

L A Y N E N E E P E R

Between the Wars: Stephen Wright's *The Amalgamation Polka* and *Meditations in Green*

STEPHEN WRIGHT, AUTHOR OF FOUR CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED novels, is by sheer dint of personal experience perhaps one of a small coterie best situated among contemporary American novelists to address, as he has in his first and last novels, the topic of war. As a veteran of the Vietnam War where he served in military intelligence as an “image interpreter” of aerial reconnaissance photography, Wright has been a first-person witness to both the mundane and horrific events of a nation at war. Unlike, however, say, Tim O’Brien who has been lastingly labeled—rightly or wrongly—as a “Vietnam writer,” Wright has managed to elude constrictive tags, in no small way through conscious effort. Although he has written what several consider to be the definitive novel about Vietnam with *Meditations in Green* (1983), he has not limited himself to that experience. When interviewed, Wright has maintained, “I’m really very, very fortunate that I did not have to spend the rest of my life being a Vietnam veteran, because there are way too many people doing that. That’s their life.”¹ Wright is no doubt acknowledging his gratitude for escaping the post-war ravages of psychological trauma suffered by so many, but his statement also indicates, I think, his unwillingness to pigeonhole himself *as an artist* as the chronicler of one particular war; writing and re-writing about *that* war has become the sole preoccupation of so many novelists and poets who endured it. His oeuvre affirms his dedication to an eclectic vision, in that *M31: A Family Romance* (1988) explores the bizarre world of UFO cultists in the

American heartland and *Going Native* (1994) delivers a postmodern tour de force representing Debord's "society of the spectacle" at century's end. With his latest work, *The Amalgamation Polka* (2006), Wright again returns to the subject of war, but this time it is the American Civil War that arrests both his attention and our own.

Between the two wars, the American Civil and Vietnam Wars, there would seem to be little immediate correspondence, save they were both exceptionally wrenching national ordeals of state, but among Wright's gifts as a novelist is his ability to reveal subterranean relationships heretofore unrecognized. Wright has said that he considers fiction to be "a superior way of knowing," and among its chief attributes must be counted the power to achieve penetrating synthesis between apparently disparate phenomena. Abstractly considered, war is a blunt instrument of polity, a violent means of executing and realizing national interests, waged to achieve some end, be it ideological, "real," or often both. Where there is division, the waging of war seeks to instill unity, one "truth," one unitary value in place of competing and conflicting values. At its simplest, war aspires to be a simplistic leveler of difference. In choosing to address America's most mythically charged war in *The Amalgamation Polka* and its most bewildering one in *Mediations in Green*, Wright seeks to demonstrate that both wars have always been perceived as having been prosecuted as the same sort of blunt, simple efforts intended to rectify complex geopolitical crises. However, in both novels, Wright instead reveals that adherence to the idea that the waging of war as a means of eradicating difference is a dangerous delusion for a citizenry to embrace. In *The Amalgamation Polka*, Wright burrows into the simple binary formula of northern and southern polarities on the issue of race to disclose that few substantive differences existed before or after the war between combatants, that instead a single, monomaniacal obsession with race undergirded (and undergirds still) the nation as a totality that no war could ever effectively remedy. In *Mediations in Green*, Wright demonstrates that a different sort of binary, of the "war over there," a foreign venture waged in a distant land "so it doesn't have to be fought here," the lynchpin preventative action in the "domino theory" meant to serve as an act of "containment"—the central trope of Vietnam War planning—is a fraudulent construct because of the deleterious domestic "spillage" that was inflicted on the American home front and so could not be contained.

The Amalgamation Polka and Racial Hysteria

Wright explores in his latest novel that most American of national obsessions, the Civil War, principal of our civic myths, and in so doing, necessarily takes on the more fundamental concern past and present: race. The Civil War was intended as a principled war, an instrument of national policy and was consciously pursued in order to repair the ideological rift borne of slaveholding, and yet such conscious efforts to mend a nation are, in Wright's estimation, masking the largely unacknowledged racial and racist manias coursing through the entire republic. Wright appropriated the title and frontispiece of *The Amalgamation Polka* from a popular antebellum cartoon depicting racially mixed couples dancing in a crowded ballroom, the etching clearly implying that dancing will "degenerate" into acts more intimate still as the night unfolds. Such racial harmony was, we have traditionally held, the hope of the Union and unspeakable dread for the Confederacy, and such a title would seem to be uncomplicated and directly related to tensions Wright explores in the book between time-honored binaries: north and south, black and white, morality and depravity. Arising from these contrarities, the Union's triumph in warfare, or so conventional wisdom would have it, has come to be seen as a vindication of racial egalitarianism embodied by white and black dancers of the frontispiece. In this sense, we might think we are in the presence of yet another "Civil War novel" exploring the monolithic American myth that mechanically iterates that the War's outcome was, if not the final arbiter of, then certainly the great leap forward for race relations in the United States. But this would not factor in Wright's pessimistic vision that his body of work has persistently cultivated, an awareness, as Andrew O'Hehir claims, that recognizes "America [...] as a collective state of delusion, a vicious, exciting and insane society poisoned at the root by the outrageous lies it has told itself."³ Wright has, in fact, written a historical novel about one of those central lies, even as he holds traditional historical novels in a certain contempt:

