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EVALUATIONS OF US POETRY SINCE 1950

Volume 1

Language, Form, and Music

Edited by Robert von Hallberg and
Robert Faggen

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CHAPTER 11

The Recipe for Charles Wright

JOHN FARRELL

All the while we thought we were writing for the angels,
And find, after all these years,
Our lines were written in black ink on the midnight sky.

—CHARLES WRIGHT, "LITTLEFOOT 18"

IF THERE WERE a recipe for writing a fine poem, no one would use it, and not just because the recipe would have already been filled so many times that readers would be tired of it. The very idea of a poem that can be reliably assembled out of preexisting elements, without a display of imagination or skill, is contrary to poetry's nature. The audience for poetry is restless for new and varied satisfactions, demonstrations of skill that exploit new possibilities in the medium. Even the oldest wine must come in new bottles. Moderately educated readers who could enjoy a poem, even one written along the lines of the best-chosen exemplars, without comparing it with the run of human powers and the state of the art—which is to say, with their past experience of reading—would have no need for a new poem at all. They might as well be content with the ones they know.

Value in poetry depends essentially on the poet's demonstration of skill in the choice or invention or arrangement either of words or thoughts or happenings, some or all of these. Not everything need be new, of course, but even in the most traditional and stereotyped performance, there must be

something in the amalgam that transforms the combination of well-known elements into an unforeseen and valuable experience. The merest hint that the performance is explicable—that it was copied from another source, for example—is enough to deflate its interest. It is no fault for Ashbery to sound like Ashbery, or Bishop to sound like Bishop, but for another poet the effect would be fatal even if the mimicry were perfect. It is the act of composition we are responding to, not just the words. As Edward Young put it, “He that imitates the divine *Iliad* does not imitate Homer.”¹ To imitate Homer, you need to make your own poem. And for Ashbery to imitate himself *too* often also becomes a fault, a lapse into mechanism.

The recipe-proof nature of poetry vetoes every reductive theory of value. If class or status or political interest could account for the success of a poem, all a poet would have to do to achieve success would be to express ideas that appeal to a certain class, foster a certain cause, or provide a certain degree of status to readers. But things aren't that simple. Even the people for whom works are intended or whose point of view they express do not necessarily enjoy them on that account. And if certain psychological themes were enough to animate a work of art, furnishing them would be easy. Had Poe been right that the death of a beautiful woman is a surefire poetic subject, there are plenty of ways to conjure up beautiful women and kill them off. But such tricks soon wear thin. Freud thought that *Oedipus the King*, *Hamlet*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* were the three greatest works of literature because they dramatize the universal wish to kill the father. If he had been right, then all works would be about this theme, and they would all be equally moving. So much for psychoanalysis.

I do not mean to say that the factors cited by psychologists or social theorists have no explanatory value, but they do not have the value claimed for them. They provide half-truths at most. All Quattrocento madonnas present roughly the same attitudes, the same ideas, ideology, and class interests; they offer the same status value for the viewer, the same opportunity for learned display or scholarly analysis. But some of them are undeniably better than others in a way that social categories can't explain. Many artists, too, have offered explanatory recipes for the creation of new works; in fact, since the time of Wordsworth artists have depended more and more upon the theory, the manifesto, and the movement to support their personal innovations. The salvos they launch against the old recipes tend to strike

deep, but the new recipes turn out to be short-lived. Each new movement has its power to attack reigning conventions, direct artistic initiative, instill creative morale, launch a *parti pris*, and conduct the reaction of the audience, but they are still destined to go out of style. The more narrowly explanatory the theory, the less effective in the long run. Artistic programs do not ultimately provide the standards for judging even the works of literature they motivate, not to mention those that were not created with them in mind. Their value is primarily diagnostic and destructive.

The truism about literature's dependence upon inimitable skill would hardly be worth stating if the past century and a half of poetic experiments had left anything else we could plausibly say about what makes a poem worth reading. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the boundaries of poetic innovation were relatively stable and so well worn as to approach the mechanical, but since then poets have pursued a course of relentless explosion, deflation, and subtraction. They have attempted the annihilation of form in the pursuit of content; the evacuation of content in the pursuit of form; the suppression of the oral and the vocal; the automation of language; the spatialization of the page; the refusal of all the traditional demands of poetry including that its interest last longer than a day. And poets have experimented with just about every combination of these. Hence the perennial need for theory. As a result of all this innovation and experiment, all that is left to identify the common properties of poetry is the personal display of skill at putting words on the printed page—to whatever end that can sustain the reader's interest. Poets still bear the burden of providing something you have not seen before, something that is worth experiencing and takes you by surprise. But the fact that surprise has turned out to be the last touchstone we can use for the value of poetry is telling in itself, surprise being an entirely relative and unstable criterion. Surprise can only be accomplished against the background of what is already expected, and that is constantly changing. Surprise is in itself a principle of change and draws our attention back to the ancient insight that poetry is an intrinsically competitive activity. Success in poetry demands leaving one's competitors behind. The experience of poetry is never simply an experience of the text. It is always in response to a performance in context.

