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The Poetry of James Wright: Moments of Epiphany

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V..... dne..... Podpis.....

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Motto:
"For everything there is a season, and a time and purpose for every matter under heaven."
Ecclesiastes 3:1

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

One of the most frequently anthologized and popularly discussed poems by the contemporary American poet James Wright (1927-1980) is arguably the poem called "A Blessing." In this poem, the speaker achieves a phenomenon called epiphany which shifts his perception, produces a positive reaction in the speaker of the poem, and conveys an enlightening message.

To show that this is not the only instance of a poem of epiphany among James Wright's works, and to explore the literary phenomenon of epiphany in the author's poetry further, the aim of the thesis is to find and analyze similar literary epiphanies which are present in a number of other poems in his works and focus on the various forms of positive transformation effects and messages these epiphanies try to convey and share. The analysis deals with poems of epiphany found throughout the whole poetical career of the poet, which also points to the fact that James Wright's poems of epiphanies are not a phenomenon of one era or one collection of poems, but rather a refreshing element found within the whole scope of the author's poetry.

The first chapter outlines the life of James Wright. It provides relevant information to his personal life and also to his poetical development. Since the selected poems represent works from the whole career of the poet, the poetry of James Wright is looked upon from two complementing perspectives in this chapter.

The most significant influences on James Wright are presented in the first part of chapter one. In this part, involvement of various contributions of particularly relevant authors or movements on Wright's work is explained. Special focus is given to Wright's association with the poet and friend Robert Bly, Deep Image, and translations of foreign poets, all of which gradually inspired and enabled the poet to create a unique poetry as well as employ certain aspects of the influences, which are found within the analyzed poems. All information is provided in order for the thesis to be able to move to the next section and take it as a further usable material to expand upon and relate it to some of the poems dealt with in the analysis.

The second part of chapter one is based on two major changes that James Wright undertook as he evolved in creating the poems. During his career, the poet first started from the poetry of traditional formal style of rhyme and iambic meter, moved toward free verse

and finally wrote also prose poems. The pieces of information are presented with respect to the influences mentioned in the previous part – namely Robert Bly and the translations of foreign poets. The second part also demonstrates that these changes had a profound effect on the development of James Wright's poetry and may be one of the reasons behind the quality of some of the poems of epiphanies presented in the analysis in the poet's later collections, especially starting with *The Branch Will Not Break*.

The second chapter focuses on defining the term literary epiphany. The chapter provides an outline of the development of epiphany over the years beginning with its Christian origins during which epiphanies were mainly revelations of divinity. The chapter moves to the important contributions of the English poet William Wordsworth who coined the term "spots of time" in one of his works, which is thought of as one of the first attempts to speak of an epiphany in literary terms. Wordsworth pointed to the existence of elevating, beneficial experiences which the perceptive observer can find within trivial tasks or events of the everyday. The chapter also mentions Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Joyce as two figures who helped establish epiphany in its secular terms in literature.

The features of literary epiphany as well as the criteria for creating and identifying epiphany within a text are provided based on a number of critical studies of the phenomenon in literature, with special focus on poetry. It also highlights the use of imagery and symbolism as contributing factors in creating a successful epiphany experience in the poem, especially because James Wright used both effectively as is shown in particular poems in the analysis. A workable summary of the definition of literary epiphany is then arrived at in the end of the second chapter so as to provide a basic overview for the analysis of selected poems of epiphany by James Wright in the next chapter.

In the third chapter, I present the selected poems which, as I attempt to demonstrate, represent poems of epiphanies with various pleasurable effects provided by the particular sudden realization that is achieved and transformation of the observer – the speaker of the poem. The poems are chosen from the earliest books by James Wright to the last ones and offer various insights and messages. In each of the analyzed poems, I focus on epiphanies and the moment of epiphanic experience with respect to the relevant constituents of the whole poem, context, and to the criteria of literary epiphany as provided in the second chapter. In the analysis, I also discuss the positive character of the particular epiphanies and

their various effects and reactions of the speaker by dealing with the sudden realizations and the messages the poems of epiphany attempt to share.

1 THE LIFE AND POETRY OF JAMES WRIGHT

James Arlington Wright was born on the 13th October, 1927 in Martins Ferry, Ohio, a factory town separated from neighboring West Virginia by the Ohio River. Born into a blue-collar family of parents Jessie and Dudley Wright in an industrial area, James Wright could see first hand what hardships life had to offer, especially more deeply felt in the era of the Depression in the United States. James's mother left high school and worked in a laundry and his father, also leaving school, worked his entire life as a worker in Wheeling's Hazel-Atlas Glass factory across the Ohio River to support the family. Although with a job, unlike others during the era, his father was at times a subject to the infamous "lay-offs" from his job. Thus the uncertainty and poverty always hang above the Wright family.

That is perhaps why a number of Wright's poems, express a tremendous sense of compassion as well as troubles insecurity may bring.[1] Wright never wanted his fate to be the same as that of his father's and tried in many ways to escape it as much as he could. Although he once worked in the factory his father worked in for two nights, he felt strongly that it was not the kind of life he wanted to experience.[2] He felt a great respect and honor for his kind and hard-working father, which he expressed in some of his poems (along with his distaste for the harsh job): "one slave / to Hazel-Atlas Glass became my father. / He tried to teach me kindness."[3] Many of Wright's works also reflect the crisis in the valley, the sense of desperation as well as the characters of people living during the era. Ohio always remained a rich material for his poems although it left Wright "torn between love and contempt for his native place."[4] Starting to write bits of poetry as early as at the age of eleven,[5] throughout his life he must have seen art as means toward refuge, respite and also to embrace it with delight to share his feelings for "sensitivity or receptivity to the world's pleasures," while at the same time what was perhaps "most important for James Wright,

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[1] David. C. Dougherty, *James Wright* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 4.
[2] Dave Smith, ed., "James Wright: The Pure Clear Word, an Interview," in *The Pure Clear Word*: *Essays on the Poetry of James Wright,* ed. Dave Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 9-10.
[3] James Wright, "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 82.
[4] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 4.
[5] Smith, ed., "James Wright: The Pure Clear Word, an Interview," 8.

poetry expressed and enacted compassion over the world's suffering" as well as over those who suffer in it.[6]

After high school where he was introduced to Horace and Catullus, both of which he admired for the rest of his life,[7] young James Wright had a plan in mind to leave the perils of the valley hopefully for good – after the graduation he joined the Army at eighteen, served in Japan and by the means of G.I. bill obtained a college education at Kenyon College , an institution with the poet John Crowe Ransom who also helped him publish during his studies two of his first "official" poems "Lonely" and "Father" in *The Kenyon Review*.[8]

In 1952 he married his first wife Liberty Kardules, a nurse and a teacher in Texas, with whom he had two sons Franz and Marshall. The couple spent a year in Austria with Wright's Fulbright grant which enabled him to work at the University of Vienna. There he dealt with poems by Georg Trakl whom Wright also later translated and who along with other foreign poets significantly contributed to the poet's own work, as will be discussed later in this thesis.

Returning back to America from Europe, Wright entered the University of Washington and studied English literature. Coincidentally, another influential poet for Wright appeared to be teaching there at that time – Theodor Roethke, with whom Wright took only one but all the more beneficial semester in creative writing class. They both became friends and correspondents; a fact which was strengthened and showed Wright's appreciation by Roethke being one of the Teds to whom *The Green Wall* James Wright dedicated in 1954.

However, both James Wright and Theodor Roethke had similar psychological issues they were forced to deal with in social situations and they both suffered from a serious disorder – Roethke suffered from a manic-depressive disorder and Wright bi-polar mood disorder which caused his first nervous breakdown as soon as at sixteen years of age.[9]

In 1954, W. H. Auden chose Wright's collection *The Green Wall* to be awarded Yale Series of Younger Poets award and wrote an introduction to it. This was indisputably the

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[6] Donald Hall, "Lament for a Maker," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems,* by James Wright (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), xxv.
[7] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 5.
[8] Hall, "Lament for a Maker," xxvi.

first major milestone as well as a success in the professional career of James Wright the poet. With Ph.D. aspirations in mind, which would open for him the possibilities of a reliable and established job, the kind of job he had always wanted to have,[10] Wright wrote a dissertation thesis on Charles Dickens and pursued further academic career as a teacher of literature at the English department at the University of Minneapolis in 1957, the same year *The Green Wall* was published.

What seemed like a period of a personal life honeymoon however soon became years of bleak difficulties. Fighting delusions, Wright underwent an electroshock therapy and psychotherapy to help him deal with his illness. After several separations, his first marriage with Liberty ended in divorce, losing both his sons who stayed with the mother. Moreover, after *Saint Judas* was published in 1959, Wright felt like he hit a dead end in his poetic career. After reading what seemed to Wright a criticism of his poetry in the literary magazine *The Fifties*, Donald Hall remembers a resigning letter Wright sent him saying: "So I quit. I have been betraying whatever was true and courageous ... in myself and in everyone else for so long, that I am still fairly convinced that I have killed it. So I quit."[11]

Many of Wright's poems reflect, perhaps not surprisingly, these unstable times as well as their other instances he experienced in his life in some of the poetry with darker moods filled with isolation and loneliness and, as Wright admitted in letters to friends, feelings of being a failure in life.[12]

Darker passages of Wright's life seemed indeed unbearable at times, and they must have felt especially hopeless when Wright wrote Hall another letter in 1959 in which he was confessing to an attempted suicide by walking into the water near Seattle. However, as Hall properly suggests, his willingness to live on was stronger, despite his problem with drinking and mental condition that haunted him throughout his life with occasional respites and save havens. His was the struggle to live and to constantly fight for and ensure the testimony that

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[9] I feel it is important to mention these facts of his life to show the context in which Wright was creating his poetry, and also, to a considerable extent, the way and arguably even his motivation to write poetry at times at all.
[10] As mentioned earlier, as a way to escape his dreadful fear of father's fate in the Ohio valley.
[11] Hall, "Lament for a Maker," xxix.
[12] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 7-8.

the branch of his life will not break – a successful struggle one might say, which also showed in his poetry filled with relieving instances of love, joy and compassion.[13]

Love and support seemed to find their ways into the life of James Wright even in those dismal times. One of such episodes happened when Wright became a friend with Robert Bly. Owing to an incident during the aforementioned "reproach" of Wright's work in *The Fifties*, of which Bly was the editor, Wright initiated a contact with Bly. After some correspondence, Wright was invited to Bly's farm for a friendly conversation and clarification and, what was more, for an unexpected, but all the more welcome, grounds of a strong, supportive and lasting friendship full of inspirations for Wright's further work, especially for the third book *The Branch Will Not Break* published in 1963.

Bly and his wife Carol invited Wright to their farm number of times since, and the farm as well as the people there became a source of inspiration for the poet. The everyday details and beauty he learnt to observe and admire in the nature of the countryside as well as moments of serene contemplation, if not meditation, he found there are present among many poems of Wright's work, some of them even a part of this thesis's topic of moments of epiphanies.

Wright was always grateful to the Bly family and never forgot to mention their tremendous encouragement and support that he needed throughout his poetic as wall as personal life, both of which, as he mentioned in an interview, they helped him save:
"They loved me and they saved my life. I don't mean just the life of my poetry, either."[14]

The farm became a place to both create the art and to share time with those closest to him at the particular time – James Dickey, Donald Hall, Louis Simpson, John Logan, William Duffy – and it also represented a place for the occasional respites from the problems of his personal life.[15]

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[13] Hall, "Lament for a Maker," xxxii.
[14] Paris Review, "The Art of Poetry No. 19, James Wright, Interviewed by Peter A. Stitt," *The Paris Review,* last modified 2013, http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright. I worked with the interview published online on the official web site, however, the same interview is also available as the following printed source: Peter Stitt, "The Art of Poetry XIX: James Wright," *Paris Review* 16 (Summer 1975): 34-61.
[15] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 8; Anne Wright, "Bly and Wright: A Passionate Poem," *Great River Review* 52 (Spring/Summer 2010): 72.

When James Wright was denied tenure at the University of Minnesota, a rescue from the desperate situation came in the form of a received Guggenheim fellowship in 1965 when he finally left Minnesota.

In 1966, Wright moved to New York and took a teaching position in English department at Hunter College in New York where he stayed for the rest of his life, met the poet Galway Kinnel and met his second wife Edith Anne Runk, familiarly called Annie. They married in 1967 and Annie instantaneously became, in a sense, his saviour and guardian angel since she helped him recover from his haunting past and move forward. She also became a new source of inspiration and support.

In 1968 Wright's fourth book of poems *Shall We Gather at the River* was published and after a vigorous, diligent work he published *Collected Poems*, first major collection of the previous works, for which Wright gained one of the finest recognitions as an author in the form of the Pulitzer Prize in 1972.

James and Anne Wright travelled in Europe, mainly in Italy and France, where was able to get a new sense of perspective as well as inspiration for his nest book *Two Citizens* in 1973, book which Wright numerously proclaimed as one of his worst and which also received various critical opinions. During these years both his father and soon after that his mother died, and Wright's grief caused another nervous breakdown.

After Wright recuperated and after he published the next book *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* in 1977*,* he received a second Guggenheim fellowship in 1978. The couple returned to Europe for another round of relaxation and trips which are reflected in Wright's poetry mainly as prose poems.

In late 1979, Wright was hospitalized for having constant problems with sore throat. The diagnosis turned out to be the cancer of throat. With only several more months to live, Wright managed to appear in White House reception for poets, and made last preparations for *The Summers of James and Annie Wright*, mainly a book of prose pieces, and *This Journey* which he handed to Galway Kinnell and finally Donald Hall with words: "I think the book is more or less done" and "I can do no more."[16]

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[16] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 10; Hall, "Lament for a Maker," xxxvii.

After what came to be the last visits paid by almost all of his closest friends and fellow poets, James Wright died on 25 March 1980 at the age of 52. *This Journey* was published in 1982, after several final revisions done by Anne Wright and other fellow poets.

During the "revolution in taste" of the aesthetics in poetry in the 1950s in America, as Dougherty argues, James Wright was one of the central figures among those poets who reacted to the at that time preferred poetry of the modernist movement, main among those T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. He showed admirable modesty and a considerable influence thanks to his capable and unique craftsmanship in the era following World War II, and was not afraid to reexamine and change his poetics when it felt necessary and beneficial to both him as the artist and the art he created. In fact, as argued in the following sections of this thesis, he subjected his craftsmanship to at least two important changes by virtue of which he was able to achieve growth in the direction he felt compelled to follow. What makes James Wright's poetry varied is the number of themes he employed, sometimes with a sense of sentiment or attachment to the subject matter.[17]

It could be said that in Wright's poetry, there is no light without darkness. As was mentioned earlier in Wright's biography, he grew up as a child of the twenties in America. He experienced and witnessed the unpleasant conditions and political struggles of the depression era, as well as its impacts on every day life, families and countryside. He saw firsthand what society can become during a struggling time like this and he also could see the victims as well as the criminals of the era. This is perhaps partly a reason why a large amount of Wright's work also deals with matters ranging from alienations, desperation, hatred, cruelty, loneliness and death.

As Smith implies, it would be a mistake, though, to call Wright a "dark poet" or a "poet of pessimism and disbelief" as has been called by some. He is rather a patient, sensitive and compassionate poet who deals with such variety of topics and people characters to explore the self, the humanity and to stay true to his feelings and reality and to express them, regardless of their nature. Although he at times delves into the darker world of the society, the poet does so because he, as Smith says, "cannot avoid the darkness

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[17] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 1.

engulfing the human spirit but who, in the romantic tradition, always brings the quickening light of poetry to that darkness."[18]

Thus the plethora of dark characters – the outcasts, misfits, drunks, traitors, condemned – is exposed and explored since they, too, are a part of the reality and the natural world and in Wright's poetry they are seen as people to whom "affirmation of the Good [is also] possible." Moreover, as Smith further observes, for Wright these people are

> figures ... human paradigms and his continual effort is to afford them love and speech. To do so is to save himself from the nightmare of pathos. Wright's myth of creation and redemption from human cruelty is based on the single absolute which allows the self to grow toward recognition, acceptance, and consolation. Love is the only possibility for reconciling ourselves to ourselves and to the world.[19]

By bringing both the darkness and the light together in his works, the whole world in Wright's poetry seems at times bitter, dark or empty, but authentic – as far as the poet's perception and skills to render that perception and experience allow him. Smith characterizes Wright as a man who "demanded the right to speak not as a persona or mask but as himself, a man in the midst of chaotic experience who means to achieve a cohesive view of the real." [20] Smith moreover sees Wright's endeavor as being rooted in his will and devotion to express wide range of emotions in an attempt to provide messages which reveal the universal and which would also be the poet's "attempt to give coherence and objectivity to the subjectively real and all but ungraspable design of human experience."[21]

After all, Wright said about himself after talking about the dark aspects of his poetry in another interview with Heyen: "I'd rather be happy."[22] He also admitted to Stitt: "I think that most of the people who are alive in the world right now are very unhappy. I don't want people to be unhappy, and I'm sorry that they are. I wish there were something I could do

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[18] Dave Smith, ed., "That Halting, Stammering Movement," in *The Pure Clear Word*: *Essays on the Poetry of James Wright,* ed. Dave Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 186-87.
[19] Smith, ed., "That Halting, Stammering Movement," 187.
[20] Dave Smith, ed., introduction to *The Pure Clear Word*: *Essays on the Poetry of James Wright,* ed. Dave Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), xix.
[21] Smith, ed., introduction to *The Pure Clear Word*, xxii.
[22] William Heyen and Jerome Mazzaro, "Something to Be Said for the Light: A Conversation with James Wright," *Southern Humanities Review* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1972): 134-53, accessed September 10, 2013, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420039555&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.

to help. I'm coming to face the fact that there isn't much I can do to help. And I think I've been trying to say that ever since I've started to write books. That's what my books are about."[23] It was perhaps this conviction of the poet which made possible one of the most beautiful and charming poems in his works.

Many critics saw him in this light too, as evidenced by Williams saying: "He was, for all his dark vision, for all his obsession – throughout most of his work – with desolation and death, our major poet of life, of the celebration of being. He is, after all, the great yea-sayer."[24] Wright's poetry presented a balancing view of the dark and the light sides of human experience with "art's most ancient ambition: the search for joy ... the flash of happiness, the blossoming of beauty."[25]

As Dougherty implies, whenever that flash of light[26] is allowed to finally shine through the seeming webs of desolation and despair, through all those living in fear and feeling alone, as Wright himself did, moments such as epiphany may appear and unfold the revelations which serve as the grand healing power – no matter how "tragic life may be there is the beauty of joy within it and we must seek tirelessly for [the joy]." The gifts of Wright's talent enabled him to create the speaker as a kind of hero at times, who, according to Smith, is virtually Wright himself, and who also shows the readers in the poetry that path in his visions "toward understanding and meaning, or love."[27]

Wright once said he said he felt like not having the talent for happiness at all.[28] Yet somehow happiness in the form of a deep sense for the beauty of ordinary moments and its universal messages always lurked hidden in a shell beneath the troubles of his life, waiting to

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[23] Paris Review "The Art of Poetry," http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright.

[24] Miller Williams, "James Wright, His Poems: A Kind of Overview, in Appreciation," in *The Pure Clear Word*: *Essays on the Poetry of James Wright,* ed. Dave Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 238.

[25] Smith, ed., introduction to *The Pure Clear Word,* xxiii.

[26] That is to say, Wright's poetry moved from "darker times" towards the ones containing light and lightness, especially in his later volumes and work, culminating in *The Journey*, as Dougherty also points out – See Dougherty, *James Wright,* 119.

[27] Smith, ed., introduction to *The Pure Clear Word,* xxvi, xxii; For the discussion considering Wright's "hero" to whom Smith likens Wright, see the corresponding passage from Wright's preface to a book of poems by Hy Sobiloff in Smith, ed., introduction to *The Pure Clear Word ,* xx-xxii.

[28] Paris Review "The Art of Poetry," http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright.

break into blossom. The poems containing epiphanies might thus serve as a testament to the poet's ability to render the balanced world and reveal its secrets, truths and healing powers.

What has been discussed so far dealt with the life of James Wright in general, as it is important to acknowledge the major facts of the poets' life which are relevant to the poetry he created as well as the thesis's topic. The information also pointed to the poet's effort to make his poetry varied and balanced. In attempt to provide more specific explanations as to why some of the information is crucial in the poet's development, the thesis now continues first with a list of the major influences on Wright's poetry and then continues with two significant changes in Wright's poetry.

1.1 The Influences on James Wright

The exact amount of influences that leave their imprint on any author's work would admittedly seem almost impossible to account for, let alone explain their particular assistance to the author's creative process. Mainly because an author is usually influenced constantly, throughout his or her life, these large or small contributions may be difficult to precisely determine or measure. Many critics, however, as well as James Wright himself in a number of interviews he attended, helped clarify some of the key influences on the considerable development of Wright's poetry.

All of the mentioned contributors are presented with respect to Wright's overall development as a poet, which is important to be familiar with in order to understand some of Wright's choices he made on the part of the construction and shape of his poems as well as the inspiration he obtained thanks to the effect of the particular influence. These changes led Wright in one way or another to his own unique poetical voice, subject matter, and inspiration, which ultimately helped him represent and express everything in the poems just as the he wanted, including in the author's work also the poems of epiphany as discussed in this thesis.

Ultimately, a poet such as James Wright may be judged, as Dougherty points out, by "the quality and stature of those who influenced his work". In the case of James Wright, as is demonstrated by the following names and their legacy, such evaluation might bring positive and fruitful results. After all, always being an avid reader and enthusiastic scholar, Wright used his talent and opportunities to draw "upon the finest and most influential

figures in Latin, British, and American literature"[29] as well as upon the foreign influences of Spanish and Latin American authors.

1.1.1 Horace

Wright always gladly referred to the "Horatian" idea of writing poetry as being almost second nature to him. Horace, the Roman lyric poet of the first century B.C., appears to have been for the poet always one of the leading "founding fathers" of the background of his poetry and one which he must have always had in his mind when attempting perfection of the art.

Wright continually and vigorously aspired toward mastering the craft of writing while associating himself with the general idea that: "I regard myself primarily as a craftsman, as a Horatian [...] and the person whom I would like to be my master is [therefore] Horace—Horace, who was able to write humorously and kindly in flawless verse. I've achieved that maybe twice in my life, but that is what I would like to be."[30]

By having such aspirations and claims, Wright rooted his Horatian inspiration in such terms as "qualities of balance, decorum, polish, thoroughness, and accuracy"[31] or to the notion which celebrated "the seeming freedom and ease with which, at its best, [the art] meets the challenge set by traditional and highly restrictive patterns."[32] By rigorously applying "the craft of Horace," it can be then stated that Wright sought in his art "the craftsman's ideal, demanding finish, correction, and attention to detail."[33]For Wright, those qualities bore profound meaning when he was trying to achieve a balance between form and the effect of the craft, especially in his early work: "In the arrangement of the words I would like to be very formal but I would like the effect of having a certain ease. That is the Horatian notion."[34]

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[29] David, C. Dougherty, preface to *James Wright,* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987); Although the influence of British literature is not specifically included in the part of the thesis, in Wright's scope of readings it was represented most notably by his favourite Charles Dickens, on whom the poet based his doctoral work.
[30] Paris Review, "The Art of Poetry," http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright.
[31] Jack Elliot Myers, *Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms* (London: Longman, 1989).
[32] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms, Seventh Edition* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), 177.
[33] Abrams, 175.
[34] Smith, "James Wright," 34.

He moved a step closer to the ultimate purpose of his poetry with respect to its readers in saying: "I would like to write something that would be immediately and prosaically comprehensible to a reasonably intelligent reader. [...] That is all I mean by being clear [...] That is a Horatian idea." Wright knew how important yet demanding it is to attempt to write the "art that hides art,"[35] the seamless perfection in its wholeness and clarity, while he was admitting that it was very difficult for him to do so.[36]

Wright indeed sought the above mentioned throughout his poetical career, the freedom, ease and clarity being arguably most vividly granted to his poetry after the "transformation" which was marked by his first major change in creating the art as discussed further in the chapter.

1.1.2 Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost

Among the early influences of Wright's art should be undoubtedly included two great American poets – Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost. Both of them seem to have had an impact on him in the sense that they provided a platform for the young poet like Wright from which he could draw his inspiration for his early work, especially for first two collections *The Green Wall* and *Saint Judas*.

When interviewed on the subject of Frost and Robinson, Wright clarified that their contribution had especially been that of sound and music of the poetry as well as their intriguing portrayal of darkness and the view of tragic world and landscapes in their poems:

> I was trying [...] to learn how to write poems in a simple syntax and also to write in a musically very precise way that had some ease to it. Here I mean something like the sound of Frost, although I also like the sound of Robinson and have tried to get close to that too. The subject matter, perhaps, had closer affinities to Robinson ... [who] felt, and this is what he portrays in his poems, that there is no verifiable justification for hope in this world [...] that hope in human beings is absolutely necessary for us to go on living. His characters are always trying to live as if there was some hope, some kind of hope, and at the same time they know that there isn't [...] You don't find the same kind of thing in Frost. Although, at bottom, Frost is vey much a tragic poet. Yet, I don't think he explores this kind of darkness as consistently as Robinson does.[37]

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[35] Abrams, 177.
[36] Smith, "James Wright," 24.
[37] Smith, "James Wright," 39; Jonathan Blunk, "A Brief Biography of James Wright's Books," *Great River Review* 52 (Spring/Summer 2010), 83-84.

