

Downloading the Poetic Self

Downloading the Poetic Self:

An Anatomy of Poetic Character

By

Frederic Will

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



Downloading the Poetic Self: An Anatomy of Poetic Character
Series: Inside Selfhood And History

By Frederic Will

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For Big Bear

I live life as though it were, in itself, a standing into a future condition, in which orders I can't imagine will recapacitate me, assigning me to the rights of place.

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INTRODUCTION

In this book we begin with the poetic work of one contemporary writer, Frederic Will, and take it as the lab material for an experiment. The experiment is to determine whether a poet deploys and expresses a *character* in his poetry, and if so whether the author's character flows from him-/herself into his/her work. (There might be a poetic creator who had "character," but from whom that character did not flow into his work. Homer is often cited as such a character-free but omniscient poetic maker. For many eighteenth-century British critics, Homer and nature were "the same"; "character, like nature," said the poet Kathleen Raine, "is always in the year one.") We could have asked this same character-question about any of the millions of writers who have tweaked language and voice during their time, and for whom the poetry of that voice was to them a stirring component of enriching life with meaning. (The notion of the "poet writer" is still laden with "romanesque connotations" and is under heavy transformation in a world of writers' workshops, little-guy street-writers, smartphone novelists, gay, lesbian, and transgender writers, hermit epic makers, you name it, as well as the higher diversified reading consumption markets. It is rare to find a person for whom poetry and complex sentiment link who does not acknowledge a "past in poetry." So the broad issue of character in poetry intersects with a virtually global psychiatry of individual expression.)

Look at a seemingly stern example! Is the character of John Milton, the man *himself*, to be found inside *Paradise Lost*? (Go scrambling through those knotty lines and fast-tied intricacies of syntax, even through the first ten epic lines you have memorized, in an effort to feel the workmanship from the inside: do you feel the throb of personality in there as perhaps you find it in Hart Crane's *The Bridge* or Shelley's *Alastor*?) This pragmatic question, which could be posed to Joe Schmoe in your writer's group as well as to T. S. Eliot or Cleanth Brooks, is as down-to-earth as they get. It's like asking whether you penetrate—or can't—the manner of the Assistant Secretary of State, as he discusses global arms treaties in Tehran. Pretty hard to penetrate the guy, no? Milton, as we all know, *was* a real person. We even "know a lot" about his life. We could biopsy him at any of the points onto which our attention hooks: onto the youngster writing his teenage Latin elegies at Cambridge (1625–29), onto

the brilliant and preciously mature poet of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (1645), those fancy English texts we strangled on in high school—the guy was 37 by that time—onto the blind creator of *Paradise Lost* (1667), on a level with the giant largeness of the human condition, or even onto the guy who *did all that*, but in real honest fact did none of it *at this date or at that date* crap, but was working more or less *all the time* in his head, so that now and then something would happen to make a section of it get published out of the long scrolled work-world of his life. We could biopsy at many a point of entry! Would we find something like Milton's "character" appearing in the "published works" of those different periods, and if so would that "character" be a hopelessly vague amalgam of tones—something milky in your hands—something we could never *quite get our hands on*; would Milton's "character thing" vacillate from one period to another; or would it bear the hard stamp of a set of linguistic habits, such as those Leo Spitzer tracked to their style homes in *Linguistics and Literary History*, and which for Spitzer seemed to justify thinking of literary character in the old Greek sense of *stamp, inscribed signum*?

We could ask the same sequence of questions of any author. Has Shakespeare's character permeated *The Tempest*? *King Lear*? Is his character the same in each work, in every part of each work? What does "character" have to mean, to render the idea of it relevant to an assertion of any of these propositions? What kind of "character" would we be talking about here, anyhow? Does "character" in the old-fashioned *moral sense* belong to such a discussion—as when we talk of "this young man's sterling character"? Or are we talking about "character" as the Greek word *character* implies it, a unique tonal engraving scratched onto a metallic surface, the *stamp* mentioned above?

