TELLING AND SELLING DIVERSIONS

The Novels of Richard B. Wright

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A SUBJECT CENTRAL TO Richard B. Wright's novels is man's need for the diversions of memories, fantasies, entertainment, advertisements and, in his most recent novel, drugs and news stories. He introduces this thematic concern rather blatantly in the first chapter of *The Weekend Man* (1970) when the narrator, Wes Wakeham, both describes his need for imaginative escape from the tedium of everyday life and analyzes this need as one characteristic of modern man:

> 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.... If the truth were known nothing much happens to most of us during the course of our daily passage.... we must cast about for a diversion. A diversion is anything that removes us from the ordinary present.

Wes tells us of his own and others' daydreams, memories, and imaginative involvement with entertainment and advertisements because he enjoys his vicarious participation in the diversions as he describes them. He also assumes that "you," a person "like most of us," are a "weekend man" as well. This implication of the reader in the psychological state of the protagonist is reinforced by the act of reading *The Weekend Man*: Wes's narrative of the diversions he experiences is the story written by Wright for sale as a *novel*ty for the reader, as a diversion in other words, from the reader's own "ordinary present." Wright's perception of the appeal of his art is repeatedly suggested by his frequent and explicit analyses, in both *The Weekend Man* and *In the Middle of a Life*, of the weekend man's need for diversions. In *Farthing's Fortunes* this subject is not so readily apparent. But while this novel is less theoretical than the earlier two, in its protagonist's referring to the need for imaginative escape and in its being itself eminently entertaining, *Farthing's Fortunes* can be seen to deal with the same subject but with a greater degree of integration of the subject matter with the narrative of the fiction. In *Final Things*, the subject of diversions is given an even broader, and more artistically successful, presentation. Before under-

taking an interpretation of *Farthing's Fortunes* and *Final Things* in terms of their treatment of diversions, however, an examination of the theory, as presented in *The Weekend Man* and *In the Middle of a Life*, of the weekend man's need for diversions, provides a necessary groundwork.

Wes, the weekend man, frequently analyses his own need for imaginative escape. For him, "the greatest diversion of them all" is his memory of the Cuban missile crisis. He recalls the end, on October 24, 1962, of his affair with a silver blonde named Karen. He had immersed himself in her fantasies of their future:

> Karen was pleased that I was taking up astronomy. It seemed to her like a fine hobby for an advertising man.
>
> And so I would fill my allotted time on this planet with a few harmless diversions; plan me a little future with ... my platinum-helmeted partner by my side. With my Tudor cottage on the leafy street and my two small well-behaved children in the private school.

At the height of the Cuban crisis Wes stayed home from work, entranced and exhilarated by the events unfolding on his television. Karen refused to join him in this diversion and her demand that he return to the office to work for their future plans led him to end their relationship. Bored with her diversion, her plans, as she was unimpressed by his, the Cuban crisis, they parted; for both the need for diversions is more compelling than the need for relationships.

Like all the other weekend people Wright portrays, Wes enjoys the essentially passive pastime of watching television shows full of action and excitement: "television," Wes explains, "is a good diversion." On Wednesday evening, depressed by the "famine" of his sexual life, he immerses himself in the activity of a television show: "I sat in my apartment watching Matt Dillon's peaceful horseface as he stepped into a tense saloon and cooled things out." Wes has entered the fictional world: from his description he seems almost to be in the same room as Dillon. This diversion commands Wes's attention despite the interruption of a "real" person. When his father-in-law, Bert Sinclair, phones, Wes muses: "In the background I could hear Bert's television; little explosions of canned laughter. He wasn't watching *Gunsmoke* for at that moment Matt was drilling two cowboys on the main street of Dodge." Wes is involved in the show to the extent that he identifies with Dillon, and imagines the lawman's thoughts: "I watched him as he walked over to where they lay, that hang-dog expression on his face. Oh shoot, why must there be all this senseless violence in my town." The pun in his exclamation, "Oh shoot," suggests that Wes laughs at his own immersion in the show. Certainly he is aware that he is a weekend man. But even as he defines and gently mocks his need for diversions he remains unchanged, dependent on television for escape from the problems of his family life and career, his "ordinary present."

A reader unfamiliar with the *Gunsmoke* series would be confused by sentences such as the one beginning, "I sat in my apartment watching Matt Dillon's peaceful horse-face." Wright expects his audience to be sufficiently familiar with television programmes to recognize Hollywood allusions. When he describes people for us in terms of their resemblance to movie stars, he again does so in the confidence that these stars are known to us. Wes's wife Molly looks like Joanne Woodward, his boss "slightly resembles" Rod Steiger and Bert is "a dead ringer for Jack Oakie." From our experience of the diversions of television and movies, we complete the characterization of Wright's diversion, *The Weekend Man.* And when we realize that, like Wes, we are familiar with the escapist world of television programmes, what I take to be Wright's point has been made: we, the readers, like all the characters in the novel, are weekend people.