Historical novels, although they're often mocked by critics, have a huge audience, and it's all about the comfort. I tried to remove the comfort, because I don't see that there was *anything* comfortable about living through the 1850s and '60s—it was the most horrific, chaotic time in American history, and I suspect it will remain that way for a long, long time. I wanted to get that sense of fear and chaos into the book.⁴

Significantly, Wright adds, lest latter-day readers feel some smug complacency, that “there may be no civil war anymore and of course no outright slavery, but the attitude that made all that happen is still around—you can’t get off that easily! Because this is not over—look at Hurricane Katrina, it’s not over.”⁵

Ironically, in a book that sees the war through to its end, Wright envisions an insidious outcome and not the happy denouement to our first long national nightmare. The novel demonstrates that easy dichotomies like the “noble Union” and the “depraved South” have always been false distinctions. Instead, I wish to show that the divided country as imagined by Wright *is*, in every essential way but one, amalgamated in the forge of the grand national crisis, but only along strictly segregated racial lines and not in ways we might expect. There is geopolitical amalgamation, to be sure; the Union is both preserved *and* re-made by the War. However, the ostensible and much fetishized object of amalgamation—harmonious racial accord between former masters, chattel property, and their “liberators”—goes unfulfilled. In Wright’s book, African-Americans before and after the War are figured as that perennial *bad idea*, the old “Negro Problem,” a people reduced to a disembodied construct, one to be analyzed and debated, a conundrum to be “solved,” thus stripping black Americans of agency and voice and rendering them as the passive recipients of whatever designations white America chooses to bestow on them. African-Americans remain objects of compassion or repulsion, but objects in any case. Distressingly, in Wright’s novel an amalgamated white majority borne out of division acts out its fantasies of rehabilitation on the Black Other, and so, in the wake of the War, Wright concludes that “the trials of America were not to be so speedily concluded.”⁶

As a work of historical fiction, *The Amalgamation Polka* is, as we might expect, conventionally plotted, largely chronological, with some significant analepsis and prolepsis, and follows the picaresque wanderings of one Liberty Fish from Delphi, New York, only son of Roxana and Thatcher Fish, staunch abolitionist crusaders and homeowners on a stop of the Underground Railroad. After the first shells fall at Ft. Sumter, Liberty enlists with the Union Army only to endure the general slaughter at Antietam, and then he simply deserts his regiment in Georgia to walk to his mother Roxana’s own ancestral home, Redemption Hall, on the Stono River in South Carolina, to confront his grandparents, Roxana’s degenerate father and mother, unreconstructed slaveholders and racist ideologues. Once at Redemption Hall, Liberty will learn that they have committed themselves to ghastly eugenics experiments on their slaves. Partaking of almost equal parts Twain, Crane, Melville, and Dickens, Wright’s bildungsroman would seem to be suggesting that

Liberty's errant path from the idealism of his abolitionist parents' to the degraded lunacy he finds in his grandparents' plantation in the depraved "slavocracy" is as uncomplicated in its teleological degeneration as the series of illustrations depicting *Pilgrim's Progress* that adorned young Liberty's classroom as a boy, but nothing is ever quite what it seems in Wright's fictional worlds, and even in those illustrations, Liberty observes that "the City of Desolation is indistinguishable from the Celestial City and both [resemble] Delphi itself" (33). In short, confusion blurs what should be neat binary oppositions.

From a young age, Liberty has been troubled by dreams and premonitions that suggest that, as DeLillo phrases it, "There is a world inside the world."⁷ An "anxious" child who is afraid of the dark, Liberty is vexed nightly:

Visiting dreams vivid as exotic sea creatures—scales intensely iridescent, eyes huge and lidless, gaping mouths lined with rows of sharp triangular teeth or, worse, cold ridges of slimy gums—gobbled him up into a labyrinth of entrails where raged vague conflicts of epic savagery and no clear resolution, desperate voyages over convulsive seas, frantic flight through narrow measureless spaces, as if just beneath the skin of the world a vast, ageless, war contended and once asleep you were inducted into service in this great invisible clash. But on whose side? And for what cause. (20)

This might be any child's nightmare, except for the portentous spectacle of "vague conflicts of epic savagery and no clear resolution"—surely a reference to the Civil War to come—and the nagging dread that the opposing combatants and ideological commitments in the looming conflict will not be unambiguous and may instead be a mired amalgamation of interests and national manias. Late in the novel, an older Liberty, now initiated in the blood rituals of combat and actual human barbarity, can now consciously reason that "this world was not as it seemed, that closely hidden behind the mundane affairs of the day lurked layer upon unexamined layer of outright strangeness, of which the outer covering was merely the protective covering, the skin, so to speak, of a beast so huge, so vital, it could never be discerned whole in all its proportions" (207).