The spirit in which recipes are created is entirely different. They represent an attempt to help others less skilled than oneself repeat a performance. The

recipes for poetry produced by practitioners like Wordsworth or Pound serve a different goal, the need, as Coleridge put it to Wordsworth, on the part of “every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great and original,” to “create the taste by which he is to be relished.”² To be persuasive, such recipes, being works of propaganda, must be very broad, but to grasp the full uselessness and irony of poetic recipes, we have to imagine a recipe that actually engages with the details of an extended poetic performance. Here, then, is a recipe for the life’s work of the widely recognized American poet Charles Wright as he has been practicing it for six decades. To produce a Wright poem:

1. Greet every new day as the occasion for a poem, and every poem as a new version of the same day. Confine yourself to lyrics, except when stringing them together into a long poem. But be certain that any section of any poem would be at home in any other. Write the same poem over and over again your whole life, but succeed in making it striking, beautiful, and never totally familiar.
2. Never leave a word out of place. Perfect the ear in a single, subtle octave, without ever missing a note. No vulgarity, no relevance, no colloquialism, no idioms, no stress. No italics, changes of tone or register. None of the local inflections of English. Never use a word that would be out of place translating Montale or Rilke. Make every line a pitch-perfect compromise between sound, sense, feel of the mouth, and aura—“One ear to the moon’s brass sigh.”
3. Set a poem in every place you have ever lived, but make all those places indistinguishable. Notice history in its setting but do not respond to it. Establish local coordinates without local color. Skim only the surface of your life into poetry.
4. Focus exclusively on landscape and the self, moving from the first to the second and back again. Include the landscape of memory, but do not remember actions or events. No politics, no history, no violence, no therapy. No achievements, failures, regrets, or missed opportunities. No love, either Eros or Agape. Meditate upon the permanent features of day and night—sky, wind, water, stars, trees, flowers, birds, and selected beasts. Observe the nuances of light. Never crack a smile or hazard a joke.
5. Admit people—other poets that is—only as memories, traces in the landscape or in the language with which you describe it. Visit one of their landscapes now and again to feel your self in it. But tell no tales, create no drama, and be moved only by the human condition in which you find yourself. Remain observant of the wind, the water, and the sky. Stick to the one poem you are always writing.
6. Honor the line above all, its inner tensions and unexpected resolutions. Never ask a line to begin without the flourish of a capital letter. Achieve beauty without grandiloquence or emphasis. In the vein of Keats, load every rift with ore—“twistwart and starbane.”
7. Hover near the brink of sense or just beyond it, “on the far side of the simile.” Show that lucidity can do without clarity, that simplicity can keep secrets. Encounter words and ideas as things, things as ideas, and ideas as words. Weigh them against each other and keep them in balance. Live in metaphor, but mostly as a grammatical device, a source of indications for an ungraspable link between things and ideas. Marshal rhetoric and repetition, but only to vary your posture or lend a hint of structure.
8. Philosophize about language and existence, citing occasional authorities. But never be drawn into argument. Let arguments justify themselves by the experience of the lines. Babble wisdom, formulate aphorisms, in a dream you will never leave.
9. Stay in the first person and the present tense—what is happening, now, in your mind, in your world, without ever becoming personal. Share with your reader the benefits of a lifetime of perfect weather, its infinite variations and velleities, from which you never allow yourself to be distracted.
10. Linger in the gentle presence of God, even though he does not exist! Solicit a kind of transcendence guaranteed by all that’s missing. But find your ultimate safety in nothing—the nothing that is you confronting the nothing all around you. Yet do not freeze with Stevens’s Snowman. The nothing is too rich and abundant to be cold. It is not an unforgiving emptiness. It is warm and full, a night with stars and wind and “the silvery alphabet of the sea.” Find it everywhere and in yourself and spend your life filling book after book out of its

“nothing” is not deflating. It is an absence, a gap, that keeps the poet at the right contemplative distance—still attentive, still hoping. Authentic presence would be implausible, deflating, and, for Wright, beyond words. Wright’s persona is not so much a speaker as a thinker, a muser, whose rhetorical constructions are a vestigial habit and who, with no audience to address, can be guided as much by the sense of sound as by the sound of sense. The Baudelairean crescendo of the ending is uncharacteristic, almost a hint of irony toward the fecundity of emptiness.

