

The Vocation of David Wright: An Essay in Analytic Biography¹

BRUCE W. JORGENSEN

DAVID L. WRIGHT DID NOT BEGIN to exist for me until more than a year after his death—in 1968 when I saw his play, *Still the Mountain Wind*. For other portions of the Mormon audience, Wright began to exist in 1970, when *Dialogue* enthusiastically published sections of his poem-cycle "River Saints," and most recently, in 1976, when *Sunstone* published his story, "A Summer in the Country."² One of the sad ironies of Wright's career as a Mormon writer is that most of us did not know him as one of us until after it was over.

Wright was born in the Bear Lake Valley town of Bennington, Idaho, on May 22, 1929, the fourth of five children and the third and youngest son in his family. After public schools in Bennington and Montpelier, Idaho, he attended Utah State Agricultural College in Logan, receiving in 1950 a bachelor's degree in English and a teaching certificate. In Rexburg, Idaho, his strong disagreements with school officials and his marriage to a student in October of that year brought on a crisis that may have permanently disaffected Wright from the LDS Church, though he never renounced nominal membership and always felt deeply bound to his family and to Bennington. The Rexburg crisis also may have helped to turn him away from teaching toward the two careers he pursued for the rest of his life—one in the Air Force, the other as a writer. In the first, he attained the rank of Major and received, in 1966, the Bronze Star for meritorious service in Vietnam. In the second, he wrote in 1955 the play, *Still the Mountain Wind*, which was produced in places as wide apart as Milford, Utah, and Cambridge, Massachusetts; in literary quarterlies in 1960-61 he published five short stories, one of which, a redaction of his play entitled "A Summer in the Country," drew praise from several critics and was reprinted in *Best*

Articles and Stories and cited in the "Honor Roll" in *Best American Short Stories 1961*; in 1964 he received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Iowa and, during a two-week visit to Bennington, began writing the poems that would comprise the posthumous cycle "River Saints." In 1967, after his separation from his wife, Wright's health failed, and he died of a heart attack in June of that year. He left behind numerous letters, journals, an autobiography, and manuscripts of unpublished stories, plays, novels, and poems, most of which are now deposited in the Merrill Library at Utah State University.³

Such was David Wright's external career. But what most interests me is the internal one, "where the meanings are" in Emily Dickinson's phrase—the emergence of David Wright's vocation as a writer out of his family heritage, his early experience, his religious beliefs, his education, his friendships, in the years up to 1950.⁴

"I might be envied by a king, for I am a Mormon boy," sings the autobiographical young Alvin Simmons in Wright's story "Speak Ye Tenderly of Kings," and to two unsettlingly glamorous "Outside World people" he boasts of his pioneer ancestor who is honored with a "big statue" that "You must of seen . . . when you come through Paris," Idaho. On both sides of his family David Wright descended from strong Bear Lake Valley Mormon pioneer stock. His mother, Lenore Booth Rich, who still lives in Montpelier, is the great-granddaughter of Charles Coulson Rich, who might be regarded as second only to Brigham Young as a Mormon colonizer, having settled both San Bernardino and the Bear Lake Valley. David Wright's father, Conover Wright, was the son of Amos Wright, who might be regarded as second only to Charles C. Rich in the colonizing of the Bear Lake region. At a time of deep disillusionment for Amos Wright, Charles C. Rich had befriended him, and Wright later testified that Rich "influenced me at the turning point of my life." Wright then went on to convert some 300 Indians, including Chief Washakie; and David Wright later recalled how even in his childhood the Indians still addressed Conover Wright as "Great White Man's Son."⁵

In the summer of 1946, between high school and college, listening to old people talk of old days and feeling a desire to collect his grandfather Wright's experiences and copy them down, David Wright recorded in his journal, begun just the preceding February, his father's story of "the time when Grandfather Wright administered to Great Grandma":

My father . . . said Grandfather turned white and his forehead was mopped in sweat and hardship stood out in his face. . . . Several men had tried to [administer to her] but lacked the power and the inspiration of God to do so. As he finished this divine plea, he sank into a chair still very white. The here-to-fore unconscious woman, who had not risen from her bed in several weeks, rose up out of her bed and spoke in a loud clear voice. "I want all of you children here to know that Brother Wright is a man of God." Whereupon she retired to bed and died within a very few hours.⁶

One influential presence at a turning point of David Wright's own life, then, was that of his pioneer ancestry, their faith and spiritual power alive in family memory and talk.

The lines of Charles C. Rich and Amos Wright converged in the marriage

of Conover Wright and Lenore Rich in 1918; and while their lives show none of the outward greatness of those progenitors, they were honest, hardworking, pious, just, and charitable people. They were also strict. L. L. Burdick, a neighbor and family friend in Bennington since 1915, remarks that "They wouldn't have a magazine in the house if it had ads for cigarettes or liquor in it."⁷ Though David Wright later rebelled against what he saw as narrowness and bigotry among small-town Mormons, he never rejected his parents. Even at the moment of his deep embitterment in Rexburg in the fall of 1950, he wrote to James Miller that he could never renounce his membership in the Church "because of the great injustice and thanklessness it would entail toward my great father. . . . He is the biggest man I know—he believes the same as these other dogs, but is not narrow. Oh, he is as great as Christ [or] Socrates!" Wright's autobiography, written in 1950–51, calls his father a "great moral shadow" in David's life. In the same autobiography Wright also recalled "the feelings of peace and love" he felt when praying at his mother's knee, and elsewhere he wrote of "the beauty and power of [his parents'] simple lives." The first volume of his journal ends with "the eternal prayer of [his] heart": "Give to Conover Wright and Lenore Rich Wright all the celestial glory and happiness in the plan of God. Preserve their righteous spirit through the eternity. Bless them with every possible blessing and let me be unconscious to their death—dreaded hour!"⁸