Looking closely at the variety of darkness, number of outsiders, criminals, and other "hopeless" personas especially in Wright's early poetry, as well as the types of landscape the poet created, such a clarification seems as an apt connection to the poet's early influences. After all, one of Wright's most successful poems – a sonnet, also discussed in this thesis, called "Saint Judas" of his second book *Saint Judas* – was, as Wright said, inspired by Robinson's skillful treatment of his own sonnets as well as an attempt to create a powerful dramatic monologue in a Petrarchan sonnet.[38]

From Robert Frost, "America's great nature poet," the inspiration for Wright's writing meant to create clear and "polished" poetry and at the same time still understandable and striking. Wright shared the idea of Frost's "profound, terrifying, and very tragic view of the universe" while admitting his was not only the view of the negative, but also the positive side of things: "I've never said life is meaningless, I've said it is tragic. I think it is intensely precious. God, sometimes I think I'm so happy I don't know what to do with me." Wright also admired Frost's work with language and words in saying: "technically there is something in Frost. He knows how to keep the adjectives out." This, Wright argued, creates striking moments in Frost's poetry.[39]

James Wright also liked and tried to implement Frost's idea about a certain way of organizing a whole collection of poems into a book. Frost's remark which Wright liked to share stated something in the sense that if there are twenty-five poems in a book, the book itself ought to be the twenty-sixth poem.[40] Thus most of Wright's collections are organized in a particular way so that they always attempt to achieve an overall impression intended, which for Wright meant producing awareness "of a relation between the poems as well as of inner relations that exist in the individual poems."[41]

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[38] Paris Review "The Art of Poetry," http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright.
[39] Paris Review "The Art of Poetry," http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright.
[40] Only an approximation made by Wright in the interview with Smith, since it differs in number from what he said in Stitt's interview.
[41] Smith, "James Wright," 36.

Such strategic organization and interconnectedness could be seen for example in the purposeful crafting his collections. *Saint Judas* is organized into three parts "Lunar Changes", "A Sequence of Love Poems" and "The Part Nearest Home." Although not divided into sections, the general idea behind *Shall We Gather at the River* for Wright meant an attempt to "move from death to resurrection and death again, and challenge death finally" as well as coming to terms with an old muse which had haunted him. Such shapeliness and a sense of continuity in books is appealing to the readers who then might have the illusion of thinking they are reading an actual book of prose.[42]

The approach toward poems with clarity, simplicity and directness is also one that Wright had always admired in his aforementioned poetical idol Horace, and such genuinely motivated strategy stayed with Wright throughout his poetical growth, even thought he moved away from some of the aspects he had earlier found in these two teachers. The early influence of these poets may thus be attributed, as Blunk suggests, to "Wright's aspiration to match the metrical skill of these American masters."[43] Later, however, Wright would gradually find other influences elsewhere for his continual development.[44]

1.1.3 John Crowe Ransom

John Crowe Ransom, a refined poet and considered as the "father" of New Criticism, was an influential person Wright came to contact in a literary course during his studies at Kenyon College. Ransom's largest contribution to the already existing aspects of Wright's foundations consisted of Ransom being very precise when dealing with poetry or any other reading. He was for Wright the embodiment of the Horatian ideal, that is, in Wright's words "the attempt finally to write a poem that will be put together so carefully that it does produce a single unifying effect". Moreover, Ransom appeared to be an inspirational teacher and a good reader since he "tried to instill in us the recognition of how necessary it is to pay humble attention to what an author is trying to say."[45]

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[42] Paris Review "The Art of Poetry," http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright.
[43] Blunk 83-84.
[44] Blunk 83-84.
[45] Smith, "James Wright," 12.

He would therefore instill in Wright the sense for critical approach toward a piece of work, even more so his own, and would perhaps even be behind the statement in which Wright said in his maturity: "[T]here can't be a good poetry without good criticism."[46] Therein is hidden the encapsulation of Wright's continual effort to improve.

Among those things for which Ransom helped lay grounds in Wright's poetry, it seems, was also the inspiration for one of the finest elegies among Wright's work, since Ransom had experience with this type of writing himself and arguably transferred some of the characteristics of the poet. Such elegiac works among Wright's poems include characters of the dead, his haunting muse Jenny, uncle Willy Lyons, Chinese politician, fate of American Indians, the murderer George Doty from Ohio, and the Ohio river which often carries strong symbolism of death and decay.[47]

Ransom, as Dougherty argues, would also show Wright, along with Frost and Robinson's influences in the similar manner, the way sound patterns work and the possibilities to use rhyme and meter. However, Dougherty also adds that Ransom' characteristic elements of impersonality in his poems were among those Wright later did not seek in his own poetry – for Wright's was ultimately the focus on the "directness of address."[48]

1.1.4 Theodor Roethke

Theodor Roethke was Wright's teacher at graduate school, later a friend, and even during the short one-semester course of creative writing, left an impact on young Wright the poet.It could be argued that Theodor Roethke server as the first bridge on Wright's journey toward discovering his own originality and authentic voice as an author – a bridge that would later be accompanied by his ultimate mentor in this area, Robert Bly.

Roethke, unlike Ransom, was not afraid to move away from the traditions of modern poetry, from the artificial constructs such tradition was deemed to create, and to embrace the fashion of Romanticism, which too can be found in much of what constitutes Wright's own work, especially the "mature" one. As Dougherty summarizes Roethke's influence of Wright:

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[46] Smith, "James Wright," 19-20.
[47] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 11-12.

> Roethke made his soul, tormented and joyful as it alternately was the principal subject of his art. Roethke saw his poems, not as detached and self-contained units of artistic meaning, but as expressions of his own intuitive consciousness [...] When he risked self-disclosure, he used images that connect at preconscious levels with the reader. His poems create [...] a private system of symbols and meanings.[49]

The summary bears several significant points with respect to Wright's poetry. The alteration between joyful and tormented is present in most of Wright's work – among those low points of the self being the above mentioned elegies, while the highest points are apparent in the joyful nature in the moments of epiphany in poems "A Blessing," "Northern Pike" or "Today I Was So Happy So I Made This Poem." The focus on meditative and intuitive consciousness as well as employing the rich symbolism is another characteristic so often interwoven in Wright's poems – among those discussed in this thesis are for example "Beginning," "The Jewel," "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota."[50]

Wright's studies with Roethke enabled the poet to see the mastery of Roethke's alterations "between tightly controlled lyrics employing complex stanza forms and intricate rhyme [...] and open forms, in which the subject alone determines the line," thus making Wright aware of the possibilities one can employ when creating the art. Seeing the teacher's skills and talents in both methods of creating poetry, Wright would find the necessary encouragement "toward the more open or organic form," he would adopt and successfully started to use later in his poetical career.[51]

Wright continued to admire and correspond with Roethke long after his studies had ended and also did not refuse to give his overall impression of his teacher's influence on him: "Roethke understood that it is careful, conscious craft which liberates your feelings and liberates your imagination."[52]

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[48] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 12.
[49] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 12-13.
[50] The list is by no means thorough; its purpose is to give relevant examples of some of the thesis's main selections of Wright's poetry.
[51] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 13.
[52] Paris Review "The Art of Poetry," http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright.

The craft included careful and critical reading[53] and the liberation of imagination and feelings was a necessary component to Wright's work and helped him achieve sincere, unrestrained and direct poetry after Wright had found the means to do it which was at the time of his first major change.

1.1.5 Robert Bly and Translations of Foreign Poets

There was perhaps in Wright's life never anyone closer or more contributing to James Wright as was the poet Robert Bly. Robert Bly was a stalwart persona of the deep image and the editor (usually under the pseudonym "Crunk") of *The Fifties* (which changed name with every decade). Besides his much helpful support in James Wright's personal life, Robert Bly influenced James Wright's poetic career in a number of ways which helped the young poet resolve the tension Wright felt while creating the first two books and to discover his own unique artistic voice and appropriate means to express it.

Bly came to Wright's life at the time when the poet was suffering greatly – Wright's personal life was all but stable and he also felt he had exhausted all his strengths in the poetry and that he had reached a dead end. When the two poets began exchanging letters and ideas, it seemed Wright had found a proper and much needed conversation counterpart. During these conversations and during Wright's stays at Bly's farm, he was exposed to an innovative way of creating poetry.

Bly tried to base this kind of poetry on a principle by which the creative process would gather "its energy from unconscious or archetypal imagery." This was at the time, when such notions had already been carefully observed and used by critics and poets in America who felt the need to explore, just as Bly and Wright did, new perspectives to deal with the art. Such approach would mean to look for "unconscious patterns with collective significance in works of art" and would also mean a definite break from impersonal approach applied by the New Criticism Wright had experienced under Ransom's lead and which felt "artificial."[54]

In this way it can be argued, based on one of the initial and perhaps on one of the most fundamental changes in Wright's poetry, Bly opened Wright's eyes to a relatively new

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[53] Smith, "James Wright," 13.
[54] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 13-15.

world of at that time only superficially explored poetry. Bly showed Wright that the traditional form Wright had been so used to employing in his poetry was not the only form available and that there were many avenues and possibilities to explore beyond the scope of what had been deemed "traditional" in America in the middle of the twentieth century.[55]

Such idea for change appears to have been initiated by Bly's involvement in translating foreign poets into which he soon introduced Wright himself. This would mean to artistically move beyond the borders of America and look for fresh and workable instances of poets who had already found and successfully practiced the art Wright and Bly were looking for. They both found Spanish and Latin American poets to be the key influences they could bring into the American poetry through the means of translating them, since the task itself would be enriching for the poets as well.[56] Robert Bly thus served as a strong impetus for Wright to start working on the translations and to finally find the new possibilities of writing they could assimilate. It turned out to be, for the development of Wright's poetry, an extremely crucial cooperation and experience.

From his early years spent in Vienna during his studies, Wright had already experienced the enticing poetry of Georg Trakl. Since he joined Bly's venture, Wright dealt with translations of poems by Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, Jorge Guillén, Juan Ramon Jiménez, Pedro Salinas, Antonio Machado, and Goethe; later even the poet's favourite author Georg Trakl. Trakl's application of surreal imagery in his own poems and helpful inspiration for the creation of the poet's desired unique, subjective, sincere self, perhaps inspired and influenced Wright's work the most.[57]

This joint work would lead Bly and Wright toward applying the type of imagery they found in the foreign poets in their own way which emerged under a new group of poets in America, which was to be labeled the "deep image". While it would appear to be an "oversimplification to identify Wright with the deep imagists," as Dougherty points out, it is

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[55] Paris Review "The Art of Poetry," http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright.
[56] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 14.
[57] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 14, 52-54; Sarah Wyman, "Painting the Poetic Image: Lessons James Wright Learned from Hispanic Poets and Painters," in *The Hispanic Connection: Spanish and Spanish-American Literature in the Arts of the World,* ed. Zenia Sacks DaSilva (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 399.

also important to look at his association with this school to understand its influence on Wright's work where poems of vivid and spectacular images can be seen.[58]

The influence of the poets of Hispanic origin on Wright's work appears to be of great value also later for some explanations of symbolic imagery woven into some of the selected poetry in this thesis. Sarah Wyman points at the major connections between Wright's work with images and that which he found in the poets he was translating. With special influence on Wright, she claims that the foreign poets helped "bring forth the intense "deep image" into "enormously energized and experimental art scene in the United States."[59]

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado, according to Wyman, for example taught Wright "the technique of creating poetic spaces in terms of light and dark imagery" but she also explains that these types of poems in Wright, although dealing with darkness, rather "suggest a wonder at mystery more often than a descent into despair"[60] making the poetry of James Wright a balanced environment. Wright complements this suggestion where he says:

> [The things] I've written about so far do have a certain darkness to them, an emotional darkness. But [...] I'm getting sort of tired of the darkness [...] I don't think that I would want to eliminate the darkness from human experience entirely. But there is something to be said for the light also, after all.[61]

With respect to the influences of Spanish American poetry on the imagery later proposed by the school of deep image Dougherty provides a summary of the relationship claiming that the use of imagery in the Spanish American poetry was to

> bear the exclusive burden of meaning in a poem. [...] for the deep imagists [...] sought through poetry a direct access to the unconscious rather than an impressionistic rendering of surface phenomena. The image gathers force within the unconscious and connects with the reader on equally unconscious levels. These poets were not concerned with exploring the motives for their behaviour, as were the confessional poets of the same period, but with forging link between unconscious and conscious levels of experience [...] poets at the inception of the movement shared a belief in the

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[58] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 14-15.
[59] Wyman, 399.
[60] Wyman, 400, 402.
[61] Heyen and Mazzaro, 134-53.

> primacy of authentic imagery, which in turn depends on the honesty and sincerity of the poet, over complex literary techniques.[62]

The above mentioned statements about the influences of foreign poets and the imagery are significant to the topic of this thesis in that it party explains the motifs behind some of Wright's poems including the moments of epiphany discussed in the third chapter – "The Jewel" and "Beginning", most notably. There seems to be a sense in them that they "gather force" in the subconscious and their attempt is to link through the imagery the sensory and emotional aspects of the reader's perception which in turn may help bring the epiphany forward. As Wyman puts it, "The Jewel" and "Beginning" try to "paint vivid poems expressing consciousness."[63] Wright in those poems is then arguably not concerned with mere rendering of the surface of the objects or the landscape, but in the universality of the implied meaning these poems try to provide through these objects' symbolism.[64]

Although Wright did not see himself as a surrealist,[65] poems such as "The Jewel" or "Beginning" contain some elements of surrealistic impression which may be seen hanging "in the air behind my body"[66] or where "the moon drops one or two feathers into the field" and "the white wheat listens."[67] Some of the poems then may indeed carry, as Dougherty fears, seemingly "nonrepresentational, "arbitrary" meanings with "transrational association". However, Dougherty also implies Wright seems to use these images in a way where the seemingly surrealistic impression they provide is not the key meaning, but which only helps to convey the underlying central meaning Wright's poems try to express in a fashion which might be understandable. [68]

Wyman, also not seeing Wright as a surrealist,[69] offers a supporting statement saying that the interpretation of the imagery in Wright's poems should be viewed in the broader

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[62] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 15.
[63] Wyman, 399-400.
[64] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 16.
[65] Paris Review "The Art of Poetry," http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright.
[66] James Wright, "The Jewel," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 122.
[67] James Wright, "Beginning," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 135.
[68] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 16.
[69] Wyman, 407.

context of the continuation of the Hispanic tradition in which "Hispanic poets create artistic world where odd floating women and passing phantom poets make perfect sense."[70] The explanation of this "oddness" opens possible symbolic interpretations in the discussed poems in this thesis where the images seem to carry symbolic meaning in order to evoke the moment of epiphany in the poem and due to the sensual and emotional responses also make the reader participate in the experience.

The imagery employed by Wright, which then makes sense in the overall context of the poem, might further be viewed as one of the strategic choices to fill the "void" created by him turning away from traditional verse to free verse, as suggested by Wyman when she compares Wright's technique to that of Jiménez's in manner which helps establish "a calm, reflective tone and mood" as "a key component in the creation of a poem" to achieve a fruitful flow and plainness.[71]

The importance of both Robert Bly and the foreign poets seems a major one. Their contributions echo throughout Wright's poetical career following the first major change and helped him not only during his "dead-end" stage of his poetry, but also continually ever since. Wright's enthusiasm for translations is also immortalized by him including several of his translations mainly in his *Collected Poems* for which Wright was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.[72]

What this brief summary of influences tried to explain is, in effect, that Wright was not the poet of one particular school or movement in America, nor an imitator of previous works. James Wright was rather a child carefully and continually molded by the influences of multiple generations of poets, countries and social backgrounds, as well as his own keen talents and experiences, all of which helped Wright crystallize his own unique style and expressions in art he loved to create and perfect and was never afraid to change, adapt, or take risks.

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[70] Wyman, 402.
[71] Wyman, 402-403.
[72] For the translations, see relevant pages in: James Wright, *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 87-115.

These influences led to particularly important contributions to the evolution of Wright's poetry, which is to be discussed now. The part attempts to show these influences are perceivable in the development of Wright's early poetry (Robinson, Ransom, Roethke), during the first major change (Bly, Trakl and other foreign poets and translations) and the constant inspiration Wright drew from Horace's ideal.

1.2 Important Changes in the Poetry of James Wright

After exploring and understanding the major influences on Wright's work, the thesis in this part deals with two major important changes that occurred in Wright's poetry, thus dividing his poetic career into three periods which to some extent differ.

To define these changes as radical changes of his poetry would, therefore, seem to be an exaggeration. It is admittedly true that Wright in his development as a poet underwent multiple continual strategic changes, as Blunk points out "[Wright's] poetry is marked by a continual expansion of strategies, rather than revolutions in style", which attempts to explain that Wright throughout his life chose "the forms appropriate for the poems he needed to write" at the appropriate time.[73]

However, the two changes discussed now were arguably the most significant "expansions of strategies" for James Wright. That is to say that they are not the only changes on Wright's poetical journey, but they appear as critical milestones and highlight the most important stages of Wright's ever-flexible treatment of his poetry and were the ones that most improved his poetry and helped him explore the depths and truths of his inner authorial voice in order to grow exponentially as an author.

With respect to the changes a person or an author can undergo, Wright informed in an interview with Smith that "I don't think that a person can change very quickly or easily [short of conversion] ... to change one's kind of poetry would be, in effect, to change one's life. I don't think that one can change one's life simply as an act of will. And I never wanted to."[74] He perceived the changes as a more or less natural part of his poetical career and thought of them as occurring spontaneously based on various influences in full harmony

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[73] Blunk, 87.
[74] Smith, ed., "James Wright," 18.

with what he had always hoped to do: to continually grow and during that time be on the lookout for discovering new available possibilities for improving his art.[75]

Luckily, the range of those possibilities opened at several times to the careful artistic senses of Wright's craft. The changes were thus ultimately able to elevate the poet to a memorable status and to a place among the finest American contemporary poets. The changes have been seen as a strategic, survival tactic and necessary choice[76] (the first major change) or as a part of his natural development (the second one). The gradual development of Wright as a poet is also one that illustrates the conditions of the poet who was born in an arguably fortunate period of time for poetry in America. On one hand he was born to the tradition of tight forms and rules of the past and on the other in an era where he could follow and expand in the flow of the movement toward free verse which tended to oppose the rigid tradition of poetry in the United States at that time.

Moreover, Wright was a poet who was never afraid to take risks or to discard a piece of his poetry if he felt it did not suit his overall aim which was to perfect and add to the art as well as create his ultimate goal in poetry – represented by clarity and immediate accessibility to the reader.[77]

1.2.1 Tradition

Wright's early work is considered to be that of an "apprentice" who in large part tries to pay homage to the predominant traditions of poetical style of the 1950s. The influences of Robinson, Frost and also Hardy naturally led the poet toward employing traditional, formalistic style. Ever since he started writing poetry up until the first milestone which is marked by the poems toward the end of the second book *Saint Judas* and the whole new collection *The Branch Will Not Break* which came after it, James Wright was writing in the traditional, well established manner – employing traditional rhyme, iambic meter and poetic diction.[78]

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[75] Smith, ed., "James Wright," 18.
[76] Henry Taylor, "In the Mode of Robinson and Frost: James Wright's Early Poetry," in *The Pure Clear Word*: *Essays on the Poetry of James Wright,* ed. Dave Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 49.
[77] Smith, ed., "James Wright," 24;
[78] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 18.

The early work was deemed as more of an imitation of others rather than a distinguishably original voice of the poet, although at the same time not to the detriment of a talented and aspiring writer such was James Wright even at this stage. While the poems of the first two books may not seem to be "a sufficient foundation for reputation," as Dougherty remarks, they are at the same time not the mere work of an amateur who simply tries to imitate his "masters" and forget about his own overall vision as a poet. By lacking the necessary authority that would distinguish the poet from others before, as Dougherty argues, the poems of his early years simply do not present the true voice of Wright who is still hidden underneath his early influences inclined toward traditional poetry.[79]

In terms of Wright's foundations in Frost, Robinson, Ransom and Roethke, some of them, in time, naturally became an undesirable influence that prevented him from speaking clearly by his own means of expression. Indeed they were at first necessary elements of a young poet's development in which the poet needs to practice and master the tradition only to eventually use a significant part of it less and less in order to come out of their shadow and express his true nature and inner voice. Wright and others among his fellow young poets thus sooner or later had to explore other possibilities beyond the scope of traditional "tight forms" in order for their poetry to be truly unique and not mere echoes of the past, nor "an updated version of their forebears'."[80]

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the fact that Wright never turned completely away from "the basic iambic line or the strategic use of rhyme."[81] While *The Branch Will Not Break* seemed to have represent a major step toward clear, direct and true expression of what Wright had long had inside tensely awaiting its proper time to shine, the shift toward more "open form" or free verse did not mark an absolute abandonment of still useful stylistic tools such as formally constructed rhyme or meter and therefore do not represent "a complete break with the past."[82]

After all, some of Wrights poems in *The Branch Will not Break* as well as in his more recent volumes contain, albeit more sparingly, poems written in verse with traditional

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[79] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 18-19.
[80] Andrew Elkins, *The Poetry of James Wright*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 33.
[81] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 19.
[82] Smith, ed., introduction to *The Pure Clear Word,* xviii.

rhymes or regular iambic meter or both. All this follows what Wright said about him using whatever possible and appropriate means to express his intentions at a particular time.[83]

1.2.2 The New Approach and Movement toward Free Verse

After *The Green Wall* and after Wright's statement he made after *Saint Judas* in which he showed his intention to change his poetry[84] as well as his aforementioned communication with Robert Bly, Wright indicated that he was not at all happy with the style he had been using in his poems at that time and that he yearned for a change or a new inspiration for his writing. Such a change and inspiration Wright found in moving toward free verse or open forms.

Even by the end of *Saint Judas*, but especially with publication of *The Branch Will Not Break* it is argued[85] a major change in Wright's style had taken place. The use of regular rhyme and meter is not used so strictly as in the previous collections and everything seems to be taking the new approach which enabled Wright to speak of himself. The use of the free verse was a form which for Wright meant using "the proper words in proper places."[86] This led the poet, as Jařab says, toward the use of more natural language without complicated metaphors with focus on pure clear word serving as a symbol in the context as well as on the semantic level within the poem.[87]

However, it is important to mention that even though it is a significant change, it is mostly viewed as a stylistic change of the form, not a thematic revolution and even so, the traditional style still is apparent in the works included even in *The Branch Will Not Break* as well as in the following collections.[88] Wright's stylistic change occurred, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter, mainly as a result of joint contributions of Robert Bly, deep image, and translations they both had been working on, namely for Wright important German and Hispanic poets, which severed as a means for "assimilating foreign

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[83] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 119-121.
[84] Taylor, "In the Mode of Robinson and Frost," 50.
[85] See, for example, Elkins, 67-68.
[86] Smith, "James Wright," 24.
[87] Josef Jařab, *Dítě na skleníku: Výbor ze současné americké poezie* (Praha: Odeon, 1989), 358.
[88] Elkins, 67-69; Taylor, "In the Mode of Robinson and Frost," 49-50.

influences"[89] which opened for the poet possibilities to expand his poetical style and improve the treatment of poems.

Wright's remark when interviewed about the notion of free verse in poetry indicates that he was well aware of both the advantages and disadvantages the free form may offer to a poet:

> For a while during the fifties most writers were tending to write in too facile, too glib a way in regular meters and rhyme. Some of *us* turned away to free verse. Since then I think that whenever one opens a magazine nearly all the poems one sees will be in free verse. More and more they strike me as being just as facile and automatic in their way as the earlier poems had been in other ways. That is, it isn't a solution to one's artistic problems just to stop rhyming.[90]

Wright used the influences to "find his own individual voice" in the free verse complementing the unique set of skills he could and did use.[91] Putting his "newly" discovered and nurtured poetical personality through the free form, however, did not mean a reckless abuse of the style to write just about anything. Elkins agrees that Wright's personality is by this time "fully *in* the poems", but that the developing process is "not simply writing about personal experience to satisfy some egotistical need to see his life in print", but rather a meaningful and simultaneous development of both the poems and the personality in them. By that virtue, Elkins concludes, "[w]e get an impression of spontaneity, even though the poems are not spontaneous outpourings."[92]

Looking at the list of the selected poems which contain epiphany, it might be interesting to note that majority of them is taken either from *The Branch Will Not Break* or from the subsequent volumes. Only two poems from the "traditional" books of *The Green Wall* and *Saint Judas* are selected ("The Angel" and "Saint Judas"). This is not to say there cannot be

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[89] James Seay, "A World Immeasurably Alive and Good: A Look at James Wright's *Collected Poems*," in *The Pure Clear Word*: *Essays on the Poetry of James Wright,* ed. Dave Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 113.
[90] Smith, ed., "James Wright," 16, italics mine.
[91] Cor van den Heuvel, "The Poetry of James Wright," *MOSAIC: A Journal for the Study of Literature and Ideas* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1974): 163-70, accessed September 10, 2013, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420008830&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.
[92] Elkins, 107, italics original.

found by someone other representative and valid examples in the early works of Wright, but it points to the fact that the stylistic change Wright undertaken enabled him to go beyond the borders of strict forms which for Wright seems to have hindered his attempt to express immediate experiences in a clear way the "open" form could finally offer.

