The Haiku as Convalescence

Every critical essay on Richard Wright's haiku collection, eventually published in 1998 as *This Other World*, begins with the startling assertion that in the final two years of his life, Wright wrote around four thousand poems in the form, of which he selected 817 for publication.[1] The fact itself is taken in these essays to be worthy of reiteration and reconceptualization, as though the haiku's very existence provokes what Wright's daughter Julia called "a biographical enigma: how the creator of the inarticulate, frightened and enraged Bigger Thomas ended up leaving us some of the most tender, unassuming, and gentle lines in African-American poetry."[2] The apparent paradox between the brutal and silenced violence of *Black Boy* and the minor-keyed grace of *This Other World* points to ways in which Wright's collection troubles, for Julia Wright as for her father's critics, the canonical binary oppositions of mid-century American verse: Asian/American; African-American/Asian-American; masculine/feminine; exotic/domestic; imperial/local. As poems written at the end of a career engaged in rapid and dramatic changes of allegiance, form and politics, *This Other World* comes to figure for Wright's critics a monument to late style, or paraphrasing Edward Said, "lateness itself."[3]

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[1] For example: Yoshinobu Hakutani, 'Richard Wright's Haiku, Zen and the African "Primal Outlook upon Life,' in *Haiku and Modernist Poetics* (London: Palgrave, 2009); Robert L. Tener, 'Richard Wright's Haiku: *This Other World*' in *Modernity and East-West Literary Criticism*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Cranbury: Rosemont, 2001); Richard Iadonisi, "I Am Nobody: The Haiku of Richard Wright" MELUS, Vol. 30, No. 3, Personal and Political (Fall, 2005), pp. 179-200.

[2] Julia Wright, "Foreword," in *This Other World*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert Tener (New York: Little, Brown and Company) p. vii. Future references to Wright's haiku will be in the body of the text and will refer to this edition.

[3] In Said's essay "Adorno as Lateness Itself," he theorizes a particular kind of style common to writers nearing the end of their lives. A sense of the impending death of a subject is knitted to an insistence on the permanence of the law. Like Adorno, Wright had

This story of the haiku as belated, convalescent and unworldly strikes me as true to the poems themselves, although perhaps not in the way in which it has generally been told. (My reading of the poems comes in the second half of this document.) But it cuts across another well-worked critical paradigm – the story of the adaptation of East Asian cultural forms into American modernist verse. According to *that* story, the fount of which is Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era*, the adaption of the Chinese ideogram for the purposes of making new American poems was a gesture of unprecedented enabling power which would leave nothing in the world unchanged by its power to resignify. For Kenner – as, in a different register, for Jacques Derrida – the ideogram's appearance in Englishs an epochal moment analogous to the discovery of iron:

> Mind applied fire to stone, and we, knowing of iron, can see stone with a different eye. A Russian mind, applied to ideographs in a time of Revolutionary propaganda [he is talking about Eisenstein], in conceiving *montage* has altered our understanding of ideographic potentialities. An American mind, brought to ideographs by an art historian of Spanish descent [Fenollosa was actually Portuguese-American] who had been exposed to Transcendentalism, derived Vorticism, the *Cantos*, and an "ideogrammatic method" that modifies our sense of what Chinese can be.[4]

Kenner's formulation remains helpful insofar as it allegorizes the imperialist work done by literature in changing and rearranging the meanings of cultural forms. The Poundian

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been a Marxist until he lost faith in the singular power of the dialectic, and, like Wright, Adorno remained valiantly presentist in his radical politics while shifting his ideological commitments multiple times in his life. Said's comment on Adorno's late writing on Beethoven thus also resonates with Wright's late writing of haiku: "Not only does the notion of advance and culmination in Marxism crumble under his rigorous negative scorn, but so too does anything that suggests movement at all. With death and senescence before him, and a promising start years behind him, Adorno is, I think, prepared to endure ending in the form of *lateness* but *for itself*, its own sake, not as a preparation for or obliteration of something else. Lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also (even preternaturally) aware of the present. Adorno as lateness itself…" Edward Said, "Adorno as Lateness Itself" in *Adorno: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) p. 201

[4] Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) p. 162

ideograph changes "our sense of what Chinese can be" because it displaces the subject "Chinese" within a global scheme, taking its place in the market called "world literature" which, in truth, it helped to construct; the Poundian ideogram acts on "Chinese" as a catachresis, propelled and emboldened by imperial violence.