In October 1946, as part of that last entry in his first journal, David Wright was planning to compile a scrapbook covering his life, divided into three sections, from 1929 to 1936, 1936 to 1941, and 1941 to 1946. That first dividing year, 1936, marks the single most significant and determining crisis in Wright's life and vocation. As Wright moved toward and through the lesser crisis of transition from high school to college, the "pre-'36 period," as he called it, seemed to him a "golden" time of personal and familial wholeness whose "beauty" and "power" he had "felt somehow" as an infant and which he longed to recover or return to. For a lonely high school graduate working for the summer in a Salt Lake City ice house, it was a source of sustaining and consoling memory:

To me the most beautiful sound in the world is the rushing song of the leaves as the wind rushes through them down at the old house. I long to be there now, when the wind is at rest and the soul is peaceful, all is quiet and the symphony of the leaves soothes the sorrows of your life. . . . Although my friends are few, my reputation bad, my enemies many, those little walks, my deep thoughts, my moods, feelings, desires will forever hold me to the place I love. . . .

The home his parents had made in a small house behind a row of lombardy poplars in Bennington, Idaho, became for David Wright the one still point in the turning world. And at that center stood the figure to which "almost all" of Wright's wonderful and "tearful memories" were linked, "the 'prince' of the world I lived in, my brother, Rich."⁹

His eldest brother, who died July 4, 1936, one day past his fifteenth birthday, was for David Wright "the exact personification of good, the complete paragon of all beauty." In college David looked back on Rich as "a boy who came closer to immortal divinity than any person I have ever

known": "If ever there lived a being who lived in heaven, while on earth, and felt at home, it is he."¹⁰ David's own potent nostalgia must have partly shaped and shaded this near-deified figure, yet other witnesses tend to agree. L. L. Burdick, who drove the bus to carry Bennington students to school in Montpelier, recalls Rich as a boy who never gave him any trouble: "He was always a peacemaker," trying to stop fights and keep older kids from bullying little ones; he wiped the runny noses and kissed the dirty faces of children from one of the town's poorer families; "if there was ever anybody ready for the highest glory," Mr. Burdick says, "it was that boy."¹¹ Even the Montpelier high school principal, A. J. Winters, who appears in Wright's letters and journals as quite stern and stinting of praise, remembered "Rich Wright as a very fine youngster and a good school citizen."¹²

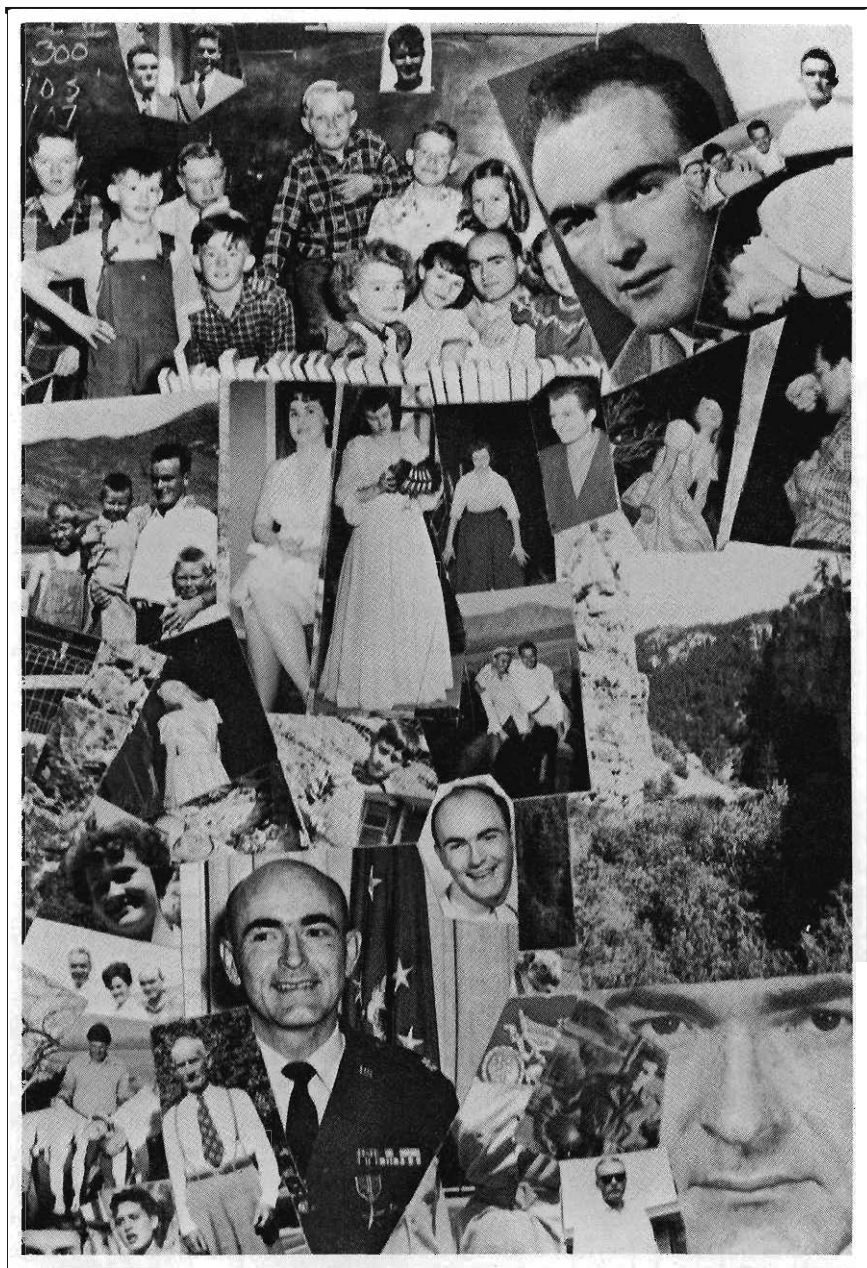
In his autobiography Wright describes Rich singing: "There was no indication of forcing. . . . The notes tumbled easily from the very soul of him." So besides being the emblem of human goodness, Rich also comes to symbolize, and perhaps symbolized even in David's childhood, a sort of poet of untrammelled utterance. Yet even in this passage an emphasis falls on wholeness, with Rich as its center: "All singing we merged together at the table where he sat," a "smiling young god."¹³