Despite his love of Italian poetry, and his fine translations of Eugenio Montale, whose thick verbal texture he ingeniously rarefies, Wright’s linguistic register is densely Anglo-Saxon, a panoply of sounds ever on the verge of music, and we are reminded that Hopkins was one of his early discoveries.

Dog Creek: cat track and bird splay,
 Spindrift and windfall; woodrot;
 Odor of muscadine, the blue creep
 Of kingsnake and copperhead;
 Nightweed; frog spit and floating heart,
 Backwash and snag pool: Dog Creek

Starts in the leaf reach and shoal run of the blood.⁷

Thinking of Hopkins, we might expect some celebration to follow this revel in the richness of word and thing, but the mention of blood is already unsettling, and the section will end with “false flesh.” Wright can flirt with a Heaneyesque confidence in the richness of things, “the music of what’s real” where, as he puts it, “The plainsong of being, is happening all the while.”⁸ “Reconstruct, not deconstruct,” he recommends, a warning to unwelcome readers. On the whole, though, it is the emptiness of things that comes through, and the inadequacy of language to make up for it, since “language, always, is just language.”⁹ Nevertheless, Wright expresses the emptiness of things and the inadequacy of words without dissonance, without what Heaney in the classroom liked to call “acoustical doubt.” Indeed, his contemplative poise can seem too placid, too little troubled.

How easily one thing comes and another passes away.
 How soon we become the acolytes
 Of nothing and nothing’s altar
 redeems us and makes us whole.¹⁰

Wright’s poetic faith hinges not upon the power of language but upon the paradox that language keeps speaking through every disappointment, every failure of presence. The landscape of his imagination keeps appearing before him with its endless suggestivity, “the page that heaven and earth make.”¹¹ His is a Berkeleyan intelligence that comes to appearances as mere appearances and uses words in mere particularity. Hence their independent and quite separate beauties. Like Berkeley, Wright looks beyond the appearances and words toward something holding them in place, only where Berkeley finds an improbable God behind the pageant of the senses, Wright finds a nothingness that serves his poetic goals by protecting the screen of landscape from being unsettled by any deeper questions of knowledge. Through the magic of grammar, Wright’s “nothing” is transformed from the name for an absence to a positive force. “Nothing forgives,” he tells us, replacing the despair of forgiveness with a phantom benediction.¹² We might think that the forgiveness of nothing should depend on its power to defuse the force of accusations, but for Wright the power to flirt with nothing, to feel the inadequacy of what appears as an invitation to what is beyond, is more important than any logic of negation. The lasting power of words spun out of nothing is an enabling consolation—“making a language where nothing stays.”¹³ This nothing that “stays” is presence and absence at once.

Wright’s relation to divinity has a recognizably fideistic character, dwelling upon negation and, to recall Paul’s formula, “the substance of things not seen.” In a fascinating interview, contrasting himself with Hopkins, a poet “charged with the grandeur of God,” Wright describes himself as “charged by the *absence* of God.”¹⁴ It is in Emily Dickinson that he finds the true model of his stance, the glimpse, in “There’s a certain slant of light,” of a God “defined by what he isn’t.” Wright guesses that this is the “ur-poem” in his unconscious, representing for Dickinson, and for him, “that moment when illumination seems possible. It never actually happens,” he adds, “at least not so far, but its possibility is the illumination, I guess, that

one is looking for." Nothing could be more Romantic, indeed Keatsian, than this stance of eternal anticipation, although, schooled by Dickinson, Wright is more focused on the appearance of illumination than on the reality behind it. But where Dickinson looks one step higher than the Romantic seeker, Wright takes a step backward. His enabling hope seems to be not that possibility will be fulfilled but that the looming moment of possibility itself will return, one of those "few moments when things seem just the way they're supposed to be." This, he explains, is why he's "so drawn to landscape as opposed to nature. Landscape is a kind of simulacra for the way things can be." It is fascinating to learn that not only is Dickinson the model for the stance of backyard illumination Wright practices but that he thinks of her as his poetic correspondent. "She's the person I'm writing to."