The notion may be supported by Seay who sees Wright's continual development to take gradually more power from the imagery he learned from Trakl and Bly and from the freedom he achieved by turning away from the rational, well-structured forms and rules of the traditional style.[93] The development of "sharp" images as well as appropriate ways of narration may contribute to the poems being more receptive for the reader's senses which may make it easier for them to see and experience the moments of epiphany in the poems without undue interference of the "rationality" which wants everything explained and leaves no space for wonder. Seay says of the evolution of Wright's poetry after the second book *Saint Judas* that the poet "gave himself more freedom to depart from a strictly "logical" progression and introduce the *unexpected, the unpredictable*."[94] He sees Wright's development at that time as that which tries to bring the approximation of the "poetic revelation in its unfolding" or a "discovery" forward by images which are not necessarily based on "logical ordering" and thus intrigue the imagination of the readers without them being analytically guided by the poet's direct explanation of his particular message in the poem.[95]

Moreover, such development of images and form of narration in some of Wright's poems since *The Branch Will Not Break*, as Seay points out "suggests that the poet is more willing to examine the irrational *messages of his subconsciousness* on the assumption that they may have been *triggered* by some *psychic mechanism beyond his understanding*."[96]

Seay's interpretations provide significant value not only for the development of Wright's poetry, but more importantly also to the topic of this thesis – epiphanies present in Wright's work. First, Seay points to the use of images and loosening of the rational thinking in Wright's poems. Too much rationality or reasoning might obscure the epiphanic moment.

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[93] This is not to say that the "new" style Wright adopted does not have any rules or structure, as has been demonstrated by statements about free verse or by the formality of even these open forms.
[94] Seay, 114-15, italics mine.
[95] Seay, 114-15.

Second, the opinion also suggests, albeit vaguely, since Seay is not concerned with moments of epiphany as such, the concept of some psychic mechanisms being triggered, which are, in effect, "messages of the subconscious." That might arguably be another use of words for epiphanic moments which are also suddenly triggered by revelations beyond the scope of rational understanding. Third, in Seay's view, the ease and flexibility of the form Wright uses enable the author to work with the reader in less explanatory ways through the sequence of images and thus create the "unexpected", "unpredicted" "revelations."

Such notions could bring the author toward creating poems of the unexpected realizations more than in the old, traditional style. Seay argues that in the traditional ways limited by rhyme and meter it is difficult to create an unexpected moment for the poet. These traditional criteria, as Seay observes, tend to make the poems "follow logical pattern" in which the discovery of the experience is explicitly discussed thus making the experience ordinary.[97]

Smith also provides another look at Wright's poems, now even explicitly talking about moments of epiphanies. Like Seay, Smith agrees that the influences of translations and work with Bly were the major contributions to Wright's new style and made it possible for the poet to move "away from poetry as an artificial, nonconversational artifact" and helped move toward "a poetry of lyrical speech characterized [among other things] by naked epiphany."[98]

Smith also goes on to affirm the existence of the basics in Wright's "innovative work" which enabled the author to work on and create "the flashing personal voice, the semisurreal imagery, the epiphany, the accruing myth of Christ-Everyman in the Hell of Ohio, and especially the pain idiomatic speech woven among tones of Frost, Eliot, and Robinson."[99]

Richard Gray sees Wright's procedures in creating poetry at this stage as highly influenced by Trakl in the manner by which the poems could "evolve quietly through layers

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[96] Seay, 115, italics mine.
[97] Seay, 115-16.
[98] Smith, ed., "That Halting, Stammering Movement," 176.
[99] Smith, ed., "That Halting, Stammering Movement," 177.

of images until they surface with the quick thrust of a striking final image or epiphany."[100] This is indeed the case of a substantial part of Wright's poetry and the poems of epiphany discussed in this thesis as they often offer highly symbolical imagery which attempts to catch the attention and imagination of the reader and allow him to participate step by step in the speaker's revelatory experience throughout the narrative strategy. The poems thus tend to be "carefully prepared by the agenda of the poem" and help bring the ultimate revelation to the fore.[101]

Moreover, Edward Lense also proves to be a person defending emerging of Wright's poems of epiphanies in the evolution of his poetry especially during *The Branch Will Not Break*.[102]

Ultimately then, it can be argued, by adopting free verse and "open" forms which brought its full potential by the time of publishing *The Branch Will Not Break* with the substantially influential support of foreign poets, Wright was able to "weave" the new style, as well as imagery in a more flexible arena in which the words, intentions and meaning could interplay naturally and clearly without unnecessary constraints of tight forms and traditional style. The whole movement of his poetry toward this approach allowed him to express wider range of feelings and expressions more spontaneously, yet convincingly, which is arguably one of the reasons why poems containing epiphany start to become more frequent in Wright's poetry starting with *The Branch Will Not Break*.[103]

As discussed in the next chapter of this essay, it is clear that Seay, Smith, and also Gray mentioned some of the key principles necessary for an effective poem of epiphany, as well as some of the artistic or aesthetic characteristics involved in the process.

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[100] Richard J. Gray, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1990), 226.
[101] Gray, 227.
[102] Lense's view will be more appropriately discussed in the third chapter of this thesis.
[103] Seay, 144.

1.2.3 "Prose poems" or "prose pieces"

Perhaps tempted by the many readings he has done in his years, by 1976, Wright had become more and more interested in writing prose.[104] That year he published *Moments of the Italian Summer* which contains only prose poems with the exception of one poem written by Anne Wright. Later with several of the prose poems revised and many new appearing in 1977 in *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* and consequently in *This Journey* in 1982, it seemed to be evident that Wright had taken another major step forward in his writing career.

By including the prose poems among his poetry first in a section in *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* called "Selected Prose Pieces,"[105] Wright marked his second an perhaps "a natural last step in [his] poetic form" on the journey as a poet who developed and grew "from metered and rhymed verse to free verse and finally to prose poetry."[106]

Even if this last step may to some seem like a limit he reached with the use of open form,[107] it shows the full capacities of Wright's artistic potential. In daring to step towards the form of prose poems, Wright undoubtedly assured everyone of his abilities, confidence and for him so typical sense of not being afraid to take risks. To summarize Wright's overall development as well as the stature he achieved by this "last" process, Elkins states:

> [W]e should remember that Wright's formal changes are parts of a continually evolving artistic and personal relationship to the world. For example, the prose form he now uses freely gives the poem the look of a logical, orderly movement, something Wright has tried to avoid in his poems since Saint Judas. Prose is often thought of as the particular medium, the medium of ratiocination and logic, as opposed to poetry, the medium of the imagination. Wright's use of prose to create a poem indicates that he feels strong enough now to use "their" form, confident in his status as person and poet.[108]

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[104] For a detailed overview of published prose by James Wright, see Dougherty, *James Wright,* 114, 149 n.1.
[105] See James Wright, *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 263.
[106] Elkins, 248 n1.
[107] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 121.
[108] Elkins, 248n1.

While Elkins's statement provides arguably the most thorough appraisal and evaluation of Wright's prose poems, it at the same time touches on a technicality Wright commented on several times, claiming they are "not prose poems" but "prose pieces" (which is also the title given to them in Wright's books). Wright stated that the distinctive terminology of prose poem, which is otherwise the common term used for such writing in most cases,[109] belongs to the French who use the term effectively and justifiably, whereas Americans are too preoccupied with looking for the exact terminology. Wright complained that this results in too much focus on the difference between poem and prose poem, but not enough attention to the actual value of the piece of writing itself. For Wright, the most important thing was to determine whether or not the writing is of good quality and therefore adding something vital to the literary background, the term notwithstanding.[110]

The prose poems add variety to Wright's poetry and provide a new kind of flexibility for a meditative strategy which would enhance the details and judgments made in his poetry. The new passion and means of expressing the poet's now perhaps completely free and unique voice are supported by Wright's own words: "I have written a good many prose pieces [...] and I did this because I liked prose and I wanted to express myself that way."[111]

He did so in a form suitable to express his feelings mostly on his numerous trips through Europe with his wife Annie. The prose poems are similar to journal entries, provide music and rhythm in a manner different from some of Wright's other poems,[112] and are usually appended by the name of the particular place. They are of various lengths, some of them longer than one page, some of them as short as once sentence.[113]

The creation of the prose poems was obviously another facet which helped bring Wright into the flashlight of contemporary poetry and a significant step forward on the disciplined, hard-working, albeit short, journey as a man and poet. As well as poems, the prose poems should be, as Elkins proposes, "read [...] carefully as [...] any product of a

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[109] Elkins, 248n1.
[110] Smith, ed., "James Wright," 19.
[111] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 116-19; Smith, ed., "James Wright," 19.
[112] Smith, ed., "James Wright," 39.
[113] See, for example, Wright's one-sentence prose poem "Saying Dante Aloud" in Wright, *Above the River*, 267.

poet's mind." At this stage, based on all the facts provided earlier, it seems it was a mind of a mature poet.

As this chapter attempted to outline, James Wright's poetical career was influenced by a number of important people, stages and steps, all of which proved to be the ground for his continual development as a poet and helped him find his own style of writing. Although James Wright's poetry underwent major changes, he never completely abandoned what he had learned in the previous process and rather sought to enrich his poetry which enabled him to produce one of the most unique poems among the contemporary poets in America. A number of Wright's poems throughout his career, as this thesis tries to explore, contain powerful and beautiful epiphanies which even more enrich the author's poetry. Definition of this literary phenomenon is discussed in the following chapter of the thesis.

2 LITERARY EPIPHANY

For the purposes of the next chapter including analyses of the selected poems of epiphany, the term epiphany is first defined with respect to its origins, brief historical overview as well as its use in literary sphere. This chapter focuses on literary epiphany and mentions its popular use in Romantic lyrics tradition in poetry, and outlines important aspects of the term applicable in poetry criticism based on various critical sources dealing with the term.

The origin of the word *epiphany* comes from the Greek word *epiphainein*, which means to manifest, to show. In terms of Christian religion, Christian Epiphany represented the "manifestation of God's presence within the created world"[114] or also "the manifestation of a god, or of spirit in body."[115] It is in fact the Twelfth Night on January 6th which celebrates Christ's divinity presented to the Magi, the Three Wise Men. Abrams identifies epiphany as "a manifestation or showing forth" and with respect to its literary use in modern poetry and prose fiction calls it "sudden flare into revelation of an ordinary object or scene."[116] Epiphany is an experience which happens to a perceiver, also called "epiphanee," who replays and evaluates its meaning.[117]

Although Abrams's description accounts for a partial explanation of epiphany in literary terms, by mentioning terms which tend to be applicable in critical approach such as "sudden", "manifestation", "ordinary object" and "flare" (which points to the subjectively seen radiance of the object as being perceived by the observer as discussed below), his interpretation would feel insufficient for the purposes of this study. Therefore, a more thorough attempt to identify literary epiphany is presented now, relying upon various literary sources and their respective approaches when it comes to literary epiphany and some of the necessary aspects which comprise the phenomenon.

However, the thesis will still draw on and expand some of the information taken from Abrams's definition, namely the notions of suddenness/unexpectedness, ordinariness,

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[114] Abrams, 80.
[115] Robert Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," in *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany,* ed. Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 38.
[116] Abrams, 80-81.

flare/intensity/radiance, and the relevant literary influences of William Wordsworth and James Joyce upon whom the literary epiphany is usually based.[118]

The most important figure during the literary development of epiphany in poetry as a means to "structure lyrical narrative"[119] is said to be the English poet of the Romantic period William Wordsworth. Wordsworth contributed to the idea of significant meanings suddenly becoming apparent in ordinary lives when he coined the famous phrase "spots of time" in his work *The Prelude* in which it was perhaps the first attempt to label epiphanic moments in poetry:

> There are in our existence spots of time,
> Which with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A vivifying virtue, whence, depressed
> By false opinion and contentious thought,
> Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
> In trivial occupations, and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
> A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
> That penetrates, enables us to mount,
> When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
> This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
> Among those passages of life in which
> We have had deepest feeling that the mind
> Is lord and master, and that outward sense
> Is but the obedient servant of her will.
> Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
> Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
> From our first childhood: in our childhood even
> Perhaps are most conspicuous. Life with me,
> As far as memory can look back, is full
> Of this beneficent influence.[120]

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[117] Jiří Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry* (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2003), 12; Wim Tigges ed., "The Significance of Trivial Things: Towards a Typology of Literary Epiphanies," in *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany,* ed. Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 26.
[118] Regarding the development of literary epiphany, William Wordsworth being the major representative of poetry, James Joyce of prose and fiction.
[119] Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 14.
[120] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: A Parallel Text,* ed. J. C. Maxwell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 258-79, quoted in Jiří Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry* (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2003), 15.

Wordsworth encapsulated in *The Prelude* several important criteria of an epiphany experience. It speaks of moments which arise through ordinary daily life experiences, are triggered by a trivial object, create an intense sensation of feeling which transforms the person's experience, usually with a positive effect on the epiphanee.

The notion of traditional meaning of epiphany, that is the manifestation of divinity to the privileged few, has undergone several changes throughout its development. Epiphany which was at first seen as a source of divine intervention moved to the age of Wordsworth where the meaning of the experience appears to be left open for the epiphanee who is to derive his own meaning from the intense experience. Gradually, such derivation of meaning is then more attributed to the processes of the epiphanee's own intellect and brings new insight to the everyday moments in which the individual mind can see ordinary things in a new way.[121]

Such notion of epiphany, the ability to see the epiphany not as a manifestation of divinity in religious terms, but as a manifestation of significant insight into ordinary moments of life, is called the secular origin of epiphany and "becomes widely regarded as a Romantic literary invention."[122] With number of his essays, Ralph Waldo Emerson appears to be the person who helped build the bridge between the Christian notion of epiphany to modern secular meaning appearing under non-religious conditions which would convey the experiences of everyday lives of people in general.[123]

The step toward formulating the exact secular epiphany as a "psychological and literary mode of perception" [124] which would be applicable in literature was done by James Joyce in a notion which is called "Joycean epiphany." James Joyce framed and used the literal concept of epiphany in his novel *Stephen Hero*. Here, the protagonist Stephen Dedalus experiences several ordinary events which, however, suddenly become significant for him and change his perception and attitude toward the object or event. He then wants to collect

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[121] Ashton Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 7-36; Lisa Larsson, ""That fluidity out there" - Epiphanies and the Sea in Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse"," (Literary Seminar, Lund University Student Thesis Database, 2005): 5-6, accessed November 12, 2013, http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=1322918&fileOId=1322919.

[122] Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 14.

[123] Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 13-16; On Emerson, see also Tigges ed., "The Significance of Trivial Things: Towards a Typology of Literary Epiphanies," 17-18.

"many such moments together in a book of epiphanies."[125] In the novel, Joyce defines secular epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" and also calls such epiphanies "evanescent moments".[126] He also helped bring forward the significant role of imagery, ordinary moments of life, triggering objects and moments of epiphany. It is based on the radiance of the object which arrives as a consequence of the revelatory sensual perception of the perceiver and which causes the epiphany to occur and enables the epiphany to be experienced by the perceiver, the epiphanee.[127]

The radiance of the object does not, however, need to be literal. Although light in its many forms with its illuminating nature possesses naturally the best potential to "illuminate" the perceiver's mind and thus cause a shift of attention or perception toward the new revelatory meaning and a successful epiphany, radiance might mean for the object to *become* highlighted for the senses of the epiphanee during the perception, which then makes it the trigger of epiphany. Any object or event, then, may in fact suddenly attract the perceiver's senses and attention if the perceiver is attuned, since the poem "is devoted to intensifying an object into radiance" and thus producing a successful epiphanic experience and not a mere "story with a beginning, a middle, and an end."[128]

Images play an important part in a poem of epiphany, since they create in the poems a necessary background to attract the sensory aspects of the reader's mind and imagination, and therefore ensure that the reader naturally takes part in the scenery presented and becomes subject to the moment of epiphany as well. Langbaum demonstrates the possible importance of rich images employed in poems by saying: "The richness of sensuous texture makes it possible for us to participate in the epiphany, because we feel the interplay on our own senses."[129]

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[124] Langbaum, 41.
[125] J. A. Cuddon and C. E. Preston, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory,* 4th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 277.
[126] *Stephen Hero* is "a part of a first draft", as Cuddon says, of *A Portrait of an Artist as A Young Man* by James Joyce. Relevant passages are quoted in J. A. Cuddon and C. E. Preston, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory,* 4th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 277.
[127] Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 16-17.
[128] Langbaum, 46, 53.
[129] Langbaum, 55.

Robert Langbaum first helps summarize the major few aspects of literary epiphany discussed so far in this chapter with the use of his statement that the experience of epiphany "reveals sprit, and breaks [...] *suddenly*, in a *moment* of insight," and that essential to epiphanies is that they are caused by moments of observation and produce sudden shifts in perception.[130] These criteria, as observed further in this chapter, tend to be among the most significant prerequisites for epiphany in poetry.

Langbaum also suggests that the mode of writing such poetry "has pervaded poetry and determined its structure since Wordsworth" and in his terms such mode is called the "epiphanic mode" of writing and is largely based on the Romantic mode. He follows by stating that this mode has also been used in writing of modern short stories, dramatic monologues and later even starts to appear in fiction.[131]

Langbaum offers his four suggestions on which to base the overall definition of the literary epiphany.[132] The first says that unlike the manifestation of divinity, epiphany experience is a process of real sensuous experience, present or recollected from the past. The second states that it is a brief moment which leaves an enduring effect. The third criterion poses that it is a sudden change in external conditions causing a shift in sensuous perception that sensitizes the observer for epiphany. The fourth deals with necessary communication between the original epiphanee and the end reader who is to become the new epiphanee – the reader makes an epiphanic leap toward a meaning.[133]

Moreover, Langbaum also explains the criterion of the reader making an epiphanic leap toward a meaning. Since the text is a mere reproduction of the perception of the epiphany done by the observer, epiphanic leap suggests that the observer communicates the epiphany within the text in such a way that the reader is able to perceive the epiphany and experience the transformative process as the initial observer. As Langbaum argues, epiphany, in essence, is experience which happens to the "sensitive observer and through him [to] the

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[130] Langbaum, 52.
[131] Langbaum, 38-42, italics original.
[132] See Langbaum, 43-44, Langbaum in his work quotes and draws upon Morris Beja's criteria of Incongruity and Insignificance.
[133] Langbaum, 44.

reader", in attempt to communicate a message of meaning, "to produce in the reader the turn of mind that would make them manifestations of spirit."[134]

While assuming all Langbaum's criteria play a part in the definition of epiphany, Flajšar highlights the fact that for an epiphany to occur in the text there must be an initial observer who may experience it and subsequently reproduce it in the structure of the epiphany poem. The nature of epiphany thus needs "prerequisites" in the form of "a qualified observer sensitized into perceiving / decoding /constructing epiphany."[135]

Tigges argues that epiphany is, "inter-subjective" and therefore experienced universally, in the sense that after experiencing it, the observer – the epiphanee – may consequently become any combination of "the author, a character [the speaker of a poem], the reader." Pointing to the essentiality of mutual cooperation and the purpose of epiphany, Ashton Nichols comments that "[it] is always put into words as a poem or a prose narrative, and a major part of its function is the sharing of the experience with the author's readers."[136] The reader, then, follows the narration and its constituents and is able to perceive the moment of epiphany, its effect and meaning.

With respect to the underlying meaning of the epiphanic experience which the manifestation brings and tries to reveal, Charles Taylor evaluates the transformation process and states that the epiphanee undergoes a transformation process which reveals "something which is otherwise inaccessible" in the everyday life or pool of knowledge, and which usually carries with it a manifestation of a moral or a spiritual significance which helps build the self of the epiphanee.[137] Ashton Nichols claims that epiphany used as a narrative technique "provides a way of moving from one intense perception to the next and thereby presenting independent truths of character rather than universal truths of nature,"[138] while Flajšar points out that the process of experiencing epiphany may reveal "fundamental truths

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[134] Langbaum, 40.
[135] Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 25.
[136] Tigges ed., "The Significance of Trivial Things," 32; Nichols, 231n. 7.
[137] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 419.
[138] Nichols, 141.

about [both] humanity and nature".[139] These notions, it seems, help demonstrate the large variety of effects of the transformation process and the contributions it may bring for the individual epiphanee, experiencing the sudden revelation.

It would thus seem that establishing viable links in the process to achieve the epiphany experience and its transformation effect is a necessary prerequisite for creating a successful epiphany. Ashton Nichols describes the progress within the imaginative structure of the poem as being linked together by several steps. Such "epiphanic imagination," Nichols says

> demands the dramatic progression from a period of normal perception through the heightened perception that leads to the unexpected culmination of epiphany to the less emotional, more intellectual, attempt to interpret the significance of the powerful feeling.[140]

The moment of epiphany would thus occur after a several "periods" of time which would be less dominant that the actual epiphany and would then suddenly intensify reader's perception and senses for its occurrence. These facts imply that a context plays an important role to distinguish the more prominent perceptions of images and objects from the less prominent. The importance of context as well as of symbols and images presented within it to help "guide" the attention of the observer toward the powerful feeling is well presented by Tigges who claims that "another essential quality of epiphany is that there must be a larger context to set off the triviality of the epiphanic image. The same, of course, goes for symbol."[141]

This notion, as Flajšar argues, points to the emphasis on a narrative situation being an important criterion, meaning epiphany is not a static description of an image or symbol without a context, but it makes use of the image or symbol in the whole process of creating the experience of epiphany in such context.[142] This also helps explain the progression toward suddenness and unexpectedness of epiphany's nature, and, more importantly, the intensification process. Since the epiphanic experience and its meaning tend to rely on the

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[139] Jiří Flajšar, "Epiphanic Transformation of the Self in American River Poems from Whitman to Hugo," in *Rivers and the American Experience,* ed. Jerzy Durczak (Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press, 2000), 60.
[140] Nichols, 117.
[141] Tigges ed., "The Significance of Trivial Things," 21.

surroundings and to what came before within the narrative context, the intensity of perception is heightened because the "spiritual significance" of the transformative process is "out of proportion to what causes it."[143] The use of images and symbols and their interplay with other aspects in the poem may then help create the particular context for the epiphany.

While Nichols's definition of the narrative progressions is of great value for the analysis of the moment of epiphany, taken as such, however, his proposition would suggest that the epiphany occurs only as an end product of previously arranged settings leading toward the final point of powerful experience. Nichols's otherwise important contribution would then in turn limit the position of the moment of epiphany in the poem somewhere to the middle position or to the final position. In fact, as Flajšar aptly observes, there are more scenarios as to where the moment of epiphany may be represented in the poem. He contributes with a more thorough perspective and clarifies that the place for the moment of epiphany "may be used / achieved at any of four stages of the poem – first, at the beginning of a poem, second in the middle, third, at the end of a poem, and fourth, outside the poem altogether as an aesthetic after-effect constructed by the reader" or as "an extended meditation by the speaker on the nature of his epiphanic moment." Flajšar supports his notion of epiphany happening "outside" the poem by giving an example from Wordsworth's "Lines" where he points out there are "no epiphanic moments", but the poem "still has an epiphanic effect upon the reader; and the idea of "extended meditation" by analyzing a part of a poem by the American poet Richard Katrovas where the meditation occurs after the first short stanza containing the epiphany.[144]

One of examples among Wright's poems which seemingly contains no epiphanies is the poem "The Jewel," which is discussed in the next chapter. In the poem, the moment of epiphany may arguably be seen as preceding the events in the poem, thus happening "outside the poem" itself, and making the poem appear to be more of the "after-effect" or "extended meditation" Flajšar is talking about, but still offering the transformation and epiphany for the reader who can undergo the "spiritual transformation" himself.[145]

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[142] Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 42.
[143] Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 24.
[144] Flajšar *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 42.
[145] Flajšar *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 43.

