

American's caged misery is so convincing that we accept murder as an understandable (if not excusable) response.

Freedom, an especially sacred word in the black vocabulary, meant more than just political liberty to Wright. The search for an authentic self consumed the novelist from one end of his career to the other as he shed successive identities supplied by his religion-obsessed mother, by the southern bigots he fled, and by the northern Communists he joined. But *The Outsider* shows that Wright, for all his intelligence and willpower, could not remake himself. The existentialism he embraced so fervently was only another religion, replacing both Christianity and communism, whereas the novel's spiritual thrashings, rhetorical afflatus, and relentless pedantry are more reminiscent of the tabernacle than of the French cafés Wright frequented at that time.

Many of these same conclusions can be drawn from *American Hunger*, a slender, autobiographical work that was detached from the original manuscript of *Black Boy* and that has now been published in its entirety for the first time. Here, writing of Chicago in the 1930s, Wright is at his naturalistic best. He offers spare and telling sketches of racial abuse and condescension, of working conditions at the time, of poisonous factionalism and ideological rigidity among the Communists, of his groping emergence as an artist. Like all of Wright's memorable work, it makes creative use of his past rather than turning away from it in self-defeating gestures of renunciation. As in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, he brings an unusual combination of intelligence and candor to the subject of race relations and teaches blacks what to be proud of in their heritage—and whites what to be ashamed of in theirs. ●

Light, Motion, Life

To a Blossoming Pear Tree

by James Wright

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 80 pp., \$7.95

Reviewed by Robert Pinsky

SOME ARTISTS create work as clearly attractive as fresh bread by proceeding in ways that, according to the best principles, ought to produce dross, lint, and inert material.

James Wright's poems, for example, always offer the reader something worth ap-

preciating, even when it is only the firmness and liveliness of his rhythms and sentences. I wish that everyone would read his poems, because they show how appealing contemporary poetry can be—and also, I admit, because they illustrate dramatically some of the ways contemporary poetry has constricted its horizons. Perhaps all of Wright's work since *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963) ought to come with a warning to the impressionable: Do Not Imitate; Can Be Fatal.

The quality I have in mind could be indicated either by the approving reviewer's cliché that the poet "trusts his imagination" or by the disapproving reviewer's cliché that would call him "self-indulgent." Beyond question, Wright indulges himself, and creates fine work by doing so; he trusts his imagination absolutely, and though it is more trustworthy than that of most writers, it sometimes lets him down.

Wright never goes very far from his characteristic subject, a subject based upon his

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MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

own sensibility: a sense that the world is almost—but not quite—too painful, damaged, and fadingly sweet to be endured. Even as one writes that, it seems that such a theme must lead only to sentimental drivel; but Wright often masters the material because of his sense of humor, his sense of timing, his dreamlike confidence that it is worthwhile to talk about his wounded animals, drunks dozing in Ohio small-town gutters, Indians stranded in bus stations. Like the greater poets Hardy and Williams, Wright never lets us be sure he has put his foot wrong. He has some of their gift for recovery and redemption, though his intellectual range does not approach theirs.

The new volume, which includes short prose works and many poems set in Italy, is part of the recent mellow, less nervous phase of Wright's work. Characteristic are the lines that conclude "One Last Look at the Adige: Verona in the Rain." They are good lines and also quite "indulgent" of Wright's peculiar self—moony and alert, self-pitying and ebullient, almost too sensitive to live:

In the middle of my own life
I woke up and found myself
Dying, fair enough, still
Alive, in the friendly city
Of my body, my secret Verona,
Milky and green,
My moving jewel, the last
Pure vein left to me.

The unrighteous heathen,
Valerio Catullo,
Was born in Verona,
And you held him in the curve of your arm.
He couldn't stand it.
He left home and went straight
To hell in Rome.
Io factum male io miselle
Adige, the lights
Have gone out on the stone bridge,
Where I stand, alone,
A dark city on one shore,
And, on the other,
A dark forest.

