



Live Poetry from Metaphor of Re-Run

Going Native

by Stephen Wright

Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994

Hardcover, 305 pp, \$22

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Stephen Wright's *Going Native* swallows up reader and characters alike in a deluge of metaphor which debunks all attempts at ready-made epiphanies of intense emotion, the kind we've had so many of in recent years. One character is so alienated that she can only repeat the sentimental pseudo-poetry of the world of romance she would like to inhabit:

Her dream name was Melissa. She lived in Chicago, or sleep's facsimile of that mythic city, under the haunted arrogance of its towers, in a shadowy winter light of alienated intimacy. (155)



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The irony of this intrinsically ironic voice is that it manages to resonate with genuine poetry in the midst of and from within the gluey, sticky, set images it sets out to expose.

Going Native, the story of a serial killer, is written mainly from the victims' perspective, each chapter dealing with a new set of characters in a new situation. The thread running from one chapter to the next is the discreet presence, or shadow, of Wylie, the killer, whose gray eyes and clothes are recognizable only as clues or vague details. Not only does his character evolve in a world of artifice, but the whole writing is saturated with references to television series, movies, and other media. Every scene seems to duplicate a mediated vision through camcorders and other means of presenting second-hand perception and a growing sense of alienation from the real. The blurred vision of intoxicated characters, high on crack, paranoid, suffering from an inflated ego, is described in highly metaphoric language which conveys the depth of the characters' entanglement in the world of artifact and their ever-increasing estrangement from a direct perception of nature.

It is remarkable how Wright's novel retrieves a sense of deep poetry and communion with nature from within the chaos of the characters' lives. Even Drake, playing the role of a Conrad character in the Borneo jungle — impersonating Bogart from "The African Queen" even as his wife impersonates Katharine Hepburn — recognizes a moment of natural beauty when he sees one:

When he turned, he saw that the entire back of her damp blouse from neck to waist was covered in a rich swarm of salt-hungry butterflies, a soft breathing coat of such intense color it seemed about to erupt into fiery applause. He didn't speak. He didn't move. The moment a web of frail strands he didn't dare break. It was possible to believe that beauty was a reciprocal of love and that nature bore no wiles. Then his unknowing wife straightened up, the butterflies scattered like scraps of torn paper, and everything returned to how it was before — only different. (232)

The "fiery applause" constantly imagined by Drake or Amanda, his wife, shows how any scene is in danger of becoming a show, set up for an audience. Beauty itself is in danger of becoming commonplace through the sheer pressure of repetition. The narrator marks a pause in two short sentences ("He didn't speak. He didn't move.") to emphasize the fragility of the moment in resistance to simulacrum. The "scraps of torn paper" recall the scenario Amanda loses in the wind on her boat ride into the jungle. You who enter here lose all Hollywood pretensions, lose the habit of seeing yourself as acting out the script of a life preconceived by some giant producer. And yet Wright's poetry of immanence is not a naive return to innocence; the presence of the serial killer is made palpable in the expression "nature bore no wiles," which echoes the name "Wylie." In spite of the danger Wylie's shadow or masked name represents, a moment of beauty has been salvaged from the general chaos.

The narrative voice loses its irony and its derogatory edge in such moments; a direct perception of the physical world is conveyed in a prose which translates something of the truth the characters try to grasp. In Chapter Six, for example, Jessie, who is often mired in clichés, leaves them when she touches her children's toys for comfort:

She found refuge in the kids' room, on the edge of Cammie's bed, in the furry maternal softness of Mister Mac the talking bear, the sunny unambiguous cheer of the furnishings, an all-enveloping baking-bread aroma of small children, the consolation of domestic detail, neglected crannies where grace dwelt, as crisis proved time and time again, the moment when Garrett first struck her as tangibly present as the baby blue rocking chair in which she sang Bas to sleep on nights of fear for both mother and son. (192-3)

This long sentence, devoid of irony, shows empathy for the character in a discreet appositive structure which proceeds through accumulation. The word *soft* marks a harmonious sensory perception by the character of her surroundings, as she touches "the furry maternal softness" of the teddy bear. In just this way, Drake almost touched his wife's back with his gaze, as the butterflies made "a soft breathing coat" on her blouse.