The word *character*, while not easy to pin to the wall when it comes to great poetry at any period, is not easy to dismiss as irrelevant to this or that body of work. In fact, the notion of *character* may in this discussion push us to rethink our entire vocabulary of criticism. (Certainly the broad-sweep genres of criticism—New Criticism, Structuralism, Postmodernism—sit uncomfortably with the notion of literary character, except perhaps in the vein of Foulcauldian querying of whether the author is, whether the author is at all *present with his personality* in the work.) Or in "dealing with Shakespeare" would we need to redefine "character" altogether, with the help of another kind of explanatory language, like that of neuroscience, in order for the notion of character to lay claim to flowing from author to text? Would character have to be some habitual style of inflecting one's reactions in language, almost a tic of response? My broad

sense is that in the instances of Milton and Shakespeare we will get most mileage by taking “character” to mean *trademark*, *tweak*, or *tone*; whichever most clearly signals a cachet that seals or at least partially identifies the work or series of works in question. My sense is also this; that if we adopt this broad sense of character, in our quick look at Milton or Shakespeare, we will find it both in word-choice and in phrase-construction, and in whatever we find in an author’s work that we want to call *style*. Writings reflect authorial style as much as a person’s speech reflects his style. My character, in what I write, is likely to be about the same as my style.

We will work with details, and close analysis, of a good many Frederic Will poems which will seem to belong inside a long development of the story of this person’s poetic character. In tracking this development we will be paying attention to the dates of publication of the works in question, the times in Will’s and our communal life in which this or that was happening. (Ultimately we will be looking for a way to study how Will’s character-download helps to place him *in* his time.)

The unromantic, hard-edged poems inspected with a hard eye at the beginning (particularly Chapters 1–7) of this book—all drawn from the middle period of Will’s work, from say the late 1960s to 1995—are meant to bring out a reigning language strategy in Will’s poetry of that time, a strategy of dislocating the mutually reinforcing relation of poet with reader, and of imposing flavor or style that is at the same time a cloaking of the writer’s individual presence. In that of course Will was to some extent simply acting out the stance of a “modern poet.” Since Baudelaire, the theme of “Western poetry has been marked by a fretful complexity, an interposition, between poet and reader, of cat-and-mouse identity games, the poet arch, the poet half-concealed, the reader led this way or that, as a *dolmetscher* of mini revelations. It may be said that Will was, in all his poetic since his earliest books, *Mosaic*, *A Wedge of Words*, *Planets*—1959, 1963, 1968—carefully breaking from the romantic mode, the mode of the open heart, and cryptofying himself. In all that, agreed, Will is standing inside the history of the language as it intersected with periods of human awareness—nascent global conflict, growth in technical skills for penetrating minds (psychologies, technologies, windows onto sociology), and from-within evolution of skills sets—like those of the Pléiade in Renaissance France—which promoted verbal dexterities and counter-plays of cross-cultural implications.

There is, though, more than just a resistance to character-sharing in those middle period—the guy was forty to sixty-five—poems. There is a discomfort, even an anger, in these midlife poems that sits astraddle Will’s

personal life in the midlife years, and that perhaps—we will almost go there, quietly—reflects arguments with itself that his own time was indulging then—the quarrels of American exceptionalism vs. the need for compromise during the Cold War; the fight club mentality which infected this under-stable period of latish capitalism, the cast-it-to-the-winds audacity of the intellectual discovering that what we think *matters* in America—the period of *Armies of the Night* (1968), Civil Rights, and the March on Washington—can move social and cultural mountains. (We will, from inside this historical wind-tossed midlife Will, remark an invisible politics of the retrograde, a progressive conservatism, a politics which can take its bearing on finial issues like prosody, the nerve system of the verbal creator, but which also plays out in a diffuse historicism that ranges from agricultural pastoralism to social communalism; thematics that floated in and out of Will's lines, and that contributed to this guy's intemperant moods about the friendliness of poetry.) Where can such a politics more subtly intrude than in the desire to take a stance for a library of the subtle ulatramontane forgotten: for the work of de Bonald and Laménais, in the French Restoration, for Maurice Barrès' *Les Déracinés*, for Evelyn Waugh's post as a foe of ecumenism in the Catholic tradition, even for Robert Bork as a doughty champion of hard thought in the face of nimble secular adjustmentism? We will fly tentative thoughts, throughout this discussion, about the relation between art work and culture work; the relation of the individual with a pen to the overgrid of socio-political in which he lives, and which he may teeth on for the sharpening of his own *tweakus linguisticus*. Many a spice, in other words, went into the taste buds of the by 1984 twice-divorced Mr. Will.