In the final analysis, literary epiphany seems to be a sudden, intense experience which helps the epiphanee acquire mostly useful knowledge and gain a realization of possibilities which in a transcendental way may transform at least part of the epiphanee's perception of life or particular moments or events. Ultimately, it is a process of sharing experience provided by the poet's speaker observing it. Charles Taylor expresses his idea of the whole process in the following words which offer a brief yet accurate summary:

> Thus a view has come down to us from the Romantics which portrays the artist as one who offers epiphanies where something of great moral or spiritual significance becomes manifest—and what is conveyed [...] is just the possibility that what is revealed lies beyond and against what we normally understand as morality. The artist is an exceptional being [...] the poet is a person of exceptional sensibility.[146]

After all, it is the transformation made possible by the manifestation which is a crucial part of the epiphany. Robert Langbaum stresses the importance of the transformative process of such experience as well as author's responsibility to provide sufficient "structure" within the concept of the art in order for the epiphany to happen and for the reader to feel the experience of it. For in art, as he says, reader is the one who experiences epiphany. He also acknowledges epiphany as "an inevitable concomitant of realistic fiction and poetry" and a transformation of details into a "visionary significance."[147]

Nichols claims the meaning of literary epiphany is based on such an experience in which "the isolated moment of one individual's immediate experience becomes a potential source of value in the minds of others" and therefore contributing to the reader or the society in which he lives and to its shared pool of enriching knowledge and imagination.[148]

Flajšar also provides an elegant summary in which he sees literary epiphany as the "narrative reconstruction, either individual or collective, of transcendent moments caused by such intense experiences" in which the "meaning of the epiphanic moment is powerful and the emotion conveyed goes beyond the sum of its quotidian constituents."[149] Therefore the

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[146] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 423.
[147] Langbaum, 40.
[148] Nichols, 34.
[149] Flajšar *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 11.

triggering object or event is elevated into something more meaningful than it would appear to be under circumstances not evoking the epiphany.

Following the notion of elevation of trivial things, what epiphany represents most in terms of its value in the art seems well summarized by Tigess's quite poetical opinion saying that the epiphany along with the imagination it brings

> provides an instrument to make Life imitate Art as well as the reverse. The pattern created by epiphanic moments in life, which can be recorder and transmitted in art, demonstrates the uniqueness of each human being's experience, as well as the simultaneous universality of this experience. By making ourselves aware of the significance of trivial things, we elevate life into something truly meaningful: a sudden flare, a dance in the centre of the starry universe.[150]

Epiphany appears to be an evolving and flexible phenomenon in the artistic world which may draw moral, or elevate trivial things to convey an interesting message of wisdom while trying to enrich and "illuminate" the art. [151]

This virtue is certainly beneficial to the art as well as the readers. In poetry, epiphany appears to be linked to the Romantic tradition which remains vital even in the contemporary poetry, among which James Wright with his poetry, especially those illuminating poems of epiphany, stands without a doubt as a figure worthy of recognition and praise.

To conclude this chapter so as to provide a brief summary of the term based on aforementioned discussion of the literary phenomenon, epiphany in poetry is such an experience which is: sudden manifestation (unexpected), triggered by an ordinary "trivial" object, scene or event (although its triviality is perceived subjectively by the perceiver) which becomes intensified ("radiating") for the senses of the perceiver of the epiphany. Moments of epiphany may be found in various places within the narrative of the poem and may be of different lengths of durations of its effects (from brief reactions to "extended meditations" upon it). Furthermore, it is necessary that it be produced in such a narrative concept and context of imaginative process which enables a sudden shift of perception and the epiphany to occur since the experience itself is out of proportion to what caused it.

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[150] Tigges ed., "The Significance of Trivial Things," 35.

Epiphany is experienced by the reader through a shared communication with the observer of the epiphany (by making the epiphanic leap) in the poem. The primary goal of an epiphanic experience seems to be the creation of a transformation process of the self of the epiphanee allowing the person to gain otherwise inaccessible knowledge through profound realization of a meaning of which he was previously not aware.

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[151] Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry,* 123-24.

3 MOMENTS OF EPIPHANY IN THE POETRY OF JAMES WRIGHT

Some of the reasons for choosing the particular poems for the analysis have been outlined in discussion about Wright's changes (namely with supporting statements from Seay and Smith). Another reason that might be prudent to address at this time is the choice of the apparent more "positive" epiphanies. That reason may stem from Wright's optimistic nature and underlying intentions of his poetry which were mentioned in the previous chapters and are expanded upon here.

Edward Lense comes closest to the above presented reasons for "positive" epiphany in Wright's poetry. He sees Wright's moments of epiphany, in his own terminology, as "mystical illuminations" or a "visionary insight" which allow the perceiver to obtain powers to see beyond the scope of trivial things into the newly visible "other world" in which everything is perfect. Only in the moments of flashes of light and epiphany can the author's speaker find such perfect world and relate to it his undergoing experiences and, furthermore, enrich his life when "a strong emotion [is] set off by some natural thing, transforms the speaker's perception ... so that he is ready to enter a pure state of joy."[152]

Such joy is indeed evident in Wright's poetry, as will be more closely demonstrated in the following sections dealing with particular examples of Wright's poems of epiphany. It is also important to say that the triggers of the epiphany or the "strong emotion" in the poems are not limited to a phenomenon found in nature only. They also include personal experiences during everyday deeds and presence of love ("The Angel," "Saint Judas," "The Fruits of the Season") or deep emotion from within one's self ("The Jewel," "Beginning") all of which at particular times lead the speaker toward a pleasurable transformation of perception with an enlightening message.

Smith provides a supporting statement in that he sees Wright's poetry as full of optimistic tendencies. He says of Wright's work that "Wright insists that the most

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[152] Edward Lense, "This is What I Wanted: James Wright and the Other World," *Modern Poetry Studies* 11, no. 1-2 (1982): 19-32, accessed September 10, 2013, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420039560&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.

fundamental nature of poetry is its affirmation of *possibility*, exactly the root characteristic of the American dream."[153]

Stiffler also argues that the affirmation of possibility is created by Wright poetical insistence to balance the darker aspects of his poetry: "Wright's central project was to move toward a synthesis of the oppositions of affirmation and negation, toward a reconciliation of the possibility of epiphany with the reality of despair." [154] This seems apt when looking at Wright's range of contrasts. The darker, lonely, desperate parts of his works that he tends to complement, especially in his poems in and following *The Branch Will Not Break*, with positive insights into natural world, love, friendship, calmness and peace. Beautiful and positive epiphanies make the poems even more unique and refreshing and meaningfully accompany the much varied poetry of James Wright.[155]

The main aim of this chapter as well as the main goal of the thesis is to provide analysis of selected poems by James Wright in order to find epiphanic experiences with positive reactions and transformation effects and deal with those effects with respect to the underlying messages the epiphany attempts to convey. The poems are presented in chronological order, partly to complement the previous chapters which helped clarify the continual development of Wright's poetry, and also for better orientation in the readings. All poems are quoted from the collection of James Wright's poems *Above the River*,[156] compiled and first published in 1990 with the help of Donald Hall and Anne Wright after James Wright's death.

Due to the fact that context and narration are related to the moment of epiphany and are therefore often crucial for better understanding and analysis, the selected prose poem is, unlike most of the other poems, quoted in the entirety before the actual analysis. Choosing only parts of the prose poem or only some lines or sentences would then seem as an insufficient base for the analysis and might also be confusing for the reader.

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[153] Smith, ed., "That Halting, Stammering Movement," 176, italics original.
[154] Randal Stiffler, "The Reconciled Vision of James Wright," *Literary Review* 28, no. 1 (Fall, 1984): 77-92, accessed September 10, 2013, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420039563&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.
[155] Stiffler, "The Reconciled Vision of James Wright," 77-92.
[156] James Wright, *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

3.1 "The Angel"

One of James Wright's earlier poems in his first collection *The Green Wall*, "The Angel" presents an example of the traditional style he was used to exploring in the beginning of his poetical career. The poem, playfully written in a form of dramatic monologue offers an intriguing insight into the epiphany of an angelic being who first contemplates the seemingly ordinary world of the mortals for whom Christ provided the ultimate sacrifice. The form of dramatic monologue helps strengthen the emotional aspects of the poem and attempts to make the reader participate and experience them along with its main protagonist. The epiphany, then, leaves an enduring effect on the angel as well as on the reader who shares it with him on the angel's journey.

The monologue begins with the angel's recalling of the events of the previous night when he was sent down from the heavens to open the tomb into which Christ was placed after his death: "Last night, before I came to bear / The clean edge of my wing upon the boulder, / I walked about the town."[157] In the angel's spare time before the duty, his curiosity and unresolved questions about the true meaning of Christ's death and sacrifice lead him into the nearby town where he expects to find the answers. However, his quest so far leaves him frustrated as he observes what seems to him an ordinary world. The plain tone of observations highlights this notion:

> People seemed at peace that he was dead:
> A beggar carried water out of a door,
> And young men gathered round the corner
> To spell the night.[158]

The angel might find solace in the fact that the world is at peace, yet he expects the world to be different after the ultimate sacrifice. The people, in his view, should know better how to spend their lives as he sees the young men who are about to "spell" the night, a word choice which implies negative connotation attributed to the attitude of the boys. All

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[157] James Wright, "The Angel," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 37.
[158] Wright, *Above the River,* 37.

these sights in the town leave the angel weary, confused and sad: "I walked, like a folded bird, about the towers / And sang softy to the blue levels of evening."[159] He feels detached from the world which fails to fulfill his expectations of the world made anew and his angelic song is the only thing which brings him closer to the familiar heavens during the upcoming night. His sadness is read between the lines of the "blue" – therefore sad – levels of evening. The angel underscores his confusion in the following lines:

> I slid down treeless, featherless, bemused:
> At curious faces whispering round a fire
> And sniffling chestnuts sugared by a woman;
> At a vague child heaving a beetle over
> In dust, to see it swimming on its back.[160]

The angel, "treeless" and "featherless", implies that he has assumed a bare form for a while to remain hidden among the townsfolk as a mere observer, not a participant, walking invisibly through the town where everybody and everything he sees appears to be "vague" and indifferent. He projects his disgust on the chestnuts which might otherwise be pleasant, but now, spoilt by the ordinariness and lethargy of the world around him, evokes more unpleasant feelings of "sniffling". The woman's attempt to sweeten the chestnuts is a futile attempt to elevate the "bemused" feelings he finds in the barren place where even an innocent child mocks the vulnerable beetle in dust of the forsaken place.

The gradual raising of the angel's anguish is not to be soothed in the following lines, but rather reinforced, as he arrives at the next unpleasant scene. Based on what the angels sees, the scenario might be interpreted as the aftermath or an attempt of a rape: "Under an arch I found a woman lean / Weeping for loneliness: away from her /A young man whistle toward the crowds;"[161] The lean vulnerable woman is weeping and wants to be left alone. The angel provides a reason for her sorrow in the form of an explanatory colon in the text. The young man's whistle is to be interpreted as him boasting after or before the act and the

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[159] Wright, *Above the River,* 37.
[160] Wright, *Above the River,* 37-38.
[161] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.

crowds, sinful in the eyes of the angel, are unmoved. He continues to walk among the buildings in hope to escape the hostile scene:

> Out of an open window pigeons flew
> And a slow dove fluted for nothing—the girl
> Blew to the air a melody lost on me.[162]

There appears to be nothing that would console the baffled and irritated angel. The singing girl is seen as a dove which is a symbol of hope, but in the world of the night, the angel fails to grasp its proper meaning and does not enjoy the otherwise pleasant moment, which in turn makes the dove, as well as the song, lost on him. He is failing on his quest to understand the death of Christ and finally expresses his questions and laments: "Laid in a pile of stone, how could he weep / For that calm town?"[163] His narration and journey in the mortal world come to a moment where he stops exploring the town and contemplates Christ's life – his actions, good deeds and the reasons for Christ's sacrifice, which, so far, seems to the angel to have been in vain:

> Looped in a yoke of darkened garden,
> He murmured blood out of his heart for love,
> Hallowed a soldier, took the savage kiss
> And gave it back a warm caress.[164]

Comparing these actions with what he has seen in the town, the angel cannot fathom Christ's actions. The questions the angel asks are clear and echo his anguish: Why did Christ die? What for? How could he have done it for *these* people who seem not deserving the gift? The angel knows Christ bore the burden of the world, sacrificed in order to make it a better place. However, the angel is disappointed, almost disgusted and his sorrowful remark after a brief pause in a single separate line summarizes the conditions of the people

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[162] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.
[163] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.
[164] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.

he sees in the human world until that moment, almost in a sigh of disbelief: "Yet no one changed."[165]

The angel's narration suddenly shifts from the slow walks and exploration of the town to a dramatic resolution. The angel finally gives up his quest to find the proper meaning to all the events in the town, "Tossing aside the worry of the place"[166] as someone startled him by throwing an apple his way he attempts to go and find refuge "pebble by pebble, song by song, and light / By light, singly, among the river boats"[167] by the nearby river. There, "at the end" of his journey, he decided to come at last before he says goodbye and leaves the shallow place without a meaning to live or die in the angel's eyes.

However, the serene place of the bank becomes a landscape with an unexpected answer to his ever so eluding questions about the nature of humanity and reasons for which to give one's life: "But then a girl appeared, to wash her hair."[168] This girl by the river suddenly becomes unlike the other girl he previous only heard playing the flute from an opened window or the one under the arch in the darkness of the night. Illuminated by the light of the day and the sparkling river, the angel can actually observe the beauty of the river woman and finds himself attracted to her:

> Struck stupid by her face,
> I stood there, sick to love her, sick of sky.[169]

It is in this moment of epiphany which is triggered as he gazes at the beauty of a radiant young girl in the sunlight when the angel can at once peek into the mortal world and achieve the desired answers, revelations and transformation. His previous experiences come to him in a split second as a flashback, now vibrating through his body by the sudden arrival of the intense epiphany:

> The child, the beetle, chestnut fires, the song
> Of girl and dove

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[165] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.
[166] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.
[167] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.
[168] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.
[169] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.

Shuddered along my wings and arms.[170]

The angel is trembling for he is now the passionate participant in the scene. Watching the girl's sensual body as she undresses herself and wades naked into the river, he becomes for the moment a mortal observer-voyeur who eagerly appreciates the details of the luscious beauty and attractiveness of the woman who brought a sign of light and meaning to the otherwise fruitless and sad worldly experience in the form of love, attraction, as well as benign sexual urge and a sense of awe. In the moment of epiphany, the angel is no more the being of heaven as he temporarily becomes a mortal who "shares the desires of mortal men."[171]

The angel feels a kind of shame though, since when the girl looks across the water, he looks down so that he is not caught staring at her. At the same time he senses yet again the presence of his material body and wings "And felt my wings waving aside the air / Furious to fly."[172] The intense experience showed him both the beauty and the vital energy of life, and since he is still an angel, his newly found wild nature he would probably not be able to contain offers the only choice – to fly away "For I could never bear / Belly and breast and thigh against the ground."[173] Angel as he is, it is impossible for him to subdue to the mortal urges, however much he feels "sick of sky" – however much he would like to give up his immortality and heaven in the presence of the beautiful women to stay with her as a human.

While thankful to the lady, he needs to depart, enlightened and transformed. Now the angel understands for what Christ sacrificed. The woman showed him the power of love, and also the desire and passion he felt when he fell in love with her. Returning to his duty for which he was sent down to earth, the angel's epiphany helped him explain all what he has seen in light of the revelatory love found in the world which he previously did not understand.

By finding the profound feeling of love, the angel no longer walks in a gloomy, sterile world without a meaning or taste for him, but in a world full of love which helped him find meaning even in the earlier perceived commonplace, sinful or dull activities of everyday life.

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[170] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.
[171] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 27.
[172] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.

Now the explanations present themselves, with him having a new perspective on the seemingly mundane, why Christ suffered and for what he ultimately sacrificed:

> Now, having heaved the hidden hollow open
> As I was sent to do, seen Jesus waken
> And guided the women there, I wait to rise.
> To feel a weapon gouge between the ribs,
> He hung with a shut mouth;
> For curious faces round a chestnut fire,
> For the slow fluting doves
> Lost on a trellis, for the laughing girl
> Who frightened me away.[174]

The poem suggests that the "hidden hollow" which was opened was not only the cave of Jesus' resting place, but also the secret heart of the angel which opened to love. After finding a way to feel and express love, everything resonates and the disgust and apathy the angel struggled with throughout most of the poem suddenly transforms into compassion and understanding. Still drunk in the ecstasy caused by the epiphanic experience, he is stuck between two worlds for the time being – the world of the mortals where love has a number of possible costumes and joyful sights, and the world to which he must to return soon. Experiencing a new feeling, the angle is also clumsily stumbling through the ungraspable potential it presents: "But now I fumble at the single joy / Of dawn."[175] Full of love and intense feelings, his epiphany expands and projects onto the views:

> On the pale ruffle of the lake
> The ripples weave a color I can bear.
> Under a hill I see the city sleep
> And fade. The perfect pleasure of the eyes:
> A tiny bird bathed in a bowl of air,
> Carving a yellow ripple down the bines.[176]

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[173] Wright, *Above the River,* 38.
[174] Wright, *Above the River,* 38-39.
[175] Wright, *Above the River,* 39.
[176] Wright, *Above the River,* 39.

The images the angel now sees and the natural scene are indeed representing the scenery and the beautiful girl whom he saw earlier bathing in the river. The pleasure he has been experiencing allows him to daydream about her blonde hair which he now perceives as "yellow ripples down the bines," which in the last word offers an approximate rhyming counterpart of the girls naked "spine."

The angel has managed to tame his passions, which would otherwise have forced him to shed his wings and become a banished angel. As he informs in the penultimate line, yet the feelings and experience are "Posing no storm to blow my wings aside. / As I drift upward dropping a white feather."[177]

Full of exciting effects of the epiphany, he loves the humanity and finds meaning in the initially barren, insignificant world, but he also feels that his appropriate place resides back in heaven. Therefore, in an attempt to unite heaven and earth – his angelic stature and the mortal passionate part which the angel has found on earth and both of which he has learnt to love, his last act is to leave a part of himself present on the earth in the form of the white feather.

His experience, although being close to the sinful nature of humans whose souls Christ redeemed by sacrificing His life, the angel became well aware of the "limitations of human beings", and now gladly accepts it as part of himself. For through the epiphany and realization of love, he is no longer a mere detached angel, but he transformed into an angel who has had the opportunity to walk among the mortals and understand the nature of love with all its drives, pitfalls, pleasures and positive aspects, just as Christ experienced them when he walked the earth.[178]

While also revealing the tempting nature of desire which surfaced as the side effect of the epiphanic moment, Wright's angel seems not to be the representation of the fallen angels who choose sin or the mortal world over the supremacy of heaven. Wright refuses to go so far as to present "The Angel" as one of the "outcasts" or "damned ones" – a popular subject especially in his early books. The angel of this poem rather symbolically forges a tranquil union between spiritual love and with that of the human body and heart.

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[177] Wright, *Above the River,* 39.
[178] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 27.

The feather which the angel drops thus becomes not only a stylistic synecdoche representing birds and wings so popular in Wright's poetry to symbolize hope and perfection[179], but a part of the angel that seals that unity and relationship.

3.2 "Saint Judas"

Saint Judas represents another piece of poetry from James Wright's second book *Saint Judas* in which he still tends to use rhyme scheme and iambic meter. James Wright once said in an interview that the idea behind writing the present poem was to explore several technical things in poetry illustrated by him saying: "I wrote a sonnet called "Saint Judas," and in that sonnet I was trying to do two things technically: to write a sonnet that would be a genuine Petrarchan sonnet and at the same time be a dramatic monologue. I got that idea from Robinson, who has a sonnet called "How Annandale Went Out."[180]

The whole poem, in the form of a Petrarchan sonnet, follows the narration of the speaker Judas, a disciple of Jesus, who committed an unforgivable act and due to his consuming guilt fled and hanged himself. In the interview, Wright shows his compassion and sympathy in his comment on the background story for writing about this biblical character: "I've always been strongly moved by his hanging himself. You would think he'd be a completely cold person. And yet, he couldn't have been to experience such complete despair," and in the conclusion of this comment, Wright adds "I tried to imagine what Judas was like." This, as discussed further, appears to be a helpful point for understanding the concluding line of the poem.[181]

The poem opens with a grim description of the speaker's determination to commit suicide. Being on his way to hang himself, he sees soldiers in uniforms as "a pack of

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[179] For closer discussion of this abundant feature of Wright's poetry, see Miller Williams's essay "A Kind of Overview, in Appreciation," in *The Pure Clear Word,* 237-38; Williams suggests that birds, wings and feathers represent in Wright's poetry powerful symbolic meanings which usually imply freedom, heavenly aspirations of the spirit, "most perfect of the perfect states", "total innocence" or "release from limited perceptions. For a complementary reading on the symbolism of birds, wings and feather that I drew from, see Luc Benoist, *Znaky, symboly a mýty,* trans. Zdeněk Hrbata (Praha: Victoria Publishing, 1995), 52.

[180] Paris Review "The Art of Poetry," http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3839/the-art-of-poetry-no-19-james-wright.

[181] Heyen and Mazzaro, 134-53.

hoodlums beating up a man".[182] In this moment where he may either turn and walk away, or step in and help the man, Judas experiences a moment of epiphany. He sees a fellow human being hurt by Roman soldiers and immediately runs "to spare his suffering."[183] He is moved by the man's dreadful condition, does not think twice about his own actions and, as he is quick to inform us, even forgets about the day he has just had – all the dreadful actions he has been a witness to and, more importantly, how he himself "bargained the proper coins"[184] for his treachery and then "slipped away."[185]

Judas is "banished from heaven" but when he finds "this victim beaten", a sudden realization occurs to him and shows that he has something in common with the victim. He shares humanity with him. Both of them have only their lives left, although Judas' is largely without hope and condemned for the sin, yet it is despite all this that Judas decides to help the man and comfort him: "Flayed without hope/ I held the man for nothing in my arms."[186]

The last line is emotionally strong, powerful, and syntactically, yet more importantly critically, ambiguous to many. While on one hand Peter Stitt views Judas' last gesture as a redemptive act, which canonizes Christ's betrayer,[187] Kalaidjian is not so willing to believe it is the proper reading of the last line, which contains "the ominous "for nothing", which infects his affirmative human gesture with the graver knowledge of a cosmic faithlessness," and finally concludes that Saint Judas serves as "an ironic reminder of [Saint Judas'] tragic fate of being a man."[188]

Wright's comments on the poem's overall meaning accompanies a clarifying suggestion with respect to the context within the poem that the poem is about a sudden moment of realization of shared humanity which can be expressed selflessly at any given time, even when Judas is on his way toward death itself. Moreover, such expression of human

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[182] James Wright, "Saint Judas," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 84.
[183] James Wright, *Above the River,* 84.
[184] James Wright, *Above the River,* 84.
[185] Heyen and Mazzaro, 134-153.
[186] James Wright, *Above the River,* 84.
[187] Peter Stitt, "James Wright: The Garden and the Grime," *Kenyon Review* 6, no. 2 (Spring, 1984): 79-80.
[188] Walter Kalaidjian, "Many of Our Waters: The Poetry of James Wright," *Boundary 2: A Supplement on Contemporary Poetry* 9, no. 2 (Winter, 1981): 104, accessed September 10, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/303038.

understanding and deep sympathizing need not require anything in return, as expressed by "for nothing" in the last line. Judas' act is without personal gain, not even the Heaven is promised to him anymore. He is "banished", yet he still decides to act, surpassing his guilty ego that would want something in return or which would drag him mercilessly onward to the place of desired suicide, doing as he would want others to do unto him and probably as Jesus would have wanted him to behave in the first place.

The act is simply happening for the sake of showing humanity and mortality, as it is evoked inside of people as a kind of epiphany especially when they see a fellow human in distress and either know or do not know what to do and how to act and; a decision which does not depend on the label or the quality of the person that the society has put on such person. Despite his terrible, treacherous act, or his determination to kill himself, which would be another sin, Judas in this poem arrived at the moment of his sudden epiphany by observing the man in need and acted on it as best as he could under the conditions and circumstances, even though he feels his flash has already been eaten by sinful guilt.

Judas still finds courage to love a fellow human being and to approach him with dignity and sympathy. According to Wright, sympathy was behind the whole idea for this poem, which by no accident is also the last of the original volume, and it arguably might be the element which also helped in resolving the "desolation of the spirit", main theme of the book *Saint Judas*.[189]

Although widely known story about an unforgivable sin, Wright's speaker wants us in this poem's version of the story to put ourselves into Judas' place so that we too can try to find inner, unconditional love and compassion. He presents Judas's epiphanies as means to acquire these honorable virtues.

3.3 "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota"

In an example of Wright's poem of vivid imagery and rural background, the reader is invited to join the speaker, presumably James Wright himself, in beautiful scenery of rural Minnesota at one of Wright's friend's farm. It is by many considered one of the best among

Wright's poems, frequently mentioned, and containing an intriguing and undeniably surprising epiphanic moment in the concluding line which also sprouted a number of speculations contemplating the line's true meaning.[190]

From the beginning, the reader is presented with sets of actions and sights the speaker experiences as he is casually relaxing in a hammock:

> Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
> Asleep on the black trunk,
> Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
> Down the ravine behind the empty house,
> The cowbells follow one another
> Into the distances of the afternoon.
> To my right,
> In a field of sunlight between two pines,
> The droppings of last year's horses
> Blaze up into golden stones.[191]

The reader is tempted to lie down and relax with the speaker as he reads these lines in the day's sleepy afternoon full of sensory images and scenes of the natural world presented in great, almost meticulous detail. The speaker draws us into the countryside with his careful observations and curious look. These three sentences with three different statements of action provide rich information about the end-of-the-day landscape filled with inhabitants of the nature enjoying their relaxing moment in the day.