In the summer of 1936 Rich was working on neighbors' farms to help offset the \$200 expense of putting running water in the family home, long days of man's work that wearied him until he "seemed old" to David when he came home in the evenings. He had a girl friend, and he planned to outrun Sakamoto, who had beaten him in the Fourth of July race in 1935. Then he suffered severe abdominal pains, he was hospitalized, his appendix ruptured and he died. Visiting him in the hospital, David knew "the awful feeling that he [was] not my brother at all"; he saw Rich as "trying to plunge back into life with a sudden final effort that would erase the mistake of his illness," saw him "in a moment of consciousness beg something to me with a movement of his eyes, a strain of a frown, beg something from a depth of great desperation."¹⁴

Of course this retrospective description owes much to David Wright's later encounter with Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*,¹⁵ but Wolfe's impassioned chapters on a brother's death might not have meant so much to Wright if he had not known the experience himself. Whatever that "movement of his eyes," remembered or imagined, begged of David—pity, useless help, completion of the life unlived, simple witness, the grace of turning away—the experience of his brother's death locked David Wright, bewildered, hungry, terrified, wondering, into a long wrestle with an angel whose name and errand he could never entirely discern.

Of the touch of Rich's death on him Wright said, "I was . . . torn apart." At the same time, as Rich "sank deep into the death of himself," David felt that "the still unfathomable something . . . had broken our material brotherhood even as it was knitting a spiritual brotherhood that would live with me forever," and he found himself, momentarily, "at peace with my wonder."¹⁶

"Hmm . . . my gracious, but it's hard to understand the ways of the lord," says Stake President Wright in the autobiography.¹⁷ The standard Latter-day Saint consolations were available, and David Wright administered them to himself not a few times over the next fourteen years, but grief would not

*David Wright*

down. If Eudora Welty is right to say that "there is only one way of depriving the ones you love—taking your living presence away from theirs,"¹⁸ then we all work that deprivation, that wrong and harm, despite our best will, in dying. For David Wright the longing for his brother's living presence would not cease, nor the wrong be forgiven, nor the hurt heal, in this world. When Rich, "the personification of wholesomeness, kindness, health, smiling cheer—all the good and innocent things of the earth," was "suddenly a big dead doll," for David "It was unbelievable." And beyond that, in the "awful

leisure" Emily Dickinson said was given "Belief to regulate," David began to find "something foul, twisted up in this death of someone good." A fragment possibly written in the winter of 1947 posed the problem harshly: "Blood, pain, brutality, violence, death contradicted the earth's vast loveliness"; death was a "black hooded wasp."¹⁹

One year to the day from his brother's death, David Wright was baptized a member of the LDS Church—symbolically, perhaps, baptized into his brother's immortality, sealed in that "spiritual brotherhood." But the death itself had baptized him experientially into the cruel irony of the problem of natural evil. For fourteen years Wright earnestly wrestled in his childhood faith against that irony, but in the autobiography of 1950–51 he would attribute to his dying brother his own feelings "that the tragedy of this leaving [his family and home place] was suffocating, that the God-promise of coming back in glory was insufficient and unreal; that the only reality was the tragedy of going, and insufferable humiliation of non-existence."²⁰

In a fragment possibly written about 1945–46, Wright reveals another dimension of Rich's death for him: "with the passing of my bro. in 1936, a new era started slowly to creep upon me. Without his companionship, I was lost & drifted into the ways of evilness."²¹ What those ways were in his earlier years, Wright never specifies, but the statement typifies the estrangement and guilt Wright felt through most of his teens, intensifying near the transition from high school to college. The guilt may stem in part from David's sense or suspicion that he wished Rich's death: Alvin in *Still the Mountain Wind* kicks his brother's stomach and calls him a "bad bastard," then feels guilty about it after Rich dies.²² Such a reaction to a sibling's death may not be uncommon; Freud wrote of his own guilt over an infant brother's death.²³ Some of David's hostility toward Rich, the root of his guilt, might in turn derive from his being the third son and feeling, as the 1950–51 autobiography suggests, excluded by Rich and Warren from the close companionship and love of their father.²⁴

Perhaps the primary form of David's estrangement was an almost inescapable sense of his inner turmoil contrasted with others' outward tranquility: "How could" his father, David asked, "be so untormented and righteous when I was so tormented and bad?" The autobiography mentions two rare moments when David overcame his isolation from his father. Once in 1942 Conover read his father Amos's patriarchal blessing and cried, and David "felt close to Dad that day, felt like I was his son then for the first time . . . the same flesh and blood. He had shown emotion like I had so that made us basically alike." Earlier, in Logan in 1938, after David witnessed a "nightmare" episode of two brothers fiercely fighting on a ditchbank, his father slept with him in Grandmother Wright's house: "He put his big honest arm around me and patted my shoulder with his hand. I felt that oneness surge through me, and love and protection."²⁵ Fraternal conflict and the need of paternal care and at-onement: even after he had rejected the institutional church and many of its beliefs, those very Mormon themes would still charge David Wright's imagination.