From a look at this banquet of interventionist mid-career poem-things, in which Will trademarks himself as never so clearly, we slide back into the history of Will the young poet, *el poeta*, whose sprudelling of poems, and would-be *lavishing* of character through poetry, already makes itself felt from a wide long bed in Honolulu, in 1936. There the eight-year-old chap lay, post-concussion, for sunny weeks of gazing down onto Waikiki Bay in what now seems prehistory, and was in fact concurrent with a true history, the Nazi takeover in Poland, the maturing of FDR as an international president, the dekulkization of the Soviet Union—plenty of history to place young Will's idyll in one version of the real world. There he lay, embedded innocently in that island paradise setting he had little awareness of, stretched out as the victim of a rashly cutting hoe, the weapon of choice for a hostile neighbor kid—all one remembers of the kid is Nicky, the name—on a hot afternoon at the bottom of the grandparental garden near the hibiscus plants. And from that pain-free consciousness,

bathed in sun, poured epics of the sea, of the weed that clogs it, and of the great cloudy naval fleets visible out there on the bright blue sheen, poetry flowed from every point into that pre-lapsarian mindscape, and back out through the eyes of a wondering eight-year-old. This was a poetry of innocent world give-back, and lived by pleading for the mercy of the world. Something of that guilelessness was as large as the ocean, itself but a single teardrop.

It would be six years later, as a mid-teenager, that the same youngster would put together an eighteen-page pamphlet of poems, *Fragments*, for his (at least so Freddy thought) startled father. The I of the maker spilled like egg yolk across the screen of the gift. We have here a default position against which to measure the “see-me-now” softness of the early romantic poetry (in *Mosaic*, 1959, and *A Wedge of Words*, 1963), the stridency of the middle-years interventionist language of Will’s poetry, or the “epic” elongations of spirit in the later long poems, *The World of John Holmes* (2014–15) or *Anonymous Assault* (2017). The character-download of *Fragments* is gothic and pantheistic; a teenager’s no-holds-barred, take-me-to-the-world testimony, natural enough at sixteen, to the sense that nature carries one’s own feelings in its heart, that sadness and *Weltschmerz* are twinned with power, and that talking about death is the only way to talk about life. The amalgam of heart feelings, in this open-souled romanticism, blends to a vulnerability Will’s midlife poems eschew. (Note, in *Fragments*, the preoccupation with the name of death, as well as with end-stopped colors, the preoccupation with blue; the omnipresence of the windswept, the dry hills, the dawns and dusks; shards of the all-formative two-year experience that had made young Will at nine and ten a part of the central Arizona mesa desert, a soulscape of buttes, bleached cow skulls, and red cactus.) He has his feelings, like any sixteen-year-old, and longs to be shared by other users of the language he too is. The preface to *Fragments* could not be more eloquent, in its obeisance to open-souledness.

Preface to *Fragments* (1944)

The intention of this collection is to demonstrate the validity of my philosophy of Irrationalism, which I consider to be of especial significance in the field of poetry. This embodies the concept that man’s truest, most natural, and hence most basic reaction to any stimulus is thoroughly irrational and passionate, particularly when measured by the standards of the scientifically frigid twentieth century. The supposed

progress to logic and the exercise of reason appears to draw man away from the spontaneous and uninvolved state which he now manifests only in his primary reactions to immediately external circumstances. I believe that poetry is one of the few areas that can still maintain the right to record spontaneously the impacts on the human mind of the materialistic, causal, and external world which has been created by the Industrial Revolution.