Except for the cowbells, which are, however, only the representations of actual cows wandering off in the unseen fields in the distance, everything seems static, almost in an infinite stasis. Such feeling of the nature's dormancy and attempt to capture the moment forever becomes more apparent and enhanced by the introduction of the last year's horses' droppings still preserved and visible in the field after such a long time. The reader feels almost cradled in the hands of the poet's work with language and images. The observer then

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[189] Heyen and Mazzaro, 134-53.

[190] Bruce Henricksen, R. J. Spendal, and David Jauss, "Wright's "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota"," in *James Wright: The Heart of the Light,* ed. Peter Stitt and Frank Graziano (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 162-66; Stiffler, "The Reconciled Vision of James Wright," 77-92.

[191] James Wright, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 122.

projects his static, stereotypical life on the trivialities happening in the still life world around him.

The preparations are slowly woven for waking statement in a sudden change which is about to happen in the next three sentences, each deserving its own single line in a poem which so far has seemed like an interesting attempt to describe a passing afternoon:

> I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
> A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
> I have wasted my life.[192]

At the time where it would definitely feel tempting to lie down in a slowly arriving sleepy evening ambience of the night and darkness, the static is replaced by a dynamic flyover of a lonely chicken hawk. It is perhaps this sight of the home-seeking bird which accumulates the sensory overflow relieved by the moment of epiphany experienced by the speaker who too is looking for a home which would bring peace to his feeling of uncertainty about his own life. The moment is marked by the closing line summarizing his attitude toward life. It seems a life with abundant opportunities to seek beauty and fullness, yet it has been for the speaker so far unappreciated, empty and lonely experience.

With the progression from an observation to observation, the reader never knows what may come next, that is why the moment of epiphany in the last line is sudden, unexpected and has the ability to immediately make the reader contemplate upon its origin and meaning. By tracing back the preceding lines of the epiphany, the seeker could be seen fully immersed in the natural world, which, as it often happens to the speaker in Wright's poem, finally helps him see beyond the human condition of loneliness and accept his place among the larger family of nature and enjoy his life unconditionally and fully.

The ambiguity of the last line tends to divide the reading of the poem into mostly two possibilities – one read as affirmative, positive, celebrating the value of one's life and its ingredients, and the second one as ominous, and mostly full of regret.[193]

In the interview with Smith, Wright tries to explain that he did not intend for the ending line to be a criticism of his way of writing, nor did he want it to be anything more than a

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[192] Wright, *Above the River,* 122.

description of his feelings at that time and that such poems "has been written for thousands of years by the Chinese poets". He also does not feel that it is surrealistic: "I said at the end of that poem "I have wasted my life" because it was what I happened to feel at that moment and as part of the mood I had while lying in the hammock."[194]Furthermore, Wright refuses the misunderstood claims of critics and sheds his own light on the subject matter and the original intended meaning with its background story as well:

> American critics think that the last line is a moral, that it is a comment which says I have wasted my life writing iambics, or that I have wasted my life by lying in the hammock. Actually, behind everything in my general thoughts and feelings was the idea that one of the worst things in American life is waste. I think that our tendency to waste is a truly dreadful one. I have told my students that one of the most horrifying things to me is to stand, being my age and look at a class of nineteen- and twenty-year-old people who are trying to read a passage of, say, Milton or Shakespeare and to see their faces saying it is a waste of time. They don't see how precious their lives are. [195]

Whether or not Wright intended the last line to be a moral, the preciousness of life seems indeed a viable choice for a reasonable interpretation of the final line. The poem's meditative background presents a speaker in a hammock, who indulges in the late afternoon mosaic of nature's beauty with an unexpected, revelatory closure.

Moreover, Bly commends Wright for producing this poem so effectively and feels that the emotion of the last line is conveyed by Wright as a success. He points to the fact that the poet lets his sensitive perception and intuition evoke the feeling on a deeper level and bring it to the fore.[196]

Bly's comment seems helpful for grasping the essence of the speaker's inner processes whereby he pays attention to each moment of the otherwise ordinary afternoon, culminating in the moment of epiphany toward the end. In the poem, Wright's speaker is gradually being attuned, image by image to his deeper level of feelings which help him realize the preciousness of life by the simple act of relaxation in the hammock and attentively observing what is happening around him in the natural world and contrast it with what others might be

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[193] See Stiffler, "The Reconciled Vision of James Wright," 77-92.
[194] Smith, ed., "James Wright," 29.
[195] Smith, ed., "James Wright," 29.

doing at the same moment: whether they are enjoying it as he is now, or wasting it, as he has up until this moment. He is aware of the fleeting moments of human life, as he is aware of the and unlike the chicken hawk, Wright's speaker has finally found the home in his heart and nature's affirmative scenes provoking an abundant sense of joy since "[v]irtually everything he sees is beautiful and peaceful." The poem's surprising ending thus urges that every moment of the human life be cherished, enjoyed and savoured by senses as much as possible so that life itself is never wasted.[197]

The speaker understood the day's lesson – among the riches of the world, the wasting of times needs to stop. As David Jauss recognizes, the speaker's last line echoes the positive nature of the entire poem and "[i]nstead of telling us how or why [the speaker] has wasted his life, the images tell us how he has finally *stopped* wasting it". It could be argued that by leaning back the speaker expresses his yielding to the moment with a sense of rewarding surrender as he finds peace even at this seemingly dark hour that is nigh. [198]

The carefully plotted images, it could be stated, reinforce the process by which the speaker is step by step touching the subconscious areas from which the epiphany can arise. Moreover, since the image of the droppings the speaker sees implies they must have undergone an alchemical transformation[199] because that they changed from waste into a valuable metal, the speaker, too, perceives an opportunity to transform his experience and feelings into the precious and valuable lesson from which he can improve his life.

The last line bears significant resemblance to the intriguing climax and epiphany occurring in a poem by Antonio Machado called "The wind, one brilliant day" based also largely on the sensuous interplay. In Machado's poem, the mysterious gentle wind comes to the speaker "one brilliant day" and by kind gestures and requests attempts to exchange the beauty of its "odor of jasmine" for something the wind expects the speaker to have. The wind calls for treasures it finds in the scent of the roses which should grow in the garden representing the speaker's life. However, the garden being a desolate place, he fails to offer anything of a value and proclaims all the flowers in the garden already "dead". Yet, the wind

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[196] Robert Bly, "The Work of James Wright," in *The Pure Clear Word*: *Essays on the Poetry of James Wright,* ed. Dave Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 90-92.
[197] Henricksen, Spendal, and Jauss, "Wright's "Lying in a Hammock"," 166.
[198] Henricksen, Spendal, and Jauss, "Wright's "Lying in a Hammock"," 166, italics original.

takes even the smallest of tokens of the unattained lushness left in the barren garden before it departs, yet still leaving the speaker depressed and mournful in the final two lines:

> The wind left. ... I wept. I said to my soul.
> "What have you done with the garden entrusted to you?" [200]

Although endings of both poems point to the frustration of one's life, there appears to be one significant difference which might also help resolve the meaning of Wright's speaker's last line. Unlike the gradually more and more broken speaker in Machado's poem, Wright's speaker patiently waits and observes and finally chooses not to dwell on the "wasted". After experiencing the epiphany, he is able to contemplate his life without any words, but does not indicate any signs of regret and appears relaxed despite whatever unproductive living he has led up until the moment. Instead of falling into a pit of a depressive state, he dares to "lean back" rejoiced at the end of the poem, for his life of waste, as he sees it, has still hope to change for the better, since it has been fundamentally transformed and enriched. [201]

3.4 "The Jewel"

One of the prime examples of Wright's craftsmanship and talent to incorporate an intricate network of images is perhaps represented in his famous poem "The Jewel." The poem has slight inclination toward surrealism since the poem's roots and origins are also likely to be attributed to Wright's exposure to deep image as well as foreign poet's influence. Images in this poem reinforce the flow of the narration and create an atmosphere in which both the speaker and the reader can experience the moments of epiphany. The entirety of the short poem is presented:

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[199] Bly, 90.

[200] Antonio Machado, "The Wind One Brilliant Day," in *Times Alone: Selected poems of Antonio Machado,* trans. Robert Bly (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 57. Antonio Machado is also one of the foreign poets whose poetry Wright had experience with during his translations with Robert Bly. Therefore I feel it is an interesting comparison of the works.

[201] Henricksen, Spendal, and Jauss, "Wright's "Lying in a Hammock"," 166; Positive effects of the epiphany are also mentioned in an essay by Peter Stitt, "The Quest Motif in *The Branch Will Not Break*," in *The Pure Clear Word*: *Essays on the Poetry of James Wright,* ed. Dave Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 71.

There is this cave
In the air behind my body
That nobody is going to touch:
A cloister, a silence
Closing around a blossom of fire.
When I stand upright in the wind,
My bones turn to dark emeralds.[202]

The whole narration seems to revolve around a deep inner meditative state seemingly resembling outcomes of introspection inside the speaker's mind. The object or event which triggers the epiphany is never mentioned, however, the reader may gather form the imagery and the implications in the poem present that the original object might indeed be the speaker himself.

In such a short and yet powerful poem, there are, arguably, two moments of epiphany. With a sudden realization that comes to the speaker, the poem itself begins with the moment of epiphany, or more precisely its after-effect. The speaker colloquially informs the reader about *this* powerful presence in his body "There is this cave / In the air behind my body."[203] As in number of poems of epiphany, this particular set of lines encourages reader to explore areas of the irrationality in order for it to be understood as a powerful moment of realization. The air behind the speaker's body is not to be interpreted as a wind blowing around the speaker's human body, but rather as a metaphorical air, the place "beyond" his mortal body which implies that the speaker is in fact talking about a place he might call his inner self or soul.

The cave at first might strike the reader as a dark place of the psyche, providing the "insight into the abyss" to which Langbaum is potentially referring.[204] However, with respect to the developing context of the poem, it can be argued that the reader may find that the cave is not a negative, dreaded cavern to which one dares not enter, but rather a positive, pleasant place of the inner self to which the speaker might gladly return for support and guidance.

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[202] James Wright, "The Jewel," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 122.
[203] Wright, *Above the River*, 122.
[204] Langbaum, 42.

Hidden deep within the soul of the speaker, the cave is depicted as being beyond anybody's reach. It is a place of refuge, a safe haven which "nobody is going to touch". He identifies the place as "A cloister, a silence,"[205] both of the attributes being rich in religious symbolism. The place is sacred and provides enough peace and quiet for the speaker to draw power from. It is an area of his spiritual body where he can always come to pray and seek guidance in cold and darker times of his life. Since Wright's speaker insists on the word "nobody" in the third line, it may also suggest that even the speaker is not allowed to touch, to desecrate the cave's importance and cleanness. By whatever actions he can take in his life or whatever sins he commits, the place will remain unblemished and represent an eternal Garden of Eden for the person to always visit for a moment of strength and hope or a blessing from within the heavenly air beyond his body.

The replenishing abilities of the place are enhanced by the fire which blazes at the centre of the cave, providing warmth and light. The fire takes shape of a "blossom", an important symbol that is to appear later in one Wright's poems "A Blessing" where the blossom is also a part of a moment of epiphany. The blossoming fire in the present poem suggests a flowery fire which may grow and enlarge itself should the speaker allow it or need it in the literal or emotional winter of his life.

Moreover, the silence and calmness are represented visually in the poem in the form of a short pause. As Wyman points out "the space after "silence" must be read as a rhythmic pause, an almost positive, signifying space within the language."[206]

Lines four and five are an excellent example of a music that can play in the speaker's ears and carry him toward the final revelation and perhaps a secondary moment of epiphany complementing the initial realization of *this cave* in the speaker. Similarly as in the later discussed poem "A Blessing", the final two lines denote a "if ... then" presumption:

> When I stand upright in the wind,
> My bones turn to dark emeralds.[207]

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[205] Wright, *Above the River*, 122.
[206] Wyman, 408.
[207] Wright, *Above the River*, 122.

In the case of "The Jewel," the choice of "when" instead of "if" implies that the transformation is always possible and attempts to say "whenever I want and stand." The speaker stands upright, symbolizing dignity, power and appreciation of his own self. "The wind" in the poem is a metaphor for the harsh conditions of life and nature, the perils of the world. The last line is an intriguing point of the epiphany which literary provides a process of transformation. The two-syllabic word body which might not play well in the music and rhythm of the lines here is therefore perhaps substituted with a more useful symbolic synecdoche in the form of *bones*. Bones are, in fact, the structure, the framework carrying the whole body and thus it may represent the overall base on which the speaker stands and exists and can be reinforced by the transformation.

The supporting base of the speaker turns to "dark emeralds", implying a metallurgic transformation of sorts. Wright's speaker in the poem is not afraid of any dangers of this world since he has found deep support within himself, a cave for refuge, a church to provide a fortress of peace and inextinguishable fire to sustain him even in the darkest of times. The effect of the epiphany is comforting and with the tone and images employed throughout the poem suggests an impregnable place that is always to be found inside the speaker's inner self. It points to an outstanding ability to persevere which the speaker comes to understand and feel in the revelation.

The epiphany in "The Jewel" reveals the speaker's possibility to metaphorically transform into "dark emeralds", a metamorphosis which is similarly also found in another poem by Wright called "Wherever Home Is."[208] In this very specific combination of words in "The Jewel," there are also hidden a number of quite interesting facts. Emeralds are crystalline green gems formed and found inside the earth's surface, within the "caves" of the Earth. The darker they are, usually, the more precious and valuable they become. Green colour of the gems may also enrich the symbolism of the imagistic poem. Green, according to symbolic features presented by Guerin, may represent "growth, sensation, fertility,

[208] James Wright, "Wherever Home Is", in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 326-327; Upon finding a lizard, probably a chameleon, the speaker ponders the idea of turning green with the creature he has found in order to acquire peace and quiet in the sunlight.

hope"[209] and Luc Benoist adds also the features of "revival, renewal".[210] Moreover, the cave in which the jewel is found might symbolize, as Benoist also informs, the place of origin, of the beginning of things, alluding to a possible place of resurrection and immortality.[211] The appearance of the cave and then dark emeralds in the last line of the poem thus completes the circle started with the poem's title and supports the theme of perseverance.

Adding to the argued assumption that the place the speaker found with the experience of epiphany is a place of immortality and transcendental possibilities, Mircea Eliade, discusses and interesting phenomenon of symbolism and claims that a jewel as an object has become throughout history a representation of the ancient symbol of pearl – symbol with which Eliade is extensively dealing in his work and which is thought of as having the powers of cleanness, renewal, the transcendental as well as the immortality.[212]

All these factors add to an already sensuous and rich variety of images and symbolic references in the poem, suggesting eternal vitality and the aforementioned newly found Garden of Eden within the speaker into which he can visit and then transform. The poem, in a sense, is infused with a constant moment of epiphany held in a brief moment of the realization and the short span of the poem, which is intense and tends to be expanding without limitations. The speaker in "The Jewel" experiences epiphanies which show him his jewel in the cave – an object representing the immortal state, therefore possible indestructibility where he can renew his strengths and hope. He can do so knowing that he can tap into his invaluable sacred cloister of his own Garden of Eden in the poem for the powers at any moment of his life.

When he stands "upright in the wind" of everyday, as the circulation epiphany shows, the speaker is transformed and his self achieves protection and safety. Moreover, if he is willing, he can radiate the light of his fire thought the refraction and reflection of the crystal to the outer world beyond the limitations of the short poem.

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[209] Wilfred L. Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature, Fifth edition* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 185.
[210] Luc Benoist, *Znaky, symboly a mýty,* trans. Zdeněk Hrbata (Praha: Victoria Publishing, 1995), 80.
[211] Benoist, 95.
[212] Mircea Eliade, *Obrazy a symboly*, trans. Barbora Antonová (Brno: Computer Press, 2004), 128, 153-54.

3.5 "Beginning"

"Beginning" offers a set of vivid images rooted in the opposites of palpable surrealistic imaging of the speaker's encounter in the open field in the middle of the night – darkness and loneliness are in the poem confronted by sudden and brief moments of light. From the very first lines the poem seems evoke the idea that the whole scene of the poem does not deal with reality, but a carefully written approximation of it and offers a glimpse into the shadowy realm of the subjective, the inner consciousness of the hurting self:

> The moon drops one or two feathers into the field.
> The dark wheat listens.[213]

The dark ambience of the scene carries the reader into the depths of the night. The only participant in the otherwise desolate field is the personified wheat. Its darkness is illuminated only by a slight light of the moon which is represented by "one or two feathers" the moon may contribute from his heavenly crescent at that time to what seems an abandoned place. The light of the moon is insufficient as the moon itself might be partially covered by clouds – a fact that will change during the course of the poem. Suddenly, the poem introduces a fraction of a narrator – so far only a mysterious voice – which is drifting through the wheat and gives a set of commands. The voice does not want anything to disturb the stillness of the moonlit scene as if expecting to see something new in the scarcely brightened field: "Be still / Now."[214]

The exclamatory tone of the voice "There they are" releases the previous tension felt in the anxiousness of the waiting and search and with "the moon's young, trying / Their wings"[215] changes the static imagery of the scene into a more dynamic platform for other events and revelations about to happen in the poem. The feathers dropped by the moon, somewhat representing metaphorical eggs of the moon, turn into adult celestial beings as the moon moves from behind the clouds, which in turn may offer more light into the

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[213] James Wright, "Beginning," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 135.
[214] Wright, *Above the River,* 135.
[215] Wright, *Above the River,* 135.

darkness of the field and reveal for the speaker hidden places and messages of the inner world as he carefully watches a mysterious woman figure from a distance:

> Between trees, a slender woman lifts up the lovely shadow
> Of her face[216]

The moon's younglings provided enough light, like a beacon guiding lonely sailors seeking their safe harbor on their lonesome journey, to unravel the mask of the darkness. The poem presents an image of a beautiful lady. The light of the moon helps the woman in lifting the shadow, the dark mask of the scenery from her face. The shadow is not to be feared in the poem as the oxymoronic attribute "lovely" attempts to reassure. The shadow is floating around an attractive lady and envelopes her beauty which poses no harm and serves as another beacon of hope and illumination in the poem. Her presence is appreciated, yet she manages to stay apparent only for a brief moment as she disappears as quickly as she moved onto the scene of the poem. The woman lights up this passage like a desired spark necessary to navigate one's way on their journey through the frightening and desperate shadows of life as she merges back with the air surrounding the place once again:

> and now she steps into the air, now she is gone
> Wholly, into the air.[217]

After several sudden and dynamic actions in the previous lines of the poem, which were marked by a triad of verbs "try", "lift" and "step", the tone of the narration returns back to where it was at the beginning. With the figure of the woman being "gone wholly into the air", the landscape represents a seemingly abandoned place. The brief luminosity of the poem fades with the woman's sudden disappearing and the field carries the speaker within its yet again dim and lonely grounds. However, the epiphany of the speaker arrives in these and in the following lines. Standing alone, the sudden revelations he just witnessed leave him pondering the wisdom "by an elder tree."[218]Everything retains its static proportions.

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[216] Wright, *Above the River,* 135.
[217] Wright, *Above the River,* 135.
[218] Wright, *Above the River,* 135.

The speaker appears to be petrified, frozen in time and space for a brief duration of time and the state he experiences allows him to sketchily inform the reader about his apparent amazement only to the extent of saying:

> I do not dare breathe
> Or move.
> I listen.[219]

The brisk succession of lines and line breaks mirrors the speaker's instructions from the beginning of the poem as it calms down whoever might be participating as well as the scene itself. Immersed in the darkness, the speaker, who is now represented by the pronoun "I", turns to his auditory sense again. The epiphany helped the speaker delve deeper into his inner self and by close listening to what it might say, he gains the ability to see through darkness and past the shadow, both of which he is able to perceive from a transcendental perspective.

> The wheat leans back toward its own darkness,
> And I lean toward mine.[220]

In the last two lines of the poem, the speaker expresses the newly acquired knowledge from the moment of epiphany. The speaker does not seem to be in distress or mourning the loss of the bright moment and the beautiful illuminating figure of the woman as might have felt appropriate in the particular situation for someone who has spent time alone surrounded by nothing but darkness and a dim light. He rather appears to be fully content and serene as he was able to resolve the sense of loneliness and inner darkness that haunted him by observing the flashes of light and short, yet tender and alleviating, moments of beauty and sensuousness under the veils of "the lovely shadow" of the woman. By mimicking the movement of the wheat which does not contend with the darker times of its lonely existence, but reacts naturally to the circumstances and thus "leans back toward its own

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[219] Wright, *Above the River,* 135.
[220] Wright, *Above the River,* 135.

darkness" freely, the speaker is able to surrender too as he embraces his own inner darkness without fear or resentment, accepting it fully as part of his own self.

Thereby he finds solace in realizing that by careful observation of oneself – listening closely to the "landscape" of the inner realm of the self, standing still and watching patiently – he might to come to terms with the fact that darkness need not be discarded or feared, but is even possible to be cherished, as is the bright side, for having its own mysterious beauty and power in life.

The "wheat" also undergoes a kind of interesting transformation by the end of the poem in a way which is symbolized by the change of the attributes given to it in the poem. While at the beginning the speakers speaks of "dark wheat", it becomes wheat which "leans back toward its own darkness" in the final lines suggesting the wheat accepts its own darkness in the moment of time, just as the speaker's transformation helped him achieve. Both the speaker and the wheat return or "lean back" to the beginning, yet reconciled by the transformation showing that the darkness is completely natural.

The poem's title, it can be also argued, may allude to the biblical theme of the origin of the world – first there was only darkness, then by God's intentions there was light – light was given in the "beginning" of the world. Therefore, light may not be valued or measured without the natural aspect of darkness in the world. By the same analogy, the poem starts overwhelmingly dark and virtually empty, yet in a quick sequence of moments, it is "given" light and momentum The speaker perceives the moments where the light is divided from darkness[221] – the light of the moon's young and consequently the light of the woman's beauty – with awe and as a revelatory experience for him even though it seems, on the surface, he has merely returned back to the original unresolved state of the poem's beginning. Only at this moment of suddenness and cleansing newness is the speaker able to achieve the moment of epiphany and transcend the unsettling darkness and move towards feelings of peace despite the constant presence of the dark. The scene presented him with light and now he can appreciate even the darkness. The reflection of the moon, the celestial beauty and the light found despite the darker times provide reminders of hope and comfort

[221] Genesis Chapter 1, 3-4

for the speaker in the world hanging eternally between fragile balance of light and darkness – both inner and outer.

Dougherty says of the conclusion of the poem that it is "not a superficial nature-worship, but an earned recognition of the inevitable end of the process, conditioned by the awareness that our harmony with nature, however imperfect, is what we have." There is a sense of the "earned recognition" and reconciliation with the darker part of the nature which then mirrors that of the nature of the imperfect self. To accept it, as the poem might suggest, is finally achieved and offers a rewarding sense of serenity.[222]

Moreover, with respect to the symbolical imagery or "surrealistic" nature of the poem, the speaker describes the sudden appearance and disappearance of the woman in a way which may suggest a possibility that the radiant woman is a symbolic reference to a meteor. It could therefore be seen as a complementary natural celestial object to presence of the moon, seen by the speaker as blazing through the night sky on the horizon between the trees and thus illuminating the scene only briefly before it fades, yet vividly enough for him to admire its beauty and consequently leave an imprint on his mind.

This would also support the triggering object in the poem, since both the moon and a figure of a woman also seem to be two objects which in poetry represent ideal ingredients for the moments of epiphany. As Langbaum suggests, a celestial body may be a powerful intensifying trigger for the epiphanic experience. Coincidentally, in another poem Langbaum discusses, he also connects the arrival of the epiphany with a sudden disappearance of the moon which leaves the speaker pondering the fate of a woman he loves. Admittedly, in the case of "Beginning" it is not the disappearance of the moon, but the light of the woman, if taken symbolically as a celestial event, which triggers the epiphany.[223]

3.6 "Today I Was Happy, So I Made This Poem"

Some of the titles which Wright uses for his poems often provide a mere background or minor context detail, yet some of them reveal more about their content than the curious reader would care to know in advance . However, in the case of the present poem, it is

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[222] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 68.

[223] See Langbaum, 44-45. Langbaum suggests the moon (and its sudden disappearance) can be the intensifying element of radiance and therefore suitable ingredient for a sudden moment of epiphany.

perhaps a good thing. The title strikes the reader's attention and therefore leaves him intrigued to find out more about the circumstances which led the speaker to such a powerful, joyful conclusion.

The poem's settings are immersed in the nature where animals and other seemingly ordinary objects of the natural world accompany the speaker and serve as sensory details which in such a short poem complement the narrative motion toward the moment of epiphany.