Besides Wright's feelings, his outward behavior tended to estrange him. Often rebellious, bullheaded, acting as if he thought only David was right,

he repeatedly ran afoul of teachers and school officials; he dropped out of the first three weeks of high school in 1944, apparently after an argument with principal Winters. It is hardly surprising that as a high-school senior Wright felt "warped and old in spirit and discouraged and hopelessly lost . . .," that he felt his "real self" as a college freshman to be "terrible mental torture."²⁶

Between 1936 and 1946, David Wright's most nearly unalloyed happiness came from sports. By 1942 he had filled "7 scrapbooks" with "about 15,000 pict." of baseball players, and by 1945 he had published statistics and three articles in baseball fan magazines. In May 1944 he won the Idaho state championship in the high jump; in 1945 he was named "outstanding player of the year" in Montpelier High football. In April 1946 he wrote Roy Partee of the Red Sox, "I am at the crossroads of life and I'm taking the baseball route. . . ." He never did take that route, though he did attend three years of college on an athletic scholarship, participating in track and baseball, lettering in football at the uncommonly light weight of 145 pounds, and writing sports news and publicity for the college teams.²⁷

Yet long before he dropped out of sports so he could concentrate his senior year on literature and writing, David Wright saw that his final identity was not *The Athlete*. Perhaps in some sense all David's athletic endeavor acted out a wish to resurrect the athlete Rich had been, as Alvin in the last scene of the play reminds his dead brother that "Daddy said Sakamoto would win this year" and begs, "Jump the fence again, Rich." Thus also, as Rich had been a singer, so David would be: as a junior he had the lead in a high-school operetta, and later in college, he occasionally sang, once on a radio program. But in comparison with his talented cousin Patsy Judd he felt he had, "alas, no ability," "no talent that the world begs of. My future is nill. My life saturated by wrong doings. My mind warped and eaten into by an evil influence. I am as a beaten, torn, wrinkled, old man compared to a small, sin free, happy beautiful child." At the time of this journal entry, July 22, 1946, Patsy was fifteen, the same age as Rich at his death, so David's despairing comparison may refer obliquely to the good and beautiful brother whose death a decade earlier David had recently commemorated in his journal.²⁸

"It's hell to be no good and want to be some good!" he wrote three months later; and through this time sickened by "the blood of hate, hate for himself," Wright strove to be good by the light of his Mormon faith. On April 10, 1946, for instance, he warns himself, "I have to take very good care of my mind lest it wander into prejudice and hate"; and in the same entry, "Oft times when alone I find sweet contentment in the thought of and knowledge that God was once a boy like me." Pieces of fervent apologetics and testimony occur often among Wright's early writings. In a letter of March 3, 1945, to a baseball player, he declared, "I have a sincere testamony in my heart, that the LDS Church is the *only true church in the world*." An essay dated March 18, 1945, asserts that "the *one* big mistake that mankind has made thus far has been discarding of religion" and foresees, after the war, "an almost unbelievable increase" in LDS Church membership.²⁹ In such writings David Wright sounds like a typical Mormon seminary student,

entirely sincere if somewhat naive, enthused by the vision of a dynamic church.

With equal sincerity, Wright tried once and for all, as a Christmas present to his mother in 1946 (at her suggestion), to give up smoking, and he promised her, "If you want me to go on a mission, I will and if you want me to quit athletics and concentrate on some other profession, I will." "I am glad," he wrote, "I am free of my former self at last. Now my mind will not be in agony & my conscience will not haunt me." Yet the essential self of David Wright was not as malleable to his mother's wishes as even David wished it to be, and the next two sentences of the letter hint that his rebellious "former self" might not have been entirely put off, might never be: "The only reason I was not completely taken over by my habits and my mind was not completely saturated is because I always kept in my mind the right principles you taught me and finally they came to the fore and conquered the wrong. Perhaps not completely yet but pray that it may be so."³⁰

Wright worked hard to make it so. On December 26 he set up in his journal a twenty-six-point plan for self-reform, based on Benjamin Franklin's "Project of Moral Perfection," and for at least a while he audited himself fairly regularly, finding among other things that he could maintain sexual purity but had difficulty with daily prayer. He quite earnestly believed at this time that the gospel of Christ as taught by the LDS Church would give him salvation from the "terrible ordeal" of his life. In an attempt at stating his "complete religious philosophy" in his journal on January 14, 1947, he wrote: "I am not afraid of any arising condition if I can once find the key to God's house."³¹

The arising conditions of college education and a deepening commitment to writing would gradually change much of this, but from 1945 to 1949 Wright's religious hunger for wholeness, his nostalgia for his lost brother, his increasing need to write, and his increasing satisfaction in writing all seem aspects of a single motive, the one intention of the self Wright was beginning to discover. Thus, what he thought of, in fact, as "the first time I have ever attempted to write anything of real importance" was an attempt, through written introspection, to "straighten [him]self out": "I realize," he wrote on February 22, 1945, "that I have made a complete failure of my life so far," so "I have decided to make a complete analysis of my life." Complete failure—despite the state highjump championship, the outstanding player award in football, the publications in baseball magazines. The sense of failure came largely from self-comparison with Rich: "My most treasured thought of the past is the thought of my brother who died in 1936, at the age of 15." At this writing, David himself was not yet sixteen, and he saw himself as "exactly opposite from Rich in almost every respect." This piece did not attempt to recover Rich, yet Rich seems its center of gravity. From this point on, most of the writing that had "real importance" to David Wright would have that same center, piece after piece an attempt to seize the brother back from death, to unite with him in "perpetual consciousness."³² This nostalgia would be the source of Wright's genuinely prodigious energy as a writer, and perhaps of his most corrosive weaknesses as a writer

and as a man.

