁷ – to the mountain ranges of Utah – “When the cold knuckles in, we come to this spot / and wait for these Salt Lake hills to walk into the garden.”⁸ Likewise our horizontal movements tour us through the distinct historical strata of Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and the recent (c. 1980s) life experience of Wright himself. (*Boleros* takes us to many more places, too, but those territories shall remain in the shadows for now.) The vertical chutes of interest that our reading “sends up” conspire to form something like a harmonic image that overlays the writing, one that ultimately reveals not a specific message within Wright’s poems but, instead, a particular effect of his certain way

5 Ibid., 503.

6 Ibid., 497.

7 Ibid., 502.

8 Ibid., 508.

of poetizing. We may consider this effect a result of the functioning of the system, invented for, and constructed by, this sequence of poems. This effect partakes of the future perfect verb tense. We may phrase it in this way: having revealed an entanglement (where previously only separation was thought to preside).

One such entanglement is that between the Ancient Greek muses (Erato, Calliope, et al.) and the parts of the body and soul as understood by the Ancient Egyptian sages (khat, saḥu, et al.). These seemingly unrelated topoi of history unite in dance in the second part of *Boleros*. The two-way arrow that Wright uses to link the Greek and Egyptian fragments derives from the language of mathematics. It signifies a material implication such that each member of the pair is true *if and only if* the second member is also true. Erato (Muse of love poetry) *if and only if* khat (the physical form, the body that could decay after death, the mortal, outward part of the human that could only be preserved by mummification). Clio (Muse of history) *if and only if* khu (the immortal part, the radiant and shining being that lived on in the sau, the intellect). Here we encounter a case of the problem as an element of the system; the system that arises, out of the world, as a carrier of a problem. The work of the poems, like “weaving-speech” of ideas and images, reveals each precise linkage and connection.

A specific line from 5(III) in the first part of *Boleros* hints at Wright’s eventual shift to the cosmology of the Ancient Egyptians, something that might otherwise strike readers as an altogether confusing leap. The line – “What is love’s habitation / but a fable of boundaries, lovers passing / athwart all limits toward a crux ansata?” – provides an opportunity to rehearse the rhizomatic reading discussed here and leads, after analysis, to a vantage point from which we might speculate on Wright’s poetizing entanglement.

We begin with *crux ansata*, also known as the ankh. The term is not at first familiar to us, but its referent is (fig. 2.1):



Figure 2.1: Ankh.

One of Ancient Egypt's hieroglyphs, literally "sacred carvings," this symbol was pronounced (we think) as *'nh* (or, in English phonemes, *ankh*) and signified the breath of life. Coptic Christians appropriated the symbol to mean "resurrection," and from there it eventually receives its Latinate translation into *crux ansata*. Chronologically, if not logically, prior to that, in the Egyptian arena, the symbol seems to have had a wildly wide array of meanings: the male and female genitalia; the sun coming over the horizon; the union of heaven and earth; the color gold; the key to the gates of death and what lay beyond. Encyclopedists expand the semantic range of the sound:

The dead were referred to as *ankhu* (having life/living) and caskets and sarcophagi, ornamented regularly with the symbol, were known as *neb-ankh* (possessing life). During the Middle Kingdom (2040–1782 BCE) the word *'nkh* was used for mirrors and a number of hand-mirrors were created in the shape of the ankh, the most famous being that found in the tomb of Tutankhamun.⁹

9 *World History Encyclopedia*, s.v. "The Ankh," <https://www.ancient.eu/Ankh/>.

With the mention of the mirror, we return to the twinning so commonly present in Wright's work: Life–Death, male–female, two dancers united in the dance. These figures are twins and opposites, crucially related. His line in *Boleros*, “athwart all limits toward a crux ansata,” offers up a meaning here, with the ankh understood as the locus of convergence where opposites unite. Lovers tend toward this locus. Indeed, lovers are always in motion (*dancing*) because nothing can bind love in place. Love must travel. Any static residence is but a “fable of boundaries,” a story told to attempt the possession of something always in motion toward a limit, thus resisting stasis.

Wright in fact first invoked the ankh near the beginning of the first poem in *Dimensions of History* (1976).

And so I start in search of that key,
the ankh,
that will unlock the act.¹⁰

His endnote in that volume details something of his knowledge of the symbol's meaning and migration.

The ankh is the symbol of life. The emblem can be found in Egypt and among the Yoruba and Ashanti. Some scholars have tried to trace a line from ancient Egypt to the Yoruba and Ashanti on the basis of this symbol's appearance in each culture.¹¹

The symbol's return twelve years later marks Wright's nuanced grasp of it in *Boleros* as profoundly relational, evocative of both catalyst (“lovers passing / athwart all limits”) and telos (“toward a crux ansata”). By the end of the section of the poem in which Wright brandishes the

10 Jay Wright, *Dimensions of History* (Ann Arbor: Kayak, 1976), 8.

11 *Ibid.*, 105.

crux ansata, we find the dancing lovers face-to-face with the most powerful force of binding fabulation, the name.

I have carried your name on velvet,
 knowing you are free, having never suffered
 the heartache of patience that love and naming
 that this our divided world requires.

Our divided (i.e., split in two) world, equal parts life and death, requires love to slow its tempo from $3/4$ to $2/4$ as it navigates the siren song of the name. Do we name what love is, or do we allow it to slip away unnamed? "All names are invocations, or curses," Wright tells us in 5(I). In 5(III), "All names are false." In 5(II), "Each flowered place requires a name that fits." (We note here that the Ancient Egyptians also arranged flower bouquets into the shape of the ankh.) As such, naming hazards stultification. Letting go of the name, however, watches as love transcends its bodily realm, risking a tragic missed encounter; unless, that is, lovers are resurrected in the beyond, both in body and spirit, as the Ancient Egyptians believed.

Movement *if and only if* fixedness. Here *if and only if* beyond. We don't yet understand *Boleros*, other than sensing the conceptual and non-conceptual maps, always twinned, that index its movements. What sort of understanding finds its form in navigation, guided by the logico-mathematical mirror of the material equivalence arrow? Muse *if and only if* body and soul, in life and in death. Earthly wanderings *if and only if* home in a lover's arms. With these coordinates, the big bang of *Boleros* coheres into a navigable multiverse.

Below we will explore (POLYHYMNIA ↔ KHAIBIT) in more depth. First, however, we offer an initial overview of the dancing Greek-Egyptian pairs. We find these pairs in en-

tries 13–21 of *Boleros*.¹² Here Wright puts mathematical equations together that pair parts of the body and soul, (as conceived in Ancient Egypt, with Ancient Greek muses. Thus,¹³

- **Erato** (Muse of love poetry) *if and only if khat* (the physical form, the body that could decay after death, the mortal, outward part of the human that could only be preserved by mummification)
- **Calliope** (Muse of eloquence and Epic poetry) *if and only if sahu* (the incorruptible spiritual body of man that could dwell in the heavens)
 - A calliope is also a musical instrument, a steam organ. Perhaps this points to a dual referent in Wright's line, "Be still, and hear the singing, while Calliope encounters the saints."¹⁴
- **Euterpe** (Muse of music, song and dance, and merriment) *if and only if ab* (the heart, this was the source of good and evil within a person, the moral awareness and center of thought that could leave the body at will)
- **Thalia** (Muse of comedy) *if and only if ka* (the double that lingered on in the tomb inhabiting the body or even statues of the deceased but was also independent of man and could move, eat and drink at will)
 - We hear these lines of Wright's: "I met my twin on a mountaintop, / in an ancient theater, in a new

12 Wright, *Boleros*, 508–25.

13 Much of the descriptive text that appears in the subsequent bullet points comes from Caroline Seawright, "The Ancient Egyptian Concept of the Soul," *h2g2: The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: Earth Edition*, January 13, 2004, <https://h2g2.com/entry/A2197109>.

14 Wright, *Boleros*, 511.

world, / where the black-robed turns and counter-turns / involved me in a dream of a polar privacy."¹⁵

- **Melpomene** (Muse of tragedy) *if and only if ba* (the human headed bird flitted around in the tomb during the day bringing air and food to the deceased but travelled with Ra on the Solar Barque during the evenings)
- **Polyhymnia** (Muse of sacred poetry, sacred hymn, dance, and eloquence as well as agriculture and pantomime) *if and only if khaibit* (the shadow of a man that can be released after death)
- **Clio** (Muse of history) *if and only if khu* (this was the immortal part of the being that lived on in the Sau, the intellect)
- **Terpsichore** (Muse of dance) *if and only if sekhem* (the incorporeal personification of the life force of man, which lived in heaven with the Akhu, after death)
- **Urania** (Muse of Astronomy) *if and only if ren* (the true name, a vital part to man on his journey through life and the afterlife)

We note the act of building, of fitting and bridging, that the equivalence arrow designates, an act of reconciliation between two cultures, mythologies, philosophies – the Greek and the Egyptian – like wellsprings of southern Europe and northern Africa respectively. Wright has mined the poetic possibilities of the mythic languages of two civilizations while forging links between their wealth of ideas, personified as they were. The bridge reveals not only their parallels and resonances, but also the sense that they complete one another. A reader of the

15 Ibid., 514.

world needs access to both vocabularies for a view toward satisfaction and understanding, a bid for fullness, a way to clothe the skeletal frames of the imaginary and the actual alike. In such writing as building, like the re-discovery of continents, Wright acknowledges debts to the work of antiquity. He guides us in the ways that we may understand our own creations as issuing from the fine machineries of ancestors. He further specifies the plurality of ancestry. His poetry testifies that we spring always from hybrid inheritance, branching together, with differences intact.

§ Revisiting: (POLYHYMNIA ↔ KHAIBIT)

The horizontal exploration of poems 5(I) and 5(III) above begins to open other dimensions of *Boleos's* structure, form, and content. That work, together with the brief overview of the Greek-Egyptian dancers, also dyes certain keywords, phrases, and images of the other poems in the collection thereby making possible a glimpse of the major constellations that run throughout the entire work. Turning to (POLYHYMNIA ↔ KHAIBIT), it is possible to see these dyed constellations and then interpret them. We will isolate some of them here after first glossing the new worlds that Wright introduces and of which we have not yet made any mention. There are so many worlds in *Boleos*. This reading is by no means exhaustive.

The subtitle of this poem, which is numbered 18, summons the Ancient Greek muse of eloquence, among other things, and the human shadow, which, according to the Ancient Egyptians, was able to be released after the death of the human. Wright will speak of this release, thereby bringing his poet's art to the typically unspeakable realm of the passage to the afterlife. "When the light struck me," he begins, and with this, the shadow is set free. The first

several lines play with dichotomies that somehow resolve into a complete, whole, experience – light and shadow, sight and blindness, hearing and deafness, muteness and speech. The touchstone of these resolving dichotomies is the word “enharmonic,” which, while typically an adjective, we feel comfortable deploying as a noun. Enharmonic names among other things the relational space of two notes that are equal in pitch but that bear different titles, such as G-sharp and A-flat, B and C-flat.

And how can I explain how the enharmonic
rapture of my name left them deaf?¹⁶

It seems that Wright guides the reader into the land of the dead and gives words to the first-person experience of the resurrection in this new land. The first-person experience, however, is not, or not only, Wright's; rather, it belongs to an enharmonic of historical figures, the most visible of whom is captain Afonso de Albu(r)querque whose ship, the Portuguese carrack *Flor de la Mar*, led the conquistador to Goa, India, the Red Sea (in proximity of the Egyptian Mamluk Sultanate) and many other places. This claim pans out when Wright evokes “Affonso” toward the end of the poem: “[...] watch Affonso play among his many disguises. / I am that Affonso [...]”¹⁷ All interpretation must be supple, however, since the enharmonic space opens to house other historical figures.

For example, a reference to the Zuñi mountains draws our attention to the US state now known as New Mexico, the capital of which is Albuquerque and seems to link to Afonso de Alburquerque but was actually named for the Duke of Alburquerque of 1706, Francisco Fernandez de la Cueva Enriquez. Thus, the enharmonic of Albu(r)

16 Ibid., 519.

17 Ibid., 521.

querque; the enharmonic of the territory of “New Spain,” already occupied by the Indigenous people of the region; the enharmonic of the Portuguese and Spanish conquistadors, melded together in one impulse to colonize. All of these possibilities are tucked neatly into the archaic “ff” that Wright chooses for name “Affonso.” This, all of this, is Wright’s lyrical polysemy at work – the coexistence of many different meanings or signs at once inhering to a single word – and our interpretation is compelled to move out in all those directions at once.

Wright also draws us to the Aztec empire and the temples of Teotihuacán where the ritual-sacrificial space opens to house numerous bodies:

But now I lie on this Teotihuacán bed,
 only the mathematics of my ascent to here
concern me;
 only the singular obsidian urge
 that obliterates the trinity in me
brings me any peace.
 Yet when the knife’s glaze surrounds my heart,
 I plunge, and plunge again,
 into a desert river, [...]¹⁸

These references stretch the “I” to the “New World” and open the first-person subjectivity to any number of residents. The knife mentioned here may be the obsidian, or sometimes flint, knife used in Aztec rituals of human sacrifice. The word “obsidian” appears in the Aztec language of Nahuatl as *tezcatlipoca*, which was also the name of the God of Destiny. Obsidian is a synonym for “smoking mirror,” and therefore Wright has entered a new “twinning” mechanism into *Boleros*, one that makes of the en-

18 *Ibid.*, 520.

harmonic a heterotopic space capable of housing all the aesthetic personae that he conjures.

What do we make of all this? Beginning with the name Polyhymnia, we read in *Boleros* a merger of many hymns into one. "Hymn" consigns four distinct meanings within its tent. First, and most typically, it names a religious song. Certainly Wright, familiar with praise singers, griots, and spiritual vocalists of all sorts, carries this meaning of "hymn" into *Boleros* with the invocation of Polyhymnia. The muse's Greek origin, however, tags a second meaning: festive song or ode in praise of gods or heroes. The term "hero" is perhaps best cast in its role within tragedy where the "tragic hero" takes the lead role but reveals his flaws through his actions. Conquistadors appear as tragic heroes in this sense. The reference to tragedy also reminds us of the theatrical dimension to Wright's poems, offering a third inflection of hymn. The aesthetic personae gathered in the poems' spaces function as characters, and not only does Wright give voice to these characters, but so too do we as readers step into the role of performer whenever we enter the text. Finally, fourth, the link between "hymn" and *hymenaios*, wedding song, unfolds from Hymen, the Greek god of marriage. Wright weds his various dancing partners, thereby sanctifying the unions.

Ultimately, "Polyhymnia" offers a useful guide word to describe Wright's poems: the interweaving of many hymns, many stories, many cultural histories into an eloquent, celebratory, and mournful song. We must recognize the transformative effect of such writing on its many sources. The poetry of *Boleros*, as does so much of Wright's poetry, recodes its materials, implicating them in the revealed network. In doing so, through the work of interweaving, it grants them the changes of rediscovered appearance. The poetry has recoded the name first

and foremost, peering into its depths, which is also to say that the name has become the agent of this lyrical work of recoding, the activator of hidden echoes, gaining a momentary hold within the confines of an encounter. The rein of the name, tethered to its limits and its restricted orbitals, unfolds to the inside, rewriting each history that it touches as it delivers them to us and our time, while guiding us back to those sources, in a dual dance.

This poly-hymn is possible and true *if and only if* khaibit, which, as mentioned, was the shadow and mirror image of the human body, as understood by the Ancient Egyptians. Not simply tethered to the soul, the khaibit, according to Rosemary Clark, embodied the intelligence of organic life, present in both human-animal, non-human animal, and plant life.¹⁹ Sensitive to light and sound, the khaibit could protect the other eight parts of the body and soul from subtle and invisible threats. The khaibit's intelligence is somewhat of a mix between what the Greeks called *phronēsis* (practical wisdom, good judgment), on the one hand, and *mētis* (cunning), on the other hand. Some scholars emphasize the manipulative and deceitful qualities of *mētis*, presented in, most frequently, the craftiness of Odysseus. Other scholars, however, see something in *metis* beyond positive or negative. "Every animal with *mētis* is a living eye which never closes or even blinks," write Detienne and Vernant.²⁰ A clear example of this living eye is the polymorphous octopus. It is possible to think of *metis* as a kind of finesse, and by extension it is possible to see the khaibit as the finesse of the body and soul, capable of the most supple and subtle movements. In life, this finesse aids the human in his or

19 Rosemary Clark, *The Sacred Tradition in Ancient Egypt: The Esoteric Wisdom Revealed* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2000).

20 Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1–54.

her organic form. After life, the shadow is set free, finds a way, perhaps, to merge with other freed shadows, and becomes something new, something beyond the organic and earthly realm. Wright may see in the Polyhymnia and khaibit bolero the necessity of speaking to the polymorphic and polytropic dimension of life, those movements that unfold in and after life, in and after (hi)story.

§ *Boleros* part one: The emergent system

Boleros has no table of contents. Its first poem (of 39, followed by a coda) commences immediately after the one-word title page.

Any system deployed to completion in any composition risks the diminishing returns of playing itself out after it has become fully apparent and legible to a reader. It sustains interest only as long as it remains emergent – always arriving, but never fully present until the end, which is to say, as the end. Consider a system that reveals itself in the unfolding of time, the accumulation of increments, rather than announcing itself as a schematic, evident in a contents page. What does such a hidden system ask of us? It requires unbroken attention, the continuous duration of the reading of the book, to make itself known. The reader must retain echoes of the pattern as they occur. We could also venture to suggest that the poet has not announced the system in advance not because he considers such a system's existence unimportant, but because he wants to attune our reading to the book's every moment rather than to its form and structure. He prefers, in this case, for the systems at work to emerge in and through the reading, to unfold as music does on a first listening.

How does this set of strategies operate in *Boleros*, or in the many instances of systems in Wright's work? They appear as a second tier of intelligence, in organizing the sets of poems, outside the frames of the individual poems, yet in conversation with those interiors of writing. What is that conversation? The system appears as the unconscious of the writing, those forces that drive it outside of its "knowledge," as impulse and as moment. In the example of Maurice Ravel's famous Bolero, the composer forges a unidirectional system from one repeated theme, growing and expanding in all directions at once – volume, speed, and increased instrumentation. The system makes itself known in this directionality, this movement forward. Yet we could say the system "eludes the present" if by the present we mean the reading of each individual poem, and even that it paradoxically pulls in two directions at once – the direction of the poem and the contrasting direction of the set of poems in which we find the system asserting itself and organizing the flow.²¹

The system – the manifold singularity, the set of connected things or parts forming a complex whole – realizes the operation of putting-into-relation. It provides common transport for the material and the spiritual. Such transport takes the form of a constellation or a dance. One reads each part in itself, and one reads the whole as pattern, then one reads the complex harmonies of alignment and misalignment between these two degrees of reading. Does *Boleros* adhere to a book-length system? Had Wright attempted anything on this scale before? We must also ask, by way of simple definition, does every system employed pre-exist its application in the poems? If this were not the case, how would we recognize it as a system as

21 This paragraph informed by Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Chales Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 1.

such? And if this is the case, does every system, capable of adoption, stand as an artifact, an object of inheritance? A system will link the poems, that conform to it and transform it, to some heritage, some lineage, in cultures and histories. Four years before *Boleros, Explications/Interpretations* displayed a loose aggregation of systematic composition. The book organized its twenty-four poems into sets in conversation, apparent on the contents page: *Polarity's Trio* (three poems), *Harmony's Trio* (six poems, clustered as two trios), and *Love's Dozen* (thirteen poems, or a sly generosity of the 12 + 1 "baker's dozen"),²² all bracketed by the bookends of single poems to open and close the collection. This early book features an end note in the form of a comprehensive essay on sources and the singular, transformative techniques of their adoption, regarding the long poem *MacIntyre, the Captain and the Saints*, that completes the *Harmony's Trio* section.

This degree of transparency of background and context would soon go underground, leaving the poems to stand alone, with all such depth of research and technique only implied. The *Explications/Interpretations* end note stands as all the more instructive of a guide for the years of poetry to come. It pays particular attention to the use of ideograms as "suggested by Mr. Robert L. Wilson's use of ideograms in a short series of unpublished poems."²³ The note states, "[t]he ideograms need not be used in every poem, but it seems to me that they are particularly useful in this

22 In the business sense, the dozen of thirteen offers the customer a simple incentive, in the form of reward, to spend more. Still, we have a dim memory from childhood of the "baker's dozen" explained as compensating for the possibility of an unseen flaw in one of the collected baked goods, lending a material form to a "margin of error." Either case informs the poetic of applying such a numbered surplus to love.

23 Jay Wright, *Explications/Interpretations* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1984), 82.

one. I have, therefore, adapted Mr. Wilson's ideograms to my own peculiar ones in order to make even more radical distinctions among the temporal and spatial voices in the poem."²⁴ We will have much more to say about this in the next chapter, but for our purposes now, this statement designates the first aspect of what will become a twofold adaptation of the system. The first degree of transformation lies in intensification, a strategy of unfolding toward the inside, making explicit those latent intricacies of the original system's set of proposals. It bears a mention that Wright includes, toward the close of the paragraph on the ideograms, this sentence, "[i]t seems to me appropriate that, for the clarification of my personal Scottish intellectual drama, I should have at hand an inventive technique elaborated by a citizen of brave Dundee and that he should have found his initiative in reading Ezra Pound, the universalist of ideograms."²⁵ Wright acknowledges the lineage, even tracing it to its flawed, tone-deaf initiator, and invokes genealogies of reading within reading, across generations. Yet this acknowledgement also introduces the second degree of transformation.

Wright elucidates the poem's four actors. Since each of them undergoes a sea-change in the writing, this note's *dramatis personae* points the reader to the originals. "The reader will recognize the poem's four actors as Wright; Capt. R.S. Rattray, a British Colonial Administrator and Scot, who headed the first Anthropological Department established by that government in what he called Ashanti, West Africa; Hugh McDiarmid, or Christopher Murray Grieve, a great Scottish poet, shaper of the Lallans Scots language and national sensibility; David Hume, British philosopher and historian."²⁶ Now we understand the ref-

24 Ibid., 82.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

erence to the appropriateness of Wilson's Dundee citizenship. Not only all in keeping with an apparent deep kinship with Scottish history and philosophy, in itself and for its place in enlightening colonial problematics, the recognition further operates as a location of the thought, the knowledge or system, undertaken in the poem. This becomes vital in the final sentence, a statement of intent at the end of the Note. "My poem is an attempt, among other things, to claim this knowledge as part of the continuing creative life of the Americas."²⁷ Thus the second aspect of the adaption: geographical.

The system, a cultural artifact as "knowledge," as a way of understanding the world, bears the stamp of its point of origin. Such knowledge one might claim, and in claiming, relocate. Poetry then becomes the agent not for the acquisition of knowledge, but for the transfer of it, the translation and reapplication of it from one context to another, beyond its point of origin. One could say to lay claim to is to migrate and to bestow citizenship upon. Each system has a home. The re-actualization of the system that poetry enacts constitutes a journey, a travel to elsewhere, which will inevitably produce a transformation in the transfer. The nature of the transformation, in every case as concerns Wright, derives from that character understood in the phrase "part of the continuing creative life of the Americas."

§ *Boleros* part two: Learning, this deep on the continent

In *Boleros*, we note first the emergence of the system at work, announced undeniably in the title, then embedded in the pages of poems as they turn, as one turns them, without recourse to a contents page. One attends to the

27 Ibid., 83.

unfolding as one would when following in the time of a dance. As the *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Music* defines bolero:

- 1.) a Spanish dance dating from the late eighteenth century, performed as a solo or by a couple and usually accompanied by castanets. The music, in 3/4 meter, is moderately fast and includes the characteristic rhythmic patterns shown in the accompanying example. The bolero has frequently been used by composers, the best-known example being Ravel's ballet, *Boléro* (1928). In this piece, Ravel repeats a single theme over and over, each time a little louder than the time before, beginning with only a few instruments and ending with the whole orchestra (the piece lasts about twenty minutes).
- 2.) a Cuban dance in moderate tempo and duple meter (with two basic beats per measure), similar to the habanera.²⁸

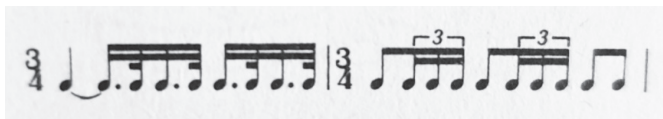


Figure 2.2: Bolero in musical notation.

The two integers of this definition suggest more juxtaposition than relocation, alluding to the disputed idea of any migration of the bolero from Spain to America. The difference between the two dances of the same name takes two forms: an American moderation of the European tempo; and American distillation of the European meter, from 3/4 to 2/4, from triplet to couplet. And so begins the book *Boleros*, with the speaking subject unmistakably

28 Christine Ammer, "Bolero," in *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Music* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 47.

the first of the quartet of actors from *Explications/Interpretations*: “Wright,” the poet’s version of himself. He and his dance partner initiate the book-length meditation on love in the cycle of the first twelve poems. He traces their travel’s together, and their vibrant encounters in each of the varied locations mapped above. Every place offers a morning market’s wealth of overflowing opulence, impressing the senses with color and taste and the mind with the detailed turns of language. The feeling subject records each impression, along with the partner’s parallel presence. The two in transit constitute the first degree of dance. In a state of dual motion, they uncover love’s risks and rewards.

Marry or burn,
 one cannot run away or into,
 for there is nothing so sedentary
 as the desire to be comforted, by love,
 or by some feeling one cannot name.
 On Hidalgo, in Guadalajara,
 the blue flowers, in their persistence
 on the neighbors’ white wall,
 comforted us, and so the lace of a plaza in sun,
 tacos at dawn from a cart in Gigantes,
 the mudéjar ache of the divided cathedral,
 the rose pinion of paseos,
 held us till summer.

[...]

It is some distance to have traveled to learn
 to resist being comforted too soon.²⁹

Nomadic hearts know there is no rose
 waiting at every door, that often a threshold’s
 atmosphere can be worth your life.

29 Jay Wright, *Boleros* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 15. Subsequent citations of *Boleros* come from this original edition.

early in the cycle to Giordano Bruno, bringing the neoplatonic mystery to its simplest ground.

Mornings I wake to see
 your black hair light your pillow,
 science enough to start me
 roving from a narrow dungeon.
 Can Bruno know what you know?³²

The impulse to rove, to movement, understood here as from out of a narrow dungeon of individuality, solitude, and sleep, springs from love and takes the form of science. We understand this movement, this travel, as dance. Like science, like “learning, this deep on the continent,” it feels like waking.

§ *Boleros* part three: *Epithalamion*

If the shift that begins at poem 13, with the parenthetical paired names atop each poem in the cycle through 21, announces an entrance of dancing deities, what becomes of the mortal couple of lovers or travelers? The mythic personages do not completely eclipse the earthbound narrator and companion, but, instead, appear in every instance as an overlay and surplus. Our task as readers then is also to ask the question, what becomes of the subjectivity? From what point or points does the voice of the poems now issue, and in what relation to the voice of the first twelve poems? The presence of the deities appears metonymic, as a renaming of the subject and a recoding of experience. The *Boleros* of the title metaphorizes the dance at the level of structure, inviting a reading of each poem as a variation and actualization of the particular abstraction of this dance. In this second degree of dance,

³² Ibid., 8.

the mortal couple recedes, as each deity duet overtakes them, over-coded atop their movements. The human couple appears as avatars. The speaking subject may slip into recitation, the report of the daily encounter fused with the discourse of the sermon, which is also to say becoming plural, a subject as an act of collecting voices. The event in turn becomes a nexus of potential events, making apparent the alternative realities contained within each event as unrealized. Every dance unfolds as “a hybrid between pure potentialities and actualities.”³³ Does the poem’s narrator understand this shift? Is the author of the poem also the author of the poem’s title, including its announcement of dancing deities? To the extent that a different author has titled and arranged the poems than the author who wrote them, at least a later instance of the same author, we may understand this later author as the secondary intelligence of structure or system. In this regard the structure, as reflected in the arrangement and titling, asserts itself as the play of forces that drive them without their knowledge. We understand this shift, in another way, as the system asserting itself on the materials of the book’s journey through time and location. The speaker rides the wave of the deity like the rider rides a horse, loosely holding the reins of the name. The pairs double, and each duet of riders enacts a double marriage.

a hand for the bell that rings all night,
 the surprise of knowing the name of the horse
 that waits in the shadow when the dance has gone.³⁴

There must be a “*Canticle*, a love-song,
 an *Epithalamion*, a marriage song of God, to our souls,
 wrapped up, if we would open it, and read it.”

33 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 185–86.

34 Wright, *Boleros*, 25.

Adorar es dar para recibir.
How much we have given to this Cathedral's life.³⁵

The quote derives from John Donne, the poet of the metaphysics of love, in clerical mode, from his *Sermon XCIX Preached at Lincoln's Inn, The Second Sermon on Matthew xviii. 7. Woe unto the world, because of offenses*.³⁶ "There must be" a little song upon the bridal chamber, pre-existing us, and awaiting our reception of it, to marry God "to our souls." The Donne line continues, "[...] if we would open it, and read it, and learn that new tune, that music [...]." One cannot anticipate the circumstances in which this implicit learning, outside the bounds of the poem, will occur. Learning always designates a shift in signs and what they signify, a deepening of meaning, an intensification of feeling, and an enlargement of the self, in transit from individual to manifold, from fixed identity to node on a network. Each episode of *Boleros* follows a fresh encounter, as this one does, guided by the apprenticeship to the deities, named and manifested in each poem's event.

A second quotation follows the first, although one may not recognize it as such, rendered as it is in unitalicized Spanish, as if claimed by the poet as his own. These five words square the equation into a ritual of patron saints, trance dances, and spirit possessions. We find them quoted in context at the end of this paragraph by researcher Stephen M. Hart.

Santería or *Regla de Ocha*, is a religious movement that originated in Cuba and that combines West African Yoruba beliefs and practices with elements of Roman Catholicism. It includes belief in one supreme being, but

35 *Ibid.*, 26–27.

36 John Donne and Henry Alford, *The Works of John Donne, D.D., Dean of Saint Paul's, 1621–1631, Vol. 4* (London: Parker, 1839), 292–307.

worship and rituals center on Orishas, deities or patron saints (with parallels among the Roman Catholic saints) that combine a force of nature and humanlike characteristics. Practices may include trance dancing, rhythmical drumming, spirit possession and animal sacrifice. One of its main differences from Catholicism is its pragmatism, epitomized by Lydia Cabrera in the following terms: “adorar es dar para recibir” [“to adore is to give in order to receive”].³⁷

And again, with a slightly different nuance, from Christine Ayorinde citing Lydia Cabrera.

As Cabrera notes, “Adorar es dar para recibir” (“to worship is to give in order to receive”).³⁸

The credo of *Santería* follows on the heels of John Donne’s wedding song: to worship, to adore, or to give in order to receive. So the poem rhetorically notes, “how much we have given to this Cathedral’s life.”³⁹ How much, in turn, received from it, in worship and adoration, a fraught reflexivity. In a postcolonial setting, such histories do not rest lightly.

§ *Boleros* part four: To a crossroads such as this

Poem 17 takes up the thread of the communal in a different mode and with a mournful inflection; “to inhabit

37 Stephen M. Hart, “How Popular is Cuban Popular Culture?,” in *Latin American Popular Culture: Politics, Media, Affect*, eds. Geoffrey Kantaris and Rory O’Bryen (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2013), 99–100.

38 Quoted from Christine Ayorinde, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 157. See also Lydia Cabrera, *Yemayá y Ochún* (Miami: Chicherekú, 1980), 128.

39 Wright, *Boleros*, 27.

many hearts" is to perish many times.⁴⁰ At this poem's header, Melpomene pairs with ba. The Muse of tragedy dances with the human-headed Horus Bird, avian servant of the dead, who sets like the sun on the Solar Barque at nightfall. The poem commences at an intersection, with its implication of forced decision, an inevitability, so it claims, for a narrator who speaks from and for the African diaspora. This bisecting decision will always eventually present itself for the Black African American poet, the poem implies, that is, the imperative to claim, within the language and scope of poetry, the grim historical accounting and to follow the line from that source to its horizon, or to turn from it on a perpendicular to an altogether different set of futures. A binary insists: does turning constitute the betrayal of obligation? Does continuation represent the missed escape?

Black spirits such as mine will always come
to a crossroads such as this, where the water moves
with enabling force⁴¹

When I walked away from the cathedral passion of
slave markets,
free at last,
my bones were dressed by the wind,
my breath danced in a cavern
where I had held a universe of vision and desire,
death and its imaginative discipline,
life, with its intensive and aged compassion.⁴²

Like the God I had many faces⁴³

40 Paraphrased from *ibid.*, 35.

41 *Ibid.*, 32.

42 *Ibid.*, 33.

43 *Ibid.*, 34.

hood and death in the birth and rebirth of the poet, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, stating the line explicitly and warping it before echoing it as a shortened refrain in the above passage.

Why should I carry this coffin, this pillar
from the childbearing tree, and out of the cradle
endlessly rock my sarco-phagus self?⁴⁵

Death inextricably intertwines with the multitude of voices, “grave-fitted,” as does injustice. Of this the poem stands as testament. For its affirmation we may look to how *Boleros* closes, with a coda in the form of a set of three octave poems, each with the same direct scheme of four rhyming couplets. The ideas from poem 17 return in the third and last of these three end songs.

Without your dead, faith dies, and one
learns how the extensible sun
of belief and aspiration
serve such an exhilaration
that only faith in love allows.
So even that pine can arouse
your suman heart, call spirit’s rain
into the heat of your domain
 Químbara cosongo,
 Químbara cosongo,
 Químbara cosongo....⁴⁶

Faith dies without “your” dead, the lost ancestors, that we inherit or choose, or that choose us. The expansive vision of *Boleros*, with all its mythic, syncretic pairings, funnels down in the final lines to inheritance, to heritage, and to the practice of continual construction and recon-

45 Ibid., 33.

46 Ibid., 95.

struction, through necessary communal memory, of each present moment in all its endless depth. Out of the tangibility of “even that pine” one learns to call “spirit’s rain.” The “suman” heart makes an adjective of the name that derives from the Sanskrit, the prefix *su-* (good) attaching to *manas* (mind). The heart, in the form of a good mind, semi-rhymes with the heat of the domain, in need of the rhyming rain. Then the poem, with its ellipses, trails off like a song fading out, with a thrice-repeated invocation.

Químbara cosongo....

The “black spirits” find this closing expression in an apparent double reference to two Cuban artists, the poet Nicolás Guillén, and Celia Cruz, the Queen of Salsa. Cruz recorded the single *Químbara* as part of her first studio album in 1974. Her Afro-Cuban style affords us the opportunity for a brief musicological foray through the synthesis of the Cuban bolero. Historians trace the origin of the style to the city of Santiago de Cuba in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, where itinerant musicians at that time earned their living by singing and playing guitar, giving birth to the *trova* style, from the word *trovadores* (troubadours). The most famous of these, Pepe Sanchez, became the father of *trova* and the creator of the Cuban bolero, a style that historians claim does not owe its origin to the bolero of Spain. An untrained musician, Sanchez composed *Boleros* in his head and never wrote them down. Friends and students transcribed those of them that now survive. In Wright’s context, we understand Sanchez as proto-dyēli, the inchoate griot, or musical archivist “homecoming singer” of the community and of the land.

The second word “cosongo” we find in the title of Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén’s second book, *Sóngoro cosongo* (1931). Guillén drew the title from the poem “Si Tu Supoiera” in

his first book *Motivos de Son*. The poem uses the phrase *sóngoro cosongo* as an apparent onomatopoeia echoing the sound of a drum.⁴⁷ Thus in this simple closing refrain, this two-word recapitulation, Wright brings *Boleros* to its close in an evocative conjunction of language, music, place, and history – a coda of precise proportions.

§ Musical interlude: Art Tatum's vision

In some of the twenty-one *Boleros* poems, Wright introduces a third element in the form of a historical personage to triangulate the pair of deities and offer a bridge to the human. Affonso de Albuquerque, Duke of Goa, a sixteenth-century Portuguese nobleman, general, admiral, and statesman, and in particular the final voyage of the carrack that he captained, serves this end in poem 18. Overseen by the pairing of Polyhymnia, Muse of sacred poetry, sacred hymn, dance, and eloquence as well as agriculture and pantomime, with the Egyptian *khai-bit*, the shadow of a man that can be released after death, this poem issues from the imagined voice of this military maritime Governor of Portuguese India who expanded Portuguese influence across the Indian Ocean.

Buried, therefore,
 I remember the flowering water
 and how it lifted my ship,
 the *Flor de la Mar*,
 out of its solitude,
 and prepared me
 to bring forth an obedience of faith.

47 Source note for this section: Hector Aviles, "'Songoro Cosongo' Part 1; The Literary Revolution," *Latino Music Café*, October 2, 2020, <http://www.latinomusiccafe.com/2020/09/30/songoro-cosongo-part-1-literary-revolution/>.

How did I know then that that very boat
 would become my coffin, my cross,
 the shadow my name would wear
 under a new dispensation?⁴⁸

I am that Affonso who found some comfort
 in the purl of rails and cactus,
 the silent skid of white pine out of the Zuñi moun-
 tains,
 the crisscross of Aztec lives that waited for me here
 when my king abandoned me.⁴⁹

Flor do Mar or *Flor de la Mar* (Flower of the Sea), spelled *Frol de la Mar* in all Portuguese chronicles of the sixteenth century, a Portuguese *nau* merchant ship of 400 tons, participated in decisive events in the Indian Ocean for nine years. It sank off the coast of Sumatra in November 1511, as Afonso de Albuquerque returned from the conquest of Malacca, bringing with him a large treasure trove for the Portuguese king. The poem reincarnates this legendary Captain-Major of the Seas of Arabia, transplanted like the city of his surname, Albuquerque, in the New Mexico desert.

Sea green birds, hungry after their flight,
 peck at the new morning in me,
 and the nine syllables of Egyptian desire
 spell my ancient name.
 I must learn the dialectic of love's form
 in the call that came with the light,
 and live with the three-petaled rose of my new name,
 here, in this new world.⁵⁰

48 Wright, *Boleros*, 37.

49 *Ibid.*, 39.

50 *Ibid.*

Into poem 19, with a similar strategy but a comparatively whimsical touch, Wright interjects American jazz pianist Art Tatum. How does the musician situate in relation to Clio, Muse of history, and *khu*, the radiant and shining being dwelling in the *sahu*, the intellect? The poem gives over much of its second half to a nineteen-line monologue, “spoken” by Tatum, whose name explicitly precedes it in parenthesis like a theatrical stage direction. His imagined, inhabited voice, since these words do not apparently derive from the historical record, offers a detailed tutorial on his musicianship.

(*Art Tatum*)

When I sit at the piano,
 I don't count the keys.
 I see you looking at my eyes;
 you wonder what I see.
 What I see is in my touch,
 and in the assurance
 that the sound will be right there.
 Some cats always carp.
 They say the music isn't mine,
 keep asking me for “an original.”
 So I lay two notes in the bar ahead,
 diminish a major,
 tunnel through the dark
 of the brightest minor,
 and come out on the right side of the song.
 I pick the composer's pocket,
 and lay the hidden jewels out there.
 This wired, hammering woman
 wants her fortune told.⁵¹

51 Ibid., 41.

Regarding this particular historical figure, we thought it appropriate to seek the counsel of a specialist. Music historian and critic John Corbett has this to say about this poem within a poem.

Tatum was known as being one of the most brilliant, lyrical pianists of his era (1930s–1950s). He possessed an incomparable right hand, playing at incredible speeds while maintaining a light touch and delicate sense of melody. Wright’s mention of others “carping” at Tatum stems from the fact that the pianist did not record or play much of his own music, but basically played standards. But he would retool them completely – the diminished major and brightest minor in Wright’s monologue – and the description of “laying two notes in the bar ahead” is a practice of blurring bar lines, carrying over a melody across the changes (from one chord into another), which creates a sense of slight tension and mounting excitement and allows Tatum to gently reinvent the tune. I think the indented passage has a different rhythm from the rest of the poem around it, a very Tatumesque rhythm – continuous, brilliant, in complete phrases that are rounded off rather than chopped up.⁵²

The speech, both reflecting on and mimicking Tatum’s piano, destabilizes the difference between “original” and “standard,” in a way that resonates with Wright’s own poetics of extraction and response. As Tatum says,

I pick the composer’s pocket,
and lay the hidden jewels out there.

Wright’s poetics select and arrange these artifacts of reality, in an intertextual architecture of juxtaposition,

52 Personal correspondence with the authors.

speaking to and echoing off one another. As he does so, he lays “the hidden jewels” of each encounter “out there” on the page. Rarely do the invocations give way to such outright ventriloquism.⁵³ This moment appears as emblematic of the book, in particular of its systematic composition like that of Tatum, composition in execution. Consider Tatum’s precise, counter-rhythmic interpolated keyboard runs breaking open the melody of George and Ira Gershwin’s *Someone to Watch over Me* as analogous to Wright’s own interaction with recognizable touchstones, including the interjection of the Tatum monologue, a dance of familiarity and novelty, inventing and revealing at once, tethered to the structure within the system that frames the endeavor.

Wright alludes to a further insight regarding vision.

I see you looking at my eyes;
 you wonder what I see.
 What I see is in my touch, [...]

Tatum suffered from impaired vision from infancy, most likely caused by cataracts. By the age of eleven, after surgical interventions, nearby objects became legible to him, and he could possibly distinguish colors. A physical assault, probably in his early twenties, reversed any benefits from these procedures and left him blind in his left eye, and with very limited vision in his right. The poem on the latter side of the speech, as Corbett notes, returns to the different time signature established in the first half, and locates itself in a version of the Dogon smithy, the forge and workshop of a metalworker.

53 We may consider Tatum’s appearance in *Boleros* a precursor to the four American jazz musicians who make similar named appearances in Wright’s *The Guide Signs: Book One and Book Two* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007): Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, Billy Strayhorn, and Horace Silver.

Hammer and anvil guide the music of my house,
 smithy of the ear's anticipation, forge
 of the mind in what it denies
 and what it fulfills.⁵⁴

The echo of the word "hammer" bridges the poem's transition from speech to verse, the padded hammers under the piano's lid that sound its keyboard evoking the smith's hammer against an anvil guiding "the music of my house." As the leap makes of Tatum a "forger" of music – both one who shapes it through beating and hammering in the fire of a furnace, and one who produces an illicit copy or imitation passed off as original – it also recalls the Dogon smith as a musician.

"At first," said Ogotemmêli, "the smith did not have all the tools that he has today. He had no hafted hammer, no file and no tongs. The red-hot iron was held in the bare hand; and that is something one can still see today, when the smiths come together for funerals. As they chant the dirges for the dead, they pick up red-hot iron in their hands in memory of the practice of the first smiths."⁵⁵

So stated the blind elder Ogotemmêli. Thus by the poem's end, we have returned to the dyêli, the archivist guardian of the community's collective historical values.

On the terrace,
 altars resonate with the water sound
 of goatskin over hollow wood,
 and the frog pitch of the mudbanks
 within the house

54 Wright, *Boleros*, 41.

55 Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 85.

answer.

I dream of the smith music within me,
and hear its cithara voice in the dyēli's craft.⁵⁶

Half-blind Tatum becomes a reflection of blind Ogotem-mêli, village elder and historian. We understand his vision in his touch, and his complex craft of forge and hammer. In the wake of these spiraling fusions, under the watchful pairing of Clio and khu, we feel justified in naming Art Tatum patron saint of *Boleros*.

§ *Boleros* part five: Temporal axis and geographical axis

While the *Boleros* volume numbers its poems continuously from 1 through 39, followed by a three-poem coda, four titles intervene on the numbering system without disrupting it, interjecting as a second level of connotation to the numerical sequence's flow.

Boleros 1 — 21

Saints' Days 22 — 33

New England Days 34 — 36

Sources and Roots 37 — 39

Coda

The two sections that follow the sequence of twenty-one paired bolero poems, we may aptly describe as unfolding along a temporal axis (i.e., the twelve calendar poems of *Saints' Days*) and a geographical axis (i.e., the two poems of *New England Days*, these latter titled *The White Deer* and *Indian Pond*). These two axes have been present implicitly in the *Boleros* sequence, and in particular in the final two poems of that sequence. Poem 20, pairing Terpsichore and sekhem, opens with a line from Mexican poet

⁵⁶ Wright, *Boleros*, 41.

José Gorostiza's *Death without End*, then proceeds to announce its location as Edinburgh, Scotland.

“The night has a tree / with amber fruit; /
the earth has an / emerald hue.”
Late, by Waverley Station,
Edinburgh draws its foggy curtain.⁵⁷

Later the poem's narrator even spies a saint, anticipating the *Saints' Days* poems.

When we arrived this afternoon,
we saw St. Christopher sitting alone and stoned
on the still bus to Lanark.⁵⁸

In equal parts placed and out of place, the poem prepares to move, and to keep moving.

Every dance is convivial,
just as the pipes and beers we share,
waiting here for the train to take me away.⁵⁹

As this set of bolero poems draws to a close, it notes “every dance” as “with life,” less in conflict and more in new-found harmony between each paired deity, albeit shared with the brevity of a provisional train station meal. In the final poem's recapitulation of the series, poem 21, pairing Urania and ren, lands in Santa Fe, New Mexico, although its first lines speak more of departure than arrival.

Letter by letter,
the Villa Real de Santa Fé de San Francisco
fades away.

57 *Ibid.*, 42.

58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*, 43.

It would have been better
 for the village to withhold its name,
 and to lie in the arms of the Sangre de Cristo
 and dream only of the healing myrtle.⁶⁰

The city lies bounded on the east by the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the southernmost range reaching down from the Rockies, and the poem draws its imagery and language from this geography. The feeling in travel of not belonging to anyplace, or belonging equally to every place, echoes against gestures of naming, of the anchor of the name, as to draw a parallel between identity and geography. Thus in perpetual motion, one's own name refuses to appear in the choral litany of each locale's ceremony.

When the faithful plunged into the Rio Grande,
 toward Guadalupe,
 I dressed myself in their cloth,
 burned their crops, and sat clear-eyed
 in their churches, waiting
for my name to appear.
 That was an informative loss⁶¹

The poem closes the series with this stanza.

Now my trade is dust.
 But my name has retained an immaculate dew,
 drawn from waterless places.
 In my stolen forest,
 Odomankoma guides Urania's hand
 through the formalities of a house,
 where love's formal body has set its passion.⁶²

60 Ibid., 45.

61 Ibid., 45–46.

62 Ibid., 46.

We know Odomankoma as the “infinite inventor” of the West African religion of Akan, so often syncretized with Christianity. Here the deity guides the hand of Urania, Muse of Astronomy in Greek mythology. Is “my stolen forest” that shelters this encounter then a utopia, or simply a reflection of reality, or both, a reflection of reality in its convivial dance mode? These complex movements systematize “through the formalities of a house,” as an astrological house, or the architecture apparent in cosmology, at domestic scale. Here “love’s formal body” supplies the system (i.e., form), asserting itself twice in these last two lines, at two degrees of scaling: house and body. It “has set its passion” as one sets a table for festivities.

Drawing out the temporal axis explicitly, the twelve-poem cycle of *Saints’ Days* tracks one for each month in sequence, as each poem finds the speaker in a particular place, on a day on which the Christian Church commemorates a particular saint. Does this cycle “follow” the travels of the previous poems? Certainly it does in the sequence of the book with its pages turning. However, the time intercuts with more complexity, in memory and resonance, than that sequential formulation might suggest. Consider these excerpts from the first three poems of the cycle.

NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LA PAZ (January 24th)

At the upper end of this continent,
 along the St. Lawrence,
 one has to learn to live with winter,
 a wood cat with a devouring patience
 and a tempered ear for the softest harmonics
 of resignation.⁶³

63 Ibid., 49.

*

NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LOURDES (February 11th)

Morning memories take root in me,
here, a winter away from New England.

[...]

A year in this city has given me
a thirst for the waters of that basilica,
and the courage to walk the bridge
of the silence she displays.⁶⁴

*

SAN JUAN DE DIOS (March 8th)

Today,
in San Juan,
winter turns a scarlet eye upon us.⁶⁵

Each location, like each calendar day, offers an interplay with its respective saint, as we observe by the first lines in San Juan, the city named for its patron, inhabited by the poem on the saint's own day. As readers we know travel in its purest form, with the poet to transport us and to generate each poem, in fact, memory, and imagination. The calendar's flow of time does not contain us as much as release us, as into a musical measure. We practice our scales, like a catechism of associations, touching down at each pin on the map. Through the poem we find ourselves, a node on the network of cities, days, and saints.

64 Ibid., 50.

65 Ibid., 52.

“Pauline tension.” As a personal “Battle between Carnival and Lent,” the enjoyment of the world’s opulence and the body’s physical pleasures comes into direct conflict with the austere, omnipresent spiritual life. One learns to comprehend the world, even to enjoy it, as always recoiling between these two poles.

But so, my name was given by my arrival
 in summer’s first heat,
 and by my mother’s understanding
 that what is sown dies and comes to life,
 love’s seeded protestation,
 the spirit’s rehabilitation after it has denied itself.

[...] I feel the Pauline tension in my body.
 I know this day holds a double blessing⁷⁰

listening for the cock crow in my spirit,
 the threefold betrayal of my mother’s grace.⁷¹

The poem makes reference to the Gospel description of Peter’s betrayal after Jesus’s arrest, as Jesus had foretold it: “*Truly I tell you, Jesus answered, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.*”⁷² We come to know this day’s double blessing as the inheritance of both faith and doubt bequeathed in the name and the date. Christianity encodes doubt as a necessary operation into its mode of faith.

Through this double blessing we come to an understanding not only of the dialectics of Christianity but also to the twin axes of time and geography as played out by these two sets of poems, and even of the pairings of the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 59.

⁷¹ Ibid., 60.

⁷² Matt. 26:34.

Boleros poems. The language of poetry sets out its dual task of establishing limits and then exceeding them.

Dialectics is, indeed, the art of *conjugation* (see the *confatalia* or series of events which depend on one another). But it is the task of language both to establish limits and to go beyond them. Therefore language includes terms which do not cease to displace their extension and which make possible a reversal of the connection in a given series (thus too much and not enough, few and many). The event is coextensive with becoming, and becoming is itself coextensive with language; the paradox is thus essentially a “sorites,” that is a series of interrogative propositions which, following becoming, proceed through successive additions and retrenchments. Everything happens at the boundary between things and propositions.⁷³

We may go further and claim that the body of the saint, in suffering, distributes the concept of the physical, dissolves it into the geographical, and into the temporal of the season and calendar. “Familial hegemony breaks down” replaced by “the familial strangeness that the book alone / can give.” All materiality now issues from the element of the name. “Proper names are also indexicals or designators, but they have special importance since they alone form properly material singularities.”⁷⁴ Whether in denotation or indication, the name links the proposition “to an external state of affairs.”⁷⁵ Two late summer poems reflect the year’s decline into the skeletal structures of autumn: poems 28 “SANTA CRISTINA (July 24th)” and 29 “SANTA CLARA (August 12th).”

73 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 8.

74 *Ibid.*, 13.

75 *Ibid.*, 12.

Loss and double loss.

The person gone through the house's door into death,
the body gone through marriage and, finally, death.
Passage into passage, what remains of you
shows in an intimation of loss, or in faith's intimacy.
So your head rests on the high altar of the Milan
cathedral,
and your heart in the House of the Noble Ladies of
Saint Theresa.

In a saint's body, familial hegemony breaks down.⁷⁶

*

So the legend reinvents the form of suffering
and the exuberance of discovering what time,
or another hand, had buried,
and you, who now require light's investment
in cloistered figures,
embrace the familial strangeness that the book alone
can give.⁷⁷

*

Poem 30 "NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LOS REMEDIOS (September 24th)" begins with a verbatim passage from the historical record, extracted and rendered as verse.

"When they came to my house that night
the dog barked twice, and the old man got up
and went out of doors and then came back and lay
down;
she flew out again, and I got up and went out of
doors;

⁷⁶ Wright, *Boleros*, 61.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

I knew the slut barked more than usual,
 but I could see nothing; I went back into the house,
 and just as I got into bed five men bulged right
 against the door, and it fell right in the middle of the
 floor,
 and they fell down."⁷⁸

Once more to the crossroads: *Hannah Tutson, Jacksonville, Florida, November 10, 1871* HANNAH TUTSON (colored) sworn and examined. Testifying to the night whipping of her husband by clansman, to *The House of Representatives for the Second Session of the Forty-Second Congress, 1871-'72, Condition of Affairs in Southern States, testimony Taken by the Sub-Committee*, p. 59. This archival text within the poem becomes an artifact of voice in the assembly, positioned below its respective saint.

Such piety turns on a name change
 —Pity, Mercy, Ransom—
 and under the spin of a different star
 becomes Remedios.

Remedios.
 Time now to reconstruct salvation.

The poem, commencing from the testimony of violation, surveys the domestic: the house as structure and dwelling, the rituals that define habitation. It circulates from Hannah's Florida, to the poet's New England, to Doña Elpidia's "the heart of Vera Cruz."

Elpidia sets a star of stones on the bank,
 and stretches her white clothes there to dry.
 Elpidia, the water, the frayed clothes
 cradle me now in their chronometry.

78 *Ibid.*, 66.

On the old house's water-stained walls
 I still see visions.
 At night, the flat leaves of the cactus
 in the patio become palms upon drums.
 Witches know me.
 And Elpidia knows my need to embrace
 the bull's horn in their voices,
 or the silence when they are gone.

Late September calls Elpidia to her saint's day,
 to the feast of her own flowering in sacred water.
 In New England now, the leaves are already auburn-
 haired,
 and the Herefords have begun to huddle against the
 intimation
of the first snow.

I have followed the earth's spine out of the White
 Mountains,
 and have leapt, by my own impulse, away from a
 familiar
 body, to here, where Doña Elpidia has shown me
 the left side of solitude.⁷⁹

Of the assailants we know them only by their actions,
 enough to trace their cruelty as a spiritual failing,
 through the concealment that identifies them, the denial
 of face and of name.

What can their white hoods conceal, except the mo-
 ment
 when the sheared soul chose to cover its face,
 and tuned its voice to a withered heart's power?⁸⁰

79 Ibid., 67–68.

80 Ibid., 66.

a guardian spirit, beyond the pilgrim mind with its guiding saints.

Night must fall upon your rosary of explanation.⁸³

The waters of poem 35 "Indian Pond" evoke spring's renewal, stubborn and eventual, at its own pace and duration, out of step with the calendar's measure. Bearing witness to the thaw's breaking ice presents itself as a heritage, taught by a father's example.

Spring's reasons come hard through the trunk of
winter.
A father like mine can spend too long in a mind's
ditch⁸⁴

But wise old Indian Pond erupts on the left hand of
spring.⁸⁵

The wisdom of pond and of deer reduces the place of the human to a humbler house, beside and within the primary elements of animal and land. In the unmeasured time of the seasons and unmapped terrain of the territory, these figures disrupt the grid of *Saints' Days* and respond to it with their own spirits, evoked by names that point to that which lingers from before the time of the settlers' arrival. In the forces gathered by the name, even this divided world meets up with itself.

83 Ibid., 80.

84 Ibid., 82–83.

85 Ibid., 83.

§ Sources and Roots: Even that pine can arouse your suman heart

Every poem instructs a reader on how to read it. It signals its mode, manners, and meanings. Perhaps it does so more directly than expectation has led us to see. We the readers attune ourselves anew each time, to what the poem presents and how it presents it. The penultimate set of three poems in *Boleros*, preceding the three miniatures of the coda, collect without titles but only numbers – 37, 38, 39 – under the heading *Sources and Roots*. The heading might prepare one for a series of endnotes and citations reflecting on the inspirations of the preceding volume, and maybe in fact these three poems, thus labeled, take on that task in their own way. One apprehends them as page-long left-justified verses, unbroken by the intermittent white space of stanza or strophe. Close and clear end-rhymes with slight irregularities of pattern weave the swift line breaks without full resolution until the end, and the occasional well-placed interior rhyme paces the short lines to an even more accelerated pitch. We may offer a first reading without yet reading the words in their lines but only the visible pattern and appearance. The superficial shape of the poem, that is, its surface, speaks to us. Each one resembles a root, growing downward in a durable spiral, as tree roots drill toward a hidden source and in doing so becoming a source themselves for those parts of the plant that reach upward toward light. Each one resembles a reverse journey to a river's source in high altitudes, opposite its faraway delta fanning into the sea.

The work of acknowledgment, of reckoning that out of which *Boleros* has grown, falls to this trio. Each commences its winding speech in Spanish before segueing seamlessly into soft vernaculars of English. We note the three

beginnings here, followed by our own rough attempts at translation.

37

Ayer me habló el corazón,
y su pena me contó,
llorando; so I lie doggó
in the skirts of a cantina known
for the quality of hearts bled
on its Moorish tiles; style, my man,
undoes the grandest among us.⁸⁶

(Yesterday my heart spoke to me,
and his sorrow told me,
crying;) so I lie ...

38

Un siglo de ausencia might,
when the axe bites the ceiba tree,
matter; two fast-moving rats, three
kola nuts, an Iroko light,—
business for the domestic bird—
a blessing, one by one—I live
on flowering water and give
you penny songs, by which the surd
of fallen flowers raises
hope in me.⁸⁷

(A century of absence) might,
when the axe bites...