Although the speaker assumes the position of a static observer, the world around him is in full play during the late evening of the day and the ongoing events catch his attention: "As the plump squirrel scampers / Across the roof of the corncrib / The moon suddenly stands up in the darkness."[224] The squirrely seems satisfied, "plump" and nimbly moves across the scene. The close presence of the corncrib signals a clue for the source of the squirrel's joyful behaviour and also the existence of a near cottage in which the speaker might be sparing his time. The squirrel is not afraid of the human world and this fact also adds to the upcoming reaction of the speaker. The sudden motion of the moon in the distance penetrates the evening of the day with its lightness. The moon "stands up" which gives the moon a sense of personification, already contributing to the co-existence between the natural and the human world in the poem. The reader is left wondering what this sudden appearance of the moon may spell.

However, the following line brings relieve as well as the first instance of an epiphanic moment in the poem: "And I see it is impossible to die."[225] Even though it is dark and the speaker is calm and not moving, the cycles of the nature continue, and the emerging of the shining moon in the distance provides a triggering effect for the epiphany. Just as the moon appeared again and signaled the renewing forces underlying the whole principle of nature's inherent state, the satiated squirrel ensures the speaker of abundance found in nature. The light suddenly shines through the scenery and enlightens the speaker's mind so that he can realize that it is impossible to die in such abundance.

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[224] James Wright, "Today I Was Happy, So I Made This Poem," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 141.
[225] Wright, *Above the River,* 141.

Overwhelmed by the sudden inflow of emotions, the inability to find better words to describe his present state leave the speaker no choice but to turn to the most iconic object he can perceive at the time and compare his newly found knowledge with that of the nature: "Each moment of time is a mountain."[226]

Mountains are majestic natural objects reaching towards the skies, beyond the limits of human potential. They serve as monumental and indestructible edifice of the natural processes, and with their perseverance symbolize the immortality with which the speaker associates the realization of his own immortal state. Their peaks are also oftentimes unreachable, as is the characteristic of every moment of time. Just as the squirrel is scampering, each moment is also fleeting and is immediately followed by another and therefore would sieve through the speaker's fingers if grasped for. This contrast of the mountain's immortality while the moon and squirrel continue to move help the speaker accept his own fate in the grand scheme of the natural world. The speaker finds solace in knowing that while death is certain, so is the immortality of each moment which can be savoured by the perceptive senses at *any* moment.

Moreover, the sane realization helps him "move out of the usual human preoccupation with time, change and death"[227] and understand that his death will be only a natural part of the cycles of nature which he witnessed through the walk of the poem and which can bring him immortality by him finally blending with the nature both physically and spiritually after death.[228]

The first epiphanic experience of the present poem may remind the reader of William Blake's own epiphanic opening in his poem called "Auguries of Innocence":

> To see a World in a Grain of Sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an hour.[229]

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[226] Wright, *Above the River,* 141.
[227] Edward Lense, "This is What I Wanted," 19-32.
[228] Peter Stitt, "The Quest Motif in *The Branch Will Not Break*," in *The Pure Clear Word*: *Essays on the Poetry of James Wright,* ed. Dave Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 74.

As in Blake's poem, Wright's speaker knows that the immortality is not a matter of longevity but rather of the attitude toward life and each of its moments. That realization depends on the possible perspective offered in both poets' poems suggesting that the infinite and eternal is always within one's grasp during an otherwise ordinary day. Even the immortality and seeming unassailability of the mountain can be conquered by climbing the mountain – seizing the moment and as Flajšar notes, making the poem "a variation on the carpe diem theme."[230]

Although Wright's speaker tries to "stretch the epiphanic consciousness indefinitely"[231] by projecting his immediate experience upon the mountain's symbolical meaning, his attempt is short-lived, as another inhabitant of the nature permeates the scene and the speaker's thoughts: "An eagle rejoices in the oak trees of heaven." Another symbolic object highlights the speaker's attention as he sees the jolly and free eagle soaring through the air. The oak trees undoubtedly belong among nature's "immortals" – oak trees with deep roots and extensive trunks and towering treetops then indeed metaphorically touch the sky and extend to "eternity" of the heaven as well as to "infinity" of the present moment.

Thus the sudden appearance of the eagle does not become an unwelcome interruption which comes to disturb the speaker's heightened meditative state, but rather serves as another complementing herald of another climax leading into the poem's second and final epiphany in the ensuing lines:

> Crying
> *This is what I wanted*.[232]

The last italicized line is the speaker's reaction to the unfolding events and to the intensified feelings of rejoice they brought along with the eagle. The use of italics seems unusual and the syntax is intriguing and therefore, as carefully observed by Flajšar, the poem's closure may suggest a "wonderful ambiguity" insofar that the reader is "not sure

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[229] William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake,* ed. David V. Erdman (Berkley: University of California Press, 1982), 490.
[230] Jiří Flajšar, "Wright's Today I Was Happy, So I Made This Poem," *The Explicator* 64, no. 2 (Winter, 2006): 97, accessed September 10, 2013, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA143862662&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.
[231] Flajšar, "Wright's Today I Was Happy, So I Made This Poem," 97.

who is speaking at the moment." According to Flajšar, it can be any combination of the speaker, the inner voice of the eagle, or both, whereby intensifying the harmony between the nature and the human that is spread throughout the poem and extending the moment beyond the human limits even after the eagle has disappeared.[233]

Flajšar's previous helpful observation brings attention to another possible ambiguity which might be found in the semantic nature of the word "Crying." With respect to the joy and overwhelming feelings of the speaker and/or the eagle, the crying might be then interpreted either as the roaring sound of exhilaration or also as the tears produced by the sudden joy and peace.[234]

The third ambiguity, enigmatically left unanswered, may also be the last line itself. What *exactly* did the speaker of the line *want*? However, a careful reader may retrace the steps and the tone of the poem and suggest that the "This" the speaker refers to is the ultimate feeling of bliss and appreciation.

What distinguishes the present poem and Wright's other poems of epiphanies which also serve as a forging seal to link the human aspect with nature is that in "Today I Was Happy, So I Made This Poem" the unity between the two happens only at the literal level and not at the figurative. That is to say it never happens physically as in the some of the other selected poems of epiphanies. For instance in "Northern Pike" the speaker eats the fish in an act of communion, in "A Blessing" the speaker is about to transform when he comes in physical contact with the horse's ear.

3.7 "A Blessing"

One of the most frequently anthologized poems of all of James Wright's collections and perhaps also one of the most popular ones among the critics as well as the non-specialized audience, "A Blessing" certainly belongs to the epitomes of Wright's poems capturing an

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[232] Wright, *Above the River,* 141, italics original.
[233] Flajšar, "Wright's Today I Was Happy," 97.
[234] Note that in Czech translation of the poem translated by Jaroslav Kořán, published in *Dítě na skleníku,* the word "Crying" is translated as "křičí" – which is in favour of the roaring sound interpretation. See Jařab, *Dítě na skleníku,* 362.

affirmative epiphanic experience.[235] It was also the inspiration to write this thesis on poems of epiphanies in the poet's works.

The pastoral scenery and its rural motifs contrast the urban symbols within the poem and the freedom and unity with nature brings the speaker to a sudden realization in a form of epiphanic manifestation in the final lines of this "most celebrated" natural lyric among Wright's poetry.[236]

The poem begins with the speaker describing the settings of a rural place into which he pays visit with his friend: "Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota / Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass."[237] The highway is nearby, representing the immediate intrusion into the natural landscape and becomes the first boundary which the speaker had to successfully overcome to join the revitalizing forces of the pasture. Twilight, in the case of the present poem, is not the same darkness heralding despair as seen in many others of Wright's poems, but is seen as a gentle blanket falling "softly" on the meadow. The stark contrast of the motorway, town and state and the ambience of the upcoming evening in the first two lines present a wonderful letting-go of the conventional mind of the speaker which can delve deeper into the mysteries of the natural world and its secrets. His becomes the desire to achieve "beauty untainted by consciousness" of the rational world.[238]

Wright's speaker immediately becomes a curious explorer of the fenced pasture where "the eyes of those two Indian ponies /Darken with kindness."[239] The oxymoronic statement present in the description of the ponies' eyes serves as yet another reminder that the darkness in this poem has nothing to do with anxiety, fear or terror. It is the tender, kind darkness which is as it should be in the natural part of the world the speaker is exploring outside the disturbing lamps and headlights of the motorway.

The visitor describes the breed of the ponies as "Indian," much to the credit of and allusion to the original inhabitants of the nature – the American Indians in the United States.

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[235] Stiffler, "The Reconciled Vision of James Wright," 77-92; David Pink, "Wright's 'A Blessing.'," *The Explicator* 54, no. 1 (1995): 44, accessed September 10, 2013, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA18054457&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.
[236] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 68.
[237] James Wright, "A Blessing," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 143.
[238] Pink, 44.
[239] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.

The speaker is the White man intruding into the habitat of those who have lived peacefully without outside intrusion. The speaker's projection may thus be one of those instances appearing within Wright's poems in which the author attempts to communicate with the original Indian tribesmen on a literal level. Wright's speaker here, as David Pink claims, is inspired to cross the boundaries of the fence to reclaim the "bond that the Indian peoples had with nature" and blend wholly with its environment which is also the ultimate ending of this poem.[240]

The ponies seem domesticated and friendly. By coming closer without an apparent fear, the horses surprisingly dare to leave their safe place amongst the "willows", and "gladly" welcome the speaker and his friend as their own kin. In fact, they are overwhelmed with joyful, feelings as the speaker perceives their human-like behaviour just as he and his friend "step over the barbed wire into the pasture"[241]:

> They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
> That we have come.[242]

The barbed wire symbolizes, just like him leaving the highway in the first line of the poem, the second boundary which is to be crossed by the speaker in order to achieve the desired communion with the nature.[243] It is also a historically marked symbol of oppression – a barbed crown worn by Christ. Both of these facts point to the speaker's gradual movement beyond the artificial constructs of limitations toward freedom. Still, the union is postponed, as the horses still recognize the speaker as an outsider who is to be respected and show him a gesture expressing both their submissiveness and reverence as "They bow shyly as wet swans."[244] With this interpretation, the horses gain the characteristic of feathered, elegant birds and they may even become Pegasian creatures in the mind of the speaker, providing hope to escape.

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[240] Pink, 44.
[241] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[242] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[243] John Martone, "'I Would Break into Blossom': Neediness and Transformation in the Poetry of James Wright," *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 64-75, accessed September 10, 2013, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420039561&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.

The two horses are seen living in harmony with each other, since they are lovers in a beautiful relationship: "They love each other. / There is no loneliness like theirs."[245] Many of the contradictions in the poem point to the positive aspect of the otherwise presumable darker version, and so is the mentioned loneliness in the present line. The horses are not lonely in the conventional sense of being abandoned by their loved ones or soul mates or not knowing love at all. Rather they are viewed as living peacefully alone, naturally as they do in the moment, perfectly happy in the solitude the nature provides for the unhindered intimacy they enjoy and which the speaker understands and in a certain way also envies. The rural life seldom offers such delicate opportunity for intimacy among people who show affection to each other in an open space.

The speaker finds himself attracted to the female "slenderer" horse "For she has walked over to me."[246] She has, in fact, chosen him willingly, which the speaker, being a man, may see as a beautiful gesture of trust. They also exchange roles in the traditional courtship scenario based on human perception of conventional rules of etiquette, since she "nuzzled my left hand."[247] It is an affectionate gesture and the first one which marks the physical contact between the human and the animals in the poem.

The symbolic unity is moreover expanded in the line describing her appearance: "She is black and white / Her mane falls wild on her forehead."[248] She represents the *yin* and *yang* energies, the balance which is found in the nature as well as in the symbolic aspects of the poem attempting to find that unity, that exact balance between animals and people, nature and the urban world, men and women. In her presence, the speaker is even more attracted to her:

> And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
> That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.[249]

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[244] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[245] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[246] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[247] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[248] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[249] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.

The sensual interplay in this part of the poem energizes the touching which highlights the previous formation of relationship between the speaker and the female horse. The Pegasian-like horse now becomes personified, she transforms again, and bears the attributes of a human girl, woman toward whom the speaker would like to express his own sign of tender affection when he admits he would like to "caress her long ear." He is moved to do so by the "light breeze" which is only a joyful excuse by use of which the speaker hides behind the nature's agent his own desire to express physical gratitude for the loving behaviour of the horse in the previous lines. It is not a strong passionate urge he feels to the woman-like creature, but a calm and courteous gesture to repay the "nuzzling" of his hand. It is at this moment when the affectionate gestures are properly and honorably exchanged when the union is finally complete and the speaker's intense feelings of gratitude are no longer containable. The "rapture" of the human-like tenderness symbolizes "the creative activity of the [speaker's] imagination"[250] and the female horse is the symbol of woman elegance, beauty and passion. His mind electrified by both the visual and the sensual aspects of his experience in the pasture, the harmless sensuous desires, and the tranquility of the encounter become one with the desires of the spirit and the speaker is able to transcend:

> Suddenly I realize
> That if I stepped out of my body I would break
> Into blossom.[251]

The power of the epiphany in the present poem is not only underscored by the "suddenness" of the realization, which is also a prerequisite for it to occur, but also by the ambiguity of the penultimate line. Before the last line is read, it is not clear as to what effects it might bring. Indeed the nature of stepping out of one's body may imply a number of "breaks" – the breaking of one's spirits, morale, as well as death, but also the transcendental ability of the soul to be released free. Thus the line ending with "break" proves to be a dramatic anticipation of the following events. The speaker may become broken, sad and devastated by his detachment from the human world and his female human

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[250] Brian Green, "Wright's A BLESSING," *The Explicator* 58, no. 3 (2000): 166, accessed September 10, 2013, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA63723177&v=2.1&u=palacky&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w.

companion waiting for him somewhere out there or he may transform into a new possible state of being. Only the last line comforts the reader that it is the latter effect of the epiphany and that the speaker would undergo the beautiful transformation of flowers, the ultimate "emblem of regeneration"[252] and revitalizing agent of the spiritual and the physical. Given the overall preparatory steps of the poem, the last lines are powerfully positive and provide a beautiful sense of relief and a cleansing effect.[253] The alliterative sequence of words in the last two lines carries the speaker's voice into an intensified meditative enhancement of his state and the two-word conclusion manifests a sense of awe.

In the brief moment of his epiphany, the speaker is allowed to finally achieve his unity with nature. It is the third step over borders he needs to take on his journey through the poem. Unlike the previous crossings, this one is on the spiritual level. His imagination carries him into the realm beyond rationality and consciousness and elevates his spirit outside the perceivable world. There, everything is one and the speaker finds joy that he is able, however for a short moment, leave the ordinary world behind and unite with nature.

Should the poem continue, his transformation may perhaps have been completed, but the poet's careful dealing with the poem stopped precisely at the right moment to leave the ending as well as the speaker in a state of expanding bliss.[254] Although the transformation occurs only in the speaker's mind and imagination, it is not to the detriment of the intense moment. The power of "A Blessing" may therefore lie "in the speaker's imagining an ecstasy as possible" since it could be said that for the speaker "to imagine ecstasy is for him to be transformed."[255] The transformation is possible despite human limitations of the physical self which, much like the limits and boundaries of the world, can be transcended.[256]

As Dougherty argues, the speaker finds he may "still be welcome in nature" and that he may "at the moments of pure rupture, [...] discover not only joy, but a recognition of [...] harmony with creation, a harmony even humankind cannot entirely destroy."[257] Surely the

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[251] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[252] Green, 166.
[253] Stitt, "The Quest Motif," 74-75.
[254] Stiffler, 77-92.
[255] Martone, 64-75.
[256] Elkins, 96.
[257] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 68.

highway and the barbed wire did not prevent Wright's speaker to enjoy the harmony of the peaceful world and to unexpectedly encounter a beautiful experience.

According to Martone, Wright's craft shown in "A Blessing" "has a distinctly Wordsworthian quality" which is represented in the "spiritual regeneration and enablement awakening the mind to a new mode of consciousness." It is no coincidence that this pastoral lyric containing arguably one of the most powerful epiphanic experiences found among Wright's poems was produced at the time of Wright's own "withdrawal from convention, both social and artistic" during the first major change and writing *The Branch Will Not Break*, and helped the "Romantic poet's mind" create the art for which he is so remembered, and perhaps becomes epitomized in this very poem.[258]

The moment of epiphany achieved at the moment of a physical touch occurs repeatedly in Wright's poems, most notably in a poem called "Milkweed", which is also the subsequent poem in the collection *The Branch Will Not Break* as well as in my analysis.

3.8 "Milkweed"

The speaker's initial lines inform us about his long-lasting sadness and estrangement. The speaker appears to be stuck in a paradoxical state, where he stands "in the open" but at the same time "lost in myself."[259] Attention to the passing of time is vague, yet he is perceptive enough to give account of his whereabouts and places he can see from his vantage point:

> While I stood here, in the open, lost in myself,
> I must have looked a long time
> Down the corn rows, beyond grass,
> The small house,
> White walls, animals lumbering toward the barn.[260]

The emotional stasis of the speaker is strengthened by the slow movement of the animals in the distance as they are ambling toward their home. The images are plain and

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[258] Martone, 64-75.
[259] James Wright, "Milkweed," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 143.
[260] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.

simple, the pale whiteness of the house reflects the speakers feelings of emptiness and loneliness. The emotional moment of the first five lines and the implied message within suggest that the speaker yearns for love – more explicitly to be loved. It seems as if the speaker has tried looking everywhere. He is "in the open" of the field, detached from the world he lives in and finds himself lost in thought and out of time. Suddenly, everything changes when he stumbles on a piece of milkweed which catches his attention on his way through the fields and he looks down and ponders:

> Whatever it was I lost, whatever I wept for
> Was a wild, gentle thing, the small dark eyes
> Loving me in secret.[261]

His inner chain of worrisome thoughts which have haunted him is suddenly resolved in a moment of epiphany where the eternal love reveals itself to him and comforts him. He becomes well aware of its unexpected presence. The love he lost or was sad for no longer burden the speaker, as his perception shifts and he finds signs of love in one small delicate flower, living wildly, presumably alone too. He admires its beauty as well as his newfound enlightenment: "It is here. At a touch of my hand."[262]

Although the reader never finds out what or quite possibly whom he lost, it does not matter, because anything he could have lost is supplemented by the natural beauty existing around him at any given moment of his life. Right at the moment it is the seemingly ordinary, yet "wild, gentle thing, the small dark eyes" loving the speaker in secret.[263]

The speaker rejoices in knowing that love he has been so desperately and fruitlessly seeking or crying for has always been around him, waiting in secret to surprise him. It is with him even now as he finds it in the smallest of things – seeds of new life in the air, and as he touches the milkweed and "the air fills with delicate creatures / From the other world."[264] Moreover, such playful likening of a flower and its seeds to animal or human-like qualities make possible and enhance milkweed's ability to love.

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[261] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[262] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[263] Wright, *Above the River,* 143.
[264] Wright, *Above the River,* 144.

As Lense agrees, the speaker of "Milkweed" is at first "brooding and depressed" but then becomes comforted and "achieves an epiphany that makes him whole"[265] by the sudden realization that, if nothing or nobody else does, the nature and the natural "other world" always loves him. Such love, the speaker now knows could be, hidden in the smallest of things in life – even in the delicate creatures – whenever he stops looking for that which is already right in front of him or under his feet and instead dares find peace and solace in accepting the fact commented upon by Robert Bly who says of the present poem:

> "Milkweed" describes the realization that the longing to be loved, the demanding of love, the insistence that everyone around us show their love, was all wrong. All the time, the walker was being loved by something unknown, "the small dark eyes / loving me in secret." The poem suggests that when we realize this, the world of saints and mystics becomes real and visible to us.[266]

As the speaker's final line lets us know, the creatures are "From the other world"[267] – the world secretly hidden beyond the human mind as well as the "world of saints and mystics" Robert Bly refers to in the above statement. The world of the troubled mind and inner thoughts of the speaker intersect with the spiritual world of the nature in which he finds abundance of souls to connect with, just as there are many seeds in the milkweed. With engaged imagination, once may be able to almost hear the speaker's grateful voice and exhilaration – Look! Do not despair, it is right here: at the touch of my hand! – and by extension – at the touch of anyone's hand. Love and joy, as could be the underlying meaning of the poem, are all around us and very close. An individual need not seek them, but simply hold out their hands, the extensions of the senses, and grasp for their healing and omnipresent essence.[268]

Moreover, the speaker in this poem is not merely a passive observer. He engages with the flower by touching it and thus spreading the love around perhaps for others who might one day be seeking it as he has. The poem and its message is indeed an epiphanic

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[265] Lense, 19-32.
[266] Bly, 85.
[267] Wright, *Above the River,* 144.
[268] Lense, 19-32; Bly, 85.

manifestation of love which attempts to extend beyond the realm of the narration and be spread, like the seeds of the milkweed, into the daily lives of humanity.

3.9 "Northern Pike"

The last poem of the original section of the collection entitled "New Poems" presents a speaker who suggests a mysterious proposal to follow his narration by means of an intriguing riddle. The reader thus seems to be taking part in the speaker's search for a solution to his predicament and contemplating thoughts, which travel back in time, from the very beginning of the poem The poem describes a fishing trip which the speaker is recalling and which bears significant resemblance to the act of attending a religious service and returns into the present tense along with a sudden moment of epiphany.

The speaker of the poem insists on the reader's participation in the events from the initial line and is therefore immediately immersed into the anticipation of the following. "All right" the speaker initially remarks and further encourages "Try this / Then."[269] He goes on philosophizing, though rooted in undisputable truth, about the nature of the mortal condition of all living beings:

> Every body
> I know and care for,
> And every body
> Else is going
> To die in a loneliness
> I can't imagine and a pain
> I don't know.[270]

Although the readers are yet not sure what they are supposed to try, the speaker offers assurance of the "only" certainty in life which is life's culmination into death. Moreover, the speaker seems distraught at the vision of the lonely and painful circumstances which surround the act of dying. It is a mystery he cannot fathom.

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[269] James Wright, "Northern Pike," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 217.
[270] Wright, *Above the River,* 217.

However, there seems to be a possibility of affirmation hidden between the lines of the poem. It playfully presents the word "everybody" as two separate words "every" and "body". What this intriguing word play attempts to imply so early in the poem is that there is still hope for all people, even the dying, since only the body will die and not the spirit or the soul of the individual who leaves the world and the poem interweaves a spiritual comfort. As a partly reconciliation and coming to terms with the fact that, nonetheless, there is no escape from death, the speaker continues with words expressing the determination to live: "We had / To go on living."[271]

The contemplation of the speaker reveals the presence of other fishermen and the line represents the obligations as well as responsibilities for one's life in that there is life before death and it must be lived step by step. Thus the speaker leaves his preoccupation with death and links his thoughts with performing ordinary tasks on the boat. The speaker continues to describe in quite a detail the actions after catching their fish and gutting it. He turns to his memory as he ponders the events occurring on the fishing trip with his fellow friends:

> We
> Untangled the net, we slit
> The body of this fish
> Open from the hinge of the tail
> To a place beneath the chin
> I wish I could sing of.[272]

Even here the speaker places the expression "the *body* of this fish" as a reminder of the previous spacing of the word "everybody", suggesting that the fisherman accepts the dual existence of spirit and body even in animals and deals with the fish with dignity. The speaker pays silent respects to the fish in his pronounced desire to sing a hymn for the dead fish in a bard-like fashion on a trip. The speaker, however, also expresses his wish that there was no need to kill or harm anything at all in the first place:

> I would just as soon we let

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[271] Wright, *Above the River,* 217.
[272] Wright, *Above the River,* 217.

The living go on living.
An old poet whom we believe in
Said the same thing, and so
We paused among the dark cattails and prayed.[273]

The sense that the poem might be an allusion to the religious communion with nature is reinforced by the fishermen's pious act of praying. The speaker recalls similar words proclaimed by "an old poet whom we believe in". As argued, the poem being about the communion and the speaker being a part of it, he thus may imply in those lines that the poet is God whose words are immortalized in the sixth commandment "Thou shalt not kill" and which contribute to the speaker's conviction that all the living deserve to live, man and creatures of the nature alike. At this moment in the past, the fishermen suddenly "pause" and attend to the moment of communion as they start to pray, as though being in a sacred place. Their prayers attempt to seek blessings for the rest of their catch that day, which represent the dead, and move on to change the subjects of their prayer toward the humans who still live: "For the right-hand wrist of my cousin who is a policeman. / We prayed for the game warden's blindness."[274]

These two adjacent lines have an effect of an irony. First, the speaker announces that the prayer is for the policeman, a servant of justice and in the next line he humorously prays that the warden does not see them fishing illegally. Additionally this can symbolize the blindness of the justice in that some may live and some die, echoing the speaker's previous wish and contemplation.

The religious service is finished by the fishermen's last prayer for safe journey home and by eating the fish, "We prayed for the road home. /We ate the fish,"[275] resembling the traditional communion routine at the end of most Christian religious services. The lonely and worrisome beginning of the poem is long gone by this moment's arrival, as the fishermen cleansed themselves by doing physical work and then gathered together and overcame the fact of inescapable death in the calm of the worship and surrendering to the moment of the fishing day.

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[273] Wright, *Above the River,* 217.
[274] Wright, *Above the River,* 217.
[275] Wright, *Above the River,* 217.