While more recent critics of this anxious influence have tended to critique Kenner's apparent ease with cultural appropriation, miscomprehension and Orientalism, most have stopped short of reversing the flow of his causality, or the strictures of his periodization. The impact of Asian cultural forms – here understood broadly to include racialized bodies, labour and surplus-values, as well as ideograms, poems and woodprints – is still largely figured as an irruptive force within modernity, crashing into the stultified and finicky world of late-Victorian letters to produce a body of work reflective of America's emerging status as a global, cosmopolitan imperial power. In his introduction to *Pacific Rim Modernisms*, Steven Yao credits Pound's fascination with the ideograph with "underwrit[ing] a fundamental change in the course of poetry in English," but adds that this impact was not located solely within the United States (or, implicitly, Anglophony however construed) but within the Asian spaces Pound was exoticizing and de-realizing. "In other words," he writes, "due to its very canonicity, the terms of *Cathay* have come to embody the authority of the cultural dominant in defining the framework of evaluation for other voicings of "Chinese" and "Asian" cultural heritage, *whether or not* specific individual poets write explicitly in response to or reaction against Pound himself."[5] Or, in another frame, contemporary critics have come to understand a second stage of Kenner's dialectic – the negation following the initial crisis of expansion – in the emergence of an Asian-American literary subject in the mid-century.

[5] Steven G. Yao, "A Rim With a View" in *Pacific Rim Modernisms*, ed. Mary-Ann Gillies, Helen Sword and Steven Yao (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) p. 29. Emphasis in original.

So Josephine Nock-Hee Park, for instance, describes the creation of a canon of an Asian-American literary canon in the late 1960s as a response, in part, to "a history of condescending and pejorative figurations of Asiatics," and demonstrates through readings of, particularly, the Asian-American writers Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Myung Mi Kim that the legacy of American Orientalism remains a constitutive element of American modernism against which American poets of Asian descent write their own forms and/or subjectivities. Like Kenner, Yao and Park emphasize the initial force of Orientalist tropings in American poetry; although where that force is a singular and heroic action for Kenner, contemporary critics have seen it more as a kind of trauma, through which poetry itself must find ways to work.

The archetype for this literary history, then, is clearly Ezra Pound's reading of Chinese poetry. And well might it be, since the dialectic of expansion followed by negation repeats, almost exorbitantly, the Hegelian account of world history offered by Pound's mentor Ernest Fenollosa in his 1898 essay "The Coming Fusion of East and West." Fenollosa, who had been a staunch Hegelian since young adulthood, faced the Spanish-American war with a curious uncertainty: the Spirit of World History had always moved from East to West, but now he witnessed the transpacific movement of American boats into Japanese harbours and Spanish-occupied Filipino ports – a movement, that is, of Spirit from West to East. Full of patronizing stereotypes and meddlesome imperial projects, Fenollosa sends out a call to Americans for a new Renaissance on a global scale:

> And now, a last word to Americans. We have awaked; let us awake enough! But last night we were as Tudor feudories, content with our local issues, our private curse of slavery, intent to erect a little island of silver coinage. How could we unify our scattered aims with no centrality of focus on the needs of a common humanity? This morning we have waked to find ourselves citizens of a new world, full of Drakes, and Sydneys, and Philips, and Armadas; rich in immeasurable colonies, investment,

> adventures; of an unlimited mind-expansion; of a race-sympathy new in human annals.[6]

Bursting forth with the utopian energy of imperialism, Fenollosa imagines a new dawn for American and world culture through the coming fusion - indeed, a colonial fusion – which would generate new verse forms ("Sydneys") and new riches. Here, the expansion of cultural forms – what Fenollosa calls "mind-expansion" – is literally synonymous with the expansion of the Spirit of World History (*geist*, mind) over geographical space.