The objection to this art, on the grounds that it is exclusive, and unnecessarily personal, may possibly be well-founded. However, I think the fault lies rather with the poet than with his medium. These creations may be considered overly personal only insofar as they fail to coincide with the impressions and reactions gathered during the life of the reader. It is the job of the impressionistic poet to depict images of such sort that they so correspond with certain fragments of the reader's existence as to both vivify the imagination and loosen the steel fetters which are progressively being fastened around our modern scientific limbs. It is with the desire of so doing and the conviction of failure that I present the following selection of "fragments."

Nine selected "fragments" will launch us on this teenage work:

First Sin

Torpid snake in the slinky underbrush
 Slide
 Glide
 Fall from your peak—snake.
 Shine forth serpent
 Lighting
 Blighting
 Drawing blood and dying—snake.
 Move young quickly—not old,
 Snake. Dusk is soon, not late—torpid serpent.
 The reeds rain white roses.
 Deep joy through steamy pores
 For you serpent
 For you
 Only.

Tumor

What I can now say is small pieces of gingham
 Cut from a large bolt; is blue thread drawn
 Across a rise of water. The fields are wild but
 There is birth still.
 A tan fawn beside the old post
 And there is birth still.
 Trembling are the long-gutted fields after
 Holding iron long.
 Must movement go on forever?
 Have we lost too much?

Trends recollected

In the samovar tinkled the airs of white men
 Drinking their tea. These were the long hours,
 Passive in the reception of wet clammy imprints.
 Open thine eyes, Marushka.
 A pot of sound, shared equally by
 A man and a door, lay
 Quiet on the floor.

In the kitchen fell a spark blowing
 White into white hearts blowing
 Blue dreams in blue faces.
 This is your bed song, child.
 Many are the bright sparks—their flashes.
 These are the long blue languid hours
 Foreign beyond despair, pouring
 Light through dark walls
 And the fresh chanting
 Fails.

In Victory

In victory we cross the peas and
 The white inches.
 Here is movement slow—time running like

A young hare. The units are small here.
 Here the empty blue fields
 Spotted with a small torrent of little
 (very little) rivers.
 Animate nothingness and the white stone.
 These only do we love—the blue sounds
 Drifting.
 But drifting is a sound too sure.
 A long sensuous expression of day on
 White cloth and
 Long. Endless.

Death and transfiguration

Shall we break the barrier?
 Will you tell the oak that dawn tomorrow
 Is once but not at present? And the frightened
 Brook? Can you tell three thousand years that
 Smoke is not blue nor the mountain clean?
 Try, train your ears and hear
 Blue water on blue stones and
 Fresh wind on fresh graves.

Sighing, dying, reflecting some light and
 Dying—expiring on the maple leaves, on the
 Petticoats of a crisp autumn dying.
 Bearing two sons (both dead now in large tombs)
 Had torn her bready features and pallid.
 Anyway a farm and pig are work and work's no
 Fun and kids (now dead) and whistling.
 Oh yes and money.
 "Sooner can a camel go through the eye of a needle
 Than a rich man enter into the Kingdom of God."

When the flowers were laid it was still
 Young but the sameness was that of a past
 Merging (in cobwebs) with an equally
 Well-discovered future (in chains).
 An apple may fall too—but slowly,
 Not Icarus nor Phaethon—but slowly,

“And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like ice in the glance of the Lord.”

Lament

Last night, throwing sixteen years of pleasure
Into the waste-basket
I died.
The new moon holds on, and the clouds.
Why do we let go, must we let go,
Dropping pleasure into the inferno
Like hot tongs?
Though the figure be inexact, the emotion
Is as certain as winter rain on tombs
And slate-gray life.
Waste-basket full of dreams, and a cold floor
On the cold floor pulpy with dreams,
Last night sixteen years of life falling
Into the waste-basket dropped
Onto the floor
And died.