When Wright says that he is a poet of landscapes rather than a poet of nature, he is not only pointing to his sense of nature as a mere screen of appearances; he is also alluding to his sense of nature as a palimpsest, a scene already inflected by the vision of others. When he calls himself a "shallow thinker," it is because he is facing a flat surface.¹⁵ He admires the Italian artist Giorgio Morandi's conceit that you can "increase the presence / Of what is missing" by leaving it out of the picture.¹⁶ And Cézanne is a seminal point of reference. The flatness of Cézanne's canvas, the vivid, half-formed shapes in his landscapes, make a fine analogue for Wright's way of seeing. But Wright's is not a painterly eye that fixes upon the visual detail. He can say that he has "no interest in anything / but the color of leaves,"¹⁷ but it is the color of that thought which interests him, not the leaves. Wright's painterliness is at a higher or meta-level, with a hint of synesthesia. He mixes images, thoughts, and sensations with experimental abandon, the way painters mix colors from their palettes.

Someone is mourning inconsolably somewhere else.
Yellow of goldenrod, bronze of the grass.
By the creek bridge, the aspen leaves are waving good-bye, good-bye.
Silence of paintbrush and cow pink.¹⁸

Each of these lines has the integrity of a separate brushstroke. There is a sense of movement in the sequence, but it is not a narrative or even a temporal movement. It is the composition of a scene on a mental canvas.

Like dreams awaiting their dreamers, cloud-figures step forth
Then disappear in the sky, ridgelines are cut,
grass moans
Under the sun's touch and drag:
With a sigh the day explains itself, and reliefs into place . . .¹⁹

The true model for this contrived landscape of assorted thoughts, images, and sensations is Eliot:

The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.²⁰

Wright has transposed Eliot's associative freedom back into a lyric framework and setting, but with the same commitment to the integrity of the unmetred line.

Through the course of Wright's career, he has experimented with different line lengths and paid tribute to various forms. A favorite resource is the journal as a string for historically dated lyrics, well adapted to Wright's "metaphysics of the quotidian."²¹ For a time he borrowed Stevens's habit of whimsically irrelevant titles. One of his finest poems, "Homage to Paul Cézanne," shows that he can marshal a rhetoric grand enough to stay longer on the wing. Once in a while, on significant life occasions, he also writes a paraphrasable poem of a more traditional sort, as on the birth of his son, though he gives his son a distinctively poetic recipe for living: "Indenture yourself to the land . . . / Imagine its colors; try / to imitate day by day, / The morning's growth and the dusk."²² But such intrusions are rare. On the whole, Wright remains in the same posture, writing the same meditation upon the beautiful, empty surfaces of things that only seem to point to something beyond.

It is a kind of believing without belief that we believe in,
This landscape that goes
no deeper than the eye, and poises like
A postcard in front of us
As though we'd settled it there, just so,
Halfway between the mind's eye and the mind, just halfway.²³

As Wright grows older the central theme of nothingness in his poetry grows a little darker, a little less controlled. “Believing without belief” loses some of its consolation, while the link between nothingness, age, and death increasingly looms. As Dan Chiasson puts it, often Wright’s “tenacious mellowness seems to fray.”²⁴ The later books show a certain discouragement in the knowledge that his poetic resources, being entirely in the vein of the negative, will turn against Wright in the end. “The strict gospel of silence”²⁵ gets more difficult to cling to. “It is hard to imagine how unremembered we all become / . . . unremembered and unforgiven.”²⁶ Wright’s unforgiven deeds are characteristically unnamed—forgiveness, in his work, seems like a metaphor for memory itself—but while he has always found a Stevensian beauty in the transience of impressions, now

Death is the mother of nothing.

This is a fact of life,

And exponentially sad.

All these years—a lifetime, really—thinking it might be otherwise.²⁷

It may, of course, be “exponentially sad,” but the statement is too bare and explicit to retain the artistic poise that has been Wright’s signature. The danger of too much explicitness is one that Wright has long been aware of. “Art tends toward the condition of circularity and completion,” he writes. “The artist’s job is to keep the circle from joining—to work in the synapse.”²⁸ If this is not true of all art, it is certainly true of his.

The quotations in this chapter make it clear how useless a recipe for replicating Charles Wright would be, how far his talent outstrips any procedural description. The values and standards by which Wright’s poems are to be judged must be derived from our experience of the poems themselves in the light of other performances. Only the poems can tell us which of the accomplishments that make poetry valuable they actually achieve. Judgments of value in art are not, of course, a post facto matter. The very pleasure we take in reading a poem is a judgment of its quality made in the wider context of our reading experience. Line by line, we are judging the performance against its intuited purpose, whether that purpose is a generic one, a refusal of all genres, or whether it is, like Wright’s, a variant of a familiar form, the Romantic lyric, taken in a peculiar direction. Still, in spite of its unique