Founded on fixed conflicts between north and south, tolerance and bigotry, freedom and captivity, the binary polarities always vouchsafed to govern our understanding of nineteenth-century America belong to the daylight world of Wright's novel, the world we think we know. Throughout the entire novel, however,

Wright implants instances, some of them which at first glance seem to hold only passing interest, that reveal that, complexly, other realities are afoot. For instance, Roxana, born on the plantation but destined to become an abolitionist firebrand, dreams, while in the very New York house that provides sanctuary for runaway slaves, that she gives birth to a black infant, “the issue of all her anxiety” (12) who she then sets adrift in a canoe, abandoning him to the river’s current. In the heart of Yankeeland, in bucolic, languid upstate New York, Liberty visits neighbors only to be derided as a “nigger lover” and attacked by a vicious family dog (52-3). When Liberty and Thatcher attempt to gain passage on an Erie Canal packet boat, the irascible Captain Whelkington retorts most offensively that he’ll board no “coon kissers,” foul sentiments from an “enlightened” northern citizenry. Even cosmopolitan New Yorkers are captivated by the strange promise held out by a “freak of nature,” “a deformed black man” turning white, in an exhibit at P.T. Barnum’s Museum and Hall of Wonders and Oddities. Ominously, the barker makes clear to spectators that “herein lay the solution to the troubled nation’s political problems” (153). For Wright, human culture north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line, as these examples prove, is shot through with what have been traditionally labeled southern attributes. Similarly, in the heart of old Dixie, Liberty comes upon a rabid native-born Union sympathizer so zealous in his devotion to the cause, that he has seceded from the secession and unilaterally proclaimed his cave free soil even in the middle of Georgia (210-12). More striking still in its portrayal of the subtle interpenetrations that negate neat binaries is a pivotal scene from the killing fields of Antietam. In gruesome hand-to-hand combat, Liberty is knocked unconscious, taken prisoner by Confederate troops, and is to be conducted to the rear as a prisoner of war by a boy soldier named Rufus. Moving rearward, the two soldiers, “enemies” from opposing armies, are beset by a withering fusillade of musket and cannon fire: “they found modest cover,” Wright narrates, “huddling together in a disappointingly shallow depression in the ground” (184-5). This foxhole intimacy suggests closer ties—a tendency toward amalgamation—than one might have guessed at, and raises questions again that were first posed in Liberty’s boyhood nightmare: Whose side? Which cause? Who are friends and who enemies?

Perhaps we need look no further, however, than Wright’s bravura opening chapter for this confusion of sympathies between supposedly warring political systems. It is a prologue of sorts, a flash-forward set in some nameless bit of scorched earth, wherein a ransacked house will soon be enkindled, while a small band of “soldiers”—intentionally ambiguous figures who, importantly, are never identified as either belonging to the Union or Confederacy—roots for spoils of war.

The novel's opening line is stark, arresting: "The bearded ladies were dancing in the mud" (3). They, we surmise, are not women at all, but drunken soldiers—again, whose army?—pillaging whatever they can find, including, one supposes, the dresses they now wear, garments looted from the "house methodically emptying itself out" (4). These anachronistic cross-dressers signal Wright's annunciation of purpose for the remainder of his book: "confusion," amalgamation, transposition become the nightmare portals of the novel. As the despoiled house begins to burn, a lone figure breaks forth from it and runs. One of the bearded ladies who sees the figure announces to the group, in the most reductive terms possible, "It's a nigger" (4). The band, in a "a spectacle of hermaphroditic frenzy" (4), then wolfishly track the young black girl as she races across the ruined landscape, but they tire and drop away, with the exception of one: "Audacious in a poke bonnet and bombazine dress, she rapidly outdistanced the rest, she hounded her quarry, she ran like a mother possessed, in a fit of chastisement, hard on the heels of an impudent daughter" (5). This inscrutable "mother possessed" at last catches the girl and then, horribly, stuffs her bonnet in her mouth and rapes her in the mud, as the others now join them, awaiting their participation in the gang rape "like patient cattle in the rain" (5).

Significantly, Wright describes the forced union between the rapist and the girl in highly charged metaphoric language: "their partially clad bodies [were] so slathered with mud as to be almost unrecognizable, ill-formed creatures who have failed some evolutionary test" (5). In a work given over to tropes of amalgamation, the central conceit of the Civil War itself, Wright's image of aborted evolutionary synthesis could not be more emphatic here: the conjoining—literally and symbolically—of black and white fails in this and every other instance in the book. However, if white /black amalgamation remains unrealized in the opening chapter (and indeed the rest of the novel), even when attempted by means of forced violation, Wright insinuates that an insidious and unintended amalgamation, this one between former antagonists of white America north and south of the Mason-Dixon line, has been fashioned. The chapter concludes with the following single-sentence paragraph: "There was a gorilla in the White House and a long-tailed mulatto presiding over the Senate chamber and the dreams of the Republic were dark and troubling" (5). By typical association, readers might wish to extrapolate from this free-floating expression of "southern sentiment" that the soldiers are in fact Confederate soldiers, and they might well be. But identification here is not that simple. Even before the girl's horrible ordeal had begun, the soldiers were singing an inane tune: "Soupy, soupy, soupy, without any bean / Porky, porky, porky, without any lean / Coffee, coffee, coffee, without any cream" (3). Again, it

could be any company's witless song as they drunkenly danced in the rain, but the historians tell us that this was, in reality, a popular mess call of the Union army itself.⁸ In all probability, a black female has been raped by the very army sent to "save" her. This "three-page section about gender, race, and biological amalgamation" as Thomas LeClair, dubs it, envisions the "dark and troubling" possibilities that were given birth out of the nightmare of devastated, once divided America and the new-born, largely clandestine amalgamation binding together what have always been supposed to be white polarities.⁹ Who believes what? Who, in fact, really represents the "good" in such a toxic culture?