Wright's second novel shares with *The Weekend Man* many elements of plot, characterization and, most obviously, subject matter. The protagonist of *In the Middle of a Life* (1973), Fred Landon, is like Wes Wakeham, a Toronto salesman whose company has been bought up by a larger, more aggressive American firm. Because they are not successful, not pushy enough, both men have been deserted by their wives. And, like Wes, Fred has the weaknesses of a weekend man. Talking to his lover, Margaret Beauchamp, he says that in his early years "he was a fat, indolent child, . . . listening to the great brown Marconi console . . . to Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy; Duffy's Tavern; Jack Armstrong, All-American boy." In the middle of his life he still uses, in his imagination, "old comic-book slang." "His head was filled with old movies and songs" when he is half-heartedly trying to find a job. But while Wes accepts himself as a weekend man, Fred considers his need for diversions a weakness. He is unlike the detached and somewhat cynical Wes, moreover, in his compassion for other people who share his need for imaginative escape. Fred's generalizations about the human condition represent what seems to be the novel's theme: "The modern soul! How starved for authentic experience!" Thus while the two novels portray and analyze the same psychological state, *A Weekend Man,* like its narrator, is ironic in tone while *In the Middle of a Life* and its protagonist express compassion for the plight of modern man.

The sympathetic understanding Fred has for what he perceives to be man's prevalent weakness is most evident in his extended description to Margaret of his mother's susceptibility to the American media. Joanna Landon's passion was Hollywood movies. She spoke "in the slightly fruity voice of a Barbara Stanwyck. Or whoever she had seen the night before at the Royale Theatre. . . . It was just that unconsciously she played out her life in other guises." She finally escaped her prosaic life in the small town with Charley Ames, an American who had once had "some bit parts in a few [Hollywood] pictures." Fred tells Margaret of the pity he felt for these "two great children" when he visited them in their

mobile home in Anaheim, California, where Charley was the projectionist in a drive-in theatre. The urban California landscape was "fractured," an "alien land" with "artificial trees" and air which "seemed electric." Charley and Joanna had become fat, drunk, and bored, sustained only by the fantasies offered by nearby Disneyland, afternoon television, and the evening films at the Star-Burst Theatre. Fred "was utterly depressed by it all." As he tells Margaret of Joanna's pathetic delusions, she too feels sadness and sympathy. "Margaret was listening closely, watching his face." As he continues, she interjects, "How sad" and "I want to hear." Because the narrator consistently presents Margaret as kind and intelligent, her response to Fred's story can be taken as that of a good audience. We are given no alternative model of response to the need for diversions than that of compassion.

In the world of *In the Middle of a Life*, everyone is involved in diverting or being diverted and the novel's thematic concern centres on this consumer situation. Fred had tried to find a place in the entertainment industry as a Hollywood script writer. His "glamorous daydreams of riches and fame" were frustrated because he did not promote his television scripts aggressively enough. Entertainment, then, is a commodity as well as a diversion. Wright examines a great range of consumer diversions by making his unsuccessful entertainer an unsuccessful salesman as well. Butcher in the employment agency tells Fred, "You don't strike me as being quite — well, aggressive enough. I really wonder if you're sales-oriented." Fred watches with disapproval the advertisements he finds on billboards, in subway cars and on window posters. His response to them is rueful; he knows that they appeal to people's need for a more exciting, more glamorous life:

> Landon's eyes scanned the advertising posters above the windows. These printed appeals for your dollar: correspondence schools, charcoal burgers, investment analysis and advice, sanitary napkins, tango lessons. Something for everyone; a democratic plentitude. His gaze settled on the picture of a young girl modeling panty hose. . . . Those advertising types knew what they were doing.

Wright, then, has his protagonist, a failure at both writing and selling diversions, comment on their pervasiveness in popular culture.