86 Ibid., 87.

87 Ibid., 88.

Dime en donda encontrar-
 te, disposable heart, red star
 by which I set my course and flow,
 a vessel marked by the dim glow
 of pride. I am a song that cleaves
 to its Guinea way, stops, deceives
 itself, falls through a lowered tone
 and returns, enhanced by its own
 failure, to the key it sustains.⁸⁸

(Tell me where to find
 you,) disposable heart...

This triple foray limns the auditory and linguistic spaces, as well as the spaces of the page, that constitute the roots and sources of *Boleros*. They attend to the metaphorical spaces of “penny songs,” of a cantina with “Moorish tiles,” of “flowering water,” and “ceiba tree,” each detail and name doubling its resonance beyond itself, with the journey of the book behind it. The poet Andrea Rexilius instructs us regarding the metaphor as gateway. Her insights, drawn from reading Emily Dickinson, we apply to the whole of *Boleros* and its extraordinary parade of paired abstractions.

A pine tree is like a sea. A pine tree is a sea. Without taking this parallel a step further, the situation bears no clarification in my mind as a reader. What must be understood is that two abstractions are being related. What is concrete between them is their relationship as images. What they bear in common, is the abstraction they are relying on one another to express. Poets who have experienced with their entire being, sight, sound,

88 Ibid., 89.

sense, etc. from one word or one image in a poem, understand that what we are writing, is both the telling, and the un-telling, of a story. And that story is not found just in the lines of the poem, or in its rhythm or breadth of description, or in its imagery, but also in its ability to make a word be what it means, as well as, be what it images.⁸⁹

We may understand the end of *Boleros*. In invoking “the end” we mean both its conclusion and its goal, the result that it sets out to achieve.⁹⁰ We know this end, these ends, as both telling and untelling the story of the dance that bears the name. The turn to roots below and sources above opens the end of the book to its most enduring intention and the lasting legacy it offers us readers – a vast construction as intricate as a branching river or towering pine – but a construction nonetheless, emergent, a process of growing and flowing out of those parts of the world it seeks to comprehend. We come to know *Boleros* as this dance of reading and unreading the world.

89 Andrea Rexilius, “On (Open): Merging Form and Meaning in Contemporary Poetics – Reading Ann Lauterbach, Elizabeth Willis, Lisa Fishman and Pam Rehm,” *How2* 2, no. 4 (Spring–Summer 2006): n.p.

90 Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

Wright's Rhythm, or "x" Marks the Weave

§ Preamble: Rhythmic étude

Jay Wright gave a very rare live public reading at Woodland Pattern Book Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on April 21, 2017, which we were able to attend. After reading the play *The Geometry of Rhythm*, performing the voices of both characters and reciting the stage directions, he delivered an informal lecture, speaking from notes, on the problem of defining the word and concept of rhythm. He prefaced this by asking the assembled audience, "would you like to help me with a puzzle?" The ideas presented and their mode of presentation in this live setting offer insight into his poetry as a philosophy practice. This first step, this precondition – lecture as collective inquiry – already frames a philosophical maneuver, collective and societal, both at origin and in destination.¹ What fol-

1 The phrase "both at origin and in destination" derives from Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, "For a Whiteheadian Laboratory 'How Do You Make Yourself a Proposition?'" in *Propositions in the Making: Experiments in a Whiteheadian Laboratory*, eds. Roland Faber, Michael Halewood, and Andrew M. Davis (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 10.

lowed offered a firsthand experience of Wright's finely tuned, intercultural building practice, as introduced and demonstrated in the previous chapter with the precise pairings of *Boleros*; that is, his method of reconstitution of those elements that endure, across the expanses of time and gulfs between languages.

To encapsulate, from notes and memory since the poet disallowed any audio recording, the lecture's ideas, its perplexity, we will say that Wright began with contrasting definitions of music in the broadest sense. He made reference to scholarly sources including *Theory of African Music* by Gerhard Kubik and *Music and the Making of Modern Science* by Peter Pesic. The ancient Greeks, he summarized, divided music into three parts, each with its corresponding parallel aspects in and of human existence.

Melody (pitch) = (equating to, corresponding to, deriving from) spirit

Harmony = soul

Rhythm = body

Scholarship of music on the African continent that approaches it by way of African languages, Wright noted, makes the unsettling discovery that none of those languages have a word for "rhythm." When referencing what non-African languages and musical cultures understand as rhythm, the languages of the continent use terms that translate as concerning place, situation, navigation, and direction, which evokes ideas of mapping, journeying, and way-finding.

One concludes that the word rhythm as commonly understood had been *imported*, as viewing this aspect of music of the African continent from the outside. From the inside, of the music and its languages, one understands losing the beat as getting lost, like making a wrong turn. Thus the beat, pulse, or flow composes a form of transit, as along a channel, from which one may go astray.

Wright encouraged comments from the audience, welcoming any proposals and ruminating on them each in turn. He closed with a concise summation of the “puzzle” of rhythm, all its contrasts still intact and unresolved, and stated in conclusion, “these things are not transparent to me.” The scrutiny of the contradiction of two divergent cultural concepts for the same musical aspect – we may understand them as conflicting methods of abstraction – resulted in the dissolution of any distinct definition of rhythm, an atomization through multiplication of antithetical facts. It was as if we had witnessed the dismantling of a house and then were given a guided tour of its recognizable pieces scattered across the site, with equal playfulness and sobriety. The “puzzle” with which the assembled audience “helped” Wright that evening in Milwaukee apparently initiated the investigation that arrived at its final form in the yet-unpublished philosophical paper titled “An Examination of Rhythm and Its Expansive Movement,” completed and circulated by Wright in 2021.² We could say the propositional endeavor, as well as the collective, explorative inquiry, together initiate Wright’s poetry. Poetry for him offers a public forum for the apprehension of contradiction, for misapprehension perhaps, and the acceptance of disjunctive ideas as equally valuable through intricate, inclusive, and uncompromising structural synthesis. At no point in his lecture did he seem to consider the Greek definition as inaccurate; only different, as if one needs to understand both the Greek (e.g., Attic and Ionic, Aeolic, Arcadocypriot, and Doric) and the African (e.g., Bantu and Mande) definitions as constructs.

We will return as a case in point to the poem “BANĀ NGOLO,” with which we began our investigation of *Pitch*

2 This and other philosophical papers will soon be published as Jay Wright, *Soul and Substance: A Poet’s Examination Papers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2023).

and Revelation, from the book *Disorientations: Groundings* (2013). We may now understand the purpose of “BANĀ NGOLO” as affixing those figures from the canon of Western philosophy to the structural frame (i.e., the number ladder that we explore in more detail in this chapter) borrowed from West African ritual, as a mode of this speculative inclusion. The poem attempts to build, to fashion, a higher plane of encounter on which two seemingly contradictory world views can meet.

Take the final stanza, a triangulation between Baca, Leibniz, and Kintu. We will offer a brief digression on each of these figures.

Baca knows density, a white escape,
 a sun compromised by an axiom of separation,
 an indiscernible Leibniz; he argues
 with a Kintu disposition that ascends and descends,
 an impossible order that will shape
 his soul’s order and will guide his introspection.
 Why should Baca display his soul’s virtues,
 the alphabet and melody that nothing here amends?
 Whose is this life-bearing form?³

Elfego Baca (1865–1945), a gunman, lawman, lawyer, and politician in the closing days of the American wild west, was born in Socorro, New Mexico just before the end of the Civil War. His family moved to Topeka, Kansas when he was a child. Upon his mother’s death in 1880, Baca returned with his father to Belen, New Mexico where his father became a marshal. In 1884, at age 19, Baca acquired some guns and became a deputy sheriff in Socorro County. He said he wanted “the outlaws to hear my steps

3 Jay Wright, *Disorientations: Groundings* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2013), 85.

a block away.”⁴ Southwestern New Mexico at the time was still relatively sparsely settled cattle ranching country, which is not to say it was sparsely populated, given the many indigenous communities there. Cowboys roamed the land and did as they pleased. They might come into a town, drink at the saloon, harass the locals, and then shoot up the town out of boredom. Baca put an end to that. Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646–1716), the Baroque polymath philosopher and mathematician, a German of Slavic descent, and the philosopher “of the fold,” we know for his metaphysical thought and theory of the monad, or an indivisible and hence ultimately simple entity, such as an atom or a person. Kintu is the mythic figure in creation legends of Baganda, the subnational kingdom within Uganda. He is the first person on earth, wandering the plain alone, meeting a woman from the sky who takes him up to introduce him to her father.⁵

Wright has written, in a very rare, published essay, “[w]hat, among other things, contemporary black poets desire is dialogue with the African world, not a borrowing from or passive acceptance of it.”⁶ In this final stanza we have a case of what such dialogue may look like: a lawyer of the American West, by way of a philosopher of Baroque Europe, in argument with the “disposition” of a figure from Baganda mythology. We now think of the number ladder as the “life-bearing form” of the poem, that structures it, and to which it refers at the start and

4 This quotation appears in a number of sources. For one example, see Sam “Sweetwater” Savage, “Tall Tale: The Legendary Elfego Baca,” *Pressreader*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/catron-courier/20210201/281599538175623>.

5 On Kintu, see Hans Schoenmaker, *The Story of Kintu and His Sons: Naming, Ethnic Identity Formation and Power in Precolonial Great Lake Region of East Africa* (Leiden: African Studies Center, 2014).

6 Jay Wright, “Desire’s Design, Vision’s Resonance: Black Poetry’s Ritual and Historical Voice,” *Callaloo* 30 (1987): 15.

end and which, among other accomplishments, frames the landscape of the poem's encounters.

If we consider philosophy, after Whitehead and William James, as the practice of bringing the knowledge of a spectrum of disciplines into alignment with the most advanced among them, we come to an understanding of Wright's practice as one of philosophy within poetry. In proposing this we also propose the refusal to privilege certain modes of knowing at the exclusion or reduction of others. We might further understand this practice as the ongoing critique of our own methods of abstraction. If we consider creativity as first and foremost the mobilization of relationality, we see the near-perfect alignment between the two fields of operation. What if we call this near-perfect alignment "rhythm" and begin to count-off our philosophical practice in time to this rhythm?

The practice of philosophy, and poetry as philosophy, then means resisting the fragmentation of knowledge, despite the necessary forms of disciplinarity, and tracing divergences according to a "logic of becoming-multiplicity in the affirmation of oppositions," as Roland Faber has written of Whitehead.⁷ The apparent dissolution of structures arises as a necessary step in the complex process of relational inclusion, since every self-policed boundary prohibits or obscures the revelation of the weave. Such dissolution is a creative act, or becomes one, with the secondary step, in the form of the guide, the shaping, on an uncovered plane, like a discovered landscape. In this way *the impossible order* of the broken old orders reconstituted, *will shape and will guide* the order of the soul and its looking inward. These revealed harmonies make us who and what we are, what we become. They determine how we apprehend ourselves, and how the world has come to surround and infuse those apprehensions.

7 Roland Faber, "Space, Time, and the Deity of Peace," in *Propositions in the Making*, eds. Faber, Halewood, and Davis, 39.

Philosophy levels the demand that all disciplines must contend with the advances of the others, its demand its mode and manner of leading in that practice of contending. Another way to say it, after Stanley Cavell, is that *philosophy has no knowledge of its own*. It has only modes of thought for reconciling the knowledge advanced by other fields. Poetry becomes interchangeable with philosophy in this formulation, with the exception that poetry works in language so precise that it cannot be paraphrased. As Wright noted in the afterword in the first edition of *The Double Invention of Komo* (1980), “[t]he poem, though a contribution to a well-defined cultural process, is itself and does not encourage paraphrase or substitution.”⁸ Its words are its ideas. Otherwise, poetry here aspires to the same mission. We understand poetry as a form of creativity that might provide a forum for such diverse reconciliation; that the conditions under which its creativity comes into existence might be constructed in such a way as to force this reconciliation. The generative problem proposed by the concept rhythm doubles here as the problem’s resolution. The way-finding amid continual re-orientation in practice becomes the form of “affirmation of oppositions.”

§ Approach from a distance

In a 1995 interview, Steven Drukman talks to playwright Suzan-Lori Parks and director Liz Diamond about their collaborations and, specifically, about Parks’s *The America Play* (1993). The topic of “meaning” dominates the first part of the discussion. Drukman, so clearly enthusiastic about Parks’s deployment of language, declares his intent to give up the notion of “meaning” in order to hear the

8 Jay Wright, *The Double Invention of Komo* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1980), 109.

musicality and poetic quality of Parks's plays. But Parks balks at this declaration:

I realize that I don't understand that word "meaning" as other people do. I think most people think that, say, for example, the Foundling Father means "x" and if you figure out what that means, what he stands for, then that will enable you to figure out the play. [...] I see that process as completely unhelpful. So I don't understand your notion of "giving up meaning." I mean, I don't understand that whole idea of meaning anyway, so I don't think we're giving up anything. I think we're, together, giving meanings.⁹

The "Foundling Father" is the guide through the first half of Parks's *The America Play*. Seemingly dressed up to resemble Abraham Lincoln, enhancing what he sees as a natural-born physiological likeness, and engaged in an ongoing reenactment of Lincoln's assassination for which people pay the Foundling Father for the chance to shoot the gun, the Black man constitutes a theatrical character and a densely packed linguistic signifier.

Drukman unpacks it for us:

[O]ne meaning is "founding father." Another meaning is "foundling" father, [that is,] a father who is an orphan is a foundling. And that's just on the level of language, that's just the words. Already with one pun you've put into motion this idea of an originless father of our country's history! Then there's Liz's task: you have a person standing there as the founding father, but he's only standing in as the foundling father, he's

9 Suzan-Lori Parks and Liz Diamond, "Suzan-Lori Parks and Liz Diamond: Doo-a-Diddly-Dit-Dit: An Interview," interview by Steven Drukman, *TDR: The Drama Review* 39, no. 3 (1995): 59.

not really saying he *is* the foundling father. So all those different meanings sort of coexist.¹⁰

And Diamond concurs. Her job, as director, is to allow the multiple significations to exist. Foundling Father *as* Forefather *as* Fo'/Faux/Foe Father. This maintenance and curation of the multiplicity of signification, which Parks eventually names "reading," opposes the all-too-common reduction of (single) signifier to (single) signified, as in *Playfully Assassinated Black Lincoln Impersonator is Theatrical Commentary on Black Violence in America*.

Drukman continues this line of conversation into his discussion of Parks's earlier play, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), specifically the role of photography in that play and text:

[T]he photograph fixes, freezes, fetishizes, and makes representation static – kind of like what critics do to you: they delimit your work this way by saying "she's African American, she's dealing with black-on-black violence."¹¹

Parks has only a one-word reply: "Right." And then after Drukman's follow-up deduction: "Yeah. Absolutely." Sensing that perhaps his analysis ended the playful conversation, Drukman semi-jokes that, "I said it all, I should've let you say it." But Parks laughs and circles back to her earlier point:

No, no, no, because, again, you're the reader, that's what's so exciting, you're doing the "meaning" thing, and that is your job in the re-circulation. It is not mine, you know what I mean?¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 66.

¹² Ibid.

The conversation swirls around this distinction between “doing the meaning thing,” on the one hand, and “meaning = x,” on the other hand. The former, an activity required of the reader, actualizes the rhythm of Parks’s theatrical scores. The latter, a final judgement produced usually by the critic or scholar, stultifies the movements embedded in the score. To accept the role of “reader,” one must willingly go on a journey, and the visceral vicissitudes of this journey – now illuminating, now mystifying – are enough to scare people away from becoming reader. Parks admits as much: “I know my plays aren’t for everybody.”¹³

Parks likely “means” that not all audience members like her plays, where “like” contains all the nuance revealed by Pierre Bourdieu’s 614-page *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984). In this respect, we know what she means. But the meaning bifurcates into a challenge: Are we limber enough to become reader? Can we play along to the beat and keep time?

§ Doing the meaning thing

Let’s zoom back in on Wright’s *Disorientations: Groundings* in order to do the meaning thing; that is, in order to become reader and read Wright. Before we depart on the journey, let’s be clear: these poems do not mean something. Wright evokes the power of altogether different verbs. His poems initiate, record, rewrite, rewire, resound, stitch, and weave. A rhythmic sensibility acts as a tractor beam to pull readers to the event horizon. Beyond the event horizon, well, things get strange, strange in the way reality might appear strange in the kernel of a black hole and strange in the way that bell hooks imagines Black aesthetics to be strange: “Aesthetics then is more than a

13 Ibid., 67.

philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming," and, more than that, a way of looking *anew*.¹⁴ If we can find the rhythm of Wright's poems, then we can imagine how he inhabits space, how he becomes through his writing, and how we might transform ourselves to see the world anew. This transformation entails a mutation of space, time, and matter, and is, for that matter, disorienting. In turn, this disorientation entails a different sense of grounding.

To do the meaning thing here and tune in to the rhythm of this book of poems, we turn to a few specific elements. First, we are captured by two aspects of the Table of Contents. The first aspect is the ordering of the poems, which appears as follows: 1.1, 1.12, 1.13 [...] 1.19, 1.110 [...] (see fig. 3.1). The second aspect is an "x" which appears, indented and on its own line, between 1.110 (linked to the poem, "There is a derelict intention in love") and 1.111 (linked to "QUATRE ÉTUDES DE RYTHME"). After that, we turn our attention to the poems that comprise section 1.111. Then, the diagram – to which we have referred thus far as the number ladder – that appears on page 75, without either context or eventual explanation. Finally, what is going on with the subsequent re-emergence of "x" and deployment of number pairs or trios (e.g., 32, 1, 33; 31, 30; 15, 14) in the poems housed within section 4.1 titled, "BANĀ NGOLO"?

Those are the primary coordinates on the map of our productive foray. And now get a glass of water and stretch. This is a long walk.

14 bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness—Strange and Oppositional," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 65.

giri sō

- 1.1 Why does the Dane think his design / 3
- 1.12 I ask you now to consider the old poet / 6
- 1.13 Some say the spirit does no work. All Greek / 8
- 1.14 Qué muerte tan larga llevan las flores en tu seno / 9
- 1.15 The friendly little immigrant will speak to me / 12
- 1.16 CURSUS ENSEMBLE / 13
- 1.17 An Irish November carries its own tune / 15
- 1.18 My sister has traced my absence, an arc / 16
- 1.19 Out of the salt-box, up the river on a barge / 17
- 1.110 There is a derelict intention in love / 18

*

- 1.111 QUATRE ÉTUDES DE RYTHME / 19
- 1.112 Gorostiza sings a radiant atmosphere / 21
- 1.113 No one says water in Lagos / 22
- 1.114 Why must we always speak to the corantados / 23
- 1.115 Must all interludes be auspicious / 24

benne sō

- 2.1 Somewhere between here and Belen / 27
- 2.12 ARTHURIAN TRIO / 29
- 2.13 Galileo perhaps believed that flowering pear / 35

- 2.14 What can I do with this silence, the sovereignty / 38
- 2.15 Speak of the property of matter, the bright hand / 39
- 2.16 What does the initiate seek, if not / 40
- 2.17 The Liatris has become Athenian / 41
- 2.18 Alfonso dreamed a melodic number / 42
- 2.19 Trappists in Vina never read / 43
- 2.110 What would you say of air that breathes, or lies / 45

bọlọ sọ

- 3.1 Now that Alexandria has died / 49
- 3.12 CAROLINGIAN TRIO / 51
- 3.13 HOMAGE TO THE INTRUSIVE,
INSUBSTANTIAL, HYPERTENSIVE, AND
INSULTING RONALD FIRBANK / 55
- 3.14 PAULINE TRIO / 64
- 3.15 En una noche oscura / 68
- 3.16 She sat, holding a match to an earwig / 71

sọ dayi

- 4.1 BANÁ NGOLO / 77
- 4.12 Love will go unnoticed, or will become / 86
- 4.13 THE SONATA'S MORAL GRAMMAR / 93

Figure 3.1: The Table of Contents from Jay Wright, *Disorientations: Groundings* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2013). All images reproduced with permission from Flood Editions.

§ Table of Contents: Order

Just as the character list that precedes Parks's *The America Play* provides a kind of primer to the linguistic and theatrical tour de force that follows in the form of the theatrical event, so too does the table of contents to Wright's *Disorientations: Groundings* deserve careful study and attention as a vital piece of that specific poetic undertaking. Whereas Drukman, engaged in Parks's primer, enacted his own readerly activity when analyzing the valences of, for example, "the Foundling Father" in the interview cited earlier, we will enact our own readerly production by lingering here on two elements of the table of contents, the first of which is the ordering system provided by Wright.

Wright's nested ordinal system – 1.1, 1.12, 1.13, etc. – is atypical for poetry but not for mathematics and analytic philosophy. The system marshaled here in the table of contents seems, in fact, to cite the system deployed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (*Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*, 1921). In that robust work of philosophical creation, Wittgenstein counts off seven primary propositions, and the word "propositions" there equates to statements that are available to empirical investigation rather than to necessarily true or false claims about reality. Within those seven propositions, there are a total of 526 numbered statements. For those unfamiliar with this work, one need only look at the beginning of Wittgenstein's groundbreaking text:

- 1 The world is all that is the case.
- 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
- 1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by their being *all* the facts.
- 1.12 For the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case.
- 1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.

- 1.2 The world divides into facts.
- 1.21 Each item can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same.¹⁵

By pairing those lines with Wright's table of contents, similarities reveal themselves straight away:

- 1.1 Why does the Dane think his design
- 1.12 I ask you now to consider the old poet
- 1.13 Some say the spirit does no work. All Greek
- 1.14 Qué muerte tan larga llevan las flores en tu seno
- 1.15 The friendly little immigrant will speak to me
[...]

Similarities exist, and yet we choose not to charge ahead with a strict identification such as Wright = Wittgenstein. Differences, or at least ambiguities, abound. For starters, Wright does not provide a starting proposition, such as we see in "The world is all that is the case." There is no "1" or, for that matter, "2" or "3" or "4." Returning to the table of contents and shifting our eyes from the numbered list to the upper-right-hand corner of the page, we notice, instead, the words *giri s̄*. Further down the page, we see *benne s̄*, and then *b̄ql̄ s̄*, and finally *s̄ dayi*. These phrases name stages of a Dogon spiritual initiation. Wright may well intend for each of these stages to function like Wittgenstein's primary propositions and for each of the poems within the four sections to act as elaborations. Then again, maybe he does not intend this. We can act like Liz Diamond and allow for both possibilities to be true, while equally allowing for the possibility to be incorrect or infelicitous.

The act of extracting an element in itself offers a form of analysis. It proposes the element's extractability, that

15 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58.

it conforms to legible wholeness, as a sub-object and an artifact of apportionment. The possibility of extraction results from the critical analysis that understands an object of study through the division of it into constituent parts.¹⁶ A note of divergence arises here between Wright and Wittgenstein. Each of Wright's titles in the *Disorientations: Groundings* table of contents doubles as the first line of a corresponding poem. A poem issues from the title or line. The table of contents thus also doubles as an index of first lines. The text of the book telescopes out of its contents. Wittgenstein's content lines appear instead as complete thought fragments on their own plateau, and the text of each corresponding part stands in discursive relation to the title, elucidating and explaining it. In this sense as well, the *form* of Wittgenstein's table of contents, the collection of recapitulated statements, becomes an artifact that Wright may extract and warp to his own purposes. He works to layer such artifacts, which we may call modes – Dogon speech, Wittgenstein indexing. Wright mines them each for their poetic content, most apparent and resonant in their overlay with one another. He furthermore proposes the implicit commentary of their juxtaposition, like introducing the two to one another in the social gathering place that is the book *Disorientations: Groundings*, the field on which they meet. He introduces the two intercultural artifacts of form as to reveal the pattern of contrasts and correspondences, vast systems that accompany the weave.

Then there is the matter of the equation “poem = proposition.” Can a poem act as an empirically provable statement? Do these particular poems act in this way? And then there is the issue of primary vs. subordinate propo-

16 We hear Dante: “So that this canzone may be well understood, I will divide it more minutely than the previous verses.” Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova (Poems of Youth)*, trans. Barbara Reynolds (London: Penguin, 1969), section XIX, lines 18–19, p. 57.

sitions: does Wright intend for poems 2.12 and 2.13, for example, to act as elaborations of proposals offered in poem 2.1? In other words, is there a hierarchical scheme at work here that we must access in order to climb Wright's ladder, as it were, or play his scales? While questioning the comparison between Wright and Wittgenstein is productive at this stage, we believe there are more similarities than differences. At least, there are significant similarities that put Wittgenstein into play within the multiverse of Wright's poetic constellation.

Consider the compelling exercise undertaken by Anca Bucur and Sergiu Nisioi and published as "A Visual Representation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*" (2016). These researchers extracted a dictionary of concepts and words that appear repeatedly in the *Tractatus* and then "infer[ed] the semantic relations between the concepts based on the contexts in which the words appear."¹⁷ The purpose of this activity was to construct "a semantic network by drawing edges between concepts." As the title of the paper suggests, the authors eventually devised computer software to visualize this semantic network.

Fig. 3.2 is the first visualization presented in their paper (the caption is also from the original publication).

As the authors write in the caption, the data set for the experiment was quite deep. The authors investigated not only the original German text but also six translations: Italian, French, Russian, Spanish, and two English versions. Looking at the images, the semantic network pulled from the data does not represent a hierarchical structure as one might expect from Wittgenstein's nu-

17 Anca Bucur and Sergiu Nisioi, "A Visual Representation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*," in *Language Technology Resources and Tools for Digital Humanities (LT4DH): Proceedings of the Workshop*, eds. Erhard Hinrichs, Marie Hinrichs, and Thorsten Trippel (Osaka: The COLING 2016 Organizing Committee, 2016), 73, <https://aclanthology.org/volumes/W16-40/>.



Figure 1: Two excerpts from the *Tractatus Network*. From left to right we have the German original, the translations into English by Pears and McGuinness (1961) in the center, and the Ogden and Ramsey (1922) translation on the right. Propositions from different groups may resemble each other more than the propositions within the same group.

Figure 3.2: Tractatus Visualization (including the caption) from Anca Bucur and Sergiu Nisioi, "A Visual Representation of Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,'" in *Language Technology Resources and Tools for Digital Humanities (LT4DH): Proceedings of the Workshop*, eds. Erhard Hinrichs, Marie Hinrichs, and Thorsten Trippl (Osaka: The COLING 2016 Organizing Committee, 2016), 73, <https://aclanthology.org/volumes/W16-40/>.

meric ordering of propositions. The authors actually find something quite different, namely that

the seven main propositions in the text including the sub-divisions are not necessarily hierarchical, at least not based on the topics addressed, rather the *Tractatus* has a rhizomatic structure in which the propositions are entangled and repeatedly make use of similar concepts.¹⁸

The humble conclusion of all this work, of which we are only presenting salient points here, is this: “we hope to provide another method of reading Wittgenstein’s work.”¹⁹ That is, rather than reading Wittgenstein as an analytical philosopher who abides by specific logical protocols and arranges his thought according to hierarchical argumentative schemas, Wittgenstein appears through Bucur and Nisioi’s visualizations (i.e., through their reading) as an artistic thinker whose movement of mind proceeds through often unexpected rhizomatic channels and produces astonishing connections. It is this artistic Wittgenstein – perhaps we could say the performance philosopher Wittgenstein – that has stimulated filmmakers and musicians to transpose the philosopher’s work into different media and authors like Beth Savickey to read Wittgenstein’s later work as opening with a series of slapstick improvisations.²⁰

In turn, the rhizomatic linkages between words and concepts in *Disorientations: Groundings* begin to appear after several readings and a lot of slow breathing and reflection. Wright sees as already entangled the lives and works of Niels Bohr (i.e., one iteration of “the Dane”), the

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 74.

20 Beth Savickey, “Wittgenstein’s Slapstick,” *Performance Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2016): 72–82.

Argentine poet Ricardo Molinari, the legendary lawman of the Wild West Elfego Baca, and the keepers of Dogon history and cosmology such as Ogotemmêli, to name but a few figures who make an appearance throughout this book's pages. The ordering system of the table of contents combined with the rhizomatic linkages between these figures amounts to a significant "rhyme" between Wright and Wittgenstein, one that speaks of a temperament poised between rigorous mathematical analysis, artistic philosophical invention, and hierophantic syntax and grammar.

The rhyme starts to gather mass and energy when we loop back to Drukman. The first sentence of the preface to his interview reads, "[t]he first time I read a Suzan-Lori Parks play I flashed to Wittgenstein [...]"²¹ He continues:

There seemed to me to be a utilitarian focus to Parks' words – a surgical intensity – that belied her play's surface impression of hypnotic languor. Surely this is what Wittgenstein meant when he spoke of language games, I thought, and the contingencies of various meanings in languages' various contexts, words having uses and not mere dictionary definitions.

Given the connection between Parks and Wright that we have proposed, Drukman's link to Wittgenstein starts to limn a luminous triangle like the kind we might see in one of Bucur and Nisioi's visualizations.

Putting it all together and playing it from the top: the intriguing ordering system presented by Wright in the table of contents to *Disorientations: Groundings* establishes a line of sight (or even a line of flight, a *point de fuite*?) between the philosophical poet Wright and the poetic philosopher Wittgenstein. Furthermore, the ordering system hints at a neatly nested series of propositions told

21 Parks and Diamond, "Doo-a-Diddly-Dit-Dit," 56.

through poetic form that will establish a rhizomatic network of signification, and we – you, me, we, all of us – become “readers” of Wright’s work once we assent to travel this rhizomatic network so as to, in the words of Parks, do the meaning thing. To “rhyme” Wright and Wittgenstein in this way is certainly not to anoint either of these figures as either philosopher or poet. Rather, the rhyme transcends, or even dissolves, or even shows to be illusory or arbitrary, the rigid boundaries separating poets from philosophers, philosophers from artists, artists from scientists, scientists from dramatists, and dramatists from real-world makers. All of this information, condensed as it is within one aspect of a table of contents (!), offers something like a key signature to the rest of Wright’s poems in this book. What precisely Wright’s ideas sound like won’t become clear until we try to play it all in the right key.

§ A note on rhyme

While we have been speaking of rhyme in a conceptual sense – the rhyming of concepts and figures with one another across the span of a book or cycle of poems – we will now say a word on rhyme in the traditional sense – end-rhymes and words with rhyming sounds – and Wright’s typically idiosyncratic uses of the device. This crafted quatrain from “BANĀ NGOLO” serves as our case study.

Romanos has a silver hymn
to his soul, its strict shape as trim
as Russell’s metrical triad, symbol
nimble enough – ironclad.²²

22 Wright, *Disorientations*, 78.

These lines work “rhyming” both conceptually and literally and demonstrate the relation between the two registers.

First, it proposes a rhyme between the figures who appear, Romanos and Russell, in particular the emblems of those figures, the “silver hymn” and the “metrical triad.” Saint Romanos the Melodist or the Hymnographer (Greek: Ῥωμανὸς ὁ Μελωδός, often Latinized as Romanus or Anglicized as Roman), was one of the greatest of Greek hymnographers. He flourished during the sixth century, considered to be the Golden Age of Byzantine hymnography, or the composition of “songs of praise.” The legend states that Romanos was ridiculed for his lack of skill as a reader of monastic texts until the Mother of God appeared to him in a dream and commanded him to swallow a scroll that she carried in her hand. He did so, awoke, and extemporized his first hymn, the *Kontakion of the Nativity*, which was immediately recognized by the congregation as a musical and liturgical masterpiece. Wright neatly pairs the saint with Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), the British philosopher, logician, mathematician, historian, and social critic. In his *Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* (1897), his Axiom II. of the metrical triad states, “[t]hree points not in one straight line determine a unique figure, the plane [...].”²³

Second, the rhyme scheme of the lines reflects the intertwinement of these figures and their corresponding concepts. The enjambed first line allows the end-rhyme of “hymn” and “trim.” Then the second couplet inverts this simple scheme, with the mid-line word “triad” rhyming with the terminal “ironclad,” and the third line’s end word “symbol” crossing over for “nimble” to start the fourth line. We see in this couplet a rhyme in the form of an X, echoing the X of our concerns in this chapter. Taken

23 Bertrand Russell, *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1897), 52.

together, the peculiar rhyme scheme of the four lines perhaps looks abstractly like this.

A
 A
 BC
 CB

We recognize in this scheme an abstraction of the quatrain's rhyming concepts. We see, rendered in language, a semblance of the "symbol" of the planar form of Russell's triangle with its plane, as well as the "strict shape" of Romanos's "silver hymn" the very shape, it would seem to say, of a soul.

Contemporary poet Dan Beachy-Quick offers two apt insights about rhyme, pertinent to Wright's frequent play with rhyming techniques.²⁴

So quietly but so familiarly, rhyme suggests that to move forward, as one must, into what one doesn't know, will be okay. If so, rhyme offers itself as some form of existential assurance, is tuned in, and so attunes us, to fears and hopes so entwined with the human condition, we forget we even need to speak of them: that in what feels to be chaos of the blank future, there is a cosmos, an order, into which we'll fit. It is not exactly a means of survival, but a trust one will survive.

The rhyme in language offers an auditory form of those assurances, a concrete parallel to the existential assurances of rhyming concepts. That is to say, revisiting our example above, the poem did not invent the rhyme be-

24 Dan Beachy-Quick, "Craft Capsule: Rhyme and the Delay in Time," *Poets & Writers*, February 27, 2018, https://www.pw.org/content/craft_capsule_rhyme_and_the_delay_in_time.

tween Romanos and Russell. The rhyme pre-exists the poem. The precision of the words that speak of the two figures encodes the parallels and repetitions: hymn, trim, symbol, nimble, triad, ironclad. Reassurances of order land in the sound of the echo, satisfying the mind after a slight sonic delay. Beachy-Quick's second insight takes up the idea of this delay, the way it plays itself out in the granular moment of the time of the poem. We quote the passage in its entirety.

Rhyme also works within and against time. I can imagine in a poem heavily end-rhymed – say a Petrarchan sonnet with its octave of ABBAABBA, or Dante's lovely, enveloping *terza rima* of ABA BCB CDC – that the surety of those sounds counters the awful, inevitable flow of mortal life in one direction. Then the poem that makes its claims about love's immortality, or memory's eternity, is no cloying euphemism, but an enacted audacity in the poem's very fiber. That rhyme works as does mythic time, returning us ever again to a point we've never truly left – the day that is all one day, world's onset, the syllable now, sun's instant of light – even as, line by line, we recognize too that we do not get to remain in that golden light of origin. We can hear in the poem that mythic life of eternal return, and in hearing it, live within it, even as the poem accompanies us in that other recognition, that line by line we move to what end is ours. Rhyme puts a delay in time. It makes us understand what otherwise would feel an impossible paradox: that we live in time, and time doesn't exist.²⁵

We understand rhyme as poetry's tool for the paradoxicalization of time and, therefore, as an instrument for inventing rhythm and revealing the entwinement of stillness

25 Ibid.

with irreversible motion. The line of the poem moves forward while the work of rhyme circles back on itself. Through the crafted artifact like the strictly shaped quatrain we have quoted above – a square with its embedded triangles – the work of rhyme leads us on a spiraling path, a harmonious paradox of motion and stillness.

§ Table of contents: “x” (first pass)

It is because of the discernable order and rigor made apparent before the book’s page numbering even commences that the mysterious “x” takes us by surprise. There, only twelve lines into the table of contents, a little “x” takes (its) place between 1.110 and 1.111 (fig. 3.3).

1.110 There is a derelict inte

x

1.111 QUATRE ÉTUDES DI

Figure 3.3: An “x” appears” in the Table of Contents from Wright, *Disorientations: Groundings*.

Having framed this entire exploration through a Drukman–Parks–Diamond–Wittgenstein polygon, we can comfortably say that this “x” does not mark the spot. Or, rather, that it does not mark *the* spot. There is no one spot under which, were we to dig there, we would discover the buried treasure of Wright’s Meaning. It is not even the case that $x = \text{something}$. If any equation suffices here, it would be Gilles Deleuze’s Baroque, Leibnizian formula “something = x (anamorphosis),”²⁶ itself a viable caption

26 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 20.

to the younger Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533) with its ur-psychoanalytic skull hovering in between dimensions in the foreground of the canvas. The mysterious "x" that Wright gives us is engaged in a kind of (perceptual, epistemological) movement similar to the anamorphic perspectival mathematics that makes Holbein's painting so freaky and Deleuze's anamorphic philosophical distortions so revelatory.

But in order to get at this "x" and its particular (indexical and performative) function, we have to make space for a textual event that transpires further on in *Disorientations: Groundings* on page 75. Thus, we rest this first pass around the intriguing little "x."

§ The diagram²⁷

The event that transpires on page 75 of *Disorientations: Groundings* takes the form of a diagram, or number ladder, that seems to come from nowhere and, likewise, if only casually engaged, appears to receive no treatment or elaboration throughout the remainder of the text (see fig. 3.4). Listening more closely, however, the diagram emits a hum that we can use as a key to understanding Wright's rhythmic sensibilities in this book of poetry. Rhythm, it

27 Wright's uptake of Griaule is not frictionless. It reflects, in fact, a musical playfulness in which Wright reads Griaule and plays back his own response in the form of poetic notes. Mindful of the necessary critique of colonial ethnographic practices, however, we mention again the article published by van Beek et al., which, at the end of van Beek's contribution, offers this thought: "claiming to write ethnography he [Griaule] offered anthropology a glimpse into the highly intriguing territory between fact and fiction, the realm of created cultures, European as well as African. At the rim of the science of man, he embarked upon a veritable journey into the realm of intercultural fiction." Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 158.

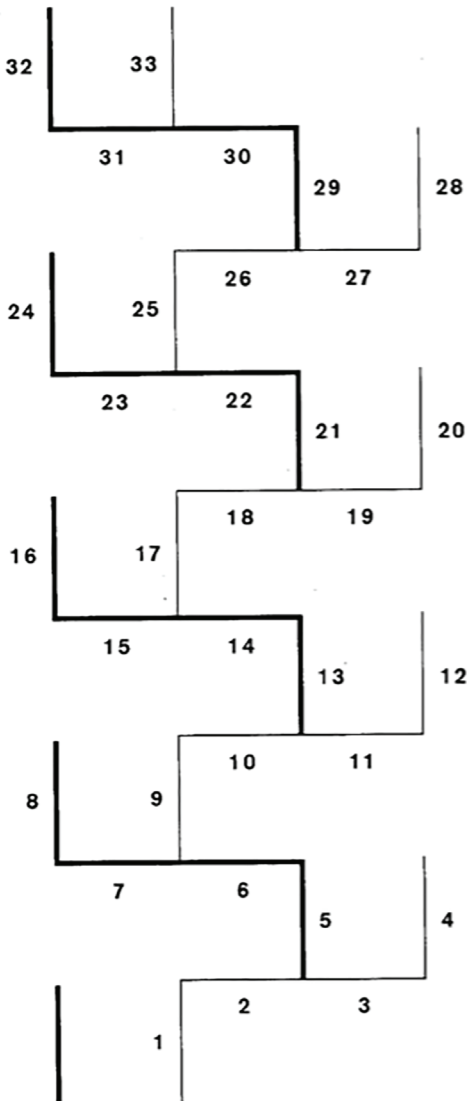


Figure 3.4: Wright's Number Ladder from *Disorientations: Groundings*, 75.

turns out, is not merely a metric measurement of musical movement, nor is it only a quantifier of some numinous musical quality; rather, rhythm offers itself as a structural, even performative and architectural, form capable of supporting the intricate weave of the world that Wright references. Rhythm is the soul of his mythopoesis, the shape of his particular experience of the disorientation and related grounding that comes from embarking on his own journey of reading the Wor(l)d. As such, the diagram is both an index of Wright's activity of "doing the meaningful thing" and a sigil or magical rebus that instigates what we might call deep reading/listening.

What does the diagram offer on first glance? Here's a list.

- A set of numbers, ranging from 1–33;
- Within this set of numbers, an arrangement of horizontal steps that, in turn, create subsets of 4: 1–4, 4–7, 8–11, 12–15, 16–19, 20–23, 24–27, 28–31;
- Reading vertically, starting on the left-most side of the diagram, the diagram discloses gradations of 8: 8, 16, 24, 32. On the right, a mirror image in the form of: 4, 12, 20, 28;
- There are two interlacing or interconnected patterns of lines, one group of which is darker or bolder than the other group;
- The darker lines appear in four segments, as do the lighter ones;
- Despite the discernible pattern formed by the lines, the diagram as a whole is not symmetrical. If we start on the bottom left, we see a bold vertical line that has no number attached to it. It seems to stand alone; likewise, at the top of the diagram, the final three numbers, 31, 32, 33, present a U-shaped pattern that is not mirrored at the bottom of the diagram.

Just prior to the diagram's appearance, on page 73, Wright commences the fourth and final section of the book. This section is called *sô dayi*. Literally translated as "clear word," *sô dayi* refers to the communication of what one has learned through the previous three stages of the initiation into the mysteries of the Dogon cosmology. We open to the possibility that Wright, with this diagram and the poems that follow, is communicating what he has learned through his own initiation into these mysteries.

That is to say, the diagram communicates Wright's findings as an initiate encountering and processing the Dogon cosmological system as recorded in Marcel Griaule's 1948 work *Dieu d'eau: entretiens avec Ogotemmêli* that was translated into English in 1965 as *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*.²⁸ While Wright has certainly accessed the Dogon through other titles, this particular book works as a cipher of the diagram. Or, to be more precise: through our act of reading, we have found a way to utilize Griaule's records to decipher the diagram and elucidate some harmonic relations within *Disorientations: Groundings*.²⁹ (And as a reminder, this elucidation is in service of unriddling the little "x.")

Beginning with the diagram's number range 1–33, there is a connection to the 33 days over which Griaule converses with Ogotemmêli, the keeper of Dogon history and wisdom who agreed to talk with the European anthropologist and ethnographer after several years of in-

28 Ibid.

29 We cannot overstate the fact that other readings are possible. For example, what would happen if we turned to the Bambara and their understanding of the thirty-three vertebrae in the human spine, which has further significance in the thirty-three stages of philosophical development within the cult of Komo? We might enlist Wright's earlier book *The Double Invention of Komo* (1980) in order to embark on this journey...

teraction during Griaule's fieldwork with the Dogon who live around what is now called Ogol in the country of Mali in the Northwest region of the continent known as Africa. Moreover, on page 75 of the English translation of Griaule's book, which brings readers to the eleventh day of conversation, Ogotemméli discusses the relationship between the Word – a polysemous term of great significance for the Dogon that we'll parse below – and the cultivation of the land. The location of Wright's diagram on page 75 of *Disorientations: Groundings* guides our attention to precisely that page in Griaule's text and the content of the discussion that transpires there.

To wade into the waters of the conversation that took place on the eleventh day between Griaule and Ogotemméli, however, it makes sense to map a few salient elements of Dogon cosmology. In the beginning, according to Ogotemméli, Amma, to whom Griaule refers as God, became desirous of sexual intercourse with earth, one of his creations. A violent first encounter between Amma and earth led to the birth of jackal who would become the symbol of God's problems and act as a non-playful mischief-maker who feeds elements of prophecy to some members of the eventual race of human beings. As a kind of corrective to this first, single child, Amma and earth came together again – this time with somewhat more harmony, though pain and grief seem to be a part of this union as well – and gave birth to twins known as the Nummo. In this vision of the universe, the two-ness of twins represents harmony, and the single number, embodied in the jackal, creates disorder.

Griaule relays Ogotemméli's tale of the Nummo's origin:

These spirits, called Nummo, were thus two homogeneous products of God, of divine essence like himself, conceived without untoward incidents and developed normally in the womb of the earth. Their destiny took

them to Heaven, where they received the instructions of their father. Not that God had to teach them speech, that indispensable necessity of all beings, as it is of the world-system; the Pair were born perfect and complete; they had eight members, and their number was eight, which is the symbol of speech.³⁰

The pair of Nummo eventually take over the work of creation for Amma, and it is from them that issue forth the first man and woman who, in turn, make eight children. These eight children are the ancestors of the Dogon people.

Intertwined within these figures and acts of creation is a cosmic numerological system in which the numbers four and eight, crucial to Wright's diagram, play an important role. Eight marks the number of ancestors from which the Dogon people descend. Four of these ancestors were male and four were female. The number four is relayed through the word *nay*, which is also the word for Sun and Four (the female number), as well as the name of a lizard-like creature who originated from the circumcised prepuce of the first man. This foreskin was understood to be the feminine part of man and needed to be removed in order to allow the male to assume his single sex. Likewise, the clitoris of the female was removed because it was the male excess that human females could not house within themselves. This removed part turned into the first scorpion. Two sets of four wooden pieces are used to create the loom needed to weave fabric, and weaving is perhaps the most important technique possessed by human beings in the Dogon cosmology. The connection between man, woman, love, and weaving becomes clearer as Griaule's conversation with Ogotemmêli unfolds. The numbers four and eight resonate within all these connections.

30 Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, 18.

The importance of weaving comes from its link to the multilayered Word that, as mentioned, plays such an important role in the creation and maintenance of all parts of the Dogon universe. When the Nummo saw the disorder caused by Amma's forced copulation with earth and the ensuing birth of jackal, they remedied this disorder by coming down to earth with special fibers:

It was necessary to put an end to this state of disorder. The Nummo accordingly came down to earth, bringing with them fibres pulled from plants already created in the heavenly regions. They took ten bunches of these fibres, corresponding to the number of their ten fingers, and made two strands of them, one for the front and one for behind. [...] But the purpose of this garment was not merely modesty. It manifested on earth the first act in the ordering of the universe and the revelation of the helicoid sign in the form of an undulating broken line.³¹

These fibers are the first Word. The earth became clothed with language, albeit a simple language that would acquire greater complexity over time. And the Word also brought organization, generally, which was good, but this organization was the cause of strife as well. Jackal, envious of the Word, committed incest with his mother to acquire the fiber-Word, thereby creating an asymmetry in the order of nature. It was this asymmetry that the Nummo conspired to fix by inventing man and woman, each of whom possessed, at first, a male and female element. This dual sexual identity was intended to bring order, via the number two, back to the disorder caused by the jackal, representative of the number one. Even though the Nummo needed to refine this strategy through the act of circumcision, it was a first step toward finding the

31 *Ibid.*, 19–20.

balance that was necessary ever since Amma's initial violent act of conquest.

After the appearance of the first Word, fiber, came the second Word, weaving. Each of the eight Dogon ancestors underwent a transformation within the earth (outlined on pages 25 and 26 in Griaule's book, which correspond to the third day of conversation) before ascending to the realm of the Nummo to which Griaule refers as "Heaven." This transformation was the same for each being until the seventh ancestor entered the earth, at which time something different happened. Due to the power of the number seven, this ancestor acquired knowledge and mastery of language, a fact that Griaule explains in this way:

The seventh in a series, it must be remembered, represents perfection. Though equal in unity with the others, he is the sum of the feminine element, which is four, and the masculine element, which is three. He is thus the completion of the perfect series, symbol of the total unison of male and female, that is to say of unity.

And to this homogeneous whole belongs especially the mastery of words, that is, of language; and the appearance on earth of such a one was bound to be the prelude to revolutionary developments of a beneficent character.³²

Perfect knowledge of language is perfect knowledge of a Word, specifically the second Word: "the second Word to be heard on earth, clearer than the first and not, like the first, reserved for particular recipients, but designed for all mankind. Thus he was able to achieve progress for the world."³³ This progress unfurled from the mouth of this

³² *Ibid.*, 26.

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

seventh ancestor, which, while undergoing the transformation within the earth, acquired teeth and began to take the shape of a loom. He imparted his knowledge of language to an ant, who would then convey it to humans, by spooling words through his mouth.

According to Ogotemmêli, the second Word is weaving is language is cloth, as Griaule explains:

[The words] were woven in the threads, and formed part and parcel of the cloth. They were the cloth, and the cloth was the Word. That is why woven material is called *soy*, which means "It is the spoken word." *Soy* also means "seven" [...].³⁴

We should add one last bit of crucial information, namely the importance of water in all elements of this world system. The word "Nummo" is interchangeable with water. The speech of the Nummo is conveyed as moisture. The first fibers brought down to earth by the Nummo bore the important humidity that helped to purify the earth after its multiple defilements. Likewise, the woven cloth, as language, carried moisture within it, a quality that doubles as instruction for the proper growing of cotton seed, indeed all seeds, which is necessary for the creation of clothing, clothing that, as noted, is "the spoken word" in material form.

With this information in mind, we arrive once again at the eleventh day of Griaule's conversation with Ogotemmêli and get the first glimpse of what Wright might be up to with his diagram. On that day, subtitled "The Word and the Cultivation of the Land," Griaule learns of the connection between weaving and agriculture. Here are three moments of understanding that Griaule conveys to us. The first is quoted from Ogotemmêli and the other two come from the ethnographer. All quotations come

34 *Ibid.*, 28.

from page 77 – and if you want to put the book down for a few minutes to contemplate that, go right ahead and do so before continuing:

The old method of cultivation [...] is like weaving; one begins on the north side, moving from east to west and then back from west to east. On each line eight feet are planted and the square has eight lines recalling the eight ancestors and the eight seeds. [...]

Cultivation being thus a form of weaving, a field is like a blanket made of eight strips, the black and white squares being represented by the alteration of the mounds made at each step and the gaps between them; a mound and its shadow represent a black square. [...]

Moreover, weaving is a form of speech, which is imparted to the fabric by the to-and-fro movement of the shuttle on the warp; and in the same way the to-and-fro movement of the peasant on his plot imparts the Word of the ancestors, that is to say, moisture to the ground on which he works, and thus rids the earth of impurity and extends the area of cultivation around inhabited places.

Weaving not only metaphorizes combinations, conjunctions, and commonalities between different materials, it enacts and incarnates the logic of those complex *combinatoria*. We may understand weaving as fashioning a common axiom between the differential relations of the diverse, contrasting³⁵ elements put in play, a discovery and actualization of resonances between, say, mathematics, music, and rites of passage. Marcel Griaule noted this of the Dogon “weaving-speech,” and one sees the epic

35 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 187.

simplicity of this inflection of composition in effect in “BANĀ NGOLO” as in so many other instances in Wright’s work. The Dogon systematized everything, when “to systematize” means an operation of weaving, which reveals as woven, the patterns of commonality between varieties of ideas, between concepts of different orders; the production of images and motifs that cohere in fluent synthesis.

Looking once again at Wright’s diagram, does not a vision of cultivated land begin to come into view? The blanket of eight strips prepared on Dogon land parallels the two sets of four lines that dominate the diagram. The zig-zag lines running through the image run along with the to-and-fro movement of the peasant working the land. The appearance of the diagram at the start of the subsection, titled *sō dayi*, tells us that Wright is able to communicate his understanding to us through this image and the subsequent poems, which is another way of saying that he will speak his understanding as one waters the cultivated ground. Do we have here a mark of Wright’s own personal cultivation? Has he, thanks to knowledge acquired through his act of reading, prepared ground on which will grow specific realizations? This act of reading, which weaves together the words of so many different authors and storytellers from so many times and spaces, assembles language into clothing that might be worn for a specific purpose?

That specific purpose seems to be, if we’ve tapped into Wright’s rhythm and are reading these things in tune, an important act of resurrection or self-re-making, not dissimilar from the resurrection made possible with the help of the Ancient Egyptian ankh (i.e., *crux ansata*) found in Wright’s *Boleros* and discussed in the previous chapter. This claim becomes thinkable after pondering Griaule’s recounting of the original garments woven from the Word brought to the Dogon by the Nummo.

We are concerned here with the fourth garment, discussed on the twelfth day, subtitled “The Word, Dress, and Love”:

The fourth thing to be woven was the covering for the dead, made of eight strips of black and white squares, which are the eight families multiplied and which reproduce the lay-out of cultivated land. The covering or pall is thus a symbol of life and resurrection.³⁶

Of all symbolic elements on which to draw, the Dogon utilize the language of this pall to adorn their homes, as we learn on the fourteenth day of conversation:

The whole façade, with its eight rows of ten dark holes separated by lighter plane surfaces, is a symbol of the pall used to cover the dead, made in eight strips of black and white squares, which itself is a representation of cleared and marked land.³⁷

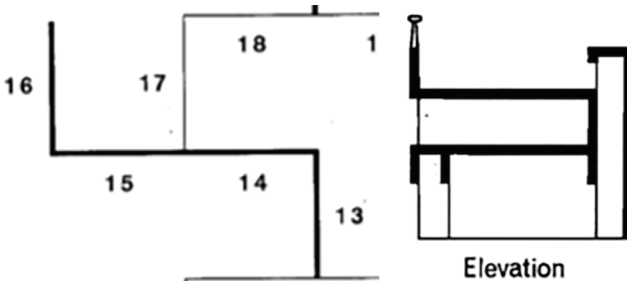


Figure 3.5: Juxtaposition of a detail from Wright’s diagram (left) from *Disorientations: Groundings*; and a sketch of a Dogon house from Marcel Griaule’s notes (right), from *Conversations with Ogotemméli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*, trans. Ralph Butler, Audrey I. Richards, and Beatrice Hooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 93. Permission for the Griaule image granted by the Copyright Clearance Center (ccc).

³⁶ Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemméli*, 79.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

And here – again, here, doing this meaning thing – we can juxtapose the elevation diagram included by Griaule in his field notes with Wright’s own diagram (fig. 3.5).

The diagram that at first appears as completely mystifying resolves into a story of Wright’s travel through disorientation into grounding, a grounding that links the poet’s wordsmithing with the cultivation of land in the Dogon tradition. As in this tradition, where the cultivation of land is not possible without knowledge of weaving, which is not possible without the fiber of the Nummo, which is not properly understood without sensing the connection between fiber and Word, which is not possible without feeling the emollient of Word’s humidity, Wright’s poetizing takes place upon an open field traversed by a rhizomatic system of literary forebears, which tells of the zig-zag path required to convert the open field into a productive tract, a zig-zag that requires a rhythmic movement not unlike that which the Dogon farmer utilizes in his craft:

[I]nside the line the cultivator advances first on one foot and then on the other, changing his hoe from one hand to the other at each step. When the right foot is in front, the right hand on the handle is nearest the iron, and *vice versa* when he changes step.³⁸

Wright’s poetizing advances with a similar discipline and thus the poems themselves grow in a specific, well-defined order. We see the analogous discipline when we read beyond the diagram and encounter on subsequent pages of *Disorientations: Groundings*, just sitting there like footnotes refunctioned into a new spatio-temporal method of citation, stanzas like this:

38 *Ibid.*, 77.

x

The permissible electron traces
 a contradiction; Xico disappears;
 I live eternity's distance with ears
 attuned to a buried horn that laces
 this design to the initiate's fall.
 Such misapprehension soon imposes
 the liberated self, the direction
 of the double, Binu's indiscretion,
 the embellished field that soon closes.

15

14³⁹

"15" and "14" link us back to the diagram, which links us back to Griaule and Ogotemméli in conversation on the fifteenth day where the Dogon elder speaks of the Binu sanctuary:

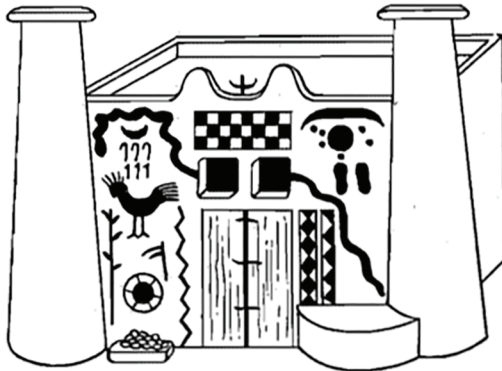


FIG. 9. Totemic shrine and its paintings

Figure 3.6: Binu Sanctuary from Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemméli*, 100. Permission granted by CCC.

39 Wright, *Disorientations*, 82.

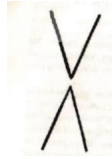
A Binu sanctuary is erected in honour of an ancestor, Binu, whose name is a contraction of two terms, one of which means "gone" and the other "come back". This ancestor was apparently dead, that is to say, gone to another world, then returned to the world of men, to his own people to protect them and to help and succour them.⁴⁰

Griaule, dutiful in his notes, includes an image (fig. 3.6).

That hook there, in the middle of the structure, above the windows and affixed to the roof, tells a story of another key character in the Dogon history (i.e., the Smith) whose anvil was the medium for conveying the third Word into existence, the Word of the musical note and percussion. Of all the important symbols worked into the architecture and paintings on the Binu shrine, this hook is the most important: "The hook is most often a double one, each of its branches ending in a tight curl. This is the horned forehead of the celestial ram, whose curved horns hold the rain-clouds."⁴¹ Thus, looking back at Wright's poem, we find the poet at work in the field, digging out the trench spoken of by the Binu sanctuary and its "buried horn." Wright moves to-and-fro in the field, zigging and zagging between Ogol and Xico (in Veracruz, Mexico), acting the part of Binu himself who, having died and then been resurrected (i.e., having gone and come back), brings succor to the land of humans. Perhaps more important than the content of the poem cited here is the zig-zag, to-and-from movement, that rhythmic dance that he signifies with an "x," a mark that helps us follow in his footsteps, if we so choose, in order to body forth the relevant rhythmic signature.