When the speaker has eaten the catch, act symbolizing unity between natural, spiritual and human world, he may achieve the moment of epiphany, perhaps much to the credit of the seeming religious act, therefore pointing to the aspects of the original sources of epiphany – religious epiphanies which came to the privileged saints or to those in the service of the religion and manifested the divine. The speaker's narration unexpectedly returns from the retrospective point of view to the present moment arriving at the moment of epiphany. The sudden realization of the beauty contrasts his initial anxiety felt while he was pondering death:

> There must be something very beautiful in my body,
> I am so happy.[276]

What at the beginning of the poem appeared to have been an ordinary fishing day presented by a desperate speaker seeking peace turned into a sudden realization of the soul's eternal state of joy and elation. In fact, the journey represents, as Dougherty agrees, both the strive to satisfy hunger as well as to sustain the needs of the soul,[277] and Seay interestingly argues that the fish is also an object representing a kind of "sacrificial gift."[278] Both arguments seem tenable in terms of the overall argument that the poem tries to allude to the religious act. Moreover, it should be noted, fish is also the symbol of Christ and therefore another strong religious symbol in the poem to complement the implications of a religious ceremony.

The epiphany may, therefore be viewed as a sudden spiritual revelation of the speaker's soul which is sustained by the offerings of both the prayer for the spirit and fish – the Christ's body – for the body of the speaker in a form of the Eucharist. The moment of epiphany allows for a transformation of the death-ridden speaker, which he himself hints toward in the beginning – every body may die, but the soul, arguably seen in the poem as the very nature of the human self, continues to live.

The sudden revelation attempts to demonstrate that the appreciation for the gifts of nature can be at times approximated to that of religious act which can help bring the

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[276] Wright, *Above the River,* 217.
[277] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 91.
[278] Seay, 118.

realization of beauty and happiness to the fore. Only when the speaker in the poem participates in the shared communion with his fellow fishermen as well as when he unites with the token of the nature's gift is he relieved completely of his burden and becomes aware of the fact that he can be, in fact is, happy at all times. After all, the speaker insists: "There *must* be something beautiful inside my body."

It is perhaps never exactly clear what is to be "tried" as the poem's beginning urges the reader to do. However, it might be possible to devise the following scenario. If the middle section of the poem is to be compressed and the rest of the poem paraphrased, the result may reveal something to this result: All right, if you do not know what to do with your life or your predicament, try this – accept your mortality, enjoy and appreciate the gifts of the nature in harmony with your inner self, and that very same "self" will reward you with an intense peaceful sense of happiness and satisfaction of spiritual proportions.

3.10 "The Fruits of the Season"

One of many prose poems within the original collection *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, the present prose poem, it can be argued, would seem to be a fitting and wonderful companion yet also a contrast to the poem "Lying in a Hammock" if placed side by side. The prose poem offers numerous sensual indulgencies as well as specific observations of the seemingly ordinary morning at a marketplace. Being a prose poem, the epiphany is continually built throughout the whole narrative context and its proper momentum and aspects are collected along the way until the speaker is struck by a revelation. Here is the prose poem in its entirety:

> It is a fresh morning of late August in Padova. After the night's rain, the sun is emerging just enough so far to begin warming the grapes, melons, peaches, nectarines, and the other fruits that will soon fill this vast square. Women and children in bright flower print dresses are already beginning to amble from stall to stall.
>
> At the very far end of the square I can see the azure and golden face of the town clock on the Torre dall'Orologio.
>
> A baker with white flour sprinkled all over his boots just drifted across the extreme right corner of my eye.

It is all commonplace, ordinary, the firm shaping of the morning
in an Italian city of middling size.

And yet—to my left I can see the entire front length of the Palazzo
della Ragione, on whose second floor the community has arranged
a huge exhibit of paintings, the enduring fruits of five hundred years.

And spread below the faces of those peculiarly tender and fierce
angels, the men and women and their children are still arriving
from the countryside, arranging for our slow ambling choice the
heaps of grapes, melons, peaches, nectarines, and all the other fruits
of the season in a glory that will not last too long.

But they will last long enough. I would rather live my life than
not live it. The grapes in a smallish stall are as huge and purple as
smoke. I have just eaten one. I have eaten the first fruit of the season,
and I am in love.

Padua[279]

The speaker first introduces the place and time of the poem's background in a casual declarative tone. The slowly emerging sun lightens and dries the previous rain so that the day can start anew. Many of the succulent "grapes, melons, peaches, nectarines, and the other fruits" are presented in the next lines to be savoured by the reader's senses, complemented by "flower paint dresses" of the women and children in Padua. The introductory paragraph is abundant in colours and sensory details. They certainly do not "amble" from the poem, but rather spout from the lines toward the reader.[280]

The description moves on to the surrounding areas, adding more intense colours of "azure" and "gold" to the previous imagery. The directions have similar tendencies to attract the reader's attention as those found in "Lying in a Hammock": "At the very far end of the square I can see," "across the extreme right corner of my eye" and "to my left."[281]

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[279] James Wright, "The Fruits of the Season," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 313-14.
[280] Wright, *Above the River,* 313.
[281] Cf. James Wright, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 122.

The town appears drowsy as the townsfolk is moving across the square very slowly. The baker "drifted" across the speaker's view, almost as if taken like a leaf by the wind of the lazy morning which is leisurely waking into the day. The very declarative plain voice of the speaker and the casualness of the atmosphere lead the speaker to one inevitable conclusion at this time: "It is all commonplace, ordinary."[282]

However, the observer quickly diverts the attention to a second floor of a building which seems to have caught his interested eye because of the "huge exhibit of paintings, the enduring fruits of five hundred years". The speaker likens the paintings to the fruits, implying their colorful nature yet the endurance of fruit sounds contradicting if compared to the mutability of ordinary fruit. He is amazed at sight and living proof that there exists a possibility of immortality for certain things in the world.

The speaker interweaves an intricate narrative underlying the whole prose poem. The paragraphs help hold one thought at a time and with the exception of the first and the last one contain one long string of thought. The repetition of "heaps of grapes, melons, peaches, nectarines, and all the other fruits" is not accidental, since it serves to create necessary build up strategy for the epiphanic moment in the last paragraph. The epiphany is postponed by the repetitions of the "ambling" movements that often attributed to the participants.

The speaker now adds another attribute to the fruits "In a glory that will not last too long" which describes the true nature of the fruits and makes his previous simile all the more striking. Throughout the narration, the speaker points to the various things that have certain temporal frame embedded in their nature. "Rain," "sun," "flowers," and "clock", they all are fleeting and impermanent conditions and "men," "women," and "children" inherently grow old and die. The paintings have survived five hundred years, yet they are fragile fruits which so far have managed to win the battle with time and mutability, not by themselves but rather by a careful handling provided by others. All the fruits of the season are also going to whither and rot soon. Their glory will perish and the speaker acknowledges this inescapable truth.

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[282] James Wright, "The Fruits of the Season," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 314.

However, in the next paragraph, which is also the last one, the attention is for the first time turned toward the speaker and his feelings. He has no reason to worry and appears to be not saddened by the truth of human life which states all things, even the lovely fruits he has been observing the whole morning, will come to an end and his epiphany slowly reaches its climax in a comforting realization:

> But they will last long enough. I would rather live my life than not live it.[283]

The lines offer consoling wisdom. The speaker of Wright's prose poem is perhaps the same speaker of "Lying in a Hammock" who, as mentioned earlier, has learnt the life's lesson and does not dwell on the things he has not done or tried in his life. Now he understands that what makes life worth it is *living* it and grasping for opportunities to do so. He refuses to give in to the suggested fleeting "glory" of all things and the "fruit's mutability" thus "does not induce lamentation but a renewed desire to live" suggested by his pronounced choice.[284]

The following lines center on that choice for which the speaker resolutely decided and leads to its consequences which have a fortunate epiphanic effect. After he tasted the grape, he realizes: "I am in love." The kind of love he feels is not attributed to anything specific in the poem and therefore suggests the universal love – love toward life itself and for life's sake – toward those choices that the speaker has made and which, quite literary, bore fruits. He never again wasted the life's opportunities to live and to enjoy the colorful fruits of day "despite transience and imperfection" which are natural to the cycle of life and will slowly affect the speaker, the fruit and all the participants.[285]

The intense colours as well as the moment of eating and tasting but one small token of the fresh fruit provided images and sensory details which radiated throughout the speaker's whole body. He becomes one with the "enduring fruit" of the paintings and has taken the responsibility to take control of his own life while he still can before another "rain" comes. But even then, the speaker knows, the sun will emerge again. The speaker rejoices enough

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[283] Wright, *Above the River,* 314.
[284] Elkins, 188.

to make him almost “break into blossom” or leave him standing there “crying” since the wisdom is what he “wanted” and, unlike the objects of his attention in the prose poem, has permanent transformative effects on his life.

The epiphany works because it is carried forth by the strength of the last paragraph which contrasts the seemingly ominous ending of the penultimate paragraph. Visual details which are abundant throughout the poem intensify and become connected with that of the taste as the speaker indulges in savouring the token of the day and the reader is willing to participate in the interplay of a wonderful experience for the senses and the soul. The intense experience reveals to the speaker the options he always has in front of him – life or death, live or die, enjoy or waste the life. By choosing the former in an important situation of the lovely day and not staying at home, he perseveres and graciously melts into the extraordinary moment of an ordinary day.

3.11 “Beautiful Ohio”

In his works, Wright usually depicts the Ohio River as a place of environmental or life crisis, place where the dead are buried, a lifeless “ditch” and “waste”. In this poem, the speaker tries to meditate on the possibility of beauty rather than death, sorrow and wane, which come to full fruition in the final line, where the river becomes and is seen as something transcendentally beautiful and magnificent despite the overall conditions and deterioration. In this case, the ambiguous title may also point not only to the River Ohio, but to the whole state, the poem thus being not only by the hostile water but also about the population of the industrial place.

The opening first two lines celebrate the origin of the name of the Ohio River – in the language of the Indians Ohio means “beautiful”, an attribute which is also presented in the title of the poem as well as in its concluding line. The poem then continues with the speaker’s retrospective view and experience he had while he was sitting nearby the river:

I had found a way
To sit on a railroad tie

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[285] Elkins, 188.

Above the sewer main.
It spilled a shining waterfall out of a pipe
Somebody had gouged through the slanted earth.
Sixteen thousand and five hundred more or less people
In Martins Ferry, my home, my native country.[286]

We are startled by such description – what could possibly be beautiful about such an ugly place. Although the depiction of the scene starts far from pleasant, the speaker still finds the waterfall "shining", a positive quality to the otherwise ghastly appearance of the water from the sewer drain. The speaker also gives an approximate account of the people living in the town at that time, who he partly holds responsible for the dreadful condition, but, as "my home, my native country" indicates, is still proud of.

A quick sudden change occurs which "Quickened the river / With the speed of light"[287] and the speaker is held in a revelatory moment for a while. In this moment, he remembers all the unflattering names the Ohio was called at that time: "I know what we call it / Most of the time."[288] However as the light glimpsed through his perception, the speaker also remembers the joy and the beauty, not merely of the Ohio River, but, transcendentally, perhaps even of the people living in the state, whom he found a way to forgive.

As he returns to the song theme first given at the beginning, the speaker rejoices in the original tribal manners of the Indians who lived in then unblemished nature. With a sense of elation, he comes to terms with the sight as it is. Thanks to his newly found perspective of the nature of the human self, which regardless how polluted it is, remains perfect and clean, the speaker is able to freshly look beyond the pollution of both the river and the soul of the population, and say in the ultimate line: "I call it beauty."[289]

Being the last poem of the book *To The Blossoming Pear Tree*, such change of perspective may have much greater meaning in the evolution of the poet, which would well support, as Elkins states, the overall theme of the book: "[Wright's] movement from the old bitterness at Ohio in the opening poems [of the volume] to the resolution in "beauty" in

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[286] James Wright, "Beautiful Ohio," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 318.
[287] Wright, *Above the River,* 318.
[288] Wright, *Above the River,* 318.
[289] Wright, *Above the River,* 318.

"Beautiful Ohio", the volume's last poem".[290] This fact contributes to the pun in the ambiguous title as mentioned in the introductory paragraph.

The moment of epiphany helped the speaker reach a point where he could see clearly, as if from a distance, something hidden not only behind the veil of filthy water, but also in the degraded society. He was able to express unbiased emotions and true love he came to feel for nature and humanity, especially in his "home and native country", whatever their current state may be, and find joy in them. Elkins elaborates on Wright's intentions which might be behind the present poem:

> In *Pear Tree*, motivated by charity, humility, faith and courage that transcend personal love, [Wright] takes an active joy in what before had power to daunt him, his identity as singer, American, and simple fallen human being.[291]

Wright's speaker in the poem moves away from the daunting sights of the spillage and in the bright light reclaims both his peace and the primeval beauty of the river. To demonstrate the shift of perspective, Elkins suggests Wright created the speaker as a kind of hero who in order to find sustaining light and happiness needs to undergo an ordeal into his own dark depths, overcome oneself and emerge victorious with that love and happiness he sought.[292] After carefully looking at Wright's work, Wright's speaker could indeed be talked of as being exactly that kind of a hero who needed to overcome himself, his displeasures and difficulties to eventually find solace and love in his life. By the end of this poem, the speaker no longer condemns the people of Ohio, nor the symbolical Ohio River so hideously presented at the beginning, but he celebrates them with kindness and open heart.

3.12 "The Journey"

Although undoubtedly longer and much more dynamic in its nature, "The Journey" might to some extent resemble earlier discussed poem "Beginning" in that it shares the

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[290] Elkins, 175.
[291] Elkins, 175.
[292] Elkins, 175-76, Elkins largely draws on a comparison with Joseph Campbell's version of mythological hero.

wasteland feeling and sudden flashes of light which carry with themselves the epiphanic experience. Series of alliterations found within "The Journey" are an excellent tool to incorporate the sounds of wind ("Blow all over your body") and evoke dryness (all the hissing sounds) which is the main uniting theme of the poem. Irregular and unexpected rhymes provide sufficient craftsmanship to accompany this at first glance dramatic poem.

The alliteration so playfully placed in the first two lines of the first stanza "sweeps" the reader into a seemingly barren wasteland of medieval Anghiari. The speaker informs about strong winds blowing through the landscape and it seems impossible for him and his companion to avoid them: "We too were swept out, out by the wind /Alone with the Tuscan grass."[293] The land is completely dry, swept of all water and what might otherwise be a luscious hillside appears now after many days of harsh, unforgiving winds as a desert, only the yellowish sand is replaced by an important carrying agent of the present poem – dust:

> Wind had been blowing across the hills
> For days, and everything now was graying gold
> With dust.[294]

The dust in the poem, as the reader is to find out, plays and important role throughout the three major parts of the poem. Beginning by its first appearance in the first stanza, the reader soon learns that everything in the poem is covered with a blanket of mysterious dust which pervades the poem and spreads over "even / Some small children scampering along a road."[295] The dust in the poem is at first a symbol of withering and impermanence mercilessly covering even the youngest who are "Twittering Italian to a small caged bird."[296] The boundaries within which the bird is placed add to the already smothering feeling the poem attempts to achieve by the thick layer of dust everywhere to be seen. The wings of the bird might not be covered with dust, but he is still unable to majestically fly away from the dreadful scenery. The playfulness of the language signaled by the "twitter" of

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[293] James Wright, "The Journey," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 337.
[294] Wright, *Above the River,* 337.
[295] Wright, *Above the River,* 337.

the small children and the immediate appearance of a bird opens a small window of hope in the poem and offers a respite. The grayish ambience attempts to be brightened by the jolly younglings whose behaviour at this stage of the poem, however, may seem like cruel mocking of the poor caged bird.

The speaker and his companion(s) are moving through the landscape and are weary of the harsh weather conditions and dustiness of the place: "We sat beside them to rest in some brushwood / And I leaned down to rinse the dust from my face."[297] The dryness of brushwood contributes to the ever-present lack of water and the reader might wonder, then, with what the speaker rinses his face when he sits down to relax.

In the brushwood, the speaker finds an unexpected surprise in the form of a spider web which, too, is covered with dust: "I found the spider web there, whose hinges/ Reeled heavily and crazily with the dust."[298] Attached to the brushwood, the sound of the hinges reeling heavily brings acoustic representation of the inhospitable surface in the poem, which by now might resemble the moon-like surface. The speaker finds abundant amount of dust even in the spider web: "Whole mounds and cemeteries of it."[299] The meaning of dust now almost turns into ash and takes on its symbolism of death and mutability which is even more apparent in the following line where it covers the vacant bodies of the spider's prey as the dust is "sagging /And scattering shadows among shells and wings."[300] The bodies are empty, barren and dry the same way as the rest of the poem's imagery conveys. They have been sucked out of their life giving liquid by the spider which is nowhere to be found. That changes with the coming of the following surprising lines:

> And then she stepped into the center of air
> Slender and fastidious, the golden hair
> Of daylight along her shoulders, she poised there.[301]

The metaphorical tides of the poems suddenly turn with the appearance of the spider lady. Not only is she described in terms which personify her and allow for her the characteristics

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[296] Wright, *Above the River,* 337.
[297] Wright, *Above the River,* 338.
[298] Wright, *Above the River,* 338.
[299] Wright, *Above the River,* 338.
[300] Wright, *Above the River,* 338.
[301] Wright, *Above the River,* 338.

of an elegant female model with her "slender" body, "golden hair" and poised posture, but she brings light into the gray images of the dim, wind-swept poem. Although living amongst the metaphorical corpse ruins of the bodies of her prey, the spider lady is surprisingly free of dust:

> While ruins crumbled on every side of her.
> Free of the dust, as though a moment before
> She had stepped inside the earth, to bathe herself.[302]

She is in the midst of a falling world, yet she manages to stay alive and fresh. The earth becomes the ideal place of cleansing for her. The spider is washed clean and the speaker presumes it happened "inside the earth". The poem acknowledges one last meaning to the dust – it is the biblical dust which creates all things as well as takes all things. Its "archetypal signification of sterility and religious association with death"[303] is intensified, yet disclaims its smothering and perilous effect, but rather offers – supported by the act of bathing – "a positive force in this poem, a benediction."[304] The earth and dust for her become a source of holy water and her impeccable looks are provided by the "baptism" she undertook.[305] The arid atmosphere and landscape of the poem thus changes abruptly and while water is not explicitly mentioned, it is found within these metaphorical suggestions in the poem. The reader might be reminded of some of Wright's previous poems discussed in which bathing of a woman also served as a powerful trigger for epiphany[306] – in the present poem, after all, the spider becomes the personification and viewed as a woman.

The spider lady can then pose freely, unblemished, and her "fastidious" cleanliness thus represents for the speaker a shining beacon of light which penetrates the sterility and grayness of the place and attracts his curious attention: "I gazed, close to her, till at last she stepped / Away in her own good time."[307] The spider is spontaneous and the temporal vagueness assures of the speaker's stasis in the moment of his epiphany as he gazes at her in awe and expectation. The sudden revelation of the spider lady brought for the speaker his

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[302] Wright, *Above the River,* 338.
[303] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 139.
[304] Stitt, "James Wright: The Garden and the Grime," 89-90.
[305] Dougherty, *James Wright,* 139-140.
[306] Cf. analyzed poems "The Angel" and "Beginning."

own revelatory experience. The moment expands as the speaker shares his newfound wisdom:

> Many men
> Have searched all over Tuscany and never found
> What I found there, the heart of the light
> Itself shelled and leaved, balancing
> On filaments themselves falling.[308]

The source of his epiphany is indeed the spider lady which brought enduring effects upon the speaker's mind. The spider does not contend with time, she does everything "in her own good time", nor with the harsh wind. She lets wind and dust "go on blowing" while balancing throughout her life as best as she can while being protected in her web even thought the ruins crumble and fall around her. The spider becomes the perfect inspiration, "the heart of light", for the speaker's epiphanic moment. Inspired by the intense events, the speaker continues the line while turning to the reader with his climatic revelation:

> The secret
> Of this journey is to let the wind
> Blow its dust all over your body,
> To let it go on blowing, to step lightly, lightly
> All the way through your ruins, and not to lose
> Any sleep over the dead, who surely
> Will bury their own, don't worry.[309]

The present, past and the future are united by the all-covering, ever-present dust. The bible references ring through the lines like a calming echo: dust you are, and to dust you shall return. The speaker is not afraid of death, nor contends with its certainty. He accepts it as the part of life. The light is, though, not brought to him from heavens but metaphorically through the small, ordinary creature he found shining clean in the web. The speaker's peaceful and confident tone stems from the realization that he, too, seizes the battles with

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[307] Wright, *Above the River,* 338.
[308] Wright, *Above the River,* 338.
[309] Wright, *Above the River,* 338.

time, nature or death itself. He advises the reader to "let the blow go on blowing" knowing that the harsh conditions are only a natural part of life. He is confident enough to step through the "ruins" of his inner self as well as the desperate circumstances life may bring. As he steps, he can carry the wonderful puns of "*light*ly" with himself. The falling ruins of withering body and ageing pose no threat at the place where he can find his own heart of light, his "jewel" if he dares yield. He is transformed into the state of serenity and also understands that his final and natural transformation will turn him into dust from which he, metaphorically, was once created.

According to the speaker, then, the secret of the journey, the secret of *life* itself as the speaker aptly suggests, is to "welcome that transformation" which is natural and "not to hold on to the self"[310] which is normally so protective and frightened. The epiphany as coming-to-terms with death is what transforms and relieves the speaker even as he is able to witness signs of death around him – the barren wasteland void of life giving water, caged bird, and empty bodies of little insects. The dead, after all, will take care of their own and it is important not to "lose any sleep", not to be "paralyzed by the effect of losing" one's life or that of others.[311] It is the similar attitude of Wright's speaker in "Inscription for the Tank" who proclaims: "Let the dead pray for their own dead"[312] or found in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" where he says: "I don't pity the dead I pity the dying."[313] The speaker of the present poem may thus also celebrate the twittering young, the small young bird, as well as himself, since they all may still enjoy the light of life.

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[310] Martone, 64-75.
[311] Stitt, "James Wright: The Garden and the Grime," 90.
[312] James Wright, "Inscription for the Tank," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 150.
[313] James Wright, "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 83.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the thesis was to search for and analyze poems of epiphanies in the poetry of the contemporary American poet James Wright which have similarly positive effects as one of the most popular and frequently anthologized poems by the author "A Blessing." The thesis attempted to demonstrate that "A Blessing" is not the only instance of such pleasurable poem of epiphany among the poet's works and that similar poems of epiphany can, in fact, be found throughout the author's poetry. The thesis discussed the phenomenon of literary epiphany in poetry and focused on the analysis of selected poems by James Wright in which the particular epiphanies produce various positive transformation effects and reactions in the observer, the speaker of the poem.

Battling a difficult illness all his life, it is interesting to see the balance in the poetry of James Wright. The poet created quite a believable representation of the world in his poetry in which there is a place for almost every aspect of the human world and subject matter: people on the margin of society, misfits, outcasts, criminals, corruption, regret, resignation on life, death, desperation, compassion, pleasures, joys, humour, love, faith and hope. All this is quite often also accompanied by a rich bestiary of animals, symbolism, and imagery.

Complementing "A Blessing" as one of the most popular poems by the author in which the speaker achieves an epiphany experience, the poet James Wright wrote a number of other poems of epiphany which provide a pleasurable insight into the moment of life or the self of the speaker. The epiphany poems in the author's works often manifest universal wisdom about life or offer various beneficial realizations.

The selected poems illustrate various environments in which the positive epiphany is experienced in James Wright's works. The poems of epiphany seem to illuminate the darker aspects of the author's poetry and create equilibrium within the broad range of his subject matters. The background of the poems is not always pleasant pastures in nature as in "A Blessing," but also include frustrated searches for the meaning of life, desolate places, drowsy moments, journeys into the dark landscapes of the psyche or metaphorical representations of the self's soul. As demonstrated, the positive epiphanies and their effects in the analyzed poems range from coming to terms with death, finding simple, yet powerful joys in everyday moments, realizing one's resilience and perseverance, to finding peace or

escape in nature. In some of the poems the epiphany also encourages the speaker to perform good deeds, acts of love, forgiveness, and compassion.

Some of the poems chosen for the analysis of the moments of epiphany are perhaps among those for which Wright is still read, re-read or studied, and therefore remembered even during this age in which approach toward poetry is perhaps situated on the margin of literature. The study of moments of epiphany in poetry or in any other form of art may then prove useful in the sense of the profound contribution they bring by the character of their revelatory nature to this hurried, impatient world and provide a pleasant form of entertainment for the imagination as well as the intrigued mind of their readers.

For those who seek poems akin to the Romantic tradition abundant in natural sceneries, rich imagery, and approaches toward human experience with all its pitfalls, dark corners, but also pleasures, joys and love, the poetry of James Wright is definitely an excellent choice. It is poetry of a troubled, yet somehow joyful Horatian, talented man, artistic craftsman and honest poet. It is no wonder that James Wright was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The poet constantly sought to improve his style and craft as is demonstrated by the two major changes during the development of his poetry. He managed to produce balanced poems as well as prose poems of great value, uniqueness, and quality for a wide range of audiences.