A phrase Wes uses repeatedly in his narrative to describe modern man's predicament is "the thundering ironies." Another is "the mystery and the wonder of it." The element of hyperbole in these phrases ensures that the reader does not take too seriously the ultimately unresolved problems of the human condition. *The Weekend Man* ends with Wes going to sleep on Christmas Eve; watching the stars, he sees no new meaning in his future. In contrast to the highly ambiguous and desolate conclusion to Wes's story, Fred's ends with an answer, a promise of a better way of life. His lover, Margaret Beauchamp, is the only major character in either novel not described in terms of her Hollywood fantasies:

her clothes, her car and her mannerisms all retain an old-fashioned Polish flavour. She lives in a world of "authentic experience" which Fred, walking with her through Toronto's European Kensington Market, realizes most North Americans have lost: "Here he felt something like the generating pulse of life, felt its rhythms traveling along his blood." And Margaret becomes pregnant by him, forcing him out of his self-indulgent fantasies into new responsibilities; *In the Middle of a Life* ends with the protagonist determining to take definite steps towards control of this new life. There is hope he can break out of the passivity induced by the diversions which so pervade modern consumer society.

IN HIS NEXT WORK, *Farthing's Fortunes* (1976), Wright reverts from his sentimental optimism to the ironic and cynical perspective of *The Weekend Man*. The reader is detached and amused as the characters of *Farthing's Fortunes* attempt to realize their fantasies of love and money. It is as if Wright decided that he would write a best-seller for his readers by offering them an exciting escape from their "ordinary present." *Farthing's Fortunes* is a tall tale and, of Wright's novels, certainly the most diverting. Whereas the events of the first two novels take place in contemporary Canadian apartments and business offices and the characters' actions are unremarkable, the next novel ranges over several countries and many years and is peopled by wildly eccentric characters whose speech is flamboyant and whose behaviour is improbable. In the two earlier novels Wright inserts extensive and barely disguised authorial theories about man's need for diversions. In *Farthing's Fortunes* he restricts blatant commentary on the meaning and structure of the book to a "Foreword" and an "Epilogue." But if handled more subtly, the subject of diversions is kept at the forefront throughout the novel by the thoughts and behaviour of the narrator, Bill Farthing, and his friend, the salesman Cass Findlater.

Bill Farthing, according to the "Publisher's Foreword," begins his writing career with the confidence that his memoirs are "interesting": "I've been places and seen things that I'll bet most people haven't. . . . If you want a story, I can give you a good one." He is amazed that the "publisher" is putting out the autobiography of the quiet and respectable Hector McCoy: "he hasn't been anywhere to speak of. He hasn't done anything. I doubt if he's ever met one interesting person in his life." Farthing appeals to the "publisher," a seller of stories, confident that his memoirs have the quality which will make them attractive to the reading audience: "I've got the first chapter of my memoirs here and you can give them a look. It's a helluva lot more interesting than that stuff by McCoy." These chapters appeal to the "publisher's instinct" and Farthing's story is completed for subsequent sale.

The other claim, this one ironic, that Farthing makes for his story is that of realism. Referring to the story's "note of authenticity" and "verisimilitude," the "publisher" pretends to take seriously such frequent protestations, during the course of Farthing's narrative, as "To tell you the truth," "damn me for a liar if I didn't," and "I'll tell you something I remember clearly." But no story which includes so many wildly improbable chance meetings can claim verisimilitude. Farthing's claims are really rhetorical gestures which function primarily to establish a sense of complicity with his readers. When he says "damn me for a liar if I didn't see Sally" as he watches the passenger car of a passing train, we, having witnessed many other equally improbable chance meetings, recognize the irony in his protestations. Farthing is inviting us to mock the pieties and the *realism* of the *McCoy* world. His story is "more interesting" because it is so improbable, so unlike our "ordinary present." Farthing tells a tale of exaggerated incidents, of an onion roast in Dawson, of the luxury of an enormous English estate and of terrible poverty in Toronto. His friends include such comic exaggerations as Martin Rooney the braggart poet, Mary Jane Fletcher the lascivious wife of an undertaker, and the irrepressible hustler Cass Findlater. The people interested in truth, church-goers such as Miss Boswell and Merle Pickett, are ridiculed for their small and tedious orthodoxy. Farthing's tale is anything but "the truth." Whereas in *The Weekend Man* and *In the Middle of a Life* the need for diversions is more or less deplored, here Farthing and Wright gratify their worldly-wise audience with an "interesting," a diverting story. Not bound by conventional truths, we are able to recognize and enjoy a clever hoax. Farthing involves us in figuring out, with him, the identity of a woman he meets outside Craven Falls: "Then it came to me in a flash. Maybe it's already come to you, if you're sharp." And he mocks the expectations generated by his tall tale. After telling of their unexpected encounter, when he and Findlater were destitute vagrants, with the rich and kind Esther Easterbrook, Farthing admonishes us: "Now, if you think I went up and introduced myself and that out of all that she offered Findlater and me a job, then you've been reading too many fairy tales." But we expect just such a change in Farthing's hitherto mercurial fortunes. Only forty pages earlier in his story his chance collision with Percy Finchwhistle had resulted in a vacation of incredibly luxurious leisure. Farthing invites us to laugh with him at his claim of verisimilitude and at our own tendency to expect traditional conventions in his story.