40 Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemméli*, 99.

41 *Ibid.*, 103.



§ Table of contents: “x” (second pass)

Figure 3.7: A portion of the *bummo* “Amma’s forming two points” from Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, *The Pale Fox*, trans. Stephen C. Infantino (Chino Valley: Continuum Foundation, 1986), 154.

Back to that little “x” that appears in the Table of Contents. Under the microscope, how might that “x” appear?

Intriguingly, this hypothetical microscopic image comes from Griaule and Dieterlen’s in depth study of the Dogon origin story, *The Pale Fox*. The authors provide a reading of it:

A figure made of two V’s – one upside down under the other – recalls the formation of the double placenta. It is called: “Amma’s forming two points,” that is, developing space. This *bummo* [as it is called] will be ritually drawn in the fields where sacred functions are performed and on the façade of the Hogon’s dwelling at Arou [of equivalent ritual status as Binu’s sanctuary]. It is one of the fundamental representations of Amma’s work.⁴²

Just as this “x” – made not of two “V’s” but, rather, a mirror image of Amma in “heaven” and Amma on earth – tells a story of an act of creation and its subsequent call into service as a surrogate for this initial creation, the “x” in Wright’s text does more than mark a spot where lies buried the treasure of meaning. It announces, rather,

42 Griaule and Dieterlen, *The Pale Fox*, 153–54.

a weave, a method of going by twisting and turning, a rhythmic procession. In the poems that follow the diagram, the “x” alerts us to a turning of direction from one day of conversation to another and then another as Ogotemméli discloses Dogon history to Griaule. In this way, as a rhythmic process, the “x” also keeps time. This is another way Wright deploys it in *Disorientations: Groundings*, as a time signature that both indexes Wright’s rhythmic cultivation in the field of poetry and instructs future performers and readers who attempt to make meaning of the words.

The “x” produces sense when it appears in the poems following the diagram, insofar as it moves Wright and readers through the strata of knowledge disclosed through both Griaule’s conversation with Ogotemméli and Wright’s conversation with the characters who populate *Disorientations: Groundings*. But why does Wright offer it to us for the first time in the table of contents, and why does it appear in that precise location, just after the poem 1.110, there is a derelict intention in love, and just before section 1.111 titled, “QUATRE ÉTUDES DE RYTHME”?

Reading the “x” as a time signature helps, perhaps, to furnish a subsequent reading. Prior to its transposition from the diagram to the poems of the last section in the book, where it carries the history of Wright’s intellectual-spiritual toil in the field of the Dogon, the “x” appears at most as a stray letter, one that somehow broke free of the *logos* spun throughout the book. But, indeed, it need not do more than flummox because its appearance serves not so much to produce meaning as to modulate momentum. Like a rest in musical notation, the “x” causes us to stop, but the stop is not a total arrest in reading so much as it is a necessary hiatus in the otherwise forward momentum usually generated by readers of tables of contents. This “x”-rest, however, pulls a little more weight than a musical rest. While not entirely prescriptive, that is, not going so far as to mandate a 2/4 or a 3/4 time signature, this “x”

does alert us to the fact that a rhythmic comportment is required of the reader. We cannot, for example, waltz our way through this foxtrot. We need not read "in time" to the poems, because "rhythm" is not a strictly metrical device for Wright. Rather, for Wright, it seems to us, rhythm appears to speak of shape and form. Thus, while we need not read "in time," we must, so to speak, be "in shape" while reading, or, to put it another way, we must keep our ears attuned to the rhythmic shapes that assist Wright in his movement through the field.

§ Four Studies in Rhythm

Kindly, Wright provides a training ground for our ears in the section titled, "QUATRES ÉTUDES DE RYTHME." (Amusingly, its ordinal position – 1.111 – might be uttered as uh-1, uh-2, uh-1... 2... 3... 4 – as we hear musicians say before launching into a number in 4/4 time.) The four poems in this section provide access to four rhythms that interest Wright, where "rhythm," again, plays a spatial, shaping, and even geometric role. Spatial and shapely attributes disclose Wright's rhythm as a kind of weave, one through which multiple epistemological and cosmological systems fuse into one garment.

While we have parsed the Dogon inspiration within this weave, it is also possible to find another topo-theoretical referent to Wright's rhythm in the work of the pre-Platonic Greek philosophers. Amittai Aviram provides a helpful citation in his essay, "The Meaning of Rhythm":

The Greek word *rhuthmos* had originally meant something quite different (than its typical definition in scholarship on poetry). Akin to the verb *rheō*, to flow, *rhythm* in its pre-Platonic sense denotes the shape

(*schēma*) of a moving object such as the water of a stream or the body of a dancer.⁴³

Aviram's etymology recalls Wright's own comments at Woodland Pattern in Milwaukee that we replayed at the start of this chapter. There, Wright invited us into the puzzle of "rhythm" by magnifying its linguistic multivalence. That is, from a European standpoint, rhythm invokes flow, stoppage, meter, and time. African languages, however, don't present a one-to-one translation of this kind of rhythm. Instead, some of them propose place, situation, navigation, and direction when discussing what Europeans hear as rhythm. Aviram's language lesson finds a home in Wright's lecture by, first, fracturing any linear continuity between the Ancient Greeks and modern Europe, and then, second, by looking at "rhythm" not through "flow," but "shape."

The Ancient Greek word σχῆμα (*schēma*) has several interesting dimensions. While primarily understood as "form," "shape," or "figure," Herodotus deployed the word to mean "air" or "mien," as in the outward bearing of something or someone. Such a bearing may be composed through dress, and therefore the notion of "clothing" seems appropriate to the word: a thing's schema is first appraised through its outward garment. It is from here that the rhetorical meaning of "figure of speech" comes into view: the sense of something is conveyed through the shape of its delivery, in words and inflection, grammar and syntax. To understand rhythm as *schēma*, we can attend to the full appearance of a given set of words. In Wright's poetry, this *schēma* is visible in the design of the stanzas, the sounds of the rhyming words, and, as we've investigated in depth, the movement of the diagram on

43 Amittai Aviram, "Rhuthmos," in *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm, History*, eds. Massimo Verdicchio and Robert Burch (London: Continuum, 2002), 161–62.

along with speech. Thus, it is possible to produce meaning within the appearance of this poetic octave, though the meaning is not tied to traditional understandings of poetic shape or poetic meter.

We also discover in this poem an uncommon “rhyme” scheme where the shape of the rhymes arises not in the consonant sounds of the words ending each line but, instead, through the semantic field of meaning woven together by these ending words:

Wedding / garden / place / crossroads
 Auondada [visited, or visitation⁴⁵] / abandoned / anti-
 quated / resuscitated

As the poem breathes through its lines, its breath tells a story. The long lines (inhales?) give us a specific location and the fruitful image of two family lines joining into one strand through a wedding ceremony. The short lines (exhales?) speak of the zig zag, to-and-fro movement that we encounter later in the diagram. A person visits and then departs. That which was old is new again. We go toward, we leave. That which was left is revived with new breath. The rhythm of this particular study, number two of four, appears not so much in the syllables of each line or even in the octave poetic structure but, instead, takes shape through the “sounds” of these “rhymes,” and here, again, these keywords function less through audible consonance and more through geometric relation. The two sets of four ending words create the points of two squares, not unlike the squares tilled in the fields of the Dogon or woven through Wright’s diagram. The printed words on the page freeze the shapes into a legible form,

45 We could be wrong about this translation. To us, it seems that Wright is pulling the word “Auondada” from old Spanish, but our translation actually comes from the word in the Portuguese language since there is a Portuguese thread woven throughout the four poems in this section.

the physicist and philosopher Niels Bohr whose presence speaks to Wright's commitment to the ontologies of classical and quantum mechanics, we can read this line as an invocation of "cosmological perturbation theory." In basic terms, this theory accounts for the formation of stars and galaxies by mapping pockets or eddies of gravity scattered throughout the universe that seed these cosmic entities. Such a reference clarifies the phrases "once expansive history" and "subjective force insufficient," each of which come into focus as indicators of cosmic growth: the universe and love expand after the "big bang," and then, due to the inability to sustain the explosive expansion, both love and universe tend toward a contraction.

Thus, without knowing the precise antecedents linked to certain references within the poem (e.g., what "name" is confused?) it is still possible to discern the rhythm of the *étude*. Placed near the middle of the poem, the "seed perturbation" radiates outward like a ripple in a pond or a gravitational pocket that creates a star cluster. The rhythm here – supporting both love and universal growth – is one of expansion and contraction, a breathing, and it becomes knowable through the appearance of the stanza's singular indentation.

Here we see the geometric aspect of Wright's rhythm, the way in which the shape of a poem on a page sets an entire ecosystem of references into motion. Or, perhaps, the way in which the shape reveals to us the always-already-in-progress motion of an irreducibly complex ecosystem. Like the Ancient Greeks, Wright's geometry does not only measure the ground of the earth or the poem's terrain; it also discloses the laws through which musical harmony comes into being. This geometry is especially visible in the fourth *étude*:

Suppose the papagayo green, a rueda
 quinta y perfecta, transcribed as a turtle-dove
 on a dry branch and every feast day born in debt.

in two distinct directions, one that follows the “d” and one that follows the “y.” Moving in two directions at once, these two paths foreshadow the dialectical tension of the radiance always opposed to light, and, taken together with the poem’s geometries, we sense a textured rhythm that weaves together the sound of words and the image of a worldview glimpsed through the stanza’s shape and semantic web of reference.

If we turn, finally, to the first of the four études, we can conclude this rhythmic practice, this étude of the études. The first poem in this series is the most musical when read aloud. Allow yourself to speak the words and feel the beat:

Tres hermanicas eran—tres hermanicas son.
 Two well exposed to failure, one who had lost the
 tone.
 Nothing comes alive with this; green is a marrow
 bone.
 Morenica y sabrosica, away with el varón.
 Granada courts Perico; a Francia lo mandó.
 All the best in Gádir, a nadar se echó.
 Discounting lime and red stone, who would ask for
 more?
 Not for the father sleeping, not for the angel’s core.⁴⁹

Here we have Wright’s interpretation of a Spanish Sephardic folk song that tells the story of three sisters whose father attempts, in vain, to preserve their innocence and keep them out of love’s reach. The syllables of each line suggest that Wright has clothed the poem as either a Spanish Alexandrine or possibly as a rarer Portuguese poetic figure known as the Bárbaro. More important than the poem’s classification is the musical adaptation at work here. Wright is playing a standard. He is

49 Ibid., 19.

invoking an old folk song, applying to it a structure that allows him to evince the song's beat, and utilizing his linguistic ability to preserve the historical dimension of the song while also making it relevant to contemporary ears. Note, for example, how the invocation of "Gádir" signifies both a castle in which one of the song's narrative lines plays out (one of the sisters is locked in a castle) and the city of Cadíz known in ancient times as Gádir.

Also, we hear here a citation of the Cuban *son* and the musico-lyrical feats of Nicolas Guillén, which Angel Augier describes passionately in this way:

The son, a passionate dance born of the Negro-white encounter under Caribbean skies in which the words and music of the people culminate in song, is the basic substance of the elemental poetry which Guillén intuitively felt as the expression of the Cuban spirit.⁵⁰

Distinctly African/Black/Negro sounds shape the rhythms of the poems-*sones*. Miguel Arnedo-Gómez underscores the importance of Guillén's method of producing rhymes with Afro-Cuban pronunciations of Spanish words, thereby emphasizing how orality drives the influential *afrocubanista* poetry of Guillén's day and how this orality gives birth to a repeatable literary form.⁵¹

It is the event of Wright's "take" on this folk song that deserves attention here, his weave of formal styles and references – to existing poets, poems, philosophical ideas, folk songs, or ancient wisdom – into his signature musical style. This style is somehow collective and singular all at once. The simultaneous emergence of so many different sonic colors calls to mind a free jazz summit:

50 Angel Augier, "The Cuban Poetry of Nicolás Guillén," trans. Joseph M. Bernstein, *Phylon* 12, no. 1 (1951): 32.

51 Miguel Arnedo-Gómez, "The 'Afrocubanista' Poetry of Nicolás Guillén and Ángel Rama's Concept of Transculturation," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 14.

Sephardic folklore plays off the Cuban *son*, which plays off Spanish and Portuguese poetic shapes. These various players are then distilled through Wright's hands and offered as a virtuosic rhythmical étude.

An apt parallel here is the pianist Art Tatum, whom Wright references directly in *Boleros*, as mentioned in the previous chapter, who was known for his masterful interpretation of standards often played at a breakneck pace, the speed in particular of his right hand. Lewis Porter analyzes Tatum's technique and gives us precisely the vocabulary needed here to understand Wright's deft handiwork.⁵² The first is that Tatum often plays chords so rich and full of dissonances that they sound like "clusters" of notes, rather than conventional chords; the second is that he was the master of "substitutions," that is, playing a different sequence of chords behind the melody than is usually played; and third is that sometimes he ventures shockingly out of one key, moves into a second key, and then comes back

Looking at each of these four études and, really, at Wright's oeuvre, we see the same techniques at play. The references across poetic traditions, epistemological systems, and geographic locations that we find in Wright's poems are similar to Tatum's rich chords that thwart ears who are straining to hear conventional groups of notes. Consider the "chord" formed by the references to Bohr, Dogon cosmology, Molinari, Baca, and others in *Disorientations: Groundings*. Once we hear Wright's cluster of references as unique chords, we can understand how he splices or substitutes sequences of unconventional notes into his poetic melodies. The chord offers another image for understanding the aggregate of two foundational

52 Lewis Porter, "Deep Dive with Lewis Porter: In Praise of Art Tatum, Stealth Radical in the Jazz Piano Pantheon," *WBGO*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.wbgo.org/post/deep-dive-lewis-porter-praise-art-tatum-stealth-radical-jazz-piano-pantheon#stream/0>.

structural devices, legible and extractable as artifacts, as where we began in this chapter, of Wittgenstein and the Dogon. We saw this in the move from “¡Que alto pino es la memoria del amor!” to “seed perturbation.” And from here we can begin to hear the prevailing sound of Wright’s poems as a journey through different keys. He asks us to move from one system of thought to another so as to return “home” with a renewed sense of that starting position. Indeed, the entire purpose of the “Quatre études” may be to prepare us for the type of journeying that will be required of us as we move through the four stages of knowledge acquisition performed in this book of poems.

§ “x” marks the weave

Having studied the studies of rhythm, we return once more to the table of contents and the little “x.” That mark loses its strict resemblance to the twenty-fourth letter of the English alphabet (clearly in the Flood Editions typeface design, it does not share the same font as the letters of the poetry that surrounds it) and starts to acquire different *miens*: a cousin of the musical rest, the symbol of Amma’s work, an indicator of stress in an accented phrase, two threads crossed and prepared for weaving. Doing the meaning thing with this little “x” attunes us to the necessary role played by rhythm in Wright’s poems. We learn that this rhythm has at least as much in common with the pre-Platonic spatial/formal understanding of that word as it does with musical mixture (*à la* the Cuban *son*) and contemporary notions of poetic meter. We learn that our speech will be required to sound out the words of the poems, that our feet will be required to tap out the beat the poem creates, and our eyes will be required to address the design of the black words on the white page. We must, in other words, bring a rhythmical sensibil-

ity into the act of reading in order to produce meaning. Where the “x” appears, Wright gives us a clue that he has zigged or zagged. The presence of the “x” isn’t necessary to denote this movement, however, since any shift from Spain to Mexico to New Mexico to Texas to Denmark to Cuba can alert us that Wright is weaving something. Put the woven garment – the discreet poems – under the microscope of your analysis and you’ll see that each thread has a richness of texture and color that requires its own research excursion. The result of this epistemo-sartorial labor is a deeper understanding of the ritual that Wright is performing through his act of poetizing.

What is this ritual? In the poems analyzed here, we glimpse a ritual of fusion. Death fuses with birth, light fuses with darkness, order with chaos, and, ultimately, words with silence. This last connection comes about through the interplay of light and dark on the printed page and is signaled by the extreme chiaroscuro of the image decorating the cover of the book, *Saint Jerome Writing* by Caravaggio. The next question to address is whether this act of fusion is what it appears to be or whether the true activity is one of revelation. That is, the gift offered by Wright may not be a magical ritual that fuses opposites but, rather, a mode of seeing that allows us to understand how seemingly opposite notions or disparate ideas are already entangled. Perhaps Wright’s rhythm, understood in its widest semantic reach, removes unneeded boundaries between cultures and thoughts and artistic repertoires, thereby disclosing or unconcealing a supremely unified field in which we all gather? We will take these questions up in the next chapter. First we must take some time to consider Wright’s ongoing deployment of extra-linguistic markings.

§ ϕ Diagrammatic, dialectic: on the extra-linguistic markings

The humble “x” points to an outsized question that furthermore presents itself here, with the operation of the noted x resembling that of a rest in a musical score. The question: how do we read those characters in Wright’s poems not meant to be spoken aloud, those ideograms and hieroglyphs that situate on the page, occurring not infrequently, on a plane of connotation entirely distinct from that of the alphabet and the languages issuing from it? Such marking first appeared in the long poem “MacIntyre, the Captain and the Saints,” first collected in Wright’s third book *Explications/Interpretations*, published in 1984 as volume 3 in the Callaloo Poetry Series from the University of Kentucky, Lexington. The volume included a substantial endnote devoted to this “dramatic” poem and largely focused on the markings. When the collected poems volume *Transfigurations* included this poem in 2000, the note did not appear. We will have more to say in chapter 5 about the subsequent removal and discontinuation of these context notes. For now, regarding the question of non-linguistic marks in the poems, we will reproduce the first paragraph of this note.

NOTE

The ideograms in the poem “MacIntyre, the Captain and the Saints,” were suggested by Mr. Robert L. Wilson’s use of ideograms in a short series of unpublished poems. Mr. Wilson uses the basic ideogram $\square \dots \square$ to indicate the opening and closing of the frame. For him, in ideogrammatic notation, there are three kinds of basic identity: 1) external, in which the ideogram undergoes a shift in meaning effected by the context; 2) internal, in which the context undergoes a shift in meaning in relation to the ideogram; 3) mixed, a reciprocal shift in

meaning. Internal ideograms are primary; external are secondary. What has attracted me to the ideograms is their ability to mark clearly the transformation of meaning in a dramatic poem such as mine. The ideograms need not be used in every poem, but it seems to me that they are particularly useful in this one. I have, therefore, adapted Mr. Wilson's ideograms to my own peculiar ones in order to make even more radical distinctions among the temporal and spatial voices in the poem. I have used > ... < for internal, * ... * and ** ... ** for external and / ... / for mixed ideograms. Mr. Wilson has tried to save me from these errors by suggesting a basic ideogram which could be distinguished by simple secondary markers, but I have trudged ahead with my own ideogrammatic weight. It seems to me appropriate that, for the clarification of my personal Scottish intellectual drama, I should have at hand an inventive technique elaborated by a citizen of brave Dundee and that he should have found his initiative in reading Ezra Pound, the universalist of ideograms. I am grateful to Mr. Wilson for his license to use his ideas, and for his understanding the manner toward the license I have taken to use them.⁵³

Take this instance of ideograms in "MacIntyre, the Captain and the Saints" as a case study, as the poem turns its attention from the Captain of the title to imagining a dialogue with the sainted philosopher David Hume on one of his famous Edinburgh walks. Ideogrammatic markings allow Wright to build the dialogue in many nuanced registers – interrogative prodding, speculative response, direct quotation – not through ordinary punctuation, but through an almost musical notation, modulating the internal-external quality of each voice in turn.

53 Wright, *Explications/Interpretations*, 82.

He is indeed dead,
but much of him still lives among us.
I believe that there is cause
to see him yet.

[...]

Oh, then, good St. David,
by whose authority do you walk?

> None ... can go beyond experience,
or establish any principles
which are not founded
on that authority. <

You are here.

I do perceive myself.

Well, I pucker and refuse
to enter that clam of memory.

Enter, if you believe in the imagination.

Your memory and your belief
lead me away from that.

I struggled with belief,
not under your saints' bells,
but here under the dissolving
assurance of my skin.

This is from Johnny Knox,
Geneva bound.

***Those who are saved
have certainty of it
in their faith, that

they are God's elect.***

I glorify God,
but I will not toll
man's corruption.

This is needless.

*It is the visible body
under the head of Christ*
Do you deny it?
Do you deny a nation
can believe that God
will provide?

> Let men be persuaded ... that there is nothing
in any object, considered in itself, which can
afford us a reason for drawing a conclusion
beyond it ... <⁵⁴

The two passages bounded by the > < signs, quote from Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40). Perhaps the poem considers them “external” in the sense that Hume, as encountered in this episode, quotes himself, or performs a public and scholarly version himself. Note the provenance of this ideogrammatic approach, and the local inflection of Wright's interest, distinguishing the Dundee ideogram from Ezra Pound's universalism. This will clearly continue to develop in the next instance, *Dimensions of History*.

When this early instance of Wright's ideograms drew on the work of Robert L. Wilson, “a citizen of brave Dundee” who “found his initiative in reading Ezra Pound, the universalist of ideograms,” a passage on the language and work of definition in Pound's 1934 pedagogical book

54 Ibid., 49–51.

on poetics *ABC of Reading* provided the proposals in question. Pound takes “the way the Chinese go about it in their ideograph or abbreviated picture writing” as an opportunity to critique the “European” recourse to “progressively remoter abstraction.”⁵⁵

In tables showing primitive Chinese characters in one column and the present “conventionalized” signs in another, anyone can see how the ideogram for man or tree or sunrise developed, or “was simplified from,” or was reduced to the essentials of the first picture of man, tree or sunrise.⁵⁶

The ideogram for sun combined with that of tree indicates “sun tangled in the tree’s branches, as at sunrise, meaning now the East.” Pound takes the definition of the color red as an exemplary case in the avoidance of the “progressively remoter abstraction” to which a “European” would turn in defining color in accordance with light wave lengths. The ideogram for “red” combines “the abbreviated pictures of ROSE / CHERRY / IRON RUST / FLAMINGO ... The Chinese ‘word’ or ideogram for red is based on something everyone KNOWS.”⁵⁷ In this way, one avoids abstraction altogether, he claims, favoring instead an encircling set of associations.

We need not universalize the elegance of the five ideograms mentioned here, in isolation and permutation, in order to appreciate their poetics. The universalizing turns take several forms, the crudest of which reduces the human spectrum to a neurotypical “anyone” and “everyone,” and the act of reading an ideogram as recognizing what that anyone and everyone “can see” and “know.” Subtler reductionist maneuvers confuse concepts of ab-

55 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions: 2010), 21.

56 *Ibid.*, 21

57 *Ibid.*, 22.

straction and concreteness, and their intertwined relations. Abstraction binds the quartet of ROSE / CHERRY / IRON RUST / FLAMINGO in ways that bring to mind Mark Wilson's predication problem. Pound's compulsions to simplify confuse the modes of signification that the ideogram unfolds in relation to language. As with many such protean Modernist forebears, the rich inheritance they bequeath requires interrogation. In *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes offered a necessary corrective to the reduced linguistic view, by way of his apprehension of the ideogram in Japan.

Or again, ideographic signs: logically unclassifiable, since they escape an arbitrary but limited, hence memorable, phonetic order (the alphabet), yet classified in dictionaries, where it is – admirable presence of the body in writing and classification – the number and order of the gestures necessary to draw the ideogram which determine the typology of the signs.⁵⁸

Barthes notes, we could say, an alphabet of gesture, fixed movements of the hand and arm that classify the ideogram of this sort, correctly reinstating the centrality of the body, which Pound had excised altogether. The laboring gesture of the hand draws the individual into history through the ideogram's sculpted writing. Wright's extralinguistic markings take up each of these questions in turn. To understand precisely how, we return to the word and begin again.

The English word ideogram derives from the Greek for "form" (*idea*). In one manifestation, it presents a written picture (for Barthes, "painting's inspiration"⁵⁹), a representation, of some essence, some idea of a thing depict-

58 Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 97.

59 *Ibid.*, 86.

ed, while avoiding language; that is, the ideogram depicts without naming. In this operation, the ideogram escapes the name. But in another instance, as in the “MacIntyre” case, ideograms operate as inflection notes, like musical dynamics, instructing the reader in how to read, how to hear, the demarcated lines. We note here the diacritics, accents, or cedillas, like tender grace notes imported to English, indicating unusual emphasis, as if to render repeatable a quirk of speech. Two of these occur in rhyming succession in the first lines of “The Healing Improvisation of Hair” (2000).

If you undo your do you wóuld
 be strange. Hair has been on my mind.
 I used to lean in the doorway
 and watch my stony woman wind
 the copper through the black, and play
 with my understanding, show me she cóuld
 take a cup of river water,
 and watch it shimmy, watch it change,
 turn around and become ash bone.⁶⁰

In this formulation, when the ideogram resembles a musical notation, the reader becomes performer. Reading awakens the score of the poem into audible performance, even if done silently. In this regard, we may say the markings also resemble mathematical symbols designating an operation, such as when \div instructs the reader to divide the number to the left of the symbol by the number to the right. In “a dramatic poem” such as “MacIntrye, the Captain and the Saints,” this “opening and closing of the frame” resembles a stage direction, an instruction for

60 Jay Wright, *Transfigurations: Collected Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 612–13. This poem appears without these two diacritical marks in Jay Wright, “The Healing Improvisation of Hair,” *The Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42740/the-healing-improvisation-of-hair>.

performance, and a mathematical operation, beginning to fold together those sacred terrains of Wright's poetry: music and mathematics.

Dimensions of History, published first in 1976 by Kayak Books, included seven symbols at the start of the book's sections. Once again, the first edition included extensive author's notes, although only one of these concerned the symbols. The *Transfigurations* collection included the symbols but omitted the notes on them. We must also note that the *Transfigurations* collection positioned *Dimensions of History* after *Explications/Interpretations*, although it was published before. *Explications* precedes *Dimensions* in its creation, and in the author's preferred sequence of reading. The note on the first symbol in *Dimensions of History* states:

The Second Eye of the World is what the Dogon of the Sudan call the Southern Cross.⁶¹

This symbol appears in *The Pale Fox*, Griaule and Dieterlen's encyclopedic volume on the Dogon. *The Pale Fox* alternately identifies The Second Eye of the World as "tonu of the separation of the twins," giving us a sense of the multiple levels of image and narrative encoded in each Dogon diagram.

Perhaps this finds us nearer to Pound's approach to the ideogram, although still resisting its universalism, emphasizing in each instance the culture of origin. This approach will reach its apex in *The Guide Signs: Book One and Book Two*, Wright's book of poetry published by Louisiana State University Press in 2007. To understand the significance of the guide-signs, we return to Griaule and Dieterlen. In the introduction to *Conversations with Ogotemméli*, Griaule summarizes the complexity of Dogon ideograms:

61 Jay Wright, *Dimensions of History* (Santa Cruz: Kayak Books, 1976), 105.

The Africans with whom we have worked in the region of the Upper Niger have systems of signs which run into thousands, their own systems of astronomy and calendrical measurements, methods of calculation and extensive anatomical and physiological knowledge, as well as a systematic pharmacopoeia.⁶²

In *The Pale Fox*, Griaule and Dieterlen divide the Dogon signs into the two major categories of the guide-signs and the master-signs. The master-signs consist in eight legible strokes, or lines, that reconfigure in multiple permutations. Like an alphabet, the master-signs include four pairs, each pair with a stroke corresponding to a capitalization, or major expression, and its partner in the lower case, or minor expression. These eight forms combine to assemble into hundreds of symbolic patterns. Griaule and Dieterlen explain the concept and relational operation of the guide-signs, of which there are only two, this way. "The 'guide-signs' show the way to the eight master-signs. The expression may also be understood to say: 'The guide-signs show (make known) the series of the eight master-signs.'" A footnote then points out that the translation of the word *ozu* as "series" from the literal meaning "way" also connotes "continuation, series, alignment."⁶³ That is to say they govern and classify the following signs. As for the "eight master-signs, they give soul and life force to everything." In addition, these "ten signs determine whether (a thing) is great or small in volume." Finally, "the complete signs of the world give all things color, form, substance." Thus do they allow an understanding of the creation, for "one knows the root (the principle or essence) of things by their form, their substance, their color." This amounts to saying that signs, manifestations of creative thought, existed before the

62 Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, xiv.

63 Griaule and Dieterlen, *The Pale Fox*, 84–85.

things that they determined. "In the Dogon word (idea), all things are manifested by thought; they are not known by (i.e., do not exist in) themselves."⁶⁴

We might venture to say that this scheme turns Pound's universalism on its head, not presenting us with extra-linguistic pictogrammatic depictions of objects or concepts, with "the first picture of" the thing, but rather offering the fixed set of signatures of existence before they find manifestation in the world. The Dogon signs generate each actualization of what they depict. This informs all the uses of ideograms in Wright's poetry of the sort that situate outside of the poems, as landmarks and guides between the poems, perhaps to "govern and classify" how we may read the poems, as the minor ideograms in the "MacIntrye, the Captain and the Saints" for example, guide us in modulating the words within their bounds. When Wright composes his book *The Guide Signs*, he appears as interested in both the relational operation of the guide-signs on the signs that follow, as well as this cosmological semiology, in signs as wellsprings of reality, the fountains of the actual, rather than reflections. Like the humble "x" in *Disorientations: Groundings*, they are truly extra-linguistic in this regard, since language, in the Dogon formulation, issues from the signs, not vice versa.

Griaule and Dieterlen go on to describe each of the two guide-signs.

The first of the two "guides" is called *burigia goy*, "the springing forth of conception."

The writers narrate the way the unbroken line's meander traces a creation journey, through the elements of air, water, earth, and fire in sequence, returning to water at its end.

64 Ibid.

The second of the two “guides” is called “sign of the envelope” (*kogo bummo*). It is made with a simple vertical line representing the envelope (*kogo*) of beings. Its role is to bring over to the “master signs,” repositories of souls and forces, the exuviae of the “four elements” used in the mixture determined by the first guide.⁶⁵

A note details that the word *kogo* “is said especially of the skin of an exuviable animal. The Bambara see in the being’s covering or exuvia (*mana* or *folo*), not only a residual form, or shadow of what it was, but also a deposit which may be donned again by a new life.” These two guide-signs, while not visually represented in the book *The Guide Signs*, appear to exert pressure, through the title’s invocation of their name, on the volume’s two books, in generating and collecting the eleven poems of the first book under the elemental sign of “the springing forth of conception,” and the thirty-three poems of the second book under the “exuviable” sign of the envelope, or the shed skin. The two books are roughly equivalent in pages, since the first includes the long poem “The Ambiguous Archive.”

The concept of the exuviae, “a deposit which may be donned again by a new life,” returns us to a striking series of fourteen poems that appears in *Dimensions of History*. The symbol on page 191 of *The Pale Fox*, identified as drawing of “Amma’s seat spinning space,” appears at the start of *Modulations: The Aesthetic Dimension*, the second section of *Dimensions of History*. Wright titles the first of this section’s four parts *I. Rhythm, Charts and Changes*. It collects fourteen poems, each one devoted to a different musical instrument or musical form of the Americas, many of the instruments of pre-Columbian origin. The first edition’s author’s note on the section reads:

65 Ibid., 85–86.

It will be clear to anyone who looks at the original musical forms that I have taken great liberties with them. There are two primary reasons for this: I am writing in another language and the original forms have been used as no more than means to perception and vision. Any standard musical dictionary, such as the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, should give definitions and descriptions of the forms.⁶⁶

The note on the first poem reads:

Teponaztli is a pre-Columbian wooden drum in the shape of a barrel. It is enclosed at both ends and has an H-shaped slit on the top that creates two tongues facing each other. It is played with rubber-tipped mallets. The tongues vibrate, the body acts as a resonator. A rectangular opening on the bottom increases the volume. The inside is cut in layers to produce different pitches.⁶⁷

We may consider the entirety of the short corresponding poem.

Teponaztli

Fat singer in three keys
 a continent rolls at your feet.
 Gourd gong of the dervishes,
 praise your end.
 Your tongue slit double,
 the mallets stamp your body,
 a calked Calliope,
 sheer deep in pitch and darkness.
 Bone clock of the spirits,

66 Wright, *Dimensions of History*, 108.

67 *Ibid.*, 108–9.

praise your purposes.
 Inside, the body,
 cut rib upon rib,
 howls at the debt the drummer owes.
 When the lion climbs
 into the skin of a llama,
 debtors to ourselves,
 we pitch the sound of serpent's feet,
 mare's claws, an eagle's brimstone,
 and the body screams against
 the stamp of a goddess
 white as pain.⁶⁸

The eighth of the fourteen poems of *Modulations: The Aesthetic Dimension* is titled "Son." The author's note reads:

Son is a folk dance from Oriente Province, Cuba. There is a solo voice exposition followed by two statements of contrasting melody based on motifs sung by the chorus. Nicolás Guillén wrote very flexible *sones* as poems, and I have made my *son* even more flexible.⁶⁹

This series of fourteen poems elucidates two ideas, in general concerning Wright's work, and specifically in regards to ideograms. The first of these ideas concerns Wright's project of cataloguing American (that is, of the Americas, in the hemispheric sense of the word) forms. "Form" has a double meaning here, connoting both musical forms and the forms of the instruments that produce them. As Ralph Ellison noted, Spain's Cante Flamenco "recognizes no complete separation between dance and song."⁷⁰ We may add the instrument producing the mu-

68 Ibid., 39.

69 Ibid., 109.

70 Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 23.

sic to this unseparated aggregate. "Catalogue" also has a double meaning: first, a simple list, naming in specificity, the name's concrete poetry in itself a form of praise and accounting, and beside the name, all the tender details of construction ("an H-shaped slit on the top that creates two tongues facing each other"⁷¹); and second, evoking or speaking from and through the body of that form, taking a turn at playing the instrument, actualizing the musical structure, in a transpositional sense of voicing it in poetry, as the poetry issuing from the form. Here we return to the second of the guide-signs, the "sign of the envelope," and the concept of the *exuviae*. We may consider the fourteen musical forms, dances, or instruments each as a shed skins, a deposit which may be donned again by a new life. In fact one must don them again, and take liberties with them, to write them in another language, in order to animate them. In this way these fourteen forms resemble extra-linguistic markings – like signs, ideograms, or hieroglyphs – and the poems issue from them, inform them for the naive reader, and stand in dialectical response to them. We might say the poetry takes its turn in playing the particular instrument, performing the dance, and manifesting the sign.

The second idea finds its clearest expression in the final line of Wright's end note on the ideograms in "MacIntyre, the Captain and the Saints": "My poem is an attempt, among other things, to claim this knowledge as part of the continuing creative life of the Americas."⁷² To claim, or to stake a claim, in knowledge in this way takes the form of play. One takes a turn at playing an instrument, compelled by remembering, or the resistance of forgetting. In the measured language of poetry, in the retracing of migration routes, to claim is to recognize as already

71 Wright, *Dimensions of History*, 109.

72 This is the final line of the author's note at the end of the first edition (1984) of *Explications/Interpretations*. It appears on page 83.

belonging, the rich vocabulary of forms out of which “the continuing creative life of the Americas” arises and continually reforms itself. The poem titled “The Hieroglyph of Irrational Space,” included in the *Transformations* series from 2000, offers a summation of these poetics of the extra-linguistic mark. The poem divides into five parts, each with a parenthetical subtitle that serves as a guide to the tenor of the following lines.⁷³

(INSTRUMENTAL)

(FUNCTIONAL)

(AXIOMATIC)

(JUDICATIVE)

(NORMATIVE)

The poem’s first section speaks to the potentialities of the instrumental turn, of the strict architecture that comes into play in the reanimation of the instrument as exuviate skin, and of the effect on the initiate who undertakes the music.

(INSTRUMENTAL)

Coral bells teach me discretion,
 a self-restraint in the deed.
 How do we measure perfection,
 the bright, introspective seed
 that rises and falls
 incessantly, calls
 its name,
 turns along the wall’s

73 Wright, *Transfigurations*, 617.

exactness and sprawls,
 the frame
 of an imagined event,
 the unmarked, figured ascent?

We will say one final word about ideograms by looking at the book *Music's Mask and Measure*, published by Flood Editions in 2007. The pared-down sensibility of Wright's later poetry has arrived in this work. The book identifies each of its five sequences of poems as *Equation One* through *Equation Five*, and each sequence's title page includes an unexplained diagram, a simple line drawing reminiscent of the Dogon signs. One may interpret the lines of these diagrams without the aid of context notes, as by turns architectural, figurative, or denoting a stage in the development of a form. We decipher them as we would semi-abstract drawings. We engage a mode of reading that does not involve language. Once again, we read them as the keynote of the poem sequence that follows, as both generating and informing that sequence, while existing outside of it, as outside of language. Furthermore, the five sequences are also identified as equations in a way which anticipates the series of *The Prime Anniversary*, but unlike in that volume, *Music's Mask and Measure* includes no actual mathematical equations in the margins. We may read equation here according to its non-mathematical meaning of a process of equating, or making equal, two distinct objects, entities, or discourses – observing a relationship of rough equality across a divide, as bridging a gap, or migrating meaning across some dialectical relation, in this case between language and an element from its outside; the poem and the sign.

The sign enacts, by way of this type of equation, a transformation on language that takes the dual form of the mask and measure of the title. The title proposes that music may display these two qualities, or sustain these two operations, since both words may manifest as nouns

and as verbs: that of mask, and that of measure. Music measures its materials and masks them. We will call its materials the "ordinary language" of the first line of the book's first poem.

This ordinary language finds
rhythm in ambiguous flame,
that stable density of one
and one, the urgent displacement
that nurtures light.⁷⁴

The measure of such language seems straightforward enough in its tempering into the poetic forms that render it musical or music-like, lending it "that stable density of one / and one." But how shall we think of the mask in this context? We quote an instructive passage on the question from Ralph Ellison's 1985 essay "An Extravagance of Laughter." Ellison, who before he became a writer aspired to composing and performing music, draws his insights from a passage in the journals of Irish poet William Butler Yeats:

Active virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask. It is the condition of an arduous full life.⁷⁵

Ellison frames the question of the mask with a distinctly American inflection.

In Yeats's sense, "masking" is more than the adoption of a disguise. Rather it is a playing upon possibility, a

74 Jay Wright, *Music's Mask and Measure* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2007), 3.

75 W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs; Autobiography – First Draft; Journal*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972), 347.

strategy through which the individual projects a self-elected identity and makes of himself a “work of art.” In my case it was a means of discovering the dimensions and cost of Northern freedom. In his critical biography *Yeats: The Man & the Masks*, Richard Ellman notes that the great Irish poet was writing about himself, but his theory nevertheless applies to the problematic nature of American identity. While all human societies are “dramatic” – at least to the extent that, as Kenneth Burke points out, the members of all societies “enact roles...change roles...participate...[and] develop modes of social appeal” – the semi-open structure of American society, with its many opportunities for individual self-transformation, intensifies the dramatic possibilities for both cooperation and conflict. It is a swiftly changing society in which traditional values are ever under attack, even as they are exploited by individuals and groups alike. And with this upward – yes, and downward – mobility and its great geographical space, masking serves the individual as means of projecting that aspect of his social self which seems useful in a given situation.⁷⁶

With this passage in mind, we may consider ordinary language an indication of ordinary being, and Wright, like Ellison, a writer who, despite his esteem and accomplishments, refuses to disown his humble roots. As the first sentence of the Flood Editions biographical note states, “Jay Wright was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1934 and spent his teens in San Pedro, California, where his father worked in the shipyards.” We may draw an equation – biographical, conceptual, poetic – between the mask and the transformation of ordinary into art.

We note the instances of masks occurring as images in Wright’s poems over the years, especially the long poem

76 Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, 212–13.

"Zapata and the Egúngún Mask" (1988), from *Elaine's Book*, to which we will return in future chapters, and these notable lines from "Love in the Iron and Loom" (1984) from *Explications/Interpretations*.

I slither from the dance a mask.
 I am a dance in mask.
 Who will answer the figure of the dance?
 Who will unmask the twin at my heart?⁷⁷

The mask facilitates an equation of a sort, a danceable and a felt equation. We borrow the phrase from Steven Meyer's essay "To Feel an Equation," with its extended quotation of an unpublished lecture that Wright delivered in Dundee in 1972, including the statement of poetry's power "to create an awareness of differing and seemingly incompatible relationships."⁷⁸ Meyer details Wright's frequent reliance on the work of Susanne Langer, in particular her divergence from Whitehead in the form of an acute reduction of the definition and scope of feeling. In Langer's words:

Whitehead's identification of "positive prehension," a cosmic principle of process as such, with "feeling" seems to me unfortunate, for it precludes any detailed study of that most interesting phenomenon which distinguishes psychology from physiology, just as the phenomena of organic functioning distinguish physi-

⁷⁷ Wright, *Explications/Interpretations*, 60.

⁷⁸ Steven Meyer, "To Feel an Equation: Physiological Aesthetics, Modern Physics, and the Poetry of Jay Wright," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature and Science*, eds. Neel Ahuja et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 340. Meyer quotes from the lecture "Feeling and Some Related Problems for Poetry" delivered by Wright in Dundee, Australia, on October 17, 1972.

ology from chemistry and physics (the boundaries between the sciences being always somewhat fluid.⁷⁹

Wright adopts Langer's narrowed focus on feeling, when he invokes her rewording of the concept "how a nerve impulse can be converted into thought," as instead "how a nerve impulse can be felt as thought."⁸⁰ Langer proposes that if "we say 'felt as thought,' the investigation of mental function is shifted from the realm of mysterious transubstantiation to that of physiological processes, where we face problems of complexity and degree, which are difficult, but not unassailable in principle."⁸¹ In this formulation, we may consider feeling as the primary generative, affective procedure, which permits "the discovery and exploration of a pluralistic cosmos through the juxtaposition of multiple symbolic discourses."⁸² That is to say, the primary procedure of Wright's poetry. The mask offers the engineering of the juxtaposition, the emblem of Langer's "physiological processes" through which "a nerve impulse can be felt as thought," the bridge by which the manifestation of one symbolic discourse enacts and adopts the appearance, and the behavior, thus the becoming, of another. We call this a mask: the process of feeling an equation.⁸³

In *Music's Mask and Measure*, the mask makes its appearance in two passages. Both occur at the heart of the book, in the first lines of the first poem, and the last lines of the sixth and final poem, of the Equation Three cycle. Between them, we find the measure.

Completely disguised,
the dancer wears the mask

79 Susanne Langer quoted in *ibid.*, 330.

80 *Ibid.*, 332.

81 *Ibid.* 330.

82 *Ibid.*, 340.

83 Susanne Langer quoted in *ibid.*, 330.

about his
body. This tree now falls,
a surface
and red lineage,

an axiom
and proposal,
the firm embrace
of the unsolved.⁸⁴

*

Set to a new
measure, they form
their own release.⁸⁵

*

So God must surely die,
and heaven
be abandoned, each
system bled and given
to itself;
then you will draw your

conclusions by
natural light,
the infinite
physics of masks.⁸⁶

The ideogram scores and underscores the language that it accompanies, its presence denoting language becoming music. This musicalization of the word enchants ac-

84 Wright, *Music's Mask and Measure*, 29.

85 *Ibid.*, 30.

86 *Ibid.*, 34.

ording to the dual scheme of measure and the mask that recodes the language as, in Ellison's phrase, "a playing upon possibility." The body of the word, like that of the dancer, thus "completely disguised," becomes "an axiom and proposal." The poetic systems that arise in all their creative novelty, replacing those former regimes that have fallen like a tree, those edifices like God and heaven abandoned, allow us, the reader, to draw our own conclusions according to "the infinite / physics of masks."

How then do these ideograms and signs guide our reading? In some cases they direct the tenor of the speech, calibrating a pause or a turn like a musical rest. In others they offer a channel of interpretation, informing nuanced differences and inflections of voice. At times they present a form of imagery, like visuals on the page, that the poems explicate. Like the guide-signs, they guide the reading of the signs that follow, a lens through which to view them. Finally we return to the complex number ladder of "BANĀ NGOLO," an apex of the diagrammatic in relation to the series of poems that follow, a most complex equation of relation between language and its outside, operative in so many ways. When we read the poems aloud, what do we do when we arrive at these signs? We cannot enunciate them, yet they measure and mask our speech. In a sense they speak us. They speak through us, and we follow their lead as we read.

Finding the “Fit” *(The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax and Benjamin Banneker)*

“The Village piper keeps trying to find the
 fit of ἀέσθησις and entanglement.”¹

How are we to think through and with the connections that Wright makes or reveals throughout each of his books of poetry and across the field of his entire oeuvre? Dogon cosmology meets the Dane, Niels Bohr. Together,

- 1 Jay Wright, *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, unpublished manuscript, 2016, 1. This paper will be assembled with other philosophical inquiries in the forthcoming Jay Wright, *Soul and Substance: A Poet’s Examination Papers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2023). Ancient Greek words appear throughout Wright’s poetry and hand-written manuscripts. We grapple with these words throughout this book, though we would like to note that in this citation Wright’s spelling ἀέσθησις is inconsistent with Ancient Greek, which should be αἴσθησις. Perhaps Wright’s spelling here is an artifact of his reading practice, traces of his encounter with inaccurate renderings of classical texts? In line with the other Greek deployed by Wright and in this book, we will follow the standard orthography below.

this complex couple links to the slow Bolero, which has somehow merged with the quick Art Tatum. The web of connections grows in size as it mixes with a gallimaufry of mathematicians and then acquires the form of a ritual ceremonial practice. This brew percolates up through a gaze cast toward a Utah mountain range. Due to the pulse and beat of Wright's language, we might think that Wright is *uniquely producing* these connections. The poet himself, however, claims that his project is one of recovery and revelation. His poems uncover the weave that already exists between seemingly disparate objects and concepts. Could both claims be true? Could Wright's poetics disjunctively fuse an act of creation and an act of revelation? This is the question we will approach from many angles in this chapter.

It is tempting to read the dual act of production-revelation through the frame of "entanglement," understood both in its basic semantic meaning (a snarl of threads) and through its more technical deployment in quantum mechanics. For quantum physicists, "entanglement" names the phenomenon "that occurs when a group of particles are generated, interact, or share spatial proximity in a way such that the quantum state of each particle of the group cannot be described independently of the state of the others, including when the particles are separated by a large distance."² Einstein referred, somewhat derisively, to this phenomenon as "spooky action at a distance."³ Given what they knew and hypothesized at the time (i.e., the early twentieth century) about the workings of time-space, Einstein could not fully endorse the

2 *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Quantum Entanglement," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantum_entanglement.

3 See, for one instance of this citation, Ben Brubaker, "How Bell's Theorem Proved 'Spooky Action at a Distance' Is Real," *Quanta Magazine*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.quantamagazine.org/how-bells-theorem-proved-spooky-action-at-a-distance-is-real-20210720/>.

view of the quantum realm, which brought along with it this notion of quantum entanglement.

In the present, however, thanks to the Big Bell Experiment, a test that measures physical demonstrations of philosophical theorems conjured by mathematicians, physicists believe that Einstein was wrong.⁴ Spooky action at a distance – i.e., the physical communication of particles across seemingly unbridgeable distances – does indeed seem to be occurring, all the time. Even prior to experimental verification, the notion of entanglement had already grown and spread into the literature of science studies and the art-tinted branches of the humanities. One of the most well-known contemporary authors on this issue is Karen Barad whose 2007 book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, not only endorses the reality of quantum entanglement but also advocates for an ethics and epistemology that builds from this endorsement. That is, Barad, starting from the well-known understanding in quantum physics that the observer (i.e., the scientist) is entangled in the ontological state of that which she observes, argues that knowledge production necessarily commences from a momentary, observer-produced cut that separates the observer from the web of connections in which she is entangled. This cut allows the observer to *imagine* what the observed data is saying. Never is the observer *actually* removed from the entangled web; rather, the observer produces a semi-fiction of autonomy long enough to discern an as-if-independent thought about that which has been observed. Barad brands this action “agential realism,” and she thinks scientists, and really all people who think a lot about anything, ought to adopt this methodological stance and epistemological under-

4 Follow the history of this test at *The BIG Bell Test*, <https://thebigbelltest.org/>.

standing when doing science, making art, or devising laws or practicing everyday life.

Could “agential realism,” which proceeds from the belief that objects emerge through particular “intra-action,” be the key to understanding Wright’s method of poetizing? Do Wright’s poems emerge from the cut that he is able to make in the fabric of time-space in which he finds himself? If so, then we could begin to understand the weave of relations between all things that Wright sees, senses, and feels as the vista spread out from a point of view that his particular poetic work makes possible. In truth, there is no discreet point of view, no place on which Wright or anybody can really stand to sense the weave. Wright and the rest of us are part of the weave. Our actions, including writing and reading poetry, emerge intra-actively through undulations within the entangled web. But while this may actually be the case when ascertained through the notion of entanglement, the case can only be thought by making a precise cut in the web, a cut that is both made by and persists as the result of, for example, *Disorientations: Groundings* or any other of Wright’s books of poetry.

The discourse of entanglement provides such an enticing possibility for understanding Wright’s poiesis, but we sense a problem. The problem comes into view by visiting the first line of Wright’s unpublished document *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, quoted above. From that line, it would seem that entanglement is *part* of a bigger picture, so to speak. The other part, αἴσθησις (*aisthēsis*), is equally important, but that, too, is not the crux of the matter. The fastener between entanglement and αἴσθησις is what Wright wants to understand – and what we want to understand. Wright calls this the “fit.” In that opening sentence, Wright conjures “fit” as a noun (“the fit”), and yet the presence of the verb (“to fit,” “to have fit”) is palpable. To “find the fit,” Wright, and by extension we readers, will need to dance through the noun-ness of the fit, the ac-

tion of fitting that creates the joint between αἴσθησις and entanglement, and all the other valences of “fit” that we can possibly wrap our minds around. Thus, entanglement is a helpful framework for parsing Wright’s connections, but the real matter at hand is finding the fit.

§ Elaboration: Fits of harmony

As a polyseme, “fit” is ready to move us in many directions at once. Which way should we go first? The appearance of Ancient Greek (αἴσθησις/*aisthēsis*) in the opening note of *Tuning* draws us down one particular path, that which leads to, and from, the word ἁρμονία, which may sound more familiar to your ears when shaped as *harmony*. We can begin to elaborate on this action of finding the fit, therefore, by listening to Wright’s “fit” as a matter of harmony.

Yet, even such a common word as “harmony” is difficult to hear clearly because of its frequent connotation of euphony or the vertical arrangement of notes on a musical staff. Prior to this contemporary meaning, however, ἁρμονία had a different and quite precise series of meanings: 1) means of joining, fastening; 2) joint, as between a ship’s planks; 3) in Anatomy, suture; 4) framework of the universe; 5) covenant, agreement; 6) settled government, order; 7) for Pythagoras, the name for three; and 8) name of a remedy.⁵

Even before music enters our ears, then, a discussion of ἁρμονία in Wright’s writing leads through this list to a particular kind of labor. The work at hand is one of fitting together, but “fitting” acquires the sense of joining logs together to fashion a seaworthy vessel. The boat’s harmony is its condition of possibility for travelling. If we

5 *LSJ*, s.v. ἁρμονία, <https://artflsrvo3.uchicago.edu/philologic4/LSJ/navigate/9/1/1287/>.

find the boat washed up on a distant shore and wish to map the journey that brought it to that point, we would begin by reading the harmony that enabled it to set sail at all. That is, we might look at the work of the joiners and speculate about the origin of the wood and the skill set that made specific fastenings thinkable. In doing so, we could realize that the craftwork of the builders – the harmonizers – was a remedy for a specific problem, that set forth by the movement and vastness of the sea. Applied as a remedy, the boat expanded the agreement between people and the cosmos, the order of nature. The boat became a temporary suture capable of uniting the land-living human with the aquatic environment. Human, boat, and sea form a musical chord for the duration of their collaboration. Thus, a particular series of elements presents itself for eventual poetic or prosodic arrangement: water, sand, salt, wood, the interplay of these elements, travel on the seas, shipbuilding, the handing down of knowledge from one craftsman to the next, cosmological certainties about the composition of the world, cartographical uncertainties that make travel a frightful adventure, the light of the stars by which to navigate at night, an attempt at order, the resolution of a journey, etc., etc., etc.

What if we call that flight of fancy, that imagery of the boat that arose from an appraisal of the Ancient Greek word *ἁρμονία*, a fit of harmony? Here, fit shows another of its meanings: a sudden burst of electrical activity in the brain that sometimes leads to seizures, sometimes to visions. Wright's fits of harmony are controlled bursts that boast specific architectural and, as we illustrated in the previous chapter, rhythmic elements that, when read in a certain way, tip us off to the work he is undertaking. The work is both an act of production (i.e., in the sense of joining logs together to compose a seaworthy vessel) and one of recovery (i.e., interpreting and giving voice to the

story of connection embedded in the various objects and ideas that he treats).

Wright's treatise *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax* is a symphony of fits. Listening to the symphony is a synesthetic affair. Seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, clairvoyantly anticipating; all of these activities are modes of sense, which, singularly, guide us through Wright's symphony. There are two specific elements to the score of this symphony that we would like to think fancifully about. The first is a schematic of the basic fittings that allow poetry, science, and ritual to join together into a harmonious accord. We access that schematic or blueprint through a deep dive into one page of *Tuning* on the surface of which we find Wright's signature polyphonic assembly of ideas. The second element is a more detailed rendering of that vista or point of view that becomes thinkable through Wright's "cut" in the weave of the world. The compass that guides us to that point of view comes from Leibniz's monad, and the instruction manual that teaches us how to read that compass comes from the creative interpretation of Leibniz performed by Gilles Deleuze in his book *The Fold*.

In another register, and as we have by now established, a kaleidoscopic array of historical figures populate Wright's poetry, actual figures drawn from a range of cultures and ages. They appear like actors on a stage, emblematic of some quality or problem that we readers must determine, since Wright's published work never, or no longer, concerns itself with elucidating the context of each figure's appearance. Yet the language and the lines that envelope the figure reflect something of each figure's particular life force. Or we could say the life force of the figure in a sense generates the lines. We readers decide when to pause on an individual, to turn away from the poetry to those archives to which a figure's appearance points us, and to delve into those contexts in pursuit of the moments when some elegant revelation or simple

detail will return us to the poetry with renewed understanding. We might see this renewed understanding as double. It comes to grasp something of the individual figure, a solitary complex emblem, infinite in itself, in all its potential unfolding. It also gives access to the relation in which the poetry has positioned the individual with other individuals, constellating a problem of juxtaposition and arrangement, that the poem sets out to bridge. The poem will “find,” which may be a way of saying construct, the “fit” between the figures as emblems of thought and the insistent, generative interference that arises when they share the stage.

The work required of you, the reader, in this chapter is substantial. An image to guide you is one of patient testing, of looking at scraps of material and determining how best to fasten them together into a seaworthy vehicle. The first deep dive into *Tuning* will be akin to examining the wood that will serve as the body of the craft. The foray into Leibniz will enable a zooming in and a zooming out, a shifting between the optic perspective afforded by a high-altitude overlook and the haptic, proprioceptive perspective of the body’s passage through the world. We then propose Benjamin Banneker as a figure who warrants some dedicated attention, directly linking the crafts of building and of writing, in a decidedly American grain. All together, the process of finding the fit along with Wright helps flesh out the act of “doing the meaning thing” which we’ve been practicing in the previous chapters. This act is, it bears repeating, a mode of production as well as one of discovery.

§ Poetry as the harmony of science and the sacred?

The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax is part poetic rumination and part philosophical treatise. The entire document is seventy-seven pages long. There are three stanzas of

text on each page, save for two pages on which there exists only one sentence each. These "stanzas" are more like prose paragraphs, but they frequently only consist of one or two sentences. The "piper" is one of several aesthetic personae who makes an appearance on the pages, accompanied by an "apprentice," an "advocate," and an "analyst." Wright also calls upon numerous scholarly voices, from physicists to philosophers to art historians. In total, there are fifty-two people and particular objects referenced in the roughly 5,000 words of the document. The pace of the text mirrors that of a conversation, as if one primary voice was referencing multiple people's thoughts in order to work out a set of imbricated problems. Reading these pages next to *Disorientations: Groundings*, it seems reasonable to assess them as an extension of the poems, a kind of testing ground that allows Wright to examine ideas in prose that he will later form, or perhaps already has formed, into poetic verse.

By looking at one of the pages of this text, you will see Wright's signature weave of ideas and thoughts:

Can we, with Faro, figure the world as a spiral (munu) where Faro occupies a constant point of origin, at the center of cardinal points?

Must we accept the spiral's vibration as a move to realize the materiality of the universe?

Roberto Jason Thalassinos enters to remind us of Philolaus and the notion that understanding something means understanding its structure and numerical ratio.⁶

Maybe these three stanzas are three logs placed side-by-side. The first is hewn from the histories of the Mande-

6 Wright, *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, 4.

speaking people, of which the Dogon are one and the Bamana are another. The Bamana, in particular, are crucial in this analysis. The third descends from Ancient Greece's Pythagorean genealogy. The middle one, the second question on the page, serves to bridge these two worlds of thought.

