

THE TWO WES WAKEHAMS:
POINT IN VIEW IN
THE WEEKEND MAN

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Point of view is central to the purposes of a fiction writer. Although the term refers mainly to the identity of the narrator and his method of narration, it can also refer to the mind through which the action is presented, sometimes called the center of consciousness or angle of vision. The voice and mind may belong to the same person, as in *David Copperfield*, or they may be separate, as in *The Ambassadors*, where a detached, omniscient narrator relates experiences as perceived through the eyes and mind of Lambert Strether. Narrators affect us very differently. They can range all the way from impersonal voices to fully-developed complex characters at the center of the action. They may themselves be writers, consciously communicating with us as readers, like Tristram Shandy, or conscientiously keeping a diary, like Mrs. Bentley in *As For Me and My House*. Sometimes they just think their own thoughts, which we have the illusion of seeing. This is true of Rachel in *A Jest of God*. We may become very close to a narrator, sympathizing or even identifying with him and his view of the world. On the one hand, he may become a friend we hate to lose, a reliable teacher and guide whose authority we accept. On the other, he may be fallible, biased, self-deceived. Can we trust the narrator? If not, the meaning of a work changes, and we must reinterpret it for ourselves, under the guidance of the "implied author."¹

The First Wes — Friend and Guide

As we read *The Weekend Man*, we realize that Wes is not just thinking his own private thoughts but trying to communicate with us, and we are lured by the sound of his voice into listening to his story. Although the critic Alfred Kazin sees such a relaxed, intimate conversation with the reader as indicative of Wright's lack of artistic form and lack of interest in the tradition of the novel,² in truth *The Weekend Man* is a descendant of *Tristram*

¹Wayne Booth's term "implied author" refers to the values and attitudes an author implies in his work. See *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 70-71.

²Alfred Kazin, "Fiction as a Social Gathering," *Saturday Review*, 3 July 1971, p. 20.

Shandy, one of the great English novels of the eighteenth century. It was Tristram, Laurence Sterne's comic narrator, who said, "Writing, when properly managed . . . is but a different name for conversation."³ Wes is more subtle than Tristram, who states explicitly that he is seeking the reader's friendship. Whereas Tristram is a self-conscious artist, deliberately setting out to write a novel about his life and opinions, Wes is just an ordinary young man going about the business of his daily life and trying to establish a relationship with us on the basis of our ordinary daily experience.

Wes lays the groundwork for this relationship in the first chapter. The present tense establishes a sense of immediacy. Wes is at his desk but goofing off, talking to us about himself and the people with whom he works. Almost everyone likes him, he says, and tells us why: "Certainly I am calm and polite and an excellent listener. I make it a point never to give offence or disagree and since I seldom have an opinion on anything I easily avoid arguments, except with my wife."⁴ His self-praise strikes us as an amusing combination of innocence, cleverness, and chutzpah, and, as we soon see, his statement about lacking opinions is ironical. Like Tristram (whose introductory quote from Epictetus states, "It is not actions, but opinions concerning actions, which disturb men"),⁵ Wes is full of opinions but keeps them well hidden — from everyone but us. Wes begins to create a relationship of mutual trust with us in talking about his father-in-law, who likes him but considers him "a queer fish" (p. 10). He will tell Bert what he wants to hear, that the Clyde R. Wheeler clipping inspired him to think of the future, but he tells us the truth, that it left him hollow in the stomach. The fact that Wes confides only in us, seeks no one else's friendship, is certainly flattering, and of course we sympathize with his position as a loner. But this is just the beginning. By a very skilful use of rhetoric, West draws us into an identification with him on the basis of the structure of our lives and our sense of personal time. He begins by talking about Bert as a Weekend Man; then, like a careful teacher, he defines the term for us: "What is a weekend man, you ask? A weekend man is a person who has abandoned the present in favour of the past or the future" (p. 11). He then switches to first-person plural, connecting us with him and with most people in our society on the basis of our secret feelings of dissatisfaction about our lives: "If the truth were known, nothing much happens to most of us during the course of our daily passage. . . . most of us are likely to wake up tomorrow morning to the same ordinary flatness of our lives" (p. 11). Wes is making us face something we usually take for granted, the fact that our lives are so structured by work or by school that we look forward to genuine living on weekends or holidays or after graduation or when the kids grow up or after our retirement. By that time we remember living as something we did in college. The present always seems to be something from which we need to escape, but Wes warns us about the dangers of the *nostalgies* or disappointment in diverting ourselves into the

³Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James A. H. Murray (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1940), p. 108.

⁴Richard B. Wright, *The Weekend Man* (New York: Signet, 1972), p. 10. Subsequent references to this book will appear in the text.

⁵As translated in Sterne, p. [1], n.

past or future. He talks directly to each of us, then makes a personal confession: "What to do? Well, you'll just have to work it out for yourself. I myself just drift along, hoping that the daily passage will deliver up a few painless diversions. Most of the time, however, I am quietly gritting my teeth and just holding on" (p. 12).