Nobility

Will you not have an apple, Princess?
The blossoms of the tree are pink and
Your heart will sail out to an apple,
Princess.
Whip the wild waves, Princess. Beat their knobby heads,
Princess.
Drive a stake in this quiet cove and moor
Your thoughts to the red oak—Princess.
The night blows softer.
Green shadows fall across your valley, my virgin,
Cutting as a bread knife thin slices of your
Form.
Flee to the blue coast—smell the white weed and
Chain thyself to red oak—tender young oak.
There is the voice casuistry and the step

Impartial.
Love a green frog, Princess.

Trial and Error

Blue saints scurry into the night and the
Pungency of fresh trees, and
Blue green organisms.
This part is called deserted—deserted.
Last man departed long since.
Yet into the limestone hills permeates a
Sweet, hand-picked ichor
Small wonder men died singing a
Young song on
Ancient hills.
Green hills—
Too old.

Plaint

Will you not pray for me, little man?
Will you not give the musty earth a fig for
My salvation, furry one.
Green roots fall quickly into the small caverns
And I am sure it would be slight bother.
Hand the white fowl a young heart and the
Blue snake a black rod, little man.
The night song is peculiar not to an
Individual but to a race of little things
Playing in the arroyos of a timeless
Twilight.
These are those forgotten
And for them flows not the
Wine and the
Long breath.

*(Never published. Copy of Fragments in author's archive in the
Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin)*

Can we say that the poetic self cries unashamedly for attention here? Are we in the pose-stance of *Werther*, of early Keats or Shelley, or of a fragment of Novalis, whose wounds and joys beg for an uninhibited airing? Literary historical thinking makes this way of putting it seem attractive. We seem to find here a pigeonhole into which to slip young Will, the maker of *Fragments* and an Hawaiian oral epic, an invert lad for whom the sound of the sensuality of the world seems to be entrapping enough formality to become a poem. Of course, there is another way of looking at this pre-pubescent style of youth poetry: one can warm up the Oscar Wilde in us—language is the means by which we hide our thoughts from one another—and around it the heavier baggage of language critique, which has in our time trained its guns on battlements as lofty as theology. Many today will report that language is a weaponry stronger than any IBM when it comes to the demolition of the walls of accepted thought. This is the side of us which says that our language is no direct portraiture of the person making it, is in poetry hardly the bearer of an ounce of character, that it can be a distorting mirror of whatever it reflects, and that the imprecisions of the verbal are fatal limitations on the cognitive usefulness of language. This will be an unromantic, if you like Wittgensteinian, language, which so far from reflecting character establishes it. This bias of thought will gleefully undermine the efforts of Romantic language to express, will confine them to “emoting,” and will leave few shreds of dignity to the sixteen-year-old hoping to share a heartfelt, with dad and the world.

Far in the future of Will’s kid-stuff Romanticism, and even of the midlife period (1970s and 80s, plus a bit) from which we will be sampling generously in Parts One and Two of this book, will lie a semi-final discussion of the prose poems, of the “later poems of serenity,” then even of the *mini-epic* itself, which make up Will’s last set of testimonies, indeed the oblation in terms of which Will becomes increasingly fond of describing what he was trying to “leave behind him.” (That classic bequeathing metaphor, Shakespeare at its head, crawls into the bedsheets with death. We will there be beyond the zone of poetry as alignment, or even of poetry as testimony, and into the zone of poetry as a way of standing into things with full throat. We will be daring ourselves to think of poetry as a way in which we are already the victory over our own defeat.) Will’s earliest poems will spring from the period, we say, when Will was already framing the definition of the “living situation” we picture-frame in the banner-heading of this book. (*I live life as though it*

were, in itself, a standing into a future condition, in which orders I can't imagine will recapacitate me, assigning me to the rights of place). Under that banner many volumes of poetry, and of prose that nothing essential divides from poetry, stand together with the decalogy, *Selfhood and History*, which Will is currently constructing for Cambridge Scholars Publishing, and which unapologetically factors poetry, fiction, philosophemata, and the poetry of prose into the tumbler of world perspectives which keeps making up what Will embraces as his "opus." (Take that work term from Will, take that grandiosity, and you may see him topple like Achilles with an arrow just piercing the fiber of his crusty heel. Of course, he is made up of promises to himself, and can see the artificial world crumbling around him as unconcernedly as Prospero sees the painted world of art in vanishing mode.)