Wright expends considerable energy in the novel to developing the idea that the national and republican manias leading up to the war were only slightly distorted inversions of one another. O'Hehir is certainly right to declare that Liberty's New York home in Delphi and Roxana's Redemption Hall in South Carolina function "like funhouse-mirror reflections of each other."¹⁰ The two households are remarkably, disturbingly, consumed by corresponding ideological fantasies. Liberty is raised in a home sustained by reformist enthusiasms. Liberty's Aunt Aroline's "liberal" endorsements of every faddish trend of nineteenth-century America including but not limited to "vegetarianism, hydrotherapy, phrenology, perfectionism, harmonialism" (8) are clearly intended by Wright to be seen as merely analogues to the other great intellectual totem of northern free-thinkers and the rest of the Fish household: abolition, the vogue without parallel in certain circles in the 1840s and 50s. Aroline avows what Roxana and Thatcher both tacitly accept: "she was convinced there were embers of revealed truth in every belief fervently held. Fervency was the key, the sign incontrovertible of spirit leaking in through the cracks of this darkling world" (8). A passionate intensity is in itself enough to justify the cause, any cause, and Thatcher and Roxana are passionately devoted to ushering in a wholly amalgamated union, one marked by liberation and racial equality. Thatcher earns his living as a circuit rider bent on social upheaval by bringing the gospel of enlightened American race relations to New York's towns and villages. Roxana herself had mounted public stages heavily pregnant with Liberty to denounce the inadequacies of a myopic U. S. Constitution. Wright refers to their abolitionist activities more than once as "crusades" (24), an utterance that gives us pause in this new century. In this family of dedicated ideologues, even gingerbread cookies become agitprop: Roxana bakes cookies shaped to resemble kneeling slaves (18); the sweet rewards of dessert items are now steeped in the gloomy national crisis.

It is easy enough to think of fervent abolitionists like the Fishes consecrating themselves to the good fight of amalgamation, to the realization of a vision in which white and black dancers one day waltz together, and their zeal for a colorless society is no doubt honorable, if a little sanctimonious. However, Wright's depiction of a remarkably similar mania among South Carolina's racist intelligentsia in the person of Asa Maury, Roxana's father and Liberty's grandfather, is nothing less than a revelation, an outrageous one, too. The moral monster awaiting Liberty at Redemption Hall is, as O'Hehir says, "as much a bitter, angry, hardened bigot as advertised. Yet he too . . . is hypnotized by America's racial dilemma . . . [and] is trying to solve it."¹¹ Like Marlowe drawing closer to Kurtz in his madness upriver, Liberty confronts ominous signs before reaching the plantation. He comes upon two horribly scarred slaves and is told that their sores are "speculating spots" inflicted by Maury as he tried to transfigure them from black to white (227). Puzzled, Liberty finally meets his grandfather behind the big house in his "speculating shed," a slatternly hovel lined with shelves of "scientific" volumes on white supremacist ideology, from racialized Biblical accounts of human origins to Anglo Saxon race theory (232-35). A self-styled gentleman scientist, Asa declares to his uncomprehending grandson, that "the infinite, in His all-encompassing wisdom, chose to bless us with a great gift. The Ethiop is the shadow laid across our path, a perplexing obstacle to the soul's attainment of the harmonious and the good. We need such a trial in order to develop our faculties to the utmost" (236). On one level, Maury attempts to intellectualize the hackneyed mythos of the white man's burden: black people are a problem for white people to solve. Readers begin to sense, with a sort of stunned recognition, that Asa's professed intentions almost exactly mirror those of white northern abolitionists who themselves wish to "fix" the divided nation's race relations, only Asa's ghastly methods of eugenic experimentation differ, but the desired outcome is the same. Asa laments to his grandson that it is "the disease of racial differentiation which has infected us for generations unnumbered" (240). With allusions to Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," Wright's Maury hopes to bring about "the transformation of black into white" (237) by "a subtle chemical process" (237). He explores other avenues of amalgamation by means of an infernal incestuous breeding program with his own black daughters, such unions ending at least once with the death of a lighter skinned but freakishly unfit infant (239). He claims, in terms eerily reminiscent of many high-minded abolitionists, that "we can end the curse of color by eliminating color entirely" (241); Asa simply means to do so in a literal fashion. When the fun-house inversions of Redemption Hall have become too much for Liberty, he finally

accosts his grandfather with the charge readers have themselves been formulating all along:

I feel obliged to point out the curious irony that you, an unapologetic, antiabolitionist soul stealer, working alone, in secret, have surpassed every other member of the this tormented family, including us northern agitators, in the pursuit of amalgamation. You not only promote intimate relations between the races, you actively practice it" (264).

With sinister implications for any amalgamation reformers to which we have been introduced, Asa replies smugly, "Prophetic vision is a merciless gift" (264).

From human experimentation to revolutionary social reorganization, Wright explores these seemingly polar contrarities only to find that they share one fixed constant, one shared object of concern: American blacks. Significantly, the objects, and I use the term deliberately, of repulsion or sympathetic obsession are left largely mute, largely passive throughout Wright's entire novel. Denied independent agency, African-Americans are acted upon by white Americans, whites of every possible ideological stripe. The amalgamation hoped for by so many of the characters is a strangely asymmetrical affair, with blacks noticeably absent from the process. Laura Miller is only half right when she claims, "Most of the novel's white characters are preoccupied with freedom and racial difference, as if reconciling the two ideas were a complicated equation and the peculiar arithmetic of solving it has knocked them off their hinges. (The black characters, very sensibly, try to stay out of their way).¹² Black characters are not staying out of the way; they are instead excluded from participating in any meaningful ways in their own "liberation." On the status of black Americans in the novel, Wright questions into what state they have been "liberated," and on whose terms? Back in his home at Delphi, Liberty's boon boyhood companion is the novel's only fully delineated black character, the runaway slave Euclid, is now housed in the Thatcher home. Prior to Liberty's southern wanderings, Euclid fishes with the young boy, initiates him into the secrets of the natural world, forces him to trace the lash scars on his back, but, tellingly, Euclid is not involved in the abolitionist cause in any way himself. Instead, he is a child's sometimes cantankerous playmate. Because of his former mistreatment as a slave, Euclid is often overcome by fits of madness and, significantly, retreats to his basement dwelling beneath the Thatcher home, there to sequester himself unseen in his "underground hermitage" (22). Echoes of Ellison's invisible man hunkered in his underground hole and pondering his conflicted relationship to