Thus Wes appears to be a complex character, whose inner tenacity in the face of a meaningless present forms a striking contrast to the external blandness others see. He seems to us sensitive, perceptive, honest and far from shallow in recognizing subtle feelings we tend to hide, even from ourselves. In his understanding of this general human dilemma, Wes strikes us as a fascinating combination of philosopher and ordinary guy — a contemporary Everyman with whom we can not only identify but also look up to as wiser, more observant than ourselves. Right from the first chapter, then, we are ready to put ourselves into his hands and let him guide us to a view of his weekend world, which is clearly a microcosm of ours. A salesman for an educational publishing company, Wes confesses his attitude to work. The textbooks bore him, but even if they did not, he would not talk about their virtues and spoil the excellent rapport he has with teachers — a ridiculous attitude from a business standpoint, but certainly human. Wes is very much in tune with the feelings of others, a trait he shows throughout the book, especially in his talks with Mrs. Teale. We learn about all the jobs Wes has quit from boredom in his account of the last time he had sex with his wife Molly, who left him because she was fed up with his drifting around. This is Wes's first main diversion into his past. (Tristram would call it a digression." Although both narrators are very concerned with the relationship between chronological and psychological time, Wes's tale is far more clear, logical, and orderly than Tristram's, which has more digressions than a straight-line story.) On that night four months ago, as Bert scolded him for his lack of direction, Wes remained patient and tolerant, partly because of his knowledge that Bert's heart was in the right place and partly because of his sense of the ridiculous, which included both Bert's shorts and the conversation. Bert's hairless, turkey-like legs were as incongruous for a man of his size as his lecture was for a man of Wes's age. Later, when Molly demands to know when Wes is going to start acting like a man and accuses him of living in his "own weird little world" (p. 32), he does not get angry. Instead, he comforts her gently and makes love to her, accompanied by Bert's snores, "wheezing and whining in a veritable comedy of noise" (p. 33). Wes seems to share with Tristram the Shandean qualities of intellect, love and laughter, the comic spirit of play. He is not afraid to laugh at himself or show his vulnerability. Ridiculous as it seems in our liberated era, he has been suffering through a sexual famine since that last encounter with his own sweet Molly. We cannot help finding him endearing, and although his attitude to work is impractical, to say the least, emotionally and imaginatively we find ourselves on his side. We tend to feel that his critics are attacking us, too, in a fundamental way — the hidden part of us that would like to throw everything over (if only we could afford it) and try something new. Since Wes seems to have the guts to carry through what most of us only dream of doing, he gets our moral support as well as our sympathy.

Tristram draws his characters from their hobby-horses, ruling interests, or passions, which Wes would call diversions from an empty present. Tristram's own hobby-horse is his novel, full of digressions about hobby-horses: "a sporting little filly-folly which carries you out for the present hour — a maggot, a butterfly, a picture, a fiddlestick — an Uncle Toby's siege. — or *anything* which a man makes a shift to get a stride on, to canter it away from the cares and solitudes of life."⁶ Wes has two main hobby-horses. The first is people-watching; he speaks with the authority of an intelligent observer about the people he meets and uses his imagination to speculate about their lives. His second hobby-horse, which canters him away from empty evenings and weekends, is watching television, a far better diversion, he tells us authoritatively, than reading, having serious discussions, playing bridge, or trying to write short stories. Thus Wes reinforces his ordinariness for us; though intelligent, he is far from being an intellectual snob. He watches old movies many times over, but his favourite show is *Run For Your Life*, the reason being the first of a series of clues to his most important value. Wes envies the hero, who is doomed to die of a terminal disease: "Every moment of Ben's life is sharpened and heightened by this awareness of his own doom. He has no future at all — only the great quivering now. Actually he's the luckiest man alive and he's having the time of his life" (p. 40). This passage ties in with three more diversions into Wes's past. The first concerns his parents' sudden death. On the night they were buried, adolescent Wes felt overwhelmed by the mystery and wonder of human life. Secondly, we see the life of Art Wakeham, Wes's father, from a double perspective — through the eyes of the child Wes and the greater understanding of the adult narrator. While the boy made a hero of his soldier dad, Wes now realizes that Art went overseas to escape the weekenders' lot, "for there is no greater diversion known to man than a war on foreign soil" (p. 50). Though little Wes enjoyed playing the war game, he had no idea of its significance.

The Summit Hill controversy is very subtly presented. The child empathizes with his mother's astonishment at his father's desire to take a walk with them immediately, at suppertime on a week night: "I don't want to go on Sunday, goddam it, I want to go now. . . . I might be dead on Sunday, we might all be dead" (p. 53). The narrator, however, is entirely with Art. In yielding to his wife's cold demand that he forget the war and act "like a husband and father" (p. 54), Art became a weekend man, living privately in his own past. Adopting a strictly routine existence, he became very much like Tristram's father, Walter Shandy, who wound the clock and made love to his wife on the first Sunday of every month, an association of habits that led to disaster at Tristram's conception. Art also resembles Uncle Toby Shandy, who lived in his past, reconstructing the battle scene where he received the wound on his groin. Notice how Wes, like a good teacher, firmly sets us straight lest we get the wrong impression of his father: "If you imagine for a moment that he lapsed into some kind of sullen martyrdom, you are wrong" (p. 54). Art accepted his destiny as a Weekend Man since he

⁶Sterne, p. 584.

realized there was no other way for him to live. Wes, however, is different, or at least he wants to be. He seems to try very hard to resist such a destiny by quitting jobs that bore him and by choosing breakfasts and routes to work by lot from peanut-butter jars so that his life will not be governed by routine.

The last main diversion into his past gives us the final clue to his motives. This was the day he bought the Holocaust bottle, the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. With the threat of the bomb hanging over his head, Wes suddenly felt the preciousness of his life and wanted to make the most of it. "In fact, I was feeling so sentient and aware on that cool and cloudy Wednesday, so consumed by the fires of my own aliveness, that at times I felt dizzy and faint with excitement" (p. 80). Like Art during the war, he feels a sense of connection with history, with all life on the planet: "Everything has meaning and nothing can be ignored" (p. 89). Unfortunately, Wes could find no one to share his experience with, since Karen, his girlfriend, thinks him silly and refuses to leave work. But the bottle of Chivas Regal he bought that day continues to hold the excitement for him. He has kept it intact for years, till Molly broke the seal and drank from it with a friend. As he drinks from it now and watches *Run For Your Life*, our gentle, tolerant narrator confesses that he became enraged at Molly's sacrilege and that their ensuing violent quarrel was the immediate cause of their separation. We find ourselves on his side, since the bottle symbolizes what he values most — his capacity to live intensely, spontaneously, in the present moment. Of course Wes wants to hang onto this sense of his potential; to him, this is reality — not any goal of life but life itself, the experience of living. Notice how Wes's account of that crucial day moves subtly from past tense into present (p. 89). He can still relive the experience as though it were happening now.