In the formative of the *period of intervention*, so named here for pure convenience—to point to the aggressive and unseductive of Will's mid-life poems—we will carry the query of *character* into the stage where character is first being formed. In *Fragments* we have looked at character-material incomplete in itself, passionately verbal, at times pseudo-epic in tone, in which the creator, though not yet in thought of that self-masking anger that goes with intervention, will simply deploy a self-figure across loosely joined thematics, and bask in the sense of a give and take with fellow word users. (*I'm here, you're there, shake!* This will be the period of clubs, support groups, of the first thrill of the Oscar Williams anthology, which opens out to you the possibilities of loosened tongues, adroit and unexpected perceptions. It will be the social period, to be exact, in which one discovers the desire to be with others, as a driver for his language.) It will be out of this thrilling early trove that we pull *An Emphasis for Easter*, a plug of evening reading in the author's living room, on a well-remembered shmooze session with fellow graduate students Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom—guys who went on, with a bravura vaster than Will's, to make themselves part of a wide literary consciousness—and others, deep helpers in the author's own attitude formation. Shall we say that the character stamp, on this epyllion (1950), is only just more distinct than that on the poems in *Fragments* (1944)? Language is taking its own head, and streaming.

An Emphasis for Easter (1950)

Stine—mother

Trole—father

Gwin—daughter
 Nelle—old servant
 Liane—son
 Brane—married to Gwin

ST. Back to a center of love, from your cold circumference
 Of manors; back to the womb whose shelter three times split
 You left to wither in a winter land.
 This flesh has shriveled as your father's acres,
 Worn with war, sapless and trenched...

TR. Your emphasis I disavow. The land is twisted,
 Repair required, a summer's trust, and walls
 Enough to calm our urgency. Myself
 Can never doubt, my son and girl, your strength
 Reminds your mother that each pod
 Must play the wind.

GW. And you, the sceptic bear.
 A world of Swedish nights I've improvised the sun,
 I've urged the spirit of a Spanish feast, yet won
 But little sympathy for every southern
 Sentiment. Of thirty months a drought
 Has cracked and peeled...

NE. I know, the southern luster
 From thy southern rind. I place the turn
 Of image which thy puberty was wont to
 Fashion up for every shape of flesh,
 In eyes, the sun or God, for breasts, red pears,
 For hair, the lily-tree which agonizes
 In a wind-embrace. The trace of heaven, found in
 Things, beguiled thee from a truest joy
 In fleshlessness. The one fire that is Christ,
 Too heavily befigured here, invites
 A naked soul. A bowl of parts, alas,
 Thy father bids enkindle thee—for thee...

GW. Ambiguous thanks, old crone...

LI. (to Gwin) Evade no less eternal judgment thinking

Is bent to find his spirit's locus
 In a sympathy with man's infections. Hocus pocus
 Though he dubs that Latin which the northern
 Ear finds uncongenial, still the spirit's
 Spirit he observes, deplores injustice, serves in act
 Our whole community. He preaches love in deed
 And in the fields. He'll wield, in short,
 A most undoubted force for equity in Sweden.

BR. Sweeting, you have just put my case
 Before those in-laws whom I care not greatly to appease.
 So little, truth to tell, do I incline
 To placate older forms, that I'll be bold
 To clarify the intrigue which demands
 My presence here...

LI. I fear the family piety dictates
 A less irreverent leisure. The impulse which
 Our northern friend extends to this exchange
 May well derange and tickle our tradition,
 But falls regrettably inapropos.
 Below Christ, I honor Stine and Trole,
 To them I urge the guidance of our talk be turned.

BR. A dainty turn he's learned, this fawn.

GW. Pray, Brane, still more respect our home punctilio.