Physical contact establishes a direct apprehension of the world, as opposed to the mediated transmission of a television screen. And yet, strikingly, Wright uses the metaphor of television waves to express the vibrations of nature, its "humming" and breathing reality:

Under his hand he could feel the pine humming, the tended machinery of the nonhuman world. Down below, the broken voice of an unseen creek, the rubbing of the wind against the firs. The sun was high and round, emitting a rain of perfect light. (90)

The metaphor of the machine which "emits" light paradoxically gives a voice to the part of nature which most escapes our human grasp. The word *humming* is often used to relate television vibrations and waves to the rustling of nature, to vegetal, mineral and animal realms beyond our immediate understanding. Another chapter describes the Nevada desert and its effect on the human body:

The body hummed like a receiver, intercepting messages beneath the noise of human traffic, down among the harmonic silence of spiders and scrub and soaring sandstone, whose baroque architecture often communicated directly with Jessie's heart, this primitive intimacy with the nonhuman a recognition of its continued existence deep inside her. (181)

Here again, the receiver, for all its manmade artificiality, is the key metaphor to grasp the unvoiced humming of nature, the subliminal language of which is "voiced" in the sibilants of alliteration: ("silences of spiders and soaring sandstone"). Every time the characters manage to "hear" the silent voice of nature, they are able to tap primitive powers they had not known they had. The mild Jessie thus realizes that "If you ever wanted to kill somebody..." "this would be the place to do it." (181) Wright cancels our usual understanding of television; he appropriates its metaphorical suggestion of magnetic power to assert a renewed sense of our connection with nature around and within us. Thus, television becomes the figure of a cognitive enlightenment in Wright's poetic expression of harmony — an enlightenment all the more remarkable for its precariousness in a world of disjunction and madness.

The wonderfully natural impression of ease and grace conveyed in the flashes of happiness Wright's characters experience does not necessarily come from depictions of nature. Sometimes the most trite and artificial objects, such as trees made of neon tubes in Las Vegas, become the most ideal "receivers" of the humming of nature in characters' lives:

Outside her window the sizzling emerald fronds of the neon palm seemed to stir slightly at the touch of night currents unsensed by its organic cousins. (183)

From the intricate metaphoric language, a sense of not only poetry but connection emerges, as if all the threads of the victims' lives finally agreed to weave themselves into an inaudible but harmonious whole:

On the rare slow night, Jessie's attention might be arrested for untold moments by the neon palm burning in her window. It was an amazingly detailed rendering, this animated tree of brittle tubing and electrified gas, renowned emblem of the Ishtar Gate, world's largest casino and hotel, sprouting from the night like a growth out of another, more vivid, more clever land where memories were diamonds and she was their queen... (167)

A sense of harmony emanates from the rhythm of Wright's sentences, sometimes offering a moment of respite and stability in the characters' fraught and fragile lives. In such brief moments of "grace," the characters are allowed a glimpse of some simple truth, expressed without mannerism despite the metaphorically enriched language. Such is the evocative cadence of Wright's prose.

It is interesting to follow the story of "vibes," humming between emission and reception of waves, in Wright's various works of fiction. The hum in *Going Native* is more a poetic tool and less an object of caricature than in the story of *M31: A Family Romance*. This novel, published in 1988, depicts a family of UFO freaks whose perversions and traumas are projected onto their belief in extraterrestrial life as if to relieve their angst in the middle of poverty and isolation. Wright's other novel, *Meditations in Green*, published in 1983, deals with his Vietnam War experience in an arresting way that goes far beyond the conventional war testimony. Wright ventures into uncharted territory precisely because he finds new literary expression to translate war into fiction. His is one of the few voices in contemporary literature that deserve to be read again and again, for the pleasure of a renewed sense of discovery and wonder every time.

OTHER BOOKS DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

Wright, Stephen. *M31: A Family Romance*. Crown/Harmony, 1988. Out-of-print.

Wright, Stephen. *Meditations in Green: A Novel of Vietnam*. Scribner's, 1983. Out-of-print.

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