character, Wright’s poetry is more susceptible to recipe than most, helping to make the point that poetic recipes don’t work without the special talent to implement them. This is what criticism and theory offer, an artistically useless set of recipes that serve only to pinpoint the relationship between the poet’s goals and his or her means of achieving them in order to suggest the character of that achievement. Such recipes, of course, are only reconstructed after the fact; for the poet, the goals are as often contrived to suit the means as the other way around. Still, coming back to Wright, there is a narrowness to his work, a sameness of thinking, stance, and tone, that can only be seen ultimately as a limitation, however admirable his ability to sustain it for so long a career at so high a level. The absence of variety and development even in mood does not suggest the ups and downs of a genuine intellectual or spiritual engagement in the vein of Stevens. Helen Vendler writes that “Wright’s verse is the poetry of the transcendent ‘I’ in revolt against the too easily articulate ‘I’ of social engagement and social roles,”²⁹ but I see no inclination in Wright to deal with anything but transcendental matters to start with, nor does he seem to be in revolt against anything in particular. His description of Dickinson’s “stationary psyche”—she “sat still, and enclosed, and let it happen, writing always from a stationary point of view”—seems more true of him than it does of her.³⁰ The mobile dynamism of a poem like “I taste a liquor never brewed” would be unthinkable for Wright. Because his preoccupation with the experience of the transcendent “I” is not authentic enough to make him inquire more boldly behind the postcard of appearances or consider in a more sustained way the implications of there being no transcendence, his spiritual quest can seem more like a pretext than a subject for poetry. Even in his late melancholy, Wright is largely content to keep the world of truth at a teasing distance—“At ease,” he says, “because the dark music of what surrounds me / Plays to my misconceptions, and pricks me, and plays on.”³¹ Is it only the ability to make solipsistic poetry out of these ironically acknowledged misconceptions that gives them their value?

The question might seem to invite an ethical judgment rather than an aesthetic one, but it is inescapably raised by the experience of reading Wright all the way through. He is the author of hundreds of beautifully crafted poems composed of truly exquisite lines. His ear and formal mastery are beyond praise. But taking the work as a whole, the governing theme of the nothing-haunted landscape becomes too predictable to carry the weight of a

life's work. And eventually the poet of elusiveness and emptiness becomes too direct and explicit in his confrontation with those things to be suggestive about them, nor is he intense enough in developing their implications to be a persuasive spiritual witness. Wright's game of hide-and-seek with nothing is neither serious enough nor playful enough to keep one wishing for more.

Notes

1. Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1918), 11.
2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, letter to Lady Beaumont, 1807, in *Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth*, ed. Paul M. Zall (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 83.
3. Charles Wright, "Dog Day Vespers," in *The World of the Ten Thousand Things: Poems 1980-1990* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 32.
4. Charles Wright, *Halflife: Improvisations and Interviews, 1977-87* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 20.
5. "Roma I," *The World*, 96.
6. Charles Wright, "Skins," in *Country Music: Selected Early Poems*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), 83.
7. "Dog Creek Mainline," *Country Music*, 36.
8. "Language Journal," *The World*, 217.
9. "Vesper Journal," *The World*, 223.
10. "A Journal of Southern Rivers," *The World*, 226.
11. "Spring Abstract," *The World*, 27.
12. "California Spring," *The World*, 30.
13. "Portrait of the Artist with Hart Crane," *The World*, 33.
14. Thomas Gardner, "Interview with Charles Wright," in *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98.
15. Charles Wright, "Why, It's as Pretty as a Picture," in *Bye-and-Bye: Selected Late Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 41.
16. "Chinese Journal," *The World*, 199.
17. "Journal of the Year of the Ox," *The World*, 186.
18. "Three Poems of Departure," *The World*, 85.
19. "A Journal of One Significant Landscape," *The World*, 196.
20. T. S. Eliot, "Gerontion," in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt, 1934), 19.
21. Wright, *Halflife*, 22.
22. "Firstborn," *Country Music*, 26.
23. "Why, It's as Pretty as a Picture," *Bye-and-Bye*, 41.
24. Dan Chiasson, "So Fluid, So Limpid, So Musical," *New York Review of Books* 61, no. 13 (August 14, 2014): 70-75.
25. "Journal of the Year of the Ox," *The World*, 177.
26. "The Woodpecker Pecks but the Hole Does Not Appear," *Bye-and-Bye*, 197.
27. "Twilight of the Dogs," *Bye-and-Bye*, 334.
28. Wright, *Halflife*, 35.
29. Helen Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 288.
30. Wright, *Halflife*, 22.
31. "Why, It's as Pretty as a Picture," *Bye-and-Bye*, 41.