Farthing frequently alludes to the similarities between his story and escapist fiction such as the fairy tales he accuses his readers of indulging in. He records his reaction when, as a young man, he finds his former lover, Mrs. Fletcher, in a whorehouse: "I was aflame with desire, as they used to say in those trashy romances." He comments on the suitability of exaggerated clichés in the telling of his tale: "to say that the bottom fell out of my world at that moment would

be just about right." But while he adopts the conventions of "those trashy romances," he at the same time mocks people who read them. On a train he meets a woman who leaves her children to his care: "what she did was get out this trashy novel and start to read the damn thing." He tolerates Mrs. Fletcher's passion for "those trashy novels" because his reading of them aloud to her is frequently the prelude to their love-making. He also reads to Esther, the crippled girl, from the more sophisticated novels of Scott, Dickens, and Hardy:

> All this stuff seemed several degrees better than the trashy romances I'd read to Mrs. Fletcher, but the funny thing was that the effect was remarkably the same. As soon as I'd get into one of these stories Esther would sit there trapped and dazed just like Mrs. Fletcher.

Thus Farthing has a double standard; he criticizes "trashy" books but uses many of their conventions in the story he writes himself.

The career of another writer offers further opportunity for Wright's indirect treatment of man's need for diversions. Martin Rooney is an Irishman convinced of the greatness of his poems which are inspired by his mother and the object of his infatuation, Alice Fry. Farthing recognizes Rooney's delusions; Alice is anything but a shy and loving maiden and as for Rooney's poetry, "the only worse lines I've ever heard were recited by a man named Jake Snipes on the night his mother died." While Farthing tries to avoid this misguided fool, Cass Findlater has a more profitable reaction:

> "What you need, Martin," says Findlater, "is somebody to promote your pomes." He turned to me. "Have you read this man's work, Bill? Listen here now.
>
> *Few things in life are so precious and fine*
> *As the thought of you dear old Mother of mine.*
>
> I mean damn it, that's beauty pure and simple."

Rooney's poems, like "trashy romances," are good diversions in that they create fantasies of ideal love and use clichés to which readers can respond. Findlater realizes the business potential of the poems: "The market for that beautiful sentiment is the kitchen wall of every home in America." Together this salesman and writer make enormous profits. Through his description of the career of such a terrible poet Farthing encourages us to share the scepticism he feels for the readers and writers of popular diversions.

IF FARTHING TEACHES US, by his scorn of "trashy" writing, the nature of our enjoyment of his tall tale, his primary role in the novel is nevertheless not this one of ironic commentator. He is a story-teller, a creator of diversions. And his friend Cass Findlater is his counterpart, the salesman of diversions.

Findlater has all the qualities Wes and Fred lack as salesmen; aggressive, talkative and optimistic, he sells bootleg whiskey in the United States during Prohibition, onions in Dawson during winter shortages, and rubber during World War I to anyone who can pay for it. If Farthing somewhat ironically uses the clichés of popular entertainment, Findlater wholeheartedly speaks, reads, and thinks in such terms as "I thought it would be a good way to break the ice at parties and generally win friends and influence people." Farthing describes his friend's daily reading habits:

> Findlater paid attention to ... the stories and theories of successful men in business. He spent a lot of time painfully working his way through twenty-five-cent books with titles like "Ten Steps to Successful Living" or "How I Made My First Million."

For Wes whose father-in-law sends him a *Reader's Digest* article about the career of the sales director of a petroleum company, or Fred who is instructed to read "the reprint of a *Reader's Digest* article which described how Wilbur P. Wade had sold an entire subdivision in one week," self-improvement manuals represent unattainable fantasies of business success. Findlater, however, follows such examples seriously and successfully. His whole-hearted acceptance of the Horatio Alger Jr. model of social climbing is exhilarating to Wright's readers because he actually acquires riches most people only dream of. At the end of Farthing's story, Findlater is living in Castle Eldorado, "a reproduction of an old-time castle such as you might find in a kid's book of fairy tales." He tells Farthing about his memoirs:

> I'm riting on the benefits of positive thinkin and of how if you keep your sunny side up and believe in God, you'll come out on top of the other feller. I rote a man in New York City and he told me his company would put it out for ten thousand dollars.

The story of Findlater as both he and Farthing tell it is a great diversion; it will be a best-seller because it describes the kind of life weekend people like to imagine.