In contrast to Wes, the other characters he describes do not value life in the present. They see it merely as something to be used, planned, directed toward the achievement of goals — security, status, success — which they see as reality and describe as "happiness." In the ruthless competition for happiness, people are seen only as obstacles to be overcome or objects to be used for one's own fulfillment: "Everyone in the land wants to be happy. It's a national goal. The Americans even write it into their constitution. . . . Give me my portion of happiness, you son of a bitch, or I'll smack you in the mouth. I demand my rights. The only problem is that it's making everyone miserable" (p. 108). We now understand Wes's lack of ambition, his isolation from others, and the impasse in his relationship with Molly, who is "determined to find her happiness, whatever the cost" (p. 142). She cannot understand his resistance to the values everyone else accepts; to her, it is a phony moral stance. But Wes's excursions into the past have put us completely on his side. Although at times, like Tristram, he wears a fool's cap, we are convinced of his wisdom and sanity in a crazy world where people chase impossible dreams and remain hostile strangers to one another. Despite his isolation and frequent attacks of the blues, Wes remains remarkably stable, maintaining a clear, solid sense of himself as an individual human being. In ironic contrast to him, ambitious men like Ron Tuttle, Syd Calhoun, and Harold Pendle strike us as humourless bores or poor misguided souls. Harold, like a good Queen's Scout, is prepared for anything, even a nuclear

attack, and meanwhile uses his bomb shelter to write a grammar text on weekends and holidays. He feels sorry for Wes, who lacks goals. By this point we have become so close to Wes as our guide, teacher, and beloved friend that we want him to have what he longs for so much; indeed, the whole novel is pervaded by his mood of intense longing for life. And what does he get? A ride to success on Harold Pendle's hobby-horse! Like Tristram, he is the sport of fortune, "the vagaries of cosmic justice" (p. 129). His bringing Harold's manuscript into Winchester House was consistent with his usual nice-guy approach and seemed to be an easy way of getting rid of Harold. Now Wes has a very promising future. It's funny as the dickens, but sad, too, since we know this is the turning-point in his life as a Weekend Man. After all, what choice does he have? He misses Molly and their Mongoloid son Andrew, and when she gives him an ultimatum — measure up or I'll divorce you — he is clearly caught. Although he warms her not to expect too much, he seems to be going along with her plans for their future in the New Year.

As a narrator, Wes is extremely skilful at manipulating mood and controlling distance. Although the general tone of the novel is, like *Tristram Shandy*, tragicomic, the emphasis varies according to Wes's purpose. During the sex scenes, he maintains a basically comic tone, not letting us get too close to the pain of two lonely strangers trying to make love. His language becomes almost mock-heroic — for example, his rapturous panegyrics on Molly's legs, St. Helen's athletic program (p. 32), and "a piece of arse that comes hurtling out of the blue" (p. 34). While Helen Corbett weeps and Wes cannot get an erection, he makes us chuckle at the way they "thrash about on the rug like landed fish" (p. 106). The account of his father's life, however, is entirely serious, and the ending of the novel is very sad in contrast to Tristram's book, which ends with a bawdy story. As Christmas approaches,

Wes draws us into a mood of despondency he cannot shake: "It is here in this apartment with me covering everything: the old familiar gloom, the baffling ordinary sadness of my own existence. . . . At this hour of the long night the only anodyne for such sadness is the diversion of sweet flesh itself" (pp. 172-73). But no sweet flesh is forthcoming. Molly refuses to "come together just for sex" (p. 173). We sympathize with Wes's rather bitterly ironic reaction, since sex is really all they have in common. Otherwise they have only a public, structured marriage. By insisting on structuring their sexual encounters, too, Molly is destroying the only possibility of spontaneous intimacy they can share. Here she follows a pattern we have seen earlier in Wes's mother and Karen. In Wes's world, the role of women seems to be to keep men firmly in line, to prevent them from following personal impulses that might lead them astray from their proper social course as Weekend Men. The sombre tone of the ending is significantly related to this problem. Although Wes has the playful Shandean spirit, he is living in a world where everything has to be deadly serious, even sex. With Andrew he can play the delightful noodling game, but Andrew is a child (ironically, with no future). Growing up means giving up play, except for power games of the sort Mrs. Bruner plays, or the phony fun at work.

As the novel ends, Wes is accepting despair. As he gazes at the stars, he connects himself philosophically with all the "lonely mariners" (p. 175) in a godless universe indifferent to the needs of men. An interesting paradox — our identification with Wes as Everyman rests on our acceptance of the essential isolation of human beings, the impossibility of genuine communication. Whereas Tristram sees life and love as very difficult, Wes sees them as impossible in the modern world. His final position is profoundly pessimistic — let us stop kidding ourselves, there is no way out of the mess we are in. At least he makes us aware that as weekend people we are all in it together.