A brisk, heedless confidence sustains the equation of the city with the poet's body, carrying through the funny "fair enough" to the portentous alternate symbols of the last four lines. Those lines attain the brooding atmosphere sought by poets, mostly younger than Wright, of what might be called the Light-Eating School, or the Darkness Breathers. But it is a real bridge and a real river connecting Wright and Catullus, more than a mere atmosphere.

Other times, the stylistic taste and sure-footedness fail to hold a poem together, however attractive the fragments may be.

In "The Best Days," Wright does not quite close the circuit between a repeated theme from Vergil ("*optima dies prima fugit*") and the depicted scene. That scene is nearly as good as the one in Williams's poem "Fine Work with Pitch and Copper." Like Williams, Wright observes men at work:

It must weigh five hundred pounds. The best
Days are the first
To flee. The taller man has gray hair
And long thin arms, the other
Squat with young shoulders, his legs
Slightly bowed already, a laborer
With the years, like a tree.

One works the edge
Of his steel claw subtly
Between the stones.
The other waits for the right instant,
A dazzle of balance, and slips the blade
Of his cold chisel into the crack.

Balancing the great weight of this enormous
And beautiful floorstone laid by the Romans,
Holding a quarter ton of stone lightly
Between earth and air,
The tall man with the gray hair reaches
Around the corner of stone
And most delicately eases
A steel pipe beneath.
The best days are the first
To flee. Now both men
Can stand upright, then gradually,
Their fine hands sure, they can ease
The stone from its place.

What is missing is thought. The general proposition about the best days is merely folded about the scene, a *carpe diem*, fits-all-sizes garment. One hunts the poem for more, like a nervous courtier straining hopefully to make out a vaporous film of new clothes on the emperor; but the arbitrariness seems to bemuse even the poet, who writes, the last time he uses the phrase: "The best days are the first to flee,/And the underside of the stone/Is pink marble/From Verona."

And yet the poem has something: the legendary grace and balance of the sleep-walker—though clearly sleepwalkers also miss quite a lot. Wright's work is always *interesting*. When your friends tell you your one-act play is "interesting," they mean that you have bored them; but in Wright's case the word deserves its root sense of something that matters. Who else could interest the reader with a prose-lyric praising his old scoutmaster? Wright's tribute incorporates this sentence as a funny and touching analogy of the scoutmaster's tenderness toward his charges:

Robert Pinsky's book of poems, Sadness and Happiness (1975), was published by Princeton University Press.

The Vedantas illustrate the most sublime ethical ideals by describing a saint who, having endured through a thousand lives every half-assed mistake and unendurable suffering possible to humanity from birth to death, refused at the last moment to enter Nirvana because he realized that his scruffy dog, suppurating at the nostrils and half mad with rabies, could not accompany him into perfect peace.

Both the dog and the syntax compel admiration. In contrast, only a writer trusting his impulses too much, and not thinking enough, could go on, a few paragraphs later, to mess things up with something as false and literary as:

When I think of Ralph Neal's name, I feel some kind of ice breaking open in me. I feel a garfish escaping into a hill spring where the crawdads burrow down to the pure bottom in hot weather to get the cool.

The simile is exaggerated and unpersuasive, its lyricism worked up.

In the last poem of this volume, "Beautiful Ohio," the poet sits looking at a "shining waterfall" of sewage spilling from a huge pipe. (This, too, recalls Williams, in his "A Salad for the Soul.") As he gazes at the cascading sewage, his thoughts are benevolent, concerning the 16,000 and more citizens of Martins Ferry, Ohio, "quicken[ing] the river/with the speed of light." What he sees, after all, is light, motion, life:

I know what we call it
Most of the time.
But I have my own song for it,
And sometimes, even today,
I call it beauty.