For the Bamana, Faro, possibly the origin of the Ancient Egyptian "Pharaoh," and Pemba are twin gods of creation. Similar to the Dogon, whose origin story tells of the vital balance ensured by twin birth and the number two, the Bamana's origin story tells of strife between the twins and an eventual rebalancing. In particular, Faro, seeking to give more power to humans than his twin would like, supplied humans with water and went on to create numerous structures in the world. Among these were the cardinal points of direction. Carry this history into a reading of *Tuning* and a subtext begins to emerge. Wright sees in the biography of Faro a thread uniting the Mande-speaking people and the Ancient Greeks.

The thread is Number. Wright is not concerned with a number of certain things but, rather, with something more capacious. What is Number? Wright considers several sources on this question, one of which is Walter Burkert's *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* where the author writes, "number is not quantity and measurability, but order and correspondence, the articulation of life in a rhythmical pattern, and the perspicuous depiction of the whole as the sum of its parts."⁷ Another source is Brian Rotman's *Mathematics as Sign: Writing, Imagining, Counting* where that author, dressed in the clothes of a semiotician, writes, "numbers no longer simply are, either in actuality or in some idealized potentiality: they [...] have been made by materio-symbolic creatures."⁸ If we play these two notes on Number together and then lay

7 Ibid., 48.

8 Ibid., 56.

in the third, Bamana-inspired note, which understands Number as a kind of divine form birthed into various finite shapes so as to bring about cosmic alignment, then we come up with Wright's sense of Number. We might think of "Number" as the thread or reed that fastens the logs of the raft together.

For the Bamana, "Number" underwrites the order of the universe. Faro establishes four cardinal directions. From there, an entire numerology unspools that culminates in the 266 sacred symbolic signs shared by the Bamana and the Dogon. For the Greeks, the cult of Pythagoras likewise insisted on the importance of Number, although the specific numerology was different than that of the Mande-speaking people of ancient Mali. More important than the alignment of the two numerological systems, however, is the materialization of Number in the world. For the Bamana, Dogon, and Ancient Greeks, Number is sensible through the vibration of the musical note. Therefore, the knowledge of the gods is not closed off to humans, whether Bamana, Dogon, or Greek. Such knowledge is palpable through the vibration of strings and striking of anvils. Wright fastens the three stanzas together with a reference to this musical vibration, emanating from munu's spiral, and the musical vibration marks the fit of harmony sounded on page 4 in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*. We might glimpse a dimension of the title here, as well. To what specifically does grammar and syntax seek to tune us? They seek to tune us to the Harmony (i.e., fit, anatomy, framework, covenant, etc.) of the divine and the profane.

Wright's reference (via Thalassinus) to Philolaus provides more information. The first philosopher to systematize the teaching of Pythagoras, Philolaus helped to develop the distinction between what he called "Limiters" and "Unlimiteds." Earth, fire, water, air, space, and time: these are all unlimited. They can be known through the mediating influence of the limiters, which are any dis-

creet form capable of temporarily holding the unlimited. When such “holding” takes place, harmony is achieved. The harmony can then be de-scribed, literally written down, by mathematics or ritual ceremony. For example, the science of the musical scale gives us access to the essence of the universal order. We can only truly understand this order if we grasp the Number underlying the music that we perceive.

In fragment 4 of an existing, incomplete text by Philolaus, the philosopher states that, “we can initially apprehend objects through our senses” but then goes on to insist “that we only come to have true knowledge or understanding of them by grasping their number.”⁹ To speak of apprehending objects through our senses, or through sense (synesthetic, singular; that which we named above), is to speak of aesthetics (αἴσθησις). To grasp the n/Number through mathematical study – which, to the Ancient Greeks, is somewhat of a redundant phrase since math – μάθημα – meant “learning” or “lesson” – is to understand the way in which the world of the gods is entangled in the world of the humans. Harmony, understood in its musical sense, was the “fit” that philosophers could examine in order to think the cosmos.

Wright pursues each of these threads throughout *Tuning*, though a central concern is the nature of this “Number” without which we cannot understand anything that our senses apprehend. Is this Number fixed or mutable? By extension, is the universe fixed or given to contingency? Does the grammar and syntax of language function in a similar way to “Number,” understood in these precise mathematical senses? Do images or symbols likewise give form to and take their form from grammar and syntax? What is the precise role of ritual in preparing

9 Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A complete translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 73.

the initiate for understanding the deep structures of sacred knowledge, and is there a grammar and syntax that each subtends both this knowledge and its transmission through ritual? These are the big questions that *Tuning* puts on the table in prose, and similar questions are exercised poetically in *Disorientations: Groundings*. The type of assembly visible in the excerpt from *Tuning* cited above functions as a synecdoche for the type of assembly that Wright undertakes throughout the entire document.

The answers to that long list of questions do not primarily concern us here. Rather, we are interested in the "fit" of the seemingly disparate systems that Wright understands as connected and mutually informing. Why? Because the act of fitting gives us insight into Wright's work *as poet*. For Wright, according to the pages of *Tuning*, the work of the poet is parallel to the work of the physicist and the individual undertaking ritual passage. In all three cases, the laborers are trying to work out the nature of the world. But to understand the revelations of each worker, we have to first understand how precisely each goes about fitting his findings together. Following the thinking of Barad, Isabelle Stengers, and other like-minded scientists, Wright sees the work of the physicist as equal parts creation and discovery. Through the construction of laboratory experiments, which is tantamount to a fiction constructed for certain purposes, the physicist glimpses the language of the universe. For those engaged in ritual, certain objects and diagrams and patterns of numbers help individuals to discern the invisible forces that penetrate our being. The poet, too, is engaged in sensing beyond the physical realm, but they utilize grammar and syntax to make words offer up more than mere semantic or connotative meaning. To know precisely how this works, that is, to grasp the mechanics of grammar and syntax that help us do magical things with words, the poet must borrow from the insights of physics and ritual alike.

Another way to put this: Wright's poetry is the fit of physics and ritual; his poetry is the harmony of science and the sacred. Crucial to this equation is the "sign" and its imbrication with the act of interpretation. What precisely is the physicist reading when they construct the math that structures a laboratory experiment? In what ways do ritual symbols function for those other than the initiates and masters of specific cosmological arcana? For those who encounter poetry but have no feel for its rhythm, does the magical mixture of grammar and syntax still transform each of the poem's words into something more than the sum of its parts? And a similar set of questions arise for those who find themselves on the interior. Is the physicist aware of their act of creation that motivates each experiment? In what way can the agent of the ritual be said to "know" or "understand" the information that arises during the performance? Can a poet fabricate within his poetry a tuning fork that will help future readers tune to the frequency of the given work?

The first third of *Tuning* encircles these questions as they pertain to the physical sciences. Again, Wright does not provide answers. Rather, he *examines* the topic by summoning voices capable of unfolding different perspectives. In addition to Faro, Thalassinus, Philolaus, Barad, Stengers, and the aesthetic personae of the piper, advocate, and apprentice whom we have already met, Wright calls upon the sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina, the quantum theorist Laurence Sklar, and philosopher Mark Wilson. All of these figures gather within the first ten pages, which, as mentioned above, contain roughly thirty sentences. Of interest here, however, is not the quantity of players at the party but the method by which Wright joins them and the fit between them that Wright is able to discern and analyze. On page 8, *en route* from Stengers to Sklar, Wright asks, "[c]ould we fit another argument?" And here again we find the "fit," followed quickly by, "[w]e might hear this note [...]" and then a quotation from

Stengers, “for the perceptive experiences monads define, each for and by itself, are in harmony, as if they were different perceptions of the same world.”¹⁰ Thus, after we have read the first eight pages of *Tuning*, while we may not have any answers to the big questions listed above, we can understand that Number, music, harmony, and fit are crucial to Wright’s method of thinking. We also know that distinctions between poetry, physics, and indigenous cosmology are less important than the threads woven between them. We have, in other words, a glimpse into the materials with which Wright will make his craft, and we even have an idea of the shape this craft will take – a kind of mosaic vessel or bricolage.

§ Point of view

Moving from Wright’s materials to the optic and haptic perspectives enabled through this movement of thought, we can now revisit the term “point of view” that we deployed earlier. We have already tentatively suggested that, understood in relation to the principles of agential realism in Karen Barad’s interpretation of quantum physics, Wright’s *poiēsis* emerges from a consciously constructed cut. This cut allows him to momentarily split himself from the web of everything in which he is not only entangled but that also, at each moment, forms the individual we know as Jay Wright. The split or cut is something like a promenade on which Wright can stand to survey the glimpse of Number, music, ritual, and so forth that he gets while reading and interacting with the world. The resulting poetry becomes something like a map that leads readers to that promenade. At the same time, the visceral aspects of the poem make it clear that, through reading, we also feel the world that becomes sensible once occupy-

10 Wright, *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, 8.

ing Wright's point of view. Each time we read the poems, we, too, help construct the point of view, something like the way that a contemporary violinist helps to construct Alban Berg's violin concerto by playing it.

At this point, as we once again slip into synesthesia, it is helpful to enlist Deleuze's work on Leibniz and the baroque from his book titled, *The Fold*. The tint of this lens helps to further resolve how precisely Wright's point of view is not something that varies with the vicissitudes of Wright's being but that exists as a place to which Wright arrives. Deleuze does not appear in *Tuning*, but Wright returns frequently to the work of the polymath Leibniz, specifically his treatise *Monadology*. Six pages in total address Leibniz either directly or indirectly, and each of those pages reveal Wright's draw to Leibniz's metaphysical point known as the monad. Deleuze's take on Leibniz is useful here because of Deleuze's explicit *production* of thought. Much like Wright, Deleuze manages to find a specific texture within Leibniz's thought while simultaneously making a new, or compossible, Leibniz, one fashioned through a creative reading of that inner texture. Thus, we are perhaps permitted to invite Deleuze to Wright's gathering.

Monads are the peculiar substances to which Leibniz draws our attention, to which Deleuze devotes much of his thought in *The Fold*, and to which Wright dedicates concerted thought. According to Leibniz, they are the only true substance, equivalent, ultimately, with what he calls "the soul." Each monad is unique and exists entirely independently of each other monad. Of the many compelling description of these substances, one particularly flummoxing adjective is "windowless," by which Leibniz seems to mean that monads are walled off from each other and the world. Theirs is a maximally active interiority. Yet, in order for a given monad to communicate with an individual's body, a communication that Leibniz insists takes place, there must be some kind of commu-

nicative pathway. Likewise, since individual bodies and souls seem to communicate with each other and with the *physis* of the world, there must be some way to account for this interpersonal connection. Leibniz uses the word "harmony" to describe these connections, as though the monads and the bodies that form like rime around them vibrate in tandem with one another and thus fit together into a complex whole, not unlike how the musical notes of a chord fit together.

Things get even more bizarre when Leibniz, as Brandon C. Look reads it, admits that

everything that takes place in the universe really is expressed by each finite mind, but the infinite perceptions present in the mind – from the butterfly's flight in the Amazonian jungle to the penguin's waddling in Antarctica – are usually too minute or too indistinct to outweigh, for example, the appearance of this computer screen or the feeling of hunger. Indeed, this infinity of perceptions is likened by Leibniz to the roar of the sea. "To hear this noise as we do," Leibniz says, "we must hear the parts which make up this whole, that is the noise of each wave, although each of these little noises makes itself known only when combined confusedly with all the others, and would not be noticed if the wave which made it were by itself." [...] The infinity of *petites perceptions* is, then, simply epistemological white noise.¹¹

In our own words, we would say that each monad contains within it all events of the universe. Due to its particular frequency, however, any given monad cannot discern this totality. Switching from the aural to the visual register, it is as if the monad, in order to filter what Look

11 *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz," <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/leibniz/>.

calls epistemological white noise, remains within one degree of the 360-degree view available to it. The view from this standpoint comes about through a complex play of representations within the monad, which, in turn, rolls into motion from the vibrations of the universal harmony of which it is a part.

Enter Deleuze, who insists that we understand the monad's "point of view" in all its strangeness. The point of view is not something that shifts depending on where the monad happens to be. "[T]he point of view is not that which varies with the subject [...] It is, to the contrary, the condition in which an eventual subject apprehends a variation."¹² If this is accurate, then Deleuze's Leibnizian understanding of perception runs something like this. The monad, which we understand as the unique soul of an individual, fastens itself to a body by means of a harmonic arrangement. The body and the soul communicate with each other and with the entirety of the universe through a complex play of vibrations. To perceive something in particular is to participate with that thing – whether it is a wave on the sea, a bird passing by, an itch on the face, a symphony – and collaborate in the particular chord or harmonic arrangement that makes up that thing. In this way, the subject does not pre-exist the experience of perception; rather, the subject comes into being through its participation in the sense event.

In his article "The Free and Indeterminate Accord of 'The New Harmony': The Significance of Benjamin's Study of the Baroque for Deleuze," Timothy Flanagan shows how Deleuze built upon Walter Benjamin's groundbreaking study of the Baroque as he prepared his analysis of Leibniz. Flanagan provides a helpful gloss on Deleuze's sophisticated rearrangement of the typical no-

12 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 19.

tion of "point of view" so central to the baroque-Leibnizian worldview:

Deleuze insists that truth is not something which varies with individual points of view but is instead the condition in which individuals realise themselves to be the subjective determination of a perspective. "Because it includes what I am doing right now – what I am in the act of doing – my individual notion also includes everything that has driven me to do what I am doing, and everything that will result from it, all the way to infinity."¹³

With this formulation, Deleuze, cited by Flanagan, is explaining how it can be that all attributes can be said of any given subject. That is, all possible variations of the subject exist, some actually and some virtually, in each moment. The subject, understood in this way, ceases to be a finite determination of one's past actions and becomes an ever-shifting perspectival point that partakes of the entirety of the universe. Such a flux of becoming is thinkable because of the play of the spiritual upon the mind-body of the human animal. It is this becoming-worlded of the eternal realm of the spirit that defines baroque aesthetics. Or, as Flanagan puts it, "rather than looking to assign either mind or body primacy with respect to the world, the baroque aesthetic is instead confronted by their spiritual (which is to say eternal) complication in the world."¹⁴

Deleuze arrives at this picture of things after encountering Walter Benjamin's study of the *Trauerspiel* and Ger-

13 Timothy Flanagan, "The Free and Indeterminate Accord of 'The New Harmony': The Significance of Benjamin's Study of the Baroque for Deleuze," in *Deleuze and The Fold: A Critical Reader*, eds. Sjoerd van Tuinen and Niamh McDonnell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 53.

14 *Ibid.*, 52.

man Baroque drama. For Benjamin, this point of view to which the eventual subject arrives is equivalent to Truth. Individuals do not determine the Truth; rather, they arrive to it. As such, for Benjamin, “[t]he proper approach to it [i.e., Truth] is not one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total absorption in it.”¹⁵ Deleuze transposes this notion of absorption into the language of individuals who “realise themselves to be the subjective determination of a perspective.”¹⁶ In both the Benjaminian and Deleuzian philosophical apparatuses, emphasis is shifted away from the subject who either sees (actively) or is seen (passively) to the event of perception itself. Baroque perception is an event that casts the viewer and the viewed as enfolded elements in a universal harmony.

For Deleuze, in his adaptation of Leibniz, the individual is capable of asserting her monadic singularity through the production of “accords.” “I produce an accord,” he writes in *The Fold*, “each time I can establish in a sum of infinitely tiny things differential relations that will make possible an integration of the sum – in other words a clear and distinguished perception.”¹⁷ Here we have the baroque-inflected understanding of Jay Wright’s poetic point of view. Through his own adventurous reading and travels, Wright maps “differential relations” between a sum of infinite things. These differential relations are lines he is able to discern as connections between each thing and movement within the world. Examples abound of this “discernment of lines,” but we can offer one here that appears in Wright’s poem *Music’s Mask and Measure*:

15 Benjamin, cited in *ibid.*, 54.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Deleuze, *The Fold*, 130–31.

The red roof tiles	The oriole has established
slip into the morning fog.	an evasive coherence,
There is a red silence	infinite, exact,
all around us.	with its place, there where
It will take years to learn	the day seems set to honor
this coherent grammar.	the bird's expressive deceit. ¹⁸

The red of the roof tiles and the coloring of the oriole are all part of the world's coherent grammar. Tuning into the harmony of the tiles and this specific bird, we begin to hear the "red" of silence. Likewise, the red of the rising sun adds a fourth note to the chord. This chord is always assembled, and yet we cannot hear it until Wright tunes our attention to it through his poetic assembly of words and images and sounds. The "stanzas" of this poem, which we might usefully think of here in their etymological senses as "rooms," are places to which we arrive to participate in the red-tinted grammar of the day. By participating in this sense event, we recognize our enfoldment within the point of view prepared by the poem. In turn, we produce an accord and join the harmony of the universe.

By calling on Deleuze, we have fit another argument into the proposal of understanding Wright's poetizing as an act of harmony. Deleuze's "accord" is truthfully a perception of harmony; in other words, to produce an accord, an individual comes to recognize itself ensconced within a harmonic arrangement of universal vibrations that unite and transverse the actual world of human experience and the spiritual world of the eternal. We can think of Wright's poetic verse and his philosophical prose as accords that are produced and realized in one stroke.

18 Jay Wright, *Music's Mask and Measure* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2007), 22–23

§ Banneker 1: To run the lines (part one)

We now propose a personification of this “accord” in the figure of Benjamin Banneker. Wright devoted two early poems to Banneker, with titles reflecting biographical episodes: “Benjamin Banneker Helps to Build a City” and “Benjamin Banneker Sends His *Almanac* to Thomas Jefferson”. Both appeared in *Soothsayers and Omens*, published by Seven Woods Press in 1976, the two concluding poems of the first section of that volume. Wright’s methodology, sense of form, scale, and structure, or construction, as well as his recurring weave of language with mathematics and geometry, and of concept with nature, all perhaps find an echo in Banneker’s craft. Such craft devoted itself to precisely those forms of harmonic arrangement entwining concrete actual experience and the durable forms of the spirit. We will take some time to examine extracts on Banneker’s life and work – perhaps we may consider them formative of Wright’s poetics – as well as to read through the landmark pair of poems.

Banneker, a free African American, lived from 1731 to 1806 in Maryland, and sustained practices as a naturalist, farmer, astronomer, and surveyor. We quote from a primary biographical work.

A Sketch of the Life of Benjamin Banneker; from notes taken in 1836. Read by J. Saurin Norris, before the Maryland Historical Society, October 5th, 1854.

Printed for the Maryland Historical Society, by John D. Toy.

A passage from page 4 narrates how Banneker came to live as a free man in those colonial years.

In preparing an account of an humble individual, it is rarely deemed necessary to furnish a long line of ancestry. The first member of the family of the subject

of our notice, of whom we shall speak, is his maternal grand-mother, Molly Welsh, a native of England, who came to Maryland (at that time an English Colony), with a ship load of other emigrants, and, to defray the expenses of her voyage, was sold to a master with whom she served an apprenticeship of seven years.¹⁹

A footnote states, "[a]ccording to the testimony of one of her grand-children, she was not only a *white woman*, but had a remarkably fair complexion."

After her term of service had expired, she bought a small farm, (land having then a merely nominal value,) and purchased as laborers, two negro slaves, from a slave ship, which lay in the Chesapeake Bay. They both proved to be valuable servants. One of them, said to have been the son of a king in Africa, a man of industry, integrity, fine disposition and dignified manners, she liberated from slavery and afterwards married. His name was BANNEKER, which she adopted as her surname, and was afterwards called MOLLY BANNEKER.

They had four children of whom we will mention alone, Mary, their oldest child. She also married a native of Africa; but, of his history, tradition gives no disclosure, except, that he embraced the Christian religion and was baptized by the name of Robert. On his marriage he took his wife's sir-name. Benjamin Banneker was their only son. The date of his birth is preserved in an old Bible, in which the event is chronicled with other details in the following order.

"I bought this book of ANORA BUCKANAN, the 4th day of January, 1763."

19 Benjamin Banneker, *A Sketch of the Life of Benjamin Banneker; from Notes Taken in 1836. Read by J. Saurin Norris, before the Maryland Historical Society, October 5th, 1854* (Baltimore: John D. Toy, 1854), 4.

“BENJAMIN BANNEKER was born, November the 9th day, in the year of the Lord God, 1731.”²⁰

One claim bears mentioning here, made by Janet E. Barber and Asamoah Nkwanta in their 2014 article “Benjamin Banneker’s Original Handwritten Document: Observations and Study of the Cicada,” to which we will refer later in more detail. Drawing on their sources from a 1999 publication of the Maryland Historical Society, Barber and Nkwanta state that

Banneker was a farmer, self-taught mathematician, astronomer, and scientist. He could have acquired his scientific mind and curiosity for the mysterious from his ancestral past, as he was born into a family of Africans whose ancestors were called Dogon.²¹

The claim to a Dogon lineage likely refers to Banneker’s grandfather, “the son of a king in Africa, a man of industry, integrity, fine disposition and dignified manners.” Benjamin did for the most part teach himself, although he had some formal education. He read extensively. A later passage gives some sense of Banneker’s living circumstances and location.

The situation of Banneker’s dwelling was one which would be admired by every lover of nature, and furnished a fine field for observation of Celestial Phenomena. It was about half a mile from the Patapsco River, and commanded a prospect of the near and distant hills upon its banks, which have been so justly celebrated for their picturesque beauty. A never failing

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Janet E. Barber and Asamoah Nkwanta, “Benjamin Banneker’s Original Handwritten Document: Observations and Study of the Cicada,” *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics* 4, no. 1 (January 2014): 113.

spring issued from beneath a large golden willow tree, in the midst of his orchard.²²

A brief passage supplies the context for Wright's poem "Benjamin Banneker Helps to Build a City."

Banneker was but once absent, at any distance, from his domicil. An appointment having been made after the adoption of the Constitution, in 1789, of commissioners, to run the lines of the District of Columbia – then called the "Federal Territory," they wished to avail themselves of his talents, induced him to accompany them in the work, and retained with them until the service was completed.²³

We believe the passage refers to a group, led by Andrew Ellicott, to establish the original boundaries of the District of Columbia, and to complete the plan for the city begun by Pierre Charles L'Enfant, who had by then returned to France. L'Enfant's design configured a city of radial streets around multiple centers established by monuments and houses of government. The city nests in the triangle between branches of the Potomac River. "To run the lines" meant to actualize this conceptual design by fixing the demarcations proportionally and in relation to one another on both horizontal and vertical planes. Such labor would have involved the use of surveying tools – the transit theodolite, a small telescope fixed atop a tripod, sighting a straight line to a target ranging rod, alternating bands of color painted on a straight shaft of pine.

22 Banneker, *A Sketch of the Life of Benjamin Banneker*, 14.

23 *Ibid.*, 11–12.

The first of Wright's two Banneker poems, "Benjamin Banneker Helps to Build a City," commences out of this episode.²⁴

In a morning coat,
hands locked behind your back,
you walk gravely along the lines in your head.

The poem's first sentence, its integrity intact although destabilized from within by two breaks, that is, the phrasing interfering with the punctuation, lands on the concept of lines. In 1988, the poet Lyn Hejinian wrote a "brief comment on 'the line'" in the context of "the line in post-modern poetry."²⁵ We will have occasion to return to this essay before we finish with this poem, but for now quote an extract from Hejinian's introductory notes as they appear in her book of collected essays and lectures, *The Language of Inquiry*:

Almost ten years before writing this comment, I had given a talk (now lost) comparing lines of poetry to lines of sight, lines of investigation, horizon lines, cartographer's lines, and to lines of travel – routes, paths, etc. The comparisons were not gratuitous, and my purpose in making them was more than metaphorical. The comparisons and the metaphors they produced ("avenues of thought," etc.) seemed empirically sound; the line in poetry required literal travel of hand, eye, and mind and its relation to purpose could be taken as

24 Quotations in this section drawn from Jay Wright, "Benjamin Banneker Helps to Build a City," in *Soothsayers and Omens* (New York: Seven Woods Press, 1976), 22–26.

25 Lyn Hejinian, "The Line," in *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*, eds. Robert Frank and Henry Sayre (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 200–203.

analogous to that of explorers, mapmakers, surveyors, and wanderers.²⁶

In its first three lines, Wright's poem has already begun to establish precisely this multitude of valences within the line, requiring "literal travel" as it laces the conceptual trajectories "in" one's head to the physical path one walks "gravely," that is, somberly, or perhaps as to invoke a grave. The poem continues.

These others stand with you,
 squinting the city into place,
 yet cannot see what you see,
 what you would see
 —a vision of these paths,
 laid out like a star,
 or like a body,
 the seed vibrating within itself,
 breaking into the open,
 dancing up to stop at the end of the universe.
 I say your vision goes as far as this,
 the egg of the world,
 where everything remains, and moves,
 holding what is most against it against itself,
 moving as though it knew its end, against death.

The lines uncover a weave of vision, of paths, manifested in the triple form of stars above, body below, and seed beyond, or outside of, the human. The seed, a microcosm that contains the tree, already unifies the vision of a geometry that reaches widely across the most extreme scale shifts. The city that will come into being to house this "more than metaphorical" scheme will be the capital of the new country, and this societal inflection encodes

26 Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 131–32.

the multi-racial moment: the presence of a Black man and mind at the country's incubation, guiding the team of white surveyors in actualizing the plan. Wright's poems in this way often look to so-called margins for their guides, guardians, and figures, repositioning them as, correctly, foundational to any consideration of the concepts and histories under scrutiny. Soon the poem will make explicit the racial inequity, if not injustice, of Banneker's unmemorialized labor, and his exclusion from the dominant historical accounts of the city's, and nation's, creation. Adopting a documentary form and a shift of register, it extracts two complete paragraphs, with only the slightest of revision, from Banneker's letter to Thomas Jefferson from August 19, 1791.

But first, we note the second person – “you walk gravely [...] what you would see” – its mode of direct address speaking across the centuries, conjuring Banneker before us as listener. The “I” makes its entrance, bearing the gift of the “egg of the world” and other resonances from the Dogon.

Amma's plan consumes you,
 the prefigured man, Nommo, the son of God.
 I call you into this time,
 back to that spot,
 and read those prefigurations
 into your mind,
 and know it could not be strange to you
 to stand in the dark and emptiness
 of a city not your vision alone.

Now, I have searched the texts
 and forms of cities that burned,
 that decayed, or gave their children away, [...]

This “I”, beyond supplying the prefigurations, one imagines as a searcher, of texts and cities, and now of Washing-

ton, DC at night, questing not only for Banneker's pattern and scheme, his life-affirming labor ("holding what is most against it against itself [...] against death") but also for some connection, some "fit," to the fires and decay in those intervening years, of the forms of cities that "gave their children away." The "I" searches for origin and original flaw, where children connote future and, possibility, the tree that will grow from the seed. Can he pinpoint where this fledgling country went astray? Can he find the exact error encoded in the scheme that bequeathed such devastation?

Now, I am here in your city,
 trying to find that spot
 where the vibration starts.
 There must be some mistake.

The "I" speaks from, in one sense, a ruin, across the years to a "you" immersed in a construction site, a city coming into being. The reflective geometry of these two poles, as ends of an axis, speak in geographical terms to the form of L'Enfant's design for the city. In temporal terms, they bring to mind the observation by the land artist Robert Smithson in his 1967 essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey."

That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is – all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the "romantic ruin" because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built.²⁷

The poem brings these themes to a momentary restatement:

27 Originally published as Luc Sante, "Robert Smithson: The Monuments of Passaic," *Artforum* (December 1967): 52–57.

A city, like a life,
must be made in purity.

So they call you,
knowing you are intimate with stars,
to create this city, this body.
So they call you,
knowing you must purge the ground.

Then immediately, and without preamble, the poem presents the first of the two complete paragraphs from Banneker's 1791 plea to Thomas Jefferson for racial justice. Jefferson, the Secretary of State, had fifteen years prior, drafted the Declaration of Independence. Banneker included with his letter a handwritten manuscript of an Almanac for the upcoming year 1792 containing his ephemeris with his astronomical calculations. The Almanac and the inclusion supply the subject for Wright's poem "Benjamin Banneker Send His *Almanac* to Thomas Jefferson" which occurs next in the 1976 volume, and which we will speak of shortly. First, the poem "Benjamin Banneker Helps to Build a City" continues.

"Sir, Suffer me to recall to your mind that time, in which the arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted, with every powerful effort, in order to reduce you to a state of servitude: look back, I entreat you, on the variety of dangers to which you were exposed; reflect on that time, in which every human aid appeared unavailable, and in which even hope and fortitude wore the aspect of inability to the conflict, and you cannot but be led to a serious and grateful sense of your miraculous and providential preservation; you cannot but acknowledge, that the present freedom and tranquility which you enjoy you have mercifully received, and that it is the peculiar blessing of Heaven."

"Reflect on that time."

The spirits move, even
 in the events of men,
 hidden in a language
 that cannot hide it.
 You were never lost
 in the language of number alone:
 you were never lost
 to the seed vibrating alone;
 holding all contradictions within it.
 "Look back, I entreat you,"
 over your own painful escapes.

The technique of the extract doubled – as a historical document out of which the new framing has drawn a subterranean poetry – recalls Charles Reznikoff's mining of courtroom transcripts in *Testimony: The United States (1885–1915)*, *Recitative (1934–1979)*. In the late 1970s, Reznikoff's work gave Objectivist poetry its name as it reproduced the speech of the witness, whose voice, while striving for the objectivity of fact, rippled with emotion, restrained and implicit. As the first Banneker poem continues in the wake of the extract, it quotes two of the extract's lines a second time, reframing them. The voice modulates, retaining its fundamental character while navigating the shift from quoted extract to extrapolated lines that follow. The moment harkens to the pioneering poetry of Robert Hayden in works such as "Middle Passage," first published in 1945, and revised in 1966, whose opening lines present a micro-catalogue of poetic strategies that Wright will go on to develop into signatures, in themselves and in combination: bilingualism, listed names, vocabulary technical and exact, lyrical strophes, understated rhyme, quoted historical language, altered quotation (in Hayden's case from *The Tempest*), and finally invocational prayer-like speech.

Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,
Sharks following the moans the fever and the dying;
horror the corposant and compass rose.

Middle Passage:

voyage through death
to life upon these shores.

“10 April 1800–

Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says
their moaning is a prayer for death,
ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.
Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter
to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under.”

Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann:

Standing to America, bringing home
black gold, black ivory, black seed.

*Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,
of his bones New England pews are made,
those are altar lights that were his eyes.*

Jesus Saviour Pilot Me
Over Life's Tempestuous Sea

We pray thou wilt grant, O Lord,
safe passage to our vessels bringing
heathen souls unto Thy chastening.

Jesus Saviour²⁸

28 Robert Hayden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 48.

§ 11 confrontations: a note on voice

Regarding Hayden's landmark poem, Wright has written the following on the subject of voice:

Some of these voices may be exactly transcribed from historical record, but it does not matter if they are not. Hayden has entered the body and captured the voice, and the spirit. The voiceless are given voice, the dimensionless spirit is redeemed, through attention to language appropriate to the speaker.²⁹

Wright has in his own work, however, scrupulously distinguished between "voices [...] exactly transcribed from historical record" and those captured and reimagined as by entering the body; which is to say, outside of the techniques of "Middle Passage," the difference does matter. In fact, the metaphorization of the difference becomes one of Wright's subjects, perhaps most lucidly rendered in *Elaine's Book* (1988). This book-length suite of poems cycles through concepts of displacement and replacement and exile, in clustered subsets of poems with sub-themes in common, such as those regarding deities (e.g., "Hathor" and "Zapata and the Egúngún Mask"), landmarks (e.g., "The Lake in Central Park"), streets (e.g., "Ann Street" and "Cornelia Street"), cities (e.g., "Guadalajara," "Lisboa," and "Madrid"), flowers (e.g., "Orchids," "Passion Flower," and "Dandelion"), and finally five recapitulatory poems (e.g., *Desire's Persistence*). Interleaving each sub-series, Wright positions eleven extracts, quotations "transcribed from the historical record" like artifacts of language, each a voice, and each granted its own page. One, two, or three of these extract pages appear between the poems through the sequence of the book, structural

29 Jay Wright, "Desire's Design, Vision's Resonance," *Callaloo* 30 (1987): 13-28.

markers that continually disrupt and restart the flow. He gives all eleven of them the same title: "Confrontation."

We may read this shared, repeated title in two distinct ways. First, each extract has issued from, or records, a historical confrontation. One of the more prominent of them quotes a paragraph from a 1930 letter from Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin to Henry Nevis Russell.³⁰ Payne, an astronomer who in 1925 radically proposed that hydrogen and helium primarily constituted the substance of stars, detailed the four primary, human obstructions she had encountered over the past four years that accounted for her "very unhappy time at Harvard." The others, many of them more obscure and less substantial, capture a variation of a voice in confrontation, and each, in its own way and with its own inflection, takes a textual documentary approach to the book's themes of exile and displacement. As these extracts interject into the book, we may read how they inform and contrast with the poems against which they immediately juxtapose. We may read both extract and poem in dialogue with one another.

The idea of "Confrontation" strikes a second chord, one which we read in relation to the title word's eleven repetitions, more broadly informing how a collection of historical voices, lifted word-for-word and precisely positioned, confronts conventional ideas of poetry as a univocal testimony from an individual poet's subjectivity and experience. What is the nature of this confrontation? It suggests not only that this poet finds his voice reflected in other voices, in the voices of the historical record that accost him, and that he in turn allows to accost us, in his and then in our reading, but also that the pre-existing poetry of those voices, left intact, breaks a confrontational hole in the fabric of the book of poetry, subjecting it to the cracks and fissures that escape from

30 Jay Wright, *Elaine's Book* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1988), 40.

it and that reveal and insist upon its place within history. Each confrontation ruptures the poetic of the neighboring poem yet grants it the stabilizing resource of communal voices, living voices from the dead, that historical documents will always retain; the confrontation of the poem outside of the poem brought roughly into its orbit.

This second confrontation bifurcates the poet into two distinct minds, two divergent degrees of intelligence: the one who writes the poem as we have come to know it and read it, as a discrete, composed, expressive unit, and the other, an altogether different shade of being, which assembles the poems in sequence with their "Confrontation" extracts like an architect after the fact of the writing. The first instance conceives of the poet as writer, the second as reader. The doubling of the poet locates both poem and extract in a mutual past that they henceforth forever share, that they together bring into emergent existence, a past that they have now written.

§ Banneker 1: To run the lines (part two)

We may read the first Banneker poem's restatement of the two lines from the correspondence in many ways: as simple repetition for emphasis, as reconfigurations of the voice now addressed, as the poem addresses itself, not to Jefferson but recoiling back to Banneker, and as imperatives of the poem itself, as statements of its purpose: "Reflect on that time"; "Look back, I entreat you." This turning back, this retrospective, reflective view, we may consider a precondition of the quest for justice, that is, a retreat from the present for the sake of understanding. How did we get here? Why did our beautiful city, and with it our country, grow into this direction and form, or formlessness? As questions doubled from Banneker's language, they make their further claim regarding the intertwinement of his science and ethic: "You were

never lost in the language of number alone.”³¹ As such, the poem makes a claim to questions that Banneker first asked, that remain questions, from one who understood the link between freedom and the heavens, the divergent justice of the social and the scientific, sharing a source.

The quest for harmonious lines and plans circulates in involution from city to house, a loose sacred geometry of the body.

We know now, too, that the house
 must take the form of a man
 —warmth at his head, movement at his feet,
 his needs and his shrine at his hands.
 Image of shelter, image of man,
 pulled back into himself,
 into the seed before the movement,
 into the silence before the sound
 of movement, into stillness,
 which may be self-regard,
 or only stillness.

Recall your number.
 Recall your calculations,
 your sight, at night,
 into the secrets of stars.
 But still you must exorcise this ground.

Here the poem offers its second extract, another unbroken paragraph, from Banneker’s letter to Jefferson.

“Here was a time, in which your tender feelings for yourselves had engaged you thus to declare, you were then impressed with proper ideas of the great violation of liberty, and the free possession of those blessings, to which you were entitled

31 Quotations in this section drawn from Wright, “Benjamin Banneker Helps to Build a City” in *Soothsayers and Omens*, 22–26.

by nature; but, Sir, how pitiable is it to reflect, that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of Mankind, and of his equal and impartial distribution of those rights and privileges, which he hath conferred upon them, that you should at the same time counteract his mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren, under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should at the same time be found guilty of that most criminal act, which you professedly detested in others, with respect to yourselves."

The poem turns from this reasoned argument, turning in on itself in the reflection that Banneker asked of Jefferson, the recollection of potential and perfectibility, implicit in the stillness of the seed before movement.

Can we say now
that it is the god
who chains us to this place?
Is it this god
who requires the movement,
the absence of movement,
the prefigurations of movement
only under his control?

How pitiable it is to reflect
upon that god, without grace,
without the sense of that small
beginning movement,
where even the god
becomes another and not himself,
himself and not another.

Here it strikes a note of theodicy. What if the deterioration of the great city and its descent into flames of destruction in the centuries ahead did not result at all from a flaw at the point of origin? What if the lines of the city

succeeded in tracing the stars? What if this injustice is the only perfection possible? Theodicy means a questioning of the vindication of divine goodness and providence under the shadow of evil acts. *Théodicée*, by Leibniz (1710) introduced this formulation: *theos* "god" + *dikē* "justice." Can one truly justify "groaning captivity and cruel oppression" by claiming the world as optimal among all possible worlds? What sort of deities preside over a world so claimed? What decrepit god reigns over such a barren landscape? What poverty of soul "without grace" belittles the existence of the other, denying "that small beginning movement," that syllepsis and polysemy, that brings two out of one? The second Banneker poem will pick up the unfinished thread of this idea. For now this poem turns its mind back to the city plan and its promise of freedom.

You sit in contemplation,
 moving from line to line,
 struggling for a city
 free of that criminal act,
 free of anything but the small,
 imperceptible act, which itself becomes free.
 Free. Free. How will the lines fall
 into this configuration?
 How will you clear this uneasiness,
 posting your calculations and forecasts
 into a world you yourself cannot enter?
 Uneasy, at night,
 you follow stars and lines to their limits,
 sure of yourself, sure of the harmony
 of everything, and yet you moan
 for the lost harmony, the crack in the universe.

Lyn Hejinian's comment from her *Line* serves to bring us back to the operation of this poem, its mode of surveying how exactly "Benjamin Banneker Helps to Build a City": "But if the line is a starting place of and within the work,

it is also its actual achievement – it provides for both the instigation of an idea and its realization."³²

Your twin, I search it out,
and call you back;
your twin, I invoke
the descent of Nommo.

This appeal to Dogon cosmology self-identifies the "I" narrator as the twin of the excluded "you" addressee. The invocation of the Nommo twin-birth primordial water deities both harkens to myths of creation and offers an affirmation of the time-delayed twin, the parallel entity, sharing location but temporally displaced. The observing, narrating "I" has not removed himself from the entangled web of history and geometry but has rather accepted his own entanglement, by way of his twinship with Banneker in the poem's widening gesture of radical inclusion. The relation of twinship that the Dogon Nommo allow fastens the "I" to the "you" in a harmonic arrangement, a prefigured vibration, facilitating and formulating the poem's set of perceptions and questions, through inter-generational communication. Ancestor and descendant commune, not through bloodline but as two figures enfolded in the same event of perception, twins reflected, as reflections in water, and reflecting on the questions they share. The two strike a chord like an instrumental duet. The nocturnal city provides the condition in which the individual "I" realizes itself as the subjective determination of a perspective, brought to clarity by the surveyor's theodolite. These lines set up the poem's conclusion, a recapitulation, a loop back to the start, and a recognition of powers beyond the human in the universe.

32 Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 132.

I say your vision goes as far as this.
 And so you, Benjamin Banneker,
 walk gravely along these lines,
 the city a star, a body,
 the seed vibrating within you,
 and vibrating still,
 beyond your power,
 and mine.

§ Banneker 2: Losing the relations

A longer passage from *A Sketch of the Life of Benjamin Banneker* elucidates the background for the second of the pair of poems, "Benjamin Banneker Sends His *Almanac* to Thomas Jefferson."

Banneker completed and published his first *Almanac* in 1792. He sent a copy in his own hand-writing to Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State, accompanied by a letter in which he feelingly alludes to the degradation of his own people. The reply of the Secretary was well calculated to arouse ennobling feelings in the breast of his humble correspondent, for he assures him, "I have taken the liberty of sending your *Almanac* to M. de Condorcet, Secretary of the Academy of Sciences at Paris, and member of the Philanthropic Society; because I considered it a document to which your whole color had a right for their justification against the doubts which have been entertained of them." – Jefferson, at the same time, expressed sentiments involving a problem, that may well demand the serious consideration of the thoughtful legislator, the metaphysician and the philanthropist; – which still remains to be wrought out, and demonstrated by the text of experiment, viz. "Whether there has been given to our black brethren," as he says, "talents equal to the

other colors of men, and that the appearance of a want of them, is owing only to the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and in America?"

The decision respecting the capacity of the African mind, is still left with succeeding generations. – From a future so far removed from us, we cannot overhear the verdict.³³

Wright's poem³⁴ seems to keep the mixed advent of Jefferson's response in mind, although it begins with Banneker, once again the addressee, preparing his correspondence.

Old now,
 your eyes nearly blank
 from plotting the light's
 movement over the years,
 you clean your *Almanac*
 and place it next
 to the heart of this letter.
 I have you in mind,
 giving a final brush and twist
 to the difficult pages,
 staring down the shape of the numbers
 as though you would find a flaw
 in their forms.

But some original flaw is less the subject of this poem than the human relations, and the power relations, revealed by this historic exchange. The narrating "I" returns, this time at more of a remove.

33 Banneker, *A Sketch of the Life of Benjamin Banneker*, 12–13.

34 Quotations in this section drawn from Wright, "Benjamin Banneker Send His Almanac to Thomas Jefferson" in *Soothsayers and Omens*, 26–28.

At night,
 the stars submit themselves
 to the remembered way you turn them;
 the moon gloats under your attention.
 I, who know so little of stars,
 whose only acquaintance with the moon
 is to read a myth, or to listen
 to the surge
 of songs the women know,
 sit in your marvelous reading
 of all movement,
 of all relations.

We may note the “I” in this early phase of an apprenticeship, who will go on to speak of the moon and stars in ever more complex ways through the years, as Wright’s poetry evolves, perhaps, we could say, even approaching Banneker’s “marvelous reading of all relations.” Still, the relations under examination here remain more earth-bound.

So you look into what we see
 yet cannot see,
 and shape and take a language
 to give form to one or the other,
 believing no form will escape,
 no movement appear, nor stop,
 without explanation,
 believing no reason is only reason,
 nor without reason.
 I read all of this into your task,
 all of this into the uneasy
 reproof of your letter.

Banneker enclosed the *Almanac* with the letter, a potent pair of contrasting texts that take two approaches to the same argument against slavery – celestial pattern and

terrestrial reason. Inequality does not stand up to the science of the mind, nor to the appeals of the heart.

There are silences
 that no perfect number can retrieve,
 omissions no perfect line could catch.
 How could a man but challenge God's
 impartial distributions?
 How could a man sit among
 the free and ordered movements
 of stars, and waters, beasts and birds,
 each movement seen and accounted for,
 and not know God jealous,
 and not know that he himself must be?

One unanticipated obstacle looms, however, to "free and ordered movements" as Banneker sees them potentially transposed from the *Almanac* to the practice of life in the new America. This is the simplest obstacle of all, "the one thing that will not reveal itself," that is, *difference*.

So you go over the pages again,
 looking for the one thing
 that will not reveal itself,
 judging what you have received,
 what you have shaped,
 believing it cannot be strange
 to the man you address.
 But you are strange to him
 —your skin, your tongue,
 the movement of your body,
 even your mysterious ways with stars.

Jefferson's reply reveals the aporia in the relations between the two men, the unbridgeable gaps of color ("your skin"), language ("your tongue"), physicality ("the movement of your body"), and even practices of the same arts

and sciences (“your mysterious ways with stars”), ultimately gaps of power and of self-determination. What Banneker understands as the objectivity of the ephemeris, Jefferson reads as one man’s vision, specifically one Black man’s desire. The closure of identity reduces the complex relations of difference, eclipsing the wealth of science with the lure of specimen.

Your letter turns on what the man knows,
 on what God, you think, would have us know.
 All stars will forever move under your gaze,
 truthfully, leading you from line to line,
 from number to number, from truth to truth,
 while the man will read your soul’s desire,
 searcher, searching yourself,
 losing the relations.

We read the poem’s final sentence this way. That we can understand Jefferson’s justification for the continued abuses of slavery only as “losing the relations,” losing the fact of differential relations, between lines, numbers, and truths, ultimately between living beings; losing those harmonic relations that encode the logic of the universe as all human knowledge has come to reveal it.

§ Banneker 3: A clock of his own construction

We observe one major change to Wright’s approach over the years since the 1976 of these two poems: the omission of Jeffersons from the pantheon of gathered historical figures (as we find, for example, in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*). Such antagonists, such paragons of injustice and hypocrisy, such human blockages, no longer share the stage. Their lost relations fade away altogether in the presence of figures of pure affirmation, albeit allowing for the challenge of dissonance and disharmony in collective

assembly; these discords in themselves offering forms of Wright-eous affirmation, in pursuit of ever more complex harmonies, contributing to the human understanding of the vast web of the universe. The gathered figures populate the weave with their radiant thought and their immutable presence.

Twenty-four years after the Banneker poems, we find the motifs returning in the poem with perhaps the longest unbroken lines of any in Wright's vast collection of work, "The Metaphysics of Sorrow." This poem appears in *Transformations*, the suite of thirty-three new poems that concludes the immense volume titled *Transfigurations*, published by Louisiana State University Press in 2000, collecting the totality of Wright's first six books. The poem attunes itself to the melancholy guidance of aspen trees in autumn.

Fix, in the morning's true measure, the spray of old
light in the aspens.
Line upon line of a gold so ensnaring might lead her
soul astray.³⁵

Like Banneker's lines, these lines, of the poem and the trees, double in purpose between the concrete and the eternal but with an entirely personal inflection and sensual magnetism.

Darkness will ripen, the arché of evening will surface
and be spent.
What does it mean to embrace the crux of the moon
and to haunt fens
festive with promised regret, and why dance in the
juniper, display

35 Jay Wright, *Transfigurations: Collected Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018), 600.

thirst for disguise, and extensive resilience for grace?
 But my thought mends
 nothing of value, proposes no arrow of time, nor the
 consent
 given to bodies affected by force and a singular es-
 cape.³⁶

As the *archē* (ἀρχή), the source, of the evening makes it-
 self known, the poem wonders what will come of this
 quest to recognize one's noblest aspirations in the world
 as one finds it. In this passing of the light, the speaker
 understands the inability of their thought to mend, to
 propose, or to consent.

How can we measure the light in a name that will fit,
 or go breath deep
 into the substance of rivers that run undisturbed by
 the light's shape?
 How can we measure the limits of virtue, the cogni-
 tive mask set
 whirling in space, unresponsive to virtue or limits, an
 aspen
 sorrow that none can describe, the extrinsic distress
 of a fixed star?³⁷

The feeling of the world, with its gold willow and aspen,
 the lodestar with its eternal guiding position, always over-
 flow with affect, with inexplicable emotion. It is in and
 through these images that we come to know ourselves,
 in them where we find our souls, so easily led astray, in-
 vested as we are in the impossible quest to "measure the
 light in a name that will fit."

We conclude these lines of thought with one final
 image: Benjamin Banneker's hand-constructed wooden

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

clock. The clock does not appear in the poems, nor does it receive any direct mention by Wright. Still, we believe that it profoundly informs Wright's work. We extracted here every mention of the clock from the *Sketch of the Life* pamphlet. A meandering sentence on pages 5 and 6 introduces it as a nexus of technology, race, geography, and the animal frontier.

His *wooden clock*, afterwards his only time piece, was his greatest mechanical achievement, and was completed long previous to 1772; for, on the emigration of some families from Pennsylvania to his neighborhood during that year, it was considered from the regularity of its movements, and also from being the unassisted production of a black man, one of the curiosities of that wild region, until recently a wilderness, where, amid the thick forests which shaded the banks of the Patapsco River, the howl of the wolf, and the cry of the panther and of the wild cat, nightly disturbed the repose of the settler in his cabin on the adjacent hills.³⁸

The wooden clock makes a second appearance on pages 9 and 10, described by a visitor to Banneker's cabin, and remembered here by the visitor's son. This episode relates the hand-made timepiece's remarkable origin.

Banneker who was now fifty-eight years of age had, from his uncommon circumstances, become quite celebrated, and no strangers who visited his neighborhood, were willing to depart without conversing with him, or visiting his cottage. It was in this retired abode that the writer's mother, accompanied by several other friends, paid him a visit in 1790. So closely was his mind occupied, that they entered his door, which stood wide open, without being perceived. Immediately on ob-

38 Banneker, *A Sketch of the Life of Benjamin Banneker*, 5–6.

serving them he arose, and received them with great courtesy. He alluded to his love of astronomy and his deep interest in mathematical pursuits, and regretted his slow progress therein, from the laborious nature of his agricultural engagements, which obliged him to spend a great part of his time in the fields. Whilst they were conversing his clock struck the hour, and at their request he gave an interesting account of its construction. With his imperfect tools, and with no other model than a borrowed watch, it had cost him long and patient labor to perfect it, to make the variation necessary to cause it to strike the hours, and produce a concert of correct action between the hour, the minute, and the second machinery. He confessed that its regularity in pointing out the progress of time had amply rewarded all his pains in its construction.³⁹

Another visitor, quoted on page 14, notes the wooden clock.

We found the venerable star-gazer under a wide spreading pear tree, laden with delicious fruit; he came forward to meet us, and bade us welcome to his lowly dwelling. It was built of logs, one story in height, and was surrounded by an orchard. In one corner of the room, was suspended a clock of his own construction, which was a true herald of departing hours.⁴⁰

Consider the clock “more than metaphorical,” a replica, enlarged, modeled from a prototype “borrowed watch,” crafted of wood available locally. Its image and its method propose a mode of understanding through remaking. The wooden clock reconfigures the watch, reworking every gear, dial, tapered pin, duplicating every movement.

39 *Ibid.*, 9–10.

40 *Ibid.*, 14.

It transposes from old world to new. "A true herald" of the relations that it modulates, as well as of "departing hours," an extraordinary time-delayed twin, descended of silver, and grounded anew in humble, ordinary materials, repository of the divine craft of a gifted human.

Another memorable clock makes an appearance in the 1983 interview with Wright conducted by Charles H. Rowell, which opens:

Poetry, if I may rearrange some bones for a moment, does deduce one function from another. In recent years, I've been energized by Samuel Akpabot's statement that "the African lives in music and in number."⁴¹

Wright goes on to speak of Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit missionary who lived in China from 1583 to 1610, who procured a clock in Chao-ch'ing Province for the prefect, Wang Van. Ricci's associate, Ruggieri, went to Macao to raise money and to buy a clock. When Ruggieri couldn't turn up the money, he decided to send the best clockmaker in Macao to Ricci in Chao-ch'ing. The man who agreed to go was, according to Ricci, "a black from the Canary Islands who had lived in India." Wright continues:

Now, Spence later refers to the man as Indian, but Ricci's formulation suggests that the man was what he would understand to be a black. What about that black man? A craftsman. Listen to Ellison on black African-Americans' intellectual and technical capabilities, and on their desires to work, to live, and to be in the world that surrounds them.⁴²

41 Charles H. Rowell, "'The Unraveling of The Egg': An Interview with Jay Wright," *Callaloo* 19, "Jay Wright: A Special Issue" (Autumn 1983): 3-15.

42 *Ibid.*, 12.

We return to Banneker. Two passages detail what is known about his death at the age of 73 and make one final mention of the wooden clock in the extraordinary funeral events.

Being without any data for the purpose, we cannot speak with certainty of the year when Banneker's death took place, but believe it was 1804.⁴³

He was buried two days afterwards; and, whilst the last duties were performing at the grave, his house took fire, and burnt so rapidly nothing could be saved! His clock, and every other specimen of his ingenuity or scholarship, were consumed in flames!⁴⁴

§ Banneker epilogue: The prime number conundrum of the cicada

Barber and Nkwanta describe the blaze, in terms less indirect than "his house took fire":

Someone had set the cabin afire. It burned to the ground with valuable documents and artifacts inside. Only a small number of papers were saved. Friends had secured a few of his other written works and documents in their home.⁴⁵

Those written works include a document on Banneker's study of the cicada. Barber and Nkwanta claim that Banneker's *Astronomical Journal* as well as other more recent writings provide evidence that he is among the first

43 Banneker, *A Sketch of the Life of Benjamin Banneker*, 17.

44 *Ibid.*, 18.

45 Barber and Nkwanta, "Benjamin Banneker's Original Handwritten Document," 112.

American scientists to document and record chronological information of the seventeen-year cycle of the periodic *Magicalicada-Brood X*, also known as the *Tibicina septendecim* cicada.

Three distinct species of cicadas dwell in the eastern United States; all spend most of their life cycle underground in nymphal stages. They live for only a few days as adults above ground. They each have almost perfectly synchronized thirteen- or seventeen-year periodic emergences.

Do cicadas have an innate understanding of prime numbers? Well after Banneker's lifetime, mathematical population theorists have proposed two major hypotheses to explain why cicadas evolved prime periodicity. The first involves an evolutionary strategy to avoid parasites. If the life cycle appears in prime numbers, it is highly unlikely that the parasites would match it. The second hypothesis is that prime periodicities are selected to avoid co-emergence and hybridization with periodical cicadas with different periods. That is, the thirteen- and seventeen-year cicada periodicities would only converge at most every 221 years. Neither of these hypotheses, however, directly explains why precisely 13 and 17 would be the most desirable of prime numbers, thus the prime number conundrum of the cicada lives on.

In any event, Banneker observed, examined, and documented the recurrence and behavior of the cicada through four seventeen-year life cycles. Notably, he was born in a brood year, thus counted his years of age as coincident with the insect's periodicity, observing them for the first time at the age of 17 in 1749, then for a second time in 1766 at the age of 34, a third time in 1783 at the age of 51, and finally a fourth time at the age of 68 in the year 1800. Barber and Nkwanta provide the verbatim transcription of Banneker's notebook page on the subject, written apparently after the third cycle and before the fourth, which it predicts.

The first great Locust year that I can Remember was 1749. I was then about Seventeen years of age when thousands of them came and was creeping up the trees and bushes, I then imagined they came to eat and destroy the fruit of the Earth, and would occasion a famine in the land. I therefore began to kill and destroy them, but soon saw that my labor was in vain, therefore gave over my pretension. Again in the year 1766, which is Seventeen years after the first appearance, they made a Second, and appeared to me to be full as numerous as the first. I then, being about thirty-four years of age had more sense than to endeavor to destroy them, knowing they were not so pernicious to the fruit of the Earth as I did imagine they would be. Again in the year 1783 which was Seventeen years since their second appearance to me, they made their third; and they may be expected again in the year 1800, which is Seventeen years since their third appearance to me. So that if I may venture So to express it, their periodical return is Seventeen years, but they, like the Comets, make but a short stay with us – The female has a Sting in her tail as sharp and hard as a thorn, with which she perforates the branches of the trees, and in them holes lays eggs. The branch soon dies and fall, then the egg by some Occult cause immerges a great depth into the earth and there continues for the Space of Seventeen years as aforesaid.⁴⁶

Here one last time in our consideration the remarkable naturalist observes the symmetry and resonance between the terrestrial and the celestial; he notes the resemblance between cicada and comet. Both share a “periodical return” and “make but a short stay with us.” Perhaps we may in the end observe in Banneker the qualities of a proto-Pragmatist, who in importing his Dogon

46 Ibid., 116.

sensibilities to the New World cautioned us to submit the poetics of theory to the unforgiving tests of practice, in experience and the observed structural measures of the physical world. We may certainly suggest that Wright has adopted and upgraded a version of this continual yoking of mind and matter, of feeling and form, a hesitation that he will phrase as a query in *The Prime Anniversary*:

Was it Ptolemy who advised us to beware
of a theoretical grasp without a fair
symmetry of practice, most rigorous and spare?⁴⁷

§ Power, craft, fit

It is possible to look back over the ground we have traveled in this chapter and to look forward to our engagement with geometry in chapter 6 by thinking of craft.

As an English noun, the "craft" calls back to Old English and Old German words *cræft* and *Kraft*, both of which referred to "power" as in physical strength, mental acumen, and ability. Eventually, the meaning of the word begins to signify "trade" and "handicraft," insofar as a craft is the result of a special skill. Alfred North Whitehead writes of craft as an aspect of freedom, distinguishing it from profession, and understanding it, in a minor key, as avocation.

The antithesis to a profession is an avocation based upon customary activities and modified by the trial and error of individual practice. Such an avocation is a Craft. [...] The ancient civilizations were dominated by crafts. Modern life ever to a greater extent is grouping itself into professions. Thus ancient society was a coordination of crafts for the instinctive purpose of

47 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 5.

communal life, whereas modern society is a coordination of professions. Without question the distinction between crafts and professions is not clear-cut. In all stages of civilization, crafts are shot through and through with flashes of constructive understanding, and professions are based on inherited procedures.⁴⁸

Wright lends the memorable word a distinctly American inflection in an early passage from *Disorientations: Groundings*.