The Second Wes — Ironic Object

We must remember that Wes is not writing an autobiographical novel called *The Weekend Man*. To Joel Brewer, only authorship could explain his old friend's thirst for weird and useless experiences (p. 169), but to Wes writing is no more meaningful than any other activity. At one time, he tells us, he composed angry letters to the press (p. 167), and he considered learning to write short stories (p. 40). Now, however, he has outgrown the need for such pursuits; he finds television a much better diversion. Despite his intelligence and imagination, Wes is not a creative artist. The creative perspective in the novel is that of Wright, the author of a fictional world which includes the character Wes Wakeham. At times, Wright's broader perspective makes itself felt. Although Wes prides himself on being aware of the ironies of life, there are many things he fails to notice. If we pay careful attention to the novel, we derive quite a different picture of Wes from the one he presents of himself. In fact, the more we think about it, the more indications there are that the implied author is having serious fun at Wes's expense and that it is Wes's consciousness as well as the world he presents that is under attack.

Alfred Kazin has noticed a similarity between the narration of *The Weekend Man* and that of a famous modern novel: "The problem of feeling totally unimportant is conveyed with a dry, comic understatement that reminds you of *The Stranger*, by Camus."⁷ Although this statement is valid enough, we can go much farther. Wes is strikingly similar to Camus's narrator Meursault in such fundamental ways that we cannot consider the resemblances accidental or the contrasts insignificant. Like Tristram Shandy, Meursault is close family, an important part of Wes's heritage. A comparison is highly illuminating for understanding Wright's irony.

Both Wes and Meursault are ordinary little men in ordinary jobs (Meursault is an office worker in a shipping company in Algiers), but their relationships to time and their attitudes to reality make them outsiders in their societies. For both men, the only real value is living in the moment. In *The Weekend Man*, Wes has revealed this value in four examples. In every case, from *Run For Your Life* to the Cuban Crisis, Wes juxtaposes a sense of

⁷Kazin, p. 21.

intense aliveness with a real or threatened death. A modern man, Wes sees himself as living in a world where God no longer exists: "It had been clear for some time now that the Heavenly Father had taken off and was now living among the stars of another galaxy" (p. 89). In a world without God, the fact of death makes human life seem absurd; yet, paradoxically, the awareness of death gives life here and now its unique meaning and value. Wes's first experience of this mysterious connection between death and life came just after his parents were buried, and during the Cuban Crisis a similar experience causes him to want to make love to Karen.

The Stranger begins with a death and a funeral. Since they were not close, Meursault is not particularly broken up at the loss of his mother. Although hardly pleasant, her funeral is a diversion from his usual routine; unlike the other fellows in his office, he does not have to get ready for work that day,⁸ and he gets four days off, counting the weekend. The day after the funeral, a Saturday, he goes swimming, meets Marie, and makes love to her. In his reticent way, he indicates a healthy enjoyment of their encounter. Shocking? Most readers would probably think so. Meursault's society is terribly shocked by this sequence of events. Later, when he is on trial for having killed an Arab, the court is far less interested in the Arab than in Meursault's mother and Marie. He is said to be morally guilty of his mother's death, and he is condemned as an inhuman monster because he did not put on a proper show of grief for her. It is clearly this lack of show that causes him to be sentenced to execution. Meursault never puts on a proper show of any kind; he lives according to his sensations and feelings and refuses to lie about them or even to exaggerate them a little in order to please others. He refuses to pay lip service to a religion that means nothing to him; he will not play expected roles or wear social masks. Meursault will not deny what he is, even to save his own neck. Thus he faces death at the age of thirty. As Camus says, "the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game."⁹ Meursault is indeed a paradox — a murderer with honesty, courage, and integrity. Although not an ideal figure (he does, after all, kill a man), he represents positive values as opposed to the corrupt and phony society he lives in. The reader who is shocked by him at first gradually comes to see him as more real, more human, more admirable than those who condemn him morally for his lack of conventional responses. As a stranger (an authentic individual), he threatens the established order, so that it has to get rid of him.

In comparing Wes and Meursault, we would probably prefer Wes, who seems to incorporate the same positive values while having an awareness of others that Meursault lacks. He is undeniably nicer and a hell of a lot smarter. He is certainly no murderer, and he has sense enough not to offend people with his personal beliefs. Thus he manages to survive and to be liked. We also recognize him as a normal guy, like us, whereas Meursault

⁸Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), p. 14.

⁹Albert Camus, "Preface to *The Stranger*," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 335-36. My interpretation of *The Stranger* is essentially the same as the one Camus gives here.

strikes us at first as "a queer fish" and later, though admirable, as somewhat extreme, to say the least. It is all very well to have integrity, but how can you live that way? And who wants to die at thirty? We recognize, though, that Meursault is luckier in being able to do easily and naturally what Wes longs to do and cannot. Although his external life is structured by the work week, somehow he avoids being controlled by that structure. Being unambitious, he takes his job for granted and lives his life outside of it. Because he is not hung up on hopes for the future or regrets for the past, he is not, according to Wes's definition, a Weekend Man. On the first Sunday, when we see him people-watching from his balcony, he could almost be Wes; Wright seems to have taken over and emphasized the observer aspect of Meursault in creating his own narrator. But Meursault can also act spontaneously in the moment. Whether swimming, eating, or making love to Marie, he is totally caught up in the activity, living with gusto. He is a sensual man, according to Baldwin's definition: "To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread."¹¹ We have to admit that in following his impulses he gets himself into a very messy situation, but he has no regrets. Only in prison does he begin to live the way Wes does all the time, passively waiting for diversions, or killing time through memory. He gets angry once, at the prison chaplain who tries to talk to him about the Afterlife, since he is sure that he has already lived a full free life on earth, the only life that matters.

