

Kevin Clark

Stature

Near the end of the nineteenth century Matthew Arnold proclaimed the existence of “laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty” against which all poets must be judged—but what these laws were exactly he couldn’t say, other than vaguely defined principles of “high seriousness” and “richness.” Today we’re even less sure. As we know, dead poets ascend slowly onto the heights of stature (or fall from them) by a disarranged, ongoing and collective reevaluation of their work. But, as critics of contemporary literature voice their own often idiosyncratic and contrary preferences, contemporary poets are subject to perhaps a vigorous critical buffeting more akin to wind shear than reasoned dialog. After years of adulation, Robert Lowell published *Life Studies* to bitterly divided reviews. Now we know *Life Studies* as one of the most influential books of the twentieth century—but at its publication it was often debunked as bad writing, hardly even poetry. Nonetheless, Lowell rose in contemporary estimation because he’d established a strong reputation and could take a chance with a radical new style, in this case the “confessional” mode.

Charles Wright’s career is in some ways like Lowell’s, and *Zone Journals*, by way of its risks, confirms that Wright is still in ascendancy. Wright, too, received a good deal of attention as a young poet. His second book, *Hard Freight* (1973), was nominated for the National Book Award, and indeed his first four books were so admired that Wesleyan University press published a selection from all of them under the title *Country Music*, which in turn won the 1983 American Book Award. These earlier poems derived much power from their two contradictory impulses: the supposition that basic elements of the universe are lasting and are, in purest form, immutable *as opposed to* the poet’s insistence that the self is unimportant and probably transient. They were all written in the much-discussed style of the seventies—deep imagery. Strange, often surreal images were intended to resonate non-rationally amid the primal archetypes of the brain. The poems are generally short, always densely lined.

But by the time *Country Music* appeared, Wright, like Lowell twenty-five years earlier, had begun to alter his poetics radically. And like Lowell’s, his verse transformed from a relatively condensed, subliminal style to a more open, elliptical, ethereal, and even at times self-referential mode. His approach to the questions of existence became less grave and more Eastern. By blending a less constricted metaphysical perspective with a new, melodically

Like Lowell, Wright had the prescience to give up what had worked so well for him, to pursue the same question with a new tool. Matthew Arnold came to conclude that the culture doesn't make a "deliberate and conscious choice" in its assessment of literature, but is compelled out of "the instinct of preservation" to recognize what is best. The paradox in Wright's case is that he has risen to such rare stature in American poetry precisely because sometime after his fourth book he came to realize that he would have to change if he was going to go on preserving *himself* against the insistent threat of ontological uncertainty.