In these Prairie Provinces,
 beaver structures an avocation
 that will never lend itself to any deductive
 abstraction, or ever get used to the hymnal
 feel embodied in muskets, copper kettles,
 fishhooks and brandy.⁴⁹

Intriguingly, the word craft's reach expands by the late-seventeenth century to include "small boat." This etymological family suggests that small boats, while certainly a result of a specific kind of skill accompanying seamanship, also manifest power, perhaps in the way that small boats baffle the binary of land and sea through their deft design, resulting from mental acumen, and rugged materiality, manifested in the physical strength of the boat's material. Poet and translator Rosmarie Waldrop, drawing together Augustine and Charles Olsen, unfolds this poetics of the boat.

"Place, there is none. We go forward and backward, and there is no place," says Saint Augustine. We go forward

48 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Adventure of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 57.

49 Jay Wright, *Disorientations: Groundings* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2013), 6–7.

and backward like a boat, which according to Olsen, is the first recorded sign for *self*.⁵⁰

Banneker's clock tells of similar powers of craft. As a sum of many parts, the clock became, in Philolaus' terms, a Limiter that could house the Unlimited of time. Unlike the κλεψύδρα (*klepsydra*, water clock, literally "water thief") of Ancient Greece, which measured time by a regulated flow of water into and out of a vessel, Banneker's clock sought to harmonize, or accord with, the movement of the stars. In one witness's words, Banneker was able to whittle wood to "produce a concert of correct action between the hour, the minute, and the second machinery." This "concert," a harmony of wooden material and celestial movement, served as a "herald of departing hours," that is, it served to "sound the praises" of time's ceaseless flow. The fit of wooden pieces into the harmonious shape of a completed clock, then, surfed that flow not unlike how a small boat surfs upon the waves of sea.

Wright's poetic fits of harmony mimic the precise clockwork of Banneker's craft. In addition to sounding the praises of time's flow, these fits entwine αἴσθησις and entanglement. Much like the figure of the Piper in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, Wright's senses perceive an underlying geometry of the world. This perception is the world's aesthetic. Despite the many unique, molar appearances of things, people, ideas, and places, the molecular structures of these appearances yield symmetries between seemingly distinct things, symmetries that we might also call rhythms. For Wright, the fit of heterogeneous spatialities and divergent temporalities speak out in a geometry that he discerns through the shape of cosmological frameworks, mythopoetic imagery, and lin-

50 Rosmarie Waldrop, "The Ground Is the Only Figure," in *Dissonance (if you are interested)* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 232.

guistic cadence. Unlike Ancient Greek mathematicians, Wright doesn't leave us at-a-glance diagrams that index these fits; instead, he registers his findings in the sound and structures of his poems and the method of his philosophical examinations.

Wright's activity is not simply concerned with the fit of aesthetic experiences. He is concerned ultimately with the fit of these experiences and the material entanglement of elements in the world in which we live. That is, Wright is concerned with determining whether the perception of symmetrical rhythms actually taps the perceiver into the entangled togetherness of all matter. The rhythms *seem* to harmonize with nature. They seem to be discovered rather than produced. But Wright understands that such a semblance may be the result of a well-designed fiction that, while ostensibly objective and devoid of artificial interference, produces an array of findings in advance of the experiment. The examination that transpires in *Tuning*, however, turns from doubt to affirmation. The rhythms and fits performed by scientists, artists, and soothsayers alike are, in other words, craft. They express the power of the Unlimiteds through various shapes and meters. Also a craft, Wright's "fit" between aesthetics and entanglement, emerges thusly, as the underlying *poetics* of the fitting, which is to say the ongoing process of writing (and wrighting) the harmony of the world.

In Chapter 6, en route to Wright's play *The Geometry of Rhythm*, we will study the geometry of this harmony, thereby participating in the mathematical substructure of what we have named here "fits." As with Banneker's mathematics, hewn from running the lines that were first derived from the correspondences between terrestrial promontories and celestial bodies, Wright's math is a body of rigorous calculations produced through a life of observation, participation, and work. This math reveals profound symmetries between human bodies, musical

sound, the movement of the planets, and atomic assemblages, and therefore the toil upon the steep terrain is ameliorated by the gradual unfolding of a point of view onto a brilliant light.

First, however, we linger on the performance of reading and reading anew.

Reading as $n+1$: Staging *The Three Matadores*

§ Problems of reading in the expanded field

In 2017, the performance company *Every house has a door* premiered a staging of a complete short play that appears embedded in Jay Wright's book-length poem *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*.¹ Lin Hixson directed the performance. We were intimately involved with this production from its beginning. The devising process, typical of *Every house*, lasted roughly two years. This chapter focuses on the experiences that unfolded from those processes, in particular the discovery of rehearsal as a form of reading, of the possibility of rereading.

This play, involving and concerning three bullfighters who appear as apparitions of a sort to the narrator of the poetry, which in *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* takes the form of an extended first-person monologue, necessitated the establishment of certain dramaturgical preconditions, most directly some understanding of the bullfight in relation to the rest of the book-length poem.

1 Jay Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive, 2008).

The long, patient work of devising the performance in rehearsal devoted much of its time to such questions. Scottish writer A.L. Kennedy, in her memorable study *On Bullfighting*, describes “a potentially anarchic, atheistic ritual.”² With cautious awareness of our own engagement of abstraction, we question further the meanings of bullfights invoked as a ritual in the Americas rather than in Spain. Gertrude Stein wrote from a position that allowed her to address this difference directly.

She always says that americans can understand spaniards. That they are the only two western nations that can realize abstraction. That in americans it expresses itself by disembodiedness, in literature and machinery, in Spain by ritual so abstract that it does not connect itself with anything but ritual.³

Stein’s provocation recalls Wright’s statement in his 1983 interview with Charles H. Rowell, which further considers this notion of abstraction as cultural.

Poetry, if I may rearrange some bones for a moment, does deduce one function from another. In recent years, I’ve been energized by Samuel Akpabot’s statement that “the African lives in music and in number.”

Following our previous chapter centered on the word “fit,” and with these measured critiques of abstraction in mind, we turn to the theater now as that forum for the creation of experience. Wright’s rendering of the three *matadores*⁴ event in the form of a play, adhering to the

2 A.L. Kennedy, *On Bullfighting* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 86.

3 Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Arrow Books, 1960), 95.

4 In our correspondence with Jay Wright regarding the play, he unfailingly wrote the word *matadores*. *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* also employs this spelling. We take it to be an archaic form

textual conventions of drama and the stage, draws a parallel between the bullfight's ritual, perhaps any ritual, or even, to use Stein's formulation, "ritual so abstract that it does not connect itself with anything but ritual" and theater, through the implicit forms shared by the two modalities, play and bullfight. That is to say, after Gilles Deleuze, "a veritable *theatre* of metamorphosis and permutations. A theatre where nothing is fixed [...] The work of art leaves the domain of representation in order to become 'experience.'"⁵ Rehearsals seek to transform, or transport, the representations of writing to the realm of experience, fitting the language to the container of the room in which it springs to life, to craft out of the word an auditory experience, a result of an abstracted form of construction. Yet while exceeding representation, the experience has a beginning always. The performance aggregates a set of direct forms and figures, perhaps dramaturgical in nature, from which the experience commences, and which propels it into a bounded realm of experience. The forms in this case include those of the bullfight, its temporality, its architecture, its storied and violent history; and the figures include audience, bullfighter, and bull.

§

The literary world has only begun to recognize Wright's wealth of unproduced plays. In fact his first noted publication appeared in 1968 under the title of *Balloons: A Comedy in One Act*. *Callaloo* journal has published his plays *Love's Equations* (Autumn 1983, no. 19) and *Daughters of the Water* (Spring 1987, no. 31). As we will note in chapter 6, a

of Spanish, and we have adopted it here for every reference to the bullfighters in the play.

- 5 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 56.

two-person play titled *The Geometry of Rhythm* constitutes the second half of the 2019 book *The Prime Anniversary*. Many more exist in unpublished form.⁶ The *Every house* production of the script that appears within *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, which we have come to refer to with the identifying title of *The Three Matadores*, marked the beginning of our recognition of Wright's theater writing, and a set of discoveries, posed here as questions or problems, regarding the relation between the plays and the poetry.

As a result of these questions, the performance of *The Three Matadores* did not present only the play. It included the recitation of several pages of the poem that envelopes the play – pages that immediately precede and follow it. Although the play appears complete within the poem of the book, one cannot distinguish the two in such a cursory manner. A reader identifies the play through its conventions of stage directions and dialogue between three bullfighters, identified as M_1 , M_2 , and M_3 . However, the poem of *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* takes the form of a monologue, and its consistent voice interjects itself into the play, interrupting and responding to the action, seeming to speak in a backstage register, as from the quiet unconscious of the action that unfolds. This necessitated, in the staging, framing the play within the surrounding pages of the poem out of which it emerges. The first question, then, presented itself: what is the play and what is the poem?

Other questions followed. How does one read Wright's long poems? Unlike a book-length series, unified in concept, such as *The Double Invention of Komo*, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* appears as a single long poem, unbroken by sections, its structural flow contravened only by the play, which arrives with its own internal structure.

6 See the forthcoming *Selected Plays of Jay Wright*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Chicago: Kenning Editions and *Every house has a door*, forthcoming).

Other such long poems appear in Wright's work, such as "The Anti-Fabliau of Saturnino Orestes 'Minnie' Miñoso," a poem of twenty-one pages, forty stanzas, 806 lines in total, in the *Transformations* collection of 2000. May we consider the long poem a form in itself, distinct from the many forms for which Wright has demonstrated his mastery, such as sonnet, ode, and seguidilla? Does it differ from shorter poems and forms not only in quantity, but also in quality? What structural elements does it bring into play? How might a reader approach the long poem? How does one read it?

A third question has haunted us in writing this book, and *The Three Matadores* forced its confrontation: what precipitated the disappearance of the author's commentary on the poems? Detailed notes on the poems had appeared in the form of afterwards in first editions of *Dimensions of History* (1976) and *The Double Invention of Komo* (1980). They last appear in *Explications/Interpretations* (1984). Why did they cease after that? In the performance's world of the stage, this question takes on a dramaturgical inflection. To what extent does sharing contextual information with an audience enhance the enjoyment and appreciation of the play? To what extent does uncovering such contextual information define reading? That is to say, the context allows the signs through which the writing speaks to appear, a revelation of their full force and amplitude.

We begin to consider these problems (we use "problem" in the generative sense; a problem, a necessity of creation) by examining one moment, and one set of lines, from the play.

M₁: Not until I lead.

M₃: Lead, lead.

Who goes first?

Napoleon goes first.

M₁: Spitefulness. Envy.

M₃: Not at all.
 Cuando la paloma quiere ser
 cigüeña.⁷

§ Strategies of staging

During early rehearsals, after initial casting about for the approach to staging that would best suit Wright's language and composition, Hixson settled on a mode of recitation of every word – poetry, dialogue, and stage directions – from the performers seated at a long table. After separating the text into its divisible structural units, the director deployed a strategy of performers reciting one unit of the text, then following it with the “acting out” of what had just been recited. The performers would rise from the table and proceed to the open arena area of the stage, conceived as a circle bisected by the line of the table. This circular area derived from the bullring, with the table cutting across it at an obtuse angle like an intervention from another dimension. The doubling of every moment – hearing it first, then seeing it – gave the audience and listener more time with the words, decelerating the pace of theatrical progression, holding each moment to its completion before moving on to the next. The three performers playing the *matadores* shouted their lines, with ample pauses between each statement, as if to be heard by one another over the imaginary sound of the crowd in the bullring. In turn, the three performers spoke the stage directions into a microphone. The narrator, the fourth performer, spoke the poetry lines into a second microphone. In contrast to the shouted dialogue, the amplification produced that intimate sense of a voice inside the head of the listener. Both vocal qualities anni-

7 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 60–61.

hilated any facile tone of the poetic, rendering the words at a maximum remove from the feeling of a *poetry reading*.

None of the performers, apparently, recited memorized lines. Instead, they all read from scripts in black binders, somewhat like musical scores, with straightforward, yet considered, choreographed moments of page-turning. The apparent avoidance of memorization, while in one sense undercutting the possibility of theatricalization, staged a presentation of reading, reminiscent of a chamber music concert. These relatively simple solutions to staging, physically and sonically, came about after months of trial and error. These months were a kind of blessing, a gift of rehearsal as reading – if not re-reading, at least of reading and reading again – which presents itself as the ideal approach to the long poems: communal immersion in the text over time. (What does it mean to read Wright “again”?)

After the discovery of this approach to staging the pages of the play, there followed the discovery of necessary backtracking. The image presented itself of building steps up to the high platform of the *Matadores* text. There would be as many steps as there were performers, four, each step preceding the play and setting an element of context, attuning the listener, in preparation for the performance, “before” the performance, in a vernacular and casual mode.⁸ The performance could then start at zero; that is, the place where the audience is upon entry, gathering and focusing their scattered energies and concerns. Each step would add one incremental concept to the proceedings. Each consecutive step would also become more performance-like than the previous. In the end, the play

8 The four performers also contributed to the devising of the performance: Sebastián Calderón Bentin as M₁, Taisha Pagget and later Anna-Martine Whitehead as M₂, Stephen Fiehn as M₃, and Tim Kinsella as the narrator.

would commence seamlessly out of the four preliminary solos.

We will not work through every aspect of the production here.⁹ We will concentrate on the first solo in some detail, since it presented three interrelated ideas: the un-attributed quotation of Federico García Lorca, the alteration of that quotation, and the multi-linguistic nature of the *Three Matadores*.

§ Revelations of context 1: *When the dove wants to be a stork*

The first performer enters and takes a seat behind a music stand with two pages on it, and a microphone on a stand. He recites the following.

Welcome everyone, thank you for coming. My name is Sebastián Calderón Bentin and I play Matador 1 in *The Three Matadores*, a short play by the contemporary American poet Jay Wright. We will present *The Three Matadores* about thirty-five minutes from now. Before that, each of the four performers will offer a solo by way of introduction. By that I mean introducing ourselves as well as introducing one aspect of the play.

I will begin by sharing with you one of the sources for *The Three Matadores*, a poem by the Spanish writer Federico García Lorca. Lorca's poem is titled, "Son de Negros en Cuba," which translates as "The Black Son in Cuba," "son" meaning a kind of music beat or rhythm.

9 We recommend two texts to the reader: Will Daddario, *Time, Space, and Matter in Jay Wright's The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* (Chicago: *Every house has a door*, 2017), and Will Daddario, "Concentrated, Polysemous, Literary Act': *Every house has a door* Reads Jay Wright's 'Three Matadores' Play," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 28, no. 2 (2018): 179–95.

There are two lines from this poem that appear in *The Three Matadores*. The first line that appears is, “I have always said that I would go to Santiago in a coach of black water.” A version of this line appears twice in Lorca’s poem. Lorca’s poem begins:

Quando llegue la luna llena
 iré a Santiago de Cuba,
 iré a Santiago,
 en un coche de agua negra.

Later, the line returns in shortened form.

Siempre he dicho que yo iría a Santiago
 en un coche de agua negra.

Jay Wright quotes this second occurrence of the line. The second line from the poem that appears in *The Three Matadores* is,

Quando la palma quiere ser cigüeña.

“When the palm wants to be a stork.” However, in the *Three Matadores* play, the line appears as,

Quando la paloma quiere ser cigüeña.

“When the dove wants to be a stork.” I will now read the poem in full in Spanish, and then I will read it in our English translation.¹⁰

This first dramaturgical note focuses on Wright’s technique of the altered quotation, in this case across lan-

10 Performance text courtesy of *Every house has a door*. Federico García Lorca, *Poet in New York*, trans. Pablo Medina and Mark Statman, bilingual edn. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 174.

(Three matadores, dressed in their trajes de luces, approach in single file. [...])¹¹

§ *In a coach of black water: A note on exile*

Lorca wrote the poems of *Poeta en Nueva York* during his visit to America in 1929 and 1930. Most of this time he spent in New York at the invitation of Columbia University. Before returning to Spain, he travelled to Cuba where he wrote “Son de negros en Cuba,” also included in the volume. General Francisco Franco, having begun his rise through the ranks of the Spanish military, had by 1930 obtained the position of the director of the General Military Academy in Zaragoza. Six years later, on August 19, 1936, members of the Nationalist militia assassinated Lorca in Granada, less than three months before the start of Franco’s dictatorship on October 1st. Because of the Fascist anti-culture that took hold of Spain for the next decades, *Poeta en Nueva York* did not appear in print until 1940, and then only in Mexico and the United States in Rolfe Humphries’s English translation.

Wright’s deployment of these two extracted lines from this poem reminds us of this complex historical context, and challenges frequently held interpretations of Lorca as a folkloric and apolitical figure. Wright positions Lorca instead as a poet of, if not exile, at least of homesickness, a pairing and distinction acutely stated by Elise Aasgaard in her essay on Wright’s 1986 *Elaine’s Book*, “‘Village to Village/The Spirit Seeks its House’: Exile and Homesickness in Jay Wright’s ‘Elaine’s Book.’”¹² We note Wright’s implicit imperative to read Lorca’s poetry as a form of protest

¹¹ Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 57–58.

¹² Elise Aasgaard, “‘Village to Village/The Spirit Seeks Its House’: Exile and Homesickness in Jay Wright’s ‘Elaine’s Book,’” *Obsidian* 7, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 81–93.

against the repressiveness of Franco's regime – a protest that makes a claim to the joys and affirmation of Lorca's sensuous, effervescent surrealism. We may read such life-affirming turns, such music and dance, as in opposition to the Franco death cult. We may also read them as attuned to the concept of home as a web woven of extra-geographical strands. Lorca, away from home, reinscribes home as "the momentary dance" afforded by that flight-line that runs through the *son* from Granada in Spain to Santiago, in Cuba, a line through which he finds himself – at home not in one place, but in the journey, in the transit between places. In this context, the three *mata-dore* apparitions appear as patron saints of the displaced.

M₃: Come here now.
Let's arrange ourselves.

M₁: For?

M₃: For the momentary dance we three can do
without a home.¹³

The "momentary dance" takes the form of seven configurations adhering to a mathematical permutation, denoted as stage directions within the play within the poem.

(They gather. Aligned, M₁, M₂, M₃. Then M₂, M₃, M₁. Shift to M₂, M₁, M₃. Then M₃, M₁, M₂. Then M₁, M₃, M₂. To M₃, M₂, M₁. Then M₂, M₃, M₁. Finally M₁, M₂, M₃. They begin a litany of cities.)¹⁴

A recurring motif in Wright's poetry, the "litany" of place names, as Aasgaard notes, lists cities that "figure significantly in the history of the Americas, and more specifically, in the memory of the 'unstressed' or disenfranchised, who traverse national boundaries and whose

13 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 62–63.

14 *Ibid.*, 63.

songs are naturally interwoven."¹⁵ In this case, the cities number seven, perhaps in correspondence with the seven configurations in the dance; cities that harken to the lore of the bullfight.

M_1, M_2, M_3 : Jerez
 Córdoba
 Burgos
 Pamplona
 Guadalajara
 Monterrey
 Bilbao
 San Sebastián¹⁶

We may presume that the ethereal arena in which the *matadores* enact their ritual does not exist in any of these seven cities, while ghosting all of them. The nomadic trinity gathers as a constellation of "some kind of exile, from one being forced from one's homeland to one having his land stolen from him by interlopers."¹⁷ Beyond these manifestations of exile, Lorca's lines suggest yet another: the premonition of displacement to come.

M_3 : Whatever you say,
 whatever you do,
 it remains sacred,
 this space that is no space,
 this space we carry with us
 from air to air.¹⁸

In his consideration of the work of Robert Hayden, a poet whom we have noted as a key figure in Wright's for-

15 Aasgaard, "'Village to Village/The Spirit Seeks Its House,'" 86.

16 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 63.

17 Aasgaard, "'Village to Village/The Spirit Seeks Its House,'" 86.

18 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 62.

mation, contemporary poet Reginald Dwayne Betts has noted that “[t]his idea of being an exile, and the gifts it brings, seems a little explored aspect of Hayden’s work.” He quotes Hayden from an unpublished interview.

I have said many, many times no place is home. Therefore, in a sense because I don’t have a home anywhere, in a sense everywhere is home.

Betts interprets this statement with all of the affirmations apparent in Wright’s Lorca extracts: “This, far from being about rejecting humanity, is an openness that allows one to love and engage with the world in a way the displaced know best.”¹⁹

§ Revelations of context 2 – *Péripigraphy*

In his 1983 interview with Charles Rowell, Jay Wright gave a roughly 1,800-word response to the first question: “what is a poem – or what do you conceive poetry to be?”²⁰ The second solo in *The Three Matadores* presented this response in monologue form. It followed the first solo’s concentration on the Lorca extracts with a preparatory set of proposals, immersing the listener directly into the world of Wright’s poetry by way of Wright’s (contextual) voice.

Soon we will speak of the bullfight. For now we will say that the third solo, departing from language, introduced the choreographic vernacular of the bullfight by demonstrating a catalogue of maneuvers involving the

19 Reginald Dwayne Betts, “Remembering Hayden,” in Robert Hayden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), xvii.

20 Charles H. Rowell, “The Unraveling of The Egg’: An Interview with Jay Wright,” *Callaloo* 19, “Jay Wright: A Special Issue” (Autumn 1983): 3–15.

muleta. This overlapped to a degree with the fourth and final solo, which operated as a sonic tuning of the performance space, strumming in turn four stationary electric guitars installed at the four corners of the performance area. Each guitar had been tuned to a different scale, responding musically to the landscapes invoked in and evoked by the poetry. As the last amplified echoes of these atmospheric strains faded, the words of the central part of the performance began, with the narrator commencing midway through the poem, before the entrance of the *matadores*.

Where is the virtue
 if the atom walks away from its power?
 I have often sat
 in the affective troposphere of Jemez,
 and have awaited the disfiguring
 order of a perfect solitude.
 I move now upon this horizon [...] ²¹

Let us now return to the question of context in the broader sense, of the effects of its inclusion or exclusion from within the bounds of the work. The *Every house* performance opted to reinstate phases of context, in the form of the four preliminary solos, context that had not appeared in Wright's books for over two decades. Yet the solos stand as a first act, structured as four sequential parts, of the performance, equal to the long second act comprised of *The Three Matadores* play. The four preliminary parts overflow their stated purpose of setting the stage. They introduce the performers in turn. They provide more information than needed, each one supplying its own particularities of excess. They step incrementally from the zero-point of arrival at the theater into the focused ritual world of the performance. The dimming of

21 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 55–56.

the lights and the tuning of the arena constitute their own performance, as the threshold becomes the environment.

In a related sense, we may ask about the disappearance of afterword notes from the poetry books, the refusal of interviews post-1983, and the poet's renunciation of contextual writing. We have come to understand these not as gestures of withholding but of transformation. We see them as perhaps channeling the impulses of essay and explication into newly discovered forms, no longer indebted to the academically inflected endnote, essay, or interview. We believe this mode of thought transmuted into the philosophical "papers," the as yet unpublished works, circulating in photocopied form through networks of devoted readers. Here we note the severing of the link that subjugates one mode to another. That is to say, the notes on context must detach from a particular line in a poem for two reasons. First, the note in this way becomes not annotation but writing. Second, the severed connection disallows the avoidance of poetry. The crafted context note always seems to encourage such avoidance despite its own best intentions. Antoine Compagnon has detailed this hazard as a result of the writing he christens *périgraphie*.

[...] a scenography that brings the text into view, with the author at its center [... n]otes, tables, bibliography, but also prefaces, forewords, introductions, conclusions, appendixes, annexes. These are the headings of the new *dispositio* enabling us to judge a book without having to read it or get inside it.²²

Separating the notes and afterwords, the preambles and references, distinguishing them as no longer accom-

22 Antoine Compagnon, *La seconde main ou le travail de la citation* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979), 328.

paniment, in service of the poetry, and affording them their own forum, voice, and structural allowances, brings about in them a different set of forms and possibilities, migrates them into a discourse of pure context, no longer explanatory, but declarative and affirming. In turn, to read the poetry, thus untethered to its elucidations, means to encounter it directly, to “get inside it,” to know it on its own terms, as isolated writing, spacious and surrounded by space. *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* arises out of this impulse, a long poem freed of any anchoring notation, released from the weight of the thetic. Let us now consider how to respond to the demands such a long poem makes of us, its readers.

§ Slow reading the long poem

Roland Barthes has defined “the conflict between the short form and the long form” as that difference between the discontinuous and the continuous. He writes in his lecture notes for *The Preparation of the Novel*:

For me, the problem is psychostructural because it involves making the transition from the fragment to the nonfragment, which involves changing my relationship to writing, which involves my relationship to enunciation, which is to say the subject that I am: fragmented subject [...] or effusive subject [...]? Or again, the conflict between the short form and the long form.²³

Perhaps in the shift of perspective from writer to reader, confronting the long poem, the novel of poems, necessitates a similarly psychostructural turn in reverse, a

23 Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 18.

transition from continuous to discontinuous. The reader must divide the long work into sections, employing the caesura as a tool of reading. How does one go about dividing the long poem into constituent parts? Where do the structural breaks occur, and how does reading those breaks facilitate reading the structure? How does reading the structure begin to comprehend the long poem?

The structure of a long work makes itself known only after a comprehensive reading, thus necessitating a second reading with that structure in mind from the outset. The sequence and resonance of the parts makes apparent three degrees of structure. First one encounters the poetic form and nanostructure of each set of lines; then one reads the microstructure of each part, which in turn allows for a discernment of the macrostructure of the whole. Once again Dante instructs us here, progressing from the *terza rima* flow of tercets to the processional, grand, circular architecture of the *Inferno*, constituting the first third of 100 Cantos of *The Divine Comedy* (*Inferno* 34, *Purgatorio* 33, *Paradiso* 33). The parts cohere by virtue of their internal structure, falling into place in relation to one another, a dynamic which in turn structures the whole. Thus the reader launches into the river of the long poem. Barthes's psychology of structure revises subjecthood accordingly. In attending to the fragments, one becomes a fragmented subject; in reading the whole, one adopts the mantle of the effusive subject. In the light of this proposal reading becomes a mode of being.

Rehearsal in turn operates as an ideal manner of reading the long poem; returning to the lines, again and again, every day for one hour or two, hearing them recited by more than one voice; the performing voices of four actors, the musing voices of director and dramaturg; the pragmatic voice of a lighting designer cueing and setting the timing of a change to coincide with a certain spoken line. One has the rare opportunity to live with the poetry, to experience how it changes from one day to the next,

from morning to afternoon to night, how all at once a line rings out as if for the first time, or something new in it makes itself known, or an echo with another line becomes suddenly undeniable.

Often, Wright's long poems present clear structural markers, even at times approaching an expansive Dante-like system. "Zapata and the Egúngún Mask," from *Elaine's Book*, 519 lines long, after a substantial preamble, sequences itself according to five days of the week, Sunday through Thursday. The preamble sets up the five sections named for days with this memorable final quatrain.

The body remains hard to define.
 Numb it with virtues
 or number it with days,
 it escapes.²⁴

Each day section composes a poem within the poem, and one may divide the work accordingly into six constituent parts: Preamble, 126 lines; Sunday, 85 lines; Monday, 81 lines; Tuesday, 37 lines; Wednesday, 140 lines; and Thursday, 50 lines.²⁵ Such a calendar form situates the poem's discourse in a fixed temporal system, rendering it sequentially bounded and lending the cultural encounter to which the title refers, between the Mexican revolutionary and the Yoruba ritual garment, a counterpoint of ordinary measure. By its conclusion, as it arrives at Thursday, it also seems to allude to a fixed ritual five-day pattern, in a turn of phrase that brings to mind the Long Count calendar. Used by pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures such as the Maya, the Long Count calendar identifies a day by counting the number of days that have

24 Jay Wright, *Elaine's Book* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1988), 14.

25 Aasgaard offers a detailed analysis of this poem, although without taking account of its five-day structure.

passed since a mythical creation date. In this case some other fixed event operates as the zero point.

Thursday.

I have come to the fifth day
in the Long Count of Desolation.
This is the day of the dead,
a night for the stone Christ
and the crossing,
a timeless boiling of nickel candles,
to be lit and caressed by the lake's
lily-infested breath.²⁶

Working within these bounds once again facilitates Wright's revelations of the sacred embedded and encoded in secular forms. This run of five days nests inside of the week of seven, like an unexpected pentatonic scale residing wholly within the musical scale's familiar octave.

Structures borrowed from the secular rituals of sporting events provide further temporal possibilities. We may consider the bullfight in conversation with this modality. The quotation from the opening of Pindar's first Pythian Ode that opens *The Prime Anniversary* points to Wright's awareness and celebration of the ancient relations between poetry and sports. Pindar's triple epinician performance sings its victory song of intertwined fact, myth, and aphorism, narrated by the encomiastic persona, the I of the "indefinite middle where distinctions between composing and performing disappear in an imitation of spontaneous utterance."²⁷ The Odes apprehend the heroes, deities, and structures of the games from which the verses spring. We could approach the structure of Wright's epic poem "The Anti-Fabliau of Saturnino Orestes 'Min-

26 Wright, *Elaine's Book*, 25.

27 Andrew M. Miller, "Introduction," in Pindar, *The Odes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 13.

nie' Miñoso" by way of baseball, with its stretched out nine-inning form. Beyond the game's structure, we could look to Wright's firsthand knowledge and experience, given his history as a semi-professional player. We must leave that enticing endeavor unrealized for now. We will propose instead a more general idea about the dual role of ritual in structuring Wright's long poems.

§ A tangled literature: Notes on ritual

In his 1987 essay "Desire's Design, Vision's Resonance: Black Poetry's Ritual and Historical Voice," Wright brings together two large-scale structural schemes resonant, as the title indicates, of forms drawn from individual sacred rites and communal historical experience. He proposes these explicitly as structural strategies in the work of poetry. Of the first, he writes, "the best of contemporary black poetry assumes the ritualistic pattern that Sunday Anozie has discerned in Christopher Okigbo's poetry, a process of separation, transition and incorporation which will place the poet on the mystic blade."²⁸ This classical three-part pattern has been elucidated by Victor and Edith Turner regarding the rite of passage. Their structural analysis, with an extended consideration of the middle period, will become particularly pertinent in regard to *The Three Matadores*.

THE PROCESSUAL FORM OF RITUAL

Rite of Passage. An important category of ritual, which Arnold van Gennep first isolated and named (1908), rites of passage are the transitional rituals accompa-

28 Jay Wright, "Desire's Design, Vision's Resonance: Black Poetry's Ritual and Historical Voice," *Callaloo* 30 (1987): 14.

nying changes of place, state, social position, and age in a culture. They have a basically tripartite processual structure, consisting of three phases: separation, margin or limen, and reaggregation. The first phase detaches the ritual subjects from their old places in society; the last installs them, inwardly transformed and outwardly changed, in a new place in society.

Liminality (from Lat. *limen*, a threshold.) The state and process of mid-transition in a rite of passage. During the liminal period, the characteristics of the *liminars* (the ritual subjects in this phase) are ambiguous, for they pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Liminars are betwixt and between. The liminal state has frequently been likened to death; to being in the womb; to invisibility, darkness, and the wilderness. Liminars are stripped of status and authority, removed from a social structure maintained and sanctioned by power and force, and leveled to a homogeneous social state through discipline and ordeal. Their secular powerlessness may be compensated for by a sacred power, however – the power of the weak, derived on the one hand from the resurgence of nature when structural power is removed, and on the other hand from the reception of sacred knowledge.²⁹

Even a brief Christian ceremony such as the Stations of the Cross, retracing the Via Dolorosa through Jerusalem to Calvary, culminating in Christ's crucifixion and remembered on Good Friday before Easter Sunday, provides an example of this three-part pilgrimage structure. The Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo, to whom Wright referred in his 1987 essay, wrote explicitly about the place

29 Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 249.

of such ritual in his poetry. In his 1965 introduction to his volume *Labyrinthes*, Okigbo noted the central place of such ritual forms and structures in his poem cycle *Porte Du Ciel (Heavensgate)*, attuned as he was to their complex, post-colonial manifestations.

Heavensgate was originally designed as a *pascalle* sequence (relating to Easter or Passover). This later turned into a ceremony of innocence, something like a mass, an offering to Idoto, the village river, where, in my childhood, I would drink, I would wash myself; the officiant, a character like Orpheus, is about to embark on a journey. Purification involves being completely naked, completely surrendering to the spirit of the river which nourishes all creation. The different sections of the poem therefore stage this officiant at various steps on his Way of the Cross.³⁰

Wright has explored pilgrimage in the Americas directly, in ways reminiscent of Okigbo's *Heavensgate* poems. Consider the long poem "Guadalupe—Tonantzin," from *Elaine's Book*.

When I stand in this Chalma silence,
I hear a village voice thunder
like a thorned heart bereft of its cross.³¹

I sit here now with a clear conscience.
It is Easter
and I am walking the stations of the cross.³²

³⁰ Christopher Okigbo, *Labyrinthes* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2020), 45. This is our own English translation, with thanks to Patrick Durgin.

³¹ Wright, *Elaine's Book*, 34.

³² *Ibid.*, 36.

This poem's fourteen parts reflect the fourteen stations of the cross, but the practice of this Christian ritual in Chalma has a decidedly pre-Columbian character, as the Turners elucidate.

Chalma is a small village in Mexico state. Located at the mouth of a broad canyon about seventy miles southwest of Mexico City, the village consists solely of an Augustinian monastery and the houses and shops of the merchants whose livelihood derives from the thousands of pilgrims to the shrine of Our Lord of Chalma each year.

It is known that Chalma was a major pilgrimage center in pre-Hispanic times, but it is not clear which of the syncretic Aztec-Ocuiltec deities were worshipped there. A tangled literature has sprung up since the time that Bernardino de Sahagun wrote his celebrated ethnography. Hobgood carefully weighs the evidence and suggests that the principal Aztec deity at Chalma was Huitzilopochtli (the war god and patron of the Aztec nation), and that his image, which was kept in a cave at Chalma, was replaced, after the conquest, by the Christ of Chalma – just as Tonantzin, mother of all Aztec gods, including Huitzilopochtli, was replaced by the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac.

The Aztec goddess of carnal love, Cihuacoatl-Tlazolteotl, had certainly been worshiped in the cave of Chalma. Her cult image in the cave was replaced with a statue of Mary of Egypt, the saint who had spent her early life in carnal sin and had lived her later years in penitence as a cave-dwelling hermit. The missionaries did not destroy the giant ahuehuete tree sacred to Cihuacoatl, however. The great tree, a few miles to the north of Chalma, still refreshes pilgrims today, and the cult of the goddess lingers on.³³

33 Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 53–57.

The poem in *Elaine's Book* that follows "Guadalupe—Tonantzin," titled "Tlazoltéotl," takes up the extended discourse of the localized rituals, attuned to the contemporary incarnations of the multiple mythologies and concentric deities. We recall Seamus Heaney's *Station Island*, another long poem dedicated to enacting and unfolding a hyper-local ritual as revelation of contemporary geographies, sociologies, and political histories, as it enacts the Lough Derg pilgrimage in County Donegal, Northern Ireland.³⁴ Heaney, however, compresses the fourteen stations of the Lough Derg pilgrimage (not the Stations of the Cross but sites dedicated to the Purgatory of St. Patrick) into twelve sections in the poem.³⁵

We note, within these historical relations between poetry and religious ritual, the intertwinement of reading and prayer. Saint Teresa of Avila, one of the great Christian mystics of Spain, stated this perhaps most directly. She understood reading as substitution in a devout religious practice and a necessity for mental and physical health.

If a man can reflect on the nature of the world, on his debt to God, on Our Lord's great suffering, on his own small service in return, and on what He gives to those who love Him, he gets material with which to defend himself against perils and occasions for sin. But anyone who cannot make use of this method runs a far greater risk, and should frequently resort to reading, since he can get help in no other way. Indeed inability to get this help is so very painful that if the master directing him forbids him to read, and thus help himself toward recollection, he will still need to make some small use of books as a substitute for mental prayer,

34 Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1985).

35 Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 108–10.

which he is unable to practise. But if the director insists on his spending great periods at prayer without the aid of reading, he will not be able to persist for long. His health would suffer if he were to do so, for this is a most painful process.³⁶

Alongside the formulation of ritual as a “trinity of knowledge,”³⁷ Wright’s 1987 essay pairs a second triad, drawn from the complex forms elucidated by J.B. Danquah in *Akan Doctrine of God* (1968), a study of thought systems of Akan societies of West Africa. This second triad Wright understands as three aspects of God – Order, Knowledge, and Death – detailed as “Onyame, the naturally given; Onyankopon, the experience of the given; Odomankoma, reconciliation of the given and experience of the given, of being and the effort toward nonbeing, i.e., knowledge.”³⁸ In working through the implications of this second structure, Wright’s observations articulate, as if effortlessly, key aspects of his poetry.

You will notice that the central term – Okra or Okara, soul (or as Danquah often puts it, *nous*, and that is mind or perception) – occurs in the social postulates.³⁹

The physical world seems valuable only as spirit’s exemplification or repository.⁴⁰

The curious thing is that the apprehension of form seems to be at the same time a realization of form.⁴¹

36 Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin Classics, 1957), 36–37.

37 Wright, “Desire’s Design, Vision’s Resonance,” 23.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, 24.

40 *Ibid.*, 25.

41 *Ibid.*

The style accurately reflects a worldview which sees experience and knowledge as cumulative, the cosmos as creatively and harmonically ordered, the social and physical world as a unitary system of infinite complexity and correspondences.⁴²

Finally, Wright draws the two systems together, overlaying them as creative processes with characteristic rigor and simplicity.

For Danquah, the strict definition of experience is inconsequential; experience is a given. What is necessary are terms to control experience. Ritual understands and accomplishes this.⁴³

He concludes:

The danger does not reside in over sacralizing experience and art; the danger lies in being inattentive to the complexity of value, vision and desire embodied in African and Afro-American experience, and the subsequent and rigorous artistic formulation of such complexity in the reconstituted and enhanced experiences of these communities. Afro-American poetry adopts the ritual form of separation, transition and integration because its own dynamism teaches it the vitality of that process in interpreting experience.⁴⁴

The first trinity, of ritual's tripartite form, thus deploys as a set of tools for the second triad, interpretive of the experience of the given, reconciliatory, and creative in the synthesis of knowledge, the construction of experience. We recall genesis as a transit between the virtual to

42 Ibid., 26.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 27.

its actualization; from structure to its incarnation.⁴⁵ In Wright's poetry we find this transit doubled and experienced as processual, as something one must live through in a series of sequenced acts both individual and communal. In this way, we perceive anew the structures at work in *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* as first the ritual structure of the encircling book-length poem, as tracing a pilgrim's journey of separation, transition, and incorporation. Of the separation of setting out, we turn to the poem's opening lines.

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.⁴⁶

Note the phatic turn, *Make of that what you will*, a phrase that arguably exists to establish or maintain contact between speaker and listener. It includes the reader from the first lines, a gesture of companionship, made in setting out, returning in the *inclusio* bracketing at the end, noted below. Wright provides no parenthesis with which to close the bullfight's intervention. Once the *matado-*

45 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 183.

46 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 1.

res inscribe their circle within the poem's journey, the poem becomes absorbed into the scene, transformed from its former state of autonomy. This dissolution of the boundary between the poem and what it apprehends, in a sense between onstage and offstage, constitutes the totality of the "art of reading" that one needs in order to navigate the complex spatiality of *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*. This "art of reading" destabilizes subject positions between reader and writer, as between the reader and the text. It even draws a parallel instability between the poem as a reader and what it apprehends, in the sense that the journey of the poem pauses to "read" a bullfight, in the form of a play, with the spectral appearance of the three *matadores*. It offers an instance of that "curious thing" about ritual and the transformations it enacts, "that the apprehension of form seems to be at the same time a realization of form."⁴⁷ We may situate this idea with recourse once again to Susanne Langer whom Wright invokes in his paper "An Examination of Rhythm and Its Expansive Movement."

Listen to Langer, "For purposes of logical analysis, art is unsystematic. It invokes a constant play of formula-tive, abstractive and projective acts based on a disconcerting variety of principles."⁴⁸

From among the list of the disconcerting variety of principles, the fact of the poem becoming absorbed into that which it observes we may note as projective, with glancing acknowledgement of Charles Olson's concept of "projective verse," his "open field poetics" so-called, by which the written word defines the "open field" of the blank page through inscriptions and patterning upon

47 Jay Wright, "Desire's Design, Vision's Resonance," 25.

48 Jay Wright, "An Examination of Rhythm and Its Expansive Movement," unpublished manuscript, 2021, 57.

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.⁵⁰

Between these two poles, the appearance of the apparition of the three bullfighters, and the mode shift that the writing enacts to the form of a play, marks indelibly the liminal center point as it opens to an interior vista.

Words that compel
 a transformative intent, or words
 that begin the demise of Being.⁵¹

Within the confines of this play-within-a-poem we encounter a structure-within-a-structure: the bullfight.

§ *In a sunless arena*: First notes on the bullfight

One may observe the bullfight's ritual structure in the *matadore's* use of three different capes, one after another in sequence, distinguishing the three acts of the *faena*, the episodic confrontation with the bull. In following the capes, we may follow how Wright's play adopts the bullfight's structure as its own. The first cape, the *capote de paseo*, doubles as a cloak that the *matadore* wears in the procession into and around the *corrida*, or the circular arena. The *matadores* soon discard the *capote de paseo* and take up

50 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 75–76.

51 *Ibid.*, 57.

and unfurl the *capote*, the large cape usually held in two hands that they will use to taunt and tire the bull. The first lines of the play depict this transitional arrival. Each *matadore* wears a *traje de luces*, or “suit of lights” decorated with their signature colors.

(Three matadores, dressed in their *trajes de luces*, approach in single file. A trumpet announces the *corrida*’s *paseo*. The matadores stop, remove their *capotes de paseo* and take up their *capotes*. They begin the unfurling ritual.)

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

(The matadores salute an invisible audience.)⁵²

After the interjected quatrain, the audience salute continues the bullfight’s ritual sequence. The duel with the bull commences with maneuvers involving the *capote*: a series of *farols*, a term connoting “lighthouse” and meaning here a spinning in place with the cape overhead, and there are other types of passes as well.

(M_2 spins in a *farol*. M_1 and M_3 execute a series of passes.)⁵³

For the third act, the *matadore* will relinquish the *capote* for the smaller *muleta* affixed to a stick and held in one hand. The other hand takes up the killing sword, concealing it at times behind the *muleta*.

52 *Ibid.*, 58. All quoted stage directions appear in *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*.

53 *Ibid.*

(M_1 takes his muleta, pivots, raising his montera to the invisible audience, tosses his montera, and steps decisively toward the center of the arena.)⁵⁴

M_1 wears a *montera*, the traditional solid black hat with its distinctive side lobes, covered in the delicate fur of fetal Karakul lambs.⁵⁵ He tosses the *montera* over his shoulder in another moment of dedication before the kill. While Wright's script notes "the invisible audience," it also implies the bull as another phantom player in the drama, a felt presence that manifests only at a displaced remove from the bullfight, as we note below. These ghostly entities seem to overtake the ritual, stranding the three bullfighters in an existential limbo as the ritual evaporates to its end. M_3 challenges M_1 .

M_3 : You dedicated your faena to a fiction.
Do you think we can forgive you?⁵⁶

The play concludes in the aftermath of the audience's invisibility becoming intangibility, fictionality, and, ultimately, unknowability.

M_3 : Where is the trumpet?
Let it sound now
to rescue us.

(M_1 starts to execute a series of passes.)

Too late.
It is too late for that.
The art is gone.

M_2 : But they want us to shine?

M_3 : They?

54 Ibid., 60.

55 Sky Cubacub, costumer for the *Every house* production, substituted repurposed rubber from inner tubes of tricycle tires.

56 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 61.

Who are they?⁵⁷

In the aftermath of the disappearance of the *matadores*, the poem's introspective monologue voice returns.

Nothing but memory now
the legacy of some prior disturbance.⁵⁸

The ritual structure of the bullfight appears intact and in sequence in the play, but also fragmentary, realized in an intermittent form like skips of a stone across water. The voice of the poem intervenes and interleaves in the gaps and spaces. In this way the poem, which envelops the play, becomes absorbed as an element within it. The poem that generated the play recursively generates itself within the play. The narrator, for the duration of the theatrical turn, becomes a character on the shared stage. We note this image and idea of mutual enfolding in regard to slow reading the long poem: we understand the long poem as an assemblage, not of chapters in a narrative but of structures telescoping out of one another, generating and generated by one another; structures as extensions of the poetry, that imbricate the poetry within ritual forms; structures that in themselves operate as text and as metaphor.

§ *I was dreaming, then, of a bull's horn* – revelations of context 3–: Second notes on the bullfight

The bullfight, in form, detail, and architecture, appeared in Wright's poetry as early as "Corrida" in 1984's *Explication/Interpretations*. The poem's first strophe recreates the ritual's grim imagery, language, and mood.

57 Ibid., 64.

58 Ibid.

Trumpets at four o'clock
 seal the rain in the Plaza.
 All capes are darker.
 Spangles choke their novilleros,
 who wait in the blood the water soaks
 from the Plaza's shallow blood urn.
 The rain eases nothing.
 Left-handed bulls shoot for the center,
 hook the guards, tumble blind horses.⁵⁹

It makes a cameo appearance in the catalogue of red imagery within the Sunday segment of "Zapata and the Egúngún Mask" (1988), recalling Roland Barthes's notion that "certain days (of the week) have their own color."⁶⁰

blank red of the matador's cape⁶¹

"The Bullring at the Quinta Real, Zacatecas" (2000), from the *Transformations* series, renders the architecture of an abandoned corrida, absorbed into the new design of a surrounding hotel, in fourteen-line sonnet form – an elegy to the past that haunts the present.

So the old bullring died and was reborn,
 a haven for hummingbirds and silence,
 a bed and brimming table to adorn
 with the rose lace of another presence.

As you descend, a bull's breath rises blue
 against the terra-cotta and sandy hue
 of the cave, and you think you hear death's call
 in a bull's threshing of dung in a stall.

59 Jay Wright, *Explications/Interpretations* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1984), 13.

60 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 40.

61 Wright, *Explications/Interpretations*, 16.

Someone has turned this center to a star,
 and has drawn a light from the silvery stone
 to a darkened flower bed that has grown
 radiant and weightless, death's avatar.

Shall I here search a flightless bird to hear
 it sing, and singing, turn to disappear?⁶²

The extended script-form passage that we have titled *The Three Matadores* at the heart of *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* constitutes Wright's most intricate and comprehensive treatment of bullfighting to date. Given Wright's ongoing exploration of the complexities of ritual form and of cultural migration routes such as those branching from the Iberian Peninsula to the Americas, bullfighting seems a natural candidate for fascination, falling as it does into both of those categories. But what of the high stakes of this encounter, the risk and the inescapable violence? A third tier of signification concerns the confrontations of writing and death metaphorized in the bullfight, a paring best articulated by Michel Leiris.

In 1931 Marcel Griaule led the ambitious large-scale ethnographic expedition, Mission Dakar-Djibouti, crossing central Africa from Senegal in the west to the Horn in the east. Griaule first encountered the Dogon on this journey. The eleven members of the expedition included Michel Leiris, a writer, first associated with the Surrealists group in Paris, who had by 1931 begun to concentrate on sociology and ethnography. Leiris's many books, in a career of publication spanning 1934 to 1968, include the 1939 work of autobiographical confession *L'âge d'homme*, translated into English as *Manhood*. Leiris titled his afterword to this work *The Autobiographer as Torero*. We present some extended extracts from that afterword here.

62 Jay Wright, *Transfigurations: Collected Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 569.

Turning to the *torero*, I observe that for him, too, there is a code which he cannot infringe and an authenticity, since the tragedy he acts out is a real tragedy, one in which he sheds blood and risks his own skin. The point is to discover if, under such conditions, the relation I establish between his authenticity and my own is not based on a mere play of words.⁶³

I have already spoken of the fundamental rule (to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth) to which the writer of confessions is bound, and I have alluded to the precise ceremony to which, in his combat, the *torero* must conform. For the latter, it is evident that the code, far from being a protection, contributes to his danger: to deliver the thrust under the requisite conditions demands, for instance, that he put his body, during an appreciable length of time, within reach of the horns; hence there is an immediate connection between obedience to the rule and the danger incurred.⁶⁴

This fact that the danger incurred depends on a more or less close observance of the rule therefore represents what I can, without too much presumption, retain of the comparison I chose to establish between my activity as a writer of confessions and that of the *torero*.⁶⁵

[... E]ven if I opened my door to dreams (a psychologically justified element but tinged with romanticism, just as the *torero's* cape work, technically useful, is also a series of lyrical flights), I was imposing on myself a rule quite severe as if I had intended to compose a classical work. And it is ultimately this severity, this

63 Michel Leiris, *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 159.

64 *Ibid.*, 160.

65 *Ibid.*, 161.

“classicism” [...] which seems to me to have afforded my undertaking (if I have managed to succeed at all) something analogous to what constitutes for me the exemplary value of the *corrida* and which the imaginary bull’s horn could not have contributed by itself.⁶⁶

Similarly, the order of the *corrida* (a rigid framework imposed on an action in which, theatrically, chance must appear to be dominated) is a technique of combat and at the same time a ritual. It was therefore necessary that this method I had imposed upon myself – dictated by the desire to see myself as clearly as possible – function simultaneously and effectively as a rule of composition. Identity, so to speak, of form and content, but, more precisely, a unique procedure revealing the content to me as I gave it form, a form that could be of interest to others and (at its extreme) allow them to discover in themselves something homophonous to this content I had discovered in myself.⁶⁷

With these extracts, we do not intend to suggest that Wright’s interest in the bullfight, or any understanding of relations between bullfighting and writing, derived entirely from Leiris. The poet, with his deep knowledge of a comprehensive range of sources literary and historical, would almost certainly have absorbed *The Autobiographer as Torero* as one of many readings of the bullfight. We offer these passages as a way of unfolding the complexity of Wright’s treatment of the bullfight in *The Three Mata-dores*. For Leiris, in the multiplicity of metaphorical functions of the bullfight regarding writing, confession supplies the horn of risk. We may consider the enveloping poem of *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* as indeed having an aspect of confession, albeit one that retraces a

66 Ibid., 162.

67 Ibid., 162–63.

more communal pilgrimage than Leiris's hyper-personal journey, but a confessional aspect nonetheless.

How small our being,
 how insignificant our flagellant
 movement toward fulfillment, toward
 an arrested light.⁶⁸

Memorably, Wright applies this quality of the plural and the communal to the torero. Where Leiris imagined an individual, Wright offers a trinity.

*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.*⁶⁹

Wright's team of three bullfighters quarrel and insult one another, yet as in Leiris's potent metaphor, they "give substance to a process," and the initiate narrator-confessor observes them as from a different dimension.

The bullfight ceremony, with its complete substructure, plays itself out lodged entirely within the liminal moment at the center of the larger ritual recounted by the speaker in the monologue of the enveloping poem. In the moments of this central ritual-within-a-ritual the narrator on his journey observes the trifurcation of his meditative quest; one figure of his questing consciousness personified and projected into the triple *matadore* eidetic form. The poet thinks and acts the self into an aggregation of braided individuals, existing in a plurality

68 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 5.

69 *Ibid.*, 58.

of mutual contamination. To know one of them we must know them all: a relation, as Leiris would say, between authenticities, those of the *matadore* and the poet, each enacted within the unforgiving confines of codes “which one cannot infringe.”⁷⁰ Wright’s trinity faces an unseen bull before an invisible audience, as in a dream, with an actual horn of risk. What might we say now about these two displaced figures, the audience and the bull?

§ *A bull lying in its purple blood* – third notes on the bullfight

The invisible audience and the phantom bull haunt the poem. Together they supply it with an undertow of threat and horror, which the *matadores* seem to acknowledge, even in their disagreement, in this dialogue.

- M₃: It was only a beginning. Attend to the music.
They want us to shine.
- M₂: Or to die.
- M₁: ¡Basta!
- M₂: That labyrinth we passed, these lengthening
shadows have taught me to fear.
- M₃: We do not discuss such matters.
- M₁: Blood is my star.⁷¹

This brief dialogue alludes to the intricate resonances between the bullfight and the labyrinth, with its implication that, within the maze of the ritual encounter, the bullfighter and bull might change places, might in fact merge into a hybrid form. A.L. Kennedy traces these echoes from Greek mythology through the *corrida* in the

⁷⁰ Leiris, *Manhood*, 159.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

chapter titled “To Send a Bull from Heaven” of her volume *On Bullfighting*.

Pasiphaë, you may remember, was the wife of Minos, King of Crete. Minos’ mother was Europa, a woman seduced by Zeus while he took the form of a bull. Which makes Minos a combination of the bovine, human and divine which you’ll find is not uncommon in myths – should you start searching for bulls in myths. Pasiphaë, already married to an almost-bull, then fell in love with an actual bull and had the ingenious Daedalus build her a cow costume so that she could consummate her new passion. The result of this union was the Minotaur – a shameful freak, far too obviously bull and man – who was confined to the labyrinth Daedalus designed to hold him. There Theseus, the matador and murderer, killed him.⁷²

In his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, Borges notes, of the Minotaur and its maze-like prison:

It is fitting that in the center of a monstrous house there be a monstrous inhabitant.

Human forms with bull heads figured, to judge by wall paintings, in the demonology of Crete. Most likely the Greek fable of the Minotaur is a late and clumsy version of far older myths, the shadow of other dreams still more full of horror.⁷³

Borges draws our attention to the Minotaur’s cameo appearance at the start of *Inferno* Canto 12 and suggests, in a disputed interpretation, that Dante draws on the depic-

72 Kennedy, *On Bullfighting*, 27.

73 Jorge Luis Borges with Margarita Guerrero, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), 158–59.

tion from the Middle Ages of the beast as a bull's body with a man's head.

Upon the summit of the rugged slope
 There lay outstretched the infamy of Crete
 Conceived by guile within a wooden cow;
 And when he saw us come, he bit himself,
 Like one whom frenzy has deprived of reason.

Just as a bull, when stricken unto death,
 Will break his halter, and will toss about
 From side to side, unable to go on:
 Thus did I see the Minotaur behave.⁷⁴

But what of "Theseus, the matador and murderer"? How do we reconcile the bull "stricken unto death," the violence and cruelty of the bullfight, in Jay Wright's rendering? How does a poet, so sensitive to the subtle intricacies of nature, of birds, animals, and all non-human life forms and forces, contend with the *corrida's* ritual sacrifice? In "The Bullring at the Quinta Real, Zacatecas," the death of the bullring sees a rebirth as "a haven for hummingbirds and silence," the hummingbird like a psychopomp, a soul-carrier for the slaughtered bull. But what of *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, when one of the absences to be read is that of the bull at the center of the ring? Wright scrupulously avoids anthropomorphism, taking care to apprehend the non-human in non-human terms, although replete with human resonances. Kennedy once again offers some guidance in this regard.

As a human being, I can have very little idea of what thoughts and images, if any, do enter a bull's head. I have read description after description of corridas

74 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Lawrence Grant White (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), 20.

where bulls are described as “brave,” as “wise,” as “cowardly”: where they are portrayed as lowering their heads in supplication to the matador before the kill, and all but asking in polite Castilian for their own deaths. And a number of writers have kindly informed me of precisely what a toro is thinking at any given time. Barnaby Conrad in *Death of a Matador* has assured me that a toro’s breeding told it, on its entry into the ring, that “it was here to fight and kill.” Many of these same writers criticised opponents of the corrida for anthropomorphising the bulls, for endowing them with a human sensibility.

For my part, the bulls I dream of are blurry, perhaps caught in the midst of motion, and show no sign of consciousness. And I realise that we often see our world, our companions, our animals, as we wish them, or need them to be. Where one party witnesses suffering in the corrida, another finds willing participation and bravery.⁷⁵

The phantom bull in Wright’s *matadores* play presents a parallel with the phantom audience, like two poles that enclose and complete the experience – the invisible audience that wants the *matadores* “to shine. / Or to die.”⁷⁶ They supply the pressure of the mob, more thirsty for blood than the *matadores* who will in the end strike the death blow. Augustine in *Confessions* describes this grotesque power through the conversion of Alypius, resistive at first to the “gladiatorial shows” of Rome, into a member for the mob.

When he saw the blood, he guzzled the cruelty at the same time. He didn’t turn away but instead riveted his gaze there; he gulped down the demons of rage, though

75 Kennedy, *On Bullfighting*, 22–23.

76 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 59.

he didn't know it. He was delighted at the criminal contest and got drunk on the gory diversion. He was no longer the person he'd been when he came, but now actually part of the mob he'd come to, and he was a true confederate of those who'd brought him along.⁷⁷

Absented, although implied and implicated, from the play that depicts the fight, the image of the bull appears in death, displaced. It makes its appearance in *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence* seventy lines after the last lines of the *matadore* dialogue, in a passage recapitulatory of the poem's many elements assembled by the confederacy of cruelty.