Wes gets angry once, too, when Molly opens the Holocaust bottle, which represents his potential for living. To him, it is a sacred object, "a minor household god" (p. 79). To Molly, nothing is sacred, and her attack on his potential seems typical of the destructive social forces that prevent Wes from living spontaneously. But let us think about that bottle for a moment; it is the most obvious clue to Wright's ironic treatment of Wes. Wes is trying to preserve a sense of life in the present in a relic of the past. Although he knows he has a tendency to divert himself into his own past, his conservatism is far more deep-rooted and pervasive than he realizes. What he really wanted to do was to keep the seal on that bottle of excellent whisky forever. But isn't whisky supposed to be drunk, just as life is supposed to be lived? Of course drinking is a form of consumption, and we can sympathize with Wes for wanting to hang onto something real in a dog-eat-dog world; yet this hanging on can create a problem for someone who wants to live in the moment. We said Wes was smarter than Meursault. He is far more cautious and canny, aware of the possible consequences of his actions and the power motives of others. He knows he cannot afford not to be. To Wes, Meursault would be terribly naive. Meursault does not worry about being used for Raymond's revengeful purposes, but Wes keeps his distance from the angry loser Charley Smith: "I do not go to Charley's side. I watch instead from the edge of the crowd like a fugitive and carefully avoid his eyes" (p. 137). Clearly Wes is too smart to risk wasting his potential by involving himself with others. Since he sees action as connected with goals and hence

¹¹James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: The Dial Press, 1963), p. 57.

with structure, he avoids acting and drifts along, waiting for "painless diversions" to fall in his lap. Ironically, he does have a goal — self-protection — which structures his life. While Meursault takes crazy risks, Wes takes none at all. In fact, he uses his reason in a calculating way to lead a very sane, secure, respectable existence. Although he sees himself as preserving his freedom, his potential to live, what he is really doing is sealing himself off from experience, stifling his spontaneity. The Holocaust bottle is a kind of security bottle which gives him the illusion of living without having to risk any of the painful consequences.

Wright's technique of having Wes as self-conscious narrator tell his story in the present tense seems to be connected with his ironic intention. Unlike Meursault, Wes is a very self-conscious man, always outside himself looking on, too much of a detached, rational observer of his own life to live impulsively. When he meets Helen at the party and asks her to have a drink with him, we think, Oh, boy, our friend is on the verge of a new experience at last. And what does he do? He analyzes his feelings to such an extent that he *knows* he would rather be home watching Ida Lupino in *Roadhouse* (p. 102). Having made the date, however, he goes through the motions dutifully, nobly, even grimly. No wonder he has difficulty with the sex act! Unlike Meursault, Wes cannot turn off his head while making love to a girl, but, as Wes sees it, the problem is Helen's unlovely body (p. 106). Although he blames others (especially Karen and Molly) for destroying his spontaneity with common sense, Wes destroys his own Saturday morning states of exaltation by sitting down and making a list of things that need doing, including the need to make an impulsive choice of breakfast: "Have breakfast. Whatever comes first into head" (p. 157). Wes is suspicious of good feelings, particularly those that have to do with charity or love for humanity, because he knows that sooner or later one has to come back down to earth (p. 159). In other words, he believes that irrational states are not to be taken seriously; they must be firmly subdued. Highly realistic, no doubt, but how can he expect to live in the moment? After listening to Mrs. Teale's story about the fire on her uncle's farm during the Great War years, Wes comments, "As we walk along, both of us feel a little let down at the sure knowledge that nothing today will be any match for that winter night of over half a century ago." (p. 120). Note the words "sure knowledge." Wes *knows*: he has made up his mind at the age of thirty that nothing in his present life can be as important or as exciting as what happened in the past, mainly to others. One way of making sure one's life will be dull and unfulfilling is to know it must be. Such knowledge controls experience, even perception. Whatever one sees will be flat, two-dimensional, not felt in its living reality.

The consequences of this state are frightening, to say the least. When Wes enters Winchester House on Thursday morning, he senses "an undercurrent of aliveness" (p. 57) in the place and is aroused by it: "I, too, am secretly thrilled by it all and my first thoughts are of death. Someone important has died. Harry Ingram has had a heart attack in New York or Sydney Calhoun has keeled over at his desk. Perhaps Cecil White has jumped from the washroom window and landed on his neck" (p. 57). Naturally, we think, he cannot be serious. Such comments coming from our gentle

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narrator make us laugh. But when Wes discovers no one has died, he turns off. He is really quite disappointed. His remarks to Roger, to whom the sale of Winchester is a life-and-death matter, are detached, robot-like (p. 58-59). Wes is interested in *real* life and death, not mundane business matters. Wright reinforces his point by another example a little later that day. As Wes is returning to work after a rum-pot lunch with Ron and Roger, he is so sunk in gloom that he prays for a diversion, "perhaps a small property accident, one in which people climb from their cars, death-pale and shaken by it all" (p. 73). Now this is not nearly so funny as his thought that something might have happened to the big shots upstairs. Here Wes is actually hoping for innocent people to experience the shock of threatened death so that he himself can feel more alive! There is something wrong, some distortion or perversion of a profound existential truth. What Wes has done is to make it into a formula: "Where there's death, there's life." He seems to be in love with death rather than with life. Unlike Meursault, Wes would never murder anyone, but it is highly likely that he would enjoy watching someone else do the dirty work. It would be an excellent diversion!