the Monopolated Light & Power Company seem not only obvious references but also purposefully apt ones. Wright offers a portrayal of disenfranchised African-Americans fought over, violently contested by white Americans, but who are never in the world of the novel themselves to be assimilated; instead white America, now amalgamated north to south, has arrived at an unholy union that excludes black America from larger processes of amalgamation while simultaneously obsessively devoting themselves to “solving” the problems African-Americans allegedly pose. Monopolated Power and Light, indeed.

Asa Maury speaks more truth than he realizes upon being told that Union generals Sherman and Grant have been victorious in their war with rebel states: they, Asa flatly declares, “concluded nothing” (290). The union has been reunited again, but only in the simplest terms. The creation of an amalgamated, colorless society, sadly, has not been effected, then or now. As one character reveals to Liberty, “This war . . . this horrible, evil war, it’s never going to end. You do understand that, don’t you? Even after it’s over it will continue to go on without the flags and the trumpets and the armies, do you understand?” (217). And so the “dark and troubling” dreams of the Republic persist in haunting a country that had wanted to believe its nightmare was over. Wright has indicated that “The Civil War was the ultimate climax of America’s racial hysteria,”¹³ but it was by no means the end of that hysteria.

Meditations in Green and the Myth of the “War Over There”

If we concede Lucas Carpenter’s point that a handful of the nearly seven hundred novels written about the Vietnam War represent the best literature written about twentieth-century warfare, then we might be led to claim, as several have, that *Meditations in Green* is one of the best of the best.¹⁴ In the tradition of Heller’s *Catch-22*, Wright’s novel puts forward an absurdist, kaleidoscopic treatment of the “war over there” that is by turns grimly comic and appalling. Wright records acts of torture and ethnocentric arrogance inflicted on both the North and South Vietnamese, the grinding boredom and attendant drug-induced stupefaction of American GIs, and the Kafkaesque inanity of military planning that have become the hallmarks of America’s understanding of the war since at least as long as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* first showed in the nation’s multiplexes. Specifically, Wright follows the steady disintegration of SP4 James Griffin of the 1069th Military Intelligence Group, our “genial storyteller, wreathed in a beard of smoke, [who will] look into the light and recite strange tales from the war back in the long time ago.”¹⁵ Griffin entered the conflict late, already cynical and disenchanted with America’s foreign intervention, only to become hopelessly

addicted to heroin as a means of coping with the strangeness and terror he found first in the jungle of Southeast Asia and then discovered reduplicated in the streets of New York City upon his discharge.

The critical acclaim and attention granted to *Meditations in Green* thus far has been almost wholly concentrated on Wright's treatment of Griffin's Vietnam experience in-country. Critical attention seems to have been transfixed by the allure of Wright's re-creation of jungle fire-fights, the metaphoric significance of herbicidal eradication of native flora, the paranoia of officers in the field, the ubiquity of the mediated image, the sadism of company psychopaths and the pathos of damaged young men who have seen or been involved in quotidian atrocities. In short, critics like Donald Ringnalda, Christopher Metress, and Lucas Carpenter have, understandably, in one sense, been captivated by the authority of Wright's magisterial combat reportage, the exotic locale of Vietnam itself, the impressionistic "news" that Wright through Griffin has brought back to the mainland from "over there."⁶ What has been largely lost, however, from such critical appraisals is that insufficient attention has been granted to the central fact that major and important sections of the novel are narrated from James Griffin *stateside*. In the world of the novel, the war is over and has already been lost. Griffin is home. Wright proves himself to be acutely concerned with the after-effects of the war on the human psyche. The actuality of the war is rendered as the nightmare from which Griffin cannot awake, and this is a glaringly neglected feature of Wright's text. Strung out on heroin, haunted by his experiences, Griffin, "back in the world," admits, "This is not a settled life. A children's cereal, Crispy Critters, provokes nausea; there is a woman's perfume named Charlie; and the radio sound of "We've Got to Get Out of This Place" (The Animals, 1965) fills me with melancholy" (8). The War is over, the war will never be over.