My exponential galaxy remains
 an engulfing silence, an axiomatic
 entanglement beyond my touch.
 I follow the meridian now,
 from hip bone to foot.
 It is Sunday,
 the first of August,
 and white and black and red.
 It is a bull,
 lying in its purple blood
 in a sunless arena.
 It is a clabbered parchment,
 freed from the tree roots
 that have hidden it.⁷⁸

The body ("hip bone to foot"), the calendar ("Sunday the first of August"), color ("white and black and red"), the bull ("in its purple blood in a sunless arena"), writing, legal and antiquated and soured, on an animal skin

77 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Sarah Ruden (New York: The Modern Library, 2017), 151–52.

78 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 68.

("a clabbered parchment), and the earth ("the tree roots that have hidden it") all come into play in this passage of exhumation, this uncovering of a weave of entangled threads drawn out of the *corrida's* ritual violence. The first of August indeed marks a holiday; that is, the Celebration of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which ended slavery in the British Empire and is generally celebrated as part of Carnival in the Caribbean, noted as Emancipation Day in Barbados, Bermuda, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the Bahamas and the British Virgin Islands. We arrive here at "an axiomatic entanglement." The slaughtered bull in the aftermath of the bullfight appears as, and alongside, a post-colonial image of emancipation; the displaced death returns to take account of the cost, the unforgivable knot at the heart of history. Like in "Zapata and the Egúngún Mask": the "blank red of the matador's cape" of another Sunday evokes multiple associations alongside its companion colors, the trio of "white and black and red"; that is, the capote to the blood of the bull, the blackness of the bull, and the blood of the human, the Blackness and whiteness of the human. Like the Minotaur, these three simple colors lend an image to the entangled fates of human and bull. In trauma the dream bull lies at the center, unredeemable, irreducible, an indelible memory image of history's sacrifice, that the poem takes as an imperative to remember. This becomes our foundation, "from hip bone to foot," beyond both sonic and physical manifestations in "an engulfing silence [...] beyond my touch [...]" Always out of reach, yet always present: this recovered parchment, this text that we must read, again and again.

§ Reading as $n+1$ part one: Nomad number

Do we ever really read something again? We read *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, finish it, and put it down.

We think about it, and when ready, we return to the first page and begin again. To “return to the first page” – what does this mean? Who opens the book? Who returns?

Consider traveling outside of the country where one lives most of one’s life. Engaged in the customs and daily, mundane performances of another culture, one undergoes shifts in modes of perception. Upon return, the home country appears different. With modifications to one’s sense organs, the old place now seems new. This version of the self – recently traveled, recently returned – has never participated in this country. Insofar as home and self are mutually informing entities, the new self now creates a new thread within the landscape of home.

“I have said many, many times no place is home.”⁷⁹ No place, we might say, but the book. The movement of return reflects the act of reading. When one returns to the first page, the latest version of the reader encounters this page for the first time. That is, the reader who carries knowledge gained from a first reading of the document (R+1) now reads the document for the first time. After that version (R+1) reads, then a new reader (R+1+1) will be able to read (and for the first time once more). These versions of the reader (R+n) will go on encountering the book this way, always for the first time. To read from this starting position is not to read again but, rather, to generate another reading, a different reading, made possible by the new configuration of the one who reads. In this way we come to understand the statement: “[t]hey do not add a second time and a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the ‘nth’ power.”⁸⁰ And so we begin, and begin yet again.

A question, a problem, haunts each beginning. Does the book exist outside of its reading? We must ask wheth-

79 Robert Hayden quoted in Reginald Dwayne Betts, “Remembering Hayden,” in Hayden, *Collected Poems*, xvii.

80 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 1.

er each reading unfixes the book and reconfigures its contents. After all, it is not only we who change while we travel, changed by our journey; it is also our home that has changed while we were away.

§

We take recourse once again to mathematics; in this case, the conceptual and semiotic theories of Brian Rotman. In “Counting on Non-Euclidean Fingers,” the final chapter of his book *Mathematics as Sign* (2000), Rotman arrives at this claim:

To express the point in almost Heraclitean terms, we are dealing here with the difference between performing an action in the universe and “repeating” it, that is, performing it “again” in a universe already changed by the “first” occurrence. Whereas classical arithmetic can assign no sense to the quote marks here, non-Euclidean arithmetic erases them by internalizing the distinctions they notate.⁸¹

Jay Wright has taken a great interest in Rotman’s work, summoning his Peircean semiotics, and in particular the term “nomad number,” from *Mathematics as Sign* in *The Tuning of Grammar of Syntax*. Since the questions and concerns of this philosophical paper make their way into *Disorientations: Groundings*, we may discern Rotman’s presence there, too, and, collectively, to sense a Rotmanian thread in the entire Wright tapestry from that point onward. We tug this thread to vibrate the topic of re-reading, or, to phrase it interrogatively, to ask: what does it mean to read Wright again?

81 Brian Rotman, *Mathematics as Sign: Writing, Imagining, Counting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 151–52.

Rotman's discussion preceding the claim about "repetition" and performing "again" runs through a consideration of Deleuze and Guattari's terms the "numbered number" and the "numbering number," as elucidated in "Treatise on Nomadology" in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Whereas the "numbered number" refers to the object of "Number" as most typically defined in discussions of mathematics, counting, and accounting – a pre-existing and static figure that follows the necessary series of 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. – the "numbering number" suggests something entirely different. We encounter and understand the "numbering number," or "nomad number," in Rotman's words, always "incorporated in that which it is said to number; it is, in other words, number in performance of itself."⁸² These two different numbers permit two distinct modalities and performances of counting.

With the numbered number, we count what pre-exists it. We count in a space that has unavoidably already been numbered before anything enters it. This space has a circular and invisible relation to counting. We use the counting with the numbered number to define the space in which such counting "subsequently" takes place, a form of reproduction.⁸³ We understand this space as the space of the three *matadores*, so numbered, their characters reflective of their respective, iconic integers: M_1 primary, leading; M_2 contrary, questioning; M_3 synthesizing, following. As Euclidean number makes Hegelian dialectics possible, the three-ness of the *matadores*, their sequentiality and fundamental trigonometry, produces them, and they reproduce this numerical, numbered arena.

The nomad counting of the numbering number does not reproduce anything. It produces itself, one step at a time, by following, always one step behind its own material process. Nomadic counting as "performed itinera-

82 Ibid., 140.

83 Ibid., 144.

tion" acknowledges the materiality that numbered counting fails to recognize, "namely, its own active presence, its complicity in the creation of numbers, into a positivity, into its own becoming."⁸⁴ Nomad counting results not in 1, 2, 3, 4, etc., but 1e, 2e, 3e, 4e, etc., where the e announces a materiality usually not permitted in the abstract, virtual world of idealized mathematics. Thus, Rotman, following Deleuze and Guattari, declares $1e \neq 1$. He goes on to posit a lived reality populated by those who produce the nomad number through counting (since, after all, the nomad number pre-exists the entity who deploys it).

Wright might find this discussion appealing for any number of reasons. First, the material reality glimpsed by the entity who engages the nomad numbering and who surfs through non-Euclidean spaces will appear entirely different to those who abide by the numbered appearance of things. We may call the counter of the nomad number "poet," since the poet sees objects as relations, entities as dynamic aggregates, and words as freighted cargo. Such nomad number, produced through the becoming of the poet and the writing of poetry, explains the energetic quality of numerological systems, such as that shared by Ogotomméli with Griaule, systems that leave their stories in geometric structures, musical rhythms, and other edifices.

However, we take a different interest here in Rotman's formulations. We wonder whether this haptic experience of nomad counting presents an analogue of the type of reading required of those who turn repeatedly to Wright's pages. Additionally, we wonder whether this kind of reader shares the spirit of the performer who works upon a stage to produce the event known broadly as "performance." If the nomad number – which knows nothing of the certainty that 2 follows 1 or of a rectilinear path connecting 3 to 4 – arises with the located, incar-

84 Ibid., 145.

nated experience of the nomad, then might a nomad text arise with the experience of the nomad reader? If a nomad reader substitutes the notion of reading a text more than once with the notion of performing the reading of a text “again,” might this reader also thrive upon the stage on which the text of a given performance, on consecutive nights and for different audiences, “repeats”?

The strategy of reading the long poems first by discerning structure and demarcating parts, in fact, allows the reader to approach the poetry by taking the parts out of sequence. One undertakes such rearrangement as a routine matter in rehearsal, practicing scenes according to necessity, spending more time on the most complex or intricate passages, before returning them to their proper arrangement as an act of performance. We understand this de-sequencing or re-sequencing practice now inflected by the act of nomadic counting; counting without sequence, as to say one and one and one, attending to need over reason, inhabiting the writing. An ideal of comprehension follows in the form of a total apprehension of the writing as architecture, or as Blanchot wrote, as spectacle: “Desire to replace ordinary reading (in which you have to go from section to section) with the spectacle of a simultaneous speech where everything would be said all at once, without confusion, in ‘a total, peaceful, intimate and ultimately uniform flash.’”⁸⁵

§ Reading as $n+1$ part two: A process given substance by a trinity

In *Mathematics of Sign*, Rotman prepares us for this analogue between the nomad-counter and reader-performer.

85 Maurice Blanchot, “Joubert and Space,” in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 60. Translation modified by Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 46–47.

His semiotic analysis of equations differentiates a “trio of actors” necessary to the production of mathematics. He identifies this trio as the Person, the Subject, and the Agent, a trinity that unseats the imagined, unitary “mathematician” who simply “does mathematics” by scribbling marks on a page. The three collaborate in a highly creative performance that acknowledges the distributed, physical dimension of mathematical thinking.

The activity of mathematics takes this form. The Subject imagines the world in which $2 + 2 = 4$. The Agent, by distinction a surrogate of this Subject, and imagined by the Subject, does the actual work of proving the equation $2 + 2 = 4$. Rotman elaborates.

Unlike the Subject, the Agent is not reflective and has no intentions: he is never called upon to “consider,” “define,” or “prove” anything, or indeed to attribute any significance or meaning to what he does; he is simply required to behave according to a prior pattern – do this then this then [...] – imagined for him by the Subject. The Agent, then, is a skeleton diagram of the Subject in two senses: he lacks the Subject’s subjectivity in the face of signs; and he is free of the constraints of finitude and logical feasibility – he can perform infinite additions, make infinitely many choices, search through an infinite array, operate within nonexistent worlds – that accompany this subjectivity.⁸⁶

The Agent could be a computer, or a supercomputer, or a team executing only computational rules and sequential constraints. We come then to the third figure.

If the Agent is a truncated and idealized image of the Subject, then the latter is himself a reduced and abstracted version of the subject – let us call him the Per-

86 Rotman, *Mathematics as Sign*, 14.

son – who operates with the signs of natural language and can answer to the agency named by the “I” of ordinary nonmathematical discourse.⁸⁷

Rendering this trio of performers visible clarifies an operation typically concealed by the mathematician; namely, the operation of predicting future realities.

A mathematical assertion is a prediction, a foretelling of the result of performing certain actions upon signs. In making an assertion the Subject is claiming to know what would happen if the sign activities detailed in the assertion were to be carried out. Since the actions in question are ones that fall within the Subject’s own domain of activity, the Subject is in effect laying claim to knowledge of his own future signifying states.⁸⁸

To validate any given prediction, the Subject deploys his Agent who, in effect, dwells in the imagined world conjured by the mathematical prediction. Both Subject and Agent live within what Rotman calls the “mathematical code” and have no direct contact with the Person who lives outside the code and takes his cues from a “Leading [mathematical] Principle.” The Principle guides the Person to construct the Subject in such-and-such a way and, by extension, to deploy the Agent in such-and-such a fashion.⁸⁹ A major claim about the materiality and lived experience of the Person, as distinct from the other two actors, follows from this:

No description of himself is available to the Subject within the Code. Although he is able to imagine and observe the Agent as a skeleton diagram of himself, he

87 *Ibid.*, 15.

88 *Ibid.*, 16.

89 *Ibid.*, 17–18.

cannot – within the vocabulary of the Code – articulate his relation to that Agent. He knows the Agent is a simulacrum of himself, but he cannot talk about his knowledge. Precisely in the articulation of this relation lies the semiotic source of a proof's persuasion: the Subject can be persuaded by a thought experiment designed to validate a prediction about his own actions only if he appreciates the resemblance – for the particular mathematical purpose at hand – between the Agent and himself. It is the business of the underlying narrative of a proof to articulate the nature of this resemblance. In short, the idea behind a proof is situated in the meta-Code; it is not the Subject himself who can be persuaded by the idea behind a proof, but the Subject in the presence of the Person, the natural language subject of the meta-Code for whom the Agent as a simulacrum of the Subject is an object of discourse.⁹⁰

Let us now assert a more direct connection between Rotman's trio of mathematical actors and our figure of the "reader" who engages with Wright's text. Let us imagine that a Person, corresponding with Rotman's Person, picks up a copy of Wright's *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*. The Person reads the first lines:

Here begins the revelation of a kiosk
beside the road

For whom does the revelation begin? We may ask this question in many forms. Does it begin for the Subject, a figure already inserted into the world of the text? If so, then a quick birth takes place as the Subject produces the Agent who will enact the journey initiated by the revelation. The Agent gathers information while wandering

⁹⁰ Ibid., 19.

along with the text, and relays that information to the Subject, who in turn begins to make meaning of it. The Subject will provide the Person with the distillation of that meaning. In time the Person will actualize these distillations of meaning in the world outside of the poem, and note the world changing accordingly, by the poem that both enfolds it and that it enfolds.

In this scenario, all three figures are The Reader, just as all three figures are, for Rotman, The Mathematician. A problem arises at this point, however. Rotman's trio performs surreptitiously and in service of the Leading Idea that regulates mathematical logic and discourse. As such, to fabricate a Reader that equates to Rotman's Mathematician once again uncovers de Certeau's quandary. Any Reader who operates without knowledge of this three-part self is likely to "read" in the way prescribed ahead of time by those guardians who validate literary meanings. If, for example, we read in order to find a specific meaning in *Reading Absence* – the meaning, perhaps, that would be discussed in a classroom after having been assigned the text as homework – then we succumb to the Leading Idea of literary discourse, with reading reduced to the strictly identifiable, etiolated role of demonstrating the proof. No discovery results; only the retrieval of precisely those fossilized concepts we have been alerted lie buried there.

In order to elude the grooves set down ahead of time by the Leading Idea, the Reader must let go of the certainty that 1 follows 2, that $1 + 1 = 2$, and allow for the never-before-experienced maneuvering from 1e to 2e. That is to say, while $1 + 1$ in fact = 2, $1 + 1$ may also = 3, since the second 1 in the equation, by virtue of its place in the sequence, also becomes N+1. The second part enfolds the memory of the first part within it. Each integer, or part, in the flow of parts, doubles as both itself alone and itself in sequence. In our analogue, then, a Reader navigates a discovered pathway through the text, sensing the

materiality of “the revelation of a kiosk / beside the road: the white eggs / nestled there in the straw [...]” so full of potentiality and the relational complexities of shifting color, as white eggs “turn blue in the amber light.” In the unraveling of the egg that follows, we may ask: what does this Reader resemble if not an ensemble of performers? They gather to read aloud, and to enact, Wright’s poetic text, once again, for the first time.

§ Epilogue: Overcode

Perhaps we have made the “mistake” of confusing ourselves with the I of the poem. If so, we commit an honest and fundamental error.

In his 1976 lecture *On Reading*, presented at the Writing Conference of Luchon, Roland Barthes addressed the shared questions “which each of us asks from our own position: *What is reading? How does one read? Why does one read?*”⁹¹ He may have asked, *Who reads?* or, *Who is the reader?* – which is also to ask, *what becomes of us when we read?*

Barthes stated unequivocally, “every reading occurs within a structure (however multiple, however open), and not in the allegedly free space of an alleged spontaneity: there is no ‘natural,’ ‘wild’ reading: reading does not *overflow* structure; it is subject to it: it needs structure, it respects structure.”⁹² Yet from this foundational stipulation, he proposed at last that we may connect the reader to a theory of Poetics by considering the reader as a character, as one of the characters, although not a privileged one, within the bounds of the writing. In Greek tragedy’s example, “the reader is that character who is on stage (even if clandestinely) and who hears what each of

91 Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 33.

92 *Ibid.*, 36.

the partners of the dialogue does not hear," with a kind of double hearing.⁹³ The reader on the stage swells in the *paragram*, the parallel grammar of the writing, perhaps confused or incomplete, but out of which "a 'true' reading, a reading which would assume its affirmation, would be a mad reading, not because it would invent improbable meanings (misconstructions), not because it would be 'delirious,' but because it would perceive the simultaneous multiplicity of meanings, of points of view, of structures, a space extended outside the laws which prescribe contradiction."⁹⁴

Here the paradox of the reader becomes apparent, a paradox which Barthes understands as issuing from the incontestable belief that to read is to decode letters, words, meanings, and structures. With the complex interplay of these codes, by virtue of accumulated decodings, reading enacts a reversal. The reader *overcodes*, not only deciphering but also producing. In accumulating language, the reader "infinitely and tirelessly traversed" by these languages, becomes that traversal.

We understand reading as the site of the permanent collapse of structure. The reader proceeds from a subject "who is no longer the *thinking subject* of idealistic philosophy, but rather devoid of all unity, lost in the double misreadings of the unconscious and of ideology, and remembering only a whirligig of languages."⁹⁵ We know the reader in this way as the complete subject, and the field of reading as absolute subjectivity: "every reading proceeds from a subject, and it is separated from this subject only by rare and tenuous mediations, the apprenticeship of letters, a few rhetorical protocols,"⁹⁶ beyond which the subject may rediscover itself and its own individual

93 Ibid., 41.

94 Ibid., 42.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

structure. This hysterical collapse of structure, Barthes concludes, will leave intact “what we must call the movement of the subject and of history.”⁹⁷

Here within the bounds of our journey through these questions, we may consider this reclaimed movement as choreography not only as movement, but also as ritual and as the dance “of the subject and of history.” From what subject does the reading “proceed”; that is to say, who initiates reading? In the words of M3: “Lead, lead. Who goes first? Napoleon goes first.”⁹⁸ To lead or to read, one begins always like Napoleon, with the grandiosity that any first step necessitates, embarking with the arrogance of ideals and in proceeding, corrupting them. “Call this wandering along this road a colonization.” To begin is to begin to colonize. Yet such impurity becomes a “radiant corruption,” salvaged by the cumulative magnitude and multiplicity of signs, attaining the hurricane force that spins the whirligig of languages, in the generative abundance of overcoding. Each nomad reader, once exiled, recovers a home in reading, makes a dwelling of ritual in its ordered and ordering sequences. In the perishing of every moment, the melting into air of all that is solid, the sojourner, the reader, the subject, the I, becomes “attuned to the disappearance of all things and of my self.” Reading the absence becomes a presentable art. In the presentation we read, and read again. We perform choreography with and through singular time signatures and legible structures that repeat before they collapse, in those spaces that come into being as the reader and the text share their time together. In the wake of the fallen structure, the universal ungrounding of learning, we perform our mutual mistaken identities, characters who take ourselves for one another before we dissipate once

97 Ibid., 43.

98 Wright, *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*, 60.

again. We act out our readings and ourselves in the arena of the page that takes the form of a stage.

The Geometry of Rhythm

§ Mathematical warm-up

Since Wright is himself a creative reader, the act of reading Wright involves reading Wright reading. Of the many things that Wright reads, and that we read along with him, as the last chapter's foray into Brian Rotman's work demonstrated, the topic of mathematics is of essential importance. As such, we have to engage with Wright's mathematical sensibilities in order to engage with his poetry.

Students of the arts and humanities will no doubt find this task daunting, and the situation is even more complex than it appears at first glance. In addition to the typical mathematicians cited as influential in the development of the craft since the earliest days of human civilization, Wright brings us into confrontation with atypical mathematicians, as lines like this one from *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax* make clear: "Think, too, of the common translation of motion into number among the Bamana, Dogon, Mossi, Senufo, Yoruba, Akan, and other μαθηματικοί [*mathēmatikoi*] energetically embraced

by our astringent apprentice.”¹ That is, the set of Pythagoras-inspired “mathematicians” includes, in Wright’s reading, African thinkers who do not rely on the formal language of mathematics that many of us recognize today whenever its hieroglyphs appear on a page. To read Wright’s reading of mathematics is to think through the entanglement of number, motion, diagram, force, energy, and sign as those terms are employed in cultures scattered through time and space. Wright’s mathematics are equal parts studies of metaphysical systems and analytical proofs.

Metaphysics, physics, and mathematics – whether coming from traditional, Western mathematicians and scientists or the greater group of μαθηματικοί – all find expression through the body. The final line of *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax* makes this clear: “The piper begins with this: he knows his body, as with all mathematical objects, incomplete.”² We learn from this single line not only that Wright, whom we might approach through that text’s aesthetic persona of the piper, identifies his body as a mathematical object, which, here, equates the body to things like “numbers,” “integers,” “points,” “lines,” and “sets,” all things that can be formally defined and used in subsequent processes of deductive reasoning; we also learn that this body-object is incomplete, meaning that, though the body can be named and identified and put to work in subsequent deductions or actions, its “identity” unfolds in a perpetual act of becoming. The body mathematical is both concrete and abstract, or, to borrow a term developed by Ioana Jucan, it is *concretely general*, both situated in a specific time and *space* and removed from it.³ As concretely general, the body coalesces with

1 Jay Wright, *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, Unpublished manuscript, 2016, 52.

2 Ibid., 77.

3 Ioana Jucan, “Thinking Performance in Neoliberal Times: Adorno Encounters ‘Neutral Hero,’” in *Adorno and Performance*, eds. Will Dad-

itself through physical process and slips beyond its own boundaries to entangle with everything else. Wright seeks to know this body mathematical in a geometric way, to diagram its vectors and understand its shape.

The desire to know this geometry leads to another insight about that final line from *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*: “The piper begins with this: he knows his body, as with all mathematical objects, incomplete.” The syntax of the sentence makes possible a parallel reading to accompany that understanding of the always-becoming, concretely general body-object; namely, we might read “incomplete” as modifying *not* “his body” but, rather, “knows.” Thinking in this way leads to the observation that the piper’s knowledge of his own body is always incomplete, and, by extension, desires further study. This reading, while somewhat oblique, makes sense when we contextualize this sentence as the *final* sentence of the seventy-seven-page philosophical examination presented in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*. Wright ends his paper with a beginning, thereby instigating a feedback loop that sends us back to page one to begin again, similar to the feedback loop we find in *The Presentable Art of Reading Absence*. The next reading will, of course, be different ($n+1$), and this looped reading becomes itself a geometrical diagram that exemplifies the always-incomplete nature of mathematical objects. From the top, looking down, the diagram appears to be a circle. When we shift from the optical perspective to the haptic experience of reading, the circle becomes a spiral. This is another geometric dimension of Wright’s pursuit.

There is also a philosophical question lurking in this final statement. Does our mathematical existence – understood in a properly Wright-eous, which is to say maximally capacious, way – follow a predetermined matrix or geometrical pattern, or does it produce the matrix as

dario and Karoline Gritzner (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 111.

it unfolds? In *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, Wright summons numerous thinkers to weigh in on this question, but one presence looms large, the presence of Spinoza whose philosophical and geometrical work is perfectly suited to Wright's mathematical queries. By looking at Spinoza's function in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, we can understand more clearly what Wright seeks to accomplish with his study of Geometry. This effort, in turn, builds on our previous "definition" of rhythm in Wright's work and leads toward a nuanced reading of Wright's most recently published dramatic offering, *The Geometry of Rhythm*. That's the main focus of this chapter, but we are honoring the painstakingly nuanced method of mathematicians and will, thus, proceed step by step. These next several pages are a kind of musical-philosophical-mathematical warm-up to the main performance.

§

For Wright, Spinoza presents a thorny situation. Through *Ethics*, we can glimpse the beautifully ordered world that unfolds from God and through each part of the world. Spinoza lays bare the geometry of everything. Unlike the Baroque effulgence of Leibniz's system, Spinoza's thought boasts no frills yet penetrates to the deep structure of the universe. Spinoza's thought is elegant in its austerity. Elegant, but lacking in *duende*. Wright senses a rhythm to the world that can only be created through the participation of a mischievous, irrational spirit, one complicit in the contingencies that Spinoza precisely denies. Wright tarries with Spinoza in order to marvel at the geometric order the philosopher is able to reveal, but then he moves on and develops colors that Spinoza can't seem to fathom.

It is instructive to sit with Wright's readings. Specifically, there are at least nine, mostly direct references to

Spinoza in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*. Wright focuses on Spinoza's *Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order* (*Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata*), written c. 1665 and published in 1677. He seems most interested in Propositions 16 and 32 of Book 1 from *Ethics* (mentioned on pages 13 and 31 of *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*),⁴ which highlights Spinoza's valorization of the Intellect and his refusal of contingency:

Prop. 16: "From the necessity of the divine nature must follow an infinite number of things in infinite ways – that is, all things which can fall within the sphere of infinite intellect."

Prop. 32: "Will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary cause."

Cor. 1: "Hence it follows, first, that God does not act according to freedom of the will."

Cor. 2: "It follows, secondly, that will and intellect stand in the same relation to the nature of God as do motion, and rest, and absolutely all natural phenomena, which must be conditioned by God [...] to exist and act in a particular manner."⁵

Scholarly interpretations of Spinoza and his crowning achievement, *Ethics*, vary significantly, but many of them agree that Spinoza's philosophical system is "closed," insofar as it is hermetically concealed within, or comprehended by, the singular notion of God, or Substance.

- 4 It is worth pausing to consider the numerology embedded in these citations. The number 32 is twice 16, and Wright uses the term "double logos" when citing these two propositions in the *Ethics*. He mentions these two propositions on pages 13 and 31 on *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, which shows off the mirrored relationship between two numbers. What might a reader make of this?
- 5 Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza's Ethics*, trans. George Eliot, ed. Clare Carlisle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 88, 99–100.

Every thing, multiplicity as such, extends as part of God. This aspect troubled so many people in Spinoza's time. God ceased to be a transcendental cause or Being and becomes, instead, the immanent matrix from which all things extend. Within each thing is God. Spinoza's *ordine geometrico* lays bare how exactly this is so.

On the one hand, we see how Wright would find this fascinating. Not only is the geometrical dimension of Spinoza's system resonant with his own reading of the universe, but the *joy* experienced through Spinoza's precise act of reasoning matches Wright's own affective disposition achieved through the act of writing poetry. The punishingly erudite and cold language of the *Ethics* distracts from the topic of joy in Spinoza, but some scholars, like Piet Steenbakkers, have sought to rectify this:

Another aspect that deserves more attention than it has received so far is the obvious connection that Spinoza himself perceived between the joy (in a strong, Spinozistic sense) of doing mathematics and the philosophical "therapy" he developed in the *Ethics*. The point has recently been made by Françoise Barbaras: what the Euclidean mathematician experiences when gradually disclosing the "universal ballet of proportion" is an unequalled joy. It is only this way that geometry could become the model for Spinoza's philosophy.⁶

To do mathematics, to discern the great Geometrical Order, for Spinoza, is to fulfill the twin benefits of philosophy, that of Knowing Thyself and Caring for the Self. Likewise, Wright's poetics serve the dual purpose of describing the beautiful weave of all things and producing a

6 Piet Steenbakkers, "The Geometrical Order in the 'Ethics,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's "Ethics"*, ed. Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 54–55.

self supple enough to participate in the weaving. In both cases, joy dwells in the doing of thinking.

On the other hand, we see how Spinoza's "closed system" would turn Wright off. Toward the end of *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, he states quite clearly, "We feel abandoned by Spinoza who tells us that our knowledge 'is merely probable, but not certain.'"⁷ This is so because, as modes of God, humans cannot fully comprehend that which comprehends them. Certainty is for God alone, though even certainty is unnecessary because its existence presumes uncertainty and that is not a possible disposition of God. "Merely probable" knowledge is connected to Spinoza's refusal of contingency and, that, too, bothers Wright. On page 1 of *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, Wright introduces Spinoza through Isabelle Stengers's critique of his closed system, thereby prompting his readers to consider the epistemological benefits of fiction and artistic creation. The choice here is between the power of rational intellect to discern God through a geometrical method and, following from that, discern the way each being participates in the order that unfolds from God (*pace* Spinoza), on the one hand, and the productive capacity of human thought, spiced with irrationality, to create the conditions of possibility from which knowledge of the universe unfolds, on the other hand (*pace* Isabelle Stengers, Karen Barad, Karin Knorr-Cetina).

As Spinoza scholar Errol E. Harris puts it, the problem – and we would say, the problem for Wright – is one of "sensuous imagination." For Spinoza, "[t]he order of the imagination [...] is what psychologists have come to call 'association of ideas,' which is not a logical order or one based on necessary causal connexions."⁸ "The purely sensuous content of *imaginatio*," Harris continues, "regarded

7 Wright, *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, 65.

8 Errol E. Harris, *Salvation from Despair: A Reappraisal of Spinoza's Philosophy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 93.

virtually as preperceptual, is in itself neither true nor false, but becomes one or the other in becoming the subject matter of a perceptual judgement.”⁹ The quarrel with Spinoza played out in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax* indicates that Wright is not prepared to cede entirely to rational understanding and the judgement of the intellect. Wright senses that the imagination aids the intellect in an extremely important way, even in Spinoza’s work, and that this fact shows itself in one specific, profoundly joyous, and mathematical activity: music making. Polyrhythmic cadence and musical improvisation, both subtended by a complex geometry, point to the pivotal moment when human reason receives adjustment from the body’s knowledge. Using Ancient Greek terminology, Wright, unlike Spinoza, senses the mutual imbrication of μῆτις (*mētis*) and λόγος (*logos*), of creative, bodily generation and rational, intellectual order.

§

We suggest that, in Wright’s work, a sensuous imagination derived from the knowledge of the body leads to a pleasing irrationality that joins with profoundly rational systems like Spinoza’s philosophy. Furthermore, we think of this irrationality as a musico-mathematical titillation commensurate with the diesis – a small musical interval that has added color to phrases composed throughout Western musical history – as it was understood by Nicola Vincentino in the sixteenth Century. Thanks to Peter Pesic’s book, *Music and the Making of Modern Science* (2014), Vincentino’s arguments have received careful historicization that helps to lay bare the polymath’s contribution to both music history and the development of mathematics. Wright refers to Pesic’s book three times in

9 Ibid., 95.

The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax, and the diesis in particular summons a musical genus that Wright touches on throughout his life's work, namely the enharmonic.

In *L'antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica* (*Ancient Music Adapted to Modern Practice*, 1555), Vincentino discussed the three classical genera, or systems of tuning: enharmonic, diatonic, and chromatic. To each of these belonged a unique, or phenomenological, sound of notes and chords played on the lyre as well as a unique mathematical substratum that measures the numerical ratios of whole and semitones. The math is particularly interesting because it tells the story of rational and irrational numbers, especially the way in which the latter vexed Ancient Greek mathematicians who refused to admit their existence. (Consider the tale of Hippasus who, after discovering irrational numbers, was promptly drowned in the sea.) Those numbers that cannot be written in clear and simple fractions, said the Pythagoreans and others, simply do not exist. And yet, the musical incarnation of these irrational numbers can indeed be produced by, for example, bending pitch on the aulos or pipe. This is the first flash of Wright's existence within this history. Is his figure of the "piper" in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax* – and perhaps the word "tuning" in the title of that paper – a dramatization of the bending pitch that Aristotle described as "orgiastic"?¹⁰

In the diatonic genus, the problem of irrational numbers is present even before we hear the diesis of a bending pitch. There, the so-called semitone is never an evenly divided mathematical embodiment of a whole tone.¹¹ To fudge the fractions, music theorists created a system of major and minor semitones, but even this, explains Pestic, was more cosmetic than arithmetic. Thus, the problem of

10 Peter Pestic, *Music and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 66.

11 *Ibid.*, 68.

the irrational semitone resurfaces in the chromatic tuning. It is only in the enharmonic tuning that a (paradoxical) solution is achieved, since the diesis lacks (mathematical) rationality when constructed geometrically but, when treated as a unit instead of a number in arithmetic calculations, attains that rationality.¹² Vincentino affirms the duality of this “orgiastic” musical phenomenon, thereby making it a sonic precursor to the wave-particle duality. That is, the deisis is both rational and irrational, as are the numbers that describe its mathematical existence. The complexity of this issue was sufficient to warrant heated discussion in Ancient Greece and in Renaissance Italy. Vincentino thought that the Ancients found a way to affirm the rational irrationality of the bending pitch that flourished within the enharmonic tuning and therefore so too should his contemporaries. This is one of his central arguments for adapting Ancient music to Modern practice.

As Pestic points out, Vincentino’s argument is groundbreaking for the way it merges music and math:

Only with the enharmonic genus does this simmering instability disrupt both the diatonic and chromatic genera and “permit the creation of steps and leaps beyond all reason.” This, Vicentino tells us, is the cause that should move us not only to call them “irrational ratios” but also, by so naming them, to install them in mathematics and music jointly as having equal existential force with the “rational ratios” we learned from arithmetic and the “irrational magnitudes” from geometry. For Vicentino, music is the intermediate ground on which arithmetic and geometry meet in such hybrid concepts as “irrational ratios,” shared between mathematics and music.¹³

¹² *Ibid.*, 68–69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

As for Vincentino, who heard in the titillating sound of the diesis an echo in the canyon between theory and experience, so too does Wright understand the enharmonic genus as a garden from which blossoms unexpected and surprising fruits. It is the musico-mathematical field of the enharmonic that affirms precisely the irrationality that Spinoza denied within his geometric system. As such, we might think of the diesis as one of the notes that Wright plays throughout his poems, thereby sounding his support for a kind of contingency, sensuous imagination, as for example heard in the musical scores supporting Dionysian orgy, and bodily knowing that he would like Spinoza to aver.

With this brief history made available by Pesic, we can listen to Wright:

Boleros, "18 (POLYHYMNIA ↔ KHAIBIT)"

And how can I explain how the enharmonic
rapture of my name left them deaf?¹⁴

Boleros, Saints' Days, "22 Nuestra Señora de la Paz (January 24)"

Strange to think of such a virgin,
drawing a midwinter veil over our hearts,
and trying to sound the enharmonic note
that will distinguish peace from death.¹⁵

Guide Signs, Book 1, "The Ambiguous Archive, (2')/-d-"

Purity here is a counterfactual, a veil
upon the proportion and form of a city engaged
with its enharmonic being.¹⁶

14 Jay Wright, *Transfigurations: Collected Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 519.

15 *Ibid.*, 528.

16 Jay Wright, *The Guide Signs: Book One and Book Two* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), Book 1, 37.

§

What, then, is “geometry” for Wright? It is a rational, well-ordered system that undergirds our physical existence and plots, via Spinoza, a connective tissue between Substance (God) and its Modes (all things); it is this order inflected with bent pitches and ritual dance that may not fit within well-trimmed ratios of mathematical calculation but that are surely sensed by experiencing our being-in-the-world. Geometry is this bent order: pitch and revelation. Through Wright’s reading, the Pythagoreans, other presocratic philosophers such as Empedocles and Aristoxenus, Renaissance scholars like Vincentino, Spinoza, Cuban musicians, and Ogotemmêli offer insight into the sound of this geometry as it plays out in Earthly and Celestial matters. We might venture a step further and suggest that the Ancient Greeks knew of this kind of geometry because of their inheritance of knowledge from the south, that is, from people like the Dogon.

A key figure in the genealogy from the Dogon through the classical Greek and Hellenistic world is Proclus of Athens (412–85 CE) who played a crucial role in the transmission of Ancient Greek thought to the Medieval European world. By adding him to the picture, another dimension of the role of the imagination in Wright’s geometry comes into focus.

In the introduction of this book, we discussed Proclus and his interpretation of Platonic methexis in Euclid’s geometry. We turn to him here, again via Orna Harari’s scholarship, to underscore his assertion that “discursive reason needs the aid of the imagination, because it is ‘too weak to see the reason principles in their folded form.’”¹⁷ There is a Neoplatonic series at play here, one to which

17 Orna Harari, “*Methexis and Geometrical Reasoning in Proclus’ Commentary on Euclid’s Elements*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 30 (2006): 381.

Proclus affixes specific terminology in order to establish the pre-existence of geometric objects. The terms, which we list here in order to proceed with Harari's explication of Proclus, are as follows: Transcendent universal, Immanent universal, and Later-born universal.

The first of these terms refers to "the universal that is separate from the particulars," and we can think of this as the Platonic Form. The immanent universal is "the universal that exists only in each specific and individual instance."¹⁸ If the transcendental universal is Triangle, the immanent universal corresponding to Triangle would be a triangular frieze on a Greek temple that clearly partakes of Triangle but is but one instance of triangularity. The Later-born universal, "that exists in our conceptions as an abstraction from individual instances," would be a painting of this frieze that represents its triangularity but, in doing so, operates at a further remove from the Form of Triangle.¹⁹

Equipped with the vocabulary, we can turn back to Harari:

Interpreted in the light of the passage quoted above, the weakness of discursive reason can be understood as an inability to apprehend the transcendent universal as the unitary cause of each of its manifestations. Proclus' conception of the relationship between transcendent and immanent universals implies that the productive power of the transcendent universal can be apprehended only through its imitation by its effects. The imagination brings into light these effects, thereby enabling discursive reason to apprehend causes. Hence in Proclus' philosophy of geometry imaginary geometrical constructions play the role that effects have in his metaphysics. Geometrical constructions

18 Ibid., 364.

19 Ibid. The Triangle example is our own.

present in a conjunctive way the occult and unitary productive power of transcendent universals.²⁰

Here is the creative element in Proclus's thought: The act of doing geometry, that is, of utilizing the imagination to imitate the transcendental universal, jumps into the foreground and ceases to hide behind the finished geometric diagram. This act of doing geometry is a kind of embodied performance necessary to the realization of the immanent universal.

There's more. Proclus, unlike his predecessors who interpreted Euclid and Plato, does not see a one-way street, so to speak, through which the transcendental universal expresses itself unidirectionally into the immanent or later-born universal. The Form is not a stamp that overrides the power of the material it stamps. For Proclus, matter – a geometrical diagram, a frieze, a body engaged in doing geometry – *participates* actively in the transcendental universal. This is the methexis discussed in the introduction of this book, and “Proclus distinguishes the substrate in which forms are realized from prime matter in which higher grades of reality are realized [...] *thereby regarding the substrate and not only the form as affecting the process of participation.*”²¹

The degree to which “the substrate” (i.e., matter) participates in the Form depends on what Proclus refers to as the “aptitude” of matter. Reading Harari:

Proclus [...] regards the substrate's aptitude as affecting the form itself; he thereby views it as yielding qualitative differences between the various manifestations of a single form. That is, the unique characteristics of each particular can be explained in terms of defective

20 Ibid., 381–82.

21 Ibid., 373, emphasis added.

reception of the form, resulting from the substrate's aptitude.²²

If we remove the negative phraseology – “deceptive reception” – we find in Proclus a truly Wright-eous idea, one that we don't find in Spinoza. For Proclus, a flawless material could participate fully in the productive power of a Form, or transcendent universal, thereby receiving the Form's power and fulfilling that power at the same time. To the extent that no such flawless material exists, Proclus sees existing material as defective in its receptive ability, at least to some extent. But it is possible to phrase this idea positively. A material's aptitude varies according to its ability to adjust its comportment to the Form at play in the world. One does not comport oneself better or worse to a Form, one comports oneself differently. This “difference” manifests as the recognizable style or signature of an artist or, for that matter, a reader.

Drifting back to Wright's literary universe, we might pause to consider, once again, Art Tatum whom we summoned in the earlier chapters on Wright's *Boleros* and Wright's rhythm. Tatum's signature reveals his aptitude. In *Boleros*, we find the piano virtuoso nested within the subsection titled (CLIO ↔ KHU). This mathematical equation suggests that Clio (i.e., Muse of history) exists *if and only if* khu (i.e., the immortal part, the radiant and shining being that lived on in the saḥu, the intellect) also exists. “Intellect” here has nothing to do with Spinoza's rationality; instead, it is a spiritual power manifested through the telling of history, an art, we will remember, that was exercised for a long time through epic poetry (think Homer). The ability of the intellect to comport itself to the unfolding of human action in history will determine the extent to which the poetical telling of history lives on (think the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). Visually impaired (like

22 Ibid., 374.

Homer), Art Tatum, whose musical performances of jazz standards managed to faithfully enact the standard while also modifying the standard through improvised flourish and fancy, counts among the great historiographers. His intellect, which manifested not as discursive reason but as the physical manipulation of keys within the "closed system" of the piano, told and re-told the history of each song he played. The telling kept the tradition secure. His re-telling modified the story, much like a question mark modifies a statement. His aptitude allowed him to tell history in the interrogative. Not "Somewhere over the Rainbow," but "Somewhere over the Rainbow?"

The interrogative mode is important because it creates another exit from Spinoza's closed system. Tatum inquired into the harmonic possibilities of an existing song, thereby opening what had become a closed track. In group jazz improvisation, the interrogative mode shows itself in the way that instrumentalists communicate and hand off to each other. The piano asks a chord and the trumpet responds. The response may utilize the same notes as the question, or it may lead in a different direction. Collectively, the calls and responses operate within a singular system, but the system is open on all sides and only "ends" insofar as the conversation falls silent for a finite period. During the audible, or non-silent, portions of the conversation, listeners (readers?) discern not only the aptitudes of the musicians who participate in the Forms of Number but also of the instruments themselves whose shapes participate in the geometry of sound. When we listen to jazz, we participate in the collective aptitude of musicians and instruments, thereby participating in the Form of Number and the geometry of Sound. Just as the musicians must engage in the performance of playing in order to unfold the occult mysteries of Form and sound, so too must we engage in the performance of listening and, in so doing, aid in the wider performance of music.

Wright's mathematics is a heady brew of Pythagoras, Aristoxenus, Vincentino, Spinoza, Proclus, Art Tatum, and many other ingredients, each of which, in one way or another, has contributed solutions to the ongoing question of Number and Form. By the time Wright writes *The Prime Anniversary* (2019), he has weighed so many mathematical matters and tinkered with so many mixtures that he is able to commit to a singular, musical geometry. The fit of geometry and musical expression is palpable throughout the book, both in terms of form and structure, but it truly shines through in the play *The Geometry of Rhythm*. That play reveals an answer to the philosophical question posed earlier. As we become ourselves, do we follow a predetermined geometry, or do we make the geometry as we become ourselves? The answer is (a rationally irrational) *yes*. To unpack that answer, we can move to the matter at hand.

§ To the matter at hand²³

In this chapter, we begin an investigation of the geometry of Wright's most recent publication, *The Prime Anniversary*. The poet's mathematical sensibilities are visible in much of his body of work, but they are particularly palpable in this book where mathematical equations appear in the text, the title names the ancient calculations of prime numbers, and the one-act play that concludes the volume offers a theatrical-thinking-through of musical geometry. The purpose of this chapter, from here on, is to continue producing meaning within Wright's universe while also lending some assistance to those for whom mathematics seem altogether opaque and unpoetic.

23 This was the most recent poetic publication as of the writing of this book.

We want to focus in particular on the play *The Geometry of Rhythm*, which concludes *The Prime Anniversary*. To approach the play, in a manner that rhymes with the dramaturgy of *The Three Matadores Play* discussed in the previous chapter, we will first present a five-part geometry lesson that tackles not geometry in general but, rather, a clear and potent example of geometry's entanglement with music. The source material for this lesson is Godfried T. Toussaint's *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm*, a book that not only helps to map the trading zone of math and the arts but also bears an uncannily similar title to Wright's one-act play. Several of Toussaint's discoveries will help to unpack the musical through line of that play, which builds itself around the so-called "Gypsy scale" or Hungarian minor scale in C. This scale, it turns out, has quite an active molecular geometry.

After the geometry lesson, we will jump into Wright's play and ride the lines of sight made thinkable by a geometric reading of that text. "Geometry" here still has a strong connection to actual math, but it also begins to veer into poetic and metaphorical territory where it acquires a more general function. In particular, this poetic geometry helps readers to navigate the ecotone of two abutting abstract landscapes, such as those of the major and minor keys in music and the emergent territory of the fork in a forking path. One of the two characters in the play, Bivio, carries this fork in his name: Bivio, from *bivius*, the Latin expression for various kinds of "crossroads." A latent Baroque dimension to the play, which will become visible by elucidating a connection between Wright's text and Alejo Carpentier's novella *Concierto barroco* (1974), suggests that the cusp of becoming, the present moment of transformation in which the self emerges from its historical ground, marks one of the play's primary themes. Wright reveals this theme through the geometry of the music underscoring the play.

Looking ahead slightly, the subsequent chapter will build on this treatment of Wright's one-act play and circle back to the poems in the first half of *The Prime Anniversary* where we encounter gems like this:

Truth: names travel a watery route to heaven,
 so says Concha Méndez, or so she would have said,
 if she had any regard for physics. Seven
 witnesses report that ether surely has failed,
 a small erasure hardly noticed at Quito;
 lines in that atmosphere seem to circle and flow
 tangent to themselves. What does geometry know?²⁴

All of the elements of Wright's poetry discussed in this book appear in this stanza: the merger of poetry, math, philosophy, and physics; a dynamic and foundational rhythm that shapes the line-length; a historical reference to "witnessing," or that moment when multiple points of view emerge and begin to discriminate between reality and fiction. We are dedicating a second chapter to *The Prime Anniversary* not only because the poems there encapsulate Wright's signature poetic aptitude, but also because the play and the poems that precede it work like parts actively participating in a whole, but parts that are, in themselves, complete and therefore desirous of individual treatment.

§ Geometry I: Intro to Toussaint

For the Ancient Egyptians and Greeks, geometry was the indispensable tool without which farming, flood plains, map-making, and other practical advances would have been unthinkable. For historians, these cultures' usage and understanding of geometry continues to reveal their

24 Jay Wright, *The Prime Anniversary* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2019), 3.

advanced, systematic thinking abilities while also revealing the limits of their abstract thinking capabilities. If, for example, numbers had no material correlation in everyday life, then they were ruled off limits. Infinity was suspect. $\sqrt{2}$ was simply impermissible, as was discussed earlier in the section on irrational numbers. And yet, especially in the case of the latter example, impermissible numbers appeared in the most rudimentary geometric equations like those which supported Classical musical theory. Geometric advances thus always cast a shadow that contained the domain of the unthinkable, and like a shadow, which had an obvious connection to material reality, this domain persisted in and as a part of daily life. Thus, a geometric diagram and its resulting equations were tethered to the metaphysical world of "Number," the physical world of bodies, and the epistemological world of mind emerging from the mathematician producing the equations. Geometry spoke and speaks to the universality of certain principles, but it also drew and draws attention to the mediation of these principles by the intervening human engaged in the calculation. As such, geometry straddles the line between universality and particularity while also hinting at a third dimension in which flourish the powers of the unknown.

A kind of geometry similar to that spied in Wright's poetry appears in Toussaint's *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm: What Makes a "Good" Rhythm Good?* (2013). The primary material of analysis in this book is a set of rhythms derived through phylogenetic analysis and treated through mathematical, geometrical study. A quotation from Toussaint explains the purpose of this approach and also shows us how his scope of thinking aligns with Wright's. In writing this book,

I wanted to illustrate how the study of the mathematical properties of musical rhythm generates common mathematical problems that arise in a variety of seem-

ingly disparate fields other than music theory, such as number theory in mathematics, combinatorics of words and automatic sequence generation in theoretical computer science, molecule reconstruction in crystallography, the restriction scaffold assignment problem in computational biology, timing in spallation neutron source accelerators in nuclear engineering, spatial arrangement of telescopes in radio astronomy, auditory illusions in the psychology of perception, facility location problems in operations research, leap-year calculations in astronomical calendar design, drawing straight lines in computer graphics, and the Euclidean algorithm for computing the greatest common divisor of two integers in the design and analysis of Algorithms.²⁵

While certainly aware of the erasure of specific cultural traditions that can happen when mathematical analysis is applied to such things as musical creations, Toussaint nevertheless adopts a strictly mathematical approach to his study because, ultimately, he seeks to explore what he calls “geometric rhythmic universals.”²⁶

To prepare us for these geometric universals, Toussaint explains how he has determined what “families” of rhythms to analyze:

At an abstract level, all rhythms can be classified into families described by these two numbers: the *onset-number* and the *pulse-number*. Let the integers k and n , denote, respectively, the onset-number and pulse-number of any rhythm. Among the timelines used in traditional and contemporary music all over the world, the values of k and n vary greatly across cul-

25 Godfried Toussaint, *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm: What Makes a “Good” Rhythm Good?* (New York: CRC Press, 2013), xiii.

26 *Ibid.*, 7.

tures. In Western music, n is usually less than or equal to 24. The fourth-century-BC Greek statesman Aristides wrote that it is not possible to perceive rhythm when n is greater than 18. However, the Aka Pygmies of central Africa use timelines with $n = 24$. Furthermore, some of the largest values of n are found in Indian classical music, where the timelines are called *talas* and the value of n can be as high as 128. In Western and sub-Saharan African music, the value of n is usually an even number. In Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, n is often an odd number, and sometimes a prime number such as 5, 7, or 11 (a number that can be divided without remainder only by itself and 1). In the Black Atlantic region, on the other hand, the pulse number is almost never a prime number.²⁷

He goes on to demonstrate how, across cultures, “the value of k is usually slightly higher or slightly lower than half the value of n . [...] Furthermore, for rhythms with sixteen pulses, a value of k equal to five seems to be preferred. Specifying the values of k and n allows the calculation of the number of theoretically possible rhythms in the family.”²⁸ But even this refined ratio between onset- and pulse-number yields an unwieldy amount of rhythms to analyze. Specifically, there are 4368 possible rhythms with five onsets and sixteen pulses. As the title of the book tells us, however, Toussaint is concerned with those rhythms deemed “good” by dint of their spread across the world. Thus, he is able to narrow his primary analysis to twelve rhythms, and he eventually identifies a single rhythm that appears in the most guises across cultures, that of the *clave son* (fig. 6.1) – a rhythm near and dear to Wright, who, we are alerted in his biographical statement

27 Ibid., 23.

28 Ibid.

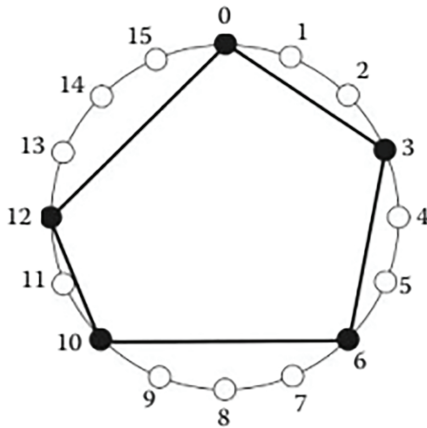


Figure 6.1: Diagram of the clave son rhythm from Godfried Toussaint, *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm: What Makes a “Good” Rhythm Good?* (New York: CRC Press, 2013), 25. All images from this text reproduced with permission from the publisher.

in *The Prime Anniversary*, identifies as a “jazz and música Latina bassist.”

Toussaint asks, “how, out of the 4368 myriad possible rhythms with five onsets from among [sixteen] pulses, [does] this particular configuration of inter-onset intervals {3-3-4-2-4} managed to become such a catchy and widely used rhythm?”²⁹ The rhythm in question is the clave son, pictured, geometrically, above. While popular in Afro-Cuban music, the rhythm itself dates back to thirteenth-century Baghdad, if not before, where musician, music theorist, physicist, and calligrapher Safi al-Din al-Urmawi recorded it under the name of *al-thaḡīl al-awwāl* in his 1252 treatise on rhythm called *Kitāb al-adwār*. The shape and tempo of this rhythm either sprung up independently in multiple Middle East and African locations,

29 Ibid., 25.

or else it migrated along trade routes – or, likely, both scenarios are true. It appears in a central role in the dance and music of Ghana known as the *kpanlogo* where musicians play it on an iron bell. Ethnomusicologists found it also in 1920 in central Africa as a staple of the *gome* music played there. Toussaint mentioned some sources that speculate about the possibility that, prior to this twentieth-century appearance of the clave son, slaves traded the rhythm back and forth from West Africa to South America and back again. Thus, though it takes its name from a distinctively Cuban music called the *son* and the *clave* percussion instrument popular there, this particular rhythm has served as the foundation for music and dance traditions throughout the world for at least eight centuries. As a percussive tempo, the clave son exists as a shared skeleton beneath the muscle and tissue of various musical traditions, and Toussaint’s mathematical analysis attempts to offer a geometric perspective of it. This perspective opens down three avenues at once to reveal an aspect of some universal principle subtending the rhythm, an aspect of the physical world in which a certain rhythm is deployed for a specific purpose, and an aspect of the body-mind of the music maker that produces the rhythm through playing it.

At a glance, the geometry of the clave son shows a particular symmetry that accounts for its status as one of the “good” rhythms in Toussaint’s study. (Draw, in your mind, a diagonal line between points 3 and 11 in order to see the symmetry.) He slices and dices the pentagon into triangles and squares as he measures the bones of the rhythm and tunes-in to its pleasing sound. The second onset – falling on the “and” after the second count: **1** and **2 and 3** and **4** and **1** and **2** and **3** and **4** – injects an “odd” rhythm, which syncopates the otherwise even meter, and this momentary stutter (on the **and**), combined with the underlying geometric symmetry of the rhythm adds to the allure of the clave son. Key to our study of Wright,

Toussaint's geometry of the musical rhythm acts like an electron microscope that reveals a root structure wholly physical and material despite the seemingly effervescent quality of the rhythm in performance.

§ Geometry II: The clock diagram

Already, there is a lot about this rhythm and Toussaint's approach to it that "rhymes" with Jay Wright's poesis. We have a sonic event, the origins of which are unknown. Unpinned to a specific moment of creation, the clave son's emergence on Earth is left open to poetic speculation. It appears in diverse ethno-cultural epicenters of the globe and attracts the attention of musicians and theorists alike. The function of the rhythm in music and dance may be unknown, but, whether deployed in ritual or for entertainment, we know that the rhythm motivated the body to move in a certain way, and thus the clave son bridges the metaphysical realm of invisible musical sound and the fleshly realm of dance and bodies. This is true of many rhythms, but, once we apply a mathematical grid of specification, we learn that this particular rhythm arises in numerous locations around the world, making it perhaps the "best" of all rhythms. The clave son could, in other words, make its way into one of Wright's rhythmic études found in *Disorientations: Groundings*, or indeed anywhere that he invites us to "get down in the music with us," as Horace Silver says (and as is quoted on the back flap of *The Guide Signs*). Or as Wright's voice of Silver proclaims in the poem dedicated to him that concludes *The Guide Signs*:

Let's meet where rhythm goes³⁰

30 Wright, *The Guide Signs*, 118.

The diagram of the clave son above is called a “clock diagram.” You can obtain it by, first, creating a line segment the length of which equates to the number of complete beats in a measure. Next, you mark out the beats accented by a percussionist to produce a given rhythm. In addition to the *son*, Toussaint returns repeatedly to the *shiko*, the *rumba*, the *soukous*, the *gahu*, and the *bossa-nova*. Finally, you wrap the line into a circle to create a representation of the repeatable beat. When you connect the accented beats with lines, you obtain a basic geometrical diagram of the rhythm from which you can go on to discern its symmetry or asymmetry and its geometric correspondence to rhythms that may sound different to the human ear but that bear the same structure. As Toussaint demonstrates throughout his book, you can make this kind of diagram for any recurrent rhythm, which means that it is useful not only for assessing the geometry of musical rhythms but also for other rhythms of the world.

For example, Toussaint creates clock diagrams for the temporal rhythms of the various leap-year cycles discerned by different calendrical systems throughout history. To account for the extra 0.242199 day that adds up to an extra day every four years, Ptolemy III proposed the concept of leap year in 237 BCE. The Julian calendar endorsed this proposal, thereby legislating an official fix to the “extra” time accumulated every four rotations around the sun. But this fix was not mathematically precise, and eventually the Gregorian calendar instituted a more exact definition of the leap year: “those [years] divisible by four, except not those divisible by 100, except not those divisible by 400. With this rule, a year becomes $365 + 1/4 - 1/100 + 1/400 = 365.2425$ days long.”³¹ While these various fixes do account for mathematical remainders, Toussaint sees them as “hacks,” inelegant solutions arrived at by reducing qualitative temporal experience to numerical

31 Cited in *ibid.*, 138.

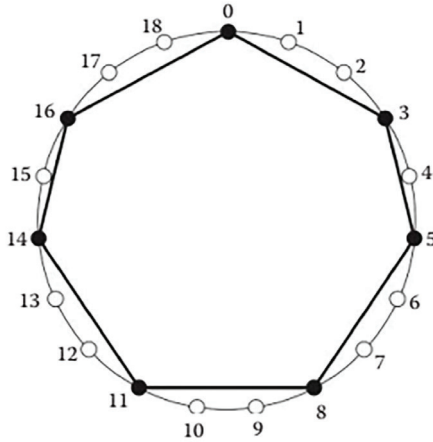


Figure 6.2: The Jewish leap year cycle from Tous-saint, *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm*, 139.

equations. More elegant solutions, he claims, arise in the Jewish and Islamic calendrical systems.