Although the religious context is absent for Wes, Wright seems to be concerned about the problem of spiritual death. Significantly, this section of the novel comes between Wes's account on Wednesday night of his father's war experiences and his account on Thursday night of the Cuban Crisis. In contrast to these dramatic events, his present is empty and meaningless. Wes envies his father for having experienced real, not just vicarious, war (p. 90). As a youth, he was so affected by seeing what peacetime existence did to his father that he has tried to avoid such a deadly fate for himself by cutting himself off from ordinary, everyday reality. But the resulting anesthesia can only be combated by the craving for vicarious violence he expresses above. Ironically, the more he avoids involvement with things he sees as destructive to himself, to his potential for life, the closer Wes approaches spiritual death. On this point, let us consider the parallels between Karen's attitude to the Cuban Crisis and Wes's attitude to the takeover of Winchester House by the "very, very dynamic individuals" (p. 111) in New York. We blame Karen for her self-righteous superiority, for refusing to connect with Wes's feelings of being under the bomb controlled by the big powers. Now Wes thinks others are silly and over-excited for feeling they are "under the gun" (p. 59) held by the big American corporation. From one point of view, that of "real life and death," the others are clods for being so concerned with the practical. But from another, they are quite right to feel shaken; their lives are going to change drastically. They will be fired or kept on, and, in the latter case, a lot more pressure will be placed on them. As Wes knows, the American Dream is already making everybody miserable. Although Wes *knows* this, he cannot connect this knowledge with the sale. That is why he also *knows* the values of the worriers are inferior because they are blah, mundane, boring. What's so crucial about a small educational publishing company, especially a subsidiary, being sold to the Americans? Real history happened long ago and far away. With all this knowledge in his head, Wes can maintain a sense of his superiority, while lacking the comprehension of a human situation that comes from *felt* knowledge. Wes has turned off his feelings and shut the others out, very politely (See pp. 58-59, 127-138). He

responds mechanically and remains unmoved by his knowledge that many hard-working family men will lose their jobs because they lack the right style. Too bad, but he has his own problems, and no time for losers. And anyway, what can he do? It is not easy to like this self-centered Wes, concerned about the problems of humanity in the abstract, but smugly detached from those of the men he works with every day. Unlike Wes, his creator Wright is a self-conscious Canadian: "We didn't see the effect of selling out to the Americans. We wanted to share in the goodies without taking the risks. Maybe that's characteristic of Canadians. Maybe we deserve what we've got."¹¹

In a way what happens to Wes is true cosmic justice. At some point, he discovered that being a nice guy who told people only what they wanted to hear was a smart way of protecting himself. People would like him but leave him alone, leave his real self intact, preserved inside his mask like the Chivas Regal inside the bottle. Now the cover he has adopted to protect himself leads to his success. While Syd and Fred and others will be fired for lacking "the smooth corporate style" (p. 137), the American bosses will love our nice-guy Wes, whose lack of pushy drive makes him the kind of salesman customers trust. His fate is to remain sealed inside his bottle forever and thus to stay terribly lonely. Although Wes sees himself as trapped by Molly, what actually traps him into his unfulfilling relationship is this mask he has chosen to wear. As we know, he does not really believe in love (p. 159). However, he says (to Molly, to Bert, to himself, to us) that he loves Molly (see p. 29, p. 33, p. 174). According to his descriptions, he clearly finds Molly hard to take in many ways — she is spoiled, selfish, snobbish, and aggressive. But her fine body and sexual energy attract him, as does her sense of humour. Note what he says about the last quality: "Her laughter is a delight to hear. I know I love her when she laughs like this" (p. 174). In *The Stranger* there is an interesting parallel to this statement. Meursault is attracted to Marie for similar reasons. Note what he says: "When she laughed I wanted her again. A moment later she asked me if I loved her. I said that sort of question had no meaning, really; but I supposed I didn't. She looked sad for a bit, but when we were getting our lunch ready she brightened up and started laughing, and when she laughs I always want to kiss her."¹² Since Meursault remains in touch with his real feelings and lets Marie know where she stands, neither is in a false position. As a result, they can share feelings and experiences: "We swam a long way out, Marie and I, side by side, and it was a pleasant feeling how our movements matched, hers and mine, and how we were both in the same mood, enjoying every moment."¹³ In contrast, Wes, who says the right things, the conventional things, to himself and Molly, traps them both into a false relationship. Thus they cannot communicate; they cannot share anything real. Wes makes use of his favourable position at Winchester to save his marriage (using one trap to gain another, if you like). After telling Molly about it, he is careful to explain to us that he is not wilfully opposed to worldly success: "The truth is that I am not a success

¹¹Quoted in Dusty Vineberg, "In Search of Sanity," *Montreal Star*, 19 January 1974. Sec. C, p. 3.

¹²*The Stranger*, p. 44. ¹³*The Stranger*, p. 64.

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because I cannot think straight for days on end, bemused as I am by the weird trance of this life and the invisible passage of time" (p. 149). This is the same guy we heard condemning the competitive approach to life (p. 108), which, presumably, he has been resisting all along. At the moment, however, it is inconvenient for him to be opposed to the success ethic. Since Molly totally accepts it, and since he wants a reconciliation with her, and especially since he is riding high at Winchester, he has to convince himself that he is not going against his own principles. At the same time, the "cannot" leaves an opening in case the going gets tough later.

Significantly, Wes heard about the Cuban Crisis on the T.V. news. Images on the screen have been far more real to him than life for a long time (they seem safer). To escape from a life structured by the American Dream, Wes watches American T.V., including the ads. His mind is thoroughly immersed in the world of advertising. Notice how interested he is in clothes, in the different makes and models of cars, in brands of products advertised on T.V., whether food, cigarettes or mouthwash. "Roger leans further forward. I can smell the last syrupy traces of Scope mouthwash on his breath. I am a Scope user myself" (p. 59). Wes also compares people to actors. "With his moon face and Joe E. Brown mouth, Bert looks like a comic from some Hollywood musical of the early forties" (p. 26). The actors are the reality; the people merely copies. Wes uses his mind to categorize, package, and label people — for example, Syd Calhoun, a "solid, roast-beef citizen" (p. 77). Although he might appear more compassionate on the surface, Wes is actually far harsher than Meursault in his judgments of others. Wes's judgments are a combination of the rational detachment he has chosen and the values he has been fed subliminally. Richard Wright has strong feelings about the forces in society that manipulate people: "Everywhere you go your taste is being programmed."¹⁴ There is an ironic gap between Wes's desire to preserve himself and the fact that he is a programmed consumer. We could justifiably ask whether he has a self to preserve, or whether it is merely an illusion, an abstraction. Wes certainly *assumes* he has a personal identity under his mask, but we can also see his preserved self as an excellent commercial product (like the sacred bottle of whisky), a product of our time. Wes is too self-conscious for his own good, but not conscious enough about what is happening to him. In switching on the T.V. he switches off an essential part of his awareness, while he avoids involvement with people for fear of being manipulated.