Alone in his city apartment, Griffin endures a terrifying flashback of a Viet Cong corpse he had witnessed: "It came on like this, scene after colorful scene, rushing in with disorienting abruptness. Memory and desire screaming through my living room at the speed of light, me clinging to the couch. Of course I was in it too, but I was being played by someone else" (17). With its quizzical Eliotian allusion ("desire" for the cessation of thought or for more action?), this is a richly complex passage, but above all it is clear that Griffin suffers both dissociation ("I was being played by someone else") and unending "participation" in the war as it plays out in his own mind. Wright's major emphasis throughout the entire novel centers on the ongoing nature of warfare after the shooting has stopped. The principal military trope of the Vietnam War was "containment," halting the spread of communism

so that not one more country would fall in the Domino Theory of foreign affairs. As a figure, “containment” has wider resonance. The American public, too, largely unwilling participants in a dishonorable engagement conducted on the other side of the globe, wished to “contain” the war, in so much as the nation desired to keep the war at a remove, symbolized most pointedly by the ill treatment accorded returning Vietnam veterans. Rather than containment, Wright records a process of ruinous contamination from the war front to the home front, psycho-social excess that threatened to engulf the country and upset the neat binary of here and there.

To date, considerable critical confusion has persisted about the structure of Wright’s novel. Certainly, the book’s formal features are complex, and that may account in part for its misapprehension. The book is not a simplistic, linear narrative. In any case, Ringnalda was the first to claim that the book was “fragmented.”¹⁷ Matthew Stewart, too, understands the text’s structure as “nontraditional,”¹⁸ as a fragmented narrative, but adds more incisively that the structure emphasizes the “constant intrusion of the past into present.”¹⁹ Readers might be tempted to a term the novel’s organizational principal as fragmentary, but to do so would be inaccurate. Wright structures the novel with tripartite strands: poems, Vietnam episodes, and New York City episodes. Fifteen poem-like “meditations” are interspersed between the chapters of the novel. The chapters alternate, sometimes shifting within chapters themselves, between Griffin on the base in Vietnam and Griffin in his New York City apartment. Wright imposes radical shifts between the here and there, to be sure, but the effect is not fragmentary. Instead, Wright emphatically underscores, not discontinuity, but constancy, a uniformity of trauma from the killing fields to the apartment living room despite temporal and geographic shifts. Rather than fragmentation, there is a seamlessness. The locales may have changed but Griffin’s experience has not. The war leaks through, notwithstanding the most careful attempts at containment, be they personal or collective efforts. Ringnalda, then, is flatly wrong by claiming that “Wright doesn’t try to make sense of the Vietnam (he’s acutely aware that it didn’t make sense). The novel does not try to fill our minds with clarifications or after-the-fact encomia. It neither condemns nor justifies America’s presence in Vietnam.”²⁰ Wright clearly signals that the sense, the horrible sense, that the war makes is the lasting impact it leaves on the men who were forced to fight an unpopular, perhaps immoral war.

Griffin’s struggles to realize order in his inner life form one of Wright’s central concerns in the novel. Pilar Marin has successfully argued that Griffin desperately seeks to impose form on his experience, yet another attempt at containment beyond the structural composition of Wright’s text. Marin is one of the few

commentators on the novel to note similitude between the New York and Vietnam episodes instead of binary distinction. Marin argues that the “jungle and city [. . .] represent fluidity, while the perimeter and the apartment are the escape from that fluidity into a relative control. But, especially in the case of the perimeter, fixity and control are not absolute.”²¹ The base perimeter established in the heart of the jungle is an attempt to demarcate a formal principle of control over the ungovernable forces of vegetative fecundity and riotous, dangerous growth. Griffin and others on the base wish to believe they are safer within the confines of the human-derived perimeter that has been temporarily imposed on the wilderness jungle that continually threatens encroachment, vegetable creep, “Like Birnam Wood” (132). The illusion of demarcation lasts only until the end of the novel when the compound is overwhelmed by the 5th Battalion of the NVA. The outside has come inside. Significantly, in a stoned reverie, Griffin imagines the carefully maintained perimeter being engulfed under omnivorous foliage that reclaims the base as only one more feature of the jungle once again (146). Marin concludes that “the tropical forest is alive, a devouring entity, one that threatens the individual’s self with total dissolution, absorption of the self.”²² Similarly, Griffin views his apartment as an imperfect sanctuary set against the urban chaos that caterwauls outside the walls of his building. As the novel opens, Griffin is shown as not being adverse to venturing forth into the city streets to range about or sit atop a garbage can delivering his “violent sidewalk imprecations” (4) to passersby. However, as the novel progresses, Griffin becomes more and more reclusive, concomitant with his growing dependence upon heroin. Griffin tries to contract his world to the most minimal dimensions, all as a means of imposing form on the external environment so as to exert control over his tumultuous inner life. Again, significantly, by the novel’s close, Griffin, having grown increasingly unbalanced, transforms his apartment into a garden, presumably for the cultivation of poppies, bringing in yards of soil and fertilizer to spread on the floors of his living space. Again containment has failed. Unconsciously, Griffin has introduced uncontrollable, jungle fecundity in the guise of a garden into the confines of his own domicile.

The third strand of Wright’s narrative, the meditations themselves, have received little critical attention, and yet several of the poems, obscure and koan-like as they may be, offer valuable insight into Wright’s thematic concerns. Stewart observes that the mediations function in much the same way as the vignettes or inter-chapters served in Hemingway’s *In Our Time*,²³ and not only places Wright’s novel in a tradition of war literature, but also offers a way to understand the oblique musings as indirect commentary on the main action of the narrative.