Wright, like his writers Farthing and Findlater, has created a "helluva ... interesting" diversion. His novel contains one adventurous, amusing, and exaggerated incident after another. He removes the reader from "the ordinary present" by humour, pathos, sex and violence. *Farthing's Fortunes* is both a story about weekend men, those escapists who hope to "find later" a "far thing," and a "trashy novel" for weekend men, the readers of Wright's tall tale. This paradox is introduced by the elaborate and obvious fabrication of the pretence, in the "Publisher's Foreword" and the "Epilogue," that neither Farthing nor this story is fictional: the reader, recognizing *Farthing's Fortunes* as fiction, thus expects, from the start, narrative ironies rather than consistent thematic state-

ments. These ironic comments tend, in the main, to concern the telling and selling of diversions. Again in *Farthing's Fortunes*, as in *The Weekend Man* and *In the Middle of a Life*, Wright has constructed a novel around the tension between his form, the diversion, and his content, the discussion of man's need for diversion.

If *Farthing's Fortunes* contains fewer and less obvious theoretical intrusions than the earlier novels, *Final Things* (1980) continues this movement to step beyond even indirect discussion, within the fiction, of the nature of diversions. This most recent novel portrays the reactions of a man to his son's rape and murder. As the police search for his son begins, Charlie Farris "felt his own life pulled in the direction of larger, darker things," and through his fear and loss "A feeling of immense pity arose within him. Man was a suffering animal. . . . Farris felt somehow united with his fellow creatures in a terrible destiny." As Farris pursues the murderers to their and his own deaths, he becomes typical of man trapped, even despite his innate kindliness, by his own destructive compulsions. But instead of using authorial intrusions or narrative ironies, Wright presents this novel's thematic content through Farris' tendency to generalize from his own experience to comment, usually pessimistically, on the human condition; the reader is drawn into Farris' depression as, for example, "the idea of the impermanence of all things filled him with a peculiar sense of regret." As well as being more self-contained, *Final Things* is distinguished from the sentimental hope and cynical humour of the earlier novels. Its title, which refers to the destruction by a wrathful God of sinful man, suggests the novel's consistently bleak perspective as well as its universal scope.

The diversions in *Final Things*, as well as the characters, resemble those of the earlier novels. Charlie Farris is a middle-aged Torontonian, a writer painfully aware and ashamed of his failed career and broken marriage. Farris and a variety of minor characters are alcoholics; his beautiful, estranged wife is dependent on Valium; their son, Jonathan, and his murderers, use and sell marijuana and pornographic pictures. The apparently universal need for consuming and, less importantly in this book, selling diversions, is presented, without narrative intrusion, as the means of escape from, as well as the cause of, violence. Diversions, then, are not discussed but rather they function as the symptoms and activators of the underlying emotions which are the raw material of the plot. The murder of Jonathan and the final massacre are not planned; elemental fears and rage, unleashed by drugs, determine behaviour. This world is too grim to face without drugs but they merely accentuate the "larger, darker things," and speed up the destruction, the "final things."

Final Things can be seen from another, wider perspective to deal with the subject of diversions to the extent that the novel analyses the role in society of a specific kind of diversion, the news story. Murchison, the newsman pursuing

Farris' version of his son's disappearance, states the case bluntly: "Child murders are headlines. People are definitely interested." If Murchison wants the story for the sales it will give his newspaper, it might also be said that Wright chose, for the sake of his novel's sale, his subject on the basis of the established reader interest in the famous rape and murder of Emmanuel Jacques in downtown Toronto. That this charge sorely misses the point of the novel is seen in the thoroughness with which Wright both explores the feeling of horror and fascination that Jacques's story raised and analyses the kind of society in which such an outrage could happen. He explores the fantasy most of the newspaper readers would have had, "What would I have done if this had happened to my son?" by taking the reader through the emotions of a fictionalized father. *Final Things*, then, attracts sales by its subject, but also moves beyond mere exploitation of a diversion to examine the compulsions surrounding such an event. Wright has successfully left behind the comments, direct in *The Weekend Man* and *In the Middle of a Life*, and indirect in *Farthing's Fortunes*, on the nature and effects of diversions and has stepped, in *Final Things*, into the more comprehensive and artistically coherent framework of analysis of one representative father in an escapist society.

THE WIND, GROWING UP

Roo Borson

The wind. It comes at night,
trying to claw the house apart.
It goes at all the windows.
The windows shudder in their frames.
The wind wants you to come out and be blown
forever through a world moving too fast
for you to see it. The way the wind sees it.
So what if you lie under the covers and shiver?
That same wind goes through your lungs, through and through,
through and through.