In the Jewish calendar, a regular year has twelve months, and a leap year has thirteen. One complete rhythmic cycle in this calendar consists of nineteen years, seven of which are leap years, and each of these leap years are distributed evenly across the complete cycle of nineteen. Thus, the leap years fall on 3, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17, and 19. After applying the Euclidean algorithm (on which, more below) to the various calculations rolled up in the lunar calendar, which leads him to count the seventh beat as the first (which in the diagram falls on number 16), Tous-saint translates his calculations into an accented timeline: [$\dots x \dots x \dots x \dots x \dots x \dots x$] (where “x” equals the leap year).³² With this accented timeline made visible, he can create a clock diagram like he did for the son and other musical rhythms (fig. 6.2).

32 For details of these calculations, see *ibid.*, 138–39.

The idea is captivatingly simple. Repeatedly replace the larger of the two numbers by their difference until both are equal. This last number is then the greatest common divisor. Consider as an example the pair of numbers (3, 8). First, eight minus three equals five, so we obtain the new pair (3, 5); then, five minus three equals two giving (3, 2); next, three minus two equals one, which yields (1, 2); and lastly, two minus one equals one, which results in (1, 1). Therefore, the greatest common divisor of three and eight is one.³³

To make the algorithm produce a musical rhythm, we only need to shift our attention from the result of the algorithmic process to the sequence of calculations performed during the computation. Here, again, is Toussaint to hold our hand and provide an accompanying diagram, based on the rhythm of the Cuban *tresillo*:

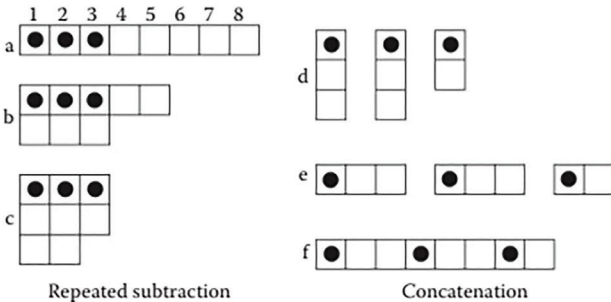


Figure 6.4: Tresillo Euclidian algorithm from Toussaint, *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm*, 131.

This procedure is illustrated with the preceding pair of numbers (3, 8). For this purpose, the smaller number three is associated with the number of onsets that we want the rhythm to have, and the larger number

33 Ibid., 130.

eight, with the total number of pulses that determine the rhythmic span or cycle.

First, write a rhythm of eight pulses and three onsets in which all the onsets are completely on the left at pulses one, two, and three as in (a). Next, take (subtract) three silent pulses from the right (pulses six, seven, and eight) and place them below the others, flush to the left as in (b). Now, there is a remainder of two silent pulses. Move these below the rest, also flush to the left, as in (c). Now that we have a single column remaining at pulse position three, the repeated subtraction phase of the algorithm is finished. The concatenation phase of the algorithm follows next. First, separate the three columns as in (d). Next, rotate each column to become a row as in (e), and lastly, concatenate the three rows to form the generated rhythm in (f). Note that the rhythm generated by this procedure is none other than the [3-3-2] pattern found all over the world. In particular, it is the Cuban tresillo as well as the first half of the clave son that we have encountered repeatedly throughout the book.³⁴

Thus, if a percussionist wanted to create a musical rhythm that “rhymes” with the temporal rhythms of the earth’s journey around the sun as calculated in the Jewish and Islamic calendrical systems, she could utilize Euclid’s algorithm. Computing the key numbers under consideration – number of years and number of leap years in a given rhythmic cycle – will indeed produce the clock diagrams and Euclidean necklaces shown above, which, in turn, can be utilized as scores for rhythmic, or musical, performance.

Music, stars, the journey of the Earth around the sun, the acts of mind required for discerning the numbers

34 Ibid., 130–31.

connecting these elements: this is the series revealed through Toussaint's geometric analysis. We have, then, an answer to a question that lingered in the background of our previous chapter about harmony in Wright's work. What permits Wright's connection between the seemingly disparate figures and objects found in his books of poetry and his examination paper *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*? We can now answer: an underlying shape that becomes visible once we figure out how to interpret the geometry of Wright's work. In the previous chapter, this geometry was equivalent to the rhythm that Wright weaves and sees woven between the elements he treats. Wright's rhythm is the result of playing the geometric clock diagram he has calculated through his own readings of history, poetry, linguistics, logic, musicology, philosophy, etc., etc.

§ Geometry III: Not so fast? (Mark Wilson)

But then another question springs up. Could we not reasonably object that the connections between Wright's various elements and the shapes he discerns through his rhythms only *appear* to be symmetrical and fast. Is Wright, and by extension are we, reading something into existence that *seems* to be true but that is in fact conjecture or misplaced wishful thinking? It turns out that Wright has asked this question of himself, and the evidence of this comes from references to Mark Wilson's *Wandering Significance* that appear throughout *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*.

Mark Wilson is a contemporary American philosopher and professor at the University of Pittsburgh. He appears in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax* on five pages and each instance seems to come from his 2006 book *Wandering Significance: An Essay on Conceptual Behavior*. In an earlier examination paper titled *A Material Emptiness, or*

Entanglement as (a) Decidable Aesthetic Form, Wright summoned Wilson on pages 35–38, offering an especially lucid crystallization of Wilson’s thought on “conceptual facades” (on which, more in a moment). In *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, Wright references these facades and the related concept of “essential idealization” (on which, again, see below), and even adopts “wandering significance” as a poetic phrase (on pages 26 and 44).

To get a feel for Wilson’s work, here’s a relevant passage from *Wandering Significance*:

Ernst Cassirer [...] framed an elaborate theory of concepts based directly upon the projective geometry paradigm: “Here it is immediately evident that to belong to a concept does not depend upon any generic similarities of the particulars, but merely presupposes a certain principle of transformation, which is maintained as identical. [...] It is this ideal force of logical connection, that secures them the full right to ‘being’ in a logico-geometric sense. The imaginary subsists, insofar as it fulfills a logically indisputable function in the system of geometrical propositions.” As the phrase “the subsistence of the imaginary” suggests, this approach presumes a rejection of straightforward realism with respect to either the physical world or mathematics, following the usual neo-Kantian inclination to treat scientific objectivity as the sharing of investigative standards between different public parties, rather than direct correspondence with empirical reality.³⁵

Wilson’s research into the philosophical problems that arise in the slippages between concept and world is key to Wright’s ongoing investigations into pattern and place

35 Mark Wilson, *Wandering Significance: An Essay on Conceptual Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 153.

as well as the action of fitting and harmony that we have discussed in this book. Importantly, Wilson slows Wright up. Wilson forces Wright to scrutinize the oft-assumed performative ability of words that makes material reality conform to the description of that reality. Conceptual facades and essential idealization are two main chasms that Wright attempts to bridge in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*.

“Theory facades” is the name Wilson gives to linguistic terms that provide a convenient conceptual handle on the given matter at hand but that, upon closer inspection, merely present the appearance of theoretical depth. There is an important difference, for example, between, on the one hand, the mathematical equations that affix specific attributes to substances through symbols such as = or \Rightarrow and, on the other hand, the linguistic modifiers that assign attributes such as “is red” or “expresses sadness musically.” “An unscrutinized facade,” writes Wilson, “can *mimic* for a true ‘theory’ (in the sense of a body of doctrine open to axiomatization) quite capably”; he continues,

our trouble with “is red” and “expresses sadness musically” descend from such origins: facade-like controlling structures surround these predicates in a manner that is vital to their integrity but also leads their registrational capacities to follow different strategies than we anticipate.³⁶

On the surface, Wilson’s observation derives directly from the critique made by many philosophers since at least Bertrand Russell, perhaps most famously Wittgenstein, that denies a fast binding between word and thing. Looking at the problem from one angle, we see the philosopher deploying syntax, grammar, and the connota-

36 Ibid., 203–4.

tion of specific words to fabricate meaning. As soon as linguistic tools are used, the register of the problem that first arose mathematically or logically changes into a different register. If this transposed register is treated as solid and primary, and if further philosophical certainties are spun-out from this primary note, then we end up building on unsturdy ground, perhaps without ever thinking directly about this shakiness. Looking at the same problem from another angle, we see the physicist who, relying on linguistic description of nature to frame a given laboratory experiment, already succumbs to the theory facade before undertaking the experiment that would, ostensibly, generate actual data that replaces the not-so-sturdy truths asserted through linguistic signifiers, grammar, and syntax.

Beyond Wilson's affinity for this "predication problem" as he calls it, a well-worn critique of language, lies a stronger claim, one that points to the fictionalization that occurs within the hard sciences. This issue leads to Wilson's term "essential idealization," which he defines as follows:

[B]efore the project of physical description can get underway at all, the physicist must *artificially intervene* with some basic conceptual structure of her own choosing to impose upon amorphous reality, even if she recognizes that her choice possesses features discordant with what we actually witness. I call this a philosophy of *essential idealization*: the scientist must select some artificially crisp set of conceptual units to prime the pump of physical description, upon whose basis she can then frame empirical descriptions of laboratory events.³⁷

37 Ibid., 365, emphasis in original; cited in Wright, *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, 9.

With these words, we can understand how Wright gathers Wilson, Stengers, and Barad together in *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*. All three thinkers emphasize the *production* of ideas that precedes and coincides with the laboratory experiment used, supposedly, to *discover* existing truths. Wright does not adhere rigidly to their warnings. On page 12 of *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax*, we find this phrase: “The piper would like to refuse his own deception, run away from Mark Wilson’s amorphous reality.” Some underlying pattern or weave catches Wright’s attention whenever he looks closely at anything, and so the phrase “amorphous reality” is too steep a price. Nevertheless, the doubts cast by Wilson through his critique of theory facades and essential idealization make Wright rest. A poet relying on words, grammar, and syntax to make worlds will necessarily need to grapple with the slippage between word and thing.

And so we return to Toussaint with a critical eye. Are his geometrical necklaces and quantification of musical shape and temporality an example of theory facades and essential idealization? Does he succumb to the wandering eye that finds a fit between disparate systems by disavowing the distinct registers and scales that separate a thirteenth-century Baghdadi physicist and a twentieth-century Afro-Cuban clave player? Does Wright permit a similar slippage when he rhymes an oriole with red roof tiles? Are we here, throughout this book, building false fronts and forcing fits between materials in Wright’s oeuvre that have no natural purchase with each other? Is our geometry lesson here a fantastical adjunct to the broader labor of reading Wright?

§ Geometry IV: The complementarity of facades

What if the name “wandering significance” applies not only to an infelicitous injection of fiction into the epis-

temologies and ontologies that strive for purity and continuity but also *invites* a poeticizing that is necessary for hearing the harmony of the world? Wilson may cause Wright to rest and doubt and ponder, but this is not a problem for Wright. For the poet, all starting points are positions of not-knowing. All forays into the world are temporary accords with the multiplicity of being. To paraphrase Gilles Deleuze: *everything happens at the boundary between things and words*.³⁸ The final page of *The Tuning of Grammar and Syntax* – one of the two pages dressed with a single sentence – alerts us to these beliefs: “The piper begins with this: he knows his body, as with all mathematical objects, incomplete.” Wandering significance may rest upon theory facades and essential idealization, but it also prepares an exploratory disposition. When the quest is for certainty and incontrovertible scientific fact, then wandering significance becomes the entry point into a deconstructive and critical self-reflexive study such as that prepared by Wilson. When the goal, however, is travel and an attunement to the deep structural resonances of the body and the metaphysical world, wandering significance becomes another term for *poiēsis* itself.

Fiction is not a bad word. It need not form a binary relationship with truth or reality. For Wright, fiction is an event – *fiction-making* – that provides a certain *complementarity*, a brushing-up against dimensions of material reality that tend to hide within pleats and folds. For this reason, Leibniz attracts Wright’s attention. Despite the certainty of his calculations and precision of his measurements, Leibniz always lends an ear to the just-out-of-reach, to that against which his mathematics laminates itself. An example of this proximity occurs in phrases like this: “[t]he pleasure we obtain from music comes from

38 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 8.

counting, but counting unconsciously. Music is nothing but unconscious arithmetic."³⁹ Leibniz cannot know that to be true. It is, rather, a truth to which Leibniz tuned himself through his mathematical foray into Number. It is a fictional or poetic certainty that need not bear the weight of subsequent scientific expeditions but can, rather, foment a type of interior momentum that will encourage individuals to continue reading the world, and reading it musically.

As fiction is not a bad word, neither is facade. Only if one treats the facade as somehow less potent than the building's interior can one continue to deploy the word pejoratively. As Deleuze shows in his work on Leibniz, however, the facade is something else altogether. In particular, the facade's harmonious connection to the interior marks the key innovation of baroque architecture and links back to the baroque aspect of Leibniz's mathematical philosophy. The facade and the interior are distinct yet complementary in a way that corresponds to the complementarity of the soul and the body of the monad. Here is Deleuze.

Baroque architecture can be defined by this severing of the facade from the inside, of the interior from the exterior, and the autonomy of the interior from the independence of the exterior, but in such conditions that each of the two terms thrust the other forward. [...] What makes this new harmony possible is, first, the distinction between two levels or floors, which resolves tension or allots the division. The lower level is assigned to the façade. [...] The upper level is closed, as a pure inside without an outside, a weightless, closed

39 Cited in Toussaint, *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm*, 129.

interiority, its walls hung with spontaneous folds that are now only those of a soul or a mind.⁴⁰

The parallel is as follows. The facade of the baroque building corresponds to the body, the interior to the soul. Each is severed from the other but not disconnected, due to the baroque undoing of the interior-external binary. Released from pure dichotomy, inside and outside fold into one another, perpetually. Or, from another angle, an infinite fold mediates the sensations perceived through the body and the realizations reached in the soul, and back again. Fascinatingly, Leibniz refers to these “realizations” as “readings.” As Deleuze tells it, “Leibniz begins to use the word ‘to read’ at once as the inner act in the privileged region of the monad, and as the act of God in all of the monad itself.”⁴¹ In other words, we do not “see” what we perceive through the body or façade; rather, we read it, insofar as we envelop into ourselves the material of our aesthetic entanglement. “Reading” is possible because of the harmonious complementarity of the facade/interior relationship.

The words of Wright’s poems are his readings of this entanglement, his fit of the harmony sounded out through the aesthetic event of traveling through the world, while also being part of the world through which one travels. Toussaint’s clock diagrams, likewise, are facades through which the rhythms of the world communicate with our souls. His diagrams are readings of the “good” rhythms circulating throughout the world.

40 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 28–29.

41 *Ibid.*, 31.

§ Geometry V: From leap years to atoms

“Have you ever had the experience of viewing two different objects from one vantage point, concluding that they are identical, only to discover after obtaining more information, that they are in fact vastly different?”⁴² This question would fit perfectly well in the previous two sections (Geometry III and IV), which were dedicated to scrutinizing the “harmony” of Wright’s poetic and philosophical connections. Are the various connections he sees between so many different systems of thought and geographical phenomena, in other words, actually there, already existing in the world? Or is Wright forging these connections as part of his personal mythopoetic designs? The latter case would be impressive in its own right since Wright’s rhythms and cadences make of these disparate systems a pretty picture of cohesion. The former scenario, however, would hint at something more, something metaphysically grand, the scale and significance of which would blow our hair back and batten our eyelids to our skulls. It is one thing to create a million-piece jigsaw puzzle of everything. It is something else entirely to decipher the connections of the millions of finely woven threads that actually connect the materials of the world. Ultimately, we aren’t concerned to prove whether Wright is right. We are, instead, looking at Wright as wright, at the fits he sees between various pieces of the world puzzle. And what our reading concludes is that he is not forcing the pieces together.

But that question that starts this section (Geometry V) actually comes from Toussaint. It starts the chapter in his book called “Rhythms and Crystallography,” and our return to Toussaint here will bring us to the end of this five-part geometry lesson. Basically, we are convinced that there is harmony in Wright’s fits and that there is a

42 Toussaint, *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm*, 151.

geometry that underlies the harmony. Toussaint's geometry is so closely aligned to Wright's own that it helps us to focus on Wright's method and his discoveries. So far, we have demonstrated that the seemingly wild scope of Toussaint's project not only bears itself out; that is, not only does he manage to justify that certain "good" (i.e., long-lived and widely-traveled) rhythms have an impressive geometry living within their temporal shapes, but he also demonstrates that several popular musical rhythms "rhyme," in a sense, with the rhythms of time-space that have been mapped out in multiple calendrical systems. In this section, we will summarize Toussaint's additional findings of rhyming complementarity in order to show how his geometric scheme appears at the level of atoms as well as at the level of planetary movement. Doing this will help flesh out more details of Wright's geometry, too, though it is important to stress that Wright's rhythm brought us to Toussaint and not the other way around. That is, all of Toussaint's diagrams exist in a certain sense folded within Wright's verses, especially those of the poems in *The Prime Anniversary* that lead up to the dramatic play, *The Geometry of Rhythm*.

"Have you ever had the experience of viewing two different objects from one vantage point, concluding that they are identical, only to discover after obtaining more information, that they are in fact vastly different?" This question resulted from the experiments undertaken by crystallographers in the 1920s and 1930s with the help of, then, new technology known as the x-ray. The scientists wanted to map the position of crystals' atoms relative to each other, and the x-ray helped to determine the position; but, the resulting x-ray diffraction patterns arose from one vantage point, and thus the similarities between different atomic structures were only similar from that vantage point. When viewing atomic relationships of three-dimensional crystals in the laboratory through the two-dimensional models made from x-raying, the

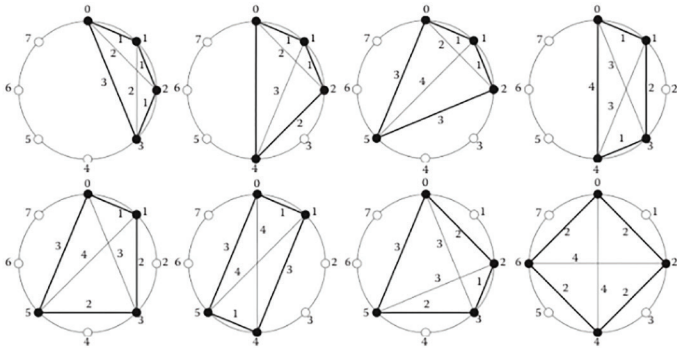


Figure 6.5: Cyclotomic sets from Toussaint, *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm*, 152.

scientists produced only apparent similarities where in fact there were significant structural differences.

Toussaint's chapter goes on to trace the evolution of the geometrical mathematics underpinning this problem. He moves from A. Lindo Patterson's geometrical experiments with one-dimensional idealized "crystals" to the response Patterson's findings elicited from the famous geometer Paul Erdős. The specifics of the math do not concern us as much as do the geometrical diagrams generated by Patterson and Erdős. These diagrams, which the mathematicians called "cyclotomic sets" (fig. 6.5), helped visualize the interpoint distances between points in space, that is, atomic distances within crystal structures.

These sets are derived from the same steps as are the clock diagrams of rhythms generated by Toussaint throughout his book. When Patterson generated diagrams that contained six black points – corresponding to five atoms – he discovered the existence of a "homometric triplet" (fig. 6.6), that is a set of geometric shapes (i.e., rhythms) that were incongruent but that had the same set of distances between points. Specifically, these

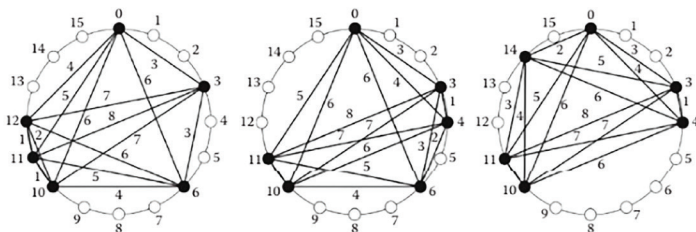


Figure 6.6: Patterson's homometric triplet from Toussaint, *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm*, 156.

"rhythms contain all the possible inter-onset interval values ranging from one to eight, and have the interval vector (i.e., histogram) given by [2,1,2,2,2,3,2,1]. The intervals of length one and eight occur once each, the interval of length six occurs 3 times, and all the other intervals occur twice."⁴³

Toussaint points out that the image on the left, if transposed into musical rhythm, would sound almost identical to the five-onset clave son, and the rhythm in the middle aligns almost perfectly with the soukous timeline. Ultimately, the summary of Toussaint's analysis is easy to put into words. Geometric analysis reveals symmetry between the atomic structures of certain crystal structures and the temporal structures of certain popular musical rhythms. Folding these findings into Toussaint's early chapter on the geometry of various calendrical leap year cycles, there is a mathematical harmony between crystals, music, and the orbit of the Earth around the sun.

§ Wright's *The Geometry of Rhythm*

The harmony of the various structures and systems mapped by Toussaint and the architecture of the clock

43 Ibid., 155.

diagram, indeed the entire notion of a geometry living within musical rhythms, prove incredibly helpful when reading the one-act play found in the second half of Wright's *The Prime Anniversary*.

Consider, for example, how Wright's opening stage directions bring to mind the geometric patterns shared by Toussaint:

*(A dark space. No movement. No sound. A sudden flood of variously colored lights turns the space into a warren of interconnected geometrical figures. There is a music stand to the left; a large manuscript paper, showing the letter "c," sits upon it. Bivio appears, wearing a choir robe. He produces claves and a small bell; carefully places the bell at his feet; begins to play the claves. He stops, mumbles or sings an unintelligible phrase, stops, repeats the process. Patterns in his performance begin to take shape. He sounds (/uu/u), then (/uu/uu), then (/uuu/u). We hear him say "glóiriam túam." He looks astonished, hides within his patterns. He screams "dómine íbismus," looks astonished, once again hides.)*⁴⁴

In this space transversed by geometrical figures first appears Bivio dressed in choir robes. The presence of claves and the bell calls to mind the geometry of the son that we, via Toussaint, discussed in the previous pages. Soon after Bivio's appearance, Wright introduces Grogach, "wearing rugby clothes." The two characters, familiar with each other, engage in a somewhat hermetic argument, the nuances of which are clearly known to them, clearly linked to high stakes, but also difficult to discern from the position of "audience." Listen, for instance, to the first lines of spoken dialogue:

Bivio: One does not sing so faithfully without a sense of the body. Dogma. The sanction of fussy clerks.

44 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 41.

I will not be constrained. (*Grograch, wearing rugby clothes, appears.*)

Grograch: Constraint. Certainly a concept worth considering. Have you?

Bivio: Have I what?

Grograch: The solution to those lines?

Bivio: I can always count upon you...

What we, the auditors, do eventually discern, however, is that the steps of the characters' disputation proceed according to the "steps" of a particular musical pattern, "the Gypsy scale": c d e \flat f \sharp g a \flat b c'. Wright helps us hear these steps through the dramaturgy of his stage directions, which direct the characters to replace the letter on the music stand with the next note in this scale. This gradual changing of the notes begins after the audience hears a solitary violin play the complete scale. Hence,

*Bivio removes the letter "c" from the music stand, replaces it with the letter "d."*⁴⁵

*Grograch removes the letter "d" from the stand, replaces it with "e \flat ."*⁴⁶

*Bivio takes away the e \flat paper, replaces it with one showing "f \sharp ."*⁴⁷

*[Grograch] points at the music stand, where the letter "g" has replaced "f \sharp ."*⁴⁸

*The "g" on the music stand has been replaced by "a \flat ."*⁴⁹

45 Ibid., 46.

46 Ibid., 50.

47 Ibid., 57.

48 Ibid., 60.

49 Ibid., 67.

The “b” now replaces the “a” on the stand.⁵⁰

The “c” replaces the “b” on the stand.⁵¹

With so much music in the air, it is important to mark our presence as “audience,” over and above that of “spectators.” While both nouns might serve to announce our position as readers of dramatic literature, a kind of literature that lends weight to the imagined vista of a staged performance, the aural activity of an audience, a group of auditors, seems particularly important. We are listening to a conversation that unfolds in tandem with a particular musical scale. Or, rather, so as not to privilege a predetermined (ostensibly active) subject that listens to the (ostensibly passive) object of the musical scale, we would revise that statement to suggest that *The Geometry of Rhythm* compels a specific kind of listening, one that undoes the active-subject/passive-object binary. This “listening” is akin to that forwarded by Jean-Luc Nancy in his *À l'écoute* (2002).

As Brian Kane argues, “Nancy’s *Listening* is really an intervention aimed at thematizing ways in which the question of the subject can be posed anew, outside of the horizon of the phenomenological subject.”⁵² Eschewing any presupposed Cartesian or even a Husserlian subject whose identity preexists the encounter with a sonic object, Nancy forwards “‘a resonant subject’ because both the object and subject of listening, in his account, resonate.” Kane elaborates: “they resonate because the object and subject of listening both share a similar ‘form, structure or movement’ [...] that of the *renvoi* – a word whose translation as ‘reference’ obscures its double meaning as

50 Ibid., 72.

51 Ibid., 75.

52 Brian Kane, “Jean-Luc Nancy and the Listening Subject,” *Contemporary Music Review* 31, nos. 5–6 (2012): 446.

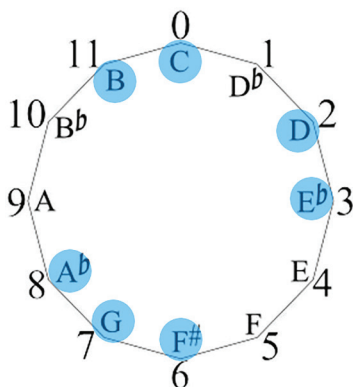


Figure 6.7: Hungarian minor clock diagram. Created by authors.

both a sending-away (a dismissal) and a return."⁵³ Similarly, with Wright's play, we, as audience, would do well to imagine ourselves as this "oddly quasi-circular" subject who is never quite an "I" but always, rather, leaving and approaching the self through the event of listening. How one becomes a self is one process laid bare through *The Geometry of Rhythm*.

The characters Bivio and Grogach are caught up in a similar circular movement and action of self-becoming. To support that claim, however, we need first to return to the clock diagrams we encountered in Toussaint's work. What happens if we wrap the "Gypsy" or Hungarian minor scale in a circle and reveal its geometry in a way similar to Toussaint's work in *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm* (fig. 6.7)?

Music theorists and mathematicians have been intrigued by the geometry of this particular scale. One scholarly reading comes from A.J. Milne et al. whose article "Perfect Balance: A Novel Principle for the Construction of Musical Scales and Meters" seeks mathematical

53 Ibid., 445.

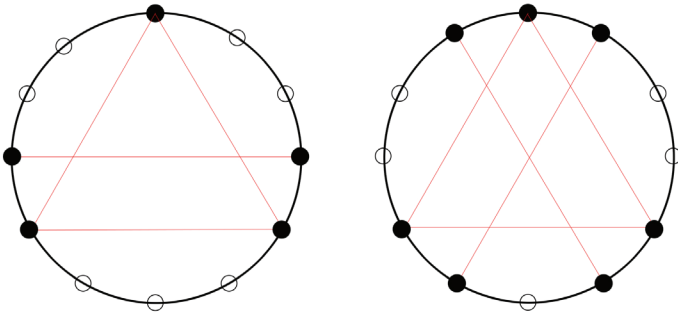


Figure 6.8: Perfectly balanced rhythms. Inspired by Milne et al., “Perfect Balance.” Created from memory.

methods to locate scales that are perfectly balanced yet uneven.⁵⁴ For these authors, “perfectly balanced” patterns show up with “a set of points on a circle whose mean position, or center of gravity, is the center of the circle.” By comparison, “[a] *perfectly even* pattern is one in which the elements are equally spaced around the periodic circle.”⁵⁵ While evenness has been identified as an important factor in the analysis of musical scales and meters, as well as in the “pleasing” sonic qualities of certain musical scales, Milne et al. have found that evenness carries with it an underexplored bias toward balance. Is there a scale, they wonder, that exhibits perfect evenness but not perfect balance or, vice-versa, perfect balance without perfect evenness? Yes: the Hungarian minor, which is also the “Gypsy” scale, which is also the fourth mode of the double harmonic scale.

Here are two new diagrams that indicate the same scale, albeit in a different way (fig. 6.8). They show the

54 Andrew J. Milne et al., “Perfect Balance: A Novel Principle for the Construction of Musical Scales and Meters,” *Mathematics and Computation in Music* 9110 (2015): 97–108.

55 *Ibid.*, 97.

mean position and center of gravity of the scale. The caption to these diagrams in Milne's et al. article reads as follows: "[t]he only two irreducibly periodic perfectly balanced patterns available in a twelve-fold period. Note how uneven these patterns are. The seven-element pattern is equivalent to a scale variously notes the double harmonic, Arabic, or Byzantine."⁵⁶ If we rotate our clock diagram of the Hungarian minor scale from above so that the G appears in the 12 o'clock position, we find that it lines up perfectly with Milne's et al. seven-element pattern.

The less rigorous, but still informative, *Wikipedia* article on this scale of many names provides still more information:

This scale (and its modes like the Hungarian minor scale) is the only seven-note scale (in 12-tone equal temperament) that is perfectly balanced; this means that when its pitches are represented as points on a circle (whose full circumference represents an octave), their average position (or "centre of mass") is the centre of the circle.⁵⁷

In the end, to state it even more plainly, the diagrams and mathematical analysis all reveal just how *weird* this scale is. Ethan Hein clarifies that the weirdness abides in the sound of the scale and its nearest cousins, like the melodic minor, in the way it somehow straddles both major and minor key worlds.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁷ *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Double harmonic scale," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_harmonic_scale.

⁵⁸ Ethan Hein, "The Freakiness of the Melodic Minor," *The Ethan Hein Blog*, January 31, 2011, <http://www.ethanhein.com/wp/2011/the-freakiness-of-melodic-minor/>. He is talking about the melodic minor, but it is in the same ballpark as Wright's "Gypsy" scale.

The scale that structures *The Geometry of Rhythm* is polysemous. It travels under many names. It is balanced, yet uneven. It is unique among scales in the twelve-tone system, and this uniqueness attracts the minds of mathematicians. Through its sonority, the scale also attracts the ears of music aficionados because it is weird, as in strange and oppositional,⁵⁹ insofar, as it straddles the major and the minor. Another way to say this is that the scale sends the ear in two directions at once. Collectively, these themes, all directly related to the “Gypsy” scale, prepare a reading of Wright’s play.

Straddling two “key worlds” at once is a phrase that applies to Bivio whose name, coming from the Latin *bivius*, denotes the meeting of two roads, crossroads, fork; traversable from two ways; having two approaches.⁶⁰ If the character’s name alone did not alert us to his two-way-ness, his first words might lead us to the fork:

One does not sing so faithfully without a sense of the body. Dogma. The sanction of fussy clerks. I will not be constrained.⁶¹

Straddling body and spirit, Bivio, he of two approaches, engages in the act of singing. The effervescent yet materially bound voice will not be constrained, and thus a part of Bivio will escape the bounds of the world in which he finds himself. We read Bivio as neither body nor soul, but, rather, as the point at which one becomes and informs the other, the fold of body and soul. His actions are underscored throughout the play’s unfolding by the “Gypsy” scale whose fugitive arrangement of notes provides bal-

59 This is a reference to bell hooks, “An Aesthetics of Blackness – Strange and Oppositional,” *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 65–72.

60 *Perseus Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “Bivius,” <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=bivius&la=la&can=biviuso>

61 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 41.

ance yet unevenness and lingers at the trading zone of the major and the minor.

Before Wright alerts us to the “Gypsy” scale – all we’ve seen, read, and heard so far is the letter “c” sitting upon a music stand – he introduces the conflict between Bivio and Grogach, and with Grogach’s appearance we find another kind of duality. Like his travelling partner, Grogach wears a name that tells of hybridity. Half-human and half-fairy, the mythological Grogach abides within Celtic lore as a kind of diasporic being that sprang from the ground of Kintyre, Scotland, but settled eventually in Ireland and various British isles.⁶² (We could also read the Grogach as a different version of the mischievous house spirit that gives birth to the Spanish word *duende*.⁶³) The dialogue that ensues between Grogach and Bivio demonstrates that the pair are familiar with each other, and between their respective appearances onstage and the introduction of the “Gypsy” scale into the visible dramaturgy of the play five pages later, the couple quarrels over a wide range of topics: the enigmatic essence of substance (via a quotation of Leibniz), the difference between music and geometry, the intersection of mathematics and personality, rhetoric, the limits of material existence, number, God (via the incantatory line, “Dómino déo” and the reference to “this infinite person”), and singing. After a quick exchange, they fall silent and rest.

When the “Gypsy” scale makes its entrance, during that rest, it does so as sound and not as symbolic marks upon a paper: “A solitary violin breaks the silence, sounding the Gypsy scale [...]”⁶⁴ The “audience” and the play’s two characters are compelled to listen, à la Nancy, in order to find a way forward through the theatrical event. Indeed,

62 “Grogoch,” *Irelandseye*, <http://www.irelandseye.com/animation/explorer/grogoch.html>.

63 *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Duende,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duende>

64 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 46.

“finding a way forward” may be the main action of this play, if we understand “forward” not as a linear motion linked to Modernist notions of progress but, rather, as a crucial kind of transformation, that which allows an individual to become himself. But this transformation reveals something unanticipated, since the individual self appears to be necessarily entwined with another, perhaps even the other. Within one there are two. Two-ness is comprehended by One.

This realization becomes apparent at the end of the play. After arguing incessantly and challenging each other’s philosophical beliefs, after the individual notes and various assemblages of notes from the “Gypsy” scale have sounded off in the space, and after a jam session in which the characters accompany intervallic patterns of the scale with their bell and claves, Wright offers this text:

Bivio: What happened? What got us into that?

Grogach: We had to make some adjustments.

Bivio: Dream up a new configuration.

Grogach: Exactly. Take another look at ourselves.

Bivio: Each one.

Grogach: Exactly.

Bivio: After all, this could go on and on, forever.

Grogach: Even though we set our own course.

Bivio: We just had to assert ourselves.

Grogach: Each one.

Bivio: We had to make sure that everyone could understand the proposition, see the complete design.

Grogach: I’d say that we have a thorough comedy here.

Bivio: Well, we haven’t gone to hell.

Grogach: No, Bivio, I mean that nothing constrains us. Not your logic, not your faith, not your body.
(The lights go out. In the dark, Bivio removes his robe, and Grogach puts it on. When the lights go up, Bivio is in

rugby clothes, Grogach in Bivio's robe. Bivio has the bell; Grogach has the claves.)

Bivio: I haven't done much for you, have I?

Grogach: Not at all. You've taught me the fragile geometry of the self.

Bivio: And you have taught me to live with my ambiguous rhythm.

Grogach: Shall we exchange names?

Bivio: Let's do.

*(The scale goes into its performance. Grogach does the cursus rhythms. Bivio rings the bell, and improvises an unusual chant. A flood of the brightest light, then sudden darkness.)*⁶⁵

The "Gypsy" scale is the distance travelled in this play, covered by Bivio, Grogach, and the audience, or a group which includes readers. With this scale, the "c" that first appears on the music stand is the "tonic." The "c' " that completes the scale is the same as the initial note, the same yet different. It is "c" but an octave higher. We call this note the "prime." By playing the scale through the octave, we accomplish a "prime anniversary," insofar as we *come around again* to "c." As an anniversary is celebrated every time the Earth makes one full rotation around the Sun, so too do we celebrate the anniversary of traversing the weird Hungarian minor. In the world of the play, Bivio starts as himself – already dual, as his name suggests – and ends as another, as Grogach, his traveling partner. Were we to embark on another go-round by starting the play at the beginning (or, perhaps, the entire book of *The Prime Anniversary*, something we'll explore in the next chapter), we would have the suspicion that this switching of identities has been going on for quite some time. Indeed, Bivio and Grogach are twinned in their acts of becoming. Wright uses similar language when, just be-

65 Ibid., 77–80.

fore the segment of dialogue quoted above, Bivio says, "I feel twinned to your skills."⁶⁶ The play tells the story of this becoming, of the one becoming two, and vice-versa.

The geometry sustaining this becoming is the geometry of the circle. We glimpse this geometry in its planetary dimension (i.e., the anniversary) and its musical dimension (i.e., the clock diagram of the "Gypsy" scale). To arrive at the prime is to emerge from the self as the self. Yet, as the twinning of Grogach and Bivio makes clear, the "self" is always dual, also wrapped up as two, as self *and* other. It is a "fragile geometry of the self," as Grogach says, because one could spin-off at any moment, like an improvising musician may "get lost" in a long jam or a planet, over time, might slip its orbit and cascade into the Sun, or a crystal might shed its form and acquiesce to the entropic forces of the universe. The geometry of the clock diagram looks so certain on paper, but playing through the geometry is a ritual fraught with disastrous possibilities.

The rhythm of the circle can take many different forms, as Toussaint made clear in his evaluation of the Euclidean necklaces that represented his various "good" rhythms. Wright demonstrates that while the rhythm, or shape, of the "Gypsy" scale organizes the play's duration, the rhythms played upon the bell and claves take multiple forms and all participate in the wider ritual of becoming. This multiplicity may be what Bivio refers to as "my ambiguous rhythm," the many shapes that an individual acquires and through which an individual moves throughout a lifetime of becoming. Hence, the play's title, *The Geometry of Rhythm*, names the journey plotted through one's life. It is not a static geometric diagram but a geometric construction, as mentioned in the section on Proclus earlier in the chapter, that is, the play is the doing of this geometry. Doing the geometry leads to under-

66 Ibid., 76.

standing how “to live” means to construct the motion of one’s life, and this motion is a series of orbits that travel through a sequence of deaths and rebirths.

§ Baroque perspective

This act of becoming is neither entirely abstract nor limited to the fictional world of the play. Rather, the transformation enacted in *The Geometry of Rhythm* has a social precedent in the world outside the play and grounds itself in a specific, ongoing historical situation. Specifically, Wright’s play generates a few harmonic overtones that fit its text and themes with another text, one crucial to the neo-Baroque literature associated with Latin American authors, such as Alejo Carpentier’s *Concierto barroco* (1974).

Carpentier, a central figure of the new novel movement in Cuba and Latin America and a member of the avant-garde collective *Grupo Minorista*, is not summoned by name in Wright’s play, but his prolific output of fiction and non-fiction writing, coupled with his multi-disciplinary approach to writing and his presence within the diasporic epicenter of Cuba, prepares a place for him within Wright’s multiverse. Juxtaposed with Bivio, Grograch, and the “Gypsy” minor scale, we might, for example, think of Carpentier’s *El acoso* (*The Siege*, 1956), a text structured like a sonata. Indeed, Carpentier was a deft ethnomusicologist, and, similar to Wright, he was absorbed by musical underpinnings to the idea known as “America.”⁶⁷ In particular, his non-fiction study of the music of Cuba and his novella *Concierto barroco* make it clear that Carpentier’s presence in *The Geometry of Rhythm*

67 Wilfredo Cancio Isla, “Carpentier, Alejo,” in *Encyclopedia of Latin American and Caribbean Literature, 1900–2003*, eds. Daniel Balderston and Mike Gonzalez (New York: Routledge, 2004), 115–16.

may be tacit, but tacit in the way that silence is tacit in John Cage's 4'33".

In Carpentier's novella, a character who goes by the title of *Amo*, Master, decides to journey from his home in Mexico to the Old World so as to immerse himself in the culture of his ancestors. Already with this character and his plan of travel, Carpentier has revealed a central theme of neo-Baroque works, that of the polymorphous inheritance of European civilization bequeathed, forcibly, to America. The *Amo*, a rich Mexican, is allied to his Spanish ancestors through blood ties but knows himself through his identity as an American. To travel from Mexico to Europe is to reverse the flow of cultural transmission as typically understood by colonial powers. Carpentier's story does not engage with the linear passage of high European culture to the colonies in the New World but, instead, shows what happens when the hybridized identities of Americans return to the Old World. Most importantly, Carpentier exhibits a kind of inner dynamism and flexibility belonging to Americans and their cultural products, qualities that Europeans and their art forms lack. When *Amo* returns to Europe, he completes a genealogical circle, and yet his New World identity feeds back into the Old World and thus short-circuits the smooth geometry of his return.

Readers of *Concierto barroco* find the artistic extension of this energetic and intrinsically eclectic identity in the form of jazz, which Carpentier inserts into the story through the character Filomeno whom *Amo* enlists as his servant while passing through Cuba to Europe. Whereas *Amo* represents the cultural plurality alive within Spanish descendants dwelling within Mexico, Filomeno adds African blood to the American equation and brings with him the musical sensibility that would eventually influence jazz rhythms.

Together, Filomeno and *Amo* travel to Venice where they meet three composers who, collectively, make a sig-

nificant donation to the great wealth of European music history: Antonio Vivaldi, Domenico Scarlatti, and Georg Friedrich Händel. Carpentier highlights jazz as the ascending master of the European classical tradition by inserting Filomeno into a *concerto grosso* played by Vivaldi, Scarlatti, and Händel at the Ospedale della Pietà. Toward the end of the elaborate musical improvisation and competition between the three Europeans, made harmonically consonant by the “figured bass” of the Baroque musical system, Filomeno plays improvised rhythms on a series of drums and percussion instruments. Though Händel had, up to that point, shown himself the best of the musicians on stage, he marvels at Filomeno’s musical ability. All three Europeans fall quiet for a time while they listen to the Cuban do his thing. As Kyle Matthews points out, this moment in the story clearly presents not only an endorsement of jazz’s superiority as a musical genre, and, by extension, the dynamism of the neo-Baroque American identity that thrives on mixed cultural inheritances, but also a demonstration of the historical tie between American jazz and Baroque music.⁶⁸

Two more scenes in the novella continue the development of this theme. The next is a portrayal of a final rehearsal to Vivaldi’s opera *Montezuma*, which, true to neo-Classical ideals arising after the hey-day of Baroque ostentation, completely re-writes historical events so as to fit the story into an aesthetically pleasing form in line also with Aristotelian norms of dramatic structure. Amo, having brought his Mexican pride with him to the viewing of this rehearsal, objects strenuously against the Opera’s distortion of actual historical events. Vivaldi barely flinches at the criticism and can provide a series of rational answers to justify his aesthetic choices. Car-

68 Kyle Matthews, “Baroque Jazz: Toward a New Understanding of Musical Form in Carpentier’s ‘Concierto Barroco,’” *Latin American Literary Review* 44, no. 87 (2017): 2–7.

pentier here juxtaposes the inflexible rules governing operatic dramaturgy with the fluid and adaptable jazz rhythms showcased by Filomeno. After this, Carpentier drives home the point about jazz by leading all the characters to a concert given by Louis Armstrong in Paris. We might read this final scene as the closing of another circle. Baroque music comes to America and mixes with the indigenous populations of the New World and slaves of African descent. Acquiring a new form – heard here as jazz – the music returns to Paris, the capital of European culture, where it reigns supreme.

Though there are no direct references to *Concierto barroco* in *The Geometry of Rhythm*, the intertextual reading finds justification in a series of “rhymes,” by which we mean words, themes, and events in both texts that harmonize with each other. The first rhyme is between Bivio and Filomeno. The latter’s name, which is well-suited to the “parasite” of a Roman comedy, affixes to the least European of Carpentier’s characters, thereby highlighting, through the poetics of (mis)naming, the historically important synthesis and transformation of European musical forms that occurs in American jazz music. Bivio, likewise, wears a Latin name but demonstrates polyrhythmic sensibilities that, when coupled with the “Gypsy” scale of Wright’s choosing, underscore their affinity to jazz improvisation. In this way, Bivio and Filomeno rhyme baroquely.

Second, the appearance of choir robes and the sound of “glóiriam túam” and other Latin phrases in *The Geometry of Rhythm* might strike the eye and ear as absurd, until, that is, one considers that Wright offers those items in their Baroque or neo-Baroque modalities. The poems that precede *The Geometry of Rhythm* in *The Prime Anniversary* offer direct citations to Roman poets, such as Vergil and Propertius. As such, we could read Bivio’s operatic singing as a continuation of Wright’s allusions to those Roman writers. Yet, Bivio is marked by a change. The

claves and bells he has in his possession carry a distinctly African and Afro-Cuban signature, and thus his singing, while in tune with Latin poetics and European Baroque opera, has been transformed over time and through geographic dislocation. Bivio, the man whose name marks a fork in the road, carries with him at least two cultural traditions, that of European classical music and that of Afro-Caribbean music. Together, they create a New World Baroque, or neo-Baroque, aura around Bivio's character. Bivio's singing and choir robes thus rhyme with Classical Rome but inflect his spirituality with New World adaptation. This rhyme, in turn, fits within Carpentier's musical fantasy.

Third, the comedy of Wright's play rhymes with the comedy of Carpentier's novella. To understand how this is so, we have to take an excursion that leads through Carpentier's musicological work, into poems from the first part of *The Prime Anniversary*, and winds back around, full circle, to Wright's play. (Bear with us.) *La música en Cuba*, written in the early 1940s and given new life in a 2002 English translation, showcases Carpentier's ethnographic and analytical skills as he works through the exciting history of music on the largest of the Caribbean islands. In the section on the Cuban *Bufos*, Carpentier makes a connection that reveals his fit within Wright's universe and also helps to explain how, at least according to Grogach, Wright's play might best be categorized as a comedy: "I'd say that we have a thorough comedy here," says Grogach, before Bivio responds, "Well, we haven't gone to hell."

The connection arises in this line about the *Bufos*: "It was, in sum, the kind of 'political theatre' that Rafael Alberti wanted to create in Madrid on the eve of the Spanish Civil War."⁶⁹ The theatrical events that take place in

69 Alejo Carpentier, *Music in Cuba*, ed. Timothy Brennan, trans. Alan West-Durán (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002),

Concierto barroco are all political insofar as they lay bare the material conditions giving rise to the American identity that flourishes in the wake of the violent colonial encounter. That identity neither wholly interiorizes the culture of the colonizer nor looks back to an imagined, Indigenous, pure identity as its antecedent. Rather, embracing mixture, the American identity represented in Carpentier's and other neo-Baroque writers' works exhibits the power of transcultural fusion, a fusion given sound in the musical form known as jazz. Likewise, we recognize Wright's play as "political theatre," not dressed in the garb familiar to readers of literature by the Black Arts Movement but, instead, wearing a distinctively neo-Baroque-American outfit. The political event onstage is none other than that of continual existence, the body's becoming spiritual and the spirit's becoming material. Carpentier's politics rhyme with Wright's. Most importantly, these politics found a particular mode of expression in the Cuban *Bufo* tradition, which, on the surface, presented light comedic entertainment. Below the surface, however, as Carpentier and Alberti knew, and as Wright knows, there is a potent political intervention taking place. Laughter marks the eruption of the intervention.

Carpentier's reference to Rafael Alberti alerts our ears to Wright's poems in the first section of *The Prime Anniversary* where Alberti, a member of the group known as the Generation of '27, appears in this way:

Alberti knows that essential rhythm, that string
of bound forms he returned to Gádir with his paint,
brushes, and definitive sketches, and his saint-
trammelled Buenos Aires politics, the blue spring
of it matched only by his faith in olive Spain.
Consider him ποιητός a perfect chaplain

at ease with Empedocles in their own domain.⁷⁰

Here we see a circular geometry underwriting the movement of an individual, Alberti, who begins life in Spain, escapes to Argentina during Franco's regime and the Civil War, and then returns to Gádir (Cádiz). Paintings like *Rhythmic Frieze* (1923) present Alberti's pictorial sensibilities and the way in which sight and sound, rhythm and color merge throughout Alberti's works and across modes of artistic expression. Wright anoints Alberti ποιητός, a word that bears a passing resemblance to ποιητικός but actually means "made by oneself, invented, feigned." What better way to describe the neo-Baroque-American subject about which we've been speaking than through this word that refers to an invented self, a self made from materials on hand, a self wholly new and yet necessarily linked to specific pasts?

During one of their arguments in *The Geometry of Rhythm*, Bivio and Grogach re-summon this word of Greek origin. Bivio says, "I keep all feigned appearances there." Grogach replies, "Feigned?" and Bivio answers, "Well made. Can't you understand?"⁷¹ These lines in fact follow upon the play's direct citation of Empedocles' philosophy of Love and Strife, something also quoted directly in this stanza from the opening pages of *The Prime Anniversary*. Wright clearly asks us to keep Alberti in mind as we read his book, as does Carpentier when he summons the Spanish-born poet in his analysis of the Cuban *Bufo*. Perhaps, in this way, Alberti's circular journey rhymes with that undertaken by the characters in Wright's play.

But back to laughter. Carpentier and Alberti both heard something in the laughter and the music of the *Bufo* that marked it as political theatre, perhaps the same thing that Simon Critchley writes about in "Comedy and Fini-

70 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 4.

71 *Ibid.*, 49.

tude." For Critchley, there is a certain breed of laughter that we should approach as a mode of resistance.⁷² This resisting laughter is the kind that buries Fascist governments, as Alberti had hoped it would in Spain. By extension, we may consider *The Geometry of Rhythm* as a comedy, one that draws rhythmic inspiration from the Cuban music surveyed by Carpentier. In Wright's case, the comedy here is, more broadly, the comedy of life. *La vita è una commedia*. Yet another Baroque topic. As in Classical Roman and Greek comedies, the distinction between comedy and tragedy can be discerned in their endings. With tragedy, the hero dies or is punished severely for selective ignorance. With comedy, despite travails, somebody ends up getting married. In *The Geometry of Rhythm*, the marriage unites numerous couples who at first seem radically unpairable: Bivio and Grogach, Love and Strife, body and soul. The united duo is truly the Two that lies at the heart of the One, the twin alive within the self, the two forces that push and pull against each other in order to produce the energy required to live a life worthy of the name.

And this brings us to the final circuit, the final connection between Wright's and Carpentier's works, a rhyme with another neo-Baroque poet, Nicolás Guillén. In an essay that reveals the Baroque sensibility of Guillén's poetry, Roberto González Echevarría develops a reading of Guillén's *Motivos de Son* that parallels the reading we are preparing here of Wright's play. Indeed, it was through reading Echevarría that the seeds of this connection between Wright and Carpentier started to sprout. Seeking to understand precisely what draws Guillén to the son, the most Cuban of all Cuban rhythms, the "best" of all of Toussaint's "good" rhythms, Echevarría finds himself thinking of a section from that "jam session" in *Concierto*

72 Simon Critchley, "Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis," *Constellations* 6, no. 1 (1999): 108–22.

barroco when Filomeno astonishes his audience with his drumming.

In this cacophonous celebration, mixing music from various parts of the world, Filomeno injects his own chant to kill a snake, with the refrain “Ca-la-basón, / Son-són,” that the others (which include Handel and Scarlatti) mispronounce as “Kabbala-sum-sum.” Upon being deformed by the Europeans, “Calaba son” [“I am Carabali,” “I am from Calabar”] reveals perhaps a common, plural origin in the Kabbala, a source of occult, encoded knowledge that, like the elements of black aesthetics, differs from the Western tradition. The “son,” like Guillén’s, is a celebration of the plurality of difference, with an emphasis on the physical joy and liberation of the ritualistic dance.⁷³

For Echevarría, the “son” in Carpentier’s jam session links Guillén to Carpentier and thus to the Baroque. Unconcerned with the ostentatious aesthetics of Baroque art, Guillén, as for Echevarría and Carpentier and Wright, heard in the son a transformational power, one that could latch on to a pre-established form, inject it with local color, and invent of it something new. As Gustavo Pérez Firmat says of Guillén, in the same special issue of *Callaloo* that houses Echevarría’s essay, it was the son that allowed the Cuban poet to work within the established tradition of the sonnet and provide that poetic form with an American inflection.⁷⁴

Guillén appears, too, in *The Prime Anniversary*: “Call upon Guillén, his radical confidence / in singing the world’s blossoming transience.”⁷⁵ Following from the pre-

73 Roberto González Echevarría, “Guillén as Baroque: Meaning in ‘Motivos de Son,’” *Callaloo* 31 (Spring 1987): 306.

74 Gustavo Pérez Firmat, “Nicolás Guillén Between the ‘Son’ and the Sonnet,” *Callaloo* 31 (Spring 1987): 318–28.

75 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 7.

vious stanza, in which Wright thinks through the multitude of possible grammatical and syntactical configurations poets and musicians might seize upon to craft their verses, it appears that Wright calls upon Guillén to have the final say in the matter. We are not to choose between this grammar and that, between this syntax or another, between the son or the sonnet, between classical music and jazz. Instead, we mix them and follow the vectors that form in the big bang created by the fusion. Guillén's verses sing of the blossom's becoming, the cusp and the frontier from which the new emerges out of the old. It is not surprising that Wright also contributes to that special edition of *Callaloo* on Guillén and, what's more, that he contributes a play, a text that must live infinite lives through performance in order to fulfil its promise.

§ Full circle

As far as *The Geometry of Rhythm* is concerned, this Baroque perspective, furnished through the establishment of multiple rhymes between Wright's play and Alejo Carpentier, helps us understand how precisely the geometry of the circle relates to action between Bivio and Grogach. When we meet Bivio, he is rehearsing. His musical practice prepares him to complete a ritual, but he requires input from his twin in order to fulfill the ritual's structure. Grogach, whom we appraise as the more grounded, terrestrial, and bodily part of the twins' equation (*duende!*), goads Bivio into action, thereby forcing him to abandon rehearsals and commit to the ritual. With both parties engaged, it is possible to advance to the end of the play where we witness a transformation of self into other.

In harmony with neo-Baroque narratives of mixture, this meeting of self and other is indeed the invention of the American individual as sung in the key of Guillén, Alberti, and Carpentier. The crossroads to which Bivio

constantly arrives is the forking of paths that lead off into his many selves. Like the imagined rider straddling a beam of light glimpsed by Einstein's thought experiments, en route to his theories of relativity, Bivio dwells in the dilation of the present, where past and future open to the now, where the self must decide to become, yet again, the self. Wright dramatizes this act of becoming, cites numerous philosophers who have weighed in on similar issues, and even provides a soundtrack in the form of the Hungarian minor key, which brings us to the ecotone or shared territory of two opposites – minor and major. When the play ends, we see the end of the circle that Wright's play has traced in the sand.

Wright's dense weave of references, both tacit and explicit, traverse the text like the colorful lines that traverse the stage at the beginning of the play. These references are not purely scholastic. They exhibit the connective tissue binding seemingly disparate worlds together. The references also function like Nancy's *renvoi*: they send us away from and gather us into ourselves, perpetually, fueling the motion of becoming that keeps individuals in flux. The references, these lines, this connective tissue, collaborate in the geometry of the text. As in the many diagrams offered by Toussaint, Wright's lines of reference help us rotate the various circles we produce through geometric readings of *The Geometry of Rhythm*. Rotating the circle helps us find the center of gravity of the play and also provides the vital motion of the act of geometry. *The Geometry of Rhythm* is another form of the performance philosophy that we spied in Proclus.

The funny thing about the geometry of the circle and the doing of that geometry is that it never ends. Likewise, when the play ends, we flip back to the beginning of *The Prime Anniversary*. The next chapter will do precisely that and, in so doing, follow the circle through a few more orbits.

Come Back Around: *The Prime Anniversary* and Poetic Orbitals

§ Reading as returning?

Might it be possible that nobody reads Wright's fifteenth book of poetry, *The Prime Anniversary*, only once? That is, when we say that we "read" *The Prime Anniversary*, might we in fact be returning to a cyclical event that has already been taking place, one in which we have, knowingly or not, already been participating?

To read these poems and the play *The Geometry of Rhythm* is, we propose, to come back around to truths we already experience as we become ourselves through the act of living. This claim, which may seem lofty or simply unsupported, gains traction when we acknowledge the philosophical work undertaken by Wright in this book. *The Prime Anniversary* pursues ontological quandaries and solutions forwarded by poets and philosophers in various times and spaces, from Ancient Greece, to Firenze in the late Middle Ages, to the Spain of the 1930s, to the rocky gardens of the Dogon in Mali, and many more. Wright is not necessarily verifying the answers put forth over

time to life's biggest mysteries; rather, he is exploring the possibility of some of those answers through poetic form in order to lay bare the geometry of becoming that we traced in the previous chapter. To avoid the lure of aimlessness that can capture a writer when "exploring" is the primary verb of an expedition, Wright calls upon his signature rhythmical rigor, the cadence, grammar, and syntax that keeps him, and by extension us, locked in orbit with the truths in question. Once synchronized with this orbit, we can sense the accumulated momentum generated through the act of coming back around, of returning to a place with new lenses that have been ground through the lived experience of purposeful travel.

There are several features of Wright's imagery and rhythmic structure that tune readers to the sensation of coming back around. One such feature is the dramatization of becoming-other – and its twin, the act of repetition with difference – featured in *The Geometry of Rhythm*. When we meet Bivio at the start of the text, he is rehearsing. To rehearse is to play again, as if for the first time. We learn that Bivio's rehearsal concerns itself with a ritual twinning, one that culminates in the text's final transformation through which Bivio and Grogach trade places and identities. Delivered as the dramatic literary score of a theatrical performance, Wright's text suggests repeated action, and thus readers are alerted to the possibility that Bivio and Grogach's ritual transformation has happened before and will happen again. They have been, are, and become each other.