"I am alone in everything I do. . . . I just have to enjoy my own company," Wright wrote to a pen pal in the summer of 1945. What he had to enjoy in his own company were mainly his memories, and his concentration on the past mainly intensified his solitude. In that same summer he wrote to Patsy Judd of a visit to his childhood home, of the "unexplainable" emotions he felt there, and of his frustrated yearning to express these in music, in painting, in writing. "So many things," he told her, "remind me of my dead bro." He wrote of his feeling "good & sentimental" and occasionally choking up during his midnight walks at the "old place," and asked, "Do you understand, Pat? Do you? You're the only one I have told this and I would feel so good if I knew you understood how I feel." He needed some kind of utterance, some kind of sharing of those feelings that meant so much to him that, as he wrote the following year, he would "rather have a dozen pasts than one tomorrow."³³

Just after starting college in September 1946, Wright read H. G. Wells' story "The Time Machine," and noted in his journal, "I wish it was within my power to write so powerfully. . . . I feel within myself the strong urge to write something great or even express myself simply—but when pen is in hand, all is lost in the haze of ignorance." Yet despite the haze, from this time on Wright felt an increasing need to excavate his childhood, which was "as layers of rock," and an increasing sense of purpose in his writing. His quest for lost time took on Wolfean or Proustian dimensions: "I am going to try to come as close as possible," he wrote on December 20, 1946, "to recording every event in my life (and thought) as anyone ever did." This was written at the same time as his letter to his mother promising he would give up smoking and try to be whatever she wished him to be. He felt this winter solstice to be "an eventful turning point of [his] life," and as he examined himself he found that "the one thing, and I believe it to be a good virtue, that has been the sum of my life is the intense desire to record past events. A historian or a geneologist." At midnight on Christmas Eve he wrote that God "gives me a clear mind that is desirous of attaining good and whereas if the plans pertaining to historical happenings are carried out, a mind that will be of service to future generations thusly fulfilling God's wishes pertaining to histories of his people."³⁴

Wright was developing a sense of mission. On January 26, 1947, on returning home from Priesthood meeting, he "told mother of my plan to write my life and she was well pleased." "I strongly feel," he wrote in his journal two days later, "that there is purpose in my writings." And on February 16, in a passage recalling the "pre-'36 period" and the "prince" of that world, he wrote what seems in retrospect almost a covenant:

. . . I want as any reward that I may earn on earth to *view* my entire life in its *entirety* and *fullness* and find and know and realize the satisfaction of the aches and deep, days [*sic*] desires of my heart which are many and mysterious and unusual. By the power of faith and prayer my goals shall be attained and my pleasure will be great and I will find satisfaction to my soul!

Wright's "mission" in writing became so all-absorbing that he felt he lived "in a haze to the outside world." By the summer of 1947 he was planning to

write a book about Rich, had spent \$25 on pictures of him, and was announcing to friends his intention to build a cabin in Joe's Gap, his favorite gorge in the mountains southeast of Bennington, where he could live by himself and write books and stories.³⁵

Yet if he had begun to desire solitude for writing, he had also begun to feel lonelier, to wish for "at least one *real* friend" to share his inner world. "I haven't any 'you,'" he had written in November 1946, and amid his plans for a canyon hermitage in the summer of 1947 he wrote to his brother Warren's new bride, Donna, that he was happy in writing but needed "a companion to understand and help me achieve." Framed by such statements, his melodramatic rededication to nostalgic writing, probably written also in August 1947, sounds ironic and even foreboding:

It is the solemn duty of every person to conjugate, in formal style, and reverent intent, the memories of past existences.

I must keep from earthly pursuits to complete this sacred task of writing of the past & its glory. It is necessary to never subjugate myself to human eccentricities to achieve this purpose. I must know none of the merry-go-round of human fallaciousness. I must ride the horse apart from the machine & trot alone down the road—to the hallowed past.³⁶

Along with Wright's one increasing purpose and his self-imposed loneliness runs a current of growing religious anxiety and uncertainty, though in 1947 it surfaces only occasionally—for instance, in journal entries during March mentioning his reading of Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* and Vardis Fisher's *Children of God* and responding to them with orthodox but somewhat shrill apologetics. There are also the personal audits in which he admits he does not pray daily, and ominous entries in which he says that his "sould seems puzzled" or that, though religion is his "fondest hope," "I wander but know not my resting place!" His notes for a "Speech to be given August 10, 1947," apparently to an MIA fireside or other similar group, suggest that he was holding to belief by main force, for one sentence admits the "fragility by which the evidence of Mormonism [*sic*] doctrine hinges" before going on to declare unshakeable faith.³⁷

"—Then he met one like him," says a fragment possibly written in the winter of 1947, "immortal friend, salvation!" The "one" was Jim Miller, who became Wright's "inner world" friend and to whom Wright would dedicate his autobiography—"the Lodestar of my creative life." Wright met Miller, a year older and already dedicated to writing, in October 1947 and soon described him to friends and family as another boy "that hears music in the trees" and "a genius born 200 years too soon."³⁸ As the disillusioned Amos, Wright had found in Charles C. Rich the man who decisively turned his life, so in Jim Miller David Wright found the friend who shared his enthusiasm for writing and writers, especially romantics, and who confirmed his vocation.

And for a time Jim strengthened David's religious life as well. Though not a Mormon, Miller had been so deeply impressed by Wright's parents during visits at Thanksgiving 1947 and the next winter and spring, that in

the summer of 1948 he was trying to bolster David's faith, contrasting the atheistic Mormon-baiting teacher Moyle Q. Rice unfavorably with a simple and devout Mormon patriarch. Miller's baptism on November 16, 1948, marked a spiritual high point in Wright's life. "God bless Mormonism!" he wrote ecstatically to his parents; "Tonite [Jim and I] shook hands in the name of eternal brotherhood." And the letter goes on to imagine "another town in heaven whose name might be Bennington. And I cry for joy when I feel that dear Rich, who died so young and has left such a memory for me, will be there with us in eternity. And I am thankful that Jim Miller has joined the church, so that he can enjoy our eternity with us." Eternity meant, at that moment, "all our blessed family in a world of happiness that will even exceed the joy we knew at the old place. . . ." That, Wright exclaimed, "is my fondest dream. And it must come true!"³⁹

