

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

elegiac lyricism, *The Southern Cross* (1981) and *The Other Side of the River* (1984) marked a definitive split from his old voice and, despite some harping from neo-formalists, deserved the widespread praise they've received. Now *Zone Journals* refines this second stage of Wright's canon.

Where *The Southern Cross* looked at the inexplicability of existence chiefly by examining the vagaries of memory, *Zone Journals* examines a state of being which is at once uncertain and yet suspended in romantic potential. The brilliance of the book is in its ability to link the details of natural phenomena to the discursive and paradoxical insights of a man energized by a belief in an invisible world, a world which cannot be known in any ordinary, direct way, if at all:

—Lashed to the syllable and noun,
 the strict Armageddon of the verb,
 I lolled for seventeen years
 Above this bay with its antimacassars of foam
 On the rocks, the white, triangular tears
 sailboats poke through the sea's spun sheet,
 Houses like wads of paper dropped in the moss clumps of
 the trees,
 Fog in its dress whites at ease along the horizon,
 Trying to get the description right.
 If nothing else,
 It showed me that what you see
 both is and is not there,
 The unseen bulking in from the edges of all things,
 Changing the frame with its nothingness.
 —"A Journal of True Confessions"

The last two lines of the passage constitute an ingeniously fruitful ambiguity: The "unseen" may be nothing more than an empty but almost sensual projection of our imaginations straining for meaning, *or* the unseen may be the stuff of physics, the force which impels the world, and its "nothingness" may in fact be nothingness to the searcher simply because it cannot be seen.

Some poets, such as Philip Levine or Sharon Olds, gain poetic tension by posing the individual against the inequities of social circumstance. But Charles Wright achieves a more refined intensity by depicting the individual trying to locate him- or herself in relation *not only* to civilization but more importantly to the meta-physical universe:

—Exclusion's the secret: what's missing is what appears
Most visible to the eye:
 the more luminous anything is,
The more it subtracts what's around it,
Peeling away the burned skin of the world
 making the unseen seen:
Body by new body they all rise into the light
Tactile and still damp,
That rhododendron and dogwood tree, that spruce,
An architecture of absence,
 a landscape whose words
Are imprints, dissolving images after the eyelids close:
I take them away to keep them there —
 that hedgehorn for instance, that stalk. . . .
 —“Yard Journal”

Wright's tension emerges from a typically postmodern conflict: He holds a near mystic belief in the infinite character of natural phenomena but he is at times deeply saddened by the likely notion that he will not be as lasting as the non-human, non-conscious particles of matter that will go on playing out the dance of the universe. The deft elegiac tone of his second phase is a register of the disappointing uncertainty he feels. He recently wrote, “All my poems seem to be an ongoing argument with myself about the unlikelihood of salvation . . .” Charles Wright is deeply in love with both the physical and aphysical worlds, but he is disturbed by what seems like our quick passing through the former and our inability ever to experience the latter.

In the poems of *Country Music* Wright could seem almost angry in his attempts to draw the unknown out of the known. In *Zone Journals* he is as equally concerned with the problem, but his strategy is to take a less adamant, more Zen-like approach. Such a strategy involves resigning yourself to not knowing in order to know; it doesn't guarantee the immortality of the artist nor the art, but it can extend the life of both. And so in the book's last poem, “Chinese Journal,” he closes with this passage:

What can anyone know of the sure machine that makes all
 things work?
To find one word and use it correctly,
 providing it is the right word,
Is more than enough:
An inch of music is an inch and a half of dust.

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.