The rehearsal we witness at the start of the text is akin to the scales that jazz musicians run through when practicing and soloing. It is an aged rehearsal, a repeated act aimed at playing again, as if for the first time, the scales that have instructed the instrumentalist on how to play at all. Wright's dramaturgy supports this reading by foregrounding the Gypsy minor scale as a central structural element to the play's action, the characters' transforma-

tions, and the readers', or auditors', act of attention. By the end of the play, Wright has offered a qualitative equation wherein becoming one-self equates to becoming-other and each act, in turn, transpires through a form of repetition that denies the return of the same and announces, instead, a ritual summoning linked to purposeful and life-long rehearsal. When we, readers, come around to the dramatization of these equations in *The Geometry of Rhythm*, we come back around to the same transformation in our own lives, albeit with keen eyesight hewn from a critical distance fashioned through the edifice of theatrical representation.

Then, of course, there is the book's title. One may accomplish a "prime anniversary" each time one plays through a musical octave, as do Bivio and Grogach when they "play through" the Gypsy minor scale in *The Geometry of Rhythm*. The final note of the scale, called the prime, mirrors the initial or tonic note. To play through all seven notes in the scale and then play the prime is to come around to where one began, but to come around to a new register accessed through a higher pitch. Wright nests *The Geometry of Rhythm* within *The Prime Anniversary*, thereby drawing readers' minds to the haptic experience of playing through, the architecture of coming around again, and the geometric figure that signifies both of those things, namely the circle. The circle is the figure whose geometry readers trace as they read, though the circle in question distends through the energy produced by repeated circuits and swells to a planetary scale and becomes elliptical. The word "anniversary" speaks of this scale and suggests that readers are not circling a modest diagram etched on wax or drawn on paper but, rather, orbiting a star like the Earth orbits our Sun.

The preview of *The Prime Anniversary's* contents offered on the inside front jacket cover helps us set our imaginations to the appropriate scale and even help us determine which musical, philosophical, epistemological keys we

are going to utilize as we play through the text. "Wright," the text tells us, "resurrects the pre-Socratic practice of exploring thought in verse." Four chutes sprout from this seed. First, the word "resurrect," literally "to rise again," emerges as a specific kind of repetition, one that brings back to life something that has laid dormant or, perhaps, has died. When we enter Wright's act of resurrection, we come back around to the pre-Socratic verse that disclosed poetry's and philosophy's Ancient intimacy. Coupled together, these two arts reveal(ed) the paths toward great truths.

Second, while Wright is interested in this poetic-philosophical *practice* of exploring thought, he is also specifically interested in the potentiality of verse to provide the momentum needed to delve deeply into the core of ideas. "Verse," a word that speaks of turning, ties the arts of poetry and philosophy to the work of farmers and ploughmen who turn the Earth. The act of turning from one line of poetry to another draws inspiration from the turning of soil, and thus to write poetry is to engage in an act of material significance, one that yields fruit and provides sustenance. Philosophy enters the picture when we consider that the Ancient Greek word for "verse," *στίχος* (*stichos*) had both a poetic and philosophical usage. In poetry, the word usually identified a "line of prose, of about the same length as the average hexameter verse, viz., about 15 or 16 syllables, used in reckoning the compass of a passage or work."¹ In philosophy, its variant, *συστοιχία* (*sytoichia*), denoted a series, an ordering, and a causal chain, as was likely to be developed through logical reasoning. This philosophical definition carried over to poetry, especially pre-Socratic poetry, insofar as the specific syntax of pre-Socratic poetic-philosophical language harmonized with the truths espoused through the content of the au-

1 *Liddell and Scott Greek-English Lexicon (LSJ)*, s.v. "στίχος," <https://art-flsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/LSJ/navigate/70/1/845/>.

thors' treatises. This harmony is equal parts musical and mathematical insofar as the geometry of poetic meter translated directly into the sonic geometry of music. The verses of *The Prime Anniversary* come back around to and turn toward this pre-Socratic verse in order to harmonize with the form and contents of those poems' mathematical, ontological, and musical discoveries.

Third, of all the pre-Socratics, Wright seems to focus on two figures in particular, Empedocles and Pythagoras. The primary touchstone of Empedocles' philosophy in *The Prime Anniversary* is the complex dance between Love and Strife, as is identified in the book jacket's blurb, but, given the historical proximity between Empedocles and Pythagoras, we surmise that the dance is, essentially, organized around a numerical pattern that discloses the laws of Nature. As such, our reading of Wright's poetry benefits from remembering that mathematics and ethics, number and poetry, and art and science are always fused together in one and the same intellectual foray.

Patricia Curd's writing on Empedocles helps to explain how this is so:

Empedocles proposes a cosmos formed of the four roots (as he calls them), earth, water, air, and fire along with the motive forces of Love and Strife. It is often claimed that, for Empedocles, Love simply produces mixture and Strife only causes separation. Empedocles' view is more complicated, for both forces mix and separate. Love unites opposed (unlike) things by pulling apart and then mixing these unlikes, while Strife sets unlikes in opposition and segregates them, hence Strife mixes like with like. Just as painters can produce fantastically lifelike scenes just by mixing colors, so the operations of Love and Strife, using just the four roots can produce "trees and men and women, and

beasts and birds and water-nourished fish, and long-lived gods best in honors.”²

On the surface, Curd shows the rudimentary parts of the ontology disclosed through Empedocles’s thought. Beyond the surface, however, she also reveals the play of Number – specifically 1, 2, 4, and 6 – in Empedocles. Four roots (i.e., earth, air, water, fire) participate in The One (i.e., cosmos). Two motive forces (i.e., Love and Strife) animate the participation. Each of these forces and roots branches off, fractal-like, into more and more pairs as it unites and separates elements into various mixtures.

Wright’s *Prime Anniversary* poems draw momentum from the dynamic interaction of Love and Strife sensed by Empedocles. To draw this momentum, Wright taps into the rhythm generated by the numbers subtending the Empedoclean and pre-Socratic worldview. While seemingly not aligned with either of the two branches of Pythagorean thought (i.e., the ἀκουσματικοί, *Acusmatici*, and the μαθηματικοί, *Mathematici*), Empedocles was certainly engaged in the discernment of the geometric ratios that ordered the cosmos. If we trace the geometric interest back to its source, we eventually find Pythagoras, though it is likely not the historical figure of Pythagoras whom Wright resurrects in this book of poems but, rather, the general shape of Pythagorean thought that is felt through the writings of his predecessors such as Philolaus and Aristoxenus. Through those two writers, we see Pythagoras in a specific light, as Carl Huffman explains:

The picture of Pythagoras that emerges from the evidence is thus not of a mathematician, who offered rig-

2 *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Presocratic Philosophy,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/presocratics/>.

orous proofs, or of a scientist, who carried out experiments to discover the nature of the natural world, but rather of someone who sees special significance in and assigns special prominence to mathematical relationships that were in general circulation.³

By recognizing that these same mathematical relationships are still in circulation – through natural patterns, musical rhythms, aesthetically pleasing poetic cadences, etc. – Wright finds a rationale for resurrecting Pythagoras and Empedocles. The Truth they pursued is the same Truth we can pursue today. The mode of pursuit they or their students employed, that is, poetic-philosophizing, continues to enable revelation.

The fourth and final chute that grows from the jacket blurb about Wright's resurrection of pre-Socratic explorations of philosophy through verse points toward the reason for all this labor. Why engage in this poetic-philosophical pursuit of Truth? The answer has to do with ethics, and, here, "ethics" rhymes most consonantly with the Ancient Greek notion of the good life. To live a life worthy of the name, one must participate in the One to the degree permitted through the aptitude of the individual. Or, as another Ancient Greek philosopher would later put it,

[t]o the man who pursues his studies in the proper way, all geometric constructions, all systems of numbers, all duly constituted melodic progressions, the single ordered scheme of all celestial revolutions, should disclose themselves [... by] the revelation of a single bond of natural interconnection.⁴

3 *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Pythagoras," <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/pythagoras/>.

4 Plato, *Epinomis*, 991e, 992a, cited in Ernest G. McClain, *The Pythagorean Plato: Prelude to the Song Itself* (Boulder: Great Eastern Book Co., 1978), 7.

Though attributed to Plato, scholars believe this line and the entirety of the *Epinomis* to be a spurious copy of Platonic style that found its way into Plato's body of work during the archival process at the Alexandrian library centuries after Plato's death.⁵ What permits its citation here is the spirit in which it has been summoned by scholars like Ernest McClain who spy in it a golden thread that connects Pythagorean thought to thinkers in later Antiquity. The text, which seems more aligned with what we now call neo-Platonic philosophy, establishes the type of philosophical pursuit that contemporary thinkers have for the most part abandoned; namely, the attempt to put one's finger on the pulse of the All.

To attempt to discover "the single ordered scheme of all celestial revolutions" through the close scrutiny of a single, natural interconnection": this is the ethical pitch that Wright's *Prime Anniversary* sets for readers. Since, however, all who pick up the book will be always already entangled with this single ordered scheme of all celestial revolutions, we must recognize this ethical call as one that has motivated our actions since before we could read. The possibility, then, is that we tune into this call by coming back around to truths we already know. Or, if you like, we could phrase this as a question: might we rediscover knowledge of the world and ourselves that we already know but have forgotten by coming back around to philosophy through poetic verse, as Wright does in *The Prime Anniversary*?

The effort of this chapter is to demonstrate some of the discoveries made by our return to *The Prime Anniversary* in order to guide your own return. It would be futile – though perhaps also comical, in the sense of "comical" developed in our reading of *The Geometry of Rhythm* – to

5 See Plato, *Charmides, Alcibiades I and II, Hipparchus, Lovers, Theages, Minos, Epinomis*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 425.

attempt a complete reading of this book. As such, we will limit our reading to certain fragments in which the geometry of the One reveals itself most clearly to us.

§ ὦ καλή ὦ χαρίεσσα

Wright summons a fragment of text and places it before the first poem as an epigraph: ὦ καλή ὦ χαρίεσσα. With a slight variation – κάλα instead of Wright’s καλή – this same fragment appears in the work of at least two Classical authors, Theocritus and Sappho. But before we grapple with them, let’s look at an unlikely figure drawn into Wright’s orbit: St. Luke. In a blog post dedicated to Luke 1:28, Stuart Dean highlights the allure of alliteration produced through the sounding of both the “κ” and the “χ” in this Ancient Greek fragment. If we add the next word in the phrase, which Wright has omitted, the alliteration grows louder: ὦ κάλα ὦ χαρίεσσα κόρα (*ō kala ō khariessa kora*). Dean suggests that St. Luke cribs Sappho’s musicality for his description of the Annunciation in order to emphasize the breath required to voice these words. As a doctor, Luke would have found particular significance in the breath, life force, that carries the words to the ear, particularly the breath behind the Angel Gabriel’s words, a breath issuing from the Holy Spirit.⁶ An initial thought arising from this fragment, read through this oblique encounter with St. Luke, is that Wright begins *The Prime Anniversary* with a praise of reading aloud. We must put breath, life force, into our reading of this fragment and what follows.

Through a slightly less opaque frame, we find the same fragment – ὦ καλὰ ὦ χαρίεσσα κόρα – in what we now know as Theocritus’s Idyll 18, a poem called an epitha-

6 Stuart Dean, “Lost in Translation: Luke 1:28,” *Medium*, December 15, 2017. URL no longer accessible.

lamium that was utilized during wedding celebrations.⁷ On the surface, the declaration, “O beautiful, O graceful girl” seems relatively straightforward: words of flattery given to a bride on her wedding day. As Nicholas Lane argues, however, we shouldn’t accept the flattering words at face value.⁸ For starters, the wedding song in question is sung to mark the joining of Helen and Menelaus. To accentuate the multiple levels of meaning woven into this union and its ensuing mytho-historical tumult, Theocritus seems to have deployed images that yielded multiple readings. For example, the singers of the song, a group of maidens, wear Hyacinth flowers in their hair. During Theocritus’s time, and clearly foreshadowing the doctrine of signatures that would mark the episteme of similitude that houses thought in the European Middle Ages, keen observers of the hyacinth read upon their leaves the mark “AI.” Uttered in repetition – AIAIAIAI – this sound is the written inscription of the cry of grief, made most famous in the story of Ajax, whose name also bears the same inscription as the Hyacinth leaves. Through Theocritus, then, we are able to hear pangs of grief threaded in between the lyrics of the wedding song; Love and Strife vocalized through lyric poetry.

Even if we halted this textual deep dive now, we would have enough information to proceed to the main body of text. Wright writes a book of poems about, at least in part, the event of *anniversary*. To begin such a work with a fragment from a wedding song is an elegant and appropriate choice. His specific decision to cite an Ancient Greek wedding song, one with ample historical influence, reveals two key premises of this book. First, these poems desire to be read aloud in order to double as incanta-

7 Theocritus, “Ἐλένης Ἐπιθάλαμιος,” *Perseus*, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Theoc.+18>.

8 Nicholas Lane, “Illusive Puns in Theocritus, ‘Idyll’ 18 Gow,” *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 83, no. 2 (2006): 23–26.

tions or songs whose musicality can provide additional meaning to the semantic content of the words. Second, the pre-Socratic practice of utilizing lyricism in this way to render philosophical truths knowable drives Wright's poetic endeavor and makes of the poems more than decorative gifts prepared to mark a wedding. Wright is philosophizing poetically on the concatenation of rhythms that pulse through even a single fragment of text. That this book is called *The Prime Anniversary* also prepares us to discover a philosophical treatment of number and its mysteries. Furthermore, we anticipate a deft commentary on temporality, insofar as the time of anniversary brings our attention to planetary scales and long-spanning historical sequences. With all this information, we could proceed to Wright's poems. But there are more rhythms to tap out.

Theocritus seems to have borrowed "O beautiful and graceful girl" from Sappho. The "Tenth Muse" of seventh-century BCE Greece seems, too, to be the source of Wright's epigraph.⁹ In particular, it looks as though Wright accessed Sappho's Fragment 108 through the Loeb Classical Library, a claim supported by two details. First, the phrase Wright chooses does not contain "κόρα." Second, the spelling of "beautiful" appears in Wright as καλή. The Loeb text, translated by David A. Campbell with a conscious nod back to Himerius (a rhetorician, poet, and admirer of Sappho in Athens from the fourth-century BCE), contains precisely this presentation of ὦ καλή ὦ χαρίεσσα. Anne Carson's translation, by distinc-

9 The term "tenth muse," supposedly affixed to Sappho by Plato, has significance in this discussion of Wright when we remember that his *Boleros* contain invocations of the Nine Classical Muses. Perhaps Wright summons Sappho in order to "rhyme" with *Boleros*? (As a scholarly note, it is important to mention that scholars doubt that Plato was the author of this phrase and other lines collated in the *Anthologia Palantia*. More likely, it was a third-century writer attempting to write as Plato or in his voice.)

tion, which she bases largely on Eva-Maria Voigt's 1971 earlier labor, shows the Ancient Greek text as ὦ κάλα ὦ χαρίεσσα κόρα. Without much doubt, though, we can say that Wright turns to Sappho through Campbell's translation.

Nevertheless, Carson is an important reference because her English translation renders the text as "O beautiful, O graceful *one*" (our emphasis). This choice is likely linked to the task of translation and, in the words of Walter Benjamin, the act of "finding that intended effect upon the language into which [the translator] is translating which produces in it the echo of the original."¹⁰ Carson herself goes on to admit, "I am never quite sure how to hear Sappho's echo but, now and again, reading these old citations, there is a tingle."¹¹ We can then see the choice of "one" as intending to bend our historical line of sight back toward Sappho's signal, which, Carson intuits, was broadcast on a different frequency than that of the traditional wedding song.

Playing on the word κόρα draws attention to its additional meanings in Ancient Greek, one of which was "pupil" as in the pupil of the eye. Here, the pupil may belong to us in the present as much as it does to Sappho in her time. That is, the effort of seeing Sappho is largely deconstructive insofar as we must learn to see through the image of her that has been constructed by posterity. Undoing that image reveals a figure *not necessarily* linked to the erotic love of two females. Undoing that image also gives way to a Sappho who may possibly never have written a lick. This was Sappho the musician, singer of lyric, player of the lyre. By bending κόρα from girl to one, Carson unsettles our certainties of Sappho and allows us to return to the fragment with new eyes and ears, to hear within it

10 Cited in Sappho, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, trans. Anne Carson (London: Vintage, 2003), 15.

11 *Ibid.*, 11.

something of Sappho's voice, something that sings not of individual brides or people or events but, rather, of Beauty and Grace more generally. Or, if we aren't willing to shift the image to such a degree, we can at least admit that Carson's adjustment rekindles the musicality of Sappho, that is, the fact that her poems were music, and thus we access a memory of the singing voice and the breath that supports such singing. As with St. Luke's alliterative allusion, Carson brings us to Sappho's life force.

Does Wright omit κόρα for similar reasons, or merely because his copy of the text doesn't include it in the first place? Our reading on this question falls silent here, but the fragment has more to say. It is an apostrophe, and, as such, collaborates in the "turning" and "coming back around" that we mentioned at the start of this chapter. This turning exists in the word itself: ἀπο-στροφή, turning back, turning away, twisting.¹² Rhetorically, the word tells of the moment when a narrator turns away from the previous focus of their verse and toward another figure. The Poetry Foundation specifies that it is employed to address a dead or absent figure.¹³ Utilized as an epigraph, the phrase starts our reading adventure with the act of turning, turning toward the past, and, if we accept the wider philosophical appeal to Beauty and Grace, the turning draws momentum from Classical ideals that functioned as motive forces in the world.

Still more significant is the fact that Wright utilizes a fragment in the Ancient Greek language, words that come through the voice of a female poet, one who speaks of love and whose philosophical inquiries took place within the temporal frame shared by other pre-Socratic philoso-

12 *LSJ*, s.v. "ἀποστροφή," <https://artflsrvo3.uchicago.edu/philologic4/LSJ/navigate/8/1/1898/>.

13 "Apostrophe," *The Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/apostrophe>.

phers. As we turn from the epigraph to the first sentence of the first poem, we also hear a historical rhyme:

Truth: names travel a watery route to heaven,
so says Concha Méndez, or so she would have said,
if she had any regard for physics [...].¹⁴

Wright hears Sappho and Méndez, the central figure of the Spanish group known as the Generation of '27, oscillating around the same Truth. The Sappho fragment turns us away from the present toward the historical figure of the great musician from Lesbos. It also facilitates our turn back toward the present, via the figure of Méndez and other poets both Modernist and Classical.

In addition to accentuating the pre-Socratic mode of inquiry that Wright will go on to employ as he further investigates Truth, this fragment pairs with other Ancient Greek words and phrases in *The Prime Anniversary* to form an enlightening constellation: ὦ καλή ὦ χαρίεσσα; μὲν βάσις ἀγλαΐας ἀρχά; and Ποιητός.

The second fragment, it seems to us, comes from Pindar's first *Pythian Ode*, constructed to mark the occasion of Heiron's victory in the Chariot race of the games of 470 BCE:

Χρυσέα φόρμιγξ, Ἀπόλλωνος καὶ ἰοπλοκάμων
σύνδικον Μοισᾶν κτέανον· τᾶς ἀκούει
μὲν βάσις ἀγλαΐας ἀρχά,
πέιθονται δ' ᾠοῖδοι σάμασιν ἀγησιχόρων ὁπότεν
προοιμίω
ἀμβολὰς τεύχης ἐλελιζομένα.

[Golden Lyre, rightful possession of Apollo
and the violet-haired Muses, to you the footstep
listens

14 Jay Wright, *The Prime Anniversary* (Chicago: Flood Editions), 3.

as it **begins the splendid celebration**,
 and the singers heed your signals,
 whenever with your vibrations you strike up
 the chorus-leading preludes.]¹⁵

This Greek phrase is a polyseme. In the context of this Pindar poem, it reveals the Golden Lyre's, and also by extension lyric poetry's, ability to set feet to dancing on the occasion of festivity. Second, as the translator's introduction to the Loeb Classic collection of Pindarian verse states, "ἀγλαΐα" is a recurrent phrase in Pindar, one that speaks of "the splendor of success (also one of the Graces)."¹⁶ It is this notion of "splendor" that motivates the additional common meaning of "ἀγλαΐα" as "joy" or "triumph." Third, lurking beneath the surface, there lingers a geometric meaning to the phrase. "Βάσις" may refer to the base of a solid plane or figure, such as a diagram of a triangle. Similarly, "ἄρχά" may refer to the apex of a summit, as in the place where two lines meet in the same diagram. Given the close connection between geometry and music in Ancient Greece, it makes sense that Pindar would include a mathematical reference in his nod to the motivating power of the Lyre. All three levels of the phrase seem to operate in Wright's citation, which starts the second poem in *The Prime Anniversary* and follows from the previous poem's final line: "What does geometry know?" Wright senses something geometric subtending the dancing feet that move to the sound of the lyre and commence the celebration of this particular victory. This combination of sound, song, dance, poetry, and joy reveal the perfect pitch attainable through poetic and athletic human enterprise.

15 Pindar, *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, ed. and trans. William H. Race (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 218–19.

16 *Ibid.*, 4.

Thus the first two stars, but what of the third? As mentioned in the previous chapter, the word “ποιητός” means “made by oneself, invented, feigned.” It appears in the third poem of the book’s first part and again in *The Geometry of Rhythm*, though only in its English translation of “feigned.” In the play, Bivio deploys the term to refer to “well-made” phrases that he has collected in his notebook as something like compass bearings that guide him through his life and work. In the constellation we scrutinize here, it is important to acknowledge that Wright affixes the Ancient Greek word to another of the Generation of ‘27 poets, Rafael Alberti, of whom he speaks in the same breath as Empedocles. Thus, by the third poem in the *The Prime Anniversary*, we see Sappho paired with Méndez and Empedocles paired with Alberti: Modernist recipients of a Classical inheritance that travels on the currency of the lyric. The aim of such knowledge is the attainment of joy, and the way to that joy is through a poetic-philosophical exploration akin to the pre-Socratic song. The three Ancient Greek phrases assemble like stars in the sky that can help to guide us on our path.

It turns out, then, that Wright’s epigraph, a mere fragment, contains within it a kind of motive force that ignites and shepherds the perpetual turning embodied in the lyricism of *The Prime Anniversary*. When we pick up the book to read it, we find ourselves already engaged with the song of Truth. Wright’s words, however, draw us into a specific orbit that joins us together with other celestial bodies from the Classical and Modern worlds. By participating actively in this orbit, we gain knowledge of a specific geometrical or numerical proportion that sub-tends lyrical verse, and, with this knowledge, we are prepared to attain the highest joy, to begin the festivities of this poetic work.

§ Concha Méndez confronts a continuous set of states.

By the time we come around to the fifth poem in *The Prime Anniversary*, it feels as if we have traveled through many universes. We do not lose our way, though, because specific images and figures recur and help to orientate us:

Concha Méndez confronts a continuous set
of states. What could she have seen in the ragged
shape
of lightning, in a solar prominence, the pet
intentions that will appear on every landscape?
Was it Ptolemy who advised us to beware
of a theoretical grasp without a fair
symmetry of practice, most rigorous and spare?¹⁷

Concha Méndez Cuesta (1898–1986) was a prolific writer and traveler who shaped the literary scene now known as the Generation of '27. Textured with extremes of love and loss, her life began in Madrid and took her to London, Paris, Brussels, Havana, and eventually Coyoacán, Mexico where she departed the world of the living in December 1986. She left behind multiple books of poetry, several plays, and an oral history-autobiography, *Memorias hab-ladas, memorias armadas* she created with her granddaughter, Paloma Ulacia Altolaguirre, during the 1980s. The highlights of her poetic and other literary contributions were accompanied by the darkness of the Spanish Civil War, the death of her first child, and the complexities of exile. Her appearance in *The Prime Anniversary* creates a Modernist pairing between herself and Alberti but also expands the scope of readers' historical consciousness by

17 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 5.

illuminating a figure who, until relatively recently, occupied a blind spot in the narratives of Spanish poetry.¹⁸

The appearance of lightning and a solar prominence links back to the first poem's mention of "ether," the medium physicists, until relatively recently, believed conducted light as it traveled through the heavens. Also in the first poem, Wright ends his verse with the question, "What does geometry know?"; an echo of that question reverberates here in the sound of Ptolemy's name. As we join up with the various orbitals spiraling through *The Prime Anniversary*, we recognize our shared center, Truth, as something discernible through physics.

Discernment, though, requires an attentive ear. The matter at hand is a kind of harmony, a music of the spheres that Wright senses and helps us to sense. Ptolemy's presence in this particular poem draws our attention to "harmony," a phenomenon on which he dwells in great depth in his *Harmonics*, written in the first half of the second century CE. In Book III, he claims, "[t]he power of harmony cannot be regarded as an object [...] but as a cause which orders material and gives it natural form."¹⁹ Though the analytic strain of Ptolemy's thought shows the influence of Aristotle on his philosophical method, the focus on mathematical underpinnings to music reveal his Pythagorean roots. An Aristotelian passage from the same source leads back to Wright's comment on a symmetry of theory and practice:

18 For a couple of deep dives into Méndez's life and work, see Catherine G. Bellver, "Voyages, Flights, and Other Patterns of Passage in 'Canciones de mar y tierra' by Concha Méndez," *Pacific Coast Philology* 30, no. 1 (1995): 103–16, and Sarah Leggott, "The Woman Writer in 1920s Spain: Countering the Canon in Concha Méndez's 'Memorias habladas, memorias armadas,'" *Hispanic Journal* 26, nos. 1/2 (2005): 91–105.

19 Cited in Joscelyn Godwin, ed., *Harmony of the Spheres: A Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1993), 23.

The power of harmony establishes in acoustics the rules which we call harmonic consonance; and this occurs partly through theoretical discovery of the correct ratios with the aid of intellect, and partly through successful cultivation of these discoveries with the aid of practice. Reason generally finds the Beautiful through theoretical speculation, then confirms it through its means of expression (the activity of the hands), then through practice molds the formless material into conformity with itself. Hence it goes without saying that the science which is common to all developments of reason, namely Mathematics, is *concerned not only with the theoretical investigation of the Beautiful, as some would believe, but also with the exhibition and practical employment of those things whose evaluation falls within its realm.*²⁰

Ptolemy's Pythagorean leanings show themselves more clearly in chapter 5 where he elaborates on the sevenfold division of the power of thought. Most relevant here is the central role played by geometry in the discernment of all these physical truths. For Ptolemy, "geometry" was utilized to measure the "quality" of sound's movements, whereas Arithmetic was utilized to measure quantity. Both the theory and practice of his philosophical method relied on geometry to tune into the harmony of the spheres.

Méndez, too, relies on geometry, but she expressed the harmony of the lightning bolt and the solar prominence through poetic verse, as did the other members of the Generation of '27. Her poetry acted like a medium through which this natural harmony could reach the ears of her readers and auditors. While the existence of ether may have been disproved, Wright affirms the reality of this poetic medium and reminds his readers and

20 Ibid., 23, emphasis added.

auditors that the harmony of the spheres will be discovered through understanding the qualitative geometry of verse. "To understand" here means to grasp in equal parts the theory and practice of poetry. We need not write like Méndez or Wright to attain such an understanding, but we do need to know how to read like them, that is, how to read the world and how to rehearse the rhythms of poetic verse.

§ The geometry of lyric

Mathematical equations appear prominently in the poems of *The Prime Anniversary*. A reader encounters them positioned undeniably in footer margins at distinct intervals following each sub-series of poems. We traced these equations as *the language of pure form* in our first chapter, how after initial decoding they appear to restate numerically the form shared by the preceding sub-series of poems. Equations act as demarcation, punctuating each end to transition to what comes next. They slow our reading and break its stride with a mode shift from language to number. Why reveal the form as equation, unless to draw out something of the cumulative geometry that the lines enact and incarnate? A first-time reader encounters the first equation after the final line of the tenth poem:

no one forgets the geometry of lyric.²¹

Wright has assigned the label of a numbered "level" to each equation as it appears. We may line up the four equations once again to grasp something of their restatement of the shape of this four-part suite of poems.

21 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 7.

Third level (a): $2 \times 5 \times 7 = 70$

Third level (b): $2 \times 5 \times 7 = 70$

Second level (a): $5 \times 7 = 35$

Second level (b): $7 \times 5 = 35$

The equations note how the suite divides into two parts, and how each of those two parts further divides into two subparts. They call these parts “levels.” The poem commences at the third level, then proceeds to the second level, where it concludes. The precise introjection of this word, “level,” metaphorizes the movement within the form that the equations recapitulate. We may understand the journey of the poems as a descent, if the third level exists above the second, like floors passed in an elevator nearing the ground, or Dante-style diminishing rings. As each level further divides into two parts, lettered (a) and (b) like algebraic variables, the twinned parts mirror one another in number, with the fourth and final Second level (b) enacting a neat reversal.

The seventeen seven-line poems, ten in Third level (a) and seven in Third level (b), all share variations on a rhyme scheme that divides the lines as 4/3. The initial quatrain always takes the form of two pairs, with three possible variations: ABAB, ABBA, or AABB. The triplet follows in every instance as CCC.

The ten poems of Third level (a) begin a tapering form at its most dense and concentrated, with rhyme acting as one valence of that density. Ever reducing, the suite steps down in terraces, elongating with a sense of acceleration as it goes: first from two seven-line poems per page for ten pages, to one seven-line poem per page for seven pages; then to one five-line poem per page for five pages, to one three-line poem per page for seven pages; then from one five-line poem per page for seven pages, to finally one three-line poem per page for five pages. It enacts each aspect of the pattern twice. We read and in-

interpret the form in its most abstract, mathematical architecture. It concentrates the words as it goes. We see in it something of the form of a spire, like Ogotemmêli's granary that reflects the form of the heavens, from a round wide base to a narrow square roof, then reaching skyward to a point. Since we call these levels a descent, we might see this spire form inverted, reflected in water. What does lyric mean, but sung or singable, the lure of feeling, the issuance of the lyre? Does this inversion bestow the lyric quality upon the form, rendering it as reflection? The levels draw down to a point as the second level closes, (a) and (b), into miniatures, sets of seven and five poems, three lines long. At the outset these short poems abandon rhyme and open the language as the lines shorten. Reducing to a clock and the name of God, the words on which its two end points, twice to its narrowest, come to rest.

Circular movement
measures a triangular
world at rest.²²

A clock makes itself
of precious metals and glass
and a damaged star.²³

This first ending recalls Benjamin Banneker and his wooden clock, now remade and making itself, as a triangle in heaven – part telescoping glass, part gold, silver, and platinum, and part the guiding star of imperfection. A sketch from Banneker's notebook, diagramming an equilateral triangle inscribed in a circle, "measures a triangular world at rest" (fig. 7.1). The image recalls an earlier iteration, from *Music's Mask and Measure*.

22 Ibid., 25.

23 Ibid., 26.

Required the Lengths of the Sides of an Equilateral Triangle, inscribed in a Circle
 whose Diameter is 200 perches with a general Theorem for all such Questions
 Solution of the above problem, _____

1000 3.142 200
 1000) 314200
 314200

 000000
 Length of the periphery - 628.1100
 $\frac{1}{3}$ of the length of the periphery - 209.466
 $\frac{1}{3}$ of $\frac{1}{3}$ of the periphery - 69.822
 $\frac{2}{3}$ Length of the sides required - 175.644
 314200

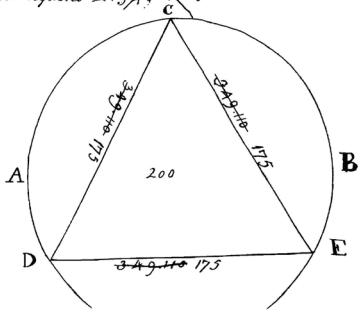


Figure 7.1: Banneker's inscribed equilateral triangle.

What we call
 our own might only be
 the first stroke upon
 a stellar
 clock, an instant shift
 of center [...]²⁴

The second ending as it arrives at the ground inaugu-
 rates a recoiling ascent, marble rising to the surface in
 service. It refigures the ascension of a saint, attuned to
 the sound of God's name in silence, or out of it. Like the
 lure of Saints' Days released from their calendar, our acts
 of reading now encompass listening; God's name instan-

24 Jay Wright, *Music's Mask and Measure* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2007), 32.

tiates the zero degree of naming, heard “when silence,” like a revelation of blind vision.

Underground, marble
starts its ascent to service,
though it hides its name.²⁵

Cum silentio
the saint waits on salvation.
Does she hear God’s name?²⁶

Once again, we believe we may read the forms in parallel with, and independent from, the words that actualize them; the inclusion of the equations in fact compels us to read them; forms distinguished from and in dialogue with language, a doubled poetry as all poetry doubles; the feeling of the form and the ringing of the word. Yet it would be a mistake to regard this late work, if we may call it that, as devoting more attention to or affording a more prominent place to explicit evocations of mathematics and the geometric. Critic J. Peter Moore has noted something of the question for us with the phrase “poetry after the late stage”: “*The Prime Anniversary*, dispenses with common sense and conceits, imagining a post-late poetics, enthralled with the notion of carrying on beyond all reasonable bounds.”²⁷ We apprehend the equations in this context, “beyond all reasonable bounds,” situated in the position of marginalia, in the footers beyond the boundaries of language’s page, a restatement in another mode and another language, the abstracted language of number and form. The form in turn extends beyond the reasonable bounds of poetic form, tapered extrusions from

25 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 37.

26 *Ibid.*, 38.

27 J. Peter Moore, “Rhythm, Divination, and Naming in Jay Wright’s Poetry,” *Hyperallergic*, January 4, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/524557/the-prime-anniversary-jay-wright/>.

out of those recognizable forms, as if to treat something like a sonnet as only a starting point for development and mutation. Such forms and geometries have made themselves known in Wright's work from the very beginning. What has changed about them now, other than their "carrying on beyond all reasonable bounds" into uncharted territory? What surfaces or volumes do they aspire to chart now? Do the forms that these insistent equations emphasize mimic something found in nature?

lines in the atmosphere seem to circle and flow²⁸

in the ragged shape
of lightning, in a solar prominence [...]²⁹

As the form flings itself from wide to narrow, like a solar flare uncoiling, something of its symmetry evokes a strange body in lines and language – wide torso standing on narrowing uneven legs; the dynamic form of a scarecrow rising out of the shape of a garden surveyed by its sightless gardener.

Ogotemmêli stands on his own green terrace.
The lines and planes of that garden should remind
him
of imaginary things, no finite and slim
number of his body's diagram, or slow pace
of a logical relation tuned to Athens.³⁰

We know not what the body can do, nor even of its form. The abstract and imaginary pitches at odds with the "finite and slim number of (a) body's diagram." The form

28 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 3.

29 *Ibid.*, 5.

30 *Ibid.*, 14.

finds itself pulled in two directions, supported on narrow legs that touch down their feet in the sky.

How like this book, within the constructions of this suite of poems, to recirculate the historical figures who have come before, setting the array of names aswirl in the measured pantheon of 210 lines. Yet it also introduces some first timers into the fray.

Marcel Duchamp hears a temporal displacement in Tompkins Square, and dreams of the fourth dimension.

[...]

All Cubists will continue to think him impure.³¹

Impurity plays the hero here, pushing its analysis beyond the volumes and surfaces that the Cubists loved to unfold, warping the vision into a dream of 4-space, as the mathematicians might say.

What do we mean by this claim that we have made regarding the body's dynamic, emergent form? We will reflect on those solitary historical figures who have made only one appearance in Wright's poetry, the *hapax legomenon* in the pantheon of notable heroes. We make a brief foray back to 1988 and to the enfolded ending of *Elaine's Book*.

§ Eyes, worldblind

We may consider Paul Celan the practitioner of a poetics most distant from that of Wright. Celan's artistry unfolded within the eye of a needle, constrained into the most unforgiving straights of postwar Europe's compro-

³¹ Ibid., 13.

mised and complicit languages, his hyper-minimalism at the furthest spectrum end from Wright's expansiveness. A Romanian-born poet of Jewish descent, Celan, forcibly separated from his parents, lost them to illness (father) and execution (mother) in an internment camp, while he survived the war years in a labor camp. He wrote in his adopted language of German, in a sense between languages, and of a decidedly minor inflection.

Two poems bracket the final section of *Elaine's Book*, both of them exhibiting a version of the same unusual form. "The Anatomy of Resonance" opens the section, and "Desire's Persistence" closes it and the book. We will describe the form by focusing on the first poem. "The Anatomy of Resonance" begins with an epigram from Hölderlin on brevity ("Die Kurze"):

And the bird of the night whirs
Down, so close that you shield your eyes.

Wright's poem then divides into seven parts, each with a subtitle, as follows: "The Bird," "Night," "Whirs," "Down," "Close," "Shield," and "Eyes." Each of the seven poems within the poem of "The Anatomy of Resonance" has been generated by one of Hölderlin's words, in a way drawing out the poetry from within the poetry, a manner of spectralism, of finding the vast pluralism within the singular. Another epigram, this one bilingual in German and English, appears at the start of the poem's final section, "Eyes."

Augen, weltblind, in Sterbegeklüft...

Eyes, worldblind, in the lode-break of dying...

Paul Celan, *Schneebett* (*Snowbed*)

a return forever to the familiar. What has drawn us back from the verses of *The Prime Anniversary* to this passage? It is the body, what it carries and what it refuses. Peter Szondi, in his *Celan Studies*, understands it this way.

While what we have here is an instance of synecdoche, the part (“a finger”) representing the whole (the one remembering), it is in fact crucial to realize that it doesn’t matter what this “finger” represents. Nowhere in the stanza is the thing represented by it at issue; in other words, it isn’t a matter of representation at all. It is this finger and nothing else that is doing the touching. One can interpret this touching as an act of memory, but the interpretation distorts the text.³³

In our case, we substitute eye for finger, and the point remains: it is not at all a matter of representation. The eye alone sees or does not see. In doing so it remains capable nevertheless of endless multiplicity – human eye to peacock tail eye to eye in the infant bud of a plant cutting to the eye within the curve of a voice in the earth. Every eye shares the eye’s geometry. In the absence of representation, a proliferation of likenesses arises.

The poem that follows in *Elaine’s Book*, “Journey to the Place of Ghosts,” begins with another Celan epigram. He becomes in these moments, his only appearance in Wright’s work, the poet of death and of mourning.

Wölbe dich, Welt:
Wenn die Totenmuschel heranschwimmt,
will es hier läuten.

Vault over, world:
when the seashell of death washes up

33 Peter Szondi, *Celan Studies*, trans. Susan Bernofsky with Harvey Mendelsohn (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 46.

there will be knelling.

Paul Celan, *Stimmen (Voices)*³⁴

Wright concludes this poem with these lines.

Sun closes down on an intensity of ghosts.
 It is time to close the path.
 It is time for the snail's pace
 of coming again to life,
 with the world swept clean,
 the crying done,
 and our ordinary garments decent in the dead one's
 eyes.³⁵

Mourning turns to morning as it will, and Wright oversees the turning, leading us back to such ordinary renewal. The dead occupy a different place, certainly, in his cosmology than in that of Celan, but this point of intersection tells us something that we needed to know about the work of geometry: it operates as a profanation of poetry. In the refusal of synecdoche and symbol, as Szondi instructs us, such poetry, "by necessity a unique instance of language" (i.e., Celan), embeds itself in the endless unfoldings of the world, the earth, the body, the universe, as it remakes our perceptions of each of them. It leaves the work of metaphor to those elements of form and structure that endow the poem with its architecture. What has Wright invented then but blocks of time, again and again, that operate as freshly formed containers for experience? These constructed volumes of time define experience as they hold it, even when they issue out of the horizons of a single word.

34 Wright, *Elaine's Book*, 74.

35 *Ibid.*, 76.

§ Reading under the sign of love

After this single (double) appearance, we see Paul Celan as the zero degree for Wright of poetry's potential for reduction to a terminal point, its ability to fold in on itself. Even in that extreme circumstance horizons open from the interior. We return to *The Prime Anniversary* with the understanding of geometry as an escape from representation: "Representation has identity as its element."³⁶ Who are we then, or whom do we become, when we read this poetry with the geometry to which it affords us access? "The identity of the object read dissolves into divergent series [...] just as the identity of the reading subject is dissolved into the decentered circles of multiple readings. Nothing, however, is lost; each series exists only by virtue of the return of the others."³⁷ We recognize ourselves as we read as becoming multiple, dissolving into and out of the text, grounded anew in form and in language. For this reason, perhaps, we continually replay this quote, which we cannot reread enough, from Ralph Ellison.

Perhaps the white reader draws his whiteness around himself when he sits down to read. He doesn't want to identify himself with Negro characters in terms of our immediate racial and social situation, though on a deeper human level, identification can become compelling when the situation is revealed artistically. The white reader doesn't want to get too close, not even in an imaginary re-creation of society.³⁸

Do we demonstrate this bad habit of protecting our imaginary, policing its territories and boundaries? If we do,

36 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 69.

37 *Ibid.*, 69.

38 Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 212–13.

its walls stand no chance of remaining unbreached in the relentless overcodes of reading nor by the commitment implicit in rereading. "First we repeat the parts, then we repeat the whole on which the parts depend."³⁹ Who is the we, aggregated in reading? What aspect of ourselves do we draw around ourselves most closely, and from what aspect of ourselves do we find escape in reading?

Bivio: Dream up a new configuration.

Grogach: Exactly. Take another look at ourselves.

Bivio: Each one.

Grogach: Exactly.

Bivio: After all, this could go on forever.⁴⁰

We acknowledge the debt that this dialogue owes to Samuel Beckett, on whom, if we recall correctly, Wright had delivered a somewhat spontaneous lecture at Marquette University earlier in the day of the reading from *The Prime Anniversary* in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Out of a theatrical void space, measured as music is masked and measures, these two figures banter in their eternal way. They speak in their idiom, we could say, as we find ourselves when reading, under the sign of love. "Love unites opposed (unlike) things by pulling apart and then mixing these unlikes." We return to the Love of Empedocles, the force opposing that of Strife. These unlike elements in our orbit, through love, we draw around ourselves as we read, aspiring as we do to dissolution and return. Susan Howe said it best:

Poetry is an incessant amorous search under the sign of love for a remembered time at the pitch-dark fring-

39 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 290.

40 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 77–78.

es of evening when we gathered together to bless and believe.⁴¹

We gather together in the moment that gathers us, communal, polyphonic, to read and to hear; and this gathering we may recognize as the form that love takes, the form of love, the legible, abstractable form that issues from the sources in love's wellsprings.

§ The emotional depth of the imaginative intellect

All of this traveling reminds us that we carry every place we have been with us everywhere we go. This is an accumulative orbit, and while the notion of coming back "around" collaborates in the mapping of circular, elliptical, and spiral movements, these circles have topological relatives that help the mind wrap around this accumulation. We think, for example, of the loom with its shuttle and the Japanese sword with its many layers of folded steel. There is, in other words, depth to the orbit, a depth that is textured and sharp. The intellectual depth is likely fathomable by this point in the book, but it feels important to acknowledge another aspect; namely, the emotional depth of Wright's journeying.

We can demonstrate the layering and sharpness of this depth by returning (naturally) to the first lines of *The Prime Anniversary*:

Truth: names travel a watery route to heaven,
so says Concha Méndez, or so she would have said,
if she had any regard for physics.

41 Susan Howe, "Vagrancy in the Park," in *The Quarry* (New York: New Directions, 2015), 12.

Wright “starts” his book of poetry here, but the names and watery route carry knowledge of the Dogon history in which water and words are so closely linked. We sense, too, in the materiality of prayer conjured through Méndez’s watery names, Wright’s sincere engagement with the cosmology and cosmography spun out through Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. Consider, for example, the placement of the two rivers, Lethe and Eunoe, that prepare souls for the transition between *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. The first river expunges memories constructed through worldly, and therefore flawed, knowledge and experience, and the second river energizes the memories of good deeds that blossomed from divine inspiration. When the living donate prayers in the name of their dead loved ones who are thought to dwell in purgatory, those prayers decrease the time spent purging sins and, therefore, speed the souls of the dead to the two rivers that lead them to heaven. Wright’s “physics,” that is, his knowledge of the movement of nature, folds the poetic verses of Méndez with the cosmography of Dante. He continues folding and sharpening the edge of this same stanza by layering in references to Ether, the death of Ether (perhaps via in the Michelson-Morley experiment of 1887), and Quito’s (Ecuador) proximity to the stars furnished by its unique elevation in the Andes.

The emotional depth of this folded and sharpened verse is made possible by Wright’s creative intellect. Tarrying with Dante⁴² helps to clarify this connection between emotion and intellect, and Wright gives us permission to tarry a couple pages later:

42 We hear Wright’s words from his interview with Charles Rowell, cited throughout this book: “for me, the poet is the man Samuel-Beckett calls The Poet, Dante. To have conceived such a poem is a miracle, to have carried it out displays a divinity that is rare among us.”

Alison reads Dante's stars, and finds a verbal shadow midway to Paradise, the truth of it in imagination, desire, integral vocation the Carthaginian might permit.⁴³

The Alison in question could well be Alison Cornish whose *Reading Dante's Stars* (2000) demonstrates beautiful erudition in service of mapping the many crucial references to stars in the *Commedia*. In his choice to say the author's first name, Wright shuttles us back to the first word of the book, "Truth," insofar as the etymology of "Alison" leads to the Ancient Greek ἀλήθεια (*alētheia*). This, too, is a watery route insofar as ἀλήθεια brings us (again) to Λήθη, the river Lethe, the event horizon of Paradise. Cornish's work lights our way back to the present page on which Wright asks us to place ourselves, at least momentarily, alongside Dante and Vergil as they travel up the mountain of Purgatorio.

Dante's *Purgatorio* is awash in temporal references sutured to the movement of the stars and their intimate dance with the human body. "Whereas in Hell time was told primarily by the movements of the unseen moon," says Cornish, "in Purgatory it is told directly by the sun. In fact, the pilgrim's [Dante's] own body serves as a kind of gnomon, casting a lone shadow across the face of the mountain."⁴⁴ Dante plots his temporal calculations through his body, thereby making sure that we, the reader, put our body on the line as well. "The synchronic time-references in *Purgatorio*, far from being a gratuitous display of astronomical erudition, should in fact be numbered among the poem's addresses to the reader because they call attention to her geographical context," Cornish

43 Wright, *The Prime Anniversary*, 5.

44 Alison Cornish, *Reading Dante's Stars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 66.

suggests.⁴⁵ Indeed, the only way to keep time in the *Commedia* is to keep in mind our own position in relation to the system. And the “system” in question is entirely emotional, insofar as the mountain of Purgatory brings to bear an affective toll on the materiality of the soul as it repents for its flaws manufactured during Earthly life. To purge is to grieve, but to grieve as praise, praise for the Divine whose embrace awaits each pilgrim beyond the shores of the twin rivers Lethe and Eunoe.

Wright returns to Dante frequently and, in turn, carries away from Dante a belief that the body is the gnomon, the γνώμων, the “one that knows or examines.” Bodies travel around and around “the mountain” and learn to sing the chord formed by the union of grief and praise. It is no coincidence that Wright’s first major book of poetry was *The Homecoming Singer*. He comes back around to that role of singer, of griot, of epic historian, in *The Prime Anniversary*. These songs are not metaphorical. These are poems to be sung, just as were Pindar’s odes and Sappho’s lyrics. Songs travel through the throat, which, in Vedic thought, houses विशुद्ध, *Vishuddha*, the chakra that balances grief and joy. Where we read signs of Wright’s intellectual acumen and creativity on the page, we must also hear the emotional depth of his song. Spinozistic joy meets Dantean grief and praise meets the Spanish poets of ’27 meets Ogotemmêli meets the pre-Socratics, etc., etc. Each folded onto the other to form a sharp verse to cut the illusion that mind and emotion are somehow separate. Wright’s intercultural tour de force finds a twin in Dante whose own cultural life at the turn of the fourteenth century pre-existed the arbitrary separation of knowledge into scholastic disciplines and benefited from the erudition of Arab thinkers such as Ibn Rushd (1126–98).

But it is also Dante’s role as mystic – understood in a particular sense – that unites him with Wright, and this

45 Ibid., 68.

comparison leads to another acknowledgement of emotional depth. One of the many astonishing elements of the *Commedia* is its combination of haptic and optic nuance. The poem presents a fully embodied vision, but it differs from the kind of ecstatic journeying undertaken by figures like Hildegard von Bingen. As Anna Aresi argues,

[t]he character Dante is not caught up in ecstasy; rather, the “vision” he attains in Paradise is what he himself calls an “imaginative vision.” In the fiction of the poem, that is, Dante passes through the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* with his body, but experiences the *Paradiso* in his mind in a dreamlike vision. A claim to have ascended bodily into Paradise, like Saint Paul, was one that not even a poet as daring as Dante would have made lightly.⁴⁶

We agree with Aresi that Dante understands his imaginative abilities as arising from philosophical contemplation, specifically in the sense forwarded by Bernard of Clairvaux in *De consideratione*. Given Dante’s familiarity with Ibn Rushd’s understanding of intellect and the methodologies of Arabic philosophers, however, we wonder if Dante’s imaginative vision also entered the realm of the *mundis imaginis*, as described by Henri Corbin. To enter this “imaginal realm,” as Corbin calls, one needed to travel well beyond the confines of Earthly knowledge – which is, if cherished solely and without spiritual support, *vanity* – into a separate ontological realm, one that is closer in proximity to Paradise. This travel is made possible by the capacity of the imagination, the visioning organ stemming from the mind. Thus, we find Dante’s trav-

46 Anna Aresi, “Dante in T.S. Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’: Vision, Mysticism, and the Mind’s Journey to God,” *Literature & Theology* 30, no. 4 (December 2016): 401.

els, throughout the entirety of *Commedia*, to be mystical in this sense: his is a spiritual performance philosophy of the creative and imaginative intellect.⁴⁷

His travels are also mystical in the sense that their purpose and engine is Love. What else is emotional depth but the sounding of Love? We know that the embodiment of Love for Dante is Beatrice who, in real life, had shed her body and traveled to the realm of spirits and who, in the narrative of the *Commedia*, appears as pure as light. In Canto 33 of *Purgatorio*, a profoundly metapoetical song, we learn that the *Commedia* only exists at Beatrice's behest, which is to say that it exists because Love wills it.

Tu nota; e sì come da me son porte,
così queste parole segna a' vivi
del viver ch'è un correre a la morte. (*Purg.* 33.52–54)

[Take note; and even as I speak these words,
do you transmit them in your turn to those
who live the life that is a race to death.]⁴⁸

With the insertion of these words, Dante basically cedes the authority of his grand poem, or at least the section devoted to Paradise, to the divine insight of his true Love, thereby eradicating himself as poet. This maneuver is a kind of decreation of self that Anne Carson discusses in her analysis of female mystics. To truly love, the self must be decreed, otherwise the self will always obfuscate that which is Loved. Dante's emotional depth, stemming

47 Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard and Philip Sherrard (London: Kegan Paul International, 1977), and Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

48 See excellent commentary here: Teodolinda Barolini, "'Purgatorio' 33: Beyond Estrangement," *Digital Dante*, <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/purgatorio/purgatorio-33/>.

from his creative intellect, ends up emptying his ego so as to more cleanly channel the light of Truth and Love.

§ Perhaps a few more words on Love

It is possible that Love presides as the predominant affective register throughout Wright's poetic oeuvre. Love and its twin, Loss, form a pair that presents itself explicitly in many poems, perhaps most notably in the thirteen-poem series *Love's Dozen*, which concludes Wright's *Explications/ Interpretations* (1984). But much earlier than that, in the poem titled "Sketch for an Aesthetic Project" from *The Homecoming Singer*, Wright already offered a hint about this crucial event called Love.

I believe now that love is half persistence,
A medium in which, from change to change,
Understanding may be gathered.⁴⁹

Wright cites these words from Thomas Kinsella's "Night-walker" (1967) before offering a four-part poem of his own that depicts a figure (a character?) navigating a solitary existence ("I can only hope to meet some other soul [...] to pluck my pity.") Wright's figure is himself a walker, perambulating through city streets, coming upon sites inscribed with historical significance:

I wait, here near the ocean, for the north wind,
and the waves breaking up on ships.
At this point, the slave ships would dock,
creeping up the shoreline,
with their bloody cargo intact
[...]

49 Jay Wright, *Transfigurations: Collected Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 83.

There are parchments of blood
 sunk where I cannot walk.
 But when there is silence here,
 I hear a mythic shriek.⁵⁰

Equating this shriek to light – “in the way it fills / my pitiless mind”⁵¹ – the figure from this sketch of an aesthetic project reveals the unbreakable bond between terror and enlightenment, between absence and revelation. Wright entitles the next poem in the book “Beginning Again,” and it may be possible to read the break between poems as an undercover enjambment, a linkage between the embodied knowledge gained from traveling the world in solitude and the regeneration of self that happens every time we return to the point from whence we came.

I return to tell how
 I come back so slowly,
 carefully, to here,
 where you see me now.⁵²

It would be easy to get lost within these wanderings were it not for Kinsella’s few words on love that preface Wright’s sketch. Love is that through which we walk. Like ether and water, it is a medium, an environment. To survive in these surroundings, one must, mostly, persist; that is, keep walking. Though it sometimes proves rough going, the effort of continuing yields understanding. We learn by going where we have to go. In this early poem, Wright borrows Kinsella’s words to present love as a kind of motivational force that propels us through quotidian existence.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁵² *Ibid.*

That love has a twin, loss, is something we learn repeatedly on our life's journeys. In his book of poems dedicated to his wife, Lois, Wright shows us these twins in action:

Love invents our bodies' devices,
 moment to moment, or
 instant to eternity,
 begins the fragmentary
 construction
 that speaks of unacknowledged
 loss.⁵³

The title of this book of poems, *Polynomials and Pollen: Parables, Proverbs, Paradigms, and Praise for Lois*, plays with the phonological occurrences known as onset and rime. Onset, or the initial consonant, is accompanied by various rimes, or the string of letters that follow the onset in order to make a word. Here, phonology borrows from ecology and reveals kinship between language and the earth. Prior to and concomitant with its linguistic usage, "rime" denotes the hoarfrost that gathers around objects during the onset of a sudden freeze. Yoked into this pairing, words appear like crystallizations of vapor that gather around an initial sound formed by the mouth. Following the same line of thought, we might think of love in this poem as the rime that forms around loss, that gives it a hoary sheen while also covering it from view. Not unlike Rumi's persistent song about the longing that is life's metronome and meaning, we sing of this love in order to return to the source. Once reunited, we'll fall silent in the music of it all.

This same sentiment resurfaces a little later in this book of poems:

53 Jay Wright, *Polynomials and Pollen: Parables, Proverbs, Paradigms, and Praise for Lois* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive, 2008), 85.

Who would envision
 the counter fugue
 of twilight,
 or the incidental music
 that comes when death
 sounds its leading tone?
 No iambic figure
 stirs the worship of absence,
 but you will hear
 the melismatic advance
 of the perfect solitude.⁵⁴

The melisma calls to mind the call to prayer ringing out from mosques. These calls are testaments to love and loss, separation and unity. Lingering on twilight, the cusp of the sun's disappearance (disappearing only to appear elsewhere, for others), Wright hears an echo of the melismatic music in the light of early evening. The sound of song and the fading light mingle and form a counter-rhythm to each other, each keyed to the systolic and diastolic pulsations of celestial and terrestrial life. Linked in this way to life, both song and light also connect to death. In fact, death's "leading tone" may be precisely the repeat occurrence of twilight, a kind of repetition that seems like it will repeat forever but will surely not. Love is that which tunes itself to this leading tone while also singing its own song of praise, even if that song is out of tune with the inevitability of the end.

§ το ἄπειρον

It seems this act of "coming back around" could go on forever, that it has always gone on. As such, we recognize and honor the feeling that the writing of this book may

54 Ibid., 99.

never end. At the same time, we understand the merit of allowing joy to find its rest, its temporary limit or bound. Perhaps, then, we can fade out on this track, like a slow diminuendo you would hear on a recording of an in-studio jam session that goes on for the players but concludes for the listeners of the album.

What better a jam to fade out on than that of love? In *Boleros*, Wright names “the dialectic of love’s form,” which we understand as the mutual embrace of an eternal geometry of the Idea, one both potential (pure power) and actualizable through the enactment of mathematical diagramming and poetic verse, and the decay of the physical body. Erato if and only if khat. This dialectic finds a beat in the contractions and expansions of the Empedoclean Love and Strife, which, in turn, propels the movement of *The Prime Anniversary*, from its first Sapphic fragment to its final performed utterances in the mouths of Bivio and Grogach. Indeed, Wright’s entire body of work, his “aesthetic project” that he sketched as early as the *Homecoming Singer*, draws its raison d’être from this polysemous and dialectical love, one which permits the marriage of so many unlikely pairs. Each marriage, however, casts its shadow, “the fragmentary / construction / that speaks of unacknowledged / loss,” and it is the dance between the festivities of the wedding and the shadow of the grave that accompanies the music, even as the music fades. There, in the dance, the body comes into being and falls apart, many times in a single life, both the seat and the seed of the memories of multiple histories.

Without your dead, faith dies, and one
 learns how the extensible sun
 of belief and aspiration
 serve such an exhilaration
 that only faith in love allows.

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