“Mediation 1” offers a plant’s-eye-view of existence: “The view from my sill is not encouraging” (3). The plant has been re-located from its natural environs, abused with inattention and ignored by those who should care for it: “Trapped indoors a plant’s pleasure becomes dependent upon human hands, clumsy irresponsible hands, hands that pinch and prune, hands that go on vacation, abandon their ferns to northern exposures, cracked beds, stale air, enervations, apathy, loneliness” (3). The parallels between the plant’s squalid existence and the wrecked life of Griffin and other veterans who were “wild” in the jungle only to be brought back to domestic relocation is unmistakable. Starkly, “Meditation 2” simply lists 43 entries for “What can go Wrong” to kill a house plant, and ends, “And these are merely the threats to common house and garden plants. Consider the problems of backwoods survival” (15-16). In the same way, the lives of fragile humans can be ruined beyond mending, both abroad and at home. “Meditation 5” imagines plant life as an instrument of vengeance: “I dream of becoming evil, dangerous, a hazard to insects, small animals, and children[. . .] I’d occupy a park where I could harass dumb campers, urinating dogs[. . .] I would be a blot on the landscape” (85). Once again we need simply transpose humans for plants to recover the poem’s import. Significantly, this is only a dream, an impotent wish to affront, to matter, to offend, but Wright clearly implies that the veteran’s reality is otherwise.

The later meditations assume even more portentous implications. In “Meditation 10,” Wright records the desire for personal annihilation. Gone are fantasies of a vengeful creation, instead the hoped for state is inanimate stasis: “got no roots / got no seed / got no insects / got no disease . . . Plastic” (105). The transformation from living thing to plastic flower without needs corresponds to the longing a damaged veteran, ostensibly home “safe” from the war’s ravages, might entertain for the cessation of thought and feeling. “Meditation 11” is an abortive plea for rebirth. In the face of contrary evidence, the speaker yearns for personal restoration: “I want to die in a shower of color and return from / the dead with annual regularity” (239). The poem closes on a desperate note: “If Daphne’s pleas were answered, why not mine?” (239). The novel categorically does not make allowances for divine intervention, and so we would expect the speaker’s wish to go unfulfilled. The last two meditations shift from a plant’s-eye perspective to a human one. “Meditation 14” details the preparation of poppy plants for the harvesting of opium. Here, plant life and human activity intersect, all with the ultimate purpose of deadening awareness, of producing a narcotized stupor. Finally, “Meditation 15” offers the apotheosis of plant and human interaction. The poem presents an itemized list of seven steps involved in the act of smoking processed opium. The last item serves

as a challenge leveled at readers: “Who has a question for Mr. Memory?” (340). The disturbing implication is that the traumatized veteran seems to welcome the opportunity to re-imagine his past and cannot forget his war-time experiences even under the heavy sedation brought on by opium intoxication. Taken as a whole, the meditations indicate that the green sensory overload and vegetable life associated with Vietnam itself have successfully infiltrated the dwellings and city streets of America, despite every human effort by those who served to distance themselves from the jungle fecundity; instead, many of those veterans suffered still from “The void at the heart of fertility” (19) that returned with them.

Perhaps one of the clearest indicators that the war has not been satisfactorily put behind either James Griffin, or the nation for that matter, is the reappearance of Everett Triplet—Trips—into Griffin’s life once more. Trips and Griffin had not only shared a hooch together on the 1069th’s base; more profoundly, they had shared the camaraderie that unites soldiers in deep bonds of friendship. They were by turns bemused or horrified by the war within which they found themselves incomprehensibly enmeshed, and their friendship, together with their communal intake of mind-bending drugs, sustained them. Despite their intimate friendship, Trips re-enters Griffin’s life much as one experiences a waking nightmare. Griffin returns from one of his infrequent forays into the city to find his door smashed from its hinges and recognizes instantly that Trips is back in his life, having been released from the psychiatric ward where he has been housed since his discharge. Trips disappears as quickly as he had appeared, but Griffin knows he will return in time. With his next reappearance, Trips divulges that he is “Hunting Nazis” (113). As purposeless as Griffin’s life is stateside, Trips has become goal-directed, but insanely so. The “Nazi” that Trips hunts is Sergeant Millard Anstin. Anstin’s “war crime” was the killing of Trips’ dog when ordered to eradicate all animals from the base compound.

Ominously, in stalking “Sarge” throughout the city, Trips seems to have found him at every turn. Forcing Griffin to participate in his plans, Trips stakes out the home of “Sarge” and attempts to shoot a man who returns there after walking his dog. Stricken by the violent outburst, Griffin wrestles with Trips to prevent his deranged murder of an innocent man and is himself knifed in the scuffle. In a blind rage, Griffin stabs Trips with his own blade, and then sits by the wounded body and wails. The episode echoes Poe’s “William Wilson” in that Griffin has attacked his own doppelganger. In knifing and potentially killing his best friend, his most intimate confidant, Griffin has also symbolically mounted an attack on a version of himself. Griffin is trying to kill off the radically unhealthy, sociopathic self that

has returned stateside. Asked by a police officer at the scene, “Okay, what’s the story here?” Griffin can only unintelligibly reply, “I don’t know. Somebody killed his dog” (319). The answer is nonsensical only to those who have not lived through the ordeal; to those men who have returned as strangers in a strange land, the killing of a pet could, by means of twisted logic, lead to the adoption of homicidal measures. When medical personnel are told that the wounded man is a veteran, Griffin mutters with scathing irony, “yes, a veteran, why he was home free” (320). Home offers no sanctuary for the war-ravaged who have simply re-located to a different front.