Wright was likely true to his feelings at that moment, but his nostalgia for the mortal joy of the old place was stronger than his hunger for eternity and his dream of the Celestial Kingdom. In the dedication of his autobiography, Wright was to announce his choice of the dream of art: "It is from witnessing [Jim Miller's] unflinching self-devotion to create from his heart the Beautiful, the Good, and the Significant that I have found the desire to forge the shape of my dream."⁴⁰

There is little more to tell of this phase of Wright's career. Like any active Mormon youth who reached the age of twenty at that time, in the spring of 1949 Wright seriously considered going on a mission, but by September, after AFROTC summer camp, perhaps influenced by Jim Miller's similar decision, he had decided to finish school and certify to teach English. But even in the spring of 1949 Wright knew himself to be seriously uncentered. His mother had written him May 10, 1949; "Dad says to plan to be here Sun. as the Stake Presidency want to interview & ordain you," but apparently the ordination never took place. An English theme dated May, 1949 and marked "ungradable," perhaps for its visionary and solipsistic incoherence, presents David and his father as more or less allegorical figures for "the difference between faith & disbelief." Near its end occurs a poignant fragment, "—but no key, no key to it all."⁴¹

A letter of April 19, 1949, to Wright from his childhood hero Ralph Maughan closes with the admonition, "always have faith in God and do only what you think is right." But the two halves of that counsel had already frighteningly pulled apart in Wright's mind. By February 1950, his father would warn him about the "difference between knowledge and intelligence" in orthodox terms, and E. L. Romney would remind him "that there was one fellow at the College that at least solved and understood certain problems and had a high degree of loyalty to his beliefs. It was Dave Wright!" Wright's own letters from this time are not among the papers at USU, and his journals for the same period are still restricted, but two letters he received hint at some of the problems he had not solved.

The first, from George Albert Smith and dated March 25, 1950, replies to a letter of Wright's received March 15, with a single-spaced page and a half of orthodox *credo*. One paragraph near its end seems to answer a direct question: "I have not seen the Father or the Son, neither have I heard their voices in an audible way, but I have felt their presence and have enjoyed the whispering of the Still Small Voice that comes from them, the result of

which has given me a testimony of the truth." President Smith closes with the affirmation that if Wright "will be humble and prayerful, searching the scriptures, [he] too may know which is the Church that our Heavenly Father recognizes. . ."⁴²

But Wright was already finding more trouble than reassurance in the scriptures, as the second letter suggests. It is from his father, dated April 14, 1950, and replies to a letter David wrote on April 6, the 120th anniversary of the organization of the Church. Apparently responding to problems David is having with the creation, the fall, Cain and Abel, the flood, etc., the letter concedes "that the Bible is not very clear on some things, there are the mysteries of life and many things we do not understand." One passage in the six single-spaced pages suggests that, perhaps more than anything else, what Wright could not get over or around was Rich's death: his father quotes D&C 29:46, "little children are redeemed from the foundation of the world through mine Only Begotten," and continues, "God was not unkind in permitting Rich's death, I am sure he knows what is best."⁴³

Not unkind to the good and innocent Rich, but what of David? For David Wright loved his brother and yearned for his living presence to the point of idolatry. In a strange, long imaginary dialogue between himself and Rich, possibly written about 1948, David asks that his "interogative soul . . . be satisfied," and Rich's voice gives the standard consolations. David tries to resign himself: "Perhaps it is unaligned with the laws of eternal progression to have faith in and pray for, the turning back of relentless time; that we may live mortally in the happiness which we once knew together"; "I must remove the obstinacy of my too-mortal mind and say it is good." But in the last line, as Rich ascends into heaven, David cries out: "*If God were you I would love him more!*"⁴⁴

" . . . as God created man and woman, so too He fashioned the hero and the poet or orator," writes Soren Kierkegaard in his "Panegyric upon Abraham."⁴⁵ David Wright, like Kierkegaard's poet, was a "genius of recollection," "jealous of the intrusted treasure" of his hero's memory, who followed "the option of his heart," striving against "the cunning of oblivion," through the impotence of memory to its transfiguration in works of literary art. But there sounds an ominous undertone here, as in Wright's life, for us who try to search out the foundations of art and religion or who would make one life of art and belief. The hero of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is Abraham, the "knight of faith," and the poet is Johannes de Silentio, who admits, "For my part I can well describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them."⁴⁶ There seems, in spite of this, no necessity that the poet not be able to make the motions of faith, and we have in the Church today several writers belonging either to Wright's chronological or to his literary generation who seem to have mastered the difficulty. But David Wright, too, however problematically, is one of us, and the shape of his life is part of our "intrusted treasure"—in its question, its disquiet.

NOTES

¹ I wish to acknowledge a travel grant from the Brigham Young University College of Humanities Professional Development Fund which supported the research for this essay; the courteous, efficient assistance of A. J. Simmonds and his staff in the Utah State University Archives; the generous and quiet hospitality of my aunt and uncle, Dr. and Mrs. Arden Frandsen, during two of my visits to Logan; and the companionable help of my wife Donna in reading and taking notes on some of the Wright and Miller papers.

² *Dialogue* V (Summer 1970): 86-94, and V (Autumn 1970): 81-91. *Sunstone* I (Fall 1976): 60-76; ostensibly a reprint of the 1960 *Mutiny* text of the story, the *Sunstone* "Summer in the Country" is a later version, probably the one Wright included in his Iowa M.F.A. thesis (1964), and it is bowdlerized to the extent that all of Wright's uses of the word "bastard" are silently emended to "name" or some other innocuous and thematically empty substitute.