Particularly so would be the case of James Wright's poems of epiphany which. As this thesis attempted to indicate, they provide refreshing reading attempting to bring the reader's imagination, sensual and inner capacities to the fore in a beautiful interplay to seek guidance from within one's self in everyday moments. The meaning and value of the poems is presented in accessible poetry.

I feel it is important to mention, with full respect to the author's creativity and range of subject matter, that the selected poems are not by far the complete spectrum of poems containing moments of epiphany found in James Wright's poetry during writing this thesis. There are more examples of similar poems analysis of which would be beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I think that the presented poems are the most representative examples for the purposes and the aim of the thesis.

Moreover, I think that the selected poems may also represent a list of the most enjoyable poems of epiphanies which might be appropriate and worth reading for those who like poetry with unexpected experiences, some form of enlightenment, but most

importantly, pleasant, illuminating and unique form of art. The poems were created by one of the most praised, talented, and accessible poets of the contemporary American poetry, James Wright, the poet who brought light and affirmation of good in his poetry, especially in the poems of epiphany.

RESUMÉ

Současný Americký básník James Wright (1927-1980) vytvořil bohatou a velmi oblíbenou poezii. Jednou z jeho nejznámějších a nejčastěji uváděnou básní ve sbírkách či antologiích je báseň zvaná „A Blessing“ (Požehnání). Dá se říci, že tato báseň je v mnohém typickým příkladem básníkovy tvorby neboť obsahuje spoustu prvků, které James Wright hojně ve svých básních používal – ať už jsou to motivy venkovského prostředí, odpoutání se od civilizace a útěk do přírody, či poutavý jazyk líčící každodenní skutečnost. V neposlední řadě se k těmto prvkům dá přiřadit symbolika, obrazy, které často nemají daleko k těm surrealistickým, a nečekané zakončení v několika posledních řádcích básně.

Mluvčí básně „A Blessing“ je na konci svého putování a návštěvy venkovské pastviny s koňmi, jež pro něj znázorňuje pouť do panenské přírody daleko od hlučících aut či zásahu lidské ruky, ve stavu téměř naprostého splynutí s přírodou. Celý jeho zážitek a kontakt s přírodou jej ovlivňuje natolik, že v posledních řádcích básně dosahuje mluvčí jevu, který se nazývá epifanie, neboli také náhlé zjevení a projev důležité myšlenky ve zdánlivě obyčejném okamžiku a uvědomění si něčeho důležitého. Tato událost mluvčího pozitivním způsobem proměňuje natolik, že v posledních řádcích dosahuje náhlé euforie, jež jej přinutí konstatovat: „Náhle si uvědomuji / že kdybych vystoupil ze svého těla / rozkvetl bych.“

Cílem diplomové práce bylo prozkoumat básnickou tvorbu Jamese Wrighta a najít v jeho dílech další básně, které obsahují podobný epifanický moment, jež má pozitivní účinek na mluvčího, podobně jako je tomu ve zmiňované básni „A Blessing.“ Práce se zabývala termínem literární epifanie a jejím výskytem v několika takto vybraných básních Jamese Wrighta a jejich rozborem zaměřeným na epifanický okamžik v dané básni. Roli při konkrétních rozborech hraje kontext, použitá symbolika a obrazy, a především reakce mluvčího v básni na epifanický zážitek. Vybrané básně pro rozbor představují řadu odlišných situací a prostředí, ve kterých mluvčí básně epifanie dosahuje, a jejích konkrétních pozitivních účinků na mluvčího.

První kapitola se zabývá životem Jamese Wrighta, vlivy na jeho básnickou tvorbu a popisuje také dvě zásadní změny jeho stylu psaní, ke kterým při vývoji jeho básnické tvorby došlo. Tyto změny vždy posunuly básníka směrem k jeho celkové snaze tvořit unikátní poezii vyznačující se čistým slovním výrazem, jasnými myšlenkami a přirozenou podobou.

Důležitým faktorem pro tvorbu James Wrighta bylo to, že se narodil a vyrostl ve městě Martins Ferry poblíž řeky Ohio v americkém státě Ohio v období ekonomické krize. Jeho otec ani matka nedostudovali a zejména jeho otec celý život tvrdě dřel ve sklárně, aby zaopatřil rodinu v těžké době. Tato zkušenost Jamesi Wrightovi ukázala okolnosti, od kterých se snažil, jak sám uvedl, utéct, aby ho nestihl stejný pracovně náročný, tíživý a nejistý osud jako jeho otce.

Navíc Wrightovi tato nevlídná doba ukázala celou řadu kontrastů a prvků, které autor sám později při své básnické tvorbě používal jako motivů. Těmi jsou velmi často, zejména v ranné básníkově tvorbě, ztracené existence, lidé na okraji společnosti, vrahové, opilci, prostitutky, lidé plní beznaděje, stejně jako prvky smrti, nesnází, zoufalství, strachu a existenciální nejistoty, často doplněné o samotnou řeku Ohio, která v určitých básních představuje nehostinnou stoku či samotnou řeku mrtvých.

Stejně tak však básníkovou tvorbou prostupují lyrické okamžiky z venkovské přírody, oblastí amerického Středozápadu či drobné humorné básně, meditativní i milostná poezie. Dá se říci, že tyto, stejně jako básně, ve kterých se objevuje epifanický zážitek, slouží jako vyvažující části k výše zmíněným elegiím a dílům zabývajícími se temnějšími okamžiky lidského života. Epifanické básně prosvětlují básníkovu tvorbu, odkrývají mluvčímu taje každodenních okamžiků a sdělují hluboké myšlenky.

Práce zmiňuje hlavní vlivy, jež jsou často ve spojitosti s Jamesem Wrightem uváděny. Ať již při studiích či při četbě, James Wright přišel do kontaktu s několika osobami, které pomohly formovat či měnit jeho básnickou tvorbu. Jedním ze základních představitelů důležitých vlivů na básníka představoval římský básník Horatius (Horace), kterého James Wright často zmiňoval jako svého „mentora“, a ve kterém autor našel inspiraci pro tvorbu pečlivé, jazykově čisté, srozumitelné a přístupné poezie.

Dalšími osobami, které pro autora znamenaly inspiraci pro jeho tvorbu, byli američtí básnící Edwin Arlington Robinson a Robert Frost, v jejichž básních James Wright viděl tvorbu básnického světa, který, byť často tragický, působí reálně. Především ve své ranné tvorbě u prvních dvou knih James Wright dodržoval preciznost formálních aspektů vyskytující se v poezii obou básníků.

Autor také čerpal formální a jazykovou důslednost z jeho dvou učitelů při studiích. John Crowe Ransom básníkovi ukázal formální dokonalost a precizní tvorbu básní; Theodor

Roethke později svou zručností jak v tradičním, tak i volnějším stylu psaní básní otevřenou formou, ukázal Jamesi Wrightovi škálu možností, jakých lze pro tvorbu poezie využít.

Cokoliv pro básníka nastínil Theodor Roethke volnějším stylem a otevřenou formou, pomohl plně zrealizovat básník a časem Wrightův velmi dobrý kamarád Robert Bly. Bly byl zastáncem toho, že by se tvorba básní nemusela držet striktních tradičních forem – jakými byli pravidelný rým a metrum – které do té doby byly považovány za jakousi normu a standard tehdejší poezie v Americe, ale že by se poezie měla odvíjet od přirozeného vyjadřování sdělujícím jasné myšlenky, které nejsou ztraceny v rýmech či složitých metaforách. Jelikož James Wright v té době hledal svůj osobitý a originální přístup k poezii a vyjadřování svých myšlenek, sloužil Robert Bly jako vítaný vliv pro Wrightův básnický posun kupředu.

Ačkoliv James Wright nikdy naprosto neupustil od tradičních forem a stylu psaní básní, Robert Bly a jeho vliv pro básníka znamenali první zásadní změnu s příchodem třetí sbírky básní Jamese Wrighta *The Branch Will Not Break*. Tehdy v jeho básnické tvorbě došlo k velmi rozsáhlému užívání volného verše. Ten se stal pro mnohé básníky té doby v Americe jakýmsi útěkem od tradičního formálního stylu a samotnému Jamesi Wrightovi umožnil psát unikátní básně, které již dlouhou dobu toužil psát.

Tyto skutečnosti byly o to více umocněny tím, že Robert Bly přivedl Jamese Wrighta k překladům zahraničních básníků, zejména pak hispánského či německého původu, na kterých oba básnící začali pracovat. U nich Wright osobně našel inspiraci pro tvorbu básní založených na přirozeném jazyce, působení silných obrazů a surrealistických prvků. Robert Bly a James Wright jsou také často spojováni s americkou školou Deep Image (hloubkový obraz), která pracuje s vědomím člověka, jeho smysly a představivostí. Mnohé z těchto prvků se objevují i v epifanických básních zmiňovaných v této práci, zejména pak v básních „Beginning“ či „The Jewel“.

Velkým úspěchem, uznáním a jistě i důkazem toho, že se jeho básnická kariéra ubírá správným směrem, byla pro Jamese Wrighta Pulitzerova cena v roce 1972, kterou básník získal za sbírku básní s názvem *Collected Poems* vydanou v roce 1971. V ní James Wright vedle básní z minulých sbírek uvedl i několik svých překladů básní zahraničních autorů.

Kromě zmíněného posunu k volnému verši prodělala tvorba Jamese Wrighta ještě druhou změnu během jeho básnické kariéry, kdy James Wright začal obohacovat svou poezii i o řadu menších básnických próz. Tyto básnické kousky mají povětšinou podobu

zápisků do diáře, které básník psal inspirován svými cestami po Evropě se svou ženou Anne a které jsou i většinou doplněny o název místa, ke kterému se vztahují. Tento krok k psaní básnických próz je považován za jeden z vrcholných projevů básnické zručnosti Jamese Wrighta.

Druhá kapitola se pro účely rozboru epifanických básní Jamese Wrighta zaměřuje na definici termínu epifanie v literatuře a jejím místem v poezii, s ohledem na tradici lyrických básní Romantismu, ke kterým James Wright nemá v řadě básních daleko. O epifanii (slova pocházejícího z řecké *epiphainein*, tedy ukázat či projevit) se z hlediska jeho historického vývoje nejprve mluví jako o zjevení či projevu vyšší moci a božstva, což je spojeno s křesťanským zjevením Krista o svátku Tří králů. Postupem času se však epifanie stává i zkušeností, která již není spojována se zjevením Boží vůle, ale spíše se zjevováním a prožíváním nenadálých a povětšinou důležitých myšlenek či skutečností. Ty lze nalézat v každodenních věcech a okamžicích, které pomáhají pozorovateli uvědomit si důležitost zpráv, které sdílí a jejich význam.

Ačkoliv ve své době a ve své poezii nepoužil přímo slovo epifanie, je anglický básník William Wordsworth považován za prvního, kdo se pokusil ve svém díle *The Prelude* pojmenovat a upozornit na takzvané „spots of time“ (místa v čase). Jedná se o určité události, které náhle intenzivněji pronikají do popředí vnímání pozorovatele a které povznáší jejich všední význam. Tím přinutí dotyčnou osobu změnit pohled na daný okamžik a pomůžou jí uvědomit si jejich mnohem hlubší a prospěšnější smysl.

Díky tvorbě Williama Wordswortha a dále také amerických spisovatelů Ralp Waldo Emersona a Jamese Joyce se postupem času pojem epifanie mění z ryze náboženského pojetí ve světský zážitek, kterého je možné dosáhnout nečekaně v každodenních situacích při pozorování a vnímání povětšinou obyčejných předmětů či událostí. Jako epifanii tento „zářící“ a intenzivní zážitek a okamžik vyvolávající určitou změnu vnímání či hlubší zamyšlení poprvé označuje James Joyce ve svém díle *Stephen Hero*.

S ohledem na rozbor vybraných epifanických básní Jamese Wrighta se kapitola dále snaží těžit z několika kritických přístupů k výskytu epifanie v literatuře, zejména v poezii. Za literární epifanii je považován takový zážitek, který je vyvolán nečekaně, často obyčejnou věcí či událostí, který náhle a intenzivně podněcuje smysly a vnímání toho, kdo jej prožívá; sděluje mu hlubší myšlenku a vyvolává tak reakce a transformační účinky,

jejichž spirituální důležitost je nesouměřitelná s tím, jaký předmět či událost epifanii vyprodukovali. Takovýto epifanický moment pak obohacuje báseň tím, že nepopisuje určitou myšlenku přímo a detailně ji nevysvětluje, ale nutí čtenáře, aby s básní, jejími prvky, kontextem a mluvčím spolupracoval a podílel se tak na zážitku samotném a jeho přínosu.

Co se týče pozice epifanického momentu v básni, kapitola poukazuje na fakt, že tohoto zážitku může být dosaženo na kterémkoli místě v básni, ba dokonce i mimo báseň. Báseň je v takovém případě jakousi dohrou či reakcí na tento intenzivní zážitek a něco takového lze nalézt například v rozebírané básni „The Jewel".

Druhá kapitola také zmiňuje důležitost celého kontextu, symbolů a obrazů použitých v rámci epifanické básně. Tyto prvky působí na smysly a vnímání jak mluvčího básně – osoby, jež prožívá epifanický zážitek – tak čtenáře, který se do celého procesu v básni zapojuje. Prostřednictvím svého mluvčího a právě těmito prvky básník vytváří a komunikuje tento zážitek. Celá tato souhra pak pomáhá vytvořit úspěšnou epifanii v básni a její účinky. Ty často sdělují důležité a obohacující myšlenky o lidském životě a vyzdvihují skutečnost, že prakticky jakýkoli zdánlivě obyčejný životní okamžik v sobě skrývá svou důležitost a krásu.

Třetí kapitola předkládá vybrané básně Jamese Wrighta, které obsahují náhlý epifanický zážitek a pozitivními účinky tak přeměňují mluvčího básně či jeho vnímání a sdělují různé prospěšné myšlenky. Kapitola začíná úvodem, který diskutuje výskyt epifanických básní v tvorbě Jamese Wrighta a jejich význam a místo v celkovém pohledu na poezii tohoto amerického básníka. Úvod této kapitoly se snaží poukázat na fakt, že se James Wright snažil vytvořit vyváženou poezii a právě epifanické básně s pozitivními a obohacujícími účinky mohou patřit mezi ty básně, které vyvažují stinné a temnější stránky básníkovy tvorby, o kterých se zmiňuje zejména první kapitola. Jak práce zdůrazňuje, dle mnohých byl totiž James Wright básník, který nelpěl na temnotě či beznaději, ale snažil se ve své tvorbě poukazovat na skutečnost, že je potřeba se smířit s lidským světem a brát jej takový, jaký je; vždy se snažil předkládat existenci možného a dosažitelného v rovnováze lidského světa a právě v epifanických básních o těchto hodnotách radostně ujišťovat.

Třetí kapitola se dále ve své hlavní části zaměřuje na rozbor vybraných básní, které jsem vybral ze všech období tvorby Jamese Wrighta a které jsou seřazeny chronologicky pro lepší orientaci i s ohledem na zmiňovaný vývoj básníkovy poezie. Výběrem konkrétních

básní se snažím mimo jiné poukázat na to, že epifanické básně nejsou záležitostí pouze jednoho období či sbírky tohoto básníka a také na skutečnost, že se tyto zážitky objevují v různých kontextech a prostředích.

Jelikož epifanie v básních vyvolávají efekt proměny vnitřního stavu mluvčího a mají za následek jeho reakci na tento intenzivní zážitek, v rozborech básní se také zabývám právě těmito proměnami a reakcemi mluvčího vyskytující se v dané básni. V básních sleduji narativní proces, který směřuje k okamžiku, kdy mluvčí dosahuje epifanie, s cílem rozebrat klíčové pasáže básně s ohledem na jejich důležitost pro okamžik dané epifanie a její sdělení. Zaměřuji se především na kontext a použití symboliky a obrazů, jež přispívají k smyslovému procítění daných okamžiků a při rozboru pomáhají objasnit jak význam konkrétní epifanie, tak i pozitivní reakci mluvčího na ni a dané obohacující sdělení. Při rozboru je brán ohled na součásti a kritéria, která mohou ovlivňovat dosažení a výskyt epifanie v básni, jak je uvedeno ve druhé kapitole.

V básníkově tvorbě, jak se snaží výběr básní v této práci naznačit, není epifanie dosaženo pouze při kontaktu s přírodou, jak je tomu ve zmiňované básni „A Blessing“, ale jedná se o řadu událostí, které zintenzivňují smyslové vnímání mluvčího básni a evokují v něm epifanický zážitek.

Například pro Anděla v první rozebírané básni se stane spouštěčem epifanického zážitku moment, kdy najednou spatří přitažlivou ženu, která se koupe v řece u města. S ohledem na kontext se jedná o zcela nečekanou chvíli a pro apatického a frustrovaného Anděla tento okamžik přináší epifanii, jejíž efekt probudí v Andělovi do té doby zcela nepoznané city smrtelníků – lásku a touhu – které rozechvějí celé jeho tělo i křídla a rozjasní jeho jinak pochmurné a znepokojené putování lidským světem. Báseň i rozbor dále sledují jeho pozitivní reakce na epifanii, která pomáhá Andělovi objasnit smysl lidského života, který nalézá v lásce, a která mu zároveň odpovídá na otázku, jež si od začátku svého putování klade – proč se Kristus za lidstvo obětoval.

Jak je v druhé kapitole uvedeno, mluvčí může dosáhnout epifanie i mimo báseň a ta je pak jakýmsi důsledkem a reakcí na tento zážitek. Příkladem v rozboru je nádherná báseň plná obrazů a symboliky „The Jewel“ (Drahokam). V této básni se mluvčí obrazovými prostředky snaží reagovat na uvědomění si existence něčeho podstatného ve svém nitru a zároveň dosahuje další epifanie. Ta jej ujišťuje nejen o nedotknutelnosti a nezničitelnosti

svého nejhlubšího já, ale také o symbolické regeneraci, vitalitě a metaforicky vytváří i jakousi rajskou zahradu v jeho duši, ve které lze kdykoliv získat potřebnou sílu.

I když některé básně začínají v temných koutech lidské duše, jak je tomu například v básni „Beginning“ (Začátek), ve větrem a prachem zmítaném prostředí téměř na hranici apokalyptického světa v „The Journey“ (Putování), či znázorněním nehostinné stoky, k níž je připodobněno „Beautiful Ohio“ (Nádherné Ohio), epifanický zážitek celou báseň prosvětluje a dává tak skutečně najevo možnost zlepšení a existenci hlubšího, uklidňujícího smyslu celé prospěšné události. Podobně je tomu i v básni „Northern Pike“ (Štika), kde se pochmurný začátek básně, kdy mluvčí přemýšlí o okolnostech smrti, postupně mění a při rybářském výletu, jež nese symboliku náboženské mše, snězení ulovené ryby evokuje v mluvčím epifanii, která jej duchovním způsobem ujišťuje o věčné vnitřní radosti a klidu.

Epifanické básně Jamese Wrighta jsou příjemné a fascinující zejména tím, že v nich mluvčí nepopisuje přímo proč či jak k danému okamžiku epifanie přišel, ale nutí čtenáře sledovat celé vyprávění a jeho kontext, včetně obrazů a symboliky, které autor do příběhu proplétá. To všechno totiž hraje roli pro pochopení významu epifanie v básni a přispívá k tomu, že je tento zážitek nečekaný a sdílí se čtenářem pronikavou zkušenost a zprávu unikátním způsobem. V básních se tedy nejedná o nahodilý a povrchový popis jevu, předmětu, události či symbolu, ale o důmyslné vyprávění, které se jejich využitím snaží apelovat na smysly jak mluvčího básně, tak i čtenáře a jeho představivost, který se na základě vyprávění a použitých prostředků postupně vžívá do mluvčího, jenž epifanii v básni prožívá a sdílí.

Kromě básně „A Blessing“, která je pravděpodobně jednou z nejpopulárnějších básní Jamese Wrighta, ve které mluvčí dosahuje epifanie, napsal tento básník mnoho dalších epifanických básní, které poskytují mluvčímu básně příjemný a prospěšný náhled do každodenních okamžiků a života. Epifanické básně Jamese Wrighta sdílí nádherné, různorodé myšlenky o lidském životě, životních zkušenostech či vnitřním já, a projevují obohacující pocity v různých prostředích a kontextech a mají, jak vybrané básně ukazují, pozitivní charakter a účinek, jenž je často vyvrcholením vnitřního napětí na konci básně.

Jak ilustrují rozbory vybraných básní, nejedná se pouze o touhu utéct do přírody a splynout s přírodou, jak je tomu v básni „A Blessing“. Tyto pozitivní epifanické momenty představují vítězné cesty do hlubin duše, smíření se smrtí, stárnutím, či temnými stránkami

lidského života, nalezení smyslu života a radosti v každodenních okamžicích, uvědomění si vlastní odolnosti a nesmrtelnosti, a také schopnosti konat dobré skutky nehledě na okolnosti či nalézat klid a lásku všude kolem sebe.

Jelikož James Wright bojoval po celý svůj život s bipolární poruchou, která mu často komplikovala život nebo dokonce způsobila nejedno nervové zhroucení, je zajímavé vidět rovnováhu v jeho poezii a snahu nalézt ujišťující a kladné okamžiky. James Wright vytvořil ve své poezii poměrně reálnou reprezentaci světa, která zastupuje téměř všechny stránky lidského bytí, aniž by se jednalo o pouhé citové výlevy. Tento svět a jeho různorodost lze spatřit i ve vybraných epifanických básních a jejich sdělení.

Mnohé z básní, které jsem vybral pro rozbor epifanických momentů, patří nejspíše také mezi ty, díky kterým je James Wright stále velmi populárním básníkem, který vytvořil unikátní a kvalitní poezii v druhé polovině 20. století v Americe. Epifanické básně Jamese Wrighta lze nalézt napříč jeho básnickou tvorbou a představují svěží zpestření a obohacení jeho poezie, která se snaží přilákat a rozeznít představivost čtenářů, stejně jako jejich citové vnímání a vnitřní schopnosti a básně jsou tak velmi příjemným čtenářským zážitkem a dobrodružstvím sdělujícím přínosné myšlenky. Díky snaze neustále vylepšovat svoji poezii, přinášet celou řadu motivů a hlavně psát co nejpřístupnějším způsobem, jsou básně Jamese Wrighta navíc vhodné pro celou řadu čtenářů, kteří mohou nalézt oblibu v básních autora, jenž zvláště v epifanických básních ujišťuje o možnostech pozitivní změny a nalezení nádherných okamžiků v každodenním životě.

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ANOTACE

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Abstrakt

Cílem diplomové práce je najít a provést rozbor konkrétních příkladů epifanických básní v poezii současného amerického básníka Jamese Wrighta, které v mluvčím básně vyvolávají pozitivní účinky a reakce. Rozborem vybraných básní tato práce poukazuje na to, že nejčastěji se vyskytující báseň tohoto básníka v antologiích zvaná „A Blessing" (Požehnání) není jediným příkladem epifanické básně s pozitivními účinky v autorově tvorbě a také skutečnost, že se okamžiky epifanie objevují v různých prostředích a kontextech. Práce rovněž poukazuje na fakt, že epifanické básně Jamese Wrighta nejsou úkazem pouze určité éry či jedné sbírky básní, ale jsou spíše osvěžujícím prvkem, který lze nalézt v celém rozsahu básníkových děl. Kapitoly diplomové práce se zabývají autorovým životem, jeho básnickým vývojem a také shrnutím termínu literární epifanie v poezii. V poslední kapitole je proveden rozbor epifanických básní, které jsou vybrány z celého rozsahu básníkovy tvorby. Při rozboru je brán ohled na celkový kontext dané básně, a na momenty vedoucím k nebo ovlivňující epifanický prožitek. V konkrétním rozboru se společně s pozitivním účinkem epifanie uvádí i shrnutí básně.

Klíčová slova: James Wright, americká poezie, básně, epifanie, okamžiky epifanie, zjevení, proměna.

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Abstract

The aim of the thesis is to find and analyze particular examples of poems of epiphany in the poetry of the contemporary American poet James Wright, which produce positive effects and reactions in the speaker of the poem. In the analysis of the selected poems, the thesis shows that the most frequently anthologized poem "A Blessing" is not the only example of a poem of epiphany with positive effects in the author's work, and that the moments of epiphany are achieved in various environments and contexts. It is also pointed out that James Wright's poems of epiphanies are not a phenomenon of one era or one collection of poems, but rather a refreshing element found within the whole scope of the author's poetry. The chapters of the thesis deal with the poet's life, his poetical development, and summary of the phenomenon of literary epiphany in poetry. In the final chapter, selected poems chosen from the whole scope of James Wright's poetry are analyzed. The poems are analyzed with respect to the overall context of each poem, and to the moments leading to or influencing the epiphanic experience. In the particular analysis, the positive effect of the epiphany is discussed along with a summary of the poem.

Key words: James Wright, American poetry, poems, epiphany, moments of epiphany, revelation, transformation.