Of the novel’s most damning testaments that the war has not been neatly, safely put to rest for those who return is Wright’s depiction of the psychological treatment Griffin receives once he is stateside again. He has been directed to the services of Dr. Arden, a Vietnam veteran himself. The outright absurdity of the “re-conditioning” that Griffin receives at the hands of Dr. Arden is patently obvious, even as Wright’s corrosive satire is withering in its critique. Absurdly, Dr. Arden promotes “flower therapy” as a means of “reeducation” for maladjusted returning veterans. With faux credulity or perhaps desperation, Griffin describes Arden’s process:

Treatment began with a sustained assault upon the infrastructure of the ego, a tactic designed to extinguish any coherent sense of self. Then followed a period of warm baths, solitary contemplation, quiet sobbing. According to the theory, out of the rubble of personality should then arise, like Brahma from the lotus, a newer, more confident “I,” wet, mewling, and goggle-eyed. This tiny creature was scolded, coaxed, and trained toward happiness in a series of private exhortatory sessions with Arden. (87)

Inconceivably, Arden’s program “designed to extinguish any coherent sense of self” is exactly the malady from which Griffin already suffers. Baths and exhortations are only two of Arden’s preposterous methods: “the trunk of his thought grew about a core of pilferings from nineteenth-century language of the flower chapbooks [. . .] gnarled notions of Oriental religion [. . .] and “positive thinking” (87): Arden’s adopted text for Griffin’s rehabilitation is, improbably, *The Psychology of the Plant* (87). Despite Arden’s ridiculous efforts, Griffin cannot help but think when looking upon his analyst that the pattern on his robe resembles a mandala of bomb craters (90), tellingly, the same patterns Griffin had been trained to interpret while in-country.

Sensing that his curative therapies are less than efficacious, Dr. Arden resorts in later sessions to a frantic self-help rant: "Let us have done," Arden insists, "with the season of death and black thoughts and brown funks. Spring approaches. Green is the color of the future. Think green!" (91). Of course, Griffin's foremost problem is that he is obsessed with green, the color of the jungle, the color of his traumatic wound. He gravely needs to get beyond thoughts of and associations with green but is tormentingly unable to do so, and Arden is too obtuse to offer real counsel or care. Griffin has never believed in Arden's therapeutic approach or any therapeutic method that will result in his "getting over" his war experience. Of Arden's scam, he reveals to Trips, "What's more American than good honest fraud [. . .] the delights of deceit[. . .] Delusion is a national pastime" (143). In the scheme of things, Griffin can only be bemused by Arden's charlatanism, if, as he indicated, an entire country can be duped about the prosecution and termination of a war a world away. In the end, Griffin "thinks green" so obsessively that he has transformed his apartment into a garden with wall-to-wall soil, and in turn abandons his appointments with Arden. Coily refusing to blame Arden, Griffin instead takes responsibility for his failure to make adequate psychological progress:

I quit my sessions with Arden. I was hopeless. I was a bad seed. He hardly had time for me anyway. The business was branching out, new outlets in half a dozen locations, everybody wanted to be a tree. I occasionally watched him on television Sunday morning, cushioned on a big satin pillow, flanked by rubber plants, holding a cabbage, and chatting with a New Jersey sprout king. He looked great. (311)

Dr. Arden functions symbolically in Wright's novel as the face of an apathetic American citizenry who might feign concern for those who fought on behalf of the nation, but of whom they are willfully ignorant. Facing the prospects of such a home front, damaged veterans like James Griffin stand little chance of successful rehabilitation and re-integration into what has become an alien culture.

Having brought the war home with him, Griffin can no longer be at home in his own country of origin. He readily admits in the book's closing pages that "I was a slow healer" (341), which raises the specter of the impossibility of his healing. Griffin becomes representative of a generation of soldiers, some of whom were beyond psychological recuperation (and this does not even take into account those who suffered physical impairment or disability). The reigning mythos of the culture was "containment," but Wright establishes convincingly that that was only empty

political sloganeering. The war conducted “over there” insidiously came back with the men who would gladly have left it in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

Wright’s two novels explore war and its effects that, on the face of things, might seem widely disparate, separated as they are by nearly a century and conducted under divergent national and ideological agendas. Wright understanding of fiction writing and reading as “a superior way of knowing” is made manifest by the capabilities his two war novels demonstrate in stripping away the dross of traditional historical “treatments” both conflicts have always been afforded to reveal instead enduring irresolution. Wright gravely distrusts the notion that war, waged as a means of instilling unified values or of terminating division, succeeds in achieving those ends. In certain real ways, Wright does not believe that either national calamity has ever really ended. Like his character Asa Maury, Wright suggests in *The Amalgamation Polka* that the Civil War “concluded nothing” in resolving complex and possibly intractable race problems haunting the nation: “Many historians,” he has recently commented, “say that the south won the war: they lost the combat part, but they won because their values are now mainstream values in America.”⁴ The Vietnam War, too, for Wright “is still the big event. I think it explains everything going on politically, culturally, and economically. . . . I think what we’re going through is a very bad, long, and troubled adolescence, and I think Vietnam was puberty. I just hoped it would end sooner. It doesn’t even seem as though it’s going to end.”⁵ Richard Nixon may have believed he extricated young American men and women from Vietnamese jungles by means of “peace with honor,” but Stephen Wright has concluded in *Meditations in Green* that a sizeable portion of those veterans who returned stateside found neither peace nor honor even after the killing had ceased.

Notes

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