Wright speaks of himself as "a moralist and propagandist."¹⁵ Like Fielding and Sterne, he tries to convey his morality through the comic spirit of play. While concerned about the pressures contemporary society places on the individual, he still believes that the roots of the problems we face are internal: "What we're really talking about is the basic flaw in the whole beast — human nature."¹⁶ What is Wes's basic flaw? From one perspective, we can see it as the same flaw that Swift and Pope were attacking in human nature — an inordinate pride in reason. Wes shares it with the Houyhnhmns and Gulliver in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* and with Walter Shandy, all of

¹⁴In Vineberg, p. 3. ¹⁵In Vineberg, p. 3. ¹⁶In Vineberg, p. 3.

whom are too hard on the weaknesses of others and overlook their own. In a way, Wes might seem to be humble in stressing his unimportance and powerlessness, in thinking nothing he does matters. But being too objective is a form of pride. Unlike Tristram who allows himself to love, Wes is not a wise fool, but a rational fool who thinks he is wise. From another perspective, Wes's flaw can be seen as a lack of courage. He hides behind his culturally-approved persona because he lacks the guts to be himself, to relate openly and honestly to others. It is much easier to wear the ready-made mask of the normal nice guy than to gamble on being different, being genuinely unique.

Wes tries to convince himself that he can live in two separate worlds at once — that he can play the game of conventional normality like an actor on a stage, yet inside his mask remain a sensitive soul concerned with the truth of his inner experience. Many of us, perhaps most of us, would like to believe we can do this (Wes, remember, is Everyman). Wright's point is that it is not a valid position. You cannot be a mechanical robot and a real person, phony and authentic, at the same time. Your psyche gets affected by the games you play, and if you do not act according to the genuine feelings and insights that you have, you lose them as well as yourself. You lose touch with yourself as a person. The parallel endings of *The Weekend Man* and *The Stranger* take us one step further. Both narrators are gazing at the starry sky, facing different kinds of death at the age of thirty. To Meursault the universe is "brotherly" in its "benign indifference."¹⁷ He is at one with it as well as with himself. To Wes, condemned to spiritual death (or life imprisonment in a false role), it has "a perfect indifference" (p. 175). He has alienated himself from reality as a whole. Wright wants us to recognize that inner and outer are not two separate realms but two aspects of reality. Living is a creative act, a bringing forth of what is within us. If life in our time has become less and less human, more and more mechanized, it is partly due to the Wes Wakehams, whose "niceness" contributes to the depersonalized world they deplore.

Some Problems in Reading *The Weekend Man*

We should now have a complete picture of Wes Wakeham, the Weekend Man, who not only perceives and criticizes but also incorporates the spirit of our time. He is both a good and a bad example — a good example gone sour, if you like. Although in potential he is a civilized, loving human being, the potential is lost, partly because of the world he lives in and partly from his own choice. The first Wes shows us how his society, composed of other people, stifles him. Since Wes is Everyman, Wright's implication is that any individual, seen from the inside, would appear to be a sensitive and sympathetic outsider (like the first Wes) and would see himself as victimized by a system composed of others, all calculating conformists (like the second Wes). The ironic view adds to, corrects, and rounds off the first. At least it

¹⁷*The Stranger*, p. 154.

should — this is undoubtedly Wright's intention. As a moralist, Wright would like us to see the total Wes as a mirror-reflection of ourselves. Although we all contribute to our own suffering and the suffering of others, we prefer to see ourselves as innocent strangers; thus we remain locked into our isolation. In order to achieve his purpose, Wright has to accomplish two things — get us to sympathize with Wes and get us to judge him. He also has to bring our emotional and intellectual responses into a unified whole. Since he wants to evoke profound rather than shallow judgments of Wes's position (he does not, for example, want us to see Wes as irresponsible because he does not keep his nose to the grindstone as good men are supposed to do), the establishment of empathy for Wes is crucial. We have to see the way it is for him from the inside. This is why Wright has put so much creative effort into the commentary that draws us into a relationship with Wes. There is no such bridge between Meursault and the reader; Meursault does very little explaining, interpreting, generalizing or confiding, at least in the first part of the novel. Thus we are kept at a psychological and moral distance from him until the trial. But Wes's tragicomic rhetoric draws us very close; it would be an insensitive reader indeed who could withstand his charm.