TR. Not angry as the stormwind that has found
 Its mountain crags invaded, its domain assayed,
 But clearly, as well-oiled thinker meets
 The other, answers every challenge, joys in
 Clarity. Yet this too with a difference,
 That I am past defeat, past blood
 Within myself. I am a skull in contemplation.
 What time I skinned the Saracen, employed
 A restless bronze with restless ballet, stayed
 Far first in rank, that time I had the peasant for my mate,
 Our hates were but a single love. But to complete
 My own incertitude, I turned home to this nest
 Of the belongsers, of the meanings, this file

Of life-solutions in the drawers of which
 Each problem's classified. I lied, and squirmed,
 And threatened to abjure my birth-rite. Then,
 One night, the body's birth-right laid its claim,
 The Thane of Crawl assumed for wife this spark,
 This burning letter, and his life, his Stine.
 A new life-order, personal and rich,
 Could supersede the former forms.

ST. Not unembittered I have seen the children go
 Below the horizon of my daily day, they've
 Faded. Leaving me a possibility,
 A hope that springs would bring one down
 On melting ice,
 The other lure back to our twilights and our cherries,
 Lure back for a talk, an afternoon. The bloom
 Is off this joy. Return a
 heart-worn woman
 And a learned priest.

NE. We ceased regret when two springs passed.

BR. And when another spring is gone, you'll long
 For battered Spain; the pain of my discourse
 Must now reveal that I have come in force,
 Over the ice, furred and fatted with
 A million Scandinavians. The tone of our
 Adventure is a serious one. Northern
 Progress in the social arts we shall
 Encourage in this Spanish land.
 Red will be the sand with just so many
 As command financially. Christ lives this day and learns
 To rule in Spain. To you, old Trole, I extend
 The hand of ally, bear the offer of a
 Sinecure...and to the rest, saving Liane,
 Whom we shall later question, offer time for swift escape
 To Tangier, where your summer house awaits.
 There need you fear no violence from a too
 Intense majority.

GW. My husband and my home I cannot equally

Respect, or so the world will have it.
 Yet poles apart are aspects, not real difference;
 The treasure of my vigor is absorption.
 Below the surface of intentions, lies the movement of
 Experience, which I,
 Seeing the ends in the beginning, love in
 Motion, will call an Easter Emphasis.

MI 1965 (I,1) (Publisher acronyms can be tracked down in the *Textualities* section, at the end of this book).

With that move through the backdrop of Will's poetic work as character formation—exuberant, synthetic, baroque, even pantheistic, as in *Fragments*—we will have a loop around Will's early trials. This early work (1944–1950) is not really work but an accentuation of lifestyle, an effort to leave that style in a name. *Naming*, we will have occasion to see in these examples, has been Will's password to the “standing into” which is trueness to the presence of the human situation, and which on an occasion, while he was dodging through the minefields of the biological situation, he nominated as an action descriptor for the maturing, aging, and ultimately surviving process. We repeat: *I live life as though it were, in itself, a standing-into a future condition, in which orders I can't imagine will recapacitate me, assigning me to the rights of place*. With a return to the barer anatomy of the making process, as he ages within, Will will return also to the original thoughts awakening gave him, into the essential process of giving things a name, and thus giving ourselves a place in what-is. (Will's earliest essays—cf. bibliography in *The Modernist Impulse and a Contemporary Opus: Replaced by Writing*, 2017—were precisely about the naming act, and the changes naming establishes in the world it interprets.) It will be no surprise to find that the poetry of Will's later stage oblation, babbles up out of the childish acquisitions of his initial steps onto the stage of being-with-other-people-in-language.

And within that degree of closure, in our overall flight through and out the other side of Will's juvenilia, we will have been able to imagine that the mid-life interventionist poems, with which we will begin Part One, are conscious moves to dissimulate the self, to prioritize language itself—think of the Tupus poems (ahead; the meat of *The Being Here Site of the Poetic*, 2011), in which a language invents itself. By contrast, the poems of childhood and of youth were a laying bare, a gesture to the innocence of language. (That is, to the innocence and transparency we ascribe to language, supposing that the fantasies, drives, and dreads of the

late teens, say, are closer than are the “reservations” of the mid-life sophisticate, to who and what we “really are.”) The “later poems,” prose poems, and mini-epics tend to the wry and colloquial, and in direction order new edicts to character-in-language, such as *let them see* you and *close no doors*. Edicts, however, are edicts, and never to be mistaken for the charming outbursts of just being here, while not even saying that you are here.