How does this look history of cultural influence look different if one takes as one's archetype Richard Wright's late turn to the haiku? Several methodological challenges are posed by this question, which the restrictions of a short paper don't allow me to explore. It would entail, for instance, paying attention to the ease with which Fenollosa assigns the legacy of slavery to the business of the previous day. (Although, with his customary bluster, Fenollosa ends up making two errors of fact: the Tudor age is post-feudal; it is also the same as the age of Elizabeth that produced those Drakes and Sydneys.) It would also be necessary, in order to re-orient American literary history towards *This Other World*, to trace the sometimes-overlapping, sometimes-diverging representations of Japan and China in American Orientalism. (As is well known, Pound's version of the poems he published as *Cathay* was an English translation based on a Japanese translation from the original Chinese.) But in the remainder of this paper, I want briefly to sketch out two ways in which Wright's turn to the haiku challenges the Pound-centric geometry (which is also Sinocentric and masculinist) on which reception histories of Asian literary forms in America generally rely. The first of these is that Wright's haiku emerge into American verse as a conservative,

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[6] Ernest Fenollosa, "The Coming Fusion of East and West" in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) p. 165

constraining, minimizing force. This "conservative" is not automatically to be taken as evidence of political conservatism – actually I'm agnostic on that front. I mean simply that the poems aim at the conservation, in poetic form, of some kind of control over a dying body; they are formally conservative, and submit to the law of the form. The Poundian logic of heroic action and traumatic reaction is nowhere to be found in Wright's collection: the works are, rather, convalescent. Written by a sick man, they aim at that least modernist (and most Boethian) target: the preparation of the soul for death. This "soul," in ways that I plan to explore shortly, may be read biographically or historico-allegorically; or both; or neither. Second: crucial to the story of Anglo-American reception of Asian cultural forms has been the putatively racially-unmarked character of the body receiving. The irruptive force of Asian cultural forms – or, to use Colleen Lye's terminology, of the "racial form" of the Asiatic – sets up a distinction between Asiatic and non-Asiatic that Wright's blackness, as well as his fragile internationalism, disrupts in the text of his own poetry. So in *This Other World*, the Orientalist form crashes against other kinds of racial and poetic form, as Wright (in the Saidian groove of lateness) attempts to reconcile himself with the laws of form in general. I'll end this paper by arguing, through a reading of one of Wright's haiku, that these two principles sketched out are frequently at odds with each other in the poetry, rather than pointing towards reconciliation and convergence.

The first of these claims risks reiterating a principle which, it has been generally agreed from Pound on down, is jejune[7]: the relative fidelity of Wright's haiku to the Japanese

[7] Kenner's commentary on *Cathay* spends a great deal of time either excusing Pound's lack of knowledge of Chinese or dismissing the apparent authority of Orientalist scholars (particularly Arthur Waley) who found his "translations" offensively ill-educated. A pithier recapitulation of the argument is made by Haun Saussy, Eric Hayot and Steven Yao in their introduction to *Sinographies*: "For us, it is not a novelty to remark that China is "invented" (by the West, by itself, by modernity, by postmodernity…); it does not satisfy us to discover, at

form. Relative, that is, to his American contemporaries. The critical assumption that Western misunderstanding is a precondition of writing about East Asia serves Wright particularly badly, since while Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder were writing haiku which boldly flouted the form's punishing formal laws, Wright stuck closely to haikus two foundational elements: the 5-7-5 syllabic structure of three lines, and the *kigo*, the metonymic reference to a particular season. It is worth reiterating that Kerouac's haiku, so keenly praised by Allen Ginsberg,[8] are notable partly for their sense of relative freedom from constraint, such as "Haiku Berkeley":

> Haiku Snyder
> I hurt the black ink
> on your kind book
> the only inconsistency sin
> I done yet to you
> sweet heart
>
> And John Wino anyway
> was to blame
>
> Dont kick me out
> of your tea
> house
> great man[9]

Indeed Kerouac's attempts, taken with Ginsberg's appreciation of them cited below the line,

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the end of a long day, that once again someone else has gotten it wrong. "Wrong in what way?" would be a better starting point; "wrong in what sense of 'new'?" Saussy, Hayot and Yao: "Sinographies: An Introduction" in *Sinographies: Writing China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) pp. xi – xii.