This is the problem: one cannot help thinking that Wright did the first part of his job too well. Wes is such a skilful rhetor, so sympathetic in his miseries and so damn funny in the comments he makes that most of us are inclined to go along with him, to take him completely at face value, rather than turn the tables on him and, at the same time, on ourselves. As a moralist, Wright is extremely subtle. That is one reason we like him, of course; unlike his interpreters, he does not bang us over our heads with his points. As I have indicated, there is a subtle pattern of irony in the novel. But for some reason, people persist in missing it and thus in reading the novel more superficially than it should be read. It is unfortunate, as Wright has much to say, especially, though not entirely, for Canadians. In classroom discussions of *The Weekend Man*, any of my students who dared to utter a mild criticism of Wes were immediately pounced on and practically annihilated by the others, who accused them of being supporters of the hateful rat race, the status quo. The same uncritical enthusiasm for Wes shows itself among older readers, especially sensitive, intelligent males, who have discovered a kindred spirit, someone who knows the way things really are in the modern world. Reviewers, too, are inclined to take Wes at face value. D. H., for example (whom I presume to be David Helwig), speaks of Wes's "tendency to notice the humanity of the idiots who are driving him crazy." He goes on to point out that "Richard Wright hardly suggests alternative reactions; his narrator has a kind of sweet tolerance; probably he loves his wife, but she is going to destroy him, and there's little sense that he could do better."¹⁸ To all of these examples, I must add myself. My discovery of Wright's ironic pattern came slowly, as I began to explore some of the things that bothered me about Wes, things I had tried to ignore because one hates to judge a close friend, especially when everyone else is on his back for the wrong reasons.

¹⁸D. H., rev. of *The Weekend Man*, *Quarry*, No. 22 (Winter 1973), pp. 77-79.

Perhaps as readers we all suffer from the flaws of laziness and self-indulgence, but we have to ask ourselves whether there is anything in the narrative technique of Wright's novel to encourage such laziness and make an ironic reading particularly difficult. The most obvious problem, of course, is that among the characters in the novel Wes has the only mind. We have an inside view only of him, and all the others are by contrast such paltry, unattractive, unimaginative creatures that we certainly do not want to place ourselves on their side. There is no character who corrects Wes in a way we are willing to take seriously. Thus, if we are somewhat uneasy about Wes the sensitive underdog, we are somewhat ashamed of ourselves. Any criticism we make of him, we feel, must inevitably be shallow — we *must* be aligning ourselves with those boors Harold Pendle and Ron Tuttle and all the others who put him down. Also, Wes adopts an ironic stance. As Wright knows, ironic attitudes toward oneself and the world can be more or less profound. They can be part of a mask preventing us from getting in touch with ourselves and the world in a profound way. As Wright also knows, we Canadians are particularly prone to adopt such stances. On this point, compare Rachel's shallow ironic attitudes at the beginning of *A Jest of God* with her deep ironic awareness at the end. But while Rachel grows in insight, Wes does not grow, and that constitutes a problem for the reader. Because of his unchanging ironic stance, many readers are inclined to accept him on faith as an authority and even to confuse him with Wright. They believe he knows everything there is to be known about himself and his world.

Another problem is that much of the humour comes from the kind of classifying and labelling Wes indulges in. And he does have some definite prejudices. He is hard on Germans, for example. Mrs. Bruner, whose origin in Hitler's Germany Wes emphasizes (p. 9), affects us so negatively on first meeting that we are ready to like Wes simply because she dislikes him. Later her sexual put-down strengthens our sympathy for him, our dislike of her. Wes makes a point of detailing Harold Pendle's effeminate characteristics (pp. 65-68), which add to the unpleasant picture of the ambitious Harold and emphasize, by contrast, Wes's own manly normality. Again, our narrator stresses the craziness of Hank Bellamy, who admits that young female students turn him on. He makes at least four separate references to Hank's insanity (p. 65, p. 69, p. 99). Although Wes himself is turned on by the "sweet young flesh" of the Grade Tennessees doing calisthenics (p. 64), the effect of his rhetoric is such that the reader is less inclined to appreciate Wright's irony than to appreciate the nice normal Wes in contrast to the weirdo Hank. Finally, Wes is very hard on women. Since many male readers would naturally share his attitudes to his own mother, Molly's mother, Molly, Karen, Helen, and Mrs. Bruner, they would hardly be inclined to question his conclusions about being an innocent victim.¹⁹ The point is if we laugh with Wes at others as types, we are not going to be inclined to turn around and judge him for categorizing and labelling them. And since all of these examples appeal to the most conventional biases in readers, it is very

¹⁹For a discussion of this specific problem, see my essay, "Wes Wakeham and the Masculine Mystique," *Room of One's Own*, 1 (Winter, 1976), 24-32.

difficult for them to begin to question the value of conventional responses to life, of normality and niceness. For most readers, therefore, an ironic reading requires a terrific wrench in perspective. It's much easier to enjoy Wes's story as a good diversion from the rat race.

Wright does intend an ironic reading, but the unifying of our emotional and intellectual responses to Wes remains a problem. As I have indicated, in creating Wes, Wright was working within different narrative traditions. The resulting unity is a somewhat shaky one. Although a subtle pattern of irony exists, the comic narrator is too powerful to be held in check by it; he runs away with the story, carrying us with him. For a different kind of effect, compare *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God*, first-person novels in which sympathy for the narrator grows steadily but is held in check throughout by a very clear pattern of irony. Wayne Booth uses a striking image to describe the effect of structural irony in a novel. We travel with the author in the back seat of a car, observing the narrator who is driving. Although he cannot speak, the author's winks and nudges make us see the narrator's self-deceived behaviour.²⁰ Most of us, I think, find ourselves travelling in the front seat with Wes, and if we feel an occasional poke in the backs of our necks or a slight tug on our hair, we are inclined to shrug it off impatiently, since we want to concentrate on listening to Wes's story. Since Wes is such a powerful narrator, however, some of us at least cannot forget him after we leave that car. "The bastard bugs me," one of my students confided. "I just can't figure him out." If this happens, it is a good start to the kind of thinking Wright wants us to do. And meanwhile, we can give Wright what he deserves — a thoughtful re-reading of *The Weekend Man*. It is interesting that Wright's second novel is written in the third person and presented in a much straighter way. Possibly he did not want to be misunderstood again.

Montreal, P.Q.

²⁰Booth, p. 300.