³ Biographical details summarized here are drawn from the Conover Wright genealogy (copies on microfilm in the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University), from James C. Miller, "Discovering a Mormon Writer: David L. Wright 1929-1967," *Dialogue* V (Summer 1970): 79-84, from Norman Mecham, "David Lane Wright," *Sunstone* I (Fall 1976): 56-59, and from portions of the Wright papers cited more specifically below. Mecham's essay relies heavily on a brief autobiographical sketch Wright submitted as part of his application for admission to the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Wright's published stories are:

"Speak Ye Tenderly of Kings," *Inland* III (Spring 1960): 23-33.

"A Measure of Contentment," *The Humanist* XX (July-August 1960): 219-224.

"A Summer in the Country," *Mutiny* III (Autumn 1960): 61-78; reprinted in *Best Articles and Stories*, March 1961, pp. 29-35.

"The Hawk," *Arizona Quarterly* XVI (Winter 1960): 332-338.

"Mice Men and Principles," *Mutiny* IV (Fall-Winter 1961-62): 97-101.

After Wright's death, James Miller compiled and edited the poems of the "River Saints" cycle together with a version of "A Summer in the Country," printed them on offset press, and bound them as *River Saints: A Mormon Chronicle* (Logan, 1969?).

A partial production record of *Still the Mountain Wind* is included in a typescript copy of the play recently sent me by Robert Rees, the former editor of *Dialogue*.

In 1973, partly at the urging of Robert Rees, Wright's surviving children deposited in the Utah State University Archives all of Wright's papers in their possession. In 1976 the archives acquired the papers of James C. Miller, Wright's closest friend, from Miller's widow. More recently, a second gift of Wright's papers, previously held by his brother Warren Wright in Montpelier, Idaho, was deposited in the archives. Still restricted, this collection includes important journals.

In subsequent references to the Papers of David Lane Wright, Utah State University Manuscript Collection 2, I will identify and, where possible, give the date of the document and the page cited, followed by a parenthesis giving the box and folder numbers decimally; thus (7.4) means that the document cited is in box 7, folder 4 of the Wright papers. I will cite the Papers of James C. Miller, Utah State University Manuscript Collection 35, in the same way, but adding the designation MS35. Wherever possible, I will preserve the spelling of the originals.

To reduce the number of footnotes, wherever convenient I will consolidate all the references in a paragraph, listing the sources in the order in which the paragraph uses them.

⁴ Emily Dickinson, ["There's a certain Slant of light"] (J258) in Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960). My question here is a version or an aspect of the question Leon Edel suggests is central to any literary biography; see his *Literary Biography* (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1973), esp. pp. xiv, 29. Edel's book has been my principal *vade mecum* throughout my work on Wright.

⁵ "Speak Ye Tenderly of Kings," pp. 23, 25-26, 27. Rich and Wright genealogical records on microfilm, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. Charles Coulson Rich, whose bust stands on a pedestal next to the Tabernacle in Paris, Idaho, is the subject of biographies by John Henry Evans (New York: Macmillan, 1936) and Leonard J. Arrington (Provo: B.Y.U. Press, 1974). The details on C. C. Rich and Amos Wright are from Evans, pp. 367-69. DLW, *Journal*, 14 July 1946 (7.3).

⁶ *Journal*, 14 July 1946 (7.3).

⁷ Interview by Bruce W. Jorgensen in Bennington, Idaho, 20 August 1977.

⁸ DLW to James Miller, 5 September 1950 and 12 September 1950 (MS 35, 2.12). *Autobiography* 1950-51, pp. 18-19, 35 (7.5). *Journal*, 27 October 1946 (7.3).

⁹ Journal, 27 October 1946 (7.3); 16 February 1947 (7.4). DLW to Patsy Judd, 24 August 1945 (1.1). Autobiography 1950–51, p. 26 (7.5). Journal, 13 June 1946 (7.3); 16 February 1947 (7.4).

¹⁰ Conover Wright genealogy. "Itinerary" for Journal IV, included in Journal II (7.4). Notebook, c. 1947 (7.13).

¹¹ Interview, Bennington, Idaho, 20 August 1977.

¹² Letter to DLW, 2 December 1948 (2.4).

¹³ Autobiography 1950–51, pp. 69–70 (7.5).

¹⁴ Autobiography 1950–51, pp. 75, 77, 83, 84, 94, 98–99 (7.5).

¹⁵ DLW to James Miller, 30 June 1951 (MS35, 1.3).

¹⁶ Autobiography 1950–51, pp. 100, 105 (7.5).

¹⁷ Autobiography 1950–51, p. 108 (7.5).

¹⁸ *Losing Battles* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 362.

¹⁹ Autobiography 1950–51, pp. 13, 17–18 (7.5). Holograph leaf describing winter scenes [1947?] (7.7). Emily Dickinson, ["The last Night that She lived"] (J1100).

²⁰ Wright genealogy. Autobiography 1950–51, pp. 89–90 (7.5).

²¹ Holograph on personalized lavender stationery, sheet 4 (7.7).

²² *Still the Mountain Wind* typescript, pp. 7, 8, 11 (copy in my possession); cf. "A Summer in the Country," *Mutiny* version, pp. 61, 62, 63; the *Sunstone* emendations of "bastard" weaken the theme of fraternal conflict in the story.

²³ Freud is alluded to by Joanne Koch in "When Children Meet Death," *Psychology Today* XI (August 1977): 79. Recent studies in the psychology of bereavement might prove quite useful in understanding David Wright.

²⁴ Autobiography 1950–51, p. 20 (7.5).

²⁵ Autobiography 1950–51, pp. 21, 22–25 (7.5).

²⁶ DLW, holograph note in margin of letter from Lucile Hall, 26 September 1944 (2.3); Warren Wright to DLW, 3 September 1944 and 1 November 1944 (3.1); cf. Journal, 15 and 19 February 1946 (7.3). Journal, 24 February 1946 and 8 September 1946 (7.3).