[8] "Kerouac has the one sign of being a great poet, which is he's the only one in the United States who knows how to write haikus. The only one who's written any good haikus. And everybody's writing haikus. There are all these dreary haikus written by people who think for weeks trying to write a haiku, and finally come up with some dull little thing or something. Whereas Kerouac thinks in haikus, every time he writes anything – talks that way and thinks that way. So it's just natural for him." Allen Ginsberg, quoted in Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Haiku and Modernist Poetics* (London: Palgrave, 2009) p. 53

[9] Jack Kerouac, "Haiku Berkeley," in *Pomes All Sizes* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1992) p. 43

suggest that the haiku indicated to these poets less a set of principles than a moment of pure subjective being; a non-mediation disguised as ethnic form. Not so for Wright:

> So cold it is now
> That the moon is frozen fast
> To a pine tree limb. (#555, 139)

The immobility of the moon, frozen in the perspective of the subject's gaze, affirms and countersigns the immobility of the form itself, with its forced syntax and monosyllabic drone.

Where Kerouac's poem is personal but timeless, Wright's is impersonal but twice-temporalized, night and winter – a poem characteristically obsessed by endings. The point is not, in the end, the "accuracy" of Wright's poem; I use the word "fidelity" to imply an affective, rather than scriptural, relation to the form. But it is clear from Wright's use of haiku that it is a form bound up with responsibility, with ornamental restriction, and with submission to the law of form. Julia Wright recalls her father's working through this form, at a time when he was also composing an unfinished novel called *A Father's Law*, as an externalization of the condition of his body:

> Back then I was an immature eighteen-year-old and, worried as we all were by his drastic weight-loss (the haiku must have been easy to carry) and the strange slowness of his recovery, we did not immediately establish a link between his poetic practices and his ailing health. Today I know better. I believe his haiku were self-developed antidotes against illness, and that breaking down words into syllables matched the shortness of his breath, especially on the bad days when his inability to sit up at the typewriter restricted the very breadth of writing. (viii)

Identifying three links between her father's writing and his ailing body – the lightness of the dossier containing the poems, their syllabic brevity, and their spacing on the page – Julia Wright reconfigures the haiku as the poetic form of her father's illness. The law of the haiku

both reflects and controls the law of the father, and the law of increasing immobility and decrepitude.

My second claim is that Wright's blackness alters the meaning of Asiatic racial form in *This Other World*. Alters what, exactly? The Poundian account of American modernism, with its emphasis on the irruptive, punctual force of the ideogram – or the haiku, for that matter; Ginsberg's sense of the haiku as a subjective flash could easily be imagist – relies on a presumptively white subject who, through a brief encounter with a racialized other, learns something about himself. Orientalist form demands – as Said has always insisted – a mutual fascination between self and other, but only in order to manage the possibility that self and other might become intertwined. Modernist Orientalism then appears to be a sophisticated mechanism for indulging an illicit infatuation precisely in order to maintain the sovereignty of the subject. Kerouac:

> When you become enlightened
> you will know that you've
> been enlightened all along
>
> Alright, I'm sick of this
> enlightenment–now I'm
> dumb again–the
> delicate blue morning
> sky through the tree.[10]

Kerouac almost comes back to Fenollosa's rhapsody over the ideograms that produce "The Sun Rises in the East"[11] – but note, more importantly, the ease with which this subject

[10] Jack Kerouac, "[Enlightenments]" in *Pomes All Sizes* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1992) p. 68

[11] "The overtones vibrate against the eye. The wealth of composition in characters makes possible a choice of words in which a single dominant overtone colors every plane of meaning. That is perhaps the most conspicuous quality of Chinese poetry. […] The sun, the shining, on one side, on the other the sign of the east, which is the sun entangled in the

recoils from the lack of individuality and sovereign agency encoded here as the timeless, but ethnicized, "enlightenment." These moments of intense and erotic Orientalist attachment followed by plain-spoken disavowal – a cycle inaugurated by Pound's early writing, and composing much of *The Cantos* – return the poet to the space of sovereignty.

That sovereignty *itself* is a racialized category remains invisible to the subject of Kerouac's poetry; yet such was the theme of Wright's report from the Bandung conference of decolonized nations, which was eventually published under the title *The Color Curtain* (1956). Wright reports on wandering around the conferences meeting-halls, cafes and bars, encountering subjectivities abjected by what he calls "racial shame" at every turn. He witnesses mistrust and suspicion between Asians and Africans begin to change into a shared sense of confrontation, as each recognizes a common interest in the global anticolonial struggle, while retaining a sense of the disfiguring differences between different experiences of colonialism. Wright's striking turn for this quasi-solidarity is "negative unity,"[12] a term that designates the possibility for shared action without ideology.[13] Deriving a central plank of his reading of this assemblage from W. E. B. Du Bois's somewhat contrarian concepts of "double consciousness" and the "color line" – indeed, Wright's renovation of this latter term as "color curtain" only reiterates Du Bois's own obsession with the tropes of curtains, veils and coverings – Wright comes to understand the post-Bandung moment as one of being-together without articulation; a subjectivity without sovereignty.