PART ONE:
POEMS OF INTERVENTION

CHAPTER ONE

I AS INTERVENTION IN POETRY: *GUATEMALA*

Stéphane Mallarmé, master of invention in language, depreciator of the naïve, wrote that: *L'oeuvre poétique implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés* ("Crise de vers", *Divagations*; 1897). The poetic work implies the *élocutoire* (elocutionary) disappearance of the poet, his disappearance behind the very language he makes himself poet in—the poet who yields initiative to the poem's words, by allowing that asymmetrical knocking together, by allowing the words' deployment of their difference from one another. The poet disappears in this process. All that is left is the poet's words, bruising against one another. The keyword for us may be *heur*t, a knocking against, a hitting. Not only does the poet yield the initiative—the creative power "behind" the poem—to the words of the poem, but he yields to them the power that accrues from their inequality, *inégalité*, the joust of power relations among these words. (Lack of interior proportion and balance is the price paid by the words for their free-market adventure among their fellows.) Having yielded so much to the words, then, what happens to the poet himself? Where did Milton go, on the far side of the work in *L'Allegro*? (Character may have been taken from him, and given over to the words of his poem, but what kind of ontological placeholder then *takes the place of his poetic character*? He has one, he's got a *character* we know for sure, for we all do; but where is it? Has he yielded himself out of existence? Is major creation a self-obliteration, for all the semblances to the opposite, the senses that big creator and big ego go together? Is there any *moi*, "personal identity," left as guidance for the poet's poem? Is the poet's character not simply left somewhere in the poem, either as a residue or as a pervasive flow?

I am asking myself that question, as I unshelve an old pamphlet, in which I had long ago (1973), twenty-three years after "An Emphasis for Easter," crowded what I thought were hot metaphors that rose from the condensed experience of creation and sacrifice, and which I now think heralded in the midlife interventional period of my own poetry, the period where ole Mallarmé caught me with my pants down, pulling back from the intra-shocks of my own words. Did my "poetic" *character* survive into

these midlife poems?

The hot-metaphor pamphlet in question was *Guatemala* (Bellevue Press, Binghamton), a pennyworth of fyre I thought at the time. The life-text to it was a trip to what at the time I took to be that searing polity—or so I characterized it, tripping off of banner headlines and the jargons that constitute a personal geopolitics as tame in fact as pussycat soup—where corruption and the jungle (sounds good, don't it? Very Graham Greene, who was doubtless subtler than yours truly at makeover jobs on the daily news, like in *The Quiet American*) vied in real-life hotness. I am there again today in my version of this poem as I surround the action re-do with the feel of it, and look for what I was; the time (I constructed) was between the lines. There again? I am watching (well I was there being, no?) a row of image-bare stelae, sixteenth-century victims of Spanish priests' ardor to remove the relics of an earlier priesthood as it was, aligned adoringly before the great temple of Tikal. (A little historical packaging here, harmless, and spot on conceptually, the meat of teacher digressions.) I was being the designated and expected attitude pose of the event. Language took the place of the stage set, abruptly.

Guatemala II 1973

Suddenly the stela takes a turn for the worse.
Who cut the priesthood back
Shaved innocent features from their diamond of sense?

Suddenly the power goes like wind from the stela.
We dash our lips to history's throat.
We breathe like tornados
Through the rock's hollow skin.

Suddenly the stela takes a turn for the better.
Forgotten features puff like cysts on the tattered rock.
The priest breaks his eyes
Open from the carnal rock.
He has seven fingers of blood in his vision.

Suddenly the stela takes a turn for the worse.
It devours the earnest face of a child.
It opens from the silence yet is only the silence.