²⁷ DLW to Ralph Maughan, 2 June 1942; to Pete Craig, 19 January 1944; to Fred Schaefer, 9 April 1945; to Pete [Craig?], 3 July 1945 (1.1). DLW to John [?], 28 May 1944; to Betty [Jane Ellis], 15 July 1945 (1.1). DLW to Roy [Partee], 21 April 1946 (1.2).

Wright's athletic scholarship and activity in sports and sports writing are mentioned in letters to Legrande Humphreys, 8 August 1946 (1.2), to E. L. Romney, 12 August 1946 (1.2), to Conover Wright, 1 March 1948 (1.3), from E. L. Romney, 1946–1950 (2.8, 9), and from Joe Whitesides, 1946–1950 (2.13); Wright's weight, in E. L. Romney to Les Goates (*Deseret News*), 1 June 1950 (2.9).

²⁸ Autobiographical Sketch, 15 April 1962 (7.6). *Still the Mountain Wind* typescript, pp. 40–41; cf. "A Summer in the Country," *Mutiny*, p. 77, and *Sunstone*, p. 76. DLW to Betty [Jane Ellis], 15 July 1945 (1.1); Carol Green to DLW, 2 September 1947 and 18 September 1947 (2.3); DLW to Patsy Judd, 24 August 1945 (1.1); Journal, 22 July 1946, 25 June 1946, 3 July 1946 (7.3).

²⁹ Journal, 20 October 1946, 12 March 1946, 10 April 1946 (7.3); DLW to Irving Young, 3 March 1945 (1.1); pencil holograph essay, 18 March 1945 (7.7); cf. holograph on personalized stationery, 25 March 1945 (7.7).

³⁰ Lenore Wright to DLW, undated [fall 1946] (3.4); DLW to Lenore Wright, 19 December 1946 (1.2); cf. Journal, 12 November 1946 (7.4), and Walley Teuscher to DLW, 31 March 1947 and 18 April 1947 with holograph annotation by DLW (2.11).

³¹ Journal, 26 December 1946, 1 February 1947, 16 March 1947, 4 January 1947, 14 January 1947 (7.4).

³² Typescript, 22 February 1945, pp. 1, 2 (7.7); "Sketches of the Past" (7.9).

³³ DLW to Betty [Jane Ellis?], [Summer 1945] (1.1); to Patsy Judd, 24 August 1945 (1.1); Journal, 3 August 1946 (7.3).

³⁴ Journal, 17 September 1946; cf. 8 September 1946 ("I have always wished to turn back time"); 13 October 1946 (7.3). Journal, 20 December 1946 (7.4). "Christmas Eve—1946—12:00

P.M.," p. 2 (7.7).

³⁵ Journal, 26 January 1947, 28 January 1947, 16 February 1947, 2 March 1947, 5 March 1947, 30 March 1947 (7.4). DLW to Betty [], 2 August 1947 (7.9); letters from Verne F. Hunter, 15 July 1947 (2.3), Carol Green, 2 September 1947 (2.3), Doris Taylor, 23 September 1947 (2.12), Betty Peterson, 26 October 1947 (2.7); cf. creative writing notes, Winter 1948 (8.6).

³⁶ Journal, 22 January 1947, 12 November 1946 (7.4); DLW to Donna Wright, 1 August 1947 (7.9). Blue Notebook (7.13).

³⁷ Journal, 2 March 1947, 5 March 1947; 1 February 1947, 16 March 1947; 11 March 1947, 30 March 1947 (7.4). "Speech to be given August 10, 1947" (7.9).

³⁸ Undated holograph describing winter loneliness (7.7); the Journal for 20 October 1946 (7.3) mentions plans for an essay about "thoughts on a typical winters morning in Bennington," which may refer to this fragment or to another fragment, in holograph and typescript, about "Alvin's" loneliness in winter (7.7). "Itinerary" for Journal IV, in Journal II (7.4); Autobiography 1950-51, dedication (7.5). Betty Peterson to DLW, 9 November 1947 (2.7); Lenore Wright to DLW, 10 November 1947 (3.4).

³⁹ James Miller to DLW, undated [summer 1948] and 1 August 1948 (2.5). DLW to Conover and Lenore Wright, 16 November 1948 (1.3).

⁴⁰ Autobiography 1950-51, dedication (7.5).

⁴¹ Conover Wright to DLW, 8 March 1948 (3.2); Lenore Wright to DLW, 14 September 1948 (3.4); DLW to Conover and Lenore Wright, 2 February 1949 and 16 July 1949 (1.3); Doris Taylor to DLW, 9 March 1949 and 20 July 1949 (2.12); Joe Whitesides to DLW, 27 June 1949 (forwarded with note from Conover Wright, "tell Joe the mission is indefinite") and 12 July 1949 (2.13); Ralph Maughan to DLW, 5 July 1949 (2.4); E. L. Romney to DLW, 29 September 1949 (2.8). Lenore Wright to DLW, 10 May 1949 (3.4). English theme, May 1949 (7.8).

⁴² Ralph Maughan to DLW, 19 April 1949 (2.4). Conover Wright to DLW, 2 February 1950 (3.2); E. L. Romney to DLW, 21 February 1950 (2.9). George Albert Smith to DLW, 25 March 1950 (2.10).

⁴³ Conover Wright to DLW, 14 April 1950 (3.2).

⁴⁴ Undated typescript dialogue ("You, my own brother"), pp. 4, 5, 6 (7.8).

⁴⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, tr. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1968), p. 30.

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 48.

I demand this freedom for myself, the freedom to view the world in its entirety, and I feel sad when I see my fellow Mormons (or my Baptist friends) reject great experiences in drama or in any of the arts, because of isolated offensive details.

-RONALD WILCOX
Vol. II, No. 1, p. 23