This element of late-Wright remains, in the mind of some of his critics, a moment of

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branches of a tree. And in the middle sign, the verb, rise, we have further homology; the sun is above the horizon, but beyond that the single upright line is like the growing trunk-line of the tree sign." Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character*, p. 60.

12 Richard Wright, *Black Power*, ed. Cornel West (New York: Harper, 2008) p. 571

13 "I got the notion that ideologies were the instruments that these men had grown used to wielding in their struggles with Western white men and that now, being together and among themselves, they no longer felt the need for them." Ibid., p. 572

depoliticization: in *Afro-Orientalism*, Bill Mullen shows how Wright's engagement with Asian anti-colonialism was limited by his Orientalist generalizations about the "Asian mind," and also argues that Bandung forced Wright to abandon (a previously Marxist) hope for global political emancipation by generating this purely negative sense of unity. "Wright's failure," writes Mullen, "to resolve [the question of whether race could be substituted for class in any Marxian paradigm] beyond a question of negative loyalty and metaphysical abjection should caution against blindly celebratory reclamations of the Bandung era."[14] But what Mullen sees as a failure of politics[15] has an effect, too, in the realm of poetics. *This Other World* is full of haiku in which an Orientalist consciousness, initially similar to Kerouac's or Pound's, fails to return to the space of sovereignty in which the Poundian attempt at racialized form comes to rest. To take only the most obvious, the first haiku:

I am nobody:
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away. (#1, 1)

Here the Orientalist red sun – although falling, not rising – intervenes in the process of subjective loss only to affirm the negativity of the first gesture. The temporality is odd, too; a present tense followed by a new syntactic subject which promises to move into the future in

[14] Bill Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 71

[15] "By the time of *White Man, Listen!* Wright was no more or less than the participant observer in his own Orientalist journey to the West. *Black Power*, *The Color Curtain*, and *White Man, Listen!* are among the most evocative books of negative loyalty written about the subaltern's relationship not only to the West but to the Marxist tradition. That Wright died before the world could become the world he wanted to see, a world without racism, without oppression, without a psychology of abjection, is a tragedy we should not thus excuse or diminish as an ineluctable aspect of diaspora consciousness. It is both a larger ambition and a larger failure than that, one with which few of us, Wright scholars and Afro-Asianists alike, have yet fully reckoned." Ibid., p. 71.

fact returns (brutally, "Took") to the past.

Two principles, then: that Wright (unlike other American Orientalist poets) saw the haiku form as a legal force, submission to which would gain him some control of his body; second, that Wright's self-conception as a black subject in the era of Bandung and "negative unity" echoes in his haiku as a loss of subjective sovereignty. For what it's worth, there is no shortage at all of critics who have made a variation of this second point, and who read Wright's "I am nobody" without any guile; as a straightforwardly empty, perhaps even sulky, response to the bad world. The last poem I want to read pits these two claims against each other somewhat, and hopefully suggests a critique of some of the stronger formulations of the second claim. It is another haiku from near the beginning of the cycle, and one of dozens throughout in which Wright *does* speak as an "I" who is not "nobody"; indeed as an "I" who issues commands. These poems speak back to the form of the georgic, the Virgilian verse form in which the poet offers agricultural instruction to his readers; advice on the cultivation of nature which then comes, in the work of Dryden and later eighteenth-century English poets, to suggest a retreat from the metropole (city) to the periphery (country). Except, in Wright's haiku-georgics, the instruction is given directly to nature, apparently lacking the mediation of a reader:

I give permission
For this soft spring rain to soak
The violet beds. (#5/2)

Here the sovereign subject returns, but in diminished form, ostentatiously granting permission for something over which he has no control. There is a kind of "negative unity" here, in which the assertion of subjective will takes the form of acceding to a natural force, which that will is observing. The poem collapses, or at least syncretizes, *permission* with

submission, such that an obedience to the general law of form – and here, as always, Wright goes out of his way to stipulate the *kigo* – allows for a new agency to emerge, if only negatively, from the dying body.