That frame of mind—undeceived, appreciative, bemused, interested—is not a bad model for the reader approaching Wright's bright, aqueous, miscellaneous, fluctuating talent. ●

Books in Brief

Natural Shocks

by Richard Stern

Coward, McCann & Geoghegan,
260 pp., \$8.95

In Richard Stern's new novel, Frederick Wursup is a "cool correspondent à la Montesquieu or Heine," whose "book about the disastrous brilliance of recent American leadership" has sold millions of copies and has earned him one of journalism's coveted chairs as an independent inquisitor. He is a Puritan in a prurient age, when news has replaced gospel and gossip has become the lifeblood of news. Wursup

seeks to settle the conflict between personal and professional bents by giving in to the "temptation of journalism ... to lose yourself in other people's troubles." He writes a puff piece about an old friend under siege, which seals the contender's political casket. He accepts an assignment for an article on death and falls for a country-fresh girl called Cicia, whose cells are being attacked by melanomatosis. Says a rogue in the book, with a nod to *Hamlet*: "Puritans harvest punishments. As if flesh weren't heir to sufficient natural shocks."

In tracking Wursup, Stern introduces a range of characters tangled in a far-flung alliance and comments on the "networks of feeling" that bind them. He also satirizes "influential" periodicals—from a shoestring newsletter called *Chouinard's* to "mastodons" like *The New York Times* and the weeklies—and the dependents they serve. Stern's style makes him a target of similar criticism: Like Wursup, his novel is sustained by the intensity of first encounters and by the spicy speculations that come with them. While Stern's prose can be inventive, whimsical, and flecked with insight, it is excessively erudite. He writes like a man in love with the sound of his own voice, whose lively references to cultural trends and too many philosophers make us weary of his worldliness.

—LINCOLN CAPLAN

Elizabeth Bowen

by Victoria Glendinning
Knopf, 320 pp., \$12.50

The indefatigable Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973), prolific novelist, renowned hostess, and inveterate traveler in Europe and America, became legendary as a grande dame of letters. Like Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, she befriended, and was adored by, countless people, both illustrious and obscure.

Victoria Glendinning's lively and sympathetic study links Bowen's childhood preoccupations with the major themes of her novels. Raised by Anglo-Irish parents at Bowen's Court, the family's County Cork estate (which, regrettably, was sold and demolished in 1960), she endured, when very young, her father's mental illness and her mother's death. Resilience and avoidance shielded the child from her own grief; and later her customary survival techniques were reflected in her fiction, with passions simmering beneath a taut surface. Along with the traditional qualities of the oddly situated Anglo-Irish—energy, warmth, style, and irony—Bowen had a lingering feeling of dislocation after an adolescence

spent among a succession of relatives. She dwelt on "the tightrope between innocence and disillusion," and her most memorable characters are young girls bewildered by the world and unaware of the formidable strength of their longings.

Though anecdotes abound, with attendant name-dropping, Glendinning nonetheless presents much of substance, particularly in her scrutiny of Bowen's unusual marriage, and offers brief, cogent examinations of her work. In a life so rich in event and emotion, spanning two world wars and immense social change, Elizabeth Bowen was, as she believed a writer ideally should be, "disabused and susceptible, and forever mobile."

—LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ

Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film

by Joan Mellen

Pantheon, 384 pp., \$12.95

When a fierce stranger with a macho moustache fired his gun at the audience in the last scene of *The Great Train Robbery*, in 1903, the American film officially canonized the brutal—and brutish—male. In the succeeding decades, that male image entertained and consoled common men, earthbound and puny of imagination, with fantasy men, defiant, virile, raw, sadistic, and free. The costumes worn by the men in the movies changed with the years, from those of cowboy to cop, gangster, secret agent; and their playgrounds moved from the frontier to the Sahara, Iwo Jima, and the streets of corrupt cities. But the codes that defined their masculinity stayed rigid. Joan Mellen views them as largely false and destructive not just to men but to women as well—and as ludicrous as the fact that John Wayne's real name is Marion Michael Morrison.

It is generally accepted that the best film critics today are women, and Joan Mellen is of their circle. Her chronological survey, moored in a feminist viewpoint, bristles with new insights and shows muted signs of anger. She writes intelligently of the changing values in American culture and of the political and psychological factors that helped create the masculine mystique. And she can treat film as art without any tiresome critic's jargon.

But not everyone will accept her contention that male bonding in "buddy" films always reflects fear of and hostility toward women; her provocative and unalloyed sexual interpretations of *Deliverance* and *The Sting* will stir both partisans and protesters. —JOHN FLUDAS